

---

EDITORIAL

**On Feminist Epistemic Habits and Critique**

Marianne Liljeström <sup>1\*</sup>, Salla Peltonen <sup>2</sup>

**Published:** October 30, 2017

**INTRODUCTION**

**Feminist critique**

Critique within academic feminism has become the object of much debate especially during the last decade. The current interest and discussion about critique and postcritique is evidenced by the increasing number of publications that in various ways assess the role and status of critique and critical theory as a driving force in academic work. Critique has a longstanding role within feminist studies, especially regarding questions of objectivity, truth, reality, interpretation, value, fact, description and representation and the ways in which scientific knowledge has uncritically reproduced notions of difference and hierarchies (Haraway 1988). Critique has especially concerned questions related to the gendered nature of knowledge, exploring and exposing ways in which tacit understandings of categories of differentiation gain meaning within various academic disciplines (Butler 1990). In addition to the larger debates around critique, its value and usefulness as an academic practice, we have also witnessed an ongoing debate about the role critique has for disciplines concerned with ‘identity knowledges’ (Wiegman 2012). Indeed, critique is one of the foundational characteristics of feminist, gender and queer studies: these disciplines have since their formation as academic disciplines been defined as oppositional, anti-institutional and *critical* by default (see Hemmings 2011, Wiegman 2012, Dahl et al. 2016).

Critique is thus internally aligned with questions of knowledge production, ethics of research (‘situated knowledges’) and the politics of academic work, but also to how we as feminist academics understand and envision our work as related to questions of transformation, emancipation, and social justice. Discussions about the researcher’s reflexivity, accountability and positionality are part of what makes feminist studies critical in its endeavour. Engaging with questions of privilege in revealing how heteronormativity, white epistemologies and western notions of subjectivity inform our work has, among others, raised questions of ethics and accountability.

Critique can be described as a common denominator for the various disciplines that form the interdisciplinary field of gender studies and as a core aspect of its methodologies and theories. Although a large part of the current debates on critique, and especially regarding interpretation and ways of reading, concerns literary studies and literary critics, the philosophical, theoretical and methodological questions they pose have a general relevance beyond disciplinary boundaries as they deal with larger claims about understanding, knowledge, politics and ethics. Hence critique is of relevance both in the social sciences, natural sciences and within the humanities. How we choose our methods, instruments of measurement, criteria, concepts and materials matter and assessing the ways in which we as researchers are implicated in our own activity in producing our objects of study is relevant to anyone interested in the politics, ethic and pedagogy of their own work (Barad 2007).

A central philosophical background to critique as it is practised within interdisciplinary feminist studies lies within poststructuralist approaches to knowledge where the conditions of knowledge production are highlighted. This Foucauldian gesture of historicising not only ideas, but the conditions of their making is central to the ways in which academic feminism has recently come to assess its own practices (Hemmings 2011, Wiegman 2012). The ‘heydays’ of feminist theory in the 1990s can be specifically described as an era when feminist thinkers engaged with critique in different ways. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, both published in 1990, are cases in point, revolutionising the philosophy of gender and hailed as the foundational work of queer theory. A major concern in the ongoing debates is how to reassess the legacy of this body of work and particularly the value of Eve Sedgwick’s division between paranoid and reparative readings (Sedgwick 2003). Sedgwick’s article pinpoints the attitude and spirit of *critique*, and both describes, defines and questions one of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor, Gender Studies, University of Turku, FINLAND

<sup>2</sup> PhD Student, Gender Studies, Åbo Akademi University, FINLAND

\*Corresponding Author: [marlil@utu.fi](mailto:marlil@utu.fi)

major 'epistemic habits' of academic scholars engaged in critique, namely 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' (the term coined by Paul Ricoeur). Other themes concern the evaluation of the 'affective turn' in feminist studies, and different kinds of readings (ways of analysing one's object of study), and their ethics: close, surface, deep, (hyper)symptomatic, queer and descriptive<sup>1</sup>.

In the Introduction to the anthology *Critique and Postcritique* (2017) Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski give a splendid overview and assessment of current academic debates on critique by examining three prevalent themes: affect, politics and methodology. Anker and Felski discuss alternative models for engaging with literary and cultural texts, paying special attention to the ideas of 'reparative reading' (Sedgwick 2003), 'surface reading' (Best & Marcus 2009), and the 'descriptive turn' (Love 2010). Besides giving their account of such alternative forms and methods of reading, Anker and Felski remind us that rethinking critique can perhaps forge stronger links between the academic and non-academic worlds. This requires us to explore new ways, models and practices of reading, understanding the objects we research that are less bound to scepticism and suspicion and more willing to affirm positive, innovative, world-making aspects of literature and criticism.

In order to better understand the persistence of critique as an academic approach Anker and Felski attend to diagnostic, allegorical and self-reflexive aspects of critique. A tentative taxonomy of the various objections to critique is offered, ranging from the 'turn to affects' to the 'chronic negativity' of critique. They note the important divergence between those thinkers who salute the emphasis on new ways of reading as a way of breaking with sceptical modes of analysis and those who emphasise the close entwining of power with affective life. They pay attention to the political stakes of the current reassessment of critique, thus if critique is political, what are its politics? Reminding us simultaneously of the fact that critique is no longer marginal in academia but part of the mainstream: 'it has become another familiar pedagogical tool and research method in the neoliberal university' (Anker & Felski 2017: 13).

Besides the body of work that engages with critique within the fields of cultural studies, literary theory and the current debates within the humanities, there is a similar kind of diagnostic work being done focusing on question of matter, new materialism and ontology. This body of work has focused on shifting the perspective beyond overemphasising language, meaning and ideology. The debates around how to value the status of 'matter' and the 'biological' in feminist studies is one example of the thematic at hand but also of how the stories we tell matter. Reassessing our own narratives regarding feminist thought and knowledge production, its locations, geopolitical formations and situatedness, regardless of disciplinary identifications is another thematic that has become constitutive of the self-understanding of the field of feminist studies (Hemmings 2011, Wiegman 2012, Dahl et al 2016). The logic that dominates here is that knowledge production is not only a process of content, but also a question of the power relations embedded in representation – who and what is included and excluded in the archives of feminist knowledge production? Defining Butler and Sedgwick as the foundational figures of queer studies has for example been questioned by scholars that provide us a different archive, turning to a genealogy of queer thinking that involves the intersections of race, class and sexuality beginning with James Baldwin in the 1960s (Hames-García 2011). Historicising knowledge, emphasising its performative effects and thus its politics, forms other 'habits' that structure both academic and non-academic feminist critical interventions.

We have chosen to focus on critique and epistemic habits in this issue in order to make visible ways in which we think about and do critique but also to highlight the habitual aspect of feminist criticism as an interdisciplinary activity. Calling for change in the name of critique that is justified by the political are not only ways in which we express how we envision social justice, these acts can also become self-explanatory gestures. For example, the ways in which we deal with issues of intersectionality, representation and identity politics often contain such gestures, a thematic that both Heather Love and Robyn Wiegman elaborate upon in the interviews of this Special Issue.

Indeed, looking at our methods of reading and analysing materials has been an important way of rethinking critique especially by scrutinising our tendencies to prefer certain interpretations over others (Wiegman & Dean 2013). Structuring the debates on critique around what Robyn Wiegman describes as 'the imaginary of the political', the promises of delivering either critique in the mood and mode of suspicion or affirmation is another habit that interests us here (Wiegman 2012, see also the interview in this issue). As editors of this Feminist Encounters Special Issue we are delighted to be able to engage in these thought-provoking, timely and multifaceted discussions by focusing on what we have chosen to frame as 'epistemic habits'.

### Epistemic habits

The debates mentioned above around critique, new reading modes and queer method testify to a growing awareness of some deep-rooted, well-established, and sometimes almost self-evident epistemic habits that reside within feminist thinking. Many of these epistemic habits are connected to ideas and understandings of critique and

---

<sup>1</sup> See among many publications about critique on a more general level, Butler (2001), Rogoff (2003), Latour (2004), Mouffe (2008), Raunig (2008), Dean & Wiegman (2013), Wiegman (2014), Love (2015), Felski (2015); and about reading theories and alternative practices, Gallop (2000), Apter and Freedgood (2009), Best and Marcus (2009), Weed (2012), Moi (2017).

of critical feminist thinking both in more mainstream feminist or activist contexts, as well as within academic feminism. One example is the emphasis on inclusive/universalist reasoning in spite of the continuing highlighting of the importance of differences and diversity of identities. Routine phrases concerning, for example, the habitual repetition of gender as performative without any further arguments or clarification, has, in spite of its position as profound feminist critique of other definitions of gender, changed the notion of gender performativity toward self-evident ‘truth’ (or truism), to somewhat of a cliché. Cliché, being a manifest form of language superseding meaning by social function caused by repetitive use, is, according to C. Namwali Serpell, characterised by avoidance of reflection (Serpell 2017: 163). This means that habit and critique are not necessarily in opposition to each other. However, by underlining the importance of attending to effects of clichés, Serpell sees possibilities for another kind of thinking: as the most habitual language, cliché releases the speaker or reader to concentrate on other matters. According to her we should see our clichés not as used-up but as useful for precisely critical reflection (ibid, 169, 177).

Another strand of criticism and perspective on our practices comes from feminist interventions into the tradition of ordinary language philosophy that centres its focus on language use, the ordinary and mundane, in order to argue for a radical and revolutionising intervention into current theoretical debates (Bauer et al. 2015, Moi 2017). By turning towards an understanding of language that focuses on our use of language (rather than a theoretical outlook on how language works), critique becomes a matter of rethinking our often too overtly linguistic conceptions of language, revealing an overemphasis on epistemology as one of our epistemic habits (see also the interview with Heather Love in this issue).

Hence, the questions that interest us in this Special Issue are:

- How critique is understood or defined or interrogated in connection to specific research problems?
- Is critique taken for granted, being in no need of special articulation because of its congruity with theory itself, and therefore with knowledge production as such?
- What is then at stake in the feminist politics of knowledge production when it comes to unravelling its epistemological foundations?
- How much of the habits we engage in are a product of the institutionalisation of academic feminism and its theoretical and philosophical legacies?

These were the basic questions and thoughts about the current state of academic feminism that inspired us to organise the symposium *A Critique of Our Own: On the epistemic habits of academic feminism* in 2016.<sup>2</sup> The articles in this special issue are both rewritten symposium plenary papers and new and commissioned texts inspired by this special issue call for papers. The way we tell our stories matter. Our narratives perform their own kind of politics. Our practices of citation reveal our interests, commitments, but also our habits (Hemmings 2011, Hames-Garcia 2011). Feminist academic knowledge now forms a specific kind of archive that is both in the making, but also reflective of the history of academic feminism. In this Special Issue we have endeavoured to challenge the conventions of our own field and to problematise our own tacit knowledges.

### Reassessing turns as an epistemic habit

One of the emerging habits in the aforementioned debates is the intensified focus on ‘turns’ despite the fact that ‘turns’ have been around for a while, at least since the postmodern turn in the 1980s (Barad 2007, Liljeström 2016). As Heather Love remarks in the interview for this issue, speaking of a turn gives us the impression of moving forward, turning a page, a new leaf. But while we might be inspired by the sensation of something ‘new’ and the different turns indeed keep us ‘moving’ intellectually, we also identify (old) habits that as routinised gestures sometimes also come to structure our approaches and discussions in a particular way. In this issue we want to focus on this tension between new emerging ways of thinking about method, reading and our epistemological presuppositions, while at the same time paying attention to precisely the habitual ways of thinking, reading and writing in the ‘new’.

Although reassessive work (for example on the linguistic turn, new materialism, or posthumanist and human-animal studies) has been problematised because of the ways in which this work inevitably comes to construct particular dominant versions of theoretical developments, narratives or representations about the field (see for example Irni and Vuola in this issue) still remain a central practice within academic feminism. Critique, redescription and dismantling of oppositions, binaries, and particular representations can be said to constitute a methodological approach in the Deleuzian, new materialist and critical approaches to knowledge (see Kyrölä, Liu Xin and Rogowska & Juleskjær in this issue). To participate in critique is thus essential to the self-understanding of what feminist academic work is – with its emergence from political activism and its critical relationship to academia – perhaps so crucial that even reassessive work ends up being critical according to all too familiar gestures.

<sup>2</sup> The symposium was connected to the Academy of Finland research project *Timelines of Academic Feminism in Finland*, located at the University of Turku. [www.utu.fi/en/units/hum/units/gender-studies/research/pages/taff.aspx](http://www.utu.fi/en/units/hum/units/gender-studies/research/pages/taff.aspx)

When we define one of the epistemic gestures of feminist storytelling to be exactly a kind of reassessment or redescription of different theoretical and historical narratives, the question of how to think about feminist storytelling in an alternative mode actualises itself. Paying critical attention to the narratives that form the historiography of our work is a practice that is justified and demanded of us in the name of the political. Engaging with or within critique has largely been framed as a question of politics and knowledge and thus centred on the questions of political forms of knowledge production. The alternative, as the story goes, is to be not only naïve, but specifically, politically naïve (Dean & Wiegman 2013, Felski 2015). The politicising of knowledge can thus be said to have become one of our main epistemic habits.

### Articles in the current issue

This special issue opens with an article by **Ellen Mortensen** assessing Rita Felski's (2015) account of critique and her alternative postcritical position. Mortensen focuses on the question of mood and does this from the viewpoint of affirmative affective thinking, paying attention especially to the notion of mood within Deleuzian affect theory.

The next two articles give historical interpretations on the formation of feminist epistemologies. With a personal and autobiographical account, **Nina Lykke**'s article concentrates on dis/identification, 'cruel optimism' and everyday utopianism as instances of feminist epistemic habits, but also as structuring themes for feminist thought. **Elina Vuola** also on her part engages in a re-reading of academic feminism, but from a very different point of view compared to Lykke: Vuola discusses the epistemic habit of exclusion within academic feminism focusing on religious feminisms. In Vuola's text the critique becomes 'cure', 'correcting' or reconstructing versions of a particular theoretical development.

Three articles deal with feminist epistemic habits of de/constructing dualisms. In order to problematise the binary between poststructuralist and new materialist feminist work, **Sari Irni** examines as her case study the history of steroid hormones, rethinking the relations between natural sciences and politics. She pays special attention to Helga Satzinger's (2012) 'politics of gender concepts' and suggests that in particular in relation to steroids a feminist critique is required which does not reproduce, but bridge the binary mentioned. **Monika Rogowska-Stangret** and **Malou Juelskjær** investigate temporalities and possibilities of thinking through new materialist theorising and concepts in order to examine conditions of the im/possibility of living live-able (learn-able, teach-able, and response-able) academic lives in current political climates. Addressing the temporal ontologies that drive and haunt university life, they deal with the notion of 'slowing down' as a response to the 'fast neoliberal university'. They make visible epistemic habits from the context of our everyday lives and practices and show the challenge in engaging in critique, proposing an ethics of a pace of our own.

The third text in the cluster of articles all engaging with the question of dualisms, is written by **Liu Xin** and deals with another set of binaries, namely both specificity and universality, and unity and plurality discussing especially the question of origin. Based on the (Irigarayan) idea of the impossibility of counting zero, Liu Xin suggests a form of feminist critique similar to what Trinh T. Minh-ha (2016) has named 'lovecidal'.

The last group of articles close in quite different ways around the question of feminist politics and knowledge production. **Katariina Kyrölä** investigates the knowledge of Black feminist thought in the music videos of Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé through the notion of disidentification, Kyrölä takes feminist criticism as her object in asking what kind of racialised, sexualised and gendered power relations and affects are articulated in the habit of asking: 'whether the videos and artists are – or are not – feminist or empowering?'

In their article about Valerie Solanas' controversial SCUM Manifesto, **Salla Peltonen Mio Lindman** and **Sara Nyman** and read the politics of philosophy as the grammar of patriarchy, claiming that the SCUM Manifesto text has critical, philosophical and political significance they also point to certain difficulties of judgement that characterise feminist and queer critique. Like Kyrölä also the authors of this article highlight the importance of asking 'non-habitual' questions, refusing to apply a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in reading Solanas, but considering the Manifesto as a highly relevant, queer philosophical text.

In addition to the articles the special issue contains two separate interviews with Robyn Wiegman and Heather Love on current debates about critique and postcritique, addressing especially the question of epistemic habits. Assessing the state and status of critique in feminist, gender and queer studies Wiegman and Love both historicise and contextualise the ongoing debates. They address the impact of neoliberalism, and the changing academic practices, linking it to personal investments. Furthermore, they also reflect on the psychoanalytical and affective aspects of critique.

Considering habitual gestures and habits of feminist academic knowledge production, and the questions, reflections, viewpoints and thoughts expressed and discussed in the published texts, that we think are particularly important within current feminist analysis, we hope that this special issue contribute to the surely intensifying debate about contemporary critique/postcritique.

September 2017

## REFERENCES

- Anker, E. and Felski, R. (2017). Introduction. In: E. Anker and R. Felski, eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (pp. 1-28). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Apter, E. and Freedgood, E. (2009). Afterword. *Representations*, 108(Fall), 139-146.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bauer, N., Beckwith, S., Crary, A., Langier, S., Moi, T. and Zerilli, L. (2015). Introduction. *New Literary History*, 46(2), pp. v–xiii.
- Best, S. and Marcus, S. (2009). Surface Reading: An Introduction. *Representations*, 108(Fall), pp. 1-21.
- Butler, J. (2001). What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue, *Transversal Texts* [online], [transform.eipcp.net](http://transform.eipcp.net). Available at: <http://transversal.at/transversal/0501> [Accessed 24 Jul. 2017].
- Dahl, U., Liljeström, M. and Manns, U. (2016). *The Geopolitics of Nordic and Russian Gender Research 1975-2005*. Södertörn: Södertörn University.
- Dean, T. and Wiegman, R. (2013). What Does Critique Want? A Critical Exchange. *English Language Notes*, 51(2), pp. 107-122.
- Felski, R. (2015). *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gallop, J. (2000). The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 16(3), pp. 7-17.
- Hames-García, M. (2011). Queer Theory revisited. In: M. Hames-García and E.J. Martínez, eds., *Gay Latino studies: A critical reader* (pp. 19-46). Durham, England: Duke University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science question on feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), pp. 575-599.
- Hemmings, C. (2011). *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Latour, B. (2004). Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern. *Critical Inquiry*, 30(2), pp. 225-248.
- Liljeström, M. (2016). Affect. In: L. Disch and M. Hawsworth, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (pp. 16-38). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Love, H. (2010). [Close but not deep: Literary ethics and the descriptive turn](#). *New Literary History*, 41(2), pp. 371-391.
- Love, H. (2015). Doing Being Deviant: Deviance Studies, Description, and the Queer Ordinary. *Differences*, 26(1), pp. 74-95.
- Moi, T. (2017). *The Revolution of the Ordinary*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mouffe, C. (2008). Critique as Counter-Hegemonic Intervention, *Transversal Texts* [online], [transform.eipcp.net](http://transform.eipcp.net). Available at: <http://transversal.at/transversal/0408> [Accessed 24 Jul. 2017].
- Raunig, G. (2008). What is Critique? Suspension and Recomposition in Textual and Social Machines, *Transversal Texts* [online], [transform.eipcp.net](http://transform.eipcp.net). Available at: <http://transversal.at/transversal/0408> [Accessed 24 Jul. 2017].
- Rogoff, I. (2003). From Criticism to Critique to Criticality, *Transversal Texts* [online], [transform.eipcp.net](http://transform.eipcp.net). Available at: <http://transversal.at/transversal/0103> [Accessed 24 July 2017].
- Sedgwick, E.K. (2003). Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You. In: E.K. Sedgwick, ed., *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (pp. 123-151). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Serpell, C.N. (2017). A Heap of Cliché. In: E. Anker and R. Felski, eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (pp. 153-182). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Weed, E. (2012). The Way We Read Now. *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*, 2(1), pp. 95-106.
- Wiegman, R. (2012). *Object Lessons*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Wiegman, R. (2014). The times we're in: Feminist criticism and the reparative 'turn'. *Feminist Theory*, 15(1), pp. 4-23.

---

**Citation:** Liljeström, M. and Peltonen, S. (2017). On Feminist Epistemic Habits and Critique. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 1(1), 01. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc.201701>

Copyright © 2017 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.