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Perversity, precarity, and anxiety: tracing a 'more precise typology' of the affect of neuroqueer failure in an in-school research-creation project

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I draw from an in-school music research-creation project to consider the complex, racist-ableist politics of failure in the early childhood classroom. I theorise failure as it unfolds through anxiety, which I conceptualise as an affect of failure, to discuss both the perverse possibilities and perilous precarities of (neuro)queer failure. I examine two samples from an in-school research-creation project, which fail in generative yet risky ways: (1) a vocal improvisation by "Kwodwo," whereupon I consider failure as mobilised through the racist-ableist politics of neurotypicality, disproportionality in special education, and refusal; and (2) research-creation's transdisciplinary courting of failure through my "critical use" of electrodermal activity. Drawing from these two samples, I suggest that, in considering this special issue's call for "bad research," educational researchers must not only attend to those failures that sit within the successful confines of what is defensible in the academy (i.e. failure without failing), but also to the intersecting ethico-political complexity of failure.

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Introduction: an embarrassment of failures

In this paper, I draw from an in-school *research-creation* project to consider the perverse possibilities and perilous precarities of *(neuro)queer failure* through its affect, *anxiety*. I take-up crip theorist Johnson's (2015) contention that we need a "more precise typology of failure" to account for the complexity with which failure unfolds empirically and methodologically in an in-school research-creation project (p. 264). My central argument is that, if "bad research" is to be ethically disruptive, there is a need to account for both the pleasures *and* perils of failure: the productive epistemic perversity of the act of failing (what methodological failure does to *knowing)* as well as the precarity of the body(mind) that fails (Halberstam, 2011; Muñoz, 2009).

I frame my understanding of "failure" through the scholar-activist concept "neurological queerness," an emerging theoretical orientation towards neurodivergence that activates queerness's political activism and antinormativity (Walker, 2015; Yergeau, 2018). The sudden popularity of the "neuroqueer" has posed fascinating questions for the field of critical autism studies in education, including: how self-stimulation, asociality, and stereotypy might be thought of as

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anti-normative (Shannon, 2020); challenging the neuro-normativity of humanist conceptualisations of volition, rhetoric, and sensory experience (Douglas et al., 2021; Shannon, 2021); contesting the humanising violence of rehabilitation (Gibson & Douglas, 2018; Roscigno, 2020); and unsettling the white neutrality through which neurodivergence is often theorised (Bruce, 2021; Pickens, 2019, 2019). At the same time, neuroqueering "failure" poses largely unattended to questions regarding which autistic body(mind)s are allowed to fail (however fabulously) and from whom diagnosis and accommodation are routinely withheld (Çelik, 2017): I consider this question through the racist-ableist politics of *under-representation.* Internationally, critical attention to issues of anti-blackness in Special Education (SEN) tends to emphasise the *over*-representation of African American and African Caribbean students in special educational provision. This attention has contested the white supremacist logics underpinning dominant pedagogical models (e.g. Annamma et al., 2013), but has neglected to consider how those same logics contribute to the *under*-representation of black(ened) students in certain areas of SEN provision, and so the withholding of certain kinds of accommodation from "the same body(mind)s on whom unabashed neurodivergence most often plays out with violent consequences" (Shannon, 2021, p. 5).

In the next section, I explicate anxiety as an affect of failure. Then, I introduce my in-school *research-creation* study: research-creation is a way of researching socio-material processes as art practices (Loveless, 2019; Shannon, 2020; Truman et al., 2019) that I'll argue courts failure through its transdiciplinary investment in non-typical measures of "value." After explicating the research-creation, and my use of electrodermal methods, I discuss two samples from the study: a vocal improvisation by "Kwodwo," whose complex failure I theorise through the racist-ableist politics of neurotypicality, under-representation, and refusal; and research-creation's methodological courting of transdisciplinary failure through my "critical use" of electrodermal methods. I suggest that educational researchers invested in failure must not only attend to those failures that sit within the successful confines of what is defensible in the academy (i.e. fail*ure* without fail*ing)*, but also to the intersecting ethico-political complexity of failure.

Background: affect, anxiety, and failure

In this section, I theorise anxiety as an affect of failure. Affect theorists have complicated the idea of 'capacities' or 'abilities'—what a body(mind) can do—from being something that a particular body(mind) possesses, to something that emerges in the transmission and reception of *affects* or *feelings:* for instance, the feeling of emotions, material forces, or institutions of power. Examples of affects (things "felt") whilst redrafting this article might include: glee (upon re-listening to the audio compositions) and anguish (at the number of words I have to cut), but also the feelings of material forces, such as humidity, moonlight, and gravity; during one redrafting, I had COVID, so was further affected by a snotty nose and viral vectors; and, as a queer person, the three violent homophobic hate crimes near my flat over a recent 10-day period are never far from mind: my feeling of these things has shaped what it is possible for me to write here. In this way, affect theorists argue that capacities emerges moment-by-moment through the changing feeling of this complex interaction of sensations: *what you feel at any given moment alters what it's possible for you to do.* Consequently, affect has been used to theorise how patterns of oppression—what might be thought as the failure in *reception* that marks a divergent body(mind) as unable to match the capacities of the idealised human subject—unfold through affective networks: mosaics of feeling that are always-already shaped by racism (Ahmed, 2014) and anti-blackness (Palmer, 2017; Weheliye, 2014), queer/trans-antagonism (Sedgwick, 2003), and ableism (Puar, 2017).

Failure has been theorised through affects such as shame (Garland-Thomson, 2009; Sedgwick, 2003) and disgust (Ahmed, 2014; Ngai, 2007): While "negative" emotions, these scholars have

theorised how each has been generative of new modes of life for minoritized people. In this article, I theorise anxiety as an affect of failure: how the fear of an unexpected/unexpectable divergence (that will potentially, but not necessarily, happen) contours the affecting-affected surface of body(mind)s marked as divergent, narrating their capacities moment-by-moment as having some degree of risky unknowability (Ahmed, 2014; Fritsch & McGuire, 2019). In the coming sections, I theorise this affect of failure in three ways: as tethered to success in education; queer reparation of failure; and failure-as-methodology.

Failure in education

In education contexts, failure is the opposite of success: something to be avoided by 'making good choices,' or overcome through repetition and individual hard work whereby, through failing, one might eventually come to succeed (Springgay, 2020). Thus, failure in the classroom is often both tethered to and reproductive of the bodily capacities associated with success. Concomitantly, European progress narratives—constructed through capitalism, neurotypicality, and the endless capacitation of whiteness—rely on racializing and colonial logics that maintain non-normative body(mind)s as limit cases for how we conceptualise the human (Jackson, 2020; Wilderson, 2020): in other words, capitalist success is proliferated by both the presence of the divergent body(mind) that failed to mimic the capacities of the ideal capitalist subject, and the capacities of the idealised European human subject (Halberstam, 2011).

Ahmed (2014) theorises affect's role in these oppressive structures as its *stickiness*, by which emotions cling to divergent body(mind)s that have become grounded as objects of socio-sensory networks. For instance, counter-terrorism billboards in UK airports encourage passengers to "trust their instincts" if they suspect someone of suspicious activity, ignoring how one's instincts, and the failure of the suspicious body(mind) to avoid those instincts, are shaped by racism. Likewise, in education, minoritised body(mind)s become "invested with capacity" through affective networks (Dernikos, 2020, p. 419), whereby affects stick to racialised, disabled and otherwise non-normative bodily configurations in ways that alter their capacities or render their reception as distinct from those of the idealised capitalist human (Gershon, 2017; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). For instance, the same behaviours by white and black (Bryan, 2020), and neurotypical and neurodivergent (Shannon, 2020) students are understood differently by teachers. In short, students' capacities are narrated differently based on how their behaviours are perceived, always-already filtered through racialising and (dis)abling doxa.

Concomitantly, children with SEN are "identified" by their failure to meet developmental milestones. SEN teachers are often required to *perform* this failure when bidding for resources (such as funding for support hours). As Rice et al. (2015) write, "If [disabled people] do not identify ourselves as disabled in the "right" way, we are often prohibited from accessing the resources we need" (p. 524): SEN teachers must adequately perform young people's failure (as well as teacher's failure to *prevent* that failure) to procure resources. It is the job of the school to rehabilitate divergent body(mind)s by imprinting new capacities that more closely mimic those of the idealised capitalist human (Schuller, 2018). Yet, Ferguson (2004) problematises the raciality of "inclusive," or rehabilitative logics, in that racialised bodies are always-already diverging from the capacities of the idealised European subject and so can't be fully "restored." This has contributed to disproportionality in special education identification and access to disability accommodation along racial lines. African American students in the US (Annamma et al., 2013), and African Caribbean students in the UK (Tomlinson, 2016), are widely discussed as being *over*-represented in "judgement-based" areas of need such as communication, moderate learning disabilities, and "emotion" or behaviour. Notoriously, throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the UK, this "investment of capacity" played-out through the label "educationally-subnormal," used to stream African Caribbean students—and others deemed "unruly"—out of mainstream school (Tomlinson, 2016),

a trend that continues in the UK today with the overrepresentation of African Caribbean students in school SEN and exclusion data. Less commonly discussed is how racialising doxa also play out in relation to black students' *under*-representation within specific areas of provision, including their under-representation for autism identification, accommodation, and support: it is this that I attend to for the rest of the paper, to consider how Black children might be thought of as not failing in the "right kind of ways" to access support (Rice et al., 2015). Thus, schools' promise of (partial) rehabilitation is to promise to make failing body(mind)s more includable within a system predicated on their exclusion (Mitchell et al., 2014; Shannon, 2020).

Repairing failure

Queer theorists have "repaired" failure as more than just the absence of idealised human capacities (whiteness, ability, cis-heterosexuality). Halberstam (2011) contends that failure to meet cis-hetero expectations of gender roles is to be "relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals" (p. 59). Moreover, Muñoz (2009) writes: "Queer failure is often deemed or understood as failure because it rejects normative ideas of value" (p. 173). Thus, failure refuses normativity. Likewise, anti-colonisation theorists complicate how failure to fulfil colonial expectations of the "good" colonised subject refuses the coloniser (e.g. Fanon, 1967). Nxumalo's (2021) conceptualisation of "unruliness"—a word often used to pathologise black children's behaviour—might be thought as a kind of failure: both the failure to meet white supremacist pedagogical expectations of value in the classroom, and the refusal inherent in that failure. Importantly, as a cis-gendered, abled white person, I don't activate this refusal as a response to exclusory pedagogy (because describing this as a white researcher would just re-centre whiteness): rather, I follow Brown (2012) to conceptualise failure-as-refusal as generative of other modes of life, "free of the regulatory terms of humanness" (para. 14). For instance, Sedgwick (2003) offers a reparative reading of shame as "legitimating" queer identity. Likewise, Chandler et al. (2018) contend that co-opting abled people's desire to stare at disabled people—which I frame as a vector of shame—is how Disability art defamiliarises ability. Thus, failing to pass as the idealised human subject generates speculative alternatives to passing.

Failure-as-methodology

In recent years, qualitative researchers have begun to turn to failure as a methodological commitment for enacting qualitative research theoretically consistent with theories of affect (e.g. Pahl et al., 2022; Roen, 2019; Springgay, 2020). In so doing, they have sought to tap into the same release from humanist expectations of capacity that animate the reparative readings of failure discussed above, by deliberately failing to follow "tried-and-true paths of knowledge production" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 6): Nxumalo (2021) frames this attention as "unruly," "foreground[ing] a research orientation that create[s] fissures in conformity and normativity" (p. 1197). In relation to qualitative research, this means unsettling positivist, representational markers of quality (e.g. objectivity, replicability), and instead attending to affect, intensity and the more-than-representational.

More specifically, failure is essential to how I understand research-creation. As a *transdisciplinary* curation of practices drawn from across the disciplines of art, pedagogy, and empirical research, invested in non-normative notions of value, and eschewing institutional expectations of quality, *research-creation is animated by failure*. Loveless (2019) contends that it is impossible to completely fulfil any singular discipline's boundaries when working across multiple disciplines. Thus, transdisciplinary methodological failure might open new lines of inquiry because of the gaps between what is *expected* of a single discipline, and what is *possible* when activating multiple incommensurate disciplines. In other words, the meshing of disciplines in unexpected ways,

and the *missing* aspects of single disciplines that no longer fit, produces partially un-expectable research findings. This is why research-creation is useful as a research praxis: when done rigorously, failing to meet disciplinary expectations might get you to places you otherwise couldn't. And yet, investing in failure in this way isn't without consequence. One of those consequences is anxiety caused by the possibility of failing to meet disciplinary boundaries in ways that don't generate anything or get you anywhere, as well as what to *do* with unexpected findings.

Moreover, methodological commitment to transdisciplinary failure should not be understood as an excuse for ill-preparedness. Rather, Loveless (2019) charges us to keep hold of the notions of both empirical and artistic rigour. This rigour is not necessarily attached to Eurowestern expectations of artistic form (Loveless and Manning, interviewed in Truman et al., 2019), but to the application of methods in robust accordance with the empirical antinormativity of methodological failure. In this way, the failure mobilized by research-creation is not a failure of quality, or to be organized. Likewise, "bad research" is bad because it contests normative notions of "good research," not because it is politically problematic, artistically ill-conceived, or empirically ill-prepared.

Summary/caveat!

Above, I outlined three theorisations of failure: (1) failure's affective tethering to success; (2) failure's *reparation*; and (3) methodological *reparation* of failure. *Research-creation is a rigorous, feminist curation of practices from across the boundaries of multiple disciplines.* It is through this curation, its failure, and the anxiety of what might (not) emerge that the research happens. As I will discuss later, my discussion of the racist-ableist politics of under-representation in SEN relies on this rejection of ordinary notions of value.

What is sometimes absent in the methodological reparation of failure—but what *is* essential to Sedgwick's (2003) reparation—is that: "Sometimes failure is just bad. Not queer, better, redeemable, a profile in courage, delicious, or a genuine experiment" (Berlant & Stewart, 2019, p. 104). Likewise, Loveless's thinking surrounding the necessity of anxiety to transdisciplinarity perhaps understates the cost to the researcher of coaxing failure. Thus, the glee surrounding methodological "failure" risks eliding how repairing failure in interesting ways ("successfully") relies on humanist capacities. Indeed, crip theorist Johnson (2015) calls for a "more precise typology of failure" that acknowledges both failure's refusal of social norms and the *"distress* of failures embodied in lives gone haywire, symptoms run rampant, personal lives devolving into uninhabitable havoc" (p. 264, italics in original). It is this "more precise typology" of neuroqueer and methodological failure—its productive perversity and perilous precarity—that I want to draw out of my doctoral research-creation in the remaining sections.

Neuroqueer(ing) method

My in-school doctoral research-creation study was conducted as a 14-months composer's residency with a class of 5–7-year-olds. The school community is racially, linguistically, and neurologically diverse: 70% identify as speakers of one of forty-two non-English home languages and 87% identify with a non-white ethnic group. 52% live in absolute poverty and the school's catchment area falls below the 3% most economically-disadvantaged wards in the UK.

The study explored how neurodiversity unfolded through music composition during a series of weekly, hour-long workshops. I used two microphones to record all sound during each workshop. Additionally, each week, two different children volunteered to wear an *Empatica E4* Electrodermal Activity (EDA) device—or what I call "gizmos" (Shannon, 2021). Later, I'll analyse two samples from this project: a vocal improvisation, which relies mostly on musical/auditory analysis, and a methodological discussion about EDA. For this reason, I explain in more detail here how and why I used EDA.

EDA is a measurement of changes in the skin's resistance to an electrical current caused by the activation of sweat glands in response to stimuli, indicating increases in the body(mind)'s state of arousal. There is a renewed interest in the findings of the life sciences in new materialist approaches to qualitative educational research (including the use of EDA), which is sometimes called *biosocial research*. There is also an interest in biomedical fields in how EDA might establish the autonomic alterity of the autistic body(mind) (see Shannon, 2021).

Research with electrodermal gizmos relies on experimental conditions, whereby the researcher measures an individual's arousal in response to a stimulus. The researcher must limit other sensory information, otherwise the measure of the researcher-induced "arousal" (e.g. by a scary picture) will be complicated by other stimuli (e.g. a thunderstorm, something funny). Moreover, electrodermal gizmos need a stable connection between the electrodes on the gizmo and the surface of the skin: failing to achieve these stable conditions introduces data noise. Movement, including walking, "coughing, deep respiratory movements … , sneezes and excessive talking" (Braithwaite et al., 2015, p. 41) disturb the position of the electrodes and temperature changes alter how easily the skin conducts the electrical charge, making the signal illegible. Thus, EDA research usually takes place in highly-controlled experimental contexts. These experimental contexts, in which researcher-determined inputs are the only possible input an individual might respond to, reinforce archetypes of autistic people as robotic (Nadesan, 2008), or "automaton-like" (Yergeau, 2018), as well as individualistic understandings of what autism *is* (Shannon, 2021).

I incorporated EDA in my classroom-based study (outside of an experimental context) as a kind of "critical use" that maps against this narration of autistic people. Fuller and Weizman (2021) contend that problematic technologies can be troubled through "critical use": through "employing and reworking them" (loc. 287). "It is through critical use," they write, "that contradictions, biases and limitations can be most fully identified, understood and, when possible, exposed" (loc. 288). My critical use of EDA might be thought of as "reparative" (Sedgwick, 2003), in that it takes up the technology in ways that sought to generatively problematise them.

Sampling failure

In this section, I return to my three theorisations of failure (affectively tethered-to-success, reparative, methodology) to discuss two samples from one workshop from my in-school study. I draw from this workshop here to consider a "more precise typology of failure" that accounts for how failure produced new findings and ways of being but also rendered body(mind)s precarious. The four-month project began and ended with a pair of soundwalks around the local area, interspersed with composition episodes, with two young people wearing EDA gizmos. In the workshop discussed here, one young person agreed to let us print out and experiment with a representation of the electrodermal signal on a line-graph. We experimented by using the line-graph as a graphic score, cutting-it-up, rearranging it, and performing it with different instruments. After several weeks of experimentation, we glued the fragments of repurposed line-graph/graphic score onto big paper and rehearsed it. One week later, in the workshop discussed below, we performed and recorded the composition using percussion (other parts of the composition were added later, repurposing different experiences from the walk). You should now listen to the work:

https://www.davidbenshannon.co.uk/ijqse

Password: IJQSE

Below, I think about how failure and its affect, anxiety, unfold in two samples from the workshop: a 55-second improvisation by Kwodwo to consider the racist-ableist politics of neurotypicality, disproportionality in SEN, and refusal; and my "critical use" of EDA.

Sample 1: Kwodwo's improvisation

"Kwodwo" (a pseudonym) is African Caribbean. At the time of this workshop, he is 7 years old. He engages in several social practices that would often be associated with the label "autism" (modified here to maintain Kwodwo's anonymity): Kwodwo speaks mostly in "jargon"—strings of speech sounds and babbles that do not efficiently communicate meaning; he has a very specialised interest in WWE wrestling, often saying wrestler's names, slogans, or favourite moves; he also frequently engages in self-stimulatory behaviours, including vigorously rocking. However, Kwodwo is not supported to use any additional sensory provision or communication tools (e.g. Makaton). Moreover, he does not have a diagnosis, is not on any diagnostic pathway, and is not included on the school's SEN register. Indeed, despite showing numerous extravagantly neuroqueer behaviours, Kwodwo is not accessing any SEN or disability accommodations.

In the recording session discussed here, the children recorded non-rhythmic percussion compositions derived from printouts of electrodermal signal. However, Kwodwo improvises during the performance, incorporating hums, giggles, and what sounds like beatboxing: he uses his voice (rather than instruments), rhythms (rather than performing non-rhythmically), and improvisation (rather than following the pre-written composition). His improvisation lasts about 55 seconds. You can hear this improvisation at 16:04 in the recording. Notably, while vocalisations by other children were interrupted by the classroom practitioners, Kwodwo's is not.

Here, I want to consider Kwodwo's improvisation and its reception with issues of disproportionality in special education. In Leeds, the city where the research took place, African Caribbean students are generally *over*-represented for SEN, yet around 50% under-represented for access to autism provision or diagnosis (Department for Education, 2022). My argument is that Kwodwo's practices that might be considered non-neurotypical when enacted by a white child somehow "pass" as neurotypical when enacted by a black child. As explored in earlier sections, I think about this "passing" as a kind of complex failure, both in terms of failure's joyous anti-normativity and the precarity of not failing in the ways necessary to "successfully" win support. My intention here is not to confer diagnosis on an individual child: this would be problematic, particularly given the history of (so-called) "educationally-subnormal" schools in England, even more so from my positionality as an abled white man writing about a black boy. Instead, for this analysis, it doesn't really matter if Kwodwo is neurotypical or not. My point is to address how a non-"neurotypical" vocal improvisation somehow passed as "neurotypical" when enacted by a black child, and so how the racist-ableist politics of underrepresentation (and associated lack of disability accommodation or support) might play out in a single minute of classroom practice. Moreover, framing the *improvisation* (and not Kwodwo per se) using the scholar-activist concept "neuroqueer" complicates "diagnosis," emphasising its contestation of white supremacist, neuronormative pedagogies without eliding their impact: in short, its pleasures and precarities. In other words, I explore how the racializing assemblage (Weheliye, 2014)—the articulated passage of affect that shapes anti-black racism—draws in assumptions of ability and capacity: or the ways in which neurodivergence, as a distancing from the capacities of the idealized human subject, is a racializing process (Jackson, 2020).

Below, I first explain why I think the improvisation failed to pass as neurotypical. Then, I problematise how failure was filtered through racializing doxa, enabling it to pass as non-anxiously, *unsurprisingly* neurodivergent. Then, I explore the improvisation's neuroqueer perversity, or how it flamboyantly refuses typicality.

Complexity 1: failure

Kwodwo's rhythmic vocal improvisation was out-of-place in a non-rhythmic percussion composition: it was the wrong-thing-at-the-wrong-time, and should have been felt through anxiety (the affect of unexpected, suprising failure). Chen (2012) and Puar (2017) conceptualise "disability" as

a moment-by-moment oscillation of affective capacity, between ability and debility, and within a specific "socio-geo-histo-infrastructural" moment (Puar, 2017): in this moment, Kwodwo's improvisation failed to meet the expectations of "neurotypicality." Thus, it resembles what Bruce (2021) frames as psychosocial madness: a "radical deviation from the normal" enacted in opposition to whatever is narrated moment-by-moment as "Reasonable common sense" (p. 8). In other words, Kwodwo's rhythmic, vocal improvisation emerged during a moment when common "sense" (i.e. neurotypicality) was attuned to *non*-rhythmic, *non*-vocal *composition*, and so was out-of-tune with normative expectations of Reason.

Moreover, unlike the composition he improvised with—which was pre-planned and pre-rehearsed with musical instruments—Kwodwo's improvisation eschewed preparation and emphasised bodily sounds, such as guttural vocals, teeth-sucks, and whistling. The bodily is often framed as opposed to Rationality: something that should be disciplined or controlled (Ahmed, 2014). Eschewing language (the purview of reason), to emphasise the bodily (the purview of the unreasonable and nonsensical, or "jargon") situated Kwodwo's improvisation as in opposition to Rationality. Finally, by improvising and not composing, Kwodwo's improvisation might be thought as "unintentional." While neurotypical people are expected to "reason" and "intend," non-neurotypicality is often (problematically) narrated as a *loss* of intentionality and rationality (Roscigno, 2020; Yergeau, 2018). Similarly, laughter is often framed as involuntary (Sharpe, 2020), associating Kwodwo's aspirated giggles with a loss of intention. Thus, Kwodwo's improvisation's eschewing of preparation, language, and (ostensibly) intentionality reinforces its failure to pass within that moment's expectations of neurotypicality.

Complexity 2: failing at failure

Kwodwo's improvisation was neuroqueerly out-of-place and so should have been unexpected. Yet, it was not interrupted by his teachers, even while other children's vocalisations *were* stopped: Kwodwo's improvisation failed to *fail* in ways that warranted intervention despite also failing to *pass* as neurotypical. In short, my contention is that Kwodwo's improvisation failed through a highly precise topology of intersecting failures that did not affect his teachers in the same way as other children's vocalisations because of how *his capacity to affect others* is narrated through ableist, white supremacist pedagogy as *less than his capacity to be affected*. To reiterate, while there is research in classrooms exploring how white supremacist/racist pedagogies discipline "unruly" black body(mind)s in ways that modulate affective capacities by assuming their neurodivergence (Annamma et al., 2013; Tomlinson, 2016), and result in their over-representation in overall SEN statistics, I am examining such pedagogies in relation to how those same assumptions play out as the withholding of autism diagnosis and support from African-Caribbean students (i.e. a highly specific kind of under-representation).

Autisms are frequently narrated as a "white boy thing," in that diagnostic criteria emphasise the original white, middle-class, male subjects of diagnosis (Çelik, 2017; Gibson & Douglas, 2018). Concomitantly, special education interventions are often framed as restorative, in that they restore the functionality of a sensory system or body part: as described earlier, Ferguson (2004) problematises the raciality of "restorative logics," in that racialised bodies are always-already diverging from the capacities of the idealised European subject and so can't be "restored." Thus, while autistic white boys are "surprising deviants," soaked in anxiety because their deviance is unexpected and they would pass as abled if not for their single (ostensibly restorable) divergence (Gibson & Douglas, 2018), women and Black people are already irredeemably divergent and so unrestorable: or what might be thought of as "*un*surprising deviants." In this way, there is always-already some assumed (neuro)divergence to the black(ened) body(mind). I argue here that Kwodwo's improvisation could never fail to enact neurotypicality because *he* as a black boy he was not expected to pass as "fully neurotypical": the same expectations of "unruliness" that result in black students being disproportionately labelled as having emotional, behavioural and

communicative disabilities also withholds autism accommodations, "the same body(mind)s on whom unabashed neurodivergence most often plays out with violent consequences" (Shannon, 2021, p. 5). Thus, the failure of his improvisation wasn't heard affectively by the teachers through anxiety—the affect of failure as an *unexpected* possibility—because its divergence was always and exactly *expected*. In this way, it was heard as having a lesser capacity to affect than be affected (Chen, 2012; Palmer, 2017).

Likewise, Barrett (1999) conceptualises the organising of sound through racial hierarchies, distinguishing the always-embodied Black sub-Human "singing voice" from the disembodied white Human "signing voice": by this, he means that Blackness is associated with embodiment and irrationality, while whiteness is associated with transcendence and rationality (see also Chude-Sokei, 2016). These qualities are applied onto the voice as what Nina Sun Eidsheim (2019) frames as the "acousmatic question." She writes: "The assumptions, expectations, and conventions of a given culture, and that culture's impression of who the vocalizer is, are overlaid onto its acceptance or rejection of the vocalizer" (loc. 441). Thus, Kwodwo's improvisation comes to be affectively filtered through racialising logics to be heard as *only* sound—or "prior to rationality" (Stoever, 2016). Similarly, Ngai (2007) theorises the racialised affect of *animatedness* as the reception of affect in such a way that associates black(ened) feeling with "the image of the overemotional racialized subject" (p. 91). Thus, the unruly, excessive animation of Kwodwo's improvisation is coded as neurotypical when enacted by a black body(mind). As such, there was little point in intervening in this improvisation—or in enacting wider SEN provision—because its divergence is unsurprising, and intervention couldn't bring Kwodwo closer to (white) neurotypicality. Despite its in-the-moment irrationality, the improvisation passed within the (neuro)typical range of blackness, depriving Kwodwo of intervention, whether in the moment of improvisation or in Kwodwo's wider participation in school.

My discussion of "expected deviation" and failing-in-the-wrong ways isn't to say that this *always* happens to *every* black child. I also haven't attended here to the role of families in this under-representation, who have good reason to be suspicious of labels (especially in light of the ongoing legacy of the so-called "educationally-subnormal" schools and issues of disproportionality). Rather, I'm trying to explore how the same racist-ableist logics that drive over-representation (disciplining black children by labelling with SEN) might be contributing to under-representation in a single minute of classroom practice (punishing black children by withholding SEN accommodations). In the next section, I further complicate this precarity with a reparative attention to Kwodwo's improvisation's "unruly" refusal of racializing/neuro-normative logics (Nxumalo, 2021). This reparation is important because qualitative research often limits its consideration of race to the extractional "rehearsal" of anti-black violence (McKittrick, 2021).

Complexity 3: refusing failure

Kwodwo's improvisation is unruly because it resists the preparedness of composition. Improvisation, Moten (2003) writes, is an enacted frustration with the confines of notation (of corporeal hierarchies), and an enactment of blackness's excess: that which exceeds the racialising "chromatic" frame (2018b). Unlike the composition Kwodwo improvised with—which was pre-planned and pre-rehearsed with instruments—Kwodwo's improvisation eschewed the score, revelling in an assortment of bodily ephemera. Moreover, the aspirated giggles interspersing his beats suggests an enjoyment in that subversion. Cree poet Belcourt writes, "Joy is an art is an ethics of resistance" (2020, p. 9, cited in Nxumalo, 2021, p. 1197). In this way, Kwodwo's joy at his unruly, rhythmic "out-of-tuneness" is itself a further subversion of how neurodiversity and neurotypicality are shaped through racialising logics in the classroom.

Similarly, Muñoz (2009) writes that queer refusal is "not just a failure to achieve normative virtuosity: it is also a virtuosity that is born in the face of failure within straight time's measure" (pp. 177–178). Thus, Kwodwo's improvisation was an *imposition*, imposing a temporal measure—

a 1-2-3-4 count—onto the arhythmic flow of the composition. Kwodwo performs this count through his rich, bassy "thum," which crackles the microphone, and makes up most of the improvisation. The "thum" resembles the properties of the Roland TR-808 bass drum popularised in electronica and Hip-Hop music, and the popularity of which rap musicologist Rose (1994) suggests unsettled the usual aesthetic of music production by encouraging producers to deliberately distort their drum sounds so as to recreate its "fat sonic boom" (p. 75) Moreover, as with the 808's use in Hip-Hop, Kwodwo's "thum" does not accentuate units of measure (1-2-3-4), but instead combines on-beats and syncopated off-beats. The point of this is not to make the problematic claim that Kwodwo was "doing Hip-Hop," but that the uncanny resemblance similarly resists institutional expectations of music aesthetics.

Moreover, hilariously, Kwodwo's rhythmic beat speeds up and slows down, implying a regular unit of measure whilst undulating in and out of time. Crawley (2020) writes that rendering rhythmic music arrhythmic "troubles" its structure, "evacuating it of any such architectonics, yielding the song to a critique of normative modes of organization itself" (p. 207). Likewise, Kwodwo's out-of-timeness critiques organisational structures, and so indulges in "ecstasy and surprise by way of the tension and release" (p. 208). Moreover, the rhythm lapses and returns, leaving stretches of rhythmless music. In this way, it resembles what Eshun (1998) writes on 'looping' in the break, that it "tricks the ear into hearing a continuous beat … anticipates the cycle, gets into the groove, lives inside the tense present of the loop" (p. 024). In this way, Kwodwo's meandering meter, its arrhythmic rhythm, refuses hetero-ableist notions of time, in an example of what Bruce (2021) calls manic time: "a locus of energetic impatience and audacity that might be harnessed to expedite change" (p. 208). The excess of Kwodwo's improvisation enacts what we might call a "refusal in interpretation of interpretation's reparative and representational imperatives" (Moten, 2018a, p.8), which can't easily be registered within racialising logics. So, instead of the anxiety of the unexpected divergence, Kwodwo's failure enacts a different kind of anxious failure: one that "harnesses" the illegibility of "unruly" blackness to resist easy reparation (Nxumalo, 2021).

Summary

In summary, what I've tried to trace here is some of the complexity of (neuro)queer failure in the classroom. Nxumalo (2021) writes that "concepts function as a method because they emerge from specific lived experiences" (p. 1193). The concept of failure emerged out of minoritised people's simultaneous experiences of precarity and their joyous refusal of that precarity. In accounting for the transdisciplinary queer failure mobilised in research-creation, I wanted to begin by tracing how that same failure is mobilised in the classroom—both its pleasure and perils—and how theories of affect as an attention to minute modulations in capacity might help us both conceptualise and refuse the conditions of that failure.

This discussion is important because exploring the racial logics of disability under-representation in special education—here focusing on the "white boy thing" of autism diagnosis (Çelik, 2017)—is often unquantifiable precisely because there is no diagnosis to quantify. Attending to this minute-long failure through theorising the affect of anxiety has facilitated a discussion on failure, failing to fail in the ways necessary to win support, and refusal of that failure.

Sample 2: anxiety and methodological failure

In this second sample, I think about how the affect of anxiety conditions the practicalities of doing transdisciplinary research. My in-school research-creation operates across the disciplinary boundaries of the artist, the teacher, and the researcher. Earlier, I followed Loveless (2019) in conceptualising failure as essential to the doing of trans-disciplinary research(-creation), because of the impossibility of meeting the expectations of more than one discipline simultaneously.

Similarly, as already discussed, research with electrodermal gizmos relies on highly controlled experimental conditions, whereby the researcher introduces a stimulus to measure how much it arouses the person wearing the gizmo: this kind of research is impossible in the classroom, where rapid temperature changes, bursts of movement, and a torrent of uncontrollable frissons are quite ordinary. Thus, the disciplinary expectations of educational research and artistic research are incommensurate with the expectations of researching with EDA. This is why I used them: to make a commitment to "critical use" (Fuller & Weizman, 2021), that upsets the ableist doxa built into those devices. In the next paragraph, I detail how I used them.

I used an algorithm to convert each EDA data point into a note value, and then played it through a synthesiser so that, as the skins' conductance increases, the pitch of the sound produced goes higher: this (ostensibly) enables us to hear the arousal of the body wearing the device alongside the composition (e.g. in the recording above). There are two moments that I want to bring your attention to: the first, is the lack of discernible electrodermal activity through the first 20 min, where the signal is reduced to a low, undulating growl. This is partly because of the operating temperature: the young people and classroom were too cold after playtime, which made them sweat less, and so increased their skin's resistance to the current generated by the gizmo. However, as explicated earlier, this is also a result of failure to follow disciplinary expectations of EDA research.

From 21:40, the signal becomes increasingly chaotic. This happened while I played one of my compositions for the young people: the Oblique Curiosities song "Alpha Centauri." The song is an up-tempo disco anthem, which "Suryanshu" (one of the children) described as "sound[ing] like the aliens came to the ghost party." We danced to the song. Skin warmed up and became less resistant to the electrical currents, at the same time as the movement unsettled the position of the electrodes on the skin. Consequently, the skin-conductance responses become buried amidst a maelstrom of excessive conductance and inconsistent contact. At points, the signal becomes so high-pitched it becomes imperceptibly shrill: the electrodermal data becomes illegible. However, this also ruined the electrodermal data from earlier in the episode, because the high data points from the dance reduced the number of possible notes that the earlier arousals could be mapped across: this, combined with the device's low responsiveness due to the cold, squashed the early signal into an illegible turgid growl. This failure is a consequence of transdisciplinarity.

Legibility is a driving force in positivist, biomedical autism research that seeks to explain the autistic body(mind) (e.g. electrodermal research), and a point of critique in critical autism studies (Yergeau, 2018). Fundamentally, in this workshop, our failure to meet the disciplinary expectations of electrodermal research made this legibility impossible. Thus, my "critical use" (Fuller & Weizman, 2021) by taking the devices outside of the experimental context made them "not work." This critical use, deployed in feminist research praxis, performs a kind of unruliness, "creat[ing] fissures in conformity and normativity" (Nxumalo, 2021, p. 1197) that "resists and unsettles reigning regimes of normal" (Bruce, 2021, p. 8). Moreover, indulging in the more-than-human excess of the corporeal, the sensational, and the nonsensical is distinctly irrational: in this way, the research "rejects normative ideas of value … It is blatantly and irrevocably anti-normative" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 173).

Conclusion: "a more precise typology of failure"

In this paper, I have taken Johnson's (2015) contention that we need a "more precise typology of failure" (p. 264) as a proposition to account for how failure is both generative and risky business. I discussed this as experienced by Kwodwo at the intersection of disabling and racializing hierarchies, as well as in relation to the methodological precarity of straddling multiple disciplines. Nyong'o (2012, cited in Johnson, 2015, p. 246) writes that repairing failure is "less a

question of choosing failure than choosing what to do with the failure that has chosen us." Likewise, the perverse pleasures of failure in research should be understood less as *desiring* failure, but rather subverting the failure already attached to transdisciplinarity and young people at the intersection of racializing and disabling logics in schools, including those who attract or fail to attract the label "special educational needs."

Issues of underrepresentation in SEN statistics are difficult to unpick in the classroom without the unethical practice of diagnosing somebody without a diagnosis. Yet, upsetting the "fixity" of diagnosis—long the purpose of critical disability studies—has never been more pressing than in the afterlives of the pandemic, where wait times for diagnosis, funding, and accommodation now exceed three years in some parts of the UK. It has only been possible to discuss the complex raciality of diagnosis here because of my use of transdisciplinary methods, analysed through theories of affect. Adopting research-creation as a (well-planned) research praxis leaves a certain amount of room for emergence of the unexpected, which facilitated Kwodwo's improvisation. Thinking about Kwodwo's improvisation with theories of affect allows us to separate it from the body(mind) of an individual child, and instead think it at the intersection of a warp-and-weft of more-than-human forces. Without the precarity of transdisciplinary methods, we couldn't have unpicked what might have been happening at this moment. Yet, courting methodological failure through transdiciplinarity isn't without consequence.

Indeed, there is a tendency in some early childhood research to paint a rosy, highly *successful* picture of transdisciplinarity and experimental methods: the children always say wonderful things and make beautiful, socially-conscious art, and they never ever just want to talk about Spider-Man, or show you something they found in their nose. Moreover, you as the researcher, artist, and facilitator/teacher never mess up, never lose your shit, and never, *ever* breathe a sigh of relief come 3 pm when they all (finally) go home. In other words, some research that courts failure turns out surprisingly successful! Painting a highly successful picture of failure creates unrealistic expectations of how "bad" research *could* unfold, but also creates unrealistic expectations of how teaching practice and childhood *should* unfold: this is problematic.

Muñoz (2009) invokes the image of the white, PrEP-taking bug-chaser—who plays at courting risk by having unprotected sex with people with HIV while relying on their privilege to access Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis and so minimise that same risk—to argue that risky play (courting failure) isn't really all that risky for some, while for others it's fatal. Likewise, disciplinary promiscuity might court failure, but that same promiscuity is fairly risk-free for those operating from positions of privilege (like the PrEP-taking bug-chaser) and destructive for others: thus, a transdisciplinary methodological commitment to failure is easiest for those *already embedded in success.*

My encounters with failure are conditioned by whiteness, maleness, cis-gendering, and particular configurations of ability, as well as my experience as a composer and classroom practitioner (albeit "expertise" that was often hilariously subverted by one or more classroom calamities). At the same time, commodifying failure as a doctoral student is tricky because, fundamentally, you must still succeed! This encourages us not to dwell on those occasions when failure simply didn't work. Trying to use electrodermal gizmos in a transdisciplinary project, fundamentally, *did not work*. This "not-working" is necessary to critical use: to upsetting the ableist, white supremacist assumptions of "capacity" built into positivist methods. At the same time, their "not-working" was unpredictable, fundamentally ruining any chance of my audibly salvaging much from them. Similarly, turning to affect *does not work,* in that such a turn cannot be successful in the narrow confines of what successful research is and does. This is the point of it: just as using the gizmos outside of positivist methods broke them, so too does bringing affect to bear in research *break* the ordinary measures of value through which we then need to stultify and write about it. This is often cited as one of the purposes of research-creation: as Erin Manning (interviewed in Truman et al., 2019) writes: "If research-creation is about engaging with what does not ordinarily register as value (as knowledge, as productive, etc.), the work is necessarily political" (p. 246). Concomitantly, Colebrook (2014) contends that we need to be careful

not to conflate the feeling of being-affected with affect-itself and so "reduce the force of concepts to the lived" (p. 89). Likewise, Brewes (2018) considers affect as: "an entity that is inimical to conceptualisation, subjective intention or linguistic transcription" (p. 317). In other words, turning to affect breaks the ordinary measures of value through which we assess the quality of research, but also necessarily breaks the concept of affect as well! This is all 'good stuff': all this breakage is what makes toying with failure so deliciously perverse (i.e. epistemically productive). But, it also has consequences for the researcher invested in transdisciplinarity.

Above, I argued that anxiety is an affect of failure, by which failure is disseminated and written on bodies through fear of the unexpected. By necessity, courting failure through transdisciplinarity—breaking ordinary measures of value, disciplinary success, and even the concept of affect itself—subjects the researcher to the anxiety of not knowing: and, like all kinds of failure, this is *bad!* My writing of this article straddled the pandemic, the delayed submission of my PhD thesis, and a course of anti-anxiety medicine (SSRIs) when the task of writing about something necessarily unknowable became too uncertain. I relied on medication to mediate the anxiety of straddling multiple disciplines, the hyphen of research-creation, of theories that break the moment you make a claim using them, and the ever-present possibility of failing in all the wrong ways: all this despite being well-situated to benefit from the epistemological positionality of the "white PrEP-taking bugchaser."

Thus, I have started to think of research-creation *itself* being an (impossible) proposition for what can be done in and with the academy and the classroom. Restricting the potential of artistic practice to the actuality of academic/classroom life is productive but must also always fail to meet research-creation's potential. Moreover, Appadurai and Alexander (2020) sound a cautionary note: rather than radical anti-normativity, they argue that failure is integral to consumer cycles in late capitalism, whereby the failure of a device (for instance, the shattered phone screen) enables the sale of that device's future iteration. Methodologists interested in courting failure, or in doing "bad" research, might do well to be cautious, being swayed as we are by failure's queer potential as another human obsession with the promise of the "new," as well as failure's inevitable failure to meet that promise.

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