

Chapter 1. Positionality Pulls up a Chair at the Kitchen Table

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Mouthwatering aromas of my neighbor's famous lasagna should have filled her family's century-old farmhouse, inspiring shared conversation. Instead, the air hung heavy with sorrow and anger as a dozen-plus members of our rural community crowded around the creaky dining table on a humid August night. A hog confinement and breeding facility designed to house 17,000 pigs—the open sewage equivalent of about 80,000 people—was slated for our airspace and watershed. The site was a mile equidistant from each of our homes, meeting the siting criteria imposed by Illinois officials, giving us no legal standing. My positionality as an academic researcher collapsed the distance, making me reflect on how I might leverage expertise for community benefit. Awkward role. High expectations. Higher stakes.

The evening prior, a tense public meeting took place about the proposed site, which was just uphill from a beloved community stream in which generations had fished, kayaked, or played. The few brave souls—me included—who dared question the corporate pork reps promoting this scheme endured mocking jeers. “You just don't understand progress. Don't you people want jobs? You're just a bunch of NIMBYs and libtards.” This became the extractive capitalist refrain spoken by white supremacy well represented within the public meeting. A panel of suited white men seated behind a table with the American flag prominently displayed behind them faced onlookers, some pro-pork; most not.

Interweaving or making space for positionality in community-engaged advocacy and research requires reflexivity, humility, and collaboration among people who may not have much in common other than a shared, specific concern. The latter point has ideological complexity in “flyover” country where academics are not always welcome or are viewed as out of touch or whatever Fox News spews across the countryside. Overcoming that complexity takes time and commitment.

Across four interdependent generations, my community sat across the table and expressed hope for a “breathable future” (Houdek & Ore, 2021). My 70-year-old neighbor quietly admitted he and his family would need to sell their homestead due to health concerns associated with the proposed hog facility. My partner, an expert on environmental hazards, knew the excrement runoff would damage water and air quality in addition to our quality of life. I research olfactory rhetoric and key connections between our sense of smell and its connection to mental and physical health. As experts and community insiders, my partner and

I shared information on the well-documented higher risks of respiratory illness and environmental damage associated with these kinds of facilities. But, more importantly, we worked as “co-conspirators,” connecting communities across various levels of expertise and lived experiences (p. 91).

At the August kitchen table, between bites of lasagna, together we mapped action plans with communal purpose, we collaboratively facilitated door-to-door peer testimonies, developed a public media campaign, formed legal policy research teams, and implemented youth-led social media campaigns. We staged public protests. We still failed.

To give you a sense of the embodied costs of failure, imagine being gagged nearly to the point of asphyxiation by the smell of pig manure on any given day. One neighbor, a Vietnam vet, actually passed out from the fumes one warm summer night. We can no longer trust the air, reliably sit outside, or hang clothes to dry. Cookouts are hostile territory for visitors in an unfavorable wind, a source of embarrassment that further isolates. The hope to breathe freely no longer exists. Big companies leverage local farmers’ complicity in these stinking ventures and ruin communities’ air and watersheds. Lawsuits abound but pork barrel profiteering seldom results in actual relief and lawyers generally pocket any largess, largess that doesn’t provide relief or buyouts for virtually worthless property.

Examining my positionality suggests how (and that) breathable futures might bloom within conspiratorial cultivation of courage and action if more people cared to do something about our damaged planetary lungscape. In my lived experience, most do not. Academia trains us to publish solitary victories and narrate anecdotal stories, but resilience reflexively comes from communal voices lifting up conspiratorial breath despite the exhaust of extractive capitalism. Such a positionality is an ongoing conversation, a speaking with, not for our about, my community partners. Neither innocent nor neutral, the work and affiliated action has rhetorical and political consequences.

References

- Houdek, M., & Ore, E. J. (2021). Cultivating otherwise worlds and breathable futures. *Rhetoric, Politics & Culture*, 1(1), 85–95.