

**What does Susan Stanford Freeman argue about the strengths and shortcomings of critique in today's humanities? How does she think new knowledge is created? How do the arguments agree with your own experience of studying literatures written in English or working with the English language?**

theories and  
methodologies

## Both/And: Critique and Discovery in the Humanities

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WHAT ARE THE “LIMITS OF CRITIQUE” IN THE AGE OF TRUMP? AT A TIME WHEN NATIONALIST AND PROTO-FASCIST MOVEMENTS ARE ON THE rise in many parts of the world? When hate-filled words and actions against the foreign, the racial or religious other, the gendered, and the differently abled are empowered to come out of the shadows and into the public realm, poisoning the atmosphere, spreading fear and despair? When corruption and greed threaten not only the foundations of democracy but also the planet on which we depend? Don't we need critique more than ever—critique of lies, of discourses and their histories, of policies and the power structures they reflect? The answer is both yes and no. Or rather, we *do* need critique, but we also need so much more than critique. Critique as an end in itself is not enough.

Rita Felski's wonderfully provocative book *The Limits of Critique* charges scholars and teachers to think beyond critique. She calls it “post-critique”—that is, a recognition of the achievements of critique (and by implication its ongoing necessity) but also a call to recognize its limits and to do more than critique in our work as scholars and educators.<sup>1</sup> As a feminist and cultural theorist herself, from her first book, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, to subsequent books on feminist theory, to her pathbreaking editorship of *New Literary History*, Felski has contributed mightily to prevailing forms of critique, as she herself repeatedly points out in *The Limits of Critique*. Recognizing a certain irony in her project, she nonetheless marshals a powerful critique of critique, focusing especially on two divergent forms of scholarly critique: poststructuralist theory and the political interdisciplines of cultural studies such as race studies, feminist and gender studies, postcolonial studies, sexuality studies, disability studies, and so forth. For all their achievements and differences from one another, she argues, both poststructuralist and political-cultural fields have diminished their objects of study through a perpetual stance of systematic suspicion that ennobles the scholar-critic and diminishes what is studied. The novel, the painting, the moment in history—all contain hidden meanings that a hermeneutics of suspicion can bring to light.

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Critique, Felski suggests, lionizes the scholar as hero and scholarship as demystification.

Delineating critique as a “mood” rather than a “rigorous” mode of thought, Felski reflects on the “mentality of critique”: “Like tenacious bloodhounds, we sniff out coercion, collusion, or exclusion at every turn. We are often stymied, however, when asked to account for the importance of meanings, values, and norms in all forms of life, including our own” (*Limits* 15). Echoing Bruno Latour’s assertion that “critique has run out of steam” (“Attempt”; “Why”), *The Limits of Critique* argues for a new mood and mode of reading, one that recognizes the agency of the text to arouse the emotions and imaginations of its readers as it circulates through time and space. Felski adapts Latour’s actor-network theory to posit the literary text as a nonhuman actor existing in a fluid and ever-changing network across the globe and through time, far from its point of origin. As such, Felski’s application of Latour to literary studies intersects in significant ways with the new world literature studies and its notions of circulation, translation, transculturation, and adaptation theorized by anthropologists such as James Clifford and Anna L. Tsing and literary critics such as Edward W. Said, Édouard Glissant, Wai Chee Dimock, David Damrosch, Rebecca L. Walkowitz, B. Venkat Mani, and Alexander Beecroft. “Texts,” Felski writes, “are objects that do a lot of traveling; moving across time, they run into new semantic networks, new ways of imputing meaning.” Within such networks, reading is a form of “coproduction between actors [texts and readers] that brings new things to light” (*Limits* 160, 174).

As a polemic, *The Limits of Critique* sits theoretically between Felski’s earlier revisionist plea for a new kind of reading mentality, *The Uses of Literature*, and her introduction to the special issue of *New Literary History* devoted to Latour. The coda to *The Limits of Critique* admits that the book arose in part

from her sense that she had failed to persuade readers of *The Uses of Literature* to develop a wider range of intellectual-emotional engagements with literary texts than critique affords. Four and a half of the five chapters of *The Limits of Critique* focus on Felski’s critique of critique; its final section sketches an alternative to critique—namely, Latour’s actor-network theory. She freely adapts it as a way of tracking what a text “sets alight in the reader—what kind of emotions it elicits, what changes of perception it prompts, what bonds and attachments it calls into being” (179)—in short, what it creates in readers, not what it conceals from them.

Felski’s introduction to the *New Literary History* issue goes a step further by suggesting that actor-network theory enables not only a newly affective mode of reading literature but also four concrete methods (“actions, practices”) that are applicable to the humanities in general; she terms them “curating,” “conveying,” “criticizing,” and “composing” (216). Functioning as a kind of sixth chapter to *The Limits of Critic*, Felski’s introduction offers these “post-critique” modes of humanities methodologies as positive alternatives to critique as an end in itself. By “curating,” she means the humanities as they are “guarding, protecting, conserving, caretaking, and looking after” the “historical remnants,” the “fragile objects, artifacts unmoored by the blows of time, texts slipping slowly into oblivion” (217). “Conveying” these acts of conserving and preserving is a necessary component of curating because communication is a form of transport, transmission, and translation across space and time “into new and often unexpected arenas . . . into the concerns, agendas, and interests of diverse audiences and publics” (218–19). “Criticizing” includes “critique” but is broader in scope; the term signals practices of “objection” that themselves might form an intellectual tradition of thought, such as feminism or Foucauldianism. Not restricted to ideological critique

or the hermeneutics of suspicion, “criticizing” incorporates all “forms and genres of disagreement” (220). “Composing” is the fourth and perhaps most important practice in Felski’s schema. Borrowing from Latour’s “Compositionist Manifesto” (“Attempt”), she writes that “composing” is “about making rather than unmaking, adding rather than subtracting, translating rather than separating” (221). “Composition” draws the humanities closer to other forms of building, making, constructing, “whether out of joists and steel plates or musical notes and physical gestures: engineers; painters; set designers; composers; novelists; website builders; scientists; dancers” (222). Where Terry Eagleton bemoans the loss of humanities critique as the sign of its demise, Felski argues that the emphasis on critique is a major factor in the declining support for the humanities.<sup>2</sup> Practices of curating, conveying, criticizing, and composing offer hope, Felski contends, for reviving a societal commitment to the humanities at a time when the rising tides of STEM fields threaten to overwhelm institutional and societal commitments for it.

A book like Helen Small’s *The Value of the Humanities* exists precisely because the value of the humanities is once again under threat. No doubt, the “crisis” of the humanities has been periodically and perpetually announced for decades. But this time, the “crisis” feels different, due in part to a convergence of several historical forces: the financial anxieties resulting from the “great recession” of 2008; rising student debt; the challenges of entering the workforce above subsistence level; politicians’ attacks on the humanities’ uselessness and “political correctness”; declining state support for public universities; populist resentment of educated elites; and, more broadly, the legacies of late-twentieth-century globalization and global conflicts that have contributed to the widespread rise of religious fundamentalism and right-wing movements that are nativist, nationalist, racist, sexist,

and anti-LBGTQ and that mark an alienated, fear-based response to the rapidly changing landscapes of the twenty-first century.

What Felski implicitly suggests, however, is that we scholars and educators in the humanities should turn the spotlight (of critique) onto ourselves. We should consider how we might have contributed to the declining commitment to the humanities—not as the sole cause but as one among many historical forces at work. At the very least, we should make the effort to see how a move away from our mood and mode of critique enables making a more widely compelling case for the value of the humanities.

A story that Bidy Martin (former chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and current president of Amherst College) tells supports Felski’s efforts to shift humanities discourse from negative critique to positive practices.<sup>3</sup> As a feminist theorist with a PhD in German cultural studies, Martin cut her critical teeth with her widely influential, early 1980s essay “Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault”; her essay helped usher in waves of feminist scholarship that critiqued the dispersed, panoptical, and disciplining discourses that permeate various forms of oppression. One of her tasks as provost at Cornell University (2000–08), however, was to oversee the reorganization of the biological sciences, an experience that brought her into close contact with many scientists. She was amazed to witness their excitement and pleasure in new discoveries, even at times their sense of wonder at the mysteries of life. How, she asked herself, had so many in the humanities lost that enjoyment in discovery? Given its focus on the creative imagination, the ideas, the desires and fantasies, and the meaning-making activities of human life, how is it that the humanities produced less pleasure or wonder in discovery than the empirical sciences?

Like Felski in *The Limits of Critique*, Martin implicitly questioned the affect of

humanities scholarship that had lost the creative pleasures of discovery. But both Martin and Felski, implying the need for more than a change in mood, emphasize the humanities' capacity for discovery, for building knowledge in ever new forms. Felski's advocacy of conserving, conveying, criticizing, and composing lays out a useful framework for different modes of humanities knowledge production. Composing, it seems to me, is the most important for its emphasis on the humanities as a practice of making, of building, of creating new knowledge.

Conveying, however, emphasizes how knowledge isn't created in a vacuum; the newly "composed" knowledge needs audiences—readers, viewers, experiencers, responders. It needs to travel to have an impact. Part of creating new knowledge involves finding effective (and affective) forms of communication that spread knowledge beyond the inner circle of narrow specialists—like a pebble dropped into a pond that produces ever-widening concentric rings of response. As director of the Institute for Research in the Humanities since 2007, I have myself witnessed how weekly seminars of an interdisciplinary community of scholars constitute a kind of "collaboratory" in which dialogue with fellows outside the bubble of hyperspecialization helps presenters understand the broader significance of their work, how it might answer the "So what?" question, and how it might be framed and presented to engage wider audiences. In my experience working with some four hundred fellows in the past ten years, I have been continually astounded by the sheer variety, power, and excitement of knowledge produced in the humanities. Critique has been a thread running through much of this work (especially in literary and cultural studies), but seldom exclusively so.

What Felski's framework for the new humanities sidesteps, however, is a direct consideration of epistemology. In "Why Has

Critique Run Out of Steam?" Latour is less interested than Felski in affect and more interested in the epistemological underpinnings of his earlier work in science studies, which he now holds up as an example of how critique has run out of steam. As a proponent of "social constructionism," Latour established his name through a critique of "*scientific certainty*" (227). Now, he worries that his efforts to "detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements" have contributed to the dismantling entirely of the reality of facts, truth, and value—a dismantling that nefarious political forces have appropriated with dangerous effects:

And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. (227)

"Things have changed a lot, at least in my village," he reflects. "I am now the one who naively believes in some facts . . ." (228). In hindsight, he believes that "a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be considered as friends by the wrong sort of allies. . . . The question was never to get *away* from facts but *closer* to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism" (231).

Latour's worries about the effects of the critique of "facts" and "truth" have taken on frightening dimensions in the recent political arena. As a December 2016 editorial in *The New York Times* points out, politicians have increasingly "pinched and yanked at facts like Play-Doh, trying to shape them to their ends." More and more, "facts" have begun

to disappear in the haze of self-created realities. During George W. Bush's presidency, the *Times* editorial notes, one of his top advisers said, "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study, too, and that's how things will sort out." When Mitt Romney campaigned for president, the *Times* continues, "politicians recognized that they could treat the news media not as some sort of arbiter of the facts but simply as one side of a he-said-she-said debate"; a Romney aide explained: "We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers." As a Trump surrogate, quoted by the *Times* editorial, said, "There's no such thing, unfortunately, anymore, of facts" ("Truth"). After the inauguration, when Trump inflated the numbers attending his ceremony on 20 January and asserted that millions of illegal immigrants cost him the popular vote, the media debated what to call Trump's relation to facts: lies? falsehoods? untruths? bogus? baseless? groundless? unverified claims? (Barry). Kellyanne Conway, Trump's counselor, told the reporter Chuck Todd that Trump's press secretary, Sean Spicer, wasn't telling lies but was presenting "alternative facts," creating a new term that went viral, along with Todd's outraged response: "Alternative facts are not facts; they're falsehoods" (Blake).

The dissolution of "fact" during and after the campaign went hand in hand with the viral spread of "fake news" on social media. But remember how we laughed during the Bush years at Jon Stewart's creation of "fake news" on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, the sharpest media satire of the American political scene and one that mainstreamed the use of past video to catch politicians in their blatant lies? By 2016, however, fake news, as the newest social media sensation, spread widely and rapidly, even at times by companies like Disinfomedia set up to make money off the

hunger for its product (see Sydell). No doubt the spread of fake news contributed significantly to Trump's election. In 2005, Stephen Colbert nailed the evolving loss of fact-based truth by coining the term *truthiness* on Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*. *Truthiness* is "the quality of seeming to be true according to one's intuition, opinion, or perception without regard to logic, factual evidence, or the like: the growing trend of truthiness as opposed to truth" ("Truthiness"). But "truthiness" reigned supreme in the devastating 2016 campaign season. It's no wonder that the extremes of Trumpism have led to landslide sales of George Orwell's *1984*, which became number one on Amazon's best-seller list immediately after Conway's promotion of Trump's "alternative facts" (Kakutani).

It's sobering to think how we in the humanities might have contributed to the spread of "truthiness" through our hermeneutics of suspicion, our critiques of "fact" or "truth" as social constructions reflecting some standpoint or other, all too often formed to serve some structures of power. That's what worried Latour in 2004, and that's what underlies his 2010 "Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto.'" But rather than (re)turn to empiricism, I prefer that the humanities continue to explore human meaning making throughout time and across space and in relation to non-human beings and realms. I prefer that the humanities continue to develop the lessons of epistemology, whatever the affect involved (from wonder to anger, from excitement to suspicion). I prefer what feminists for decades have called a "both/and" approach to binary thinking—in this case, the opposition between critique and composition that underlies Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, as well as Latour's 2004 and 2010 essays. Critique, in my view, has not run out of steam. If anything, we need it even more, as the *Times* editorial—itsself an act of cogent critique—illustrates.

What *has* run out of steam is the categorical imperative to always problematize: cri-

tique as end in itself, as the alpha and omega of humanities scholarship. I suggest, in other words, that critique and what Felski calls “composing” can be complementary. Indeed, they are often (though not exclusively) necessary to each other in the endless varieties of discovery that the humanities are capable of. Here, I disagree with Latour. For him, “*what performs a critique cannot also compose*. It is really a mundane question of having the right tools for the right job. With a hammer (or a sledge hammer) in hand you can do a lot of things: break down walls, destroy idols, ridicule prejudices, but you cannot repair, take care, assemble, reassemble, stitch together. It is no more possible to compose with the paraphernalia of critique than it is to cook with a seesaw” (“Attempt” 475). In contrast to Latour, I say that at times it is indeed necessary to knock down walls before you can build new ones. Perhaps one can adapt or recycle portions of the old walls, but it is imperative that we recognize that many walls of scholarship block new modes of thought, keep certain people outside. Just for starters, think of the new knowledge produced in the past forty years about women and gender, about race and postcoloniality, about sexuality and the body. Without knocking down some walls of normativity, of hegemonic thought, without “curating” differently, new “compositions” would have been unthinkable on these issues.

Critique is often what clears the way for new frameworks of thought, new discoveries, new ideas. This is why I think the epistemological grounds of the humanities must remain an imperative for reflection. The renewed empiricism Latour envisions does not sufficiently make way for the epistemological paradigm shifts that enable so much path-breaking work. And a paradigm shift gains momentum precisely through a critique of how the old paradigm leaves too many anomalies unexplained, outside the system. It’s no accident that women’s studies in the 1970s often resorted to Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure*

*of Scientific Revolutions* to justify the critique of androcentric and phallogocentric frameworks of thought, culture, and institutions.<sup>4</sup> Such critique cleared the way for a paradigm shift, a major transformation of the ground on which women and gender could be newly understood in myriad ways. In short, critique laid the groundwork for discovery. For many (not all) modes of knowledge creation, critique was and still is a necessary first step, but it is not the endpoint of discovery. Both/and.

The spirit of Socrates, who chose hemlock to preserve his integrity as gadfly, is alive and well in the humanities. And it should be. But we would know nothing of it if his pupil Plato hadn’t written the Socratic dialogues, moving beyond the reproduction of the gadfly to create his own complex philosophical system of ideas of which Socrates is only a part. Some 1,800 years after Socrates, Kabir—the *bhakti* singer-poet in Benares, India—improvised gadfly poems that needed all established religions, state power, and gender normativities in the service of his generative mysticism:

Listen carefully,  
Neither the Vedas  
Nor the Qur’an  
Will teach you this:  
Put the bit in its mouth,  
The saddle on its back,  
Your foot in the stirrup,  
And ride your wild runaway mind  
All the way to heaven. (14)

Kabir was an illiterate weaver, but his songs were “curated” (to use Felski’s term) after his death and have come down to us through multiple written versions, alongside the living improvisational tradition of Kabir performances still widely prevalent in India today (see Mehrotra). Critique, in short, can be part of creation, of “composing,” of discovery, of conveying the creative visions and affect of a “wild runaway mind.”

A poem by the Syrian American poet Mohja Kahf condenses the potentially rich

interplay between “critique” and “composition” in a poem about epistemology, about how what one knows depends on the angle of vision:

*Hijab Scene # 1*

“You dress strange,” said a tenth-grade boy  
with bright blue hair  
to the new Muslim girl with the headscarf in  
homeroom,  
his tongue-rings clicking on the “tr” in  
“strange.” (41)

It’s the poet, watching and reporting on the scene, who understands how strangeness is in the eyes of the beholder. Who, she makes us ask, has the authority to determine what’s strange in the context of cultural normativities of religion, nationality, and gender? What, in fact, constitutes strangeness, and who seeks to embrace it, for what reasons? The poem performs a critique, invites us to participate in its critique, but does so much more than critique as it enlarges our knowledge of different rebellions in American classrooms and how they clash in a post-9/11 age. In *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Kahf models the spirit of the gadfly without being reduced to it. She composes; she creates; she conveys. And the affect—hers and ours—is humor. As Felski would say, Kahf’s poem is an *actor* in a network of expanding readers. The poem begins in critique but isn’t limited to it. The poem’s agency is to make us laugh, to make us feel what it means to be looked at as strange, and thereby to enlarge our understanding, to change the way we think. Like the poem, this too can be the agency of the humanities.

## NOTES

1. Felski’s title and project echoes Thomas M. Kavanagh’s *The Limits of Theory*, written from within the critical theory camp, just as the heyday of poststructuralist theory had run its course in the United States.

2. Helen Small makes a related argument against critique in *The Value of the Humanities* but bases her defense of the humanities on their value (variously defined) rather than on devising alternative methodologies.

3. Martin told this story at the panel The Futures of Interdisciplinarity for the Humanities, at the Institute for Research in the Humanities, University of Wisconsin, Madison, on 15 September 2008.

4. Feminist standpoint theory, developed out of the 1970s debates about epistemology, has influenced me here and can be usefully found in Sandra Harding’s *Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*.

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