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Coda: Theory Matters

Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt

It would perhaps be too much of a good thing and counter-productive altogether to expect a truly common denominator at the end of a collaborative effort dedicated to the allocation of the place of theory in literary and cultural studies today. Rather than artificially synthesizing or neatly typologizing the current state of affairs in the light of the contributions to this volume, our diagnosis highlights difference, plurality, creativity, unpredictability, performativity, a dialogic interdisciplinarity, complexity, and, after all, the acceptance of contingency at the heart of theoretical discourse in the humanities today.

As the essays in this collection reveal, there is an inter-categorical dynamics of difference between theory and theory, which depends on the questions or problems at issue, be these systematic or inter- or transdisciplinary. If there is a common denominator in the broadest sense of the word, it might be an understanding of scholarship, knowledge, and truth which allows for the comparison of theories and, thus, is able to even suspend a particular theory from its applicability in practice momentarily. Different

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theories imply different categories for a metatheoretical, cultural, critical, or textual practice. And if these categories vary, the approaches to integral components of any practice may vary, too. If this is the case it seems more than questionable if there is such a thing as a common, predetermined, default reality of theory (and/or of practice, for that matter) at all.

Accordingly, rather than presenting individual theoretical positions as unique on the basis of closed principles, this volume and its contributions suggest that no such uniqueness can belie the contingency inherent in theoretical categories of any theoretical position. Theory and doing theory, we would like to propose, must be self-conscious about this contingency. There is no *a priori* stability of theoretical categories, as we cannot ever assume that a particular degree of stability (in the popularity or efficacy, for instance, of a particular theory or a particular way of theorizing at a particular moment in time) can be maintained. Theory implies constant revision, constant change, constant improvement, constant specification, and ever more detailed definition. Truth for us implies ever so much further research(ing) into particular categories of understanding literature and culture, texts, objects, textuality, and materiality. Accepting contingency means accepting the plurality of arguments, measuring these against each other, and creatively and imaginatively disputing their attainability, applicability, and viability. Critics, scholars, readers, human beings, thus, are constantly, inevitably, engaged in theoretical reflection and in observing the world (including other observers and other modes of observation)—theory, therefore, matters to us, because it *is* us.