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why stories matter: the political grammar of feminist theory

Clare Hemmings, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011, \$84.95, ISBN: 978-0822348931 (cloth), \$23.95, ISBN: 978-0822349167 (Pbk)

Feminist theorizing will not be the same after this book. The stories of progress, loss and return that Hemmings identifies in narrativizations of the recent feminist past are recognizable to us all. Their shared affective force in the celebratory or mournful tone that they adopt also rings true. Yet, Hemmings uncovers, in the political grammar of our storytelling, the kind of ethical and political, indeed transformatory potential that even the most reflexive of us could not have anticipated.

Why Stories Matter is not motivated by the need to write better feminist theory or to set straight the story of feminism's past by providing a corrective her-story. It uncovers, instead, the politics behind the telling of 'selective and motivated histories' that form the stuff of feminist theorizing, feminist theory and its proper subject, but also of wider institutionalized and transnationally available meanings of gender. Most significantly, it shows how we can tell these stories differently – rather than tell different stories – for political and not merely discursive effects. One could argue that this is the only way in which feminist theorizing can today proceed – by being reflexive of and accountable to its own (discursive and affective) conditions of production in a context of unequal global power relations. Hemmings' critique of feminist storytelling that champions, laments or advocates a return to the past comes at a time when feminism is itself declared anachronistic in the postfeminist West, to be exported as 'gender equality' to the non-West. Feminist stories matter because they are *amenable* to the circulation of such neoliberal, neoimperial and heterosexist global sensibilities.

In order to uncover the politics of Western feminist storytelling and intervene in its telling, Hemmings closely analyses a selection of English language primarily feminist journals such as *Signs*, *Feminist Review* and *Feminist Theory*. She identifies in them the 'backbone of Western feminist storytelling' in tropes of progress, loss and return, and the ways in which they are secured and made believable through citation techniques (not in terms of authorial intent but institutional recognition) and the mobilization of affect. They are more similar than they appear on the surface, relying on similar decade and generational markers and transitions, shared concepts especially around 'the

political', binary pairs, and a subject-object divide with positive or negative affect. Together they declare feminism as always surpassed, as lost in ways that sit all too well with current postfeminist declarations of feminism's passing. Feminist theory secures rather than challenges, Hemmings shows in one of the book's most compelling arguments, a variety of postfeminist, gender-equality discourses that are central to the reproduction of global power relations. In distancing itself from these 'antifeminist' agendas via the rhetoric of 'cooption', a more self-reflexive feminist theory that is attuned to the *continuities* across different contexts and forms of power and inequality is precluded.

Progress, loss and return narratives rely on other exclusions and separations. Through a careful analysis of citation (or its lack), Hemmings shows how black and lesbian feminist critique is firmly rooted in the past; how postmodernism and poststructuralism are unhinged from their feminist histories; and the 'merely cultural' separated from the material. Thus, 'selective citation is essential to how Western feminist stories work' (p. 164). The second part of the book focuses on the citation of Judith Butler not only to make visible the erasures underpinning Western feminist storytelling, but also to tell the story otherwise. In locating Butler who is recognized as heralding feminism's transformation, if not demise in a male theoretical tradition (Foucault), citational practices effectively place her outside a feminist genealogy. Poststructuralism itself comes to be marked as male and as different from feminism, and sexuality becomes separated from materiality. Hemmings masterfully 'recites' Butler via Monique Wittig thereby providing a resonant lesbian materialist history to feminism, and restoring the centrality of sexuality to feminist concerns.

In practicing recitation, Hemmings opens up the possibility of telling feminist stories differently by folding back the textual and political absences on which they rely including those that found a coherent subject. Recent attempts to rethink the subject of Western feminism through the extension of empathy and agency to its (racialized, sexualized) 'others' fall short, Hemmings argues, of displacing the former's privileged subject status. She turns, instead, to 'affective excess' (in disgust, shock and horror) as marking the limits of Western feminist empathy and intersubjectivity, indeed of feminist subjectivity insofar as it reveals the layers of history foreclosed in subject creation including the subject's location in an other's history. Against linear, evolutionist approaches to history, 'renarration' enables the writing of a more complex history of feminist theory, with multiple origins and temporalities, and one that is more accountable to the 'amenabilities of feminist storytelling' especially to conservative ends.

Hemmings' interventions do more than constitute a meta-critique of Western feminism; they historicize and provincialize Western feminism with implications on how gender, sexuality and feminism are understood and taken up in a variety

of trans/national contexts. This book is compulsory reading for anyone interested in feminism today; not just in Anglo-American feminism or in feminist theory, however, demarcated.

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