Affective Structures
of Modern Life

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LIVING

ON

AFTER

FAILURE

LIVING ON AFTER FAILURE

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LIVING

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FAILURE

AFFECTIVE STRUCTURES OF MODERN LIFE

To those who have failed
and continue to fail,
and who blame no one and nothing else except themselves,
living or otherwise

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

THE AFFECTIVE STRUCTURE OF FAILURE

This book is about failure. More specifically, it is about living on in the wake of failure, living with the mark of failure henceforth etched indelibly at the heart of existence; it is about articulating forms of living on where existence trails after failure. This will thus not be that typical book where one learns from failure or where one learns to overcome failure. It is not concerned with conjuring an optimistic or positive horizon out of experiences of failure. It will not provide consolation by imagining a life pedagogy from failure for the recuperation or reparation of either the individual or the collective. Instead, this book does not leave the negativity of failure: it examines living on in terms of existing *with* the full force of failure. Not seeking a way out of failure, it is about getting stuck with failure, following where failure leads existence and thought. As such, this book is a coming to terms with the ineluctability of failure and existence, the inextricability of existence from failure. In this regard, it serves, at best, as an ontological reckoning, reminding us of the fact of existence's entanglement with failure, which we tend, or prefer, to forget. Otherwise, to the disappointment or even chagrin of some readers, this book offers little, if anything, for political action or thought in any conventional sense, but I will explain why in due course. Meanwhile, as I would like to put it in this introduction, this book takes into account how

failure structures our existence, how it constitutes our existential structure. Indeed, if we care to acknowledge, failure is always there inflecting our lives, refracting our sense of existence: it either cuts across our existential condition with an irrepressible force, relentlessly reminding us that it is perhaps *the* incontrovertible sense of existence, or it subtends our lives, undercutting and troubling our existence with an equally disturbing force. Failure is thus a structure no less affective than existence in all its troubled or troubling registers. In the words of the philosopher Costica Bradatan, "Failure is a profoundly disturbing experience—as disturbing as life itself."[1] To recognize failure as an *affective structure* of existence is to give voice to what we have always feared to acknowledge: that we can never escape the sense of failure, that the sense of failure always stays with us.[2] More critically, it is to give voice to those who have dared accept this irreducible sense of failure in existence, those who cannot, or even do not want to, dissociate themselves from it, those who refuse the ideology of success and its attendant rhetoric of grit and resilience, those who have no wish to carry on. It is to give elucidation and legitimation to their complex and troubled sense of existing with failure, despite—if not precisely because of—the fact that these modes of being run counter to what we commonly or "normally" consider to be productive, meaningful existence, veering pessimistically toward the nihilistic even. This book does not silence them to the margins or lacunae of what it means to exist.

There are several motivations for this book. More immediate and explicit is the constant swarming of failures into contemporary life since the beginning of our present century: 9/11 and the catastrophic collateral damage to civilian lives in the subsequent "war on terror," the 2008 Great Recession, Fukushima in 2011, the 2016 Brexit vote and the US presidential election, police shootings of Black Americans and the continued impunity of police brutality, ineffective gun control policies, the hate crime of 2016 at the gay club Pulse, the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue massacre, the 2021 anti-Asian Atlanta shootings, #metoo, the global mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, and too many others to name in this ever-growing list.[3] In relation to this list, this book can be said to be very much a response to its time, a response to an implicit imperative made by its time to register contemporary failures. Yet this book is concerned with quite different failures from those listed macro failures. It focuses on failures on a smaller scale instead, which are nevertheless equally important and even urgent for us to attend to. But if this book is not dealing with macro failures, it is also because any

beginning of a proper redress for those (geo)political, economic, sociocultural, and institutional failures would seriously require a collective response, something to which a monograph such as this present work—that is, a project undertaken by an individual—can never assume to approximate itself.[4]

The second motivation is the burgeoning of what might be called "failure studies," whose literature now spans the disciplines of philosophy, sociology, economics, the physical sciences, technological sciences, literary studies, queer theory, critical race studies, the digital humanities, performance studies, and more.[5] The works in this literature recognize failure as a contemporary human condition and rightfully claim that we can no longer defer its understanding, critique, and even appreciation. However, as will be seen, most of them can be hasty in giving failure a positive spin, which also entails giving failure an optimistic horizon, leaving us with barely a rigorous thinking of failure, one without any true engagement with the affective structure of failure. It is for failure studies not to be a superficial engagement with failure that this book insists on a more veritable thinking of failure: one that faces failure straight on, one that is more truthful or honest with respect to not only what failure reveals to thought but also what thought feels before, if not amid, failure. As I will argue in this introduction, this would be a thinking of failure that stays with failure and all its negative affects *without trying to get out of them*; this would be nothing short of thinking at, or as, an impasse, yet this would perhaps also be thinking *failure as failure*, finally.

This leads us to the third motivation, which is the emergence or publication of certain works of contemporary literature that include Édouard Levé's *Autoportrait* and *Suicide*; Rachel Cusk's *Aftermath* and her *Outline* trilogy; Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*; Yiyun Li's *Dear Friend*, *Where Reasons End*, and *Must I Go*; and Kate Zambreno's *Appendix Project*, *Drifts*, and *To Write as if Already Dead*.[6] These texts are arguably representative of our present zeitgeist as they register the contemporary sense of overwhelming failure, but they point indeed to personal failures or the personal sense of failure rather than macro failures such as those listed earlier. They thus deal with relationship failures (in Cusk), the failure to will oneself to do anything (in Moshfegh), career-related failures (in Zambreno), and the existential failure to want to live (in Levé and Li), and they illustrate how such failures can effectuate lasting emotional, psychological, and physiological transformations in the individual, rendering them no longer the same, forever changing their relations with others and the world. These texts also show how individuals subsequently recalibrate (or not) both their sense of

existence or what it means for them to exist and their means of living on after failure. One could say that genres, in Lauren Berlant's sense—that is, both discursive and nondiscursive gestures, or nascent forms of expressions, that endeavor to respond to, or cope with, surrounding phenomena—are flailing here.[7] Following Berlant's line of argument, genres sustain living on for the moment, and elucidating them can be critical for recognizing and respecting modes of being that are trying to survive certain pressures of contemporary life. And yet, the genres—especially the nondiscursive gestures—in these literary works, while seeking to manage the entanglement of failure and existence, may not be successful after all. Or else they might not even want to succeed at that. Thus, they *might* render—albeit in thoughtless, purposeless, will-less, or disinterested ways—some form of minimal living on after failure possible; they can make existence—that is, existence that coexists with failure—at least bearable for the moment. But they also leave individuals with the hopeless condition where they, alone in their respective solitary selves, continue to grapple with the veracity of failure as an incontrovertible sense of existence. They are always left irreducibly and unbearably with their failures, their sense of failure, on their own.

The texts suggest, therefore, that failures at the personal level can oftentimes be felt more intensively and enduringly than larger-scale failures at the social, economic, political, and even historical levels, and that attending to them can be critical too. They underscore how personal failures cannot be ignored or bracketed when thinking about contemporary failure, and this is something we will heed here.[8] More significantly for this book, they are narratives through which individuals reckon with how the sense of failure constitutes an irrefutable or unsurpassable sense of existence that no recuperative or reparative rhetoric or philosophy, no progress narrative, and no talk therapy can sublimate (indeed, the narrator in Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Cusk in *Aftermath*, Levé in *Autoportrait* and *Suicide*, Sedgwick in *A Dialogue on Love*, and Li in *Dear Friend* either express doubt or suspicion about psychoanalysis and/or psychotherapy or they profess an ineffectiveness of these practices with regard to their sense of failure). As said above, the genres in these narratives do not seek to overcome failure, to leave failure behind and get on with life, as if failure is then but a distant or insignificant memory of a mishap. This is how the texts, more than failure studies, can be instructive for a staying *and* coming to terms with the relentless nature of the affective structure of failure that negatively undercuts contemporary existence. It is precisely because of their deeper and more sustained engagement with failure, their willingness to stay longer with the

affective structure of failure, their expositions on the difficulty of extricating existence from failure or the near impossibility of surviving the ineluctable entanglement of existence with failure, that these works of contemporary literature will be the focus of this book.[9] In turn, it is in view of a better approach to these texts, one that faces straight on the problematics of failure in them and/or failure in general, rather than anxiously or paranoidly seeking to overcome, dispel, or repress them, that this book, again, argues for the tarrying with failure and all its negative affects, for the inhabiting of the impasse that failure as an affective structure of existence is. With this, we can perhaps better approximate ourselves to a thinking of failure that will correspond to forms of living on in the aftermath of failure in these texts as well as others that deal with the contemporary sense of personal failure. The stakes, though, are not only hermeneutical. As suggested earlier, the elucidating of such a thinking of *failure as failure*, of failure's affective structure, can help us better understand the inextinguishable sense of failure in real, contemporary existence as well, helping us understand those who cannot shake off the sense of failure in them, those who have a particular attachment to their failures, those who no longer want to carry on in the wake of failure. It is, in short, to accord them a discursive and affective space that grants them the freedom to articulate and languish in their sense of failure, instead of telling them to snap out of it and reappropriating or reinterpellating them into ideologies of success and their norms of grit and resilience. If there is one failure that we should avoid, perhaps it is that which makes them feel that there is no legitimate space to attend to their sense of existential and ontological failure except in a suicide note.

Twenty-First-Century Epic Fail

The primary task of this introduction is the explication of a thinking of *failure as failure*, of failure's affective structure, of the thorough impasse that such a thinking of failure is. Put simply, it is to outline how we can arrive at such a thinking, how such a thinking looks like, and what entails from it. Before proceeding, a slight return to the backdrop of contemporary failure is in order, so as to identify a trait of failure that will be important for us and to draw out a linguistic mode of articulating contemporary failure that seemingly prefigures the general prose style of our selected literary works. From there, we will be able to mark the stylistic difference with regard to writing about failure in this present century in comparison to the preceding one. We will also be able to discern why there is the preoccupation with, if not

sympathy and/or empathy for, personal failures, rather than macro failures, in contemporary writings. All this will precisely lead us to the important consideration of the affective dimension of failure, as well as unravel for us how we still do not have a thinking of failure in a strict sense.

Let us, then, recall our earlier list of twenty-first-century failures. If one indeed grants them the status of failure, we might be tempted to call our present century the century of failures.[10] Quite immediately, though, there will be others who will oppose this claim and counterpropose the preceding century as *the* century of failures. The twentieth century, after all, was witness to two World Wars, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the Great Depression, the Watergate scandal under the Nixon administration, the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the AIDS epidemic, the 1918 influenza pandemic, the phenomenon of "failed states," the Columbine school shooting, etcetera. This is not to mention that the most quotable or cited words on failure have come from one of that century's great modernists: indeed, Samuel Beckett's phrase of "fail again. Fail better" resounds till this day, as if there can be no other, *better* way to capture the sense of failure.[11] And yet, as if in response to this, we have had in the early part of the twenty-first century the millennial-speak "epic fail." What the phrase or even "speech act" does is to pronounce almost immediately the failure of anyone, anything, anywhere, anytime. With "epic fail," not only are political, juridical, or social institutions failing but a dress, or a cupcake, can also be a "fail." "Epic fail" clearly is no longer "trending" today but looking back at it at present can give us enough critical distance to assess its values and shortcomings for a thinking of contemporary failure. I will come back very soon to this. For now, let it be said that "epic fail" has perhaps captured the zeitgeist of sensing—and needing to call out—failure everywhere, on every scale, in almost every domain of contemporary life; it registers or encapsulates the sense that no other century like the present had failures so prevalent and pervasive in practically every aspect of life. In addition to "epic fail," perhaps we should also not forget to mention the establishment of the Museum of Failure in Sweden in 2017, which arguably stands as a concrete artifact attesting to the sense of failure overwhelming us today, so much so that we need a physical space to archive our failures for all to see.[12]

To be clear, this book is not interested in determining the present century as the century of failure par excellence; its purpose is not to compare this and the preceding century in order to see which comes out tops in terms of having greater or more failures. This is not the conversation I am interested in entering in this book. Each epoch, after all, will understandably

consider some of its failures to be incomparable to others in history, if not for all time. Hence, rather than staging a competition between centuries to determine which of them has failed better, it is more just, reasonable, and perhaps helpful to say that failure is accumulative. In other words, each age adds its failures to the one(s) after. From the perspective of the latter, then, it can seem that failure is but mounting and piling in its time, that the sense of failure is weighing especially upon it, since it has to remember the failures of the previous century or centuries as well, as if the failures of its own time are already not enough to bear or account for. The compounding effect of failure notwithstanding, perhaps what we need to acknowledge is that every epoch has its failures or that failure is for all times (even though, as I will re-state later, we hardly give it time, we do not accord it its own temporality). The sense of failure being with us all this time or throughout time becomes more salient if we recall the failure since the beginning of time of Adam and Eve to heed the commandment to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge, which led not only to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden but also the impossibility of mankind to ever reclaim residency there. Against the back-drop of this "original" failure, one could say—and this would only reiter-ate failure's accumulative nature and/or effect—that mankind's subsequent failures are but *postscripts* to this first failure. Postscripts and failure share several characteristics: like failures that pile on one another, one can always add a postscript to another, a post-postscript to an existing postscript, ad infinitum; failure is also oftentimes acknowledged after the fact—that is, the consciousness of failure might come only after the act that constitutes that very failure is already completed, and this again renders it like a postscript in the sense of an addendum to the main text, not unlike an afterthought. It will be important to think postscripts alongside failure, therefore, and I will do so in the conclusion of this book. For now, let me simply posit, in light of failure's postscripts, that the thinking of failure is constant across time; failure preoccupies the thought of each epoch, regardless of it manifesting as an explicit subject in the epoch's philosophy, literature, and the arts or as an implicit backdrop to the discourses of the epoch.

It remains critically important, nevertheless, to underscore how failure is thought about and/or articulated differently in each epoch. This is not only to recognize that, despite failure being a constant phenomenon across time and space, each failure can be different from the next. This is also to allow us to illuminate how differently we treat, respond to, and cope with failure according to each epoch; it might even enable us to offer a different way of thinking about failure *within* an epoch—which is indeed a princi-

pal endeavor of this book, a chance presented to us by the deluge of failures that have been overwhelming contemporary life so far to think about failure in a way that stays with it rather than seeking to surpass it. This is why it can still be insightful to emphasize the difference between our century and the one before, specifically with regard to the representation—that is, the inscription, of failure. This difference is perhaps already evident in the free citation by anyone of "epic fail"—admittedly quite the frivolous amalgamation of the two terms *epic* and *fail*[13]—in contrast to the exclusive attribution of the phrase "fail again. Fail better"—thoughtfully crafted in spare modernist style—to Beckett. Furthermore, what "epic fail" has done is to wrest the title of "failure" away from exclusively monumental events oftentimes on a global scale, as was typically done in the twentieth century, and to recognize that ordinary, everyday happenstances are worthy of the title too. What "epic fail" has taught us, then, is that we should not be attuned only to major, geopolitical failures but also to minor, supposedly mundane, or even banal ones. Indeed, there is no reason to marginalize or deny ordinary, everyday failures; there is no good reason either for us to hierarchize failures or prioritize which ones to consider. It is not as if we have learned well from past major failures. If anything, we have only *not failed* to repeat them, and one recalls Fukushima here, where the lessons of Chernobyl seem to have gone unheeded, proving Beckett right about failing again only to head "worstward." As "epic fail" has arguably led the way, then, perhaps it is time to give as much attention to every failure, to all sorts of failure, but especially those that we tend to overlook or disregard: those that seem so ordinary or pedestrian, those that seem so minor or insignificant, those that are personal and hence seem less "eventful" than those of larger, historical, or planetary dimensions.[14]

"Epic fail" also belongs to common, everyday, or even banal language, and this highlights another critical difference in the articulation of failure between our present century and the preceding one. Just as failure in the twentieth century was typically invoked in relation to major events, the writing of failure at that time was also seemingly the domain of major writers, including Beckett himself. Indeed, Beckett never failed to make failure the mark of artistic genius, and he and other (largely male) modernist writers or artists would wear this badge fiercely and proudly as if it were their prerogative to write or think about the grand failures of their times in their highly stylized manner.[15] This explains the seriousness they bring to the treatment of failure, despite or in spite of the dark humor that can be found in their works, in contrast to the frivolous laughter that accompanies the

pronouncements of "epic fail," which generally signals an insouciance with regard to whether the failure in question will be addressed or not.[16] In general, then, twentieth-century failure may be considered a "grand narrative" writ large by the "great" modernist writers/artists. With "epic fail," though, the genre of writing or speaking about failure is no longer the privilege of "great" writers/artists; as part of common speech, "epic fail" has given everyone—or rather, has reclaimed for everyone—the right to proclaim the failure of just about anything. Put another way, "epic fail" has democratized both the way we consider what constitutes failure and the way we write or talk about failure. I would like to think that the vernacular and democratizing spirit of "epic fail" is somewhat reflected in the works that interest us in this book, across which we find a notable majority of female voices: voices of female writers at various stages of their writing careers, of various standings in literary circles and institutions today. I have already mentioned the ordinary failures with which these texts are preoccupied. These failures are also correspondingly recounted largely in prosaic language, oftentimes bereft of stylistic (dis)ingenuity, which not only grants these texts the capacity to expound with raw or brutal honesty on the affective structure of failure but also allows them to stand apart from the heavily stylized twentieth-century modernist writings of failure. (Nevertheless, ordinary or personal language in these texts can also fail in managing the ineluctability of existence and failure. When this happens, one is left with bodily responses that react clumsily, awkwardly, uneasily, ineptly, failingly, and this is where we will need to turn our attention to more corporeal genres in Berlant's sense.)

But to go back to "epic fail": despite its democratizing force with regard to what counts as failure and who gets to proclaim failure, it nonetheless has its problems. We have earlier briefly highlighted its flippant, if not uncritical, nature. Indeed, when uttered so often without much thought, the enunciation "epic fail" can reduce everything to failure, and this reduction threatens to erase the very notion of failure, since if everything is failure, then nothing is effectively a failure. (Or, as the literary scholar Gavin Jones puts it, "To say that failure is everywhere condemns it to being nowhere."[17]) This reduction flattens out not just the differences of each failure but also the different *experiences* of each failure, even though we might be speaking of a similar failure. For example, my experience (as a scholar of the humanities who trucks mainly with books most of the time) of failing to replace a lightbulb and my affective responses to this failure (minimal, if not none to speak of) can be very different from another's—say, an engineer who furthermore prides himself in handiwork. Affects surrounding failure are im-

portant; therefore, not only do they articulate the critical difference between one failure and another, or between one's experience of failure and another's, they also help us recognize how every failure is registered differently in every one of us, hence teaching us how every failure counts, how every failure in fact matters. This is why it will be insufficient for us to think failure solely in terms of structure, not especially the cold, antihumanist, or anhuman structure according to French theory of the late 1960s and early 1970s.[18] This will be inadequate to a thinking of failure that dwells in failure and that exposes itself to all that comes with or after failure. Taking into account (negative) affects of failure will be necessary, too, and this is why we need a thinking of failure that reckons with failure's affective structure.

Toward an Affective Structure of Failure

Now, any engagement with affects cannot elide the personal.[19] And the personal cannot be bracketed from any thinking of failure. The personal, after all, has his or her unique relation to failure. This explains how even though failure might be pronounced or established by a collective, it cannot have an enduring force in, or effect on, the individual if it did not resonate strongly with (something within) the individual. Put another way, even though failure can be produced by political, economic, sociocultural, and institutional shortcomings, there remain undoubtedly affects of failure that speak very much, if not more insistently, to the individual.[20] These are affects by which the individual still feels largely and irreducibly affected. Or else they are affects that reawaken and thereby amplify a prior affect of failure within the individual, one that precedes and goes beyond political, economic, and social determinations. By affect here, I follow scholars such as Teresa Brennan, Sara Ahmed, and Jonathan Flatley to think it generally in terms of something that is in the air, something atmospheric, which generates from the confluence of personal and external forces and which can leave one with a great unease, a lingering sense of undefinable dread if not a debilitating effect not unlike a "suspended agency" that results from an "ugly feeling," according to Sianne Ngai.[21] To all this, I would add that we can also think of affect in terms of pressure, the effects of which become palpable through either a change in an atmospheric system or an interaction between two such systems. Thinking failure as such an affect would perhaps help us understand how the sense of failure exerts some form of real bodily and psychical force from either within or without the individual. But I stress here the cases where the collective might try all it might to dispel any notion of failure but

the individual insists nevertheless on his or her failure, thus rendering all external attempts to negate it simply futile. In these cases, the pressure from the sense of failure within is too insistent or overwhelming to enable one to be receptive of outside forces. If we keep this in mind, it would not be difficult to think how failure can largely be a personal affair. In this regard, we could even say that it is at the level of the personal that failure finds its true force, where failure is sustained and gathers its intensity, and that the personal is perhaps where a thinking and understanding of failure true to failure should locate or immerse itself.

I would like to argue here that the personal sense of failure can be articulated in terms of what Raymond Williams has called a "structure of feeling." Certainly, "structures of feeling" pertain to the social, although this social has to be understood *not* as an established or institutionalized grouping, *not* as a gathering with its dominant or normalized and normative comportments: the social here does not refer to "social forms" that are "recognizable" or "explicit," embodied by "institutions" or "formations and traditions," and projected in "dominant systems of belief and education" or "influential systems of explanation and argument."[22] In other words, the social, for Williams, is not a formed community or collective that considers the thoughts, feelings, and experiences to shape its social consciousness to be done, that takes its construction to be something of the past and no longer ongoing. The beginnings of "structures of feeling" are not to be found there; in fact, they might even be suppressed by the social, (mis)understood as "formed wholes" or "fixed," not granted legitimation or recognition.[23] In Williams's words, "structures of feeling" are "experiences to which the fixed forms do not speak at all, which indeed they do not recognize."[24] (Putting this in relation to our thinking of failure, there is no doubt that contemporary cultures of success or our success-oriented societies would find what we are considering a "structure of feeling"—that is, one that tarries with failure—hardly acceptable.) "Structures of feeling" thus find their outlets in "social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations that have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available" or, in short, in "emergent formations."[25] Put another way, they unravel in certain pockets of society, among minor groups or groups that have yet to find their grouping; it is there where thoughts and/or sentiments that are refused currency in the larger social context can find some minimum expression or be shared at least to a minimal extent. This does not preclude "emergent formations" from counting (on) individuals who are disparate and isolated from one another as they can be, which is to say, individuals

who, again, have not yet found their social grouping. This is why Williams would further argue that "structures of feeling" are markedly registered in the works of individual literary writers of a particular period who might not necessarily be in conversation with one another but work "in relatively isolated ways."[26] Williams's examples are "the new semantic figures of Dickens, of Emily Brontë, and others" wherein one finds "exposure and isolation as a *general* condition, and poverty, debt, or illegitimacy as its connecting instances," as opposed to "early Victorian ideology" that "specified the exposure caused by poverty or by debt or by illegitimacy as social failure or deviation."[27] In our case, it is in the selected works of Moshfegh, Cusk, Levé, Li, and Zambreno that we are locating a contemporary "structure of feeling" in terms of a staying with the personal sense of failure more as a general condition than a "social failure or deviation."

It is with Williams's reference to individual literary writers that we lean into the personal dimension of a "structure of feeling." A faithful reading of Williams, again, would counsel meticulous use of the term *personal*. According to Williams, the traditional positing of the personal against the social is a false distinction, whereby the social is regarded, once again, as already complete and fixed, and the personal as something that lies as if outside the social, a "this, here, now, alive, active, 'subjective'" entity that is seemingly antithetical to the constitution of the social.[28] For Williams, both the social and the personal are always in a germinal relation with each other: the personal feeds the social and vice versa.[29] Thus, even though the first articulation of a "structure of feeling" may be identified in the domain of the personal, it can in fact find its resonance in another individual or other individuals, and this will become irrefutable once these individuals begin to communicate with one another. This social dimension of a "structure of feeling" is affirmed, as Williams points out, when the linguistic idiom or style particular to a "structure of feeling" finds itself shared among other individuals, without there being any conscious collective effort for such a sharing—and we need only recall for our purposes the prevalence of the phrase "epic fail" or the commonality of the prosaic prose style of our contemporary literary works engaged with personal failures.[30] But to return to the *personal* in its traditional usage: what remains useful for us as well as for Williams is its indication of a "living presence" or "the specificity of present being" or what might be regarded as "private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating."[31] The extant dimension of a "structure of feeling" at the level of the personal, or what might seem so "alive" of it, however, can also paradoxically be anguishing, defeating, or even deathly, such as what I am

underscoring in this present work the refusal to extricate oneself from the despairing and debilitating sense of personal failure. It can thus generate a "tension" that is "an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency" for fixed, social forms, which typically predicate themselves on the hopeful, optimistic, and the productive.[32] It is critical, therefore, to elucidate the unfolding of a "structure of feeling" in all its manifestations as thought, bodily experience, and affective dimensions at the personal level, no matter how pessimistic or depressing they are, before this "structure of feeling" gets smoothened out or resolved by the larger social forms, before it becomes "formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations," by which time, according to Williams, "a new structure of feeling will usually already have begun to form, in the true social present."[33] This is indeed the reason for our focusing on the personal in our understanding of failure as a "structure of feeling," in order to register that sense of personal failure, which can be mundane or even banal but is nevertheless difficult for, and even constitutive of, everyday existence for some individuals, before it is being glossed over or sublimated into something else at the larger social level.

For us, then, failure as a "structure of feeling" is an affect traversing the world (in our absence), to which some of us (in our presence in the world) are then more attuned. Some of us indeed allow ourselves to be affected by this affect. Or, as Ahmed would say, this affect of failure "sticks" to some of us.[34] There are indeed some of us who sense this affect of failure more than others: we, the (un)lucky ones in this elective affinity with failure; we, born always untimely, with stars always misaligned; we, predisposed—as psychologists like to say—to this affect, to this affinity. Again, some might insist that this select group is particularly sensitive to failure due to prior or existing sociocultural conditionings that perpetuate the ideology of success or determine success as a norm. However, if we keep in mind how affects work—that is, how they precede and exceed both institutionalized or normalized ways of feelings and personal emotions—then we might also understand how failure can be something that lies outside of sociocultural logics too. In this regard, we could also say that failure circulates or operates like a more general, neutral, or even impersonal *sense.* Sense may indeed mean common sense, intelligible sense, or even nonsense. In other words, failure can be, as common sense, something commonly agreed upon to be so; as intelligible sense, the undesired outcome despite following steps programed to avoid precisely this negative result, or else the consequence of not following strictly those steps; and as nonsense, something that defies all reasoning, going against both common and intelligible senses. But I would say that

it can also be more and less than these senses, something less identifiable or categorizable than these senses, or else exceeding these categories. This sense—which is, again, general, neutral, or impersonal—pervades existence undeniably or irresistibly but which, like affect, is felt more acutely, more intensely, more lastingly, by a select few, the few who are more willing to recognize it than the rest of us are willing, or else dare, to do so. In any case, this sense, this "structure of feeling," can never be ignored or dispelled completely. With what Williams calls its "palpable pressures" exerting on us, the "structure of feeling" of failure is all too real and visceral, constituting parts of our existence with its undeniable "tensions, shifts, and uncertainties."[35] "Structures of feeling" do not remain silent, in other words. They need to be articulated; they seek their articulation. Thus, even though a "structure of feeling" might not resonate with a more general sentiment or historical consciousness, it is nevertheless irrepressible in the sense that it will find "qualifications, reservations, indications elsewhere."[36] According to Williams, it is in language that a "structure of feeling" will find its murmurings, albeit "at the very edge of [an epoch's] semantic availability," with its "specific feelings, specific rhythms," and this is also how it sees to its nascent forms or formation in works of literature.[37] For us, to reiterate, the contemporary "structure of feeling" in terms of a dwelling with personal failure finds expression in (the style of) the literary texts that we will be discussing in this present work, with the prosaicism or even banality of "epic fail" arguably contributing as an ambient soundscape to this affective structure.

The Problem of Failure

Before going further, there is undoubtedly a lingering question that begs to be answered: What is failure? The following definition might help us with a provisional response: "Failure doesn't come from falling down. Failure comes from not getting up." This is a common enough definition that can be found printed on T-shirts. But it is a negative definition of failure. In other words, the definition is there *not* for us to heed it, *not* for us to embrace failure. Rather, it is meant for us to do otherwise. It is a rallying call for us to get up, to rise from the fallen or prone state; we are to climb out of the hole of despair, to move on, scale greater heights. The definition is thus meant for us to be motivated to overcome failure, surpass it, negate it, leave it behind us. But this is precisely how we have stopped thinking about failure in any strict sense. Or, as Bradatan has said, "As a rule, we fail to take failure seriously."[38] As we are urged, or as we urge ourselves, to quickly

emerge from failure's psycho- and topological depressions, we renounce failure, disavowing it, repressing it, refusing to face it straight on. We shun failure. We do not give it due attention, denying its temporality, resisting its duration. Here, it will be instructive to follow Jones in thinking that "failure is . . . not, like error, a single instant, but an ongoing experience, or rather a set of foundational and all-encompassing human experience."[39] Otherwise, we fail failure in terms of not taking failure for what it is. All this is how, despite centuries or even millennials of failures, we still do not have any rigorous thinking of failure—one that takes into account its entire conceptual and affective dimension. Put another way, this is how failure, while being a problem to existence, also comes to have its problem—that is, how failure is yet to be thought of *as failure*.

The all-too-human tendency to gloss over failure, or the endeavor to turn failure into something else—into its very opposite even, which is success—can be found in most works of failure studies too. Many of them take failure to be but a (necessary) step to success, a critical lesson that will only lead to better things in the future, if not make one a better person. So, for example, the biologist Stuart Firestein will identify failure as a building block for scientific discoveries or breakthroughs.[40] Or else, Bradatan, the philosopher whom we have been citing so far, while wanting as I do to take on failure with a "eyes-wide-open approach," also cannot resist imputing to the thinking of failure the positive, moral lesson of humility for humanity.[41] For him, the understanding of failure must be a way to "narrate our way into humility," which is not simply a bildungsroman of sorts, allowing us to "come to terms with our imperfection, precariousness, and mortality, which are all epiphanies of failure" or "to realize who we are" but also a writing that leads us *out of* failure, a "cathartic" narrative through which "failure can work wonders of self-realization, healing, and enlightenment."[42] Success is no doubt in his horizon, as he says too: "Having taken failure as a guide, you stand a good chance to succeed."[43] Otherwise, the queer theorist Jack Halberstam, even though desiring, as is also my commitment, to explore the "darker territories of failure associated with futility, sterility, emptiness, loss, negative affect in general, and modes of unbecoming," would quickly attribute to failure the political potentiality to counter systemic inequity, racism, and gender or sexual discrimination.[44] According to Halberstam, "Failure [is] a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, 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."[45] And the composition scholar Allison D. Carr, whose thoughts on failure such as its visceral or limitless dimensions, including her attempt to "reconstruct failure in its own image," while largely resonating with mine, nevertheless supplements the experience of failure with a positivity—that is, "to validate its worthiness as a meaningful part of composition."[46]

Laudable definitely as their engagements with failure are, a veritable staying with failure, as I see it, hardly has any room for imagining a future effective politics, ethics, or pedagogy, however.[47] Thinking *failure as failure*, as I would argue, is very much without such, if not any, use-value or merit; it is an impasse in the strict sense of the word, a thorough *inoperativity*. We can understand *inoperativity*, from the French *désœuvrement*, in Maurice Blanchot's sense, which signifies that which, from within, undoes every endeavor to give a work some sense of accomplishment, completion, wholeness, or totality. In the wake of Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy has also enlisted the term in the context of thinking about community, to indicate how any constitutive, constructive communitarian project is ultimately for nothing since there is, in fact, nothing to be done for it.[48] Giorgio Agamben also has his own take on inoperativity or *inoperosità* in his native Italian: for him, it returns us to our ontological condition where the horizon of existence is never solely circumscribed by what we can or must do either through our vocation or our personal and/or collective pet projects (aesthetic or otherwise) but also by our (im)potentiality of "*not* making a work."[49] Agamben's point no doubt resonates with what I have said at the beginning of this introduction that the thinking of *failure as failure* is but an ontological reminder of how our sense of existence can be ineluctable from failure. So, if there is "a questioning of use" to our thinking of failure, then it would only be, to follow Sara Ahmed, "a questioning of being," "a question about how a person lives their life";[50] that is, again, ways of living that are essentially unproductive or even useless to any political economy, including any political aspiration, and such an ontological reminder clearly deviates from Halberstam's political thinking of failure as that which can be "*productively* linked to racial awareness, anticolonial struggle, gender variance, and different formulations of the temporality of success."[51] Otherwise, we could follow Lee Edelman here to say that this would be failure as "bad education," one that teaches us *nothing*—a nothing that is radically outside of, and inassimilable or "inimical" to, normalized, institutionalized ways of thinking what a meaningful life is or should be, a nothing that is "a disturbance of order."[52]

There is the question of aesthetics, nevertheless, in which "inoperativity"—in Blanchot's, Nancy's, and Agamben's senses—and Edelman's "bad edu-

cation" are deeply entrenched. It is undisputable in my turn to literature in this present work, too, and in this respect I share much with Jones's *Failure and the American Writer*, another work of failure studies that I have cited a fair bit as well. Certainly, Jones's focus is on nineteenth-century American literature, but he is also interested in texts or writers who take a "probing look at the *personal* dimensions of failure, at faults more generated than imposed."[53] Other than locating the site of the personal for the study or theorization of failure, we have also seen Jones insisting on the specificity of each failure rather than making the generalizing move to label everything failure and on failure's lasting duration. As we will soon see, too, he furthermore takes failure to be an entity "*in itself*" and not in relation to something else.[54] With regard to literature, Jones undoubtedly aligns himself with Herman Melville, one of his studied authors, in the conviction that it "is the finest medium to express an overwhelming failure that haunts us personally, and an existential failure that defines us as human beings."[55] I echo this conviction, but where I depart from Jones is his apparent submission of failure to a literary function or use (and not bringing it back to the ontological and/or the existential). For Jones, "failure as a literary question" entails a working through of existential failure as formal literary experimentations such as "the shaping of style, genre, character, plot, and narrative voice."[56] Not only would this see to "a special kind of writing [come] into being" but also the determination of failure "as a kind of aesthetic practice and literary identity."[57] Not unlike many scholars of failure studies, then, there is in Jones the reflex to render failure productive, to invoke a positive horizon for it. As he says of his selected authors, "Failure comes to light as a specifically literary condition, the motor of stylistic expression itself. . . . In the hands of these writers, literary discourse possesses a peculiar power to mean as it fails."[58]

It can further be said that there is something Beckettian in Jones's investment in failure, since almost all his authors are not just known today to be literary geniuses but who also in their time regarded their failures as a "sign of election of artistic distinction," bestowing them with an exceptional ability to translate existential failure into literary forms.[59] In this respect, I find the force and eminence of literature over failure seemingly overstated while ordinary failures of ordinary people, which fall outside the purviews of aesthetic judgment (or religious morality or geopolitical interest, which are the social and historical factors against which the personal sense of artistic failure of some of Jones's authors are determined), get sidelined. Forgotten are failures at the ontological level that can never be translated into formal literary elements; the discomfiting senses of failure that no literary discourse

can inscribe except intimated at best by nondiscursive gestures. The difficulty of failure for common existence, at the end of it all, is overshadowed while difficulties at the level of formal experimentation are celebrated or privileged. This is how, for Jones, in his reading of Melville's *Pierre*, "failure would . . . be flipped into aesthetic power by a new style of self-conscious difficulty and irony."[60] It is through such a transvaluation of failure into some form of literary "power" for literary ends that Jones will also write that "difficulty becomes failure's cure."[61]

Away from the literary vocation and in more general terms, the above "difficulty" can be understood as a demonstration of tenaciousness, of having grit and resilience. In the face of a failure that proves difficult to dispel, grit and resilience are indeed the counsels of common understandings of failure and most works in failure studies: through grit and resilience, we will overcome failure, and we will be on the path to success. Yet we have to be wary or even critical of the calls for such terms, for we have since recognized them to be part of the vocabulary of neoliberal capitalism, fueling the latter's compulsion for us to keep trying, keep working, despite setbacks, and regardless of our minds or bodies being capable of laboring on or not.[62] To demonstrate grit and resilience is to apparently prove our continued productivity, our potentiality to still contribute to the economy, hence our sustained employability. Yet the cruel reality is all too evident: hardly any employer picks up a past failure. Or else, when that happens, one is made to continue laboring with a much compromised remuneration (even more) incommensurate to one's real worth.[63] This is not to mention that under neoliberal capitalism, we have been conditioned to assume individual responsibility for whatever failures that have befallen us, compelled to refrain from highlighting the fault—systemic or otherwise—on the part of social, economic, and political institutions, further discouraged by the almost insurmountable task of holding these institutions accountable. Not only does the neoliberal capitalist order not acknowledge its failures, it also does not accept those on the part of its subjects.[64] Essentially, failure in itself is anathema to this order. The only condition where failure can be admitted is when it goads neoliberal subjects to improve their operativity or try another tack in order to perform better, all only in the service of the political economy. This is precisely how Beckett's phrase "fail again. Fail better" has been able to gain currency in Silicon Valley, through a gross or deliberate misreading to take the phrase to only mean "failure can become big business."[65] Failure as such is clearly not failure per se. (And because failure per se cannot

be business, it can only be, as I would say again, personal.) In this case, one imputes to failure a tangential trajectory whereby some other productivity, or more precisely profit, can be extracted from it. As Silicon Valley–speak goes, one must not only fail but also "fail often and fast." Put another way, if failure is allowed to disseminate within the neoliberal capitalist order, we must recognize this failure as but programed and controlled, produced only to see to the order's even longer lasting functioning. As Stefano Harney and Fred Moten put it, "The algorithm of work subjects every labor process on the production line to undoing, disassembly, and incompletion, in order to demand it be completed better, assembled better, done better. It leaves behind not an improved organization but a metric to ensure the organization will never be satisfied. The metric measures everything against its last instance, ensuring that the last instance never comes."[66] Should there be a real failure, they go on, the order "must everywhere convert [this] failure from a perversion to a point on [the assembly] line. It must everywhere reduce failure to a bell curve. It must be everywhere. It must be a total education."[67] Against this, Harney and Moten will insist on still instantiating real failures within the order. They would call for the experimentation, if not improvisation (which is different from, and opposed to, the notion of improvement according to the neoliberal knowledge economy), with a "kink," which would constitute a "block" or "a dread or jam" against the order's general and incessant flow of "the assembly line, the flow line, the high line"[68] To put it in our terms, this "kink" would be nothing short of an impasse, undoing any sense of "resilience and preparedness," failing or letting fail any regulatory and surveillance regime of testing and improvement instituted by exploitative and racist neoliberal capitalism.[69]

The unwitting mobilizing of lexicons that form part of neoliberal capitalist rhetoric notwithstanding, there is also, I repeat, the invocation of a positive or optimistic horizon for failure by failure studies (invoked no less, to be sure, by neoliberal capitalism's appropriation, misrepresentation, and even profiteering of failure). I consider this its recuperative or even reparative move with regard to failure. More critically, however, it reveals that when it comes to failure, we are typically delimited by a binary mode of thinking or what Anne Dalke calls the "success/failure complex."[70] We tend to define failure by its supposed, apparent opposite: success. We make failure and success polemic terms by which one (failure) is to be abandoned for the other (success). What the binary presupposes and entails is that there can be no failure if we do not have something like success, that there can be failure

only in relation to something else considered a success. This binary way of thinking is reinforced by the consideration of failure in perspectival terms, where someone or something is rendered a failure for having fallen short of what has been viewed to be success. The notion of failure as a matter of perspective belies the other common definition of failure as the inability to meet certain expectations. Accordingly, anything less than the anticipated outcome, or anything that does not meet the defined targets or objectives set along the way, is considered a failure. Keeping in mind, however, those who are particularly responsive to the sense of failure, one should not assume that the view or horizon of success owes it to others or to a general consensus. Keeping in mind also what has already been said about the affect of failure, the vision of failure (and success) is not necessarily always imposed upon the individual by a larger sociopolitico-economic apparatus, and the individual does not necessarily internalize this vision passively. The perspective of failure might be an insistence coming from within the person who thinks he or she has failed while others do not see that failure. (It is in this regard that one person's failure might even be seen as a success to another and vice versa. I leave aside the reprehensible case of one person's failure being seen as a success *for* another.) No doubt, the insistence of such a perspective might undoubtedly be conditioned by sociocultural institutions or norms. Yet, one must not neglect to consider how the personal perspective remains even though those conditionings have been relaxed via, for example, psychological interventions such as cognitive behavioral therapy or when views toward some of these norms, if not the norms themselves, change. The perception of failure thus owes it to the persons themselves, as they know that there is a sense of unmistakable or irrefutable failure within, despite or in spite of all those conditionings. They see failure only in themselves; there is no failure except themselves. No excuse—racial bias, systemic inequality, sheer dumb luck, etcetera—will be admitted; nobody's fault, no fault of anything, except theirs. Call it the curse of perfection; the perfectionist's curse.[71]

Even in the perfectionist's case, failure seems undeniably trapped within a perspectival framework. Failure, then, is as if all but a matter of perspective: the perspective of those who cannot let go of their failings, of those who can see only failure and nothing else, or even of those who do see success (elsewhere and in others) but choose nonetheless to see failure only in themselves. They would say, as one of the characters in Cusk's novel *Outline* does: "Your failures keep returning to you, while your successes are something you always have to convince yourself of."[72] Perhaps there is no escape from the

perspectival trap with regard to failure. Or else, what I am also suggesting is that, at the end of it all, it is perhaps difficult, almost impossible, to think that there can be an originary perception of failure unconditioned by other people and/or things that have been conferred the status of success. But perhaps this is because of failure's irreducible nature: it is as *the* irreducible that it invites various perspectives, yet at the same time is indifferent to them. Nevertheless, the problem of thinking failure in perspectival and/or binary terms, if it is not already evident, is that it only traps the thinking of failure within a relativism, leading us admittedly nowhere in the thinking of failure, leaving us further away from any thinking of failure itself, if not setting up any thinking of failure to fail. To sidestep this relativism, I do propose picking up from our earlier reference to Williams, to think failure especially in terms of structure: a structure of existence, which is to say, failure as an integral part of existence, if not the sense or feeling that is constitutive of the fact of existence. I deviate slightly from Williams at this point, though, and take structure to mean the minimal (dis)organizing force or principle that either perpetuates existence or from which existence can never escape but has to roll with it. I am leaning more toward another French thinker, Gilles Deleuze, in this regard, who has said that structure is something like the perpetual noncoincidence of "an extremely mobile *empty place*" and "an *occupant without a place*,"[73] which is to say, a never-ending nonfulfillment for both a space to find its tenant and a person to find a place of their own.

Deleuze's notion of structure is arguably shot through with a certain sense of failure, and I would add to this depressive feeling to say that thinking failure as a structure of existence or an existential structure is to accept the state of being thrown or having fallen into failure from nowhere, without a higher ground to attain, without any previous elevated terrain to reclaim. It is to think failure as irreducible to nothing, comparable to nothing. Failure as structure of existence is to experience failure in a way that is indifferent, or rather blind, to what others say about failure or success, to how others define them. Or, to borrow the words of the French novelist Catherine Cusset, the "structure of failure" that underlies existence is one that, at the end of the day, cannot be attributed to the fault of others, the hubris of one's egotism or narcissism, the susceptibility to viciousness, the consequence of madness, or the effects of youth.[74] Failure as such, to put it another way, can just be a state of being, an existential ontology, or, rather, an ontological existentiality into which one is not so much thrown but, again, fallen, fallen *as such*, without a determinable cause, without any external push.[75] It is, to borrow the words this time of Roland Barthes, the zero degree of existence.

Failure as structure of existence would also mean that failure is something that touches every one of us. No one is immune to it. This explains why, for many of us, life is oftentimes seen as a project that seeks to rectify some kind of previous or even original failure, to fill the sense of failure with something else, turning our entire existence into a lifelong struggle to overcome that failure. There is, of course, no guarantee that we will ever succeed at this project in our lifetime. In fact, we might just keep failing, which is to say that we keep repeating the structure of existential failure, as Beckett reminds us in "Worstward Ho!" from which the phrase "fail again" is taken. According to Beckett there, we constantly fail, or our lives are irreducibly structured to fail over and over again, no matter how much we try—ad infinitum and ad nauseum—to figure out if our sense of ontological failure precedes the world with all its sociopolitico-economic structures setting us up to fail. As Beckett also intimates, settling this issue—if it were ever possible—would not make us feel better about our failed existence either. Heeding Beckett's lesson, then, we can say that it is erroneous to determine whether failure or success comes first. Success does not precede failure, nor vice versa. Failure and success are firsts. Failure and success are always already there, on their own, each not dependent on the other. Or, to cite Jones again, "Failure is not simply the inverse of success. It has its own story to tell."[76] If we accept all this, we will then begin to free ourselves from delimiting the thinking of failure to a relativist, perspectival affair and/or a binary mode of thinking.

To ensure that there is not another sliding into relativism or binarism, we will also have to refuse, despite the negative definition of failure, wondering if there can be a positive one—one that does not render failure a defective, undesirable, disavowed, disdained term. We might even say that we do not need a new definition of failure after all. The definition "failure comes from not getting up" is already sufficient. In other words, failure, defined in itself, is "not getting up." It is just that, precisely that, and nothing else. Failure is essentially falling down *and* staying down.[77] (And if failing is falling, these two terms are incidentally differentiated but by a change of a letter: the letter *i*, which surely brings us back to the personal dimension of failure.) To think *failure as failure* is to stay with this definition and not be preoccupied with the idea of getting up. And one should not bear down on this state or condition with any judgment, not especially one that gives staying down or "not getting up" a negative value. (Is it not better at times to stay down too? One hears the advice to "stay down" in a fight—sportive or otherwise—in order to not suffer any more injuries, to stop the blows from coming.) This is where a thought of failure should linger or even settle; this is the topolog-

ical depression with and/or in which thought should rest. Thought should be prepared to sink in this abyss; it should be prepared to dwell in it, wallow in it even. In the face of this depression, thought should not be anxious to lift itself up from there: renounce all *Aufhebung*—that uplifting (but also canceling) move in dialectical thinking—if one wants to truly think about failure, if one wants to arrive at a true thinking of failure. The thinking of failure, in all, perhaps does not concern any dialectics, and this is perhaps how a thinking of failure breaks with the restricted economy predicated on the success/failure binary. This is also to say that there should henceforth neither be any looking forward to something else beyond the fallen state, no thought of any "after" following the state of staying down.[78] In this space and time of interruption that disrupts or suspends all dialectics, progress narratives, and linear (capitalist) chronology, thought will finally look at failure straight on, face it squarely, stare at it with eyes fully opened; thought will tarry with failure, allowing failure to take it wherever failure likes to go in failure's own time and duration, if not in its contretemps—that is, its inopportune phenomenality or inopportunity that defies (*contre*) all chronological or linear time (*temps*), enduring beyond the latter.

Instead of seeing the definition of failure as "not getting up" as a negative one, then, we should embrace it, reclaim it from its abandonment, if we are committed to the thinking of failure. This is not to say, though, that we are turning the definition into a positive one—this would only be to sneak in a progress or success narrative. We avoid this move as long as we keep in mind failure as an affective structure of existence, which is also to say, and we return to a thinking of structure closer to Williams's here, an affect that is a "neutral kernel" that will accommodate whatever feelings or emotions that accompany it, as Ngai would say in borrowing the term from Paolo Virno.[79] In this regard, the sense of failure need not be all doom and gloom; it need not be all depressive, festering only with sadness, dejection, hopelessness, anguish, resignation, regret, etcetera. We certainly feel all these negative affects or "ugly feelings" (to borrow Ngai's term again) especially if failure is taken as a lack—that is, again, failure understood as a falling short of expectations: we fall into the crevice of despairing underachievement as we consider ourselves not having done enough for ourselves, for others, or in comparison to others. But failure can also be constituted by doing too much, doing more than required. Here, failure comes in the form of excess, manifesting itself in the superfluous. And instead of a hole into which one sinks, as in the case of one failing to perform within expectations, one spills over (no doubt into another, different hole) along with the excess that overflows

the limits of what is deemed acceptable. Failure here, as excess, is pleroma, if not jouissance.[80] And if jouissance bears the sense of the ecstatic, then failure is indeed not all doom and gloom all the time: there can even be a perverse glee in failure, a joyous death drive, to extend the psychoanalytic rhetoric in relation to failure. To be sure, this jouissance, or death drive, does not have a positive or optimistic dénouement; it knows that nothing is going to turn out well, that there is no happy ending.[81] Here, one could think of the sometimes mocking, sometimes imprudent laughter that accompanies certain pronouncements of "epic fail" and the subsequent shrugs, which can signal some form of resignation with regard to the state of things, knowing that the failures will remain and that nothing can be done about them. With such a jouissance, let us, then, acknowledge and accept that there is no escaping things negative in thinking about failure, in recognizing failure *as* failure. "Any failure is hell," as Yiyun Li would say.[82] Failure *is* negative, but it is not negative in comparison to something considered positive. It is negative in itself, without any further dialectical move.[83]

Negativity, Impasse

In the negation of the call to get up, of a next step forward/upward, of a progress narrative, and of recuperation, reparation, or recovery, one could also call failure as such *negativity*, if we understand negativity, following Berlant and Edelman, as not only "a resistance to or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks of coherence imposed on thought and lived experience" but also that which "reject[s] the impulses to repair social relations that appear to us irreparable."[84] This is the example of those who inhabit the sense or affect of failure and refuse to (re)connect with those in the larger society who reject failure or who buy into the ideology of success; they would be the "inconvenient people" according to Berlant's vocabulary in the posthumously published *On the Inconvenience of Other People*.[85] Failure as negativity is without recuperation or reparation, and staying (down) with failure would be, following Edelman, "enacting a negativity with no other end but its own insistence."[86] As I would put it, such a negativity would be a "depressive position" tout court—that is, a "depressive position" more absolute than Melanie Klein's (or Eve Sedgwick's reading of Klein's) because it will be taken in its very literal sense, and because it is not derived from any prior "paranoid position." In fact, the "paranoid position" here—which sees failure everywhere— is constitutive of, fused with, if not coterminous with, this more absolute

"depressive position." Keeping in mind again the personal dimension of failure, it is important to state that the "paranoid position" here of seeing failure everywhere pertains only to oneself and not others. As such, in contradistinction to Sedgwick and/or Klein, there is actually not much, or even no, reparative work demanded of the self to compensate another who would have been symbolically but nevertheless violently rendered a part-object through a typical "paranoid position." In our absolute "depressive position," the self does not seek reparation either. There is no do-over here, no position to rectify or remedy, no (re)calibrating of one's perspective with an optimistic horizon. There is just the acceptance that things are as such: a depressive position through and through, without any will to working toward, without any hope for, a reconstitution of a new whole (whether of oneself or of the other) from the ruins of failure.[87] Here, I would like to borrow Berlant's phrase in her reading of Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*—even though I am aware that Berlant refuses a thoroughly absolute depressive position—and call this "unconditional negativity."[88] Or we can recall Blanchot's and Nancy's term *désœuvrement*, which underscores the "inoperative" (nothing works, indeed, in failure) or the "unworked" (everything falls apart, no less, in failure), and lets be the existential condition whereby nothing can be done, nothing is to be done. If not, Agamben's reiteration of the term as *inoperosità* might be closer to what we are getting at, since it not only names the "potential not to act" but also the "*potential for darkness*," whereby existence not only "undergoes and suffers its own non-Being" but also welcomes it.[89] In any case, any endeavor to turn failure into some pedagogy—aesthetic, moral, philosophical, existential, etcetera—or motivation for productivity is simply the fantasmatic work of the imaginary.[90]

In all, then, failure is simply and precisely the impasse. It is all about being stuck. There is no way out; no exit.[91] No passage through; sheer intransitivity.[92] The reckoning with this impasse is essentially a personal, solitary experience (and this is what the literary texts that interest us will reaffirm too). This also accounts for how, even though failure can be a very common occurrence for all, the experience of failure and its accompanying affects, if one indeed acknowledges the impasse that traverses them all, can be very unique to each person. It is because of this impasse that one's experience or perception of failure, and one's feelings about failure, can never be completely communicated to another, can never be fully understood by another. There will always be a trace of failure that will remain to haunt only the individual, one that speaks only to the individual. Once again, then, even though

failure is a common enough phenomenon for all, there is no commonality in the experience of it among those who undergo it. This is failure's *shared un-shareability*, as I would put it, and which I will say more in one of the chapters of this book.[93] Or else this is failure as structure that is more *infra* than Berlant's "infrastructuralism," especially if we hold *infra* to its literal meaning to pertain to what lies deep within (the individual), which can certainly surface at a later time to cause displacements (in the individual) in yet different ways. Berlant's "infrastructuralism," meanwhile, with its debt to Marshall Sahlins, concerns connecting with other measures practiced by others in order to make the present bearable and to build better responses or coping mechanisms to a phenomenon should it come up again in the future.[94] The idea of failure's shared unshareability clearly pushes back against this communitarian contour or horizon of Berlant's "infrastructuralism." But to come back to failure as impasse: if thought is to truly commit to thinking about failure, then thought must be prepared to precisely get stuck in this impasse. Thinking about failure will be the experience of not only thought at an impasse but also thought as impasse. And again, thought must not seek to get out of this impasse. In this regard, I veer closer to Derrida's idea and thinking of the impasse than Berlant's especially in *Cruel Optimism*. For Berlant, one can still find some sort of footing in the impasse, the possibility of productively making sense of the situation, of possibly gaining some enlightenment out of it. According to Berlant, "The impasse is a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs."[95] In this impasse, one is preoccupied with preparing oneself for what is to come; one remains on guard, looking forward to what arrives from the horizon, hopeful even. For Berlant, then, this horizon can be an optimistic future, recognizing that "for many . . . , living in an impasse would be an aspiration."[96]

For Derrida, though, the experience of the impasse—or what he would prefer to call by its other name of "aporia"—leaves one with less certainty, less confidence in one's way. It is essentially about "not knowing where to go,"[97] which is to say again, getting stuck, seeing obstacles (mental and/or physical) on all sides, a pure lostness or errancy, with no illuminating light to make sense of things.[98] Thought finds itself in a state of helplessness and/or hopelessness here—nothing much to be done. Derrida goes on to say, and I quote him at length:

It had to be a matter of the nonpassage, or rather from the experience of the nonpassage, the experience of what happens and is fascinating in the nonpassage, paralyzing us in this separation in a way that is not necessarily negative. . . . It should be a matter of what, in sum, appears to block our way or to separate us in the very place where *it should no longer be possible to constitute a problem*, a project, or a projection. . . . There, in sum, in this place of aporia, *there is no longer any problem*. Not that, alas or fortunately, the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem what would constitute itself and that one would keep in front of oneself, as a presentable object or project, as a protective representative or a prosthetic substitute, as some kind of border still to cross or behind which to protect oneself.[99]

Thinking failure in light of Derrida's impasse, then, is where thought approaches paralysis. And just as what we have said earlier about failure being indifferent to binary structures, this impasse or paralysis should not be seen in negative and/or positive terms either. Perhaps the best or only way to put it is to call it negativity again, and here it will involve negating failure as a problem to be solved, negating failure as a project to be accomplished by overcoming it. Thinking failure would be to immerse in this negativity, which would also mean that failure is no longer seen as something placed before us from which we should always avoid. It is always too late for that anyway. Here, if there is any movement, it would be, according to Derrida, "to move not against or out of the impasse but, in another way, *according to* another thinking of the aporia, one perhaps more enduring," which is to say, tarrying only with the impasse of failure, as long as failure lasts.[100]

And let there be (no) disappointments: moving according to failure or enduring with failure as such is also where thought fumbles, flops. The thinking of failure implicates a fumbling or flopped thought. It goes nowhere. It produces nothing. It does not advance thought or thinking itself. Quite to the contrary, in fact: it sends thought into catatonia. It is where thought really breaks down, where it finds itself amid a true "inoperativity." It collapses, runs aground, falls apart. It lets itself lapse. It is thought slumped, dejected, rejected. It has nothing much, nothing new, nothing impactful to say. It is thought stuck in the rut, exposed in its utmost vulnerability. It is thought thoroughly weakened, a real weak thought (without dialectics).[101] It can only drift aimlessly, finding itself degenerating into a state of torpor, falling into a sleepless sleep that seeks not so much a recuperation but perchance to cease existing. To cite Berlant again, genres are flailing here no less, as

thought tries to grapple with failure, as it stands in the face of failure, as it tarries with failure. With genres flailing, there will also be, as Berlant tells us too, drama. We would no doubt be witnessing a histrionics of thought here, if not the "drama of negativity" in Berlant's terms, arising from a sense of "out-of-syncness"—which I would say is not too foreign to the sense of displacement cutting through the structure of failure if we follow, as we did earlier, Deleuze's understanding of structure as the noncoincidence of a place without tenant and an occupant without a place—whereby dramatics is "a way to maintain an affective mess for which most people do not have the skill or trust in the world's, or other people's, patience."[102] With all the drama, I would even say that this is perhaps thought's "epic fail" moment: thought with a sense of failure so common, so unexceptional, even embarrassing, like any other "epic fail," for all to see. But to state it one more time: while the occurrence of failure might be common to all, there is always something of its experience or the sense of which that remains unshareable. In this regard, the drama here is closer to the melodramatic, where melodrama, to follow Li again, is unlike tragedy and comedy that desire an audience in "sharing themselves to elicit tears and laughter"; melodrama, on the contrary, "meets no one's expectations but its internal need to feel," letting one be awash with what "alienates and discomfits" oneself, including, as Li underscores, suicidal ideation.[103]

In this melodrama, then, thought does not allow for itself any respite. It goes along with the sinking feeling, the sense of imminent drowning, inhabiting the discomfort, unrest, agitation, unease, restlessness (*inquiétude*), shame even. And even though all these are undoubtedly unbearable, such a thinking of failure perhaps not only cannot but also does not want to let go of failure. It sticks with, or to, this impasse without any aspiration, and one might say that this attachment to failure is a crueler optimism than Berlant's "cruel optimism," since there is no illusion or delusion of a "good life" promised by the object of attachment, no keeping faith with any "good life" despite or rather in spite of one's knowing that that promise will never be fulfilled.[104] It is a crueler optimism also because, to recall the dark side of melodrama, it holds on to existence *not* because it is hopeful of existence but is only waiting for the time when it can exit existence, when this exit opens up. And this exit will be granted not because it finally finds the resolve to let the ideation pass into an act, for this would only mean getting out of an impasse, but only because it has slid or fallen inadvertently into it, without ever knowing it. This crueler optimism is but an all-out pessimism, not unlike what Eugene Thacker has called "infinite resignation," in choos-

ing the impasse.[105] I add here that this is where our present work distinctly deviates from Halberstam's project once again. So, even though this present work shares with Halberstam the appreciation and the commitment to elucidate (without judgment) failure's "awkwardness, clumsiness, disorientation, bewilderment, ignorance, disappointment, disenchantment, silence, disloyalty, and immobility," we will *not* be optimistic enough to "revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures," not to mention that we consider our failures here to be not at all fantastic but common or banal.[106]

What remains for a true thinking of failure is to learn to respect the very impasse that constitutes the affective structure of failure. Put simply, it is all about learning to accept failure, to let it sink in fully (in us). Then we will begin to truly listen to all the cries of thought in its tarrying with failure, in its endurance of failure: the sobs of disappointment, the cries of help (without actually wanting any real help), the declarations to quit, the depressive discourses, the words of despair, the sighs of pessimism, the moans and whines of regrets, and the silent resignation to give up everything, including existence.[107] Every cry deserves to be heard, all of thought's no less. And as Werner Hamacher has taught us, language has that capacity to register and transmit both pains and the cries of pains.[108] Contemporary literary writings, as suggested and as will be shown, are already doing this. For the language of thought—under the names of philosophy, theory, "autotheory," critique, "postcritique," etcetera—to not lag too far behind in responding to the "structures of feeling" of our times, it must let resound all those cries of pains from the anguish of failure, from the sickness of depression while experiencing failure, from the weariness in enduring failure or being beaten down by failure, from the fatigue in trying to overcome failure, from burning out in enduring or in endeavoring to surpass failure. To reiterate, this is thought laid bare, exposed in probably its most intimate vulnerability. Yet this would be, to borrow Heidegger's term, the unconcealment of thought in its honest or truthful response to the undeniable affects of failure (and to be sure, again, there will be no illumination in this unconcealment but the exposure to the dark abyss that is the irreducible structure of failure in existence).[109] And to extend the Heideggerian vocabulary here, we could say that failure asks of us an attunement (*Gestimmtsein*) to it, an attunement to an ineluctable aspect of existence, one from which we have however always tried to extricate ourselves. Failure does not call for its *fine*-tuning, which will only modulate it into something else, its opposite, at worst. We definitely should not tune *out* (of) failure either. In our attunement, we should be *in* tune with it, once again with all its affects, pains, cries, genres, dramas,

and melodramas, and this is where we are exposed to the fuller dimension of the mood (*Stimmung*) of being. And while Heidegger reminds us that being is not all existence but also involves the exiting from existence, or, as Halberstam so deftly puts it, "To live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die."[110] I would like to highlight that there is no less a mood to this exit, albeit a darker mood than Halberstam would want it.

To be sure one final time, all this is not about coming to terms with failure in the sense of recognizing it only in order to rid or relieve oneself of it, to get over it, to be free of it. In a sense, one never gets over it, or one can never come to terms with it, because one can never really be at ease with it even though one now stays with it, tarries with it. There is always a lingering dread.[111] This is not talk therapy or talking cure for thought, as if one would be on the road to some form of recovery thereafter. If thought should rest with failure here, this rest is no convalescence; there is no "better" to aspire to. Neither is this a session in psychoanalysis nor an exercise in symptomatic reading, as if to uncover some unconscious element, which once unraveled will trouble us no more.[112] Perhaps there is only, at best, "descriptive reading" that draws out the relations between thought and failure.[113] At the end of it all, one might also wonder what the point is with such a thinking of failure. I have said earlier in this introduction that a thinking of *failure as failure* is necessary if we want to avoid any superficial understanding of the topic at hand in any form of failure studies. I have also suggested that it could provide us with a heuristics into the aforementioned works of contemporary literature, appreciating the genres that are flailing there to be those with respect with failure and not distort them by rendering them to serve other ends. I have also claimed that such a thinking of failure, which also attends to all the affects that failure could bring, can be critical in terms of according a discursive and affective space to those whose sense of existence is ineluctably tied to failure, where they can have the freedom to articulate and languish in their sense of failure. To repeat what had been said earlier: if there is one failure that we should avoid, it is perhaps that which makes them feel to have no legitimate space to express their sense of failure except in a suicide note. In whichever case above, we are no doubt endeavoring to answer the questions that are typically posed to the act of thinking: What are the stakes of such a thinking? To what ends would such a thinking serve? Yet perhaps these are the wrong questions with regard to the thinking of failure because they imply the refusal, once again, to let failure be: they betray the anxiety to turn failure into something else again, the will to make thinking failure a productive activity and/or with a positive outcome. These

questions constitute, then, another letdown, if not a failure, in the think-ing of failure, the failure of thought to follow through with failure. Perhaps we do not need to feel so apologetic, therefore, and just say that there is no point to the thinking of failure. It is wasted time, implicating wasted lives, but only so in the perspective of the progress narrative of neoliberal capi-talism, and not so for any honest elucidation of the sense of existence that does not bracket the ontological and existential structure of failure. Or else this is failure "study"—"study" in the singular as Harney and Moten would want it, which is to say, an incomplete or incompletable thinking with "no end and no connection to improvement, never mind efficiency," and which does not constitute any point on, or to, the flow of the knowledge econo-my's principles or dictates of instrumentality, achievement, excellence, and accreditation, but always an "(in)permanently unformed, insistently infor-mal, underperforming commitment" to failed existence.[114]

Drifting With/in Failure's Shared Unshareability: The Chapters

Throughout this book, then, we will not be seeking any effective or pro-ductive use of failure. We will simply keep in mind failure as the affective structure of existence, staying with its negativity, irreparability, inconsola-bility, and intransitivity. We will be looking at selected works of Moshfegh, Cusk, Levé, Li, and Zambreno that largely keep to failure's impasse rather than try to get out of it, involving at times wasted lives, no less. This is not to mention the largely "autofictional" dimension of most of these texts, which stresses the urgency for us to attend to the personal sense of failure. And we will look at genres there—especially nonclassical ones—that tend *not* to contest or push back against failure; genres that seek, instead, to incorpo-rate, embody, or assume the sense of failure. Some of these gestures can be unwilled, flailing without intention: mere bodily responses or reflexes that are dragging along the rest of one's self—call it mind, spirit, or soul—that equally has no interest in escaping the negativity of failure. To reiterate, these genres might, on the one hand, help one cope with existence after the reckoning with a sense of failure that never goes away. On the other hand, they do *not* help make life better.[115] Like the impasse discussed previously, these genres, in short, bear no "cruel optimism." Ultimately, they are but the minimal gestures that remain for the individual in their living on after fail-ure, as the individual inhabits the negative affects of failure, tarrying with the sense of failure. They keep the individual drifting along a stranded exis-

tence that follows wherever failure takes it. Let it be said here that there is no hoping or expecting that this drifting will arrive at any safe, stable, comforting ground. It is a drifting by which one knows one can sink anytime. Sinking might even be the more apt movement that corresponds to failure's falling and staying down. Yet, given that many of the principal characters or narrators in our literary texts do not sink, we will keep to the image of drifting, albeit, to be sure again, *not* a drifting whereby one stays above failure but a drifting in which one is very much immersed or awash with failure.

The genres that we will be examining across the chapters are: (1) flopping, (2) drifting itself, (3) a dark care of the self, (4) melodrama, and (5) *postscripting*. In a way, one could read the movement of chapters as the stages of reckoning with failure, of what one feels or does as the sense of failure irremediably sinks in. Put another way, it could be read as that which charts the sense of descent or degeneration in the wake of failure, as one finds one's existence henceforth hopelessly entangled with the sense of failure. In this regard, and perhaps true to the thinking of failure called for in this book, the chapters laid out as such are meant to resist any ascending narrative arc, to refuse suggesting any narrative of progress. Again, if anything, the narrative flow, if there is one, at best echoes the notion of falling that we have claimed to be "proper" to failure. (The citational marks are there because there is nothing proper to failure; failure is without propriety, property, properness.) To be sure, though, we will not to be merely listing or describing the stages of falling. In explicating the genres in question, the chapters also demonstrate how this exposes the fact that some genres of failure can be granted full or fuller expression only on conditions of class and race, or else that they are driven by practices predicated on assumptions of unequal gender privilege or dynamics.[116] This is especially the case of the first two chapters. In the following chapter, then, we will look at the genre of flopping in Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Flopping implicates falling, the movement, to repeat, that corresponds to failure. Flopping also involves staying down, which, as seen, too, constitutes the very experience of (staying with) failure. The narrator in Moshfegh's text is determined to do just that, to stay down, and perchance to sleep, to take a break from the world, to allow herself to wallow in her sense of failure. For all this, she is willing to lay waste to everything around her: her well-being, her career, her relation with her best (and only) friend. She languishes in a mode of existing that gives in to breakdowns, or to use the terms invoked earlier, to *désœuvrement* or *inoperativity* or *unworking*. As she acknowledges, such breaks, however, are afforded to her only because of her white upper-middle-class privileged

position while the Egyptian migrants must work the graveyard shifts at the bodega that she visits in her drugged-out/somnambulistic state; while the Asian "artist" Ping Xi who, in order to gain recognition and success in the art world, must produce ridiculously provocative pieces while repressing the sad affects surrounding the seemingly broken relationship between him and his mother. Staying with the genre of flopping thus allows us to further pursue the questions about race and class in relation to failure: Who is allowed to fail? Who gets to wallow in failure, to ride out the entire sense of failure? Who can afford the breaks in all senses—the physical and mental breakdowns, the break from work, the break from the world—that failure brings with it? Perhaps without surprise, we will see that the access to the sense of failure, to the freedom to flop and languish, is not equal to all, even though, as said before, failure can be common to everyone. As the chapter will recognize, too, this is not only because of failures in places or cultures of work such as their systemic racial inequity but also of a personal failure to think about work otherwise.

The chapter after turns to Cusk's *Outline* trilogy, which consists of the novels *Outline*, *Transit*, and *Kudos*. The genre that interests us here is precisely that of drifting, which the narrator does in all three novels, but particularly so in the first, and that is why we will be focusing on *Outline* more than the other two novels of the trilogy. In general, drifting can be said to be the mode of being in the wake of failure, arguably after falling or flopping; it is existing in a state of lostness as one finds oneself in a world that is no longer the same, as one sees the world differently. Regardless of this drifting arriving at an intended destination or not, which in turn depends on whether the drifting in question has an aim or not, drifting here is, to reiterate, where existence is paradoxically buoyed, kept afloat while being awash by the negative affects of failure. In Cusk's novels, drifting is very much aimless, without a real point of arrival in mind or view.[117] It comes to the narrator in the aftermath of her divorce, unmooring her from what she had believed to be meaningful or purposeful existence. In drifting, she inhabits the negative affects of this relationship or familial failure, occupying space after space wherein each space is already imprinted with the lingering dread of finding oneself still living on when everything seems meaningless. Through her drifting, she comes to further recognize her unbelonging in the world; her almost timeless peregrination only affirming her sense of failed existence as being out-of-sync with the rest of the ordinary world, where nothing changes, where the drudgery of everyday work—be it renovation works for a house, a hairdresser's work, or the work of narcissistic peripa-

tetic writers—goes on as usual. At the same time, her drifting also exposes a world that is thoroughly egotistical, which is to say, a world always anxious to proclaim its successes only to conceal its inherent sense of insecurity, denying its own failures, and barely lending any sympathetic ear to the stories of failure of others. Her drifting is not exactly smooth sailing, therefore, and this drifting will be seen as complicated, if not delimited, by unequal gender power dynamics, specifically the overbearing sense of male privilege, which also drifts or drones incessantly on their own failures and successes, without a care for others. To better understand and critique such conflicting drifts, we will, in this chapter, turn to Barthes's notion of the Neutral, which has *dérive* or drift as one of its qualities, and which might even be a way to free us from a thinking of failure predicated on a positive/negative binary.

A sinking feeling becomes palpable in the next chapter. Now, if the world, as in Cusk's novels, shows no care for failed existence that is unable or refuses to extricate itself from failure and its negative affects, or if the world in general does not know how to care for failed existence that darkly desires an exit from existence, then the individual is left very much to their own devices. In a way, Michel Foucault can be said to be quite sensitive to such a precarious existence in his writings on a "care of the self," when he writes about "the plunging view" (*la vue plongeante*) that opens up at the moment when one weighs the choice of either suicide or living on in the face of existential crises. Foucault counsels looking up and away from the abyss of pessimistic negativity, turning instead to a more optimistic and positive "care of the self" that attends to one's bodily pleasures unrestricted by (heteronormative) sexual codes. Yet, as we will see in this chapter through Levé's *Suicide* (and *Autoportrait*) alongside Eve Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*, one oftentimes fails (to attain) that uplifting view: one languishes at the edge of abyssal negativity; one plunges into it. As I will explicate, this is the *other* "plunging view" that belongs to Ovid's Narcissus, one that is no less a "care of the self," albeit a darker one, no doubt, which attends to the self that seeks to follow the sense of existential failure to its very end. Dark or otherwise, a "care of the self" calls for a genre too. Here, genre takes on a more traditional or conventional sense since it deals with, according to Foucault, writing, specifically one that records everyday ordinary activities, thoughts—and Foucault admits thoughts of dying here—feelings and desires, all without any claim to larger pedagogical or political ends. In this chapter, we will consider such a writing in terms of what Nancy has called "exscription." According to Nancy, exscription is a mode of writing that is reticulated with existence;

it marks the traces of the body as the body moves out of its ipseity and into the world in its everyday existing, in its everyday interaction with the world. In tandem with existence as such, we will see how exscription in Sedgwick and Levé also registers the sense of an irreparably failed existence, supplementing any record of life with the desperation to exit existence.

A dark care of the self, with or without deliberate exscription, leaves one nevertheless with a great unease. This is where the genre of melodrama begins to brew. As mentioned before, this melodrama, according to Li, is not melodrama as we know it: this melodrama refuses spectacle, drawing the melodramatic into his or her interiority where he or she dwells in the discomfit of the sense of failure. This is melodrama exercised with reserved, if not reluctant, sentimentality. It does not give in to the fantasy of a "good life"; it does not aspire to reach it; it is not even frustrated by the fact that such aspirations always end in disappointment. This is also where we reckon with what we have earlier called failure's shared unshareability, which is, to reiterate, the recognition that no matter how much of the experience of failure is shared with others through conversations or writing, something of failure will always be reserved only for ourselves, never communicated or communicable to others. In the subsequent chapter, then, which reads across Li's *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You*, *Where Reasons End*, and *Must I Go*, we will look at how those who are particularly attuned and attached to the sense of failure would want to keep failure's shared unshareability to themselves. They even take it to be their private sanctuary or bubble. They thus resist the sublimation of failure into some form of collective reparation, which is the typical move made in failure studies and/or affect theory as they impute to failure a communitarian trajectory and horizon. Trouble arises, however, when another, especially someone close or a loved one, lays claim to failure's shared unshareability, too, if not first. This is when the genre of melodrama becomes a response that attempts to come to terms with how this shared unshareability was not recognized earlier; it can even be the attempt to wrest failure's shared unshareability back for oneself. Troubled or even frustrating as this melodrama is, it only affirms failure's shared unshareability, and this is important in helping us recognize, accept, and respect the desire of those who prefer to keep the sense of failure to themselves, their wanting to dwell or wallow in it, their refusal of any communitarian project that would turn failure into a reparative object or collective pedagogy. It brings us to the acknowledgment of how inescapable the sense of personal failure is, how there can be no relief to it, how failure, at the end of it all, is just so personal.

The chapter on melodrama in Li also brings us back to the notion of genre in the classical sense. This is because we will see how the melodrama of failure's shared unshareability plays out across the novel in its conventional register (*Must I Go*), the novel in its contemporary "autofiction" mode (*Where Reasons End*), and a hybrid text that mixes dimensions of memoirs, talks, and the essay form (*Dear Friend*). No doubt, we are, through this book, working with genres in both its more contemporary sense of discursive and nondiscursive (hence bodily) gestures and its classical or formalistic sense. In so doing, we want to suggest that, with regard to failure, we cannot do without one and the other. In other words, it might be the case that the classical genre can never be adequate in registering and making sense of personal failure, requiring the supplemental gestural or corporeal genre; at the same time, though, the latter in itself is not sufficient either, needing in turn more conventional representational genres as coping mechanisms. This oscillation between the nonclassical and classical senses of genre can indeed be said to chart our trajectory in this book, as we move from discussions of Moshfegh's and Cusk's texts to those of Li's. Picking up from the chapter on Li, the conclusion will consider how failure does not escape writing. To follow Nancy's rhetoric again, failure exscribes itself, furthermore beyond the determination or mediation, filtering, or control of consciousness. In this regard, and in consideration of the different modes of writing that Li mobilizes, the composition of failure is barely composed; it is without composure. Failure can never settle with one form of writing; it is always anxiously abandoning one form for another. As if in its embarrassment, it can never find (formal) closure. We will put all this in terms of a genre of *postscripting*, which will refer not only to writings that come after the sense of failure but also posthumous writings, even though their author is not yet dead—which is to say, scribblings that struggle with the absurd fact of living on with, or after, failure, when one feels already dead. As the conclusion suggests, no one *postscripts* as well as Kate Zambreno through her works that include *Appendix Project*, *Screen Test*, and *To Write as if Already Dead*.

To return to the general trajectory of this book, it can be said otherwise too that the chapters follow closely the movement of a "structure of feeling," if we recall how the latter can find its murmurings from within the individual before it gets communicated to the outside world. The difference here is that failure does not get recognized or acknowledged by the world to be its historical consciousness; the world very much denies the sense of failure as its zeitgeist. It remains generally indifferent to an individual's sense of failure and pushes failure back to the domain of the personal. At the

end of it all, there is no time and space in the world for failures—especially if they concern failure *as* failure, failure without reparation, recuperation, and restitution—no matter what Silicon Valley, motivational talks or books, T-shirts, and even failure studies say. The chapters thus confirm, once again, the personal dimension of failure, or how the sense of failure is essentially or ultimately a personal affair. They all point to the fact that only individually do we feel the full force, impact, or weight of our sense of failure; only individually do we inhabit the moods of negative affects that swarm or linger during the course, and in the remainder, of our failed existence, without any consolation.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1   Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, 10.

2   I note that Renyi Hong has also used the phrase "affective structure" in a different context to understand how some of us have become so passionate about work. See Hong, *Passionate Work.*

3   Some notes on these failures are in order: It is by now generally accepted that 9/11 was a response to problematic US foreign policies and a result of internal security lapses. The 2008 Great Recession has now laid to rest the myth of financial institutions as being "too big to fail," with financial analysts arguing against the defense of this phrase and companies associated with it since. The #metoo movement rightly called out the masculine gender for failing mankind in abusing positions of power and authority to sexually harass women in workplaces.

    In 2020, with the death of George Floyd under police custody—a result a police officer pressing his knee against Floyd's throat during the arrest, which was then followed with mass protests across many US major cities—even the former president George W. Bush, responsible for the "war on terror," has called the country's systemic racism a "tragic failure." The historian Elizabeth Hinton recognizes it, more critically, as a "failure of generations of leadership" ("George Floyd's Death Is a Failure of Generations of Leadership," *New York Times*, June 3, 2020). With regard to COVID-19, the *New York Times* editorial board has called the response of the US health-care system to the pandemic an "epic failure" (editorial, March 20, 2020). By 2021, the World Health Organization also acknowledged the early responses to the pandemic as a global series of failures. It is not always policy failures when it comes to tragic school shootings. It can be the "abject failure" of an individual, as the head of the Texas State Police has recognized in the Uvalde elementary school shooting in 2022, where the on-site police commander delayed for almost an hour any action against the shooter (J. David Goodman, "Head of State Police Calls Response to Uvalde Shooting an 'Abject Failure,'" *New York Times*, June 21, 2022). In addition to these failures, we should also not forget how higher education has been at a new low in this present century: funding

crises for humanities research and teaching that have led to the reduc-
tion in size, if not closure, of humanities departments in several UK and
US universities; the drastic lack of tenure-track humanities jobs while
even more graduates enter the job market, a hopelessly depressing situa-
tion that gave rise to the phenomenon of "quit lit" by many of the disen-
chanted graduates; its "structural failure" in protecting victims of campus
sexual assault and duly punishing perpetrators, the reckoning of which
coming belatedly only thanks to #metoo.

4   Cardona's *Global Failure and World Literature* apparently goes the other
way.

5   This field is by no means even or cohesive. In any case, for a sample
of this expanding literature, here are just some titles: Feltham, *Failure*;
Feltham, *Anatomy of Failure*; Firestein, *Failure*; Sandage, *Born Losers*; Ap-
padurai and Alexander, *Failure*; Dekker, *Drift into Failure*; Lukianoff and
Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*; Halberstam, *The Queer Art
of Failure*; Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*; Lee, *Failures of Feel-
ing*; Franta, *Systems Failure*; Graham, *Failing Gloriously and Other Essays*;
Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*; Bey, *Cistem Failure*; Kendi, *How to Be an
Antiracist*; Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*; Setiya, *Life Is Hard*. Even
more recently, there is the *Routledge International Handbook of Failure*,
where the editors signal toward a "critical failure studies."

6   Other writers whose selected works also register a contemporary sense
of failure would include Jennifer Egan (especially *A Visit by the Goon
Squad*), Sigrid Nunez (*What Are You Going Through*), Jesse Ball (*A Cure
for Suicide*), Raven Leilani (*Luster*), Catherine Cusset (*L'autre qu'on ado-
rait*), Pauline Klein (*La figurante*), and Michel Houellebecq (*Sérotonine*).
Unfortunately, I do not have the space in this current work to discuss
these works. Also, I am certainly citing authors from contemporary
Anglo-American and French literature, fields with which I am familiar.
I have no doubt, nevertheless, that certain works of contemporary Ger-
man, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, or Korean literature engage with such a
sense too. I leave it to experts in these fields to continue further the work
of eliciting the question of failure in contemporary literary works of other
languages.

7   See her eponymous essay, "Genre Flailing," and Berlant's thinking of genre
as such can be found from *The Female Complaint* to *Cruel Optimism*.

8   As will be evident, my turn to the personal has nothing to do with the
"self-help" counseling manner that is found in Setiya's *Life Is Hard*, not to
mention that his aim is for us to get out of failure, "to loosen the hold of
failure" (96) on us.

9   Levé's unpublished texts, collected and published as *Inédits*, arrived after
the chapter on Levé was completed, hence the omission of any discussion
of this text in this present work.

10   I do acknowledge that there will be those who perversely consider some of the phenomena mentioned in the list to be successes rather than failure (and this no doubt feeds into the discussion of the perspectival treatment of failure later in this introduction). However, a critical account of how these phenomena can essentially be failures lies beyond the expertise and scope of this book.

11   Other than "Worstward Ho!," from which the phrase cited comes, Beckett's other works such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* have also been understood to capture the twentieth-century zeitgeist of profound failure. Other modernist writers known to inscribe the pathos of failure in their works include T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Osamu Dazai, and Thomas Bernhard. We should also not forget *Stoner* by John Williams, which has now been acknowledged to be the best but most unknown novel on failure in the twentieth century. Gavin Jones in *Failure and the American Writer* will argue that before the twentieth century, failure was already foundational in nineteenth-century American writers, projected in the literary forms of that time. As he notes, too, for Henry Adams, one of his studied authors, "the nineteenth-century was a failed century" (158).

12   I do admit that the overall program of the Museum of Failure does not sound as pessimistic as I put it here. To the contrary, it looks forward to a positive or optimistic horizon through the learning of past failures. This move, however, is an aspect of current ways of treating failure that I critique, as will be seen later.

13   It is indeed highly doubtful that much, if not any, critical thought belies each enunciation of "epic fail." I add here that Eugenie Brinkema, while contemplating insufficient violence in the film *Cabin in the Woods* to bring about an inevitable general or more comprehensive or even absolute violence, hence only deferring the latter, reads this insufficient violence as suggestive of how "a twenty-first-century rereading of the twentieth century ends less in a will to formalization than with a will-less *whatever*." Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams*, 163. To me, such a statement resonates with the contrast between Beckett's formalized phrasing of twentieth-century failure and the "whatever" dimension of "epic fail" in the twenty-first century. I return to a consideration of failure and the form of writing in this book's conclusion.

14   Or, as Stewart has observed, the ordinary itself "falters, fails" too. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 29. She would also say that it is in failure that the ordinary would be found (93).

15   See Beckett, "Three Dialogues." Speaking of the artist Bram Van Velde there, Beckett would say that Van Velde is "the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world" and that from Van Velde one must learn of the "fidelity to failure." Beckett, *Proust*

and Three Dialogues, 125. Jones in *Failure and the American Writer* has likewise noted this take on failure by Beckett. As noted earlier, he will also argue that such an approach to failure was already nascent in nineteenth-century American writers such as Henry Adams, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville, where failure in their works is an expression of "a personal condition of white masculinity in crisis" (11).

16   It is beyond the scope of this book to critically think about the humor that belies "epic fail." Let me note, however, that the subject of enunciation scoffs or laughs at the failure but does not in any explicit fashion stand apart from it in order to critique it. In this regard, one might see in the enunciations of "epic fail" what Berlant has called "cruel optimism"—that is, a kind of optimistic attachment to an object that is actually doing more harm to oneself, a willing blind faith, or, in other words, in the supposed good promised by the object, instead of a critical distancing from it. "Epic fail" indeed largely does not renounce the failed object and/or the structure that is producing the failed object. Despite one's pronouncement of "epic fail," one still believes in the "good life" that the structure promises, "epic fails" included.

17   Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 161. Jones will also continue to say, in the context of the literary period in which he is interested, that such a rhetoric concerning failure "misses the peculiar shape failure takes in nineteenth-century texts."

18   For such a critique of "high theory" of those decades, see especially Terada, *Feeling in Theory*.

19   To be sure, I am *not* saying that affects are personal or derivative from the interiority of an individual or subject. As I will state later, following recent affect theory, affects arise from the circulation of internal and external forces. Brian Massumi calls this the "transindividual" dimension of affects and Jonathan Flatley calls this affects' "relational" quality. Massumi, *Politics of Affects*; Flatley, *Affective Mapping*.

20   Judith Butler has suggested that individual failures can be a result of failures at those macro levels: "No one person suffers a lack of shelter without there being a social failure to organize shelter in such a way that it is accessible to each and every person. And no one person suffers unemployment without there being a system or a political economy that fails to safeguard against that possibility. This means that in some of our most vulnerable experiences of social and economic deprivation, what is revealed is not only our precariousness as individual persons—thought that may well be revealed—but also the failures and inequalities of socioeconomic and political institutions. In our individual vulnerability to a precarity that is socially induced, each 'I' potentially sees how its unique sense of anxiety and failure has been implicated all along in a broader social world." Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 21.

21   See Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*; Ahmed "Affective Economies"; Flatley, *Affective Mapping*; Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (the phrase "suspended agency" is found on page 1 of this text).

22   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 130.

23   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 128.

24   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 130.

25   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 133–34.

26   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 134.

27   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 134.

28   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 128.

29   As Williams tells us, too, a "structure of feeling" arising in the personal can have "particular linkages, particular emphases and suppressions" (134) with past and/or existing fixed social forms. The sense of failure as a "structure of feeling" of our times, therefore, can indeed be a modulation of how the twentieth century has grasped failure, if not an ongoing process with how mankind deals with failure. We have suggested this in our discussion of how the sense of failure can be accumulative, except our inscription of it today may be more democratic, less stylized, and without the privileging of larger, geopolitical failures. Otherwise, the "structure of feeling" of failure in the personal can come from without, too, although this external source is not (yet) made explicit or manifest but only exists as a trace of something in the air. And this is why the sense of failure that comes from the outside is not necessarily attributable to institutions and their norms.

30   With respect to recent affect theory, this would be, again, the "transindividual" (Massumi) or "relational" (Flatley) aspect of a "structure of feeling." Also, it is when a "structure of feeling" finds its reverberation outside the individual, when it constitutes the resonance buzzing between the individual and the larger community, that it can signal the mark of a zeitgeist, or how, according to Williams, it "gives the sense of a generation or of a period" (131). It is given the literary works that interest us, the millennial-speak "epic fail," as well as the real-life phenomena of failures and the growing field of failure studies, that I have made the claim that the sense of failure constitutes very much the zeitgeist of our present century.

31   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 128, 132. These aspects furthermore loosen a "structure of feeling" from the other traditional opposition of "feeling against thought"; instead, they allow a "structure of feeling" to embrace "thought as felt and feeling as thought"—that is, a "practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living an interrelating continuity" (132). As suggested earlier, this is indeed how we are understanding failure as an *affective structure* and not solely as structure.

32   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 130.

33   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 132.

34   See Ahmed, "Affective Economies." In following Ahmed's piece, one could perhaps also speak of a *subject* of failure. Of course, the *subject* in question in Ahmed's piece is one who disseminates a certain affect among their community, an affect generated from the passage of another who is different from them and from that community. In the example given by Ahmed, this affect is a negative one, such as dread. When the subject is successful in circulating that affect among their community, there results in the explicit hatred for that other. Like Ahmed, I critique such a subject. Moreover, I would also resist thinking the category of the subject amid the affect of failure; in relation to failure, I would argue for the *reject* as the more apt figure of thought. For this figure of thought, see Goh, *Reject*.

35   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 129, 132.

36   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 130.

37   Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 133, 134.

38   Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, 5.

39   Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 155.

40   See Firestein, *Failure*.

41   Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, 4.

42   Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, 3, 4, 10, 236.

43   Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, 10. I thought this statement of Bradatan's rather ironic given that earlier he would condemn business-management or entrepreneurship talk of failure as "a stepping stone to success" nothing but "self-deception by another name" (5). All this is to say that Bradatan does not stay with failure. In fact, that is clearly not his intention. As he says of his book, it is "not about failure for its own sake" (5).

44   Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 23.

45   Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

46   See Carr, "In Support of Failure." In this essay, Carr also says, "My interest is not in rescuing failure, uplifting it, pulling from it happy, success-oriented resolutions or morals. Instead, I want to think about what could happen if we risk dwelling in the shameful muck and mire of our failure; if we give ourselves permission to experience failure on its own terms, not as something that exists only in opposition to something else but something that is *present*." As will be seen, or if it is not already evident, my rhetoric veers very close to Carr's. However, as I will point out in later notes, Carr does not necessarily stay with failure. The abandonment of failure's negativity for something more positive becomes undeniable in Carr's later essay, "Failure Is Not an Option," where she proclaims that "the virtue of failure should be . . . celebrated" (78), or that "failure should be welcomed, if not actively sought out, signaling as it does both the presence of creative, risky thinking and an opportunity to explore a new direction" (76).

47 As Marin says sarcastically, "We would like to see [in failure] the opportunity of a new life, a blank page, to endow a failure with a retrospective value in transforming it into knowledge, a richness, an experience. There would be virtues in failure. Really?" And she continues: "The large part of failures teaches us nothing. Worse, we often get stuck in the stammering [*bégaiement*] of the same failures, as if they were inevitable, and all this in a paradoxical jouissance of their almost reassuring repetition." Marin, *Rupture(s)*, 20 (my translation).

48 See Blanchot, *Le pas au-délà*; Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*; Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*.

49 Agamben, "On Potentiality," in *Potentialities*, 179. See also Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, particularly the chapter "Work and Inoperativity." On another note, I stress a *thorough* "inoperativity" for our purposes to mark a slight deviation from Blanchot, Nancy, and Agamben. This is because, in Blanchot's case, the elucidation of *désœuvrement* does not signal the end of all literary or aesthetic work nor call for any moratorium on the latter. Instead, writing must continue in order to constantly remind us of the *désœuvrement*, which can also be a "disaster," that is always working from within. This is also not to mention that Blanchot is not inclined toward failure. For him, to do so "would be to be nostalgic of success." Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*, 25 (my translation). With respect to Nancy, the renunciation of any communitarian project, likewise, is not a call for the end of community. Instead, it reaffirms how community takes shape in its own terms, according to the desires of every entity that is coming and going according to their desires, hence constituting this community in its evolution *and* devolution. In Agamben's reclamation of *inoperosità* for human ontology, which, according to him, is also borne by "bare life" or *zoè*—which is to say, life as mere existing before it takes on any political, legal, social, and professional form and which renders it available for abandonment, banishment, or exile by a sovereign power—this is also done with a view of a "coming politics" that embraces *zoè* rather than setting it apart from political life or *bios*. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 213. If it is not evident already, I am seeking to stay with "inoperativity" before it progresses to take on any affirmative and/or political value.

50 Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 2.

51 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 92 (my italics).

52 Edelman, *Bad Education*, xvi. Edelman counts sex, queerness, Blackness, trans, and women as the "nothing" of "bad education," which are "not meant to appear" within the world dominated by white heteronormative morality but which nonetheless exert pressure on such a world. Following the works of Halberstam, Bey, and the Afropessimists Frank B. Wilderson III and Calvin Warren (especially his *Ontological Terror*), I would agree that this group of "nothing" is also associated with failure. I suspect,

though, my sense of *nothing* includes, on the one hand, more than that group to account for certain non-Blacks, non-whites, non-queers, non-trans, non-women, non-deviant-sex to be failed "nothings" that do not add up to normalized meaningful life, and on the other, a sense less than what Edelman would like the term to signify as I lean toward a *literal* "nothing."

I note too that Edelman associates the notion of incompleteness to his "nothing," which is, in Edelman's words, the "nothing" that is "fracturing the ontological consistence of what 'is.'" Edelman, *Bad Education*, xvi. As will be indicated in this introduction and the following chapter, Harney and Moten also mobilize this idea of the incomplete to celebrate the failure embodied by those who threaten to break the flow of the white, racist, capitalist order.

My learning *nothing* also runs counter, once again, to Halberstam's positive perspective on his project "about failing well, failing often, and *learning*." Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 24 (my emphasis). I discuss a little the problematics of the rhetoric of "failing well" in another note in the conclusion.

53   Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 157 (my emphasis).

54   Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 38.

55   Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 57.

56   Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 37, 16.

57   Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 12, 38. For failure as a source of alternative epistemologies and literary identity, see Ochoa, *The Uses of Failure in Mexican Literature and Identity*.

58   Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 159. A similar move of subjecting failure to a literary use is arguably found in Cardona, *Global Failure and World Literature*.

59   Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 43.

60   Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 51.

61   Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 39.

62   As Stefano Harney and Fred Moten remind us, "Resilience is the name for the violent destruction of things that won't give, won't return to form, won't bend when access is demanded, won't be flexible and *comp*liant. Stopping when you are told to stop and moving along when you are told to move along demonstrates resilience and composure; but broken, breaking, dissed assembly demonstrates itself openly, secretly, dissembling in captured but inaccessible glance, for us, to us, as incomplete and much more than complete." Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 44.

63   As many cultural theorists or cultural studies scholars have pointed out, we are dealing with failures of workplace cultures and work ideologies here. I will refer to their scholarship in the next chapter.

64 See also Appadurai and Alexander, *Failure*. They identify a "regime of failure"—that is, the apparatus formed by "a certain epistemology, political economy, and dominant technology" that determines, judges, and naturalizes what failure is, usually a human shortcoming set in opposition to the "success" of technology (2).

65 Such an entrepreneurship of failure constitutes what Bradatan considers "a mockery of failure by trying—without irony—to rebrand it and sell it as nothing less than a stepping stone to success." Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, 4.

On another note, I suspect Carr unwittingly or unconsciously falls into the trap of Silicon Valley–speak or ideology when she says, "To find a way to make [failure] work for me," "to make failure something I do, to make it my business." Carr, "In Support of Failure."

66 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 43.

67 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 64.

68 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 19, 44.

69 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 44.

70 See Dalke, quoted in Carr and Micciche, *Failure Pedagogies*

71 In his reading of Melville's *Pierre*, Jones has also noted that "perfectionist premises are primed to fail." Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 47.

72 Cusk, *Outline*, 41.

73 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 41. See also the section on "The Empty Square" in Deleuze, "How Do We Recognize Structuralism?"

74 See Cusset, *L'autre qu'on adorait*, 244, 252.

75 My thinking of failure as ontological here stands in contrast to that of Scott Sandage's, who argues that failure is a historical determination through the creation of the credit system, which rendered defaulters "losers" or "failures." It also differs from Colin Feltham's thinking of failure as a sociological phenomenon, driven by social groups that desire to make a clear divide from those who perform badly in school, those who traffic in vice, those who are poor, and those who cannot find jobs.

76 Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 16. Later, he would also say, "Failure has its own plot, based on fundamental contradictions deep within our moral and existential beings" (58).

77 See the chapter on Herman Melville on the relation between failing and the image of falling. Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*. John Ochoa has also reminded us that failure is "etymologically related to a fall," given that "the Latin *cadere* means both 'to fail' and 'to fall.'" Ochoa, *The Uses of Failure in Mexican Literature and Identity*, 5.

78 The sense of "after" in the title of this present work should be read in a similar vein. In other words, we are not speaking about the question of living on when failure is a thing of the past, when there is no more failure,

where life is assumed to be better. Rather, and to reiterate, it is more the case where failure is recognized to be ineluctably part of existence, where life is living on inextricably with failure.

79 See Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 4. The quintessential "neutral kernel" of failure's "structure of feeling" could also explain the experience of emptiness at the heart of failure.

80 I am following Werner Hamacher in his understanding of pleroma here, which signifies that which is supposedly filled up or sealed tight against spilling over yet nevertheless finds its contents escaping. In Hamacher's words: "What is supposed to be closed, once and for all, can never cease to close." Hamacher, *Pleroma*, 1.

81 It is in Seminar 20 where Lacan will say that jouissance "exactly implies the acceptation of death." Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, 222 (my translation). And in Seminar 19, in the session "The Desire to Sleep," which will be relevant to our next chapter, Lacan will also make clear that jouissance is not simply or all "enjoyment" but also bears some form of pain, since jouissance is when "one knocks oneself," when "one hurts oneself." (*quand il se cogne, qu'il se fait mal*) Lacan, *Ou pire*, 217 (my translation).

Néstor Braunstein provides a very clear explanation of Lacanian jouissance. Like how we have noted previously, Braunstein also underscores that there is pain involved in jouissance, in addition to jouissance being intimately associated with a death drive. See Braunstein, "Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan." Useful for our thinking of failure, Braunstein also notes that jouissance "does not point to anything, nor does it serve any purpose whatsoever; it is an unpredictable experience" (106). He furthermore highlights its sacrificial aspect, which is not too foreign to the Georges Bataille's notion of unproductive expenditure in *La part maudite*, and which we will make mention later. According to Braunstein, there is "the malefic jouissance of stripping the other of the goods he holds dear" (106), and one can think of the dear goods of success that our contemporary cultures or societies cherish and from which our thinking of failure as jouissance is trying to untether ourselves.

And to reiterate the absence of an optimistic ending to jouissance, Lacan will say that jouissance is always on a repetitive loop with desire, if not chasing after desire. But desire, for Lacan, is always a lack, and so there is always a lost or impossible object for jouissance too. See also Braunstein, "Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan," 106. Here, it is also perhaps appropriate to cite once more a line from Marin that I have done so in an earlier note: "We often get stuck in the stammering of the same failures, as if they were inevitable, and all this in a paradoxical jouissance of their almost reassuring repetition." Marin, *Rupture(s)*, 20.

82   Li, *Must I Go*, 164. Here, I am also resisting the perspective on failure by failure studies, such as Setiya, where he proclaims that "failure is a many-splendored thing." Setiya, *Life Is Hard*, 91.

83   Or, according to Marin: "Failure [*l'échec*] is often nothing other than itself: destitute [*pauvre*], disappointing, a pure dud [*raté*]." Marin, *Rupture(s)*, 20.

84   See Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, xii.

85   And perhaps those who live in the negativity of the impasse of failure would be inhabiting "transitional forms that slow and extend ways to live inconveniently with each other." Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, xi.

86   Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 120. Not unlike how we are thinking about failure as structure here, Edelman in this text also thinks of negativity in structural terms. According to him, "Negativity is unchanging *as structure* because negativity *structures change*" (121). In relation to failure, I would insist that the change that is ongoing in failure as negativity is *not* one for the better. The change does not bring about the overcoming of failure but the difference in the experience, sense, or feeling of failure from one moment to the next.

87   For a far more nuanced reading of the paranoid and depressive positions in Sedgwick, moreover with reference to failure, see the section "What Survives" in Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable.*

88   Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 55. I provide another take on Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love* in one of the chapters in this book.

89   Agamben, "On Potentiality," 181, 182.

90   Shall we say that staying with the impasse and negativity of failure is the experience of the Real in Lacanian terms? For Lacan, in a 1975 lecture given at MIT, the Real is where one knocks oneself, and it is not difficult to see how the existential condition of failed experience is one that is full of knocks. Lacan also considers the Real as the impossible, and perhaps we can say that the Real of the impasse and negativity of failure is impossible only because we always tend to deny failure, because we always seek to construct the Imaginary of a life of successes.

91   Jones has also said, again in his reading of Melville's *Pierre*, "Failure . . . is *both* inborn *and* institutionally imposed, with no exit offered from its recursive loop." Jones, *Failure and the American Writer*, 58. In a more contemporary context, one that pertains in addition to race, Mimi Khúc has written, in a way that resonates with mine, of failure as "all-encompassing, endless, forever," which constitutes "a kind of crip time," rendering one to be in "an endless suspension in failure, even as everyday you are trying to 'do' your way out. There is no way out." Khúc, *dear elia*, 9. Khúc's book appeared after the completion of my manuscript, and as

such, I regret to say that I can only engage with her book more deeply in another occasion.

92   This recalls perhaps Edelman's notion of (queer) negativity, which involves the "willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here." Edelman, *No Future*, 31. No doubt, the thinking and experiencing of the impasse of failure bears no less the sense of "no future." Not surprisingly, too, "no future" is also a phrase one finds in Beckett, "Worstward Ho!," 83.

93   As a preview of that chapter, I will just say that, in articulating failure's shared unshareability, I am resisting the communitarian contour that one might tend to give to the thinking of failure, something that can be found in recent affect theories that engage with failure. I note here too that my rhetoric echoes that of Elaine Scarry in her study of pain. Scarry was addressing pain caused by war and other physical violence, which leave visible wounds on the body. If there is pain associated with the sense of failure, this pain is neither locatable in the body nor does it leave an explicit, physical scar on the body. Nevertheless, this pain can be felt viscerally, no less, and sometimes worse, precisely because of its nonlocalized or nonlocatable quality. See Scarry, *The Body in Pain*.

94   See the discussion on "infrastructuralism" in Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*. My more literal reading of "infra," which is to say, something that pertains to the internal, something deep within the personal, also resonates with Stephen Marche's reflections on failure as the quintessential condition of writers. I believe this is suggested when he writes, "Failure is the body of a writer's life. Success is only ever an attire." Marche, *On Writing and Failure*, 7.

95   Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4. Or, as she says further: "In the impasse . . ., being treads water; mainly, it does not drown. Even those whom you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it, and to protect what optimism they have for that, at least" (10). On another note, I agree with Berlant's thinking of the impasse in her dialogue with Lee Edelman: "The impasse not yet or perhaps never caught up in the drama of repair is neither life existentially nor life post-traumatically but existence, revealed in the stunned encounter: with the contingencies of structuring fantasy; in what one loves in one's own incoherence; and in the bruise of significant contact, with people and with words." Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 41.

96   Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4–5.

97   Derrida, *Aporias*, 12.

98   If not lostness, there is surely a sense of loss too. According to Edelman, "Loss is not merely an emptiness but something more dimensional, something that fills the vacated space that's left by what used to be there." Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 47. Here, I would argue that

such a sense of loss effectively belies the sense of structure according to Deleuze as mentioned earlier—that is to say, structure as the noncoincidence of an occupant at a loss of place and the empty place without an occupant in sight. And loss inherent to the structure of failure, I would add, is one that is without knowledge of the object of loss. In that sense, it is like melancholia, according to Mark Fisher, which is sadness that does not have an object for which it grieves. There is, once again, as I have remarked in another note previously, emptiness.

99   Derrida, *Aporias*, 12.

100   Derrida, *Aporias*, 13.

101   I am clearly referring to Gianni Vattimo's "weak thought" here. However, while I am sympathetic to his taking into account of Being's "faded transmission," its "taking leave of" existence or "passing away," its "waning," its "fullness of its decline" or its "fully living its weakness" (Vattimo, *Weak Thought*, 45, 46, 47, 48, 50), I do suggest going further by suspending, interrupting, or even leaving aside dialectics, which Vattimo will say that his "weak thought" "has not entirely left . . . behind" (39).

102   Berlant, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 56. And Edelman would add, "Drama, like negativity, may be harder to escape than we think" (50). Bradatan has also written that in failure, "we are out of sync." Edelman, *In Praise of Failure*, 4.

On another note, I added a hyphen in "dis-placement" in my reiteration of Deleuze's understanding of structure because place would seem to lose its function as place, or even status of place, as long as it finds no one to occupy it.

On yet another note, but staying with the question of mess and failure, there is Jean-Paul Sartre on Jean Genet (Sartre, *Saint Genet*). Sartre is indeed interested in the failures of writers such as Baudelaire (in *Baudelaire*) and Flaubert (in *L'idiot de la famille*). To his treatment of failure in Baudelaire, Maurice Blanchot will have a response. See Blanchot, *La part du feu*. As already mentioned, this present work will be more interested in twenty-first-century writings and so will leave out any discussion of these works. Nevertheless, I am indebted to Elissa Marder for pointing out to me this trajectory that starts from Baudelaire to Sartre and to Blanchot.

Meanwhile, Halberstam has also written that the "queer art of failure" "promises . . . to fail, to *make a mess* [my italics], to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate." Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 110. We are clearly following a more passive, resigned attitude with regard to failure. As suggested, too, our sense of negativity is very close to Edelman's. Halberstam, as evident, wants instead to glean some form of political use from negativity. For him, "negativity might well constitute an antipolitics, but it should not register as apolitical" (108).

103　Li, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, 52.

104　The more positive outlook of Berlant's "cruel optimism" can be elicited from her take on optimism as "an orientation toward the pleasure that is bound up in the activity of world-making, which may be hooked on futures or not." She goes on: "Even when it turns out to involve a cruel relation, it would be wrong to see optimism's negativity as a symptom of an error, a perversion, damage, or a dark truth: optimism is, instead, a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently." Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 14.

105　See Thacker, *Infinite Resignation*.

106　Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 186, 187. With respect to Halberstam's optimism, or what he would also call "a new kind of optimism" (5), we should be precise to say that this does not imply an uncritical positivity. As he states, this is "not an optimism that relies on positive thinking as an explanatory engine for social order, nor one that insists upon the bright side at all costs; rather this is a little ray of sunshine that produces shade and light in equal measure and knows that the meaning of one always depends upon the meaning of the other" (5). Pessimists as we are, we cannot see that "little ray of sunshine." We are unable to be in tune with the positive mood and tone that Halberstam brings to the thinking of failure, we cannot envision the "wondrous anarchy" (187), to borrow Halberstam's phrase, of failure to the existing order of things.

107　On the impasse and getting stuck and their relation to depression, see Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 20–21. See also Critchley's *Notes on Suicide*, which encourages the composition of suicidal thoughts free from moral, religious, and even philosophical judgment, hence paving the way forward from Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*, which rejects suicide as worthy of philosophical praise. But here, I am closer to Bradatan when he writes, following the psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, that "talking sympathetically about suicide . . . is not an apology for suicide. It's an attempt to understand, from within, one of the most difficult decisions a human being has ever had to make. If we can't do more to help these people, at the very least we owe them this understanding." Bradatan, *In Praise of Failure*, 187. In my view, this understanding can take on the form of giving them the discursive and affective space to stay with the negativity of the impasse.

108　See Hamacher, "Other Pains."

109　Heidegger, of course, has been seen as some sort of failure in philosophical circles, because of his acquiescence to the Nazi regime after being elected by the latter as the rector of Freiburg University and because of his anti-Semitism in his thinking, undeniable since the posthumous publication of the *Black Notebooks*. Peter Trawny provides a rather sympathetic reading of the latter. Trawny, *Freedom to Fail*.

110 Or, as Halberstam deftly puts it: "To live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die." Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 186–87.

111 And as Berlant says, which also brings us back to failure's problematization of any reparative move: "Dread raises uncomfortable questions about repair, the unclarity of what repair would fix, how it would feel as process and telos, and whether it would be possible, desirable, or worth risking." Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 39.

112 Here, I refer to an earlier note on the psychoanalytic term *jouissance*, and I should admit that I was simply scratching the surface of psychoanalysis there. Readers will find that I will do likewise with other psychoanalytic terms such as *mourning*, *melancholia*, *drift* [*dérive*], and *narcissism* in the rest of this work. Indeed, I have no intention or ambition for this work to be a psychoanalytic understanding of failure. Neither do I seek to present psychoanalytic readings of the selected texts here. I believe furthermore that psychoanalysis is not the right theoretical interlocutor for the latter, given too that most of these texts, as mentioned earlier, are in fact suspicious of psychoanalysis. In a way, then, I am respecting their preferences to explicate failure and its accompanying genres in an idiom other than this theoretical language. My personal worry about relying on psychoanalysis here also has to do with it having the tendency to be a "strong theory," seeing rather reductively psychoanalytic tropes such as the family drama, sexual drives, or the unconscious at work everywhere. This is not to say, however, that psychoanalysis has nothing interesting to say about failure. To the contrary, one will find interesting psychoanalytic insights into failure in Edelman's works (both *No Future* and *Bad Education* as well as *Sex, or the Unbearable*, written with Berlant) and Schuster's *The Trouble with Pleasure* (especially the preface, which includes the section "The Failure Not to Be") or even Phillips's *On Giving Up.*

113 On a descriptive method that draws out relations, I am following more or less Love in "Close but Not Deep."

114 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 44, 68.

115 Since we have already referenced Agamben, and given that we have noted how genres in Berlant's sense are also of gestures or the gestural, as well as us announcing right at the beginning of this introduction that we are reckoning with a general nonutilitarian ends of a study of failure and its genres, let us highlight here Agamben's notes on gesture, which underscore a certain uselessness of gestures. According to him, "Nothing is more misleading for an understanding of gestures . . . than representing, on the one hand, a sphere of means as addressing a goal (for example, marching seen as a means of moving the body from point A to point B) and, on the other hand, a separate and superior sphere of gesture as

a movement that has its end in itself (for example, dance seen as an aesthetic dimension." Agamben, *Means without Ends*, 58. He goes on to say, "If dance is gesture, it is so, rather, because it is nothing more than the endurance and exhibition of the media character of corporal movements. *The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such*" (58). The gestures or flailing genres that we are interested in in this present work likewise do not have "an end in itself" but are "of a pure and endless mediality" (59)—that is, manifesting or expressing how the body responds to the sense of failure, doing so especially when words fail to articulate or communicate that sense of failure. As Agamben will also say: "The gesture is . . . communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality. . . . [The] gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language; it is always a *gag* in the proper meaning of the term" (59).

116   With respect to the critical relation between race, gender, and failure, this present work admittedly does not go as deeply into this issue as Love in *Feeling Backward*, Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*, Harney and Moten in *All Incomplete*, and Bey in *Cistem Failure*, for example, do. Any real engagement with this issue certainly demands a work on its own, to which I am definitely committed. I am particularly interested in the failure of certain Asians to be engaged in race discourse and activism in a timely manner, including their failure to form critical solidarity with other minority races. As said, though, this will have to be left for another occasion. Besides, for a critical understanding of those failures in racial terms, I also believe in the necessity of first explicating the affective structure of failure, the fact that some of us never leave our sense of failure, and some of the genres that are flailing in response to it, hence this present work before that commitment.

117   Here, I also note the epic quality of Cusk's trilogy. Arguably, that quality can also be found in Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* with the narrative's year-long temporality. With the notion of epic, I want to bring us back again briefly to "epic fail." What is really missing or wanting in the latter's articulation is a thinking or even rethinking of epic and, keeping in mind Aristotelian poetics, pose the question of how the epic might be more fitting to contemporary failure as opposed to tragedy, not forgetting that the tragic is the preferred quality of "grand narratives" of twentieth-century failures of Beckett and other modernists.