CHAPTER 6.

RECOGNIZING FEMINIST RESILIENCE RATHER THAN SEEKING SUCCESS IN RESPONSE TO FAILURE

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> It's okay to fail. Our goal should be to fail miserably and to fail often—as long as we keep learning from those failures and keep moving toward the goal we have set. Failure is a bruise, not a tattoo.
>
> – Michelle LaFrance, "Discourse Community Fail!"

My writing body is a balance. My torso is a pillar, my head a beam, and on each hand of an outstretched arm, I hold a pan that informs a scale that sits in my unsettled stomach. When the pan on the right becomes stacked with white paper filled with edits and recommendations, I halfheartedly pull pages from the top of the pile for revision, telling myself that I will feel better when the weight lifts. My inner voice says, "There are so many comments on this page," and the pan on the right slams to the table of my mind. The weight of writing failure is heavy and makes a raucous. I immediately seek ways to weigh down the pan on my left by gathering successes and opportunities to win. Desperate to tip the scale back into my emotional favor, I imagine scheduling blocks of time in my day where I can work harder on drafts, ways to give more of myself to service on campus or in my field, or I remember a grant application I can complete to see a project through. "Whew! That was close," I say to myself, imagining the pans floating, level, at last. I know that using my body in this way is not sustainable, but rather than finding ways to build resilience to the weight of failure, I have consistently sought success to ensure that the scale doesn't tip.

Managing the feelings of failure that come with writing is something I deal with often. As a junior faculty member who is in the process of fulfilling publication requirements for future retention, tenure, and promotion, I am once again back in the seat of the student writer. I imagine that receiving revision comments for some is truly generative or invigorating even. Paul Feigenbaum (2021)

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writes, in "Welcome to 'Failure Club'": "In fact, for students across English studies, the learning rewards of failure potentially include: finding unexpected and poignant connections between disparate ideas or domains of knowledge, cultivating a more nuanced understanding of complex concepts, and composing compelling and vibrant (if unruly) texts in various genres and modes" (p. 403). This is what I imagine when I think about my students reflecting on drafts, re-envisioning what their next draft might be.

The feelings I associate with receiving feedback on my writing are what Allison Carr (2013) describes as "a *deeply felt*, transformative process that incorporates feelings of anxiety, desperation, confusion, and shame" (p. 2). I am the educator Darci Thoune (2020) describes who balances protecting students from failure while encouraging them to fail gently but also wrestles with my own past and present failures (p. 53). These details are important to my trajectory as a writing teacher because my feelings of failing and being a failure are tied to writing more often than to any other activity with which I engage and have shaped my identity and the way I relate to writing.

I am a forty-something Chicana who returned to and graduated from my hometown Southwest Border university as a non-traditional student. I was not mainstreamed from high school to college with the writing skills many of my peers possessed. My ambivalent relationship with writing is complicated, more so due to taking a fifteen-year break between early college and my return in my thirties. When it comes to writing, I relate best to Charlie Brown in "A Boy Named Charlie Brown" (Schultz, 1969), in a yellow and black sweater, my mouth in a squiggly line with all but the Peanuts gang singing "Failure Face" to me as I peck away at my keyboard. I can say I still haven't adapted to this negative association with writing, nor to situations I find myself in related to writing struggle but am always willing to try something new to see my way out of it.

Taking new approaches to writing failure is not a new idea. For example, Paul Feigenbaum (2021) asserts that "helping students reconceptualize motivation and failure is an ethically, affectively, and progressively critical component of writing pedagogy" (p. 405). As a part of writing pedagogy, one can deduce that for every writer, there are failure stories, and for every teacher, a cliché, or an approach to helping ourselves and our students access the possibilities that come from feedback rather than the stifling products of failure that threaten to keep us from writing.

Feelings of failure tied to writing are not unique. Each of us seems to have a story we can share about the sick feelings we get as a result of a writing failure that might be as brief as a text interaction that led to a misunderstanding or longer, but not necessarily less devastating. There are so many failure experiences and such a need to find ways to move forward that in 2020, Allison Carr and Laura Micciche edited the first entire volume of essays addressing failure

in *Failure Pedagogies: Learning and Unlearning What it Means to Fail*, offering narratives, suggestions for ways we can support our students, and varying definitions of success and what it means to fail.

As a commonplace, failure means something different to everyone, and each relationship with failure has developed in a unique way. This is one of the reasons I believe it's so valuable to have numerous approaches to handling writing failure because there is not one answer. I began using failure as a way of motivating myself to do better as a child. I didn't fail on purpose but used the shame, embarrassment, sadness, and sometimes anger to fuel action. Although I hadn't paid close attention to this tactic until recently, I have spent a lifetime believing that negative self-talk would produce positive results, and this is probably because there were times when I saw a correlation that wasn't there. I think of Allison Carr's (2013) advisor telling her, "I think you like to fail," and wonder if I have used failure as a way of benefiting from what I thought were positive results from self-scolding (p. 14). I may have never addressed this behavioral pattern had I not realized that over the years, my physical responses to failing, such as anxiety and insomnia, are far more powerful and damaging than any motivation failure has ever produced.

Throughout these processes of learning about myself that are long overdue, I discovered that I am not resilient to failure in the ways I believed I was, at least not according to traditional definitions of resilience. Rather than being a master of bouncing back from adversity, I have only sought winning in ways not related to writing as a balm to the emotional and physical effects I'd feel after failing. I've learned more about the false truths I'd owned for so long, as well as about resilience and the possibilities of responding to failure with resources that come from places that don't require that I work harder. This chapter is an opportunity for me to share some of my experiences with writing struggles that result in failing and resilient responses to adversity in relation to times I've failed at writing and labeled myself a writing failure. I will also share the concept of feminist rhetorical resilience (Flynn et al., 2012), the ways that common definitions of resilience and feminist rhetorical resilience differ, and the potential ways that we can use feminist resilience to frame writing prompts for students that can help them balance failing at writing with acknowledgment of the ways their writing has had an impact on themselves and the people around them.

SOME WORDS ON RESILIENCE AND FEMINIST RHETORICAL RESILIENCE

Resilience is one of the most commonly used words to describe students since the beginning of the 2020 COVID pandemic. The American Psychological

Association (APA) even created a page on their website titled "Building Student Resilience" (2023) containing a letter for families and guardians as a reassurance and grade-appropriate modules with lessons addressing "Actions," "The Body," and "The Mind" that encouraged the building of resilience to pandemic life. While I can identify the well-meaning motivations behind using these lessons, I argue that efforts to build resilience overnight, or ascribing resilience as a character trait, is a way of ignoring the need to pay attention to the well-being of a population or person, assured that they are tough and bounce back easily. I believe this takes place especially when we tell ourselves that we have provided the tools necessary to build resilience. But resilience isn't solitary, nor maintained without community. As a term that is used widely, from economics and political science to urban planning and globalization, resilience in each context shares similar definitions that center on adapting to the experience of adversity, including the ability of the individual to return to the state they were in prior to experiencing a crisis or struggle. These definitions give the impression that a person is not changed or taken down by adversity, and if they are, it is because they didn't have special resilient traits to see them through. There is also the impression that one can mold themselves back to who they were in the before times, before things got rough, if only they have what it takes.

Conversely to popular definitions and beliefs on resilience, no matter the magnitude of the adversity a person faces, they do not ever return to who they were before, and no one emerges from adversity unscathed, if they emerge at all. Adversity is ongoing and reveals itself in a variety of magnitudes, so much so that adversity is often accepted as the way life is. Further, expecting someone to adapt to the adversities they face suggests that one doesn't emerge from their crises but learns to feel comfortable in them, lacking the agency to seek a way out or to change. Feminist rhetorical resilience says otherwise. Elizabeth Flynn, Patricia Sotirin, and Ann Brady (2012) introduced feminist rhetorical resilience as a metaphor used in feminist rhetoric that "places greater emphasis on agency, change, and hope in the daily lives of individuals or groups of individuals," and ". . . suggests attention to choices made in the face of difficult and even impossible challenges" (p. 2). Further, these theorist's define feminist rhetorical resilience as enactments that are "communal, relational, and social" (Flynn et al., 2012, p. 5) while attending to concepts such as "agency, mêtis, and relationality" (Flynn et al., 2012, p. 7). These descriptors differ greatly from commonplace approaches to resilience as feminist resilience focuses on the resources available to an individual, particularly those who do not have power, but rather on the individual to see themselves through, to the end of a crisis. While it is not my main argument in this chapter, I assert that one never emerges from major life crises but feels their presence off and on throughout their lives.

Attracted to Flynn, Sotirin, and Brady's (2012) concept of feminist rhetorical resilience, I completed a dissertation titled "Enactments of Feminist Resilience in the Composition Classroom: Re-Scripting Post-Adversity Encounters Through Writing" (2020) involving a study on the feminist resilient responses of students in three first-year composition classes at a Southwest Border university where I was participant-observer. The objective of this study was to examine the occurrences of feminist resilience enacted by students as they recall their responses to adversities faced inside and outside the classroom. These students also recalled instances in which they had witnessed someone else responding to adversity in a way they believed was an expression of resilience. From my findings, I made an argument about the need for a composition curriculum focused on feminist resilience. What I have incorporated most recently is the consideration of failure associated with writing as one of the adversities students face.

In the study, the three composition teachers assigned a writing project at the end of the first unit that centered on the students' relationships to reading, writing, and language. I aimed to answer the following questions: "In what ways is feminist resilience exhibited (i.e., text, comments, behaviors, etc.)? How do gestures of feminist resilience allow students to re-script encounters and push back on their social positioning? What motivates students to enact feminist resilience? And how are the processes of enactment of feminist resilience learned?" (Trujillo, 2020). My analysis of student essays and interviews with five self-selecting participants revealed that students do not think about resilience unless they are asked to reflect upon their actions in response to adversity. I also learned through the study that students re-scripted their encounters with others through withdrawal and movement in and out of silence as resilient action. Most of the students interviewed couldn't define resilience, although felt that they knew it when they saw it. It is not uncommon to use terms without thinking about what they mean, and failure is among these commonplaces. Students also expressed a belief that resilience is learned from others and is gained through experiences rather than being a trait with which someone is born.

I found it interesting that in an interview, a student using the name J.T. incorporated failure when asked questions about resilience on two different occasions. Of the considerations of types of adversities students faced in their relationships to reading, writing, and language, I had considered issues such as being bilingual or multilingual, struggling with grammar, or not knowing how to read for comprehension, but had not focused on feelings of failing or being a failure as a writer. LaFrance and Corbett (2020) write, "In our experience, we become better writers by failing, sometimes abysmally, at the writing tasks set before us. Even so, few among us like to talk about failure, let alone admit to the ways we have failed" (p. 295). It's not explicit, but this statement accentuates

the solitary nature of not just writing but failing at writing. Writing successes come pre-packaged with feeling that they are for the public, to be stuck on the refrigerator with our favorite magnet, while challenges are to be experienced in private, or turned upside down on the desk when returned by the teacher. I suspect that because writing failures are not often discussed, I was less likely to think of failing as an adversity students face in relation to writing.

FEMINIST RESILIENCE AND WRITING

While there are many ways for students to fail at writing, those that come to mind are feelings of failure when facing edits and recommendations, when writing is misunderstood, or when writing does not receive the grade or positive recognition the writer was certain they would receive. In my experience as a writing teacher, I have found that the sting of failure is most prevalent when the student has written about a personal experience and ties their writing struggles with an invalidation of the personal details they have shared.

Rather, through feminist resilience, the writer seeks neither to find ways to feel successful balancing failure, does not seek ways to escape writing or revision, nor seeks to become comfortable with feelings of failure, but instead reflects on the changes in their writing that have occurred over time and the changes their writing has brought about in the world around them. I posit that when student writers recognize themselves as agented individuals who can withdraw from their writing periodically as a way of imagining ways to recreate possibilities for the next steps, they will have an opportunity to switch the focus from what they have failed at to considering the possibilities. Through short writing prompts, I hope to create opportunities for students to reflect on their writing and the effects of the writing around them, where they recognize writing that has brought about hope and change.

While I value and have put into practice what I imagine may be all definitions of reflection that scholars in writing studies have produced over the last thirty years, I am drawn to Jeff Sommers' (2011) approach to reflection in this situation because it asks students to write about their own beliefs about writing, and their peer's beliefs about writing as well, rather than tracking their writing processes. Taking Sommers' (2011) approach into consideration, I suggest that we encourage students to think back on their own experiences and beliefs about writing for the sake of identifying enactments of feminist resilience in themselves as writers. Reflection, in this case, is about students' building awareness of what their writing has done, rather than what it has failed to do or ways they have failed at writing in the past.

I argue that feeling like we've failed at writing isn't something we're supposed to be cured of or learn to live with but something that we enter and emerge from

as we practice stepping away from our failure to withdraw and rethink how we want to reengage on our own terms. We could stay in the muck of failure for a while, as Carr suggests (2013, p. 10), but we don't have to live there because we risk moving from failing as an action into failure as an identity. When writing about graduate students who dropped out of their programs, LaFrance and Corbett (2020) write, "It's only those who developed resilience—who kept writing despite the setbacks—that then moved from this place of uncomfortable confusion" (p. 303), and I extend this to posit that it is not only the traditional definition of resilience that applies here that are dependent on individual strength, but on feminist resilience, wherein the student used the resources available to them as assistance to see their way past and through their writing failures.

ADVERSITIES FACED WHEN WRITING

Some might wonder what the big deal is about receiving feedback or being able to focus on the productive side of having another person respond to writing as a way of providing a chance for revision. Per Thoune (2020), ". . . like all relationships, feedback is sometimes complicated. This is especially true when the feedback we receive tells us that we need to be and do better, that we didn't get it right, that we need to make another attempt, that we failed" (p. 54). What we write is not just about what we want to say but is about who we are and what we have chosen to share with our readers. This is surprising to some who consider academic writing to be less personal, but all writing is personal, and thus, feedback is pointed at the author's identity as much as it is on the content.

In her essay, Thoune (2020) further notes that the writer has a choice about how they will engage with feedback in a relationship where the writer can re-script how they think about failure and its role in the writing classroom. We can take Thoune's (2020) idea of failure as an opportunity for reflection on the feedback they've received and sharing our own failures as teachers in yet another direction by guiding students through writing prompts to recognize the times in their writing journeys when they have enacted feminist resilience as agented writers. Through writing prompts, students can also explore their relationship to their teachers and reviewers, who give feedback as resources rather than as their adversaries. This also helps to address Thoune's (2020) concerns about asking students and instructors to become vulnerable when asked to reflect on failures.

It is imperative to remain considerate of student vulnerabilities. A way of doing so is to remove the onus from the individual to become better writers on their own and to recognize the power of resources and community in the face of adversity. Further, by taking strategic approaches to writing that include withdrawing to re-imagine or re-consider the goals for their writing, students

take an agented position in where their writing revisions go, rather than taking recommendations from feedback as instruction that they may have reasons for resisting that are not easy to immediately articulate. In a discussion of Jack Halberstam's (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure*, LaFrance and Corbett (2020) note that "Taking risks is an important piece of the growth of a writer; planning for more purposeful failures can then be a part of our intentional and strategic growth as learners and writers" (p. 300). In connection with feminist rhetorical resilience, I view planning for more purposeful failures as not only risk taking but also as a resilient response.

RESPONDING TO FAILURE

In *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success,* Carol Dweck (2006) reminds readers that failure is an action, not an identity (see also Miller, this volume). This statement makes sense and even invokes a nod from me as I read it. I say something to myself like, "Hmm. Yeah, I like that." I'd much rather say, "I failed," than say, "I am a failure." Pithy sayings like this are good and well until I get comments on a chapter I've submitted for review, and within moments, I begin to feel my shoulders tense and am overwhelmed with nausea as my eyes scan the draft, subconsciously taking count of places where the text is highlighted, my gaze sliding over the comments, some kind and productive, others not.

In "Workshopping Failure Pedagogy for Creative Writing Studies," Wally Suphap (2023) addresses common narratives supporting the idea that failure is something that we must endure to grow and experience the transformative benefits of writing. But Suphap also recognizes that "failure can also be embodied and harmful" (p. 3), drawing on the work of Carr and Micciche (2020) to extend approaches to failure pedagogy to include recognition of the harm that is felt in response to failure and that these responses are "messy," and to argue that failure is not always productive. Many of us have been taught, however, that failing is productive, and part of the formula includes persistence and even tough love.

When it comes to failing at writing, many of my students react, as Joseph Williams (1981) describes in "The Phenomenology of Error," with feelings that they must apologize or offer an excuse for errors in writing. While one or two grammar errors fall under the category of embarrassing, a handful or more are what some would consider a social error. It is possible that the written error, regardless of its size, is, as Williams writes, "located in two physical spaces, the grammar handbook and grammarian's mind, and in three experiences, the writer's mind, the mind of the reader, and the page" (p. 309). Writing failure feels as if it's multiplied like it's something we've done out of carelessness to the reader that has harmed them by

misleading them or has wasted their time, and thus we need to say that we are sorry that they have been on the destructive path of our error.

On the other hand, some are taught that failure is something we have to undergo in order to realize success. Regarding success, Suphap (2023) notes that it ". . . is often defined narrowly, according to a set of standards and norms linked to capitalistic structures that valorize certain markers of success (e.g., publication bylines, social media followers, and book advances)" (p. 3). For one of the students whom I interviewed for my dissertation (2020), J.T., success and failure are directly linked.

> K.T. - Do you think you can recognize resilience when you see it in another person?
>
> J.T. - Yeah, you definitely can. You can see when a person is being put down either in the classroom or, um, just in general and how in the real world you can see where they're being put down and when they bounce back even stronger, but usually it's over a course of time. So, it's not necessarily a single event that you see resilience, but it's over, of course, of trial and error.
>
> K.T. - Right.
>
> J.T. - Failure. Keep failing. Failure, failure, and then finally success.

For this student, failure, adversity, and resilience seem to be related to one another, in that one must fail and employ resilience as a way of, at last, realizing success.

During the same interview, J.T. brought up a friend from a math class as an example of resilience. Regarding the friend, I asked:

> K.T. - Did you ever help him, or (pause)?
>
> J.T. - Yeah, we had study groups and helped each other with homework and what not.
>
> But you could tell that he was definitely - he never quit working things out. He always put a little more effort in each time he failed.
>
> K.T. - Do you think the teacher or anybody else treated him differently? Because he, like, was trying so hard?
>
> J.T. - Well, he uh, he got positive feedback from all his peers, including me, like, oh, you know, we're here to help you keep working at it, and same with the instructor. The instructor was kind of, um, he gave you the heavy hand, he wasn't like the

> nicest, but what he was giving you was helpful. When he said it to you, didn't seem like the nicest thing to say, but now that I look back, he was saying those things to make you better.
>
> K.T. - To motivate you?
>
> J.T. - And so, yeah, the instructor didn't notice that a student was trying really hard, even though it was a challenge. It was easy to get your feelings hurt by the teacher like, yeah, it can be. I think in retrospect, it's easy to be like, yeah, they were really doing it for the best, but during the time you're like [the student grimaced at this point in the interview].

This example is an affirmation of the ways that negative reinforcements regarding failure are seen as motivators, reactions to failure, or ways that a "heavy hand" or even tough love are meant to get someone who has failed to work harder and not give up for the sake of being better. As discussed above, however, I would be the first to tell anyone that while I can see the thought process behind linking failure, resilience, and success, using negative comments or forcing success as a means of enacting resilience is neither healthy nor sustainable. In lieu, I have created writing prompts with hopes that they will serve as alternatives to focusing on failure, trying to become comfortable with failing or seeking ways to cover up the feelings that come with failure.

WRITING PROMPTS CENTERED ON FEMINIST RESILIENCE

Considering feminist resilience as rhetorical agency that continually recreates possibility, I believe that locating one's "agented actions of feminist resilience" (Flynn et al., 2012, p. 8) in the face of writing can be a productive way of responding to feelings of failure tied to writing. As a way of avoiding superficial responses to questions addressing students' recollections of times they were resilient to writing adversities, I would begin with the following 10-minute writing prompts:

- What would you consider to be a writing success?
- What would you consider to be a writing failure?
- What is the difference between failing at writing and being a failure?

The following 10-minute writing prompts would avoid asking students about their writing processes or writing failure, but to write the relational nature of writing. Agency is also addressed in the following prompts, as are opportunities for students to write about times when their writing has brought about

change, hope, or allowed them to shapeshift for the sake of taking on a new identity. The prompts are as follows:

> Write about a time, or times, when you have:
> - used writing to work out a problem
> - shared your feelings with someone through writing
> - felt proud of what you've written
> - contributed to bringing about change in the world either at the local or global level—this could include song lyrics, posters, letters, homemade cards, messages, or stories
> - given your writing as a gift
> - shared sentiments of hope to another through messages in your writing
> - given them a chance to change shape through writing characters or by saying something in writing you would not say in a spoken interaction

After responding to these writing prompts, it may be productive to ask your students to write about how their definition of writing successes and failures changed. If so, how? If not, why do you think that might be? Students could also be asked if reflecting on the work that their writing has done in their and others' lives has had an impact on the way they feel about their writing when they otherwise might have felt they failed.

CONCLUSION

If becoming a better academic writer comes from practice, then I hope I live many, many more years because in over forty years of writing, I have yet to write in such a way that does not require many, many drafts. LaFrance and Corbett (2020) write: "If there is a better way to become an effective academic writer, many of us don't ever find it" (p. 295), and thirteen years into my academic experience, I feel this and silently pray it isn't true, even though I know deep down that it is. The part of me that believes I am among those who will infinitely search for ways to be a better academic writer also knows that I can find important lessons that come from my writing process while knowing that these teachings are not apparent until I have created a significant amount of distance between myself and my writing. In sum, writing failure is deeply felt, lonely, and it's possible that these feelings will continue throughout our writing lives unless we recognize that resilience in this situation can be relational rather than solitary and that we can move away from our writing to rescript encounters with our

feedback, and our words. ¡Animo! dear reader, there's more. We have feminist rhetorical resilience to consider, and within, there is hope.

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