1993, Atlanta, Georgia. It was the first year that Joe realized his work was actually being read. We lived in South Carolina, so put our weimaraner, Amber, in the van and drove to Atlanta. We were excited to meet up with Peter and Jenny McLaren, and to meet Yvonna Lincoln. Peter had arranged a meeting with Joe and Yvonna to discuss a project. Joe was pretty overwhelmed at the idea of meeting and lunching with Yvonna, his work was grounded in Lincoln and Guba, and he had no idea what Peter had in mind. Earlier that morning, Jenny and I were off somewhere (it was our first meeting and we were instantly friends) and Joe and Peter were at the hotel on the terrace eating breakfast with Amber sitting at Joe’s feet. They were crazed laughing, as was their habit, creating their own language much like twins do. It was at that conference that Joe and Peter determined they had to be twins from different mothers, that they were obviously zygotes who were separated at birth. At any rate, they turned to look at the man eating next to them and realized with glee that it was Red Skelton. They both jumped on the opportunity to meet Red and to listen to him tell stories. However, their notion of being star-struck took new meaning as Skelton continually spewed scrambled eggs in their faces. But the time Yvonna got there, Joe and Peter were hardly the controlled scholars they intended to be.

The reason for the meeting was clarified almost instantly. After Joe and Yvonna did their redneck southern roots bonding, and an instant rapport emerged with the three, Yvonna invited Joe to join Peter in writing a piece for Norm Denzin’s and her new Handbook of Qualitative Research. As she named the scholars who would be included in the book, Joe couldn’t contain his shock and pleasure at being invited to work with Peter on this project. Indeed, Peter insisted Joe be the lead author on the chapter, which has become known throughout the research world as a seminal piece on critical theory and research, first published in 1994, 2000, and this piece in 2005 and 2010. Neither Joe nor I could read this piece without thinking of the weimaraner, Red Skelton, the zygote twins, and Yvonna Lincoln. This little sidebar is a note of love and friendship to Peter McLaren and Jenny McLaren, and to Yvonna and Norm for inviting “the boys” to contribute this piece. SS

JOE L. KINCHELOE AND PETER MCLAREN

12. RETHINKING CRITICAL THEORY AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

THE ROOTS OF CRITICAL RESEARCH

Some 70 years after its development in Frankfurt, Germany, critical theory retains its ability to disrupt and challenge the status quo. In the process, it elicits highly
charged emotions of all types—fierce loyalty from its proponents, vehement hostility from its detractors. Such vibrantly polar reactions indicate at the very least that critical theory still matters. We can be against critical theory or for it, but, especially at the present historical juncture, we cannot be without it. Indeed, qualitative research that frames its purpose in the context of critical theoretical concerns still produces, in our view, undeniably dangerous knowledge, the kind of information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth.

Critical theory is a term that is often evoked and frequently misunderstood. It usually refers to the theoretical tradition developed by the Frankfurt school, a group of writers connected to the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. However, none of the Frankfurt school theorists ever claimed to have developed a unified approach to cultural criticism. In its beginnings, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse initiated a conversation with the German tradition of philosophical and social thought, especially that of Marx, Kant, Hegel, and Weber. From the vantage point of these critical theorists, whose political sensibilities were influenced by the devastations of World War I, postwar Germany with its economic depression marked by inflation and unemployment, and the failed strikes and protests in Germany and Central Europe in this same period. The world was in urgent need of reinterpretation. From this perspective, they defied Marxist orthodoxy while deepening their belief that injustice and subjugation shape the lived world (Bottomore, 1984; Gibson, 1986; Held, 1980; Jay, 1973). Focusing their attention on the changing nature of capitalism, the early critical theorists analyzed the mutating forms of domination that accompanied this change (Agger, 1998; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999; Giroux, 1983, 1997; Kellner, 1989; Kincheloe, & Pinar, 1991; McLaren, 1997).

Only a decade after the Frankfurt school was established, the Nazis controlled Germany. The danger posed by the exclusive Jewish membership of the Frankfurt school, and its association with Marxism, convinced Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse to leave Germany. Eventually locating themselves in California, these critical theorists were shocked by American culture. Offended by the taken-for-granted empirical practices of American social science researchers, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were challenged to respond to the social science establishment’s belief that their research could describe and accurately measure any dimension of human behavior. Piqued by the contradictions between progressive American rhetoric of egalitarianism and the reality of racial and class discrimination, these theorists produced their major work while residing in the United States. In 1953, Horkheimer and Adorno returned to Germany and reestablished the Institute of Social Research. Significantly, Herbert Marcuse stayed in the United States, where he would find a new audience for his work in social theory. Much to his own surprise, Marcuse skyrocketed to fame as the philosopher of the student movements of the 1960s. Critical theory, especially the emotionally and sexually liberating work of Marcuse, provided the philosophical voice of the New Left. Concerned with the politics of psychological and cultural revolution, the New Left preached a Marcusian sermon of political emancipation (Gibson, 1986; Hinchey, 1998; Kincheloe, & Steinberg, 1997; Surber, 1998; Wexler, 1991, 1996b).