CHAPTER 1.

A GENEALOGY OF FAILURE

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Failure is a compelling paradox.

On the one hand, few of life's vicissitudes are more familiar to us than failure: the bitter sting of failed careers, the end of cherished relationships, ego-draining professional or academic failures, the dramatized downfalls that fill popular fiction, the quotidian (and always untimely) failures of digital devices, cars, and other appliances. And who can deny the ultimate and unavoidable failures of our own human, all-too-human bodies?

There are also the macro-failures we share in a democratic society like the United States: our mostly bungled response to the COVID-19 pandemic, our repeated failure to do much of anything about mass shootings, our general inability to meaningfully address the existential threat of climate change in policy proposals, and—some would say—the encroaching failure of liberal democracy itself (Luce, 2018). Failures, large and small, are everywhere, all the time, just over the horizon.

And yet, for all of failure's lived ubiquity and closeness, how well do we really understand it?

Taking a broad historical view of the concept of failure from the *arete* of the ancient Greeks (Hawhee, 2004) to the earliest Medieval universities with their agonistic oral disputations (Clark, 2006) to the present era of hyper-anxiety surrounding college admissions (Cornwall, 2022)—complete with celebrity cheating scandals! (Medina et al., 2019)—this chapter attempts to map the history, present, and future of failure as it intersects with both neoliberal rationality and formal education. My primary goal is to illuminate how failure "works" alongside both the development of capitalism and the rise of the university as a significant social institution.

In what follows, I provide an eclectic, genealogical account of failure's discontinuities and mutations over time, especially as they pertain to how we understand success and failure, winning and losing, and competition. For the ancient Greeks, failure and victory alike could be found in the contestive, identity-forming struggle of the *agon*, whether in wrestling or in oratorical competition or on the field of battle. In the Middle Ages, oral disputation in the early university retained much of this agonism but shifted its focus from identity construction to

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ritualized questioning and the maintenance of canonical knowledge (Connors, 1997). To fail academically in the context of a medieval university was to deviate from the accepted, sacred knowledge of the canon.

But these were understandings of failure that played mostly on the surface of things. In the modern era, failure has burrowed deep into our psyches, becoming an internal, individualized experience enmeshed in what Brown (2015) calls the "sophisticated common sense" logic of neoliberalism (p. 35). With its celebration of the individual-as-entrepreneur and the extension of market rationality to all facets of existence, neoliberal rationality has intensified into a kind of hardened, common-sense dogma for individuals in late capitalism, perhaps especially in the era of ubiquitous digital connectivity and social media, even as its viability as a set of economic policy assumptions and prescriptions has waned since the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 (Sitaraman, 2019).

I conclude by sketching a vision for an academy in which success and failure have been reframed not around *winning* but around mutual support, collective action, and community. Here, I follow most closely the work of researchers like Feigenbaum (2021) and Kapur (2015), whose work on generative failure holds great promise for informing how we as educators might rethink our approaches to teaching and learning, even as we advocate for the kinds of large-scale structural changes that would ultimately be necessary to cultivate classrooms and workplaces where failure is truly accepted as both productive and part of the growth process. How might these binary terms—failure and success, losing and winning—so slippery in their familiarity and so limiting in their shaping of both private and public life, be refocused or even unbundled to encompass a commitment to social justice, equity, collective action, and advocacy?

This chapter, ultimately, is about more than grappling with the simplistic binary of success/failure. It is about more than even just our impoverished vocabulary for understanding success and failure. It is about power. How might power be (re)distributed, (re)thought, and/or (re)used for the collective good of the greatest number of people? How might (re)thinking our obsessions with failure (and success), with winning (and losing), and with competition and scarcity help us get there? How might a different understanding of failure—one informed by a genealogical reading of failure that defamiliarizes failure and reads against the grain of "official" histories (i.e., the rise of the bourgeois subject)—inform our present moment?

Seriously, what other choice do we have?

FEAR OF FAILING WITHOUT A NET

Neither the ubiquity nor proximity of failure provides any guarantee that we actually understand it, much less talk about it. The rise of academic Failure

Studies over the course of the last decade or so is an acknowledgment of this fact, as well as an earnest attempt by scholars and researchers from a variety of disciplines to draw failure out of its secret places, as it were, and into the open, so that it can be better analyzed and understood.[1] Carr and Micciche (2020b), writing in the introduction to their important edited collection *Failure Pedagogies: Learning and Unlearning What It Means to Fail*, identify the "growing, collective obsession with failure" in both academic and public discourse as a "trend [that] makes concrete the relationship between failure and success that has long played a role in bootstraps ideologies pervasive within American progress narratives" (p. 1). Like the sweet smell of success, failure, too, is ever-present, humming along in the background, always lurking in the recesses of our thoughts, occasionally muscling its way into the foreground of the cerebral cortex. It's telling and instructive that Carr and Micciche (2020b), borrowing a metaphor from Ahmed (2017), refer to failure as a "sweaty concept" (p. 2). Sweaty concepts are those that emerge from lived experiences and bear the marks—the sweat and discomfort—of their toil, refusing to hide the fact that they are the products of laboring bodies, bodies that must be seen, bodies "that are unsettled by the labor of dealing with systemic failures" (Carr & Micciche, 2020b, p. 2). A sweaty concept "shows the labor involved in its making," resisting the "reassuring takeaways" and uplifting bromides that we've been conditioned to trot out in polite company, perhaps especially in academic discourse (Carr & Micciche, 2020b, p. 2).

It's probably true that many of us avoid candidly discussing our own failures, at least openly or publicly, and then only if they can be reframed in a way that somehow enhances our identity, diversifies our personal "stock portfolio" of rich and formative experiences, or provides curious onlookers with a comforting uplift. Failures are generally only safe for public consumption if they can be recast as hard-earned comebacks, used to showcase an entrepreneurial spirit, or offered up as fodder for an appropriately cheery Instagram story, perhaps extolling the virtues of "never giving up" or "believing in yourself." Failure, in other words,

1 Several articles and book-length studies in a variety of disciplines, from rhetoric and composition studies to history to film and media studies, have emerged in the last decade that attempt to understand failure, several of which are examined in greater detail in this chapter (Appadurai & Alexander, 2020; Burger, 2012; Carr, 2013; Carr, 2017; Carr & Micciche, 2020a; Feigenbaum, 2021; Rickly, 2017; Sandage, 2005; Smith, 2010). An interesting corollary to the rise of what some have dubbed "Failure Studies" is "Quit Lit," a genre characterized by academics writing about their experiences leaving academia. It is worth noting that both Failure Studies and Quit Lit have emerged as recognizable genres of academic and public discourse in the last two decades, with a noticeable uptick after the global financial crisis of 2007-2008.

though everywhere and always imposing itself on lived experience, can be a difficult concept to get at precisely because it is so familiar. As the notion of failure as a sweaty concept suggests, it's rare that we can just sit with failure, just *let it be*, without making it into something else: a lesson, a warning, a tactic. There is a logic behind this; it is the logic of neoliberalism and human capital.

In global capitalism—or more vividly, in what Odell (2019) pointedly calls our "blasted landscape of neoliberal determinism"—failure, like everything else, takes on an inescapably economic character (p. xii). The modern subject, conditioned by economic scarcity and a kind of gnawing, tenuous (or "sweaty") precarity, is indelibly shaped by the always-on, dehumanizing entrepreneurialization of human activity under neoliberalism. We are always and everywhere prepared, poised, and presented as market actors—"*homo oeconomicus*," following Foucault (1979/2003) in his lectures on biopolitics from the late 1970s. This means that what "counts" as success (and failure), as winning (and losing) now figures primarily—if not exclusively—within a hyper-competitive market-driven economic matrix of calculations, one in which the individual striver is constrained not only by the stigma associated with failure but also with the tangibly real possibility of total economic and material loss.[2]

The fact is that, for many people, due in large part to the United States' notoriously lousy social safety net (Aaron, 2020), these days, second chances are about as rare as a low-interest loan for a bad credit borrower. In fact, much of the current precarity in our society can be directly traced to the hollowing out of the social safety net in the United States and other developed nations over the last fifty years, coupled with the inherent instability of global financial capitalism and ubiquitous bootstraps sermons about bettering oneself through

2 As Brown (2015) notes, this is not to say that all aspects of life have been monetized or marketized under neoliberal rationality but that the *model* of the market has colonized all domains of life, even in contexts where money or markets are not explicitly involved (pp. 33-35). People on dating apps often approach their activities there as investors or entrepreneurs, diversifying their "dating portfolios" to net as many connections (or matches) as possible; similarly, parents obsess over school rankings and placement rates at K-12 schools and elite colleges. Neither of these examples is explicitly monetary in that the immediate goal is to generate wealth. Rather, they suggest how people are construed as market actors in nearly all facets of life, which underpins the ever-present fear of fiscal and material failure that characterizes contemporary existence. As far back as the 1980s, Ehrenreich (1989) diagnosed this anxiety as the American middle class's "fear of falling." More recently, Brown (2015) writes: "*Homo oeconomicus* as human capital is concerned with enhancing its portfolio value in all domains of its life, an activity undertaken through practices of self-investment and attracting investors. Whether through social media 'followers,' 'likes,' and 'retweets,' through ranking and ratings for every activity and domain, or through more directly monetized practices, the pursuit of education, training, leisure, reproduction, consumption, and more are increasingly configured as strategic decisions and practices related to enhancing the self's future value" (pp. 33-34; original emphasis).

hard work and savvy self-presentation.[3] These and other forces have conspired to create a situation where economic ruin is an ever-present threat from which none of us—even the moderately well-off—are ever truly immune. Ehrenreich (1989) refers to this as the uniquely middle-class "fear of falling." The majority of working Americans are a single paycheck away from financial hardship or ruin according to a study by the nonpartisan research organization NORC at the University of Chicago (Passy, 2019). Not surprisingly, BIPOC are among the most economically vulnerable Americans: "Right now the net wealth of a typical Black family in America is around one-tenth that of a white family" (Mineo, 2021).

Moreover, under the contemporary regime of neoliberal rationality, where "heretofore noneconomic domains, activities, and subjects" are transformed into economic calculations, and everyone is obsessed with "enhancing [their] portfolio value in all domains of . . . life," to fail economically is, in some rather obvious respects, to fail ultimately and decisively (Brown, 2015, pp. 31-32).[4] As Nealon (2008) pointedly puts it, life under 21st-century neoliberalism features the constant and "mundane reminder that many *successful* people in wealthy countries are still only a couple of paychecks or a serious illness away from the street" (p. 54; emphasis added).

Like precarious workers at all levels of society and industry (Sagan, 2016), is it any wonder that today's college students are afraid to take risks with their learning, majors, and coursework? The problem is not that today's students are dull or uninspired, or even necessarily that they have been shell-shocked by the pandemic (McMurtrie, 2022), but that they are deathly afraid to fail, which in the current environment of precarity can lead to increased debt and extreme economic hardship, especially for low-income students. Reporting on a recently concluded, large-scale study of over 1,000 students on ten campuses, Fischman & Gardner (2022) describe students' relationship with learning and schooling as a transactional one:

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3 Add to this volatile mix the fact that a college degree, which for decades has proven to be one of the most durable pathways to the middle class in the US, keeps going up in price. As we will see in a later section, elite academic institutions can pretty well charge what they want, with some parents infamously paying hundreds of thousands of dollars to get their children in "through the side door," which was Rick Singer's term for bribing coaches, admissions officers, and other university representatives to shepherd the children of elites into top universities like Stanford and the University of Southern California (Thomason et al., 2020).

4 My examination of contemporary failure in this chapter is obviously and unapologetically U.S.-centric, especially in its examples and in the broad contours of its main arguments. While I do make several attempts to show how neoliberalism shapes subjectivity and failure in a global context, the majority of my examination is focused firmly on the U.S. context for reasons that I hope will become clear over the course of this chapter.

> We found that nearly half of [students] miss the point of college. They don't see value in what they are learning, nor do they understand why they take classes in different fields or read books that do not seem directly related to their major. They approach college with a "transactional" view—their overarching goal is to build a resumé with stellar grades, which they believe will help them secure a job post-college. Many see nothing wrong with using any means necessary to achieve the desired resumé, and most acknowledge that cheating is prevalent on campus. In short, they are more concerned with the pursuit of earning than the process of learning.

Similarly, Davidson (2017/2022), in a description that will be familiar to anyone who has been in a college classroom in the last decade or so, describes how students are "burdened by debt" and therefore "narrow their choices":

> They do not explore and test options for a productive potential career that intersects with their passions and interests. Instead, the financial strain of tuition debt turns college from an aspiration for a better future, alive with possibility, into a cynical enterprise, a union card, as people used to say, on the way to the best-paying job they can wrangle, *whether they like it or not*. (p. 166; emphasis added)

As a way to remedy this situation, educators have sought to lower the stakes of failure by changing the narrative and showing students that failure is a part of the process of growth and learning. Many instructors experiment with labor-based grading contracts, course menus, low-stakes assignments, and other curricular mechanisms to change the structure of their classes in ways that encourage risk-taking and experimentation. But as Feigenbaum (2021) notes, "these efforts do not challenge the ideology of hypercompetitive individualism; in other words, lowering the stakes of failure is not the same as *de-stigmatizing* failure" (22; original emphasis). Hallmark (2018) argues that the "Failure is OK" narrative is damaging to low-income and first-generation college students, many of whom are economically vulnerable and, realistically, unable to fail. Scholarships can be lost, utilities can be disconnected, family members can suffer. For the most vulnerable among us, failure can have very real material consequences that are difficult or even impossible to undo. Telling these students that "Failure is essential to success," while perhaps true on some level and for some (privileged) students, conveniently ignores the reality of privilege and rampant inequality in American society while bracketing the material consequences

of failure in a "precarious meritocracy" like the US (Feigenbaum, 2021, p. 18). "Precarious meritocracy" names the neoliberal ideology that "portrays academic and professional success as a matter of personal accountability rather than an outcome engendered by systemic forces" (Feigenbaum, 2021, pp. 18-19).

Our own historically specific (and quite recent) understanding of failure has limited our collective capacity to imagine other forms of success, or even happiness, particularly as it pertains to the relationship between education and material achievement. At the same time, as Duina (2011) convincingly argues in a book-length exploration of the American obsession with winning, "The power and prevalence in American society of the language of winning and losing means that we do not engage in . . . self-discovery and that we settle, in turn, with an approach to life that is tiring and fails to fulfill us fully" (p. 202). Much of this lack of imagination can, I suggest, be chalked up to the aforementioned precarity and the lack of a robust social safety net that would enable greater risk-taking and make it possible for people to rise above the claustrophobic confines of neoliberalism's all-encompassing market logic and view themselves as more than merely human capital.

Within the paradigm of neoliberalism, it has become laughable to suggest alternative, collective forms of resistance to the ever-intensifying demands placed on students, workers, professionals, and others. Much of this has to do with the frailty of the human ego and the collective failure of our political imaginations. Much of it has to do with our impoverished vocabulary for articulating alternative conceptions of success and fulfillment outside the narrow confines of what actor Charlie Sheen so memorably encapsulated over a decade ago (*"winning!"*). The beauty of the human animal and the experience of life itself—our originality, our uniqueness, our many-splendored talents and higher natures—are swallowed up and rendered insignificant and speck-like when reckoned against the relentless machinery of global capitalism. Truly, winning is everything because we literally can't imagine anything else more valuable:

> Neoliberalism retracts this "beyond" and eschews this "higher nature":
>
> > the normative reign of *homo oeconomicus* in every sphere means that there are no motivations, drives, or aspirations apart from economic ones, that there is nothing to being human apart from "mere life." Neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity: not only with its machinery of compulsory commodification and profit-driven expansion, but by its form of valuation. (Brown, 2015, p. 44; original emphasis)

What if people truly had the space to fail? What if there were alternatives to success and winning that didn't automatically and inexorably lead to failure? What if failure could be refigured as both a necessity and a prerequisite for not only success but also for the ethical, sane practice of life itself?

What if there were more to life than "*#winning!*"?

WHAT IS FAILURE? WINNERS, LOSERS, & DIFFERENTIATION

Celebrities, politicians, and other public figures are as susceptible to failure as the rest of us, though when they fail it is quite often in a more spectacular fashion. Such is the nature of modern celebrity. In the summer of 2022, the American public gleefully picked apart the personal lives Johnny Depp and Amber Heard in daily dispatches from the courtroom (Roberts, 2022). With each fresh failure revealed through tearful testimony, we get another taste of the bittersweet fruit of *schadenfreude*.

For some lucky ones, failure even functions as a prerequisite for a mid-career revival or future success. Robert Downey, Jr. managed to reinvent himself from a coked-out has-been twenty years ago to a coveted spot atop the Marvel Pantheon. Michael Jordan's now-mythical failure to make the varsity team in high school—a story retold so often it has become woven into the fabric of the modern sports ethos—preceded his inexorable rise to basketball superstardom. Even Oprah Winfrey was fired from her first on-air gig as an evening news anchor (Zurawick, 2011), later becoming the world's most beloved talk show host and baroness of a billion-dollar media empire.

A key feature of this kind of failure is that it must be followed by a convincing narrative of self-overcoming and triumph through perseverance, like the gangly Abraham Lincoln and his undisputed place of honor in American political mythology. We can celebrate the failure(s) of those who ultimately go on to win and win big. There are others: Winona Ryder (from shoplifting strange things to reinventing herself in the Netflix hit *Stranger Things*), Britney Spears, Neil Patrick Harris, Michael Keaton, Eliot Spitzer, and Mark Sanford, just to name a few. Failure *of a certain kind* can almost always be forgiven and even forgotten with enough subsequent wins or even a single really big win.[5]

Duina (2011) calls them the "turnaround victors" (p. 101), a class of winners who lose initially, perhaps even losing consistently for a long time, as in the case of

5 This is a key distinction. Some failures, such as moral failings and some criminal activity, cannot be so easily forgiven, if forgiven at all. It seems highly unlikely, for instance, that Harvey Weinstein is poised for a late-career comeback, to take one example among others. Then again, public opinion has softened a bit on Bill Cosby in recent years, so one never truly knows (Deodhar, 2022).

a Lincoln or a young Stephen King, only to turn it around and win big in the end. Hollywood loves winners like these, both in fiction and in real life, because they make for such good stories. Movie audiences adore narratives where the downtrodden hero overcomes all odds. Every March, fans of college hoops fall in love all over again with a mid-major Cinderella team that improbably survives to play in the Final Four. Other types of winners in Duina's (2011) useful taxonomy of winners and losers include the *consistent victors* (those who always win—boring!), the *selective winners* (those who only win once or twice but win in a spectacularly magnificent way, thus never having to prove their status as definitive winners again), and finally, the *relentless minds* (those who keep losing but whose "unfailing spirits and determination in the face of repeat failure at achieving the desired results" makes them heroes of perseverance and, thus, winners in the minds of many) (p. 105).

Turnaround winners need little elaboration. These are the stories that capture our imaginations and fill our myths and legends. They are the cherished chestnuts with which we send our children off to their slumbers; together these are the stories that fuel the American Dream. The ragtag soldiers of the Continental Army, being led by General George Washington, defeating the British Empire's war machine in the American Revolution. Ulysses S. Grant pulling himself up from a broken-down alcoholic on the Missouri plains to a great Civil War general and, ultimately, to President of the United States after the war. Rosa Parks triumphing over the forces of racism by refusing to take a seat at the back of the bus and sparking the kindling of the nascent Civil Rights movement.

Former NFL quarterback Tom Brady is perhaps the best and most widely recognizable contemporary example of a consistent winner. Brady never seemed capable of losing, even when by all rights he probably should have, such as when he led the New England Patriots to a thrilling come-from-behind victory over the Atlanta Falcons in Super Bowl LI in 2017. Down 28 to 3 midways through the third quarter, Brady rallied his squad to an unprecedented 34-28 overtime victory.[6] It remains the biggest comeback in Super Bowl history (Edmonds, 2022). Even "Deflategate," the cheating scandal whereby members of the Patriot's team and coaching staff were accused of deflating opponent's footballs, didn't let the air out of Brady's legacy as a consistent winner. On the other hand, relentless minds can be a bit more challenging to identify for reasons that we will examine below. The late actor Christopher Reeve is one example of a relentless mind-type of winner. As Duina (2011) describes it:

> Reeve was once Superman. An accident confined him to a wheelchair, paralyzed, from 1995 to 2004. He could have

6 Super Bowl LI (in February 2017) was the first and, at the time of this writing, only Super Bowl to be decided in overtime.

> resigned himself to a secluded, depressive life of inaction and self-pity. Instead, he famously chose to "go forward," to live his life to the fullest, and in the process, to work hard to help those who suffer from paralysis. His mentality was that of a winner and we, the audience watching and hearing, undoubtedly viewed him as such—definitely. (p. 105).

This fascinating sociological taxonomy of winners and losers merits some elaboration. First, it is important to realize that our love of winning (and winners) and our contempt for losing (and losers) is not as simple as it might appear. For Duina (2011), as both spectators and competitors, whether in sports, the game of life, or some other competitive arena, winning in and of itself is not terribly interesting. Instead, certain factors have to be present—there is no great pleasure in watching a chess master put a kindergartener in check or an NBA star dunk on a high school player. Duina (2011) suggests that four elements must be present for competition to trigger the "effort-reward mentality" (p. 17) so central to American society and our well-documented love of winning[7]: (1) the promise of differentiation among participants and competitors, (2) uncertainty as to who will win and the ever-present possibility of failure (i.e., the risk involved in competing in the first place), (3) the safe distance that the spectator has from the event itself (no real harm can come from losing, in other words), and (4) there must be an element of schadenfreude (Duina's term is "sadism") in which we take pleasure in watching others struggle and potentially fail (pp. 20-34). "We are interested in the thrill and subliminal satisfaction that come from contemplating but then avoiding danger, the subtle pleasures we feel from seeing others suffer, and above all, *our desire to be different and define our own identity*" (Duina, 2011, p. 33; emphasis added).

This last characteristic of competition—the potential to distinguish ourselves from others—is perhaps the most essential because it has to do with competition as a practice of identity formation. Duina (2011) devotes an entire chapter to the thrill we get from seeking competition in order to set ourselves apart from our competitors and from the mass of humanity. This thrill is not merely connected to the inherent pleasure of winning, however, but also to having one's worldview legitimated through competition and through the identity-forming process of distinction and differentiation. "A central function of competition—a key raison d'être—is to *make distinctions*, to differentiate among people in a

7 According to the World Values Survey (https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org), an ongoing international research project that attempts to map and rank the "social, political, economic, religious and cultural values of people in the world," Americans consistently score at the top of surveys that examine attitudes surrounding how much stock we place in winners and in the act of winning.

normative (better versus worse, good versus bad, right versus wrong) manner" (Duina, 2011, p. 192; original emphasis). In other words, we compete so that we may draw even more firmly the distinctions between ourselves and others. Failure is essential insofar as it brings to life those all-important distinctions between "us and them." (Cue the Pink Floyd.)

Internet culture is obsessed with failure, especially the meme-laden, pre-mainstream, and often mean-spirited internet culture of roughly 2006 to 2012 (Phillips & Milner, 2021; Douglas, 2014). So-called "fail content" was a staple of message boards and meme channels like 4chan, where users reveled in the embarrassment and almost ritual humiliation of others (also known as "lulz") through memes, images, and inside jokes. On today's internet, such fail content still exists on social media sites like X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok, but the specific architecture of the web during this earlier era lent itself more readily to such crudely sketched, "stickly" images. Douglas (2014) calls the dominant aesthetic of this era of internet culture "Internet Ugly," a sloppy, amateur-driven visual aesthetic borne out of rapid-fire posts and the necessity of quickly producing content in order to participate (and win lulz) on rapidly evolving threads. As Douglas (2014) goes on to explain, on 4chan, for example, a meme incubator largely responsible for launching Internet Ugly, there simply isn't enough time for users to produce polished content and images:

> Every thread is deleted within days or sometimes minutes; these constantly disappearing pages encourage rapid iteration of ideas. Users frequently make quick-and-dirty cut-and-paste photo manipulation as conversational volleys. But these images are rarely sophisticated—polish your reply in Photoshop for an hour and the thread might be done before you are. (p. 315)

Over time, the Internet Ugly aesthetic developed from a glitchy, barebones necessity to a look that users intentionally and proudly cultivated as the aesthetic hallmark of online "fail culture." Adopting the Internet Ugly aesthetic signaled that one had "learned how to internet" and thus was on the right side of the us/them divide that powered internet culture's "obsession with failure generally" (Phillips & Milner, 2021, p. 59). Growing out of the subculture of online trolls, the injunction to "learn how to internet" was code for knowing:

> how to replicate or at least decode the internet culture aesthetic, to respond to memes 'correctly,' and, most important of all, to not take anything too seriously. The result was to cleave the *us* who knew how to internet, who got the jokes, who responded to things with a troll face, from the *them* who didn't

> or couldn't or wouldn't. For internet people, feeling distressed online—because something someone saw something unseeable, because someone clicked a link they shouldn't have, because someone fed the trolls—was a self-inflicted wound. (Phillips & Milner, 2021, p. 58).

In wrapping up the discussion of competition as a ritualized way of articulating differences, Duina (2011) also notes how, in a curious (and faulty) logic of generalization, "we have a puzzling tendency to use the outcomes of competitive events to generalize about the competitors" (p. 48). Thus, successful athletes and coaches become CEOs and leaders of diverse organizations. We hang on Elon Musk's every tweet, extrapolating from his success at finally making an electric car people want to buy that he must also be a gourmet chef, an accomplished lover, an expert in education, or a social media tycoon (Dang & Roumeliotis, 2022). Warren Buffett, another of the world's richest men, is yet another example of someone who, because he has attained great success in one rather limited realm of human experience, we assume must be proficient in many others. Donald Trump, yet another rich man known mainly for cheating others in business and starring in his own reality TV show, is surely capable of leading the free world . . . right? Competition, in other words, is more than just a laboratory that produces winners and losers. Competition produces distinctions, identities, and legitimations. As we will see in the next section, this is hardly a new phenomenon, though contemporary neoliberalism has given it a few interesting twists.

AGONISM, *ARETE*, AND THE GREEKS

Ancient Greek culture provides a useful starting point for a discussion of the evolving nature of failure throughout history. In a masterful reading of the rich interplay between rhetoric and athletics in ancient Greece, Hawhee (2004) persuasively links the centrality of the agon, or the site(s) at which contests and victorious encounters took place, to the repeated production of *arete*, a word that is often simply translated in modern English as "virtue," but that more accurately refers to the complex interplay of forces that, for the Greeks, produced what we might think of as a repeated performance of virtuosity, skill, goodness (*agathos*), or glory (*kleos*).

Crucially, neither the agon nor the complex, repetitive production of arete were concerned solely or even primarily with victory, winning, or some other ends-driven outcome. To be sure, the promise of victory, of defeating one's enemy in battle or decisively pinning a wrestling opponent at the Olympic games, were a significant component of the agonistic encounter—encounters that, it

should be mentioned, extended beyond athletic competition and martial combat to encompass rhetorical displays of cunning oratory and sophistic competition. However, as Hawhee (2004) repeatedly warns, to stop there would be to miss the larger and more compelling picture; the Greek term *athlios* was the one more closely related to the "explicit struggle for a prize" as the result of outcome-driven competition (p. 15). Agon, by contrast, with its etymological connections to the *agora*, or marketplace, served Greek culture as "the ancient gathering place *par excellence*," emphasizing "the event of the gathering itself—the contestive encounter rather than strictly the division between opposing sides" (Hawhee, 2004, pp. 15-16; original emphasis).

At the same time, it is the lure of potential victory in the context of the agon that gathers, structures, and enables the production of arete, which it should be pointed out, held a great deal of value in Greek society, particularly for male citizens (Hawhee, 2004). For the Greeks, arete was the driving force of agonistic encounters, the corporeal and discursive display of virtuosity that could only be repeatedly enacted—never finally attained—in the occasional space of the agon, whether athletic competition, oratorical performance, or martial showdown on the field of battle. Hawhee (2004) is careful to note the central role of repetition to the entire arete-producing enterprise. Since, for the Greeks, one's identity was functionally inseparable from one's actions, the agon played an all-important role in providing the stage on which these repeated enactments of arete could unfold in real time. In other words, Hawhee (2004) writes, for "the ancient Athenians, identity did not precede actions, and this applied to all aspects of one's life. That is, one could not just 'be' manly (*andreios*) and all that entails without displaying 'manliness' through manly acts of courage" (Hawhee, 2004, p. 18). In short, arete, in both its bodily and discursive forms, was a function of one's virtuous actions that could only be repeatedly demonstrated, never finally "won" once and for all.

By late Roman antiquity, as literacy and writing began to gradually supplant oratorical display, the suppler, more complex Greek notion of arete ossified into something closer to our own morality-tinged notions of virtue. At the same time, the all-important linkages between repeated enactment and the production of arete also hardened into a form more recognizable to the modern reader. Quintilian, writing in his *Institutio Oratorio*, demarcates good and bad writing throughout this classic rhetorical treatise by referring to the supposedly gendered qualities of each. Carr (2013), drawing on Brody's (1993) feminist history of writing advice and instruction, *Manly Writing*, persuasively makes the case that by the time of Quintilian, "a speaker's inability to display adequate skills in oration and argument represented the possibility of the speaker's 'fail[ure] to be manly, the possibility for an invasion of the male writer by the feminine'" (para.

15). Writing/oratory that is deemed bad, sloppy, or ineffective is, according to Quintilian, associated with the feminine, whereas good writing/oratory is "virtuous, clean, strong, and manly" (Carr, 2013, para. 15). We will see this connection between failure and unmanliness return again in the coming millennia and in the following sections of this chapter. Further, Carr notes that Quintilian believed that "men whose rhetoric was sloppy, showy, or deemed not 'good' were accused of producing *effeminate* rhetoric, the province of the eunuch, an 'unnatural' deceptive being robbed of its reproductive organs" (Carr, 2013, para. 15). Here, perhaps for the first time in such a modern form, we can see most clearly the links between masculinity and failure.

FAILURE IN THE MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITY

The long and fabled history of the modern research university in the West is replete with agonistic, male-centered struggles as ritual sites of failure and success or victory, largely because of the centrality of oral disputation (and hence, rhetoric) to the traditional curriculum. As Connors (1997) notes unequivocally, women have been excluded from the history of the university, in large measure, because they were barred from being rhetoricians and, in many cases, from speaking publicly in the first place. He writes:

> From 500 B.C. through 1840, women were definitively excluded from all that rhetoric implied in its disciplinary form. Rhetoric was the most purely male intellectual discipline that has existed in Western culture. Women were not merely discouraged from learning it, but were actively and persistently denied access to it, and thus the discipline coalesced around male behavior patterns. (Connors, 1997, pp. 28-29)

In Clark's (2006) comprehensive history of the modern research university, agonism looms large in the medieval practice of disputation (*disputatio*), which Clark (2006) identifies as one of two essential academic activities that structured academic life and secured the fortunes (or failures) of would-be scholars, masters, and doctors from the Scholasticism of the medieval era up to the proto-disciplinary era of the nineteenth century (pp. 68-69). (It will surely come as no surprise to most readers that the university's other essential activity during the previous millennium was the lecture, in all its droning pomp and glory.) Both the disputation and the lecture were oral practices *par excellence*, and they retain much of this character even up to the present day. Indeed, the history of the modern research university cannot be told without repeated reference to the gradual triumph of literacy over orality, or as Clark (2006) puts it, "the

hegemony of the visible and legible over the oral" (p. 68). This gradual shift, of course, ties the evolution of the modern research university to the crucial distinction between orality and literacy that has shaped—at least according to some scholars and theorists—the last 2,000+ years of human knowledge and intellectual development (Ong, 1982/2002).

In the late Roman Code of Justinian (*Codex Justinianus*), which dates back to the mid-sixth century CE, the architects of the medieval university found justification for their argument that Roman law bestowed upon scholars the same privileges as crowned athletes. As Clark (2006) notes, the jurists Bartolus and Baldus "could easily liken academic training to athletic competition in imperial Rome because medieval disputation resembled a joust" (p. 74). In its earliest instantiations, the medieval disputation was a semi-ritualized display of oral dominance, one that was quite often cast in martial terms. As Clark (2006) notes, "a rhetoric and theater of warfare, combat, trial, and joust have been central to scholastic and academic practices since the twelfth century" (p. 75). Like the practice of law in medieval Europe, the practice of disputation in the early university was more concerned with ritualized displays of power, force, authority, and strength than with either the discovery of facts or the disinterested pursuit of original knowledge for its own sake. These concerns would come much later. But the disputation was central to academic life and career advancement; its basic tenets have survived to this day in the form of oral exams and the would-be doctoral candidate's final, ostensibly public, dissertation defense.

The disputation, in its most general form, resembled a courtroom, which only served to heighten its agonistic, "joust-like" qualities. There was the presider (*praeses*) or "judge," the respondent (*respondens*) or "defense," and the opponents (*opponentes*) or "plaintiff" (Clark, 2006, p. 76). The focus was on the form of the proceedings more so than on the content of the arguments. In the public disputation, the general public, as well as key university figures, academic officers, and even local nobility, could perform the role of the opponent; the presider was a member of the faculty, usually a master or doctor, who took his place at the *cathedra*, an ornate lectern located in a central location. Place and space were key elements of the proceedings, with nobles and academic officers in the audience taking their seats on elevated benches in such a way that preserved and displayed their status as "set off [or apart] from the general public" (Clark, 2006, p. 77). From the Middle Ages on, the disputation could be "formal or informal, public or private [and] might take place daily, nightly, weekly, monthly, quarterly, semiannually, or annually" (Clark, 2006, p. 76). As suggested by the ritual placing of key figures and participants in the disputation, the focus was squarely on maintaining existing and differential relations of power among the participants in a semi-ritualized setting.

In fact, the disputation was not conducted with the goal of producing new or original knowledge, at least not in the sense that we think of the term "original." Originality, in the medieval university, meant something more like "of or pertaining to the origin(s)" rather than its more modern connotations of innovation, academic discovery, and heretofore uncharted intellectual territory. Therefore, the primary focus of the disputation was not to break new intellectual ground but to reaffirm the canon and the canonical orthodoxy by ritualistically dispelling error and unorthodox knowledge while defending the honor of the canon. Clark (2006) puts it this way:

> The disputation was an oral event. It aimed not at the production of new knowledge but rather at the rehearsal of established doctrines. What was produced—oral argument—was consumed on the premises. The disputation did not accumulate and circulate truth. It, rather, disaccumulated or dismantled possible or imagined error. The roles instantiated differential relations of power and knowledge. Protected by a presider, a respondent learnt the dialectical arts needed to fend off erroneous arguments of opponents. One learnt, ultimately, how to defend the canonical as proclaimed in lecture. (p. 79)

AMERICAN STRIVERS: MASCULINITY AND SPECULATIVE CAPITALISM IN THE AGE OF "GO-AHEAD"

As Sandage (2005) argues in *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, a meticulously researched history of American losers both notable and obscure, "The American who fails is a prophet without honor in his own country" (p. 18). Indeed, since the early nineteenth century, failure in the American context has been squarely focused on one's own fluctuating fortunes, on the triumph or downfall of the individual striver. Crucially, the ability to succeed or the propensity to fail becomes an essential trait of individual identity in the American nineteenth century, a story that Sandage (2005) narrates (with receipts!) in this magisterial history. Culling material from across the historical record, including revealing snippets from debtors' journals and private diaries, *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, business records, contemporary advertisements, and the popular journalism and cultural commentary of the day (including such stalwarts as *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly*), Sandage (2005) illustrates with copious detail how the "master plots and stock imagery of individual moral blame infused the culture of American capitalism" (p. 92). "In this way," Sandage (2005) writes, "failure proved the doctrine of *achieved identity*. 'Men succeed or fail . . . not from accident or

external surroundings,' a Massachusetts newspaper reiterated in 1856, but from 'possessing or wanting the elements in themselves'" (p. 92; emphasis added).

Notably, failure was, from early on, located "in the man." It was, in other words, an internalized condition—an essential trait of the individual—and at the time, the popular discourse on failure in business and elsewhere in life treated it not unlike a disease or genetic predisposition (Sandage, 2005). In 1842, no less a commentator than Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal, "The merchant evidently believes the . . . proverb that nobody fails who ought not to fail. There is always a reason, *in the man*, for his good or bad fortune, and so in making money" (Gilman & Parsons, 1970, p. 295; emphasis added). This bit of Emersonian wisdom appears again and again in Sandage's (2005) historical overview, as the book painstakingly chronicles the gradual development of interiorized failure as a species of character *in the man*.

Take the word *loser*, for example. Sandage (2005) shows how a newspaper report on the 1820 Boston fire could refer to an innkeeper with great material losses as a loser in a neutral sense: "The keeper of the hotel *is a great loser*, particularly in furniture and liquors" (p. 131; emphasis added). This is not an image of the loser in the contemporary, post-Beck (1994) sense ("I'm a loser baby / So why don't you kill me?"), but in a neutral and more literal sense, referring simply to someone who has lost a great deal of material property and wealth. By mid-century, and accelerating in the bust-and-boom, "go ahead" decades following the Civil War through the Gilded Age, to be *a loser* ceased to be a one-off occurrence, something that happened to somebody, but had transformed into an interiority, a type, or essential quality. It was to be a "bad egg," a "good for nothing," or in the words of one credit agency report from 1852, "Broke & run away . . . not w[orth] the powder to kill him" (Sandage, 2005, p. 130).

Other entries were similarly colorful, as Sandage (2005) dutifully records: "Cannot be w[orth] anything tho has the strange faculty of being always in bus[iness] & yet doing nothing" (p. 149). Another entry reported, "We have no confidence in his success or bus[iness] ability," while yet another opined cheerily, "Bus[iness] on the increase & parties here who sell [to] him largely have confidence that he will finally succeed & become well off" (Sandage, 2005, p. 100). These notes and millions of others could be found in the 2,580 handwritten ledgers that Mercantile Agency clerks researched, scribed, and scrupulously maintained between 1841 and 1892 (Sandage, 2005, p. 128). Founded by Lewis Tappan in 1841, the Mercantile Agency was the nineteenth century's version of Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion, the holy trinity of modern credit reporting in the United States, all rolled into one. There were competitors, of course, but Tappan's Mercantile Agency was the first and arguably the most influential.

Codifying confidence (or the lack thereof) in the service of credit capitalism, the Mercantile Agency sought to manage risk

> *by managing identity*: a matrix of past achievement, present assets, and future promise. Neither rating consumers nor granting credit, it graded commercial buyers for wary sellers. Lewis Tappan—an ardent social reformer—did in the marketplace what others did in asylums and prisons. He imposed discipline via surveillance: techniques and systems to monitor and classify people. Local informants quietly watched their neighbors and reported to the central office . . . . The marketplace now had a memory, an archive for permanent records of entire careers. (Sandage, 2005, pp. 100-102; emphasis added)

Moreover, Sandage (2005) is careful to show how nearly as far back as the dawn of the Republic, failure—whether to pay one's debts or remain solvent in business or make good on some other life-sustaining enterprise—contained within it a moral obligation as well as a financial one. Even in the years immediately following the Civil War, when modern contract law made it possible for a man to legally discharge his fiscal debts, the question of whether his moral debts could be so easily discharged remained.[8] As Sandage (2005) writes, "Ironically, a magnified sense of moral obligation as a thing apart, a truth immune to the legal fictions of the contract, laid the foundation for U.S. bankruptcy reform after the Civil War. The reason stayed '*in the man*,' but the remedy did not" (p. 66; original emphasis). To fail in business, even if one could discharge one's debts, did not automatically make good on the stiff moral penalty that remained firmly attached to the individual debtor.

The American "Go-Ahead" nineteenth century, with its devastating financial panics, banking collapses, credit crises, and fledgling bankruptcy reform, fused the practical republican ideals of manliness and moral virtue with the burgeoning market economy and the new entrepreneurial realities it engendered. Crucially, to fail in business was seen as both a moral failing and a failure of manhood. "To a nation on the verge of anointing individualism as its creed," Sandage (2005) writes, "The loser was simultaneously intolerable and indispensable. Failure was the worst that could happen to a striving American, yet it was the best proof that the republican founders had replaced destiny [i.e., one's station at birth] with merit. Rising from laborer to entrepreneur was the path to manhood" (p. 27). The phrase "go ahead," with its origins as a sailor's yell, came into vogue as a way to capture the "go ahead spirit" of the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Sandage

8 Because of the historical context under discussion here, I am intentionally using masculine pronouns.

(2005) writes that it "named a kind of masculinity wherein some delivered while others 'miscarried.' Men failed because they lacked spunk" (p. 87).

Prior to this, before the advent of market capitalism and the accompanying celebration of the entrepreneurial self, *to fail* (or to be *a loser*) was an accident of fortune, a more or less random waylay on the highway of life that could happen to anyone. Similarly, in the early Republic, what we now think of as "success" was framed as "yeoman competency, which valued the maintenance of current status and plenitude more than the cultivation of risky ambitions" (Sandage, 2005, p. 81). Sandage (2005) notes how "The man with 'a competency' (in the language of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) sustained his independence by land ownership and contentment, providing for his family today and squirreling away necessary resources against tomorrow's troubles (p. 81). However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the concepts of success and failure had evolved and complexified; success now meant a restless, relentless striving for more, the robust, energetic, and distinctly "American *go-aheadism*" of the era (Sandage, 2005, p. 84). Failure, by extension, had become a stigma and developed an interiority and depth all its own—a wanting or lacking "in the man." A "failure" no longer referred to an unfortunate event or set of circumstances, like highway robbery or a fluke illness, but referred instead to a *person*, one who was morally suspect and effeminate at worst, lazy and shiftless at best.

As the entrepreneurial subject has evolved alongside global, just-in-time capitalism and neoliberalism have turned individuals into always-on digital media companies, there are now perhaps more ways to fail—and fail in full view—than ever before. Meme culture, with its "Epic Fail," pays homage to our thinly cloaked obsession with failure, as does the rich patois of schadenfreude that has come to define reality TV and celebrity culture. However, even as neoliberalism has undoubtedly amplified, intensified, and infused our language of personal failure, it has predictably shrunk both our vistas for imagining success outside of the market-driven limits of neoliberalism and the "higher natures," as Brown (2005) puts it (p. 44), that make us human in the first place.

#WINNING: CHARLIE SHEEN, DONALD TRUMP AND THE REVIVAL OF FAILURE

It is entirely fitting that during and in the immediate aftermath of the Trump presidency, there would be a revival of interest in failure as an academic and theoretical concept. After all, without failure, there can be no winning, and if there's one thing Trump stood for, it was #winning. At a rally in 2016, then-candidate Trump famously claimed that if elected, "we're gonna win so much, you may

even get tired of winning." His rallies, for years a notorious and inextricable part of the fabric of American politics, were far less about policy prescriptions or legislative goals than they were about the brute show of force through numbers—a red sea of MAGA hats and Punisher t-shirts. The message was nothing if not consistent: I will return the US to its winning ways.

As preoccupied as he appears to be with winning, Trump also (in)famously loves to call out "losers." In a September 2020 conversation with senior members of his staff, Trump reportedly referred to 1,800 WWI-era US marines buried in a military cemetery in France as losers, presumably because they were dead. (The fact that they died fighting for their country doesn't seem to impress Trump, either.) Goldberg (2020), writing in *The Atlantic*, suggests that Trump's "capacious definition of *sucker* [a synonym for *loser* in Trump-speak] includes those who lose their lives in service to their country, as well as those who are taken prisoner, or are wounded in battle."

He called John McCain a "loser" for getting captured in Vietnam and spending nearly six grueling years as a POW in North Vietnam. He referred to former president George H. W. Bush as a loser for getting shot down by Japanese soldiers during WWII. Before he was banned in early 2021, Trump repeatedly took to X (then Twitter) to call out those he saw as losers: political opponents, fellow Republicans, journalists, women he didn't like, the parents of Gold Star Army Captain and war hero Humayun Khan, and the list goes on. Confronted with the reality of his own loss of the presidency in 2020, Trump and his supporters haven't taken it well. He first doubled down on his phony claims that the election was somehow rigged before setting in motion an attempted coup on January 6, 2021. The rest is history.

Trump's definition of a loser is probably looser than most, but I would suggest that the former president's acerbic and totally unprecedented habit of deploying the "L-bomb" reflects, albeit in an exaggerated way, a key feature of American life and culture, one that must be considered in any exploration of failure. Charlie Sheen called our attention to it over a decade ago in a bizarre series of public spectacles. In this chapter, I simply call it *#winning* (pronounced "hashtag winning"). As Sitman (2019) writes:

> These [neoliberal] policies and others seem designed to sow paranoia and inflict pain, which is part of the point. The right benefits from people becoming more isolated, hunkered down, wary of others, and doubtful that a better future can be built. It is to such people that the reactionary message appeals: the best you can hope for is to hoard what you have, and attack the shadowy forces and alien others that you're told

> imperil you and your livelihood. Solidarity and generosity are turned into risky wagers not worth taking.

What we may need now is a collective, societal understanding of failure that spreads the socio-economic effects of failure across society. One way to achieve this may be through universal basic income (UBI). By providing everyone with the basic necessities of life through one of the many popular universal income proposals now being considered in progressive US cities like Los Angeles, Denver, and even Birmingham, Alabama, citizens can reduce the individual shame and indignity late capitalism offers most people across society (DiBenedetto, 2022).

RE-ENVISIONING SUCCESS: THE NEOLIBERAL FAILURE OF IMAGINATION

The problem, as I have suggested in this brief history, may not lie so much with the ubiquity of failure but in our impoverished ideas about what constitutes *success* and a life well lived, or what philosophers used to call "the good life." Neoliberalism, as I have endeavored to show, has impoverished our imaginations. As I have argued elsewhere (Cook, 2013), it mocks both our attempts at collective action and our imaginings of a world beyond work and money with its relentless logic of individual achievement and its narrow focus on material wealth. Trump, with his crass and cruelty and insults and continuous crowing about #winning and Making America Great Again (MAGA), is the apotheosis of this neoliberal failure of imagination.

In closing, I want to suggest that the rise of running culture in North America and the multitudes it contains—sport, hobby, competition, festival atmosphere, community, social outlet, and more—may serve as an interesting counterpoint to neoliberal logics of success and failure. In the last several decades, running has gradually emerged in the United States and other developed countries as the sport of the masses. If horse racing is the sport of kings, then running is, as Bingham (2019) suggests, the sport of "kings, queens, and the people." Part of running's appeal lies in its simplicity, the fact that virtually anyone of sound body can do it. You don't need special equipment or an expensive gym membership or years of training and know-how. You don't even really need running shoes (Hopes, 2022), though I would personally recommend it. In the sport of running, everyone wins, and everyone cheers on everyone else. If a runner falls or injures themselves on the course, it is viewed not as a failure of that individual but as a failure of the support crew, volunteers, course marshal, and others to ensure the success and well-being of everyone involved. Well-managed races are a thing of beauty. The crowd comes together to support each other.

Similarly, the running community in North America is geared not so much toward the stark binary of winning and losing but toward mutual aid, support, collectivity, and enthusiasm for the practice itself. The focus is on being together, supporting each other, cheering on your buddies. The vast majority of regular runners—even competitive ones—never win any races; few even place in their age groups. But here is where winning doesn't equal the feeling of accomplishment and sheer joy that runners get when they finish their first race—whether a 5K fun run or a 26.2-mile marathon—is the point, not whether an individual crosses the finish line first or last. (Well, aside from the massive health benefits that running provides—a point on which nearly all exercise scientists and healthcare professionals agree [Lee et al., 2017; Willis, 2017].) In other words, the dynamics of failure, its consequences as well as its costs, are spread out across the racing community, from participants to volunteers to spectators to paid employees. You still have to pony up your $110 registration fee, of course, because . . . capitalism, but from that point on, the beating heart of race day is all about the feeling of community that inevitably arises from the undulating throng and the unmistakable sound of injection-molded foam rubber on pavement.

Now, don't get me wrong. I am not so naïve as to think that running is not a competitive sport—it is, and there are those elite runners who compete at the highest levels. But at the end of the day—or rather, at the start of race day—the world-class marathoners line up at the same starting line as the stooped middle-aged guy with the beer gut who signed up on a dare. It doesn't matter how fast you are or how slow you are. It doesn't matter what your body type is or how much you weigh (Runner's World, 2022). Running is egalitarian, yes, but it is more than that. It is a model for community that may help us re-think our values surrounding #winning and scarcity, success, and failure.

What would it take for academia to adopt a similar framework for understanding and working through the dynamics of failure and success? Higher education is, as many have indicated, as hierarchical an institution as it gets, where individual successes and failures mean everything—for faculty as well as students. As every professor knows, even a practice as banal as group work has a bad reputation in higher education, which suggests the extent of the focus on the individual and her ultimate success or failure (Lang, 2022). As I have argued in this chapter, there are powerful forces working against such a reconceptualization of individuals, forces that suture the techno-algorithmic to the socio-economic in ways that threaten any meaningful reversal of our current situation vis-à-vis failure and success. Appadurai and Alexander (2020) show how ubiquitous digital connectivity has transformed the decidedly nineteenth-century record-keeping of the old Mercantile Agency into something far more dangerous and penetrative. This, they argue, has led to a "tectonic shift in the classical idea

of identity" (Appadurai & Alexander, 2020, p. 61). What they call "predatory dividuation" is the process by which individual human subjects are broken down "into a series of scores, ranks, features, attributes, and dimensions"—data that are "useful for the production of immense profit by the financial industries . . . [a] decomposition of the individual [that] is crucial for risk ratings, credit scores, consumer profiling, and for other operations on which contemporary finance depends" (Appadurai & Alexander, 2020, p. 61). Western modernity's idea of the sovereign individual, where "personality, agency, motivation, interest, and the body were encased in a single envelope"—has been supplanted by global capitalism's newfound ability, via digital technologies of control, to transform

> the nature of human subjectivity to make it easier to aggregate, recombine, monitor, predict, and exploit subjects for the purposes of financial markets, primarily by making scorable and rankable "dividuals" the sources of debt. To incur debt, you need no special ethical, biological, or racial capacities. You need to be a debt-worthy dividual. (Appadurai & Alexander, 2020)

They go on to analyze Uber as an example of a company that exploits this new logic of the "dividual" to blur the lines between human drivers and bots, further cementing the illusory "horizon of endless choice" that Appadurai and Alexander (2020) see as so dangerous to classical liberalism's conception of the individual human subject (p. 124).

In closing, I am reminded of a famous and highly-meme-able quote attributed to former president John F. Kennedy: "One person can make a difference, but everyone should try." This is the way. It is only through collective action that individuals can come together to change the world, to cast off oppressive systems, to subvert the suffocating logic of neoliberalism, and to complexify the simplistic binary of success and failure.

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