theories and methodologies

Response

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ONE OF THE WAYS WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE VALUE OF SCHOLARSHIP IS TO CALL IT TIMELY. TO CLAIM THIS KIND OF SALIENCE FOR CRITICISM often means ignoring the slow pace of academic publication and the ironies that delay can introduce. Alternatively, you can redefine timeliness: acknowledging delay, you live with its ironies as well as you can. Academics have tended to follow this second course, refusing to keep up with the relentless pace of events in favor of a more considered approach. For many, this looks like a case of sour grapes. With real relevance out of reach, critics cultivate the long view, their articles just so many tweets rotting on the vine.

"Cultures of Argument" counters this kind of accusation, showing how, even in the face of crisis, an expanded sense of the present matters. These essays address current threats to literary criticism in the context of reflections on the history of the field, the fate of institutions, and the nature of thought itself. As enrollments decline and the job market crumbles, these critics treat academia as a culture, as a world. Rather than join in the fire-sale atmosphere (everything must go!), they cast a sober eye on academic life, pointing out its toxic aspects but also making a plea for what should remain.

Robert Chodat argues on behalf of criticism as a form of aesthetic response involving a "mixture of perceptual intensity, intellectual challenge, existential excitement, and moral risk." For Chodat, the roots of critical activity run deep, which may help it survive the loss of its supporting professional infrastructure. Chodat is joined by other critics here in looking beyond the anxiety of the current moment, teaching us how to think in a crisis. Even though this cluster originates in an MLA convention panel held in January 2019—by some measures, ancient history—these essays have become more, not less, relevant over time, gaining in significance as the crisis deepens.

In her presentation at that panel, Pardis Dabashi addressed the desires of junior scholars—PhD students, postdocs, and untenured faculty members—to undertake less aggressive and more collaborative forms of scholarship. Younger scholars, she claimed, would like

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to practice criticism that deemphasizes conflict and proceeds instead by agreement and amplification. In her words, they would prefer to "*con*vene" rather than to "*inter*vene." The freedom to experiment with different styles of criticism has been the prerogative of senior scholars, however. Only those with job security have so far been willing to risk a break with academic protocols of denunciation and one-upmanship. Dabashi presents junior scholars as invested in alternatives to critique and looking for new, less hostile ways to communicate. But the pressures of the job market mean they must continue to play the role of traditional, combative academics.

Dabashi addresses both the intellectual desires and the pragmatic considerations of junior scholars, offering a model of how scholarship might incorporate attention to its conditions of production. But as a materialist argument, this one is oddly incomplete. As its least privileged members of the academic world, untenured scholars are in a position to perceive its baleful aspects. The progressive collapse of the job market might result in bolder indictments and imagined alternatives, since junior scholars have the freedom of those with nothing, or very little, left to lose. But Dabashi's point is not that junior scholars are in revolt against academic life, but rather that they want to break out but cannot.

By this account, junior scholars' desires for cooperation and agreement are thwarted by their need to maintain the appearance of aggression. This is where, I believe, the argument does not go far enough. In asserting that junior scholars have been inspired by senior scholars exploring alternatives to critique but have been unable to follow their example, Dabashi suggests that the impulse of generosity is primary and authentic. In this view, the stance of aggression is just a stance, an attitude that must be adopted for practical ends. This misrecognizes the effects of material conditions, which not only force us into false positions but also remake the substance of our thought.

A simpler explanation presents itself. Perhaps junior scholars who continue to obey academic norms of competition and aggression are not suppressing unacceptable desires for collaboration. Perhaps they are driven by actual feelings of competition and aggression, the kinds that are regularly produced in situations of scarcity. As a system that grants advancement to a select few, academia has whetted the appetite of all. Kathleen Fitzpatrick points out that the culture of competition is only made worse in an institutional context ruled by metrics of individual achievement. But if we regret the aggressive behavior that results, we may still value intellectual ambition. The effects of the continued disappearance of resources remain uncertain. As the last routes to advancement close down and the spoils of victory disappear, it may be that people are no longer willing to play the game. But this is not the situation that Dabashi describes: rather, she points out the widespread reluctance of those still in the game to play it.

My point is not to show that the desires that Dabashi attributes to junior scholars are fake, a cover for more self-interested motives. I do not want to debunk this argument, which hit home powerfully for me. I am one of Dabashi's senior scholars, named as such. I was clearly enabled by tenure to experiment with descriptive method and alternatives to critique. I am also implicated as an adviser to PhD students, steering them away from modesty in the face of grim prospects. I have repeatedly impressed on students that they need to make stronger claims and bigger interventions to stand out in the job market. Keeping a close eye on the stakes of their projects, I urged them to up the ante, even as I pursued quieter paths myself.

Dabashi captures this divided state precisely. Furthermore, she makes clear how little recent claims on behalf of new reading methods have to do with modesty. By showing that this stance of weakness and humility is actually a form of privilege, she reveals

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that ethos is not merely a matter of attitude or disposition—it is also about power. This is a hard lesson for many academics to learn, since they often struggle to acknowledge their own authority. We may be answering to the rule of "loser wins" that, according to Pierre Bourdieu, characterizes the cultural field (39). Queer theory has long been critiqued for its disavowal of agency and failure to recognize its own dominance. But work on the new modesty has faced similar criticism, for its immodest ambition to transform the style and content of academic thought.

It may be that junior scholars are more immune to this sort of hubris, and that they can engage in academic arguments in ways that are more genuinely modest. But if so, the pages of *PMLA* are probably not the best platform to launch such a program. Rather than spend our time refuting individual claims of modesty, I think we might better acknowledge ambition as a widespread feature of academic life. I personally applaud the ambition of Dabashi's argument. The stakes of her essay are appealingly high: she does not argue that we should all be nicer to each other, but rather sets her sights on the basic form of academic argument ("They say, I say"). It is in recasting thought as a matter of amplifying, extending, or building on others' ideas—rather than contradicting or correcting them—that Dabashi makes her most significant intervention. Of course, it is impossible to make arguments without building on the work of others—this is something we all know, and try to teach. But it is also true that I rely on "They say, I say" in asking students to highlight their distinct contributions.

Were I to give up the kind of jockeying that Dabashi decries, I am not sure that I could imagine foregoing disagreement with other critics. The scholars in this cluster suggest appealing alternatives: Kyle Kaplan, for instance, cites political solidarity in queer studies, and Michael Bérubé points to affirmative traditions in cultural studies. Yoon Sun Lee offers a deep challenge to the argumentative style of critical theory, which depends on the repeated displacement of explanatory frameworks. In contrast, she considers the history of narratology, structuralism's "dutiful child." Linking narratology to natural history, Lee shows how its investment in taxonomy has meant a willingness to add new facts and revise old ones. These emendations take place within a shared horizon, the project of naming and describing kinds of stories. The "revolutionary" habits of mind that Lee associates with theory—the will to subvert and overcome rather than to add and realign—may be hard to let go. The lack of a shared framework, and a shared set of objects, has led to crisis in the profession. But agreement about what we are looking at seems as far out of reach as agreement about what to make of it. And the form of the cluster itself is animated by the atmosphere of crisis and by struggles over a dominant paradigm.

Those struggles, even if unresolved, can be highly instructive. For instance, reading Amanda Anderson's piece in the cluster, I was in full agreement with her suggestion that arguments should be judged by their content rather than by their ethos and that it is futile to make prescriptions about critical stances or moods. I found myself utterly persuaded even though I have spent most of my career making prescriptive arguments about critical affect and ethics. But reading along, I was also deeply persuaded by Nijah Cunningham's argument about the different audiences that critics write for. In contrast to Anderson, who calls for a shared and transparent language of disagreement, which I see as essential to democracy, I hear Cunningham insisting that many dissenting voices will never appear in such debates. In Cunningham's view, we must write to these voices and on their behalf. Is it possible to imagine democracy in the absence of such commitments?

While both of these critics forward a vision of communication as just and inclusive,

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their arguments lead in different directions, toward two conceptually and politically irreconcilable kinds of writing and public discourse. It is only by moving between these contradictory positions that I form my own ideas. While I want to encourage listening and acknowledgment, argument in the sense of disagreement seems to me crucial to thought itself. Although I can believe we might learn other habits, for many of us it is only by disagreeing with an argument that we give it our full attention, that we take it seriously.

The jury is out on the question of whether thought is possible in the absence of disagreement. But I don't think we need to wait for a verdict when it comes to the presence of aggression in academic culture, or indeed more broadly. Bérubé blames "toxic masculinity" among mid- and late-career male professors and suggests that we disentangle styles of interpretation and critique from the separate issue of "being . . . an arrogant jerk." But if there were ever an illustration of Anderson's point that prescriptive arguments about ethos were unsustainable, this would be it. Can we really persuade people not to be jerks, and if we can, are academic articles the way to do it?

Bérubé is surely right that senior men are responsible for some of the most egregious behavior. And yet neither age nor gender nor status is a sufficient guarantee against bad action. It seems to me that both toxic and beneficent qualities are distributed quite widely—not exactly randomly, but not predictably either. There is some irony in forwarding a vision of junior scholars refusing to engage in Oedipal strife in the context of an argument that sidelines senior faculty members. Sometimes aggression is at its worst when people ignore status differences, but keeping things within one generation can also go wrong. If *Lord of the Flies* seems too melodramatic an example, the chilling accounts given by Grace Lavery and Erin Spampinato of life on academic *Twitter* should give us pause. This supposedly nonhierarchical space is apparently given over entirely to the search for competitive advantage. Will we give up critique to embrace the ethics of punching up? Is punching the only option?

My qualms about a single generation's search for its own utopia reflect in part my strong attachment to the university as a space of intergenerational exchange. It is true that this generational mixing has been the cause of misapprehension, condescension, and even abuse and that economic inequality inside and outside the academy profoundly structures relations between generations. Nonetheless, academic life is one of few realms in which meaningful exchange across age groups is systematically enabled. Both as a student and as a teacher I have been enriched by intellectual, political, and personal encounters with people of all ages to whom I am not related. This ideal of exchange may be broken, but I refuse to give up on it.

I realize that my arguments here may strike some as a defense of the status quo: let's keep disagreeing with each other; it is important to maintain contact across generations; do not replace academic publication with social media. However, I too see the need for change, and I am persuaded, even moved, by many things that Dabashi writes. Like everyone else, I have been to an academic conference: I know there are problems. I am also aware that because I have tenure at an elite university, I am invested in maintaining structures that were never available to many people in the first place. But in addressing the relation between tenured and untenured scholars, it seems to me that raw injustice is the issue, not how we argue with each other.

As the situation worsens, and tenure recedes even farther out of reach, antagonism may yet prove to be an important tool in navigating the relations between generations. But we also may find ourselves allied in a shared struggle to keep the lights on. Perhaps the point now is to hold on to the spaces in which

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we can disagree with each other, whether generously or churlishly. If things continue on as they are, we may even find ourselves growing nostalgic for bad academic behavior. Nitpicking, grandstanding, bullying, condescension—none of that sounds so bad to me, as long as we can do it in person. It is possible that someday we will stop fighting with each other. But that might happen only when there is nothing left to fight for.

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