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Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander, *Failure*

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In *Failure*, published in November 2019 by Polity, Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander examine financial and technological "protocols, both obscure and routine," that generate a regime of failure, in which a particular epistemology, political economy, and dominant technology come together to normalize failure, an inherent feature of advanced capitalism, in the name of risks, upgrade, and innovation (p. 117). Drawing on Karl Popper's work on failure and Joseph Schumpeter's work on innovation and creative destruction in the history of capitalism, the two explore the ways contemporary capitalism shapes financial and technological systems into an interconnecting apparatus, which produces and normalizes failure, and creates a pervasive sense that all success belongs to technology and its virtues, and that all failure belongs to the citizen, the investor, and the consumer. Appadurai and Alexander build *Failure* by incorporating four disciplines: science, business, queer studies, and infrastructure studies, and particularly draw inspiration from queer scholars such as Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Jack Halberstam, and Ann Cvetkovich's discourse on "toxic positivity" and "cruel optimism" (p. 6). In *Failure*, Appadurai and Alexander argue that failure is a privilege for a few (the 1 percent at the top) who have the luxury to fail because when they fail, they "fail up," but the vast majority of people (the other 99 percent at the bottom) do not have that luxury because when they fail, they always "fail down," and made accountable for "their mistakes as well as for the mistakes of others" (p. 119).

Appadurai and Alexander center *Failure* around North America's tech and finance worlds, Silicon Valley and Wall Street. By limiting their investigation of failure to these two bi-coastal cultures, the two seek to reveal how Silicon Valley and Wall Street deny and displace failure and monetize both forgetfulness and ignorance of the consumers by setting up conditions that lead them to quickly forget repeated crises. According to Appadurai and Alexander, in this "cycle of denial and displacement, only one thing is certain, the certainty of failure as repetition and the repetition of failure" (p. 18). Throughout the book, the two seek to isolate, identify, and mitigate the destructive effects of failure on people's lives and to explore how they can better remember the failure of the past and resist the monetization of failure by Silicon Valley and World Street. In response to Silicon Valley and Wall Street's repeated broker promises of a better future through failure, Appadurai and Alexander state: "The answer is thus not to forgive and forget, or to reclaim failure as revolutionary; the answer is failure, remembered" (p. 125). Hence, the purpose of *Failure* includes creating critical consciousness among people regarding the failure of technological and financial products so that the people can know that failure is not their fault; instead, failure is inherent in a capitalist economic structure where the 1 percent at the top win at the expenses of the other 99 percent.

In *Failure*, Appadurai and Alexander argue that the celebratory narrative of failure promoted by Silicon Valley and Wall Street is a volatile and variable concept, which is "*the difference that doesn't make a difference*" (Emphasis added, p. 9). For instance, while Silicon Valley thrives on the idea that failure is key to innovation and success, Wall Street heavily penalizes individual bankers and traders who fail to accomplish goals. While acknowledging key differences between Silicon Valley and Wall Street, Appadurai and Alexander opt to identify and isolate the similarities between these two worlds to focus on failure. The two argue that Silicon Valley and Wall Street are mutually dependent parts of a shared ecology because they thrive on failure, and their monetization of failure has a wide-reaching impact on people's lives. By closely looking at the failed promises made by Silicon Valley and Wall Street, Appadurai and Alexander argue that Silicon Valley and Wall Street have commodified failure, and they sell this commodity by making a machine of broken promises of happiness to the people that their products would bring happiness and success to their lives, while denying or dismissing the existence of failure in their products although people experience them in their everyday lives.

To move beyond this failure and success binary developed by Silicon Valley and Wall Street, Appadurai and Alexander integrate queer studies of failure in *Failure* and argue that the neoliberal "promise of happiness paradoxically results in increased anxiety, moments of breakdown, and 'wounded attachments' to the capitalist structure of power" (p. 6). They align with queer scholars' call for a more nuanced understanding of experience outside the heteronormative "neoliberal 'success' framework and its binary relation to 'failure'" (p. 7). In addition, Appadurai and Alexander also draw from infrastructure studies, specifically Andrew Russell and Lee Vinsel's works on maintenance and repair. Referring to Russell and Vinsel, the two show that while the historical study of maintenance and repair could be traced back to the classic works of John G. Burke's (1966) "Bursting boilers and the Federal power," modern electronic and mobile technologies are designed to fail in order to sustain the culture of upgrades and replacements. According to Appadurai and Alexander, these technological products are strategically built as black boxes that users cannot easily or inexpensively fix. The users who try to fix their technological devices face either an exhausting and costly uphill battle or an inevitable failure because of existing legal systems. As a result, the lifespan of technological devices such as smartphones has significantly shrunk. The average mobile phone is thrown away in Western nations after only 11 months of use. Although this technological failure causes distress and anxiety among users, Silicon Valley perpetuates the idea that the failure is an individual act and systematically conceal or deny the true cause of failure. By closely analyzing several case studies, Appadurai and Alexander argue that failure is an epistemology, affect, and political economy inherent to capitalism's market logic. According to Appadurai and Alexander, failure "converts the user of digital or financial products into a perennial tester, a reporter on failures, whose behaviors, choices, wishes, and needs are channeled into the design, testing, and experience protocols" (p. 12). And this cycle endlessly continues as failure gets repeated, and Silicon Valley and Wall Street thrive on failure by keeping users waiting for their so-called upgraded innovative products.

In *Failure,* Appadurai and Alexander show the system of power relations in waiting and how waiting links Silicon Valley and Wall Street. According to the two, although Silicon Valley and Wall Street make money "delinking price from value" by creating false promises of future growth, waiting is the key link between the two experiences of techno-failure and market failure (p. 105). For example, Wall Street keeps customers waiting for credit approvals for receiving loans and paying interests, and Silicon Valley keeps customers waiting for the loading of their tech products to be complete. Drawing on Tawil-Souri (2007), Farman (2018), and Janeja and Bandak (2018), Appadurai and Alexander point out the idea that from ancient times waiting has been known to be the condition of "subordination and inequality" (106). And both Silicon Valley and Wall Street monetize waiting by transforming it into a commodity. But Silicon Valley and Wall Street systematically normalize waiting by training consumers to forget and forgive the traumatic experiences of waiting. As a result,

consumers in general do not ask questions about why they are waiting to watch videos on YouTube, waiting in Banks to deposit or receive money, or in doctors' offices to receive treatment, and why they need to fill out specific questionnaires before receiving services. Often, they do not know that they are not just purchasing commodities but also becoming commodities of Silicon Valley and Wall Street.

In *Failure*, Appadurai and Alexander provide detailed examples of how Wall Street creates false consciousness among people by connecting anxiety, uncertainty, and ignorance that they should share some responsibilities in bailing out big financial players when the big players fail to materialize their greed. Drawing on Appadurai's (2015) previous work, *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance*, the two analyze the financial collapse of 2007-8 and argue that "the failure of the financial system in 2007-8 in the United States was primarily a failure of language" although "greed, ignorance, weak regulation, and irresponsible risk-taking were important factors in the collapse" (p. 98). They call the failure of derivatives a failure of language because derivatives are basically linguistic contracts, and the financial market "exploits the linguistic power of the contract through the special form that money is by definition the most abstract form in which the value of commodities can be expressed" (p. 99). The two argue that market failure is not just an inevitable result of excessive speculation, inadequate regulation, or unscrupulous bankers, which are mostly highlighted in the literature, but also "a systematic feature of the connection of markets to wider aspects of our social and technological lives under advanced capitalism," which are mostly ignored in ongoing conversation (p. 116). The two remind their readers that market failure is inevitable as it is the essential basis of advanced capitalism.

Failure depicts that market and techno failure is the systematic features of advanced capitalism, which allows Wall Street and Silicon Valley to set the conditions under which financial or techno failure is remembered or ignored, but users' experiences of failure are constantly denied in order to monetize failure. Thus, capitalism creates a toxic culture based on failure where some, yet not all, are perpetually punished for their failures. For instance, some men at the top have the privilege to fail, while women, people of color, and the LGBT always fail down. At this point, a question arises: what sort of strategies do we need to devise and follow to resist this toxic culture of monetization of failure? Appadurai and Alexander outline five strategies to resist this toxic culture. First, we need to learn how to better remember failure. Second, we should be more forceful in "demanding accountability" from corporations and their stakeholders (p. 124). Third, we should create pressure on government agencies and regulators to set new policies to limit the use of "ethically dubious business models like planned obsolescence and, instead promote legislation such as 'the right to repair'" (p. 124). Fourth, we should strive "to develop digital and algorithmic literacy that can help us to 'un-black-box' our opaque devices and to better understand the infrastructure they rely on" (p. 124). And finally, our "regulators need to find ways to stay ahead of the world of both digital and financial innovations to provide social precautions which precede new instruments, tools, and platforms before they collapse, implode, or vanish with our money and our time" (p. 124).

Failure serves as a critical exercise in understanding the discourse of failure in advanced capitalism. Although advanced capitalism strives to make people forget its failure, Appadurai and Alexander aspire to remind their readers that the failure in capitalist market structure is real, and it affects individuals and groups. The two tend to argue that failure is not an isolated issue that accidentally happens in projects, institutions, or lives; instead, it is a "product of judgements that reflect various arrangement of power, competence, and equity in different places and times" (p 1). The two center their discussion of failure in Silicon Valley and Wall Street to reveal how these two bi-coastal worlds monetize both forgetfulness and ignorance of ordinary people. Throughout the book, they try to disseminate the idea to their readers that failure is a commodity systematically designed to make more profits. So, failure of tech and financial products is not the fault of individuals who use them. Therefore, Silicon Valley and Wall Street must take the responsibility for the failure of their products, and the people who use their products should never forget the failures they experienced and make corporations accountable for their failures. Thus, we can resist this toxic culture of monetization of failure, which produces disappointment, remorse, and regret and has costly effects on individuals. Although in *Failure*, Appadurai and Alexander pay more attention to the commonalities between Silicon Valley and Wall Street because of their focus on failure, the two suggest that there is a deep need to examine more closely how digital and financial capital differ and in which ways they connect, to create the complex operating system of contemporary capitalism.

References

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