theories and methodologies

"Never Punch Down"; or, How We Disagree (Online) Now

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ACADEMIC *TWITTER* IS FOND OF THE PHRASE "NEVER PUNCH DOWN." THE SAYING COMES FROM STAND-UP COMEDY, WHERE IT WAS A TENET of life on the road: if you stick to punching up—that is, making fun of the powerful—you'll get laughs. If you make jokes at the expense of the weak, you're more likely to be greeted by a hostile audience. Faced with an unfamiliar crowd in a new city, a performer could trust that they wouldn't go too far wrong by making fun of CEOs, presidents, or queens. Punching up to power was generally seen as liberating, or at least fair play given these figures' privilege. Punch down, however, and you might get punched back.[1]

More recently, on academic *Twitter* the construction "never punch down" has become shorthand for the idea that users should avoid abusing their IRL powers online. The rule seems to go something like this: if you have tenure or a lot of *Twitter* followers, you're not supposed to criticize those without your level of access to institutional security or currency in the attention economy. I know this because I was once the target of this kind of criticism, and I witnessed a backlash, led mostly by early-to-mid-career scholars, against it. After a nonacademic essay I wrote was widely and gleefully criticized by certain influential corners of academic *Twitter*, it was these recently tenured scholars who argued publicly on my behalf that senior scholars should avoid punching down at someone like me, then a graduate student. Derisive tweets were swiftly deleted, and I even got an apology message from one faculty member involved. Though I wanted my argument to be taken seriously, and I feared being infantilized by the never-punch-down narrative, I had also experienced firsthand the damage a chorus of mockery can do to a developing writer. (I have struggled to maintain the confidence to write ever since.) My experience—I cannot emphasize enough—was extremely minor compared with the experiences of other scholars, some of whom have been victims of sustained harassment from both inside and outside the academy. It nonetheless left me with a number of questions about how power operates on *Twitter* and how

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PMLA 135.5 (2020), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.963 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that power intersects with institutional and cultural power outside it.

In limning the affect of the critical intervention, Pardis Dabashi writes that the pressure scholars feel to intervene "has a way of ossifying hunches into convictions" (4). If this is true in our academic writing, it is even more true on *Twitter*, where a snappy claim can rocket a scholar to broad influence (both inside and outside the academy). There, it seems, convictions have a way of ossifying into one-liners. *Twitter* criticism is generally delivered with the affective punch of a joke, often a joke that implies—rather than states—the content of that criticism, relying on the superior understanding of an audience in the know. The terms we use to describe the way criticism is deployed on *Twitter* reflect the platform's culture of rhetorical virtuosity and casual cruelty. We say that a tweeter who got ruthlessly criticized in flamboyant fashion has been "dunked on," that those who criticize ignorantly deserve swift and steady "clapbacks," and that naive or uninformed tweeters often get "owned."[2] Amanda Hess has described this sort of terminology as "an ideal code for people who believe their mastery of the internet has raised them to a higher plane of existence." As Hess writes, "the most successful 'ownage' finds hubristic targets, people who think they know more than they do. But ownage is itself a hubristic act; it turns knowledge into a tool for exploiting another person's lack thereof." Sound familiar?

On academic *Twitter*, the affect of these one-liners is often half-serious, half-sarcastic. Such statements make real intellectual points in pithy ways that are attentive to the platform's rhetorical and cultural conventions. Since reading Dabashi's essay, I've been thinking of these tweets as "twitterventions," the place at which the fast-paced discourse of the Internet meets the long-standing scholarly tendency to claim authority by undermining the ability of others to do so. (If you're wondering why I'm not bringing specific examples of such twitterventions into this essay, it is because I cannot in good conscience do that. Although doing so would strengthen my argument by providing evidence, it would also undermine my claim that we should not use *Twitter* primarily to intervene on one another.) While academic *Twitter* gives us more access to one another than ever before, the people who currently make up the academy are stratified by class in dramatic new ways. Many young scholars (like me) are carrying upward of one hundred thousand dollars in loan burdens and finding themselves on the market for several years before securing a tenure-track job (or leaving the profession). Numerous reports have shown that the combined burdens of work stress and economic precarity have created a mental health crisis among PhD students (Wong). Stories about adjuncts living in their cars, supplementing their incomes through sex work, and even dying from the pressures of precarity have become well-known cautionary tales about the increasing brutality of the field (Gee; Kovalik; Harris).

What Michael Bérubé in this issue of *PMLA* calls the culture of "intellectual aggression," which has always been a feature of our field, looks different to me under such circumstances (see also Ruddick, "Near Enemy," "Professional Harassment," and "Unnamed Work"). If the adjuncts, graduate students, and early-career researchers on whose labor the university increasingly runs are struggling to meet their basic needs, then we cannot expect them to participate in a seemingly abstract critical discourse, because—of course—for them that discourse is not abstract. Even polite disagreement with a senior scholar, whether in person or online, can feel impossible when you believe that they can influence your ability to work in the field. It's terrifying when, as happened to me, a senior scholar disagrees with or mocks a precarious member of the community publicly. What might have been a small slight in a seminar room is magnified by the megaphone of social

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.963 Published online by Cambridge University Press

media. Thus, I worry about the confluence of the current economic stratification in the field, the long-standing critical culture of "intellectual aggression," and *Twitter*'s tendency of "ossifying hunches into convictions." I also fear that if we teach young scholars that punching up is the only way to do political work, we can only expect to produce senior scholars who punch down (on *Twitter*, but also while asking questions of their peers at conferences, or in their classrooms). As *Twitter* increasingly transforms from an "extramural space" to a professional one, we need to think carefully about how we want to conduct discourse there (Zuroski). Instead of replicating our current academic culture, with its hierarchies and abuses intact, we could use this space to create what Dabashi calls "convention" (9). Building on Kathleen Fitzpatrick's "generous thinking," Dabashi uses "convention" to describe a model of academic utterance in which critics think with and alongside other critics. As opposed to intervention, which requires the displacement of previously held views, convention, for Dabashi, invites scholars to think together, making space for a communally built intellectual arena.

Marginalized communities have long understood that *Twitter* discourse can strengthen rather than fracture political will. As Makeba Lavan argues, echoing Arthur Schomburg, Black *Twitter* has crucially convened "counternarratives" and produced "counter-memory, assembling supplementary information that challenges the dominant narrative propagated in traditional media" (57). As Lavan reminds us, it was pressure from this community that led to George Zimmerman's indictment for Trayvon Martin's murder. Most protest movements of the last decade (from the Arab Spring to #BlackLivesMatter) have relied on social media to mobilize and build coalitions, a pattern that bears out the truth of Lavan's analysis. The same kinds of counternarratives are produced, writes Eugenia Zuroski, when marginalized academics use *Twitter* as "an academic 'backchannel'—a place where conversations *about* the institution and people's experiences of it can unfold and gather collective energy in a way that rarely happens *within* the institution." As both Zuroski and Patricia A. Matthew point out, this space is especially important for academics of color, who are still vastly underrepresented in higher education and who "prior to social media's ubiquity" often "faced alone . . . the social and professional isolation that can come with being one of the only people of color in a department" (Matthew 241). Similarly, Jason S. Farr and Travis Chi Wing Lau have written of the ways in which *Twitter* has transformed accessibility for scholars with disabilities, allowing them to build alternative communities that respond to the often "inaccessible character of the [traditional academic] communities and institutions which [they] navigate." Seen through the lens of the marginalized, "social media platforms like *Twitter* offer a democratizing means by which communities can be formed and sustained through dialogue and collective thinking." Similarly, Hannah Alpert-Abrams, Mimi Winick, and Amanda Henrichs have invoked Fitzpatrick's work in the digital space, asking how "we can practice #GenerousThinking for a more liberatory future" (@hralperta, "Today"). Senior scholars like the organizers of *Scholars for Ethical Review* (ethicalreview.commons.gc.cuny.edu) and *Tenure for the Common Good* (tenureforthecommongood.org) have also done much to make *Twitter* hospitable and useful to those the academy has not traditionally served.

Despite these positive developments, academic *Twitter* contains very real dangers, especially for Black, Indigenous, and people of color; precariously employed academics; and other marginalized groups in the academy. These dangers include the internal toll of public criticism and abuse, which has been movingly described by Dorothy Kim, Alex DiBranco (qtd. in Allam), and others. There are also concrete professional consequences

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.963 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for many academic tweeters. As Matthew writes, "rescinded job offers, locked *Twitter* accounts, and racist and sexist campaigns lobbied against the most vulnerable members of the academy—untenured faculty of color" testify to the dangers of the space (242). Furthermore, the president of the United States now uses *Twitter* as an alternative to the mainstream press, by which he often claims to be victimized. This is a perverse appropriation of the powerful counternarrative that Black *Twitter* created to correct inaccuracies in the historical record. Since the Republican super donor Paul Singer recently bought a major stake in *Twitter*, in hopes of pushing out the current CEO Jack Dorsey, it seems likely that we will continue to see the platform's subversive potential eroded (Deveau and Hammond).

Given all this, is academic *Twitter* redeemable? As I see it, much of *Twitter*'s radical potential comes from its ability to center the standpoints of individual users. The term *standpoint theory* generally describes feminist theory's response to so-called objectivity, its means of confronting the epistemic certainty that other discourses (like science) have tended to produce. As Donna Haraway argued in 1988, feminists understood the subtext of most claims to objectivity: that the claim reproduced an account of the world that seemed to have no embodied or phenomenological basis but that actually resided in the subject position of the white, cisgender, upper-class man (581). Standpoint theorists have used this critique of traditional objectivity to make a case for the embodied status of all knowledge (and therefore all critique). Philosophically, it led feminists to the conclusion that all knowledge is "situated" and that "only partial perspectives" can ever produce anything that looks like objectivity (Haraway 581, 583). I can never have the same insights as my colleague who lives in a different body with a different history. It is only through the convention of multiple standpoints that we create knowledge. This account of epistemology bears a resemblance to Dabashi's construction of a critical modesty that assumes "epistemic parity with . . . readers," inviting "them in on the critical act" rather than performing its own expertise by negating their experiences (8).

Twitter is very good at connecting a person's standpoint—the embodied position from which they approach the world in a phenomenological sense—to the knowledge that they produce. (Though I think this is true of *Twitter* in general, it is especially true of academic *Twitter*, where a user's institutional position and background are easily verifiable.) Identity is its key vector. Social location is valuable, since the discursive culture on academic *Twitter* generally recognizes that some subject positions produce unique forms of knowledge and insight. Unlike much literary theory and criticism, *Twitter* discourse often relies on embodiment as evidence. It connects the personal to the political in obvious ways. *Twitter* thus makes standpoint theorists of us all. Its ability to center identity can be, as Lavan, Zuroski, Matthew, and Farr and Lau have shown us, a powerful force for coalition building.

If all this sounds like an appeal for civility on academic *Twitter*, it isn't. Calls for civility, as they are deployed in our culture, usually ask the disempowered to cooperate ("be nice") to avoid risking expulsion from the system that is abusing them. Punching may well be necessary in a world where intractable racial, gendered, social, and economic divides make it nearly impossible to be heard without such force. That said, it doesn't need to be our only discursive strategy (especially if the puncher is a person of privilege in the academic hierarchy). Instead, I argue that—particularly on the Internet, where we are especially liable to both punch carelessly and be misunderstood—we try to cooperate, convene, and, yes, treat one another well for the sake of our collective power to shape the future of the academy. Instead of asking the

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.963 Published online by Cambridge University Press

structurally weakest among us to capitulate to the dominant culture, this process will require the most powerful to be receptive to the cultural challenges mounted by vulnerable members of the community. That Dabashi's paper at the 2019 MLA convention caused a stir is evidence that this work is hard; that *PMLA* is publishing this cluster is evidence that it is also possible.

If the work of liberalism in the last hundred years has been partly to value and make space for difference, the work of neoliberalism is to commodify that difference in ways that appear to be in line with "liberal inclusiveness" but actually undermine coalition building (Psomiades 56). This is also currently the work of many institutions of higher education. Struggling under the weight of underfunding, declining admissions, an increasing sense in the United States that college may not be worth its costs, and a more general culture of anti-intellectualism, institutions are understandably doing everything they can to cut costs. We—educators—are, and always will be, one of their biggest costs. For this reason, despite the values or goodwill of particular administrators, our institutions don't want us to collaborate; in fact, the most threatening thing we could do is to form strong political alliances between "professionally secure, midlate career" academics and the precarious members of the profession on whose labor most institutions now run (Dabashi 2). The critical intervention that seeks to invalidate the past to clear room for itself is exactly the kind of work that capitalism wants us to do, because it creates generations of scholars who can't speak to one another across their meaningful differences. What could be more useful to a program that relies on our not unionizing than our alienation from one another?

In other words, my answer to the question posed by this cluster—How do we, and how should we, argue now?—is simply this: in ways that don't make it impossible for us to form political coalitions, collaborate, and see one another's standpoints. We can disagree, but we don't need to disagree in order to make our own claims. Online, we don't need to dunk on one another in order to make space for ourselves, and we could all benefit from thinking carefully about the way our own power is refracted by the kaleidoscopic intersection of multiple registers and kinds of power on *Twitter*.[3] We should remember that *Twitter* is a place where our hunches are likely to ossify and our affects are likely to be misread; we should also remember that these inevitabilities are not unintended outcomes of *Twitter* discourse, but part of its actual design. If capitalism in general wants to dehumanize us, the particular brand of late capitalism in which we are living wants us to dehumanize one another.

All discoveries of value are collective; if we remember them as the result of the work of great individuals, we are obscuring much complexity for the sake of this individualistic narrative. Reading a biography of Edith Wharton recently, I learned that she used to sit in bed writing each morning and that she would throw completed pages onto the floor of her bedroom for her maid to pick up and collate (Lewis). Perhaps her servant would have liked to write novels; perhaps she would have liked to stay in bed all morning. Perhaps the world lost a number of great works of literature because she couldn't. Whether in terms of material support or intellectual atmosphere, nothing creative—like knowledge production—happens through the work of lone individuals. All our work as scholars should center that truth, especially if we claim to want to divest from the white supremacist, imperialist, and misogynist logic around which the American university was first organized. Now that it seems clear that higher education as an institution is in decline, or at least undergoing a sea change, we should be using *Twitter* to convene academic community. To do so would be not simply to do right by the most precarious members of the academy, but also

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.963 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to acknowledge that in a culture that doesn't highly value education, we are all precarious. Academic workers were never different from the other workers on whose labor this country runs. If recognizing that is painful, it also makes me feel cautiously optimistic; reality is a good place from which to start, if one wants to build a better world. There is both freedom and power in such modesty.

Notes

I would like to thank Pardis Dibashi and Grace Lavery for providing me with the opportunity to write this essay and for their thoughtful and supportive feedback on drafts.

1. As far as I can tell, the precise origin of the phrase "never punch down" is unknown. It may arise from the early-twentieth-century satirist Finley Peter Dunne, who wrote, in the voice of his fictional comic alter ego Mr. Dooley, that the goal of a newspaper is, among other things, to "comfort[t] th' afflicted, [and] afflic[t] th' comfortable" (141–42). Dunne's construction has been adapted in numerous ways. One version avers that satire's goal is "to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted" (Phillips; see also "Point of View"). Though he does not use the term *punch down*, George Carlin is often cited for explaining and popularizing this concept for modern audiences. When asked by Larry King about the comedy of Andrew Dice Clay, Carlin offered a critique of punch-down comedy, noting that Clay "target[ed] . . . underdogs." As Carlin explained, this approach was in contrast to traditional stand-up comedy, which "has picked on people in power, people who abuse their power" ("George Carlin" 00:09:13). See also Cohen.

2. See Schwedel; "What's a 'Clapback'?"; and Hess.

3. Many members of the academy already do this kind of convening on *Twitter* brilliantly. An incomplete list of scholars (that is, reflecting my own standpoint, community, career stage, and disciplinary proclivities) who use *Twitter* to broaden scholarly conversations and amplify the voices of others includes Brandy C. Williams (@brandycwill), Rithika Ramamurthy (@rithika_ram), Julia Ftacek (@JuliaFtacek), Jay Shelat (@jshelat1), Amy Gaeta (@GaetaAmy), Helen Rottier (@helenrottier), Brian M. Watson (@brimwats), Christina Katopodis (@nemersonian), Sarah Ross (@PaxVictoriana), Justin Thompson (@WalterTater), Grace Rexroth (@GraceRexrothCU), Kristin Moriah (@DarkStars__), Ronjaunee Chatterjee (@ronjaunee), Kristin Distel (@kristin_distel), Madison Priest (@madison_priest), Kelly Fleming (@accessoriness_), Lauren Eriks Cline (@leriksclne), Sari Altschuler (@SariAltschuler), Amy R. Wong (@amyrwong), Tita Chico (@TitaChico1), Min Hyoung Song (@minhyoungsong), Rebecca Colesworthy (@rcolesworthy), Kathleen Alves (@katalves18c), Lucia Lorenzi (@empathywarrior), Jaipreet Virdi (@jaivirdi), Keisha N. Blain (@KeishaBlain), Manu Samriti Chander (@profchander), Manushag (Nush) Powell (@nushpowell), Jason Pearl (@jasoninmia), Jason Tougaw (@JasonTougaw), Deborah E. McDowell (@dem8z), Roopika Risam (@roopikarisam), Kathleen Lubey (@kathylubey), Stephanie Insley Hershinow (@S_Insley_H), and Jonathan Hsy (@JonathanHsy). A good way to discover scholars who are trying to use *Twitter* this way is to follow the hashtag #GenerousThinking, which attempts to mobilize Fitzpatrick's *Generous Thinking* on social media for the benefit of academic "staff, alt-ac, and contingent workers" (@hralperta, Private message). See also Dombrowski; Visconti.

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