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Book review: Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Western Feminist Theory

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Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*:

The Political Grammar of Western Feminist Theory,

Duke University Press: Durham, 2011; 288pp.: 978-0-8223-4916-7

Reviewed by: Deborah M. Withers, *Independent Researcher, UK*

Clare Hemmings lives in a world of stories. Feminist stories that shape the contours of debates that many people working inside feminist academic communities will immediately recognize when they read her book *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Published in 2011, *Why Stories Matter* is Hemmings's eagerly anticipated book-length study that delves into the narrative heart of contemporary feminist epistemology. Ever since Hemmings published 'Telling Feminist Stories' and 'Invoking Affect' (2005a, 2005b), her work on the narrativization of Western feminist theory has produced debate and contention (Torr, 2007). Her writing has made a significant impact on how feminist theorists think about the relationship between historiography and epistemology within feminist knowledge politics, and the role of affect in shaping the positions of feminist subjects writing critical narratives.

The first part of *Why Stories Matter* thus charts a familiar terrain, as readers are introduced to the three trajectories of narrativization that Hemmings argues frame contemporary Western feminist knowledge politics: loss, progress and return. Through close readings of what Hemmings describes as narrative 'glosses' (p. 19), she interrogates the common-sense ideas about 'what we think happened' (p. 133) in the history of Western feminist theory. She adeptly demonstrates how knowledge about the critical feminist past, present and future is 'textually secured and mobilized' (p. 33) through rhetorical devices that produce historiographical meaning.

Although the narratives Hemmings explores differ in affective orientation, they both subject feminist histories to the same forms of periodization (1970s, 1980s, 1990s and the contemporary moment) and present their narratives affectively in a critical struggle for who can claim to be the 'proper' feminist subject or what Hemmings calls the heroine/anti-heroine of feminist theory (p. 63). Hemmings's neat unpicking of the narrative dynamics that inform feminist knowledge politics presents a tempting critical invitation to scholars in the field to reimagine the relationship between feminist historiography and epistemology. Hemmings's answer to her own challenge is to develop critical tactics, such as recitation and attentiveness to affect, that she argues can help challenge the vision of a 'singular Western feminist past' (p. 226). These tactical offerings form the second half of the book.

If you are not already familiar with these arguments through having read articles such as 'Telling Feminist Stories' (2005b) first-hand, then you may have encountered them through the citation practices of Western feminist storytelling. These practices are the empirical site from which Hemmings draws her arguments in *Why Stories Matter*, as she

employs a methodology of quoting from selected journals and the year they were published, rather than individual authors.

Such a methodological turn by Hemmings arguably courts a certain degree of controversy: It may be seen as unethical or ungenerous, given how it reduces an author's hard work to an effect of the 'political grammar' of Western feminist theory. The decision to engage with narrative trajectories in this way is justified by Hemmings for two main reasons. First, it is to collectively 'situate repeated claims that might otherwise appear to be individual, shifting analysis away from the subject (who is right or wrong)' (p. 194). I found this tactic to be a persuasive one, as it allows Hemmings to explore the repetitions and patterns of Western feminist theory through her characteristically meticulous readings.

A second reason for removing the authorial ownership of common discursive enunciations is to attend to the fact that 'our reading and writing of Western feminist stories locates us institutionally rather than only in relation to individual others, or in a more abstract political sense, and this is rarely given sustained attention' (p. 134). While I welcome such a move, as it has the potential to examine the wider political structures in which academic (not only feminist) knowledge production is immersed, I felt that this reason for studying citation practices was underexplored within Hemmings's text.

The main problem with the latter aim is that Hemmings fails to account for how academic discourses are intensely regulated fields. That is, academic feminist discourses are not 'innocent' sites where people simply exercise their agency in the collectively practiced recitation of common-sense feminist stories, which is the impression I sometimes got from reading *Why Stories Matter*. Such a position assumes consent and belies the coercive aspects of how knowledge is produced. People do of course collectively participate in shaping these stories, but the terms of their participation are often agreed in advance by the conventions of academic discourse. This point is not taken into account within the text.

Indeed, I would argue that the *acknowledgement* of the pervasiveness of the institutional location of Western feminist theory without attention to discourse as a disciplinary field marks the political horizon of Hemmings's book. This is something that she arguably admits to in her resolution on the final page when she talks about 'staying with the limit' (p. 226) of knowledge production. Maintaining the threshold of established knowledge politics is so that feminist theory can remain for Hemmings a 'space of work, rather than the space that must be cleaned up in order for judgements to occur' (p. 226).

While I would agree that it is important to attend to the messiness and complexity of critical thinking, Hemmings's choice to 'stay with the limit' arguably arises because she remains so ambivalently attached to the stories of Western feminist theory: 'knowing how these narratives work does not precipitate their transformation' (p. 134) she writes. Hemmings's suspicion towards (new) materialism – articulated with understandable caution about how abandoning the insights of the 'cultural turn' can reinforce racial and sexual inequalities 'we might otherwise not wish to be called upon to endorse' (p. 127) – augments her political attachment to textuality. Presenting her own kind of anachronistic intervention within the current field of feminist theory then, Hemmings suggests there is nothing outside the story (and our 'affective entanglement' (p. 80) with it).

With such a commitment to stories, it may be surprising that alternative or so-called 'corrective' (p. 16) histories, that one could argue are much needed to reshape the banal and one-dimensional tableaux of feminist history that Hemmings describes, are not given

any potential to transform knowledge politics. The presence of counter-histories can only exist for Hemmings as a critical opportunity to acknowledge the partiality of all historiography. However, the supposed 'discursive dissonance' (p. 16) these histories produce as a 'reminder that all histories are selective and motivated' (p. 16), often rely on whether 'we' (that is those involved in the 'collective' production of feminist knowledge), actively choose to forget or remember their existence.

In fact, much of Hemmings's argument in the second part of the book relies on the mobilization of active counter-memories that are, in fact, rendered difficult (if not impossible) to access within the narrative frames of Western feminist theory she outlines in such depth. Take, for example, her use of recitation as a tactic to challenge the dominant modes of storytelling within Western feminist theory. We read about Hemmings's own sense of alienation from reading critical interpretations of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* because of the way they erase Butler's connection to the work of lesbian philosopher Monique Wittig. To remedy this, Hemmings reinserts Wittig's presence within Butler's history. Such a move, arguably, can recuperate alternative understandings of Butler's work that do not erase her complex influences.

While such work is necessary, it is clear the political motivation to recite for Hemmings emerges from a very private (individual) reading practice that utilizes personal memory and affect as a strategy to rewrite critical reception. This strategy is limited for me because it fails to account for a reader's resonance with an interpretation or their wider compliance with the dominant modes of storytelling within Western feminist theory. What if, for instance, the readers of a text have no experience of dissonance that forces them to rewrite or reconsider the dominant critical narratives in the first place? The answer, one suspects, is simply that the dominant modes of critical storytelling remain intact. Thus, the critical proposal suggested by Hemmings is reduced to the circularity of intertextual-subjective transmission that yields little capacity for ontological *or* epistemological transformation. And this example for me really demonstrates how the strategies she proposes in the second half of the book, to rectify the problems that she cleverly articulates in the first half, do not hold up in the face of what is clearly a very complex challenge.

For if memory and affect are crucial terrains of political struggle, those terrains need to be widened in difficult and more dynamic, collectively orientated ways that are genuinely accountable to the multiple dissonances of the past. It cannot be assumed in advance that everyone will know that the history they are encountering is partial. How can multiple histories serve as a reminder of the partiality of history if no one remembers they *are* partial (the mobilizing limit to the critical terrain of memory) or worse, no one cares (the mobilizing limit to the critical terrain of affect)?

How far can individual dissatisfaction with the multiple erasures of already-cited (established, endlessly repeated) narratives really undermine collective practices of knowledge production? Particularly when 'the feminist reader is [...] highly motivated to remain staked in these narratives' (p. 134), practically, what is to be gained from changing *the way* stories are told? The risks of incorporation, recuperation and dismissal of alternative histories and critical interpretations thus remain very real within the critical landscape Hemmings describes.

There is an added irony in all of this, emerging from Hemmings's use of recitation as a critical tactic that can make 'visible what is, importantly, *already there*' (p. 180).

This is because it arguably draws substantially on the critical practice of Adrienne Rich's 'Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction' (Rich, 1972: 18). Such active forms of forgetting within Hemmings's own text betray the call to affect and (active) memory she deems so central to the possibility of a different critical practice.

Why Stories Matter is both an insightful and infuriating book. It articulates the epistemological limits of Western feminist theory and displays multiple ambivalences about moving beyond them. It should be widely read among scholars of Western feminist theory because of the careful readings and cautionary tales it offers. I would encourage readers, however, to examine its limitations seriously and think of creative ways that can really make the stories that are told about the world matter in multiple, nuanced, imaginative, accountable and transformative ways.

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Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, Pauline Dongala, Omotayo Jolaosho and Anne Serafin (eds), *African Women Writing Resistance: An Anthology of Contemporary Voices*, Pambazuka Press: Cape Town, South Africa, 2011; 337 pp.: 978-0-85749-020-9

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In recent years, African women's writing has gained increased visibility, not only in its own continent but also within world literature. This can be observed in the high literary output of recent African female writers, whose presence in jointly edited volumes is evident today, with examples such as the short story collection *A Life in Full and Other Stories* (2010) edited by The Caine Prize for African Writing – where 9 of its 17 stories are female authored – as well as the launch of the ambitious *Women Writing Africa* series by The Feminist Press, with volumes published biennially from 2003. The extensive anthology *African Women Writing Resistance: An Anthology of Contemporary Voices* can be considered an outstanding contribution in terms of its thematic unity, the quality of much of its writing and its objective of 'bringing the voices of emerging African women writers to a wider audience', as stated in its introduction (p. xiii). Published by Pambazuka Press, though originally published by the University of Wisconsin Press in 2010, it includes 36 texts linked in having been written in the last few years by African-born women and to illustrate, as the title suggests, different forms of resistance to oppression in the continent.

The texts, most previously unpublished, belong to a great diversity of genres and nationalities, which makes the volume all the more interesting and illustrative of African women's contemporary writing. Poetry, short fiction, interviews, essays, autobiographical reflections,