

The Queer Art of *Failure*

JUDITH HALBERSTAM



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A JOHN HOPE

FRANKLIN CENTER

BOOK

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Judith Halberstam

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FOR

ALL OF

HISTORY'S

LOSERS

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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*.

## Punk Failures

Irvine Welch's notorious classic punk novel, *Trainspotting* (1996), is a decidedly unqueer novel about failure, disappointment, addiction, and violence set in the slums of Edinburgh. The novel is made up of obscene rants and violent outbursts from the Scottish working class, but it also contains limpid moments of punk negativity that point, in their own snarling way, to the implicit politics of failure. *Trainspotting* depicts the trials and tribulations of unemployed Scottish youth seeking some escape from Thatcher's Britain with ferocious humor and wit. Renton, the novel's anti-hero and one of about five narrators in the text, refuses the usual developmental trajectory of narrative progression and spends his time shuttling back and forth between the ecstasy of drugs and the agony of boredom. He undergoes no period of maturation, he makes no progress, neither he nor his mates learn any lessons, no one quits the bad life, and ultimately many of them die from drugs, HIV, violence, and neglect. Renton explicitly acknowledges his refusal of a normative model of self-development and turns this refusal into a bitter critique of the liberal concept of choice:

Suppose that ah ken aw the pros and cons, know that ah'm gaunnae huv a short life, am ay sound mind etcetera, etcetera, but still want tae use smack? They won't let ye dae it. They won't let ye dae it, because it's seen as a sign of thir ain failure. The fact that ye jist simply choose tae reject whit they huv tae offer. Choose us. Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yersel in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye've produced. Choose life. Well, ah choose not tae choose life. If the cunts cannae handle that, it's thair fuckin problem. As Harry Lauder sais, ah jist intend tae keep right on to the end of the road. (187)

Renton's choice to not choose "life" situates him in radical opposition to modes of masculine respectability but also gives him space to expose the contradictory logic of health, happiness, and justice within the post-welfare state. In this brilliantly wicked speech he justifies his choice of drugs over health as a choice "not to choose life," where "life" signifies "mortgage payments . . . washing machines . . . cars . . . sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mooth," and basically rotting away in domes-

ticity. Society, he tells us, “invents a spurious convoluted logic to absorb people whose behavior is outside its mainstream” (187); within this logic “life,” a numbing domestic passivity, constitutes a better moral “choice” than a life of drugs and drink. This same logic offers the armed forces to young men over street gangs and marriage over sexual promiscuity.

The polemic extends also to the structure of colonial rule within the United Kingdom. In a scathing diatribe against the English for colonizing Scotland and the Scots for letting them, Renton rants in defense of his maniacal and violent friend, Begbie: “Begbie and the like are fucking failures in a country ay failures. It’s no good blaming it on the English for colonising us. Ah don’t hate the English, they’re just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can’t even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonised by. No. We’re ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the low, the scum of the earth. The most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat into creation. I don’t hate the English. They just get on with the shit they’ve got. I hate the Scots” (78). Renton’s diatribe may not win points for its inspirational qualities, but it is a mean and potent critique of British colonialism on the one hand and of the falsely optimistic rhetoric of anticolonial nationalism on the other. In a very different context Lisa Lowe has described writing that refuses the binary of colonialism versus nationalism as “decolonizing writing,” which she calls “an ongoing disruption of the colonial mode of production” (1996: 108). *Trainspotting*, a Scottish decolonizing novel, envisions drugs, theft, and violence as the “weapons of the weak” utilized by the colonized and working-class males of Edinburgh’s slums.

Renton’s critique of the liberal rhetoric of choice and his rejection of hetero-domesticity results in a spewing, foaming negativity that seeks out numerous targets, both dominant and minoritarian. Sometimes his negativity slips easily into racism, sexism, and deep homophobia, but at other times it seems to be in tune with a progressive politics of critique. Indeed Renton’s speech finds its echo in recent queer theory that associates negativity with queerness itself. Lee Edelman’s book *No Future* recommends, Renton-like, that queers might want to “choose, instead, not to choose the Child, as disciplinary image of the Imaginary past or as a site of a projective identification with an always impossible future” (2005: 31). While Edelman’s refusal of the choices offered folds the symbolic order back upon itself in order to question the very construction of political relevance, *Trainspotting*’s refusals cling fast to the status quo because

they cannot imagine the downfall of the white male as part of the emergence of a new order. *Trainspotting* ultimately is far too hetero-masculine in its simple reversals of masculine authority, its antifemale fraternity, and its unpredictable bursts of violence. Without an elaborate vision of alternative modes, the novel collapses into the angry and seething language of the male punk from whom a legacy of patriarchal and racial privilege has been withheld. In this example of unqueer failure, failure is the rage of the excluded white male, a rage that promises and delivers punishments for women and people of color.

How else might we imagine failure, and in terms of what kinds of desired political outcomes? How has failure been wielded for different political projects? And what kind of pedagogy, what kind of epistemology lurks behind those activities that have been awarded the term *failure* in Anglo-American culture? The rest of this chapter is an archive of failure, one that is in dialogue with Sandage's "hidden history of pessimism" and Muñoz's "queer utopia" and that explores in the form of notes and anecdotes, theories and examples what happens when failure is productively linked to racial awareness, anticolonial struggle, gender variance, and different formulations of the temporality of success.

#### *Fourth Place: The Art of Losing*

The highs and lows of the Olympic games every four years showcase the business of winning and the inevitability, indeed the dignity of losing. The unrelentingly patriotic coverage of the games in many countries, but particularly in North America, gives a beautifully clear image of the contradictions of American politics and more specifically of the desire of white Americans to flex their muscles *and* pose as the underdog all at the same time. While individual American athletes practice plenty of failure at the games, American audiences are generally not permitted to witness those failures; we are instead given wall-to-wall coverage of triumphant Yanks in the pool, in the gym, and on the track. We are given the history of winners all day, every day, and so every four years American viewers miss the larger drama of the games, emerging as it does from unpredictability, tragedy, close defeat, and yes, messy and undignified failure.

In a photography project associated with the Olympic games in Sydney in 2000 the artist Tracy Moffat took profoundly moving pictures of people who came in fourth in major sporting events (see plates 1 and 2). In a catalogue essay associated with a show of these works, Moffat says that

she had heard rumors that someone had suggested her as one of the official photographers for the games that year. She comments, “I fantasized that if I really were to be the ‘official photographer’ for the Sydney 2000 Olympics I would photograph the sporting events with my own take on it all—I would photograph the losers.”<sup>1</sup> She says that while everyone else would be directed by the mainstream media to watch the triumphant spectacle of winning, she would focus on “the images of brilliant athletes who didn’t make it.” Ultimately, however, she settled on the position of fourth for her photo record of losing because coming in fourth was, for her, sadder than losing altogether. By coming in fourth the athlete has just lost, just missed a medal, just found a (non)place outside of recorded history. Moffat notes, “Fourth means that you are almost good. Not the worst (which has its own perverted glamour) but almost. Almost a star!” Fourth place constitutes the antiglamour of losing. As she says, it is not the perverse pleasure of being so bad you are almost good; no, fourth represents a very unique position, beyond the glory but before the infamy.

Moffat tried to capture in her photographs the very moment the athlete realized that he or she had come in fourth: “Most of the time the expression is expressionless, it’s a set look, which crosses the human face. It’s an awful, beautiful, knowing mask, which says ‘Oh shit!’” She photographs swimmers still in the pool, their bitter tears mixed with chlorinated water; her camera finds runners exhausted and exasperated, fighters knocked to the ground, players picking up sports equipment after the event. The whole series is a document of desperate disappointment, dramatic defeat, and the cruelty of competition.

These images remind us that winning is a multivalent event: in order for someone to win, someone else must fail to win, and so this act of losing has its own logic, its own complexity, its own aesthetic, but ultimately, also, its own beauty. Moffat tries to capture the texture of the experience of failure, the outside of success and the statistical standard that determines who loses today by a fraction of a second, a centimeter, an ounce, and who tomorrow is lost to anonymity. *Fourth* for Moffat also refers to the “fourth” world of Aboriginal culture, and so it references the erased and lost art of a people destroyed by the successful white colonizers.

### *George W.: The Art of Google-Bombing*

A few years ago, if you googled *failure* the first entry to appear was “Biography of George W. Bush.” Was this the work of some clever Internet activists? Apparently so. As BBC News reports, Google is fairly easily manipulated by “Google-bombing” to tie certain pages to particular phrases, and so one group of Google-bombers managed to hook up George W.’s page to the phrase *miserable failure*. We would all agree that George W. deserves to enter the annals of history under the category of failure, and yet failure is a lofty word for Bush, since it implies that he had a plan and then failed to execute it. In actual fact what is stunning about Dubya is how far he went on so little. Failure, as the images in the *Fourth* series imply, connotes a certain dignity in the pursuit of greatness, and so while *miserable* might be a good word for the Bush-Cheney era, they were actually horribly successful in terms of dominant understandings of success. George W. Bush of course represents the problems of building an economy and a politics around winners and winning instead of around the combinations of loss and failure that are inevitable to any system. Just so you know, entry number two when you googled *failure* was “Biography of Jimmy Carter” and number three was “Michael Moore.” The link for Moore takes you to a picture of him at the Republican National Convention holding up an “L for Loser” hand sign.

### *The Anti-Aesthetic of the Lesbian*

Which of course takes us to other L words. *Lesbian* is irrevocably tied to failure in all kinds of ways. Indeed, according to Heather Love, “same-sex desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, impossibility and loss. . . . Homosexuality and homosexuals serve as scapegoats for the failures and impossibilities of desire itself” (2009: 21). And Guy Hocquenghem notes in “Capitalism, the Family and the Anus,” “Capitalism turns its homosexuals into failed normal people, just as it turns its working class into an imitation of the middle class” (1993: 94). For Love, queer bodies function within a psychoanalytic framework as the bearers of the failure of all desire; if, in a Lacanian sense, all desire is impossible, impossible because unsustainable, then the queer body and queer social worlds become the evidence of that failure, while heterosexuality is rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfillment, and success(ion). Hocquenghem repudiates the psychoanalytic frame and instead



sees capitalism as the structure that marks the homosexual as somehow failed, as the subject who fails to embody the connections between production and reproduction. Capitalist logic casts the homosexual as inauthentic and unreal, as incapable of proper love and unable to make the appropriate connections between sociality, relationality, family, sex, desire, and consumption. So before queer representation can offer a view of queer culture it must first repudiate the charge of inauthenticity and inappropriateness. For example, the television show *The L Word* wants to overcome and replace the “backwards history” of lesbians with a sunny and optimistic vision of gay women. The makers of the obnoxious and infectious Showtime soap would love, in other words, to redefine lesbian by associating it with *life, love, leisure, liberty, luck, lovelies, longevity, Los Angeles*, but we know that L can also stand for *losers, labor, lust, lack, loss, lemon, Lesbian*. “Same sex, different city,” the ads for the show declare cheerily. And it is that “same sex” assurance that represents the heart of *The L Word*’s success, for the loser in the glossy and femme-centric series is of course the butch, who can appear only as a ghostly presence in the fluffy andro character of Shane.

What *The L Word* must repudiate in order to represent lesbian as successful is the butch. The butch therefore gets cast as anachronistic, as the failure of femininity, as an earlier, melancholic model of queerness that has now been updated and transformed into desirable womanhood, desirable, that is, in a hetero-visual model. But the butch lesbian is a failure not only in contemporary queer renderings of desire; she stands in for failure in consumer culture writ large because her masculinity becomes a block to heteronormative male desire. While feminine lesbians, of the variety imagined within a hetero-pornographic imagination, are deployed in advertising culture to sell everything from beer to insurance policies, the masculine lesbian proves an anathema to consumer culture. And so in *The L Word* we see that in order to make “lesbians” appealing to men and straight women, the specific features which have stereotypically connoted lesbian in the past—masculine appearance and interests and jobs—must be blotted out to provide a free channel for commodification. Indeed commodification as a process depends completely upon a heteronormative set of visual and erotic expectations. While even feminine gay men can function within this framework (because they still model a desire for hetero-masculinity) the butch lesbian cannot; she threatens the male viewer with the horrifying spectacle of the “uncastrated” woman and challenges the straight female viewer because she refuses to

participate in the conventional masquerade of hetero-femininity as weak, unskilled, and unthreatening. *The L Word* lesbians “succeed” within the specular economy of televisual pleasure precisely by catering to conventional notions of visual pleasure. By including a boyish but not mannish character, Shane, the show reminds the viewer of what has been sacrificed in order to bring the lesbian into the realm of commodification: namely, overt female masculinity. Shane instead occupies the role of the butch while evacuating it at the same time; she dates heterosexual and bisexual women, she gets mistaken (unrealistically) for a man, she dresses in an androgynous way—but she remains recognizably and conventionally female. Shane’s success, and the success of *The L Word* in general, relies upon the excision of the lesbian mark of failure.

### *The Queer Art of Failure*

Gender trouble of the butch variety is very often at the very heart of queer failure. But the queer legend Quentin Crisp transforms the apparent pathos of the gender queer into an asset: “If at first you don’t succeed, failure may be your style” (1968: 196). In this witty refusal of the dogged Protestant work ethic Crisp makes the crucial link between failure and style and, in his own effeminate persona, embodies that link as gender trouble, gender deviance, gender variance. For Crisp, failure as a style also involves his “career” as a “naked civil servant,” someone who chooses not to work and someone for whom work cannot be life’s fulfillment. Indeed his autobiography, *The Naked Civil Servant*, links his own coming of age, and his moment of coming out into his own particularly flamboyant queerness, with the fall of Wall Street in 1931. He writes, “The sky was dark with millionaires throwing themselves out of windows. So black was the way ahead that my progress consisted of long periods of inert despondency punctuated by spasmodic lurches forward toward any small chink of light I thought I saw. . . . As the years went by, it did not get any lighter, but I became accustomed to the dark” (2). This particular ethos of resignation to failure, to lack of progress and a particular form of darkness, a negativity really (which I discuss in later chapters), can be called a queer aesthetic. For Crisp, as for an artist such as Andy Warhol, failure presents an opportunity rather than a dead end; in true camp fashion, the queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness. Indeed the darkness becomes a crucial part of a queer aesthetic.

In *Bodies in Dissent* (2006) Daphne Brooks makes a similar claim about

the aesthetic of darkness in relation to the theatrical performances of African Americans from the period of antebellum slavery to the early twentieth century. Using an impressive array of primary materials culled from archives in the U.S. and the U.K., she reconstructs not only the contexts for African American performance but also the reception of these stagings of “embodied insurgency” and the complex meanings of the performers’ own bodily histories, biographies, and risky theatrical endeavors. Like Joseph Roach in *Cities of the Dead* (1996), Brooks crafts a critical methodology capable of retrieving lost performance cultures, negotiating their aesthetic complexity and rendering their meaning to both black and white audiences in the U.S. and the U.K. Roach’s work forms a backdrop for some of Brooks’s energetic re-creations of nineteenth-century African American transatlantic performance, and she takes from him the notion that culture reproduces itself through performance in the mode of “surrogation.” I used Roach’s notion of surrogation as cultural production in chapter 2 on forgetfulness; here I am interested in the way Brooks uses the term to think about how subcultural performers and images incorporate traditions of performance and activate new sets of political meanings and references. For Brooks, the body of the performer becomes an archive of improvised cultural responses to conventional constructions of gender, race, and sexuality, and the performance articulates powerful modes of dissent and resistance. She reads the theatrical texts in her archive along the axis of propulsive transformation and seeks, through patient historical contextualization and inspired textual analysis, to locate in each text sites of aesthetic and political possibility. For example, she develops a brilliant reading of the aesthetics of opacity and locates textual darkness as a “trope of narrative insurgency, discursive survival, and epistemological resistance” (108). Darkness, Brooks continues, “is an interpretive strategy” and a mode of reading the world from a “particular and dark position” (109). It is this understanding of “textual darkness,” or the darkness of a particular reading practice from a particular subject position, that I believe resonates with the queer aesthetics I trace here as a catalogue of resistance through failure.

Following Brooks’s aesthetics and Crisp’s advice to adjust to less light rather than seek out more, I propose that one form of queer art has made failure its centerpiece and has cast queerness as the dark landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness. Obviously nothing essentially connects gay and lesbian and trans people to these forms of unbeing and unbecoming, but the social and symbolic

systems that tether queerness to loss and failure cannot be wished away; some would say, nor should they be. As Lee Edelman, Heather Love, and others have argued, to simply repudiate the connections between queerness and negativity is to commit to an unbearably positivist and progressive understanding of the queer, one that results in the perky depictions of lesbians in *The L Word* or the reduction of gay men in film and on TV to impossibly good-looking arbiters of taste.

“Darkness,” says Brooks, “is an interpretive strategy,” (2006: 109) launched from places of darkness, experiences of hurt or exclusion; darkness is the terrain of the failed and the miserable. The idea of a queer darkness, a strategy of reading as well as a way of being in the world, explains a series of depictions of queer life in photography from the early and mid-twentieth century. Brassai’s photographs of lesbian bars in Paris in the 1930s and Diane Arbus’s odd photographs of female “friends” both partake in very different ways in these dark images of queers. Brassai’s famous and iconic photographs of Paris capture hidden worlds of thieves, pimps, prostitutes, and queers. In the text that introduces his censored collection on their publication in the 1970s, he explains that he had always disliked photography until he was inspired to “translate all the things that enchanted [him] in nocturnal Paris” (1976: n.p.). The photographs collected as *The Secret Paris of the 1930’s* are intended to look back on the sinful and seamy worlds that Brassai documented but could not show at the time the photographs were taken. When the book was finally published in the 1970s it was accompanied by a moralistic text designed to explain the weird images to an imaginary “straight” reader. Brassai calls *Le Monocle* a singular “temple of Sapphic love” among all the whorehouses in Montparnasse and describes the habitués as exotic masculine creatures who wore their hair short and reeked of “weird scents, more like amber or incense than roses and violets.” Despite the judgmental text, the photographs of *Le Monocle* capture what looks to be a fantastic, dynamic lesbian nightlife, far more interesting than most queer bars that exist in Paris today. That said, the photographs also capture what Heather Love calls “impossible love” or “the impossibility at the heart of desire” (2009: 24). With this concept she means to indicate lines of connection between political exclusion in the past and political exclusion in the present. While liberal histories build triumphant political narratives with progressive stories of improvement and success, radical histories must contend with a less tidy past, one that passes on legacies of failure



8. Brassai, "La Grosse Claude et son amie, au 'Monocle,'" ca. 1932. © Estate Brassai-RMN.

and loneliness as the consequences of homophobia and racism and xenophobia. As Love puts it, "Backward feelings serve as an index to the ruined state of the social world; they indicate continuities between the bad gay past and the present; and they show up the inadequacies of queer narratives of progress" (27). To feel backward is to be able to recognize something in these darker depictions of queer life without needing to redeem them.

The photographs of *Le Monocle* are shrouded in darkness, shadowy even though the scenes they depict are quite upbeat and joyful. In this way the images are able to capture both the persistence of queer life and the staging of queer life as impossible. Brassai's narrative speaks of pathetic inverts longing for unattainable masculinity: "All the women were dressed as men, and so totally masculine in appearance that at first glance one thought they were men. A tornado of virility had gusted through the place and blown away all the finery, all the tricks of feminine coquetry, changing women into boys, gangsters, policemen. Gone the

trinkets, veils, ruffle! Pleasant colors, frills! Obsessed by their unattainable goal to be men, they wore the most somber uniforms; black tuxedos, as though in mourning for their ideal masculinity.”

Of course as even a quick glance at the photos reveals, “all” of the women were not dressed as men; some were dressed in high-femme outfits, and the tuxedos that indicated the butches’ state of mourning could as easily be jaunty evening wear or even wedding outfits. And yet there is something dark about the images, something lost, something unattainable. What remains unattainable in the butches’ masculinity, we might say, is what remains unattainable in all masculinity: all ideal masculinity by its very nature is just out of reach, but it is only in the butch, the masculine woman, that we notice its impossibility. Brassai’s photographs thus capture three things; the darkness of the night worlds within which queer sociability takes place; the failure of ideal masculinity that must be located in the butch in order to make male masculinity seem possible; and a queer femininity that is not merely dark but invisible. Queer femininity in these images disappears as lesbianism when partnered with the more visibly queer butch, and when it does come into visibility it appears inauthentic in relation to both queerness and heterosexuality. In these senses one can say that the photographs represent queer failure and craft a queer aesthetic to do so.

But that was then. As Sontag writes, “The moody, intricately textured Paris of Atget and Brassai is mostly gone” (2001: 16). Reading Brassai now, we can marvel at the queer Paris he saw and can provide new captions, visual and textual, that rewrite and inhabit his narratives of melancholia and masquerade. Brassai located these images in a section in his collection titled “Sodom and Gomorrah” and labeled them “homosexual,” thinking, obviously, that he had captured a lost and forbidden world of sinful inversion. The title refers to the biblical myth of orgiastic realms selected for destruction in Genesis. Heather Love uses the myth of Sodom and Gomorrah to think about the backward look that Lot’s wife casts while leaving the sinful cities. This look turns her into a pillar of salt: “By refusing the destiny that God has offered her, Lot’s wife is cut off from her family and from the future. She becomes a monument to destruction, an emblem of eternal regret” (2009: 5). Brassai, however, thinks back to Proust’s “Sodom and Gomorrah.” He describes his reaction as he watched the women dancing together in the bar: “I thought of Marcel Proust, of his jealousy, his sick curiosity about the foreign plea-

asures of Gomorrah. The fact that Albertine had been unfaithful to the narrator with a woman bothered him far less than the kinds of pleasures she had experienced with her partner. ‘What can they really be feeling,’ he continually wondered” (1976: n.p.).

What indeed? The age-old question of lesbian sex—What do they do and feel together?—emerges here within a visual world that Brassai creates even as it eludes him. The photographs tell more than Brassai ever narrate: of inventive transgendering, the careful remodeling of the “heterosexual matrix” by butch-femme couples reveling in the possibilities that Paris at night offered them in the 1930s, and of darkness, the shadow world within which the inauthentic, the unreal, and the damned play out their shadow lives. Another photograph from Paris also shrouds the image of the lesbian in shadow and fails to penetrate its façade. Cecil Beaton’s portrait of Gertrude Stein from 1935 shows another view of queer Paris, one that has entered into official histories and which seems removed in time and space from Brassai’s underworlds. However, as if to hint at the shadow world that haunts the histories for which we have settled, Beaton presents the viewer with two Steins.

In the foreground a large and masculine Stein, dressed in a heavy overcoat and wearing a tight cap on her head, stares grimly into the lens. The only concession to femininity is her collar brooch, a shadow fetish replacing what should be a tie with an image of feminine decoration. The hands are crossed, the lips are pursed, and the face is lined and serious. Behind the large Stein stands a shadow Stein, now without the overcoat; we see her skirt and waistcoat and brooch, and the brooch now makes us look again at the first Stein. This portrait of Stein repeats another image of Stein with her lover, Alice B. Toklas, in which Stein stands in the middle foreground and to the right and Toklas shadows her back and to the left. In both images of the gender-ambiguous body of Stein, her masculinity is measured against another image in which she is doubled but not mirrored. Toklas, who looks defiantly back at the camera as if to deny her placement as Stein’s other or dependent, puts Stein’s masculinity into perspective. By making us see Stein through Toklas, the photograph forces us to adjust the measurements we usually use to “see” gender; the gender queerness of both Toklas and Stein relays back and forth between them as the viewer’s gaze shuttles from one to the other, guided by a strange wire sculpture that hangs between them and throws its own shadow upon the wall. The posing of the queer subject as shadow and



9. Cecil Beaton, "Gertrude Stein." (1935). Bromide print. 8 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.  $\times$  6 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (21.4 cm  $\times$  17.0 cm). Courtesy of the Cecil Beaton Studio Archive at Sotheby's.

shadowed seems to cast the construction of queerness as secondary to the primacy of heterosexual arrangements of gender and relationality, but in fact it comments upon the disruptive potential of shadow worlds.

Writing about Diane Arbus, another archivist of "sexual underworlds," Sontag claims, "Like Brassai, Arbus wanted her subjects to be as fully conscious as possible, aware of the act in which they were participating. Instead of trying to coax her subjects into a natural or typical position, they are encouraged to be awkward—that is to pose" (2001: 37). The pose, Sontag suggests, makes the subjects look "odder" and, in the case of Arbus's work, "almost deranged." Sontag criticizes Arbus for using her camera to find and create freaks, and she compares her unfavorably to



Brassai, noting that Brassai not only documented “perverts and inverts” but also “did tender cityscapes, portraits of famous artists” (46). Arbus makes “all her subjects equivalent” by refusing to “play the field of subject matter” (47). Her narrowness, in other words, makes her a solipsistic voyeur rather than a talented photographic artist. Indeed Arbus’s photographs of transvestites, midgets, and dwarfs do present the world as a freak show and parade queer and ambiguous bodies in front of the camera to illustrate the range and depth of freakish alterity. And while Brassai’s photographs were largely shot at night, Arbus presents her subjects in the clear and cold light of day. But Arbus does not limit her freak show to so-called freaks; patriots, families, elderly couples, and teenagers all look strange and distorted through her lens. To use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s terms, Arbus “universalizes” freakishness while Brassai “minoritizes” it. Brassai looks at the transgender world as if peering at strange insects under a rock; Arbus finds ambiguity across a range of embodiments and represents it as the human condition. In the portrait “Naked Man Being a Woman, NYC, 1968” she records the representational instability of the body itself, the fact that it cannot function as a foundation for order, coherence, and neat systems of correspondence.

Arbus cited both Weegee and Brassai as influences on her work and said of Brassai, “Brassai taught me something about obscurity, because for years I have been tripped out on clarity. Lately it’s been striking me how I really love what I can’t see in a photograph. In Brassai, in Bill Brandt, there is the element of actual physical darkness and it’s very thrilling to see darkness again” (Bosworth 2006: 307). In Brassai’s pictures the darkness actually frames what can be seen; the context for every image is the night itself, and the players in the secret worlds of Paris are illuminated momentarily by the camera’s gaze but threaten to fade to black at any moment. For Arbus, the darkness and what cannot be seen are less a function of light and shadow and more a result of psychological complexity. Her image “Two Friends at Home, NYC, 1965” cites Brassai’s butch-femme couples but removes them from the unreal night worlds and places them in daylight. Arbus’s biographer, Patricia Bosworth, wrote about this image, “[Arbus’s] constant journey into the world of transvestites, drag queens, hermaphrodites and transsexuals may have helped define her view of what it means to experience sexual conflict. She once followed ‘two friends’ from street to apartment, and the resulting portrait suggests an almost sinister sexual power between these mannish females. (The larger, more traditionally feminine figure

stands with her arm possessively around the shoulder of her boyish partner. In another shot the couple is seen lying on their rumpled bed; one of them is in the middle of a sneeze—it is both intimate and creepy)” (2006: 226). Notice that it is Bosworth rather than Arbus who assigns the label “creepy” to the image and who represents the photograph of two friends as part of an undifferentiated world of freaks: trannies, intersex people, circus performers, disabled people. Arbus assigns no such values to her subjects; rather she labels these two dykes “friends.” One could argue that the term refuses to see the sexual dynamic animating the two, but in fact the rumpled bed and the physical closeness of the two bodies ensure that we acknowledge, in Arbus’s terms, what we cannot see.

For Arbus, the photograph itself stands in for a lost world, a context that eludes the viewer who cannot see beyond the spectacle of difference. Arbus in fact inserted herself, almost desperately, into these worlds of difference and tried to use her photographs to force viewers to be aware that they do not see everything or even anything. When a viewer like Bosworth looks at the butch-femme couple in their apartment, a couple whom Arbus has followed home, she sees something she believes she is not supposed to see, and so the image becomes “intimate and creepy.” (I could not find the sneeze picture that so disturbs Bosworth.) But when queer viewers see the image nearly forty years after it was taken, we see something intimate and messy: it offers us a visual bridge back to a pre-Stonewall queer world, a world that is both infinitely removed from ours and amazingly close. The butch’s open gaze at the camera, at Arbus, and the femme’s protective look at her partner and away from the camera create a circuit of vision within which each participant in the image’s construction, the artist and her two subjects, both sees and is seen. Arbus can be read through this picture as less a prurient voyeur and more a chronicler of the unseen, the unspoken, and the untold.

Monica Majoli, a contemporary queer artist based in Los Angeles, picks up the theme of darkness in her work (see plates 3 and 4). Majoli takes photographs of her ex-lovers as they appear in a black mirror and then paints from the photographs of the mirror images. Impossibly dark and impenetrable, and brimming with melancholy, these portraits defy the definition of mirror, of portrait, and even of love. A mirror image of course is first of all a self-portrait, and so the images must be read as both a representation of the artist herself and depictions of love affairs and their aftermath (see plates 5 and 6). In most of the portraits Majoli pairs a drawing or painting of a figure with an abstract version, calling

attention to the murkiness of all oppositions in a darkened mirror space. While a conventional painting might depend upon some kind of relation between the figure and the ground, in these portraits the background fills out the figure with emotional intensity, with darkness, and asks us to look hard at interiority itself. The abstract versions are no harder or easier to read or to look at than the figures, reminding us that the figures are also abstractions and that the shape of a head or the outline of a breast guarantees nothing in terms of a human presence or connection or intimacy. The portraits are painfully intimate and at the same time refuse intimacy. All attempts to look closer, to make out features, to understand the trajectory of a line end in the same boiling darkness, a black that is not flat because it is a mirrored surface and a mirror that is not deep because it sucks up the light from the image.

The portraits are made after the love affair has ended and represent what we think of as failure—the failure of love to last, the mortality of all connection, the fleeting nature of desire. Obviously desire is present in the very gesture of painting, and yet desire here, like the black mirror, devours rather than generates, obliterates rather than enlightens. Majoli's paintings are technically very difficult (how to sculpt a figure out of darkness, how to draw in the dark, to reflect the emotional and affective issues) but also emotionally wrought (how to narrate the relationship that ends, how to face the end of desire, how to look at one's own failures, mortality, and limitations). She holds up a dark mirror to the viewer and insists that he or she look into the void. Harkening back to a history of representations of homosexuality as loss and death from Proust to Radclyffe Hall, Majoli's paintings converse with the tradition of imaging begun by Brassai and extended by Arbus.<sup>2</sup>

Failure animates much of the work of another California artist, Judie Bamber. For her the thematics of losing and failure appear within visibility itself as a line or threshold beyond which you cannot see, a horizon that marks the place of the failure of vision and visibility itself. While José E. Muñoz casts queerness as a kind of horizon for political aspiration (Muñoz: 2010), Bamber's horizons remind us that possibility and disappointment often live side by side. Bamber's seascapes, painted over a period of two years, make a record of the subtle but finite shifts in mood, tone, and visibility that "nature" offers to the gaze. In her work the landscape becomes cinematic, not one overwhelming painterly whole but a series of fragments presented montage style within a series that has a beginning and a definite end. When we look at the paintings we are under-

whelmed by nature and begin to see nature as technology, as an apparatus (see plates 7 and 8). The viewer is drawn over and over to the horizon, the line between sky and sea that sometimes shocks with its intensity and at other times disappears altogether. The ebb and flow of the horizon in and out of vision is in many ways the theme of the series as a whole. Bamber's depiction of the horizon as limit speaks to a queer temporality and a queer spatiality that resist a notion of art as capable of seeing beyond and in fact makes art about *limitation*, about the narrowness of the future, the weightiness of the past, and the urgency of the present.

This notion of a limited horizon returns us to Edelman's book *No Future* (2005), in that both Bamber and Edelman seem to be inscribing queer failure into time and space. While for Bamber the seascapes drain nature of its romance and its sense of eternity, for Edelman the queer is always and inevitably linked to the death drive; indeed death and finitude are the very meaning of queerness, if it has meaning at all, and Edelman uses this sense of the queer in order to propose a relentless form of negativity in place of the forward-looking, reproductive, and heteronormative politics of hope that animates all too many political projects. My attempt to link queerness to an aesthetic project organized around the logic of failure converses with Edelman's effort to detach queerness from the optimistic and humanistic activity of making meaning. The queer subject, he argues, has been bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to antiproduction, and to unintelligibility, and instead of fighting this characterization by dragging queerness into recognition, he proposes that we embrace the negativity that we anyway structurally represent. Edelman's polemic about futurity ascribes to queerness the function of the limit; while the heteronormative political imagination propels itself forward in time and space through the indisputably positive image of the child, and while it projects itself back on the past through the dignified image of the parent, the queer subject stands between heterosexual optimism and its realization.

At this political moment Edelman's book constitutes a compelling argument against a U.S. imperialist project of hope, or what Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) has called "bright-sidedness," and it remains one of the most powerful statements of queer studies' contribution to an anti-imperialist, queer, counterhegemonic imaginary. And yet I want to engage critically with Edelman's project in order to argue for a more explicitly political framing of the antisocial project, a framing that usefully encloses failure. While Edelman frames his polemic against futurity with epigraphs

by Jacques Lacan and Virginia Woolf, he omits the more obvious reference that his title conjures up and that echoes through recent queer antisocial aesthetic production, namely “God Save the Queen” as sung by the Sex Pistols. While the Sex Pistols used the refrain “No future” to reject a formulaic union of nation, monarchy, and fantasy, Edelman tends to cast material political concerns as crude and pedestrian, as already a part of the conjuring of futurity that his project must foreclose. Indeed he turns to the unnervingly tidy and precise theoretical contractions of futurity in Lacan because, like Lacan and Woolf, and unlike the punks, he strives to exert a kind of obsessive control over the reception of his own discourse. Twisting and turning back on itself, reveling in the power of inversion, Edelman’s syntax itself closes down the anarchy of signification. In footnotes and chiasmic formulations alike he shuts down critique and withholds from the reader the future and fantasies of it. One footnote predicts criticism of his work based on its “elitism,” “pretension,” whiteness, and style, and projects other objections on the grounds of “apolitical formalism.” He professes himself unsympathetic to all such responses and, having foreclosed the future, continues on his way in a self-enclosed world of cleverness and chiasmus. Edelman’s polemic opens the door to a ferocious articulation of negativity (“Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital Ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” [29]), but ultimately he does not fuck the law, big or little L; he succumbs to the law of grammar, the law of logic, the law of abstraction, the law of apolitical formalism, the law of genres.

So what does or would constitute the politics of “no future” and by implication the politics of negativity? The Sex Pistols made the phrase “No future” into a rallying call for Britain’s dispossessed. In their debut song, written as an anticelibratory gesture for the queen’s silver jubilee, they turned the National Anthem into a snarling rejection of the tradition of the monarchy, the national investment in its continuation, and the stakes that the whole event betrayed in futurity itself, where futurity signifies the nation, the divisions of class and race upon which the notion of national belonging depends, and the activity of celebrating the ideological system which gives meaning to the nation and takes meaning away from the poor, the unemployed, the promiscuous, the noncitizen, the racialized immigrant, the queer:

God save the queen  
She ain't no human being  
There is no future  
In England's dreaming. . . .  
Oh god save history  
God save your mad parade  
Oh lord god have mercy  
All crimes are paid.  
When there's no future  
How can there be sin  
We're the flowers in the dustbin  
We're the poison in your human machine  
We're the future your future. . . .  
God save the queen  
We mean it man  
And there is no future  
In England's dreaming. . . .  
No future no future  
No future for you  
No future no future  
No future for me.

No future for Edelman means routing our desires around the eternal sunshine of the spotless child and finding the shady side of political imaginaries in the proudly sterile and antireproductive logics of queer relation. It also seems to mean something (too much) about Lacan's symbolics and not enough about the powerful negativity of punk politics, which, as I pointed out in relation to *Trainspotting*, have plenty to say about symbolic and literal nihilism. When the Sex Pistols spat in the face of English provincialism and called themselves "the flowers in the dustbin," when they associated themselves with the trash and debris of polite society, they launched their poison into the human. Negativity might well constitute an antipolitics, but it should not register as apolitical.<sup>3</sup>

In chapter 4 I follow the trail of an antisocial feminism made by Jamaica Kincaid, among others. Here I want to turn to an antisocial feminist extraordinaire, who articulated a deeply antisocial politics that casts patriarchy as not just a form of male domination but as the formal production of sense, mastery, and meaning. Valerie Solanas recognized that happiness and despair, futurity and foreclosure have been cast as

the foundations of certain forms of subjectivity within patriarchy, and she relentlessly counters the production of “truth” within patriarchy with her own dark and perverted truths about men, masculinity, and violence. For Solanas, patriarchy is a system of meaning that neatly divides positive and negative human traits between men and women. She inverts this process, casting men as “biological accidents” and at the same time refusing to take up the space of positivity. Instead she colonizes the domain of violence and offers, helpfully, to cut men up in order to demolish the hegemonic order. While straight men are “walking dildos,” gay men are simply “faggots” and embody all the worst traits of patriarchy because they are men who love other men and have no use for women. In *SCUM Manifesto* (Solanas 2004) homosociality of all kinds is called “faggotry,” and men are supposed to both fear and desire it. For Solanas, men in all forms are the enemy, and there is no such thing as a male rebel. She famously turned theory into practice when she took a gun and shot Andy Warhol for “stealing” a script from her. While we might be horrified by the anarchic violence of her act, we also have to recognize that this kind of violence is precisely what we call upon and imply when we theorize and conjure negativity.

The real problem, to my mind, with the antisocial turn in queer theory as exemplified by the work of Bersani, Edelman, and others has less to do with the meaning of negativity—which, as I am arguing, can be found in an array of political projects, from anticolonialism to punk—and more to do with the excessively small archive that represents queer negativity. On the one hand the gay male archive coincides with the canonical archive, and on the other hand it narrows that archive down to a select group of antisocial queer aesthetes and camp icons and texts. It includes, in no particular order, Tennessee Williams, Virginia Woolf, Bette Midler, Andy Warhol, Henry James, Jean Genet, Broadway musicals, Marcel Proust, Alfred Hitchcock, Oscar Wilde, Jack Smith, Judy Garland, and Kiki and Herb, but it rarely mentions all kinds of other antisocial writers, artists, and texts such as Valerie Solanas, Jamaica Kincaid, Patricia Highsmith, Wallace and Gromit, Johnny Rotten, Nicole Eiseman, Eileen Myles, June Jordan, Linda Besemer, Hothead Paisan, *Finding Nemo*, Lesbians on Ecstasy, Deborah Cass, SpongeBob, Shulamith Firestone, Marga Gomez, Toni Morrison, and Patti Smith.

Because it sticks to a short list of favored canonical writers, the gay male archive binds itself to a narrow range of affective responses. And

so fatigue, ennui, boredom, indifference, ironic distancing, indirectness, arch dismissal, insincerity, and camp make up what Ann Cvetkovich (2003) has called “an archive of feelings” associated with this form of antisocial theory. But this canon occludes another suite of affectivities associated with another kind of politics and a different form of negativity. In this other archive we can identify, for example, rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, overinvestment, incivility, brutal honesty, and disappointment. The first archive is a camp archive, a repertoire of formalized and often formulaic responses to the banality of straight culture and the repetitiveness and unimaginativeness of heteronormativity. The second archive, however, is far more in keeping with the undisciplined kinds of responses that Leo Bersani at least seems to associate with sex and queer culture, and it is here that the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire are unloosed. Dyke anger, anticolonial despair, racial rage, counterhegemonic violence, punk pugilism—these are the bleak and angry territories of the antisocial turn; these are the jagged zones within which not only self-shattering (the opposite of narcissism in a way) but other-shattering occurs. If we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate.

“If at first you don’t succeed,” wrote Quentin Crisp, “failure may be your style.” The style of failure is better modeled by my list of antisocial dignitaries. It is quite possibly a lesbian style rather than a gay style (since very often gay style is style writ large), and it lives in the life and works of Patricia Highsmith, for example, who wrote hateful letters to her mother and in her notebooks scribbled of her strong desire to be disinvited to friends’ dinner parties.<sup>4</sup> I will return to the archive of antisocial feminism later in the book, but for now, in relation to the art of failure, I turn to queer artwork preoccupied with emptiness, a sense of abandonment. The queer collaborative Spanish artists Cabello/Carceller link queerness to a mode of negativity that lays claim to rather than rejects concepts like emptiness, futility, limitation, ineffectiveness, sterility, unproductiveness. In this work a queer aesthetic is activated through the function of negation rather than in the mode of positivity; in other words, the works strive to establish queerness as a mode of critique rather than as a new investment



in normativity or life or respectability or wholeness or legitimacy. In some of their early work, for example, they portrayed collaboration as a kind of death struggle resulting in the death of the author, the end of individuality, and the impossibility of knowing where one person ends and another begins. In other photographs they abandon the figure altogether and photograph space itself as queer.

In a series of photographs following a research trip to California in 1996–97 Cabello/Carceller document the empty promises of utopia. The images of vacant swimming pools in these works signify the gulf between fantasy and reality, the subjects and the spaces onto which they project their dreams and desires. The empty pools, full of longing and melancholy, ask the viewer to meditate on the form and function of the swimming pool; from there we are drawn to contemplate the meaning and promise of desire. These swimming pools, empty and lifeless, function as the city street does for Benjamin: they work in an allegorical mode and speak of abundance and its costs; they tell of cycles of wealth and the ebb and flow of capital; the pool also functions as a fetish, a saturated symbol of luxury; and like the shop windows in the Parisian arcades described by Benjamin, the water in a swimming pool reflects the body and transforms space into a glittering dream of relaxation, leisure, recreation, and buoyancy. At the same time the empty pools stand like ruins, abandoned and littered with leaves and other signs of disuse, and in this ruined state they represent a perversion of desire, the decay of the commodity, the queerness of the disassociation of use from value. When the pool no longer signifies as a marker of wealth and success it becomes available to queer signification as a symbolic site of failure, loss, rupture, disorder, incipient chaos, and the desire animated by these states nonetheless.

The swimming pool is a place of meditation, an environment within which the body becomes weightless and hovers on the surface of a submerged world; it is a site where the body becomes buoyant, transformed by a new element, and yet must struggle, overcome by the new and potentially hostile environment. Like a tiled Atlantis, the exposed pool, filled now with air rather than water, reveals what lies beneath the sparkling surface of chlorine-enhanced blue. It takes us to a threshold and forces us to contemplate jumping into air and space. Some of Cabello/Carceller's images draw the eye to the threshold and show how the comforting rectangle of the swimming pool can blur into a shapeless mass. These blurred thresholds lend the pool a menacing aspect; in "Sin título (Utopia) #27, 1998–99" we are reminded that the ladders leading into and out of the



10. Cabello/Carceller, "Sin título (Utopía) #27," 1998–99." Color photograph. 70 cm × 50 cm. Printed with permission of Elba Benítez Gallery (Madrid) and Joan Prats Gallery (Barcelona).



11. Cabello/Carceller, "Sin título (Utopía) #29," 1998–99." Color photograph. 70 cm × 50 cm. Printed with permission of Elba Benítez Gallery (Madrid) and Joan Prats Gallery (Barcelona).

pool, placed at the top of the pool and rarely descending to the floor, are useless without water. The empty pool becomes a trap for the human body when the water has been emptied out.

The spaces emptied of bodies rhyme with another series by Cabello/Carceller: empty bars strewn with the debris of human interaction. These photographs, like the photos of the empty swimming pools, record the evidence of presence in the absence of the body. The emptied-out spaces demand that the viewer fill in the blanks; we may feel almost compelled to complete the picture in front of us, to give it meaning and narrative. We people it ourselves by allowing it to reflect back to us, not the missing self, but the unwillingness we feel at the edge of the void. The photographers lead their viewers to the site of dispersal and then leave us there, alone, to contemplate all that has been lost and what remains to be seen. These images of the desolate bars, however, represent, almost heroically, not only queer community, but also what it leaves behind. The bar area in "Alguna Parte #5" looks tawdry and exposed; the bottles of alcohol nestle up to a fire extinguisher, implying the combustibility of the environment. Now fire, not water, is the element that lies in wait. The litter-strewn floor, dotted with disco lights and unruly shadows, speaks not of abandonment, like the empty pools, but of use and materiality. The greasy, sticky, sweaty floor displays the impact of bodies on its surface and counterposes the bar to the clean and hygienic spaces of heteronormative domesticity.

The bar is simultaneously an interior and an exterior space (as is the swimming pool); these are spaces, heterotopic spaces in Foucault's terms (like mirrors), where the surface gives way to depth and the depth is revealed as illusory. Like the pools, these interiors offer up a confusing array of surfaces; their planes are not laid one on top of the other but confuse perspectival vantage points and mix up the relation between the foreground and the background, what is emphasized and what is downplayed. The smoke adds to the blurred vision and intensifies the inverted relations between internal and external, body and space, floor and wall, bench and bar. In the multiplicity of planes the viewer understands the vantage point of the lesbian bar as scattered, constellated, and as we wander through we are shocked, suddenly, to have glimpsed the outside, to have crossed a threshold; the camera takes up a new vantage point in relation to the bar, and as we come close to the sticky floors, as we contemplate the debris before us, we glance up and see the outside beckoning



12. Cabello/Carceller, "Alguna Parte #5," 2000. Color photograph. 125 cm × 190 cm. Printed with permission of Elba Benítez Gallery (Madrid) and Joan Prats Gallery (Barcelona).



13. Cabello/Carceller, "Alguna Parte #2," 2000. Color photograph, 125 cm × 190 cm. Printed with permission of Elba Benítez Gallery (Madrid) and Joan Prats Gallery (Barcelona).



14. Cabello/Carceller, "Alguna Parte #23," 2000. Color photograph, 150 cm × 100 cm. Printed with permission of Elba Benítez Gallery (Madrid) and Joan Prats Gallery (Barcelona).

through the back of the bar. The door is open, it is morning, and the bar stands exposed to the light of day.

The light of day, like the disco lighting in the lesbian bar, comes in many forms and performs different functions for viewers and for those who dwell within it. Returning to Judie Bamber's seascapes, we see how they too are preoccupied with thresholds that cannot be crossed, relationships between light and dark and the dissection of the void. In these paintings of the ocean, set in Malibu, Bamber orchestrates the drama of the relation between sky and sea but without ever succumbing to a romanticization of nature. In fact the series constitutes a kind of critique of nature; by archiving the shifting contrasts between air and water, she actually remarks upon the limits of nature, its finitude, rather than its infinite sublimity. There came a time, Bamber recalls, when she looked out at the ocean from her balcony in Malibu and realized that the view that presented itself was one that she had seen before rather than another unique display of color and natural virtuosity. What Bamber paints, then, is the limit: the limit of vision, the limit of nature, the limit of color itself, the circumscribed imagination, the lack of futurity, or, in other words, the expansion and contraction of all our horizons. As Nayland Blake writes of these paintings in a catalogue essay that accompanied their first showing, "It is important that these are paintings of the Pacific, the terminating point of American westward expansion. From a place of completion we gaze into a haze of potential that arrests our gaze and yet offers nothing back that could orient us. We have come to an end" (2005: 9). Linking the circumscription of sight to the regulating function of the national fantasy of expansion, Blake astutely links the sense of disorientation produced by the paintings to a political project that relentlessly gobbles up land and materials on behalf of its own racialized reading of destiny and completion. Bamber's paintings as "anti-maps," as images of dissolution and disenchantment, force an abrupt halt to fantasies of national expansion.

Bamber's seascapes are melancholy without conveying nostalgia. They also refuse the auratic mode of artistic production and settle into an aesthetic of repetition; each painting repeats the basic set of relations between sea, sky, and horizon, and each situates the drama of liminality very precisely in time and place. As if to cancel out the possibility that we would read the virtuosity of the artist as what replaces the virtuosity and genius of nature, Bamber tries to eliminate her very brush strokes from the canvas to create the illusion of mechanical reproduction. At the

same time the paintings perform what Dianne Chisholm, citing Walter Benjamin, describes as “spacing out,” or the miming of the “porosity of space” (2005: 109). In this process, Chisholm argues, the narrator allows herself to be absorbed by the city and to become part of its narrative and its memories. In Bamber’s paintings the tense interactions between sea and sky, sky and horizon, light and mood, color and liminality, all produce the “porosity” that the viewer sees and even rejects. According to Chisholm, porosity represented to Benjamin the spaces of the city that dramatize shifts in the mode of commerce or the content of the urban street, the flows of exchange and desire. Chisholm writes, “The porosity of the city of queer constellations enables us to see the confluence of history even as it is engulfed in the capital(ism) of post-modernity. The gay village is exceptionally porous. Here gay life is lived out on streets that are conduits to intimate and communal contact and prime arteries of commodity traffic” (45). Bamber’s paintings are of the city and yet separate from them; they are images of Los Angeles, a reminder of the city’s appeal; the seascapes both reflect and repel—they shine from the sun and absorb all light back into their surfaces. They seem to emit their own light source and, like the stereotype of Los Angeles body culture, they confuse the relationship between natural beauty (the sunset) and technologically enhanced beauty (the spectacular sunset on a smoggy day). Bamber’s seascapes remind us that visions of utopia are class-bound; while one group of Los Angelinos look out on the smog-enhanced seascape, another group is trapped within the same toxicity inland. Fantasies of sufficiency and safety are crisscrossed by the sirens and helicopters that maintain the city as an invisible grid of regulated spaces.

Bamber’s extreme realism, here and elsewhere in her work, connects painting to other media rather than setting it apart as craft in opposition to technology, and it serves to denaturalize the object of the gaze through intense scrutiny. Most seascapes are discussed in terms of epic time frames. The Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, like Bamber, is attracted to the seascape as a minimalist image, but unlike Bamber he sees the seascape as a representation of primal time and describes it as “the oldest vision.” He uses a fast exposure to “stop the motion of the waves,” but the instance he freezes is supposed to connect back to a memorializing sense of longevity and duration (Sugimoto, 1995: 95). Bamber’s seascapes, technological as they may be, are more committed to minimalism than Sugimoto’s in that no waves at all appear, and she depicts, not arrested motion, but the end of time and motion forward.

While Sugimoto says that he is amazed by the expansiveness of the seascape, its infinite array of differences, Bamber's queer vision sets her apart from the tradition of the genre; she resists the romance we may have found in a Constable, the theatrics in a Courbet seascape, and she refuses the reverence we see in Sugimoto's photographs. Instead she flirts with the here, the now, and creates stark and disciplined images that are as much about the frame as they are about the subject matter.

Much of Bamber's work, whether a perfectly rendered image of a vagina or a photo-realistic depiction of her father, practices a desentimentalizing method of representation. In her paintings of miniature objects like the dead baby finch in plate 9, the scale of the painting both magnifies the death of the bird by framing it as art and diminishes it by making its smallness into a felt quality. The deployment of scale, here and in the seascapes, makes relevance relational and contingent but also turns the still life into something queer, into a limit, a repudiation of duration, longevity, versatility. Bamber captures the thing in its moment of decline or expiration, documenting not just death but the death of an illusion. The painting's title, *I'll Give You Something to Cry About (Dead Baby Finch)*, marries melancholia (the death of the bird) to extreme realism (other things are more important), and it drains out the potential sentiment of the painting, conjured by the subject matter and the small scale, replacing it with precise depiction. The realism of the depiction of the dead, and ugly, bird introduces the viewer to nature most cruel rather than soft-pedaling the death of a young thing. The juxtaposition of the words *dead* and *baby* unites ends with beginnings and reminds us that sometimes an end is not a new beginning: an end is an end is an end.

### *Children and Failure*

Lee Edelman's critique of heteronormative investments in the child dovetails nicely with Bamber's refusal of the affect associated with premature death. But Edelman always runs the risk of linking heteronormativity in some essential way to women, and, perhaps unwittingly, woman becomes the site of the unqueer: she offers life, while queerness links up with the death drive; she is aligned sentimentally with the child and with "goodness," while the gay man in particular leads the way to "something better" while "promising absolutely nothing." Like Renton in *Trainspotting*, Edelman's negativity has a profoundly apolitical tone to it, and so to conclude



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 acknowledgment of the unsentimental, amoral, and antiteological 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.



## Introduction

1. Benjamin Wallace-Wells, “Surfing the University: An Academic Dropout and the Search for a Theory of Everything,” *New Yorker*, 21 July 2008, 33.
2. See David A. Price, *The Pixar Touch* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).
3. David Graeber also discusses “low theory” in his book on anarchism. He writes: “Even more than High Theory, what anarchism needs is what might be called Low Theory: a way of grappling with those real, immediate questions that emerge from a transformative project” (9). I think Graeber and I are thinking along the same lines here.

## CHAPTER ONE. Animating Revolt

1. Amy Sutherland, “What Shamu Taught Me about a Happy Marriage,” *New York Times*, 25 June 2006, Style section.
2. See, for example, Roger Ebert, “March of the Penguins,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 8 July 2005; Stephen Holden, “The Lives and Loves (Perhaps) of Emperor Penguins,” *New York Times*, 24 June 2005. Holden writes, “Although ‘March of the Penguins’ stops mercifully short of trying to make us identify with the hardships overcome by a single penguin family, it conveys an intimate sense of the life of the emperor penguin. But love? I don’t think so.”
3. Jon Mooallem, “The Love That Dare Not Squawk Its Name: Can Animals Be Gay,” *New York Times*, 31 March 2010, Magazine section.
4. Natalie Angier, “In Hollywood Hives, the Males Rule,” *New York Times*, 13 November 2007, Science section.

## CHAPTER TWO. *Dude, Where's My Phallus?*

1. For more on queerness as “disorientation,” see Ahmed 2007.
2. Bruce LaBruce, “Dudes’ Smooch Leads the Way,” *Eye Weekly*, 1 February 2001, online.
3. A similar argument motivates Macarena Gomez-Barris’s meditations on the politics of remembering in the wake of state terror in *Where Memory Dwells* (2009).
4. Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim, “Beyond Gay Marriage,” *The Nation*, 18 July 2005, 25.
5. See Newton 1996; Weston 1998; Rubin 1975; Eng 2003; Butler 2002.
6. This film is just one of a whole slew of “forgetting” films, including *Memento* (2000, directed by Christopher Nolan) and *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004, directed by Michel Gondry). But the earnest films on forgetting are too quick to make forgetting into the loss of individuality. I am interested in what forgetting enables, not what it blocks.
7. See Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* and Freeman’s *Time Binds*. These very important books on queer temporality came out as I was finishing my book and therefore I have engaged with them less than I should have. Muñoz also writes extensively on failure in *Cruising Utopia*.

## CHAPTER THREE. *The Queer Art of Failure*

1. See Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, [www.roslynoxley9.com](http://www.roslynoxley9.com).
2. For details on Patricia Highsmith’s troubled relationship with her mother, her anti-social tendencies, and her propensity for lists, see Joan Schenkar, *The Talented Miss Highsmith* (2009).
3. Harkening back to a history of representations of homosexuality as loss and death from Proust to Radclyffe Hall, Majoli’s work also converses with that of artists painting from dark rather than light—sometimes called the “tenebrists,” painters like Caravaggio (famously rendered as queer by Derek Jarman in a film of the same name), and Rembrandt, who painted out of the darkness while refusing to make it recede and give way to the light. The eighteenth-century Spanish painter Goya is most often associated with Black paintings, and his works combine horrific subject matter with gloomy perspectives on the human conditions. Art from the dark side refuses humanist narratives about enlightenment, progress, and happiness, and it reminds us of the violence, the density, of human experience. This is what we forget when we insist upon positive images in popular representation and when we focus only on political recognition and acceptance in our politics. For further information on the black mirror and the politics of painting in the dark, see Lasch 2010 and English 2010.
4. Tavis Nyong’o makes a similar argument in relation to Lee Edelman’s polemic and the missing reference to punk (Nyong’o 2008).

5. Robert McRuer has theorized the multiple relations between queerness and disability in his landmark book, *Crip Theory* (McRuer, 2006).

#### CHAPTER FOUR. *Shadow Feminisms*

1. Elizabeth Freeman tackles a similar reconsideration of S/M in relation to feminism and queer temporalities in a chapter titled: "Turn the Beat Around: Sadomasochism, Temporality, History" in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010: 137–70).

2. Jamaica Kincaid interviewed by Marilyn Snell, "Jamaica Kincaid Hates Happy Endings," *Mother Jones*, September–October 1997.

3. Jeffrey Fleishman, "Member's abrupt resignation rocks Nobel Prize community," *Boston Globe*, 12 October 2005.

#### CHAPTER FIVE. *Homosexuality and Fascism*

1. For an informative account of the women who formed Britain's Volunteer Police Force see Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism* (2001).

2. Harvey Milk, speech on 25 June 1978, quoted in Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 364.

3. For more on Stein's interest in Weininger, see Harrowitz and Hyams 1995.

4. Richard Goldstein, "Culturati: Skin Deep" in *Village Voice*, February 9–15, 2000.

5. Edith Newhall, "Out of the Past," *New York Magazine*, 3 December 2001, 5.

6. Collier Schorr, "'Racing the Dead' by Howard Halle," *Time Out New York*, 13–17 September 2007.





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Judith Halberstam is professor of English, American studies and ethnicity, and gender studies at the University of Southern California. She is the author of several books, including *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) and *Female Masculinity* (1998).

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