

# Chapter 47. Stories from the Field: When Worlds Collide and the Research Hits Close to Home

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On the day I became “Dr. Kostelich,” I presented my research to a crowded room of committee members, family, and friends. It was a successful, celebratory defense. I overviewed my rural-focused work, highlighting how agricultural literacies are sponsored/suppressed within neoliberal contexts, particularly using an example of big agribusiness’ impact. I carefully positioned myself as an insider to this world, which I was and am, and I also critiqued it heavily and with academicese—a secondary discourse I had acquired but kept confined to academic spaces and dissertation pages.

This was the first time my family had heard my research. I come from a rural community who collectively raised me and an agriculturally producing family whose love is embodied in my very being. They raised me to know that my roots run deep, and they taught me that when it gets tough—and it will—to keep my plow firmly in the ground and to keep on tilling. This phrase—this mantra of my life—was modeled time and time again, and when the rain didn’t come and cattle prices dropped and bills were hard to pay, we kept going, brains and bodies.

My worlds collided the day of my dissertation defense. I had found a research niche where I could reconcile my rural essence with academic inquiry and a dissertation project on agricultural literacies that had real, tangible impacts. I could be part of the community and critique it—or so I naively thought. When the formalized portion of the defense was over—and we know who the intended audience was: my committee who determined my doctoral fate—I found myself at lunch with family as they began to ask me questions. I could not hide behind phrases like, “critical agricultural literacies,” “suppression by neoliberal sponsors,” and “sponsoring organization ideologies.” I could no longer use academicese to articulate an argument that called into question aspects of how we do rural life and the powerful organizations who sponsor our livelihoods. In my post-defense haze, I was met with a shocking realization. I may have successfully defended the dissertation to my committee, but I had just begun the true challenge of my work: to articulate these concepts to audiences both in and outside of the ivory tower. I would have to learn how to articulate my work in a way that contributes to conversations in the field, literally and figuratively. What was—and is—at risk is potential alienation, for scholarly critique—particularly in our current political

climate—is often met with suspicion, rejection, and/or distrust, even from those who know and love us well.

This experience served as a brutal reminder that there is no abstract distance between myself and my work. My work and my home community—the essence of who I am and where I am from—will collide, and I must, for the sake of my own convictions, forge a path where I don't forsake one for the other. I choose both: to make a commitment to my scholarly work and a commitment to maintaining relationships with those whose lived experiences coincide with my study. This can be excruciating labor, and I know that I'm not alone in the quest. Explicitly situating our positionalities in our scholarship and in our lived experiences is a much-needed avenue for grappling with the labors involved when the research hits close to home. Questions to ask ourselves as we grapple: How do we do this hard but oh-so important bridging work? And how do we care for ourselves and others in the process?\*

\*The author has spent a good amount of time in therapy and has taken six years to process before putting these brief words on a page.