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Literary Theory and Criticism

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Queer Theory External Reading:

Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* Notes

* Theories:
  + New = wisdom
    - “Lose the idealism of hope in order to gain wisdom and a new spongy relation to life, culture, knowledge, and pleasure”
  + Success = heteronormative + wealth-accumulating
    - “Success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation”
  + Failure = good
    - “Failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world”
    - Failure “can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon ‘trying and trying again’”
    - “If success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier than in the long run and offers different rewards”
  + Failure = queer
    - “Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well”
    - “For queers failure can be a style”
  + Masochism = form of embracing failure = good
    - “While the libido tends to ward off the death drive through a ‘will to power,’ a desire for mastery, and an externalization of erotic energy, sometimes libidinal energies are given over to destabilization, unbecoming, and unraveling”
    - “Invites us to unthink sex as that alluring narrative of connection and liberation and think it anew as the site of failure and unbecoming conduct”
    - Cutting = form of masochism = form of embracing failure = good
      * “Following up on the act of cutting as a masochistic will to eradicate the body…to find another realm of aesthetic production dominated by a model of radical passivity and unbeing”
  + Failure = refusal of self = radical passivity
    - A “dismantling” performance of the self is a “not a liberal gesture of defiance but accesses another lexicon of power and speaks another language”
    - “The willingness of the subject to actually come undone, to dramatize unbecoming as a function of her or his own body”
  + Benefits of failure:
    - “Allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from the unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods”
    - “The negative thinker can use the experience of failure to confront the gross inequalities of everyday life in the U.S.”
    - Relieves pressure—“where the feminine success is always measure by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures”
* Approach
  + What’s the alternatives?
    - “To explore alternatives and to look for a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations”
    - “Locate all the in-between spaces”
  + High theory and low theory
    - “The book darts back and forth between high culture and low culture, high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge”
    - “Using low theory as a mode of accessibility”
    - “Look for low theory and counterknowledge in the realm of popular culture and in relation to queer lives, gender, and sexuality”
  + Purpose:
    - “Goal-oriented and activist”
    - “Open”
      * “Unpredictable outcomes, unsure”
    - “Wander, improvise, fall short, and moves in circles…lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds…in losing we will find another way of making meaning…no one gets left behind”
      * “Shifting, flexible, and adjustable”
* Evidence
  + *Little Miss Sunshine* [2006] (film)
    - Example of one destined to fail
    - “Failure could be the source of misery and humiliation….also at least to a kind of ecstatic exposure of the contradictions of a society obsessed with meaningless competition”
    - “Reveals the precarious models of success”
  + *V for Vendetta* (film)
    - “Is everything a joke…only the things that matter”
    - Failure = alternative
  + Cabello “Sin título (Utopia) #27” (digital photograph)



* + - “Symbolic site of loss”
    - Signifies from a marker of wealth to queer loss and disorder
  + *Chicken Run* (film)
    - “We either die free chickens, or we die trying”
    - “Are those the only choices?”
    - There is a better response: “shadow archive of resistance”
      * “one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing”
      * Occupied with negativity and negation
  + *Autobiography of My Mother* [1997] (autobiography book)
    - Losses her origins and losses her mother
    - “the unstory of a woman who cannot be anything but the antithesis of the self that is demanded by colonialism”
    - Unbecoming: “aborting a child, she avoids love, family, and intimacy and disconnects herself from all of those things that would define her”
  + *The Piano Teacher* (novel)
    - Unbecoming
    - Similar to *Autobiography of My Mother*
  + Kara Walker’s “My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love”
    - “Convey the atrociously violent landscape of the American racial imagination”
    - “experience of power…productive power, power for, but also negative power, or power to unbecome”
  + “Cut Piece” (Clip)
    - Unbecoming
    - Radical passivity – willingness to deconstruct self