INTRODUCTION.

CHOICE, CONTROL, AND PERFORMANCE: WRITING STUDIES AND THE RHETORIC OF FAILURE

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> Failure is a feeling long before it becomes an actual result. It's vulnerability that breeds with self-doubt and then is escalated, often deliberately, by fear.
>
> – Michelle Obama

> Failure is a bruise, not a tattoo.
>
> – Jon Sinclair

As a nontraditional community college student in late-1990s Seattle, I failed my math requirement twice before finally (and barely) passing it the third time.[1] In 1997, I started my first academic job as a writing center tutor at the same community college. Seeing so many fellow students struggle and worry, I started to obsess over the idea of what it means to fail a writing course or assignment as a *student* versus what it means to fail a student in a writing course or assignment as a *teacher*. In 2005, my first attempt at passing the PhD exams failed, though . . . I promise you . . . I earnestly tried. What *does* it mean to fail at an important performance, to be a failure, or to fail someone at something?

Rachel Hodin (2013) reports on 35 people who (famously) failed or were painfully rejected before becoming legendary in their fields and professions. Some of these notable "failures"?

- Abraham Lincoln entered the army as a captain and left as a private. He also tried to start several businesses before becoming president, all of which failed.
- Lady Gaga, after finally being signed by a major record label, was dropped after only three months.

1 Portions of this introduction originally appeared in Corbett and Kunkel (2017) and LaFrance and Corbett (2020).

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- Vincent van Gogh only sold one painting during his lifetime, and that was to a friend for very little money.
- Steven Spielberg applied to, and was rejected three times from, the University of Southern California School of Theater, Film and Television.
- J. K. Rowling was fired from her London-based Amnesty International job for writing stories all day on her work computer.
- Stephen King's first book, *Carrie*, was rejected 30 times.

In 1968, writing process pioneer Donald Murray argued that the most important experience of all for a writer is the experience of failure. For Murray, the process of writing is laden with failure: "The writer tries to say something, and fails, and through failure tries to say it better, and fails, but perhaps, eventually, he says it well enough" (p. 119). Forty-five years later, Allison Carr (2013) urged compositionists to fully explore the pedagogical potential of the concept of failure. About ten years later, she revisited and reflected upon that notion (Carr, 2024; Carr, this volume). Writing studies scholars have paid increasing attention to failure in multiple contexts, including in relation to threshold concepts (Downs & Robertson, 2015; Anson, 2015; Brooke & Carr, 2015); retention (Powell, 2014); grading and assessment practices (Caswell, 2014; Inoue, 2014, 2022; Babb & Corbett, 2016; Inoue & Bailey, 2024); graduate writing (LaFrance & Corbett, 2020); imposter syndrome (Thoune, 2020); race, gender, and class intersections (Inoue, 2020; West-Pucket et al., 2023; Inoue & Bailey, 2024); and learning transfer (e.g., Donahue, 2012; Beaufort, 2012; Wardle, 2012; Driscoll & Wells, 2012; Yancey et al., 2014; Anson, 2016; Corbett & Kunkel, 2017; Corbett, 2018). Failure is a universal concept widely applicable to every aspect of writing studies. Perhaps it is *the* most universal concept applicable to writing studies (or life, for that matter).

One way to frame failure, as exhibited, for example, in the narratives of Part Three of this volume, is to think about failure in terms of individual human agency as well as sociocultural factors. In the Obama (2021) quote above, when she says that fear "is escalated, often deliberately, by fear," she is pointing to the aspect of social control, how outside forces can "often deliberately" cause us to experience deep feelings of fear, which frequently cause us to fail. When combined with the Sinclair quote, Obama's individual "vulnerability" and "self-doubt" meet Sinclair's personal "bruise" that does not have to become a more permanent "tattoo" of stigmatized failure. In this sense, questions of *control* (see Figure 1) become important in conceptualizing failure, with failure occupying one end of a broad and deep continuum of success/failure: How much control do you have over a situation? How much control does someone or something else have in a situation? When is it harder to identify the locus of control or how much *choice* you have in a given situation?

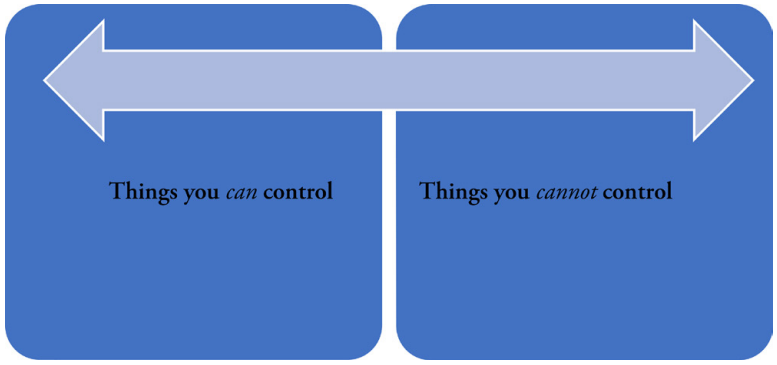

Figure 1. Continuum of success/failure and the locus of control, from things you can control to things you cannot control.

But what it means to fail can also mean vastly different things to vastly different people at vastly different times. Classical rhetoricians described the role of failed performances in rhetorical training. For example, Quintilian (ca. 95/1921) called for a socially-interactive rhetoric classroom where (white, male, citizen) students were explicitly called upon to showcase their communicative strengths while coming to terms with their own weaknesses—and performance failures—and those of their peers. Quintilian strongly believed that in order to do justice in preparing his students for the ups and downs of an often brutally competitive world, he needed to socialize them accordingly. Quintilian describes how both stronger and weaker students received rigorous rhetorical training in dealing with defeat and failure (and witnessing how their peers also dealt with defeat and failure) during oratorical performances:

> Having distributed the boys in classes, they made the order in which they were to speak depend on their ability, so that the boy who had made most progress in his studies had the privilege of declaiming first. The performances on these occasions were criticised. To win commendation was a tremendous honour, but the prize most eagerly coveted was to be the leader of the class. Such a position was not permanent. Once a month the defeated competitors were given a fresh opportunity of competing for the prize. Consequently success did not lead the victor to relax his efforts, while the vexation caused by defeat served as an incentive to wipe out the disgrace. (I.1.23-25)

For Quintilian and his contemporaries, there was great benefit in putting students on the spot, in providing them with rigorous rhetorical practice, giving and taking criticism in their speaking and writing performances—and, in the process,

also learning how to cope with and manage fear of failure. The role of the instructor becomes that of the coach, encouraging rhetorical acumen, win or lose, as described by Quintilian: "If he speaks well, he has lived up to the ideals of his art, even if he is defeated" (II.17.23). And if "he" is defeated but has learned enough from that failure, then he might have the opportunity to someday prove victorious.

Given, then, crucial aspects of *kairos* and *chronos* when conceptualizing such a slippery notion as failure, a particularly useful way of thinking about the concept of failure for writing studies might be to apply a classical rhetorical frame. The authors of Chapter 2 (this volume), Alexis Teagarden, Justin Mando, and Carolyn Commer, offer a useful three-part frame with their theorizing of failure vs. risk-taking based on the "classical genres of oratory and their orientation toward time: the forensic (focused on the past), the epideictic (focused on the present), and the deliberative (focused on the future)" (see Figure 2).

With this orientation toward failure, questions of *time* become mandatory: When, in the past, have I experienced moments of failure? How did that failure affect my present, or (if I so choose) what can I do now to try to remedy that past failure? How can I look to the (possible) future to anticipate elements of (possible) failure, even as I look to the past and attempt to control my present? These can be tough questions to try to answer at any time in a person's life experience. But with time might come wisdom. For example, many contributors to this collection seem to dance an attitude of looking back to relatively recent past failures—in a relatively early or precarious career in the field (pre-tenure or contingent status and relatively few academic professional successes)—hoping to find lessons on how to not repeat those failures. Other contributors seem to reflect on temporally more distant past failures with an attitude—from relatively successful mid-to-late professional academic careers in the field (tenure and a critical mass of professional successes)—that they can continue to successfully manage any remaining critical incidents that come their way.

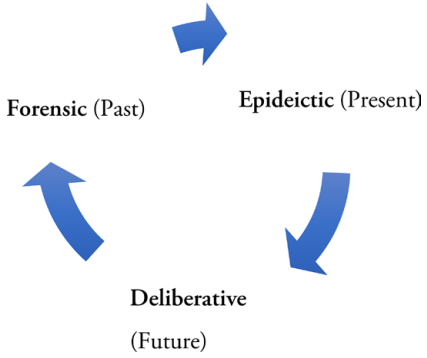

Figure 2. "Classical Genres of Oratory and Their Orientation Toward Time."

STUDYING OTHER'S CRITICAL MOMENTS OF FAILURE . . . AND LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

The frequently used concept of "discourse communities" is just one variable to consider in relation to the locus of control, orientations toward time, and failure. In *Writing across Contexts*, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak (2014)—with their notion of "critical incidents"—offer an unpacking of negative transfer in the negotiation of discourse communities. The authors define a critical incident as "a situation where efforts either do not succeed at all or succeed only minimally" (Yancey et al., 2014, p. 120). They illustrate this concept through the extended study of Rick, a first-year physics and astrophysics major, who struggled to write about science for a general audience in his writing course then failed to write an acceptable lab report for his chemistry professor based on what he learned from writing about science for a more general audience. Ultimately, Rick learned—through persistence and accepting responsibility for his own learning—to make moments of failure opportunities for growth and improvement.

Prominent scholars in writing studies have also reported on coming to terms with their own professional "failures." Anne Beaufort (2012) reflects back on some of the issues she failed to fully account for, in terms of positive knowledge transfer, in the sample curriculum and pedagogy suggestions of her longitudinal study *College Writing and Beyond* (2007). Like Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak, Beaufort reported on a student, Tim, who, much like Rick, left his freshman writing course believing he had learned strategies for writing applicable to the other discourse communities he would subsequently encounter. Yet, as Beaufort describes, Tim failed to come to terms with the multifarious communicative situations he faced and apparently took much longer in his realization of the complex nature of discourse communities. But Beaufort lingers on her own researcherly shortcomings as well, relaying what (she realized) finally had to occur for Tim to begin to realize some sense of how all the communicative pieces might come together for him to experience success, his first professional job with an engineering firm.

While the concept of discourse communities can account for a lot of the socio-rhetorical reasons why we might experience a critical incident, we also need to consider more personalistic and individualistic variables. Asao Inoue (2020), in the "Afterword: Failure and Letting Go" for the collection *Failure Pedagogies: Learning and Unlearning What It Means to Fail*, intimates how—as successful, widely published, and respected as he is in the field—he has not succeeded in publishing anything in our flagship journal *College Composition and Communication.* He describes how an experience with a highly unsympathetic review of a

manuscript he submitted to a journal early in his career caused him to (harking back to the Michelle Obama quote above) *fear* submitting anything for consideration since causing him to "fail at giving up that past failure" (Inoue, 2020, p. 261). But Inoue's fear of failure does not stop with his scholarship.

Like others in the collection *Narratives of Joy and Failure in Antiracist Assessment: Exploring Collaborative Writing Assessments*, Inoue (2024) has also questioned whether he has *failed* some of his students from time to time. Inoue describes how he may have failed while working with a young Black female student, Brea, from a working-class family in the Seattle-Tacoma area in a first-year composition course. Inoue had to come to terms with the ambiguity of Brea's performance in relation to his antiracist assessment ecology when she seemed not to directly engage with what he intended to be antiracist collaborative and linguistic aspects of certain assignments. Inoue was uncertain if Brea was performing a certain amount of resistance to Habits of White Language (HOWL) aspects of assignments by choice and if there was anything he was doing that might have been too pedagogically or conceptually controlling. While Inoue expresses unsureness about whether their pedagogical interactions were a complete failure, he also expresses unsureness about whether their interactions were a complete success. In the same volume, Sarah Prielipp (2024) also questions her own antiracist pedagogies in relation to HOWL student learning outcomes (SLOs) and whether or not students failed certain aspects of assignments or whether her system of assessment somehow failed these students. Ultimately, feeling that she needed to do a better job of helping students learn from failure, she needed to listen to their impressions of their own performances better:

> Rather than focusing on SLOs, I now ask students to measure their success by their own learning goals: What did you want to learn? How did you do it? What worked and didn't work? What do you still want to learn? Their language determines how they will be assessed, and this focus on the students' goals for their assessment holds me more accountable to their learning needs as we adjust what we should do in class based on their goals . . . Like my students, I, too, must learn from my failure and continually seek to improve my practice. (Prielipp, 2024, p. 188; cf. Babb & Corbett, 2016; Corbett & Kunkel, 2017; Corbett & Villarreal, 2022; Wood, this volume; Fenty, this volume)

In short, both Inoue and Prielipp are rightfully worrying about—and actively striving toward—building reciprocal trust and empowerment in their teaching and the reporting of their teaching.

Dana Driscoll and Jennifer Wells (2012), in relation to failed moments of knowledge transfer, argue that individual dispositions—like motivation, values, self-efficacy, and self-regulation—need to be accounted for much more when trying to account for any failed performance. For example, in considering the value of a more individually-focused lens for Beaufort's student Tim, discussed above, the authors observe:

> While Beaufort's study focuses on Tim's perceptions of his discourse communities, she does not focus on the dispositional aspects Tim has that may be causing those perceptions (such as locus of control, motivation, etc.). Beaufort also does not discuss anything about Tim as a person outside of the educational setting.

Turning our lens toward the personal and individual might nudge us to ask different types of questions regarding Tim's specific critical incidents and the idea of failed performance in general. Could there have been personal reasons that caused some of the trouble Tim had in negotiating in and between the discourse communities of first-year composition, history, and engineering? Too many commitments like a job, family, or illness might have played a part. A simple lack of motivation and effort may have been a culprit. Perhaps by the time Tim finally saw the "end" of his education, when he finally succeeded in landing a professional engineering job, all the dispositional pieces came together (or started to come together) more synergistically with that particular discourse community. A concept Driscoll and Wells build into their disposition theorizing is the theory of attribution, which can help us begin to make connections between individual agency and motivation and the outside force of discourse communities. Simply put, attribution theory deals with how much control a person believes they have over a situation and how much the cause of success or failure is a result of their own actions or circumstances beyond their control (Turner, 2007). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, Elizabeth Wardle (2012) speculates that perhaps fields themselves warrant attribution consideration for frequently inculcating students with problem-solving attitudes and dispositions at the expense of problem-exploring dispositions. The author believes that this dichotomy forces students into a "psychological double-bind" that can result in confusion and failure. In many ways, then, the students we discussed above with Yancey et al. (2014), Beaufort (2012), and Driscoll and Wells (2012)—as well as teacher-scholars like Corbett and Villarreal (2022), Inoue (2024), and Prielipp (2024)—are understandably facing both immense socio-rhetorical as well as psycho-rhetorical forces they are doing their best to negotiate in the quest to survive and make sense of the critical incidents, and the

accompanying chance of a failed teaching-or-learning performance, we all must inevitably face.[2]

Finally, and to further complicate this analytical frame, we would do well to remember Erving Goffman's thoughts on failed performance. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) writes, "We must be prepared to see that the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by a very minor mishap" (p. 56). Goffman suggests the ways in which socio-rhetorical actors, rather than simply "attempting to achieve certain ends by acceptable means," also "can attempt to achieve the impression that they are achieving certain ends by acceptable means" (Goffman, 1959, p. 250). Hence, in relation to failure, the old admonishment: "Fake it, till you make it." Elsewhere, in his later work *Forms of Talk*, Goffman (1981) analyzes the consequences of failure to execute a successful performance. He explains how the very awareness and prospect of social control is a powerful means of social control, causing social actors to make preemptive moves (right or wrong) to avoid the stigma of failure at all costs. The plurality, often ambiguity, of the locus of control lends itself to the drama of human communication—including failed performances—and adds yet another layer to the many variables (see Figure 3) that can help us make sense of the vagaries of successful and failed performances.

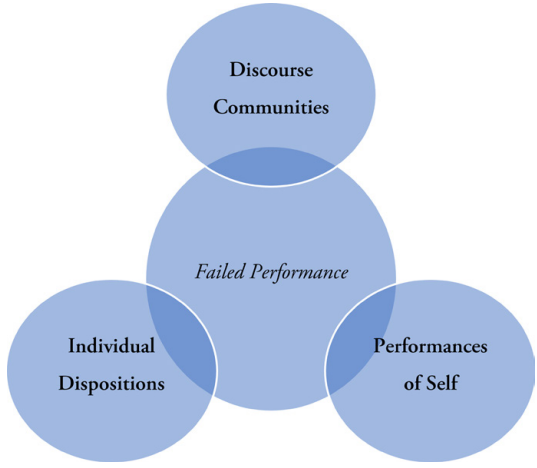

Figure 3. Overlapping Socio-Cognitive Elements of Failed Performance.

2 Here, we might think about individual dispositions and negotiation of discourse communities in terms of the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* habits of mind: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, flexibility, responsibility, and metacognition (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, & National Writing Project, 2011). While these dispositional traits might have been intended to apply to first-year writers, they also seem applicable to all professionals at any level.

WHY THE POSSIBILITY OF FAILURE IS SO VERY PERSONAL . . . AND SO VERY SOCIAL

Whatever theories and frames we decide to use to try to make sense of failed performances, one thing for certain is that they involve people's stories of dealing with the *a*ffect of failure. Given the fact that contributors to this collection are going to be doing a lot of similar intersectional intimations, I'd like to offer readers a sense of my own coming to terms with the intertwining social and personal realities of failure, with a couple of brief snapshots from my own personal and professional experience.

I was a nontraditional, low-income, high-school dropout with an abusive and dysfunctional upbringing who returned to school at the age of 27 to earn my high school diploma and begin taking courses at Edmonds Community College near Seattle. Up to that point, it's not hard to argue that I was more-or-less a failure in life.[3] I worked hard as both an undergraduate (where I often worked multiple jobs, including at our campus writing center) and a graduate student to professionalize. As an undergraduate, I started presenting papers at conferences, landed my first academic publication in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* (Corbett, 2002), and continued this creative academic momentum as a grad student. I served as graduate assistant director of both the Expository Writing Program and the English Department Writing Center at the University of Washington, Seattle. Perhaps somewhere inside, I was attempting to allay any doubt that I was a legitimate academic performer.

Oftentimes, what seem to be crushing defeats can—in time—prove really only *major* setbacks . . . But they sure don't feel that way at first . . . When I initially failed my PhD qualifying exams in 2005, I wondered and worried if that was the end of my academic ambitions. Faced with my three—suddenly stern—mentors/committee members to orally defend my written exams, I found myself truly afraid and on the defense (c.f. Blomstedt, this volume; Donelson & Cox, this volume; D'Agostino, this volume). I floundered my way through three

3 As I reported on our writing center workshop (Corbett, Decker, & Halpin, 2005), in a *Writing Lab Newsletter* article (Corbett, 2005): In a surprising, provocative testimonial, unbeknownst to both my colleagues (though they knew full-well the subject matter), I punctuated the alternative tone of our presentation when I began, "I am a PhD student, the principal investigator in an ongoing Human Subjects Division approved research study on peer tutor training, a classroom composition instructor, and the founding director of a writing center. But nine years ago, I was a high school drop-out sitting in jail for distribution of marijuana." With this last line I watched the eyes in the room, including my fellow presenters, grow large and intently focused as I continued to relate my personal transition from the subterranean world I knew to the academic one I now inhabit. I talked about anxieties, but also teachers who were patient enough to dispel them at least enough for me to continue through, teachers who gave me the skills and knowledge I needed to continue on. (p. 6)

hours of brutal Q&A that left me feeling helplessly worried and deeply wounded. At the time, it felt like the biggest failure of my life, like there was something really wrong with me—that I had been unmasked and finally found out . . .

But what I really needed to understand was the loose, baggy monster that is the genre of the exam essay. I needed to realize that it wasn't just ME (the actor); it was also YOU (the scene). It is well-understood in writing studies that students unfamiliar with a new writing situation or genre will fall back (regress) often on summary rather than argumentation and analysis. What my committee wanted were smart, sophisticated, argumentative essays. Sure, they wanted a reasonable amount of evidentiary support, but when I started to really study other people's exams, what I noticed was that they might only have ten or fifteen—strategically well-chosen—sources for each essay, rather than, say, the thirty or forty I had ridiculously tried to stuff in.

The lesson here? When faced with an unfamiliar writing situation, I study models of the genre I am about to write in. I don't just peruse—I study. After meeting with my dissertation chair, I realized I should have also talked more with all my committee members about precisely what they would be looking for. How much summary did they want? How much argumentation did they want? Etc.

Then came the new rhetorical situations of the job search. I learned a hard lesson during my exams, one that I'll never forget. In preparation for the job search, I did all the things right, textually, that I did wrong during the exams. I took all the sample materials I could get and studied them, especially the cover letter. The first draft of my cover letter was very vague about my experiences, publications, accomplishments. Too much "aw shucks" and not enough "look at this!" perhaps. But after studying, especially my chair's cover letter from his uber-successful job search eight or so years before, I knew exactly what I needed to do. (The ancient rhetorical art of imitation in the service of invention must never be taken for granted.) I noticed that he didn't hold back in describing the details of his publications, presentations, administrative positions, research activities in his cover letter—the significance of them, what they mean to our field, what they did for his teaching and learning, what they could mean for the institution he was trying so skillfully to persuade that they needed him. Once I felt I had a stronger draft of the letter, I asked all my committee members to read it and give me feedback. I took it through several successive drafts; I babied it and compulsively worked every paragraph, every sentence, every word until I felt satisfied. And as the job search progressed, I tweaked it as I tried to better fit the needs of the particular audience I felt I was writing for.

In both the PhD exams and the job search I made deliberate choices to toe the line, to conform. I made conscientious choices in my attempts to *avoid*

failure by studying and performing more "expert," "smart" communicative moves that would not shock the minds and memories of my various audiences. Goffman (1959) analyzes the many complicated ways social actors judge and prepare to be judged or legitimized. He writes, "Paradoxically, the more closely the impostor's performance approximates to the real thing, the more intensely we may be threatened, for a competent performance by someone who proves to be an impostor may weaken in our minds the moral connection between legitimate authorship to play a part and the capacity to play it" (Goffman, 1959, p. 59). The further I moved through my processes of becoming an academic professional, the more proficient I became at writing my way through the academic hoops I was learning to jump through. The more competent my authorial performances became, the more I felt I was opening myself up to unmasking, to judging, to de-legitimization. I tried my best to *control* my actions in ways becoming of a budding teacher-scholar. Then, I made the *choice* to prepare myself to fail at making everyone who read my materials love me and want to hire me.

PERFORMANCES (AND REALIZATIONS) OF SELF: RISKING IT ALL ON FAILURE

Harking back a few decades, many centuries, (and to the start of this introduction), Donald Murray (1968/1982) urged that the writing course should be an experimental one:

> A course in practicing, a course in trying, a course in *choice* [emphasis added], a course in craft. Failure should not be accepted passively, but failure should never be defeat. The student should learn to exploit his failures as he rediscovers his subject, re-searches his information, redesigns his form, rewrites and edits every sentence. (p. 119-120)

We might just as easily argue that the curriculum and pedagogy in writing studies must, therefore, also be a curriculum and pedagogy with the notion of failure at its core. But one wherein students and teachers learn to metacognitively come to terms with the concept of failure, to manage their own experiences with failure, and to exploit the notion for its full worth. And this applies just as relevantly to the career path of the student or the teacher.

What might it mean, then, to negotiate the often-fuzzy interstices of choice and control in failure, adversity, and success in relation to conformity, resistance, risk or boundary-pushing, and performances (and realizations) of self? What if you might be too poor, or too Black, or too Latinx, or just too queer? The work of queer theorists can aid us further in these complex calls to personal growth

and becoming, offering foundational insights into our attempts to negotiate time, space, control, and choice. To queer something can mean to take an alternate path, to disturb the order of things, to "fail" in or "dis" traditional orientations and ways of knowing and ways of acting and performing (Ahmed, 2006; see also Johnson & Sheehan, 2020; West-Pucket et al., 2023). Judith (Jack) Halberstam (2011), in *The Queer Art of Failure*, offers what might be called a theoretical blueprint for how academics often learn to balance exactly the tensions they experience between needing to conform to conventions and expectations in order to succeed and the desire to resist and take risks. Making the choice to take intellectual risks is an important piece of the growth of a writer or teacher of writing (see Teagarden, Mando, & Commer, this volume). Planning for more purposeful failures can then be a part of our intentional and strategic growth as learners and writers. For Halberstam (2011), failure and risk-taking offer their own rewards: "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmasking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (pp. 2-3). Halberstam believes that one can realize a state of being "in but not of" (p. 11) the university, that even though we are—indeed more-or-less by choice—part of the socially engineered world of the modern university, we might still *realize* our own local, esoteric knowledges, and that these unbridled knowings might just do their part to push the boundaries of the serious, stuffy academy where any sort of resistance by force may seem futile. In short, Halberstam urges academics to make choices in how they "fail" to be "normal(ized)."

If fortune does indeed favor the brave (and, sometimes, the queer), then scholars in writing studies can learn a lot—and sometimes risk a lot—by using failure as a conceptual lens to study and reflect upon all aspects of the complex intersectional work we do. In this collection, writing researchers from all subfields of writing studies share their thoughts, experiences, and studies on the concept of failure. This collection is intended for teachers and researchers of writing across the disciplines. The 18 original chapters, as well as the Afterword by (none other than the most-cited scholar on the topic of writing studies and failure in this collection) Allison Carr, will expand and complicate concepts and ideas related to the topic of writing and failure, like the ones explored in Carr and Laura Micciche's (2020) *Failure Pedagogies*; Stephanie West-Pucket, Nicole Caswell, and William Bank's (2023) *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*; and Inoue and Kristin DeMint Bailey's (2024) *Narratives of Joy and Failure in Antiracist Assessment,* especially in terms of pedagogy and identity. It is divided into three interanimating parts: Part One: Historicizing and Theorizing Failure; Part Two: Case Studies and Professional Profiles of Failure in Action; and Part Three: Short (but Bitter/Sweet) Narrative Snippets of Failure.

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