

Beyond the Big Three: French Feminist Theory Today

French Feminist Theory

By Dani Cavallaro

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Review by David Ross Fryer

In an important contribution to both feminist theory and the intellectual history of twentieth-century France, Dani Cavallaro delivers a comprehensive and much needed primer in French feminist theory. The very category of “French feminist theory” is a problematic one, since of the “big three” thinkers often associated with it here in the U. S. (Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous), none is French by birth. Cavallaro categorizes as French feminist theorists those writing in France who are concerned with “the specificity of women’s conditions in France and ... with the ambiguities of its culture” (xi). Cavallaro includes, then, in the list of thinkers whose thought she will primarily explore: Helene Cixous, Christine Delphy, Colette Guillaumin, Luce Irigaray, Sarah Kofman, Julia Kristeva, Michele Le Doeuff, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Paola Tabet, and Monique Wittig (x). Already in the introduction Cavallaro’s book distinguishes itself with its breadth. Little has been written in English on most of these thinkers, and no book has yet dealt with all of them in any serious manner. Cavallaro’s book stands as a deeply important work that fills a gap in feminist scholarship in the English-speaking world.

Cavallaro organizes her book thematically, exploring how French feminist theorists deal with issues such as sexual and gendered identity, sexual relations, embodiment, and language and subjectivity. Each chapter investigates how its topic is dealt with by multiple authors, and Cavallaro is careful to give equal time to different sides in each debate. While each chapter deals with its thinkers in a contextually sensitive manner (for instance, Cavallaro asks us to consider Kristeva’s having been born in Bulgaria and moved to France at the age of twenty-four in our considering her theory of the foreigner (144)), only the first chapter is historical. This method of organizing the text might not serve those who want a more straightforward treatment of each thinker in her own right. However, I find the thematic organization coherent and a very useful way to have gone about the project

and it offers the reader a useful panorama of how French feminist thinkers approach their topics. For instance, I am most familiar with the concepts that Cavallaro explores in chapters two and three (“Sexual and Gendered Identities” and “Language and the Subject,” respectively), but walked away from chapters four, five, and six feeling that I know had a good working knowledge French feminist thinkers’ engagements with “Patriarchal Institutions,” “Writing and the Body,” and “Power, Race, and the Stranger” (the titles of these chapters, respectively). One reason for this is that Cavallaro is able to translate some difficult concepts into accessible language—no easy task given her subject matter. The book closes with a somewhat tantalizing description of the Anglo-American feminist engagement with French feminist thought. It, too, is organized thematically, and definitely left me hoping that someone will spell out more fully the connections she introduces.

The book sets up French feminist thought as organizable along the axis of difference v. equality. It further identifies materialist and linguistic feminism as the two methodological approaches that its subjects take. These are not a new way of categorizing and describing French feminist thought, but they remain useful ones, and Cavallaro utilizes them with nuance and care. For instance, in chapter two, Cavallaro shows how, while both Irigaray and Cixous focus on the category of sexual difference as foundational for thought, they mean different things by them. Cixous’s notion of bisexuality is ultimately at odds with Irigaray’s notion of the two irreducible sexes.

While I have a number of small criticisms of and disagreements with some particulars in the book (for instance, I find her discussions of Lacan to be overly imprecise, often employing the language of his critics to explain his theories instead of using his own terminology), there is nothing that stands out as a blatant “misreading” here. This might be because the readings she does offer remain close to the surface; Cavallaro is not offering a deep theoretical engagement with any of the thinkers, exposing their assumptions and philosophical underpinnings. But this is not her goal. This book is offered as an introductory text, and it delivers quite well what it promises.

There are excellent in-depth studies of the most familiar French feminist thinkers available. Tina Chanter’s work on Irigaray and Kelly Oliver’s work on Kristeva come to mind. But until now there has not been a comprehensive overview of French feminist thought. This introduction fills a gap in current scholarship, and, I hope, will provide the foundation for our deeper engagement with some of the “lesser known” figures that this book explores.