theories and methodologies

Scenes of Argument

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IN A CRUCIAL MOMENT FROM HENRY DUMAS'S SHORT STORY "STRIKE AND FADE" (C. 1965–68), AN UNNAMED NARRATOR OBSERVES WHAT IS left of a city in the immediate aftermath of an urban uprising: "The word is out. Cool it. We on the street, see. Me and Big Skin. We watch the cops. They watch us. People comin and goin. That fire truck still wrecked up side the buildin. Papers say we riot, but we didn't riot. We like the VC, the Viet Cong. We strike and fade" (111). The staccato established by the short phrasings, fragments, and use of the vernacular evokes a sense of anxiety, contributing to what Carter Mathes aptly describes as Dumas's "aural portrait of black urban space under siege" (91). Dumas's careful attunement to the rhythmic feelings, or *grooves*, of the everyday adds texture to that opening pronouncement, "The word is out," which, in this instance, registers a temperate disposition simultaneously alert and giving off the impression that one is maintaining the order of things. Everything will have changed by the time the phrase returns in the short story's penultimate paragraph, when the narrator and Big Skin are no longer eyeing the police but are instead woven into the collective action of an indeterminate "we." Dumas writes, "The word is out. Burn, baby, burn. We on the scene. The brothers. Together. Cops and people goin and comin. Some people got good loot, some just hoofin it. A police cordon comin. We shadows on the wall. Light comin towards us. We fade" (115). The political message seems obvious. It's the post-Watts 1960s and disenchantment with the civil rights movement is setting in. For an emerging generation of radical black artists and activists, the time has come for people to

> . . . confer
> on the possibility of
> Blackness
> and the inevitability of
> Revolution. (Giovanni)

"Strike and Fade" is Dumas's contribution to this radical shift in the tenor and tone of black politics. In it, he stages the self-organizing

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activity of an explicitly masculinist form of black rebellion and, through his unnamed narrator's sensitive awareness, depicts how an ordinary black man becomes a black militant. Dumas, further, appears to distill his message in the mouth of a wounded former Green Beret named Tyro who has just returned from Vietnam. "Play thangs careful," Tyro tells the narrator, Big Skin, and the other men who have come to visit him. "Strike and fade, then strike again, quick. Get whitey outa our neighborhood. Keep women and children off the streets. Don't riot. Rebel. You cats get this message. Do what you got to do. Stick together and listen for the word to come down. Obey it!" (115).

In an invitation to a book party celebrating the publication of Dumas's collections *Play Ebony Play Ivory* (1974) and *Ark of Bones* (1974), which features "Strike and Fade," Toni Morrison exclaimed that Dumas "had written some of the most beautiful, moving, and profound poetry and fiction that I have ever in my life read" (311). Dated 17 September 1974, Morrison's invitation was sent about eight years after Dumas had been shot dead by a New York City Transit Police officer, in May 1968, seven weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Morrison, then senior editor at Random House, tapped Angela Davis, Jayne Cortez, Eugene Redmond, Melvin Van Peebles, and John A. Williams to join her in recognizing the literary contributions of this relatively unknown black writer whose life had been cut short. These notable black artists and intellectuals who gathered in Dumas's name come to mind every time I read this text. Like the clandestine black militant organization that forms and deforms itself in Dumas's short story, that social gathering always flickers for me in the background of his writing.

I begin with this brief discussion of Dumas in order to shed light on a problem of recognition at the heart of the debate about critique that has preoccupied literary studies since the publication of Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015). That Felski's concept of postcritique has exerted such influence for the last five years is undoubtedly a testament to the argumentative force animating her desire to move beyond the calcified modes of interpretation she sees exemplified in Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion." As a result of Felski's warning against the "proliferation of a hypercritical style of analysis that has crowded out alternative forms of intellectual life" (10), as well as the impassioned responses from her detractors, "postcritique" has become something of a talisman. It either holds the power to change the fate of a discipline in crisis, or its mystical properties threaten to derail literary scholars from their proper aims. The problem of recognition that I refer to resides in the shadows of the postcritical debate, and, perhaps because it goes unacknowledged, it continues to have a profound effect on academic life today. Recent arguments against critique that strive for alternative interpretive styles and methods tend to eschew the epistemologies that shape the horizon of a postcritical future. The postcritical project thus turns its back on forms of intellectual life it unwittingly associates with critique and deems hermeneutically aggressive.

In a way, "Strike and Fade" stages a similar problem of recognition through Dumas's troping of guerrilla warfare. By the end of the short story, the unnamed narrator speaks from the position of a spectral social form: "We shadows on the wall" (115). The haunting presence conveyed by this "we" is in stark contrast to the state of hypervisibility the narrator describes at the start of the text: "We on the street, see. Me and Big Skin. We watch the cops. They watch us" (111). Dumas's use of the nickname Big Skin subtly augments this visual encounter, naming someone who accompanies the unnamed narrator throughout the short story while also alluding to the layer of social signification that is black flesh. The narrator's relation to Big Skin, like the black subject's relation to blackness, falls prey to racist

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epistemologies that render even the most intimate expressions of black social living as perceived threats to civil society. Yet, when the "we" finally assembles into a collective form of agency it does not merely act "*like* the VC"; instead, it achieves a spectral form that is somehow present—"We on the scene"—yet, at the same time, ungraspable: "We fade." The book party commemorating Dumas has a similarly indeterminate status in relation to my reading of the text. While some readers might relegate the party to a mental footnote, I remain drawn to interrogate its fleeting presence in each reading of "Strike and Fade." I am left groping for knowledge: Who gathered to hear Morrison, Davis, Cortez, and the others read from Dumas's recently published collections? Which selections did they choose? Did someone read "Strike and Fade"? How did they sound? What was the feeling in the room? Did Cortez read "For the Poets," which she dedicated to Dumas and Christopher Okigbo?[1] Or bring a copy of *Mouth on Paper* (1977), where the poem is printed alongside Melvin Edward's drawings? Does she sound different when she reads it again, retitling it "Kai Kai," on *Maintain Control*, a 1986 album she recorded with Ornette Coleman, Abdul Wadud, and the Firespitters? This line of questioning only partially registers the residues of unmarked social formations that haunt my encounter with Dumas's text and constitute something akin to what Wai Chee Dimock calls a "resonant universe" (1068), or to the distant congregations that Ashon Crawley and Emily Lordi locate in and as the (back)ground of black culture. Like Dumas's urban guerrillas, the haunting refrain of others gathering around this text and my evocation of such unverifiable presences challenge our normative modes of reading, writing, and thinking about literature; like a hum muted by history, the dull reverberations of that recursive assembly and diffusion require an expansion of our hermeneutic horizons, offering glimpses into alternative styles of intellectuality that are, as Hortense Spillers might put it, "already there, *at hand*."[2] The resonant social universe of "Strike and Fade" calls for an inquiry into the styles of intellectual life that are not typically recognizable as such, as well as the scholarly ideas and practices that determine which ways of being and thinking assume perceptual form within the field of literary studies. At stake in this is a question not only of approach but also of presence that informs the various ways we argue. Where postcritical debate has focused on our treatments of texts, I wish to shift our attention to argumentative address and the ways we present ourselves in the making of a claim.

Arguments are addressed to a presumed other. They operate like the poetic device of apostrophe, which, through the direct address of absent, dead, or inanimate entities, is a form of ventriloquism, in which a speaker "throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness" (Johnson, "Apostrophe" 32). Just as apostrophe enables a dialogic space, argument generates a relational context, conjuring an interlocutor. In relation to that implied other, we establish ambiguous scenes of argument that cultivate unique voices and styles—what David Scott determines to be "modes of intellectual *presence*, or being-with-others," which are entwined with our hermeneutic orientations to texts (24).[3] Any consideration of the practice of argument must therefore contend with the constructions of the other that determine intellectual styles of self-presentation. Indeed, just as the poet-speaker uses apostrophe to summon an absent other into being—into presence, into life—our critical arguments summon an addressee, one who focalizes our claims and establishes the intellectual context in which our arguments unfold. Though our interlocutor doesn't respond, its summoning is enough to set the terms, tone, and discursive limits of the scholarly conversation.

These reflections on the discursive space created by academic argument are inspired

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by the paper Pardis Dabashi gave at the 2019 MLA Annual Convention, which was the catalyst for this cluster. Dabashi posed a question that helps to shift the terms of the postcritical debate: "To whom are post-hermeneutic modes professionally accessible?" (2). Instead of implying that some of us in the profession are not permitted to engage in conversations about critical methods and moods that Felski has set into motion, Dabashi wishes to seriously consider the implicit risk that postcritique carries and its unequal distribution across generational lines. She insists that "the notion of the scholarly intervention as it's been upheld in the history of the discipline—that is, the ways that we've been trained to communicate why an argument we are making matters to the field and how it is new—may no longer speak to how we as early-career scholars of this generation think or want to articulate ourselves." Nonetheless, she goes on, "we are the population who has to adopt its rhetorical conventions perhaps the most fervently, in order to attain professional security." Dabashi's claim brilliantly formulates as a problem of style the contradictory pressure that early-career scholars now endure. "[T]he material realities of being a precariously placed scholar today," she writes, "have direct impact on not just what we say, but how we say it" (5). If Felski wants us to cultivate different attitudes toward our texts, Dabashi advocates "for re-orienting ourselves vis-à-vis each other—that is, laterally, scholar to scholar" (3). Dabashi thus turns our attention to the intersubjective dimensions of intellectual life and invites us to investigate the implicit relational structures and modes of address that foster argumentative styles in the field. While this intersubjective turn sheds light on the institutional privilege and asymmetrical relations of power the postcritical debate tends to sidestep, it also opens up questions about the epistemological frames that define the subject of (post)critique. To the extent that the agent of critique is the aggressive, suspicious, and charismatic foil to the affective moods and styles of self-presentation that the concept of postcritique is meant to foster, it remains unclear to me if the postcritical debate is at all concerned with confronting the systems of inequality that structure academic life, or if it simply marks an occasion for the reinstitution of academic norms through "the back door of redress" (Ferreira da Silva 25).

This ambivalent image of academic life beyond critique can be seen, I suggest, in a set of rhetorical operations similar to those that once projected visions of a world postidentity in the aughts. Take, for instance, *The Way We Argue Now* (2006), in which Amanda Anderson coins the term "culture of argument" as a way of describing "the discursive practices and habits that underpin the unfinished project of modernity and the evolving institutions of liberal democracies" (6). Anderson stages a defense of critical detachment and reflective distance as means of rejuvenating the liberal-democratic spirit of the humanities. This is also an expression of concern with "the dominant paradigms within literary and cultural studies that have had an adverse effect on the fostering of public-sphere argument precisely insofar as identity has come to seem the strongest argument of all" (17). For Anderson, identity claims threaten to undermine modes of scholarly exchange defined by fairness, reciprocity, and mutual understanding: "while the politics of identity has made significant contributions to the way we do scholarship across many humanities disciplines, it has also at times allowed claims to identity to trump other claims, thereby disabling reciprocal reason-giving argument" ("Culture" 88). Held in opposition to the unfinished project of modernity that drives the humanities, identity emerges as an impediment to the give-and-take that characterizes Anderson's ideal of a liberal-democratic culture of argument. Her assertion finds its persuasive force in the figuration of identity as a threat to the ideal versions of public discourse that underpin

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academic life. Her argument thereby reflects a more general tendency in literary studies to transpose the various forms of scholarly activity that take identity as a point of inquiry and category of knowledge into an abstract idea of identity that is at the heart of what Anderson and others refer to as the politics of identity. Such an understanding of identity does little more than efface ongoing debates, longstanding intellectual traditions, and other manifestations of intellectual life that orbit questions of social difference. In this regard, Anderson's descriptions of the potentially adverse effects of the politics of identity on liberal-democratic cultures of argument are particularly instructive scenes of argument. On the one hand, her argumentative practice establishes a context for intellectual exchange defined by principles of fairness and rationality, but, on the other, her descriptions of the potential perils of identity read as apostrophic moments in which this menacing figure briefly appears and suddenly fades. Identity is thus the haunting presence on the scene—a demonic entity, an ever-present threat against which the intellectual exchange is defined: Anderson's addressee, in its "mute responsiveness," is turned into a speechless horror. The postcritical dream of moving beyond critique is similar to the vision of overcoming identity insofar as both evacuate entire domains of intellectual activity and ways of thinking and knowing that do not align with established conceptions of academic life.

Some might remember the infamous United Colors of Benetton story that Patricia J. Williams tells in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991) to help define what she calls the "ideology of style" undergirding the claims of neutrality and objectivity in legal and other modes of academic writing. Williams recounts how editors of a law review drastically revised an essay she submitted for a symposium on the theme of excluded voices. In that essay, Williams linked the rhetoric of privatization to corporate unaccountability by narrating her experience of having been denied entry into New York's Soho branch of the clothing store Benetton by a young white salesclerk who refused to buzz open the door when he saw that it was a black woman who rang to enter. With each round of edits, her enraged tone, the name of the clothing store, and, finally, all reference to her race were removed. "This is just a matter of style," the editors insisted. Reflecting on the ideology of this claim to style, Williams notes "how the blind application of principles of neutrality, through the device of omission, acted either to make me look crazy or to make the reader participate in old habits of cultural bias" (48). The rhetoric of neutrality and the attendant liberal ideal of color-blindness embodied in the editors' conduct delegitimized Williams's claims and deemed the links she was making between racism, rights discourse, and categories of personhood to be outside the scope of legal scholarship. Yet, Felski tell us, "when legal scholars assail the neutrality of the law in order to lay bare its hidden agendas, they . . . subscribe to a style of interpretation driven by a spirit of disenchantment" (2). From this perspective, Williams can only appear as the disgruntled critic and symptomatic reader whose bad mood has pervaded the humanities. The sensitive attunement to voice, reception, genre, and narrative form that Williams exhibits in her writing and in her intellectual style more generally would be unintelligible through the lens of postcritique. Felski's argument against critique would not be able to accommodate the episodic quality of Williams's writing and how she situates each of her retellings of the Benetton story within a specific discursive context—in the law review, at a law-school conference, and in speaking engagements at universities—enabling her style of analysis to capture the routinized aggressions, everyday patterns of humiliation, and mundane forms of terror that fall upon black lives. A more generous reading of Williams might find a

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theory of black self-making hidden under the mark of critique. One wonders if there are unexplored connections between postcritical assessments of mood and disposition and the social positions of those we think and argue with. "What Williams means by social position," Barbara Johnson contends, "involves the ways in which *she* displays herself *as constructed by others*. Her style becomes the style of the other addressing her" ("Alchemy" 177).

Like Dumas, Williams has a good ear. Her storytelling exhibits a generosity, though not in the way that postcritique envisions readings to be generous. Her storytelling offers up neglected domains of social life as intellectual gifts that might foster attitudes that are perhaps less modest and sincere than the liberal-democratic visions of interpretation as "a coproduction between actors" but verge on a compassion, a feeling with, directed toward those discredited and devalued in the name of postcritique—namely, the forms of intellectual life that solely appear as threats as soon as they arrive on the scene (Felski 174). Williams's retellings activate a copresence that normative modes of argumentation seem to foreclose in the service of maintaining an ethical posture toward an abstract other. In "Strike and Fade," when Tyro, the wounded messenger, tells his visitors to "[s]tick together and listen for the word to come down," it's almost as if Dumas, like Williams, privileges listening as a fundamentally social approach to the text over merely reading it. We can listen, for instance, to how the story is structured by an echo of the sentence "The word is out." Is this an idiomatic expression through which the text refers to itself, or does it pose philosophical questions about language or the possibility of a black public sphere? Might the dramatic shift in the story from "[c]ool it" to "[b]urn, baby, burn" convey a theory of history? Perhaps that echo might even model the historical life of the text as akin to a long song or a serial poem that "culls and extends a field of sympathetic resonances, lingering while moving on by way of recursiveness and feeling-with" (Mackey ix). Listening would then operate similarly to the "hermeneutic attitude" that Scott associates with the late Stuart Hall's intellectual style insofar as what I am describing as an attunement to the social universe resonating from Dumas's text is driven by "the moral-political prospect of being not only expressively but also *receptively* present to others" (Scott 27). At a moment when it seems the project of critique has reached its limit, we might benefit from opening ourselves to the danger of thinking with others.

"Can critique ever be generous?," asks Tiana Reid. Perhaps, it just requires that we listen.

Notes

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1. Christopher Okigbo (1932–67), a renowned Nigerian poet, was killed in combat during the Nigeria-Biafra War.

2. Spillers writes that we "are accustomed to hearing that the intellectuals must go back to community, but the only community there is goes forward with the objects already at hand. In fact, the 'answers' that he/she seeks are already there, *at hand*, if by that we mean the willingness to *stake the inquiry*" (115).

3. In 2011 Barbara Tomlinson defined "the scene of argument" as a central tenet of a feminist "socioforensic" mode of analysis that "seeks to reshape how we construe, critique, and transcend the always already gendered nature of public and scholarly texts, their interpretation, their disaggregation, and the consequences of their framing as 'objective' or 'subjective,' 'scientific' or political" (18). I shift between singular and plural versions of this concept as gestures toward Judith Butler's notion of "the scene of address" (9–22) and Saidiya Hartman's attention to forms of terror and racial subjection that unfold in everyday life.

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