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## Review Essay: Engaging Feminist Histories

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# Review Essay: Engaging Feminist Histories

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## Reviewed Works

Hemmings, Clare. 2011. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke UP.

Hesford, Victoria. 2013. *Feeling Women's Liberation*. Durham, NC: Duke UP.

Scott, Joan Wallach. 2011. *The Fantasy of Feminist History*. Durham, NC: Duke UP.

I remember, as an undergraduate, short-handing the idea that second-wave feminists were all a bunch of middle-class racists in a paper, but deciding that I really needed to cite this claim. I pulled my copy of Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (1970) from my feminist bookshelf; I'd purchased it at a garage sale at some point, thinking, "I should probably have this." Leafing through the book's lightly dust-scented pages, I was surprised (and, in light of my fast-approaching deadline, perhaps even a bit dismayed!) to discover diverse contributions and a number of intersectional analyses—and I did not know what to do with that information. I couldn't cite this! I felt like I'd discovered a secret that I was not supposed to know.<sup>1</sup>

While the exact moment that I reached for *Sisterhood Is Powerful* is untraceable, I imagine it as occurring around the late 1990s or early 2000s, a time period marked by a burgeoning of texts centrally concerned with "third-wave feminism" (see Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Gillis, Howie, and Munford 2004; Heywood and Drake 1997; Labaton and Martin 2004). Perhaps this anecdotal incident points toward not only my own critical investments at a particular moment, but also about a broader investment in "wave discourse," particularly distinguishing between feminist waves, during this period. Emerging concomitantly with these "wave" texts, however, were also numerous critiques of the limitations of the wave metaphor within feminist thought (see Groeneveld 2011; Henry 2004; Thompson 2002). Recent publications like Victoria Hesford's *Feeling Women's Liberation* (2013), which takes on a reparative reading of second-wave feminism; Clare Hemmings' *Why Stories Matter* (2011), which analyzes the narratives that have shaped feminist stories; and Joan Wallach Scott's *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (2011), which gives us different conceptual tools for the study of feminist histories, are part of a new context that one might call a "post-wave moment"; each text approaches Western feminist histories in ways that complicate and enrich our understanding of these histories, beyond the

first-, second-, and third-wave structure, and in ways that might even surprise us.

*Why Stories Matter*, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, and *The Fantasy of Feminist History* are centrally concerned with how the ways in which feminist histories are always interested stories, invested with particular kinds of “feminist attachments” (Ahmed 2004). How we speak and write about feminism and feminist histories—whether these are trajectories of theory, feminist waves, or activist histories—influences our teaching of feminism in our classrooms. This review essay considers what each of these texts has to offer for scholarship on and the teaching of feminist histories, arguing that the approaches that all three text advocate—for more dynamic, surprising, and unpredictable versions of feminist histories—open up pedagogical opportunities to challenge calcified knowledges and invite teaching moments for unlearning and relearning.

### **Why Stories Matter: Western Feminist Theory's Dominant Narratives**

Clare Hemmings' *Why Stories Matter* takes the dominant stories regarding the history of feminist theory as its subject. Hemmings identifies three narratives—of progress, loss, and return—that have shaped the stories that feminism tells about itself. Progress narratives posit that feminism has moved from simplicity to complexity and nuance, and from singularity to multiplicity. The idea that feminism has moved from a single axis analysis of gender to intersectional analyses is one example of a progress narrative. But this narrative that can be easily complicated by a whole host of factors, including the fact that feminists were engaging in intersectional analyses prior to the 1980s and 1990s, as *Sisterhood is Powerful* can attest. Moreover, these kinds of progress narratives frequently dismiss earlier second-wave feminist work outright rather than actually engaging with what might productively be learnt from the past. In contrast, loss narratives imagine a feminism that has moved from a vibrant political force to a stale and depoliticized academic careerist pursuit, while return narratives attempt to reconcile and combine, what Hemmings calls “the lessons of postmodern feminism with the materiality of embodiment and structural inequalities” in order to move forward from a perceived theoretical impasse (4-5).

*Telling Feminist Stories* is concerned with these narratives because of their amenability to post-feminist and neo-imperialist agendas. A feminist narrative of progress, for example, can find itself disturbingly resonant with the post-feminist and neo-imperialist discourse that equality has been achieved in the West: both suggest that “we” have moved forward. As Hemmings argues, Western feminist stories cannot be considered outside of, and are implicated in, these larger neoliberal imperialist projects.

Methodologically, *Telling Feminist Stories* focuses on the citation tactics and textual affects of stories about Western feminist theory. Focusing on citation tactics allows Hemmings to probe what is glossed or taken for granted in feminist genealogies. Paying attention to the “things that go without saying” in feminist theory or “technologies of the presumed,” as Hemmings calls them, provides insight into both the particular investments of feminist theorists and what is thought of as shared information or knowledge. These notions of the “shared” and “common” tend to gloss over multiplicity, debate, and dissent. Western feminist theorizing, Hemmings argues, creates heroes and villains in feminist theory. Hence, the positions from which we write are far from innocent; the feminist reader and critic are always positioned as allies and on the “good side” of the debates.

*Telling Feminist Stories* is not a “how-to” book. Hemmings does not offer a set of correctives to the dominant stories of feminist histories, arguing that these correctives would have their own sets of critical investments. Nonetheless, Hemmings does make a set of interventions into the existing dominant narratives. In addition to her caution regarding the collusion of feminist narratives of progress and loss with post-feminist and imperial discourses, she also argues that theory generated by women of colour is devalued and over-simplified within dominant feminist narratives, in that it often serves a kind of “magical theory leprechaun” role that propels white feminist theory forward. She pushes back at the ways in which feminist narratives of loss position post-structuralism as a depoliticizing force that hurts feminism. And, finally, she tracks the ways in which lesbians become castigated figures that stand in for essentialism and racism of the “past.”

## ***The Fantasy of Feminist History: Conceptual Tools for Feminist Historians***

Joan Wallach Scott's *The Fantasy of Feminist History* argues that psychoanalysis, specifically the concept of fantasy, opens up historical inquiry because it allows for ways of discussing the psychic investments critics have in the stories they produce (3). Scott sees psychoanalysis as centrally concerned with sexual difference as an "unresolvable dilemma" that animates gender (5), as attempting to answer the question, "What do these bodies mean?" (16). Scott sees the Lacanian modern sex subjects as psychic responses to the historical phenomenon of modernity (114). *The Fantasy of Feminist History* brings together the author's past and more recent essays, some of which make use of this initial theoretical framework more than others; however, Scott does not necessarily develop or, in some cases, necessarily need the psychoanalytic frame that she introduces in order to make many of her claims.

The strengths of Scott's work are in her introduction of key terms like "fantasy echo," which provides ways of thinking about how identities are historically and unevenly produced; "feminist reverberations," which helps us understand how social movements iterate themselves across varying spatial and temporal contexts; and "sexularism," the entanglement of sex with secularism. Two of these terms—"fantasy echo" and "sexularism"—developed from mistakes (mis-typing or mis-hearing), mistakes that produced surprising effects; it is through paying loving attention to these moments of slippage that allows Scott to produce new conceptual paradigms for thinking about feminist histories.

Despite these important conceptual contributions, Scott's account of feminist histories frequently produces a progress narrative of the kind that Hemmings is so critical. In two related examples from different parts of the book, Scott writes:

Not only do we now take differences among women to be axiomatic, having heeded the criticisms of women of colour, of Third World women, and of lesbians in the 1980s, but we also have refined our theory and increasingly substitute gender for women as the object of our inquiry. (32)

At least since the 1980s, feminist scholarship has learned (often quite painfully—think of the bitter challenges posed by women of color to the hegemony of white women, by lesbians to mainstream feminism's normative heterosex-

uality, and by Eastern European women to the presumed superiority of Western feminist theory) to make nuanced distinctions along multiple axes of difference. (73)

The "we" of Scott's narrative of feminism is Western and implicitly white, Western feminists who have progressed from singularity to multiplicity in their analyses: from women to gender to multiple axes of difference. Women of colour, lesbians, Third World women, and Eastern European women are thus figured as helpers to Western feminism rather than as generators of theory that might also be Western or as having its own stakes that are not concerned with Western feminist theorizing at all. The verb "heeded," in the first selection also confers heroic status upon Western feminism: it is Western feminists who have made the benevolent choice to pay attention to these criticisms, not the criticisms themselves that play the active role in this dynamic. While the ultimate results for Western feminism have been "painful lessons" that have been generative for unmarked feminist scholarship, theory marked by multiple axes of identity is fixed as a moment in the 1980s and identified as "bitter," and thus these short-handing statements fall into the decade-based view of feminism of which Hemmings is so critical and have a tendency to recenter Western feminism, even through attempts to decenter it.

Despite the progress narratives of feminist theory that I have identified in Scott's work, Scott herself goes on to critique the simplicity of these same narratives, although she tends to keep the overall story of progress in place. She writes, "to tell the story in the way that I have implies a singular narrative, which distorts the past" (38). This seems to beg the question: why tell the story in this way in the first place? This question has implications for how feminism is taught: does one move from presenting a singular narrative in the intro course and then complicate it at the upper levels? Or, does one attempt to tell a different story of feminism from the start? While many of Scott's conceptual tools allow us to find ways into telling different stories about feminism, her own narratives of feminist theory are structured around the notion of moving from simplicity to complexity in both the content and structure of her work.



## **Feeling Women's Liberation: Reparative Approaches to Feminist Histories**

One text that uses Scott's work to tell different stories about feminism is Victoria Hesford's *Feeling Women's Liberation*. Hesford writes a history of the United States feminist movement as a history of feeling; it is a reparative project focusing upon the watershed year of 1970. Women's liberation, Hesford argues, was as an upsetting event, one that is subject to strong feelings that occlude its complexity (2). She argues that the failure to historicize the production of women's liberation as a white women's movement has led to reductive and incomplete readings that present the movement as calcified. Her primary focus is upon the emergence of the feminist as lesbian as a central and, for mainstream media and some feminists, an anxiety-producing figure consolidated, in Hesford's view through Kate Millett's identification as bisexual in 1970. What makes Millett a key figure for Hesford's analysis is that representations of Millett's life continually exceeded, challenged, and subverted mainstream media representational frames.

Hesford reads along the archival grain of women's liberation, focusing on mainstream media coverage of the movement through a semiotic analysis of the *New York Times* from 1970; women's liberation manifestoes; and Millett's autobiography *Fear of Flying*. Hesford's analysis of *New York Times*'s coverage of the movement is a stand-out chapter. In it, Hesford argues that women's liberation was fought over and through the perceived ordinariness of white, middle-class women (23) and that media coverage of women's liberation represented the movement in relation to a nationalized white middle-class femininity. Through her reading of key feminist statements, including Robin Morgan's "Goodbye to All That"; Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*; and a Women's Liberation Statement speaking against *TIME* magazine's vitriolic attack on Millett, Hesford develops a nuanced argument that delves into how the women's movement was both responding to and implicated in mass-mediated "proper" femininity (85).

Using Scott's notion of the fantasy echo, Hesford compellingly argues that the lesbian figure (or lavender menace) within second-wave feminism brings together the lavender lady of the late-nineteenth century suffrage movement and the mannish woman or invert of the early-twentieth century. These two figures circle around

each other within women's liberation discourse, Hesford argues, but never become fully conjoined (135). Thinking about the figure of the lesbian as a fantasy echo provides a way to think about how identities are produced through history and shift over time; that echoes are inexact helps theorize the production and development of identities as less linear and more unpredictable than conventional genealogies might suggest.

Hesford argues that the second-wave lesbian continues to echo in a contemporary context, operating as a ghost or "screen memory" that displaces knowledge of women's liberation and continues to haunt and thus shape contemporary feminisms. She is an overdetermined figure that "whites-out" historical complexity. Hesford notes the irony that this once radical challenging figure now functions representationally as a conservative figure of feminism's essentialism. While Hemmings argues that part of this shift can be accounted for by the rise of queer theory, I also see this shift, in part, as the result of the absorption of mainstream backlash against feminism into feminist discourse and a wariness of playing into or actively taking up the tropes used to dismiss feminist claims.

As a way of speaking back to the claims of women's liberation as simply by, for, and about white, middle-class women, Hesford pays a loving attention to the movement's racial politics. Hesford reads black feminism's absence from media coverage as part of a containment strategy to help render women's liberation intelligible to the public, a strategy that also fed back into how women's liberationists saw and constructed themselves. But, drawing on Kate Millett's autobiographical accounts of her interactions with people of colour, which are often coded through exoticizing discourse, Hesford argues that the inability of women's movement to form cross-race alliances speaks to the "lack of collective memories, and fantasies, of transformational encounters between black and white women and the inability of white women to move towards the difference of black women" (202). If there are fantasy echoes of cross-race alliance in the long history of the US feminist movement, they are faint ones, ones that require greater attentiveness and critical listening.

## **Conclusion: Reimagining Feminist Histories**

Given the paucity of cross-race alliances in conventional movement histories, Hesford wants new

memories of the movement to be produced, in her words, “memories that will enable less limiting and more surprising articulations of our attachments and disattachments to the unsettling eventfulness of that time” (211). Similarly, Hemmings concludes her book with a hope for less predictable present and future and Scott advocates for the benefits of the vertigo that can be produced by critical examination. These calls for more unsettling ways of doing feminist histories are related to the pedagogical possibilities of surprise. As J. Bobby Noble argues, “the existence of identity-based programs stage tactical opportunities to teach students to be surprised by what they do not—perhaps cannot ever—know” (174). Being surprised by something offers an opening to unlearn what we already think we know; surprises unsettles us.

Can, Wendy Kolmar asks, “we only be haunted by our history, or can we find some productive ways to use and engage it?” (236). If we are indeed haunted by the ghosts of feminism’s “past,” moments of surprise have the potential to open up spaces where ghosts can speak to us. I think of my copy of *Sisterhood is Powerful* that I opened, read, was surprised by, and closed up again, somewhere in my past. We may not be able to, or our students may not be able to, use that new knowledge or new remembering right away, but we can hope that the process of being unsettled will echo and reverberate into the future.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that second-wave feminism was actually a utopian moment free of racism, classism, and homophobia, but it is to say that we need to take a closer look at what is being mobilized through blanket dismissive claims about North American feminism in the 1970s, particularly when this is an attempt by contemporary feminists to then self-construct themselves as untainted by or having moved beyond these processes in which we are all implicated.

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