1. Make the Dialectic Great Again!
On Postcritique in Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015)

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"Where is power in all of this?" When I posed the question to a speaker at a recent American Studies conference, it seemed innocuous. The speaker had used Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT), and I wanted to know if ANT can recognize the concentrations of corporate power in the production, circulation, and reception of cultural commodities.[1] That's how I would describe at least one of the primary characteristics of US culture, which was the speaker's topic. Little did I know at the time that, by focusing on power and invoking other abstractions like "capitalism," I was being stereotypically critical. Somewhere, a postcritic yawned.

According to Rita Felski, critique has become boringly obvious. "Anyone who attends academic talks," Felski writes, "has learned to expect the inevitable question: 'But what about power?'" (17).[2] Felski saw me coming from a mile away. In *The Limits of Critique,* her postcritical manifesto, Felski argues that critique is not only an ensemble of overly familiar ideas about literary and cultural interpretation but also a pervasive and predictable mood. Critics are the deans of Paul Ricoeur's school of suspicion.[3] They read texts and other cultural artifacts as if they were police interrogating a suspect upon whose guilt they have always already passed judgment. Critics "stand back" from texts, coolly and shrewdly refusing to be duped by the beauty of a well-chosen word

1 "There is now very little cultural production outside the commodity form," writes Michael Denning in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso, 2004), 104.

2 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

3 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 28–36.

or identify with likeable characters. Critics also typically "dig down" into texts, excavating their political unconscious for symptoms and clues of something "unflattering" and "counterintuitive" that they cannot admit outright, which is usually this or that "complicity" with social forces that are more important than they are—capitalism, patriarchy, racism, imperialism, heteronormativity, power/knowledge, and so forth (54–55, 58). Whether standing back or digging down, critics are relentlessly negative. Consider the prefixes of critics' favorite verbs: *de*mystify, *de*bunk, *de*construct, *de*naturalize, *un*mask. And since critics treat texts as passive bearers of dominant social forces, they regard their own negativity toward texts as political resistance to the status quo. While critics may praise texts on occasion, they mostly celebrate the ones that affirm their predetermined ethical and political commitments.

To describe critique as suspicion is to "redescribe" it, since critique isn't commonly regarded as a dominant discourse or a ubiquitous mood. Felski uses the concept of redescription to distinguish her approach from what she calls the "critique of critique" (9–10). Her goal isn't to fix critique by unmasking its complicities; she wants neither to stand back from critique nor dig down into it. Instead of applying critique to demonstrate the deficiencies of critique, Felski aims to challenge the status of critique as the Swiss Army knife of literary and cultural studies. In Felski's estimation, this all-purpose tool has been too successful: it has monopolized interpretation and weakened our capacity to understand the full diversity of ways that texts mean and that readers relate to meaning. Thus, it's not a matter of banishing critique but rather of opening up its one-party system. "There is no one-size-fits-all form of thinking," Felski writes, "that can fulfill all [the] aims [of interpretation] simultaneously" (9).

In addition to its intellectual and pedagogical concerns, *The Limits of Critique* is motivated by what Felski calls the "legitimation crisis" of literary studies—and of the humanities more broadly—in the United States (14). The last decade has witnessed a precipitous decline in undergraduate enrollments and majors in the humanities, while the number of jobs published in the English and Foreign Language Editions of the Modern Language Association's *Job Information List* has fallen to historic lows.[4] "Postcritical reading" is Felski's term for a diverse assortment of rhetorics and affects that can expand understanding of our relationships with texts and cultural artifacts while providing a

4 Eric Hayot, "The Sky is Falling," *Profession*, May 2018, https://profession.mla.org/the-sky-is-falling/.

positive grounding of the value of humanistic inquiry under conditions of departmental defunding. Instead of wearily standing back, the postcritical reader generously explores attachments to texts, such as "aesthetic pleasure, increased self-understanding, moral reflection, perceptual reinvigoration, ecstatic self-loss, emotional consolation, or heightened sensation" (188). Instead of digging down and discovering that the text is an effect of some predetermined social abstraction, the postcritical reader recognizes texts as agents in their own right. Drawing on ANT, Felski reframes the social nexus between texts and readers as an interdependent assemblage in which texts actively participate in eliciting attachments. Felski sums up the lessons of postcritique as follows: "*Interpretation becomes a coproduction between actors that brings new things to light rather than an endless rumination on a text's hidden meanings or representational failures*" (174). This rethinking of interpretation might renew our disciplinary methods and moods, put humanists back in touch with the everyday reading practices of students, and "inspire more capacious, and more publicly persuasive, rationales for why literature, and the study of literature, matter" (191).

The Persistence of Critique

I had enough encounters with Felski's "critics" in graduate school, where I occasionally made the mistake of using terms like "beautiful," to make me sympathetic to postcritique. But I'm also a Marxist critic, and *The Limits of Critique* left me with the impression that the problem with Felski's critics is that, to put it reductively, they aren't Marxists. Terry Eagleton, a Marxist who has critiqued aesthetic ideologies *and* written an introduction to the Gospels, reviewed *The Limits of Critique* favorably.[5] I often found myself nodding along to Felski's arguments against the fetishization of negativity and in favor of hermeneutic practices that attend to positive values like hope, joy, and love. If Marxists didn't believe in these things, their critiques would be in vain. Even Adorno, the archetypal curmudgeon, admitted that demystification and de-

5 Terry Eagleton, "Not Just Anybody," review of *The Limits of Critique*, by Rita Felski, *The London Review of Books*, January 5, 2017, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v39/n01/terry-eagleton/not-just-anybody.

bunking are for the sake of something better: "Consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite."[6]

I want to reflect on the specific location of Marxist critique in Felski's postcritical project by returning to my starting point, the postcritic's boredom with the question, "What about power?" If postcritics are bored with questions about power, that doesn't prove anything about the significance of the questions or about their object. The monotony of power may not be sexy but it's a good indicator of power's durability and thus of the continuing necessity of critiquing it. The people and institutions that wield power aren't bored enough with it to give it up. Police in riot gear aren't bored with power.

But the more I think about how boredom functions in *The Limits of Critique*, the more I see subtle instances of the dialectic and critique. What I find in Felski's boredom with the "inevitable question" about power is not an invitation to try out other, more diverse styles of interpretation, but rather a prohibition, an impatient eye-roll that asks, "Won't you please stop asking *that* question already?" Fredric Jameson, a favorite target of postcritics, observed of an earlier manifesto, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michael's "Against Theory," that "we are being told to stop doing something[.] [N]ew taboos … are being erected with passionate energy and conviction."[7] Felski's invitation to postcritique also dialectically generates its opposite, a taboo. What I'm trying to identify is the dialectical form of Felski's representation of postcritique; I'm trying to understand how postcritique *disconnects* from competing theories in order to represent a new hermeneutics of connection.

The dialectical tradition tells us that the new can only be a determinate negation of the old. In other words, Felski cannot say yes to postcritique without saying no to critique; she cannot direct her reader toward postcritical styles of interpretation without simultaneously pulling them away from critique, especially if critique has as tight a grip on intellectual discourse and affect as she claims it does. A tight grip must be pried open. Felski's negativity is most apparent when she explains that the concept of postcritique isn't meant to "prescribe" and "dictate" new reading practices but to "decline" and "steer us away" from critique (173). For the championing of any new theoretical orientation must simultaneously negate competing orientations, even if

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6 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2004), 247.

7 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 183.

the new orientation is explicitly affirmative. To put this another way, the freedom of a new mode of expression, as Adorno said of modernism, is undercut by the unfreedom generated by its taboo on repeating the old modes.[8]

My intention in framing Felski's rhetoric as dialectical and critical isn't to mock her as hypocritical. I take to heart her point that we can disagree with a text without accusing it of skullduggery, and for that reason I don't think Felski is "repressing" the dialectic. Rather, I am insisting on the legitimacy of the dialectic as a mode of critique by showing, in a dialectical reading of Felski, that she also needs the dialectic. The terms "dialectic" and "dialectical" appear all of three times in Felski's chapters, and two of these are in quotations. The one time that she addresses dialectical thinking directly is in a parenthesis in which she brushes aside the idea that the dialectic can help critique overcome its negativity fetish (8). In Felski's view, turning to the dialectic is just doubling down on critique, insisting that the cure for critique is more critique. In contrast, I view the dialectic as a competitor to postcritique that already appreciates the limits of critique as one-sided negation, demystification, and debunking. The dialectical tradition is "pre"-postcritique, insofar as it anticipates some of Felski's core arguments, and "post"-postcritique, insofar as it can endure the decentering of what Felski means by "critique."

It's instructive to examine how Felski accommodates one of the most powerful counterexamples to her case against the one-sided negativity of critique: Fredric Jameson's dialectic of utopia and ideology in *The Political Unconscious*, a book that serves as a paradigm case of critique and as a disavowed cousin of postcritique. In the conclusion to *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson engages with Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy*, the very text that Felski draws upon to redescribe critique as suspicion. Jameson claims that the negativity of the Marxist critique of ideology is insufficient: negation must always stand in dialectical tension with a positive utopian hermeneutic that identifies and celebrates the traces of a more emancipatory future in the cultural production of the past and present. The Marxist hermeneutic is "the *simultaneous* recognition of the ideological *and* Utopian functions of the artistic text."[9] "The dialectic," Jameson has written more recently, "stands as an imperative to hold the oppo-

8 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1.

9 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 290 (my emphasis).

sites together, and as it were to abolish the autonomy of either term in favor of a pure tension one must necessarily preserve."[10]

In order to maintain her case against the negativity of critique in the face of such claims, Felski must move the goalposts. In the case of Jameson's dialectical critique, the problem with critique suddenly isn't that it lacks a positive vision but rather that this positive vision is, first, too utopian, because it requires a total rupture with the present, and second, too Marxist, because Jameson's positive vision corresponds to the Marxist notion of classless society (64). Yet the Marxist tradition doesn't envision utopia as a complete break with the present. Ernst Bloch calls such a break an "abstract utopia" and contrasts it with "concrete utopia," a future society that builds on both the contradictions and positive potential within the present.[11] This relation between the present and the utopian future in Marxist thought is another instance of the determinate negativity that silently structures Felski's own representation of postcritique in relation to critique. And what, exactly, is wrong with classless society? Felski's advocacy for literature's power to surprise seems to mean that Jameson shouldn't already have stable ideas about what he thinks about a better society before reading literature. In other words, at the moment when Felski cannot maintain her account of critique as being bereft of positive values, she changes the criteria of critique's failure specifically to refute Marxism, whose problem is that its positive values are *too clear*. The major advantage that postcritique now seems to have over Marxism and the dialectic is that, unlike "classless society," its Latourian values sound reassuringly non-ideological and non-antagonistic. I'll return to this point later, when I come back to Felski's points about the legitimation crisis of the humanities.

Another dialectical style that pervades Felski's rhetoric is "deflation via inversion," a protocol that she ascribes to critique but ends up using herself to great effect (128). Critics think critique is a means for resisting institutional power, Felski reasons, but it's actually an institutionally validated academic discourse. Critics think critique is politically marginal, a shot at the dominant culture from "outside" or "below," but critique is in fact mainstream. Critics think they are heroically resisting disciplinary regimes, but they are really mimicking the police in their moralistic search for guilty texts. Critics think they are tearing down all conventions, but critique is itself a conventional discourse whose protocols resemble those of genre detective fiction.

10 Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2009), 65.

11 Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 98–122.

Critics describe their projects in lofty ethical and political terms, but they are sustained by more mundane pleasures, such as the "aha" moment when a critical reading connects the dots into a satisfying whole, or the pleasure of performing expert superiority to amateurs and other uncritical readers.

To be sure, Felski's critical reversals are not *symptomatic*. "The goal," she writes, "is not to unmask critique by exposing the hidden structures that determine it" (120–121). Nonetheless, a critical strategy of estrangement pervades *The Limits of Critique*—a strategy that distances the reader from what critique appears to be and from what critics claim to be doing. If critique "seeks to wrest from a text a different account than it gives of itself" (122), then Felski is also building a case against critique that is quite different from the account that critics give of themselves. And it is this estrangement that empowers Felski's portrayal of critique, a portrayal that should strike critics as odd and fresh—and annoying—precisely because it isn't how we usually think about critique. Felski obliquely acknowledges this estrangement when, at the start of chapter 4, she briefly addresses the reader and distinguishes those who are still reading her book from those who have stopped reading in a "fit of exasperation" (117). Readers are exasperated because Felski is challenging the common-sense notion of critique in "unflattering" and "counterintuitive" ways, to use the terms she mobilizes against critique. Her critics are egotistical and self-aggrandizing, moralistic and myopic, snobby and cruel. They resemble washed-up superheroes and wannabe cops.

I'm intrigued by how Felski treats her Marxist and dialectical rivals specifically because it is allegedly *critique* that cannot abide competition. On Felski's telling, critique's hegemony is so complete that critics have corralled everything that is not critical into the deficient category of the *un*critical. Either you're a critic or you're naïve, gullible, or politically complacent. Either you're with critique or you're with the terrorists. I'm only slightly exaggerating. Since Felski wants us to think about the affects of theory, it seems only fair that we appreciate her snarky hyperbole—a hyperbole that communicates how much Felski enjoys sticking it to critique. (Yes, I am also enjoying writing this.) Consider, for example, this wonderfully alliterative, even lyrical, passage: In the eyes of the critic, "every detail is pregnant with potential purpose, haloed with a heightened, even hallucinatory, intensity of meaning. … [E]very literary detail quivers with a secret import; every phrase harbors a potential double meaning; any minor character can suddenly spring to the fore as a clinching proof of a text's hidden agenda" (99). There is an unmistakable pleasure

in these sentences: the pleasure of exaggerating and mocking critique's own melodramatic pleasures.

In a perceptive review, Lee Konstantinou calls Felski's representation of critique a "cartoon." Konstantinou observes that "critique is certainly an important part of literary studies, but is far from being the sole or even exclusive disciplinary ethos of the profession. By contrast, Felski and other advocates of postcriticism often make it seem as if defenders of critique are a ruthless zombified horde."[12] As much as I sympathize with Konstantinou's unabashedly critical rebuttal, his point is one-sidedly negative. Yes, Felski exaggerates, but I don't see this as a simple diagnostic error. Felski acknowledges early on that she runs the risk of "unduly exaggerating [critique's] presence" and admits that while critique is "dominant," it's not the only thing we do (4). On the one hand, this admission is incompatible with colorful rhetoric that inflates critique's power. On the other hand, Felski needs a powerful adversary against which to measure the necessity and urgency of postcritique. This is how manifestos work. The justification for *The Communist Manifesto*, for example, is found in its opening invocation of the holy alliance against communism. Conversely, it's hard to imagine, say, *The Ford Pickup Truck Manifesto* or *The Cheeseburger Manifesto*. Being in a position of cultural dominance, these objects lack an antagonistic holy alliance and thus an occasion to become manifest.

Jameson anticipates Felski's problem but suggests that it cannot be solved neatly. This is how Jameson responds to the totalizing effect of Foucault's notions of discipline and power: "I have felt … it was only in the light of some conception of a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic norm that genuine difference could be measured and assessed."[13] Jameson is foregrounding the dialectical logic of his representation of what was then a hegemonic method and mood, postmodernism. Like Felski's redescription of critique, Jameson's theory of postmodernism tends to produce a sense of totalizing closure. Jameson's solution is to underscore the dialectical relation between totalization and difference, the way that totalization provides a perspective from which difference can be more fully perceived. If we replace the term *postmodern* with *critique* in Jameson's representation of postmodernism, we get a dialectical

12 Lee Konstantinou, "The Hangman of Critique," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 17, 2016, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-hangman-of-critique/.

13 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 6.

grounding that would help to explain why critique necessarily sounds so domineering in *The Limits of Critique:*

> I am very far from feeling that all cultural production today is [critical] in the broad sense I will be conferring on this term. [Critique] is, however, the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses—what Raymond Williams has usefully termed "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production— must make their way. If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant then we fall back into a view of history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable. At any rate, this has been the political spirit in which the following analysis was devised: to project some conception of a new systematic cultural norm and its reproduction in order to reflect more adequately on the most effective forms of any radical cultural politics today.[14]

Felski cannot ground her dialectical representation of postcritique in this way without dislodging her non-dialectical theoretical framework, ANT. For the utility of Latour's thinking for postcritique is, on the one hand, its ontological flatness (what Jameson calls "sheer heterogeneity" and "a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable"), and on the other, its non-radical cultural politics.

The intellectual and aesthetic pleasure of Latour—at least in his American reception—lies in his Whitmanesque charm, the thrill of enumeration and the surprise of weird montages or "litanies."[15] The most satisfying moment in the application of ANT seems to be the sentence in which actors are indiscriminately listed and juxtaposed, as when Felski describes the literary assemblage as composed of "publishers, advertisers, critics, prize committees, reviews, word-of-mouth recommendations, syllabi, textbooks and anthologies, changing tastes and scholarly vocabularies, and last, but not least, the passions and predilections of ourselves and our students" (170). What impresses me about the list is the inequality that results from assembling unequal things equally. The politico-economic resources of publishers and advertisers—to which we should add powerful distributors like Amazon—are not equal to individual

14 Jameson, 6.

15 Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 38–39.

passions and predilections. Disney isn't a mere partner in an egalitarian co-production.

While ANT is supposed to recognize the irreducible heterogeneity of beings and relations, it conveniently morphs into the opposite when applied to critique. In the essay from which Felski and other postcritics take inspiration, Latour's "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?", the postcritical litany degenerates into a means to abstractly equate and dismiss different critical theories. In Latour's view, the vast majority of critical practice follows the same rigid and predictable steps. The first move shows that a fetish object—here Latour lists "gods," "fashion," "poetry," "sport," "desire"—is nothing but a material entity onto which people have projected their idealized wishes.[16] In a second move, the all-knowing critic reveals that the source of the projected fantasies is not the individual after all, but "economic infrastructure, fields of discourse, social domination, race, class, and gender, maybe throwing in some neurobiology, evolutionary psychology, whatever."[17] The way Latour cobbles together explanatory frameworks that point to very different kinds of determination, from economics and race to discourse and biology, and ends the list with "whatever," suggests that *anything* could be added. This move elides the radical difference between arguing, for example, that class antagonisms and racism are tightly articulated in hegemonic rule, on the one hand, and that social and political hierarchies reflect biologically-encoded hatred of racial others, on the other. Any abstract homological relation that purports to show the basic similarity between these two explanations of power is trivial in comparison to their radically different ways of conceiving the social world. Yet Latour cannot acknowledge this difference because he needs all forms of critique to be essentially the same in order to exaggerate the scope of his postcritical alternative to them. On the one hand, Latour argues that one of the essential problems with critique is that it always posits vague abstractions (economics, discourse, society, race, class, whatever) behind fetish objects; on the other, this argument is itself a massive and self-serving abstraction from the concrete differences that distinguish theories from one another.

Latour's framework proves to be especially impoverished when thinking about the issues to which politically-conscious humanities scholarship and teaching are committed. There's something gravely missing in the notion that

16 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 238.

17 Latour, "Why Has Critique," 238.

the murder of unarmed Black people by police is best understood as a co-production of bullets and Black bodies, chokeholds and necks. When undocumented people and asylum seekers are deported from the United States, it's more than an assemblage of uniforms, handcuffs, guns, courts, laws, judges' gavels, chairs, desks, paper, suits, door locks, passports, and airplanes. There is something tone deaf about approaching the COVID-19 pandemic postcritically. It seems to me that ANT is inadequately critical in such cases because it's best suited to relationships that can be construed horizontally and non-hierarchically. Actor-network theory purportedly allows not only for diverse descriptions of networks but also has an ethical and democratic respect for all objects as agents. As critic Benjamin Noys observes, "the 'charm' of Latour" is his expansion and pluralization of agency and his focus on "small beauties" that "defy the snobbish and arrogant critic."[18] This is why ANT appears to be a useful language for legitimating literary studies and the humanities: it offers a *benign* theory of social connection that stands a better chance of placating more powerful critics than the ones we meet in *The Limits of Critique*.

The Crisis of the Humanities

Another way that Felski addresses the problem of exaggerating critique's hegemony is by distinguishing between two kinds of critique. There is everyday critique, which shares the stage with a range of practices of reading, writing, and teaching, especially in the undergraduate classroom; and there is critique as the dominant *metalanguage of legitimation*. The latter is allegedly too negative to provide a positive account of the value of literary and cultural studies to people outside the profession, whom Felski vaguely denotes as the "public" and "intellectual strangers who do not share our assumptions" (186). The crisis of the university is part of a larger, class-based project of bottom-to-top wealth redistribution that took off after the collapse of post-World War II prosperity in the 1970s. The widely acknowledged result is a return to Gilded Age-levels of inequality in the United States. To frame this situation in the Habermasean language of legitimation crisis, as Felski does, ignores the central dynamic of class conflict over social wealth and falsely implies

18 Benjamin Noys, "The Discreet Charm of Bruno Latour," in *(Mis)readings of Marx in Continental Philosophy*, ed. Jernej Habjan and Jessica Whyte (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 207.

that the struggle against the defunding of education and other public goods is principally a matter of democratic deliberation. As Wolfgang Streeck argues, economic policy is becoming ever more decoupled from democracy, one major consequence of which is the "plundering of the public domain through underfunding and privatization."[19] We will always need convincing arguments, but class power doesn't magically dissolve when elites hear a great pitch about why they should give more of "their" wealth away through forms of redistribution such as investment in education or health care. Taxes tells us more about the legitimation crisis of the humanities than the fact that many of our colleagues are critical sourpusses.

Thus, Felski's justification for decentering critique is at its politically weakest when she faults critique for hindering the articulation of the social value of literature and the humanities. Thanks to critique, we have a feeble "language of value" (5). But feeble to whom? The problem isn't that critique cannot explain the value of humanistic education to some vague "intellectual strangers" but rather that critique cannot explain this value in a way that convinces a particular coalition of plunderers of the public domain: neoliberal presidents, deans, administrators, managers, politicians, and their various allies. The plunderers will probably never be satisfied until we redescribe humanistic study in terms of nationalist self-congratulation, colorblind inquiry, and the one value that capitalist societies prize above all, profitability. Instead of racking our brains for ways to explain to them how we fit into their value system, we should build political counterforces that recognize the use value, not exchange value, of public goods. We should fight not for the scraps left over from austerity budgets but for universal free education in a society in which university funding is no longer beholden to profit. As Joshua Clover points out, "if there is to be something ahead, an emancipation of learning, it will not be discovered in the hearts and minds of administrators and legislators persuaded to see the error of their ways, but in a transformation of the society beyond the edges of campus."[20]

Within the university, the dialectic offers another alternative to postcritical thinking. As Jeffrey Nealon has argued, although it's commonplace to critique the corporate university, higher education has actually followed a differ-

19 Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System* (New York: Verso, 2016), 68.

20 Joshua Clover, "Who Can Save the University?" *Public Books*, June 12, 2017, https://www.publicbooks.org/who-can-save-the-university/.

ent trend: corporations have ruthlessly cut middle management, but the managerial-bureaucratic class has *swelled* in universities.[21] This class spearheads a discourse of scarcity that conceals their own disproportionate consumption of budget resources. For example, an audit of the University of California Office of the President concluded that the number of administrators and managers has grown 60% since 2000. The number of tenure-track faculty grew by only 8% during the same period, despite a 38% increase in student enrollment. The audit concluded that the Office's administrators and executives earned $2.5 million more than state employees in comparable positions, while the Office also held an undisclosed $175 million in reserve that could have financed student services.[22] In a brilliant demonstration of dialectical thinking, Nealon recommends that we see the positive in the negative: faculty should use the corporate logic that the corporate university celebrates against it and advocate for freeing up budget revenue by downsizing the bloated managerial-bureaucratic class, thereby returning management to its proper place, in the hands of faculty and students.

Keep the Ladder

To her credit, Felski is remarkably lucid about some of the problems of *The Limits of Critique*. In the book's final paragraph, she reiterates her desire to avoid a critique of critique, but also acknowledges that she has indeed tried to negate critique, thus falling into the "performative contradiction" of employing the very negativity from which she wants to free us (192). The end of the book reminds me of the end of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, where he acknowledges that he has negated his own argument and encourages the reader to see that argument as a ladder that took us from one mental location to the next, and that can now be thrown away. Similarly, Felski ends by expressing her desire not to reform critique but to get beyond it. Whatever she borrowed from critique now seems to be just a tool to help us get through it. Having reached the other side, we can now discard the ladder.

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21 Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 66–84.

22 Patrick McGreevy, "State Audit Finds UC President's Office Paid Excessive Salaries to Top Staff and Mishandled Budget Money," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 2017, https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-sac-uc-audit-20170425-story.html.

But Wittgenstein wanted to delineate not just the limits of critique but of language as such. The *Tractatus* ends with the mystical encounter with that which can be regarded only in silence. Felski, in contrast, has plenty more to say. But the question remains: if there is more left to say, why should it be said one-sidedly, in the register of positivity? There is still much in our world that deserves negation. If critique without positivity is blind, positivity without critical negativity is empty. To make the dialectic great again means to hold onto the tension between the equal validity of hope and critique—a contradiction that is grounded in an American present that we can only love *and* hate, equally.