8.
Unsettled

Transitory Lovers and the Boundless Art of Brendan Fernandes

TO FAIL. TO FAIL TO BE LOVED. To fail to return the gaze. To fail to exist in the mirrored reflection of another. Brendan Fernandes's performance *Encomium* was staged in the Onsite Gallery at the Ontario College of Art and Design, University in Toronto, Canada, as part of The Multiple Lives of Artists Conference. As discussed by Jack Halberstam in their work regarding the beauty of queer failure, I consider *Encomium* to be a queer art of refusal. Fernandes's performance offered time in which to consider the wonderful failures of passions that do not approximate heteronormative, secular capitalist ideals of love as never-ending devotion. Fernandes's installation troubled the idea of love as the mirroring of matching bodies, offered a queering of ideas of success, and explored the relationship between white secular capitalism and normative understandings of romantic love. The installation *Encomium* was inspired by Plato's *Symposium*, a classic within Western philosophical traditions. In Plato's iconic text, love is ruminated on through speeches of praise and devotion. In Fernandes's embodied rendition of Plato's writing, the language of love is explored through the bodily gestures and techniques of dance. The body is a work of translation, where words perhaps fail to capture the affective feelings of unrequited love and temporalities of desire, both fleeting and impermanent. Instead, it is through the bodily gestures of dance and movement that the failure to approximate platitudes of heteronormative romantic scripts is expressed when the lovers in *Encomium* walk away.

I had the pleasure of being captured by the artistic vision, creative restlessness, and passion of Fernandes when we met months before

the opening of *Encomium* in Toronto, where I interviewed the artist about his remarkable body of work and artistic vision. I write now of *Encomium* and other installations that are among Fernandes's incredibly diverse and rich creative oeuvre. In the embodied grammar of dancers, the temporalities of artistic movements that defy succinct nationalisms, the impossible translations of emotion, and the lexicons of multiple subaltern genealogies, Fernandes's visual spectacles rewrite history, sometimes without so much as a word. There is violence done to a body that is beyond translation. There are lusts and desires that carry no words. There is the momentary work of an artist's installation that much like love, ends, hanging like smoke in the air before falling into memory.

"PERFECT LOVERS" AND THOSE WHO WALK AWAY: DISIDENTIFICATIONS OF LOVE

Writing of a 2013 staging of *Encomium* at the Rodman Hall Art Centre at Brock University, Canada, Patrick Mahon states, Fernandes presented his *Encomium* (speech in praise of love), which resonates with the knowledge that Plato theorized the "ideal" form of love to be between males. So, in the piece, Fernandes made a robust declaration about love and queerness. Among this work's other functions is the assertion that the art gallery can be used for presenting queerness in ways not often included among the many expressions of mourning and rage necessitated by the AIDS crisis (Mahon).

While Mahon writes of the optimism presented in the idealized "healthy" queer male lovers who perform in *Encomium*, one should be aware of how biopolitical notions of health are grafted onto homonationalist images of queer bodies to align them with state interests against queer "terrors" to the nation.

Rather than seeing *Encomium* as a celebration of the success of queers in a post-AIDS crises moment of "pink dollar" branding, I read this installation as a celebration of queerness that is reminiscent of the inspirational work of queer artists of colour such as Felix Gonzales-Torres. Gonzales-Torres's disidentifies with timely narratives of eternal love that follow straight temporal narratives in which one is born to be educated, work, fall in love with one partner of the opposite sex, reproduce ideal citizens who succeed lineages of racial, religious,



Figure 8.1: Brendan Fernandes, Encomium*, 2013. Installation and Perfomance Stills. Photo: Brendan Fernandes. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.*

and class-based norms, and die. Similarly, Fernandes works on and against Plato's narrative of heteronormative romantic temporalities. Rather than wholly divorcing himself from dominant canons of straight Western art history, Fernandes enters into an embodied queering of Plato's romantic scripts. His work disidentifies with art histories and heteronormative temporalities of romantic love. As a disidentificatory act, Fernandes's work also refuses to wholly identify with trite narratives of mainstream heteronormative capitalist love found in mainstream film and television. However, the artist's work does not turn away from the idea love completely. Rather, *Encomium*

disidentifies with romantic Western canons of poetic renderings of desire. This also mirrors Muñoz's discussion regarding racialized and queer youth's breathtaking ability to survive racist and homophobic majoritarian public spheres.

IT ONLY GETS "BETTER" ONLINE: ART AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL CULTURE

Within spaces of Western secularism, queerness is often a matter of privatized legal right and personal choice regarding which branded queer product to consume or Grinder dating sight to click through. Discourses of teleological Western "progress" often construct a world of legal, affluent gay subjects clicking through windows of MacBooks as being better off in privatized capitalist isolation than living in spaces where nosey neighbors would peer through bedroom windows. And yet, one can ask how privatized rights to be left alone to labour and consume remove any discourse of desire from the public sphere. One can further question how the imagined progress of secular capitalism might in fact produce new forms of violence.

Violence also enters the intimate spaces of lives and minds through the ever-present Internet. Jamie Rodemeyer was an American boy of fourteen who killed himself after being bullied online by high school classmates. On the Internet, he read the words: "JAMIE IS STUPID, GAY FAT AND UGLY … HE MUST DIE!" (Atluri, "Is Torture" 246). The Internet is perhaps exemplary of what Gilles Deleuze meant when he argued that in societies of control, the school, the prison, the hospital, and the market exist in a mutual system of never-ending deformation (3-7). Within worlds where lives are increasingly lived online, the Jamies of the world carry the hate speech of the school with them. The online worker or student is everywhere and nowhere, out of the bounds of clocked hours, and yet is consistently surveyed and controlled by the powers of state and market.

As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri state, "Since value is outside of every measure (outside of both the 'natural' measure of use-value and monetary measure), the political economy of postmodernity looks for it in other terrains: the terrain of the conventions of mercantile exchange and the terrain of communicative relations" (87). Hardt and Negri go on to discuss the relationship between the contemporary



Figure 8.2: Brendan Fernandes, Encomium*, 2013. Installation and Perfomance Stills. Photo: Brendan Fernandes. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.*

market and contemporary biopolitical control: "Conventions of the market and communicative exchanges would thus be the places where the productive nexuses (and thus the affective flows) are established—outside of measure, certainly, but susceptible to biopolitical control" (87). When does one's ability to be regulated end in a time in which employers can survey them online, and one's classmates can harass them online? The tragic death of Rodemeyer demonstrates the ironies of the proliferation of text within cyberspace that produces the disturbing



Figure 8.3: Brendan Fernandes, Encomium*, 2013. Installation and Perfomance. Photo Stills. Photo: Brendan Fernandes. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.*

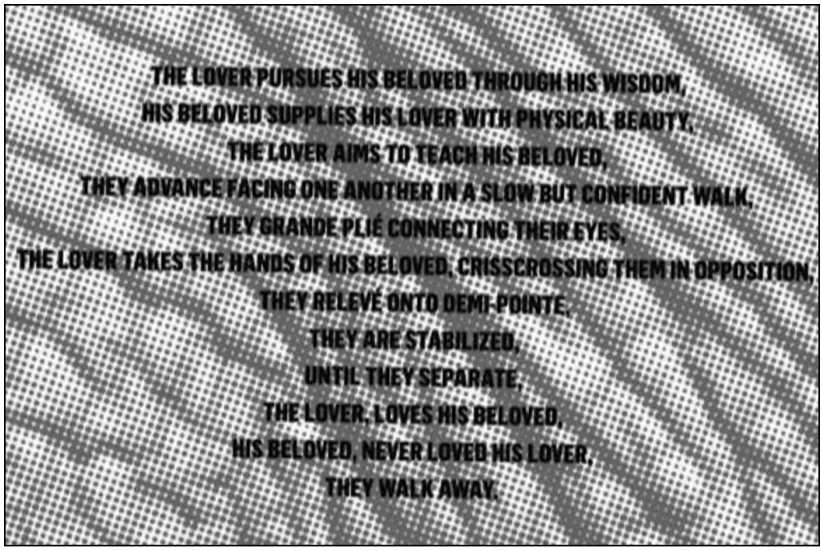


Figure 8.4: Brendan Fernandes, Encomium*, 2013. Installation. Photo: Brendan Fernandes. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.*

paradoxes of isolation and a lack of ethical responsibility toward others. Before killing himself, Rodemeyer posted this message online: "I always say how bullied I am, but no one listens to me.… What do I have to do so people will listen to me?" (Edwards, Edwards, Wahl, and Myers 55). Despite access to an infinite array of communication methods, Rodemeyer felt censored and unheard. Slavoj Žižek argues that we are living in a post-political, biopolitical moment. The author defines "'post-political' [as] a politics which claims to leave behind old ideological struggles and instead focuses on expert management and administration, while "bio-politics' designates the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives as its primary goal" (*Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* 40). Foucauldian biopower and biopolitics bind the everyday performative gestures, health, and aesthetics of bodies to state power through injunctions, orders, and routines. Biopolitics also involve subtle regulations of populations whose lives are supported to produce idealized gendered, racial, and religious subjects. Žižek goes on to argue, "It is clear how these two dimensions overlap: once one renounces big ideological causes, what remains is only the efficient administration of life" (*Violence* 40). He argues that within our post-political, biopolitical present, the only way to mobilize people is

through fear (*Violence* 40): "Today's liberal tolerance towards others, the respect of otherness and openness towards it, is counterpointed by an obsessive fear of harassment. In short, the Other is just fine, but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive, insofar as this Other is not really other" (*Violence* 41). While the corporate branding of social media sites extend themselves to people as entertainment and fun, we bear witness to the use of these sites to enact biopower against the weak and the oppressed. What is also interesting is that the response to cases like Rodemeyer's has also erupted through social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

The "It Gets Better" campaign was launched by gay sex columnist Dan Savage after an outbreak of queer suicides erupted in the West. Technology was used to disseminate messages regarding the success of queer subjects. In regards to contemporary capitalism, Žižek uses an example of a chocolate laxative to discuss how capitalism ventures to sell us solutions to the problems it causes (*Violence*). Could the use of an online media campaign used to offer quick snippets of speech and narratives of neo-liberal capitalist success be seen as a chocolate laxative of sorts? It seems ironic that much of the violence that young people experience happens through online media, and instead of the response being a political campaign or ongoing protests in public space; it was more internet activity. Deleuze argues that the most mindless reality television shows are successful because they mimic the corporate situation with precision. One can ask how the "It Gets Better" campaign acts as a form of reality television, with acceptable queer subjects narrating their achievement of North American dreams, often through their ability to attain capital and normative familial structures.

It is also interesting to consider how "It Gets Better" turns on ideas of teleological progress. Judith Butler states, "Politically, the questions—'What time are we in?' 'Are all of us in the same time?' and specifically, 'Who has arrived in modernity and who has not?'—are all raised in the midst of very serious political contestations" (1). Butler argues that the idea of warring civilizations or cultures within the "war on terror" would "miss an important point, namely, that hegemonic conceptions of progress define themselves over and against a pre-modern temporality that they produce for the purposes of their own self-legitimation" (1).

We live in increasingly high-speed anti-intellectual times in which "progress" is associated with capitalist accumulation and privatized legalized right. It purports to "get better" online and through corporatized branding and mainstream television coverage. Art might function as one of the remaining forms of thoughtful public culture within late secular capitalist life worlds. Rather than seeing secular Western capitalist time and space as "better," one can consider canons and traditions of art in which love and desire are made into public acts of witnessing. Fernandes's art resonates with that of Gonzales-Torres who politicized queer desire, love, and intimacy through art installations that unsettle heteronormative illusions.

Within the time of Plato, love was lyrically and publically evoked through songs of praise that offered a public staging of love and desire. It is through the disidentificatory artistic praxis of artists like Gonzales-Torres and Fernandes that we are left with opportunities to publically see queerness and to consider love collectively. Muñoz states that within the work of Gonzales-Torres "[p]rivate loss is restructured as public art" (170). Gonzales-Torres constructed billboard installations in New York that commented upon the loss



Figure 8.5: Brendan Fernandes, Encomium*, 2013. Installation and Perfomance Stills. Photo: Brendan Fernandes. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.*

of his lover and other queer people to AIDS. A billboard depicting an empty bed with indented pillows where lovers once slept offers a public visual to all of the private trauma of queer lives. Muñoz writes, "The billboards powerfully challenge notions of publicity and privacy. The image, repeated throughout the city, is one that represents not a presence, an identity, but instead an absence, a lacuna, a void gesturing to something valuable, loved, and missing" (170). Within cultures of Western secular capitalist privatization of desire and sex, the general public is free to avoid any images of queerness or Otherness that trouble them. While one is legally free to desire and express love in multiple ways, there is little space where the public is challenged to question subtly and violently enforced heteronormative ideals of intimacy, love, beauty, and desire. Like Gonzales-Torres's, Fernandes's artwork turns very private questions of love and desire into public events. Muñoz states, "The performances and installations of Gonzales-Torres achieve a tactical misrecognition of dominant publicity's public/private binary" (169). Similarly, in disidentifying with Plato's writings regarding love, Fernandes also turns questions of love and desire into a form of public culture. Plato's writings were public texts that offered philosophical commentary regarding love, and would often be read aloud and debated publically. Fernandes queers Plato in ways that challenge homonationalist images of queerness as branded, privatized, "legalized gay" imagery. Queer love and its failure to visually and temporally approximate heteronormative white settler ideologies become a public disruption of racist homophobic public culture. Gonzales-Torres's *Perfect Lovers* was an art installation that commented on the artist and his lover who died of AIDS. His piece included two battery-powered clocks that fail to keep the same time. As Lisa Le Feuvre writes, "The 'perfection' lies in the failure of accuracy; anything else would be romantic fiction. Like these out-of-sync clocks, human beings are all fallible; perhaps this is most explicitly revealed to us in how we understand the past—that is, through memory and imagination. Here failure abounds" (2010). Titled *Perfect Lovers*, the installation offered a wry ironic commentary on the imperfection of bodies, time, and desire, none of which can be measured by clocks or scales. The bodies of lovers and the affective resonance of desire cannot be timed or measured. Similarly, within Fernandes's remarkable *Encomium*, the dancers do not remain within

each other's mirror image. The lover and the beloved walk toward each other, mirroring each other's gestures and movements. They are frozen in each other's image, moving in time to each other's breath and step and yet they can never be perfectly synchronized. The beloved does not love his mentor, he fails to remain perfectly timed and in synchronicity with his suitor. Breaking with the narcissistic will to mirror his lover and with heteronormative capitalist scripts of love as a form of eternal property ownership over another, the beloved turns and walks away.

Like a student who fails to repeat after a teacher, a pupil who fails to need their mentor, or a queer child who does not grown up to succeed the heteronormative image of their parents, optimism does not lie in perfect bodies, scales, or ledgers, but in the radical possibilities of uncertainty. Gonzales-Torres's *Perfect Lovers* commented on the failures of love and desire to be fully structured by the clocks of secular capitalist temporalities, and the scales of idealized images of health that support the vitality of bodies that are economically viable to nationalist aims. Such valorizations of biopolitical strength happen through the simultaneous denigration and devaluation of other lives, namely those whose futures are not imagined to support the production of idealized citizens, seen as incidental to fantasies of white, heteronormative nation-building. Similarly, the beauty of *Encomium* lies not in the optimism of perfectly timed love and desire, but in the uncertainty of queerness and the freedom of the one who breaks from the mirror image of the mentor's gaze and walks away. The installation is an optimistic queering of ideas of time that challenges the increased branding of happy gay families as those that approximate the trite romantic fictions of heteronormative, white settlers.

There was a simplicity to the staging of *Encomium* that involved the repetitive movement of two bodies walking toward each other in synchronicity, breaking with each other's mirror image and walking away. Far from the frenzied pace of endless Internet activity, the simple gestures of two male bodies walking toward each other and the text affixed to the gallery wall that made reference to queer sex, desire, and love was a remnant of queer protest and philosophical canons of public overtures of the intimate, predating Google. Fernandes included posters with a script that guided the installation for audience members to take with them, before they too walked away. The gallery space was

barren, with white walls forming the backdrop of the staging. Muñoz writes of similar minimalist techniques utilized by Gonzales-Torres: "Gonzales-Torres's minimalism evoked meaning and employed connotation, using the minimalist style to speak to a larger social order and to expanded issues of identity. His refunctioning of minimalism enabled him to rethink identity and instead opt for disidentity" (170). *Perfect Lovers* utilized two simple clocks to offer a rich philosophical text that opens up questions regarding the nature of love, capitalist secular temporalities, death, and desire. So too does *Encomium* offer a seemingly simple visual image that explores complex questions regarding failure, the mirroring of romantic partners, and a queering of ideas of eternal love. The rescripting of Plato's writings, which often artistically ruminate on a love between mentor and student, also opens up ethical questions regarding age, patriarchal modes of desire, and agency.

While the mentor loves the student, does the student express free will or are they made to romanticize the gaze of the teacher as a father figure owing to paternalistic power relations? The love between a young man and an older man, while romanticized in many great canons of art and literature, can be troubled within heteronormative masculinist power relations where "father figures" are often desired through the idealization of older, affluent white male bodies that signify recognizable faces of authority in white settler colonies. Fernandes's *Encomium* does not wholly identify with this patriarchal romance script, but rather disidentifies with this unproblematic equation of power and desire, as the one who is mentored refuses to be fully captured by the gaze of authority. There is a resonance in Fernandes's work with that of Gonzales-Torres whose work exists on the margins of multiple essentialisms, those of idealized affluent white queer culture, heteronormative representations of racialized masculinities, and multinational, multicultural branding of sanitized saleable difference.

Within discourses of secular capitalism, one could also argue that the body of the older man once celebrated in the times of Plato often becomes an undesirable object of desire owing to the ageism of branded images of beauty in which unattainable images of youth become "sexy." Ideas of romantic love and sexual desire within normative capitalist discourse are increasingly inseparable from

oppressive forms of advertising and media that create an unattainable bodily ideal. Wealth, beauty, youth, and power are disturbingly conflated in ways that idealize billboard images as love objects. Rather than subverting paternal authority, the market economy becomes the ultimate figure of authority, dictating which bodies are desirable. By using the bodies of live dancers, Fernandes's *Enconium* troubles the fetishization of a disembodied fantasy of branded sex appeal. The live performance recuperates the corporeality of queerness, with the bodies of queer men dancing far from the pages of magazines and Internet screens, moving in the real time of the gallery space. The two lovers stand face to face, confronting the body of (an) Other not as a recognized LGBTQ category or a celebrity icon but as one whose jouissance cannot be kept at a distance. The presence of an embodied and emotive lover interferes with the ostensible individualism and interiority of the self. The audience who bears witness to *Enconium* is also challenged to see queer sex and desire not as a celluloid and screen fantasy, but in the flesh.

SKINNED ALIVE: ART AS ACTION

In disidentifying with dominant stagings of bodies within the dance world, Fernandes transforms the cultural logic of the dance world and the art world by making work that crosses disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, in queering ballet and art Fernandes's work also challenges succinct ideas of politics and the political. This public staging of queer bodies is in itself a political event that turns the motions of queer lovers into a social movement of artistic sensuality. Fernandes's body and body of artwork are also in constant movement as he crosses borders to stage installations and hold artist residencies in New York City, Toronto, India, Africa, the Caribbean, and throughout Europe. Failing to be held in place by the hierarchal ordering of bodies within the mainstream dance world and biopolitical categorizations of bodies that attempt to name and hold ideal citizens in place, the artist and his work are in constant flux. As Fernandes states,

> I always say that identity is something that is in line with cultural histories. This is positing Stuart Hall that identity is in a constant flux. I'm not just Indian or Canadian or Kenyan. I

> am these things. I'm also queer, I'm also a dancer, subculturally I still reference punk rock from youth so those things also make identity. Identity is something that is always changing, in flux. (Fernandez)

Encomium offered a visually striking image of bodies: two men dressed in matching wrestling costumes striking the postures of ballerinas. Like Fernandes's own body as one that archives a disidentification with dominant cultures of ballet and dance in which the imagined ballet dancer is often an archetypal white feminine body, *Encomium*—like much of Fernandes's art—is a poignant disruption of aesthetic norms.

In speaking with Fernandes regarding the politicization of bodies, we discuss his own trajectory, as someone who trained to be a ballet dancer and whose body is also an archive of movements across multiple borders. Multiple ideas of movement frame Fernandes's identity and artistry: "[A]s a dancer movement is something that is generalized through spectacle. But as a dancer, the reason I stopped dancing was that I got injured and I wasn't allowed to dance anymore. So it all kind of frames the idea of identity and the kind of makeup of who I am." Fernandes further comments on the relationship between hierarchical orders of bodies and ballet, stating,

> I look at ballet as a kind of hierarchical order. And that's the reason I stopped dancing because ballet was promoting a kind of rigorous idealized body that I wasn't able to have so I was kind of filtered out of the system. So I'm looking at the idea of making gestures, gestures of the body but also kind of political gestures so what does the movement mean through the racialized body, the queer body, that I make it through this space with my body being transformative.

There is a historical and ongoing relationship between the making of bodies through the cultures of "high art" and racist biopolitical hierarchies of recognized and valorized citizens. The "body beautiful" image of the ballerina within the Western bourgeois imagery of the mainstream dance world is often represented as a hyper-feminine, white, thin, heteronormative, youthful, cis-gender woman. This trope

of the imagined ballerina gains its visual resonance from images of "innocent," white femininity found in Eurocentric fairy-tale representations of certain women. Within the mainstream world of ballet, it is often difficult to find images of subaltern bodies, just as these bodies are often not represented within dominant romantic narratives. Fernandes's installation restages bodies of dance and canonical bodies of romantic poetry as a political movement, recharting bodies and the body politic.

Žižek writes of responses to trauma, discussing two ways in which violence is often responded to; through the superego and the through the act. Žižek writes,

> So, rather than remain stuck in debilitating awe in front of the Absolute Evil, the awe which stops us to THINK what is going on, one should recall that there are two fundamental ways to react to such traumatic events which cause unbearable anxiety: the way of superego and the way of the act. The way of the superego is precisely that of the sacrifice to the obscure gods of which Lacan speaks: the reassertion of the barbaric violence of the savage obscene law in order to fill in the gap of the failing symbolic law. (*Welcome* 143)

Žižek further discusses the possibility of responding to trauma in ways that challenge the obscene order of power. He discusses an unlikely heroine of the Holocaust, a ballet dancer who took action, and in doing so, offered an act of resistance:

> One of the heroes of the Shoah for me is a famous Jewish ballerina who, as a gesture of special humiliation, was asked by the camp officers to dance for them. Instead of refusing, she did it, and while she held their attention, she quickly grabbed the machine-gun from one of the distracted guards and, before being shot down herself, succeeded in killing more than a dozen officers. (*Welcome* 143)

Fernandes's artistic installations do not reassert the violence of "high cultures" of dance often born out of existing disciplinary structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capital in which the

vitality of the white feminine ballerina supports the death of queer bodies like Rodemeyer, and the invisibility of racialized bodies. Rather, there is a disidentification with dance that works on and against dominant visualizations of bodies to produce public bodies of art as embodied politics. The figure of the ballet dancer who does not approximate ideal whiteness, who is categorized as being at best invisible to and at worst disposable to national narratives, haunts Fernandes's artistic defiance. Like many racialized, queer, feminist, and political artists he uses the tools and techniques of the dominant biopolitical order to challenge normative ideas of art, culture, and the body itself. The queer dancers within *Encomium* are not straight-shooting cowboys, firing colonial guns on a white settler landscape. Rather, in their failure to remain in place, they unsettle dominant ideals of love, embodiment, and desire. Ideas of normative straight love and racist hierarchies of bodies are tied to vulgar Nazi genealogies that marked queers with pink triangles as constructed objects of extinction, just as bodies marked as racial and religious Others were scripted for death.

Fernandes subverts the violent obscenities of heteronormative romantic scripts in the gallery space, an unlikely battlefield of combative dance. The Jewish ballerina that Žižek writes of turns the guards' gun on them in ways that minoritarian artists disidentifiy with mainstream "high culture," staging their own nationalist narratives in a different shade, pitch, and key. The Jewish ballerina and the racialized queer artist are often not found in official histories and aesthetic representations of nationalism. They are those whose bodies archive violence, trauma, and hatred, and yet who despite all odds, continue to shoot from the hip.

THE JOYS OF FAILURE: QUEER ICONS NEED NOT SUCCEED FOREFATHERS

The body is a never-ending archive of admirable failings. Within the secular capitalist world, one is often raised from cradle to grave to endlessly attempt to live up to an idealized body connoting heteronormative white wealth. Along the way, every inevitable failure to approximate an unattainable and rather banal image of success is often met with narratives of individual blame for ostensible failures.

Halberstam discusses failure, both as a constructed concept that pathologizes the oppressed and in relation to a queering of success that troubles universal notions of error. The queer body, as one that does not follow the successive line of patriarchal forefathers within Halberstam's text, is not one to be grieved, but rather one that troubles the very terms "success" and "failure." Queer failure asks one to consider the relationship between aspirational cultures and violent structures of biopolitical governance. Halberstam writes, "Perhaps most obviously failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods" (3).

Within Fernandes's *Encomium*, the beloved walks toward his mentor in the gallery space, and they are frozen for a fleeting moment within each other's gaze. However, the beloved does not fully return the gaze of the one who loves them. They break from the synchronized routine, shattering the mimesis of successive heteronormative patriarchal succession, in which sons follow in the footsteps of fathers, the governed followed in the footsteps of those who govern, and romantic love is bound to patriarchal lineages and heteronormative families. The mirror image is broken as is the narcissistic fantasy that holds hegemonic fantasies of "true love" in place. The lovers turn and walk in opposite directions. As Fernandes states,

> I look at love as a space of failure. So I look at in relation to the body and how the body reaches a point when it can't do something. How does the body relate to ideas of love and failure. So I have this piece and I've created pieces with dancers. So I have this piece that's called *Encomium* based on Plato's the symposium where Plato speaks about an asymmetrical love between a younger male and his companion. And he speaks of how this love will dissipate because the mentored with grow up and not need his mentor anymore. There are a lot of those questions of love and failure.

Halberstam draws on Foucault's writings regarding disciplinary power to discuss queerness and loss. The author suggests that disciplinarity is a tool of modern power that judges success based on the molding of bodies and minds to approximate normative ideas that are

tied to modernist state structures and capital. Disciplinarity "depends upon and deploys normalization, routines, conventions, tradition, and regularity, and it produces experts" (Halberstam 7). The tutelage of the student who must follow the orders of the mentor is akin to the lover who is bound to patriarchal models of desire. The authorial body that commands the law of the father can capture the partner in a gaze imbued with disciplinary power. And yet, in Fernandes's embodied staging of *Encomium* there is a queering of romantic love that also troubles the heteronormative, patriarchal disciplinarity of both family and education. The mentored no longer needs the mentor, just as the child no longer needs the parent, just as love fails to last.

THE KISS OF DEATH: KILLING WHITE SETTLER MYTHOLOGIES

Within Fernandes's deft artistic world, there is also a connection between the body as an archive of failing and the troubling of normative ideas of gender, race, and the nation state that trouble the biopolitical aims of nation building. As an Indo-Kenyan-Canadian artist who resides in New York City, Fernandes's body crosses borders both literally and metaphorically, as neither the artist's body nor their body of artistic work approximates mainstream normative images of "India," "Africa," "Canada," or "America." Throughout the remarkably diverse range of Fernandes's artistic praxis, there are constant allusions to the primitive that both deride racist and colonial notions of Africa and Africans. Simultaneously, Fernandes disidentifies with the supposed primitive, subverting colonial notions of progress that construct the secular West as being advanced and bodies in the Global South as failing to live up to secular capitalist modernity's narcissistic image. Drawing on animalistic metaphors in their work, Fernandes's art ruminates on ideas of love that are bound to the death drive. He states, "I also look at love through the dynamics of power, of predator and prey. So the kind of cycle of life that needs to be happening. I've done a number of drawings of Lions taking down buffalos so it looks like they're embracing but they are actually engaged in this kiss of death" (Fernandez).

Fernandes also uses the primitive to explore the inevitable failures of succinct ideas of nationalism that bind people to notions of authenticity.

His artistic work gestures to the beautiful failings of queer, racialized diasporic artists. Halberstam writes of the relationship between capitalism and universalist ideas of success in which one is taught to see their inability to succeed in capitalist structures as their own fault. This apolitical and ahistorical amnesia is used to produce harmful platitudes of North American positivity. As Halberstam states, "While capitalism produces some people's success through other people's failures, the ideology of positive thinking insists that success depends only upon working hard and failure is always of your own doing" (3). As discussed throughout *Uncommitted Crimes*, the South Asian and Asian body within North America is often used to promote and enforce this ideology through the myth of the "model minority." Asians are imagined to be successful based on hard work in comparison with the vilified Black body, the racialized poor, undocumented migrants, and the Indigenous. At the same time, ideas of "cultural authenticity" that fossilize racialized communities in images of the primitive are used to sell "multicultural" products to affluent yuppies in search of Orientalist exoticism.

LIGHTEN UP? THE QUEER PARODIES OF MULTICULTURALISM

There is a space of irony, humor, and dialogue that is opened up in Fernandes's artistic work. One in which the failure to construct Africa through colonial metaphor gives way to the mockery of trite images of the Global South and the racialized migrants associated with antiquated ideas of culture and community. Fernandes mocks the "African Lion Safaris" of North American multicultural, multinational capitalism through an artistic labour praxis that defies the clocks and ledgers of normative apolitical cultures of consumerist exoticism. Fernandes's art of failure reveals the ironies of multiculturalism as a discourse that constitutes Asian bodies as thankless workers, while fetishizing the branded ironies of over-the-counter forms of "cultural authenticity" marketed to white Western consumers.

As discussed throughout *Uncommitted Crimes*, there is a comedic and ironic space that is opened up within the multicultural pageantry of late capitalist secular worlds. Racialized migrants are often deeply exploited, working in the lowest tiers of the capitalist system, while "authentic" multicultural products are often expensive forms of cultural

capital gesturing to what Badiou calls the worldless" space of global capitalism (Badiou qtd. in Žižek, "On Alan Badiou and Logiques des Monde"). The racialized migrant is a depersonalized worker behind the counter at 7/11, while Asian food, yoga, and ayurvedic healing are



Figure 8.6: Brendan Fernandes, Neo-Primitivism II, *2007. Sculpture and Installation Stills. Photo: Brendan Fernandes. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.*

expensive industries used to sell products. There is a deep and dark irony regarding forms of branded multiculturalism that market third world poverty to rich white Westerners as exciting, decadent, and exotic. Writing in regards to the ironies found in Fernandes's artistic oeuvre, Mahon discusses the artist's queering of multiculturalism. Fernandes uses his personal experiences as an Indo-Kenyan who grew up in suburban Ontario, a world away from colonial images that produce essentialist and ridiculous fantasies of Africa and Africans to trouble racist ideologies. As Mahon suggests, Fernandes's comedic brilliance lies in using his own experience as a Kenyan-born Indian who immigrated to Canada as a youth to humorously problematize the nature of authenticity. A particularly memorable performance video, *Foe* (2008), shows Fernandes training with a voice coach to learn (and often fail to learn) how to mimic the accented English

spoken by an ostensible "real" Kenyan-born Indian, not one raised in the oral flatlands of suburban Toronto, as Fernandes was. Pandora Syperek describes Fernandes's *Neo Primitivism II*, which was staged as part of the Sobey Exhibition in Montreal in 2010. Fernandes was the youngest artist to ever be shortlisted for the prestigious Sobey Art Award. Syperek comments on the ironic and playful images of Africa in Fernandes's art:

> Upon entering Fernandes's section of the Sobey exhibition in Montreal, one was confronted by a herd of life-sized plastic deer wearing African masks made of white resin. Though potentially menacing, the fake creatures were all braced in the same startled position, as if prepared to flee. A forest of vinyl spears that wrapped the gallery wall—at once violent and decorative—further confounded the juxtaposition between the deer's jeering false faces and their timid disposition. Entitled *Neo-Primitivism II* (2007), this plastic-fantastic *mise en scène* playfully invokes postcolonial critiques of the gaze that emerges in encounters with the unknown.

In failing to be known through romantic saleable images of Africa and India that gain their currency from colonialism, and in failing to entertain quaint provincial narratives glorifying white settler Canada, Fernandes's work queers racial authenticity. There is an intermixture in their work between images of queer desire that trouble dominant white settler narratives of happy straight white settler families, and also disrupt racist constructions of culture that imagine racialized migrants to be representatives of timeless traditions and other places, far from here. Mahon writes of the humour that Fernandes applies to queer discourses of race and multiculturalism, and the colonial ideology that often underpins both:

> Wry humour is part of Fernandes's artistic toolkit, and it was not left idle here. Alongside all the thoughtful exuberance in *Encomium I, II, III*, the artist presented a video entitled *seeing i* (2014). This animation shows line drawings and rolling dialogue that reads like excerpts from a social media exchange between two elephants, one Asian and the other African. The

> work suggests the breakup of a gay relationship while also alluding to post-colonial power struggles.

Discussing the role of the comedic in this artistic praxis, Fernandes states,

> Humour is definitely something that I use and that I am kind of playing with through stereotypes like African Lion Safari. Those are the kinds of things that mediate "Africa." And I still say "Africa" because African kind of gets visualized as this land of the primitive, the exotic. So those are the kinds of things that I faced when I moved here. I was asked, do you have elephants in your backyard? Did you have a school or cars? So I'm trying to parody this. I think that it's there. It's a way to open up the dialogue. So I'm kind of freaking out in the video. So humor is a tool, a way of getting people to engage with the work but underneath it there is always a kind of political, poignant message underlying it.

As a racialized, queer, migrant artist whose body straddles the divides of many fictionalized communities and whose artistic work crosses disciplinary boundaries, Fernandes's brilliance lies in confounding succinct categories. Rather than producing art that can be easily labeled as the property of one group or nation, Fernandes's artistic work is in constant movement, dancing across borders of time, space, and fixed notions of identity. It is through the artist's restless and transitory migrations and the multiple artistic mediums they utilize that the shape-shifting iconoclast and their work are united, in unsettling and liberatory ways. If "great white men" succeeded within Canadian, American, and European histories of colonialism by "settling"—both in implicitly violent structures of white heteronormative love and explicitly murderous settlements on the land of colonized people—Fernandes refusals to settle in profoundly political ways.

HEAR NO EVIL, SEE NO EVIL: SILENCE, THE ACT, AND DEVIL'S NOISE

Halberstam draws on a diverse archive of supposed failing that crosses

historical, racial, and national boundaries to collect an arsenal of what the author terms "weapons of the weak" (88). Halberstam discusses the revolts of landless peasants in Southeast Asia and slave rebellions in which different strategies ranging from working slowly to making



Figure 8.7: Brendan Fernandes, Neo-Primitivism II, *2007. Sculpture and Installation Stills. Photo: Brendan Fernandes. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.*

errors in labour production were used to dissent against colonial and capitalist hierarchies. Drawing on Scott, Halberstam writes, "Describing peasant resistance in Southeast Asia, Scott identified certain activities that looked like indifference or acquiescence as 'hidden transcripts' of resistance to the dominant order. Many theorists have used Scott's reading of resistance to describe different political projects and to rethink the dynamics of power" (88). One of Fernandes's most striking installations, *Devil's Noise*, makes reference to the protests of South African students who revolted against the imposition of Afrikaner language in schools during the reign of Apartheid. As Fernandes states in describing the installation,

> *Devil's Noise* was conceived and produced during a residency at the prestigious German new media academy ZKM. This

> work investigates the student protests of 1976 in South Africa in which silence was used as a means of protest by student groups opposing the imposition of the Afrikaans language within the school system, effectively barring much of the population from participation. The title references a protest sign carried by a young boy stating We Will Not Speak Your Devil Tongue. The work questions how language can act as a way to oppress and control people.

In refusing to speak the language of colonizers, in failing to approximate the linguistic injunctions of disciplinary power, these students were part of a "hidden transcript" of insurrectionary silence. While speech and the ability to articulate oneself and to name ones oppression is often seen as a part of progressive politics, it was in failing to speak that these students both literally disrupted the authorial voice of education bound to racist state structures, and metaphorically troubled the association between the passive voice and defeatism. This triumph of silence can also be thought of in relation to loud, aggressive, warring masculinities that often define images of supposed victors throughout official historical discourses.

One can return to Žižek's discussion regarding the two reactions that emerge in response to traumatic events, "the way of the superego and the way of the act" (*Welcome* 143). While students could have responded to the violence of apartheid through an assertion of the obscene violence of the symbolic law, asserting an authorial voice of masculinist power that mirrored that of state authority, they opted instead to act in silence. It was through the body in silence that they staged a protest. These 1976 student protests in South Africa are connected to other political movements that arose during this time period. As one author states,

> The political context of the 1976 uprisings also take into account the effects of workers' strikes in Durban in 1973; the liberation of neighbouring Angola and Mozambique in 1975; and increases in student enrolment in black schools, which led to the emergence of a new collective youth identity forged by common experiences and grievances. ("Soweto Student Uprising")

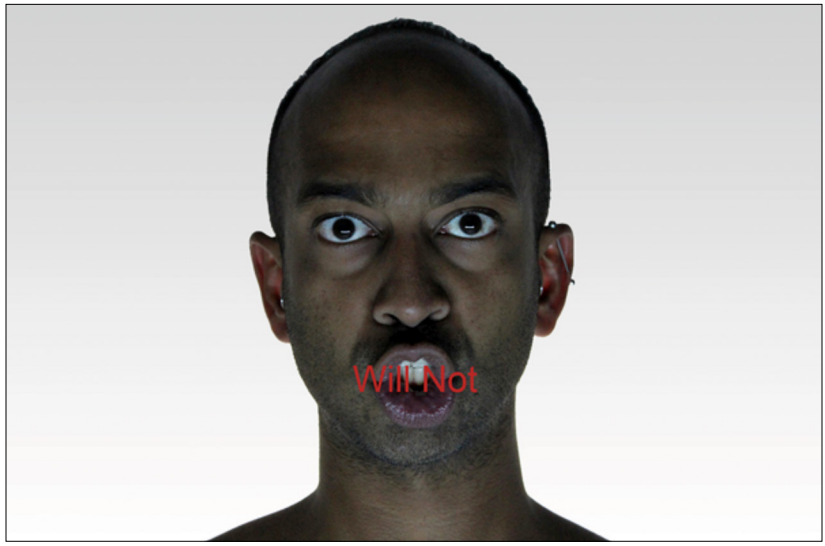


Figure 8.9: Brendan Fernandes, Devil's Noise, *2011. Installation and Video Stills. Photo: Brendan Fernandes. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.*



Figure 8.9: Brendan Fernandes, Devil's Noise, *2011. Installation and Video Stills. Photo: Brendan Fernandes. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.*

While, as Butler notes, secular Western capitalist narratives of progress are often used to imagine that things have "gotten better" over time and that North American and European nations are more

progressive than countries in the Global South, the embodied defiance of revolutionary protest movements prove otherwise.

The "wordless" space of global capitalism offers an endless stream of written English language words, with hate speech popping up on computer screens alongside diatribes on feminist listserves and advertisements for happy meals, and yuppie yoga studios. An infinite array of text and speech regarding otherness might correspond to a fear of the embodied Other, one whose bodily difference cannot be contained or quantified. Racialized queer artists who visualize and politicize embodied alterity demonstrate a courage beyond mere words.

Fernandes's *Encomium* involved the silent march of two queer dancers whose fleshy sensuality creates artistic spaces of queer politics as public culture. The words that sit dormant on screens, with teenagers typing "It gets better" before pulling the triggers of guns to commit suicide conceals the material and psychological realities of subaltern lives and deaths. In the space of the art gallery, watching and bearing witness to the artistic prowess of Brendan Fernandes, *Encomium* was for me an erudite form of protest. The remarkable artistic event gave vitality to the timeless spirit of rebellion. Brendan Fernandes disidentifies with Plato in profound ways, through public occupations of space.

The queer love that cannot be named, spoken, or ever held in place. The body that walks away.

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