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Telling Feminist *Philosophy* Stories:
Introduction to the *Feminist Philosophy
Quarterly* Symposium on Cressida
Heyes's *Anaesthetics of Existence:
Essays on Experience at the Edge*

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Telling Feminist *Philosophy* Stories: Introduction to the *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* Symposium on Cressida Heyes's *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge*

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Abstract

This introduction reflects on *practices of telling stories* about works by influential contemporary feminist philosophers, interrogating what is considered impactful feminist philosophy. I frame this edition through a particular kind of recitational engagement with Heyes's work—through her own previous writings and my first-personal experiences with the text and her role in my intellectual formation as my dissertation supervisor. I draw on Clare Hemmings's (2011) work on the grammar of feminist intellectual storytelling, offering brush strokes through embodied and relational stories that help me make sense of *Anaesthetics*, in order to tell alternative stories to frame the work, specifically Heyes's methods, impacts, and the relations amongst her previous works. In reflecting on the embodied realities and feminist intellectual networks that inform our framing practices, I consider how we are relationally and affectively invested in figures and thinkers, our schools of thought, our style of philosophy, and our forms of participation in the discipline. Through these reflections, I trace Heyes's work as grasping life examples with rich opportunities to grapple with stubborn philosophical ambivalences in conceptualizing embodied freedom and agency, while developing adaptive methods that probe their transcendental conditions.

Keywords: Clare Hemmings, feminist philosophy, Cressida Heyes, feminist agency, resistance, embodiment, feminist storytelling

“My interest in suffering is perhaps indicative of my unease with feminism-as-martyrdom and my (unfulfillable) desire to challenge authority and break free of docility in the name of a kind of liberation that I am ostensibly arguing against. In the end, how to make sense of the claim that agency and freedom have multiple grammars within the context of my own feminist political commitments is a genealogical project that may just be the subject of my next book.”

—Cressida Heyes, response to reviewers of *Self-Transformations*, 2010

This symposium contains an introduction by the author to *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge* (2020),¹ three original essay responses by Megan Burke, Talia Mae Bettcher, and Alisa Bierria, and a response to these essays from Heyes. The essay responses are revised and triply anonymous-reviewed versions of commentaries presented at the Pacific APA in 2022. These essays resist the summary-criticism formula of standard commentaries, as each deploys ideas in the monograph into a conversation with their own work, extending and complicating Heyes's arguments. Given that we have the benefit of Heyes's introduction to her monograph, careful engagement with said work by Burke, Bettcher, and Bierria, and Heyes's response to these essays, there is less of a need for an editor's introduction to rehash or boil down (choose your cooking metaphor) the monograph under discussion. Taken together, in form, we have a model of feminist philosophical conversation, but in content, these pieces offer a meditation on the role of experience in intersectional feminist philosophy—specifically, one that brings forward states of *unconsciousness*, since they are primarily devalued, neglected, and absent from the philosophical literature. My introduction takes the example of this symposium as a provocation to reflect on feminist philosophical *practices*, considering specifically framing, storytelling, and intellectual inheritances. Rather than thematically “introducing” the special issue, I undertake a particular kind of re-citational engagement with Heyes's thinking, drawing on Clare Hemmings's (2011) work on the grammar of feminist intellectual storytelling.

Looking back, I did not anticipate that my introduction would wade into such meta-introductory territory. However, I should have seen the seeds of my bad faith in the proposal for the symposium, where I suggested my introduction would locate *Anaesthetics* in Heyes's intellectual trajectory, assuming and imposing a coherent, continuous, and progressing body of thought, which culminates in the author's latest work. My proposal also claimed I would square the introduction with the mission of the journal—specifically, to raise the presence and impact of women and feminist philosophers. Despite what some might call my cockeyed optimism, this error thankfully offers a chance to reflect on *practices of telling stories* about works by contemporary feminist philosophers, which thereby shapes what is considered impactful philosophy. Heyes also grapples with framing practices when introducing Wittgenstein as a figure of political inquiry, understanding it as a “complicated hermeneutical challenge” (2003, 3) and citing what she calls “ambiguous biographical evidence” (2) in an attempt to sketch connections to a political vision. We are often asked to explain and describe intellectual inheritances in our writing without direct

¹ This monograph won the David Easton Award from the *Foundations of Political Theory* caucus of the American Political Science Association in 2021. Other winners include Jurgen Habermas (in 1997), Charles Taylor (2008), and Wendy Brown (2012).

engagement with the invisible frame of prior agreements about what counts as worthy of discussion (Zerilli 1998). To put a finer point on our philosophical training, this kind of writing is common but not considered a central form of intellectual engagement in philosophy. The notion of *introducing* itself carries a temporal entry point for stories, evoking narrative structures about how ideas are best understood and how thinkers are best placed in a field. It is no surprise I promised such a story of linear, intelligible intellectual trajectories, since telling coherent philosophical stories is rewarded in our discipline. These stories often take the shape of ideas progressing through a dialectic of step-by-step critique and overcoming critique that moves us to a position of greater and more illuminated philosophical understanding. In resisting my proposed storytelling, I'm pushing the genre of introduction to its *edge*. Instead, I offer brush strokes, citing Heyes's own reflections and works, as well as relational and embodied stories that help me make sense of *Anaesthetics*, offering ways of engaging feminist intellectual networks and embodied realities that inform our framing practices.

Hemmings's (2011) work has in mind practices of feminist political storytelling that both deploy particular citational tactics and encourage specific textual affects. The first being about *who* we cite *when*, especially in framing questions, evoking schools of thought, which thus contributes to forming feminist subjects (Hemmings 2011, 5). The affective texture is how one is oriented *towards* their school of thought, its (deserving) prominence or (tragic) lack thereof, its (exciting) cutting-edgedness, its (sad) old fashionedness, and so forth. Hemmings asks the very important question of how these relations to feminist schools of thought and influential figures distinguish *generations* within feminist academics, forming professional norms and resulting subjectivities. For example, as a reader of Heyes's three monographs, I might impose a teleology of first overcoming problems of essentialism (*Line Drawings* [Heyes 2000]) and then overcoming gendered embodied practices as necessarily repressive (*Self-Transformations* [Heyes 2007]), leading to overcoming erasures of gendered nonexperiences (Heyes 2020). The use of "essays on" in the monograph's title, signals resistance to both an imposed characterization of a bounded central problem and narratives of heroic "overcoming." Heyes's inclusion of a "coda" at the end of *Anaesthetics* evokes its Latin meaning of "tail" or "edge" (*cauda*), trailing behind her feminist method of (re)working with case studies and the irreducibility of individual experiences. Hemmings argues that when we frame a text or an author as "overcoming" a problem, the "political grammar of feminist narratives" reiterates a methodological essentialism, positioning a fixed, potentially heroic subject of the narrative as one tells a story. Heyes (2020, 142) points to exactly this imposition in another register, saying that "in Foucault's rendering a life and its author are in theory immanent to each other, this position quickly gets lost in discussions of agency, which inflate self-sovereignty and overstate the scope and value of choice, action, and (for

feminists especially) transgression.” Further, Hemmings (2011, 195) argues that we must abandon the “fantasy of neutrality” that covers over our affective attachments to particular thinkers, their works, and how we tell stories of their interrelatedness. Hemmings suggests that a return to first-person experiences can challenge these dominant teleologies because they offer multiple overlapping perspectives and affects towards texts (13). This is in explicit tension with dominant norms of academic philosophical writing (we speak of ideas, not personal relationships!) and academic neoliberal professionalization, where we must tell objective, linear stories of our research impact and how it will solve complex social problems, while at the same time “breaking new ground” in our disciplines.

When I turn towards my multiple and overlapping experiences of *Anaesthetics*, I’m confronted with the kinds of temporal and affective markers Hemmings describes. I especially couldn’t tell a neutral or objective story about *Anaesthetics* even if I put on my most impressive analytic philosopher hat. By now, my meta-framing of this special section should signal a hesitation, one relating to relational networks and affective ties to the author: from 2007 to 2014 Cressida Heyes served as my dissertation supervisor. Most if not all who read this will have a grasp on how affective and formative this relationship can be, especially if one undertakes this relationship ethically, deliberately, and with extraordinary humour, as Cressida does. It is said that the mark of an effective mentor is the ability to access the mentor’s imagined voice in one’s inner monologue. Writing this introduction with the internalized voice of my mentor—who is also the text’s author—prompted, to put it mildly, a phenomenology of splitting. Shifting and sifting between and amongst my imagined thinking voices—me, my advisor, the text, my experiences of its development, professional and philosophical norms, guardrails of past experiences—I sat to write on the work but could not write in proposed form. This is the point of feminist risk where we must claim, I think, how we are relationally and affectively invested in figures and thinkers, our schools of thought, our style of philosophy, and our forms of participation in the profession, including such influential relationships as supervisor/supervisee.²

² I am deeply indebted to Ethel Tungohan, whose podcast *Academic Aunties* (2021–present) highlights these relational networks and at the same time cultivates communities of care for navigating exclusions in the academy. (See Michael Rancic, “*Academic Aunties* Provides a Community of Care,” *University Affairs*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/news/news-article/academic-aunties-provides-a-community-of-care/>.)

It is extremely common for former students to write on or edit the work of their supervisors,³ yet philosophers rarely discuss in the open the ongoing impact of these affective and relational attachments when doing so—they remain in the background. These relationships are referenced, if at all, as *past* (and we find ourselves in the objective/neutral/independent present), even though so-called historical anecdotes about philosophical figures and lineages are retold and shape the *present*. It is puzzling that we do not speak more openly or often about these relationships of influence, since situating thinkers in temporal relationships is a foundational practice in the discipline, whether they are of direct pedagogical influence (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle) or mutual influences (Arendt and Heidegger, Sartre and Beauvoir) or as a respondent (Kant and Hume, Sartre and Husserl). How we tell stories of influence (and we do) often maps progress narratives where a new generation of academics create a break with the past as we slowly shelve anachronistic work. Given that feminist philosophy is a relatively new area in Western philosophy, its framing and affective storytelling practices are of particular importance as we consider who are figures of impact or influence and why. As someone who has studied Simone de Beauvoir in great depth, my sense is that the stories we tell about feminist philosophers and their works profoundly shape not just the wider discipline but how we find our intellectual networks in philosophy.

For example, my dependence on Beauvoir's feminist existential-phenomenological method sustains the frame through which I understand philosophy—I'm deeply indebted to her method of philosophizing by way of reflecting on first-personal accounts. Beauvoir is perhaps a perfect case of what happens to feminist philosophers with what Hemmings labels "star status," where a feminist thinker is "heterocited" as a dependant thinker, one whose primary and exclusive influence is a male/masculine precursor and their dependence is used as a way of marking a shift *away* from feminism (2011, 164, 167).⁴ Heterocitation in philosophy has a self-perpetuating irony to it since most feminist philosophers are *required* to be fluent in a white male/masculine cannon through which to form oneself and find philosophical tools and footing in the discipline. Beauvoir is my own "touchstone" figure, signifying a generational shift in some parts of feminist philosophy. This generational shift itself has had considerable impact on the understanding of

³ Just as I prepare to publish this, I have found that Heyes has published a chapter on the public philosophy of her dissertation cosupervisor, James Tully: "Justification, Pluralism, and Disciplinary Discontents; or, Leaving Philosophy" in Dimitrios Karmis and Jocelyn Maclure's *Civic Freedom in an Age of Diversity: The Public Philosophy of James Tully* (Heyes 2023).

⁴ For a sustained discussion of Beauvoir's citational politics, see my article "La Grande Sartreuse? Re-citing Beauvoir in Feminist Theory" (Rodier 2015).

Beauvoir as citationally dependant on Sartre. Does the shift away from dependence then move us towards heroic stories about Beauvoir? Given that feminist philosophers are often described as merely deriving or applying the work of their male intellectual precursors, how do we critically retell stories about their intellectual labour and development of ideas?

When I was considering how to discuss Heyes's "intellectual trajectory," I kept coming back to her touchstone figures, Wittgenstein and Foucault—both figures whose methods signify breaks with dominant philosophical norms. One way in which I can frame Heyes's engagement with these two precursors is internal to their recursive philosophical methods. For example, Heyes's use of Wittgenstein's "aspectual captivity" returns her to examine ontological "pictures" of how things must be, and experiments with philosophical practices trying to shift the conditions that make these pictures possible. Likewise, Foucault's focus on knowledge/power regimes, revealing techniques, and contingencies of producing "the subject" also point us to meta-commitments, explaining why *Self-Transformations* can be understood, I think, as a feminist metaethical project. Grappling with the limits of entrenched ontologies in *Self-Transformations*, Heyes (2007, 18) observes that many of our attempts at resistance to oppressive norms "may inadvertently be premised on the same grammar and serve to entrench them yet further into our form of life." This makes sense of why Heyes's philosophical approach is a sustained seeking out of sites to probe the limits of how we can think these ambivalences while resisting oppression (whether in political uses of "woman," the relationship of the self and the body, or the role of nonexperience in feminist politics). These related cases demonstrate a deliberate feminist selection of life experiences through which to develop and refine recursive method of philosophical examination that holds the potential to shift their embodied meanings and political uses. The genealogical phenomenological method demonstrated in *Anaesthetics*, I think, signals somewhat of a shift towards adapting and inventing critical tools more specifically for the historical moment it is developed to address. Heyes develops these case studies around specific feminist ambivalences within forms of gendered subjectivity, specifically those in which dominant norms for hypervigilant (feminist) agency carry with them interrelated experiences of "checking out" in feminist/feminine experience. Her method continues the work of provoking transformative understandings of feminist ambivalences amongst multiple grammars of agency and freedom (Heyes 2010, 232), but develops it for postdisciplinary feminist contexts unanticipated by Foucault or Wittgenstein.

An area of the monograph that is not discussed at length in the commentaries is chapter 5, "Child, Birth: An Aesthetic." This work discusses a rare topic in feminist philosophy, and it addresses an even more rare embodied affective relation, too, which is storytelling about one's birth experience. Perhaps, like me, you gleefully flip to an author's acknowledgements to get glimpses into their "real life" or writing

process. When I did so, I was delighted to see Cressida's acknowledgements cite their own dissertation cosupervisor Marguerite Deslauriers, who said, on learning Heyes was pregnant, "that this undergoing would be a great gift to philosophy" (Heyes 2020, ix). Amongst the cohort of her students at the time, we (rightly) joked that pregnancy and birth would be in the next book. This generational connection strikes me as particular to a feminist philosophical story—an embodied supervisor, reproductive labour, and one's earthly, messy body united through overlapping temporal connections, manifest in writing. In *Anaesthetics*, Heyes writes:

When I was pregnant I longed to read a birth story written by a feminist phenomenologist. *What is it like?* . . . [I hoped] for a richer, more evocative language to capture the lived experience of childbirth—one that managed to be self-conscious of its own historicity and politics, while not only telling a historical or political story; one that used the conceptual tools feminist phenomenologists have developed without denying the specificity of the body. (134–35)

My time as Cressida's student was marked by this experience and writing, since her son was born in my second year of her supervision. Subsequently, I attended talks and read papers on placenta eating and epistemologies of ignorance, birth, and pain, all the while knowing it would one day find a way into a monograph that took the analysis into new directions. Despite and in light of these many discussions and scholarly engagements, I became pregnant one month after defending my dissertation. It is hard to put into words the interplay between forming my philosophical capacities with a supervisor as they craft work on a life-altering embodied experience and then undertaking it myself after such a transformation. Stories such as these—that centre life experiences unique to forms of gendered subjectivity—provide, as Heyes (1997a, 2) writes, a corrective to the "psychological—pathological?—dissociation from the ethical and political complexities" that shape how we do philosophy. Heyes's insistence on philosophical engagement with what are normally excluded embodied realities shows the levels to which her commitments to grasp new ways of doing philosophy goes. This creative risk signals new forms of crafting oneself in the discipline, allowing for space to engage embodied networks of intellectual inheritances.

My birth story shared similar experiences of pain, such as Cressida describes, but otherwise did not resemble her experiences. I came up against agency-denying medical violence that left me physically and psychologically very fragile. Shortly after giving birth, Cressida visited me at my home. I explained how, step by step, my nonnormative body signalled risk, triggering life-altering pain, interventions, and violations. These interventions were characterized by a palpable binary substitution

of my human value with the value of my child's life. With my eyes full of tears and a leaky, swollen body full of surgical staples, we had a long discussion, mostly with Cressida listening, holding my seven-pound newborn, who was struggling to gain weight, with his fresh newborn skin flaking off his wrinkled tiny body. After this long discussion, one thing Cressida said stuck to me and reoriented me to the "rough ground" of my individualistic thinking (Heyes 2002). She said many supportive and helpful things, but in the end sighed and said, "Birth has become a place where we fight over life and death" (Heyes, in discussion with the author, 2015). This drew my attention to the biopolitical forces had escalated from questions about risk to surgical and medical techniques on my/the body in ways that outstripped my possibilities for agency. Sharing private moments of postpartum pain and recovery, *we take our philosophical minds with us*—into spaces wholly walled off from the academic world of philosophy but in which we find rich opportunities to shatter pictures that hold us captive.

My work is ostensibly citationally dependant on Beauvoir, but my citational dependence on Heyes, animated by my intellectual formation and ongoing relational, embodied, and affective networks, creates and maintains much of the implicit ground of my intellectual projects. How and where can we bring forth this implicit background in our work? Tracing interpretive approaches to Beauvoir, Linda Zerilli (2012) describes affective tendencies for framing feminist intellectuals as either flawless foremothers or helpless tools of the dominant patriarchal order. She notes that Beauvoir is no damsel in distress needing rescue! Her methodological point is that when we go searching for predefined interpretations and prescriptive politics from feminist philosophers, we snuff out the ambiguity necessary for a vital feminist politics. For Zerilli (2012, n.p.), Beauvoir's texts "are neither feminist nor anti-feminist: rather they open up and onto the space of feminine contradictions; they give voice to a feminist subjectivity that is at best at odds with itself." My own grappling with the limits and ambivalences of introducing this symposium highlight, I hope, the level to which a form of methodological bilingualism is required in feminist philosophy and also in the wider contemporary neoliberal university. My initial proposal spoke to the form of dominant philosophical training that has strategically enabled my entry into the profession, but the introduction I produced, I hope, does justice to the ways in which I've been taught to critically resist that training. Giving voice to these embodied relations has kept me coming back to Cressida's comment on how these ambivalences play out when we undertake our writing processes: "I certainly struggled deeply with the problem that philosophical writing is a mode of transformation that works both through and against itself, and doubly so when embodied practices are at stake" (Heyes 2010, 231). Without putting too fine of a point on it, I hope that the landscape of Heyes's thinking I've laid out fills in more of *Anaesthetics* for readers, guiding them to key points in her method. Fifteen years after first becoming her student, I am

grateful I could (re)write myself through this engagement with her thinking—re-citing *Anaesthetics* through the affective and scholarly ties that tether me to it.⁵

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