
BOOK REVIEWS

Meili Steele. *Critical Confrontations; Literary Theories in Dialogue*.
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In *Critical Confrontations; Literary Theories in Dialogue*, author Meili Steele is clear about his goals: “My hope for this book is that the reader will emerge with an understanding of what the major interpretive problematics are, what the challenges to these positions have been, what the strengths and weaknesses of these different theories are, and how these theories can dialogue with each other to meet our current demands for democratic interpretation” (2). Steele is ambitious, but his book generally succeeds. Indeed, he is justifiably hopeful that this book can “serve an important pedagogical function” (1) as an “introduction to theory” text. However, although Steele claims that “the book does not assume a prior knowledge of theory” (4), it should be used by students who already want to know about theory and who already have some familiarity with the theorists mentioned. The dialogue format, where approaches are compared with each other and where they can ask questions of each other, provides a context for the differing approaches and a useful mechanism for articulating either ideological or functional consequences of some of these approaches. Also, the discussion often includes application to specific primary texts, either by Steele himself or by a theorist he is discussing. For example, Steele uses Susan Glaspell’s short play, “A Jury of Her Peers,” and he cites Edward Said’s use of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. Using the hermeneutic circle as a model, Steele offers a “progressive structure” (4) that builds on what comes before, advances, and then circles back in an attempt to provide a general understanding of the current discourse of literary theory. This approach is successful, primarily because of the clarity of the discussions.

Steele begins with an introduction to what some theoretical sensationalists refer to as a crisis: a conflict between what Steele calls “the poststructuralist camp” and “a tradition-based view of language” (1). Discomfort about reducing theoretical discourse to a synthetic bipolar argument is quickly dispelled, however, as Steele embarks on a complex “metatheoretical story” to explain different ways that language “both cripples and enables us” (111). Even though Steele sees American culture as too handicapped by the Enlightenment tradition for us fully to under-

stand how we are “first and foremost beings in and through language” (5), he is concerned also about how tradition is not accounted for in the language-based approaches. Although he allows that poststructuralism “has developed schemes for examining the marginalization and oppression of cultural voices” (1), Steele argues that theory “has not offered to empower those voices or ethical/political ideas to guide multicultural conversation” (1). He further argues that “the marginalized have abandoned the strictures of poststructuralism” (1), but that is not true. Steele’s own discussion belies this. In his chapter on “The Poststructuralist Critiques of Interpretation,” he explains how Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark*, “makes a case for a deconstructive mode of reading” (56). Indeed, as Steele says, “Morrison’s use of a critique of identity shows how the critique of identity at the level of the sign can be put to the service of change” (57).

In the chapter on feminist criticism, Steele discusses three broad positions that inform feminist theories: liberal, gynocentric (or “essentialist”), and constructionist (76), and offers a critique of a method used by some feminist critics called “strategic essentialism” (81). Steele uses Marie Cardinal’s *The Words to Say It* for a novel illustration of how feminist theory can combine all three positions to add an ethical and political dimension. In the penultimate chapter, Cornel West’s “prophetic pragmatism” is presented antithetically to Edward Said’s “metahermeneutical” critical project (96). Although Said’s work unmasks Western imperialism, and although Steele does “have theoretical problems with West’s pragmatic solution” (113-14), West’s work is in some ways privileged because of “the way he helps us think about the politics of difference” (102). Steele is correct when he asserts that this issue of difference is “perhaps the most vexing issue facing theory today” (102).

Yet, questions surface: for example, is it really, as Steele asserts, “the task of contemporary hermeneutics” to combine “the idea of tradition as a nurturing resource” with those theories that “read our being in language” (21)? Also, is it the role of theory to meet a demand for democratic interpretation? Steele is straightforward about his own agenda: he is attempting to construct “the metatheoretical issues and values of the democratic subject” (94). He clearly sees literary theory as having an emancipatory function: “What ought to guide theory and practice are democratic values of mutual recognition, attention to others, autonomy, freedom, equality, and care” (94). Yet, is this what we ask theory to do *for* us? Or, do *we* use theory to do these things? By Steele’s own example, Tony Morrison provides a model for how to perform these tasks using current poststructuralist methodology. Yet, there is value here; it is important to ask what it is we expect of theory. Moreover, a theorist or critic oftentimes proceeds with the same goals that Steele presents, but the goals are assumed or implied rather than stated. And, for many

of us who are being asked now to work out issues related to what is currently called “multiculturalism,” we do need a way to theorize community and difference. There is one curious omission: no mention of queer theory, even though Steele quotes Eve Sedgwick.

This is a challenging yet useful book in that it offers dense yet brief and lucid discussions of the ideas of current literary and cultural critics, such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida, Edward Said and Cornel West, Judith Butler and Juliet Kristeva, and Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Although throughout this book Steele supports a privileging of the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, he does not give Gadamer cult status. Those who wrangle with the complications and shortcomings of theory will want to read it. ✱