CHAPTER 18.

"~~TRUST THE PROCESS~~": DISSERTATION GATEKEEPING, FAILURE, AND GRADUATE STUDENT WRITING

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DISCLAIMER: MY FAILURE NARRATIVE

The largest takeaway from my failure narrative is that while what transpired was challenging in the moment, I understand through the benefit of hindsight that what took place *needed* to happen. I am grateful for the individuals who worked tirelessly with me on my project (including my partner and inspiration, Janine Morris). The individuals that comprised my committee are devoted educators and *great people*, and I understand that I would not be where I am today as a researcher and practitioner had it not been for their support during the direst stages of my project. As I write this narrative of failure, *my failure*, I understand that the extensive revision process that ensued after my defense postponement was necessary.

MY FAILURE NARRATIVE – WHAT HAPPENED?

It has taken some time for me to arrive at a place where I could write about this experience. To go back through saved emails, the external committee member's report and memories that fill the gaps around these evidentiary items was not easy. By every barometer of measure, you would classify my dissertation experience as a bad one. My PhD journey began in 2010 at a university in Ontario, Canada. After completing my required coursework, passing my major and subfield dissertation examinations, and engaging in a lengthy four-year writing process, I completed a draft of my dissertation in 2017 and, having submitted this draft to my committee, received support from *nearly* all committee members that the draft was defensible. A defense date was established for October 2017.

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To say that I was ecstatic to move to the final stages of this process would be an understatement. Of course, like most students in this situation, I was terrified, given what lay ahead. My institution's defense process was perhaps a bit more punitive than other institutions in the sense that the defense committee consisted of a three-person advisory committee, an on-campus external adjudicator from outside my home department, an off-campus external adjudicator, and a moderator from the home department who also possessed the ability to ask questions about the dissertation and the claims made within. For months leading up to the defense—and while my draft was under review with the off-campus external—I met with members of my committee regularly and was assured that the project was "good" and that the defense was "merely a formality." I recall one member of my committee specifically stating that "while the dissertation wasn't the best, it was certainly good enough to pass;" as such, I had, in their words, "nothing to worry about." These assurances, while much appreciated, did not pacify my anxiety, and, like most students, I spent months preparing for the defense (both my partner and I brainstormed potential defense questions and held numerous one-on-one meetings where she would pepper me with questions to better prepare me for this process).

It was within two weeks of my scheduled defense date when all this preparation was rendered meaningless. Thinking back, I remember this day so vividly, and what transpired on that date will live with me forever. I received a missed call from my advisor, who rarely ever called. Rather than immediately calling this person back, I assumed it was a mistake on their end but decided to check my email to see if there was any further correspondence. There, at the top of my inbox, was an email earmarked with high importance, and the contents within stated that I should call this person immediately. Trembling, I scanned my contacts for my advisor's number and called. They answered quickly and got straight to the point: The review from the off-campus external was back, and this person absolutely eviscerated the project, eating the *entire* meal and leaving no crumbs in their assessment of the work. While on the call, my advisor kindly sent the external's report. The opening line read: "This thesis 'cannot come to examination.' Overall, it does not demonstrate the research techniques, scholarship, knowledge of the subject, or appropriate level and quality of discussion and argumentation needed to meet the requirements of a doctoral degree." The conversation between my advisor and I went as you might expect it: somber and polite in its origins, though once the gravity of the situation set in, my tone in the conversation devolved from subtle and confused to a place where the pauses in my speech were replaced with some variation of the f-word.

I was blindsided. More than this, however, I was angry and frustrated. I kept asking my advisor how/why the external's report carried so much weight

in determining my defense fate. Moreover, if the claims this person made in their opening statement were true, how was none of this brought to my attention during the extensive reading, writing, and revision process that took place the previous four years? There were no easy answers to these questions, and, in hindsight, it was probably unfair of me to confront my advisor with them at that point. Unfortunately, the power that the off-campus external possessed—a *major* influence in the process that wasn't exactly made clear to me during the course of my writing—set off a series of events that led to my defense date being postponed to October 2019. In that time, the expectation fell on me to make extensive and global changes to the work.

Adding another layer of stress and anxiety to the situation is that in the months leading up to my initial defense date in 2017, I was able to secure a Visiting Assistant Professor position, pending defense. While I was ultimately able to remain in this position, staying put meant that the revisions needed to be completed ASAP. I was fortunate to have an institution and department chair who believed in me throughout this challenging process, though their support did not mitigate the pressure that keeping this job added to an already stressful situation. I'll spare the reader here from the site-specific changes that took place during my eighteen-month revision process. In October 2019, almost two years to the date, I successfully defended the thesis and was able to graduate with my PhD in 2020. What I want to make clear, however, is that this is *my* failure narrative, and the defense postponement fell on my shoulders. I produced the work, and it simply wasn't good enough. And while I wish I could have avoided the extensive revision process that took place, this process has led to several learning lessons that inform my teaching, advising, and scholarship in my current position in higher education.

THE LARGER TAKEAWAYS – WHAT FAILURE TAUGHT ME?

My failure narrative taught me many important lessons: (1) failure is *not* equitable; (2) privilege plays a tremendous role in an individual's ability to overcome failure, regardless of what the myths surrounding 'hard work paying off' have previously taught us; and (3) failure in the writing process underscores the importance of revision and how one must wholly commit to this exercise if they are to complete their project. Allison Carr and Laura Micciche (2020), writing in *Failure Pedagogies*, investigate equity and privilege in the writing process, questioning ". . . [f]or whom is failure a real end rather than an opening to generative possibilities?" (p. 3). The authors note that "the relationship between failure and success . . . has long played a role in bootstraps ideologies pervasive within American progress narratives" (Carr & Micciche, 2020, p. 1), and they

similarly wonder whether every person who fails is granted equal access to the same "generative" opportunities to persist? Gillespie's discussion of failure linked to material conditions in this collection, and an individual's ability to "fail safely," extends Carr and Micciche's discussion further. Within the myths of American exceptionalism, however, the widely held misconception is that any person can achieve impossible feats so long as the individual in question is willing to *put in the work*. *Putting in the work*, in itself, carries additional emotional weight and cultural baggage linked to dominant white culture, where the archetype for perseverance is most commonly white bodies who harbor a commitment to hard work and self-reliance.

Carr and Micciche's (2020) line of questioning is significant not simply because it helps undermine these myths of progress, but because, viewed through the lens of higher education, it forces educators to question whether all failures are created equally. That is to say, are educators ensuring that the students they advise, and who may misstep in their thesis/dissertation process, are afforded the same opportunities as other students to amend and reconcile this situation? Are educators performing the critical work of undermining the "beliefs, attitudes, and actions . . . that support or perpetuate racism in . . . unconscious ways" (Smithsonian, n.d.) in the counsel they provide their graduate students? Teagan Decker, in this collection, writes a narrative of failure from a graduate student perspective that offers an insightful look into the kinds of issues (e.g., various socio-economic stressors, imposter syndrome, to name a few) current graduate students are experiencing and that we, as advisors, should be cognizant of in advising their work.

The final takeaway from my failure narrative connects with Darci Thoune's (2020) writing on *failure potential*. In "Failure Potential: Using Failure as Feedback," Thoune (2020) notes that a student's ability to use failure productively points to their "failure potential" and their capacity to learn from their mistakes. Thoune (2020) writes that, for some, ". . . failure could exist as an ending point," while for others, it could function "as a form of feedback . . . for students and instructors, failure provides us with information at a crossroads in the writing process that will likely affect future writing practices and performances" (p. 54). On one level, Thoune points to the provisionality of failure and how one's ability to use feedback productively can sometimes be linked to their subject position. She extends this conversation in the essay, noting that feedback should always be conveyed with words of encouragement in order to not shut the writer down and turn them away from the revision process. On another level, however, and extending my previous statement, Thoune's quotation offers important insight into the role that *failure potential* plays in the revision process and how educators must be upfront about this process with their graduate students.

Looking back at my narrative of failure, while the situation was incredibly challenging in the moment as it unfolded, I know that I was extremely fortunate to be granted the opportunity to revise the work and to get it to a place where it could be defended. In the months after the postponement, my committee was extremely generous with their time, providing appropriate feedback as I worked on my revisions. Borrowing a line from Carr and Micciche (2020), I understand that in my situation, failure opened itself up to "generative possibilities" (p. 3), and this is not always the case for individuals who find themselves in a similar situation. Making failure equitable is something that currently informs my advising, and interpersonal communication plays a vital role in this process. That is to say, understanding who the student is on a human level, their background, how they respond to feedback are critical; keeping these items at the forefront of one's counsel can help level the playing field, so to speak, to ensure that failure is not a result of a privileged situation.

The other important aspect to achieving equity in failure coincides with Thoune's (2020) central argument: Failure can be productive when students embrace feedback and the larger, more extensive changes that need attention. Driscoll's piece in this collection extends this conversation further, noting the important role that failure can play in our writing and revision processes. Driscoll specifically urges practitioners to normalize failure with graduate students so they may better see its potential. Failure is not an endpoint; rather, it is an act that can be super generative and is something we *all* struggle with (and should be made visible to others). In my situation, I had a tremendous committee that was patient with me and who offered encouraging advice that made the long process of revision palatable and something to look forward to. In this case, *failure potential* stemmed from an understanding that revision is not simply a matter of accepting track changes, nor does it mean inserting a word or two here and there within the document to amend sentence-level concerns. Rather, larger issues present in the draft often need major attention, and having these conversations with students early on is critical. Students should be made aware that no person submits the *perfect* draft. Revision is a process that everyone goes through, and it is vital to be upfront with students so that they are aware of what this process looks like (and the time it takes to complete). Avoiding these sometimes-difficult conversations is a disservice to graduate student writers.

MINOR TAKEAWAYS – WHAT FAILURE ALSO TAUGHT ME?

Making Clear Departmental Expectations. Perhaps the biggest "minor" takeaway from my narrative of failure is ensuring that departmental expectations for a thesis or dissertation are clearly defined and communicated to the student. As

I noted above, it was not entirely clear to me that if a dissertation draft did not pass the off-campus external examiner's reading, then the student would not pass and would be out of the program. When I meet with students about joining their project as an advisor, in our initial conversations, the expectations for completing the thesis are clearly defined, and students are assigned readings from the department that explain the following: what the thesis/dissertation process looks like; what a timeline for completion looks like; what will happen if the thesis/dissertation isn't completed within the two academic-year window; what the defense portion looks like; what it means to pass with revisions; and what it means to fail the defense.

Being Aware of the Power Dynamic Between Advisor and Student. Ultimately, the advisor makes the final call on whether a project is ready to go to defense, and this can sometimes lead to an unequal power balance within that relationship. Ironically, during my actual dissertation defense, one of my advisors noted that I wrote my second chapter on the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Diaz, 2008) and, since my writing of the chapter, the author of the text had been accused of sexual harassment and verbal abuse towards women. My advisor thus asked how I would envision teaching this text, given these accusations. What my advisor was ultimately referring to was the incredible power that instructors often hold in their class and their ability to pick and choose what they teach and to augment some facts while potentially glossing over others. In this case, those accusations are now a part of the story when teaching the novel (especially since so many of the characters depicted within the text outwardly promote a specific brand of toxic masculinity, making it difficult to ignore the connections between fiction and reality). Since my defense, my advisor's question is one I have turned over multiple times in my mind, in part because I want to ensure that I am doing justice to the curriculum I teach and the students I advise. As educators advising a long-standing writing project, we need to be aware of the power we yield and the gatekeeping that comes with this counsel, ensuring that the relationship between advisor and student is more equitable.

How Punitive Should the Process Really Be? The final minor takeaway from my failure narrative has pushed me to have a candid conversation about how punitive the super-punitive dissertation process needs to be. I want to be careful with what I'm writing here, in part because aspects of the process are necessary and important. Students need to demonstrate the research techniques, subject knowledge, and line of argumentation appropriate for a thesis/dissertation. In addition, there is an adequate level of research that students must engage in. These are items that, for me, are non-negotiable; understanding how to research and write in the humanities is critical. Still, though, some processes are more punitive than others. Oftentimes, the decision to allow a student to defend comes

from the number of burning academic hoops they have jumped through, lending credence to the notion that these processes should be reconsidered and, if necessary, revised on the administrative level.

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