

Book Review - Claire Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Duke University Press, 2011. 272 pp.

Reviewed by Gigi McNamara

Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory by Claire Hemmings is a thoughtful and provocative addition to the canon of contemporary feminist theory as it asks us to question firmly-rooted beliefs. Narrative storytelling and self-reflexivity are crucial to studying the history of feminism and feminist discourse, but Hemmings shows that all is not as it seems in contemporary feminist scholarship. By analyzing and critiquing key feminist journals including *Signs*, *Feminist Review*, *Feminist Theory*, and *European Journal of Women's Studies* (17), Hemmings provides a useful and germane interpretation of three key feminist narratives - progress, loss and return. In doing so, Hemmings theorizes that the ways in which feminists "tell the story" is as important as the stories themselves. Hemmings is interested in studying the "pervasive stories that feminist and other theorists participate in reproduce, and embellish" (17). More importantly, she seeks to examine the potential political motivations behind that storytelling. In short, she writes, "...how feminists tell stories matters in part because of the ways in which they intersect with wider institutionalizations of gendered meanings" (1). Hemmings is particularly interested in studying how these journals presented essays regarding Western feminist theory's development.

Divided in two parts containing three chapters each, Hemmings asks us, the reader, to reexamine many accepted feminist tropes. The first section of the book deconstructs

three widely known tropes. The second asks us to reexamine the contributions of scholar Judith Butler, including *Gender Trouble* (1990) using a new analytical lens.

The first trope, progress, includes examining the notion that we have moved past the overly simplistic notion of “woman.” Since we have embraced the duplicity of meaning regarding what “woman” stands for, we no longer cling to a “false unity or essentialism” (2). In short, feminist theory has moved away from preoccupations with the labels of ‘patriarchy,’ ‘woman’ and ‘female subordination,’ focusing instead on the power structure that shows the intersections of gender, race and class.

The second trope, loss, explores the supposed demise of feminism in recent decades. No longer unified by an all-consuming, collective identity, feminism and the feminist movement have become fragmented. Indeed some may even argue that feminism’s day has past. There exist divisions between scholars and activism, between academic theorizing and a real-life feminist movement. Hemming writes: “Conservative institutions of feminist thought and the generational popularity of ‘postfeminism’ are empty parodies of a feminist social movement that has incontrovertibly past” (4).

The third and final trope, return, involves the notion that feminists have recognized and validated feminism’s existing shortcomings and limitations, but are prepared to move forward “ from the current and theoretical and political impasse” (5). This trope marks our current understanding of feminism. Previous decades of feminism brought us awareness and social change, but, Hemmings notes, “is it is now time to pull back from the deconstructive abyss – which has its own orthodoxy anyway – and move beyond critique” (97). She concludes, in a telling moment that, “We need a new direction that

is neither nostalgic nor taken in by what is quite often rendered as the sheer silliness of postmodern and poststructuralist seductions. In the cold light of day, we know better” (98).

Hemmings’ research methodology involves analyzing selected citations from the aforementioned journals. Most importantly, she teases out the similarities behind each author’s argument and identifies recurring patterns within those arguments. Her goal is not to critique each author’s *individual* position, but rather analyze the repetition and similarities of said arguments. By bypassing the theoretical positions presented by each individual author, Hemmings succeeds in broadening and strengthening her overall argument. Hemming cites only the journal and year of each article. The phenomenon is bigger than any one scholar or journal and “the system,” academia, is somewhat complicit. This conclusion, Hemmings argues, supports the notion that the academy supports the retelling, and reinforcement, of an accepted belief system. There are remarkable similarities to the arguments presented. Feminist scholarship, at once potentially transgressive and transformative, has fallen into a common conundrum. Hemmings writes: “...Western feminist progress narratives’ insistence that feminist theory has moved to a more expansive present, one full of new epistemological innovation and complex objects and analytic frames, relies on a flattened vision of the feminist past” (162). In order to move forward with a more expansive view, scholars must not be fearful of questioning a historical “truth” about feminist theory.

The second half of the book analyzes the contributions of the influential, and frequently cited, scholar Judith Butler. Hemmings challenges us to reexamine how readers have

traditionally interpreted Butler's seminal work, *Gender Trouble*. Hemming writes: "Whether for progress, loss or return narratives, Butler is routinely positioned as forcing feminist theory onwards, beyond itself" (165). Studying how and when writers cite Butler's work, Hemmings asserts our collective understanding of this scholarship as "outside" the accepted, feminist linearity. She attempts to reexamine Butler's contributions to feminist scholarship by "rereading" her theories via the contributions of Monique Wittig. Hemmings argues that she chooses Wittig's work in particular because of "her central presence in *Gender Trouble*" (182). Could there be a different way to interpret the historical influences on Butler's work? While this is a provocative statement, Hemmings causes us to question the academy's position on feminist theory. Academic citations "mark Butler as responsible for moving Western feminism beyond both essentialism and identity reductionism" (54). Instead of focusing on the usual and common historical timeline when analyzing feminist scholarship, Hemmings argues that "renarration" allows for a more nuanced and complex reading of feminist theory. In short, Hemmings uses Butler's work as a case study for her stunning and original hypothesis.

The questions ultimately posed by Hemmings are vexing and compelling. This book is suitable for members of the academy, including graduate students and faculty, who are interested in exploring the academy's accepted citation practices. From introductory to advanced-level classes in feminist theory, students will be asked to think "outside the box" when citing, and privileging, key scholars. Most importantly, in an era when women's studies departments are redefining their missions in order to be more inclusive for many diverse groups, *Why Stories Matter* asks us to deconstruct the power structure

which allows certain narratives to be told and retold as the historical and accepted underpinnings of feminist theory.