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Unboxing Labels as a Graduate Student

As I think about my place in academia as a second-year Ph.D. student, Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* is timely and powerful. Riding on the backs of many similar works, Felski manages to truly investigate the way hermeneutics of suspicion have created an environment where "literary scholars are confusing a part of thought with the whole of thought, and that in doing so we are scanting a range of intellectual and expressive possibilities" (Felski 5). Academia has become its own worst enemy, occluding and prohibiting certain forms of discourse in favor of others. Not because these alternate forms of discourse are unworthy or unintellectual, but because academia often relies on tradition and on short-sightedness. Scholarship is at a pivotal moment. A moment that resembles the turning to theory in the 1980s. A moment that will hopefully create a more inclusive environment where different "moods" of writing are not only allowed but also accepted within the discursive community--an environment that corrects "antinormative normativity" and "skepticism as dogma" (18, 9).

Personally, I am at that point in studies that I begin to turn away from coursework and look to comps and to beginning a dissertation. Constantly, my peers question what it is that we do. Each time we meet a new person or begin a new class, we introduce ourselves by labels, labels like: eighteenth-century, gender and sexuality, law and literature, property and consent, transatlantic, etc.. The systems in which we are required to participate institute and mandate these labels. While gladly taking on these labels, we also find that they no longer truly explain what we do, but they are the only language we have. Our work is reduced to one word or at most five. Furthermore, these labels announce our types of "militant reading" (1). While wanting to spill forth our desires for research and to convey our love of reading, no words further need to be spoken. These labels box in our work. The current system boxes in our work and favors skepticism over innovation and inquiry. Many times we become our labels. How many times have you been referred to by your time period or area of specialization? In the land of Faulkner students, I am the woman that does that old stuff, eighteenth-century stuff. This in no way spells exactly what I do, and at the same time, is exactly expressive of what I am expected to do.

One of Felski's most compelling moments comes in Chapter Five, where she draws on actor-network theory to diagnose the current problems in scholarship. Felski lays open the problem with the way history is treated by English Departments and scholars. These "sacrosanct" boundaries that are laid on time periods are arbitrary at best, and they limit the scope of scholarship to brief moments in a long history of the world (154). Felski then goes on to show

how postcolonial studies has challenged “notions of the discrete, self-contained spaces of nation . . . Similar models might help us explore the mystery of transmission across time” (155). On the one hand, I can see why these systems and labels were first laid in place, because the demands of teaching require such labels. If the almost infinite catalog of literature is more manageable when divided, those divisions across nation and historical period make sense. On the other hand, these boundaries are often arbitrary and rigid at the same time. For example, there are very good reasons that the long eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century both claim Jane Austen. She belongs to both. Her work impacts both. Austen also has a presence now. The same can be seen with something like queer theory. Sexuality does not stop or cease to change at the boundaries of period. In the eighteenth-century, sexuality is as fluid as the Kinsey scale indicates at the individual level. Fluid has a tendency to flow and mix with what surrounds it, coming in waves instead of rigid edges. As Marxist critics have shown, historical changes do not simply stop and begin. In each change, there is usually struggle or a period of normalization when a new conception takes hold. Felski lays bare the problematics of period and says, “The idea of period . . . serves much the same function as the idea of nation; we assign texts and objects to a single moment of origin in much the same way as we tether them to their place of birth,” and we do this to try to reach that one reading of the text (158). Instead of opening up dialogue, this approach threatens to close it.

Now that Felski has shown the problem, what do we do about it? Surely, there is a need to act. But how? Felski seems to think we must start in the classroom. She details how a class she taught began with the standard forms of most survey courses, but the second half of the course focused on postcritical readings of texts. This allows students to practice these other moods of textual interpretation. They are then given the opportunity to practice affective and attachment readings of texts. By setting up the course in this way, students are able to form relationships with the text that skeptical readings might preclude.

I appreciate that Felski shows how this course construction gives students the ability to connect to readings, but she fails to show how this will change academia as a whole. How do we change the system, because we still have to operate within the system we are given? Until those from high above that do the hiring look for candidates that are not bound by these labels, there will still be only minimal room for these types of affective readings. How can I as a graduate student use the techniques that Felski has laid bare and still create publishable, hireable work? Often I have wanted to bridge boundaries in time period, but I have felt restrained by a system that demands I stay within my figurative tennis court. As a historicist, I want to get at the real truth of certain moments, but how would I go about studying for that when the academy commands me to read certain texts within a certain historical period to prove that I know what I am trying to talk about? These are real questions for which I have no answers. I want my scholarship to build

and to not always be about tearing down. Whatever the answers are, certainly scholarship will only improve and expand as we continue to probe these questions and unbox our discipline.