Book Review / Compte rendu

Martinez-Aleman, Ana M., Prusser, Brian, and Bensimon, Estela Mara (Eds.) (2015). *Critical Approaches to the Study of Higher Education: A Practical Introduction.* **Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pages: 331. Price: $34.95 USD (paper).**

Reviewed by Maggie McDonnell, PhD student, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University.

Perhaps especially in the field of education, socially conscious critical inquiry is a fundamental facet of research. Our campuses are often a microcosm of our diverse society, and students, faculty, and researchers experience the benefits and the obstacles inherent in a stratified society. Therefore, we strive to recognize privilege and marginalization in our research. While this book presumes to present an introduction to such critical research, it tends to focus almost exclusively on the American higher education system, and issues of race and class within that system.

The editors, and several contributors, are involved in work for the Association for the Study of Higher Education's (ASHE) Institutes on Equity and Critical Policy Analysis. The book positions critical research as crucial to a democratic education system, in which critical approaches can help stakeholders in higher education "see beyond the normative models and frameworks that have long limited our understanding of students, institutions, organization, governance, and … policies" (p. 4). At the heart of the book is the idea that linking critical theories, models, and methodologies with a self-aware critical vision is essential to social action in higher education.

In the opening chapter, Martinez-Aleman provides an overview of critical theory and its relevance to research and policy-making. Obviously, one chapter cannot provide an in-depth survey of the topic, but Martinez-Aleman provides a comprehensive list of suggested readings for deeper delving into the various theories. Her overview begins with Horkheimer's premise that the goal of critical theory is to address the problems that arise from social inequity; by adopting a consciously critical approach, researchers can "decenter" their perspectives to employ the marginalized critical eye, particularly in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class. She touches on Habermas, the Frankfurt School, Saussure, and Foucault to provide the foundations for such research, and discusses the ne-

cessity of conscious subjectivity in analysing, revising, and creating policies. As do other chapters, this one concludes with a sample study, in which Martinez-Aleman uses critical discourse analysis of a text from the NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) to demonstrate the how and why of her proposed method of analysis.

Most of the chapters follow a similar pattern: a brief history or context for the critical framework, a discussion of the typical methodologies or approaches, and one or two sample studies to illustrate the theory in application. As one might expect from the context, many of the researchers spend some time on their own practice and positioning; in the second chapter, the author uses personal narrative to explore the tension between emerging perspectives and the established bodies of scholarship, which arises in part from researchers coming from within the marginalized or underrepresented groups struggling with the disconnect between the research that surrounds them and their lived experience. The third chapter examines the dominant power structures in higher education, and how these structures are created and subsequently become "deeply ingrained" (p. 60) as the "natural" way to govern academic institutions and education, and includes analysis of public funding models in American higher education as a theory-in-practice illustration of the approach. In a similar vein, the fourth chapter explores the conflict between "market-like competition" rampant in higher education, particularly in the US, and human capital discourse, which positions investment in education as fundamental to public well-being.

The fifth chapter is an excellent overview of the nature and purpose of critical historical inquiry, and provides a useful chronology of the development of critical historical analysis in general, and as applied to education, and is one of the only chapters to even mention queer theory, however briefly. The sixth chapter turns to post-colonial approaches, examining "the role universities play in the struggle for hegemony in the globalized era" (p.130), and proposing another perspective from which to examine the "confrontation over ideology and resource allocation" (p. 145).

The latter half of the book focuses on race and class as determiners of access and opportunity in higher education. Chapter seven returns to the idea of autoethnography to establish "critical pedagogical perspective" (p. 153), and spends some time looking at the underlying principles of the ASHE (Association for the Study of Higher Education), which could be helpful for novice researchers working toward methodology from a critical stance. The next two chapters focus on critical action research and critical race theory, highlighting some of the "taken-for-granted" (p. 174) practices and policies which affect racial and ethnic groups in higher education, particularly when it comes to access and admission policies. These chapters provide some food for thought in terms not only of tools and approaches, but of researcher privilege, as well as the limitations of research; inquiry may reveal problems, but true change demands institutional commitment based on critical research.

Chapter ten is the one chapter devoted to a feminist theoretical stance; it begins with a subjective discussion of the transformative role of critical inquiry, both for the institutions and for the researchers, and posits that researchers must be conscious of their privileged positions to be most effective. The author documents her critical journey from "nomadic" researcher to "(feminist) poststructural" (p.221), to demonstrate the how and why of self-aware positioning, then offers an analysis, from this perspective, on parental leave policy in higher education.

Chapters eleven and twelve come back to race and class inequities, arguing that despite the recent drive for post-secondary education, students of colour are disproportionately represented in certificate programs rather than degree programs, and that certificate training frequently requires re-education, unlike degree holders who are "trained for a lifetime of jobs" (p. 245). The thirteenth and final chapter begins with the idea that researchers are not operating in a philosophical vacuum, but rather from assumptions regarding ontology, ideology, epistemology and methodology (p. 286); research from and/or about marginalized communities and policy-making based on this research should be self-aware and conscious of the research perspective. The author outlines Merten's tenets of transformational paradigm, and includes two short sample studies.

The emphasis of this book is quite decidedly on issues of race and class; given that at least one author argues that the current US system is as stratified as it was in the pre-civil rights era, not to mention the ongoing racial tension in the United States outside the academy walls, perhaps this bias is understandable, and even commendable. On the other hand, there is precious little discussion of other standpoint-based research: one chapter from a feminist perspective, one from a post-colonial position, and nothing at all devoted to gender theory, queer theory, or intersectionality. As well, among twenty-six authors, only three are currently working outside of the US, so the focus is naturally on the American system. That said, this book may well be a good starting point for novice researchers interested in socially conscious critical inquiry; most chapters include at least one research case to illustrate the application of the approach in question, as well as comprehensive bibliographies to allow novice researchers to delve further into a given framework. ❦