

Unspeakable Failures

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Failure has become an acceptable, even celebrated, part of innovation, education, and personal growth, a sign of resilience—as long as individuals bounce back in quick and efficient ways; as long as they *fail, fast, forward* (Bartz). On the surface, the popular rhetoric around failure lifts the taboo by reframing failure as a ubiquitous experience and learnable skill; however, without critical engagement and efforts to create counter-stories, failure and resilience rhetorics operate as a discourse of white privilege. Failure experiences that do not make the imperative turn toward success are the unspeakable failures, unspeakable because we lack language or support systems for experiences that do not rebound quickly and consistently into forward movement. By developing responses that are analytical and reflective, and by unpacking the rhetorical construction of the failure stories that are shared publicly, we can explore ways to better understand and voice the unspeakable failures.

As a graduate student, the story of Kairos captivated me—that fickle and fleeting god who offers opportunity, in a flash, to the bold and prepared. Tracing the legend of opportunity through centuries of artwork and literature, I discovered that the god Kairos is often portrayed as the goddess Occasio. As a young white woman and the first in my family to attend graduate school, I felt a kinship with Occasio based in my deepest and quietest desires. Just by attending graduate school, I felt like I had seized the goddess of opportunity, but I constantly feared that she would slip away. I met my fear face-to-face when I discovered Metanoia, the female figure who inhabits the realm of missed opportunity and regret. But the experience of metanoia, I later learned, always involves regret *and* transformation—a “change of mind or heart” catalyzed by regret, repentance, remorse (Liddell and Scott 1115). As a graduate student, the transformative dimension of metanoia sparked feelings of hope and possibility.

Maybe missed opportunities can serve as openings.

Maybe I don't need to carry the weight of fear and shame heavily in my body.

Maybe there is a different story to tell about opportunity.

I spent a decade, in my research and teaching, working to expand the story of Kairos by reclaiming regret and missed opportunity as generative experiences. In earlier work, I framed metanoia as a missing piece in conversations about kai-

ros and I imagined what it could mean to “seize metanoia.” I envisioned richly variegated paths of metanoic experience, but the kairos story still dominated my thinking; I could not see my way out of it. I kept defaulting to metanoia as a learning process through which “a rhetor becomes better prepared for the next moment of opportunity” (“Metanoia and the Transformation” 11). I was trying to understand experiences around and beyond kairos, but I failed to question the underlying narrative of success. I stuck to the script, lining the road to success with metanoic moments.

Over time, I started to see the consequences of looping metanoia into kairos. I realized that my metanoia-based pedagogy, aimed at expanding opportunity for writers, risked putting students in an even more vulnerable position. For many of my students, the concept of metanoia is freeing. Amber Sutherland, for example, a student who took my upper-division nonfiction workshop in 2016, shared, “Metanoia allowed me to embrace regret, which opened up a huge new world for me with my writing and the way I think. Embracing the regret that metanoia gives you allows you to be comfortable with where you are, and who you are, and who you were before” (Myers et al.). For Amber, embracing regret opened up new possibilities, but I started to wonder about the voices I was not hearing. And then, as time passed, I started to wonder why the once enthusiastic voices—like Amber’s—were fading from the conversation.

What about the experiences of regret that are not generative or transformative? What about the students who are not able to move forward or bounce back, those who get stuck in failure and regret no matter how hard they work?

I have come to understand failure experiences that do not make the imperative turn toward success as the *unspeakable failures*—unspeakable because we lack language or support systems for failure experiences that do not rebound quickly and consistently into forward movement. Unspeakable failure develops out of dangerously simple generalizations: the notion that successful failure is a skill we can all develop if we put our minds to it, and the idea that resilience is an embodied capacity we can all build—again, if we put our minds to it. These assumptions feed a stock story of success in the United States that conflates bootstrapping with resilience and maintains the idea that both success and failure are chosen and controlled by individuals. Unspeakable failure, I argue, stems from the refusal to see, and speak back to, the underlying privilege—distinctly white privilege—that permeates failure and resilience rhetoric.

In the sections that follow, I begin with Scott Sandage’s work on the history of failure in the United States, looking specifically at the underlying concept of “obligatory striving” and the nineteenth-century linguistic shift toward “personal failure.” From there, I turn to current trends in popular rhetoric, particularly rhetorical strategies that either distance or link failure and the personal

or bodily. After examining historical roots and current trends, I emphasize the implications: without critical engagement and efforts to create counter-stories, failure and resilience rhetorics operate as a discourse of white privilege.

[Obligatory] Striving for Success

At Boise State University, many of my students travel winding paths into and through the university. They return to school after time away. They juggle family and financial obligations on top of a full course load. Some students work all night and then go straight to 7:30 a.m. classes. Some are reinventing themselves after a difficult relationship or an unsatisfying career. So, when I begin class on the first day of the semester with the question, “How did you arrive here, in this moment, at Boise State?,” my students respond with a collective sigh and a you-don’t-even-want-to-know look in their eyes. They all tell really interesting, and vastly different, stories of the paths that brought them to our current moment, but the timeline tends to be laden with shame—too many years . . . too many majors . . . too many mistakes. Their stories inevitably end with: “I should have figured it out sooner . . .” *Successful people figure it out sooner*. With these winding paths and ongoing obstacles, many of my students feel as if they have already failed when they enter the classroom. One student described his day-to-day experience at the university as “living in a suspended state of failure.” Even when they are doing well, many students fear that their efforts are never good enough—or just never enough.

Before moving to Boise, I taught at Stanford University, a place where students feel the fear of failure pressing at their backs. During my time there, I heard too many stories of young people committing suicide on the train tracks not far from my office. I quickly learned about the Stanford “duck syndrome”—the idea that students may look calm on the surface, but the “waters” beneath are troubled by a frenzy of movement. Students glide by each other in classes and dining halls, masking the physical and emotional exhaustion of their “paddling” to get or stay ahead. Though the duck syndrome narrative originated at Stanford, the mentality spans campuses across the country. In fact, even before entering college, students experience “college admissions mania,” a process where “the treadmill never stops and the stakes can feel impossibly high” (Bennett). The shame of the winding path, the quiet pressure of the duck syndrome, and the mania of the treadmill, all point to an underlying ideal that equates educational success to ceaseless movement.

Scott Sandage, in his celebrated book *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, describes this ceaseless movement as “obligatory striving,” explaining, “Ours is an ideology of achieved identity; obligatory striving is its method, and failure and success are its outcomes” (265). Through obligatory striving, comprising the power and persistence of thoughts and actions, individuals

can propel themselves toward success and away from failure—a mindset that results in sprinting “as much to outrun failure as to catch success” (2). While such movement toward success can feel empowering, it also generates a well of shame at the other end. Pushing forward, pressing onward, and climbing upward frames failure as more than blatant mistakes, as the very act of slowing down can be considered a sign of personal weakness. The duck syndrome narrative allows for failure—as long as students keep paddling; the treadmill metaphor allows for stumbles—as long as students keep running.

Popular failure and resilience rhetorics do not uncouple “obligatory striving” and success; instead, striving-for-success operates as the underlying ideal in failure rhetoric. As a result, it may seem as if failure has become more visible and acceptable on college campuses—the taboo lifted—but the failure stories that circulate most widely are ultimately success stories. Or, as Anne Sobel puts it, “Americans love a nice, meaty failure—as long as it ends with success” (“How Failure in the Classroom”). Popular failure rhetoric, specifically “fail-forward” and “build resilience” messaging, brings failure out of the shadows, but it does not eliminate the shadows. Instead, the elevated ideal of successful-failure deepens the shame around failure experiences that do not conform, feeding the silence around unspeakable failures. In what follows, I begin with the emergence of “personal failures,” as a concept, in order to track on-going efforts to collapse and expand the rhetorical distance between failure experiences and personal responsibility. Current trends in popular failure rhetoric seem to create distance between failure and personal responsibility; I will show, however, that failure remains deeply personal.

Personal Failures

The idea that an individual can be “a failure” or “a loser,” commonplace to the level of cliché today, was born of the boom-and-bust economy of early American capitalism. Sandage points to the moment in U.S. history when failure transformed from an external event (related to business ventures and bankruptcy) to an aspect of individual identity. As Sandage writes, around 1800 “Americans ‘made’ failures, but it took a while before failures made—or unmade men ... Failure was something made, not someone born—until the market revolution” (11). If a business venture failed, the entrepreneur *made* a failure but was not considered to *be* a failure as a person. According to Sandage, both the 1828 and 1855 versions of the *Webster Dictionary* defined failure as “a breaking, or becoming insolvent,” but by 1857 *Webster* explicitly connected failure to an individual’s character: “some weakness in a man’s character, disposition, or habit” (11-12).

Context plays a large role in this revised definition, as the heartbreaks and triumphs of the market revolution demanded explanations. A new language

of failure emerged to describe these swings: “wiping out,” “flunking out,” “go to smash,” “fizzle out,” “dead broke,” and so on (25). The market revolution created a paradoxical pattern of success and failure where “The ideal was unreachable unless a man pushed uphill—yet, pushing and ‘going to smash’ or appearing ‘hard pushed’ exposed his weakness to all” (26-7). Efforts to better understand and control this stream of boom-and-bust experiences led to new perceptions of failure, responsibility, and character. It was not enough to blame circumstances or luck; a failed business venture was now the result of personal mistakes and shortcomings. As Sandage concludes, “This was the legacy of the nineteenth century: failure as an imputed deficiency of self” (259). With this shift, a newfound sense of self-monitoring and self-evaluation enters into the work of achieving and maintaining success (11-12). If failure—like success—can be accepted and rejected, claimed and reclaimed, on a personal level, then any individual who is not perpetually working to overcome failure and strive toward success can be considered *a failure*.

Today, framing failure as a “deficiency of self” clashes with the pace and perception of innovation in business, technology, and education. Innovation, as currently conceptualized, requires failure and risk-taking and thus necessitates a language of failure that, at least on the surface, shifts the emphasis away from personal fault or flaw. To frame and control the new stream of boom-and-bust experiences that come with innovation, we have seen the language of “wiping out” and “flunking” transform into mantras such as “fail fast, fail often,” “fail better,” and “fail forward” (Asghar). In her 2012 commencement address, former Yahoo CEO Carol Bartz streamlines the message into “fail, fast, forward,” instructing graduates to: “Recognize you’ve failed, try to do it fast, learn from it, build on it, and move forward.” In the Silicon Valley, this messaging has become so prolific that failure now represents a “rite of passage,” even a “badge of honor,” to be presented with pride on a résumé (Martin; Roose).

These trends in popular failure rhetoric allow for the illusion of agency, reframing feelings of shame as a speed bump rather than a signal of flawed character; however, the messaging exists under the umbrella of Neoliberal ideals of individualism, efficiency, competition, and profit. As long as Neoliberalism operates as the default for envisioning and interpreting success, failure experiences will perpetually recalibrate to the obligatory striving response, sweeping the complexities of failure into a fast-forward movement and mantra.¹ In a Neoliberal framework where “[i]ndividuals are regarded as rational

1. For an example of how this “recalibration” to Neoliberal ideals plays out in political discourse, see James A. McVey’s “Recalibrating the State of the Union: Visual Rhetoric and the Temporality of Neoliberal Economics in the 2011 Enhanced State of the Union Address.”

economic actors who are expected to make choices that will maximize their human capital” (Stenberg 5), failure becomes a commodity to be acquired and a skill to be mastered in a quick and efficient way. Gross and Alexander, in alignment with Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, argue that the Neoliberal pressure to constantly succeed at failure leaves “everyone feel[ing] like he or she is failing at everything, all the time” (287-88). If failure must be strategically and quickly controlled, even mastered, then instead of erasing the concept of personal failure, a new category of failure surfaces: those who fail at failing successfully. Or, as I show in the next section, the true failures fail at building their personal resilience. The mandate to “fail forward” and “build resilience,” predicated on privilege and haunted² by whiteness, resituates failure in the bodies of individuals.

The Resilience Muscle

Popular failure rhetoric, as explored above, de-emphasizes personal responsibility for failure, but the parallel emphasis on “building resilience” shifts the focus onto the individual’s response to failure. The concept of resilience represents hope and empowerment in the face of difficult situations; resilience rhetoric, however, often focuses on individual bodies and neglects the myriad social inequities, stereotypes, and conditions that prevent people from “failing forward.”

Through her speeches and recent book collaboration, Sheryl Sandberg reaches large audiences with messaging that links resilience to the body. In her popular 2016 commencement address at UC Berkeley, she invites students to imagine resilience as an embodied capacity, even comparing it to a physical body part that can be exercised. In the speech, Sandberg shares the devastating experience of losing her husband and offers the lessons that she “learned in death.” She tells graduates to go out and “build resilience,” assuring them: “You are not born with a fixed amount of resilience. Like a muscle, you can build it up, draw on it when you need it.” Since delivering the commencement address, Sandberg partnered with Adam Grant to publish a book and create a website dedicated to building resilience. Their website, *Option B*, offers resilience strategies and stories in response to situations ranging from “grief and loss” to “health, illness, and injury” to “abuse and sexual assault.” They also provide “strategies to build everyday resilience,” again emphasizing the idea of the “resilience muscle.” The “Build Your Resilience” section of their

2. When I refer to the “haunting” of whiteness, I am drawing on Kennedy, Middleton, and Radcliffe’s collection *Rhetorics of Whiteness: Postracial Hauntings in Popular Culture, Social Media, and Education*.

website announces, “Resilience is like a muscle you can build. It’s just a matter of knowing how” (Sandberg and Grant).

Far from an anomaly, Sandberg’s description of resilience as a personal, embodied capacity aligns with trends in popular rhetoric. Described by Flynn, Sotirin, and Brady in *Feminist Rhetorical Resilience*, “commonsensical and popular understandings” of resilience “emphasize the self-sufficient, heroic individual” (5). This individual has “the ability to respond positively in the face of adverse conditions and calamities, to gain ground where others might give in to difficulties and obstacles” (5-6). Certainly, it can be invigorating to imagine resilience as a capacity for self-improvement that exists within everyone, a muscle that “heroic individuals” can build and flex—especially when faced with the kind of shattering loss that Sandberg experienced or the debilitating pressure of perfectionism that many students face. At the same time, though, the idea that people are born with something like a “resilience muscle” implies that resilience exists equally and occurs naturally within the bodies of all individuals, as part of the human spirit or anatomy. Working under the assumption that all people are equipped with a resilience muscle, if they can just learn how to build it, allows us to celebrate or dismiss individuals (or praise or shame ourselves) based on efforts to build that “muscle”—a mindset that directs attention away from social conditions and constraints.

Resilience-based support plays a vital role in coping, healing, and growth, but the underlying messaging conveyed through popular resilience rhetoric cannot go unquestioned because even the most dedicated striving or the strongest resilience response cannot guarantee success. There will always be what Kate Losse calls the “less buoyant failure stories.” People are positioned to fail in irreparable ways as an imperative of capitalism and a result of inherently unjust stereotypes and systems, but the dominant narrative of success still insists that failure exists as a weakness of character and lack of conviction. We cannot, as Tyler Hallmark urges, “ignore the fact that failure affects people differently, and that privilege plays an important role in who is allowed to fail—and who isn’t.” We must turn our attention toward new conversations about failure, conversations that move beyond what failure is as experienced by individuals and into the realm of how failure operates on larger systemic levels. These concepts—obligatory striving, failing forward, building personal resilience—are not isolated ideas; they all operate together, quietly and consistently, as defining features in the stock story of success in the United States.

Pulling Ourselves Up by Our Resilience

Stock stories, Aja Martinez explains, “feign neutrality and at all costs avoid any blame or responsibility for societal inequality”; they are “powerful because they are often repeated until canonized or normalized” (38). The Amer-

ican Dream, with its “bootstrap mentality,” serves as the long-standing stock story of success in the United States. But the story does not end there. The proliferation of failure and resilience rhetoric, “repeated until canonized or normalized,” extends “bootstrapping” into a required stance for responding to all forms of adversity. The concept of “building resilience,” absorbed into the stock story of success, becomes a form of bootstrapping. Even though the “bootstraps break before the boots are on” and “too many have no boots” (Villaneuva, *Bootstraps* xiv), the emphasis on resilience—framed as an embodied capacity—reinforces the idea that success, failure, and successful-failure are all a matter of personal strength and work ethic. We should all, as the stock story goes, be able to pull ourselves up by our resilience.

Bootstrapping through failure experiences requires ceaseless movement; however, the ability to sustain steady forward momentum comes from privilege. More specifically, freedom and fluidity of movement—what Sara Ahmed refers to as “motility”—is a key feature of whiteness. Ahmed explains, “If whiteness allows bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home, then those bodies take up more space. Such bodies are shaped by motility, *and may even take the shape of that motility*” (“A Phenomenology,” 159, emphasis in original). Failure and resilience rhetoric, with steady movement through adversity as a core element of the messaging, assumes the ability to “move with comfort through space”—movement that applies to both physical and emotional spaces. Those who feel as if they can “fail forward” and “build resilience,” if they just put their minds to it, are relying (often unconsciously) on the motility granted to some bodies and denied to others.

Ahmed, drawing on Frantz Fanon, describes the ways in which bodily privilege creates or denies movement:

If classical phenomenology is about ‘motility,’ expressed in the hopefulness of the utterance ‘I can,’ Fanon’s phenomenology of the black body would be better described in terms of the bodily and social experience of restriction, uncertainty and blockage, or perhaps even in terms of the despair of the utterance ‘I cannot.’ Husserl and Merleau-Ponty describe the body as ‘successful,’ as being ‘able’ to extend itself (through objects) in order to act on and in the world. Fanon helps us to expose this ‘success’ not as a measure of competence, but as the bodily form of privilege: the ability to move through the world without losing one’s way. (161)

Bodily privilege becomes visible in those who can respond (or who automatically respond) to failure, and “fail forward” messaging, with the “I can” mentality. With this mentality, the correlation between building resilience and

achieving success is taken for granted. The distance, or what Ahmed refers to as the “proximity,” between failure and success feels small, manageable (155). Instead of acknowledging bodily privilege or proximity, failure and resilience rhetorics stress individual “competence,” promoting the message that each (courageous) individual has equal “ability to move through the world without losing one’s way.” Such messaging frames the ability to fail-forward and stay on track as both individual and universal, reinforcing the perception that failure is a personal deficiency.

Ahmed extends the discussion of bodily privilege even further through the idea of “stopping,” elaborating how some bodies flow freely into the movement of failing forward, while others are stopped. According to Ahmed,

For bodies that are not extended by the skin of the social, bodily movement is not so easy. Such bodies are stopped, where the stopping is an action that creates its own impressions. Who are you? Why are you here? What are you doing? Each question, when asked, is a kind of *stopping device*: you are stopped by being asked the question, just as asking the question requires that you be stopped. (161, emphasis in original)

This “stopping,” Martinez explains, occurs in experiences of both failure and success: “[M]y race is continually targeted by colleagues, students, and professors as a personal and professional deficit when I struggle, and as an unfair advantage when I succeed” (34). In both cases, race is used as a form of “stopping”—a way to derail forward movement (“unfair advantage”) or explain the halting of forward movement (“personal and professional deficit”). Villanueva speaks to the default assumption of “personal and professional deficit” when he writes, “The disproportionately few people of color in front of the classrooms or in our publications, given the ubiquity of the bootstrap mentality, reifies the conception that people of color don’t do better because they don’t try harder” (“On the Rhetoric,” 650-51). The rhetoric of “failing forward” and “building resilience” functions in a way that privileges steady forward movement and positions “stopping” as a personal choice or a sign of weakness, distracting from the social conditions and systems that create barriers.

In contrast to the experience of “stopping,” whiteness can have a “smoothing” effect, easing forward movement on the road to success. Drawing from his personal experience, Ira Shor explains, “whiteness smoothed the often rough road I traveled from the working class to a tenured professorship. However, on this peculiar trip, the advantages of my whiteness were rarely drawn to my attention” (Prendergast and Shor 379). Whiteness must, Shor urges, “be distinctly made visible,” and failure and resilience rhetoric offer a concrete site

for that critical work (379). We must attend to how whiteness functions to smooth the road to success so that we can begin to complicate and unsettle the mythology of resilience bootstrapping. When, for example, we encourage students to “fail forward” in the writing process or on an exam, or when we motivate colleagues to build resilience in their journey along the tenure track, we must remember that striving-for-success is a privileged position, haunted by whiteness, through which some bodies are propelled forward and others restrained, no matter how hard an individual works. The sections that follow offer two entry points for future work: critical engagement in the middle of failure experiences and strategies for un-resolving successful-failure stories.

In the Middle of Failure

Rather than trying to rush through or brush over failure experiences, we should, as Ahmed argues, focus on *stopping*. She explains, “a phenomenology of ‘being stopped’ might take us in a different direction than one that begins with motility, with a body that ‘can do’ by flowing into space” (“A Phenomenology” 161). Unsettling patterns and complicating the messaging in failure rhetoric, then, begins from “a phenomenology of ‘being stopped’” rather than an imperative to push forward through all forms of adversity. That means we need to both identify and create *stopping* by attending to how bodies are stopped and intentionally stopping during failure experiences with the goal of understanding failure in new ways.

At the 2015 CWPA conference, Shari Stenberg and Zach Beare offered the idea of working “in the middle of failure,” focusing specifically on emotion as an entryway into critical engagement with failure. They expressed the concern that “when we talk about the ways that failure might help individuals develop grit as a post-failure affect, we have a tendency to ignore the complexity of emotions that are involved when one is in the middle of failure.” Engaging the emotion that surfaces in the middle of failure can uncover the stories we are telling ourselves about how and why we and others failed, and we can begin to shape new questions and responses. As Stenberg and Beare put it, “While so much work talks about how failure can make one stronger and more calloused and more protected, the way that failure also has the potential to puncture and fracture and expose cracks in foundations might be equally as useful.” In other words, critically engaging the emotions of failure involves a simultaneous in-and-out-of-body experience where individuals attend to feelings within the body while also looking beyond their experience.

Turning toward the emotion associated with failure experiences conjures what Daniel Gross and Jonathan Alexander refer to as “the critical power of negative emotion” (290). This turn toward emotion follows the path paved by Queer theorists, like Judith Halberstam, who explore how “unhappiness,

dissatisfaction, and even failure might serve as entry points to critique the power structures and normalizing discourses that direct our lives and efforts along certain lines” (Gross and Alexander 288). Such an approach does not discount individual experiences of emotion, but instead seeks ways to “turn such failure, our disappointment and frustration, into critique” (289). Gross and Alexander argue, “The cost of forgetting negative emotion, even the experience of failure, is high. Success feels good, but it does not reorient us against unjust norms. Success, as it trumps personal failure, can also numb us to failures that are structural” (290). Working in the middle of failure, turning toward the negative emotion that we experience and witness, can reveal new questions and complexities. Such reorientation can also help us rethink the source of the emotion—particularly with a feeling like shame that is not just produced within, but is also imposed upon, bodies.

Allison Carr refers to failure and shame as “congenial bedfellows.” As she explains it, shame moves experiences into the category of failure: “Shame acknowledges the failure, and in so doing, names the failure *as failure*, causing us to feel isolation while making us painfully aware of our relationality” (emphasis in original). As a default response, people tend to isolate themselves and turn inward because, Ahmed explains, shame “feels like an exposure” and “the bind of shame is that it is intensified by being seen by others *as shame*” (*Cultural Politics*, emphasis in original, 103). Shame marks the difference between an individual experiencing a failure and feeling like *a failure*. The idea that an individual can be a personal failure is only possible under the influence of shame. And shame is highly influential because it is personal and situational, as well as socially bound and constructed. Shame entangles the personal and social—“the biology and biography of a person” (Probyn 82).

While shame feels like personal exposure, it can also function to expose. Experiences of failure and feelings of shame reveal the instability of ideology and the fallibility of stock stories and stereotypes. Halberstam writes, “failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities” (88). The shame associated with failure stems from an implicit agreement or alignment with social expectations, values, and norms. Shame, in other words, contains the rulebook for appropriate versus inappropriate behavior within a community or situation. In order for emotion to have meaning and power, the rules must be agreed upon; or as Laura Micciche puts it, “[O]nly through collective, implicit assent in communal life does emotion have meaning” (11). According to Ahmed, “Shame can work as a deterrent: in order to avoid shame, subjects must enter the ‘contract’ of the social bond, by seeking to approximate a social ideal. Shame can also be experienced as *the affective cost of not following the scripts of*

normative existence” (106-7, emphasis in original). People can avoid shame by sticking to the “script,” and they experience what Carr describes as “the raw sting of shame” when they stray from that script or break the rules.

In the case of failure experiences, there are many ways to break the rules. One of them is to defy the expectations of obligatory striving—to stop or be stopped. If striving exists as the norm associated with success, then those who do not strive or cannot “bounce back” into the movement of striving, are not following the script. Breaking the “social bond” of striving can thus usher in feelings of shame, directing failure into the bodies of individuals (*I am not working hard enough, trying hard enough, doing enough...I am not enough*). Shame sounds an alarm. Or, in Ahmed’s words, “When shamed, one’s body seems to burn up with the negation that is perceived (self-negation); and shame impresses upon the skin, as an intense feeling of the subject ‘being against itself.’ Such a feeling of negation, which is taken on by the subject as a sign of its own failure, is usually experienced before another” (103). When individuals feel shame “burn” in the body and “impress on the skin,” they often collapse inward, spiraling into accusatory and punishing questions: How could I...? Why didn’t I...? Why can’t I...?

Turning toward “the critical power of negative emotion” in the middle of a failure experience can transform shame-based feelings and judgements into a spotlight that illuminates the script, creating an opportunity for inquiry that moves beyond self-blame. In other words, an emotion like shame makes the social norms, stereotypes, and rules of the situation visible, and we can respond to feelings of shame in ways that move the emotion out of individual bodies and into new forms of conversation. For Gross and Alexander, negative emotions, at their best, “signal the need for critique and often motivate people who experience the world differently” (286-7). Engaging the negative emotion of failure as a critical tool means changing the emphasis in questions of self-blame, diverting attention away from the “I”: *How* could I? *Why* didn’t I? *Why* can’t I?

Meagan Rogers illustrates the shift away from personal blame when she advocates for “racial awareness narratives” as a pedagogical strategy for surfacing white privilege (223). In her classes, she shares a personal story about a moment in which she was “both unintentionally racist and consciously antiracist” (228). In telling this story, she directly acknowledges the feelings of shame that the story evokes, but she does not focus the narrative on her feelings; instead, she explains, “I placed that shame alongside my conscious choice on how I acted” (229). The idea of “placing shame alongside” failure experiences opens up important avenues for conversation with students and colleagues. First, we can encourage intentional slowing or stopping—when failure is fresh—to place shame alongside the experience in order to situate

personal feelings within social circumstances. Shame, read like a text, contains a list of “should” statements that are rooted in values and beliefs. In failure experiences, we can unravel feelings of shame like a scroll: we can spread out the script and read the list of instructions, drawing the values to the surface so that they become a dialogue instead of a directive.

At the same time, we must consider the motility in this emotional self-monitoring. We must understand that such intentional slowing or stopping—as well as *choosing* to put shame alongside an experience—is a sign of white privilege. As such, we must always ask: Who is allowed to make intentional stops in order to work in the middle of failure, and who is not? Who can “place shame alongside” and who does not have a choice? How are bodies and experiences marked with shame?

This invitation to inquiry does not dismiss the importance of behavioral guidelines or the realities of personal responsibility; shame functions in important ways to control destructive behavior and spark personal reflection. The point, instead, is to identify default responses to shame and failure—the impulse to internalize the emotion and absorb the responsibility. When we stop, or pay attention to stopping, in the middle of failure, we can start to unpack the shame and scrutinize the sources of societal ideals and systemic oppression.

Un-resolving Failure Stories

In addition to the analysis that can take place in the middle of failure, we must also turn our attention toward storytelling. When failures are translated into narratives, we tend to see the same storyline over and over. And it makes sense: the failure stories that are shared in public venues emphasize successful-failure because success and failure are bound to individual identity and authority. The storyteller must construct the story in a way that balances vulnerability and strength in order to maintain or advance his or her *ethos*. However, when the failure story begins with a successful outcome, the storyteller inevitably works backwards, recasting failures as bumps on the road to success. The complicated movement of exploration and struggle gets funneled into the progression toward the successful outcome. We can, however, work to un-resolve failure stories. We can unpack existing examples of successful-failure narratives: unraveling the plotlines, identifying the tropes, and unsettling the assumptions.

Fail-forward rhetoric reaches large audiences, on a regular basis, through the commencement speech genre. As mentioned earlier, Sheryl Sandberg launched her resilience message during a UC Berkeley commencement address to a live audience of thousands and, since then, to a YouTube audience of hundreds of thousands. Additionally, two of the most well-known and widely circulated commencement speeches, delivered by Steve Jobs at Stanford and

JK Rowling at Harvard, focus on successful-failure as the central theme. All three commencement speakers—Sandberg, Jobs, and Rowling—are white, and they each addressed audiences at elite institutions. Embodying whiteness at an elite university does not guarantee success; in fact, the ubiquity of success often intensifies the fear of failure. Access to resources and the motility of whiteness does, however, decrease the distance between failure and success. Thus, “fail forward” is more than an inspirational message—it’s a viable option. On the other hand, fewer resources and less motility increases the gulf between success and failure, making the forward-failure a larger and larger leap. When commencement speeches are posted online and circulated through social media, the rhetorical situation changes, but the message does not. This implies equal access to successful-failure and reinforces the emphasis on individual resilience and courage, regardless of circumstances.

Steve Jobs’ 2005 commencement address offers an example of a speech that was delivered at Stanford University but then reached millions of people through YouTube (32 million views and counting). In the speech, Job shares three stories that were pivotal to his success: each one a failure that transformed into a turning point; each one haunted by whiteness and motility. In the three stories he shares, he has access—access to a college campus; access to financial resources; access to the very best health care. Thus, even though the speech revolves around experiences that seem, initially, to be stopping points, Jobs’ stories ultimately have a sense of unfettered movement. He conjures the courage and embodies the resilience to regain momentum, but the undercurrent of movement, the motility, was always there—a stream that he could dip his feet back into. To un-resolve the successful-failure narrative in his speech, we can ask questions such as: What resources are required in order to follow his advice? How and where does his whiteness (and maleness) allow him to move freely where others may be stopped? How is his body read, during and after failure?

Un-resolving failure stories means identifying plotlines that highlight the courageous individual and ignore the privilege that enables movement and rewards courage. Additionally, we can work to un-resolve the genre of “failure story,” seeking to identify the many sub-categories that exist under the umbrella. What if, for example, we categorized Steve Job’s commencement address as a *racially privileged failure narrative*? How might such a distinction help us imagine different experiences and expand the genre of the failure story?

Commencement speeches provide a large archive of successful-failure narratives to analyze, but the narratives are constructed within tight constraints (i.e., an inspirational message, delivered in a culminating moment, often by someone outside of the community). With the proliferation of resilience programs on college campuses, more and more students and faculty are sharing their failure stories on a regular basis. As failure and resilience discourse gains

traction, we must seek productive opportunities to un-resolve the stories that circulate locally, bringing new layers of rhetorical awareness into our campus conversations and resources.

The Stories Alone

Thus far, I have focused on challenging and complicating failure rhetoric; however, I want to pause here to emphasize the important—even life-saving—work that “fail-forward” messaging can do on college campuses. The 2015 *New York Times* article, “Suicide on Campus and the Pressure of Perfection,” links “America’s culture of hyperachievement” to the increase in “suicide clusters” at high schools and colleges across the country (Scelfo). These “clusters”—a group of 3-6 student suicides in a single year and on a single campus—show the urgency behind the “fail forward” and “building resilience” messaging. Many students live with a constant, often debilitating, fear of falling behind and failing to live up to expectations.

To mitigate the pressure of perfectionism, colleges and universities are developing programs that directly address failure and resilience. The Resilience Consortium, for example, represents the combined efforts of ten elite universities seeking to help students build their “capacities for persistence, creativity, emotional intelligence, grit, cognitive flexibility, risk-taking, agency, adapting to change, delaying gratification, learning from failure, and questioning success.” Tulane University offers a program called “The Untold Story of Failure” that encourages students, faculty, staff, and alumni to share their stories as a way to “normalize the idea of failure and setbacks.” The Thrive program at UT-Austin offers an app that provides access to student stories and interactive activities to encourage reflection practices and coping strategies. These programs, and many others across the country, are responding to the immediacy of the pain and pressure that students experience. Sharing failure stories can offer a profound moment of catharsis, particularly for students who have struggled in silence. As resilience programs continue to evolve, we must look for ways to extend story sharing to include story shaping.

When faced with the crisis of high suicide rates, providing coping mechanisms and cathartic experiences can feel more urgent than critical engagement with the rhetoric of failure, but we have to consider the long-term effects of the language we use and the storylines we promote. If the stock story of success goes unquestioned, then the coping and catharsis will fade and the fear will return. The invitation to share failure stories, alone, does not make such sharing safe. Martinez describes her time in the academy as full of “barriers of institutional racism, sexism, and classism” (33) and she has faced, as quoted earlier, “unrelenting experiences in the institution in which my race is continually targeted by colleagues, students, and professors as a personal and

professional deficit when I struggle” (34). The decision to share a personal failure story in the high-pressure environment of higher education is a sign of bravery; but the freedom to share a personal failure story—without barriers and targeting—is a sign of white privilege.

What, then, does it look like to give voice to a wider range of experiences when doing so can prove vulnerable and unsafe? Critical race theory, and counter-storytelling methodology in particular, offers a starting point for envisioning how we might expose and challenge stock stories of success on our campuses. For example, Martinez models dialogic composite storytelling, placing a stock story and counter-story side-by-side. In Martinez’s example, the story revolves around Alejandra, a character who has failed her PhD qualifying exam—a context that Martinez selected because it serves “a programmatic gatekeeping function for graduate students,” a form of stopping (40). From the perceived failure, Martinez puts forward two very different conversations. In the stock story, three professors assess “Alejandra’s progress and status in the program” (40) and whether or not she is a “good fit” (42). The stock story contains a restrictive rubric for success, full of assumptions about how a “successful student” should operate in academia. The counter-story, presented as a phone call between Alejandra and her mother, takes place after the program director has advised Alejandra to leave the program. Their conversation is full of questions, and, as such, models the work of slowing down to unpack assumptions in the face of a perceived failure.

As college campuses continue to develop resources and conversation around failure and resilience, we need to uncover the underlying stock stories and map the parameters around “speakeable” and “unspeakeable” failures on our campuses. From there, we need to integrate counter-storytelling practices into the collection, distribution, and discussion of failure stories. Composite storytelling offers a starting point, a way to begin surfacing a wider range of stories and experiences without asking students to risk the vulnerability of the spotlight.

Conclusion

During the 2005 commencement season, the same year that Steve Jobs took the stage, David Foster Wallace delivered the address at Kenyon College. He started with a “didactic little parable-ish” story about two young fish who happen to pass by an older fish. As they pass each other, the older fish nods at them and says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” After they swim on for a bit, one fish turns to the other and says, “What the hell is water?” Wallace immediately assured the audience that he would not assume the role of “wise, older fish explaining what water is to you younger fish”; instead, “The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often

the ones that are hardest to see and talk about.” At the end of the speech, he returned to the fish parable to describe the “capital-T Truth,” as he saw it:

It is about the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over:

This is water.

This is water.

When power and privilege go unquestioned, when whiteness goes unnoticed, the successful-failure narrative—the idea that all courageous and resilient individuals can and should fail-forward—becomes the “water,” the stock story of success that is “hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time.”

Seeing the “water,” for me, started with the realization that I was stuck in a thought pattern that perpetually looped metanoia back into kairos, failure into success. But it’s not just a “loop” in my thinking: it’s my privilege, my white privilege in particular, that defaults to the perception of successful-failure as an open road for the brave and hard-working. I have come to realize that the story of Kairos, the one that captivated me as a graduate student, is a story of motility. The god of opportunity, with wings on their back and feet, embodies constant and unfettered movement, and I was projecting that motility onto the concept of metanoia. Instead of questioning the freedom of movement embedded in kairos, I tried to extend that movement, that motility, into the realm of missed opportunity. I encouraged students to reimagine regret as a gateway and to mobilize failures into stepping stones. But then, when I started listening to my students’ silences and struggles, the underlying privilege in my pedagogy surfaced.

When I turned toward failure to seek understanding instead of answers, the quick and efficient pace of striving slowed into the layered work of inquiry. I focused on surfacing questions and stitching together ideas: obligatory striving, the rhetorical construction of “personal failure,” resilience bootstrapping, the haunting of whiteness, the middle of failure, and unresolved plotlines. Instead of a solution or formula, these pieces illustrate a process—a snapshot of one person’s effort to unravel a stock story to see how it’s built. To avoid replacing one stock story with another, we have to not only deconstruct stock stories but also acknowledge the ways in which we contribute or comply. That is the work, messy and slow, that will bring new light and language to the unspeakable failures.

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