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Writing failure: knowledge production, temporalities, ethics, and traces

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This volume follows failures out into the world, exploring how they unfold ethnographically. Taking a longer view shows how objects, narratives, and diagnoses of failures may be crafted, acted on, suffered, resisted – unmade or recomposed. Thus while tropes and diagnoses of failure can temporarily (re)organize, narrate, and stabilize the world, the kinds of failures explored here also indicate a mode of uncontainable excess that refuses the boundedness of knowledge objects, temporalities, and spaces. This volume offers three main interventions. The first concerns knowledge production: how objects of failure are crafted through selective ways of knowing that occlude both other modes of apprehension at different scales and failure's many affective valences. The second thinks through the knotted temporalities – whether pasts, futures, suspended presents, or repetition and sedimentation – that make and are made by failure. Finally, writing about unfurling failures requires careful attention to non-linear reverberations and traces as well as to open-ended and mobile narratives that produce different social and material effects.

A sense of failure hangs in the air.[1] The COVID pandemic foregrounded the creaking strains of global society, the latest reminder that lethal economic and health inequalities persist, whetted on postwar development projects aimed at their amelioration. With almost unbroken war over the last century or so, this has been the most murderous period in history (Hobsbawm 2002). The Doomsday Clock shows 100 seconds to midnight. The list spools out of modernity's failed projects of social transformation and is met by failures of planetary care. Alternatives crumble as they are proposed (Newell & Taylor 2020), perhaps because, as Marilyn Strathern observes, they rehearse the same habits of thinking, deaf to other voices (Strathern & Latimer 2019: 487; see also Prince & Neumark 2022*a*; Stengers 2015). Apologies and acknowledgements neither atone for nor staunch the systematic violence of dispossession, genocide, and destruction across the modern age. Whether we're hanging by a thread or in freefall is moot.[2]

But ideas about failure's positive generativity also flourish. Gaily taking Joseph Schumpeter's prophetic obituary of capitalism's ultimate self-immolation for a manual on how to succeed (Schumpeter 1942; see also Birla 2016), Silicon Valley has equally

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bizarrely adopted Samuel Beckett's 'Fail again, fail better' line as its mantra. Beckett's *Worstward Ho* (1984), the quotation's source, is concerned with the paradox of 'achieving' the worst en route to inevitable death and decay. While openness to failure is seen, in some quarters, as critical for market innovation, technoscientific or indeed intellectual progress, this can all too easily cloak the crushing effect on individuals or tip into mandatory projects of self-improvement. The sentiment that failure is the fire in which strength of character is forged and success seized has launched a thousand motivational Hallmark cards, self-help manuals, and podcasts (Long & Moore 2013: 2).[3] Such exhortations ring hollow for those who have no second chance or lack a social safety net. Clearly, failure has a lively presence in the world but is not easily caged.

Echoing or in response to intimations of finality and inadequacy, anthropological engagements with failure fall, roughly, into three camps. The first is concerned with failure as endpoint (Miyazaki & Riles 2005[4]). The rash declaration that the Soviet Union's collapse marked the end of history (Fukuyama 1992) was swiftly overturned by scholars' emphasis on unfolding transformations and reconfigurations across postsocialist space. This body of literature, in tandem with postcolonial studies (Chari & Verdery 2008; Stoler 2008), continues to suggest the complexity and plurality of both states' practices and rhetorical discourses, on the one hand, and vernacular responses to an apparently singular and absolute failure, on the other (Nguyen-Vo & Hong 2018). Such reactions range from mourning a regime's lost promises (Geissler 2011; Yarrow 2018) to rejection, nostalgia, anger (Greenberg & Muir 2022), or quietly continuing practices and beliefs. It is worth emphasizing that by too easily diagnosing and dismissing certain regimes and projects as failed blueprints, their residual future potential is devalued, their promise is denigrated (Geissler & Tousignant 2020), and their endurances are unseen (West & Raman 2009). Elsewhere, while places and people may be written off as collateral damage by someone else's calculus (Alexander & Sanchez 2019; Lerner 2010), some failures may elicit or be replaced by new ways of being and thinking. In this special issue, we carry through this emphasis on plurality, recognizing that while some failures *are* endpoints that cannot be parlayed into successful enterprises, something often lingers, whether the affect of disappointment, enduring desires for a better world than this, material remains, or colonial logics.

The second approach challenges the term 'failure' as a censorious, normative judgement, usually predicated on yardsticks drawn from different contexts, other value regimes, or ideal models that have scant purchase anywhere (Abram & Weszkalnys 2013; Appadurai 2016*a*; Mica *et al.* 2023). This take is related to questions of recognition that spin on the classificatory politics of who recognizes whom and to what end (Alexander & Sanchez 2019; Bowker & Star 1999; Povinelli 2002). The corollary is grounded on queer and now 'crip' or critical disability theory, where such mainstream evaluations of success or failure are sidestepped or rejected as irrelevant at best, murderously violent at worst. Instead the emphasis is on what things and people are, possibilities for living otherwise, and a present-orientated playfulness embracing failure as nonconformity (Halberstam 2011; Howe & Takargawa 2017).[5] Science and technology studies and the history of science have long made similar interventions querying the normalization of 'failed' experiments and technologies (Bijker, Hughes & Pinch 1989; Haraway 1994; Mol 2002).

This special issue builds on a third perspective that approaches failure as an ethnographic category (Appadurai 2016*b*; Carroll, Jeevendrampillai, Parkhurst & Shackelford 2017; Prince & Neumark 2022*a*; 2022*b*) with unfurling social and material

effects. Timothy Carroll *et al.* (2017) derive a general theory of failure from their engaging ethnographic chapters, suggesting that failure is when things do not behave as intended or expected, is always negative (therefore carrying moral implications of blame), and reorganizes social relations in the future. This theory works for their volume's concern with materiality and emphasis on what happens in the space between the collapse of one social/material system and the formation of the next. The broader compass of the contributions here partly supports such conclusions but also discusses instances where failure *is* expected, positively freighted, and works through multiple temporal registers, including reorganizing the past. What also appears is a mode whereby lives may be sustained by drawing on a substrate of failure. Although not directly in conversation with Carroll *et al.*, Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander (2020) provide a commentary on the intentionality and expectation of some failures through their analysis of the deliberate redistribution of financial and technological failures onto customers, who become habituated to such experiences (see also Mica *et al.* 2023). Their discussion is instructive for how failure's potency can be sharpened by its 'disappearance', but also obliquely raises the question of scale with which we engage more directly.

Tracking the generative potential of some failures has form. Clifford Geertz (1957) famously used a failed ritual to criticize functionalist understandings of social order, highlighting how it ushered in change (see also Hüsken 2007). The anthropologies of religion and ethics also show how sensing and responding to failure are central to many practices of self-cultivation, whether acknowledging sinfulness or aiming to correct – or learn to relinquish responsibility for – what are believed to be moral failures (Beekers & Kloos 2017; Fahy 2017; Hüsken 2007; Mautner 2020; O'Neill 2022). These studies excavate the subtle range of responses to and moral valences of failure that surpass ideas of things gone wrong, blame, and accountability.

Elsewhere, the idea that 'the normally invisible quality of infrastructure [only] becomes visible when it breaks' (Star 1999: 382), jarring into citizens' consciousness, has led to the notion that infrastructural failure's revelatory capacity (Carroll *et al.* 2017; Green 2017; Smith & Woodcraft 2020) or absence (Harvey & Knox 2012) is a means through which institutional failure or instability is manifested. But the assumption that functioning, invisible infrastructure is universal has also been roundly criticized (Larkin 2013). In cities of the Global South, infrastructure is rarely complete or seamlessly functioning (Simone 2004*b*) and thus has a vigorous presence, even in its absence, in people's lives – no habituation here! The same holds abundantly true for many (post)socialist countries (Alexander 2012; Benjamin 1986; Dalakoglou 2012; Lemon 2009). One extension is that 'failure' may be too readily applied to African cities, occluding an appreciation of what is actually there (Simone 2004*a*: 16, 96) and reducing the entire continent to a reductive cliché (Roitman 2017).

Engaged with ethnographically, failure thus appears as a mobile, revelatory event or constitutive discourse (Kosmatopoulos 2011) 'setting in motion a range of effects' (Smith & Woodcraft 2020: 2) and inviting analysis of 'the practical life of ideas' as they unfold (Best 2014). One striking result of following failure out into the world is seeing how it may be operationalized to attract funds (Kosmatopoulos 2011; Mattioli 2020), such that failure and success can be two sides of the same coin (Appadurai 2016*b*), although typically unequally distributed. Likewise, analyses of modernist enterprises bent on improvement suggest that certain failures are instrumentally transformative in the service of power (Ferguson 1994; Gunder Frank 1966). Such

'successful' failures, with felicitous performative effects for some, are useful reminders that failures and successes alike can be experienced quite distinctly by different groups, as illustrated by political decolonizations springing from postwar failures of empire. Our essays further complicate this linear cause-and-effect logic by tracing other wayward, contingent effects of such failures and how such reattributions are articulated and experienced by those charged with performing them. As such, we are in critical dialogue with Appadurai's (2016*a*) superb edited collection of essays, within and beyond anthropology, which highlights that failure is a 'loose', 'volatile and variable' concept, essentially not a fact but a human judgement, raising questions of authority and, crucially, being shaped by local cultural assumptions which change over time and through encounters with other ideas about failure (2016b : xxi).

Initially, we, too, aimed to bracket off the question of whether or not something or someone is a failure to avoid the cul-de-sac to which this can lead: reproducing failure as designation. But it rapidly became clear that simply excluding failure as a false representation, or co-opting it to trouble normalizing discourse, potentially evades the responsibility of making visible what it means to live in the long shadows of labels that degrade places and people. Refusing to declare something a failure can itself be morally culpable.

This is where the importance of understanding how failure works as a local category and who gets to diagnose and label something or someone as a failure comes into play. If we always resist naming failure as a fact, we lose the ability to call authority to account when moral and legal obligations are refused and such actions are reinterpreted away from failure. Most of these instances centre on specific failures of care, the neglect of moral and legal obligations by authorities to citizens. Thus while failure may be sidestepped as a normative judgement, it is worth remembering that E.P. Thompson's (1971) conception of moral economy is grounded on the idea that people can legitimately protest authorities' failures to fulfil their responsibilities. There is a temporal ethics at play here too. The deliberate and constant deferral of discharging duties displaces a policy's or project's realization to an obfuscatory 'not yet' limbo, adjacent to the elusive, promised utopias of planning (Abram & Weszkalnys 2013; Geissler 2011). But the effect of such postponements can be felt and suffered as present dereliction: 'justice deferred is justice denied' as the legal maxim puts it. Through the analytic of disappointment, Greenberg and Muir (2022) move beyond protest as a response to such abrogations, encompassing disengagement, refusal, anger, formation of new solidarities, and simply slogging on. This Janus-faced nature of failure demands a vigilant awareness of how easily failure can slip from fact to judgement, from moral and legal dereliction to denigration.

However, whether failure is taken as given, ethnographically or analytically, or judgement paused, our principal aim is to attend to its material, discursive, and embodied traces and reverberations. Such mapping can challenge the sense of failure as a singular post hoc judgement or show how scales and times can merge. Nuclear contamination and fossil fuel consumption, for example, link damaged bodies and Anthropocenes[6] and highlight such failures' mutagenicity, one failure generating the somatic conditions for the next. Failure's effects, moreover, may be as much anticipatory, or rehearsed in the present, as retrospective. Casting something as a future or present failure can stabilize uncertainty, create knowledge through identifying cause and effects, and make things happen through carefully bounded objects of failure. But such acts can also be contested and revisited as failures are reconstituted and recalibrated.

In such a spirit, this special issue focuses on what failure *does*, how it is experienced, understood, and made to matter. In so doing, failure appears less amenable to simple definition than might be expected – often not so much the opposite of success, however impoverished the definition, as lack of care or imagination. Here we train our attention on the complex, proliferating, ambiguous properties, times, effects, and affects of the tropes and events of failure, embracing plurality in our ethnographies of what failure variously enables, constrains, and renders invisible across multiple scales. We aim to hold the various modes of addressing failure, outlined above, in tension, following the contours of different forms of failure as they open out or preclude certain interventions and responses, are rejected or redefined (Zoanni 2018). This approach resonates with Dace Dzenovska's (2020) take on emptiness in the Latvian countryside, which has a sensual dimension, multiple explanatory narratives, and is the site of reconstituting ways of life and ideas about the future.

Likewise, a given failure's aftermaths may serve to reinforce power but may also have consequences that unfurl elsewhere in different ways. As the contributions here explore, the possibilities offered by failure may be an emancipatory otherwise, an impulse to address a future or present catastrophe, or an imposed, etiolated rendering of what living in other ways could mean. The embodied tension of these different stances can be felt acutely by those who seek to tackle given objects of failure as policy-makers, scientists, innovators, or caregivers, but find, as citizens, parents, and spouses, that they are more intimately connected to the matter of concern through other ways of knowing and other forms of relation. Expert knowledge proves an essentially contested terrain. What can be felt as conflicting demands on how one should act in turn highlights what some of our informants identify as ethical failures, an under-explored side of the anthropology of ethics (Fedirko, this volume). What happens when someone, whether bureaucrat, journalist, migrant, or scientist, fails to achieve, or is constrained by events beyond their control from achieving, a project or an ethical life, as they understand it?

Building on these literatures, this special issue offers a series of distinct but related contributions. First, *scale* is central to understanding how failure can appear and disappear depending on perspective or analytical level. Individual failures can be folded into the trumpeted successes of institutional juggernauts, exhaustion, or an inability to care adequately for kin silenced by declarations of political, organizational, or technoscientific achievements. Second, *questions of knowledge production*, how a given object of failure is made known (or unknown) and by whom, are crucial for explaining the multiple forms of failure, how failure can persist, and why some failures carry positive valences and others negative. Third, the *multiple temporalities* that generate and are produced by failure are linked to selective ways of knowing, whether open-endedness, action in anticipation of failure, recomposing past and future narratives and relations, or lives punctuated by the rhythm of disappointed expectations. Finally, responding to how failure unfolds demands not only a sense of how its moral heft, whether negative or positive, is variously claimed, rejected, or weaponized, but also an appreciation of the *ethical implications* of our own methodological strategies. This introduction ends by reflecting on the ethics of pausing as ethnographers and staying with failure. Should we write without judgement or choose on occasion not to relativize failure but to see in certain events that people have been failed?

In one sense, our start point is the impossibility of ethnography if seen as totalizing description or authoritative account, alongside the ethical possibilities offered by ethnography for connecting to other ways of living and being. Ethnographic approaches

are particularly suited to following the labels and ramifications of failure across scales, times, places, and different epistemological domains, not merely tracking gaps between reality and abstraction but bearing witness to the work performed by those abstractions. In part, this follows a disciplinary tradition of exploring alternative knowledge systems and how such epistemologies can be stifled by particular forms of 'expert' knowledge (Visvanathan 2016; Yogarajah 2022). The methodological and ethical capacity of ethnographers to think collaboratively with, across, and beyond boundaries, whether peoples, species, times, places, or other organizing categories (Haraway 2016; Ingold 2014), allows us both to see how lived worlds of failure continually exceed abstractions or reductive accounts, whether negative or positive, and to reflect on our own positional limits in evoking plurality and partiality. Attending to and working with what might be seen as failures of anthropological knowledge production, in terms of what claims are made, by whom and how, is a bumpy but revitalizing ride (see Ahmed 2017; Geissler, this volume).

A volume such as this calls for the temporalities and conditions of its production to be made explicit. It took Madeleine Reeves over a decade to be able to write about the ramifications of the Osh events in Moscow. COVID lockdowns initially slammed doors shut on my own fieldwork and prevented Wenzel Geissler from performing a promised restitution of a borrowed item – threatening to knot his own enterprise too tightly with that of colonial forebears – until renewed movement undid obstructions, allowing him to keep his word. Like most of you reading this, we have struggled and sometimes failed to meet work obligations and properly enact kin and neighbourly care during the pandemic (see Fennell, this volume). Meanwhile, Taras Fedirko's discussion of ethical Ukrainian news reporting was abruptly sharpened by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Time thus unravelled certain failures, recast accounts, or mocked careful planning with unexpected events.

An empirical thread linking our contributions is a concern with the proper conduct of public life broadly understood. Thus our essays address state institutions (welfare; legal inquiries; building regulation; museums; economic, migration, and environmental policies); the public sphere of media; current and past scientific programmes to improve health and energy provision; and the mingling of international credit and authoritarian political regimes. We consider people working within these institutions and spheres but also lives caught up in these public processes, which are typically responding to perceived failures. In most of these ethnographic contexts, the kinds of failures that appear are rarely discrete phenomena but entangled with and produced by accretions of other failures (see both Smith and Fennell, this volume).

Joshua Reno's and Madeleine Reeves's contributions touch on present-orientated kin care that clashes with official policies insisting on norms of progress and integration. Each also reflects on ethnographic questions of detachment versus engagement that query what can be claimed or provoke awkward moral obligations being called out in fieldwork; ethnographer and informant may each cast the collaborative relationship very differently.

Thus, Reno teases out the paradoxical post-welfare failures that emerged in response to adult care scandals in New York City in the 1970s. Auto-ethnography provides space to juxtapose a lack of distance and range of instances with the intimate knowledge of how it feels to be cast as a failure, as claimants for citizen rights from neoliberal states generally are. While Reno's son, Charlie, is well cared for, underpaid caregivers are routinely failed by demands for distorted representations of carework

and progress (although funds are predicated on such progress being inappropriate for Charlie), working in an environment of surveillance that assumes fraudulent payment claims – which in turn enrols family carers as unwilling monitors, fearful of failing to comply with absurd requirements.

Meanwhile, Reeves traces how the reverberations of the 2010 violence in Osh are experienced by Uzbek and Kyrgyz migrants in Moscow as the fragile, intimate sociality of shared spaces deteriorates. Digital media not only amplify events in Osh but also calcify uncertainty into reductive, binary accounts of ethnic division and blame. Reeves also calls for attention to various local diagnoses that index, inter alia, the delinquencies of uncaring states. Asked to take a public stand in support of one 'side', naming the apparent failure of international media's objective reporting, Reeves demurs. This moment of what she calls ethnographic failure is richly suggestive of the difficulties of negotiating ethical tensions between professional impartiality and sympathetic participation.

Taras Fedirko and Fabio Mattioli both analyse East-West imaginaries and responses to shifting political economies. Fedirko explores how some Ukrainian journalists, sidelined by a new media economy, seized the moral high ground by drawing on a model of Western liberal transparency to formulate an ethical code that is at once personal and professional. This embrace of ethical reporting includes performative accusations of other journalists' failure, and indeed their own when they fall short of their own standards. These judgements are deployed as an act of moral distinction, marking out their own professionalism as opposed to that of other journalists working for oligarch-owned media.

Mattioli examines a global phenomenon – here the 2008 financial crisis – from its margins (Macedonia) to challenge assumptions of uniform effects. But by expanding the temporal frame to embrace the entire postsocialist period, and interweaving conversations with international and national economists as well as citizens, a more complex picture emerges. Different versions of normality and failure are crafted and denied (e.g. by reductive economic indicators), concealing the complicity of international credit with an authoritarian regime and enabling the mundane corruption endured by citizens, who are forced to engage in unethical actions simply to make a living. By unpacking the 'normality' behind the idea of crisis, Mattioli shows how reductive tropes of crisis conceal both multiple emic understandings and routine failures, thus demonstrating the damaging inadequacy of 'Westsplaining' phenomena elsewhere and the scalar conflation caused by corruption and collusion.

Alice Street, Charlotte Bruckermann, and I discuss how failures are known, valorized, and experienced by experts (scientists and policy-makers) who respond to different kinds of environmental, humanitarian, or indeed market failures, whether in the present or anticipated. One shared methodological concern is with different ways of knowing at different scales such that individuals' exegeses and bodily apprehensions of failure are profoundly at odds with other narratives of progress and success. All three of us equally refuse to take speculative capitalism or the hype of fusion energy and carbon markets as analytically adequate endpoints, each essay mapping material, somatic, intellectual, and affective repercussions.

By working ethnographically across multiple scales, Street's anatomy of a Boston start-up's failed humanitarian HIV diagnostic device for rural African clinics shows how failure emerges through the temporal misalignment of non-linear research and development knowledge production, investment capital drawn down by achieved

milestones, and mutable global health standards. In turn, these discrepancies sharpen the device's incommensurable economic and humanitarian valuations. Street uses this account to challenge anthropologists' own predilection for dolefully marking the graves of attempts to improve health, instead suggesting an ethical imperative to leverage such failures to consider what *is* possible for global health in conditions of material, financial, and regulatory uncertainty.

My own ethnography of fusion energy development traces its history's consequential failures that have shaped a massive, international fusion experiment in France. Moving ethnographic attention to the unfolding present invites less an archaeology of what caused a failure than how absolute failure is suspended: how the project keeps going despite budget and schedule overruns or what seem insuperable problems. Thus, alongside recalibrated project deadlines, there are temporal switches in public-facing narratives to 'meanwhile' achievements and to experimental openness, which valorize and incorporate failure, making it essential to progress – of a different kind. Suspension reappears as mothballed devices are revivified with material technology advances. Reflecting on fieldwork constraints during COVID, I suggest that the very 'thinness' of online conversations rehearsed many junior staff's accounts of isolation, anxiety, and illness.

Elsewhere, Bruckermann analyses how young Chinese policy-makers respond to calls to address pollution through carbon markets (despite their financial and environmental failures) and the revolutionary practice of experimental, swiftly changing policies that transform failure into positive 'improvement'. Meanwhile, as both citizens and parents, they are also painfully aware of the dangers posed by air particulates as they literally embody environmental policy failure.

Finally, Constance Smith and Wenzel Geissler trace the ramifications of infrastructural failure to think how past failures are endlessly reproduced as objects of knowledge, and whether such wayward, incomplete, and unfolding narratives can ever be ethnographically rendered from a present enmeshed with the past. While both take the ethical position of evoking the unbounded complexity of such apparently self-evident failures, their methodological strategy differs. Smith takes the stance that residents were categorically failed by the Grenfell Tower fire but also highlights the various ways in which a disaster can be known, and the differing weight such knowledges carry. Thus London's deadly tower block conflagration unfurls in different tempos and through different ways of knowing via court investigations, experimental policies, grief, and nausea through which the forms of failure are continually recomposed.

By contrast, Geissler enacts the ethnographic and analytical failure he raises of evoking something that resists description by thinking through ethnography's limits in narrating ruins. Material debris may suggest a completed past, but what appears in the scraps linked to a former scientific hill station in Tanzania is more complex, defying closure. Far from being outside looking back, the ethnographer is implicated in a past that is endlessly rehearsed in the present and refuses to add up to a whole. Geissler closes our special issue by opening a space for thinking with and accompanying failure as an act of acceptance.

In conversation with these contributions, the remainder of this introduction discusses our three principal interventions for thinking through failures and their aftermaths: the forms of knowledge production at play in crafting objects of failure; what kinds of temporalities are at stake in making and responding to failure; and,

finally, how, as ethnographers, we can engage with this mobile and mobilizing trope. This concluding section opens with two revisionist histories of an assumed failure and a commonly agreed success (on its own terms). Both point to polyvalent experiences and times, highlighting not only the messy, non-linear, often barely planned nature of events, uprisings, and policy-making in the moment, but also how stories are told and retold that shape, then reshape (and open up for query again), an incorrigibly plural world into ordering narratives. This approach leads to a consideration of whether and how some failures might ever be snared in all their complexity and ambiguity and whether writing failure might itself be an act of care that circumvents ascriptions of success, failure, and finality.

Knowledge production: the object of failure

Constructing an object of failure is generally already a response to an event, whether the snap of a bridge cable, precarious health and work, or sometimes encountering the unfamiliar. This reaction raises the question of how and why a given event is made into a failure and not (for example) a disaster or apocalypse – typically a natural event – or crisis: a diversion from normality that may be regained (Roitman 2014; although see Mattioli, this volume; Muir 2021). Elsewhere, medical (McGoey 2010) and 'wellness' industries have also given rise to the phenomenon of creating failures *ex nihilo* that seduce the unwary into costly redress. Perhaps late capitalism's last gasp is the commoditization of anxiety. This section considers how such objects of failure are crafted, and to what effects, before considering how these knowledge objects and effects play out in two related areas: metaphors and imaginings of humans-as-machines; and development and policy. One key effect that emerges is the reallocation of failure, but this, too, can be reappropriated and used as a mode of challenge.

Making a failure knowable provides evidence of failure. This act is largely the work of detachment and containment, removing complexity, placing things in and out of scope, creating neat narratives of causality, and deploying certain ways of knowing that frame the object. The tension between messy complexity and the appealing elegance of abridged versions of events is acute. A nuanced, thick description rarely takes the form of a manual. But the brief report, where explanation hovers in the empty space between bullet points, may compel action that might be misplaced, or serve only one of multiple interests: a failure of evidence.[7]

The reductiveness of a failure object, tractable to evaluation, judgement, and action, reconstitutes the unfathomable reach and entanglement of relations that may map the contours of a particular failure. The puzzle is neatly anatomized in the case of the Grenfell Tower legal inquiry (Smith, this volume). To be effective, it must locate itself somewhere between the misfiring of a refrigerator's electrical circuit and the accumulation of decades-long systemic failures to address corruption, economic inequality, and the proper care of citizens. The former can be addressed, but cannot provide an adequate understanding of this failure event; the latter is beyond the reach of a court of law or policy, however much it is shown to be the cause. And there lies the ethical conundrum of accounting for failure.

The intense contestation over the edges of a failure object or event is illustrated by disputes over pollution, whether it slowly seeps and spreads over time or is caused by a cataclysmic system failure, such as Bhopal or Chernobyl. Essentially, the conflict is over scoping a failure object. Thus Ellen Spears (2014) traces the systematic dumping of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) by Monsanto and residents' consequent struggle

to refuse the company's attempts to bound both the damage's extent and their liability. This conflict appears repeatedly in such cases, pointing not only to the work of limiting but also to the ways in which extent is variously claimed and denied (Alexander 2020). Crucially, scope bounds possibility, action, redress, and explanation. Timothy Morton's (2013) concept of climate change as hyperobject extends this line of thinking; the inability to limit, contain, and make climate change knowable may partly explain our collective lack of action (see Bruckermann, this volume).

Closely connected to scoping exercises, formal ways of knowing via evaluation criteria, statistics, categories, predictive models, and received forms of evidence presuppose explanatory structures, thereby eclipsing others (both Mattioli and my own essay, this volume). Recognition serves both to know and unknow: metaphor, analogy, or presumptions of uniformity all carry entailments that can be devastating. Thus Russian urban policy's assumption that migrants are always single, male, and in search of work displaces other reasons for their movement (Reeves, this volume). Moreover, such acts of knowledge-making give little space to somatic and affectual forms of knowing. William Desmond brilliantly evokes corporeal responses to thwarted efforts:

> Failure engulfs us, threatens to drown us. We sometimes say: the person was crushed by disappointment … The person may even wear failure in his physical features. A bend in the body, a slight slouch, communicates in gesture the entire plight – the look of being beaten. You can tell by the way he carries himself … by the fact that he does not carry himself at all – he *drags* himself (1988: 294-5, italics in original; see also Zsigmond 2016).

This special issue's contributors parse the affects of being failed, judged to have failed, or internalizing a sense of having failed to be otherwise through a parent's frustration at endless forms requiring completion that bear no relevance to the child they purport to describe (Reno); the intense anxiety of working on an ill-defined project (my essay); the sensation of ash on the skin from a burnt home (Smith); or unearthing a dusty prototype from a failed project (Street). Pollution prompts a particularly visceral response via its feel and taste on the tongue; acrid smell; ghostly smogs that obscure the sun; and bronchial and other ailments (Alexander 2007; Bruckermann, this volume). Such forms of knowledge are routinely downgraded or ignored, particularly when the slow violence of environmental catastrophes is engraved on the bodies of the poor but at a pace that eludes easy attribution of blame (Nixon 2013).

A formal semantic account of laughter as a way of responding to or coping with failure remains to be written but appears here ethnographically through multiple registers. Macedonian citizens and Chinese policy experts employ bitter cynicism and irony about failing systems beyond their control (both Mattioli and Bruckermann, this volume). Staff on a fusion megaproject variously deploy deadpan humour or frustrated laughter to indicate the absurdity of some situations, distance themselves from decisions, or stake a claim of authority (my essay). Meanwhile, in Geissler's ethnography, awkward mirth arises from spaces of ambiguity, especially between failure and success.

The metaphorical translation of human bodies to machinic extensions has proved strangely persistent, despite machines often proving unruly. But prizing clockwork functioning activates expectations that necessarily entail failure. Thus human lives are punctuated by the regular rhythms of audits – performative rituals of failure and achievement, omission and commission – from birth to death. A young English trainee

midwife, herself pregnant with her first child, described her distress and anger to me on hearing mothers in labour being told they had 'failed to progress' (FTP) to the expected stage and would therefore require medical intervention. This tendency suggests little has changed since Emily Martin (1987) documented how, in North America, women's bodies are routinely made into sites of failure: menstruation is presented as bodily degeneration, inefficiently only releasing one gamete, while menopause is a malfunction, which can be medically addressed but only in ways that invite further failure (cancer or osteoporosis). From birth onwards, bodily weights and measures indicating satisfactory development are matched with cognitive tests that mark the progress of an algorithmically rendered child. Measurements, exams, performances of ability, and comparative judgements escalate across a lifetime, presenting a capacious range of ways in which to fail. The consequences can range from frustration to evasion, stress, resistance, or incorporating feelings of incompetence or stigma. The assumption that bodies and minds can work unceasingly and productively day in, day out is given the lie by exhaustion and chronic stress. From such a perspective, death is the ultimate failure (Appadurai & Alexander 2020: 1): a machine sputtered into irretrievable breakdown.

Scope and language are equally central to analyses of how development and policy projects construct their object, fail to address it, and yet persist. The event of failure is routinely marked by trigger words such as 'dysfunctionality, collapse, disaster, poverty, famine, violence, and exploitation' (Venugopal 2018: 238). The clarity of the case for remedial intervention is enhanced by its selectivity: failure objects are created as much by what is left out – such as global historical enmeshments – as by what is included (Ferguson 1994). Equally, the cause of the problems inviting attention is invariably out of scope: extraction and dispossession are not up for redress (Lea 2020). In Rajesh Venugopal's (2018) taxonomy of diagnoses from within the industry of why development projects have failed, most explanations centre on how the object of failure has been bounded. Analyses of failed development projects typically co-locate technocratic and uniform approaches, irrespective of local conditions (Ferguson 1994: 257; Scott 1998), a myopia that can have devastating effects. The disappearance of politics and sociality into algorithms that displace expertise and judgement rehearses this enchantment of quantifiable technique (Amoore 2020; Porter 2020 [1995]). Saskia Sassen (2016) observes that indicators used to evaluate countries in the Global South focus on economic 'growth', thus eclipsing the depredations suffered by aid recipients in the service of such expansion. The generative quality of these failures is intrinsic to how they are conceived and operationalized.

Many such development projects are driven by neoliberal ideas of the market that have manifestly failed in their own terms and yet prove resilient: the central thesis of 'zombie economics' (Quiggin 2010). There is less focus on why core economic mantras have persisted to the point that financial irresponsibility has become a 'collective good' (Crouch 2011).[8] Indeed carbon markets' endurance after their utility has been disproved has also attracted the moniker of 'zombie markets' (Newell & Lane 2016). Jacqueline Best (2020) suggests that the persistence of many neoliberal policies might be partly explained by their contingent, unplanned, shape-changing nature. Some scholars go further in discerning a logic behind such failures in development projects, which simultaneously displaces politics and serves local power (Ferguson 1994) or global capitalist interests (Gunder Frank 1966). The claim that internal logic drives such instrumental or functional failures (Brenner & Theodore 2002) explains not only their

aftermaths but also their persistence.[9] A broader take is that failure is endemic to capitalism and used instrumentally to 'fail forwards' (Peck 2010), creating crises that justify austerity and authoritarianism at home and abroad alike (Mattioli, this volume). The neoliberal 'virtue' of competition, of course, ensures that someone always fails.

Similarly, and echoing Susan Leigh Star's (1999) observation about failed infrastructure, Michael Power places audit's expanding influence and general ineffectiveness in the same category as 'all kinds of policing: all have problematic criteria of success and are generally only publicly visible when they are seen to fail. But failure generally leads to a call for more policing and only rarely for a thorough analysis of why policing is failing' (1994: 7). The effects are beautifully caught by Tess Lea (2020) in what she calls the hauntology of policy failure: not only the materiality and temporality of endless documents, meetings, and inadequate outcomes – housing that fails to comply with the most basic understanding of shelter from the outset – but also the stress and trauma of living through such endless activity to neither purpose nor end. In sympathy with this approach, our contributions consider the broader effects of such policy failures (Reeves; Reno; Geissler) alongside how they are reasoned and experienced by those charged with implementing them (Bruckermann; Smith).

Reallocating or redistributing failure is a common method of actively 'unknowing' something (Alexander & O'Hare 2020; Appadurai & Alexander 2020). Thus, a constant critique of neoliberalism is the moralized reorientation of systemic failings to individual (in)capacity and lack of will; rather than provide, the state is there to encourage citizens to be self-reliant (Cruikshank 1999). Such 'empowerment' is typically directed towards the most vulnerable and least able to care for themselves, alongside withdrawal of support. There are countless examples of such redistribution. The escalation of waste production, sometimes seen as the root of terminal anthropogenic change (Hecht 2018), is regularly ascribed to individuals' unbridled consumerism, foregrounding a small fraction of overall waste arisings and skirting what Vance Packard (1960) prophetically called 'the waste makers', the producers of built-in obsolescence.

Ethnographic attention can, however, complicate the picture of purposeful, linear redistribution. Thus the state-funded privatization of adult social care in the United Kingdom, in a context of growing need and steadily reduced budgets, has produced a fragile care market at serious risk of failure (Hudson 2016). Long seen as a safe investment, three of the biggest chains of equity-backed care homes collapsed in the past decade, unable to meet debt repayments (Plimmer 2020). Long before they folded, the standard of care was appalling. In 2020, a Continuing Professional Development course I attended for local authority officers charged with contracting adult care provision encouraged them to see savage budget cuts as a prompt to draw creatively on community and third sector resources and enable more independence among 'service users'. Some enthusiastically grasped what they called the opportunity for innovation, while others described the emotional and physical struggle of ensuring adequate care in financially harsh circumstances, well aware of the fragility of 'two mums trying to run a daycare centre'.

But (re)attributions of failure are not only a resource of the powerful, they can also be a mode of challenge, reappropriation, or changing the topography of debate. Disability activists have long challenged urban architects and policy-makers for failing to create an accessible environment for all (Hamraie 2013). Ukrainian journalists build a moral high ground from which to call out media corruption as professional failure (Fedirko) while Chinese citizens (Bruckermann) and London residents (Smith) insist that regulation

has failed and, by doing so, make claims on the authorities for action (see also Reeves). Failure can become an instrument of leverage.

Queer theory is rarely used to think through global political economies, but the insistence on challenging normative but irrelevant evidence of achievement and failure is as relevant for understanding how countries and economies are constructed as failing – and then failed (Sassen 2016) – as for appreciating how human lives are deemed failed for simply being different. It's also a useful bridge to the next section, which considers failure's temporal affordances, including an expansive, present-orientated moment that can be the very opposite of defined objects of failure.

Temporalities

Thinking through failure's repercussions necessitates engagement with the different kinds of temporalities that can both make and be generated by various failures. The previous section suggested how certain ways of knowing are freighted with temporal entailments: machinic tempos ill fit a body's rhythms; the endless repetition of certain failures can be soul-sapping. Here I pick up that emphasis via modernity's times, highlighting the devastating and pervasive effects of such temporal regimes that are relentlessly focused on a narrow future. This temporal orientation is then juxtaposed with two alternatives to such progressive narratives, which propose different ways of conceiving of and living with failure.

Modernity's ethically freighted, teleological, and future-orientated narrative of progress continues to underscore normative ideas of success, proving endlessly productive of failure. From the constant improvement of the self as an ethical duty (Foucault 1977; 1988; Rose 1990) to what a sound economy or well-functioning state should look like, such progress tends to be premised on growth, expansion, and future-orientated change (Sassen 2016). It's hard to recover a sense of betterment that hasn't been co-opted by this driving, and rather exhausting, impulse. And yet in James Ferguson's (1999) ethnography of the Zambian Copperbelt's failures to deliver on its promises, the sense is of receding ever further from, rather than moving towards, modernity's idealized image.

Typically, policy is aimed at remediating a past or current failure in hope of a better future. But the effects of identifying failure objects can also be anticipatory. Thus, for example, the expectation that, without intervention, life will be extinguished by climate change drives present action (both Bruckermann and my essay, this volume). The public realm's institutional activities are similarly underwritten by this sense of forward movement, undertaken as due process: '[T]he 20th-century commitment to experimentalism as a public form is precisely the affirmation of the *corrigibility* of failure, what some have called liberal democracies' investment in problem-solving' (Marres & McGoey 2012: 3, original emphasis). Legal inquiries and post mortems are carefully staged, excavatory processes aimed at revelation that leads to judgement, correction, and closure (but see Smith, this volume). Fedirko's contribution examines intimations of immorality that are conjured via precisely this liberal sense of progressive corrigibility. As Bruckermann details, the idea of policy experimentation in China has very different roots in revolutionary tactics that value flexibility and responsiveness, folding 'failure' into learning and improvement (see also Prince & Neumark 2022*b*), unexpectedly resonating with the idea that failure is essential to innovation (Street). Outright failure, in a sense, is constantly recalibrated and deferred to an unspecified future, just as often happens in industrial megaprojects (my essay). Two different

constellations of progress and experimental open-endedness emerge. Where policy, journalistic professionalism, innovation, and science are concerned, progress may be understood as meshed with open-ended improvement, but the carework that Reno describes is premised on narrowly defined progress, and the enactment and results of such care must demonstrably eschew experimentation.

The postponement of addressing acute environmental failures appears again in the belief in technocratic standard 'solutions' or 'fixes' that underpin the phrase 'best practice': off-the-shelf policies, projects, and technologies (Pfotenhauer & Jasanoff 2017). Typically, such technofixes (Huesemann & Huesemann 2011) paint rosy pictures of prospective techno-utopias, displacing past and present problems (and accountability) to the future (both Bruckermann and my essay, this volume). The great promise here is that nothing need change. The negative effects – failures – of excessive extraction, chemical fertilizers, nuclear contamination, fossil fuel usage, and waste generation, to name a few, will either be nullified or transmuted into something that enhances humanity's existence. Politics is simply out of scope. Thus, for example, energy-from-waste plants appear to spin waste into gold, apparently removing the problem of waste while producing energy. Suddenly the need to curtail waste production is obviated. But as with so many technofixes, there are unexpected consequences that exacerbate the problem they aim to solve. Such 'green energy' plants demand regular inflows of waste and produce negligible usable energy (Alexander 2016; Levidow & Raman 2020). Meanwhile, anthropogenic change has already affected geological time.

Paul Virilio's (1986) thesis that speed is the shaping force of global society subjugates future orientation to pace and movement, locating failure – qua accident – in each technological advance to increase velocity. But that restless speed can be found elsewhere. The increasing projectization of the workplace brings deadlines and output quantification, accelerating rhythmic demands that pay scant attention to a person's temporal constraints: their physical and mental capacity to work long hours or commitments elsewhere (Rosa 2013). This corollary can intensify the effects of assuming bodies are machines: anxiety, exhaustion, misery.

Nonetheless, caution is needed in simply seeing a riposte to modernity's temporal tramlines in possibilities and being otherwise. Such possibilities for different presents can be double-edged, shaped by how the object and diagnosis of failure are understood, by whom, and to what end. The moral or political project of much anthropology is to undermine the hegemonic pretensions of imperial expansion by demonstrating alternative possibilities (Carrithers 2005; Graeber 2007) and for living otherwise (Shotwell 2016). Queer theory (Halberstam 2011), in particular, celebrates the fruitfulness of being deemed a failure by mainstream standards, which includes lingering in an open-ended space of becoming and experimentation, resisting categories and progress. However, this is easily bent to an insistence that lives *must* be lived otherwise to meet ill-fitting conceptions of possibility. Roma who reject the 'opportunity' to reform themselves from a life of vice are castigated as failures for this racially marked, moral incapacity (Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2017). Similarly, Reno (this volume) describes how caregivers must demonstrate that their charges have 'progressed' to being other than they are and can be.

An emerging tradition within 'posthumanist' scholarship starts from an assumption of a world that is already failed or irrevocably altered by human inaction and action (Mathews 2020). This stance flicks the temporal gear to a focus on getting by amidst

the hauntings of the past. Failure qua present toxicity appears less as a feature of objects, systems, or materials than as shaping how worlds are encountered (Nading 2020). There is, in other words, no outside perspective from which to observe. This is an essentially messy place in which to dwell (Shotwell 2016; Tsing, Swanson, Gan & Bubandt 2017), calling for an ethics that recognizes such complexity (Haraway 2016; Osborne 2019; Preiser, Cilliers & Human 2013; Shotwell 2016; Tsing *et al.* 2017) and rethinks how we live with the world in conditions of failure and ruination. As with much work on failure, this tradition is inspired by queer theory (Halberstam 2011) in its profoundly playful commitment to possibilities, inhabiting the otherwise and foregrounding hybridity in place of a purity that never was (Shotwell 2016). Such a stance privileges posthuman, multispecies relations demanding an ethics of mutuality and care to allow us to coexist in a failed world (TallBear & Willey 2019). As this introduction explores, however, failure diagnoses and responses are often open to other readings and emphases. Thus the approach outlined above might be nuanced by foregrounding the devastating effects of certain toxicities on life forms – the results of acts of violence across social and geographical scale and through time – that exceed celebrations of hybridity (see, e.g., Geissler & Prince 2020).

Such a sensibility also appears if we flip the 'traditional' anthropological emphasis on social order to one that starts with entropy and understands human endeavour as constant attempts to keep chaos and decay at bay (Hage 2021). Thus Ash Amin (2016) takes failure as his start point, as do studies of repair and maintenance (Alexander 2012; Graham & Thrift 2007; Martinez & Laviolette 2019). Perhaps the shock when things go wrong is the erroneous expectation that materials do not decay, rot, rust, and crumble without continual attention (Carroll *et al.* 2017), that consumables should last and not defy repair. The stories that we tell pluck an order out of chaos but maybe the wonder is that things hang together at all. Attention to materiality perhaps teaches us to oppose failure not with success but with how we conceptualize our relations to the world such that we care for it and one another. A fine example here is the early Bolshevik rethinking of relationships to one another, objects, and the world, which aimed to shift the subject-object property relation to a comradely subject-to-subject relation of mutual care (Kiaer 2005). There are more complex engagements with material care in Geissler's account (this volume) of a Tanzanian, colonial-era uniform. It is cleansed for a temporary German museum exhibition but rendered inert, suspended in a museum case until its return to the owner. 'Cleansing' here bears sinister connotations of eradication.

Switching temporal scale may radically alter whether or not something is perceived as a failure. The seesaw between seeing the world either as a constant state of becoming (including decaying and ruination) or as socially meaningful coalescences of matter misses the point: people and things are both. Privileging different temporalities just foregrounds and eclipses one or the other. Death can be taken as the ultimate failure of body-as-machine, relief, a reconfiguration of carbon and energy, transition to a new and better state, and so on.

A quite different sense of modernity's times is found in modernist literature, often unfinished and concerned with scraps (Benjamin 1999; Musil 2011 [1930]), which writes against progressive teleological narratives, emphasizing circularity, endurance, and is 'committed to failure. Failure aesthetics involves … the critique of literary "success" and narrative coherence … often characterized by a repetitive, fragmented, and nonlinear text that privileges moments of paradox, confusion, anxiety, and

breakdown over moments of revelation, discovery, coherence, and resolution' (Ullyot 2015: 1). Such an approach provides useful signposts to alternative ways of tracing out failure's multiple temporalities, following wayward, ambiguous, unpredictable consequences alongside linear intention, as our essays explore.

But tidy taxonomies of temporalities ill serve how they can be experienced as painful clashes by individuals who inhabit multiple roles – work, kin, community – with different expectations and ways of knowing and acting on or suffering failure. Chinese officials, tasked with responding to pollution, may cynically, experimentally engage with carbon markets, but are also concerned with keeping their own career trajectory open and advancing while uneasily inhaling the same particulates against which citizens protest (Bruckermann, this volume). Similarly, Kazakh municipal bureaucrats in the early 2000s were acutely aware that the paper world on which they operated bore scant resemblance to the largely undocumented, cacophonous, foul-smelling city they lived in and for which they were responsible (Alexander 2007). Smith shows how the excavation of Grenfell Tower's failure prompts ways of acting on time, continually synthesizing new narratives about the past and future that are recalibrated in light of the shifting circumstances in which former residents find themselves.

It might seem that, in the end, what is left after failure is material debris, redundant policies, unrealized projects, damaged bodies, legal inquiries, and archives. But failure can also be continually remade and reappraised through such material objects, memories of dashed hopes, and once-rejected experimental devices being relaunched. Over time, it becomes harder to trace unfurling connections and limits, especially in the case of extreme pollution disasters or savage violence. How, then, might we write the aftermaths of failure? The final section opens with reappraisals of an assumed failure and an equally powerful narrative of success, which highlight the untidy contingency of most events and the power of a good post hoc plot to draw out deliberation, cause, effect, and hence logic where there may well be none.

(Re)writing failure: reverberations and traces

'Complexity and failure are an unattractive combination', writes historian Christopher Clark (2019) in wry justification of his earlier lack of interest in the 1848 European revolutions. Re-examining the stigma of failure that haunts them still, he notes that in this 'non-linear, transformative, "unfinished" revolution … clearly defined endpoints are hard to come by'. Nonetheless, transformative it was. As part of his restorative act of challenging reductive, post hoc, nation-state-focused narratives and reconnecting pan-European revolutions, Clark details how many of the social rights that were fought for were indeed incorporated into new constitutions; the old powers may have continued but, as Bismarck, no less, noted, were now radically altered in form. Demands for equality were not extinguished but became central to political debate, albeit far from achieved (Clark 2019); a cynic might see this as a homeopathic response to revolutionary demands. Perhaps the lasting effectiveness of 1848 lay in the quiet bureaucratization and routinization of radical demands as both revolutionaries and indeed, as Clark points out, counter-revolutionaries became administrators and executors of the revolution.

Revolutions and protests are a useful way into our theme of the complex consequences of what appear or are labelled as failures at one time but which may be radically rethought in later reinterpretations. After all, it is a sense of things being profoundly awry that spurs uprisings in the first place. It is precisely the kind of work

performed by subsequent framings of revolutions as failed that interests me here. What is eclipsed, in the example above, is the radical transformation of governments. In turn, the conditions for the 1848 revolutions were created by the 1789 French revolution (and indeed the Haitian revolution), where possibilities for a different kind of world were brought into the light (Cherstich & Holbraad 2020). There are echoes here with Lida Maxwell's brilliant discussion of performative lost causes: legal trials that failed, but were brought expressly to air a cause and solicit responsiveness from 'belated publics' (2016: 12). Her concern is to reframe familiar accounts of democratic, legal failures, re-narrating them as generative sites of democratic productivity.

Echoing the felicitous performative effects of some development failures noted above, we might see these legal failures as successes in relation to other criteria long before public discourse and legal narratives are changed. Again, Fuad Musallam (2020) shows how Lebanese political activists use the experience of collectively narrating their failures to spur future action and maintain cohesion. The revolutionaries of the suppressed Dharfur insurgency refuse the label of defeat and failure; they may not have power in the public realm, but ideals live on, transmitted and enacted through kin (Wilson 2020).

Recent, revisionist histories of the initiation of neoliberal policies in the United Kingdom and United States (Best 2020) are similarly enlightening. Aiming to reduce inflation without recession, the experiment of putting monetarist and supply-side theory into practice by Margaret Thatcher's government was not only a signal failure, but was also clearly recognized as such at the time by policy-makers – and yet the theoretical narrative flourished politically and globally, 'mythologising what were actually failed ideas' (Best 2020: 595) or 'flawed experiments' (Peck 2010: 246), through rebranding economic failure as political success.[10] As Jacqueline Best puts it, '[T]he quiet failure of neoliberalism is partly discursive and partly material, partly intentional and partly accidental' (2020: 601). This counterintuitive history has a softer and perhaps therefore a more compelling logic than that proposed by James Ferguson (1994). Restoring the complex messiness of such policy experiments takes the edge off the teleological, intentional frame of functional failure theses. The lady, it turns out, was very much for turning.

Returning to our central concern of what failure does, Clark (2019) shows that contemporary portrayals of the 1848 revolutions as failures were deliberately constitutive moves by 'the historians and memory managers of the European nations' to reinforce nationalist projects. In such a light, 'failure, far from being a conclusive verdict, can become a site of emergence' (Smith & Woodcraft 2020: 1): the ascription of failure acts to stabilize a proliferation of prospective possible pasts and designate causality. But the possibility of reassessment is always there.

The kinds of failure explored in this volume show how complex and plural such emergences and aftermaths may be, including how people try to fashion a life in already-failed worlds. More specifically, what appears is a struggle between limiting designations of failure that confine and enclose it as a knowledge object, locking it in place and time, and how failure is apprehended ethnographically as something profoundly intractable to such containment. This is failure as a mode of excess and refusal that transcends or merges scales and temporalities, spills over from work into kin care, threatens to turn charges of moral failure back at the accusers, reverberates across space and time, and is entangled with other consequential failures: accumulating, sedimenting – intensifying, as Fennell suggests (this volume). For our interlocutors, such unbounded

failures are variously sensed as anxiety, frustration, despair, nausea, physical and mental illness, awkward mirth – the very opposite of neatly crafted objects of failure. The material debris of failed projects, whether (un)formed through slow decay, cataclysm, or the inability to harness time and capital, again suggests an open-endedness to how such failures pulsate through time, slipping through attempts to shut them down.

Taken together, the essays in this special issue ask how we as ethnographers can write and account for failure, ethically and faithfully, whether following non-linear, transformative, unfinished repercussions backwards and forwards in time or tracing out the ripples across different social formations and relations from a given decision or event, uncrafting objects of failure. This may require attending to how people strive to reconstitute objects and narratives of failure or staying with the elusiveness of such coherence from the ethnographer's perspective, faced only with scraps, moments, ambiguities, and traces that resist being skeined together.

As the contributions suggest, there is no one answer, just as we do not propose a singular theory of or approach to failure per se. Rather, this collection of essays has tried to make a virtue of caring for failure as an act of sympathy, staying with the people who share their worlds with us, whether this means taking a stand where people have been systematically failed or privileging a mode of ethnographic description that remains with failure as a way of caring for it. Perhaps the one thing we can be sure of is that neat diagnoses and narratives of failure are rarely the last word.

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NOTES

[1] Perhaps in response, scholarly studies of failure are also booming. In January 2023 alone, as this special issue was being typeset, two significant interventions were published (Bradatan 2023; Mica, Pawlak, Horolets & Kubicki 2023).

[2] Costica Bradatan (2023) provides a far more nuanced, philosophical take on the gifts of failure, eschewing popular ideas of success in favour of humility and the chance of a life better lived through engaging with human limits, frailties, and failures.

[3] Letting other pens dwell on guilt and misery (e.g. Greenberg & Muir 2022; Ortner 2016), James Laidlaw (2016) reminds us of tangible improvements in health and living standards.

[4] Here, an ethnographic corrective to success biases implicit in market performativity analyses.

[5] See also Visvanathan (2016) for an Indian folk model where failure and human frailty are just part of the cosmological world.

[6] See Navaro, Biner, von Bieberstein & Altuğ (2021) for a comparable approach to violence's aftermaths.

[7] See Penny Harvey for challenges to radioactive sampling methods based on 'the relationship between the absence of evidence and the evidence of absence' (2020: 16).

[8] Closely associated are prosperity theologies (Coleman 2000), millennial capitalism, occult economies (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999) and the positive spin placed on speculative risk-taking.

[9] See Ssorin-Chaikov's (2016) ingenious rereading of Soviet Siberia through such functional failures as turning points, forever renewing the Soviet project.

[10] Reduced inflation *was* achieved but through recession and unemployment, driven by other economic instruments.

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Écrire l'échec : production de connaissances, temporalités, éthique et traces

Résumé

Le présent volume propose une exploration ethnographique du cheminement des échecs et défaillances dans le monde. Par son approche sur le long terme, il montre comment les objets, récits et diagnostics des insuccès peuvent être fabriqués, travaillés, endurés, comment on peut leur résister, comment ils se défont ou se recomposent. Si les tropes et diagnostics de l'échec peuvent, pour un temps, (ré)organiser, raconter et stabiliser le monde, les types d'échecs examinés ici révèlent aussi un mode irrépressiblement excessif, refusant les limites des objets de connaissance, des temporalités et des espaces. Le présent volume propose trois grandes interventions. La première concerne la production de connaissance : la façon dont les objets de l'échec sont élaborés selon des modes sélectifs de connaissance qui font obstacle à d'autres modes d'appréhension à des échelles différentes ainsi qu'aux multiples valences affectives de l'échec. La deuxième pense les temporalités entremêlées (passés, futurs, présents suspendus, ou encore répétition et sédimentation) qui font l'échec et sont faites par lui. Enfin, il faut, pour retracer le déroulement des échecs, porter toute son attention à leur retentissement et à leurs traces non linéaires, ainsi qu'aux récits ouverts et mobiles qui produisent des effets sociaux et matériels différents.