AFTERWORD.

FAILURE: A DWELLING

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This will be a bit of a wandering reflection.

A few nights ago, having some trouble falling asleep, I reached for my phone. Usually, when I can't sleep—a rare and therefore all the more bothersome event—it's because I can't quiet my mind. My word for it is spiraling. Maybe you know this feeling. My therapist tells me when I am spiraling, I should write down whatever it is that my brain won't let go of.

"Let it go."

She says this will calm my mind by reassuring me that my thoughts will be waiting there for me when I need them.

I love my therapist, but the first time she suggested this, it sounded so stupid to me—and something about my spiraling is that often I have very good ideas and insights mixed in with all the annoying worry—and so for the years we have been together I have not taken this advice for fear, I suppose, of cutting off the opportunity to have an idea. But a few nights ago, having some trouble falling asleep, spiraling, I reached for my phone. I thumbed open the Notes app and wrote:

> All the ways I feel inadequate
> Weird to be the most cited person in a book
> Failing my students
> Systems failing me
> Everything everywhere all at once
> Push more unsettled discomfort
> It will be fine

A summary of the spiral, notes toward a writing project that has been weighing on me for months. I fell asleep.

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I am, I must admit, a bit uneasy about the title of this volume, which could be read as reifying the success/failure binary that most work on failure in our field

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has been, in one way or another, trying to deconstruct. Still, as I reflect upon the chapters within, upon the range of other engagements with failure over the last decade, and maybe especially upon my own work on this subject—I get it. There would simply not be a market for this book if deconstructing the binary were as simple as turning one's attitudes 180 degrees. It is the nature of the dominant narrative to dominate, and the success/failure binary is wholly baked into our profession, our society, our economy, our self-concepts. If anything, this volume is a testament to just how difficult it is to break out of this model for reasoning, and I admire the work these authors have done to expand and complicate our relationship with the binary: as a dyad and with each individual term.

In an interview with Shane Wood for *Pedagogue*, describing the way my thinking on failure has changed over the last decade, I said, "I'm less committed to [failure] as a concept that . . . is portable" (Wood, 2022). The more time I spend with the idea of failure, the more I sense that the deep *meaning* of this term is too context-specific and contingent to hold scholarly significance. It both sticks and slips. Or as Karen Tellez-Trujillo (this volume) puts it in her chapter: "As a commonplace, failure means something different to everyone and each relationship with failure has developed in a unique way . . . It is not uncommon to use terms without thinking about what they mean, and failure is among these commonplaces." At the same time—maybe because of all this sticking and slipping—there is something shimmery here. Alluring. People *want* failure *to mean*, to carry meaning, for the same reason I wanted failure to mean when I first began writing about it: We want to feel that our struggle is not a waste. That our bad feelings are not indulgent or vain or shameful or weak. The idea of failure helps to hold this, and us. If we can name it, we can know it, find community in it.

The range represented by the chapters in this volume underscores my hunch. All of us—self included—use this word as if its meaning is shared, yet, *except for its relational opposition to success* (a fixed narrative that supersedes any individual's consent to be shaped by it), there is no unifying meaning for "failure" here, though there is a great deal of difficulty, struggle, challenge, fuckups. Failing, and being failed (by others, by processes, by systems, by chance), the term offers a fleeting coherence. I make this observation not as critique but as evidence toward a thesis that failure's *failure to be known* is its singular most compelling and worthwhile characteristic.

If there is something we *can know* about failure, however, Paul Cook's opening chapter (this volume) represents, in my judgment, the most comprehensive review of failure's systemic meaning that has been written. His genealogy quite effectively glosses all the ways failure has come to have its associations—with capital, with morality, with social position and power, and with the myth of

individual striving that pulses beneath it all. Still, it tells us mostly about failure in the abstract. Fitting, then, that the next two chapters that round out part one stage what I read as a dialogic of the most closely held perspectives on failure *as we live it*, revealing in the process one of its more frustrating limitations: its terministic emptiness. Or maybe radioactivity is a better metaphor? An atom is considered radioactive when it has an excess of charged material, rendering it unstable and prone to chaotic behavior. Such atoms seek stability, and they find it either by throwing off charged material or bonding with a more stable element. Elsewhere, I have written that we may have to accept that failure, as a term, is perpetually "unsettled" (Carr, 2024). On its own, it refuses to be stilled. To talk about failure in a critical way, by which I mean to hold it still long enough to make meaning of it, we end up reaching for other ideas and concepts, more stable elements.

In one such example of this phenomenon, Teagarden, Mando, and Commer (this volume) graft failure onto "intellectual risk," emphasizing or promoting a meaning of failure that I would characterize as fundamentally optimistic, inasmuch as "risk" is commonly understood as leading to rewards that are "worth it," i.e., "no risk/no reward." "Intellectual risk" is the optimistic promise upon which the university, as an institution—and by extension, its disciplines—has built itself, and so it makes perfect sense to me that readers, teachers, and students would find this terminology attractive.[1] And while I agree with the authors' assertion that "writing instructors would be better served foregrounding intellectual risk instead of failure" (Teagarden et al., this volume), my agreement hinges on an understanding of "failure" as antithetical to optimism: Yes, writing instructors *would be* better served foregrounding optimistic frames for learning.

As such, I *disagree* with their assessment that a pedagogy oriented around intellectual risk "is a way of pursuing the same goals and enacting the same values" as a pedagogy that adopts "failure" as its lodestar. Quite the contrary: Failure does not *feel good*. It does not promise.[2] Rather, we might say failure threatens. Therefore, the values and goals of one cannot possibly be evident in the other.

Why does this catch my eye? It's not the job of an afterword to dissect the preceding pages. But Teagarden et al.'s atomic maneuvering (if I may be allowed to invoke the above metaphor one last time) serves as a standout example of the ways failure begs to be made stable. It's a fascinating illustration to me because

1 In fact, if I had to summarize my own pedagogical orientations in a few key phrases, I am certain this would land in the top few; despite being a champion for failure in my scholarly vita, I almost never bring it to the foreground with students.

2 Though, the work on failure that Teagarden et al. reference in building their case (my own 2013 "In Support of Failure") does advance a problematic "pedagogical mandate of happiness" as Johnson and Sheehan (2020) rightly critiqued.

my interest in failure has always been about bad and unstable feelings, as this chapter (and another they cite, Johnson and Sheehan's [2020] work in *Failure Pedagogies*) fairly and astutely observes, and trying to write about failure *qua* failure has meant trying to sit with and advance, yes, an "epideictic" idea of failure that calls for "living in" those bad feelings (Teagarden et al., this volume), missed goals. I have wrestled with the implications of that interest elsewhere (Carr, 2024), and truth be told, I have had a change of perspective about the ethics of conscripting students into those bad feelings, no matter how well I think I can control it, and regardless of my "good intentions." My interest in "living in" the bad feelings of failure persists, but let's say, on an individual opt-in basis. This requires, I think, a rigorous commitment to self-understanding, among other emotional and material supports. And so, while the notion of intellectual risk is indeed attractive, I wonder if we are still talking about failure at all. I raise this not to undermine the authors, whose work on this idea is extensive and useful, but rather to foreground a question that, for me, lies at the heart of this book (and at the heart of my own scholarly commitments): What are the boundaries of failure? And what is its use to us?

While Teagarden et al. offer a clever pathway for *redirecting* students' fears of failure toward potentially more optimistic outcomes, Wood's chapter (this volume) describing ways to help teachers and students excavate what "feels like" failure strikes me as a second exceptionally savvy way of sidestepping failure's refusal to be known. In asking what failure "feels like," Wood confronts failure's subjectivity head-on without sacrificing the term's use-value altogether. It is an approach that opens a door to failure-as-gathering-place, which others in this volume similarly exemplify. Failure-as-gathering-place is a kind of eternal unknown: where we hold the things we don't understand, where we gently press on the bruise of rejection, still tender in spite of the passage of time.

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This must be my fourth or fifth draft. I keep stalling out here. There are more paragraphs on the next page, but I'm not sure if I want them or how to get there if I do. On my browser right now, I have another tab open with a doc of the lines and paragraphs I've already cut, ideas that don't seem germane (though what isn't germane to failure?). I keep trying to cut the list of worries from the opening, now several months old, but for some reason, I keep coming back to it. That I have it at all—that I haven't left-swiped it out of the Notes app, that I'm interrupting my line of thought right at this moment to reveal something of the backstory of this draft—may be an illustration of what Duffy describes in his chapter (this volume) as another kind of *dwelling place* of failure: the tattered folders in the office, or else the digital files in the ever-present cloud, each
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holding false starts and abandoned or otherwise unfinished writing, "material evidence of labor I don't want lost." Surely all of us gather here, in these places, not *together* together, but in community around the proof of our existence, of our creativity, of our struggle?

Last spring, a year ago as of the time of this writing, I was the chair of a committee charged with strengthening and promoting the welfare of the faculty when the president of the college initiated a full review of all academic programs, with the implied goal of rank-ordering them on hastily derived, bullshit metrics in order to identify areas of consolidation or elimination. Like every small college without a billion-dollar endowment, the consequences of neoliberal fetishism and failure of imagination had come to roost in our balance sheet, though, of course, we can't say that out loud because it would become a public relations nightmare.

In my role as committee chair, I called a faculty forum; I wrote an open letter summarizing the forum; with my committee members, I weighed the risks of refusing to go along with the directive (leaving the president and Board to own the fallout) against the possibility of proceeding apace (local control); I made resolute remarks at multiple faculty meetings; I privately sought outside advice on what kind of maneuvers a faculty body without the protection of a union might make against a hostile administration; I stopped sleeping and lost my appetite.

How does one uphold their charge to promote the welfare of the faculty in this instance? What use are strongly worded statements and memos against a president and Board of Trustees trying to find many millions of dollars in the cushions of sagging office couches? I did all of the right things procedurally, and it didn't make a difference.

There's more, summed up perhaps as an inadequacy of presence, a failure of attention. This year, I cannot seem to stay on top of student work despite optimizing my pedagogy to my understanding of what I can and can't do. In a job that feels made increasingly intolerable by the consequences of austerity, being accountable to my students feels like the most important use for my energy, and I'm failing at that all of the time. I have less patience with myself.

I keep thinking about The Daniels' 2022 breakout film *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, which follows Michelle Yeoh's Evelyn Wang chasing the big baddie Jobu Tupaki, alter-ego of her daughter Joy Wang (played by Stephanie Hsu) across multiple timelines in a quest to save the universe (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022). To do so, Evelyn must learn to "verse jump" by performing the least likely action imaginable (for example, chewing used gum, giving oneself intentional papercuts) in order to temporarily access some of the more useful skills possessed by other, more successful Evelyns across the timelines: a chef, a movie star, a martial arts master, a rock, a person who never emigrated from China.

Early in the film, it is revealed that *this version* of Evelyn—the one with a failing laundromat and resentment-ridden marriage—is the least successful of all the Evelyns. In other words, she is the failingest Evelyn who ever failed. And it is for precisely this reason that Fail Evelyn is the only one who can save the universe: "She is the least likely, and therefore the one that is perfect. The least likely actions are . . . what allows her to access the skills from the other Evelyns" (Nguyen, 2022). The film is reminiscent, in some ways, of Halberstam's (2011) landmark work on queer failure, which turns to myriad artifacts of "low culture" (animated children's films, avant-garde art) to "think about ways of being and knowing that stand outside of conventional understandings of success" (p. 2). Evelyn has to consistently commit to the unlikeliest actions in direct conflict with what actions may benefit her personally in order to save the world. It is not a critique of established norms so much as a chaotic refusal to engage them.

We may see a similar dynamic at work in the recent demonstrations in support of Palestinian lives by college students across the US and globe, maybe most prominently (as of the time of this writing) by the students at Columbia University, whose ongoing demonstration was finally answered by President Minouche Shafik authorizing the New York Police Department to storm the campus in riot gear. In this case, we have a group of students refusing to ignore their university's complicity (via its investment portfolio) in genocide—a kind of failure of compliance—which provokes a response that, in prioritizing political and capital interests over human rights, reveals yet another failure: the failure of the university to uphold the myth of its mission. Yet, it was a catalyzing moment. Rather than quell dissent, the Columbia University demonstration and raid inspired dozens, perhaps hundreds, of encampments established in solidarity with the cause of Palestinian civilians. A distributed community of refusal.

Weeks ago, a year after my committee's maneuvering failed to alter the decisions that seemed to be preordained, the new committee found a pathway had been cleared to escalate the faculty's concerns. After the previous motions had been ineffective, the faculty have found solidarity and community in other methods of noncompliance, some more organized (outreach to the Board) than others (subversion of performance review documentation).[3]

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Failure as gathering place, failure as dwelling place: This heuristic might comfortably hold perspectives from Driscoll (this volume), Laura Decker (this volume), and Donelson & Cox (this volume). In reflecting on their experiences

3 I am sorry to be cryptic, but I hope readers can forgive me.
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revising their graduate exams, the latter co-authors call for a "community-oriented approach to failure" to return to when "sometimes, the only answer is to sit with . . . the discomfort . . . [and] bear witness, rather than needing to work to resolve our embodied feelings of despair around rejection-as-failure" (Donelson & Cox, this volume). Isn't this what Driscoll (this volume) models with her CV of Failure? Maybe sharing this document with students doesn't capture the contemporaneous bad feelings of each ungotten grant, each revise & resubmit, but surely there is no shortage of vulnerability and risk here, and it does make plain for junior scholars the knotted terrain of achievement. Laura Decker (this volume), likewise, offers a way of "doing" failure that builds community, repairing one's own rejections and missed opportunities by "planting seeds" in others' gardens. In reading, I was reminded of the legacy of the late Bill Hart-Davidson, who publicly committed to nominating at least one colleague for recognition or award every month. Imagine this ethic in the context of one's own failures: For every gut-churning fuckup, take a turn in the rejection garden, water someone's tomatoes, fertilize the blueberries. This is not unlike what Mario D'Agostino (this volume) takes away from his own unnecessarily strenuous trek through his dissertation process: correcting those harms by refusing to pass them along to his own students, instead prioritizing in himself an ethic of transparent mentorship and communication.

Might this volume—chock full of stories of failure, however, that feels and means to each individual author—be understood as a kind of dwelling for failure, a rejection garden, an offering of community?

I am not sure whether I have said anything interesting here. This is the thing about failure: Its unknowability forces, for me anyway, a certain kind of hesitation in thought. Am I getting it "right?" What would that even mean? I am trying not to worry about it. I am trying to *take a risk*. I am trying to tell you that for me, failure *feels like* not knowing, but not knowing also feels like the only place I want to be, with other not-knowers, spiraling together and taking notes. It feels bad, and it feels fine. All of it, all at once.

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