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AL Symposium

The Limits of *The Limits of Critique*

Rita Felski's new book *The Limits of Critique* (2015) offers a skeptical reading of mainstream literary critical practices from the advent of cultural studies to the present. As she puts it in her opening lines, "this book is about suspicion in literary criticism: its pervasive presence as mood and method. It is an attempt to figure out what we are doing when we engage in 'critique' and what else we might do instead" (1). Several scholars have reviewed the book since its publication. None have done so without offering a certain degree of critique themselves. Bruce Robbins excoriates Felski's book. He argues that, at best, Felski practices what he imagines her to be preaching against and, at worst, she advocates a fandom that amounts to the "corporate re-structuring of the humanities." Heather Love and Stephen Best provide more qualified reviews. They express their admiration for Felski's book, yet they both push her to be more precise. Love wants Felski to acknowledge the range of queer critical styles. Best wants Felski to consider how interpretation requires multiple readings, a fact that he believes can help her elaborate on her hazy, proposed alternative to critique, which she calls post-critical reading.

These responses to *The Limits of Critique* begin to index the range of prevailing critical practices that Felski aims to put into relief. What is surprising, though, is that none of these reviewers of the book directly confronts the fact the *Limits of Critique* offers little evidence of critique, as the author defines it. In her introduction, Felski surveys suspicious scholarly hermeneutics, and she notes conventional critical language (the verb "interrogate" is her best example). But nowhere does Felski cite, much less, unpack an example of a scholar engaging in a prototypical version of critical practices. I suspect that she has not included examples because

the remarkable variety of critical moods and methods makes it almost impossible to generalize about them. As in literature, so too in criticism, when one critiques one does multiple things.

While this absence is the greatest weakness of Felski's book, it is also, I think a potential strength of the book. The lack of supporting evidence is ultimately helpful for readers who are willing to concede, in traditional critical fashion, that a pervasive form of anything is difficult to typify yet essential to denaturalize. These kinds of open-minded yet suspicious readers of Felski's book are propelled to turn to their own literary periods, theoretical bents, and sub-fields for consideration and reflection on the suspicious critical practices that, more or less, snugly fit the textual materials that they study. For example, as a scholar of early American literary studies, it seems to me that the possibly limiting "detective work" of critique, which Felski describes, has its hold on my field. A considerable body of early American scholarship since the mid-1990s has aimed to determine how literature penned in the colonies and in the early republic measured up, ideologically, against the tides of imperialism, racism, sexism, and, to a much lesser extent, classism. In lockstep, teachers have taught students to grasp these ideologies and to ferret them out in literature, ideally, so that they can discover their own interpretations of specific works. Recent spatial and materials turns, which are pronounced in my field, have hardly altered these scholarly and pedagogical approaches. If anything, they have amplified them. What these two turns typically facilitate is a more precise understanding of the rhetorical ingenuity and revisionary capacity of a range of early American literary works based on more detailed or wider geopolitical picture of the crucible of prevailing hegemonic forces.

While trends in early American literary studies support Felski's claim about critique, they also refute one key element of Felski's argument. In her introduction, Felski repeatedly wonders what we might be missing by only adopting the moods and methods of suspicion. Since the

publication of Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs* (1985), early Americanists have entertained this concern. They have had to do so because in reckoning with the much-derided aesthetics of some of their materials, scholars have often taken the default position of making ideological critique a sufficient justification for their interest in what they admittedly consider less coherent and pretty literature. Attentive to the harmful scholarly and pedagogical implications of such a rhetorical move, Tompkins and her contemporaries have always put forward the Felski-like approach of embracing what they enjoy about the body of literature that they study and teach even as they submit it to thorough, inventive, cultural-studies anchored interpretations. Such approaches continues to define the field. For instance, one can, to this day, find, in every issue of new early American journal, *J19*, a section entirely devoted to pleasure reading, or essays about "a text—visual or artifact, literary or critical, old or new, material or virtual—that brought you pleasure and that you believe will bring pleasure to others." Such examples illustrate that in early American studies, as the very least, critics who are heavily engaged in critique have always been reckoning with its limits.