

CHAPTER 9.

OHIO FARM STORIES: A FEMINIST APPROACH TO COLLABORATION, CONVERSATION, AND ENGAGEMENT

Christine Denecker

The University of Findlay

Sarah Sisser

Hancock Historical Museum

The Ohio Farm Stories project began with a grant from the Ohio Humanities Council and a goal of collecting and showcasing narratives that focus on family farm life and the ways in which agriculture has and continues to shape lives and local Ohio communities. Integral to these narratives are emergent themes of how farming practices and values have evolved to meet societal demands in the past century. This chapter situates the farm stories research within Royster and Kirsch's three-step inquiry framework layered with notions of narrative and place. The result is a series of Ohio Farm Stories montages that provide both fixed and open interpretations. Portions of this chapter allow readers the opportunity to "listen deeply and respectfully" to the words and images of the project. The chapter closes with insight into the trajectory of the project and the project's "public life"—specifically the complexity of interpretation when narrative becomes a collective, collaborative endeavor among the researchers, the participants, and the community.

In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, Jacqueline Royster and Gesa Kirsch (2012) argue that current feminist rhetorical scholarship is pushing beyond its former goals of "rescuing, recovering and (re)inscribing women rhetors" (p. 25) to more general methodologies that position researchers to "discover new genres, voices, and ways of reasoning that have been cast in shadow for many decades if not centuries" (p. 150). Furthermore, these methodologies apply to subjects beyond the female, and provide "mechanisms by which listening deeply, reflexively, and

multisensibly become standard practice not only in feminist rhetorical scholarship but also in rhetorical studies writ large” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 20). Such feminist rhetorical methodologies undergird on-going collaborative research between The University of Findlay and The Hancock Historical Museum, research that serves to preserve and reflect upon the agricultural history of Ohio.

This campus-community collaboration, entitled *Ohio Farm Stories*¹, began with a grant from the Ohio Humanities Council and a goal of collecting narratives from six Hancock County farmers in order to provide community members with the opportunity to trace the ways agriculture has and continues to shape the cultural landscape in northwestern Ohio. Integral to these narratives are emergent themes of how farming practices and values have evolved to meet societal demands in the past century.

Specifically, this campus-community partnership demonstrates an application of feminist rhetorical practices used to foster community engagement beyond academic borders. As feminist scholars, we have been challenged to answer Royster and Kirsch’s call to study non-traditional texts and local sites with the goal of “look[ing] beyond typically anointed assumptions in the field in anticipation of the possibility of seeing something not previously noticed or considered” (p. 72). Likewise, in this research, we have employed feminist thinking and practice in order to collect and then rightfully honor the stories of our local farming community and, in doing so, move these stories “from the ‘margins to the center’” by “eliminating boundaries that privilege dominant forms of knowledge building, boundaries that mark who can be a knower and what can be known” (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 3). As such, we consider our work a form of feminist intervention derived from and infused with “an ethos of humility, respect, and care” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 21) meant to put forth and nurture conversations about the history of Ohio agriculture.

In this chapter, we reflect upon the ways in which feminist rhetorical methodologies afforded us the means to honor the farmers’ stories in ways fitting with how they view their experiences. We begin with an explanation of the project’s roots and then situate our research within Royster and Kirsch’s three-step inquiry framework layered with notions of narrative and place. The multiple layers of this framework create a methodological structure that allows for the farmers’ voices, their homes, their barns, and their farms to co-mingle with the emotive experiences of all those involved in the research process. The result is a series of *Ohio Farm Stories* montages that foster both fixed and open interpretations. To

1 Originally, the project was entitled, *Ohio Farm Histories*. We chose to change the title after the initial work, as we believe the word “Stories” more accurately reflects the narrative function of the project, whereas “Histories” has a different connotation not as closely in keeping with the intent of the project.

increase the probability of open interpretations, portions of this chapter are constructed as to allow readers the opportunity to “listen deeply and respectfully” to the words and images of this project, just as we have strived to do. Finally, we conclude this chapter by reflecting on the trajectory of the project and the public life of the project—specifically the complexity of interpretation when narrative becomes a collective, collaborative endeavor among the researchers, the participants, and the community.

PROJECT ROOTS

“It all starts on a farm, somewhere, somehow”

- Farmer Gary Wilson

The *Ohio Farm Stories* project has its roots in two distinct places. First² is the successful Historic Barn Tour hosted by the Hancock Historical Museum in September 2013.

The self-guided tour, enjoyed by over 700 individuals, included stops at six century-old barns along with the opportunity to experience the sights, tastes, and sounds of the County’s heritage. Owners of three of these properties along with owners of three other County properties³ were eventually invited to participate in the *Ohio Farm Stories* project.

A short digression puts this tour and the subsequent *Ohio Farm Stories* project into context. In 1900, Hancock County had 3,263 farms; as of 2015, 831 farms encompassing 230,261 acres blanket the County. Of the 531.4 square miles of the County, 80% is used for agricultural production (G. Wilson, personal communication, September 1, 2015). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hancock County farmers were diversified, raising livestock and various crops. However, as agriculture became more commercialized, farmers found that diversified farms yielded small monetary returns (G. Wilson, personal communication, September 1, 2015). As a result, many were forced, in the words of farmer Miles Von Stein, “to get big or get out.” Specific to the dairy industry, in 1920, the County boasted over 10,000 head of dairy cattle. By the year 2000, that number had dwindled to fewer than 1,200 head, and today there are just four dairy farms in Hancock County⁴ (G. Wilson, personal

2 Subsequent successful barn tours were held in 2014 and 2015 (up to the time of this chapter’s publication).

3 The farmers were chosen specifically by Sarah who had already developed working relationships with them via other projects through the Hancock Historical Museum.










4 See the final video montage segment in *Function of the Farm* for Gary Wilson and David Spahr’s discussion on the number of dairy farms in Hancock County, 2015.

communication, September 1, 2015). In brief, while Hancock County remains a predominantly agricultural region, the nature and scale of farming has changed in the area over the past century. Thus, while not the intent of the 2013 Historic Barn Tour, this event served as a means for resurrecting, remembering, and celebrating the County's agricultural past. It also helped sow the seeds of the *Ohio Farm Stories* project.

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Figure 9.1. Barn Tour Announcement.

Along with the Barn Tour, the project's roots can also be traced to ideas birthed from work with the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN). This public archive “provide[s] a historical record of the literacy practices and values of contributors, as those practices and values change” (DALN home). As a result, when we—a faculty member at The University of Findlay (who had participated in collecting DALN contributions) and the director of the Hancock Historical Museum (who had organized the Historic Barn Tour)—were asked to brainstorm project ideas in response to a potential Ohio Humanities Grant, the notion of digitally collecting and archiving the stories of Hancock County farmers emerged.

Upon securing the grant, we considered, to borrow the words of Royster and Kirsch, how best to “honor their [the farmers’] traditions” (p. 20) in our gathering of their stories. We also grappled with other questions posed by Royster and Kirsch’s framework, such as “. . . how do we render their [the farmers’] work and lives meaningfully?”; “How do *they* frame (rather than *we* frame) the questions by which they navigated their own lives?”; “How do we transport ourselves back to the time and context in which they lived knowing full well that it is not possible to see things from their vantage point?” (p. 20).

Our commitment to answer these questions and to “listen carefully and caringly” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 147) led us to conduct pre-narrative-collection conversations with each farmer. In March 2014, we traveled to each farmer’s home to build relational bonds; that way, when it came time to record their stories, the experience would be more of a conversation than a potentially stiff exchange between researchers and research participants. Torrill Moen (2006) underscores the “necessity of time and space to develop a caring situation in which both the researcher and the research subjects feel comfortable” (pp. 61–62). Likewise, to borrow from Kris Blair, et al. (2009), our pre-interview discussions helped negate researcher-research subject hierarchies, and instead, cultivated a “non-hierarchical, co-equal model among colleagues” (p. 17). This approach also met the goal of feminist rhetorical practices in that it opened a space “for a more dialectical and reciprocal intellectual engagement” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 14) among us and the farmers, not unlike the “learning together” model described by Jenn Brandt, et al. (Chapter 7, this collection), which “encourages multiple perspectives and voices with active participation from all parties” (this collection). Thus, we came to view the farmers in the study as co-researchers and co-learners rather than subjects or participants.

These co-researchers consisted of five men and one woman⁵. It may be of interest to note that, according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, 784 of the

5 These co-researchers included Mark Metzger, David Spahr, Wayne Marquart, Jacki Johnson, Gary Wilson, and three generations of the Von Stein family: Harold, Dennis, and Miles.

farm operators in Hancock County were men, and 47 were women. As such, women's voices, at least those at the helm of farm operation, are an anomaly in Hancock County. With that said, farming in the County is historically a generational, familial enterprise; therefore, the initial pre-interview discussions (and the subsequent interviews, themselves) included family members other than just the farmers, themselves⁶. This was not by design. Instead, as these conversations unfolded across kitchen tables, other family members joined in to add to each narrative. Specifically, in four discussions, the farmers' wives played significant roles in shaping the narratives shared, and in one of those cases, three generations of family members simultaneously contributed to the storytelling.

At play here were notions of place and belonging in our choice, as researchers, to literally meet the farmers where they lived. Roxanne Mountford (2001) suggests the importance of material space and its effect on a "communicative event" when she states, "The material [space] . . . often has unforeseen influence over a communicative event" and "rhetorical spaces carry the residue of history within them" (p. 17). Consequently, feminist theories of space/place impacted our decision to conduct all narrative collection work within what bell hooks might call the farmers' "culture of belonging." This phrase denotes the place in which one's "sense of identity was shaped" (2009, p. 7); a place where "ways of belonging were taught" and where "cultural legac[ies] [were] handed down" (p. 13). For us, it was not enough to meet farmers within the culture of Hancock County; instead, we found it pertinent to meet the farmers in their homes, walk with them through their fields, and stand inside their barns since these places were important in the shaping of each farmer's identity. In doing so, we followed Royster and Kirsch's call to be "mindful of the locations we visit . . . and to our own embodied experiences, the responses invoked in us by visiting historical sites and handling cultural artifacts" (2012, p. 22).

The Spring 2014 pre-narrative-collection interview sessions were followed with non-scripted video recordings of each farmer at his or her farm. Equipped with a borrowed video camera, microphone, and minimal videography experience, we set out to record the stories, knowing that those stories (and not the quality of the video) were what mattered. We arrived at each farm with questions to use as prompting; however, we quickly found it best to let the farmers "frame the questions" as they shared how they had "navigated their own lives" (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 20). Most began their stories with a history of the farm. For our part, we simply listened, absorbed into this, our shared culture of belonging. In the end, we walked away with hours of raw footage and a sense that our journey was far from complete. Indeed, our County's agricultural past was within

6 Often, as in the case of the Metzgers, Spahrs, and VonSteins, these additional family members were off camera; however, their voices can sometimes be heard as part of the recordings.

reach; it lie curled up in the shadows of century-old barns; it peered at us from around the corners of abandoned migrant buildings; it waited patiently in cellars and silent milk houses. These recorded conversations were our first glimpses into what would become *Ohio Farm Stories*.

In amassing the stories of the six farmers, we logged over twelve hours of videotape relating how our County and its agricultural heritage had evolved over the past century. These partially edited videos ran on a continual loop as part of an exhibit at the 2014 Hancock County Fair and were accompanied by professionally designed posters depicting each farm(er) featured in the project.



Figure 9.2. Mark Metzger Ohio Farm Stories Poster.

In Summer 2014, we analyzed the hours of video in preparation for a September presentation at The University of Findlay, entitled “Life on the Farm.” The fair exhibit and lecture arguably became sites of feminist intervention in that both provided spaces for university and community members to experience the farmers’ stories and for us to move what might be considered a rhetorically “marginalized group” to “the center of social inquiry” (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 3).

THEORY MEETS THE FARM

“Farming’s in your blood. The smell of fresh dirt plowed over. There’s really just no other smell like that.”

- Farmer Dennis Von Stein

Feminist rhetorical principles, and the extent to which these principles are interwoven with concepts of material place and narrative, provide insight into the ways in which the *Ohio Farm Stories* project tells us “something about ourselves, our community, the nature of storytelling, and the role of the academy in creating and sustaining community activism” (Blair & Nickoson, 2016, this collection). In particular, Royster and Kirsch’s (2012) inquiry framework consisting of critical imagination, strategic contemplation, and social circulation informed our scholarly practices and helped make meaning of the stories we collected on a number of levels—from the personal to the communal. The fact that our study focused on mostly white, male farmers may seem methodologically mismatched or in contradiction to Royster and Kirsch’s support of breaking “through habitual expectations for rhetorical studies to be overwhelmingly about men and male-dominated arenas” (p. 17). Still, the authors suggest that their three-part inquiry framework has the propensity “to propel general knowledge-making processes in the field at large . . . to another, better-informed, more inclusive conceptual space” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 18). Therefore, while on the surface the *Ohio Farm Stories* project may appear to re-inscribe traditional patterns of rhetorical scholarship, a deeper look reveals how feminist rhetorical principles legitimized our intervention on behalf “of those whose voices have rarely been heard or studied by rhetoricians” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 20).

In particular, the first part of Royster and Kirsch’s framework, “critical imagination,” helped us shape an open, participant-driven research approach that resulted (for the most part⁷) organically in the stories our co-researchers wanted to tell. We approached this work not unlike Kathryn Perry (Chapter 10, this collection), who sought to empower the single mothers in her study “to tell their stories as uniquely as they could” (this collection). Equipped with a healthy understanding that narratives are “shaped by the audiences to whom they are delivered” (Andrews, et al., 2013, p. 6), we consciously worked to craft a space in which the farmers could “frame . . . the questions [and thus, the stories] by which they navigated *their* own lives” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 20; italics, ours).

Next, in culling through the unedited videotape, the second element of Royster and Kirsch’s schema, “strategic contemplation,” allowed us to achieve interpretations that honored the complexity of the narratives in ways that transcriptions of the stories alone could not. To explain, according to Molly Andrews, et al. (2013), when it comes to narratives, “Sometimes you don’t get the ‘whole story’; and all stories are incomplete, since experience and subjectivity cannot fully make their way into language” (p. 10). Furthermore, criticisms of

7 In our final interview session, we used more prompting questions than in the other sessions. Therefore, this session seemed less organic than the others. See the Conclusion section of this chapter for a more thorough explanation of this point.

narrative argue that its privileging of “transcripts—mostly speech” overlook the contributions of “paralinguistic material, other media, interpersonal interactions or other social context” (Andrews, et al., 2013, p. 9). Through strategic contemplation, though, research becomes a “lived process” where attention can be given to physical interaction with objects and to the emotions derived from a particular moment and/or place. In other words, significance is attached to “the materiality of archival work—visiting places, handling artifacts, following unexpected leads, standing in silence, and allowing for chance discoveries and serendipity” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 89).

Our presence, then, was necessary at each place of inquiry in order to “get the ‘whole story,’” and to better realize the contention that opens this section—that “farming’s in your blood.” Consequently, we found it imperative to walk alongside the farmers through the barns and pastures, sit with them in breezy gazebos, gingerly handle their Civil War letters and heirloom quilts, crank ancient corn shellers, and stoop to avoid the careening paths of noisy barn swallows in an abandoned milk shed. Simply put, each material space (and our physical and emotive reactions to those spaces) contributed to each story told. Mountford (2001) argues that material spaces—and we extend that to objects here—carry a “physical representation of relationships and ideas” (p. 17). Thus, our embodied reactions to *these places*, *these objects*, and *these stories* enabled us to better analyze and “to consider with critical intensity what may be more in shadow, muted, and not immediately obvious” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 76) in the narratives each farmer chose to share.

That is not to say that we, as researchers, do not acknowledge the subjectivity of such endeavors. As life-long inhabitants of Hancock County, we are “members of [this] culture and can scarcely remain unaffected by the narrative forms that are already imbedded therein” (Gergen & Gergen, 1988, p. 261). Kelly Concannon, et al., in their study of community literacy partners (Chapter 8, this collection), also grapple with divorcing the researcher’s context from interpretation and ask, “To what extent are these narratives shaped by the audiences (professors/feminists) that read them?” (this collection). Undoubtedly, our personal imbedded narrative forms had an impact on our analysis of the stories and our eventual decision to organize the patterns of discussion (that were apparent to us) into five themes: 1) the *Barn*—its function and purpose; 2) the *Role of the Farmer*—and how it has evolved; 3) the *Evolution of the Farm* itself; 4) the *Economics* of farming in Hancock County; and 5) the *Disconnect* between rural and urban life. Hunter McEwan (1997) suggests that a feminist approach to narrative research “conveys a sense of the author as engaged in a gender related enterprise—weaving together the world we experience with its various peoples and events so that it becomes a believable whole” (p. 89). While we might take

issue with the notion of *Ohio Farm Stories* as a “gender related enterprise”—we see it as a decidedly *human* enterprise—merit resides in McEwan’s notion that our attempts at organizing the stories thematically is, in fact, a “weaving together” of the “world we experience(d)” through strategic contemplation of our physical presence in the place where the narratives occurred both literally and through reminiscence.

This space, then, opened by Royster and Kirsch’s framework, allowed us to consider both embodied and disembodied elements in our analysis. It also afforded us the opportunity to move fluidly and nimbly across the past, the present, and the future of the farmers’ narratives and, as a result, provided us with deeper, richer insight into how *Ohio Farm Stories* are nested among the (presumably many) agricultural narratives of the County. Narrative researchers such as Andrews, et al. (2013) argue that “a focus on the chronological or experienced ‘time’ may close off information about unconscious realities and material causalities”; in contrast, feminist approaches to narrative research recognize “the co-presence of futurity and past in the present, the reconstruction of the past by new ‘presents’, and the projection of the present into future imaginings . . .” (p. 12). Thus, the interplay across past, present, and future impacted our interpretations of the narratives. Likewise, this melding of experiences across time undergirds the third element of Royster and Kirsch’s framework: social circulation, a notion that serves to “flesh out the contours of social spaces” in order to “make more visible the social circles within which they [women] have functioned and continue to function as rhetorical agents” (2012, p. 24).

When applied to the *Ohio Farm Stories* narratives, social circulation points to the significance of co-mingling the farmers’ words with their work on the farm and in other locations⁸. Similarly, their tools, equipment, and barns, as well as their familial ties (and the importance of those ties to their work) “take on different meanings in different contexts across time and space” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 156). Likewise, their land; the use of migrant labor; their participation in organizations such as 4-H and FFA⁹; and myriad other factors, including, but not limited to shared cultural, social, and rhetorical tropes such as “it was all work back then—hard work”¹⁰ all contribute insight into the complexity,

8 Many of the farmers shared stories of having to obtain employment off the farm to supplement their farming income.

9 4-H is a national youth mentoring organization which includes a focus on agriculture. In Hancock County, 4-H members regularly participate and demonstrate their leadership, citizenship, and agricultural skills at the annual County Fair. FFA stands for Future Farmers of America. Similar to 4-H, the goals of this organization are to “strengthen the future” by “growing leaders and building communities.”

10 These words were stated by Farmer David Spahr in his interview. See his video in the section entitled *Role of the Farmer*.

the deepness, the vastness of the farmers' stories. But not *just* their stories; social circulation pushes researchers to contemplate the significance of lives and lived experiences as “evolutionary” as well as “dynamic” “creating knowledge and legacies of action and performance” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 23, p. 25).

QUILT-WORK OF NARRATIVES

“Isn’t that something how life kind of turned on me from farming to this?”

- Farmer Mark Metzger

This co-mingling of elements across time enabled us, as researchers to better “see, hear and understand more ecologically” the public and private “contours” and “challenges” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 24) of the farmers’ lives and histories. In particular, through this approach, we could acknowledge and honor the “hard work” trope and others like it without simplifying the stories. In addition, our capturing of the narratives through video also allowed us to go beyond simplistic analyses or limited representations indicative of traditional print research described by Elizabeth Daley (2003) as “technological bias.” She states, “Print supports linear argument, but it does not value aspects of experience that cannot be contained in books. Print deals inadequately with nonverbal modes of thought and nonlinear construction” (p. 34). Case in point, the comment that opens this section (made by Mark Metzger) would read differently in print than in its verbal rendering: “Isn’t that something how life kind of turned on me from farming to this?”¹¹ At first glance, the print reading limits the interpretation and would call for additional clarification, since the phrase “turned on me” carries negative connotations. However, the actual verbal rendering remit with tone, gestures, and facial expressions conveys a much different message—one which displays Mark’s delight in how his barn has now become a place of “play” when it was once all about work. Furthermore, when Mark’s message is positioned at the end of a montage of the farmers’ memories about barns, the result is a quilt-work of narratives “that could never exist in the physical world but are thematically and conceptually related” (Daley, 2003, p. 35):

Montage allows feminist narrative researchers to consider critically the process of how they might “become ‘witness’ to another’s life” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 23), while pushing back against simplistic interpretations. In discussing film and media literacy, Daley (2003) argues, “If one wants to go beyond the predictable and formulaic, there needs to be room for serendipity during the production or creation of a film or multimedia document” (p. 36). This process, known as, “the collision of intelligences’ . . . produces something unforeseen by

11 This quote can be heard in the sixth video of the *Barn* montage.

the creative team” (Daley, 2003, p. 36). As researchers, we had (and continue to have) no way of knowing exactly how viewers might react to the *Barn* montage and its stories of building barns by hand in World War II juxtaposed with Gary Wilson’s memories of his children “growing up in the barn” while their mother bottle-fed lambs. What we *did* know is that we had reacted viscerally to these stories (and those found in the subsequent montages¹²) at the moments of their telling.



Video 1. *Barn Montage*. <https://youtu.be/WtK5phUoGyA>

In the words of Daley (2003), “Montage permits an interaction between the creator and the receiver, as well as among the elements of the creation. It not only allows but encourages the recombination of elements to create new meanings” (p. 35). Said another way, the quilt-work of narratives that we created might have one meaning to us as researchers, but it would likely create messages and meanings for our audience(s) that we could not anticipate. Moen’s argument, similar to that of Daley, suggests that the fixed (or what he might deem “final”) interpreted narrative is open to multiple, cascading interpretations (p. 62). Thus, we knew that audience members at our *Ohio Farm Stories* lecture would layer their own memories, experiences, and biases into that story-sharing space. Ultimately, then, the audience would contribute to both the public and the private messages of each montage, resulting in the—“something unforeseen”—of interpretation.

Selecting the video clips for each montage was difficult, though, and unset-

12 Five montages in all were created for the September 2015 lecture at The University of Findlay.

ting, because, as Moen (2006) argues, “interpretation starts immediately when one story is selected out of any number of other possible stories, and it continues during the entire research process” (p. 62). Therefore, the very act of beginning the interpretative process meant that particular footage would be privileged, and other pieces of footage would be left out. So as patterns of *Barn*, *Role of the Farmer*, *Function of the Farm*, *Economics*, and *Disconnect* emerged, other clips—no less important—fell away: clips of Mark Metzger scurrying squirrel-like up a ladder to the apex of his barn and clips of Jacki Johnson pulling Civil War letters out of Zip-loc bags. Still, what remained gave us pause in its power, and as Daley (2003) suggests, the act of choosing and quilting the footage into “thematically and conceptually related” sequences “allow[ed] for and respect[ed]” our use of intuition (p. 36). And intuition told us immediately that a poignant clip of Mark Metzger discussing the sale of his dairy cattle and the transition of his farm from livestock to crop production had to lead off the montage entitled, *Function of the Farm*:



Video 2. *Function of The Farm Montage*. <https://youtu.be/qzu0mMTxaio>

We would like to think that the vulnerability Mark displayed in the story of his farm’s (and his own) evolution, demonstrates the best of feminist rhetorical principles with regard to collaborative research. As Freema Elbaz-Luwisch (1997) argues, “stories are most instructive and revealing when they are most personal, and often when the owners of the stories are most vulnerable. As researchers, we cannot easily protect them [owners of stories]: In fact, it is precisely in wishing to treat them as equals that we expose them to risk” (p. 82). We trace our instincts to “protect” Mark’s story to the culture of belonging we shared with him—a culture that suggests (if not dictates) that men do not demonstrate

emotional vulnerability. However, we also saw in Mark's narrative, the ways in which "An ethics of caring, connectedness, and collaboration" (McEwan, 1997, p. 85) can lead to a powerful moment of story-telling. His narrative also stands as evidence of the co-mingling of public and private that often occurred in these story-telling exchanges.

Public and private were similarly intertwined during one of our conversations with Jacki Johnson. In her pre-interview, Jacki spoke with pride about her family—from her parents to her children to her grandchildren. Later, in her subsequent recorded interview, she haltingly revealed that her teenage granddaughter had passed away unexpectedly just days prior. As researchers, we struggled to compose ourselves upon hearing this news put forth in such a raw, unsolicited manner. Unexpectedly, we found that our feminist inquiry had positioned us in a moment where our "hearts were on our sleeves" (Sullivan, 1992, p. 57). The recorded discussion changed directions briefly as Jacki proceeded to share photographs of her granddaughter and the details of her death. In that moment, we were simply three mothers sharing the burden of unexpected loss.

Here, Lisa Ede's (1992) words seem fitting: "I increasingly find myself looking for ways to connect, rather than to separate, what I experience as my 'personal' self with my scholarly and pedagogical work" (p. 328). Our personal "selves" connected to Jacki's grief and prohibited us from including this exchange within any of the montages prepared for the public lecture. Here, we made a conscious choice as researchers to protect Jacki's vulnerability. As Sullivan (1992) suggests, "The researcher's own race, class, culture, and gender assumptions are not neutral positions from which he or she observes the world but lenses that determine *how and what the researcher sees*" (p. 56, italics ours). We would add: *and what that researcher shares in public venues*¹³.

Our protective impulses toward Mark and Jacki demonstrate that strong push-pull of public/private that continued to problematize our efforts "to align feminism with community engagement beyond academic borders" (Blair & Nickoson, this collection). Still, it was through the private that we and (we believe) our co-researchers experienced a growing sense of hooks' "culture of belonging" in a more public sense. Here a juxtaposition of Gergen and Gergen's notions on "nested narratives" (1988) with Royster and Kirsch's ideas on social circulation helps explicate this phenomenon. Both sets of academics theorize about evolutionary social relationships; Gergen and Gergen within the context of narrative and Royster and Kirsch within the context of feminist inquiry. According to Gergen and Gergen, "Not only do people enter social relationships

13 Obviously, we have chosen to share a textual recounting of Jacki's story in this particular public forum; however, we demonstrated our commitment to protecting the integrity and vulnerability of the video-taped version of the moment by not including it in any of the montages.

with a variety of narratives at their disposal, but, in principle, there are no temporal parameters within which events must be related through narratives” (1988, p. 263). Likewise, Royster and Kirsch’s (2012) social circulation “involves connections among past, present, and future . . .” (p. 23). In terms of the *Ohio Farm Stories* project, the farmers shared narratives in non-linear ways and criss-crossed generations, time, and social spaces in doing so. The result of shedding temporal parameters, says Gergen and Gergen, is “nested narratives, or narratives within narratives”; likewise, the storytellers “may come to see themselves as part of a long cultural history” (1988, p. 263).

The point then is that the farmers’ individual, private narratives are nested within a larger, over-arching public narrative of Hancock County that could be equated with a “long cultural history” as spoken of by Gergen and Gergen and even hooks. We also argue that just below that over-arching history reside many other intact as well as nebulous sub-narratives specific to the farmers. These narratives have public as well as private elements and are evidenced in the montages. Below *these* narratives lie nestled the private narratives that weave across time, such as those of Jacki and the loss of her granddaughter: thus, nests reside within and among nests, which reside within and among nests, and so on. Elements of community can be derived from or read into any of these layers.

Furthermore, a drill down into these “community nests” reveals a number of binaries, such as Hancock County resident v. non-Hancock County resident, country v. city, past v. present. While not all neat or exact, these binaries emerge more clearly in the *Disconnect* montage:



Video 3. *Disconnect Montage*. <https://youtu.be/5QAPQgldMrk>

Images of distancing criss-cross the community binaries in this montage: Gary Wilson's observation, "The farther away you get [from the farm], the less connected you become" is echoed in Jacki Johnson's lament that current society is "too many generations away from the farm." David Spahr uses the phrases "far away" and "several generations away from the farm" in his comments, and Miles Von Stein points out the distance between farmer and non-farmer by stating, "We're going to have to teach the people who don't know [about agriculture]." In *The Responsibilities of Rhetoric* (2010), David Zarefsky notes: "Rhetoric brings a public or community into being. It accomplishes this task by enabling people to recognize common bonds, to see their interests, experiences, and aspirations as consubstantial" (p. 16).

In the case of the *Disconnect* narratives, bonds among farmers and the binary of country versus city constitute the farmers' sense of community and create as well as define what it means to be "of the same substance or essence." That shared substance includes tropes of hard work, shared labor and responsibility among family members, and the push-pull of shepherding a farm toward future sustainability while at the same time maintaining century-deep roots. And while we, as researchers, recognized the commonalities among these notions about community even before the transcription phase, we also acknowledge that, in positioning the disconnect comments within the same montage, we have privileged and increased the volume of the binary. Still, that binary reflects, what Zarefsky might call, one of the "larger values," shared within the farming community that serves to contribute to a "sense of who we are" (p. 17). And ironically, *that* binary serves to blur other binaries: public v. private, academic v. community.

REAPING WHAT'S BEEN SOWN

"We're getting so far away from the land in our thinking and our living . . . the rest of the world is several generations away from the farm"

- Farmer David Spahr

Without exception, the farmers in this project shared a fierce pride in their heritage and a common view that parts of that heritage were slipping away, as is evidenced in the quote above by David Spahr. Likewise, the artifacts they shared were illustrative of a language of agriculture and of manual labor that has been all but lost save for those few "native speakers" who recall how the implements were used, whether from their observations as youngsters or from the demonstrations of their ancestors. Many of the objects the farmers shared embodied pride in their family heritage, from a worn ledger illustrating the economic efficiency of an ancestor, to a draw-knife used by an industrious forefather to craft

shake shingles for an early homestead. When the farmers shared these objects, our honest, visceral reactions seemed to serve as validation of the significance of these honored symbols.

Only once did we stray from the feminist methodologies that had fostered mutual respect and had led to open vulnerable discourse. This occurred in July during our final interview with the three-generations of VonSteins. Nearly two months had passed since we had completed the other five interviews, and it had been four months since we had originally visited the VonStein farm. The delay in the recorded interview precipitated several outcomes not in keeping with our feminist methodologies. First, it created a space of time which eroded the previous social relationship we had cultivated with the VonSteins during our pre-interview conversation. In that discussion, three generations gathered around the kitchen table to share photos of the devastation caused to the farm during the 1965 Palm Sunday tornado outbreak¹. The conversation that ensued was not confined in any temporal or generational manner—the discussion layered past and present and moved fluidly among grandfather, father, mother, and granddaughter. However, when we returned to the farm in late July, a spot was set up in the barn for the discussion. Gone was the familial feel of the kitchen table; gone was the non-hierarchical dialogic mode of collaboration; both were replaced by a “setting” for an interview.

The time gap and change in setting resulted in a strained discourse, despite the fact that we were in the VonStein’s barn. Quiet ensued when videotaping began, so we reverted to asking pointed questions and prompting discourse related to the themes we had already isolated for the montages rather than letting the VonSteins tell *their* story. To borrow David Spahr’s words from the beginning of this section—we were “getting too far away” from our feminist methodologies in how we were thinking about and living our research. And when we veered from those methodologies, there were fewer authentic moments, less vulnerability, and less potential for the research to be a “*lived process*”² (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 87). In the case of the final interview, we neglected to create space where we could “see and hold contradictions without rushing to immediate closure, to neat resolutions, or to cozy hierarchies and binaries” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 21-22), even though we had fostered such a connection in our pre-interview-conversation. In retrospect, we should have stopped the interview and encouraged discussion that flowed more naturally by walking with the Von-

1 On April 11-12, 1965, the Midwest experienced the second biggest tornado outbreak (to that date) of all time. Tornado damage was widespread throughout Hancock County, Ohio.

2 Kirsch and Royster (2012) describe a researcher’s “*lived process*” as the ways in which a researcher “moved back and forth between past and present, between visiting historical sites and bringing them into the present, between searching archives and walking the land” (87).

Steins through their greenhouses or around their vast gardens of sunflowers. In this mistake, we learned intimately what Kirsch and Royster (2010) are getting at when they state, “Experience, in fact, has taught us that it takes patience, humility, and honesty to develop well-grounded principles for engagement and excellence” (p. 664). Said another way, “You reap what you sow.”

CULTIVATING THE ENDEAVOR

“That’s what this country was started on, God and farming. You get away from that, and there’s not much else.”

- Farmer Jacki Johnson



Video 4. Final Thoughts Montage. <https://youtu.be/jZNnwFSz9bg>

As this chapter suggests, utilizing feminist rhetorical principles in gathering and then analyzing the farmers’ stories was at once liberating and confounding. Yes, we had agency to consider *all* elements of the storytelling experience in making meaning for ourselves, the farmers, and our community. The rub was that the complexity and tangled interplay of these elements resisted any simplicity in our attempts to corral them into a neat, cohesive whole. Declarations such as Jacki Johnson’s that “God and farming” undergird America have a surface simplicity, but it is the teasing out of the layers of stories, and time, and tradition beneath her comment that feminist researchers seek to reveal. Luckily, place and materiality give feminist researchers space to do that. Still, the auto-ethnographic elements that seeped into our work—while legitimized by Royster and Kirsch’s framework—also positioned us as “both product and producer of a given cultural phenomenon” (Wood &

Fassett, 2003, p. 288), and at times, we were not entirely comfortable negotiating those roles. But isn't that the point, after all? To engage in this "back and forth movement" of analytical *and* embodied research and ground that research "in the communities from which it emanates" (Kirsch & Roster, 2012, p. 86)? In the end, we embraced the intertextuality of the entire enterprise as the farmers' voices co-mingled with our emotive experiences as well as the material spaces in which we interacted to create the polyphony of *a community* and of many sub-communities. Ultimately, we learned "to attend to our own levels of comfort and discomfort, to withhold quick judgment, to read and reread" (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 76) the texts and experiences our co-researchers afforded us in order to honor the stories shared with us—tangles and all.

Like Moen (2006), "We would like the stories to be thinking tools for our research colleagues, as new inquiry questions might arise from the narratives" (p. 65). Said another way, we see *Ohio Farm Stories* as a type of scholarly activism, not unlike that advocated by Keri Mathis and Beth Boehm in their chapter, "Build Engaged Interventions in Graduate Education." Similarly, we recognize "the rich resources and information that community partners already possess and that we can help facilitate (and ultimately *benefit* from) in our collaboration with them" (Mathis & Boehm, Chapter 6, this collection). Thus, the interpretation and meaning-making does not end with us, since our plan to make the raw footage of the narratives accessible in archive form open to the public allows for an infinite number of future interpretations, connections, reminiscences, and community-building experiences. Much like the potential outgrowth of the community engagement "knot-work" described by Mary Sheridan (Chapter 11, this collection), we envision others cultivating the narratives into projects and endeavors we have not imagined. With that happy thought, we will continue to do the good work of feminist intervention, adding to the archive in order to move the voices of agriculture inward from the margins of rhetorical research. Feminist rhetorical principles make that movement possible, just as those principles make possible the complexity of interpretation when narrative becomes a collective, collaborative endeavor among the researchers, the participants, and the community.

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