CHAPTER 14.

FAILURE TO LAUNCH? THEORIZING RHETORICS OF REJECTION FROM GRADUATE STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

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Early one spring semester, we struck up a conversation in the writing center where we both worked as graduate consultants. Jerrice was in the process of revising one of her qualifying exams, and Anicca had just gotten a journal rejection after two rounds of revision.

As we conversed, we began to understand we were both living in exhausted places related to our perceived rejections and failure. Our initial conversations and those that followed revealed that one of the most difficult parts of our experiences was a lack of space to talk about them openly with peers or mentors, in part because of shame but also in part because of the difficulty of relational understanding from those in "different" professional locations than ourselves.

For example, Jerrice mentioned going to a trusted advisor and receiving what she perceived as "good" advice, but from the vantage point of a well-established scholar in the field who, though they offered some perspective, couldn't *really* relate to the challenges of scholarly failure from the precarious standpoint of a graduate student. On the other hand, Anicca had mostly kept her own failure a secret, working to keep narratives of it away from a competitive graduate cohort in our widely celebrated program, very much for fear of judgment or for stepping beyond the bounds of her graduate student role as an older returning student. The result of our conversations, detailed in this chapter, was that we began to conceptualize a peer-centered, relational model for support, which we constituted through our experiences as writing center tutors. We contend that writing center theory and training provide a valuable model for these relational support structures.

And so we began, together, to unpack and make meaning of our own internalized narratives related to scholarly failure within the context of our graduate community. Carmen Kynard (2012) suggests that for graduate students, sending an article out "means that students will have to go out on a limb and do what graduate students seldom do: let go of fear and insecurity. . . in other words: allow themselves to risk getting their work rejected" (n.p.). We found together that it is vital to have fellow travelers if we are to live *with* fear and insecurity and maintain the stamina it takes to persist in our work.

We begin here in an effort to map how we both built strength and resilience by leaning on our conversations and relationship. We mean to take off where LaFrance and Corbett (2020) leave us (they say grad students need to be trained to fail) and extend their argument to make a claim for the need for a community-oriented approach to failure that builds resilience. As Tellez-Trujillo (this volume) notes, "Resilience isn't solitary, nor maintained without community." So then, a community approach, built in writing center pedagogies, led us to begin learning what we will call the "rhetorics and etiquette of failure." We suggest that orienting toward failure, not alone, but together, can be a source of strength for our continued professional work.

To explain this orienting, we engage our own experiences in story form below and trace the ways we, as writing center fellows and practitioners, drew from peer support strategies mirrored in our writing center work to bolster one another across programmatic milestones, setbacks, and workplace contexts.

ANICCA

Our conversation began because Jerrice was working on a proposal she wanted me to look at. Then, she told me she was revising a graduate exam, and she began to consider out loud why returning to the document was so emotionally difficult to do. I realized how familiar these feelings were to my own, as an older student and as someone who was prepared for graduate school in some ways and woefully underprepared in others. Particularly, I related to her experience as someone who carries a perpetual outsider identity in academic spaces tied to working-class identity.

I told her how I'd worked on an article and how embarrassed, how ashamed I felt about not getting it in. I told her how, for weeks, I had poured over revisions. How I'd submitted it to a flagship journal in our field at the encouragement of a professor. I told her how, in the absence of faith in myself, I'd revised and worked to catch every sentence-level error over and over and over, something I would caution other writers against but found myself doing obsessively, trying to make it perfect, to prove my belonging.

I shared the feedback I'd gotten. The first round of reviewer comments was both helpful and not. One reviewer (unknowingly, of course) used a previous article I'd contributed to as an example to compare to my current one, as they pointed out every flaw in my current work. The other, a generous, well-known name in the field, noted that she, too, was unconvinced (but really wanted to be) and needed an argument. I told Jerrice how confused I was because the professor who told me to submit it had promised that it was "ready for publication." I told her how hard it was to revise multiple times only to get rejected and how I'd lost faith in the piece itself.

This is what began our friendship, bonding over the ways in which we made sense of our failures and how the particular social location we found ourselves in made it difficult to seek help. We wondered together if faculty, whom we had gone to for advice, simply couldn't help us because, by all measures, they had achieved the kind of success we were apprenticing ourselves to. Because our shared work was located in a writing center, we began to ask ourselves what it would look like if we took all we knew about the writing center as a space for dismantling hierarchies and analyzing power and for dynamic relationship building across experience, as a model for helping one another through rejection and failure.

And so, we began to do that. It took years. But, somehow our friendship, built in peer feedback, taking place in our writing center, was a tool we were building together to persist, to get back up and keep believing our voices matter.

Now, living in different states, we continue to make sense of our failures and rejections, so normal in academic life—in the classroom, in our scholarship, in our mentoring, in our professional next steps—and to bolster one another. That work revolves around understanding one another's goals just as we do with writers in consultations and considering the role of our positionalities, experiences, and orientations as integral to our relationship with the field and our own work.

As returning students and professionals with different racial identities, research interests, and experiences, we continue to find a path through listening, recasting, mapping, and sharing resources. Our relationship is a place where it is safe to cry, to crack jokes, to talk shit, and keep on going through it. Through the continuous moments of rejection, we somehow fostered a community where our failures are not visceral but moments for reorientation.

JERRICE

I recall during my comprehensive exams, where the experience of rejection reverberated my feelings of failure after my initial submission was returned "needing

revision." Upon my eager request to receive feedback, my chair quipped, "you did what many grad students do in these exams" apparently signaling my errors were common rhetorical choices made among grad students.

While the statement may have been factual, its ethos sliced through my ego like a corroded machete as each word chopped away at what little confidence remained. I already suffered from interminable doubt in my ability to display "acceptable" scholarly performance. I was sure my contrary perspectives would most certainly impede any success I might have. My chair was unaware of the impact the feedback had or how it caused a very real disorientation. It wasn't until later, in a creative writing space we worked in together, where I shared the embodied experience, that she learned what I was feeling was unbridled failure.

Since I was a child, the mantra of radical belief to become "the best you can because you can" was etched within the marrow of my identities. But it now seemed in contrast to my experience. The ambiguity of what I had done or hadn't done sent me reeling down a rut of despair where I festered in silence and isolation.

I occasionally re-emerged from my mental station when I decided to meet with a few of my committee members. Even as I was confident they'd see me, I became convinced it was only to ingeminate the knifing I'd already received, so I entered with my heart in hand, hoping doing so would lessen any further damage to my already incapacitated soul. I asked for advice on how to proceed after describing what I felt as hollowing failure, only to hear a dismissive response to my anguish: "Rejection is part of the process."

As I sat there pondering how my inquiry went unanswered, I reorientated the question, asking point blank, "How do you recover from rejection?" My press caused the molecules in the room to shift momentarily as I listened to conflated moments of rejection offered to explain its necessity. I sauntered away from this encounter, wondering why the rhetoric of rejection has some sort of expected "etiquette," where admitting or revealing a discourse of disorientation is met with hushed tones.

This ponderance became an utterance when hearing of Anicca's article rejection, which she shared only after offering me comfort and encouragement. It was after hearing her attempt to rationalize her own rejection that I encouraged her not to—and to instead name it as she feels it because it was absolutely ok to do so. It was here where our kinship birthed friendship spearheaded by our questioning the lack of support and guidance grad students are provided for instances of rejection. We began to ask: How do we, as grad students, rising scholars, and job seekers, navigate moments of rejection, which can quickly become embodied, by representing failure as an experience that is professional but also lives in the personal?

THEORIZING RHETORICS OF REJECTION AND FAILURE

As mentioned in the introduction to this collection, failure has and can be theorized in a number of important ways for writing studies, and we aim to build on those important works. We find particular resonance in Judith Halberstam's (2011) work on failure. Like Halberstam, as we discussed writing this article, we found ourselves returning over and over to non-scholarly references from popular culture for diverse and abundant representations of failure and rejection, as well as models of relational responses to it. Popular culture is a rich ground from which to explore the multitudinous aspects of theorizing failure. We turned to those texts as models of relational approaches in order to theorize our own experiences of rejection and failure. Below are some brief vignettes that we discussed in our personal conversations about rhetorics and etiquettes of failure and rejection.

In an episode of *The Loud House*, a Nickelodeon cartoon, two sisters grapple with rejection and failure while inadvertently competing for the same accomplishment (Sullivan & Marshall, 2018). The older sister finds herself simultaneously advising her younger sibling on how to handle the emotions of a rejection over a piece of writing, coaching her to resubmit, *and* losing her own perspective on relational support when the younger sister receives an opportunity she herself sought out. It's complicated, y'all. In graduate programs, we often find ourselves in real or imagined competition with people we love, champion, and support. So then, we wondered, what happens when we are challenged and where our own locations leave us lost? How do we support one another anyway? And what if past rejections inflame moments of failure that have yet to be resolved?

Another example we discussed was in a Chuck Lorre comedy series, *Mom*, where one of the characters experiences failure through a series of program rejections (Lorre et al. 2017-2018). Much like Anicca, they are too embarrassed to tell anyone but eventually disclose to someone near. The response: The listener confesses to being unable to offer any advice.

This too, was familiar territory. What do we do when, sometimes, the only answer is to sit with this, with the discomfort? It is those moments that we can bear witness, rather than needing to work to resolve our embodied feelings of despair around rejection-as-failure much as Jerrice coached Anicca to do. Instead of rationalizing, *feel*.

Finally, in yet another example within a Chuck Lorre series, a married couple, both academics and researchers, find that their theory has been disproven. Reeling in their individual despair at the moment of their own nuptials, they find each other at the same location—rejection-as-failure. Here, we learn that rejection and failure can coexist, can show up even amidst our collaborative moments, yet can be processed together in intimate and familial ways.

Though in many ways, some of these examples eventually highlight some humorous aspects of rejection and failure or use humor to approach a painful subject (something academics have difficulty doing in those moments), they also serve to familiarize and normalize the discomfort of rejection and failure—to make it palpable. We believe that is what our community, graduate student-mentor relationships, and connections can make available. In writing center relationships, where feedback is critical and reciprocal, we meet each other exactly where we are, whether drafts are imperfect or imagined. We, as a community of writers, begin to build together a working theory that coheres and disperses in the moments we are together.

We build rhetorics and etiquettes together in these precise moments. We do so collaboratively and collectively as we ask questions, witness, and work to provide continuity across ideas and texts together. In other words, by responding to internal and/or external perceptions of rejection, whether feedback or doubt, we develop behavioral practices with one another that are not built from the outside but rather develop in relationship. So often, helpful advice in moments of rejection and failure is unhelpful for that very reason; it comes from the outside, or above, from a mentor.

We instead argue that working together as peers in these moments is a valuable space from which to live with, learn from, and persist through our embodied and professional experience of rejection, failure, and, ultimately, progress.

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