



## Certain uncertainties: Living unlearning



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 26 December 2013

Received in revised form

30 December 2013

Accepted 30 December 2013

#### Keywords:

Uncertainty

Poststructural research

Doubt

Loss

Academy

Identity

### ABSTRACT

This introduction to the special issue reflects on its theme – that is, the less obvious impacts of lingering in academic spaces. It places the development of this collection in context, sketches its contents, and articulates the concerns and hopes that it pursues.

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*Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*

Beckett, 1984

### 1. The call

Like many special issues, this collection began with a call for papers. It asked what happens to our knowing when we, as students and scholars, enter academic spaces – that is, the physical, discursive, ideological, emotional, relational, and embodied locations in which we perform ‘higher education.’ In many disciplines, learning is not a simple upgrade from error and ignorance; the thinker and the thoughts are both subject to revision. Education is a move from passive to active, from object to subject, from knowledge consumer to knowledge producer. It is one of the few Great Goods in these morally ambiguous times. At its feet we burn received wisdoms rolled up in hundred dollar bills and dissect certainties. In exchange, we expect the safety and superiority of knowing better, knowing more: a quasi-secular salvation. Whether we aim to be street-wise or book-smart or both, learning equals progress.

But learning is also – perhaps necessarily – sometimes painful. Without arguing ‘for’ or ‘against’ education, this collection makes room for the ambivalent aspects of becoming learned: the apostasy, break-ups, break-downs and betrayals that may come along with our breakthroughs. It asks: what is the price of doubt, and who pays it?

### 2. Try again

This collection began when I did one year of a Creative Writing BA, got sick, took a year off, went to do God’s work in Russia, didn’t find myself, went back for an independent studies program, and followed it up with an interdisciplinary MA because I got funding and didn’t have the pre-req’s for other programs. Then I spent 8 years out of school doing non-profit work and having kids; every September withered without new beginnings.

It began when I won playwrighting awards in my teens and twenties but got scared of theatre people. School was the easiest kind of hard; I was awesome there. Life boiled down to one decision a year: course selection. It was a way to avoid growing up.

It began when I married way too young and was way too religious and driven. If I had been happier, who knows? But at school, even bad news was good news; when bits of me broke, I milked those wounds, wrapped them in theory, and sold them. It was cheaper than therapy. It gave me a place, a purpose, a method of transmuting loss.

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Too glib; try again.

If time and causality could be connected like dots to describe the shape of our imagined present, the first dot would be marked, 1975: University of Saskatchewan Experimental Kindergarten. There is a teacher, her back to me, seated on a piano bench, addressing the small strangers on the carpet at her feet. I do not want to join them. My lunch box and coat are left in a locker in the hall, the one with the panda sticker on the door. I want to stay there with the panda. I see the room before walking in, through the windows in a dim adjacent gallery. A few silent adults turn from the windows to watch my mother show me the chair where she will sit: nearby. From the classroom, the windows are a silver wall. Where is she? The teacher wants me to sit down, to find my place in the herd. The children giggle and whisper and stare. “Here,” the teacher says, finally, picking one from the pack. “This is Mayumi. She’s from Japan. She needs a friend. She doesn’t speak English.” We assess one another. We both have dark eyes and dark hair, cut short and straight with thick bangs. What are my options? I follow the silent girl through the tangle of thin criss-cross limbs to our spot on the edge of the carpet.

Locals put their children on the waiting list for this place at birth. They only accept a few, aiming for a sample with maximum diversity. I don’t get in because, until recently, I’ve been raised in Inuit villages, and my favorite food is slivers of raw frozen caribou, and I’ve never seen trees or roads that go anywhere. I get in because I will not speak to children.

The pieces are all there: the gaze, power, voice, agency, representation, compulsion, and an alarm bell ringing in the amygdala. Warning, it says: levels of security and certainty are dangerously low; proceed with caution.

By the way: I still want to stay with the panda.

### 3. Try differently

She is clinging to my shoulder and will not be put down when I lean forward. I know this place: here we go ‘round the mulberry bush, the space-time loop. The panic it used to cause is pharmaceutically dulled to an edge of resignation, a thin tip of despair. I sit back. I close the laptop. Its aluminum lips are quietly set and sealed around the pulsing light of the unsaid, the cornucopia of work.

“Sorry, Polly,” I say, stroking her head. “You’re a good girl, it’s going to be okay.” The small brown dog trembles on my chest. For chrissake, I think. You don’t have to multitask while she’s having puppies.

The next day the laptop has an application stuck in its throat. I ought to be pounding it out but a bit of internet banking turns into an hour of online shopping. Paypal thanks me. I will thank me, too, a few weeks from now, when I’m not sweating in my coat in some over-stuffed temple of consumption trying to identify affordable, desirable, and useful objects that will even-out a three-way calculation of kid-Christmas-gift equivalency, standing in lines while my spine grinds its teeth. None of their friends will find Empower-mints in a Rosie the Riveter tin in the toe of their stockings. That’s way cooler than whatever I ought to be doing. This will save time in the long run and support the Feminist Majority Foundation. That other thing might be my job, but it’s almost time to make supper now anyhow.

Besides, I don’t want to do that application. I want to – oh, hell, who knows. The women in my family are like hoarders, stacking up wants that might make us unlovable, filling up drawers with last straws, until one day we’re caught and crushed under all the things that we wouldn’t fight about.

The laptop is still waiting, mouth open: say AAAAAH. The application in its throat doesn’t look like a big deal, it could be finished in a couple hours, but behind it the to-do list stretches on, infinite as a dusty line of sharecroppers. Each one has mouths to feed. Somewhere in the back waits: write an introduction for a collection of essays on what happens to our knowing in academic spaces.

*Losing it: Learning in the ruins.* What does that even mean? I left the essays somewhere, under piles of knitting patterns and marking templates and gigabytes of data that need to be sorted and culled. It has been a shamefully long time since I put out the call for papers. Words have slowly rolled between authors and reviewers, gaining mass and grit like winter’s first snowmen. Now they are stacked into final drafts, melting, waiting for the cryogenic freeze of publication.

And there I am, online, looking for the perfect winter boots. Rooting around for what I need, blind as a newborn puppy.

The boots arrive three weeks later. They don’t fit.

### 4. Special issue supreme

Note: The test kitchen has not certified the success of this recipe.

Make one junior scholar from equal parts curiosity and conceit with a pinch of naiveté. Sift to remove certainties (over time they become bitter). Moisten with coffee until workable and knead/need until it holds together. Chill until firm.

Separate two faiths; save the jokes (you’ll need them later). Discard the whites (of course).

In a large bowl, whip poststructural theory to stiff peaks. Fold in junior scholar, crumbled, in a few quick strokes (if overworked, it will not rise).

Pour into an editorial pan, lined with a call for papers. Steam on low for two years, lifting the lid every few months to stir in submissions. Do not scorch.

When ready to serve, turn up heat and remove lid. Skim off grammatical errors. Boil down the juices and glaze with reserved jokes.

(I am not great at skimming).

### 5. Laying the table

Imagine an academic dinner where I get to invite really smart, amiable people to come discuss something I’m wondering about. We eat whatever bland fare the on-campus food service monopoly passes off as premium: breaded protein chunks in sugar-sodium sauce, flabby vegetables, a slice of bright Styrofoam cake, tepid coffee. Or – after all, this is a fantasy – we get off-campus, to a fair trade café full of plants and mismatched armchairs. I lay out the issues, like curios on a tray. Most are unrecognizable, but a few take familiar forms.

There is a little Patti Lather (2007), unknowing, being wounded by thought, drawing back from the erasure involved in empathy and a too easy, too quick eating of the other, from a recognition that maps the other only as it relates to the familiar. She has deconstructed the fabric of learning, so it’s a little patchy. She is moving carefully through truth claims, finding the seams and unpicking them, pulling out their stuffing to show the seams below. It seems like seams all the way down. Does all that uncertainty make it hard for her to choose from the menu of life? Or does she live in compartments – privately knitting things up as fast as the public Patti unravels them?

There is Britzman and Pitt (2006), with lovely knowledge in one hand and difficult knowledge in the other, blindfolded and impassive as statues of justice. We all know which hand we ought to pick; “I took the road less travelled by,” the rigorous say smugly,

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