

**Response to Tomie Hahn’s “Troubling failure(s): Situating bodies in research and art,”
Tes Slominski (independent scholar, Charlottesville, VA)**

Few pieces of writing have stuck with me as tenaciously as the passages in Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* where she plays with prepositions to first disorient and then reorient readers. I suppose my fascination and consternation with prepositions goes much farther back—from the moment my first semester of college when I realized that most English speakers do not say that something is “in the floor” instead of “on the floor.” This was one of my earliest experiences when my sense of myself in geographic and linguistic space was destabilized. That this moment of disorientation was triggered by a preposition around the same time I was learning about dative case in classical Greek was a happy accident, though I did not draw this connection at the time. Studying Irish Gaelic brought other disorientations: as someone with better-than-average directional sense who used to try to get herself intentionally lost in the woods or on back roads to test her ability to find her way home, compass directions have always fascinated me. Yet I remain confounded by the variety of words for describing direction in Irish. Topography does not disorient me, but the words that describe direction do. When the world is round, what is up, and what is down?



I got this tattoo shortly before I left my tenure-track job in 2019 to return to Charlottesville, Virginia. This design (so beautifully executed by Brooke Sutter in Madison, Wisconsin) represents a mooring, a reorientation toward home as both a location and a somewhat portable sensorium—the smell of lilac, the sound of horsehair against fiddle strings or pen against paper, the embrace of humid air, the voices of my youth. A mooring, engraved in flesh, at a time when I felt absolutely adrift professionally. And for me, to be adrift professionally in academia felt less

like being adrift in a lake or even an ocean, and more like how I imagine it would feel to be “on the drift” in space, hoping to goodness my last remaining fuel would take me to the nearest station, and that the entities there would take the goods I had to trade instead of my soul. Intensely anxious yet also free, somehow. In space, what is up, and what is down?

When I left teaching, I walked away from a profession I loved but a job that was beginning to transform me into a person I did not want to become. When I made the decision to leave, I had hoped to find another full-time teaching job—but by the time I handed in the keys to my office, I knew the words “independent scholar” would appear on my name tag at conferences that fall. I felt shame, but also pride. I left the professorate mere months before my book was published, with several writing and editing projects still in progress—I left at a high point in a career many would consider “successful.” In the course of what we all hope will be a long professional life, what is up and what is down?

In orienting ourselves toward (or away from) failure, we might find ourselves climbing ladders or mountains, hanging on to the thinnest of ledges or threads, or falling into an abyss or into despair. Motivational corporate talk urges us to “FAIL up,” as though “down” is an unthinkable place. Similarly, the commodification of self-care culture entices us to do what social workers call “spiritual bypassing”—silencing difficult or negative thoughts and avoiding the hard work of addressing problems in the interest of positivity or self-comfort. We are told that failure sounds like a chainsaw revving up, and it takes time to hear its sounds for ourselves—just as it took Tomie a while to hear the sounds of puffins and razorbacks as themselves.

As someone who would probably have been diagnosed as suffering an excess of black bile in past centuries, and as someone who found strange comfort in being down in a room-and-pillar coal mine in Cape Breton, I am tempted to extol the virtues of “down.” But that’s not where Tomie’s talk—and her work more generally—lead me. And as she just said, “Growth arises through a perturbation of previously experienced schemas.” So I want to perturb the schemas of “up” and “down” and start talking about “over.” What might “FAILing over” feel like? Where might it take us? What if—as it was for me—“FAILing over” is a key to survival?

What do I mean by “failing over,” then? I mean that failure is both iterative and relational—something that has the potential to deepen our experience (over and over again) and to build or transform relationships—if we let it. Tomie just spoke about finding the roll of rice paper where her teacher had sometimes guided her hands in producing brush strokes, and at other times, had traced over her work in orange ink. To me, this is not about success or failure, it’s about the relationships that are the fundamentals of transmission. It’s about the people—who might not be present or even alive—who participate in one’s process of orienting hand to paper, and who witness (from whatever vantage point) the reorientation of memory to material object to sense.

Tomie’s new book includes a delectable array of sensory “recipes,” and I’d like to finish with one of my own. Thanks also to Fred, who somehow always seems to send me exactly the right idea or text at exactly the right time, whether that’s a Poulenc sonata or CA Conrad’s (Soma)tic Poetry Exercises, which are in my mind as I compose this “recipe.”

A Recipe for FAILing over

Set aside anywhere from 2 hours to 2 years for this exercise.

Think of a path you might be on. It's best if this path feels unpaved or rocky and tastes like failure. The more metallic that failure tastes, the better.

To prepare yourself for this exercise, go outdoors and find a small rock. A piece of gravel will do just fine. Put it in your shoe and go back indoors. Have paper and a pencil handy for later—a pencil is best because everything is provisional.

Now, lie down on a sofa. A large chair will also work. If you have the wherewithal, you might experiment with a coffee table or some other kind of surface, like a kitchen counter. Try to avoid lying on a bed because that's too predictable and might make you think of sleep or sex. Maybe that's productive depending on what kind of failure path you're imagining, but I do not recommend it. If you suffer from vertigo, work through it as best as you can. And maybe take an allergy tablet—that helps me sometimes.

Look at your indoor world upside down. Ponder what it would be like to slide down the tilt of the ceiling over a stairway or sit under the umbrella of an upside-down chandelier.

Now that you've disoriented yourself and maybe had a laugh or two, think back to your path. Stay upside down if you can. Think about the people who might not be on or near this same path, whether that's because they have run away from it by dissociating and losing themselves in work, substances, or sex. Or maybe because the path seems treacherous and terrifying, and they have averted their eyes because they love you and are worried that you might fall off the edge. Or maybe it's not obvious to them that this path even exists. Any or all of these might be possible. Think about these people and say out loud to them, "It's ok. Maybe we can catch up later." Sit up, take the pebble out of your shoe, and go make a nice cup of tea.

Now, imagine the people who are close to where you are on that path. Are they people you know well, or people you only sort of know, or people you don't know yet? Who is a few yards ahead of you on this path? And who might be closer to the beginning of this path, if you are a ways down it already? These people might be close friends, but they are also just as likely to be a particular barista at your favorite coffeeshop or the five-year-old down the street. They might not be human people, or even obviously animate (for example, about 10 years ago during a particularly lonesome time, I developed a habit of saying goodbye to a particular wall in my apartment whenever I left). Write down all these people, human or otherwise. Spend some time thinking about the ways that this thing called "failure" has brought you closer to them, and maybe reach out to one or two of them.

Repeat occasionally as necessary. In a different moment, consider these writing prompts:

1. What is your relationship like with people whom you perceive to have failed in some way?
2. What is your relationship like with people whom you perceive to have succeeded in some way?

3. What are your relationships like with the parts of yourself that you perceive to have failed or succeeded?
4. What is your relationship to the fear that might or might not shape all of these relationships?
5. And finally, what does all this look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like?

In failure, what is up and what is down? And how is over?

I hope you have all found some comfort in the disorientation of thinking around, inside, and maybe through failure. Now I will hand the microphone over to Fred....

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