"Unbeing and Unbecoming": A Review of Halberstam's Queer Art of Failure

Review of *The Queer Art of Failure*

by Judith Halberstam 2010; Duke University Press

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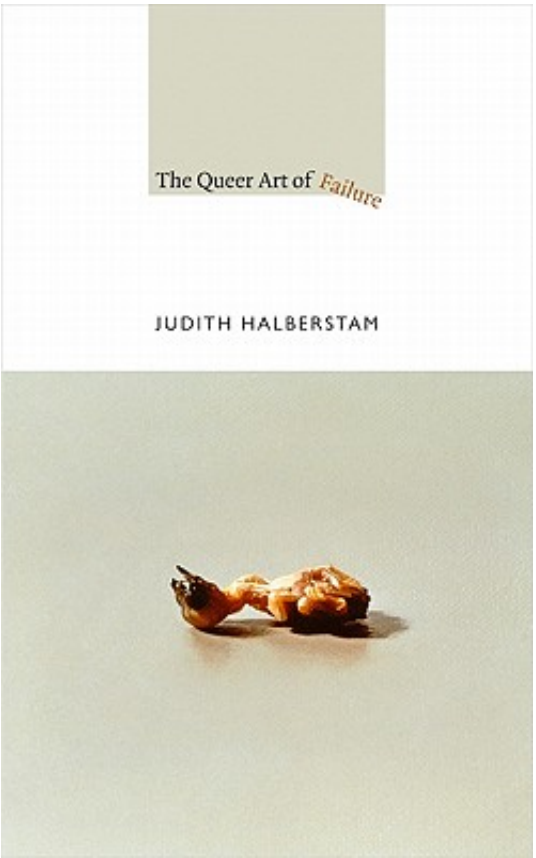

Described as an “archive” (19) of antidisciplinarity, Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* forwards a concept of failure that is about “alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends” (24). Over the course of the book, Halberstam pulls the reader on a provocative tour of the back alleys, dank basements, and condemned warehouses of low theory, advancing a complex theory of failure meant to interrupt the narrative of “success” that pervades North American ideology and sensibility. Flitting deftly between the complex theoretical paradigms of queer, Marxist, and radical feminist thought and a number of eccentric, sometimes bleak artifacts of popular culture, Halberstam dives headlong into explorations of “animation, art, stupidity, and forgetfulness,” as well as “the meaning of loss, masochism, and passivity” to realize a radical vision for alternative futures. Full of juxtapositions, *The Queer Art of Failure* is a

symphony of off-key notes that have a surprisingly satisfying ring against the same-old elevator muzak of mainstream thought it encourages us to abandon. Though each chapter takes readers hither and thither to far-flung references and texts, the book rests on a single premise: “Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2). Thus, failure as a term gets queered; playing with the idea that failure is something to be avoided, Halberstam urges us to discover the energetic underlife of failure as a tool for undoing narratives of hetero- success and progress.

The book can be roughly divided into three sections: the first two chapters explore failure as a mode of becoming, assembling a hodgepodge collection of novels, popular films, and avant-garde art to represent the “formalized and often formulaic responses to the banality of straight culture and the repetitiveness and unimaginativeness of heternormativity” (110); the middle chapter picks up where the introduction leaves off, developing a theory of failure in full scope; chapters 4, 5, and 6 then examine failure as a mode of *un*becoming, arguing that “these modes of unbeing and unbecoming propose a different relation to knowledge” (23). Though the book is aimed toward scholars of queer theory, its strategy of reading accessible texts subversively gives it considerable appeal to scholars of rhetoric and writing interested in looking differently at key texts and debates. (Because the latter part of the book focuses more intently on the work of queer theory itself, this review will examine the first third of the book only, due to its widespread methodological applicability.)

Chapters one and two feature Halberstam’s queer readings of a number of enormously popular animated films—among them *Toy Story*, *Chicken Run*, *Finding Nemo*—as well as a small number of live-action films, most notably the 2000 stoner hit *Dude, Where’s My Car*, that coalesce to build a case for adopting a lifestyle of failure, a way of living that

> 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 where 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 thinking. (3)

In the first chapter, Halberstam zeros in on animated features she dubs “Pixarvolt” films—films that forward themes of rebellion and revolution against established ways of being and knowing. Where more traditional children’s films might be interested in upholding the homogenous, nuclear family, the strength of the individual, the importance of “home,” and in preserving heteronormative narratives of gender, sexuality, and origins, the Pixarvolt films present alternative visions. *Toy Story* (John Lasseter 1995) is interested in a ragtag community of toys with a host of social, emotional, and physical “defects”; characters in *Over the Hedge* (Tim Johnson 2006) rely on collective action to protect their habitats from sloppy, consumerist humans; *Chicken Run* (Peter Lord and Nick Park, 2000) follows the plot of chickens escaping the coop for a free life among rolling pastures and only a few roosters; and *Robots* (Chris Wedge 2005) reveals the body as nothing more than an assemblage of parts socially re/constructed. Such films, Halberstam argues, demonstrate a kind of failure of the genre of children’s films, exploiting fissures in conventions such as the “quest” plot or the “family” story (in which misfit, practically anarchic juveniles mature into well-behaved citizens) by turning these narratives on their head and guiding protagonists toward more creative, improvised relationships in which diversity of friendships prove more satisfying than the homogeneity of family and collective action proves more effective than individual genius. Furthermore, as Halberstam puts it, these films “[refuse] to allow the radical thematics of animated film to be dismissed as ‘childish’ by questioning the temporal order that assigns dreams of transformation to pre-adulthood and that claims the accommodation of dysfunctional presents as part and parcel of normative adulthood” (30-31).

Continuing her study of film, the second chapter, “Dude, Where’s my Phallus” explores the genre of what I’ll call

the “doofus” movie, where the protagonist’s main character trait is his/her stupidity or forgetfulness. In this genre of films, among them *50 First Dates*, *Finding Nemo*, and *Dude, Where’s My Car?*, stupidity and forgetfulness typically function to disrupt the usual plot progression, as the audience is forced to endure endless looping while the character regains his/her footing in the story again and again, usually to comedic effect. Though we may think of these films as generic or lame, Halberstam suggests these films have something unique and subversive to offer, arguing that for women and queer people particularly, “forgetfulness can be a useful tool for jamming the smooth operations of the normal and the ordinary […] forgetfulness becomes a rupture with the eternally self-generating present, a break with a self-authorizing past, and an opportunity for a non-hetero-reproductive future” (70). One might wonder if an ethic of forgetfulness would be advantageous for scholars in fields such as ours, where the model of hetero- (read: traditional) reproduction results primarily in the preservation of the so-called high arts (canonical literature, art, philosophy) and the continued denigration of its arguably more relevant “stepchildren,” among them departments of composition, writing, and rhetoric. What might happen if we managed to “forget” the story of our origins, or our place in traditional departmental hierarchies? What if we turned our attention away from successful work to so-called “failed” rhetorical projects? Might we then uncover ways of writing, researching, and teaching that moves us toward alternative futures?

As I stated previously, *The Queer Art of Failure* is more about the import of queer theory in our present cultural moment than it is about a particular discipline, especially one so practice- and pedagogy-oriented as the field(s) of writing and rhetoric. That is to say, despite its celebration of “low theory,” it circulates comfortably in the realm of institutionalized discourses. However, the epistemology it puts forth could be considered by some (myself among them) to be practically tailor-made for those interested in rhetorical studies. Halberstam’s methodology places texts at the center of her vision, not so that she may theorize in the vacuum of academic scholarship (theory for theory’s sake), but so that the texts themselves serve to critique North American ideology as well as to offer alternative models for how we might do and be in the world. This kind of work is central to the projects of rhetoricians of all stripes. In fact, methodologically Halberstam’s book follows and expands the central thesis of Porter et. al.’s *CCC* article, “Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change” (2000) which argues, plainly, that institutions are themselves rhetorical constructs shaped by texts; as such, they can be re-shaped, dismantled, and/or rebuilt with texts. And, Halberstam’s coterie of texts cohere thematically to promote visions of collective action, teamwork, non-normative relationship building, and the transgression of boundaries, actions that will certainly be—if they are not already—advantageous to anyone in the university who hopes to be a part of the university of the future. The modern university operates on an antiquated system of what Halberstam calls “disciplinary correctness,” which “signal[s] a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing” but which “[does] not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy” (6). She continues later, “This is not a bad time to experiment with disciplinary transformation on behalf of the project of generating new forms of knowing [….] As the big disciplines begin to crumble like banks that have invested in bad securities we might ask more broadly, Do we really want to shore up the ragged boundaries of our shared interests and intellectual communities, or might we rather take this opportunity to rethink the project of learning and thinking altogether?” (7). Such a question applies equally to global concerns as it does to more local ones, among them the pedagogies that rule our classrooms and curriculum design. Halberstam’s emphasis on failure as a gateway to creativity, discovery, and wonder might prompt us to think about how we might dismantle those more traditional, acceptable modes of writing instruction to make room for “losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing.” Such provocations lead me to another question: Could the field(s) of writing and rhetoric, guided by an ethic of failure, become a model for a productive, forward-looking discipline? Such questions no doubt help us forge connections to and re-see texts that may be more familiar: David Bartholomae’s *Writing on the Margins* (2005), Harriet Malinowitz’s “A Feminist Critique of Writing in the Disciplines” (Jarratt & Worsham 1998), and Sara Ahmed’s *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge 2004) and *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke 2010), among many others.

Failure, for Halberstam, isn’t as simple as falling short of expectations. It is an artform, “a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and […] 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” (88). Forwarding such a vision, *The Queer Art of Failure* will be an enjoyable, challenging, and provocative read for anyone in the broad field of writing studies, whether senior faculty or graduate student (and whether well-versed in

or painfully ignorant of queer studies), interested in a fresh perspective on how to do meaningful, intellectual work. As a doctoral student in rhetoric & composition myself, I found the book satisfying and lively, especially given that I read it on the heels of the canonical, historical texts that make up a good deal of my qualifying exam preparation. All in all, *The Queer Art of Failure* has the potential to transform the way we think about our work in the world, encouraging us to re/create alternative futures.

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