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CULTIVATING SPHERES: AGRICULTURE, TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, AND THE PUBLICS

'We're Getting so Far Away from the Land': Disrupting the Traditional Rural Literacy Myth through *Ohio Farm Stories*

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The *Ohio Farm Stories (OFS)* project began with a grant from the Ohio Humanities Council with 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 ideas of how farming practices and values have evolved to meet societal demands in the 21st century. This article situates *OFS* research within Royster and Kirsch's (2012) three-step inquiry framework, layered with a discussion of what is often understood as traditional rural literacy within the context of public memory. Two *OFS* video montages are included within the article, so that readers might listen 'deeply, reflexively, and multisensibly' (20) to the words and images of the project. These words and images evoke questions regarding myth, education, agriculture, and societal change. The article closes with a discussion of how the rhetoric of farming disrupts the rural literacy myth and positions farmers as powerful advocates in shaping the future as well as future understandings of where and how our nation's food sources are grown and harvested.

Part I: Sowing the Seeds

Northwest Ohio, and particularly Hancock County, Ohio, is flat. Fields of corn and grain and soybeans roll long into the horizon, and the blue-grey sky hovers wide. Little towns burrow in deeply, mainly Swiss and German in descent, separated by stands of woods and small family farms. In the fall, combines clog narrow country roads, and red wagons filled sometimes with grain, sometimes with tomatoes, creep respectively toward elevators and processing plants. One medium-sized urban and several suburban areas interrupt the fields and the trees and the towns. But the heart of Hancock County—as with much of Northwest Ohio—is defined by its long-rooted farming communities. Of the county's 531.4 square miles, 80% is farm land (Wilson, 2017: n.pag.). Generation after generation works that land—often beside each other.

In the eastern part of Hancock County, Mark Metzger farms the land his ancestor, John Adam Metzger, settled in 1832, and can recall family stories of how Native Americans crossed the farm as they journeyed to visit relatives in Defiance County, Ohio. Several miles from Metzger's place lies the Spahr Jersey Farm, established in 1879. David Spahr and his son, Brian, manage the 700 acre operation—one of only four remaining dairy farms in the County. Off to the west, World War II veteran Wayne Marquart raised sugar beets, tomatoes, corn, wheat, and dairy cattle on the farm his father purchased when Marquart was just five years old.¹ Further south, Gary Wilson recently passed down his family farm (established in 1883) to his son, who, as an eighth-generation farmer, raises livestock and crops just as his ancestors did. Jacki Johnson's farm sits southeast of Wilson's; her great-grandfather acquired the property sometime before 1875, and Johnson's hand-hewn barn, now home to a small hog operation, likely dates to pre-Civil War time. There are others: the vonSteins operate a multi-generational crop-farming business of several hundred acres, similar to the Burners, the Deeds, and the Probsts—all families whose farms have reached the century mark or beyond.

These nine families' stories collectively serve as the basis of the *Ohio Farm Stories* (OFS) project. A collaborative effort between the University of Findlay (UF) and the Hancock Historical Museum (HHM), OFS began in Fall 2013 with a grant from the

¹ Wayne Marquart died in 2016, two years after participating in the *Ohio Farm Stories* project.

Ohio Humanities Council, and the goal of chronicling the agrarian history of Hancock County farm families in order to trace the ways farming practices have evolved over the last century as a result of societal, economic, and environmental demands. Six farm families participated in phase one of the project (2013–2014) and three families participated in phase two of the project (2016–2018). Between 2014 and 2016, the first phase of OFS was shared with the public through public and scholarly presentations, an academic manuscript, and others (see the final section of this manuscript for details). Additional grant monies were also secured during this time.

All the farm families in *OFS* have weathered and even resisted cultural changes, which include the movement 'from small family farms to large-scale factory farms, from crop diversity to commoditized homogeneity' (Olmstead, 2018: n.pag.). For example, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, farms in the county were diversified: farmers raised livestock, such as cattle, sheep, and hogs, as well as crops. Such small, diversified farms were vital for early settlers who had little access to any food sources but those which they grew, raised, and slaughtered. As agriculture became more commercialized (in Hancock County and globally), farmers found small, diversified farms yielded minimal returns; their options were to 'get big, or get out'. Many chose to 'get out'. In 1900, Hancock County had 3,263 farms. Today, just 831 farms remain (Wilson, 2017: n.pag.).

While many 'got out,' the Metzgers, Spahrs, Marquarts, and others in the *OFS* project stayed in. Why, and maybe more importantly, how? What sustains these and other farmers, at a time when farm incomes continue to drop and more than half must supplement their income with employment off the farm? The United States Department of Agriculture estimates that American farming incomes will drop by 13% from 2017 to 2018 (USDA, 2018: n.pag.).

How is their ability to adapt, to survive, and to hope inextricably intertwined with the identity and history of the County? These questions drove my colleague, Sarah Sisser (director of the HHM), and me, as we set out on a cold, blue morning in March 2014. Ourselves natives of Hancock County, Sarah and I did not know, as our boots crunched the snow on Mark's farmhouse driveway that day, the eventual and numerous gifts *OFS* would reap. We also did not know how important our shared

cultural literacy and subject position within the community of Hancock County would be, as we became “witnesses” to another’s life’ (Royster and Kirsch, 2012: 23). From the very first meeting with Mark (and then with the other farmers), hours upon hours of stories piled up. Old photos were dug from drawers; century-old journals, Civil War letters, and family quilts were shared; farming lineages were linked back and back and back, like clothes on a line.

The spaces between public and private blurred as Sarah and I became intimately aware of the cultural, social, and geographical forces that have shaped the Hancock County agricultural community into what bell hooks (2009) would call a ‘community of like-minded souls’ (21)—a group that shares a common history, common values, a common epistemological view, a common literacy, and, thus, a common cultural narrative. We went into the project with goals of chronicling the county’s agrarian history and economic evolution; however, those goals soon became somewhat secondary. In the years since its inception, *OFS* has grown to become a space of community and education. It has become a space to remember and to share stories. Ultimately, we have found that the act of sharing these stories challenges the traditional rural literacy myth and demonstrates the farmers’ own role in establishing a ‘rhetoric of farming’, which positions farmers as public educators and advocates who remember and glean from the past while they simultaneously grow into and shape the future.

In ‘The Rhetorics of the Farm Crisis: Toward Alternative Agrarian Literacies in a Globalized World’, Eileen Schell (2007) notes that despite ‘shifts in agricultural production, a romanticized image of the small family farm still holds iconic sway in American life’ (78). This image, according to Schell, is mythologized through ‘traditional rural literacy’ (78), a mythology that seeks to hold on to a romanticized past in a world where globalization and technologies loom as threats to that past. Without critical reflection, those dwelling inside agrarian communities might simply buy into the mythology and hold tightly to a past ‘culture of belonging’, where a ‘sense of identity was shaped’ (7), ‘ways of belonging were taught’, and ‘cultural legac[ies] [were] handed down’ (hooks, 2009: 7, 13). Likewise, those outside agrarian communities may lack a critical understanding of farm life, and as a result, perpetuate

a rural mythology that 'emphasize[s] the Yankee ingenuity and adaptability of farmers' or worse yet, consider farmers 'as objects of pity, or as an endangered species that needs to be saved' (Schell, 2007: 96, 95).

Granted, this inside/outside approach might be construed as a neat binary for exploration of the rural literacy myth through the *Ohio Farm Stories* project; however, the farmers themselves often returned to this binary as they shared their stories. The lament, 'We're getting so far away from the land', was repeated almost verbatim and demonstrates a resilient, shared belief that a growing gap exists between rural and urban people, which results in misunderstandings of, as well as a lack of appreciation for, agriculture. With that said, the *OFS* farmers also recognize that education and advocacy can ameliorate that gap, and they see their role as agents in that work. Specifically, their words intimate the responsibility the farmers themselves have—as do other marginalized cultural groups—to 'claim agency in shaping communication in the public arena' (Propen and Schuster, 2008: 299)—a tenet of technical communication. In short, the rhetoric of farming inherent in *OFS* is a call to action and a challenge to the rural literacy myth.

This article provides an intimate look into the *Ohio Farm Stories* project—from its inception, to its curation, to its exhibition in public forums. The article is in four parts: Part I Sowing the Seeds provides an introduction to the *OFS* farmers and their rural community. It also lays the groundwork of the symbolic American rural mythology this article seeks to disrupt through its discussion of the rhetoric of farming. Part II, 'Gathering Stories', provides an overview of the *OFS* project methodology, and Part III, 'Cultivating Past and Future', features the farmers' voices in the form of video montages based on themes gleaned from *OFS* interviews. An analysis of the montages follows in Part III and demonstrates how the farmers' words and actions serve as a rhetoric of farming. This rhetoric, based in rural identity and culture, empowers the farmers and manifests itself through educational opportunities both inside and outside agrarian communities. The article concludes with Part IV, 'Harvesting the Rhetoric of Farming', which posits that *OFS* creates a needed space for community members to share, as well as to cling to, aspects of the rural literacy myth that provide a sense of unity and cohesion. Ultimately, though, the rhetoric of farming disrupts

the rural literacy myth and positions farmers as powerful advocates in shaping the future as well as the future understanding of small-scale rural operations.

Part II: Gathering the Stories

As Sarah and I planned our visits, we envisioned the work we were embarking on as akin to that found in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN).² We foresaw a digital archive of farming narratives that would focus on the agricultural and economic history of Hancock County and could be gleaned by community members and scholars for historical and research purposes. As with the DALN, our original focus was on capturing what the farmers had said—not on the medium for collection. Also, similarly, feminist rhetorical practices guided our methodologies; in particular, we utilized Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacqueline Royster's (2010) three-step framework of critical imagination, strategic contemplation, and social circulation. This framework advocates 'an ethos of humility, respect, and care' considered 'critical to excellence in rhetorical inquiry' (649). Through critical imagination, researchers have a mechanism for engaging in deep listening and 'a more richly rendered understanding...' of their subject (Kirsch and Royster, 2010: 649). This 'richly rendered understanding' is achieved by utilizing dialogic and dialectical strategies that allow researchers to see the world (as much as is possible) from their subjects' vantage points (Kirsch and Royster, 2010: 650). Strategic contemplation 'entails reflecting on how we become "witnesses" to another's life and how we carry that new knowledge forward into the future' (Royster and Kirsch, 2012: 23). It also 'makes room for the researcher to acknowledge her or his own embodied experiences' (Kirsch and Royster, 2010: 659) in relation to what is being studied. Moreover, strategic contemplation legitimizes—even demands—that researchers slow down, reflect, and meditate on 'the responses invoked ... by visiting historical sites and handling cultural artifacts' (Royster and Kirsch, 2012: 22). In the case of *Ohio Farms Stories*, strategic

² The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) is a digital site where the public can upload, view, listen to, or read stories about experiences people have had with reading, writing, and communicating. Video and audio segments on the site are largely raw and uncut. The DALN can be accessed at <http://www.thedaln.org/#/home>.

contemplation necessitated meeting the farmers in their homes, on their land, and among their animals, machinery, tools, and memories.

While we started with some guiding questions, Sarah and I primarily saw our initial discussions with the farmers in their homes and/or barns as an important, informal step in building rapport prior to collecting a digital record of whatever information the farmers chose to share. We sought to follow best practices in narrative theory by devoting 'time and space to develop a caring situation in which both the researcher and the research subjects feel comfortable' (Moen, 2006: 61–62). According to Torill Moen (2006), the stories participants share with researchers 'depend on ... when and where they are being told' (60). Likewise, Henry Giroux (2000), in his discussion of cultural work and the value people bring to 'sites of learning', notes the importance of 'begin[ning] at those intersections where people actually live their lives and where meaning is produced, assumed, and contested' (355). Thus, a primary goal of the discussions was to meet the farmers in spaces familiar to them, so that they might feel more at ease sharing their stories when we returned with our video camera.

Sarah set up the discussions with each farmer since she had a previously established relationship with each, thanks to a Hancock County Barn Tour event she had sponsored in her role as director of the Hancock Historical Museum.³ I, on the other hand, had more work to do, since I only casually knew two of the farmers prior to the project. Although I grew up in the rural community (Arlington, Ohio) where two of the farmers' families had lived for over a century, it became apparent early in our process that my first task was to earn the farmers' trust so that I might, to borrow Royster's (1996) words, take on 'the role of negotiator, someone who can cross boundaries and serve as a guide and translator for Others' (34).

Our first interview, in particular, stands as evidence of how the cultural literacy Sarah and I shared with the farmers proved integral in the story-sharing process. As we sat at Mark Metzger's kitchen table, much of his early discussion was directed

³ The Barn Tour is an event organized each September by the Hancock Historical Museum. Select Hancock County farmers are invited to open their barns to the public, who visit the spaces via a self-guided tour. Nearly 800 people attended the inaugural barn tour in 2012. Many of the participants in the *OFS* have also participated as host families in the Barn tour event.

at Sarah and rightfully so, as Mark and Sarah had shared many previous positive interactions through the Barn Tour event and Mark's volunteer work at the HHM. I had introduced myself to Mark as someone who had lived in Hancock County her entire life, and he was certainly polite to me. When an opportune moment arose in the conversation, and I asked him if he ever had his tractors serviced at the Allis Chalmers dealer in nearby Arlington, which is on State Route 68. It was then that an important shift occurred. First, I revealed a shared literacy in knowing something about farm implement dealers. Second, I obviously had an historical knowledge about the region, as the Allis Chalmers dealer in Arlington had been out of business for more than twenty years. Mark turned his full attention to me when I asked if he remembered a mechanic at the dealership named Bill Jolliff. He smiled and nodded, and the grin became wider when I added, 'He was my grandpa'.⁴ This kairotic moment served to bond Mark and me within a shared culture of belonging, and from that point on, we began to build a relationship. The moment also made me more deeply cognizant of rural literacy (and all literacy, for that matter) as a shared enterprise. Yes, I am a native of the agricultural community I study; however, I am not a farmer. I am the grand-daughter, niece, sister-in-law, daughter-in-law, friend, and neighbor of farmers. At times I am an authority; at times I am on the margins; at times I am somewhere in between.⁵

In 'Narratives of the Self,' Kenneth Gergen and Mary Gergen (1988) explain that one's narrative 'is a linguistic implement constructed and reconstructed by people in relationships, and employed in relationships to sustain, enhance, or impede various actions' (256). The relationships built and the contexts shared in the initial *Ohio Farm Stories* discussions, then, provide glimpses into the agricultural community that might otherwise have been lost, withheld, or overlooked without a shared sense of culture as a starting point and without a more contemplative, reciprocal, and egalitarian approach to narrative collection.

⁴ This revelation could have been a detriment if not for the fact that my grandfather was a respected mechanic and was well-liked within the farming community.

⁵ Reynolds (1993) contends that 'As feminist location theorists emphasize, rhetors must take responsibility for their ways of knowing' (334).

Moen (2006) locates the participant in narrative story collection 'as a collaborator rather than an informant guided by the agenda of the researcher' (61), an approach which supports 'a sense of equality between the participants' (62). This approach is in keeping with feminist rhetorical practices that are 'mindful of the hierarchies of power and authority in the research process' (Hesse-Biber, 2010: 4). In the end, attention to relationship-building and collaboration precipitated an organic leveling of power in the storytelling process. Thus, as Sarah and I met with the farmers in their homes and discussed their lives across kitchen tables strewn with cups of lemonade and sepia-print photos, we transitioned from researchers conducting pre-interviews into friends and neighbors listening to, participating in, and reveling in shared stories of our Northwest Ohio community. This leisurely approach also allowed 'new vistas to come into view, unexpected leads to shape [our] scholarly work, and new research questions to emerge' (Royster and Kirsch, 2012: 22). Our discussions had transformed into 'visits'; hours passed, and before we left, we had thumbed through dog-eared photographs of the Palm Sunday tornado outbreak, toured out-buildings and barns, learned how to crank corn-shellors, and reminisced about community events. We shared laughter, and we recognized our shared humanity over some tear-filled memories.⁶

Certainly, Sarah and I were humbled by the honor of listening to and of participating in the type of dialectic exchange that shapes, nurtures, transmits, and creates shared notions of culture. Like Kirsch (2005), we 'learned how quickly seemingly abstract, impersonal questions could lead interviewees to reveal deeply personal, emotionally charged information—as if to a friend' (2164). Indeed, the depth of these exchanges depended upon a number of factors, including previous interactions and the web-like familial and casual connections that are inevitable in small communities. As a result, the *OFS* project also taught us how feminist rhetorical practices can lead to ethical dilemmas. For example, during one exchange a particularly personal and painful moment was revealed. Sarah and I shut off the camera and simply listened. Our first loyalty was (and is) always to the farmers as

⁶ On April 11–12, 1965 (what was Palm Sunday), the Midwest experienced its second biggest tornado outbreak (to that date) of all time. Tornado damage was widespread throughout Hancock County, Ohio.

human beings—not to the stories. Kirsch reminds feminist scholars that 'we need to understand that our interactions with participants are most often based on friendliness, not genuine friendship' (2170), and to be fair, all levels of friendship have emanated from our *OFS* work. Some *OFS* participants are now like family, joining us at life events such as weddings; others greet us warmly when our paths cross casually; and still others pass us now with just a nod and a wave. In each case, though, the extent of any on-going *OFS* friendship is dependent upon the farmers 'and the degree to which they wish to interact with us' (2169).

The mindfulness of being trusted as curators of the farmers' stories led Sarah and me to rethink our original 'digital archive of farming narratives' concept as phase one of *OFS* came to completion. Admittedly, we had not set out to craft an 'Ohio Farm Documentary'; instead, we had hoped to capture the truth of a particular moment in time in order to provide a means for reflecting on and preserving that moment. We achieved that goal. However, as we culled through hours of video from the six farm family stories collected as part *OFS*-phase one, themes emerged, and we began to realize the immense importance of what we had recorded. As a result, we invited Dr Megan Adams to join the *OFS* team for phase two (when we collected stories from three additional families) in order to provide digital expertise, so that future *OFS* videos might be of higher quality and serve as more suitable vehicles for sharing the farmers' voices with the public.⁷

Royster and Kirsch (2010), in their discussion of social circulation, state, '[W]e need to make more visible the social circles within which [women] have functioned and continue to function as rhetorical agents' (24). Similarly, Giroux (2004) argues the importance of considering 'what pedagogical conditions provide the groundwork for agents to enunciate, act, and reflect on themselves, their relations to others, and the wider social circle' (499). Thus, since the *OFS* videos made 'more visible' the public and private spaces in which the farmers 'function as rhetorical agents' (Royster and Kirsch, 2012: 24) and provided a medium in which the farmers could express themselves and expound on 'their relations to others' and 'the wider

⁷ Dr. Adams is an assistant professor of communication at the University of Findlay.

social order' (Giroux, 2004: 499), it made sense to improve their quality in phase two. Furthermore, as we fashioned the videos into montages based on themes, we recognized the potential for audiences to have a more 'embodied experience' (Kirsch and Royster, 2010: 659) through video, since through that medium audiences could encounter the cadence of voices, the gestures and facial expressions of the speakers, and the human interaction enjoyed during our *OFS* visits.

Part III: Cultivating Past and Future

In all, we created ten montages from our analysis of the stories we gathered: five in phase one and five in phase two. Each montage is approximately five minutes in length. These montages were prepared for public lectures that helped us fulfill the obligations of our grant. Their impact, though, surprised even us. According to Elizabeth Daley (2003), 'Montage permits an interaction between the creator and the receiver, as well as among the elements of the creation' (35). That interaction has been strong and visceral, as audience members and the farmers themselves have demonstrated, lingering long in the public spaces after the montages are presented. Two montages in particular, 'Disconnect' (from phase one) (see **Video 1**) and 'Women in Farming' (from phase two) (see **Video 2**), provide useful lenses for acknowledging the farmers of Hancock County as purveyors of a rhetoric of farming—a rhetoric that sometimes reifies but more often than not disrupts the rural literacy myth.



Video 1: Disconnect Montage. 'Disconnect' can be viewed at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GnrTXf8Y6mYKPZkN4oTTk0-_b3SHSFL/view A transcript of 'Disconnect' is available at the end of this article.



Video 2: Women in Farming. 'Women in Farming' can be viewed at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZGnKFxv8LKIwYg519yp0KzeKOZZCPRzE/view> A transcript of 'Women in Farming' is available at the end of this article.

The predominant thread, 'We're getting so far away from the land', runs through the five narrative clips included in the Disconnect montage.⁸ Admittedly, the binary between urban/suburban and rural cultures is amplified due to the montage form where the voices of the farmers directly follow one another. Gary Wilson explains, 'The farther away you get [from the farm], the less connected you become.' Jacki Johnson echoes Gary with 'We're too many generations away from the farm', and David Spahr offers, 'We're getting so far away from the land in our thinking and our living—knowing where food comes from and how it's produced'. He then adds, 'The rest of the world is several generations away from being close to the farm'. Since each farmer's individual comments were unsolicited, the strong echo in the comments (to the point that the actual wording is nearly the same) demonstrates a shared belief in what Schell (2007) calls 'agricultural illiteracy', a term used to describe the general public's lack of awareness regarding 'the conditions under which our nation's food is grown, harvested, distributed, and marketed' (81).

⁸ This montage features the following farmers: **Clip 1** Gary; **Clip 2** Jacki; **Clip 3** Gary and David; **Clip 4** (left to right) Dennis, Harold, and Miles vonStein (Harold—now deceased—was Dennis's father, and Dennis is Miles' father); **Clip 5** Gary.

While the farmers never use the term 'agricultural illiteracy', their examples provide direct evidence of such a phenomenon. The danger in agricultural illiteracy, as suggested by Gary's, Jacki's, and Miles VonStein's comments, is that it 'create[s] a rhetorical situation in which the reader or viewer' is disconnected not only from what occurs in agricultural communities but also from how their own futures intertwine with those of their agrarian neighbors (Schell, 2007: 81). As Gary notes, 'Farm land ... is viewed differently by those who farm it compared to those who buy lots from it'. His words—as with the others in this montage—suggest that the problem of agricultural illiteracy can be traced to distance; we lose sight of and begin to devalue that with which we are not intimately connected on a daily basis. Inherent here lies the notion that disconnect (and, as a result, agricultural illiteracy) occurs when we fail to connect with or remember our past. According to Gary, '[The farm land] is not only [the farmers'] *present* livelihood, but it has been the livelihood of their *ancestors* for several centuries' (emphasis added). Said another way, to 'get so far away from the land' implies an initial connection *with* the land—one where we were all farmers, where farming was once a shared enterprise. Thus, a strong, intentional chain from past to present to future underscores the agrarian way of life in Hancock County, as values, farming practices, and work ethic are handed down from one generation to the next.

By that logic, agricultural illiteracy occurs when links in the agrarian chain are broken. However, the shared past (intimated by Gary's words), along with a shared dependence on our nation's food supply, can be utilized as conduits for advocacy and (re)education. According to Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2007a), 'A critical public pedagogy in rural contexts involves communities in public dialogues about the future and works against the division of the needs of individuals and groups' (9). Technical communication, then—through the public pedagogy of the *OFS* rhetoric of farming—can serve to repair that chain. By positioning themselves as educators, the farmers offer opportunities through which those outside or on the periphery of rural communities might 'see the situation of farmers as interconnected with their own concerns for healthy communities and healthy food' (Schell, 2007: 98). Like Schell, who looks to farm advocacy organizations and their public education efforts as key players in 'promot[ing] an alternative

agrarian rhetoric and literacy' (98), the farmers recognize that it is their 'constant job to educate the public'.

Jacki utilizes forums such as the Pork Producers' Association, 4-H, and Agriculture Alumni groups. Miles sees the County Fair as a place to root out misconceptions, and Gary, a former extension agent for The Ohio State University, serves on many local and regional boards as a representative of the agricultural community. Similarly, Mark (not featured in the Disconnect montage) hosts church and museum groups on his farm in order to share the County's agricultural heritage, and several other *OFS* families lend their time and talents through vocational agriculture instruction, 4-H, county fairs, the annual Barn Tour, and farmers' market events. In doing so, the *OFS* farmers 'revise problematic practices to create more egalitarian power relations and more widely beneficial effects' (Scott, 2004: 298) for members of the rural community as well as those outside the community. In other words, they engage in a *rhetoric of farming*, a form of technical communication in which the farmers re-claim and reframe agricultural identity against the rural literacy myth's view of farmers 'as objects of pity, or as an endangered species that needs to be saved' (Schell, 2007: 95).

The 'Women in Farming' montage extends the education conversation and demonstrates even more fully that, for the *OFS* farmers, the rhetoric of farming consists of actions as well as words.

In this montage, two points emerge: first, many of the *OFS* women 'gave up the city life' and became farmers as a result of marriage—a notion that might seem to reinforce the rural literacy myth, particularly the myth's 'implicitly hierarchical vision of gender relations' and 'heteronormative patriarchal patterns' (Wilkerson, 2007: 125).⁹ Certainly some truth lies there as Barb Deeds, Ann Burner, Mimi Burner, and Laura Probst all chose to make their lives on their spouses' generations-old homesteads. However, the second point of the montage challenges the myth and further reaffirms the rhetoric of farming as a form of embodied technical

⁹ This montage features the following farmers: **Clip 1** (left to right) Barb, John, and Frank Deeds (Frank—now deceased—was John's father); **Clip 2** Ann, Nick, Rob, Mimi, and Lauren Burner (Ann speaks first and is mother to Rob; Mimi speaks second and is wife to Rob, as well as mother to Lauren and Nick); **Clip 3** Laura and Greg Probst; **Clip 4** John, Frank, and Tom Deeds (Tom is Frank's son and John's brother); **Clip 5** Nick, Mimi, and Lauren; **Clip 6** Laura and Greg Probst; **Clip 7** Lauren, Bob, Rob, and Nick Burner (Bob is Rob's father, Lauren and Nick's grandfather).

communication where 'learning itself becomes the means not only for the acquisition of agency but for the concept of social change itself' (Giroux, 2000: 354). Here the farmers demonstrate even more deeply the leadership and collaborative roles played by women and men in agricultural communities—roles that serve to root out agricultural illiteracy and persuade insiders and outsiders to 'rethink our mindset about agriculture' (Olmstead, 2018: n.pag.).

In the montage, the phone's ring—which signals a customer's call—interrupts Laura Probst, who runs a website where consumers can order items such as beef, chicken, eggs, pork, and syrup, all from the certified naturally grown farm that she and her husband run with their children.¹⁰ Laura also homeschools her children (the farm is their science lab) and provides advice as well as demonstrations on how to prepare and store food. On the weekends, her husband, Greg, organizes and runs the local farmers' market, where community members stroll, chat, shop, and become witness to not only a variety of regional foods and plants, but also their agrarian neighbors who produce these products. Lauren Burner, a college student, studies Agricultural Science and has plans to 'continue the family farm tradition' as well as give back to her community by opening a rehab center for large animals.

In other montages not included in this article, Lauren talks of how, while in high school, she coaxed and then taught her non-farm friends to help with feeding and grooming her steer, so that she might more readily join them for a night out. Frank Deeds, in his decades of teaching Vocational Agriculture to Hancock County students, notes the societal changes he observed during a lifetime of agrarian work and studies.¹¹ All the farmers featured in these videos are advocates. All are educators. All precipitate change. In addition, all recognize, to borrow Laura's words, 'It's a lot of work'. 'It' (farming—and by extension, here, advocacy) is also their choice, their identity. Nedra Reynolds (1993) contends that a person's character is formed by his or her 'community or culture' (329).¹² Likewise, Giroux (2000b) argues that '[c]ulture's primacy as a substantive and epistemological force highlights its educational nature

¹⁰ The Probst Family Farm website can be accessed at <http://www.probstfamilyfarm.com/>.

¹¹ Frank Deeds was 98 years old at the time of the *OFS* interview.

¹² For the purposes of this argument, I extend the definition of 'character' to include 'identity'.

as a site where identities are continually being transformed and power enacted' (354). In each case, the *OFS* farmers derive strength, optimism, guidance, and a sense of identity from the past. Just as importantly, they assert power through education, advocacy, and activism—all of which help them to shape and position the agrarian identity and future of Hancock County.

Part IV: Harvesting a Rhetoric of Farming

On a cold, rainy evening in late March 2018, farmers and community members linger long over cookies and punch and memories in a dimly lit conference hall. No one wants to leave. This scene repeats often. After every *Ohio Farm Stories* public presentation, farmers and community members remain to swap stories and laughter.¹³ They ask if there will be more *Ohio Farm Stories* presentations and offer suggestions as to who we should interview next. Often they share artifacts with Sarah and me: a 1900s scuffed red ledger that recounts the cost of feed; a framed document certifying a family farm has reached the century mark; a family letter (an heirloom)—fragile, on blue-grey thin, faded paper—dated 1857. These artifacts, these 'gifts', each have a story to tell, as do those who offer them. The hour after the presentation of the *OFS* montages passes just as quickly as the presentation itself. According to Daley (2003), 'the art of storytelling, always performative, has been a major way of transmitting culture and values throughout human history' (36). Furthermore, Giroux (2004) argues that narratives can 'exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think about themselves and their relationship to others' (499). In sharing their stories, the farmers in this study make public the private struggles, hopes, goals, memories, and experiences of their very selves, of their very lives. When others (e.g. researchers, an outside audience) interact with these stories, then the stories connect to their private struggles, hopes, goals, memories, and experiences—to their lives. This is the power of the rhetoric of farming.

The *Ohio Farm Stories* project also reveals the community's need for a collective space to reminisce about the (real or perceived) simplicity and innocence of the past. And that need, at least to some extent, re-inscribes nostalgic elements of the

¹³ At the time of writing, five *Ohio Farm Stories* presentations had been given in Northwest Ohio.

traditional rural literacy myth. The complexity runs more deeply than that, though. Lauren already plans to 'continue the family farm tradition,' because 'family comes first'. Gary describes the farm as providing, for generations, his family's livelihood. The filial loyalty to small, rural farms and to the generations who have worked, dreamed, and struggled together cannot be underestimated or under-valued. Important, too, are the ways in which *OFS* problematizes rural mythology and brings an 'end to the innocence' therein. Those spaces that evoke the past also serve as platforms for not just imagining but also for designing the future of agrarian life in Hancock County.

Finally, in these spaces the rhetoric of farming reaps a variety of benefits: it legitimizes small-scale agricultural practices often scrutinized by the general public; it promotes advocacy in regard to agricultural issues in traditional rural settings, such as quantity over quality; and it encourages 'an ethical engagement with, critique of, and intervention into the conditions, functions, and effects of value-laden practices' (Scott, 2004: 298) found in generationally-rich rural communities. Ideally, a rhetoric of farming can also establish or re-establish common bonds between those within rural communities and those on the margins or outside those communities. It is on-going work. It is constant work. In Gary's words, 'There's always going to be new people who need to understand how and why [farmers] do things'. As with the rural literacy work of Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2007b), the work of the *Ohio Farm Stories* project 'is not the end of the literacy endeavor but the beginning' (190). January 2019 marks the beginning of phase three of the project. Through the words and actions of the *OFS* farmers, a rhetoric of farming emerges. That rhetoric can potentially serve to right rural literacy misconceptions and ameliorate gaps between those in agricultural communities and the generations of Americans who have gotten 'so far away from the land'.

Video Transcripts

Ohio Farm Stories: Disconnect transcript

Gary Wilson: 'The long-term goals between those that live in town and in the country sometimes are different. As population grows, there will be more housing needed, and guess where things are going to grow into—it's going to grow into farmland. And farmland, I think, is viewed differently by those who farm it compared to those who buy lots from it to build houses. This is not only their present livelihood, but

it's been the livelihood of their ancestors for several centuries, really. You go back 100 years, you'll find 90% of the people involved with agriculture. Many times, you can just go back one generation—back when I was a kid—to find your family on the farm, and now it's three and four generations. And the farther away you get, the less connected you become, to the point when people ask where a gallon of milk comes from, well, it comes from a grocery store, and they don't realize, well, there was a real animal, by the name of a cow, that produced that, and, and, it didn't do that willingly. It had to be cared for properly. It had to be happy and comfortable, as I said earlier, and healthy, and the more that they were in those kinds of situations, the more that they will produce. And how a farmer has refined their business to be as efficient as they can, many times the populace has not agreed with that, and they don't like the fact that chickens are in cages or sows are in farrowing crates as they give their babies or in gestation pens. They think that's cruel, um, but farming has noticed that keeps them healthier; otherwise, they don't play nicely together'.

Jacki Johnson: 'The agricultural, whole program, or mentality I guess I want to say, is dwindling, because we are too many generations away from the farm. I know when Bill [her husband, now deceased] and I were in the County Pork Producers' Association, we did some in-store promotions, and, um, I remember up in Toledo [Ohio], I was talking to a lady one day, and stuff, and she said, "I can't believe that you kill animals for all this stuff and things, and you guys should get out of farming". And I said, "Where would you find anything to eat?" and she said, "I'd just go to the grocery store and get it!" and I said, "Where do you think the grocery stores get their food that you buy and eat?" "Well, from a factory", so the mentality—we as agriculture people have to continue to educate people, and if I can do it through 4-H, and I'm in the Ag Alumni group at the school in Arlington [Ohio]—and the programs that I helped with and put on, and like when we had the Barn Tour here, you know the boys [Jacki's sons] were here, and they talked to people and told stories and told about the barn, and told about livestock and things. You have to be able to get out there and do it or we're not going to have anything to eat someday'.

David Spahr: 'Well, we're getting so far away from the land in our thinking and our living—knowing where food comes from and how it's produced, which includes the breeding of seeds and all kinds of use of chemicals and on and on, so it is complex and, you know, farmers are probably down to 1% of the population today'.

Gary Wilson: 'You're right'.

David Spahr: 'And we're ... and the rest of the world is several generations away from being close to the farm'.

Miles vonStein: 'Well, I believe that the longer farming goes on, there's going to be a disconnection between the rural and urban communities, um. You can see it at the fair, you know. I'm active in the fair, the county fair, and you can just see it when families come in. They don't know anything about where their meat comes from, where their corn comes from, and my mom works in town, and the women she works with, they don't even know what a cornfield is. They think it's all sweet corn. They don't even know what, what a regular just hybrid corn is. And I think down the road it's something we're going to have to teach the, uh, I guess, the people that don't know where their products come from and how it gets there, so as a farmer we have to do our job in teaching everyone else'.

Gary Wilson: 'So we just have a constant job to do on educating the public on how we farm, why we farm, and why we do, what we do. And that's never going to change, because there's always going to be new people who need to understand how and why we do things'.

Ohio Farm Stories: Women in Farming transcript

Barb Deeds: 'The first time I saw this house, it's like, 'You expect me to live in this?' well, because I grew up in Dayton [Ohio], so my whole exposure to farming was when we went to the fair once a year. So it was . . . my parents knew that we—I must love him when I told them I helped him wash a, a pig for his hog production class. So, so I gave up the city life'.

Ann Burner: 'This was all new to me, except my mother was from a farm family over around Houcktown [Ohio], and uh, so she never had a whole lot of sympathy that Bob was in the tractor and I wasn't with him but whatever. No, I didn't grow up on a farm, and uh, it took you—it takes you a few years to get used to the—you being the boss and him only being a boss when he comes in'.

Off camera: 'Mimi, you didn't grow up on a farm?'

Mimi Burner: 'No, I did not grow up on a farm. Um, I lived in Van Buren [Ohio] for a while until my eighth grade year, and then my mom got remarried and I graduated from Cory Rawson [High School], so yeah'.

Ann Burner (off camera): 'Which we've tried to forgive'. [laughter]

Mimi Burner: 'So this was all—when I met Rob—a whole new ballgame. Still learning the whole process'.

Laura Probst: 'This is a lot more work than I ever thought. I've told him before, if I had known how much work this was going to be then, I might've thought twice about it'.

Greg Probst: 'Me, too!'

Laura Probst: 'I mean, I love it, and I love what we do, and I love the benefits that we have, and I love [phone rings] the way of our kids, [phone rings] but it's a lot of work. [phone rings] And I'm tired of that!'

[laughter]

Frank Deeds: 'I have to admit I wouldn't be qualified to teach today. I had one girl. That was one of the first years that girls were allowed in Vo Ag. And now boys are pretty scarce. It's mostly girls'.

Lauren Burner: 'I currently major in Animal Science with a specialization in beef and then I also have a minor in Ag Business, so'.

Off camera: 'Did all of your time in 4-H ...?'

Lauren Burner: 'Led to, yes, led to the career or the major that I'm in as of right now, so. I was very involved in 4-H and FFA all through high school, and some day, I would like to own my own rehabilitation center for large animals, so that's my goal'.

Laura Probst: 'I can a lot of my stuff. We can a lot of garden stuff. We can all of our chicken and chicken broth. And so there's a lot of people that um "Ok, I've got these chickens, now what do I do with them?"

And so I try ...' [cell phone dings].

Greg Probst: 'Speaking of customers' [laughter]

Laura Probst: 'Um, I'll try to teach them what to do. Like there's the one, a different lady that I was talking to that said she has a growing family and she has this chicken, and she wants to figure out what to do with it, and I said, "well, I can it", and she said—she was saying that she didn't have enough freezer space, and I said, "well, just can it", and I said, "have you canned before?" and she said, "no", and she said, "I'm afraid to", and I said, "well, if you want some help", so, she said, "Will you just tell me when you're going to can, and I'll just come over and watch you", and I said, "Yeah, that's fine".

Lauren Burner: 'My plans are, yes, hopefully I do get to come back here and grow—or start my family in one of these two houses here on the farm and carry on that tradition, but, you know, like Nicholas, you know if it comes down to it, "family comes first", and so, I think in the end, we'll probably work as a good team and continue the family farm tradition ... so, yeah.'

Nick Burner: 'There's definitely going to be a lot of bickering ... so, that's why there's two houses.' [laughter]

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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