

The Queer Art of *Failure*

JUDITH HALBERSTAM



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A JOHN HOPE

FRANKLIN CENTER

BOOK

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Judith Halberstam

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS | DURHAM AND LONDON | 2011

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Printed in the United States
of America on acid-free paper ©
Designed by Amy Ruth Buchanan
Typeset in Quadraat and Quadraat Sans
by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.
Library of Congress Cataloging-
in-Publication Data appear on the
last printed page of this book.

Duke University Press gratefully
acknowledges the University of
Southern California, which
provided funds toward the
production of this book.

FOR

ALL OF

HISTORY'S

LOSERS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Perhaps no one actually wants acknowledgement in relation to a project on failure! Nonetheless, in the spirit of the alternative forms of knowledge production that this book advocates, I must recognize here all the wonderful people who have guided me to failure, stupidity, and negativity, not to mention loss, lack, and SpongeBob SquarePants. Though she may not remember it, Lauren Berlant first introduced me to the wacky art of plot summary when she narrated at length and in hilarious detail the *South Park* episode “Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo.” The episode stayed with me for many reasons, not least for its themes of exclusion and loneliness in the story line about a Jewish kid at Christmas. But it was in the retelling, at an MLA convention no less, that the Christmas Poo seemed to open up new narrative zones of possibility. There is much plot summary in this book, hopefully of the Berlant entertaining variety. I have performed some of it for audiences at many universities, and I thank all the people who have invited me to speak in the past five years, as this book took shape. I also thank my wonderful colleagues at USC, including Ruthie Gilmore, Sarah Gualtieri, Ange-Marie Hancock, Kara Keeling, Robin Kelley, Josh Kun, Akira Lippit, David Lloyd, Maria Elena Martinez, Teresa McKenna, Tania Modleski, Laura Pulido, Shana Redmond, John Carlos Rowe, George Sanchez, Karen Tongson, and Sherry Velasco.

I thank the many artists whose work has in part inspired this book: Judie Bamber, Nao Bustamante, Cabello/Carceller, *LTTR*, Monica Majoli, J. A. Nicholls, Collier Schorr, and others. And I thank the students with whom I work, especially Deborah Alkamano, Zach Blas, Matthew Carrillo-Vincent, Jih-Fei Cheng, April Davidauski, Jennifer DeClue, Laura

Fugikawa, Kiana Green, Yetta Howard, Alexis Lothian, Stacy Macias, Alvaro Marquez, Alice-Mihaela Bardan, Gretel Rosas, and Evren Savci, for making their own contributions to my thinking on alternative pedagogies and the pursuit of ignorance.

At a time when, sadly, the idea of subversion has gone out of style, I still want to pitch my tent with a renegade band of persistently subversive intellectuals: Paul Amar, Alicia Arrizon, Carmen Romero Bachiller, Jennifer Brody, Daphne Brooks, Jayna Brown, Judith Butler, Heather Cassils, Mel Chen, T. Cooper, Ann Cvetkovich, Harry Dodge, David Eng, Antke Engel, Kale Fajardo, Roderick Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Rosalinda Fregoso, Elena Glasberg, Gayatri Gopinath, Herman Grey, Dominique Grisard, Aeyal Gross, Christina Hanhardt, Gil Hochberg, Sharon Holland, John Howard, Silas Howard, Annamarie Jagose, Keri Kanetsky, Jane Knox, Tim Lawrence, Ariel Levy, Ira Livingston, Renate Lorenz, Heather Love, Lisa Lowe, Martin Manalansan, Angela McRobbie, Robert McRuer, Mara Mills, Nick Mirzoeff, Fred Moten, José Esteban Muñoz, Eileen Myles, Maggie Nelson, Tavia Nyong'o, Marcia Ochoa, Gema Perez-Sanchez, Raquel (Lucas) Platero, Chandan Reddy, Isabel Reiss, Lisa Rofel, Jordana Rosenberg, Tiina Rosenberg, Cherry Smyth, Dean Spade, Anna Joy Springer, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, Jürg Tschirren, Deborah Vargas, Del Grace Volcano, Jane Ward, Patricia White, and Julia Bryan Wilson. I thank the UCI Humanities Research Center and David Goldberg in particular for selecting me for the Critical Animal Studies group, and thanks to Mel Chen for her leadership in the group.

Special thanks to Ken Wissoker at Duke University Press and to Lisa Duggan, Elizabeth Freeman, and Lisa Rofel for their astute and encouraging readings of various drafts of the book. Last but not least, I offer thanks and love to my very own quirky little animated family of Ixchel Leni, Renato Leni, and (most important) Macarena Gomez-Barris, all of whom inspire me and encourage me to fail better every day.

Parts of this book have appeared as essays. A piece of chapter 1 appeared as "Beyond Broadway and Main: A Response to the Presidential Address," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2009), 33–38. A very early version of chapter 2 was published as "Forgetting Family: Queer Alternatives to Oedipal Relations," *Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Studies*, ed. Molly McGarry and George Haggerty (London: Blackwell, 2007). An early version of chapter 4 appeared in German as "Notes on Failure," *The Power and Politics of the Aesthetic in American Culture*, ed. Klaus Benesch and Ulla Haselstein (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2007).

What's the Alternative?

Mr. Krabs: And just when you think you've found the land of milk and honey, they grab ya by the britches, and haul you way up high, and higher, and higher, and HIGHER, until you're hauled up to the surface, flopping and gasping for breath! And then they cook ya, and then they eat ya—or worse!

SpongeBob: [Terrified] What could be worse than that?

Mr. Krabs: [Softly] Gift shops.

—“Hooky,” *SpongeBob SquarePants*

Just when you think you have found the land of milk and honey, Mr. Krabs tells poor old SpongeBob SquarePants, you find yourself on the menu, or worse, in the gift shop as part of the product tie-in for the illusion to which you just waved goodbye. We are all used to having our dreams crushed, our hopes smashed, our illusions shattered, but what comes after hope? And what if, like SpongeBob SquarePants, we don't believe that a trip to the land of milk and honey inevitably ends at the gift shop? What is the alternative, in other words, to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other? What is the alternative, SpongeBob wants to know, to working all day for Mr. Krabs, or being captured in the net of commodity capitalism while trying to escape? This book, a kind of “SpongeBob SquarePants Guide

to Life,” loses the idealism of hope in order to gain wisdom and a new, spongy relation to life, culture, knowledge, and pleasure.

So what is the alternative? This simple question announces a political project, begs for a grammar of possibility (here expressed in gerunds and the passive voice, among other grammars of pronouncement), and expresses a basic desire to live life otherwise. Academics, activists, artists, and cartoon characters have long been on a quest to articulate an alternative vision of life, love, and labor and to put such a vision into practice. Through the use of manifestoes, a range of political tactics, and new technologies of representation, radical utopians continue to search for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject. This book uses “low theory” (a term I am adapting from Stuart Hall’s work) and popular knowledge to explore alternatives and to look for a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations. Low theory tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop. But it also makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal. And so the book darts back and forth between high and low culture, high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge, in order to push through the divisions between life and art, practice and theory, thinking and doing, and into a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing.

In this book I range from children’s animation to avant-garde performance and queer art to think about ways of being and knowing that stand outside of conventional understandings of success. I argue that success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation. But these measures of success have come under serious pressure recently, with the collapse of financial markets on the one hand and the epic rise in divorce rates on the other. If the boom and bust years of the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first have taught us anything, we should at least have a healthy critique of static models of success and failure.

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

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

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

In *Bright-sided* Ehrenreich uses the example of American women’s application of positive thinking to breast cancer to demonstrate how dangerous the belief in optimism can be and how deeply Americans want to believe that health is a matter of attitude rather than environmental

degradation and that wealth is a matter of visualizing success rather than having the cards stacked in your favor. For the nonbelievers outside the cult of positive thinking, however, the failures and losers, the grouchy, irritable whiners who do not want to “have a nice day” and who do not believe that getting cancer has made them better people, politics offers a better explanatory framework than personal disposition. For these negative thinkers, there are definite advantages to failing. Relieved of the obligation to keep smiling through chemotherapy or bankruptcy, the negative thinker can use the experience of failure to confront the gross inequalities of everyday life in the United States.

From the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures. In many ways this has been the message of many renegade feminists in the past. Monique Wittig (1992) argued in the 1970s that if womanhood depends upon a heterosexual framework, then lesbians are not “women,” and if lesbians are not “women,” then they fall outside of patriarchal norms and can re-create some of the meaning of their genders. Also in the 1970s Valerie Solanas suggested that if “woman” takes on meaning only in relation to “man,” then we need to “cut up men” (2004: 72). Perhaps that is a little drastic, but at any rate these kinds of feminisms, what I call shadow feminisms in chapter 5, have long haunted the more acceptable forms of feminism that are oriented to positivity, reform, and accommodation rather than negativity, rejection, and transformation. Shadow feminisms take the form not of becoming, being, and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming, and violating.

By way of beginning a discussion of failure, let’s think about a popular version of female failure that also proves instructive and entertaining. In *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006, directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris) Abigail Breslin plays Olive Hoover, a young girl with her sights set on winning a Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant. The road trip that takes her and her dysfunctional family to southern California from Albuquerque makes as eloquent a statement about success and failure as any that I could conjure here. With her porn-obsessed junky grandfather providing her with the choreography for her pageant routine and a cheerleading squad made up of a gay suicidal uncle, a Nietzsche-reading mute brother, an aspiring but flailing motivational speaker father, and an exasperated

stay-at-home mom, Olive is destined to fail, and to fail spectacularly. But while her failure could be the source of misery and humiliation, and while it does indeed deliver precisely this, it also leads to a kind of ecstatic exposure of the contradictions of a society obsessed with meaningless competition. By implication it also reveals the precarious models of success by which American families live and die.

Michael Arndt, who won an Oscar as the scriptwriter for the film, said that he was inspired to write the script after hearing Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California declare, "If there is one thing in this world that I despise, it's losers!" Obviously the faintly fascistic worldview of winners and losers that Schwarzenegger promotes has contributed in large part to the bankrupting of his state, and *Little Miss Sunshine* is in many ways a view from below, the perspective of the loser in a world that is interested only in winners. While Olive's failure as a beauty pageant contestant plays out against the soundtrack of "Superfreak" on a stage in a bland hotel in Redondo Beach in front of a room full of supermoms and their "JonBenet" daughters, this failure, hilarious in its execution, poignant in its meaning, and exhilarating in its aftermath, is so much better, so much more liberating than any success that could possibly be achieved in the context of a teen beauty contest. By gyrating and stripping to a raunchy song while heavily made-up and coiffed little cowgirls and princesses wait in the wings for their chance to chastely sway in the spotlight, Olive reveals the sexuality that is the real motivation for the preteen pageant. Without retreating to a puritanical attack on sexual pleasure or a moral mode of disapproval, *Little Miss Sunshine* instead relinquishes the Darwinian motto of winners, "May the best girl win," and cleaves to a neo-anarchistic credo of ecstatic losers: "No one gets left behind!" The dysfunctional little family jumps in and out of its battered yellow vw and holds together despite being bruised and abused along the way. And despite or perhaps because of the suicide attempts, the impending bankruptcy, the death of the family patriarch, and the ultimate irrelevancy of the beauty contest, a new kind of optimism is born. Not an optimism that relies on positive thinking as an explanatory engine for social order, nor one that insists upon the bright side at all costs; rather this is a little ray of sunshine that produces shade and light in equal measure and knows that the meaning of one always depends upon the meaning of the other.

Undisciplined

Illegibility, then, has been and remains, a reliable source for political autonomy.

—James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*

Any book that begins with a quote from *SpongeBob SquarePants* and is motored by wisdom gleaned from *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *Chicken Run*, and *Finding Nemo*, among other animated guides to life, runs the risk of not being taken seriously. Yet this is my goal. Being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours. Indeed terms like *serious* and *rigorous* tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy. Training of any kind, in fact, is a way of refusing a kind of Benjaminian relation to knowing, a stroll down uncharted streets in the “wrong” direction (Benjamin 1996); it is precisely about staying in well-lit territories and about knowing exactly which way to go before you set out. Like many others before me, I propose that instead the goal is to lose one’s way, and indeed to be prepared to lose more than one’s way. Losing, we may agree with Elizabeth Bishop, is an art, and one “that is not too hard to master / Though it may look like a disaster” (2008: 166–167).

In the sciences, particularly physics and mathematics, there are many examples of rogue intellectuals, not all of whom are reclusive Unabomber types (although more than a few are just that), who wander off into uncharted territories and refuse the academy because the publish-or-perish pressure of academic life keeps them tethered to conventional knowledge production and its well-traveled byways. Popular mathematics books, for example, revel in stories about unconventional loners who are self-schooled and who make their own way through the world of numbers. For some kooky minds, disciplines actually get in the way of answers and theorems precisely because they offer maps of thought where intuition and blind fumbling might yield better results. In 2008, for example, *The New Yorker* featured a story about an oddball physicist who, like many ambitious physicists and mathematicians, was in hot pursuit of a grand theory, a “theory of everything.” This thinker, Garrett Lisi, had dropped

out of academic physics because string theory dominated the field at that time and he thought the answers lay elsewhere. As an outsider to the discipline, writes Benjamin Wallace-Wells, Lisi “built his theory as an outsider might, relying on a grab bag of component parts: a hand-built mathematical structure, an unconventional way of describing gravity, and a mysterious mathematical entity known as E_8 .”¹ In the end Lisi’s “theory of everything” fell short of expectations, but it nonetheless yielded a whole terrain of new questions and methods. Similarly the computer scientists who pioneered new programs to produce computer-generated imagery (CGI), as many accounts of the rise of Pixar have chronicled, were academic rejects or dropouts who created independent institutes in order to explore their dreams of animated worlds.² These alternative cultural and academic realms, the areas beside academia rather than within it, the intellectual worlds conjured by losers, failures, dropouts, and refuseniks, often serve as the launching pad for alternatives precisely when the university cannot.

This is not a bad time to experiment with disciplinary transformation on behalf of the project of generating new forms of knowing, since the fields that were assembled over one hundred years ago to respond to new market economies and the demand for narrow expertise, as Foucault described them, are now losing relevance and failing to respond either to real-world knowledge projects or student interests. 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 commitments, or might we rather take this opportunity to rethink the project of learning and thinking altogether? Just as the standardized tests that the U.S. favors as a guide to intellectual advancement in high schools tend to identify people who are good at standardized exams (as opposed to, say, intellectual visionaries), so in universities grades, exams, and knowledge of canons identify scholars with an aptitude for maintaining and conforming to the dictates of the discipline.

This book, a stroll out of the confines of conventional knowledge and into the unregulated territories of failure, loss, and unbecoming, must make a long detour around disciplines and ordinary ways of thinking. Let me explain how universities (and by implication high schools) squash rather than promote quirky and original thought. Disciplinarity, as defined by Foucault (1995), is a technique of modern power: it depends upon and deploys normalization, routines, convention, tradition, and

regularity, and it produces experts and administrative forms of governance. The university structure that houses the disciplines and jealously guards their boundaries now stands at a crossroads, not of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, past and future, national and transnational; the crossroads at which the rapidly disintegrating bandwagon of disciplines, subfields, and interdisciplines has arrived offer a choice between the university as corporation and investment opportunity and the university as a new kind of public sphere with a different investment in knowledge, in ideas, and in thought and politics.

A radical take on disciplinarity and the university that presumes both the breakdown of the disciplines and the closing of gaps between fields conventionally presumed to be separated can be found in a manifesto published by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in 2004 in *Social Text* titled “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses.” Their essay is a searing critique directed at the intellectual and the critical intellectual, the professional scholar and the “critical academic professionals.” For Moten and Harney, the critical academic is not the answer to encroaching professionalization but an extension of it, using the very same tools and legitimating strategies to become “an ally of professional education.” Moten and Harney prefer to pitch their tent with the “subversive intellectuals,” a maroon community of outcast thinkers who refuse, resist, and renege on the demands of “rigor,” “excellence,” and “productivity.” They tell us to “steal from the university,” to “steal the enlightenment for others” (112), and to act against “what Foucault called the Conquest, the unspoken war that founded, and with the force of law refounds, society” (113). And what does the undercommons of the university want to be? It wants to constitute an unprofessional force of fugitive knowers, with a set of intellectual practices not bound by examination systems and test scores. The goal for this unprofessionalization is not to abolish; in fact Moten and Harney set the fugitive intellectual against the elimination or abolition of this, the founding or refounding of that: “Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society” (113).

Not the elimination of anything but the founding of a new society. And why not? Why not think in terms of a different kind of society than the one that first created and then abolished slavery? The social worlds we inhabit, after all, as so many thinkers have reminded us, are not in-

evitable; they were not always bound to turn out this way, and what's more, in the process of producing this reality, many other realities, fields of knowledge, and ways of being have been discarded and, to cite Foucault again, "disqualified." A few visionary books, produced alongside disciplinary knowledge, show us the paths not taken. For example, in a book that itself began as a detour, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1999), James C. Scott details the ways the modern state has run roughshod over local, customary, and undisciplined forms of knowledge in order to rationalize and simplify social, agricultural, and political practices that have profit as their primary motivation. In the process, says Scott, certain ways of seeing the world are established as normal or natural, as obvious and necessary, even though they are often entirely counterintuitive and socially engineered. *Seeing Like a State* began as a study of "why the state has always seemed to be the enemy of 'people who move around,'" but quickly became a study of the demand by the state for legibility through the imposition of methods of standardization and uniformity (1). While Dean Spade (2008) and other queer scholars use Scott's book to think about how we came to insist upon the documentation of gender identity on all governmental documentation, I want to use his monumental study to pick up some of the discarded local knowledges that are trampled underfoot in the rush to bureaucratize and rationalize an economic order that privileges profit over all kinds of other motivations for being and doing.

In place of the Germanic ordered forest that Scott uses as a potent metaphor for the start of the modern imposition of bureaucratic order upon populations, we might go with the thicket of subjugated knowledge that sprouts like weeds among the disciplinary forms of knowledge, threatening always to overwhelm the cultivation and pruning of the intellect with mad plant life. For Scott, to "see like a state" means to accept the order of things and to internalize them; it means that we begin to deploy and think with the logic of the superiority of orderliness and that we erase and indeed sacrifice other, more local practices of knowledge, practices moreover that may be less efficient, may yield less marketable results, but may also, in the long term, be more sustaining. What is at stake in arguing for the trees and against the forest? Scott identifies "legibility" as the favored technique of high modernism for sorting, organizing, and profiting from land and people and for abstracting systems of knowledge from local knowledge practices. He talks about the garden and gardeners as representative of a new spirit of intervention and order favored within

high modernism, and he points to the minimalism and simplicity of Le Corbusier's urban design as part of a new commitment to symmetry and division and planning that complements authoritarian preferences for hierarchies and despises the complex and messy forms of organic profusion and improvised creativity. "Legibility," writes Scott, "is a condition of manipulation" (1999: 183). He favors instead, borrowing from European anarchist thought, more practical forms of knowledge that he calls *metis* and that emphasize mutuality, collectivity, plasticity, diversity, and adaptability. Illegibility may in fact be one way of escaping the political manipulation to which all university fields and disciplines are subject.

While Scott's insight about illegibility has implications for all kinds of subjects who are manipulated precisely when they become legible and visible to the state (undocumented workers, visible queers, racialized minorities), it also points to an argument for antidisciplinarity in the sense that knowledge practices that refuse both the form and the content of traditional canons may lead to unbounded forms of speculation, modes of thinking that ally not with rigor and order but with inspiration and unpredictability. We may in fact want to think about how to see *unlike* a state; we may want new rationales for knowledge production, different aesthetic standards for ordering or disordering space, other modes of political engagement than those conjured by the liberal imagination. We may, ultimately, want more undisciplined knowledge, more questions and fewer answers.

Disciplines qualify and disqualify, legitimate and delegitimate, reward and punish; most important, they statically reproduce themselves and inhibit dissent. As Foucault writes, "Disciplines will define not a code of law, but a code of normalization" (2003: 38). In a series of lectures on knowledge production given at the Collège de France and then published posthumously as a collection titled *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault provides a context for his own antidisciplinary thinking and declares the age of "all-encompassing and global theories" to be over, giving way to the "local character of critique" or "something resembling a sort of autonomous and non-centralized theoretical production, or in other words a theoretical production that does not need a visa from some common regime to establish its validity" (6). These lectures coincide with the writing of *The History of Sexuality* Volume 1, and we find the outline of his critique of repressive power in these pages (Foucault, 1998). I will return to Foucault's insights about the reverse discourse in *The History of Sexuality* later in the book, especially to the places where he implicates sexual mi-

norities in the production of systems of classification, but in *Society Must Be Defended* his target is academic legibility and legitimation, and he describes and analyzes the function of the academic in the circulation and reproduction of hegemonic structures.

In place of the “all-encompassing and global theories” that the university encourages, Foucault exhorts his students to think about and turn to “subjugated knowledges,” namely those forms of knowledge production that have been “buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations” (2003: 7). These forms of knowledge have not simply been lost or forgotten; they have been disqualified, rendered nonsensical or nonconceptual or “insufficiently elaborated.” Foucault calls them “naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity” (7) — this is what we mean by *knowledge from below*.

In relation to the identification of “subjugated knowledges,” we might ask, How do we participate in the production and circulation of “subjugated knowledge”? How do we keep disciplinary forms of knowledge at bay? How do we avoid precisely the “scientific” forms of knowing that relegate other modes of knowing to the redundant or irrelevant? How do we engage in and teach antidisciplinary knowledge? Foucault proposes this answer: “Truth to tell, if we are to struggle against disciplines, or rather against disciplinary power, in our search for a nondisciplinary power, we should not be turning to the old right of sovereignty; we should be looking to a new right that is both anti-disciplinary and emancipated from the principle of sovereignty” (2003: 40). In some sense we have to untrain ourselves so that we can read the struggles and debates back into questions that seem settled and resolved.

On behalf of such a project, and in the spirit of the “Seven Theses” proposed by Moten and Harney, this book joins forces with their “subversive intellectual” and agrees to steal from the university, to, as they say, “abuse its hospitality” and to be “in but not of it” (101). Moten and Harney’s theses exhort the subversive intellectual to, among other things, worry about the university, refuse professionalization, forge a collectivity, and retreat to the external world beyond the ivied walls of the campus. I would add to their theses the following. First, *Resist mastery*. Here we might insist upon a critique of the “all-encompassing and global theories” identified by Foucault. In my book this resistance takes the form of investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity; we might read *failure*, for example, as a refusal of mastery, a critique of

the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing. Stupidity could refer not simply to a lack of knowledge but to the limits of certain forms of knowing and certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowing.

Really imaginative ethnographies, for example, depend upon an unknowing relation to the other. To begin an ethnographic project with a goal, with an object of research and a set of presumptions, is already to stymie the process of discovery; it blocks one's ability to learn something that exceeds the frameworks with which one enters. For example, in an ethnography to which I return later in the book, a study of "the Islamic revival and the feminist subject" in contemporary Egypt, Saba Mahmood explains how she had to give up on mastery in order to engage certain forms of Islamism. She writes: "it is through this process of dwelling in the modes of reasoning endemic to a tradition that I once judged abhorrent, by immersing myself within the thick texture of its sensibilities and attachments, that I have been able to dislocate the certitude of my own projections and even begin to comprehend why Islam . . . exerts such a force in people's lives" (2005: 199). She concludes this thought as follows: "This attempt at comprehension offers the slim hope in the embattled and imperious climate, one in which feminist politics runs the risk of being reduced to a rhetorical display of the placard of Islam's abuses, that analysis as a mode of conversation, rather than mastery, can yield a vision of co-existence that does not require making others life-worlds extinct or provisional" (199). Conversation rather than mastery indeed seems to offer one very concrete way of being in relation to another form of being and knowing without seeking to measure that life modality by the standards that are external to it.

Second, *Privilege the naïve or nonsensical* (stupidity). Here we might argue for the nonsensible or nonconceptual over sense-making structures that are often embedded in a common notion of ethics. The naïve or the ignorant may in fact lead to a different set of knowledge practices. It certainly requires what some have called oppositional pedagogies. In pursuit of such pedagogies we must realize that, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick once said, ignorance is "as potent and multiple a thing as knowledge" and that learning often takes place completely independently of teaching (1991: 4). In fact, to speak personally for a moment, I am not sure that I myself am teachable! As someone who never aced an exam, who has tried and tried without much success to become fluent in another language, and who can read a book without retaining much at all, I realize that I can

learn only what I can teach myself, and that much of what I was taught in school left very little impression upon me at all. The question of unteachability arises as a political problem, indeed a national problem, in the extraordinary French documentary about a year in the life of a high school in the suburbs of Paris, *The Class* (*Entre Les Murs*, 2008, directed by Laurent Cantet). In the film a white schoolteacher, François Bégaudeau (who wrote the memoir upon which the film is based), tries to reach out to his disinterested and profoundly alienated, mostly African, Asian, and Arab immigrant students. The cultural and racial and class differences between the teacher and his students make effective communication difficult, and his cultural references (*The Diary of Ann Frank*, Molière, French grammar) leave the students cold, while theirs (soccer, Islam, hip-hop) induce only pained responses from their otherwise personable teacher. The film, like a Frederick Wiseman documentary, tries to just let the action unfold without any voice-of-God narration, so we see close up the rage and frustrations of teacher and students alike. At the end of the film an extraordinary moment occurs. Bégaudeau asks the students to think about what they have learned and write down one thing to take away from the class, one concept, text, or idea that might have made a difference. The class disperses, and one girl shuffles up to the front. The teacher looks at her expectantly and draws out her comment. "I didn't learn anything," she tells him without malice or anger, "nothing. . . . I can't think of anything I learned." The moment is a defeat for the teacher and a disappointment for the viewer, who wants to believe in a narrative of educational uplift, but it is a triumph for alternative pedagogies because it reminds us that learning is a two-way street and you cannot teach without a dialogic relation to the learner.

"I didn't learn anything" could be an endorsement of another French text, a book by Jacques Rancière on the politics of knowledge. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Rancière (1991) examines a form of knowledge sharing that detours around the mission of the university, with its masters and students, its expository methods and its standards of excellence, and instead endorses a form of pedagogy that presumes and indeed demands equality rather than hierarchy. Drawing from the example of an eighteenth-century professor who taught in French to Belgian students who spoke only Flemish, Rancière claims that conventional, discipline-based pedagogy demands the presence of a master and proposes a mode of learning by which the students are enlightened by the superior knowledge, training, and intellect of the schoolmaster. But in the case of Joseph

Jacotot, his experience with the students in Brussels taught him that his belief in the necessity of explication and exegesis was false and that it simply upheld a university system dependent upon hierarchy. When Jacotot realized that his students were learning to read and speak French and to understand the text *Télémaque* without his assistance, he began to see the narcissistic investment he had made in his own function. He was not a bad teacher who became a “good” teacher; rather he was a “good” teacher who realized that people must be led to learn rather than taught to follow. Rancière comments ironically, “Like all conscientious professors, he knew that teaching was not in the slightest about cramming students with knowledge and having them repeat it like parrots, but he knew equally well that students had to avoid the chance detours where minds still incapable of distinguishing the essential from the accessory, the principle from the consequence, get lost” (3). While the “good” teacher leads his students along the pathways of rationality, the “ignorant schoolmaster” must actually allow them to get lost in order for them to experience confusion and then find their own way out or back or around.

The *Ignorant Schoolmaster* advocates in an antidisiplinary way for emancipatory forms of knowledge that do not depend upon an overtrained piper leading obedient children out of the darkness and into the light. Jacotot summarizes his pedagogy thus: “I must teach you that I have nothing to teach you” (15). In this way he allows others to teach themselves and to learn without learning and internalizing a system of superior and inferior knowledges, superior and inferior intelligences. Like Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which argues against a “banking” system of teaching and for a dialogic mode of learning that enacts a practice of freedom, Jacotot and then Rancière see education and social transformation as mutually dependent. When we are taught that we cannot know things unless we are taught by great minds, we submit to a whole suite of unfree practices that take on the form of a colonial relation (Freire 2000). There are several responses possible to colonial knowledge formations: a violent response, on the order of Frantz Fanon’s claim that violent impositions of colonial rule must be met with violent resistance; a homeopathic response, within which the knower learns the dominant system better than its advocates and undermines it from within; or a negative response, in which the subject refuses the knowledge offered and refuses to be a knowing subject in the form mandated by Enlightenment philosophies of self and other. This book is in sympathy with the violent and negative forms of anticolonial knowing and builds on Moten’s

and Harney's opposition to the university as a site of incarcerated knowledge.

In the project on subjugated knowledge, I propose a third thesis: *Suspect memorialization*. While it seems commonsensical to produce new vaults of memory about homophobia or racism, many contemporary texts, literary and theoretical, actually argue against memorialization. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Saidiya Hartman's memoir, *Lose Your Mother* (2008), and Avery Gordon's meditation on forgetting and haunting in *Ghostly Matters* (1996), all advocate for certain forms of erasure over memory precisely because memorialization has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories (of slavery, the Holocaust, wars, etc.). Memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls "a ritual of power"; it selects for what is important (the histories of triumph), it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions, and it sets precedents for other "memorializations." In this book *forgetting* becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription.

Low Theory

We expose ourselves to serious error when we attempt to "read off" concepts that were designed to operate at a high level of abstraction as if they automatically produced the same theoretical effects when translated to another, more concrete, "lower" level of operation.

—Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity"

Building on Rancière's notion of intellectual emancipation, I want to propose low theory, or theoretical knowledge that works at many levels at once, as precisely one of these modes of transmission that revels in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seeks not to explain but to involve. So what is *low theory*, where does it take us, and why should we invest in something that seems to confirm rather than upset the binary formation that situates it as the other to a *high theory*? Low theory is a model of thinking that I extract from Stuart Hall's famous notion that theory is not an end unto itself but "a detour en route to something else" (1991: 43). Again, we might consider the utility of getting lost over finding our way, and so we should conjure a Benjaminian stroll or a situationist *derivé*, an ambulatory journey through the

unplanned, the unexpected, the improvised, and the surprising. I take the term *low theory* from Hall's comment on Gramsci's effectiveness as a thinker. In response to Althusser's suggestion that Gramsci's texts were "insufficiently theorized," Hall notes that Gramsci's abstract principles "were quite explicitly designed to operate at the lower levels of historical concreteness" (413). Hall goes on to argue that Gramsci was "not aiming higher and missing his political target"; instead, like Hall himself, he was aiming low in order to hit a broader target. Here we can think about *low theory* as a mode of accessibility, but we might also think about it as a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory.³

As long as there is an entity called *high theory*, even in casual use or as shorthand for a particular tradition of critical thinking, there is an implied field of *low theory*; indeed Hall circles the issue in his essay "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." Hall points out that Gramsci was not a "general theorist," but "a political intellectual and a socialist activist on the Italian political scene" (1996: 411). This is important to Hall because some theory is goal-oriented in a practical and activist way; it is designed to inform political practice rather than to formulate abstract thoughts for the sake of some neutral philosophical project. Gramsci was involved in political parties his whole life and served at various levels of politics over time; ultimately he was imprisoned for his politics and died shortly after his release from a fascist jail.

Building on this image of Gramsci as a political thinker, Hall argues that Gramsci was never a Marxist in a doctrinal, orthodox, or religious sense. Like Benjamin, and indeed like Hall himself, Gramsci understood that one cannot subscribe to the text of Marxism as if it were etched in stone. He draws attention to the historical specificity of political structures and suggests that we adjust to developments that Marx and Marxism could not predict or otherwise account for. For Benjamin, Hall, and Gramsci, orthodoxy is a luxury we cannot afford, even when it means adherence to an orthodox leftist vision. Instead, Hall says, Gramsci practiced a genuinely "open" Marxism, and of course an open Marxism is precisely what Hall advocates in "Marxism without Guarantees." Open here means questioning, open to unpredictable outcomes, not fixed on a telos, unsure, adaptable, shifting, flexible, and adjustable. An "open" pedagogy, in the spirit of Rancière and Freire, also detaches itself from pre-

scriptive methods, fixed logics, and epistemes, and it orients us toward problem-solving knowledge or social visions of radical justice.

Accordingly *hegemony*, as Gramsci theorized it and as Hall interprets it, is the term for a multilayered system by which a dominant group achieves power not through coercion but through the production of an interlocking system of ideas which persuades people of the rightness of any given set of often contradictory ideas and perspectives. *Common sense* is the term Gramsci uses for this set of beliefs that are persuasive precisely because they do not present themselves as ideology or try to win consent.

For Gramsci and Hall, everyone participates in intellectual activity, just as they cook meals and mend clothes without necessarily being chefs or tailors. The split between the traditional and the organic intellectual is important because it recognizes the tension between intellectuals who participate in the construction of the hegemonic (as much through form as through content) and intellectuals who work with others, with a class of people in Marxist terms, to sort through the contradictions of capitalism and to illuminate the oppressive forms of governance that have infiltrated everyday life.

Today in the university we spend far less time thinking about counterhegemony than about hegemony. What Gramsci seemed to mean by counterhegemony was the production and circulation of another, competing set of ideas which could join in an active struggle to change society. The literature on hegemony has attributed so much power to it that it has seemed impossible to imagine counterhegemonic options. But Hall, like Gramsci, is very interested in the idea of education as a popular practice aimed at the cultivation of counterhegemonic ideas and systems. Hall has spent much of his career in the Open University, and he does what he ascribes to Gramsci in his essay: he manages to operate “at different levels of abstraction.”

Both Hall and Gramsci were impatient with economism. This is a general principle ascribed to Marxist thought and describing a too rigid theorization of the relation between base and superstructure. As Althusser makes clear, the “ultimate condition of production is [therefore] the reproduction of the conditions of production”; in other words, in order for a system to work, it has to keep creating and maintaining the structures or the structured relations which allow it to function (2001: 85). But this is not the same as saying that the economic base *determines* the form of every other social force. Economism, for both Gramsci and Hall, leads

only to moralizing and cheap insight and does not really allow for a complex understanding of the social relations that both sustain the mode of production and can change it. Low theory might constitute the name for a counterhegemonic form of theorizing, the theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production.

Pirate Cultures

What else is criminal activity but the passionate pursuit of alternatives?

— Design Collective Zine, Shahrzad (Zurich and Tehran)

A great example of low theory can be found in Peter Linebaugh's and Marcus Rediker's monumental account of the history of opposition to capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. Their book traces what they call "the struggles for alternative ways of life" that accompanied and opposed the rise of capitalism in the early seventeenth century (2001: 15). In stories about piracy, dispossessed commoners, and urban insurrections they detail the modes of colonial and national violence that brutally stamped out all challenges to middle-class power and that cast proletarian rebellion as disorganized, random, and apolitical. Linebaugh and Rediker refuse the common wisdom about these movements (i.e., that they were random and not focused on any particular political goal); instead they emphasize the power of cooperation within the anticapitalist mob and pay careful attention to the alternatives that this "many-headed hydra" of resistant groups imagined and pursued.

The Many-Headed Hydra is a central text in any genealogy of alternatives because its authors refuse to accede to the masculinist myth of Herculean capitalist heroes who mastered the feminine hydra of unruly anarchy; instead they turn that myth on its many heads to access "a powerful legacy of possibility," heeding Hall's cogent warning, "The more we understand about the development of Capital itself, the more we understand that it is only part of the story" (1997: 180). For Linebaugh and Rediker, capital is always joined to the narratives of the resistance it inspired, even though those resistant movements may ultimately not have been successful in their attempts to block capitalism. And so they describe in detail the wide range of resistance with which capitalism was met in the late sixteenth century: there were levelers and diggers who resisted the en-

closure of the public land, or commons; there were sailors and mutineers and would-be slaves who rebelled against the captain's authority on ships to the New World and devised different understandings of group relations; there were religious dissidents who believed in the absence of hierarchies in the eyes of the Lord; there were multinational "motley crews" who engineered mutinies on merchant ships and who sailed around the world bringing news of uprisings to different ports. All of these groups represent lineages of opposition that echo in the present. Linebaugh and Rediker flesh out the alternatives that these resistant groups proposed in terms of how to live, how to think about time and space, how to inhabit space with others, and how to spend time separate from the logic of work.

The history of alternative political formations is important because it contests social relations as given and allows us to access traditions of political action that, while not necessarily successful in the sense of becoming dominant, do offer models of contestation, rupture, and discontinuity for the political present. These histories also identify potent avenues of failure, failures that we might build upon in order to counter the logics of success that have emerged from the triumphs of global capitalism. In *The Many-Headed Hydra* failure is the map of political paths not taken, though it does not chart a completely separate land; failure's byways are all the spaces in between the superhighways of capital. Indeed Linebaugh and Rediker do not find new routes to resistance built upon new archives; they use the same historical accounts that have propped up dominant narratives of pirates as criminals and levelers as violent thugs, and they read different narratives of race and resistance in these same records of church sermons and the memoirs of religious figures. Their point is that dominant history teems with the remnants of alternative possibilities, and the job of the subversive intellectual is to trace the lines of the worlds they conjured and left behind.

My archive is not labor history or subaltern movements. Instead I want to look for low theory and counterknowledge in the realm of popular culture and in relation to queer lives, gender, and sexuality. Gender and sexuality are, after all, too often dropped from most large-scale accounts of alternative worlds (including Linebaugh's and Rediker's). In *The Queer Art of Failure* I turn repeatedly but not exclusively to the "silly" archives of animated film. While many readers may object to the idea that we can locate alternatives in a genre engineered by huge corporations for massive profits and with multiple product tie-ins, I have found that new forms of

animation, CGI in particular, have opened up new narrative doors and led to unexpected encounters between the childish and the transformative and the queer. I am not the first to find eccentric allegories for queer knowledge production in animated film. Elizabeth Freeman (2005) has used the Pixar feature *Monsters, Inc.* to expose the exploitive reality of the neoliberal vision of education and the absence of gender and sexuality in the radical opposition to the neoliberal university. Describing *Monsters, Inc.* as a film about desire, class, and the classroom, Freeman joins forces with Bill Readings's (1997) scathing indictment of neoliberal university reform and argues that the film, an allegory of corporate extractions of labor, "illuminates the social relations of production" even as it mediates them (Freeman, 2005: 90). In the repeated staging of an encounter between the monster and the child in the bedroom—which in the film is designed to generate screams, which in turn are funneled into energy to power Monstropolis—*Monsters, Inc.* implies but does not address, according to Freeman, an erotic exchange. For Freeman, the queerness of this encounter must be acknowledged in order for the film to move beyond its own humanist solution of substituting one form of exploitation (the extraction of screams) for another (the extraction of children's laughter). The libidinal energy of the exchange between monster and child, like the libidinally charged relations between teachers and students, should be able to shock the system out of its complacency. Freeman writes, "The humanities are the shock to common sense, the estranging move that will always make what we do unintelligible and incalculable and that may release or catalyze enough energy to blow out a few institutional fuses" (93). She advocates for teachers to create monsters of their students and to sustain in the process "unruly forms of relationality" (94).

I am less interested than Freeman in the libidinal exchange between teacher and student, which I believe remains invested in the very narcissistic structure of education that Rancière critiques. But like her, I do believe deeply in the pedagogical project of creating monsters; also like her, I turn to the silly archive for information on how to do so. Not everything in this book falls under the headings of frivolity, silliness, or jocularly, but the "silly archive," to adapt Lauren Berlant's priceless phrase about "the counter-politics of the silly object," allows me to make claims for alternatives that are markedly different from the claims that are made in relation to high cultural archives (1997: 12). The texts that I prefer here do not make us better people or liberate us from the culture industry, but they might offer strange and anticapitalist logics of being and acting and

knowing, and they will harbor covert and overt queer worlds. I do believe that if you watch *Dude, Where's My Car?* slowly and repeatedly and while perfectly sober, the mysteries of the universe may be revealed to you. I also believe that *Finding Nemo* contains a secret plan for world revolution and that *Chicken Run* charts an outline of feminist utopia for those who can see beyond the feathers and eggs. I believe in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant; I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely. I seek to provoke, annoy, bother, irritate, and amuse; I am chasing small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, fancies. Like Jesse and Chester in *Dude, Where's My Car?*, I don't really care whether I remember where the hell I parked; instead I merely hope, like the dudes, to conjure some potentially world-saving, wholly improbable fantasies of life on Uranus and elsewhere. At which point you may well ask, as Evey asks Gordon in *V for Vendetta*, "Is everything a joke to you?" To which the very queer and very subversive TV maestro responds, "Only the things that matter."

The animated films that make up the main part of the archive for my book all draw upon the humorous and the politically wild implications of species diversity, and they deploy chickens, rats, penguins, woodland creatures, more penguins, fish, bees, dogs, and zoo animals. Pixar and DreamWorks films in particular have created an animated world rich in political allegory, stuffed to the gills with queerness and rife with analogies between humans and animals. While these films desperately try to package their messages in the usual clichéd forms ("Be yourself," "Follow your dreams," "Find your soul mate"), they also, as Freeman implies in her piece on *Monsters, Inc.*, deliver queer and socialist messages often packaged in relation to one another: Work together, Revel in difference, Fight exploitation, Decode ideology, Invest in resistance.

In the process of studying animation—a knowledge path that might track through popular culture, computer graphics, animation histories and technologies, and cellular biology—we study, as Benjamin knew so well, classed modes of pleasure and technologies of cultural transmission. In an early version of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Benjamin reserved a special place for the new animation art of Walt Disney that, for him, unleashed a kind of magical consciousness upon its mass audiences and conjured utopic spaces and worlds. In "Mickey Mouse and Utopia" in her inspired book *Hollywood Flatlands*, Esther Leslie writes, "For Walter Benjamin . . . the cartoons depict a real-

ist—though not naturalist—expression of the circumstances of modern daily life; the cartoons make clear that even our bodies do not belong to us—we have alienated them in exchange for money, or have given parts of them up in war. The cartoons expose the fact that what parades as civilization is actually barbarism. And the animal-human beasts and spirited things insinuate that humanism is nothing more than an ideology” (2004: 83). According to Leslie, Benjamin saw cartoons as a pedagogical opportunity, a chance for children to see the evil that lies behind the façade of bourgeois respectability and for adults to recapture the visions of magical possibilities that were so palpable in childhood: “Disney’s cartoon world is a world of impoverished experience, sadism and violence. That is to say, it is our world” (2004: 83).

The early Disney cartoons, in tandem with Chaplin’s films, built narrative around baggy caricatures and eschewed mimetic realism. The characters themselves fell apart and then reassembled; they engaged in transformative violence and they took humor rather than tragedy as their preferred medium for engaging the audience. But as Benjamin recognized and as Leslie emphasizes, the Disney cartoons all too quickly resolved into a bourgeois medium; they quickly bowed to the force of *Bildung* and began to present moral fables with gender-normative and class-appropriate characterizations, and in the 1930s they became a favorite tool of the Nazi propaganda machine.

Contemporary animations in CGI also contain disruptive narrative arcs, magical worlds of revolution and transformation, counterintuitive groupings of children, animals, and dolls that rise up against adults and unprincipled machines. Like the early Disney cartoons that Benjamin found so charming and engaging, early Pixar and DreamWorks films join a form of collective art making to a narrative world of anarchy and anti-familial bands of characters. But, like late Disney, late Pixar, in *Wall-e*, for example, joins a narrative of hope to narratives of humanity and entertains a critique of bourgeois humanism only long enough to assure its return. *Wall-e*’s romance with the iPod-like Stepford wife Eva, for example, and his quest to bring a bloated humanity back to earth overturn the fantastic rejection of commodity fetishism early in the film in which he combs the trash heaps on earth for priceless objects, casually throwing away diamond rings while cherishing the velvet boxes in which they sit.

Very few mainstream films made for adults and consumed by large audiences have the audacity and the nerve anymore to tread on the dangerous territory of revolutionary activity; in the contemporary climate of

crude literalism even social satire seems risky. And in a world of romantic comedies and action adventure films there are very few places to turn in search of the alternative. I would be bold enough to argue that it is *only* in the realm of animation that we actually find the alternative hiding. Nonanimated films that trade in the *mise-en-scène* of revolution and transformation, films like *V for Vendetta* and *The X Men*, are based on comic books and animated graphic novels. What is the relationship between new forms of animation and alternative politics today? Can animation sustain a utopic project now, whereas, as Benjamin mourned, it could not in the past?

Failure As a Way of Life

Practice More Failure!

—Title of LTTR event, 2004

In this book on failure I hold on to what have been characterized as childish and immature notions of possibility and look for alternatives in the form of what Foucault calls “subjugated knowledge” across the culture: in subcultures, countercultures, and even popular cultures. I also turn the meaning of failure in another direction, at the cluster of affective modes that have been associated with failure and that now characterize new directions in queer theory. I begin by addressing the dark heart of the negativity that failure conjures, and I turn from the happy and productive failures explored in animation to darker territories of failure associated with futility, sterility, emptiness, loss, negative affect in general, and modes of unbecoming. So while the early chapters chart the meaning of failure as a way of being in the world, the later chapters allow for the fact that failure is also unbeing, and that these modes of unbeing and unbecoming propose a different relation to knowledge. In chapter 4 I explore the meaning of masochism and passivity in relation to failure and femininity, and in chapter 6 I refuse triumphalist accounts of gay, lesbian, and transgender history that necessarily reinvest in robust notions of success and succession. In order to inhabit the bleak territory of failure we sometimes have to write and acknowledge dark histories, histories within which the subject collaborates with rather than always opposes oppressive regimes and dominant ideology. And so in chapter 6 I explore the vexed question of the relationship between homosexuality and fascism and argue that we cannot completely dismiss all of the accounts of Nazism that link it

to gay male masculinism of the early twentieth century. While chapters 4 and 5 therefore mark very different forms of failure than the chapters on animation, art, stupidity, and forgetfulness earlier in the book, still the early chapters flirt with darker forms of failure, particularly chapter 2 on losing and forgetfulness, and the later chapters on negativity continue to engage more alternative renderings of the meaning of loss, masochism, and passivity.

All in all, this is a book about alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends. It is a book about failing well, failing often, and learning, in the words of Samuel Beckett, how to fail better. Indeed the whole notion of failure as a practice was introduced to me by the legendary lesbian performance group LTTR. In 2004 they asked me to participate in two events, one in Los Angeles and one in New York, called “Practice More Failure,” which brought together queer and feminist thinkers and performers to inhabit, act out, and circulate new meanings of failure. Chapter 3, “The Queer Art of Failure,” began as my presentation for this event, and I remain grateful to LTTR for shoving me down the dark path of failure and its follies. That event reminded me that some of the most important intellectual leaps take place independently of university training or in its aftermath or as a detour around and away from the lessons that disciplined thinking metes out. It reminded me to take more chances, more risks in thinking, to turn away from the quarrels that seem so important to the discipline and to engage the ideas that circulate widely in other communities. To that end I hope this book is readable by and accessible to a wider audience even if some nonacademic readers find my formulations too convoluted and some academics find my arguments too obvious. There is no happy medium between academic and popular audiences, but I hope my many examples of failure provide a map for the murky, dark, and dangerous terrains of failure we are about to explore.

By exploring and mapping, I also mean detouring and getting lost. We might do well to heed the motto of yet another peppily alternative DreamWorks film, *Madagascar*: “Get lost, stay lost!” In the sequel, *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* (whose byline is “Still lost!”), the zoo escapees from *Madagascar 1*—Marty the zebra, Melman the giraffe, Gloria the hippo, and Alex the lion—try to get home to New York with the help of some crazed penguins and a loopy lemur. Why the animals want to get back to captivity is only the first of many existential questions raised by and smartly not answered by the film. (Why the lemur wants to throw Melman into the volcano is

another, but we will leave that one alone too.) At any rate, the zoo animals head home in a plane that, since it is piloted by penguins, predictably crashes. The crash landing places the animals back in “Africa,” where they are reunited with their prides and herds and strikes in the “wild.” What could have been a deeply annoying parable about family and sameness and nature becomes a whacky shaggy lion tale about collectivity, species diversity, theatricality, and the discomfort of home. Perversely it is also an allegorical take on antidisiplinary life in the university: while some of us who have escaped our cages may start looking for ways back into the zoo, others may try to rebuild a sanctuary in the wild, and a few fugitive types will actually insist on staying lost. Speaking personally, I didn’t even manage to pass my university entrance exams, as my aged father recently reminded me, and I am still trying hard to master the art of staying lost. On behalf of such a detour around “proper” knowledge, each chapter that follows will lose its way in the territories of failure, forgetfulness, stupidity, and negation. We will wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which, to return to the battered vw van of Little Miss Sunshine, no one gets left behind.