

Review:

Octavio Pimentel. *Historias de Éxito within Mexican Communities: Silenced Voices*

Shane Teague,
Texas State University

In much traditional discourse on success, there is an undercurrent of objectivism. Pseudo-empirical conceptions of economic success, which grant economics an undue status as an objective metric by which to measure cultural superiority, tell the comfortable, the wealthy, and the privileged that some cultures are just better by virtue of their production. This false objectivity justifies the reification of White European American (WEA) values and only those values by reducing time-honored ideas about success in certain communities to excuses for those communities' poor performance and, as in the extremely regrettable case of the present day in the United States, using that incongruence between definitions of success to subjugate and demonize those communities' who do not share WEA values.

The ethnocentrism of the right, particularly that of the new, hardline rightwing—who are overwhelmingly unreceptive to frank, honest discussion of race and class—makes

submission to WEA success narratives mandatory and reaffirms worshipping monetary gain as the sine qua non of American life. The mindset of the assimilationist right is ultimately a dualistic way of thinking. Understanding and combating this mindset is all the more important today for students, teachers, and private citizens alike, given the events of the 2016 presidential campaign and just the first three months after the election of the 45th President of the United States. *Reflections* readers do this work in their private and professional lives, and, as such, *Historias de Exito within Mexican Communities: Silenced Voices* could become a very important activist text, allowing scholars and educators to counter this dualism, to pluralize our discussions of success, and to counter the fallacious narrative that success is only found in economics. Pimentel disrupts ethnocentric points of view on latin@s, positing that success, in effect, has no objective measure. While the text may not lend itself to being taught, per se, *Historias* should be required reading for scholars working with populations in latin@ communities.

Historias should inspire some deconstructive work on and reassessment of the success metrics engrained in the national identity of the United States. As Victor Villanueva suggests in his foreword to *Historias*, some of our imagined national identity will need to be troubled to move beyond simplistic notions of success. To accommodate stories that include those metrics and narratives derived from latin@ communities, Villanueva asserts that we have to attempt to “understand how a man who is described as a good man (buena gente) and hard worker (buen trabajador) but is nevertheless jailed and deported can be a success” (xii). The fact that this condition, that of Luis, one of Pimentel’s interviewees, is a material reality experienced by a human is enough to trouble the binary of success vs. failure due to its poignant illustration of latin@ incongruence with WEA ideals. Luis is unsuccessful on their terms because he has not achieved financial excess; on his own terms, however, he meets his family’s needs, provides his children with educational opportunities, and works hard. Adding this nuance to discussions about success is precisely the labor that Pimentel undertakes in *Historias*.

Historias begins troubling WEA conceptions of success by confirming that there are other metrics against which to measure

it and also by providing two concrete instances in which success is measured subjectively by different cultural standards. Rather than defining latin@ success and failure in WEA terms, as the degree to which latin@s submit to poverty and poor performance, as much conservative discourse does, *Historias* reveals how latin@ communities have traditionally defined success for themselves. In doing this work, Pimentel and his research participants have begun to publicly counter the prevalent narrative of deficiency that follows latin@s throughout their lives. Ending this rhetoric of deficiency, paying attention to these *historias* from the latin@ community, is more important now than ever before, given this year's populist dragging of latin@s in the media. *Historias* does the work of ending this narrative, but more public work will need to be done in order to finally halt the latin@ deficiency narrative.

The public work to be done and the angle that Pimentel takes on the public presentation of latin@ success is precisely why *Reflections* readers should give *Historias* their attention and should incorporate its ethos into their research, classrooms, and community outreach. Pimentel and his study participants demonstrate the inadequacy of—the calculated racism of—the WEA narrative about latin@ success while simultaneously positively arguing against the centrality of WEA success narratives. Put another way, Pimentel explores the flip side of the ethnocentric, fallacious argument that centralizes WEA ideas about success in the first place, in turn illustrating the inadequacy of WEA ideas. In either case, *Reflections* readers working with latin@s or within latin@ communities can benefit from reading and integrating Pimentel's work because it provides a means to demonstrate and encourage the pluralization of success narratives and, pivotally, a means to do the same without degrading the individualistic ideals intertwined with American identity.

Consider the story of Quetzin. Quetzin owns and operates a very successful food production business in Salt Lake City. Quetzin started from virtually nothing with a \$10,000 loan in 1997. Though he obtained a B.A. and completed a year of law school in Mexico, when he came to the United States, there was little in the way of opportunity waiting for him. Now, two decades later, Quetzin's business is a multi-million dollar company. Quetzin has achieved the American

dream, but Quetzin himself does not personally define success as achievement of monetary gain. Instead, Quetzin's definition of success is multi-faceted and intricately intertwined with his culture and familial history. To Quetzin, success is defined by how many people he can help and how he can help them, how hard he works, and his family's well-being. While Quetzin would be considered a capitalist success, his own attitudes about success run counter to the inherent individualism in traditional capitalist success stories.

Telling stories like Quetzin and Luis' is of great importance today, as latin@s are vilified in the media and fast capitalist ideals about success become more and more engrained in the fabric of American life. Pimentel's *Historias de Éxito* provides two examples of pluralized success stories as well as a way to explore and pluralize narratives of success from the cultural standpoint of the latin@. Maybe most importantly, *Historias* demonstrates the plain fact that, although latin@s may define success differently from White European Americans, this diversity of definitions can and should exist in the United States today if for no other reason than to help us all avoid the dualistic thinking of the generations that came before us.

Shane Teague is a Masters student in Rhetoric and Composition at Texas State University where he studies translingualism and writing pedagogy. His work can be found in *Reflections*, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and *Texas Books in Review*.