contribute to learning, and we participate in learning communities. Technological change can enhance our mission in this era of great experimentation. Online reading will change reading, no doubt, but online formats, including those yet to come, will be valuable to the extent that they contribute to learning processes. We teachers of language and literature can bring to this discussion the importance of reciprocity and collaboration. Our learning, the particular character of language and literature study, is not a matter of a one-dimensional transmission from an expert to consumers but a participatory spiral, with exchange, assertions and corrections, and a horizon perpetually open to the new.

Reading for the brown bag discussion, Feb. 15 11:45am-1pm Curtin 989

Unlearning
JACK HALBERSTAM

I appreciate the timeliness of Russell Berman's 2012 MLA Annual Convention presidential theme, Literature, Learning, Language, as well as its alliterative quality. Of course the emphasis on "I words" leads me to add a few of my own, including lesbians, losers, London riots, lash, loss, love, and lament. Lamentable certainly conjures up one set of attitudes toward recent trends in universities away from language, literature, and learning and toward business, consumer practices, and industry, and yet my intent here is not to mourn the decline in the humanities or to bury those who see them as superfluous and outmoded; instead, I want to be part of their reinvention. While the bad news is that it is painfully true that the humanities have entered a time of severe crisis, the good news is that crisis is not limited to the humanities but in fact defines the era we inhabit, the economy we have inherited, and the futures we currently imagine. Crisis in the global economy has given rise to a series of questions about justice, politics, transformation, protest, and knowledge, and it is those questions I seek to confront here through an engagement with the Occupy movements, new forms of protest politics, new modes of feminism and queerness, animation, and revolt.

I want to address the presidential theme, articulated by Berman in terms of a "defense of learning," by addressing the importance of simultaneously

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learning to unlearn—learning, in other words, how to break with some disciplinary legacies, learning to reform and reshape others, and unlearning the many constraints that sometimes get in the way of our best efforts to reinvent our fields, our purpose, and our mission. Unlearning is an inevitable part of new knowledge paradigms if only because you cannot solve a problem using the same methods that created it in the first place. In her new book *New You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn*, Cathy Davidson provides multiple insights into learning, language, and the institutions dedicated to their advancement. Noting that while the deficits in attention that are part and parcel of how we learn, or fail to learn, may signal “the shortcomings of the individual,” she argues that “attention blindness” also leads to new opportunities for collaboration (100), in that it emphasizes how important it is to join forces with one another to make sense of a complicated world. For Davidson, then, attention blindness, or the way the human brain focuses in on one task or one piece of data to the exclusion of many others, should lead us to “share our perspectives” to see more (5); it should lead us to learn not to pay such close attention, to unlearn focus, to relearn what attention means in an age of constant data streams and endless updates; it should teach us to collaborate.

But in fact, as Davidson also argues, the ways in which we currently train ourselves and others and the institutions in which we do so are woefully outdated and ill-suited to the multitasking world of hypercommunication. In a phrase that is most often attributed to Alvin Toffler but actually was only quoted by Toffler, the psychologist Herbert Gerjuoy says:

The new education must teach the individual how to classify and recategorify information, how to evaluate its veracity, how to change categories when necessary, how to move from the concrete to the abstract and back, how to look at problems from a new direction—how to teach himself. Tomorrow’s illiterate will not be the man who can’t read; he will be the man who has not learned to learn.

(414)

To which Davidson adds, “Unlearning is required when the world or your circumstances in that world have changed so completely that your old habits now hold you back” (19).

We are living in a time of crisis, one that has been manufactured by the overwhelming emphasis placed in our culture on money, the economy, work, and business. But now is not the time to mount a defense of learning, genius, and expertise, nor is it a time to emphasize a canon or to dig into idealizations of the book and print culture and excoriations of screen and digital culture. Instead, our current crisis affords an opportunity to rethink the ways in which our institutions may prohibit rather than promote learning by severing us from alternative modes of knowing. The focus on the individual, on genius, on expertise may well be outmoded. Indeed, even in business worlds, the idea of individual wealth is becoming anachronistic as we live out the dire consequences of routing money through the individuals who make up 1% while bankrupting the multipliers who represent the 99%. Business in the future, and this was Toffler’s point, will not be aimed simply at the stockpiling of cash, property, information, and resources but will increasingly lean toward better modes of circulation, conservation, sharing, reusing, and sustaining.

The best argument we have right now for the humanities is that they fields that converge under that banner have an opportunity to represent a refusal of old-market imperatives; their value lies in a resistance to quantification and in their ability to ride new modes of communication into new realms of knowledge. The humanities—with their built-in resistance to clichés and propensity for channeling the counterintuitive, their insights into linguistic complexity, representational instabilities, and epistemological crises—perhaps more than other areas of knowledge production, have the tools for remaking the entire enterprise of learning. And given the recent budget-cutting measures experienced by most public institutions and the scarcity of administrative patience with diminishing enrollments, the humanities also have the urgent incentive to unlearn, relearn, rethink.

Does this mean that we should rethink the genre or period organization of English departments? Certainly. Does this mean that departments organized in terms of national cultures—German, French, Italian—may need to be reorganized in terms of the circulation of global cultures? Definitely. Does this mean that those who are satisfied with what they learned as graduate students some twenty or thirty years ago may find their knowledge bases to be redundant in this age of updates and upgrades? Inevitably. Does this mean that disciplines will fall and new organizations of knowledge will rise in their stead? Absolutely, and they already have. We can sit and fiddle in English departments and German departments while the university burns, or we can throw fuel on the flames and look for the phoenix of new structures of knowing. And how does this work? What form do these new structures of knowing take, and will we recognize them when they appear? They may well appear as new modes of paying attention or splitting one’s attention, as Davidson proposes, and they will certainly manifest in new noncanonical formations. But the refurbished pedagogical structures that will shift us out of linear learning and into
fractal models of give-and-take will probably be taught to us by students who will enter into learning with skill sets totally different from those we entered with and who will require different forms of inducements to pay attention and will force us to behave differently to keep their attention.

Learning is becoming not simply a two-way street but a multilane highway, and while there are drivers, passengers, navigators, and riders led by engines, signs, and flows, there are also new navigation systems, lots of alternative forms of transportation, and endless routes to be tried and traversed. The teacher in this extended metaphor is not necessarily the driver—the teacher may be the passenger. In fact, if I think back to how I learned to ride a motorbike, I am amazed to remember that my buddy Kim taught me by riding behind me. That is to say, she trusted that I, a complete novice on motorbikes and not much more experienced in cars, would be able to learn best not through imitating her or following her instructions with me on the bike and her safely on the pavement but by being given the power to steer myself and her out of danger. As we actually began to move with speed, as I began to control the bike with a bit more authority, and as the bike began to ride with us both, I realized that teaching is about risk, danger, and moving aside rather than about memorization, structure, and control.

The new politics of our time, the politics of occupation, passive resistance, and unlearning, exemplifies beautifully these new notions of attention, learning, and unlearning, focusing and unfocusing, refusing and resisting that students increasingly bring with them into the classroom. The occupation groups recognize that, as I have implied in my book The Queer Art of Failure, in an economy that engineers success for an elite few at the expense of the failure of the many, failure becomes a location for resisting, blocking, slowing, jamming the economy and the social stability that depends on it.

And so, in this polemical call for unlearning, I propose that we need to undiscipline ourselves, free ourselves from our training, and find new narratives to tell about life, literature, and learning, narratives more attuned to the harsh realities of human frailty and less calibrated to the rhythms of late capital. While the novel, for example, developed alongside capitalism, almost as a record of the new understandings of subjectivity, self, community, and value that organized new urban classes, now the novel stands as a marker of something else, something lost perhaps, a lost horizon, a failed future. As Julian Barnes puts it in The Sense of an Ending, "Does a character develop over time? In novels, of course it does: otherwise there wouldn't be much of a story. But in life? I sometimes wonder" (113). Barnes, like Zadie Smith in On Beauty, uses the novel not to track development over time or to exemplify a kind of aesthetic rescue but rather to signal the end of something or someone: in Barnes's novel it is the end of the knowing narrator whose sense of self and purpose organizes meaning for everyone else in his world. In Smith's novel, it is the end of the universe of white men that E. M. Forster described in Howards End, the novel from which Smith takes her cue. For Barnes, the novel leads us to the brink of knowing what we cannot know; for Smith, the novel reveals the semantic architecture that produces knowledge in the form of social hierarchies. Both books, written by British authors in the aftermath of empire, question colonial modes of expertise and knowing and the capitalist enterprise of adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing. As Barnes puts it, when we gamble, we think of our winnings as accumulating in value, as adding up to something. "Your winnings accumulate," he summarizes, before asking, "But do your losses?" (113). In capitalist terms, we are asked to think about gains, accumulation, and profit in infinite terms, but we are also told to think of loss as finite, as something we may have and then may lose. As we now know, loss also accumulates in the form of mounting debt, and so Barnes leads us to the unwelcome knowledge that "life isn't just addition and subtraction. There's also the accumulation, the multiplication, of loss, of failure" (113).

The mission for the humanities in the years to come will no longer be simply the cultivation of critical thinking, the democratization of knowledge, the decoding of aesthetic complexity. No, the humanities now must teach us to unlearn the wisdom of the past and substitute wild forms of experimentation for domesticated tried-and-true traditions of thought. We might want to learn from the humanities how to frame refusal as a mode of critique, how to foment new forms of social cohesion, how to live in the moment, how to conserve, how to live beyond norms, how to rethink the meaning of the political, how to unlearn elitism, cliquish sectarianism, and notions of superiority. We might want to learn what, in the realm of cultural capital, it means that we are the 1%.

In the Queer Art of Failure, I advocate low theory, low culture, anarchist notions of knowledge production, and cooperative models of wisdom. I advocate surprising nonelite archives, plot summary, and critiques of the logics of winning, success, and triumph. I argue for forms of being that seem possible when one is a child but quickly become unthinkable for adults.

To that end then I turn to another source of culture, wisdom, and political innovation: the Muppets. Yes, those Muppets, the lovable puppets of the 1970s and 1980s who made an amusing and poignant comeback recently in their glorious new film, The Muppets. The film revive the meaning of
money into early versions of the Pixar studio in 1986. The new CGI films that resulted from his collaborations with animators revealed a very different animated universe than that of Disney or Warner Bros. Pixar’s three-dimensional worlds had depth, perspective, and, perhaps most important for our purposes, the algorithm for representing crowds, masses, and multitudes in all their complexity rather than as a single figure repeated across the screen. The algorithm for multitudes just may turn out to be the quantum leap that enabled a generation to stop thinking in terms of singularity and self and start thinking in terms of the many and the collective.

We are living in a time of constant and massive change, and none of us should be standing still and lamenting our losses, not in relation to literature, language, or learning. The recent occupations of Wall Street and other centers of finance remind us that as the problem changes so do the solutions. One era’s mode of political transformation may become the next era’s symbol for accommodation and assimilation. To keep pace with change, we need to move or change the meaning of movement as the occupiers have done across the country. And now that many of the occupations have disbanded, people are still asking questions about what we want, what needs to happen next, and what comes after. Indeed, even as the occupation of Wall Street reached its fever pitch, Slavoj Žižek visited to speak to the crowd and to tell them, “Carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal life. Will there be any changes then? I don’t want you to remember these days, you know, like ‘oh, we were young, it was beautiful.’ Remember that our basic message is, ‘We are allowed to think about alternatives.’” There are always alternatives, but the idea that “carnivals come cheap” misses the point of the entire movement. This is a carnival, and carnivals are protests that never envision a return to normal life but know that normal life is one of the fictions of colonial and neocolonial power; a fiction used to bludgeon the unruly back into resignation. Like many anticorporal and anticapitalist movements, this current movement refuses to conjure an outcome, eschews utopian or pragmatic conjurings of what happens on the “morning after” precisely because the outcome will be decided on by the process of dissent, refusal, and carnivalesque failure. All we can know for sure is that the protests signal and announce a collective awareness of the end of normal life.

In the end, this message was delivered also by the film The Muppets—a wild and Wildean celebration of theater, carnival, and the queer unreality of life after capital. For the Muppets and for us, there are so many lessons to be unlearned on the road to knowing. The Muppets—proponents of horizontal tactics eliminating the notion of talent and genius and allowing
all to participate in the show, of permeable boundaries between audience and cast, amiable and effective bashing of the rich, and sweet and generous incorporation of the anonymous, the shy, and the untalented in their endeavors—exhort us all to unlearn the lessons of capitalism that come packaged as freedom, fantasy, and finance and to learn anew the curiosity, the sheer wonder, of not knowing on the path to transformation.

WORKS CITED


Of Degraded Talk, Digital Tongues, and a Commitment to Care

IMANI PERRY

In his 1964 collaboration with the photographer Richard Avedon, *Nothing Personal*, James Baldwin wrote, “For nothing is fixed, forever and forever, it is not fixed. The earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have” (n. pag.). As was sometimes his way, Baldwin said something obviously true, with gorgeous profundity. We offer our testimony, our witness to coming generations, but we also are called to witness or see them as they come forward. What seeing requires is in part that we acknowledge the temporality of life, of us, of them. Nothing stays the same. Not even language.

And yet here we are in the digital age, and we have repeated conversations that indicate we are uncomfortable with the organic transformations that are consistent parts of life, now scaffolded by increasingly sophisticated technologies. We are witnessing the renewal of some old anxieties. One is the anxiety about the perceived degradation of language, letters and art. Moral panics about language are routine in the midst of empire and in any heterogeneous societies that are divided by stratification and difference. The elite preserve domination through the word, as the masses resist the incursion of colonizers by capturing, mimicking, or remaking