

4. Queer Success

He explains: “I started lifting weights when I was nine years old, for the diving. And that early impact ... It’s like with gymnasts, it keeps everyone quite small.” Daley shrugs, an Olympian whatever. This is just one of those weird compromises – inexplicable and unacceptable to the rest of us – that Olympic athletes tend to make. ... Daley admits he has been criticised by some campaigners for continuing to enter competitions in countries where there is state-encouraged homophobia. “I go to Russia to compete quite often. I’ve competed in the Middle East. Lots of people would say, ‘Boycott. Don’t go.’ But, do you know what? I think that going there, in a married relationship, and being able to compete, and climb on to a podium as a gay man – I think that speaks louder than boycotting. I think it shows we’re real. Visible. I think it’s powerful.” ... So he steps to the edge of the concrete. “This is Tokyo. I will stand at the end of the board and be present. I’ll breathe. I’ll see my son and my husband in the audience. And that’ll be enough.”¹

There are many kinds of success, and a greatly larger number of narratives of derailed biographies and initiatives. Areas in which we can be successful and receive recognition to match that success are manifold. Some of these areas correlate wonderfully to understandings of success shared by majorities in specific societies, while others necessitate a specific form of recognition. Not every successful human inevitably

1 Tom Lamot and Tom Daley, “I’m only recognised when strangers think of me in my pants,” in: *Guardian (US Edition)*, February 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/feb/22/tom-daley-only-recognised-strangers-think-of-me-in-my-pants>.

becomes a global household name. The parameters of success for those who do are definitely not automatically explicable.

Our opening quote is taken from an interview with Tom Daley, a British Olympian, who came out to a global public via a video platform in 2013.² This step gave the young athlete new renown beyond the borders of the diving community. It also made him known particularly, although not exclusively, in queer subculture. His achievements suddenly fell under an especially bright media spotlight, a development that inevitably prompted speculative comments on connections between his sexual orientation, his good looks, and his sporting success.

It is particularly sport, perhaps more than any other societal arena of achievement-based contention, which makes such honors special: distances, times, points, or specific strings of coordinated moves can be measured and compared easily. Sporting contests are played out under the watchful eyes of referees, and are accompanied by a media-based euphoria. Gradually, those who are successful continue to inch up the career ladder, in order to hopefully triumph by winning gold, that loveliest of all colors, at World Championships and Olympic Games.

The podium, the medal hung round ones neck, and the title and descriptive accolade to match, document these often-fleeting moments of being at the top. Which makes it even more important to conserve this fleeting fame in personal terms, to weld it to differing presentations of one's own personality. It's not only in sport that success can slip through one's fingers, whether through comparisons, a lack of respect being shown for success, or in the fickle transience of what media and public regard as sufficient achievement.

On several levels, Tom Daley can claim that he's experienced substantial success and specifically queer success. He's reached the very peak as a global sportsman, ensuring far-reaching recognition for his achievements from that section of the public informed about sport. Moreover, through coming out he appears to have widened further the circle of people who recognize his achievements, to include members of the public

2 Tom Daley, "Something I want to say" Accessed November 1, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJwJnoB9EKw>.

who generally pay little regard to sporting events. Whether intentionally or unconsciously, he's managed to make his achievement visible: he has publicly connected his success with his own person.

One predicate for the recognition of that which is being exhibited is a counterpart or counterparts, who will register and value what is on show. However, a particular significance also must be accorded to that which is being presented and comprehended in any given societal space. In this fashion, queer success in the twenty-first century can justify itself through several of its facets. While doing so, it locates itself shockingly near—nearer than ever before—to ill-considered representational ideals of post-modernity: *achievement, love, and desire*.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “achievement” as “a result gained by effort: accomplishment.”³ Put more specifically, this definition links achievement with labor spent, experiencing strain, and a relatable result. Those results that correspond to heteronomous aims play a decisive role in what follows—regarding the recognition of success. The same applies to rewarding and acknowledging what has been achieved because of the result, i.e. a collective clarity in the context of exceptional goals. It rapidly becomes transparent that this form of determining achievement, which can be accessed through measurability, enjoys wide acceptance. This is how success in sport finds expression in units of time, or points, financial success through bank balances or employee numbers, and academic brilliance through titles and institutional affiliations. Yet we still must differentiate as to what motivates a particular achievement in the first place, whether a person is moved to act by “genuine fun in meeting a particular challenge, or because they want to reassure themselves regarding their own abilities, or because they want to avoid a specific failure that’s looming.”⁴

3 Entry for “achievement” in: *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2023). Retrieved November 1, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/achievement>.

4 Thomas A. Langens, “Leistung,” in: *Handbuch der Allgemeinen Psychologie – Motivation und Emotion*, ed. Veronika Brandstätter, Jürgen H. Otto (Göttingen: Hogrefe, 2009), 217n.

In 2009, shortly after the worldwide financial crisis, a female politician, little known until then, led by example during turmoil. Her successful interventions, a combination of achievement in the challenge of demonstrating one's own abilities, and the avoidance of a communal calamity, have gone down in history:

Iceland's spectacular meltdown was caused by a banking and business culture that was buccaneering, reckless – and overwhelmingly male. ... The crisis led to the downfall of the government and the prime minister's residence—which resembles a slightly over-sized white dormer bungalow—is now occupied by Jóhanna Sigurdardóttir, an elegant 66-year-old lesbian who is the world's first openly gay premier. When she lost a bid to lead her party in the 1990s, she lifted her fist and declared: "My time will come." Her hour has now arrived – and the same is true for a cadre of highly accomplished businesswomen.⁵

The media reception was unable to stave off the queer success shining through this story: Sigurdardóttir's biography touched people with its highs and lows, bound together with a mellow far-sightedness. The moment of political return was molded out of particular economic and apocalyptic circumstances, making it possible for her personal openness regarding her sexual orientation could seep through authentically, on the media plane and in societal politics. Jóhanna Sigurdardóttir was able to clock up this kind of success, and sudden recognition from wide swathes of the public, before her first activities in office—through years of steady achievement and through taking a chance to become prime minister of a nation-state rocked by crisis. From this point on, her actions would now not only be evaluated and relativized according to a general scheme, but also connected to her being a lesbian woman. Her success became a queer success, which the politician was also able to use

5 Ruth Sutherland, "After the crash, Iceland's women lead the rescue" in: *Guardian (US Edition)*, March 21, 2009. Accessed November 1, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/feb/22/iceland-women>.

as such, when she married her long-term partner under the new law on same-gender marriage.⁶

After interest had been aroused in her person, the Icelandic politician's achievements were noticed and remarked on in much wider circles than before. Whether this was due to the economic crisis, her sexual orientation, or simply coincidence, Jóhanna Sigurdardóttir was discovered as a successful human by the public, even though the actual essence of what she had achieved remained unchanged. Interested observers bestowed the allure of queer success upon her as a politician and as a lesbian woman. The pathos of a queer pioneer was also pinned to her, a maneuver that provided the stage on which what she had achieved could be cherished. What she has accomplished is unquestionably impressive. There remains just as little doubt that she's been able to gain attention far beyond the borders of the northern island through details about her own individuality.

The second challenge to a generalizing way of perceiving success comes in the form of *Love*, which is substantial, eternal, or true by turns. The question posed thereby is no less complex than the question of how achievement is recognized:

The Walt Disney complex, i.e. the search for the glimmering princess or prince, is exemplary, and deserves to be commented on. Despite critical scrutiny, the myth of "true" love remains, in utter accordance with cinematic models, and functions as an elementary matrix governing the enduring search for this heteronomous singularity. This can turn the search for a partner into a dream one has grown to love, and make search functions deteriorate into a product of one's own idealized notions, to a perfect fit, which must fulfill not only one's own interests and potentialities, but also that which an individual isn't able or willing to fulfill themselves.⁷

6 Reuters Staff, "Iceland's gay PM marries partner under new law," in: *Reuters*, June 28, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-49721320100628>.

7 Martin J. Gössl, *Schöne, queere Zeiten?*, 114.

The forms that love and its heteronomous reception appears in are subject to diverse modalities of integration, in which media images, experiences, and role models influence how an individual shapes and values how they love. In this process, true love rapidly subjugates itself to a specific understanding of success, to the belief that the emotional connection between people can be classified as either successful or a failure. For many people in a virtually interconnected society, the fulfillment that stems from true love and the experience of a successful relationship has remained important, or has become even more important.⁸

Recent decades particularly have seen a shift in the queer perspective on success regarding love and relationships, a transformation that can be linked to changes in societal politics in the same period. The increasing legal equality of opportunity for same-gender partnerships is celebrated by many active representatives of queer communities—but as both boon and bane for these communities simultaneously. There's no place where this cognitive opposition has been expressed more publicly and clearly than in the UK in the third millennium:

In Britain, legalizing gay marriage would be partly symbolic. Civil partnerships—passed under Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labor government—gave same-sex couples equal access to national pensions, inheritances, tax breaks and other rights enjoyed by married heterosexual couples. But Cameron, a Christian and married father of three whose position on same-sex marriage gradually evolved since winning the party's leadership in 2005, is calling gay marriage a matter of basic human rights. He is also making a pitch to uneasy religious conservatives, suggesting that the institution of marriage will reinforce traditional values of commitment and monogamy within the gay community.⁹

8 See, for example, Silvia Fauck, *Mid Love Crisis, Beziehungstipps für Fortgeschrittene*, (Munich: Piper, 2020).

9 Anthony Faiola, "British Conservatives lead charge for gay marriage (29.03.2012)," in: *Washington Post*, March 29, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/british-conservatives-lead-charge-for-gay-marriage/2012/03/29/g1QAzatzjS_story.html.

The recognition of queer love is steered, via a road signposted as “equality of opportunity,” toward a majoritarian ideal of society, which forces (queer) perspectives about success in love and relationships to change. Whether matching with a conservative understanding of the same or not, the centuries old concept of marriage—and the values that accrue to that—became part of the colonial norms of societal majorities, from which there is no escape. Films, books, poems, social media performances, and family traditions are all packed to the brim with omnipresent expectations concerning marriage, to which people can now subordinate queer permutations for relationships. It’s on this stage that the new millennium individual moves, between societal recognition and social disorder. Furthermore, this third millennium human oscillates between success and neediness, and between idealized emotional success and the represented insufficiency of solitude:

It is ironic that both sides acknowledge the limiting of bodies and relationships produced through Lawrence and same-sex marriage,¹⁰ yet neither examines the debate from a standpoint of raced and classed queer liminality. The modernist time claims of queer theorists are not useful because, given the current progression of the political landscape, it is not possible to reclaim that kind of activism without accounting for the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture. Further, the mainstream can no longer ignore queer critiques of governmental regulation and the interrogation of bodies and relations. Because both sides point to the production of bodies that exist outside of the either/or framing of the debates, should we not start our examination of the issue from these bodies/relations that toe the line between queer and mainstream? Liminal bodies are those bodies that slip in and out of spaces, but are not fully acknowledged in either space. Further, because liminal bodies actualize slippage between categories, they highlight the ability to get beyond the either/or framing of the debate, while showing cracks in institutional frameworks—cracks that are potential sites of resistance. Examining bodies that occupy the

10 See: Dale Carpenter, “The Unknown Past of Lawrence v. Texas,” *Michigan Law Review* 102, no. 7 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.2307/4141912>.

raced and class liminal space between the queer and the mainstream will further open up the debate, allowing scholars and activists to account for those who are forced to the margins by both sides in the dichotomous debate.¹¹

Indeed, the heteronormative structure at question here really is the true point of contention in understanding new queer articulations and the assumption of legal equality of opportunity. And these structures are proving themselves more obdurate than previously thought, especially in relation to their idealized consequences. Through these, queer love, the recognized and visible form of love, can now also be subdued by the imposition of a heteronormative grid. Thus, if further details come into play, queer love can be understood as classically “successful.” Key details like monogamy, or eternal constancy if you prefer, can be quickly communicated, even if they can only be checked with difficulty, and much later in the day. So that suddenly, even if animated movies on the subject are a long time in coming, notions of a future like in a Walt Disney fairy tale become the dream of successful love, even for some in the queer community. In any case, this normative force runs rampant, strongly influencing those who allow themselves to be satisfied by applying traditional forms of relationships. These groups seem to spare hardly a thought for the curtailments that go hand in hand with such choices, or exclusions resulting from them.

The process of giving oneself up to *Desire*, the experience of a bodily and sensual connection with one or more others, often happens in the twenty-first century in ways never previously enacted in the history of humanity. Online platforms, established meeting points, urban diversity, and the Sexual Revolution taking place from 1968 have transformed sexual desire into something that’s experienced in several dimensions:

11 Andrew Clark, “Falling through the Cracks: Queer Theory, Same-Sex Marriage, Lawrence v Texas, and Liminal Bodies,” *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 20, (2011), 40, <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.20.04>.

[These] changes are not about sex per se, but they all touch on key themes about the personal life. They suggest how the formality of sexual emotions, manners, language, groups and hierarchies of the past have become increasingly supplanted by more informal relations, so sexual patterns have been “deregulated.” We now live in a world of sexual choices ... , pure relationships ... , cold intimacies ... and disclosing intimacies ... Tight codes and formal rules have given way to more fluid rules and a highly questionable set of choices about the personal life. A seeming “endless hunger for instant change,” “self reinvention” and “short term living” have become themes which characterize the new personal—read also sexual—life.¹²

The actual possibilities for being able to perceive and experience one’s own desire, also produce—far-removed from conventional structures—evaluation formats for successful or abortive transformation of desire. Both a desirous way of playing with oneself and the voluptuous connection with other people are under pressure from increasing idealizations:

Popular media coverage may be sensationalistic, and undoubtedly influences attitudes and sexual behavior in adolescents and young adults. However, the hook-up phenomenon is not merely a creation of the media; rather, the media seems to be reflecting an actual shift in behavior. Such casual sexual experiences among college students are by no means a product of the 21st century; “one-night stands” and “casual sex” have been studied without the current “hook-up” context However, the high prevalence of these behaviors, coupled with an openness to display and discuss them, appears to be recent, particularly with respect to women¹³

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- 12 Ken Plummer, “Critical Sexualities Studies,” in: *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Sociology*, ed. G. Ritzer, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444347388.ch14>.
- 13 Chris Reiber and Justin R. Garcia, “Hooking up: Gender differences, evolution, and pluralistic ignorance,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 8, no. 3, (2010): 391.

Sexual desire becomes one lively facet of an individual's life-performance, enabling that individual to put things into practice, visibly and resourcefully. Although many forms of desirous encounter are still encircled by taboo or weighed down by shame, the menacing fog emanating from a dirty cloud of attributions is starting to lift. Queer forms of desire, some of which have been cloaked in shame for smaller groups, others for many, are now split down the middle. This means that some experiences of queer desire are at least visible now, while other needs are still tabooed and thus in practice somewhat repressed. This sense of shame when faced with unbridled lust has not been, and cannot be—especially in the twenty-first century—reigned in, to remain exclusively within the bounds of same-genderness. As queer theoretician Michael Warner explains:

Normalization and deviant shame. In modern culture the statistical and demographic imagination has created a new variety of shame. Norm of health and physicality are no longer understood to stem from divine plan So I experience shame in the degree of my deviance from this imagined but essentially distributional norm. Queerness can be understood as the constitutive antithesis of modern demographic imaginary, and therefore in a sense as its unanticipated by-product.¹⁴

Queer culture has practiced in countless ways the complexities not just of shame but of performances of shame, of formally mediated imitations of shah that objectify counternormative experience, of squirm-making disturbances in social field that bring counterpublics into a kind of public co-presence while also deploying shame to make a difference from the public. ... Staging shame as disruptions of relationality, we paradoxically create new relationships insofar as we can school ourselves not to be ashamed of our shame—a project that of

14 Michael Warner, "Pleasures and Dangers of Shame," in: *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 291.

course disappears the second we persuade ourselves that not being ashamed of our shame requires us to be proud.¹⁵

Shame grounded in a societal perception of a queer otherness could transform itself, principally in the wake of the Stonewall Revolution, into a feeling of pride, whereby not only the personal but also desire was understood as a political and public substance. In the shadow of a series of conflicts in societal politics the idealization of successful desire—a sexuality of accomplishment—gained traction. This means that it's now no longer only people in queer communities who feel impacted by questions as to how their sex-life is doing, and through which means, or with whom, it can be enacted. The experience of desire has dared to make its way out of bedrooms and back rooms. To a point, it's left the admonitory conventions of previous ages behind it. Discovering one's own body and satisfying sexual appetites allows people to appear whole at least—or such, at least, is the perception of a modern form of faith. Sexual desire as *terra incognita* calls us to embark on journeys of discovery, challenges us to experiment, and wants intensive experiences in our one-off existences. Whoever abstains from vivacious desire seems to choose to go without fulfillment, consciously eschewing a successful saunter in the garden of sexual liberties.

Queer successes being oriented toward *achievement, love, and desire* reflects both a subcultural history and a normative standard. The capitalist understanding of achievement is continually offering the individual opportunities to clock up successes through their own hard-charging creative force. Or at least, this is the big capitalist story, and one which is still valid for many today:

Economic inequalities have increased significantly in Germany. However, they are now accompanied by not more but less economic mobility. While, on the upper financial levels, a concentration of high incomes and wealth is taking place, supported by fiscal and tax politics to match, poverty is cementing itself dramatically at the lowest level.

15 Michael Warner, "Pleasures," 295n.

These polarizations in society's structure are embedded in an enduringly high inequality of opportunity in the German educational and vocational system. If recent tendencies of decreasing inequality of opportunity have been recorded recently, then these will have been conditioned by, if nothing else, a trend that has received little attention to date: the tendency of decreasing, or at least stagnating intergenerational aspirational mobility—which has happened concurrent to increasing downward social movements, particularly among the middle-classes.¹⁶

Even if successful achievements, viewed economically, are shaped by many factors—just like any other area of life—the fantasy of climbing socially as the result of one's own will power still seems catchy. All the more problematic seems the recognition that is extrapolated from that or, conversely, the allocation of guilt when success remains elusive.

It's precisely these factors that influence success that are such a challenge from a queer understanding of the subject, because an adolescence that “works,” in psycho-social terms, an empowering education system, or one's authentic agency as a human can be impacted negatively by heteronormative parameters. Irrespective of whether it's an exhausting experience of coming-out at school, or parents with zero understanding for who one is, or the pressure to conform in a work-place setting: all these can function as individual, influencing factors, with consequences to match for an individual's everyday life. Perhaps it's precisely because of such biographical travails that queer success seems so illustrious, and maybe societal circumstances in recent decades have made it more illustrious still: imagine an individual actually mastering something, despite everything. Nonetheless, isolated examples of success should not delude neither a general nor a queer subculture regarding the extent and profundity of still existing queer challenges, however important the statues provided by such cases are. On both macro and micro levels, it's not at all easy to be forced into diagnosing a difference between oneself and the

16 Olaf Groh-Samberg and Florian R. Hertel, “Ende der Aufstiegs-gesellschaft?” *APuZ aktuell, Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 65, (October 2015), 31.

majority. Yet for so many individuals, such differences are relevant, as they precipitate radical, biographical ruptures.

Most homeless youth have histories of family disruption, abuse, and family substance use LGBT status, although not necessarily the proximal cause of homelessness, is correlated with higher risk of many factors associated with homelessness, such as victimization at home and at school ... Some homeless youth were “kicked out” and others actually chose to leave because of conditions they could no longer tolerate ...¹⁷

Achievement, love, and desire as one form in which queer success manifests may sound like a rather slick major chord, but the success in question is partly autonomous, partly heteronomous. A lack of self-determination particularly can precipitate precarious personal circumstances—potentially becoming homeless, or dropping out of school, are stark illustrations of this phenomenon. The same absence of autonomy also encourages some individuals to retreat into a heteronormative farce. Both moments, precarization and retreat, deflate the egalitarian nature of queer success as a catchall concept. Mindful of this, the open question of what queer success should actually be about must be answered elsewhere.

Queer success necessitates both individual and collective perspectives, capable of giving an account of the aforementioned circumstances surrounding the multiple factors that influence queer life. Normative value systems are permanently in flux, but are nonetheless applied in a variety of ways. From these emerge multidimensional biographies of queer individuals, of whom some, despite all obstacles, build accomplished lives, or even existences that societal majorities interpret as successful. Other individuals, who have undergone the same pressures from normative values, have no choice but to endure existential crises.

17 Geoffrey L. Ream and Nicholas Forge, “Homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth in New York City: Insights from the field,” *Child Welfare* 93, no. 2 (2014): 10.

Such impasses, which appear to be written into the cultural code of queer communities, call out for social responsibility to be taken for fair development opportunities, and grounded social care. Moreover, what's needed is a lived openness for many varieties of love in all their consensually celebrated forms, but without imposing historical, or majority-backed idealizations onto queer people. True success is to be found here in the self-determination of an individual person, in the creation of a shared basis of two or more people, and in the authentic experience of one's own desirous imaginations. People are all too quick to judge—a daily danger in queer communities, as in non-queer ones—anything seen as either too far-out, or too conventional. The allure of beautiful success stretches itself out sinuously over many areas of life, and often reproduces itself abundantly. Idealizations articulated by third persons can be the consequences of such reproduction, which can lead to a further exaltation of achievement, love, and desire. All too eagerly, a common next step involves drawing comparisons and analyzing apparent deficits: less success, no relationship, or an unconventional form of sexual longing, and the grand facade of recognition already begins to crumble. But it's precisely in the multifariousness of the facades that the fruitful difference between success and queer success lies. This is a nexus where, in consequence, unconventional forms of showing esteem are celebrated. Whether polyamory, leather fetishism, or simply jobs that earn people a living—none of these should be viewed as a label for exterior perceptions of queer success: and all the less so, when the task in hand is actually considering a holistic picture of a queer biography. As long as heteronormative processes of socialization impact negatively on queer individuals, majority-based grids for evaluating success will have a substantially distorting effect on queer biographies—even leaving aside the overall fact that the patterns through which we judge the success of others are far from being fair. That's why it matters for a queer subculture to respond critically when required—even if it might prefer to bask in the recognition that majorities are finally granting it. And this is required on all occasions when individuals are turned into laughing stocks, or pressurized into socially invisible realms. Both these forms are all too familiar mechanisms for maintaining systems of labeling

and stigmatization, which should leave nobody in the queer community cold.

Queer success is about mastering the challenge of developing an emphatic life in a community that openly shows esteem for an individual's closest companions and other acquaintances—and for all the potentialities these people have.

