

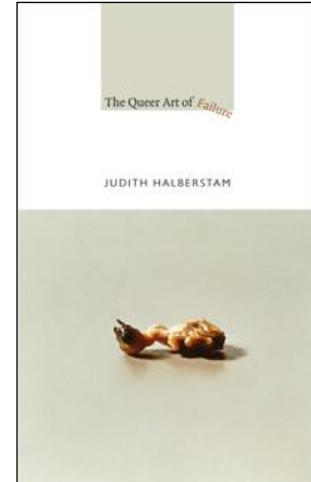
Judith Halberstam, **The Queer Art of Failure**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, 211 pp., \$79.95 (hardcover), \$15.61 (paperback), \$14.83 (Kindle edition).

Reviewed by

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Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* is an energetic and loving tribute to those of us who fail, lose, get lost, forget, get angry, become unruly, disrupt the normative order of things, and exist and behave in the world in ways that are considered antinormative, anticapitalist, and antidisciplinary. In this manifesto on failure, the author claims the possibility of failing well. She also looks at what it means to not win, to not buy into consumer culture, to not aspire to accumulate goods, or to challenge disciplinary boundaries. In doing so, Halberstam expands the archive of work that ought to be taken seriously, but hardly ever is. Her turn to overlooked or overtly rejected texts succeeds by throwing "high theory" out the window. From *SpongeBob SquarePants* to Valerie Solanas, from Jamaica Kincaid to *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), Halberstam collects a set of narratives that weave together a politics of solidarity, of refusal, of unbecoming and unknowing, of the absurd that all come back to failing differently, failing better, and failing collectively.



The Queer Art of Failure aims to upend the logics of success—logics central to our contemporary moment that are also particularly resonant in light of "the collapse of the financial markets on the one hand and the epic rise in divorce rates on the other" (p. 2). To launch her critique, Halberstam borrows and adapts Stuart Hall's concept of "low theory" to address the places, spaces, films, and figures that might pose an alternative position, where possibility may be found in "the unexpected, the improvised, and the surprising" (p. 16). One question that this framework poses is whether or not Halberstam succeeds in dismantling these logics, or does she instead invert the logics of success and failure to promote a new way of conceptualizing failure? Does she validate queer failure so that queer failure is the new success (a version of queer exceptionalism?). If that is the case, then she does indeed fail. Through the author's framework, we might understand failure as a different sort of success—the type that opens up the doors to the kinds of important conversations this book addresses. For example, Halberstam wants to talk about what is learned in forgetting. Or who sets the terms of success and failure? By framing her argument from within the opposing forces of success and failure, as well as claiming the in-between space, she poses a very important critique of the logics of success and failure, which makes the question of whether or not the aims of the book succeed or fail completely irrelevant.

In her book's introduction, Halberstam positions the independent film *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) as emblematic of the type of failure that she wants to recover and rethink. She discusses the ways in which the adventures of the film's protagonist, Olive, are a statement about "a society obsessed with meaningless competition" (p. 5). Indeed, the young Olive offers the film's audience what Halberstam calls "a new kind of optimism" (ibid.) in that, surrounded by the world of teen beauty pageants and enmeshed

in a fairly dysfunctional family, Olive's failures are understood as liberating, as opening the door for darkness and shadows within optimism's bright lights and world of positive thinking.

Halberstam dedicates Chapter 1, "Animating Revolt and Revolting Animation," to what she calls "Pixarvolt" films. The author details the way in which the computer generated imagery (CGI) used to create Pixar films is developed by folks who have experienced their own types of failures—being rejected by academia or rejecting academia—as leaders and thinkers configured beside academia that have developed their own way of alternatively producing filmic images. Halberstam brilliantly reads the film *Chicken Run* (2000) through the lens of "class struggle" in a way that brings to the fore the themes often found in "Pixarvolt" films—namely, revolt, cooperation, collective struggle, and transformation as alternatives to "the grim, mechanical, industrial cycles of production and consumption" (p. 29). Halberstam guides us through a number of Pixar films that fall into this "Pixarvolt" category, including *Toy Story* (1995), which features toys coming to life to band together and escape their own version of captivity; *Bee Movie* (2007), notable for its playfulness, flexibility, and room for variation with the themes of gender, sex, labor, and pleasure; and *Over the Hedge* (2006) in which the cross-species collective of animal groups organize to right the wrongs done to them by the suburbanite antienvironmentalist humans. Each of these films offers to audiences "new forms of being" and "different ways of thinking about being, relation, reproduction and ideology" (p. 42) that, for Halberstam, are importantly enabled by the "failures" of the CGI production team.

In Chapter 2, "Dude, Where's My Phallus? Forgetting, Losing, Looping," perhaps the most persuasive use of textual analysis within this book, Halberstam zeros in on the themes of stupidity, memory, queer temporality, and alternate forms of family and sociality to read *Finding Nemo* (2003) as differently emblematic of the "Pixarvolt" genre. For the author, the character of Dory (voiced by queerly marked Ellen DeGeneres) represents a different sort of knowing that might otherwise be considered stupidity. Within the context of the animated film, however, Dory's character explores different ways of relating to others and alternative ways of existing in the world. In fact, Dory is a key figure within the narrative, a figure whose different way of knowing and forgetting is instrumental in the rescue she embarks on with the father clownfish, Marlin. In this way, Dory presents a case for queer temporality, a break from a linear and teleological version of understanding history as well as an acknowledgement of "antifamilial kinship" models (p. 81). In Halberstam's reading, *Finding Nemo* speaks to queer theory's insistence on alternative models of kinship, its resistance to reading history as if there is such a thing as definitive histories, and makes a space for alternative forms of knowledge formations and practices.

One of the major strengths of *The Queer Art of Failure* is that it speaks directly to academia and scholarship and provides a model for an antidisiplinary take on the themes of failure and negativity—a continuation of a conversation that has been ongoing since the 2005 Modern Language Association debates among queer theorists (see Lee Edelman, Jose Estéban Muñoz, and others). Precisely because of its adaptation of this particular model, Halberstam's book speaks to a much wider audience than it does to queer theory alone. Particularly relevant for communication scholars is the in-depth textual analysis of these animated films situated within a conversation of optimism and possibility. Halberstam introduces a way of thinking that may be refreshing to the communication scholar in that many of these films would likely not be considered counterhegemonic without her particular lens and spin.

However, there is some reason for concern in regard to the way Halberstam celebrates and then fails to seriously address the political economy from which the "Pixarvolt" films are produced and released. She makes mention of the perils of the "gift shop," but the critique ends there, pitting a political economy critique on the side of cynical resignation. It does seem that the mention of the ways in which "Pixarvolt" films are caught up within certain modes of production and with a certain potential to be captured by the interest of capital would be well-warranted. An attention to the realm of political economy may shift the way possibility can be configured. Either way, optimism and possibility are hard pills to swallow when thinking through texts that are particularly enmeshed within capitalism.

In Chapter 5, "The Killer in Me Is the Killer In You: Homosexuality and Fascism," Halberstam contends with some of the more unsavory aspects of queer history that are often glossed over in favor of heroic models extracted from history to depathologize queer lives. Instead, Halberstam insists that understanding the political entails "embracing the incoherent, the lonely, the defeated, and the melancholic formulations of selfhood" (p. 148). By examining and acknowledging the existence of Gay Nazis, Halberstam continues to provide support for her overall argument, which reconsiders the importance of being unsettled by our complex and contradictory histories—a project that insists on not rejecting the "failed" subject.

One consideration that seems to be overlooked by the author is the valorization of failure as a theme, or as something to aspire to, without recognizing that failure is a privilege that not everyone might be able to afford. Conceptualizing and theorizing the political possibilities of failure is certainly an interesting and thought-provoking exercise, and for many, myself included, it offers a certain sort of (therapeutic) relief from the drive for normatively understood standards of perfection. But does it mean something differently when we start talking about failing on a material level? When we talk about people that are struggling to make ends meet with too many mouths to feed? Or when we are talking about young academics hoping to make a name for themselves? Does it take a certain amount of cachet to advance interdisciplinary projects? Will young academics who fail to breach the threshold even enter the academic world? There might be less to celebrate within failing on a material level than there is to celebrate and conceptualize on a theoretical level. I would love to see where theory and material reality might converge in the context of this conversation, as I'm sure it would open up even more places from which to think through and understand the very important themes Halberstam places center stage.

As a whole, this book is a must-read, particularly for scholars who work at the intersection of Media Studies and Queer Theory. It provides a unique lens and a unique voice through which to explore meaning-making through mediated texts. The turn to failure, interdisciplinarity, negativity, unbecoming, and thinking through the concepts of optimism and possibility within failure offers a very refreshing set of questions from which, no doubt, future scholarship and future conversations will follow.