

Rather than just arguing for a reevaluation of these standards of passing and failing, *The Queer Art of Failure* dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we currently live. Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbefitting, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of

being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon “trying and trying again.” In fact if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards.

What kinds of reward can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. As Barbara Ehrenreich reminds us in *Bright-sided*, positive thinking is a North American affliction, “a mass delusion” that emerges out of a combination of American exceptionalism and a desire to believe that success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than structural conditions (2009: 13). Positive thinking is offered up in the U.S. as a cure for cancer, a path to untold riches, and a surefire way to engineer your own success. Indeed believing that success depends upon one's attitude is far preferable to Americans than recognizing that their success is the outcome of the tilted scales of race, class, and gender. As Ehrenreich puts it, “If optimism is the key to material success, and if you can achieve an optimistic outlook through the discipline of positive thinking, then there is no excuse for failure.” But, she continues, “the flip side of positivity is thus a harsh insistence on personal responsibility,” meaning that while capitalism produces some people’s success through other people’s failures, the ideology of positive thinking insists that success depends only upon working hard and failure is always of your own doing (8). We know better of course in an age when the banks that ripped off ordinary people have been deemed “too big to fail” and the people who bought bad mortgages are simply too little to care about.

If at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style.

—Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant*

The value of some aspects of historical gay identity—deeply ideological though they may be—have been diminished or dismissed with successive waves of liberation. Central among these is the association between homosexual love and loss—a link that, historically, has given queers insight into love's failures and impossibilities (as well as, of course, wild hopes for its future). Claiming such an association rather than disavowing it, I see the art of losing as a particularly queer art.

—Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*

Queer failure . . . is more nearly about escape and a certain virtuosity.

—José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The There and Then of Queer Utopia*

Toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, as the United States slipped into one of the worst financial crises since the Great Depression and as economists everywhere threw up their hands and said that they had not seen the financial collapse coming, as working people lost their homes due to bad mortgages and the middle class watched their retirement accounts dwindle to nothing because of bad investments, as rich people pocketed ever bigger bailouts and sought shelters for their wealth, as casino capitalism showed its true face as a game played by banks with someone else's money, it was clearly time to talk about failure.

Failure, of course, goes hand in hand with capitalism. A market economy must have winners and losers, gamblers and risk takers, con men and dupes; capitalism, as Scott Sandage argues in his book *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (2005), requires that everyone live in a system that equates success with profit and links failure to the inability to accumulate wealth even as profit for some means certain losses for others. As Sandage narrates in his compelling study, losers leave no records, while winners cannot stop talking about it, and so the record of failure is “a hidden history of pessimism in a culture of optimism” (9). This hidden history of pessimism, a history moreover that lies quietly behind every story of success, can be told in a number of different ways; while Sandage tells it as a shadow history of U.S. capitalism, I tell it here as a tale of anticapitalist, queer struggle. I tell it also as a narrative about anticolonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming. This is a story of art without markets, drama without a script, narrative without progress. The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.

Failure can be counted within that set of oppositional tools that James C. Scott called “the weapons of the weak” (1987: 29). Describing peasant resistance in Southeast Asia, Scott identified certain activities that looked like indifference or acquiescence as “hidden transcripts” of resistance to the dominant order. Many theorists have used Scott’s reading of resistance to describe different political projects and to rethink the dynamics of power; some scholars, such as Saidiya Hartman (1997), have used Scott’s work to describe subtle resistances to slavery like working slowly or feigning incompetence. The concept of “weapons of the weak” can be used to recategorize what looks like inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance in terms of the practice of stalling the business of the dominant. We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.

In his refusal of economic determinism Gramsci writes, “Mechanical historical materialism does not allow for the possibility of error, but assumes that every political act is determined, immediately, by the structure, and therefore as a real and permanent (in the sense of achieved) modification of the structure” (2000: 191). For Gramsci, ideology has as

much to do with error or failure as with perfect predictability; therefore a radical political response would have to deploy an improvisational mode to keep pace with the constantly shifting relations between dominant and subordinate within the chaotic flow of political life. Gramsci views the intellectual function as a mode of self-awareness and an applied knowledge of the structures that constrain meaning to the demands of a class-bound understanding of “common sense.”

Queer studies offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems. What Gramsci terms “common sense” depends heavily on the production of norms, and so the critique of dominant forms of common sense is also, in some sense, a critique of norms. Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique. José Muñoz has produced the most elaborate account of queer failure to date and he explains the connection between queers and failure in terms of a utopian “rejection of pragmatism,” on the one hand, and an equally utopian refusal of social norms on the other. Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, makes some groundbreaking claims about sex, power, and utopian longing. Sometimes gay male cruising practices and anonymous sex take center stage in this genealogy of queer utopian longing but at other moments, sex is conjured in more subtle ways, as it was in *Disidentifications* (1999), as a desiring and melancholic relation between the living and the dead. Often, Muñoz’s archive takes center stage and at times he turns to the fabulous failure of queer culture mavens like Jack Smith or Fred Herko but at others he is quite openly working with the success stories (O’Hara, Warhol) in order to propose a whole archaeological strata of forgotten subcultural producers who lie hidden beneath the glittering surface of market valued success. While Muñoz makes queerness absolutely central to cultural narratives of failure, there is a robust literature that marks failure, almost heroically, as a narrative that runs alongside the mainstream. And so, let’s begin by looking at a spectacular narrative about failure that does not make the connection between failure and queerness and see what happens. This should foreclose questions about why failure must be located within that range of political affects that we call queer.

this chapter I want to discuss the queerness that circulates quite openly in mainstream children's cinema with clear political commitments.

Mainstream films marketed to children produce, almost accidentally, plenty of perverse narratives of belonging, relating, and evolving, and they often associate these narratives with some sense of the politics of success and failure. Rather than be surprised by the presence of patently queer characters and narratives in mainstream kids' films and by the easy affiliation with failure and disappointment, we should recognize the children's animated feature as a genre that has to engage the attentions of immature desiring subjects and which does so by appealing to a wide range of perverse embodiments and relations. Rather than protesting the presence of queer characters in these films, as one *Village Voice* reviewer did in relation to *Shrek 2*, we should use them to disrupt idealized and saccharine myths about children, sexuality, and innocence and imagine new versions of maturation, Bildung, and growth that do not depend upon the logic of succession and success.

Mainstream teen comedies and children's animated features are replete with fantasies of otherness and difference, alternative embodiment, group affiliations, and eccentric desires. In many of these "queer fairy tales" romance gives way to friendship, individuation gives way to collectivity, and "successful" heterosexual coupling is upended, displaced, and challenged by queer contact: princes turn into frogs rather than vice versa, ogres refuse to become beautiful, and characters regularly choose collectivity over domesticity. Almost all of these films foreground temporality itself and favor models of nonlinear and non-Oedipal development and disrupted and often forgotten histories. Repetition is privileged over sequence; fairy tale time (long, long ago) and mythic space (far, far away) form the fantastical backdrop for properly adolescent or childish and very often patently queer ways of life. So while children's films like *Babe*, *Chicken Run*, *Finding Nemo*, and *Shrek* are often hailed as children's fare that adults can enjoy, they are in fact children's films made in full acknowledgement of the unsentimental, amoral, and antiteleological narrative desires of children. Adults are the viewers who demand sentiment, progress, and closure; children, these films recognize, could care less. Just to illustrate my point about these queer fairy tales as both exciting ways of staging queer time and radical new imaginings of community and association, I want to point to a few common political themes in these films and to note the abundance of explicitly queer characters within them.

Queer fairy tales are often organized around heroes who are in some way “different” and whose difference is offensive to some larger community: Shrek is an ogre forced to live far away from judgmental villagers; Babe is an orphaned pig who thinks he is a sheepdog; and Nemo is a motherless fish with a deformed fin. Each “disabled” hero has to fight off or compete with a counterpart who represents wealth, health, success, and perfection.⁵ While these narratives of difference could easily serve to deliver a tidy moral lesson about learning to accept yourself, each links the struggle of the rejected individual to larger struggles of the dispossessed. In Shrek, for example, the ogre becomes a freedom fighter for the refugee fairy tale figures whom Lord Farquaad (“Fuck wad,” a.k.a. Bush) has kicked off his land; in Chicken Run the chickens band together to overthrow the evil Tweedy farmers and to save themselves from exploitation; in Babe the sheep rise up to resist an authoritarian sheepdog; and in Finding Nemo Nemo leads a fish rebellion against the fishermen.

Each film makes explicit the connection between queerness and this joining of the personal and the political: monstrosity in Shrek, disability in Finding Nemo, and species dysphoria in Babe become figurations of the pernicious effects of exclusion, abjection, and displacement in the name of family, home, and nation. The beauty of these films is that they do not fear failure, they do not favor success, and they picture children not as pre-adults figuring the future but as anarchic beings who partake in strange and inconsistent temporal logics. Children, as Edelman would remind us, have been deployed as part of a hetero-logic of futurity or as a link to positive political imaginings of alternatives. But there are alternative productions of the child that recognize in the image of the nonadult body a propensity to incompetence, a clumsy inability to make sense, a desire for independence from the tyranny of the adult, and a total indifference to adult conceptions of success and failure. Edelman’s negative critique strands queerness between two equally unbearable options (futurity and positivity in opposition to nihilism and negation). Can we produce generative models of failure that do not posit two equally bleak alternatives?

Renton, Johnny Rotten, Ginger, Dory, and Babe, like those athletes who finish fourth, remind us that there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner. Let’s leave success and its achievement to the Republicans, to the corporate managers of the world, to the winners of reality TV shows, to married couples, to SUV drivers. The concept of practicing failure perhaps prompts us to

discover our inner dweeb, to be underachievers, to fall short, to get distracted, to take a detour, to find a limit, to lose our way, to forget, to avoid mastery, and, with Walter Benjamin, to recognize that “empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers” (Benjamin, 1969: 256). All losers are the heirs of those who lost before them. Failure loves company.