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**Clare Hemmings. 2011. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 288 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 9780822349167**

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In *Why Stories Matter* (2011) Clare Hemmings follows several feminist journals (e.g. *Signs*, *Feminist Theory*, *Feminist Review*) arguing that over the past couple of decades themes of progress, loss, and return have come to dominate Western feminist theory. This has demanded not only a rethinking of Western feminist theory, but also the ways in which histories are constructed. As Hemmings suggests, ‘feminist theorists need to pay attention to the amenability of our own stories, narrative constructs, and grammatical forms to discursive uses of gender and feminism we might otherwise wish to disentangle ourselves from if history is not simply to repeat itself’ (2). In this spirit, Hemmings’ interest lies not in what she prescribes as a “corrective” story telling or bringing forth that which has been left out of the Western feminist archive, but rather a questioning of the very politics and rea-

soning that ‘sustain one version of history as more true than another, despite the fact that we know that history is more complicated than the stories we tell about it’ (15-16).

*Why Stories Matter* offers a well-structured analysis and convincing critique of reoccurring Western feminist narratives of progress, loss, and return. To illustrate her points, Hemmings uses back-to-back citations from various journal issues, at times using as many as three or four quotations in a row, to expose repeated patterns in Western feminist thought across a multitude of disciplines. Rather than citing the authors of the articles Hemmings instead cites the journal and year of its publication. This nontraditional technique proves effective as it demonstrates the power of institutional production and the appropriation of individualized positions. Hemmings stresses that in ‘citing journal place and time rather

than author, I have situated these narratives not only as shared by a group of individuals, but also as institutionally resonant...my point is that our reading and writing of Western feminist stories locates us institutionally rather than only in relation to individual others' (134). Hemmings' citation tactics alone uncover a troubling framework in Western feminist writing securely positioned in repetitious narration rendering itself stagnant, commonplace and in desperate need of interruption.

The first half of Hemmings' book addresses narratives of progress, loss, and return dedicating a chapter to each of these themes. The Progress narrative, as Hemmings explains, is most commonly portrayed as a positive account marking success and accomplishment. This, she argues, is typically relayed in a chronological order that brings the audience from a Western feminist past (typically the 1970s) to a complex feminist present, one that credits the shifts in Western feminist thought as opening a new space for contemplation. Hemmings suggests this technique distances itself from earlier readings incorporating words such as 'patriarchy', 'woman', 'female subordination', and instead focuses on power relations such as gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, and class. The story of progress, according to Hemmings, is marked by a redemptive underpinning in so much as it uses a corrective structure to make it a story of transfor-

mation, strategically outlined to deconstruct, move beyond, and move forward (35). In Hemmings' introduction she discusses her reasoning for not wanting to 'point out the errors...and suggest other pasts' (12) primarily because in telling the past, one is prompted by the position they wish to occupy in the present. However, should presenting the past through a position held in the present be examined as negative? In presenting 'other' histories, must we assume that there were 'errors' in the previously told stories of the past? Could it be that in revisiting histories, rereading them, and providing examples of other histories that were perhaps overshadowed by more dominant narratives, we can address the many layers of feminist history and expose the dangers of the teleological narratives/histories that concern Hemmings?

Hemmings' next chapter, 'Loss', works in conjunction with her previous chapter on progress. Both are noted as being the most common stories depicted, as they are mutually dependent on each other - recovering lost histories yields progress. However, loss is not merely about the recovery of other stories, it is also a critique of the progressive narrative; here post-structuralism is held responsible for the de-politicization of feminist commitments. In this story, 'feminist academics and a new generation of women have both inherited and contributed to this loss, particularly through their

lack of interest in recent feminist history and an acceptance of political individualism' (4). In this section, Hemmings does not shy away from voicing her own opinions and concerns on feminism in the academic arena and the isolation of its generational lineage. She concludes, '[s]ubjects of progress and loss narratives insist on their absolute separation from one another, missing the ways in which they utilize and instantiate a common historiography, missing the ways in which that historiography grounds post-, quasi-, or antifeminist claims as well' (83).

Hemming's final chapter, 'Return', acts as a joining of the two narratives. The return narrative is one which aims to remedy both stories of progress and loss through a current position held in the present. '[R]eturn narratives can thus affirm a common present by affirming a shared past' even if the previous narratives were secured and marked through difference (98).

The last half of Hemmings' *Why Stories Matter* focuses on practices of citation as a potential approach to telling common feminist stories differently. Hemmings exercises her concept of re-citation by offering a re-reading of Monique Wittig via Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Hemmings' ability to re-cite Butler through Wittig offers an alternative position (not marked in 'Foucauldian' references) and makes available a rich lesbian feminist history of materialist sexual politics.

Hemmings' demonstration of re-citation results in not only opening up other histories, but also recognizes the importance of reflective thinking as an exercise to help one extract from it alternative modes and methods of institutional and political engagement in the present. Confronting recent attempts to reread the subject of Western feminist thought through modes of empathy and agency, Hemmings, in her final chapter 'Affective Subjects', argues that empathy often 'manages' rather than 'transforms' the subject/object relation. Hemmings goes on to explain empathy as 'always marked by that which cannot be empathized with and draws that limit as a self-evident boundary for what (and who) can be included in feminism itself' (197). Taking cues from Gayatri Spivak and Julia Kristeva, Hemmings discusses shock and horror as providing possible ruptures in Western feminist narratives of progress, loss, and return. However, through the analysis of several case studies, Hemmings finds that in confronting horror it reciprocally produces a limit to the subject/object relation. Hemmings resolves that horror casts out the abject and, as a result, reconfigures 'feminist subjectivity as coherent' and 'mark[s] others as fully readable within its singular temporality' (223). Therefore Hemmings returns to recitation as a practice refusing to resolve the limitations noted in her previous critiques. Hemmings concludes, 'judgements that are based

in the protection of a singular vision of a Western feminist past, present, and future are bound to reproduce rather than challenge' the amenabilities of feminist storytelling (226). It is in this spirit that Hemmings' *Why Stories Matter* requests a move towards new subversive and unpredictable narratives, which can be made evident if we simply wish for history not to repeat itself.

Clare Hemming's *Why Stories Matter* delivers a valuable perspective on how historical feminist writing is received and functions today. For anyone interested in feminist theory, historiography, and the writing of feminism into history, this book should be compulsory reading.