REWRITING THE NARRATIVE: CONVERSATIONS ON FAILURE, SUCCESS, AND COMMUNITY IDENTITIES IN A PUERTO RICAN DETROIT

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a descriptive study calling on ethnographic methods of qualitative research as a means to explore experiences of a Puerto Rican community in Detroit, Michigan. The central focus of this work is on personal researcher observations and on the retelling of experience-oriented narratives related to the perceptions of success and failure as told by two Puerto Rican identifying community organizers in Detroit. As an object of inquiry, the gathered narratives on success and failure are representative of community interactions, community engagement efforts, and cultural upbringing, capturing the rhetorical nature of success and failure and the ways in which they shape the work of community organizing. Largely, this research is motivated by a driving force to understand how community experiences and motives function to counteract commonplace narratives about Detroit, highlighting how the identities of those in organizational leadership roles operate as an avenue for engaging members of the community and moving toward a new narrative. The data explored in this thesis emerges from three separate phases of fieldwork research during which interviews, observations, and participations served as capacities for realizing the rhetorical characteristics of success and failure existing in this particular community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the Puerto Rican community of Detroit, Michigan: thank you for sharing your space, your time, and your stories with me. Thank you for your unequivocal commitment to the work of solidarity that far exceeds the words on these pages. I'm forever grateful.

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Introduction

Growing up, my closest crew of friends—who would come to be my *brothers* in time—emerged from all walks of life and color, some of whom are as Boricua[1] as me. Among each other, we shared a connectedness, an embeddedness in the community we were each and all a part of. We were relative in time and in space; relative, too, in ways of knowing and of languaging as a network of young people who learned more *about* each other *from* each other than any other way. Each knew the others irks and quirks and we all knew just who to pass the rock to when we needed a shot to fall in a quick game of hoops at our neighborhood park. We all knew what kind of playlist should be booming from the distant speakers, as we ran the courts, to incite the hype of the moment when one of us would drain a basket. This was the intrinsic, active awareness we shared. We each went to class and we each learned a little differently, increasingly dependent on our own means of navigating the curricula and teaching styles we faced at the ring of the bell. We each struggled, some of us more so than others, and the lack of academic motivation seemed to unfold from challenges brought on by the "somewhat standardized" curricula of school that Jabari Mahiri points to in *Shooting for Excellence* (94). Despite this, we may have recognized, perhaps not quite so consciously, the breadth of school culture as it continually shifted from class to class, teacher to teacher, and from the exchanges among different groups of students we would interact with on a regular basis for years on end. We each were at battle with our own means of learning—our own styles of *knowing how* up against the conformed *this is how* that voided some of us out and down the path of a stricken education. Nevertheless, we each, too, had an ingrained perception of what it meant to "be" *successful* and that, as the story stands in many a community, had a lot to do with one's performance in school.

[1] Boricua: a term recognized to identify someone as Puerto Rican; from the native Taíno name for Puerto Rico, *Boríken*

What I've come to recognize is that "success" is much more intricate than the simple definitions ascribed to it, much in the way "failure" is.

At the point that I write these words, my brothers and I surpass the decade peak of our brotherhood, despite my having left. At the point in which we each chose to pursue our own avenues, I was the sole one who sought after academic endeavors. At this point, at this ongoing stage in the crafting of my scholarly self, it is the very relationship I've described which has come to shape me as a devotee of both the community and the writing classroom—both with their own characteristics of "success" and "failure" that often revolve around complex identities and ways of languaging. This is the train of thought that has kept me moving along the stretch of track headed for that desired place: a place where we can imagine opportunities for students to engage in ways which make sense to them and the practices of knowing and languaging that naturally transpire in their own arenas of discourse and that somehow shape how they navigate moments of perceived failure and success.

Much in the way that Jabari Mahiri draws on cultural models for literacy learning situated in the classroom, I also find myself wondering how educators might work to acknowledge student identities and interactions in planning and providing a more effective and engaged literacy education (12). Incorporating James Banks's *five types of knowledge*, Mahiri points to his developed model for the teaching and learning of writing as it stems from the blend between students' *personal/cultural knowledge* and *popular knowledge*:

- **Personal/cultural knowledge**: concepts, explanations, and interpretations that students derive from personal experiences in their homes, families, and community cultures

- **Popular knowledge**: concepts, etc. that are institutionalized within the mass media and other institutions that are part of popular culture

- **Mainstream/academic knowledge**: concepts, etc. that constitute traditional Western-centric knowledge in history and the behavioral and social sciences

- **Transformative academic knowledge**: concepts, etc. that challenge mainstream academic knowledge and expand and substantially revise established canons, paradigms, theories, explanations, and research methods

- **School knowledge**: concepts, etc. that are presented in textbooks, teacher's guides, other media forms, and lectures by teachers

Within this landscape of ideas forwarded for understanding rhetorical dynamics and sites of knowledge production, I look to expand on perceptions of *personal/cultural knowledge* and *popular knowledge* as a way to aid my understanding of community interactions, albeit open to the interplay between Banks's other types of knowledge as they seem to find place. In making sense of such a framework for establishing curricular content in writing instruction, Mahiri forwards the notion that "students bring to the classroom a host of personal differences which should properly be seen as markers of their specific relational position inside their various cultural groups." It is precisely the move of *self-identification* embedded in these relational positions that Mahiri suggests is "fundamental to their writing development" (63). Communicating the moves and motives of self-identification among Puerto Ricans in Detroit, within the "confinements" of success and failure, is the route that I've since traveled in an effort to imagine how these processes operate in a community close to me. Through first-hand

research, I've worked my way into a place where communicative identities and interactions among people and cultures seem to always be present. As a teacher of writing hoping to bridge the community-oriented experience of interaction with classroom-level interactions, I've seen through to Mahiri's consideration for new student positionality as an inherent move of establishing self-identification in a new place:

> New college students are at an age and in a situation that forces them to consider complex issues of identity and family/community connectedness, especially since they have often been distances from their familiar support systems, and they must consequently determine how they will represent themselves in and to a larger, stranger world (82).

As an exigence to move forward with—one of integrity, of commitment, and of an awareness for the world both within and beyond the writing classroom—I look to Mahiri's call for a more community-focused research practice in light of constructed and co-constructed community narratives, so as to inch us toward that desired place where students' personal/cultural knowledge and interests can be reasonably bridged with our larger-scale schooling goals situated around the development of critical thinking and writing skills (115). Doing this however, requires effort. It requires an awareness. It asks teachers to see through to the ways of languaging and *being* in students' home communities as a path toward understanding how they navigate interactions and how they imagine their own belonging, their own success in what is immediately a new community of knowing and being for each.

First understanding the role of identity and its relationship with community connections and interactions is essential to making sense of how teaching and learning happen in those learning environments otherwise "external" to the writing classroom. Recognizing how

community engagement and experiences of interaction can influence means for learning or growth in classroom settings might begin to show for their interconnectedness after all, thus reconciling the relationships students have with the classroom—not as exits from, but as *extensions of* community-based knowledge making. I've moved into this realm of qualitative research with my sights set coming to a closer understanding of:

1. How individuals holding leadership/community organizing roles in Detroit's Puerto Rican community foster a sense of community among themselves and other Ricans
2. How they understand and work to foster relationships, connections, and interactions with other populations of Latinx groups in the Detroit area
3. How the stories they tell about their experiences doing this work have shaped the growth (or lack thereof) of the larger community and their notions of both failure and success

Approaching this work, it has been my intention to capture scenes of community building and knowledge production in Detroit's vibrant Puerto Rican community as one that is not as immediately visible as, say, those of New York, Chicago, or Central Florida. How do they understand their own interactions in communal spaces where they are not the majority? What are the moves that indicate how they foster community relationships in particular spaces places of interest? In what ways do the perceptions of their own success as community organizers reflect their experiences of learning, knowing, and *being* Puerto Ricans in Detroit? I approach this work of rhetorical success and failure and community building with the orientation of an educator of writing. It is my hope that the observations and conversations encompassing the body of this

work, while not directly related to contexts or constructs within the classroom, might implicate considerations for teaching and learning and the first-year experience.

First Encounters: Community-Centered Pedagogies and the Strength of Stories

As I step down and off of the Michigan Flyer[2] from East Lansing to downtown Detroit and toward the Detroit Hispanic Development Center, I walk—iPhone Maps app open and in hand—embracing all that is Michigan summer weather. With an evolving schedule for my week in Detroit floating in the Cloud and on my Notes app, I look to ensure that I have the correct address to my destination. At this point of my visit, at this initial encounter of what I consider my *fieldwork*, I'm making my way to an afternoon community workshop at the Hispanic Development Center, being led by a visiting music group known as Las Cafeteras. Las Cafeteras, a Mexican band having originated in Los Angeles, is on tour and in town for Detroit's own Concert of Colors weekend. Unsure of what to anticipate, I decide to anticipate nothing at all.

"We are first storytellers before we are musicians"

The afternoon prior to their Concert of Colors set, Las Cafeteras took the liberty of leading a community workshop, hosted by the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation in downtown Motor City, which I would soon discover to be a regular approach to their touring lifestyle—a way of "connecting through touring," as one of the band members told it. This was the very afternoon that I first experienced the reverberating clacks from two Las Cafeteras members as they stomped against their *tarima* (a hand-engineered wooden pallet also used for storing equipment). This was no subtle choreography. "El Chuchumbé," a century's old Afro-

[2] Michigan Flyer: Public transit (bus) system that operates from within the state of Michigan

Mexican tale of resistance from Veracruz, was the song being performed for those attending the workshop as their feet pounded away with a merging cadence of free force and rhythm. When I asked one of the band members about the narrative underlying "El Chuchumbé," they made it clear that this was a number which, historically, had been strictly outlawed and banned from Mexico as it pokes fun at the history of controversies surrounding sexual exploitation of women and children by the church, just as it drives the persecution of mixed peoples, by those in power, to the forefront of its lyrical makeup. The tune is (and always has been), I was told, an outlet for being able to vocalize oppression, to share the sheer fact that *the people* aren't alone and that, in spite of the seriousness of societal and political circumstances surrounding them, they can sing and dance on.

What followed immediately after their performance was an event so simply remarkable for indicating sites of knowledge production within a community. A lecture-like aura emerged from this warehouse space of nearly thirty Detroiters, its surrounding walls covered in locally-crafted graffiti. One of the group members rolled out a whiteboard from the back of the room as another began to communicate the importance—the *power*—of story. By merely asking the audience their thoughts

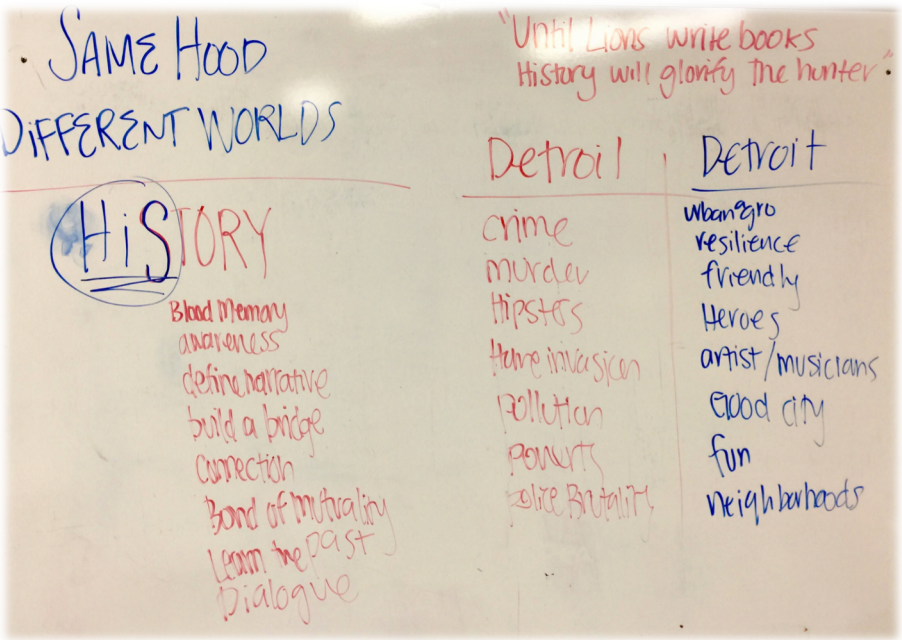

Figure 1: Attendee responses from "Same Hood, Different Worlds" workshop; indicates both negative and positive characteristics ascribed to Detroit

on what stories can do in communities and *in the world,* response after response seemed to accentuate the value that narratives have in the lives of the city's own locals. As the band inquired on their perceptions of Detroit's positive and negative stereotypes, they would continue to jot down attendees' responses on the whiteboard. This was a continuation of their workshop segment, which they named *Same Hood, Different Worlds*. The narrative emerging from the positive and negative stereotypes being shouted out by this diverse group of Detroiters seemed to paint a portrait for how the city is both locally and largely perceived. This practice of co-constructing a narrative as a collective encouraged me to continue thinking about the role narrative has in, among other things, shaping communities and the *perceptions* of communities.

"Until lions write books, history will glorify the hunter"

The band soon invited everyone in attendance to take a seat at a table and *write*. Las Cafeteras provided blank loose-leaf pages and pencils as all in attendance picked up their composing materials and took a seat. One of the band members led the way by providing a set of sentence-starting prompts to get everyone's ink to their respective sheet. I took a moment to look around, recognize my surroundings, and appreciate the fact that these people were actively engaging in a community writing process. I had to know the

Figure 2: Las Cafeteras performs as workshop attendees gather in a circle to recite their writing out loud

band's philosophy behind having these community members involve themselves in a live discussion, then pick up a pencil and begin creating narratives of their own. The Las Cafeteras member who I reached out to told me that because all of them had gone to college, they had developed the community organizing background needed to be able to assess demographics, develop exercises, and lead interactive activities such as their own *Same Hood, Different Worlds* (personal communication). Once everyone was finished writing, the crowd—myself included—were asked to rise up and form a standing circle. As everyone scattered around and managed a large, collective circle, Las Cafeteras joined in, instruments in hand, and began a tune. One of the band members moved to the middle of the circle, read his full prose, and welcomed the locals to do the same. *So they did*. The acoustic music would drop in volume as each person voiced themselves for the capacity of the room to hear. When I asked the same band member about the importance of narrative for an individual's education and the value of situating identities in a classroom, I was told that "authenticity comes from story writing." The band went on to acknowledge that the best stories are from those who understand who they are, those who understand and share their contradictions and who can still love themselves in spite of those things.

As a first encounter of fieldwork in the city, this experience begins to pave a direction toward my own imagining of the parallels between community and classroom, as sites of learning and knowledge production, and for considering the ways they might mirror one another. Such an organic co-constructed teaching and learning moment as *Same Hood, Different Worlds* at the Detroit Hispanic Development Center workshop works to evidence the larger goals that I have set out for myself as an academic in rhetoric and writing studies. I've grown increasingly intrigued by the rhetorical nature of success and failure, as broad constructs and as subject-level

conceptualizations, as a way of languaging that seems to hold stakes in how people imagine their own belonging and well-being across different social environments. Imagining how pedagogies of writing and composing might continue to be resituated with student-centered learning at the forefront of considerations is an endeavor that continues to be researched and rethought. As an avenue for understanding how the community identities that students bring into the writing classroom shape processes of teaching and learning, as Jabari Mahiri and others do, I move forward by offering my experiences of engaging in *and with* a community of Puerto Ricans in Detroit. This is a story of my efforts to account for understanding how identities of Puerto Ricans are situated in the downtown and southwest Detroit areas, where they don't hold the dominant demographic of the population—Latinx or otherwise. I trust that moving toward an understanding of how socially-fueled interactions operate in a community might begin to forge a path for understanding, too, how they happen in a composition classroom. Perhaps an understanding of successful or unsuccessful interactions in a community may begin to help us, in composition theory, figure how understandings of students' own perceptions of success and failure in academic writing contexts influence their own inherent ways of learning in moments of classroom interaction.

What follows is a comprehensive look into my field experiences in the community, as well as an account of my conversations with Puerto Rican community members and leaders residing in Detroit. This research sets out to offer an avenue for understanding how working people who devote their lives to advocating for a culture and for community connectedness understand their own tunes of success and failure in their work. This is but only as a step in the direction of visualizing how community experiences might help us understand and orient classroom ones. Through interview conversations and impromptu chatter with Puerto Rican

community members in Detroit and through personal observations over the course of three fieldwork phases, I've sought to communicate the apparent indicators of positive and negative experiences that have shaped, in some way, the work they do in and for the community of Detroit. I've chosen to do so by replaying their lived experiences, by sharing their stories as they have shared them with me.

Methods and Methodologies

In order to learn, students must use what they already know to give meaning to what the teacher presents them. But this possibility depends on the social relationships revealed in classroom culture and the communication system inherent in the patterns and motives of discourse that teachers must initiate but collaboratively establish with students in the intersections of teaching and learning (105).

– Jabari Mahiri, *Shooting for Excellence*

Energizing my drive to understand the correlations between culturally-situated interactions in communities, classrooms, and their relationship with teaching and learning is Victor Villanueva's enriching observation that "in generalizing personal events, students find that nothing is value free, that all is in one way or another political, is always affected by and affecting their conduct as citizens of the various communities they travel within and through" (54). Villanueva asserts, through *Bootstraps*, that students in the classroom come to discover they are "constantly in dialectical relationships with their environments and that these environments are affected by social, political, and economic situations" (54-5). This very acknowledgement accentuating the relationship between factors external to the classroom and their influence on engagement in the community seems to, in some way, extend to the classroom community as one among multiple environments students "travel within and through." With this in the back of my mind, I look to understand just how each participants' relationships with their environment are shaped in this way—how their perceptions of success, of failure, and of their community's growth are perhaps, in some way, mediated by their interactions with others in or around the community.

Spaces, Places, and Faces: A Brief Introduction to Fieldsites and Research Participants

Club Puertorriqueño de Detroit was a small bar and event space in a warehouse-like location situated in a particularly industrial part of town. Chain link fence and sliding gates secured the parking lot and the entrance to the building—that is, until the weekend made its way into the lives of the working Puerto Rican people in Detroit. Each Friday evening was the moment when the gates would rattle their way open for the local Boricuas. Standing tall at the entrance were the United States and Puerto Rican flags, waving side by side in their respective and yet interconnected rhythms of pride. Upon my initial visit here, I met Eduardo—voluntary treasurer of Club Puertorriqueño and full-time audio service engineer for Ford Motor Company. My interview with Eduardo, who goes by Eddie, was held at the club prior to the arrival of its usual Friday evening crowd. As the weekend nights of my fieldwork phases ensued, I'd find myself chatting with those who regularly visited the club, playing dominoes with the locals, and listening to live salsa and plena styles of music being played by Eddie and his band of musicians—everyone's well-deserved weekend in full swing, everyone having a time. In the months immediately following my third research visit, it was brought to my attention that Club Puertorriqueño de Detroit had indefinitely closed its doors due to a lack of funding, support, and participation.

Osvaldo, known in the community as Ozzie, oversees *BombaRica*—Detroit's own Puerto Rican performance group. They perform across different venues and public spaces in Detroit and surrounding areas, showcasing the moves and sounds of Puerto Rico's African and indigenous Taíno roots. Having been born on the island and brought to Michigan as an infant, Ozzie's embodied Puertoricanness permeates through his commitment to BombaRica and other community-centered events throughout Detroit. He has remained at the forefront of the

operations that support Detroit's annual Concert of Colors weekend each summer. I managed to be in town for Concert of Colors, during my third and final phase of fieldwork, which took place in August of 2017. I had the grateful opportunity to interview Ozzie and observe his managerial operations at Concert of Colors, as well as two separate BombaRica performances—one being a downtown practice performance at The Spirit of Detroit and a full-fledged stage performance at the grand opening of Detroit's Beacon Park.

In taking up this ethnographic approach to data collection, it is important to consider the affordances that interviews and engaged personal observations offer as a way of knowing in the community. As Irving Seidman suggests, capturing the experiences of individuals can be reasonably approached through observation, explorations of history, and experimentation. Seidman further communicates the pertinent quality of interviewing by concluding that it is a "powerful way to gain insight" and is, more specifically, "consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language" (11-14). My fieldwork process took place over three individual phases (visits); notations of the work completed during each phase can be seen in the following graphic.

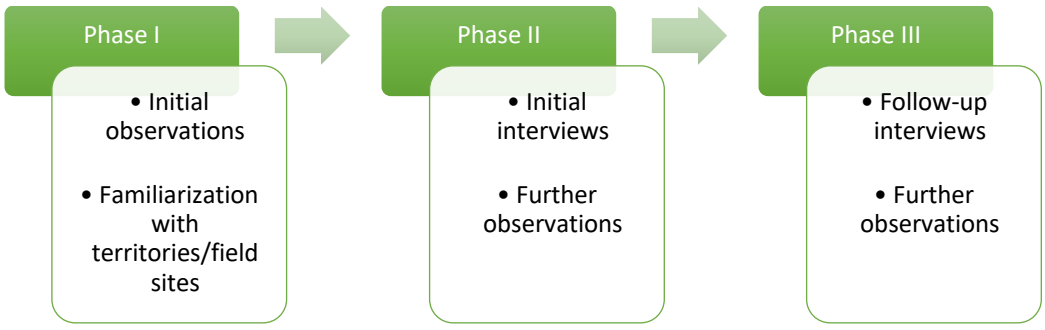

Figure 3: Fieldwork phases and descriptions of research activities

Interview Questions and Orientations Toward "Success" and "Failure"

The questions that I asked Ozzie and Eddie were consistent across both interviews. I arranged them according to overarching topics of interest, namely: their Detroit residence, their occupation/workplace, their perceptions of *success* and *failure*, and a set of closing questions that worked to capture how these different elements speak to each other. Additionally, I included subsections that supported each of the overarching areas of inquiry. To offer a sense of how my questions were organized, I've included them, here, according to the format described.

Questions pertaining to Detroit residence

- When did you come to Detroit? From where?
- If you were born and raised here, where and when did your family come to Detroit?
    - What drove them to this city?
    - What were your parent(s) occupations while living here?

Questions pertaining to workplace

- How would you define your occupation?
    - Why did you pursue this path?
    - What is your ultimate goal in continuing to do this work?
- Give me an example of an experience with success in doing this work.
- Given your experiences, what does success mean to you?

Questions pertaining to notions of success and failure

- Were you raised with a specific understanding of success and failure?

    - Tell me a story that remember hearing, growing up, about what it means to be successful.
    - Give me an example of something you experienced as failure. What does failure mean to you? What is your approach to navigating failure?
- Can you think of an example of how living and working in Detroit has shaped your understanding of what it means to be successful and what it is to fail?

Closing questions

- How do your specific experiences shape your identity as a Puerto Rican in Detroit?
    - In what way(s) do you think this is similar or different from other Puerto Ricans in the city?
- What do the past and present-day narratives of Detroit's economy mean to you and your lived experiences?

The scope of my interview questions works to capture a few different individual and interconnected things—the histories and stories they were raised with, the work they do in and for the community, how they imagine success and failure to play out in the community (by reflecting on lived experience), and how these experiences have since shaped their perceptions of what these words mean in light of their identities as Detroiters and as Puerto Ricans. Moreover, the questions asked to both participants aim to make sense of the ways in which their ongoing work in the community might continue to be somehow shaped by different experiences and interactions. Given the different levels at which these questions and areas of inquiry operate, it is precisely in this way that I seek to understand how their identity construction, as Puerto Rican

community organizers in Detroit, reflects the negotiation "of subject positions at the crossroads of the past, present, and future" (Block 527). A further point worth noting is that I have elected to approach my interviews and conversations without providing a preconceived definition of what "success" or "failure" mean (or *don't* mean) on my account nor anyone else's. They were left intentionally broad and open-ended, so as to allow the individualized perceptions and understandings to be captured in the most organic way possible. As communicated in "You Get Pushed Back," the rhetorics of success and failure (and what they mean to whom) are vast. One frequently voiced position accounted for through the authors' focus-group research largely included appeals to individualism, "often locating one's success or failure solely in the actions of individual actors" (Fassett and Warren 26). Given this orientation toward individualized understandings of "success" and "failure," I have approached my own interviews and fieldwork without a shared working definition of either word. Instead, I've chosen to let the stories told about success and failure speak for themselves and have imagined their embedded meaning through the lens of their experiences as community organizers, as Puerto Ricans in Detroit. A more concrete reasoning for this decision emerges from a separate ethnomethodological study involving focus groups with undergraduate students and their graduate instructors. In taking up research on *academic* success and failure in relation to students' academic performance, Deanna Fassett recognizes that there is no universally agreed upon understanding of "success" or "failure"—that the understandings and meanings associated with them will shift "from person to person, from context to context, and from era to era" ("On defining at risk" 47). With this in mind, I recognize and argue that understandings of "success" and "failure" function similarly, in the community, as Fassett has observed in her classroom/student-centered research on academic success and failure.

Identity and Individuality in Relation to Success and Failure

Leading into my fieldwork, the driving force underlying my desire to understand how identities are situated and interpreted by the self and by others in a community through given interactions emerged primarily from texts in the vein of Edward Fergus's *Skin Color and Identity Formation: Perceptions of Opportunity and Academic Orientation Among Mexican and Puerto Rican Youth*. At its core, the focus of Fergus's text is driven by "the reflexive influence students' negotiation of their self-identifications and external interpretations of identification had on their perceptions of opportunity and academic orientation." Through multiple deductive and inductive analyses, Fergus looks to student discussions and open conversations as a means to indicate differences in how students of various phenotypes discuss their ethnic identification and how others see them across grounds of race, culture, and the interplay between them. These analyses and the summaries that emerge shed light on external interpretations of identity, especially as they exist in relationship with students' own perceptions of academic opportunity and academic orientation" (33). Given that my particular inquiry into the lives of Puerto Ricans in Detroit is not centered on students, my orientation toward this work is devoid of any direct correlation to student life, the student experience, or opportunity in the *academic* sense. Instead, it is my intention to make evident the markers that might forward a sense of how identities are situated within a community of working class Detroit Ricans and how the layered identities of Puerto Rican community organizers living and working in Detroit come together to communicate an understanding of success and failure. This "layered" complexity recognizes, as Stuart Hall calls attention to, a sense of cultural identity that turns away from the exactness of "one experience, one identity" (225). Beyond being Puerto Ricans in Detroit, they carry with them the histories that have since influenced the path of their own positioning. Identities, in this "layered" way,

belong to the past as much as the present and future. I aim to carry out a focus on individuality in a similar fashion as Elizabeth Aranda approaches "Struggles of Incorporation Among the Puerto Rican Middle Class" in that I focus on the personal, individual interpretations and meanings that participants ascribe to their community engagements and interactions. While I do indicate similarities and patterns across conversations, I find that these perceptions which emerge from the narratives told indeed operate at the "level of the subject" (203). Beyond interviews alone, I find it important to note the distinction between my efforts to *observe* how community interactions take place in the spaces visited as separate from my efforts to, at times, involve myself directly in those interactions. Each respective phase of my fieldwork in locations across Detroit and southwest Detroit gave rise to unique observational experiences and telling conversations with those actively involved in the community. I approached each phase with different goals, different considerations, different curiosities, and an open mind as to what would happen and how each new phase might build on the one before it.

Positionality as a Researcher in the Field

The close analysis of this data operates on a driven goal of understanding how cultural identity/orientation, personal experience, and perceptions of success and failure are mobilized and how they speak 1) to each other and 2) to each individual's position(ality) in the spaces where they engage with the community at hand. Importantly, it is through my conversations, interactions, and engagements with others that I situate my own identity as a Puerto Rican—the histories of my father's own inherent motives and mobility existing consistently in time and space with the stories that I hear from Puerto Ricans in Detroit. It is the awareness of my own rootedness and my own embodiment of a particular culture of knowing, doing, being, and

languaging that fuels how I approach these conversations as both a listener and as a maker of meaning, just as Cintron does in *Angels' Town*. Importantly, indicating my own *Puertoricanness* in this work is reflective of Aja Martinez's implicit move to locate her own researcher positionality in the work performed and discussed throughout "A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory." As a methodological recommendation that reflects composition pedagogy and Critical Race Theory (CRT), Martinez's work centers attention on counterstory narratives of Chican@s as a means to combat dominant narratives otherwise largely recognized in the field of composition and rhetoric. In doing so, Martinez explicitly indicates that she focuses her research on Chican@s for two primary reasons: because they are a rapidly growing population in the academy and because they are a group from which Martinez feels that she can draw upon her own "cultural intuition" (66). The nature of this cultural intuition, closely mirroring how Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss discuss "theoretical sensitivity," allows me to recognize the ways in which my own Puertoricanness and my inherent orientation toward Puerto Rican cultures and communities exists as a personal quality through which I feel that I can attribute a certain kind of meaning to the data that I gather. It is in this way that I have come to understand my upbringing, the stories of my father's successes and failures, my summers spent in Puerto Rico growing up, and the associations and interactions with my Puerto Rican and other Latinx friends in Florida as a collection of personal experiences which give light to this notion of *meaning*. This meaning [of the self] appears to represent "a very important source of cultural intuition" that derives from the background I bring with me to the research situation—the research situation being, in this case, Detroit's Puerto Rican community (Bernal 7).

Qualitative Approaches to Data Collection

The materials that serve as data in this account emerge from many places and things. Largely, they emerge from inscriptions and exist as *fieldnotes* in that they "are products of, and reflect conventions for, transforming witnessed events, persons, and places into words on paper" (Emerson, et al. 12). They are, in my case, notes representative of things that I have seen happen and things that I am told. The fieldnotes that I have function, in many ways, to create and to foster a socially close, yet experientially separate, stance in all observations, interactions, and interviews that are pointed to (43). While this work is not a full-length ethnography, I encourage it to be thought of as *ethnographic in nature*, as it begins to make many of the precise moves often employed in this approach to qualitative research. Beyond highlighting my findings, this research explores my commitment to "going out and getting close to the activities and everyday experiences of other people" (Emerson, et al. 2). The authors of *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* communicate the fieldwork researcher's role as one that asks them to take up immersive positions in key sites and scenes of others' lives as way of going about observing and understanding the experiences that seem meaningful and important to them. Importantly, the nature of this work looks to capture the "ordinary routines and conditions under which people conduct their lives," as well as the pressures and constraints associated with them (3). Much in the way that Ralph Cintron focuses in on a particular Latinx community in the city of Chicago through his ethnographic account, *Angels' Town*, my research seeks to explore the ways in which people "make and unmake themselves" and how these makings are received in negotiations or interactions with others in the community—with particular attention to how success and failure are understood through efforts of community organizing (x). What makes this ethnographic "in nature" is the approach to data collection that I have taken up over the course of the three

fieldwork phases described earlier. While the time spent with participants in sites of interest has not been extensive, it has been generative. I have managed to compose a range of fieldnotes through interviews, conversations, and observations about how success and failure seem to rhetorically function in the working lives of those in the community, of those who represent the organizations and spaces described.

Story and Counterstory as Qualitative Data

The data discussed, here, are stories. They are the stories of others, of those whose bodies are often other(ed). They are stories of what others have seen, heard, and have brought themselves to understand about how a community understands themselves and their connectedness (or lack thereof) with communities of other Latinx nationalities in the city and among themselves, within their own band of Puerto Ricans. Moreover, these are stories that tell of how one's own identity resides in relationship with perceptions of *success* and *failure* that they were raised with and how they imagine the role that success and failure continue to play in their working lives. Beyond stories, they are lights that have emerged from conversations—with those in the community, with myself, and with scholarship that aims to shed light on community experiences, writing classroom experiences, and the ways in which they speak to each other. These stories, much in the way that Malea Powell describes stories of her own retelling, are complex arrays of events which illuminate "shimmering strands of a constellative, epistemological space" (384). These stories are stories of experience, of success and failure, and of the very interactions that represent values of community engagement in spaces as complex as the stories told about them. As a cloudy dynamic that seems to hold weight in academic contexts and beyond, stories surrounding success and failure offer, too, ways of thinking that sink into the

stories of cultural and racial identities within a working-class community and that speak to community building efforts. As such, these are also the stories around success and failure that, in some nature, reveal how one's own identity is understood and what these broad constructs mean in the context of the work they do in and for an increasingly diverse Detroit, Michigan. It is through the narratives told about their work as Puerto Rican community organizers in Detroit that I look to make visible the parallels between identity and the socioculturally constructed narratives emerging from shared moments of engagement with others who seem to share a set of characteristics or values (Block 527). David Block's *Researching Language and Identity*, from Linguistics, seems to locate the work of identity as often characterized by how individuals' feel about who they are and where they belong (528). As such, it is my intention to capture how they feel about their efforts in community organizing as implicative of how they understand their own situatedness in the larger Detroit community. I've organized these stories and conversations in such a way that the individual interviewed is not considered separately from the position, place, or organization that they embody through their labor (in their roles as representations of these spaces or groups). I made this conscious decision as a means to ensure the stories remain transparent and visible in light of who they are, what they represent, and what their stories tell about their own positionalities as members and *leaders* in Detroit's Puerto Rican community. This is my retelling.

¡BombaRica!

Imagine someone who embodies and exhibits an aura of all things Puerto Rican culture in a given community. You hear others speak on this individual's name in such an honorable, admiring tone with nothing less than an indebted respect for the work that they do. That person is Detroit's own Osvaldo "Ozzie" Rivera. Ozzie oversees operations of the city's Puerto Rican cultural performance group, *BombaRica*, and is also among their band of musicians as a conga player. Ozzie's sheer cruciality as a leader in the community became increasingly transparent with each time that we met. More than in the way others talked about him, it was also in the way that he went about his work. The investment he has in Puerto Rican culture and in Detroit was visible everywhere we went together. From the histories he shared with listeners as they danced along to the sounds and moves of BombaRica at Beacon Park to the moment when he welcomed me backstage, at the Concert of Colors, to meet The Big 3 Palladium Orchestra—his presence evoked something of a *symbol* of the community on behalf of his commitment to their well-being.

Having been initially brought to Detroit from Juana Diaz, Puerto Rico as an infant, Ozzie told of his family's rootedness in Michigan that began just prior to his birth. His uncle had moved to Saginaw, Michigan as a worker in the migrant farms during the late in 1940s. Soon following his work in Saginaw, he decided to move to Detroit to pursue an opportunity as a worker at a steel processing plant. It was at this point of settlement that Ozzie's uncle called on his three brothers-in-law to make the move to Detroit for work—one of whom was Ozzie's father. His father left Puerto Rico for the chance to work in the city while Ozzie's mother remained on the island until he was old enough to fly. At five months young, Ozzie and his mother were on a one-way plane headed for Detroit. His father began working with Pennsylvania

Railroad, repairing and maintaining train tracks, and would soon find work with Detroit Brick and Block along the eastside riverfront. As he grew up, his mother remained a housewife until Ozzie's father became disabled and was no longer able to meet the demands of hard labor. It was at this point that Ozzie's mother began working at Midwest Fiber, a small neighborhood warehouse close to home. By the time Ozzie began attending college, his mother would become the first woman to ever be employed at Vandermark Painting, following a turn in civil rights that sparked religious and community activist movements against the company for not hiring women.

Beyond the promise of work for his father that would eventually bring Ozzie to a life in Michigan, he recalls growing up "in a household that was fiercely proud of its Puerto Rican heritage" (personal communication). While both of his parents held only a 3rd grade education to their names, Ozzie told me that they were immensely knowledgeable and rich in culture and that they shared "a natural national pride." This was a common feature among his extended family and the surrounding community at large. One of Ozzie's uncles, nine years his senior and also living in Detroit, "was like an older brother" to him and reinforced a more modern understanding of Puerto Rican culture. It was this embeddedness of cultural pride and community that would have a large influence on Ozzie's own inherent values as a Puerto Rican in Detroit. As early as his high school years, he recalls rallying alongside fellow Puerto Ricans in the city as a means to promote political awareness and a general activism in the name of Boricuas. These are the moments that Ozzie spoke to as "significant," given that the overwhelming majority of Latinos in Detroit were Mexican and Mexican Americans, not Puerto Ricans.

The story that I've just retold emerged in response to asking Ozzie how he feels his early life experiences have shaped his identity as a Puerto Rican in Detroit. What became increasingly important to me was reaching an understanding of how perceptions of success and failure play

out in the vein of identity and of *being* in this particular community and through the work that he does. As a follow up, I prompted Ozzie to speak to the understandings of "success" and "failure" that had a role in his upbringing and how they have developed. "Education," he told me, "was the one area where success was touted heavily by family and the catholic schools" but that, largely, stories of success and failure did not have much of a presence in his youth. Reflecting on this, Ozzie suggests that the lack of any transparent shared understandings of success and failure must be due to the fact that, in his community, "most folks were just trying to survive economically." When I brought up "failure," Ozzie spoke briefly to two failed marriages and some minor shortcomings in his community work, but he didn't mull over failure for very long—and it seemed intentional. Thereafter, Ozzie shared just how his own perceptions of "success" and "failure" have since developed over time, imagining success as something that has been *learned* through his own lived experiences as but one moving part of a much larger community:

> I have learned to define success by how we can move the needle forward in the well-being of our community, both Latino and the Detroit area. In some ways, the challenges Detroit has faced the past few decades have been a story of fighting against failure, hoping to turn the corner and be "successful." The fact that southwest Detroit and the Latino community has been touted as one of the success stories these past few decades in Detroit has been one of "success." The fact that many Latino and southwest Detroit activists have dedicated themselves to the stability of this community can never be underestimated.

A few interesting points emerge here. First: historically, "education" directly corresponded to success from perspectives that were not his own, which he recalls from not only his family, but also from the Catholic church. Second: that Ozzie had, through his heavily

involved community engagement efforts, brought himself to understand success as relative to the *well-being* of a community and the Latinx population's role in nurturing the "stability" of Detroit (Detroit, of course, carrying its own baggage of dominant failure narratives). In conversation with Ozzie, he broadly describes his occupation as a social work administrator who has worked in a number of educational settings. He was driven to this work as early as his high school years, becoming known as a youth political activist in the 1970s and being hired by a community-based organization based on his reputation. In speaking to his interests in the arts and in activism, Ozzie had been recognized, early on, for his efforts in "combining performance with community-based cultural organizing initiatives." With my mind set on notions of "failure" and of "success," I prompt Ozzie to speak to a moment in his life that he associates with "success." In responding to me, he revisits his experiences as a youth activist, recalling his first "official job" as an agency organizer. While holding this position, Ozzie was credited with the establishment of a nationally recognized youth multi-service agency that trained a number of young people on *leadership*. Looking back on this experience, success, for Ozzie, translated to his ability to "train others to broaden community work and to promote Latino self-determination," which rang in a tune relative to his notion of success described above, namely, working toward understandings (and solutions for) "how we can move the needle forward in the well-being of our community, both Latino and the Detroit area." Ozzie was sure to mention that a few of those who went through the leadership program went on to become award-winning journalists, Grammy-winning musicians, poets, doctors, engineers, documentarians, and so forth.

A further point to account for comes from his mentioning of Detroit's history as a community—one of "fighting against failure"—and how this resembles the like of Puerto Rico's ongoing economic turmoil. Ozzie mentioned this well before I posed a closing question that

asked him to reflect on the narratives of Detroit's past and present economic state and the role that they have had in "crafting" his identity as a Puerto Rican in Detroit. This brought me to realize that these are precisely the narratives that ring as true to Detroiters as they do to outsiders. This was the shared awareness that was openly expressed by Detroit's own people at the Hispanic Development Center workshop that I attended during my opening phase of fieldwork. There seems to be a living and breathing "then and now" narrative that I opened my eyes to while in the city.

Detroit: *a city of "possibility and resurgence"*
Detroit: "either you're with us or against us"
Detroit: the "poster child" site for economic decline and urban decay—"ruin porn"
Detroit: the "reshaping" / the "resurrection"

"A place on the rise" is what seems to describe the kind of optimistic present-tense nature of Detroit's turnaround. It's a given that stories of failure and success hold weight in the construction of these narratives. These contrasting rhetorics which encapsulate much of Detroit's community-centered narrative have been interesting to place in perspective with how things are perceived by Ozzie through the lens of his work as a community organizer. Seemingly, the move away from the negative and toward the positive is a larger *community* effort and Ozzie was certain to note the Puerto Rican/Latinx role in this narrative-oriented movement. For the purposes of continuing to describe my conversations with Ozzie, I'll share his response to the closing question that I asked in light of Detroit's economy narrative:

What do the past and present-day narratives of Detroit's economy mean to you and your lived experiences?

Puerto Rico and Detroit, the latter in more recent times, have been the poster children for neglect, ridicule and resource removal. We have to keep struggling for another narrative when efforts are made to displace us. We survived no matter what.

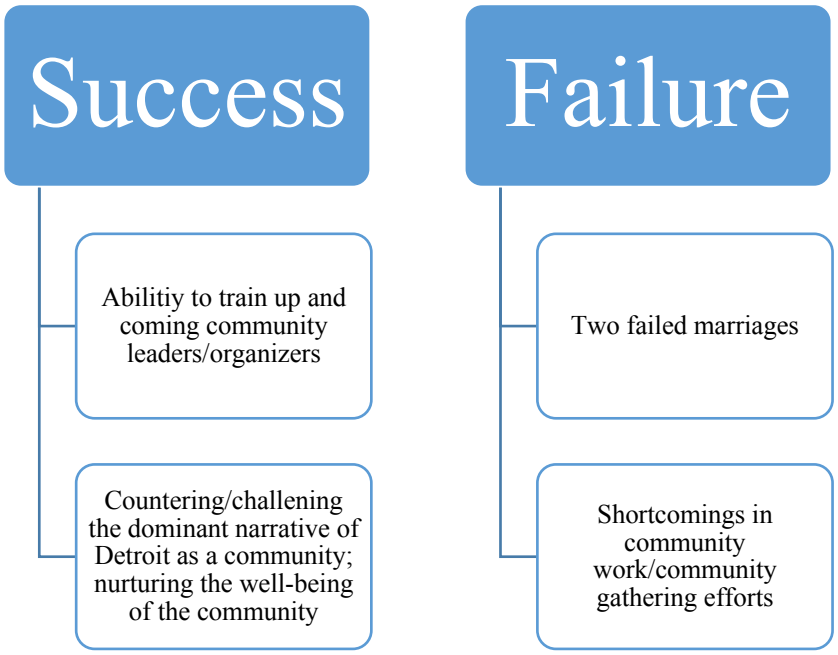

Figure 4: Summaries of success and failure (Ozzie)

Reflections on our Conversation

The stories told here begin to communicate how Ozzie understands his own situatedness within the community that he lives and works in. His role. His effort. His offering. Ozzie's positionality as a Puerto Rican, as someone who advocates for Puerto Rican culture for a living offers a unique perspective on what success and failure look like in a given context. These are the stories that are individual in nature about existing narratives that are largely accrued. Considered respectively, the stories that are told (and the factors that influence them) have

helped me to see how the individual positions themselves alongside others, helping "avoid generalizations" about how people experience success and/or failure. This is a move that seems to represent how certain meanings are made (and understood) both similarly and differently, based on the factors of influence that shape meanings. For Ozzie, not only is success or failure recognized through his embodiment as a Detroiter, but also as a Puerto Rican in Detroit, accounting for not just *his* history, but the histories of his family and of his cultural orientation.

The tune of success, on Ozzie's account, seems to be representative of a layered interconnection between the values he was raised with, how he has "come to define" success through his awareness and active participation, and how these perceptions are made visible through the work that he continues to do as an advocate for the community. Much in the way that bonds among the community and the promotion of "Latino self-determination" are important to Ozzie, I'm reminded of Daniel M. Gross's and Jonathan Alexander's particular attention to Ed Diener's definition of success in terms of the status quo: "being successful means accomplishing those things that are valued by one's culture, flourishing in terms of *the goals set forth by one's society*" (282). Giving light to failure/success narratives which seemingly support values that are inherently cultural (and particularly in the case I am making for people of color, namely Puerto Ricans), I suggest, here, that Ozzie's tellings operate at the level of the *counterstory* in that they reflect those experiences which are not often told—experiences in which resistance and survival that emerge from failures, insomuch as successes, shine at the core in order to challenge the dominant narratives otherwise told about Detroit, thus helping to strengthen the traditions of what they mean, as told from the perspectives of people of color (Aja Martinez 70).

We survived no matter what.

In many ways, the "fight against failure" through the lens of community organizing channels an endeavor toward challenging the dominant narrative—the otherwise "popular knowledge" (Mahiri) conveyed about Detroit's status as a city through the stock story narratives of failure so often told in popular media. Whether or not observed as a "practice," it can be reasonably thought of as a move, as a step toward a transformative knowledge that is more transparently representative of the stories and experiences emerging from the community and from the home and *not* from the outsider perspective. The story becomes one of flipping the switch, of turning the tables and rewriting the narrative encompassing Detroit as a city and a community at large—an ongoing effort that focuses on success as a kind of attitude toward community engagement that does not *forget* the failures of the past, but rather navigates the rewriting of failure through the values of those who are rewriting it.

Concentrating on this logic of success, in broad terms and as it is theorized in Gross and Alexander's *Frameworks for Failure* from rhetoric and composition, I'm further reminded of an early visit to Club Puertorriqueño de Detroit, where I met the club's longtime owner, Monin Bermudez. We're sitting, sharing a delightful conversation about

Figure 5: Mural on the wall at Club Puertorriqueño de Detroit

the community, about the club as being a space of belonging and togetherness. She then points to a nearby wall mural—a mural of a farmer, a woman, a dog, a rooster, all within close proximity of one another on the property of a small cottage-like home (see Figure 5).

NUNCA OLVIDES LO QUE FUISTE

"Never forget where you come from," Monin tells me. This was her translation of the scripture written beneath the artwork on the wall. It's a narrative that is as community-situated as it is culturally-situated. It's a narrative of collectiveness and connectedness—an effort toward strengthening the community under a more positive light.

NUNCA OLVIDES LO QUE FUISTE

I think of Monin's translation, the *meaning* of this mural, and am reminded that Ozzie's ultimate goal in the work that he does in (and for) Detroit is to continue "promoting community organizing" and to mentor others in community leadership roles. Ozzie shared with me the *need* he feels to "train as many individuals as possible who can continue progressive organizing." These conversations seem to meet at the crosshairs in that they inherently value a sense of community, of bonds and of relationships among a collective—and it starts with the individual. These conversations directly speak to one another, despite being entirely separate conversations that I had. The "need" Ozzie communicates to me seems to symbolize that the practice of mentoring leaders as figures who will work to sustain the values of community connectedness is something that brings him success and happiness. However, it should be considered that a

success of this nature comes at the cost of some nature of failure. In paralleling a "framework for success" with a "framework for failure," Gross and Alexander posit how both of these, together, can bring us closer to an understanding of how failure and negative emotions are "an ineradicable and sometimes crucial component of our educational lives." In the same vein, the author's work to configure a model for critical pedagogy that reflects Ira Shor's call for a more "holistic, historically situated, politically aware intervention in society to solve a felt need or problem, to get something done in a context of reflective action" (288). In this way, it seems that Ozzie's desire, his *need* to train individuals in community organizing in order to be successful is reflective of this "intervention," based on a "felt need or problem," which is "embodied in the experience of systematic failure" (289). *Is Detroit's systematic failure somehow also Ozzie's?* In a way, the driving force behind both 1) his effort to reshape the dominant narrative and 2) to continue training others to be conscious community organizers reflects the move to solve the "problem," to somehow respond with reflective action in a way that represent his identity, his histories and

Figure 6: BombaRica performs at The Spirit of Detroit; a performer instructs a group of passersby to dance to the rhythm of the music being played

his present embodiments of both Puerto and Detroit. In a way, then, the values and motives shaping his role as a community organizer seem to reflect the kind of historically situated, politically aware intervention recognized in the model for critical pedagogy described by Shor. The *need* in Ozzie's case seems to emerge from the dominant narrative of Detroit's crumbling economy and community at large. This "felt need" for change reflects a kind of rhetorical exigence that attributes to his perception of success within himself and the success that he imagines, likewise, of the larger community and its "well-being." So BombaRica play on. Congas drumming away, the tunes and the moves of the island and the sounds of resurgence coming together as a way to bring the community together—toward a new narrative, toward a new perception of Detroit's success.

Club Puertorriqueño de Detroit

It was during my first arranged visit to the club that Eddie Caraballo and I had the chance to meet in person. Before he showed up, however, I had some quality time to mingle with a lively weekend crowd at Club Puertorriqueño. It was an opportunity that I couldn't pass up. The club was a space predominantly comprised of Puerto Ricans and other Spanish-speaking people who I imagined were all, ancestry aside, living and breathing Detroiters at the core. Perhaps more accurately: Michiganders, given the likelihood that a few were from around another part of town. However, I never imagined being approached at the bar by a Boricua wearing an Indians baseball jersey, in Detroit, who I'd come to find out had traveled from Cleveland. He was in town for some tournament or another, in Detroit, that his daughter was participating in. We both stood there leaning with our arms against the bar, beside each other, talking about anything while swigging Corona. "Why Cleveland?" is the question I'd eventually ask, and the answer was simple: *work*. He told me that there's a significant number of Puerto Ricans in Cleveland—something entirely new to my own knowledge of mainland communities. They know each other because they happen to find each other. They come to places where there are jobs and opportunities to live and work reasonably. More importantly, the club was largely a communal space where Puerto Ricans would gather in Detroit—to play music, to dance, to drink, to play dominoes, to chat and share stories. The nature of what I was experiencing in this space mirrored Juan Flores's observation of "lively gestures and hearty laughter accompanied by casual conversation" in the Puerto Rican casitas[3] of The Bronx (66). Club Puertorriqueño was a seemingly unexpected place situated in southwest Detroit where they embraced and expressed the style, the music and dance, the food, the language and ways of languaging, the games, the

[3] Casita: Spanish word translating to "little home."

embodiment and expression of all things Boricua. Flores goes on to account for the kind of transposition effect encompassing casita culture, which I found to be happening at the club—"for the community, building and being at the casita kindles a performative sense of vividly imagined place and time: "as if" we were in Puerto Rico or Puerto Rico were here…" (73).

Coming to a community completely new to me, I felt the need to share why I was there. At every turn, with every new person I met, I was met with the kind of look that I anticipated getting going into this. The look of unfamiliarity. I was shot with look after look that resided somewhere in between "we've never seen you around here before" and "welcome," ultimately leaning toward the latter. So I began telling my story. I told nearly every Boricua I met that I was visiting from East Lansing for research. I kept the academic jargon tucked away and was as reasonably brief and straightforward as possible. I told them that my research was on the Puerto Rican community in Detroit. Tales of my father's move from Río Piedras to Spokane, Washington as an ambitious twenty-something in search for "better" began to nurture and energize many of the conversations that I had with those at the club. A couple of *free* Coronas later, I was at the domino table.

Shortly thereafter, Eddie showed up and I had the chance to meet him. We talked and I discussed my research with him ever so briefly. That evening, the club happened to be *packed*. The loudness of salsa music was in an intense rhythm with the chatter of Puerto Ricans who danced, played dominoes, ate, drank, watched the news and sports on nearby bar TVs, and debriefed about the workweek now behind them. Intuition told me that this was not the time to start asking interview questions…and I was more than fine with that. This moment in time was an experience, no less, that I've since come to reflect on as a kind of sharing of identity that required less of an academic orientation and more of my own participation. So I celebrated with

them—even if it was merely a celebration of a forthcoming weekend. I had a couple more beers. I lost a couple of dollar bills at the domino table. I was in Puerto Rico, but somehow in Detroit.

It was during my second visit to Detroit and to Club Puertorriqueño that I managed to have an interview conversation with Eddie. We met at the club on a weekday. The club parking lot was empty and the Lyft driver who dropped me off was certain to ask "you sure this is the place?" Of course it was. Sure, it was in an industrial part of town situated in a warehouse among garages, storage spaces, and across the street from a shipping container facility, but this was the place—U.S. and PR flags still flowing in rhythm with the wind. Eddie and another club volunteer pulled into the parking lot within minutes of each other. We went inside, the lights were switched on, and our conversation began. Going into the interview, I knew that the story I wanted to tell would call on an awareness of one's own place in the community and their understanding of how they got here, as was the case with Ozzie.

As it turns out, Eddie's aunt had been living in the city of Detroit at the time that his father was looking for a place in the states. His father having come to the mainland U.S. from the mountains of Caguas, Puerto Rico, Eddie recalls his father's stories about the brief time he'd spent working on farms in North Carolina before eventually moving back to the island. Ultimately, after making a second move from Puerto Rico to Detroit, Eddie's father stayed with his aunt in Detroit. While his father didn't initially have plans to stay there, a house fire would ultimately prompt him to stay, find work, and make a life in the city. Eddie's mother, who moved to Michigan from Guadalajara, Mexico, met his father while both had been taking English classes at a little place called Ser Metro—a place that has since been a veteran's hall and is now a bar. "My mother has a similar story," Eddie told me. His mother once worked in a factory, in an auto parts manufacturing facility, while taking college classes to complete an

Associate's degree in nursing. She never satisfied the requirements of the degree. Instead, she went on to work jobs as a school secretary and as an assistant at the secretary of state, handing out driver's licenses.

Reflective of the questions asked early on in our discussion, Eddie spent a considerable amount of time speaking to his connection to his parents and the personalities of both. His father, who worked for General Motors, was a frequenter at Club Puertorriqueño and Eddie would often come with him to listen to music and perform before taking up a volunteer position with the club. "As you can see," he tells me, "I'm usually hanging around Puerto Ricans and I'm a very strong advocate for Puerto Rican culture" (personal communication). An emerging question in our conversation, I asked him to consider how he represents his Puerto Rican and Mexican identities differently. Eddie began by telling me that he has come to be a direct reflection of his parents. "My mother isn't openly patriotic. She has an appreciation for her culture, but you know, you never saw her waving around a Mexican flag..." On a contrary note, he speaks of his father as very outgoing and prideful: "…whereas my dad always had the flag on his rearview mirror." Beyond acknowledging his father's open expression of pride and joy for Puerto Rico and how he feels his work for the community channels his father's personality, he added an important factor that has shaped his advocacy for Puerto Ricans in Detroit:

> At the same time, I see the need there is from the Puerto Rican side. You see a lot of well-established Mexican businesses…though there's definitely a need to help the Mexican community, it seems a little more balanced. You see very successful Mexicans, you see businesses, you see this and that…you even see it with the extended community. I feel like the Puerto Rican community has needed my help more than the Mexican community, so that's where I've focused a lot of my own

> efforts is in trying to embrace my Puerto Rican side, to make sure I understand what it is, what it means…cause I mean nobody wants to be a fake, you know, a pretend Puerto Rican.

When I told Eddie to share an experience that he had with success, it became a story of a young Dominican girl who was closely involved in the traditional Puerto Rican parrandas (Christmas caroling) with Eddie and other local musicians during the holiday season. Eventually, there came a point when Eddie welcomed her talent to his band, offering her an opportunity to sing with them at a performance. "Watching her progress musically" was the success that Eddie saw through to in this situation. He reflected on her growth as a singer—from the parrandas to community gatherings at their church, until she ultimately had the chance to entertain a crowd from the stage alongside Eddie's band and, as he put it, "introduce them to the culture." Eddie told me that in the weeks following the event, the same Dominican girl told her parents that she wanted to have her Quinceañera (15th birthday celebration) at the Puerto Rican Club.

> Even though she's Dominican, she felt at home here in the Puerto Rican club. She felt that the people really embraced her…you know, she feels connected to the club, she feels connected to the culture, she feels connected to the community. Those are the kinds of things that are very fulfilling to me.

What struck Eddie as a "failure" is an ongoing story of unsuccessful efforts toward building and strengthening the community of not only Puerto Ricans, but largely of all Latinx groups in Detroit. There was no absence in the sense of priority so closely tied to community and togetherness throughout our conversation. It permeated through the story of the young Dominican girl. It would shine through Eddie's expression as he described their efforts to continue growing and maintaining a sense of community at the Puerto Rican club. He told two

related stories of failed experiences, one which spoke to the lack of connectedness among Puerto Ricans and other Latinx communities in Detroit (predominately Mexican) and another that explored the challenges to maintain a strong sense of community between the Boricuas themselves. Early on in this conversation, Eddie communicated a "general sense of rivalry" that exists between the Mexican and Puerto Rican communities in Detroit, citing a very apparent "lack of understanding" between them:

> It's not a national thing. I would say it's more of a regional thing…the Mexicans that tend to come here from Mexico are from more of the northern side of Mexico and the culture there is different. I just think that there's a lack of understanding from both communities and to a certain extent a lack of tolerance.

Eddie, being of both Mexican and Puerto Rican descent, acknowledged that many of the Mexican community members who come directly from Mexico are simply raised in a different kind of culture than the Spanish-speaking cultures of the Caribbean islands. In his experience, he has noticed that more of the second-generation Mexicans and Puerto Ricans living in Detroit seem to share a connection, more so than the first-generation families that initially migrated to Michigan. In our conversation, Eddie called attention to a critical indicator of how he has seen the second generation come to realize the relationships between them—through *language*:

> Because of the language, the second generation people have, you know, embraced the things that we have in common in order to create a larger community…but still, with the first generation, there still seems to be some level of tension and just a lack of understanding—I call it a general ignorance—you know, but it's just there, it's something that's evident. We've had Mexican events here at the Club,

> events targeted at the Mexican community, and there are some that do come here and have a great time, yet there are others that feel very uncomfortable coming here.

When Eddie spoke to the public events targeted at drawing in the Mexican population of Detroit, I was able to see just how efforts of community building have played a role in the labor he does for the Puerto Rican Club. Whether or not these events are "successful," he says, boiled down to the people—how open they are to understanding the other culture, to the other community.

> A lot of the time, when they come here with that negative attitude, it's just going to reflect on their experience…we can't change that. People are who they are, but we try to be as welcoming to all cultures here as possible in order to keep us all united and support each other and help each other out.

Eddie talked a lot about attitude as being a critical factor in how interactions tend to play out—both within the Puerto Rican community and in cross-cultural, cross-national connections with Detroit's Mexican community. Tensions that Eddie addressed, existing within the Puerto Rican community itself, emerged as a topical conversation on languaging and the spreading of rumors as imposing a negative influence on interactions and efforts to bring the community together, especially by way of events that he hosts at the club. When asking Eddie to describe an experience with failure, it was yet another story about his attempt to circulate and host an event at Club Puertorriqueño—in this instance, a domino tournament. "Sometimes we hold events and essentially get zero turnout," Eddie admitted. Focusing in on a particular moment in time, he recalls his attempt to host a domino tournament, just weeks prior to our interview, in which most

of the club's regulars failed to show up and offer their support. He credits this lack of attendance to a "practice" of spreading rumors referred to as, in Spanish, *bonchinche*:

> It stems from a lot of what we call "bonchinche"—it started with some gossip from a few weeks prior…it was frustrating to me because we had discussed the event and the people understand that we're doing it for the community, we're doing it for them and for *everyone* and yet they still don't come out.

Eddie told me that *bonchinche* is common "in our Puerto Rican community." Admittedly, many people are driven by the gossip that flows around and it is commonplace that the story ends up being misconstrued: "it starts off as somebody got poked with a pencil and by the time it gets to the fifth person, it's that somebody threw a grenade." This is the kind of languaging that often happens in the community that ends up hurting their efforts to keep the community together. "Unfortunately, a lot of people take pleasure in that," he told me, "they take pleasure in pointing out the negative things more than the positive."

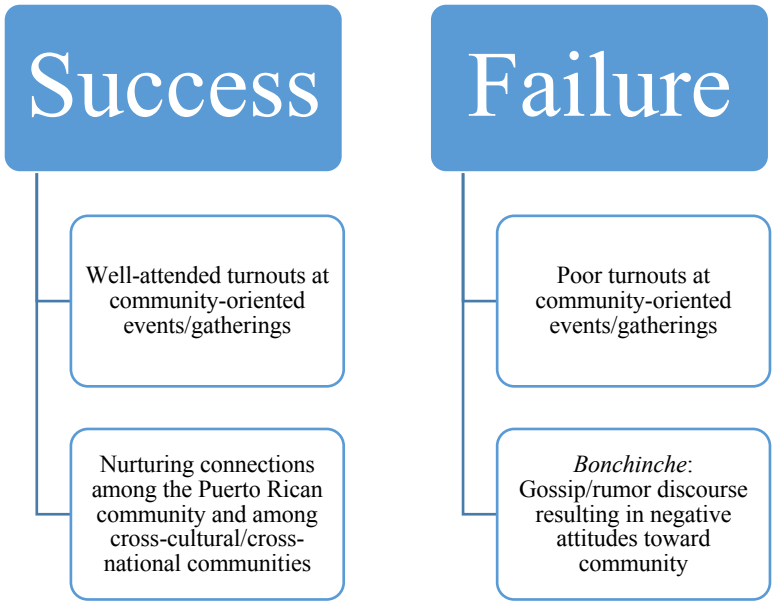

Figure 7: Summaries of success and failure (Eddie)

Reflections on our Conversation

This is the very conversation that has encouraged me to think back to Fergus's discussion on a student's self-identification as a "Detroit-Rican." The student that Fergus listened to—Samantha—is Puerto Rican and living in Detroit. Fergus notes that Samantha's identification as Detroit-Rican invoked a recognition of her Puerto Rican roots as "always present where she goes." Still, Fergus notes that the community hosts its own role in this identification. Beyond being in tune with representations of "Rican-ness" stemming from her mother and grandmother, Fergus conveys that her use of Detroit-Rican involved a "layered understanding" that signaled a relationship between her cultural, ancestral rootedness to Puerto Rico and an embodied identification to a specific locale that she since adapted to: Detroit.

I imagine that a similar thing happens in the story that Eddie tells me of the young Dominican girl. This narrative experience seems to speak to a way in which someone maintained their embeddedness in a particular culture, yet recognized the precise influence that the surrounding community has—Detroit, yes, but also a *Puerto Rican* Detroit, a "layered understanding" of the values at play. It seems to be a negotiation worthy of recognition in any effort to understand how those from different backgrounds engage with others in different—sometimes complex—spaces. The "layered" nature of identification, here, portrays that there are a host of factors contributing to how an individual understands their own connectedness within a community and a given space where interactions take place. For Eddie, a story of connectedness within a particular space was the story resting on the edge of his tongue when making sense of "success," directly citing it as something that brings him "fulfillment." To recall Deanna Fassett's study findings from her study on undergraduate student conceptualizations of success, she indicates a pattern in the ways which success is contingent with fulfillment, attained through

various means. She specifically indicates the rhetorical nature of individualism and fulfillment as one of two identifiable themes that emerged from her focus group interviews: "(1) success is determined by an individual, internal assessment of whether one has achieved personal fulfillment, or (2) success is determined by an external, imposed assessment of whether one has achieved someone else's standards" (68-9). Thinking about an interaction as an engine with the potential to influence attitudes and behaviors of students, I was intrigued to discover just how attitude and behavior, too, have influenced ongoing efforts to nurture the relationships among Detroit's Puerto Rican community (particularly with other Latinx groups). What Eddie describes as a "failure," as discussed previously, also reflects community attitudes and behaviors.

It ultimately seems that the exchanging or sharing of "bonchinche" emerges as a kind of negativity attributed to discourse interactions within the community. Eddie, who associates failure with the lack of attendance at community organized events that he works to arrange with others at Club Puertorriqueño, sees that this influence of discourse favoring the "negative" gets in the away of his success—success being collective moments within the community that give him a sense of fulfillment, such as the experience with the young Dominican girl and the effective turnouts of events at the club. It becomes clear that hearsay among the community exposes weaknesses in the efforts to bring the community together in the space devoted to nurturing the positive interactions needed to keep the community thriving. Beyond bonchinche, the stories of cross-cultural interactions among Latinx communities in Detroit also gives rise to failure when there is a lack of interest in engaging in those events which target other Latinx nationalities. Eddie, in his role as a volunteer organizer of a community-oriented space, works to gather different Latinx groups as a way of recognizing their similarities, toward a kind of social justice for Latinx people largely.

In an ongoing effort to grow and connect the community, the work that Eddie does as a volunteer for Club Puertorriqueño seems to place togetherness and unity at the forefront of motivations. In fact, given my other observations and conversations of engagements and events at the club, I brought myself to recognize that, beyond merely motivation, it exists as a kind of driving force behind their operations. Eddie's embodiment of both Mexican and Puerto Rican nationalities seems to make for intriguing observations regarding the connections among both populations of Latinx Detroiters. Largely, efforts to host events that reach out to both communities, while sometimes successful and other times not, is reflective of historian Delia Fernandez's research on Michigan Puerto Rican and Mexican communities in "Becoming Latino: Mexican and Puerto Rican Community Formation in Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1926-1964." Fernandez's historical account of these cross-national and cross-cultural engagements shares details about the connections and tensions among both nationalities in the Grand Rapids community during the span of years denoted in the title. Her research recognizes that both Mexicans and Puerto Ricans ultimately seemed to "see the value of crossing ethnic lines and fostering cultural exchanges," despite never losing their individual ethic/national identities (100). In doing so, it is suggested that, together, they accepted a "broader, Latino identity" that extended beyond the linguistic relationship they shared as Spanish-speakers. As Fernandez additionally points to, these connections were fostered by their own forging of a Latino identity related to everyday experiences with religion, popular culture, and recreation. As an example, she notes that Puerto Ricans and Mexicans often located their connectedness by way of movies: "though movies reflected Mexican experiences and culture, Puerto Ricans could relate to the storylines and for an hour and a half they could watch the big screen in a language they could understand" (96). As such, movies were but one avenue for Mexicans and Puerto Ricans to both

forge a kind of shared Latino identity in small-town Grand Rapids. In this same research, Fernandez acknowledges the tensions that arose within the community, citing visible conflicts between acquaintances, friends, and family through social interactions. Speaking to Eddie's perspective, this mix of connections and tensions seems to represent the balance of larger Latinx engagement efforts at Club Puertorriqueño: "we've had Mexican events here at the Club, events targeted at the Mexican community, and there are some that do come here and have a great time, yet there are others that feel very uncomfortable coming here" (personal communication). Nevertheless, it is seemingly through his work and his embodiment as both a Puerto Rican and Mexican living in Detroit that he has aimed to encourage an acceptance of a "broader Latino community" in the city.

Overall, the conversation that Eddie and I had about the connections (and disconnects) between the Puerto Rican and Mexican communities of Detroit (predominantly southwest Detroit, in some contexts referred to as "Mexicantown") was driven by more than his own embodiment of both Puerto Rican and Mexican culture. In particular, I was seeking out an understanding of whether or not (and to what extent) they find connections among themselves through shared characteristics, as pointed to in Eddie's story of community organizing in Detroit and as acknowledged in Delia Fernandez's historical account of social interactions in Grand Rapids. Just in the way that Julia Albarracín aims to understand the extent to which Mexican immigrants' perceptions of other Latinx experiences in their community "has implications for their own lives," I was largely driven by a curiosity about how they might locate solidarity as a collective (38). Albarracín, looking specifically at a community in Illinois, was interested in understanding the factors that influenced their sense of connectedness as one among a variety of Latinx groups. The stakes for this particular interest seem high, as Albarracín notes that certain

interviewees believed the sense of "linked fates" with other Latinos was important for influencing the political system. In considering the larger-scale potential that the Latinx community holds in shaping the way(s) Detroit is portrayed and the way(s) Detroit is observed as a community, I think back to Eddie's ongoing effort to host events to draw in the Mexican community at Club Puertorriqueño. I'm reminded that the lack of understanding and the "general" ignorance that so often correlates to poor turnouts among different generations of Latinx groups has long been an experience of failure for Eddie. This being the case, I'm brought to think about the ways in which attitude is closely tied with community organizing. Beyond Eddie's role in hosting the events, the level of participation is often left up to the individual and whether or not they are comfortable (or willing to step outside of their comfort zone on behalf of the greater Latinx community of Detroit). Nurturing this level of collectivity seems, to me, an ongoing effort of learning—one that speaks to the eight "habits of mind" in *Framework for Success*. This, of course, links back to student engagement and success in the college writing classroom. However, the degree to which habits of "curiosity," "openness," "engagement," and "flexibility" speak across contexts, to community organizing efforts and to student success in the classroom, seems significant.

Curiosity: the desire to know more about the world.

Openness: the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.

Engagement: a sense of investment and involvement in learning.

Flexibility: the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.

These habits, among four others, are considered through the lens of student learning in the writing classrooms and seem to reflect the values Eddie voiced in our conversation about the community-oriented events held at the club, such as the "failed" domino tournament. While these interpretations of curiosity, openness, engagement, and flexibility may be somewhat limited in their definitions, they each seem to reflect a rhetoric in the vein of positive attitude. Eddie, through his work at the club, actively works to foster a space where these (especially openness and engagement) are highly encouraged and are, in many ways, embodied. Given Eddie's emphasis on attitude in our conversations, I brought myself to consider the ways in which his focus on the "lack of understanding" and "general ignorance" between communities parallels a lack, thereof, of curiosity, of openness, of engagement, and of flexibility as they are described here. In consequence, it becomes apparent that Eddie's own success suffers when the surrounding community neglects to see through to his efforts of bringing them together in the social spaces where these habits hold the potential to help shape the community in a positive way.

Conclusion

These are the conversations that begin to shed light on a particular community and on particular perspectives of how present leaders in Detroit's Puerto Rican community see their own success and failure through the very work that they do. In light of these conversations, it becomes apparent that instances of tension among cross-cultural interactions emerged as part of the "problem" of larger community building efforts, perceived as a *failure* in Eddie's eyes. On quite the contrary, I'm reminded of the ways in which togetherness and a sense of belonging manifested by others is thought of as a *success*. What I imagine this communicates is the ever-important value of community that is perhaps best recognized in the very interactions that people have with one another—individually or as a collective. I've shared these stories to make evident the significance of space and place that is alluded to, through these conversations, and the relationship between communal spaces and efforts of community building that encompass the work that both Eddie and Ozzie do. Space and place seems important for a number of things, among them the social integration of those individuals who migrate to entirely new places at any point in their lifetime. Just as Elizabeth Aranda found through her research on Puerto Rican migration to the mainland United States, those who migrate often cope with the challenges and struggles of incorporating by "recreating support networks in the host society." As Aranda illustrates in an example of a Puerto Rican migrant's experience, the narrative told of this individual's experience explained the ways in which involvement in a predominantly Latino (mostly Puerto Rican) church helped him and his wife create a network of friends," ultimately aiding them in their adaption to a life in the mainland United States (210).

The idea of a "network," here, becomes increasingly relevant to the nature of work performed by both Ozzie and Eddie, nevertheless in distinct ways. It's the effort described

throughout this retelling of their stories that accounts for their commitment to creating and nurturing spaces for underrepresented communities to come together, to interact, to be social across both similarities and differences. In Ozzie's case, as I've described, the notion of success further operates at the level of his own ability to train new faces how to be leaders in community organizing roles. It is the perceptions of failure—literally, in the cases described, a kind of failed attempt at creating or maintaining a connection—that seems to speak to how a lack of community organizing might have a negative influence on the community at large. Interestingly, the ways of languaging that disrupt these efforts (such as *bonchinche*) appear to boil down to each community member's own attitude and is thus increasingly dependent upon the individual.

What I have evidenced through the narratives retold about the histories, the working lives of Puerto Rican community organizers in Detroit are the ways in which conceptualizations of success and failure are acutely crafted through experiences of community work interactions and community gatherings, through the awareness of the challenges being faced by the community at large, and through cultural/familial values. In this way, it can be reasonably thought that the rhetorical nature of success and failure are hardly concrete—rather, they have the potential to shift with changing times and circumstances encountered at the level of the subject. What becomes clear is that the meaning ascribed to certain language is vast, seemingly comprised by varying factors and to varying degrees that link back to their ethnic, spatial, and work identities. In the cases described, identities are seemingly layered, recognizing the awareness participants have of the intersection between their deep roots (as both Puerto Rican and as mixed Puerto Rican and Mexican), but also of their rootedness in their specific locale: Detroit. Consequently, the factors that have been channeled through the questions asked consider the ways in which cultural and familial perceptions of success and failure are passed down, how success and failure

are shaped by the work of community organizing and community interactions, and the role that culture can shape these understandings. Further, in an evident relationship with the re/construction and co-re/construction of narrative, these conversations aim to make visible the role that community engagement and community organizing have in proactively reshaping the success story behind the face of Detroit. They account for the ways in which interactions among the community have shaped perceptions of what success and failure mean, indicating the role that these lived moments have in accordance with their own identities as Puerto Ricans in Detroit and how they are represented through story, through telling, through sharing. It is, seemingly across both cases described, through their embodied identities as Puerto Rican Detroiters that they have committed to a kind of work which channels advocacy for connections across Latinx cultures and nationalities. It is through their work and through their organic perceptions of success and failure that they also work to challenge the commonplace narratives of success and failure that exist for both Detroit and Puerto Rico.

In spotlighting my case for further attention on narratives of success and failure in the vein of community building and community organizing, I return to Fassett and Warren's acknowledgement of individualism and the move of locating one's own successes or failures in the actions of the individual actors. As I hope to have explicitly described in the retelling of the narratives explored through this fieldwork research, the *actions* of community organizing as ongoing efforts encompassing the body of work taken on by these participants are individual in nature, with notable overlaps and outliers between them. It is through this notion of locating success and failure within the actions (as told through the stories) of individual actors that I echo Frankie Condon's call for the necessity of narrative. Because these stories about what success and failure mean have emerged from a community, it rings true to me that there is a need to

make central our efforts in learning to read and engage with the stories of others—especially of those who are so often othered. When I say "our" efforts, I make the return to focus on academics, scholars, *teachers* of writing who often encounter narrative genres of knowing, doing, and being that reflect communities which may be unfamiliar to them, to *us*. As such, I forward a new layer to this necessity—a need for composition educators to realize the importance of dynamics and of rhetorics tied to success and failure as a way to encourage and engage in "practices of listening, attending, acknowledging, and honoring the stories of our students and colleagues of color" (32). Beyond stories, these are contributions. The stories of others, of those other(ed) are more than stories in that they are "perspectives toward an ongoing conversation in the field about narrative and dominant ideology" that intersect with a potential to influence the standards otherwise imposed on programmatic practices and curricula in the field (83). Largely, the complexities of success and failure and their relationship with individuality, with the personal, offers an avenue for exploring the rich epistemological and rhetorical traditions informing those narratives, belonging to people of color, which speak to moments of interaction within the very communities that share complexities of their own (Condon 33). These complexities across contexts of the classroom and the community, in the words of Ozzie Rivera, can never go underestimated.

Discussion

While the scope of this fieldwork has been intentionally limited, I trust that the *trajectory* of this approach to fieldwork allows for opportunities to consider the vast applications of community perspectives across other contexts of spatial interactions and engagements. What I hope these insights forward, looking ahead, is a refined means for imagining how the perceptions and practices of community building that happen in spaces external to the classroom can somehow speak to negotiations and interactions in academic learning environments. Returning, momentarily, to Fassett and Warren's study, I'm reminded of a quote from a respondent that directly speaks to the strategic rhetoric of individualism in the tune of "being" successful:

> In order to be successful, you have to want to learn. You have to want to be there.

The notion of *being there* seems to speak to the significance of place and the relationship between place and progress. If indeed the *ability to write well* is "linked primarily and explicitly to college preparation and career success," I find myself wondering how to create spaces for students that reflect frameworks for success, for failure, and the negotiation between the two. Moreover, as a teacher of writing, it is a priority that I work to understand and nurture a writing classroom environment that places the interplay of success and failure dynamics and the identities, the values of individual students at the forefront. In doing this, I look to directly vocalize the negotiations between the values of the students—individually and as a collective community—in tune with my own student learning values as communicated in designed goals and outcomes. If it is true that students who come to college writing with these experiences and habits of mind "will be well positioned to meet the writing challenges in the full spectrum of academic courses and later in their careers," I wonder how practices and attitudes toward

community-engaged integrations in learning environments might reflect in the composing of narratives and of discourse exchanges in moments of peer review, group-oriented activities, and the like.

My aim, in the long term, is to continue working with Latinx communities in some capacity through the lens of the everyday rhetorics that they experience, of the stories they tell, and of the implications for teaching in learning their community-situated narratives offer. Just as Aja Martinez's commitment to her work, and her work itself, acts as "a vehicle by which to raise awareness through counterstory of issues affecting the access, retention, and success of Latin@s in higher education," it is my goal to continue observing and working through a similar commitment of my own (82). Under this same scope, I continue to narrow my focus in on the first-year writing classroom, which functions as a part of the larger first-year experience of new college students, whether or not they are first-generation. Beyond imagining the classroom as a contact zone where identities and values of individual students might mesh and collide, I also consider the role(s) success and failure dynamics have in the assessment of writing and of writing students. Asao Inoue, in "Designing Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies," recognizes the elements, the *moving parts* of antiracist assessment in a heuristic intended for developing generative writing assessment ecologies. This is forwarded, moreover, as a way of helping writing teachers think about the ways their classrooms are antiracist and reflect the individualized bodies of students that encompass their seemingly complex class rosters. Among considerations for devising rubrics, providing feedback, and more, there is a realization of the role that failure and success play in the classroom and in the assessment of writing students and their work. Inoue poses questions such as:

- How is failure constructed as a place in the ecology?
- How is success constructed and how often are students placed in the position of success?
- Is success public or private?
- Do you offer any formal moments in the course to ask students about how failure and success are created in the class, in their writing, in their labors, or how the nature of success and failure have changed for them?

While these are only a few among many of the questions offered in the fifth chapter of Inoue's larger text, these questions, as considerations, prompt a recognition of success and failure as they are constructed, negotiated, and communicated in this writing classroom. Emerging from this conversation on success and failure is an opportunity to acknowledge just how these conceptualizations are constructed or co-constructed in ways that may reflect the layered factors comprising identities, as observed in my community-centered research. Through experiential narrative, we may better understand how students position themselves in their communities as users of language and as meaning-makers, so as to avoid generalizations about how students experience, understand, and navigate perceived moments of failure and success. Understanding, early on, how these dynamics operate in the classroom (and in the lives of students) might allow for a more transparent co-construction and negotiation of writing assessments that reflect those values in place in the classroom—that is, the values set forth by both writing students and writing instructors. The next step, then, is just that: to understand how moments of interaction play out in the classroom and how the perceptions and the values students come in with shape those interactions and their learning, their progress as writers. With this nature of inquiry as a next endeavor of research, I look to carry forward the practices that

I've applied through my community-based fieldwork in Detroit as a way to begin imagining the parallels, the *possibilities* between the many ways of knowing, doing, and being that exist within the writing classroom and within the arenas of discourse students walk in from.

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