8. Sorting through Feminist Cabinets with Clare Hemmings's *Why Stories Matter* (2011)

Maria Sulimma

The cover of Clare Hemmings's *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011) shows the minimalist art installment *Cabinet VIII* (2007) by artist Rachel Whiteread, an open cabinet filled with fortyish square boxes paper-wrapped in discreet colors. For the purpose of their 2008 auction, Sotheby's lauded Whitehead's use of "negative spaces" as well as an overall impression of the "post-minimal austerity of a white cabinet."[1] The neat, organized cabinet is less an allegorical illustration of the compelling book it graces than it may serve as the starting point for its theoretical undertaking. Feminist thinker Hemmings sets out to unwrap packages, to disturb their deliberate arrangement, and to take stock of what it is that we pack and store when we speak of feminist history and theory. There is an aesthetic at play on the book's cover which minimalist celebrity Marie Kondo would be delighted by, but, fortunately, Hemmings is not one to push aside a feminist past that does not "spark joy" in favor of a more adequate retelling, a clinical clean slate. Her goal is less to develop an alternate Western feminist intellectual history than to experiment "with how we might tell stories differently rather than telling different stories" (16).[2]

This essay on her work hence amounts to a kind of "culture cubed" rather than squared. After all, hers is a book *about* feminist theory which takes writing in feminist theory as its material, but is also a book *of* feminist theory

1 "(Auction) Red: Rachel Whiteread, Cabin VII," Sotheby's, accessed March 31, 2020, www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2008/auction-red-n08421/lot.10.html.

2 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

nonetheless, an important and innovative contribution to this vibrant interdisciplinary field. Hemmings is interested in feminist knowledge production, feminist theory-writing, and feminist academic cultures and frames such practices as feminist storytelling. "Story" is her term for the accounts feminists give of what happened in the past forty years of Western feminist theory; with "narrative," Hemmings describes the repetitive patterning of stories in content, context, and format across time (rather than referring to them as Foucauldian "discourses" or more generally "history"); and lastly, "(political) grammar" is her term for the narrative techniques these stories employ. This vocabulary is, of course, part of the inventory of literary studies and narratology. It is this disciplinary rooting that the following contribution suggests as a way to further appreciate Hemmings's intervention in our current moment, in which feminism after being repeatedly pronounced dead is commercially and socially ever-present.

To sort through a cabinet, to reorganize, to take stock or inventory—these are basic principles of housekeeping, traditionally coded as feminine and (often invisible) domestic labor. As metaphors, those activities allow me to describe and interact with Hemmings's work. Just like the kind of meta-theoretical analysis of her study, such housework is reproductive and keeps a household, or in this case feminist theory, alive, although it may not seem relevant at first. The book cover also evokes a bathroom medicine cabinet and thus recalls an illness or disease to be remedied by Hemmings's work. However, her reader cannot hope for a quick fix, a few easy guidelines that would help us be better feminist storytellers and feminist theorists. Rather what Hemmings suggests, is much harder and more substantial: she urges readers to sit with discomforts and uncertainty, to embrace ambiguity, and to decenter Western feminist theory. Such interventions and transformations are neither absolute nor definitive: "This works as a kind of serious joke … intended to open up rather than close down other possibilities in the present. I believe that keeping meaning open in this way is a primary feminist responsibility."[3] Rather than mending holes by including what was previously erased, for Hemmings, openness and unfinishedness of meaning and meaning-making should be a collective goal of feminist theory.

3 Clare Hemmings, "What is a Feminist Theorist Responsible for? Response to Rachel Torr," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 1 (2007): 69–76, here 75.

The Politics of De-Authorization and Recitation

In the first half of the book, Hemmings dedicates a chapter to each of the dominant stories of feminist theory: they are stories of progress, loss, or return. Her dazzlingly massive corpus consists of the issues of sixteen major peer-reviewed journals in feminist studies and gender studies as well as social and cultural theory published between 1998 and 2007. Hemmings offers close readings of the narrative strategies/grammar of these stories and cites only the year and journal of a publication, not its author(s), title, or topic. By following this tactic of de-authorization, she draws attention to feminist storytelling as a collective practice resonant with institutional logics. Because processes of peer-reviewing involve academic communities—aside from the individual author(s), active agents in knowledge production include editors, reviewers, boards, and responders—journals lend themselves to Hemmings's notion that feminist storytelling is created through collective repetition.

Despite their different subjects, the different affective attachments they inspire, and their different prognoses for feminist futures or rather the future of feminism, the feminist stories that Hemmings finds interact and share several commonalities. They firstly all rely on a decade-by-decade approach to feminism's history (the 1970s, the 1980s, the 19990s, the present/the 2000s).[4] Secondly, they all diagnose the current death, demise, or antagonism of feminism in the present. They use the "cultural turn" of the 1990s as a signpost (albeit evaluated differently by each story). Thirdly and lastly, they are "presumed" in that they rely on seeming common sense knowledge which the writer/theorist and reader should be able to agree upon. Here, Hemmings's findings immediately stand out, because these stories do not correspond to the prominent waves-metaphor so often used to speak about Western feminism's different stages. The stories cannot be conceived of as temporal phases but comprise three overlapping ways that feminist theory has found to speak about itself, about its past, and about what would need to happen in its future.

4 This chronology leaves individual decades "overburdened yet curiously flattened despite each story's unique truth claims" (5). For example, it contains the contributions of feminists of color as well as lesbian feminists solely in the 1980s—with few exceptions reframed as postcolonial or queer theory in the 1990s. Such a characterization not only erases these writers' earlier and current work but "fetishizes" their contributions as pillars of anti-essentialism or activism celebrated or mourned in the present (162).

Stories of progress emphasize improvement or maturity; they celebrate how far feminism has come since "the 1970s" and what has been won in the intellectual debates of the decades since. Among the achievements, such stories prize intersectionality and diversity. They pride themselves on moving away from inadequate, earlier essentialist and universalized categories like "woman." In these accounts, the past is "cast as irredeemably anachronistic in order that the present can represent the theoretical cutting edge" (38). A story of progress highlights an evolutionary move of feminist theory from simplicity to complexity, and from singularity to multiplicity, as well as opportunities the future offers for feminism to expand further.

As a mirror image of the optimistic subject of progress stories, the subject of stories of loss mourns the present as having moved away from past feminist activism. Such stories nostalgically view "the 1970s" as a time of rich feminist collaboration, a time of robust social movements and vibrant activism. They find that the poststructuralist influence of the 1990s has replaced activism with a depoliticized and overly theoretical career-feminism located primarily in the universities. Because the feminist theorist/storyteller relating these stories is herself likely an academic, the stories have to establish her as different from her career-driven peers. Interestingly, this differentiation occurs on the basis of disciplinary belonging. Those stories blame poststructuralist "theory play" for the decline of activism in the feminist academy: "(disciplinary) social science rigour and certainty is contrasted to [and pitted against] (interdisciplinary) humanities fluidity and openness" (85). In this thinking, poststructuralism becomes a catch-all to describe postmodernist, poststructuralist, or deconstructivist critique, methods, and theories. For stories of loss, queer theory is a significant part of an "elitist" cultural turn and incompatible with the kind of social science feminism these stories hope to reinstall in the present.

Western feminist stories of return seek to reconcile the other two strands of storytelling. In their conciliatory approach, they admit losses but also seek to continue a celebratory, positive stance to regain what has been lost. Thus, the subject position of a return narrative can be taken up by theorists previously signed up for progress or loss narratives, if they renounce what is presented as an already "unwanted critical and political burden": poststructuralism (106). As a compromise, they find poststructuralism to have offered relevant insights, like the abandonment of essentialism, but, in a nod to loss stories, argue it may now be time for more sturdy social-science approaches in light of continued gendered inequality worldwide.

Both the method with which Hemmings traces the manifestations of the three different stories as well as one of her proposed practices to intervene in their formations—to tell them differently—depend on citation. She calls these two different citation tactics de-authorization and recitation. By emphasizing citation, Hemmings follows in proven feminist practices of taking stock: counting names in indexes of publications, syllabi, conference programs ("congrats, you have an all-male panel!"), or faculty lists to make arguments for the inclusion of women.[5]

As explained above, by withholding author names, de-authorization avoids the singling out of individual authors as embodiments of larger trends. This allows Hemmings to respectfully accentuate academic practices without pointing fingers. I was reminded of Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine's *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (2011). Newman and Levine highlight gender- and class-based value judgments in US-American television studies, yet do so by discussing the work of individual colleagues whom they find complicit in those legitimating discourses. By focusing on specific academics, their examples run the risk of drawing attention away from the institutional dynamics so rightfully criticized. De-authorization may in this case serve as a productive kind of plagiarism.

Some of *Stories*'s reviewers found this "unique,"[6] but others felt it was bordering on the "unethical or ungenerous."[7] Hemmings expresses understanding for such concerns since "feminist theorists' contributions are too often sidelined in social theory already" (236). Her risky maneuver (and that of her publisher Duke University Press, since this book is as much the result of a collective practice as the articles it analyzes) serves as an important lesson in the dangers of peer-reviewed academic writing. Hemmings highlights how academic writing is shaped by "technologies of the presumed" and "politics of the rehearsed": "these resonances across and between narratives situate us as feminist subjects in ways we are not fully in control of" (19, 20, 134).

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5 In the words of Sara Ahmed, "I am referring to all those who travel under the sign women. No feminism worthy of its name would use the sexist idea 'women born women' to create the edges of feminist community, to render trans women into 'not women,' or 'not born women,' or into men."*Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 14.

6 Ilya Parkins, "Affecting Feminist Subjects, Rewriting Feminist Theory," review of *Why Stories Matter*, by Clare Hemmings, *Cultural Theory* 2, no. 2 (2011): 30–34, here 31.

7 Deborah M. Withers, review of *Why Stories Matter*, by Clare Hemmings, *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19, no. 2 (2012): 253–256, here 254.

Her proposed method to tell stories differently also utilizes the "surprising—if a little cheeky—experiment" of "recitation."[8] Recitation is inspired by practices of feminist and postcolonial rewriting of literary "classics" and canonized works because in both instances "the potent absences or half-presences in the original text become central in their rewriting" (181). Birgit Spengler argues that such rewritten fictions "direct their readers to a mode of reception that will acknowledge the text's deliberate association with a literary predecessor and take it into account."[9] Not to be mistaken with mere substitution, recitation becomes a method to reorganize and repack the feminist cabinet in a reflexive and reflecting manner. In her demonstration, Hemmings recites Judith Butler by replacing their intellectual alignment with Michel Foucault with the rarely acknowledged influence of Monique Wittig. Through the seemingly simple act of replacing Foucault's name with that of Wittig, Hemmings changes the meaning of select quotations and reinterprets the stories they contribute to. Her intervention disrupts Western feminist stories that hold feminism and postmodernism apart, draws out the influence of lesbian materialism in Butler's work, and troubles the division between feminist theory and queer theory. In response to a critique for focusing on an academic "star,"[10] Hemmings argues that is precisely Butler's exceptional role in Western feminist storytelling, as either the heroine or villain equated with poststructuralism and/or queer theory, that lends itself to telling stories differently (176).

For this "repetition with a twist" to work, Hemmings centralizes her attachments: "I am, once again, not a neutral observer of these histories and citation practices, but someone who has vested interest in challenging them, and these investments are brought to the text rather than only being produced in the moment of reading" (178). Some reviewers found recitation to be a limited practice specifically because it requires prior textual attachments as well as an awareness of the way those attachments are erased in stories. "What if," Deborah Withers wonders, "the readers of a text have no experience

8 Michelle Meagher, review of *Why Stories Matter*, by Clare Hemmings, *Women's Studies* 41, no. 5 (2012): 601–604, here 603.

9 Birgit Spengler, *Literary Spinoffs: Rewriting the Classics—Re-Imagining the Community* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2015), 13.

10 Rachel Torr, "What's Wrong with Aspiring to Find Out What Has Really Happened in Academic Feminism's Recent Past? Response to Clare Hemmings' 'Telling Feminist Stories,'" *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 1 (2007): 59–67.

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."[11] Carla Lam similarly concludes that "whether one agrees they [recited stories] would, ipso facto, be better epistemologies and ontologies ultimately depends on one's affective attachments."[12] Such criticisms miss how Hemmings's newly recited story neither seeks to replace a previous story nor claims to be a "correct" version that definitively settles the score.

Instead, the impulse that *Stories* offers feminist theory (or feminist scholarship generally) is to embrace the partiality of storytelling without aspiring to represent wholeness. It aims to generate productive discomforts and ambiguity. It urges scholars to not only reflect on one's own textual attachments but to begin theory-building from precisely these attachments whichever form they take. Hypothetically, if a reader felt she could not notice erasures in feminist stories, her textual insecurity may serve as a productive point to recite (in Hemmings's sense) their accessibility. Hemmings does not propose a method that would be available only to the most confident and well-read feminist theorists but conversely one that may make feminist theory more accessible. It increases the things we can do with theory and the ways in which we can engage with the writing of others. It is central that this call to redesign and rethink feminist theory comes from someone so expertly versed in the landscape of Western feminist theory. It recalls a related intervention in literary theory by Rita Felski, another eloquent theorist who suggests a reevaluation of the craft she so impressively masters, the revision of a field she is well established in.[13]

(Un)Folding Feminisms

One of Hemmings's favorite words to describe the interventions she proposes is striking in this regard. Frequently she describes how her approach "folds"

11 Withers, review, 255.

12 Carla Lam, "Know(ing) the Difference: Onto-epistemology and the Story of Feminism," review of *Why Stories Matter*, by Clare Hemmings, *Hypatia* 30, no. 2 (May 2015): 486–493, here 489.

13 On Felski, see the contribution by Jesse Ramírez in this volume.

> … textual and political absences in the stories we already participate in … back into narrative in order to reconfigure the political grammars of Western feminism. (27)
> … the hauntings of Western feminist stories that matter to me … back into the textual heart of narratives of progress, loss, and return. (165)
> … what haunts these stories back into them, making visible what is, importantly, *already there*. (180)

Gilles Deleuze has written extensively about the fold as a philosophical-theoretical concept to think about a world compressed and shaped in multiple visible and invisible pockets. The borders between folds, their differences and sameness, interested Deleuze who finds folding to create a labyrinth-like structure hidden away and always only partially revealed:

> Always a fold within the fold, like a cavern within the cavern. The unit of matter, the smallest element of the labyrinth, is the fold, not the point, which is never a part, but only an extremity of the line. That is why the parts of matter are masses or aggregates, as corollary to the compressive elastic force. The unfold is thus not the opposite of the fold, but follows one fold until the next.[14]

There is much here that can be applied to Hemmings's reworking of familiar stories through practices of folding. Hemmings folds "hauntings" into stories, ghostly presences or vectors that hover, that seek entrance, and that the attentive storyteller becomes aware of. The recited story is just another version of feminist storytelling—never the last call but only a more detailed loop in the labyrinth of folds. Deleuze, like Hemmings, prioritizes the process of (un)folding as a productive yet endless activity. However, to recite Hemmings through Deleuze would create the kind of "heterocitation" that Hemmings is rightfully weary of, so instead let's consider more commonplace, everyday uses of folding as they are more coherent with the housework of cabinet inventory I am interested in.

The OED defines the act of folding as follows: "To arrange (a piece of cloth, a surface, etc.), so that one portion lies reversed over or alongside another; to double or bend over upon itself. … Often contextually implying repeated action of this kind. to fold up: to close or bring into a more compact form by

14 Gilles Deleuze, "The Fold," *Yale French Studies* 80, Baroque Topographies: Literature/History/Philosophy (1991): 227–247, here 231.

repeated folding."[15] Many things can be folded: clothing, books, furniture, or appliances are unfolded to be used and folded to be stored for various reasons, among them utility, convenience, preparedness, or aesthetics. The much-quoted advice that "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair," attributed to Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to the US Congress and first presidential candidate of color, reminds us that the preparedness and utility of the folded appliance have feminist potentials for independence and self-reliance. To unfold is to allow for greater complexity and more consumption of space. Bodies or body parts fold and unfold during exercise demonstrating flexibility and endurance. When Hemmings folds absences back into narratives, she makes these feminist stories less palatable, less convenient, possibly less aesthetically pleasing, and also less flexible to be utilized for non-feminist purposes.

In a podcast interview, Hemmings expressed the hope that her work "opens up for the reader and the writer a possibility of multiplicity in what has happened in feminist thinking that makes it much harder to coopt multiplicity because cooptation tends to require a very seamless narrative that can be taken over by a different political discourse."[16] While *Stories* is an important lesson about feminist knowledge production, it also makes an urgent case for why feminist stories "matter" in regard to their amenability for non-feminist, and even antifeminist, or postfeminist purposes. Feminist stories lend themselves to "a broad range of accounts of gendered meaning in a contemporary global sphere" (156). Commercial dynamics are part of these institutionalized gendered meanings, as well, even though the extreme commercialization and commodification of feminism were not as pronounced yet when Hemmings published her book.

Rescuing Feminism from its Desire for Heroines

In *Stories*, Hemmings finds the trope of the death or demise of feminism to accommodate a kind of quest for the feminist subject; her desire to rescue feminism serves as the driving force of her storytelling. In recent years, however,

15 *OED Online*, s.v. "fold, v.1," accessed March 31, 2020, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/72479?rskey=SejIcw&result= 5&isAdvanced=false#eid.

16 "Interview with Clare Hemmings," interview by Yasmin Gunaratnam, *Case Stories*, 2013, audio, 6:05-6:28, http://www.case-stories.org/clare-hemmingsnew-page.

feminism(s) in popular culture have changed from paradoxical postfeminist iterations in *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) or *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) toward the more celebratory stance and increasingly commercialized appropriation of feminist images and rhetoric within "marketplace feminism."[17] These days, pop stars like Beyoncé refer to themselves as feminist—most prominently at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards. Designer Christian Dior sells a $710 T-shirt telling us that "We Should All Be Feminists" with budget versions available from H&M and Forever21; "political" femvertising seeks to "empower" female self-acceptance. We have moved far from times in which popular culture did not present feminism as fashionable, young, and aspirational, but as passé: the unspeakable f-word that only clichéd figures like "feminist killjoys," angry "feminazis," "hysterical" or lesbian man-haters would use.[18] The problem with the seemingly "evolved," recent messages, as Sarah Banet-Weiser puts it, is that the politically sounding statements reduce feminism to the surface and the individual. As a result, even when "spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility … it often stops there, as if *seeing* or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures."[19] Popular feminisms amount to mere proclamations of identity ("this is what a feminist looks like"), as if proclamations are enough to change systemic inequalities.

It would be easy to spin new feminist stories out of this trajectory: a feminist story of progress, of popular culture bringing students into our seminar rooms eager to learn feminist scholarship; a feminist story of loss, of a postfeminist marketplace that profits off of and depoliticizes feminist work; and a feminist story of return, because both previous versions sound true. Hemmings's work demonstrates how claims to feminism as an accessory for self-expression and self-fashioning are not opposed to feminist theory-building. Just like in the commercial co-optation of feminism, in feminist storytelling, there is an extended emphasis on the storyteller as the subject of her stories. Even if her quest or mission may have changed (feminism does not require much redemption these days), its stories are imagined as stories of femi-

17 Andi Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to Covergirl, the Buying and the Selling of a Political Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), xiii.

18 On "feminist killjoys," see Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 37–42.

19 Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.

nist subjectivity that easily lend themselves to the commercial exploitation through consumer culture.

Feminist storytelling is driven by "a desire to be the heroine not the antiheroine of feminist theory" (80), a heroine absolved of all doubts about her story which are instead cast onto the enemy it proposes to blame for the demise of feminism. "The right to be the heroine," Hemmings writes "is one of the main prizes fought over within Western feminist narratives," in contests or battles over being the "real feminist theorist" (191, 80). Narratologist Gérard Genette described the narrator who appears as the protagonist of her own story as "autodiegetic."[20] Western feminist storytelling (or most writing in and about theory) tends to privilege modes of autodiegetic writing and asks readers to share in this perspective on the storyworld. Whether readers identify with one particular feminist story over another depends on their ability to identify with the feminist subject produced by the story: her successes, frustrations, realizations, and hopes for the future. "Unsurprisingly, we usually prefer the tales that present us in a favorable light over those that do not" (80). This "favorable light" involves shedding all "taints" of privilege and casting ourselves as the underdog a reader should root for. Again, Hemmings's self-reflexive consideration of her involvement in the stories demonstrates their "affective pull": "These narrative appeals draw me in and spin me round, sometimes spit me out" (136; 63).

To give an example of the ways that casting oneself as an underdog occurs in the cultural repertoire of the moment, there appeared to be a ubiquitous desire to shed the taint of privilege(s) in the year 2020. Cultural critic Lauren Michele Jackson calls this tendency "a kind of verbal tic of the pandemic, an oral asterisk assuring others of our consideration and responsibility—very unlike *those* heedless people over there."[21] Like other intellectuals of color, Jackson describes experiencing an inconsiderate kind of "unchecked privilege-checking" engaged by everyone from celebrities to "acquaintances and estranged friends, family members and hookups," all of whom "came out of the woodwork, confessing a privilege that they hoped to be comforted for. One began to realize that for some people there must be ecstasy in saying,

20 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 244–45.

21 Lauren Michele Jackson, "Kim Kardashian and the Year of Unchecked Privilege-Checking," *The New Yorker*, December 23, 2020, www.newyorker.com/culture/2020-in-review/kim-kardashian-and-the-year-of-unchecked-privilege-checking.

over and over, for whomever would receive it, 'I am … ,' 'I am … ,' 'I have … ,' 'I have …' … It did not occur to many people in 2020 that unbosoming can be worse than silence."[22] That is because the person casting themselves in this autodiegetic mode is completely unaware or inconsiderate of the pain, discomfort, or plain inconvenience that their "confessions" and desire for absolution cause in the person they are speaking to—and whose absolution for their privilege they seek. Jackson's analysis demonstrates the popularity of wokeness in the current moment, and how it is used in such "confessions" to enact exactly what Hemmings criticizes as a problematic kind of storytelling with the goal of ridding oneself of guilt and presenting oneself as morally good, a worthy protagonist of the story.

But although these iterations might be new, reflective of a different moment in history, their baseline position is not. The literary and cultural figure of the female storyteller is well established; it ranges from fairy tale narrators—Scheherazade of the Middle Eastern folk tale collection *One Thousand and One Nights* who saves her life through cliffhangers in her captivating stories—to the female trickster figures explored by Lori Landay.[23] These cultural archetypes have long been attractive to feminist audiences and may be unconsciously mobilized in the stories feminist theory tells about itself and the types of engagements its stories offer. Storytelling has always been relevant to pedagogy and (political) education, and it seems little surprising that theory and other genres of academic writing also utilize its tropes.

The Death of the Feminist Author?

But if this subject status is also a problem, how does Hemmings propose we proceed? Does the feminist theorist have to (symbolically) die in her writing, thus replaying the much-proclaimed death of the author? The feminist theorist-cum-subject may not have to die but she will have to move to the sidelines to tell stories that do not exclusively depend on her subject status and quests to rescue feminism.[24] Hemmings here takes her cue from Gayatri Spivak who

22 Jackson, "Kim Kardashian." (first four ellipses in original)

23 Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

24 On the role of first-person narrative in sociology and cultural studies, see the essay by Alexander Starre in this volume.

challenges Western feminism's insistence on itself as a subject in a relationship with a postcolonial subaltern to which only it can extend subject status. The solution is neither to propose a new feminist subject nor to do away with subjectivity altogether but to move from autodiegetic storytelling to storytelling from a homodiegetic narrative position, in which the theorist is not at the center but a minor character. Hemmings suggests that the transformation of the relation between the feminist subject and object allows for "other histories and *intersubjective* relationships that are less routine or overdetermined" (196).

Following from Hemmings's observations on older types of feminist storytelling, we need to be careful to not merely rephrase our stories and present ourselves as the new feminist heroes out to save feminism from either capitalist commodification or teenage Instagrammers posing in feminist H&M t-shirts with copies of Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990).[25] The neoliberal capitalist market did not merely grab our passion and our work—feminist stories—and we cannot be the innocent victims on a revenge quest to redeem feminism. The responsibility to "save" feminism, be it from its demise through the "wrong" feminist subjects or postfeminist capitalist forces, is too much for an individual subject to shoulder: such constructions overstate "the difference a feminist subject position will necessarily make to how narratives work, and … [allow] a feminist eye to be deflected from the politics at work in her own invested construction," Hemmings concludes. Ultimately this produces "epistemological and political dead ends" (136–137).

The realization that "she may not be the subject of history at all" will spark different textual engagements and affects for the writers and readers of feminist history and theory (214). To tell narratives differently, the Western feminist storyteller will have to give up her position as the exclusive subject, regardless of how uncomfortable and even horrific the new dimensions of her familiar stories will become. In media and film studies, work on shock, horror and the abject, as well as in postcolonial responses to this scholarship, Hemmings finds productive concepts to express these consequences and describe her desire for a feminist future with "some unpredictability" (226). Both of Hemmings's methods to make feminist theory less amenable to co-optation—de-authorization, recitation, and the encouragement of uncomfortable

25 Granted, young Instagrammers (and especially female-identifying ones) get dunked on enough as it is. Yet, this adds to my point, that such social media users and their self-fashioning cannot serve as an enemy for feminist theory and feminist activism.

alternative textual affects—serve to disorient readers. Hemmings imagines feminist storytelling and feminist theory as uncertain and undecided. Hers is a plea to allow oneself to become unsettled, to unlearn the landscape of feminist theory, to give up the safety and security that certainty offers.

Through Hemmings's interest in affect and feminist knowledge production, her work intersects with that of fellow feminist thinkers like Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed.[26] To recite Hemmings with Berlant, Western feminist stories stem from their narrator's desire for a kind of "feminist good life" in which the demise of feminism is prevented, the feminist heroine becomes united with the reader of her text, and their shared feminist efforts are recognized. Each of these stories sets up its own antagonists as obstacles for why this feminist good life has not manifested yet and constitutes a future to aspire toward. Hemmings in a way suggests that we need to reflect upon the desire for this good life as a fiction that does political work in the present.

Similarly, in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Ahmed argues for an understanding of feminist theory as "homework," an encompassing activity not reduced to the academy or the classroom, but a continuous work of building: "we need to resist positioning feminist theory as simply or only a tool, in the sense of something that can be used in theory, only then to be put down or put away. It should not be possible to do feminist theory without being a feminist, which requires an active and ongoing commitment to live one's life in a feminist way."[27] Like Hemmings, Ahmed encourages feminists to embrace the multiplicity of one's engagements and experiences shaped by feminism and shaping feminism: "What's my feminist story? Like you, I have many."[28] Hence, the cabinet that we may sort through with Hemmings will become even messier: this is a feminist politics of ambivalence that is interested in "the entanglement of the space of the present encounter (imagined or real) as the space of [home]work, rather than the space that must be cleaned up in order for judgments to occur" (226). Our awareness of the amenability of feminist stories is something we have to assume to be part of these stories, something we cannot neatly tease out and separate.

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26 See contributions by Frank Kelleter and Samuel Zipp in this volume. Ahmed's work is an ideal candidate for future installments of this publication.

27 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 14.

28 Sara Ahmed, 30.

Ambivalent Futures

Hemmings's follow-up book to *Stories* was eagerly awaited by feminist readers such as myself, curious to find out how she would do feminist theory after the interventions of her earlier work. *Considering Emma Goldman* (2018) continues Hemmings's interests in displaced subjectivity, the uncertainty of feminist theory and history, recitation, and affective attachments. In this book, it is not solely the desire to be the feminist subject but also the desire for the feminist icon (which resonates with the celebrity feminist or the feminist spokesperson) that sparks her interest. Hemmings walks this tightrope with patience for herself and the feminist stories she tells about/with Goldman as well as her own complicated relationship with the controversial figure. Again, Hemmings folds ambivalence back into the stories she explores, for example with regard to Goldman's racism, instead of following the desire to neatly repackage Goldman for a feminist present. Not to make one's limitations and affects something to be overcome, but instead to turn them into the foundation of theory-writing: this is what Hemmings encourages by example. Her feminist politics of ambivalence are demonstrated in her affective engagements with Goldman: "She speaks back in the ways that those represented have a habit of doing: in her resistance that I feel in my belly, in the ways words or images will not bend to my interpretation, in the fervency of her own writing that seeps into mine, so that at times I feel more like a fraudulent medium than a queer feminist theorist."[29]

In her response to a critic of her earlier writing, Hemmings has similarly described how she struggles not to rely on established academic mechanisms. Defending an alternate story of feminist theory is hard when also dealing with criticisms of her work that rely on the grand narratives that her books precisely critiques. To defend herself in this manner would result in an unproductive deadlock for her: "And so we face one another, in irritation and in mockery, under- and over-reading both, imagining each other. Was that what I wanted?"[30] As both of the above quotations demonstrate, the critical persona Hemmings takes up in her work is no confident heroine but characterized by self-reflexivity, aware of her desires in writing theory, and interested in where these desires stem from rather than giving in to their pressures. This is a

29 Clare Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 25–26.

30 Clare Hemmings, "What is a Feminist Theorist," 70.

patient persona which is understanding and almost gentle with her textual needs and those of critics, colleagues, readers, or others.

The surprisingly compatible combination of intellectual curiosity and gentleness (of which de-authorization is but one example) is an inspiring perspective well worth imitating as a writing practice. Hemmings's embrace of discomfort and ambivalence, as well as her understanding of theory as storytelling, is fundamental for current feminist theory and cultural theory. This is especially true in the context of the neoliberal university and its increased pressures on productivity and "marketability" of scholarship. The kind of theory Hemmings proposes (and produces) asks us to sort through seemingly tidy cabinets and fold back things that are hidden. The overflowing boxes of the cabinet quickly become impossible to close. Feminist theory sprawls out of them, leaks into our lives in messy ways that inspire us, but also exhaust and challenge us. This is a rich scenario for cultural theory and feminist theory in the twenty-first century.