

## On *Why Stories Matter* by Clare Hemmings

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*Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, by Clare Hemmings. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 288 pp. ISBN 0822349167.

“People talk *about* narratives, but people *tell* stories” (Arthur W. Frank, qtd. in Neile 263). In *Why Stories Matter*, a bracing and important contribution to feminist historiography and activism, Clare Hemmings does both. Woven among her meticulous analyses of three narrative types that map the trajectory of Western feminism, the author inserts the storyteller’s voice, sometimes her own, to tell the tale. Her premise, stated early, is worth quoting in full: “I seek to flesh out the substance of Western feminist stories and to intervene by experimenting with how we might tell stories differently rather than telling different stories” (16). While Arthur Frank is not cited, his thinking about the agency of stories, discussed recently in an interview in the pages of this journal, links Hemmings’s accomplishment with the larger issues of “human flourishing” to which Frank refers (Neile 264).

One of the truths upon which feminist history has been based from the start is that history itself is a big part of the problem. It is problematic in the way it is constructed, taught, and used to produce policies and legislation: to naturalize

that which is not natural. History is a tool, wielded by those who own it to control those who don't. There can be alternative histories or revisionist histories, a "people's history," but never "the" history. Yet as we all know, by the very existence of "Women's History Month" the other eleven months are largely devoted to what my student Hakeem once mischievously defined as "regular history."

Histories are stories we tell to construct a past, thus analyzing rhetorical devices and storytelling structures not only can reveal the conditional nature of all historical writing but also, as Hemmings argues, can lead the way to genuinely better, more politically efficacious history. The structural underpinning of her particular analysis is the variously repeated declaration that "feminism is over." Each of the narrative structures dissected records a trajectory toward this "truism." Crucially, Hemmings does not set out to "correct" this history, to find the real story. Instead, the reader comes to understand the defining tropes of each version, her or his own place within it, and the ramifications of its conclusions.

In Part 1, Hemmings analyzes, using unnamed quotes from several feminist journals, the types of narrative structures consistently found in recent feminist historiographies. Parsing "progress," "loss," and "return" versions of Western feminist narratives, Hemmings identifies the ways in which the same historical period, roughly the late 1960s through the 1990s, elevates different "heroines" and demonizes different "villains" based on competing teleologies. Significantly, she argues that these narratives have the veneer of truth by virtue of their authorial certainties and their rhetorical structures while, in fact, they are at best glosses, at worst caricatures, of complicated overlapping histories.

In Part 2, she unpacks the amenabilities between these narratives, in their storytelling forms rather than in the content of the stories. These details allow feminist subjects to locate ourselves (to participate in, or distance ourselves) from progress, loss, or return versions of western feminist narratives. In essence, feminist subjects are constructed through the repeated assertions of these narratives, a postmodern framing that is, to Hemmings's credit, rigorously defended through concrete example rather than relying on the open-ended play of floating signifiers of identity formation. This last I mention because the last two chapters present strategies of revision to feminist narratives whose potential relies on Hemmings's readers' acceptance of the value of narrative play while still hewing to the veracity of content. Finally, she attempts two strategies of rhetorical recalibration, "re-citation" and "affective mobilization," to activate the narratives toward a political grammar that is resistant to postfeminist declarations. Feminism isn't "over,"

Hemmings tells us, but it (and we) need a narrative makeover.

In the “Introduction,” Hemmings meticulously maps her approach, familiarizing her reader with the key terms that will become embedded in their own political grammar: the narratives—progress, loss, return—and the buzzwords—essentialism, difference, unity, materiality, play. Her particular strategy is significant, closely reading passages for which, with her editor’s and publisher’s agreement, she has not provided author citations. She offers them as representative “glosses” of various histories of feminist theory from journals such as *Signs*, *Feminist Theory*, and *Australian Feminist Studies*. By leaving the authors unnamed, she locates commonalities that can’t be attributed to individuals and that represent, instead, a kind of received wisdom that forms the historical narratives she spends the next three chapters unpacking.

“Progress” tells a story of moving beyond. So-called second wave feminism was too white, too straight, and too essentialist. Progress means we (the contemporary feminists who recognize themselves as the heroines in this story) have moved beyond the sins of our mothers and have replaced the old, tired “women in patriarchy” with difference, which is diffuse, changing, and unstable. Identity is the catalyst in progress narratives, whereas woman is no longer the issue.

“Loss” laments the abandonment of praxis and of politics, to be replaced by theory and by the institutionalized careerism of academic feminists. “Theory,” and here I add scare quotes, refers to the “cultural turn” and laments the abandonment of the term woman as a descriptor, given over to the endless play of gender.

“Return” presents the resurrected “materialist” feminist, chastened by the lessons learned from theory, including poststructuralism, critical race, and queer theory, but ready to return the body and politics to the center of things.

The reader will note that the previous three paragraphs are deliberately oversimplified and mildly dismissive. The tone is not directed toward Hemmings but meant to indicate in a forum more abbreviated than hers the relative ease with which we can locate ourselves within one, or more likely, *parts of all three* narratives. It is this that makes the next chapter so crucial. “Amenability” points to similarities present in each, including temporal markers, binary oppositions, and hierarchies. To elucidate just one example, Hemmings focuses on the generational distinction that has been recognized in psychological terms as a “family drama” and that serves as almost a plot device to create tension among otherwise similarly interested players in the battle for the “right” feminism.

The last two chapters propose possible means to, as stated above, tell better

stories. “Re-Citation” adopts some of the open-ended play of postmodernism to rethink the “cultural turn” that, in different ways, figures significantly in each of the narratives. Judith Butler, the central figure in this exercise, is realigned outside of the “heterocitational” axis of Foucault and Derrida to reestablish a citational line where feminist, rather than poststructuralist, concerns are primary. Again this is an oversimplification and sounds perhaps like wishful thinking but is, in Hemmings’s painstaking articulation, utterly convincing: “By suturing her [Butler] to Monique Wittig instead, I sought to reveal a lesbian materialist history to feminist poststructuralism.” (195)

“Affective Subjects” brings Hemmings’s earlier decision to anonymize the glosses she closely reads in Part 1 full circle, by analyzing affect rather than individual subjects: “Attempting to answer that question of motivation—in the stories I tell as well as those I analyze, and the relationship between these—has led me to integrate questions of affect as central both to how narratives of progress, loss, and return function and as key to effective intervention at the level of transformative political grammar” (24).

Each narrative strand—progress, loss, return—is examined through its affective potential, emphasizing two key approaches in recent feminist scholarship, empathy and agency. Hemmings chooses to read these through two subjects of sustained feminist theory and activism that, nevertheless, put these approaches under considerable strain, female genital cutting and transsexual surgeries. This emphasis brings affect, in the philosophical sense of meaning as it is lived at the bodily level, to the fore. In unpacking both the words (empathy in relation to discomfort, agency as it reveals the true workings of power) Hemmings proposes, or at least opens room for, affective mobilizations that decenter the subject of Western feminist narratives, promote genuine, rather than theoretical, intersubjectivity, and offer a path toward a more reliably affective political grammar of present and future feminism(s).

Having already incorporated Hemmings’s analysis into my own thinking, and testing her strategies in my own scholarship, I believe the potential is formidable. Countless disciplines, including my own, feminist art history, have devoted substantial ink to historiographical storytelling around the same issues identified across the narrative glosses Hemmings dissects. The problematic Western-centric “wave” distinction, the generational jockeying for position, the decrying of essentialism, racism, classism, or professionalized depoliticization—all these figure into the hand-wringing, soul-searching narratives of all fields crafting responses to

the “feminism is over” rhetoric that is so attractive, so “amenable” to those who wish feminism had never started in the first place. Judging from the virulence of the current “war on women” in the United States, the global epidemic of sex trafficking, the widening gap between the superrich and everyone else that weighs most heavily on women and children, there is little need to question “Why Stories Matter.” And there is every reason to believe that we, as feminists, need to tell our stories better.

So this review proposes, in the spirit of Pragmatism (a word sprinkled generously through the chapter on Return narratives, but which I capitalize to indicate my philosophical intentions), that the ramifications of the strategies Hemmings has crafted require testing for their practical consequences. Every professional conference should have a session on “re-citation,” an active exercise in creatively rethinking these “technologies of the presumed” that she identifies (19). Anthologies need to gather this scholarship together, then it needs to be disseminated into teaching resources and textbooks. This is not an exercise in “correcting the record” but in replacing received wisdom, what Hemmings also terms the “politics of the rehearsed” (20) with multiple trajectories. One example, from my discipline: Feminist art historians are likely to have grounded their materialist practice in the feminist-marxist scholarship of Griselda Pollock. Disciplinary glosses however, are likely to locate the materialist origins of this “new art history,” without the feminism, in the writings of T. J. Clark. Re-citation does not dismiss Clark’s contribution but puts feminist concerns at the foundation, rather than further down the citational line (see, e.g., Pollock).

In addition, extending Hemmings’s gathering and parsing of historiographical storytelling from feminist scholarly journals to popular media is essential. The received wisdom of feminism’s anachronism, exhaustion, or moribund status is gleefully adopted, such that *Time* magazine blithely includes “feminism” in its 2014 list of words to be banned. The retreat and apology do little to ameliorate the general acceptance by layers of editorial input, which determined that this was an appropriate stance to take (Steinmetz).

It is worth stressing again that Hemmings doesn’t just analyze; she strategically puts herself in the narrative, tells her own story. In Chapter 2, under a subheading “Political Attachments,” Hemmings writes: “You may have noted already the intensity of my own response to Western feminist loss narratives thus far? Any attempt to map loss narratives from the sidelines on my own part has already begun to falter” (78). The places where the author does this are thrilling

and jarring, so drilled have we been to adopt the disembodied voice of authority. In narrative terms, though, this regrounds the reader in that most steadfast of feminist chestnuts, “the personal is political.” Tell it, sister!

And here again the recent interview with Arthur Frank with which I began this review is instructive. Making the observation that narratology and linguistics don't ask, “What is a good story?” Frank is interested in how stories *do* things. His overriding premise in his recent work is that stories precede experience, that we learn possible outcomes through stories and make decisions based on those understandings.

“Stories teach us what sort of consequences follow from what sort of action; that's their narrative logic. We then perceive moments in our own lives as fitting that narrative logic, and we act as if in the story” (264). Weaving Hemmings's feminist narratives through Frank's Aristotelian “truth as a kind of goodness” points to the potential of a feminist political grammar genuinely capable of promoting the kind of global social change so urgently needed.

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