

theories and
methodologies

Introduction to “Cultures of Argument”: The Loose Garments of Argument

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AT THE JANUARY 2019 MLA CONVENTION IN CHICAGO, I GAVE A PAPER ENTITLED “THE PRESSURE TO INTERVENE: A CASE FOR THE MODEST (Young) Critic” on a panel called Post-critique and the Profession. The purpose of the panel was to encourage us to think about the postcritical debate in terms of the material realities of literary studies today. My paper interrogated the recent call for postcritical forms of scholarship from the perspective of the humanities’ current labor crisis. I had been struck by how arguments for imagining alternatives to traditional hermeneutic modes of literary criticism were inherently future-oriented: “this book joins an animated conversation about the future of literary studies,” Rita Felski writes in *The Limits of Critique* (2015 [10]). While intrigued by her and others’ encouragement to decenter critique and forge other ways of engaging with our texts, I couldn’t help thinking to myself, “Wait; what future?” Though one might imagine that the target audience of this plea for new kinds of criticism would be people like me—at the time a graduate student trying to break into the profession—my future as an academic was so terrifyingly uncertain that to plan for a future in which I’d be able to do any form of scholarship, critical or otherwise, seemed imprudent at best. To write about a postcritical future of literary studies and to insufficiently address how grim the future looks to those of us who hold the future of literary studies in our hands seemed a worrisome oversight.¹ In short, while arguments for postcritique, surface reading, and the like seemed as if they should be talking to me, I couldn’t help but sense that they weren’t really talking to me at all.

Moreover, while Felski and others were advocating for new modes and “moods” of analysis (Felski), I was looking for new modes and moods of *argument*. Though the bulk of the postcritical debate seemed to turn on the matter of the critic’s position vis-à-vis the text, what felt more salient to me as an early-career researcher with no professional security—and to me as a critic, more generally—was the positioning of my claims vis-à-vis the claims of others. I contended in Chicago that “since thus far the postcritical debates held in widely

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circulated and visible academic forums have mostly been conducted among professionally secure, mid-to-late-career scholars, we've not yet had the chance to discuss the kind of epistemic modesty that matters very deeply to early-career-stage scholars now—that is, scholars entering graduate programs in or around 2008.” That modesty, I suggested, has less to do with modes of analysis than it does with modes of scholarly articulation. It has to do with academic argument and the situation of one's claims within the existing critical conversation. I didn't want to talk differently about texts; I wanted to talk differently about how others were talking about texts.

The paper was met with pushback of the sort that made me worry even more about my ability to secure tenure-track employment. There was a full range of responses to the paper, but the room was generally split between two camps: seasoned late-career scholars who bristled vociferously at my suggestions, and precarious and early-career scholars who saw themselves in my description. Later that evening, a group of us—Kim Adams, David Sugarman, John Linstrom, Michelle Rada, and I—went out to dinner and had a long conversation about the future of academe and whether we have a place in it.

I proposed this cluster—named “Cultures of Argument,” after Amanda Anderson's phrase from *The Way We Argue Now* (2006 [6, 17])—so that we might sustain a conversation about the intellectually limiting and in some cases noxious ways we are arguing today. And so that we might do so—borrowing from the metaphors of argumentative speed Kyle Kaplan develops here—in the inherently slower form of the written word rather than under the heightened pressures of the conference room. The psychic challenges of that particular day have subsided. But what has remained, even as my career has entered a less precarious stage, is the sense that we might do a better job of thinking with patience and being patient with thought. And writing and reading,

which invite a slower form of reception than speaking and listening, might allow us to have that conversation more effectively. In their essays, my co-contributors think with me about argument, either by directly responding to the Chicago paper or by reflecting independently on argumentation in literary studies.

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus open the introduction to their special issue of *Representations* on surface reading by naming their project as born out of a particular generational peer group: “this issue's contributors and editors,” they write, “constitute a relatively homogeneous group of scholars who received doctoral degrees in either English or comparative literature after 1983. Our shared training,” they continue, “delimits what we mean and don't mean by the term 'read.' As literary critics, we were trained to equate reading with interpretation: with assigning a meaning to a text or set of texts” (1). But now we have a generation of scholars who were not necessarily trained to equate reading with interpretation. My cohort, for instance, entered graduate school in 2012—three years after the appearance of that special issue of *Representations*, two years after Heather Love put out “Close but Not Deep,” one year before Franco Moretti collected his previously published essays in *Distant Reading*, and fifteen years after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduced “reparative reading” to literary studies. I don't recognize my cohort's critical landscape in Felski's description of it in *The Limits of Critique*. (In his essay for this cluster, Michael Bérubé suggests that he doesn't quite recognize his in it either.) The shared training of my graduate peer group had already become infused with other modes of literary analysis than those committed to unearthing texts' hidden depths. Most graduate students in literary studies today operate from the premise that while the surface of the text may be telling us one thing, its depths are likely telling us another and that what lies beneath

most probably has to do with structures of power and sociopolitical dominance. But early-career scholars today also don't need convincing that a hermeneutics of suspicion is not the only approach to reading literature. The field of critical production for us is quite heterogeneous: the mixing of critical and at least some postcritical methods has become something we take for granted. For contemporary early-career researchers, neither critique nor postcritique has run out of steam; both are steaming along just fine.

What post-financial-crisis—and now, COVID-19-era—early-career researchers do need convincing of, however, is that at the end of their grueling years in graduate school, they'll find a job doing what they've been trained to do and that it won't be egregiously exploitative. Indeed, the second reason a reassessment of our modes of scholarly argumentation is in order is because arguing—advancing claims within a given critical conversation—is one of the primary means by which critics communicate with other critics, generate their scholarly identities, and, ultimately, establish professional security. To be sure, all critical utterance is relational; “academic writing has one underlying feature,” write Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein; “it is deeply engaged . . . with other people's views” (3). Scholarly argumentation is the art of forwarding claims through the interpellation of an existing critical community. But the state of the humanities today is such that the foundations of that community are crumbling to the point of all but disappearing. And the labor-market conditions under which emerging scholars are trying to generate scholarship and find secure employment throw into uncomfortable relief the extent to which when one advances a claim, the people with whose views that claim is in conversation populate a critical ecosystem that is both small and hierarchical. Those people include not only individuals in whose hands one's professional future might lie but also one's

peers, whose futures are as precarious as one's own. Emerging scholars today—especially those without secure academic employment—can find their critical disagreements pitting them either against those with far more institutional power or against their equally precarious peers. Critical argumentation can thus be a deeply vexed, vulnerable act, which holds within it both the promise of becoming less professionally vulnerable and the danger of doing so at the cost of others.

Graff and Birkenstein root contemporary argumentative practices primarily in the theories of rhetoric and persuasion that Kenneth Burke developed from previous rhetoricians. The basic principle that one forms academic arguments not in isolation but “in conversation” with other critics hearkens back to a moment in academic history quite different from ours. As a metaphor for how to generate knowledge, Graff and Birkenstein use Burke's oft-quoted scenario of a discussion at a party:

You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion. . . . You listen for a while, until you decide you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally's assistance. (110–11)

For all the ways that literary studies has challenged the political conservatism and exclusionary practices of the New Critics, it has largely left unquestioned this basic framework for scholarly intervention. The scenario Burke depicts is gendered, judgmental, and competitive. This party appears to be populated by men only (white, middle- to upper-class, one imagines), who revel in pitting themselves against their peers and either lionize or pass damning judgment on the quality of their “ally's” or “opponent[s]” contributions. This is a view of argumentation

as a phallic interjection of new knowledge—“you put in your oar”—whose terms are not based in learning, teaching, reflecting, revisiting, and creating. Instead, one is either a winner or a loser, glorified or shamed.

Burke’s party throws into stark relief not just the gendered, erotic, and racialized dynamics that, as Grace Lavery, Bérubé, Nijah Cunningham, and Kaplan rightly suggest here, inform our argumentative practices. It also exposes, more generally, the extent to which argument is the performance of a subject position. It is an action with a politics in need of critical scrutiny, especially now that the demography and critical preoccupations of academic literary study are a far cry from those of the mid-century. The participants in today’s academic “party” occupy a much broader array of subject positions than the ones implied in Burke’s scenario, and they are defined by new forms of labor inequity. It therefore behooves us to reassess the affects, processes, and outcomes that this scenario, now outdated, supports.

This might explain why Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s *Generous Thinking* (2019) has elicited a collective sigh of relief among so many early-career scholars and precarious academics. Bringing developments in postcritique to bear on the methods through which we generate our scholarship and our academic identities, Fitzpatrick encourages not a move away from critique but a move away from what she calls “competitive thinking.” Generous thinking, according to Fitzpatrick (and as Bérubé emphasizes in his essay for this cluster), is entirely compatible with critical thinking. “[T]he dark opposite of generous thinking,” she writes, “that which has in fact created an imbalance in scholarly work,” is not critical thinking but “*competitive* thinking, thinking that is compelled by what sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen called ‘invidious comparison,’ or what [Winfried] Fluck refers to as the ‘race for professional distinction’” (33). There is an inherent individualism, Fitz-

patrick argues, to the systems of merit and modes of knowledge production that form the contemporary university, an individualism that encourages “reading against the grain” not just of texts but of each other (2). The contemporary academic humanities often encourage modes of argumentation that signal the distinction of one’s claim—and one’s person—through “the rejection of everything that has gone before” (26).

Of course, there are many existing forms of argumentative framing. We don’t just debunk and challenge; we build from, we complicate, we expand. And as Kaplan’s and Cunningham’s essays especially illuminate, fields oriented toward the study of cultures of marginalized communities are likelier to engage in more experimental (e.g., auto-theoretical, openly speculative) modes of argumentation than those represented in Fitzpatrick’s account. It is no wonder that Duke University Press’s book series *Writing Matters!*, one of the most avowedly experimental series to have emerged in recent years, is co-edited by Lauren Berlant, Saidiya Hartman, Erica Rand, and Kathleen Stewart, seasoned scholars of Black studies, feminism, queer theory, and affect theory.

Nevertheless, in the dominant mode of scholarly intervention that graduate students are often taught to espouse in order to make themselves marketable, scholars still vie for the novelty and significance of the knowledge they produce by saying, albeit in different ways, “For a long time the field has thought *p*, but in fact it’s actually *q*,” or “Only if we understand *q* can we truly understand *p*.” The dominant form of scholarly intervention relies on an understanding of literary-critical knowledge production as predicated on the attribution of previous critical oversights, in many cases suggesting mutually exclusive rather than co-terminous argumentative positions.

But recent work by junior or recently promoted scholars suggests a growing desire to engage in forms of critical utterance that

don't rely so heavily on the "they say / I say" formula, in which one must articulate the value of one's contribution by scanning the existing critical ecology for faults to correct. Sarah Chihaya, Merve Emre, Katherine Hill, and Jill Richards, for example, claim that the value of their collectively written *The Ferrante Letters* (2020) derives not from its argumentative intervention but from its attempt to engage in a kind of criticism "deliberately oriented toward the ongoing labor of thought; one that would not insist on a static argument but embody a flexible and capacious process. We would not be competitive," they write, "not try to one-up one another" (Chihaya et al. 3). Aarthi Vadde and Melanie Micir, meanwhile, explore the venues that have typically accommodated such critical practices, those based in "the casual, minor, repurposed, and ephemeral writing expelled from literary criticism's traditional purview" ("Obliteration" 520). Sophie Seita, the author of *Provisional Avant-Gardes* (2019), says that she "move[s] within the same world" as many of the poets she writes about and is thus more invested in cultivating that community than in "having the final say in a critical argument" (In-person interview). And finally, Alix Beeston writes her current book-in-progress, "Photographic Women," in a fragmentary form that reflects the "chanciness and fitfulness of everyday research practices" and the "mysterious play of intuition and conjecture" (4). She draws particular strength from art historians' recent contention that images elude argumentative mastery—that they have the power of "resisting, speeding, slowing, affirming, contradicting, and sometimes partly ruining the arguments that surround them" (Elkins 26).²

Why, then, do we insist on mastering our literary texts with conceptual arguments that not only "smooth out" their "fundamental ambivalences," to borrow Kaplan's phrase, but do so, predominantly, by scrutinizing existing criticism for inadequacies? Indeed, the final reason we might defamiliarize and

reassess our dominant mode of scholarly intervention is epistemological. The mood attending the dominant mode of scholarly intervention is one of finality and conclusiveness, an assurance that this is the reading the field needs in order to truly understand what a given text or set of texts is doing. To be clear, there is a place for this kind of negative force. Works like Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* show us our previous blind spots in ways that can never, and should never, let us see literature in the same way again. Critical interventions born out of profound and justified disagreement with what has come before have done and continue to do vital political and intellectual work in the academy.

But it's unclear whether the intensity that rightfully attends such interventions—what Yoon Sun Lee in her essay calls the "rhetoric or temporality of crisis"—needs to be transferred to the work we do in our more everyday, micrologically productive criticism. Conclusiveness is, after all, an odd mood to adopt when it comes to making claims about literature. The epistemological status of literary-critical claims is not so stable as to warrant the dispositive polish characterizing so much of our scholarship. Despite our efforts to mitigate the discomfort that such indeterminacy can elicit—efforts anywhere from cognitive approaches to literature and the positivist strains of the digital humanities to the "historicist/contextualist paradigm" more generally (North 1)—we can never entirely escape the fact that we are not making rational truth claims, as Robert Chodat argues in his essay here. And so to situate the knowledge one has produced about a work of literature relative to other such knowledge in a position of mutual exclusivity seems the product of an epistemological category error.

But we know this. We know it, and yet we argue as if we don't.³ The rhetorical conventions of argumentation in our discipline

demand that we communicate our views as if they *were* truth claims and thus justified in displacing previous views. We know that two seemingly opposing readings of *Nightwood*, *The Canterbury Tales*, or *Salvage the Bones* can be “true,” in the sense that they enable us to see the text in different, mutually illuminating ways. We know, too, that while there are certain readings that reach us more, that feel righter to us, that illuminate the text and context of a work of literature in a way that helps us make better sense of it, we nevertheless don’t believe in the “correctness” of a reading of *Middlemarch*—however well-supported by textual and historical evidence—in quite the same way that we believe in the correctness of a mathematical equation or the fact that all human beings deserve equal rights. The status of critical claims about literature occupies an undefined territory between knowledge and belief, something on the order of a hunch—uniquely, excitingly, and also perilously indeterminate. And yet, the language of the scholarly intervention has a way of ossifying hunches into convictions, if not certainties. And unless those convictions have something to do with the just—as they do in works like *Playing in the Dark* and *Orientalism*—it might strike us that to place one’s claim about a work of literature in a position of mutual exclusivity with another is incommensurate with the bottomless polyvalence of art.

Thus, if there is a particular form of faultfinding that no longer speaks to the epistemic spirit of the current generation of emerging scholars, it’s not the critical faultfinding of high theory as such. What might no longer feel right, rather, is the argumentative faultfinding of the dominant mode of scholarly expression and its concomitant mood of assurance and finality. This emerging generation of scholars is showing itself to be more interested in seeing the moment of argumentative utterance as one of trial and experiment. I spoke in Chicago of the potential affordances of viewing literary criticism

as a moment of speculation rather than an expression of assurance. Speculative work more comfortably invites others into the critical act; it more easily assumes epistemic parity with its reader.⁴ It allows us to see scholarly argument as a moment of address rather than redress, a summoning of a critical community around a given idea. This would be a form of argumentation as a call not to intervene but to convene.

The combative culture of theory’s interventionism—justified in many cases—has trickled down into the way we argue for the relevance of most of our scholarly contributions. And that combativeness often leaps from the page to the seminar, the conference, and the lecture hall, creating environments that are damaging to graduate students and are often rationalized by their professional superiors as par for the course, good for their intellectual development, or both (Ruddick, “Professional Harassment”). In her essay for this cluster, Erin Spampinato examines the pervasion of *Twitter*, now an extension of the academic sphere, by its own form of damaging interventionism.

What would our criticism look like were we to wear our arguments like loose garments? What if instead of constricting our claims within rhetorics of certainty so as to quell our anxieties about the relevance of our individual contributions, if not of literary criticism as an epistemic endeavor, we were to work free those argumentative hooks—unfasten the buttons that give definitive rhetorical form to what might, epistemically, frustrate form—and lean into our uncertainty? To proceed from the premise that when we advance literary-critical claims, we are entertaining possibilities? That when we produce knowledge about a given text, we are trying to get at something about it rather than contain it? That part of the value of what we do as literary critics lies precisely in reckoning with the difficulty of naming what kind of work we are doing in our discipline (Ruddick, “Unnamed Work”)?

The danger, of course, is that approaching literary criticism as attempts to "get at" something has the potential to jeopardize quality control. If all we're doing is trying to grasp at something that we suspect is the case about a text, we run a high risk of, well, bullshitting—playing right into the hands of skeptics of the humanities. Literary critics, unlike, say, analytic philosophers, are, for better or for worse, not restricted by principles of deductive logic when making their arguments, and therefore the criteria for evaluating good and bad criticism remain elusive and challenging to communicate, as Chodat writes here. For Joshua Landy, who has written extensively on what he sees as the lack of argumentative rigor in literary studies and critical theory in particular ("Most Overrated Article?"; "Deceit"), analogous criteria for good literary criticism might be found in the world of law. In literary criticism, as in the law, Landy maintains, "there is no such thing as 100% proof." But our standards, in his view, should mirror those of legal argument: our arguments should be coherent, exhaustive, and plausible. "One's view of a text should not contradict itself; it should not be contradicted by something in the text that one (conveniently) ignored; it should accord with our best current picture of the way things actually are (e.g., how humans behave, how language works)" ("Speculation").

I'm especially sympathetic to this view. But a crucial distinction between legal argument and contemporary literary-critical argument is that lawyers argue from precedent, while literary critics—and especially early-career scholars—are largely bound by expectations of novelty. It's because the law has in the past treated a similar set of circumstances in a certain way that it should also treat the current circumstances that way. For the most part, lawyers don't want something new on their hands; novelty presents a threat to their case. By contrast, novelty is crucial currency in the publishing market and prestige economy that, as Fitzpatrick writes, characterizes

the contemporary humanities. While lawyers make their case based on what has happened before, literary critics make theirs on what hasn't. The danger of generous thinking—especially acute for today's precarious scholars—is that in reading generously, one might find that one is in full agreement with what has already been said by someone else (Fitzpatrick). One cannot build a publishing career and gain professional security by writing essays and book proposals whose main claims are that "X critic got it right and I'm here to remind you." Literary scholars often *have* to read ungenerously, if not manufacture disagreement, in order to create elbow room for their scholarship.

But we might instead engage in more forms of argumentative framing that make claims not at the expense of existing claims but alongside them, that recognize they may be onto something but that also openly accommodate some measure of doubt. There is value in showing one's seams, in attending honestly to the "ongoing labor of thought," in asking not "What do you think?" but rather "Where is your thinking right now?" Admitting to the fallibility of one's own position would likely require one to take a less negative, slower, more curious approach to the work of others. What kind of academic environment would this approach to argument—argument as provisional, as plausible, as trial rather than verdict, as experiment rather than product—generate?

It would not generate one in which early-career researchers under current labor conditions could get secure work. The irony is that because the precarious gain professional security by publishing through venues that often judge a piece of scholarship on how successfully its critical intervention builds itself on the perceived faults of other views, the precarious have to adhere to more familiar rhetorical paths of argumentation. Though the ways 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 contemporary early-career researchers think or want to articulate their claims, these scholars are the ones who have to adopt the field's rhetorical conventions most fervently. The critical intervention is in large part *the* currency with which graduate students and precarious academic laborers pay for secure work. The material realities of being a precarious academic worker, in other words, have a direct impact on not just what one says but how one says it.

In choosing the contributors for this cluster, I tried to stage an alternative to Burke's party, to curate an arena in which representatives from not just a wide array of fields but also various career stages and states of institutional security could convene around the topic of argumentation in literary studies. But this cluster inevitably plays into the very model of critical argumentation it seeks to decenter, since the Theories and Methodologies section of *PMLA* occupies a vital place in the prestige economy of literary studies (a point Love incisively elaborates in her response essay). This structural feature of the cluster compromises the force of its provocation. I chose nevertheless to propose *PMLA* as its venue because until concerns such as those aired in this cluster are consecrated by the pages of journals like these, and by the voices of those the profession has deemed worthy of its attention, persons with the institutional power to address those concerns will likely not listen.

In her essay here, Fitzpatrick first explores what it might look like to argue in a way that is both critical and generous, then discusses why this is so hard to do in contemporary academia, and finally makes a case for why it is essential that we do it. Next, Spampinato thinks through the modes of argument permeating *Twitter*. She uses the concept of critical convention to imagine what *Twitter* could be despite its basis in capitalist neoliberal competition and the aggressive inter-

ventionism that the medium's compulsory pithiness easily invites. Bérubé then emphasizes the distinction between social critique and argumentative demeanor, suggesting, finally, that there is a "toxic-masculinity mode of debate in academe" that it behooves us to abandon. Lavery thinks further both about the argumentative potential of the extramural arenas of critical expression Spampinato explores and about the sociopolitical ethics of argumentation Bérubé touches on at the end of his essay. She contends that venues such as *Twitter* and digital extensions of scholarly journals are especially well-suited to alternative forms of argumentation, and she draws out the feminism underpinning my call for a reassessment of our argumentative practices.

Lee then defamiliarizes the rhetoric of "perpetual crisis" often attending scholarly interventions by exploring the additive nature of argumentation that has flourished in the field of narratology. Chodat, meanwhile, turns to Stanley Cavell's notion of the "passionate" utterance to present a case for understanding the claims we make about literature not as rational arguments but as "responses" to the invitations extended by art. Cunningham then explores the politics of identity informing the "scenes of argument" in which such utterances are apostrophically addressed, as well as the forms of silence and silencing that such scenes both conjure and enforce. Anderson productively pushes back on what she sees as my attempt to name a unitary epistemic spirit of a generational cohort, by insisting that one of the liberating features of contemporary criticism is precisely its ethical multiplicity. Kaplan goes on to provide an example of that heterogeneity by exploring the different argumentative styles animating contemporary queer feminist theory. And finally, Love looks back on the cluster of essays, making a case for argument on the grounds that it is in disagreeing with others that one comes to realize what one thinks. She also worries, and with good reason, I think, that a reassessment of our argumentative

practices is useful but ultimately not enough when we are faced with the death of the humanities and the university as we know it.

But my hope is that, taken together, these essays show that to wear one's argument like a loose garment is compatible with disagreement. In fact, those who know me personally know that I have something of an argumentative strain and that in another life I would have trained to be a trial lawyer. Argument is a good thing. To forward a claim is to stake a claim on the world. Disagreement is a sign that I'm thinking, that I'm alive to the ideas in front of me. And I couldn't agree with Love more, that disagreement is an expression of meaningful differentiations in thought—this very introduction is littered with such differentiations, some small, some big. The point is that these scholars have revised my thinking in ways that make me want to listen—to learn, to adjust, to reassess, to accommodate more, to understand better, to reflect on my own thoughts. The point, too, is that we are always still thinking. And our writing is always catching up with our thinking.

In trying to name a growing desire on the part of today's early-career researchers to de-center the practice of interventionism and the rhetorics of certainty that it often espouses, I was not in Chicago, nor am I now, encouraging a reversal of academic history whereby we return from the project of knowledge production back to that of personal opinion and evaluative judgment (Clune). Nor, further, am I making a case against conflict. Conflict is intrinsic to the very act of modern interpretation, and this is one of its many virtues (Chander; Frow). But I would nevertheless insist that we must go mindfully into each instance of disagreement. Argument, as Anderson has shown by way of Habermas, is a communicative action that contributes crucially to the articulation of a community. But this particular community is now collapsing. Pierre Bourdieu once critiqued Kant for assuming that "cultural claims" take place within

a utopically even arena of critics (Chander, para. 4). Far from it, Bourdieu insists; cultural claims are sundry "position-takings" (qtd. in Chander, para. 6) within a "field of struggle" populated by agents "invested" with varying degrees of capital (Chander, para. 6). We, too, must recall, relentlessly, that argumentation does not occupy a noumenal sphere outside the very real power relations that structure academic life. One of the reasons a spirit of critical convention is so difficult is that one must trust in the critical generosity of one's interlocutors and such trust can so easily be betrayed (Fitzpatrick). Even as I write this introduction, I worry about the potential fallout of my claims: How will they be read? I've disagreed with some and agreed with others; some who read me will jump to find faults with my arguments, all of which are now and will always be in a state of change and development, always subject to my unending and productive doubts, doubts that fuel rather than stymie my thinking. Doubts that more in academia could afford to dabble in.

NOTES

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1. As Jacquelyn Ardam put it in a 2019 tweet that has since gone viral, "[S]ure is easy to claim weakness when you have tenure or TT job. The Q of weakness looks v different from the land of the contingent" (@jaxwendy). See also Vadde and Micir, "Weak Theory"; Mendelman.

2. See also Brinkema, for a critique of what she calls the "not this, but that" kind of argumentation permeating recent film theory (28–29). Note that everyone in this list of early-career scholars is securely employed. Doing this kind of work requires precisely the sort of conventional institutional support that precarious early-career researchers do not have, though they, I'm suggesting, are the ones who may have the strongest impulse to do it.

3. Many thanks to Beeston (In-person interview) for this formulation.

4. For some examples of openly speculative work that takes very different forms, see Dabashi “Dear Nella”; Field; Hartman.

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