A Poststructural Feminist and Narrative Analysis of Food and Bodies:
Community Organizing for Social Change in a Sustainable Agriculture Initiative

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This dissertation titled

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Abstract

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A Poststructural Feminist and Narrative Analysis of Food and Bodies: Community Organizing for Social Change in a Sustainable Agriculture Initiative

Director of Dissertation: Lynn M. Harter

This dissertation explores organizing strategies surrounding rural food insecurity. Through ethnographic and interview-based research, I worked alongside Rural Action, a social enterprise that seeks to foster sustainable food systems for the people of Appalachia Ohio. Guided by poststructural feminist and narrative sensibilities I worked with this organization over the course of one year. I volunteered as a clerk at a produce auction, worked in community gardens, and attended planning meetings. Over the course of these activities I collected discourse, including participant observation field notes, semi structured interviews, promotional materials, and participatory sketching. Three research questions guided my research: What mobilizing narratives about food are composed and circulated by Rural Action? How does the communicative labor of Rural Action foster stakeholders’ capacity to act? How does the communicative labor of Rural Action foster social movement outcomes?

I present my analysis in chapters four, five, and six. In chapter four I argue that organizational origin stories have the ability to both mobilize for action, as well as moralize bodies. For organizations centered around a food-based mission, this becomes even more complicated. In chapter five, I present discourse that supports how our assessment of risk, in terms of the food we consume, is impacted by how we aesthetically...
evaluate that food. Finally, in chapter six, I present a theoretical concept that I term narrative resilience. This framework is built upon a pragmatic orientation towards social problems. I demonstrate in this chapter how Rural Action demonstrates such an ethos. I conclude with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications.
Dedication

To Grandpa, who told me I could be anything I wanted to be.
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Chapter One: Feeding Hungry Bodies

“Can I have extra,” a small voice longingly petitions. Today I am volunteering in the lunchroom of a local elementary school helping the cafeteria staff serve food. Here, in this space, the push and pull of lack and want is evident. Here, in this space, nestled in the heart of Appalachia, more than 40 percent of children depend on the school’s free and reduced lunch program to eat. A parent tells me a story of a child we see in the lunchroom. My heart sinks as another parent laments, “We tried to send food home with her, but her parents kept taking it from her. She eventually bought a lockbox from a yard sale and keeps everything we send home there, locked away from her parents.”

In the makeshift lunchroom, as I dollop food on Styrofoam trays, I am surrounded by lived differences and profound inequities. A child with a plate of canned corn and frozen pizza sits next to another child with a package of sushi. Children enter the lunchroom separately. “Packers” enter first, followed by the “buyers.” Long rectangular tables line the converted space originally meant to be an auditorium. I am encouraged, though, by the creative resilience of volunteers. “I knew we could do it,” a parent tells me as we dish out food. “I knew that our community had lots of farms and willing community partners, and I knew that other districts were having some success making fresh changes to their menus, so I was interested in getting some fresher foods in our school system.” With the support of a Farm to School grant and the organizing structure of Rural Action, parents, staff members, and community volunteers are daring to imagine beyond the confines of traditional bureaucratic logics. Through its communicative labor and material practices, Rural Action (RA) offers an innovative model for addressing hunger and food insecurity in Appalachian Ohio. As it states on its website, Rural Action
is organizing for social justice. Rural Action trusts me to narrate its efforts. This project seeks to do so in a way that enriches theory and practice.

The year: 1964. The poverty rate: a staggering 20 percent. Lyndon B. Johnson was president. America was on the heels of an economic boom following the end of the World War II, but as the 1960s drew to a close, the country began to experience more severe economic disparity. While America’s middle class was growing, millions were left behind. To address the growing wealth disparity, Johnson began programs that were collectively known as the “War on Poverty.” Appalachia became the setting for such a struggle. In February 1968 Robert F. Kennedy made one final stop before beginning his campaign for president (Wunderlich & Norwood, 2006). Of his visit, Senator Kennedy said this to a crowd of 20,000 people at University of Kansas:

I run for the presidency because I have seen proud men in the hills of Appalachia, who wish only to work in dignity, but they cannot, for the mines are closed and their jobs are gone and no one – neither industry, nor labor, nor government – has cared enough to help. I think we here in this country, with the unselfish spirit that exists in the United States of America, I think we can do better here also. I have seen the people of the black ghetto, listening to ever greater promises of equality and of justice, as they sit in the same decaying schools and huddled in the same filthy rooms – without heat – warding off the cold and warding off the rats.

(Abramsky, 2013, pp. 78-79)

Appalachia became a centerpiece for such social and political discussions regarding inequity in America. Appalachian Ohio is one such region.
This dissertation takes as a central character this region, looking to pay tribute to and honor the voices of those who inhabit this space. More specifically, I examine the way one community group, Rural Action, organizes around issues of food insecurity in Appalachian Ohio. In the remainder of this chapter, I articulate the scope of food insecurity generally and rural food insecurity specifically. I then articulate a communication centered approach to understanding how Rural Action organizes around food insecurity, focusing specifically on the communicative labor of Rural Action. In Chapter Two, I articulate my poststructural feminist and narrative sensibilities and in Chapter Three overview my inquiry practices. I offer three analysis chapters (Four, Five, and Six) and conclude with Chapter Seven and a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of this project.

**Food Insecurity: A Brief History**

In response to work begun by President Johnson’s “Great Society” legislation, in the 1980s President Ronald Reagan convened the *Task Force on Food Assistance* to further address the issue of hunger. What was clear at this point was that there was no common definition of hunger established. Without such a common understanding, assessing hunger and providing assistance became difficult. Consequently, in the 1990s, Congress enacted Public Law 101-445: the National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act (NNMRR). This law was established to assess the US nutritional and dietary status. As a result of the NNMRR the measurement known as food insecurity was established. Prior to the mid-1900s, no such language existed. Surprisingly, the task force concluded that, “there is no evidence that widespread undernutrition is a major health
problem in the United States,” but instead acknowledged a “hunger” problem. Put another way, there was debate over the biological manifestations (malnutrition) of lack of food on the one hand, and social manifestations (hunger) on the other. Illuminating such tensions, in 1985 President Reagan declared:

To many people hunger means not just symptoms that can be diagnosed by a physician, it bespeaks the existence of a social, not a medical, problem: a situation in which someone cannot obtain an adequate amount of food, even if the shortage is not prolonged enough to cause health problems. It is the experience of being unsatisfied, of not getting enough to eat. This, of course, is the sense in which people ordinarily use the word. It is also the sense in which the witnesses before us and many of the reports and documents we have studied have spoken of hunger. This alternative definition of hunger relates directly to our communal commitment to ensure that everyone has adequate access to food, and to the nation’s endeavors to provide food assistance. And in this sense we cannot doubt that there is hunger in America. (US Task Force, 1984, p. 36)

In this statement, President Reagan addressed not only the need to acknowledge the medical consequences stemming from hunger, but also the social consequences, firmly placing such a topic within the realm of communication studies.

This move by the Reagan administration was important because prior to this Congressional act, no such language existed to talk about lack of food access on a holistic level. Today, the term is still contested. In order to develop a common lexicon for
understanding, for this study I rely on a definition of food security offered by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, which understands food security as:

- a situation in which all households have both physical and economic access to adequate food for all members and where households are not at risk of losing such access. There are three dimensions implicit in this definition: availability, stability, and access. Adequate food availability means that, on average, sufficient food supplies should be available to meet consumption needs. Stability refers to minimizing the possibility that, in difficult years or seasons, food consumption might fall below consumption requirements. Access draws attention to the fact that, even with bountiful supplies, many people still go hungry because they are too poor to produce or purchase the food they need. (Hamm & Bellows, 2003, p. 38)

Food insecurity continues to be a social problem warranting sustained attention from social scientists and other allied field.

Approximately 86 percent of households in the United States are identified by the government as food secure, while 14 percent (17 million households) are deemed food insecure (ERS, 2015). Almost 7 million of these households are considered to have very low food security, meaning that food intake for these households is reduced or disrupted due to limited resources. While the percentage of households living in food insecurity has dropped by a margin of one percent since 2011, the percentage of individuals considered to be living with very low food security has remained the same (ERS, 2015). My work
focuses specifically on food insecurity in rural settings. The next section expands upon this topic.

**Rural Food Insecurity**

Most studies involving food insecurity have approached the topic by examining samples selected for urban or inner city environments, low socioeconomic levels, or homelessness (Shanafelt, Hearst, Wang, Nanney, 2016). Noticeably missing are studies that explicitly account for rural populations’ experiences with food insecurity (Ramadurai, Sharf, & Sharkey, 2012). Rural America often brings to mind bucolic scenes of sprawling fields, patchwork barn houses, and horses grazing in open land. It is hard to imagine living in an area surrounded by farmland, and still individuals struggle to access sufficient food. This is far from the lived reality of individuals in these areas. For instance, in Southern Ohio there are entire counties with no grocery store. This portion of the population is noticeably missing a voice. At the turn of the century, approximately 20 percent of food insecure households lived in nonmetropolitan areas (Nord, 2002). The studies that do examine rural regions are largely concentrated on developing areas outside of the United States (e.g. Boukary, Diaw, & Wünscher, 2016; Mabuza, Ortmann, & Wale, 2016). Ramadurai, Sharf, & Sharkey (2012) argued that “rural food insufficiency as a health communication issue is undertheorized and overlooked” (p. 795). The present study takes up this call, explicitly accounting for rural food insecurity within the context of Appalachia.

Appalachian Ohio is an area within the United States that experiences severe poverty. The region is comprised of 32 counties. Although there is great diversity in
socio-economic resources across this region, collectively these counties comprise the poorest economic region in the country. According to the 2011 census, more than 17 percent of the population within this region lives in poverty. This is compared with a nation-wide average of 15 percent (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, 2013). As a result, many individuals in this area lack access to sufficient nutrition. More than 16 percent of individuals in this region are considered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to be food insecure, meaning that these individuals lack access to enough food for an active, healthy life (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, 2013). Of all of the 32 counties that comprise Appalachian Ohio, Athens County represents the highest rates of food insecurity in the state. Within Athens County, more than 20% of the county is food insecure, which represents more than 12,000 community members (Gunderson, Satoh, Dewey, Kato, & Engelhard, 2015).

What is more, populations such as the aging, the homeless, and the economically struggling are impacted by food insecurity (Nord, 2002). In particular, children are a particularly vulnerable population. While most households living with food insecurity attempt to shield children from the effects of inadequate access to food, approximately 3.7 million households in the United States are still unable to provide adequate nutrition for children (ERS, 2015). This is particularly concerning because childhood is a critical developmental stage in the lifespan. During this time children establish health-related behaviors related to eating habits and physical activity that carry lifelong implications (Food Marketing to Children and Youth, 2006). What is more, children from low-income homes experience disproportional negative health outcomes related to cognitive and
physical development. These negative health outcomes are due in part to the fact that children from low-income homes are less likely to have access to a healthful diet (Food Marketing to Children and Youth, 2006).

**Historical Origins of School Lunch Programs in the United States**

In an effort to redress childhood nutrition, the federal government began in the late 19th century to establish school nutrition programs, marking the beginning of what Dwyer (1995) discusses as four “revolutions” in United States nutrition policy. Indeed schools are important sites for health and wellness. Glanz, Sallis, Saelens, and Frank, (2005) outlined a model of community nutrition that includes what they term the “organizational nutrition environment,” which includes home, school, and work sites. School nutrition programs directly address this environment. The following section outlines a brief historical overview of the school nutrition programs in the United States.

The history of school lunch programs in the United States may be traced back to martial beginnings. At the brink of the Cold War era General Lewis B. Hershey testified before congress that more than 40% of draftees were being turned away due to poor diet (Parker, 2002). Thus, in an effort to ensure a robust military force, the government went to work on legislation that would ensure nutrition-rich food to children. This history is particularly important to the way we understand school lunches today. Martial metaphors are often employed to describe the lunchroom (i.e. a “battlefield,” or the “war on lunch”).

In 1946, these efforts by the US government culminated in President Harry Truman signing the act that would establish the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The act reads:
It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food, by assisting the States, through grants-in-aid and other means, in providing an adequate supply of food and other facilities for the establishment, maintenance, operation and expansion of nonprofit school lunch programs (USDA, 1946, p. 231, original emphasis).

Since that time, the NSLP has become one of the most prolific government programs in history. Levine (2008) goes as far as to call it the popular social welfare program our country has ever witnessed. Sixty-one percent of food insecure households depend on the NSLP every year (ERS, 2015). The NSLP is one of the three largest Federal Food Assistance programs in the country, including also the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) and SNAP for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The numbers are certainly staggering. Since it’s inception, the NSLP has served over 180 billion lunches. The NSLP currently feeds more than 31 million children every year (GAO, 2014).

On the heels of the NSLP, the government passed the Child Nutrition Act in 1966. This act would in turn establish the School Breakfast Program (SBP), which expanded school meal programs and offered further assistance for low-income students. In 1988, the government expanded the program again to include reimbursement for snacks in afterschool programs (USDA, 2013). More changes followed. As instances of childhood obesity and mortality continued to rise, key stakeholders began to take note. While
parents, politicians, and policy makers agreed that the NSLP and SBP performed a vital function in the social welfare of our nation, the nutritional quality of the food being served in school meals is of equal import. School meals are often high in fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium, presenting a unique health concern for children who predominately rely on these meals for the majority of their nutrition (Dwyer, 1995). By 2009, the government was no longer having trouble finding well-nourished recruits. In fact, as some Generals stated publically, recruits were becoming “too fat to fight” (Confessore, 2014). Thus, in 2010, the Obama administration passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids (HHFK) Act in order to more closely align school meals with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (USDA, 2012). As a result, in order to qualify for government funding, each lunch offered in schools must contain a meat (or meat alternative), a grain, low-fat or fat free milk, a fruit, or a vegetable.

The passage of the HHFK Act served as a turning point in many cafeterias across the country. The legislation mandated that schools increase the availability of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains offered in school meals, while still operating on the same or reduced budget. Significant changes included offering fat-free and low-fat milk and reducing the levels of sodium and saturated fats. Due to the passage of this more stringent legislation, schools were forced to rely on the government for assistance. Schools participating in the NSLP receive assistance from the USDA in multiple ways. First, the USDA provides cash reimbursement for each meal served. The breakdown is as follows: for each free lunch served, schools receive a total of $2.93, for each reduced-priced lunch, schools receive $2.53, and for full-priced lunches, schools receive $0.28 (USDA,
Further, the USDA provides bonuses to schools that purchase government commodity foods, at an additional 22.75 cents for every lunch served. Second, schools rely on commodity foods subsidized by the government. Schools must historically rely on agricultural surplus commodities (i.e. pork, dairy, and meat products) to assuage budgetary restraints (Gunderson, 2014). Commodity foods are controversial, being termed, for instance, a “black box” by watchdog organizations in terms of their nutritional quality (FRAC, 2008). The tradeoffs are significant. Some studies indicate that the reliance on commodity foods may lead to the over consumption of energy-dense food, prompting a positive net caloric intake and weight gain (Stein, 2015).

In addition to financial constraints, another challenge facing school meals is that of participation. Recent trends suggest that while participation of paying students (students who pay full-price for school lunch meals) is decreasing, free and reduced student participation (students who are subsidized by the government for their school lunch meals) is increasing by more than three million students (FRAC, 2015). As growing economic disparities continue to grow, participation in government assistance programs continues to steadily rise among students from low-income backgrounds. In light of this trend, which suggests that low-income children increasingly rely on school lunch programs, this dissertation seeks to privilege the voices of such actors and their families.

Of the 30 million students who eat school lunch daily, 17.4 million of those children receive free or reduced priced lunch (FRAC, 2008). Indeed then, this suggests that the NSLP particularly impacts children living in low-income homes. Issues of food
access are particularly important in an area such as Appalachian Ohio. Of the 25 school districts in Southeastern Ohio, eight qualify as community eligible for free and reduced lunch, meaning that more than 40 percent of all community members utilize government food assistance. On average, children receive more than one-third of their nutrition at school. For children participating in the NSLP and SBP, almost half of all nutrition is consumed during school hours (Story, 2009). In Southeastern Ohio, various community groups organize to address the issue of food access in schools.

The NSLP must also answer to changes in the rise of childhood obesity. Current estimates posture that approximately 17 percent of children in the United States are considered “obese” (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014), meaning that, in children 2-19 years of age, body mass index (BMI) was at or above the 95th percentile. While research from within the medical community suggests that childhood obesity may lead to negative health outcomes such as coronary heart disease (Freedman, Khan, Dietz, Srinivasan, & Berenson, 2001), decreased self-esteem (Strauss, 2000), and Type 2 diabetes (Han, Lawlor, & Kimm, 2010), more current research proposes that environmental factors are primarily culpable for such an epidemic (Ebbeling, Pawlak, & Ludwig, 2002). Thus, social and physical factors such as the built environment (i.e. transportation and ease of access) and social factors such as community integration, are equally, if not more, important in preventing instances of childhood obesity. This is in line with current meta research which suggests that physical and social factors contributes to overall quality of life, as well as life expectancy (Woolf & Aron, 2013). Thus, school lunches, which represents the yoking together of physical and symbolic space, is an important site for
beginning to understand the health consequences of a public health issue such as childhood nutrition. To address such a multifarious issue, various programs have been established to creatively address various facets of school meals. One such program is the Farm to School Program.

**Farm-to-School Programming**

While commodity food purchases are a concern for various stakeholders, this purchasing comprises only about 20 percent of total food purchases for NSLP schools. Schools spend 80-85 percent of their government funding to buy food on the open market, as opposed to commodity purchases (Nicholson, Turner, Schneider, Chriqui, & Chaloupka, 2014). This, then, leaves a large portion of funding for the purchasing of foods from various sources. Beginning in 1996, school projects in California and Florida prompted the beginning of the National Farm to School Network. With the passage of the HHFK Act in 2012, the Farm to School program was formally established. Since, the program has been recognized for its commitment to public health and was recognized by the White House Task Force on Childhood obesity in 2011 for its innovative strategies addressing obesity prevention (Joshi, Henderson, Ratcliffe, & Feenstra, 2014). In 2016, the USDA announced the formation of the Office of Community Food Systems (OCFS), demonstrating a resolve to address childhood nutrition. The OCFS currently employs 7 regional lead members and 6 national staff members to plan and coordinate all programming.

Through Farm to School (FTS) programming the USDA distributes more than 5 million dollars a year to schools, agricultural producers, and non-profits with the mission
of helping, “schools connect with local producers and teach children where their food comes from” (USDA, 2015). FTS grants are awarded in four categories including support service, implementation, planning, and training and range from $20,000-100,000. Institutions and organizations must demonstrate at least a 25 percent match or in-kind donations to be eligible to receive grant funding. Grant funding is assessment based on outcomes such as local and regional economic impact, social capital, and increase in food literacy. In school year 2013-2014, 42,173 schools participated in FTS programming and close to 600 million dollars were spent on local produce (USDA, 2016). While the FTS program was originally established to incorporate local foods into the NSLP and SBP, it has recently expanded to target summer programing and adult care. In sum, I argue that FTS programming answers recommendations from the American Dietetic Association that advocates for:

Adequate funding for and increased utilization of food and nutrition assistance programs, the inclusion of food and nutrition education in all programs providing food and nutrition assistance, and innovative programs to promote and support the economic self-sufficiency of individuals and families, to end food insecurity and hunger in the United States (Holben, 2006, p. 446).

Rural Action is one such organization that is working to employ such efforts.

**An Overview of Rural Action**

Food insecurity rates are highest in rural areas (ERS, 2015). Rural Action is a non-profit, member-based organization located in Athens County, Ohio, designed to address this and other concerns of rural areas. RA primarily serves Athens and the
surrounding six counties including Meigs, Vinton, Washington, Hocking, Morgan, and Perry. The group organized in 1991 around the mission to “foster social, economic, and environmental justice in Appalachian Ohio” (Rural Action, 2015). The organization addresses diverse issues including water quality, trail access, waste and recycling, and local food access. RA organizes around three key “pillars” to promote sustainable development, including the economy, equity, and environment. The organization currently employs 21 staff members and 27 AmeriCorps volunteers (Rural Action, 2015). RA currently hosts one of the largest rural development AmeriCorps staffs in the country, demonstrating its service to the community.

Rural Action organizes around an asset-based philosophy, meaning that rather than focus on deficits in the region, the organization looks to maximize surrounding resources. Inspired by Ernesto Sirolli’s (1999) notion of Enterprise Facilitation, Rural Action organizes around a people-centered approach, adopting that:

Economic development has more to do with people than with so-called comparative advantage, more to do with our collective qualities as citizens than with the trees on our lands or the fish in our seas, more to do with the resources in our heads than those under the ground. (p. xv)

For example, the organization looks to teach landowners how to harvest ginseng on their own property for profit. This, organizing principle, I argue, is predicated around a sense of place and exemplifies a narrative framework that is at the heart of my inquiry and analytic practices for this project. This ethos privileges the intersubjective meaning making within and among stakeholders in order to organize around social change.
RA is structured around six main initiatives: sustainable agriculture, sustainable forestry, watershed restoration, zero waste, energy committee, and environmental education. For the purposes of this dissertation project, I focused on the sustainable agriculture initiative. The goal of this arm of RA is to “build healthy local food economies in Appalachian Ohio.” The organization does this through four primary projects: The Chesterhill Produce Auction (a hub for rural food), the Ohio Foodshed (an online resources for local partners to increase community presence), Country Fresh Stops (pop-up stores designed to provide fresh produce in traditionally established food deserts), and Season Creation (peer-to-peer education program to help regional growers). In sum, these projects sponsored by Rural Action’s sustainable agriculture program seek to address rural food insecurity in a diverse and compelling ways. The Chesterhill Produce Auction is at the center of most of the programs efforts. Thus, I spend time below explaining its efforts.

One of the most prominent goals of the sustainable agriculture program is strengthening its institutional partnerships. The Chesterhill Produce Auction (CPA) provides a means to connect growers with larger institutions such as restaurants, hospitals, and schools. The auction model allows growers a centralized location to sell large quantities of food for set times each week. While individuals may purchase from the auction, its intent is to provide institutional partners an outlet to purchase directly from regional growers and provides an alterative means of purchasing outside of corporate wholesalers. The auction began in 2005 as the passion project of two local residents of Chesterhill, Ohio, Jean and Marvin Konkle. Rural Action’s initial role was to
aid the Konkle’s in incubating their dream and turning it in to a reality. They initially played a key role in organizing and planning the auction, but were not solely responsible for the auction’s day-to-day activity. Rural Action’s partnership afforded the Konkles the ability to, for example, apply for grant funding that they would not qualify for otherwise. In 2010, Rural Action purchased the auction from the Konkles before they retired.

The auction runs twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays. The primary growers represented at the auction are Amish farmers from the surrounding areas. The auction setting is an ideal fit for these farmers who must rely on non-mechanized means of transportation to deliver their produce to market. Food is auctioned off to the highest bidder. During the busy harvest season (late May-early August), there are two separate auctions that run simultaneously: small lots and large lots. The large lot auction provides an outlet for institutional partners to purchase large quantities of produce at once, while the small lot auction caters to individual buyers. The organization keeps a running tracks of produce purchased and published these average prices on ohiofoodshed.org. The organization retains a 17% commission fee, with the rest of the profits going directly back to the farmers.

A culminating moment for Rural Action’s work to strengthen institutional partnerships came in late 2014, when Rural Action was awarded a $100,000 Farm to School grant from the USDA to support the more than 10,000 students enrolled in six surrounding school districts – the largest sum granted to any FTS program. To maximize grant funding, RA partnered with Chesterhill Produce Auction and Hocking College’s Culinary Arts program. Chesterhill Produce Auction provides an outlet to local farmers to
sell their produce at wholesale pricing, while Hocking College provides the space and resources for centralized processing of fruits and vegetables. The production chain looks something like this: food is delivered from Chesterhill Produce, processed by Hocking College students, and then flash frozen and stored at a central processing unit. Food service managers for each school district may then decide to purchase these foods directly from RA, rather than a larger commercial vendor.

Food insecurity is noticeably seen in local schools. As of the 2013-2014 school year Athens City Schools (ACS), one of the largest school districts served by RA, enrolled 2,747 students. 85% of those students are white, non-Hispanic. Additionally, nearly 40% of students are considered by the state to be “economically disadvantaged.” ACS is positioned in a rural, mountainous region and is located in the county with the highest poverty rate in the state. In 2012, the number of children enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program in ACS rose dramatically, from 26.6 percent to 40.2 percent. This positioning makes Athens and its surrounding areas a unique research site for investigation. While the school district represents affluence from the surrounding university population, it also represents severe poverty as well. Further, there are no nearby private schools that attract a large number of students. Nearly all of the region’s children attend public school.

In sum, the FTS grant is part of a larger initiative to connect local growers with institutions such as schools, hospitals, and universities. RA represents a web of various community partnerships. From Hocking College, to Chesterhill Produce, to community volunteers, RA brings these individuals and organizations together. RA relies on this
intricately woven network of relationships to accomplish its work in the community.

Importantly, I view RA as an important site for understanding how the ideas of “healthy bodies,” “food,” and “nutrition” are symbolically constructed, challenged, and changed within the community. Understanding the discursive practices of Rural Action demands an entry point. In the final section of this chapter I outline my communicative approach to RA and its attendant discourses.

A Communicative Understanding

As the above history suggests, the issue of food insecurity is complex, and demands attention to not only physiological factors but also environmental, social, and cultural factors. As Morton, Worthen, and Weatherspoon (2004) charged, the “causes of household food insecurity stem from complex interactions of economic, social, structural, and environmental problems” (p. 103). Through its focus on shared meaning, symbolic construction, and discursive understanding, a communicative perspective is key in understanding such a multifaceted issue. In this project, I explored how members of a Rural Action talk about and organize around food.

As a health and organizational communication scholar, I am interested in how food, nutrition, wellbeing, and diverse bodies (e.g., “the packers” and “the buyers” in the lunchroom) assume meaning through societal discourses, relational interactions and institutional practices. My understanding of discourse is informed by Lupton’s (2012) articulation:

Discourse, in this usage, can be described as a pattern of words, figures of speech, concepts, values, and symbols. A discourse is a coherent way of describing and
categorizing the social and physical worlds. Discourses gather around an object, person, social group or event of interest, providing a means of “making sense” of that object, person…all discourses are textual, or expressed in texts, inter-textual, drawing upon other texts and their discourse to achieve meaning, and contextual, embedded in historical, political, and cultural settings. (p. 2).

What sorts of meaning, then, tend to “gather” around food and food insecurity? How do these intersubjective meanings in turn influence our bodily understanding of food and wellbeing? These questions inspired my dissertation. As a feminist, I am interested in the constitutive power of discourse in evoking subjectivities and social realities as well as material consequences (e.g., access to nutrition-rich food). These theoretical commitments drew me to RA. Through its communicative labor and inter-organizational efforts, RA is attempting to shift communal understandings of food and nutrition, and build sustainable local food economies. My dissertation focuses on how RA’s sustainable agriculture initiative is disrupting food insecurity and the embodied experience of regional hunger. Specifically, I will explore how RA works to shift communal understandings of food and nutrition and foster societal transformation through its communicative labor, defined by Dempsey (2009) as a form of symbolic power linked to social legitimization and cultural values. Ganesh (2015) urged communication scholars to explore how the communicative labor of organizations fosters the work of social transformation.

Scholars concerned with the ability of organizing to obtain social justice are particularly interested in theorizing and problematizing agency because it is
implicated in any account of social change and transformation, or the lack thereof...Agency is crucial for scholars concerned with social movement organizing for many reasons, but perhaps more than any other, the need to unpack the relationship between the communicative labor of social movements and broader social transformation. (p. 481).

My dissertation answered this call by exploring how Rural Action, through its communicative labor, fosters what Ganesh described as the “capacity to act” (i.e., agency) and the “ability to move” (i.e., social transformation). In the next chapter I overview key tenets of my poststructural feminist and narrative standpoint – theoretical sensibilities that shaped how I entered this context and encountered stakeholders.
Chapter Two: Narrating (Feminist) Bodies

The experience of poverty runs deep in this region. I consider the situated nature of poverty and health as I wind my way into the RA headquarters, which sits atop a large hill and looms over the valley above. The organization is accommodated in an antebellum red brick home that once housed the Hocking Valley Coal Mining Company’s manager and his family. Exposed brick invites and reminds of the history that once was. Each wave in the original glass of the building’s windows tells a tale. I imagine the area as it might have been when the building was first erected – a vibrant hub for commerce in Southeastern Ohio. Steam pours from the factory smokestack as a man with soot on his face turns and wipes his brow with his sleeve. He takes a brief respite from the physical labor – escaping, but for a minute, the punishing sun above. Children play amidst the gob piles of coal debris left over from the mining operations. The home towers over a cluster of tiny bungalows across the street that now serve as reminders of the coal patch town that once was. Towns almost identical to this once dotted the Southeast Ohio landscape. Miners and their families lived atop the land that would be mined during the day and slept on at night. Employers supplied everything from food, to housing, to clothing – bodies were disciplined to be productive.

This land remains a relic of once was – a portrait of lack and want. This land represents some of the most severe poverty in the state. Today, individuals still remain beholden to the land – it gives and takes away. While the region is surrounded with some of the most fertile ground in the region, it also represents one of the most barren in terms of who is able to gain access to these resources. As I enter the building I begin to think
about the confluence of discourses housed within this building itself. How do the
discursive practices in this area serve to inform cultural beliefs and practices related to
health, wellness, and bodies? How does the narrative of this land act as scaffold to
understanding larger cultural, social, and historical conditions? The first section of this
chapter theoretically engages these questions through the lens of poststructural feminism
and narrative theory. The next section of this chapter then builds upon this theoretical
framework, grounding these and other questions in extant literature.

Poststructural Feminism

As previewed in chapter one, I adopted a communicative framework for
understanding food insecurity and the organizing practices associated with addressing
such social problems. I view organizational sites as one piece in a larger signifying
system of discourses through which subject positions and subjugated knowledges about
health and wellness are produced. Thus, I approach the study of such organizing practices
from the perspective of poststructural feminism (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Buzzanell &
Liu, 2005; Weedon, 1997). “What institutional and individuals’ texts say and do (and do
not consider saying or doing) depicts discursive attempts to fix meaning or realities.
Poststructuralist feminist analyses show the nuanced ways in which discourses and
individual identities can and do shift in varied and often conflicting ways with
implications for human agency,” surmised Buzzanell and Liu (2005), identifying the
utility of such a perspective in organizational life (p. 4). In general, poststructural
feminism is characterized by following key premises: 1.) contingency of identities, 2.)
concern with the circulation of power, and 3.) problematization of taken-for-granted
discourses. Each is discussed in turn below.

**Contingency of identities.** While identities are constructed within and through discourse, poststructural feminism takes seriously its role of fostering human agency. This is an oft-cited critique leveled at poststructural thought that poststructural feminists take on directly (e.g. Tretheway, 2001). As Weedon qualified:

> Although the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available” (p. 125).

In poststructural feminist spirit, I follow Ganesh’s (2015) lead in positioning agency in deceptively simple terms: “the capacity to act” (p. 481). From this perspective, agency arises in the “sphere of the social” (p. 482) in communal and participatory fashion. I view RA as one piece of this social sphere that harnesses the potential to act. Meanwhile, drawing inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari (1983), Ganesh usefully emphasized an *eventful* view of agency.

> Philosophical work on events is rich and varied, but a Deleuzian conception of events is particularly apt because it emphasizes becoming, the process through which material, ideational, and symbolic entities assemble, engage, transform, and co-constitute each other through time, constantly making and remaking organizations. (p. 482)
The focus on becoming in Ganesh’s definition is key. Indeed this understands agency as a process, not an end state. An eventful view of agency affords attention to what organizations actually do, and with what consequences.

**Operation of power.** Next, poststructural feminism is concerned with the circulation of power – how, when, and why it is employed. Poststructural feminism seeks to destabilize structures of power – prompting us to examine social and historical factors to reveal structural and discursive struggles for power. Far from being repressive, borrowing heavily from Foucault, poststructural feminism sees power as a force which produces knowledge. In his landmark work, *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault (1980) initiates that:

> Power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage, or repression. . . . If, on the contrary, power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire, and also at the level of knowledge. Far from preventing knowledge, *power produces it*. (p. 59, emphasis added).

This is to say that power is not merely to be understood as a function of brute power. Rather, it stimulates particular knowledges and ways of thinking which then produce material consequences in the world. For this project I am concerned with the ways in which discourses of poverty operate to inform access to food resources. What systems of power are in place to define health?

Relatively, due to its concern with power, poststructural feminism also acknowledges the ways in which various identities may be subject to forms of power in
distinct ways. My identity as a multiracial, college-educated, cisgender female, for instance, subjects me to various forms of power. On the one hand, I am afforded privileges such as access to education, that some of my participants are not. On the other, as a multiracial female, I am subjected to various forms of marginalization and aggression that many of my participants may identify with. Identity is not monolithic. Various identities intersect at various points in time to form certain subject positions. Thus, poststructural feminism privileges the intersection of various identity categories in its quest for emancipation. That is, not only is gender a key social identity for understanding inequalities, but also other categories such as race, class, age, and ability. As case in point, Holviono (2008) positions poststructural feminism as a key theoretical stance in helping scholars to more aptly consider intersectionality in organizational life. That is, how do issues of race, class, as well as gender, coalesce to inform our understandings of marginalization. To address these questions, Holviono (2008) recommended the telling of alternative narratives from organizational actors, “across different axes of power and identity practices” (p. 263). Because identity is contingent, it is an underestimation to only consider gender in an examination of marginalized identities. In this project I sought to privilege the intersectionality of these various identities when examining the experience of food insecurity within Appalachian Ohio. How, for instance, does an Appalachian women negotiate her identity amidst other competing discourse surrounding food and poverty?

Disruption and resistance: Imagining otherwise. Finally, poststructural feminism seeks to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions and allows for critique of
institutional texts as well as individual practice. It is this disruptive nature that draws me to this line of inquiry – the ability to dislodge meaning; the capacity to imagine otherwise. What organizations and individuals do (or do not do) demonstrates discursive attempts to craft selves and realities. From this perspective then, poststructural feminism seeks to unfix meaning, challenging and critiquing organizational practice, as well as individual meaning (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005). Unique to poststructural feminism, however, is a commitment to the capacity of humans to evince change in their social world, an element that, as Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) pointed out, is often missing from other feminist critiques. I seek in this study to move beyond a solely discursive understanding of feminism. Early champions of such thinking maintained that we exist within and through sites of discursive struggle. Weedon (1992), for instance, maintained that, “neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside of their discursive articulation” (p. 105). More recent theorists have emphasized the importance of examining the interplay between both the discursive, as well as the material elements. A decade later, for example, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argued that gender produces material consequences and serves to (re)produce social realities that privilege particular interests over others.

Within organizational contexts, poststructural feminists look to understand what may be lost in traditional bureaucratic structures dominated by instrumental logics. Bureaucracy, as Ferguson (1985) maintained more than thirty years ago, is anti-political in that it seeks to mask differences. This is the antithesis of what Mouffe (2013) supported as an “agonistic” style of democracy, which argues the need for a multipolar,
rather than a unipolar world. This view is one that advocates for a pluralistic understanding of democracy (or democracies) and human rights. She argued that without the presence of viable alternatives, the range of dissent and discussion is limited. A poststructuralist feminist lens embraces this pluralistic view of the world and redresses bureaucratic tendencies to foster discursive closure.

*Alternative organizing.* In this project I stand alongside feminist scholars who are dedicated to alternative organizing strategies (e.g. Buzzanell, 1994; Deetz, 1992; Harter, 2017; Harter, Leeman, Norander, Young, & Rawlins, 2008; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). An important move in this literature is opening up space for the theorization of organizations as alternative discourse communities—groups that discursively challenge prevailing knowledge-power relationships (e.g., Ashcraft, 2000, 2001, 2006; Harter, 2004). Harter, Edwards, McClanahan, Hopson, and Carson-Stern (2004) characterized alternative discourse communities as being characterized by “cooperative enactment, integrative thinking, and connectedness” (p. 409). Importantly, literature regarding alternative organizing highlights the false binaries perpetuated by dominant instrumental logics (e.g., emotion/reason, mind/body, labor/leisure, public/private, art/science). Feminist scholars inspired by poststructural thought seek to move beyond such dualistic understandings of the world. These culturally determined binaries, considered remnants of transformation associated with modernity (McKerrow, 1991), heavily influence our cultural understanding of the world and our movement in it. In a Burkean sense, these binaries act as terministic screens which reflect and deflect different realities (Burke, 1966).
By moving beyond these dualisms, we are able to broaden our capacity to communicatively address issues of social justice, such as food insecurity. Through a poststructural feminist deconstruction, Mumby and Putnam (1992) offered an alternative organizing construct, bounded rationality. Bounded rationality is a feminist organizing pattern that reclaims marginalized aspects of organizing such as “nurturance, caring, community, supportiveness and interrelatedness” (p. 474). This foundational work was significant in shaping the way communication theorists understand organizing behaviors. As Ashcraft (2000) wrote, “the preservation of such a system requires tolerance for ambiguity and a heterarchy of – or contextually, relationally dependent preference for – goals and values” (p. 355). This view privileges organizational life as contingent, in-flux, and ever changing. It is from this perspective that I approached my examination of Rural Action.

Given its explicit mission “to foster social, economic, and environmental justice,” its grassroots foundation, reliance on community members, and its commitment to fostering civic conversations (http://ruralaction.org/about-us/who-we-are/), I position Rural Action as an alternative discourse community. Members of alternative discourse communities engage in communicative labor, described by Dempsey (2009) as a form of symbolic power linked to social legitimization and cultural values. “Communicative labor,” argued Harter, Broderick, Venable, & Quinlan (2013, p. 152), “produces information, knowledge, ideas, values, and emotions,” discourses employed by organizations that seek to identify social problems and imagine possible alternatives. From my interactions thus far with RA, I have witnessed the ways in which the
organization attempts to resist hegemonic discourses of poverty by promoting sustainability and community partnerships. Just as poststructural feminism allows scholars to imagine creative alternatives to present exigencies, so too does narrative theory. I discuss narrative theory, and its applicability to my study, in detail next.

Narrative Theory

*The world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation.*

- Fisher, 1984

Poststructural feminists agree that storytelling is a primary sensemaking strategy and resource for social change. Feminists rely on storytelling to raise consciousness about lived experiences and inequities and emphasize that the personal is political (Fixmer & Wood, 2005). Holvino (2010), for example, emphasized the use of narrative to solicit stories from individuals experiencing marginalization. The history of narrative scholarship is multidisciplinary. Some strands of narrative study reach back to sociolinguistics (Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997) even as other work is informed by literary scholars (e.g., Kenneth Burke). In their foundational study, Labov and Waletzky (1967) were concerned with the ways in which narrative functioned within and among race and class difference. Indeed, narrative may function to inform our understanding of difference. This point is key to a study of food insecurity and poverty. As Fisher (1984) submitted, narrative thought braids together both the argumentative and the aesthetic. He concludes that “the narrative paradigm does not deny reason and rationality; it reconstitutes them, make them amenable to all forms of human communication” (p. 2).
Thus, narrative privileges that the act of knowing takes disparate forms. Narrative is at once an artful endeavor as well as a reasoned activity. I join Mattingly (1998) in understanding narrative as “a discourse featuring human adventures and sufferings, one which connects motives, acts, and consequences in causal chains” (p. 275). Narratives, then, contribute to bearing witness to inequity and injustice. From this definition espoused above we may say of narrative that it involves the action (emplotment) of a social agent (character) within a given context (setting). The following addresses each of these contours of narrative in turn below.

**Emplotment.** Narrative theory, like poststructural thought, emphasizes the situatedness of everyday life. Indeed, then, our everyday movement through the world, if seen through a narrative lens, is contingent – that is, the way in which our experiences become emplotted. Like the plot of a story, narratives endow events, objects, and actions with consequential meaning (Ricoeur, 2008). Put another way, subjects are embedded in various contexts, and, in turn, endow that context with meaning through narrative.

The emplotment of narrative understanding is situated in time and space. Narrative is, as Bruner (1991) tendered, “irreducibility durative,” meaning that it is ongoing in its consequentiality. In other words, narrative pertains to the unfolding of events over the course time. Narrative understanding may not be linear, but it is sequenced in ways that are meaningful for the social actors living amidst them. Further supporting the temporality, Fisher (1984) refers to narrative as a process of unfolding – a process he terms narration. He suggests that narration is “a theory of symbolic actions – words and/or deeds – that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or
interpret them” (p. 2, emphasis added). Through the process of emplotment, stories develop characters and their relationships, and imagine alternative possibilities (Bruner, 1991). Throughout this study I focused on the everyday act of food consumption and witnessed the often sequestered stories of those who lack sufficient access to food.

**Characters.** The characters emplotted within narratives are intentional actors. Narrative supplies us with ways of interpreting the actions of characters (Bruner, 1991). Narrative is neither fully deterministic, nor is it fully indeterminate. While characters are endowed with agentic capacity, that capacity is still realized within particular institutional and social forces. Narratives are significant because they are not only a way of expressing the world around us, they also shape that experience. Bruner (1991) notably argued that “just as our experience of the natural world tends to imitate the categories of familiar science, so our experience of human affairs comes to take the form of the narratives we use in telling about them” (p. 5). In other words, narrative operate in a reciprocal fashion whereby characters shape narratives inasmuch they are shaped by narratives.

The power of stories as sensemaking resources rests in their capacity to aid characters in accounting for expectations gone awry. Narrative is a form of self-expression, representation, and identity construction. It is through stories that we come to understand self and our place in the world (e.g. Riessman, 1990; Somers, 1994). According to Somers (1994) narrativity has four dimensions: ontological narratives (how social actors make sense of and act in their lives), public narratives (narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations), metanarrativity (the larger narratives within which we are all embedded as social actors), and conceptual narrativity (the concepts we
construct as social researchers). Following Somers’ lead, I approach narrative from an explicitly broad and intertextual standpoint, casting a wide net that included participants’ accounts and autobiographical stories, institutional plots and meta-narratives (e.g., technology as progress) and societal tropes (e.g., metaphors) that surround food insecurity over time and across genres of communication (e.g., educational pamphlets produced by Rural Action, newspaper reports).

Social actors, then, have the capacity to invent counternarratives, stories that challenge the dominant, or master, narratives of society. Organizations are key sites in the construction of counternarratives (i.e., Harter, 2017; Harter, Scott, Novak, Leeman, & Morris, 2006; Novak & Harter, 2008). Lindeman-Nelson (2001) asserted that, in addition to telling and listening to stories, individuals may also invoke stories for particular purposes. Seen this way, stories become a key communicative resource that offers our ability to craft selves and realities (Bruner, 1991). This agency imbues social actors with an immense ethical responsibility, for stories may be used to both empower and sequester. Organizations such as RA may, through their communicative acts, serve to dislodge fixed meanings and taken-for-granted assumptions and evince change.

**Setting.** Narratives occur within particular spaces that are consequential to the meaning making process of social actors. Setting emphasizes the situatedness of narratives in social life. That is, narratives may not be understood in isolation. When adopting a narrative approach we must consider a host of dynamics at play, including economic, legal, social, cultural, and political systems of power. As Foucault (1977) suggested, we are continually embedded within matrices of power that are not entirely of
our own making. Setting is important for this reason. By taking this seriously, I attribute situations such as poverty and food insecurity as issues which coalesces around these various factors – a situation that is not solely a product of the individual, but rather the setting of which that individual is a part.

Settings, many times, can become characters in their own right. Appalachian Ohio certainly has become influential in the story I tell about food insecurity. Each time I traveled to a site, I traced the path carved for me by the Hocking River, which, at this point, has become a character in her own right. The Hocking -- meaning gourd -- gives shape to the land, and the people. As a symbol of bounty, I consider the irony of this name -- the push and pull of lack and want. After several days of heavy rains, the Hocking River is expectant -- angry, foreboding, forceful. The winding roads are disconcerting, almost making me dizzy as I make hairpin turns staring at sharp drop-offs on either side of my car. Misdirection -- it becomes my way of becoming acquainted with the land. This is a landscape that cannot be prescribed or predicted, just sensed and felt. This way of knowing/sensing is often meandering, wandering, and indefinite like the roads upon which I travel. Indeed, this is the way of the land. The setting of my project is evocative and summons us to understand further what it is like to live, sense, and be in this area. Narrative is one means of privileging the importance of the land in this land.

What, then, are the consequences of such an approach? This section concludes with a few estimations. Stories also serve ideological and political functions. Consider Langellier’s (2001) argument:
Embedded in the lives of the ordinary, the marginalized, and the muted, personal narrative responds to the disintegration of master narratives as people make sense of experience, claim identities, and “get a life” by telling and writing their stories. (p. 700)

The study of narrative represents the coming together of structuralism of the 1960s and poststructuralist influences of the decades that followed. With this came the influence of pragmatic and performative approaches (Langellier, 2001). From a pragmatic standpoint, contemporary narrative inquiry not only seeks to understand what meaning is created and maintained, but also how that meaning functions. It asks: what difference does that narrative make within our social worlds? What are the differences that make a difference?

More critically, narrative inquiry seeks to evaluate and provide commentary on social life. As Langellier (2001) asserted:

Both a doing and a thing done, personal narrative is a performative struggle for agency within the forces of discourse that shape language, experience, and identity’s body: who speaks to whom for whom under what conditions and with what consequences? (p. 700)

Further, narratives are also performative endeavors. Thinking of narrative in this way is what Conquergood (2002) would privilege as a knowing who, rather than a knowing that. I privilege the notion that individuals are unfinalizable, in the Bakhtinian sense. As Schechner (1998) reminds us, performance offers the ability to approach people, places, things, and events as continuously in progress and never complete. Narrative privileges
this way of knowing. This is an inherently political and ethical endeavor, one that Pollock (2008) refers to as “response-ability” – the responsibility of being responsive.

Relatedly, narratives serve a witnessing function (Reissman, 2002). As such, when adopting a narrative approach, we must attend equally to both presences and absences. As Charon (2005) urged, we must listen to not only whose voice is heard (narrative voice), but also whose voice is not heard (narrative silence). Implicit in such a framework is the assumption that narrative has the capacity to bear witness to social injustice. This is the promise of such a focus in a study pertaining to food access.

In particular, organizations are key sites where power relations are produced and reproduced. As Mumby (1987) set forth almost thirty years ago, organizational narratives serve to legitimate (or delegitimate) particular realities. This is particularly important for a study of a community-based group such as RA. A political reading of narrative must take in to account not only that narratives are a form of organizational reality, but also ask whose interests are served in the storytelling process. There is much at stake here, when adopting this view of narrative. For, as Somers (1994) maintains, “The self and the purposes of self are constructed and reconstructed in the context of internal and external relations of time and place and power that are constantly in flux” (p. 621). Indeed then, we can view organizational narratives as inherently disruptive in that they seek to unsettle our taken-for-granted assumptions of the world and our understanding of “the way things should be.” From this perspective, since reality is continually in flux, there is no natural order of things, but rather, this reality is continually be invented and reinvented.
However, it would be a gross oversight to suggest that narrative only functions within the discursive realm. Narratives do not function in isolation from their physical and corporeal environments (for further reviews see Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Stories are embodied. They have the ability to affect health outcomes (Reissman, 1990), healing (Edvardsson, Rasmussen, & Riessman, 2003), and aging (Yamasaki, 2009). Further, narratives may limit access to material resources. For example, in a study of women’s experiences as work, Tretheway (2001) found that aging narratives led to diminished material resources for middle-aged women in the workplace. Indeed, as Althusser (1972) reminds us, ideology has a material existence. Thus, a study of food access must consider not only the discursive, but also the material and corporeal elements related to the narratives associated with food. Ultimately, the power of RA’s communicative labor, including its storytelling, rests in its “ability to move” – to change, transform, and impact societal meanings, material circumstances, and embodied realities (Ganesh, 2015).

With my theoretical framework in place, in the next section I bring together literatures on food insecurity, food and communication, bodies, and alternative forms of organizing to help further shape my approach to this multifaceted issue. I will begin with a review of prior work in communication related to food insecurity.

**Food Insecurity**

In recent years, health communication scholars have called for research which attends to the growing issue of food insecurity in rural areas (i.e. Ramadurai, Sharf, & Sharkey, 2012). Earlier work regarding food insecurity suggests food security is one of the most pressing health disparities expressed by marginalized individuals. In fact, lack of
access to food is one of the most dire of all health disparities. As an exemplar, in his work with the Sentals in rural Bengal, Dutta-Bergman found (2004) that hunger is the greatest source of disease and illness as expressed by participants. Often in this line of research, the voices of individuals living in poverty are muted, with researchers focusing on policy development and intervention evaluation (see critiques by Dutta, 2008). This leads to an interpretation of poverty which reflects dominant power structures and ideologies (Asen, 2002). In this project I answered prior calls by health scholars for further work in the area of rural food insecurity.

Many studies regarding food insecurity and food access have taken a policy approach. Policies govern our everyday lives. From how we move, navigate, and understand our bodies, to how we determine what foods go in our bodies, policies play a large role in determining our movement through everyday life. As I indicated in chapter one, school lunch programs are subject to a host of regulatory discourses. These policies determine what foods can be served, to whom, when, and at what cost. Thus, it is important for me to review communicative approaches to policy. I view policy as simultaneously enabling and constraining. Thought of in terms of strategies and tactics (DeCerteau, 2011), policies provide the road map within which we navigate our lived experiences. That is, while policies provide a framework (strategies) for our being-in-the-world, we traverse this framework within and through our communication (tactics). Further, policies are mutually reinforcing of their constituents. Policies govern individuals inasmuch as individuals may utilize policies for their own aims. Policy may serve as a contradiction which both facilitates and restraints knowledge formation.
(Canary, 2010). For instance, Kirby and Krone (2002) influentially asserted, policies may exist, but participants may be unable to enact them. Conversely, individuals may creatively engage with policy to enact change. Further, the study of policy allows us to push the boundaries of applied scholarship by serving as “a starting point to translate our scholarship into material benefits for the individuals we study (Trethewey, Scott, & LeGreco, 2006, p. 136). Indeed, a focus on policies necessitates attention to the material conditions that impacts community members. Given this, my work affirms the necessity of a policy approach to research on food insecurity.

The study of policy has the ability to bring together micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis to form a more robust understanding of communicative interactions that inform policy development. While most organizational communication scholarship has focused on policies related to work-life (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Kirby & Krone, 2002), as well as economic and social pressures related to marketplace viability (D’Enbeau & Buzzanell, 2011), this study attended to policy as a discursive formation, thus making space for attention to the meso-level of analysis – a space where larger cultural influences and individual actions meet to inform how policies are not only enacted, but also executed. As organizational policies develop, often contradictory knowledges also emerge that can either generate or hinder systemic change (Canary, 2010).

Beyond policy, food insecurity implicates bodies. Common among the literature on food insecurity is the vulnerability of bodies in such situations. For example, living within such circumstances may force individuals to manage particular identities that are discredited – known as stigmatized identities (Goffman, 1963). Individuals living in
conditions marked by food insecurity often face issues of stigma. This may lead to material consequences. For example, prior research in both the US and India suggests that individuals are less likely to seek help from food pantries due to issues of stigma (Dutta, Anaele, & Jones, 2013; Pine, 2017). Further, issues of food insecurity has been linked with feelings of perceived powerlessness with regard to government and social structures (Knezevic, Hunter, Watt, Williams, & Anderson, 2014). However, democratic engagement and community involvement may help to ameliorate the effects of such stigma. Research has shown that participatory processes create a sense of empowerment for citizens and reduce the negative repercussions that may come with such stigma (Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Knezevic et al., 2014). In this project I examined the ways in which RA worked to create this sense of democratic engagement, thereby working to reduce to negative consequences of food insecurity. Schools became one of many sites for this sort of engagement. In a participatory ethnographic account, Thorp (2006) highlighted school gardens as a place of connection. She reflected:

> The garden became a place of connection because it operated according to different rhythms from schooling. You cannot hurry a garden; it is beholden to a temporal pace, unaffected by human clocks and schedules (p. 33).

RA partners with community organizations in their FTS program to create, maintain, and sustain school gardens. In this project I attended to these spaces as key sites of potential democratic engagement for students. From a narrative approach, this required I attend to stories. Stories speak and do the work of making noticeable the vulnerability of bodies. I was particularly attuned to how Rural Action told stories about those experiencing food
insecurity—communicative labor with social and material consequences. The next section overviews the work related to narrative approaches to health and organizing.

**Narrative Approaches to Health and Organizing**

Within healthcare, White and Epston (1990) invited narrative into the field of psychotherapy with the initiation of narrative therapy. This form of patient care advocates that clients view their situations as texts which may be written, and rewritten. As Bianco (2011) penned:

> Whether narrative-informed or narrative-specific, a storied approach to psychotherapy recognizes that we are complex characters engaged in vast, overlapping, and often contradictory subplots. A narrative approach to mental health acknowledges that a person is a collection of multiple selves living within multiple realities (p. 300).

Coinciding with the so-termed “narrative turn,” many practitioners are relying on narrative frameworks for patient care. Rita Charon (2001) has been instrumental in championing the narrative medicine movement in healthcare, which she describes as “the ability to acknowledge, absorb, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others” (p. 1897). As Frank (2004) surmised, narrative medicine is not premised on thinking about stories, but rather, thinking with stories. That is, a narrative commitment towards health involves a way of being, an orientation towards the world, which directs us to the storied experiences of others. Rather than acknowledging that stories exist, a narrative orientation demands that we remain ever attuned to the victories, challenges, and mundane events that surround us everyday – stories waiting to be told. As Stewart (2007)
promoted, “ordinary scenes can tempt the passerby with the promise of a story let out of the bag” (p. 23). I see narrative as an aesthetic endeavor, where the quotidian may become artful.

In terms of agency, narratives live at the border. That is to say, narrative simultaneously straddles the boundary between enabling and constraining the human capacity to act. Mumby (1987) sought to challenge the notion of narrative as a way of fostering shared community. Rather, he argued, narrative may often mask ideological messages of control and oppression. Such may be the case with issues related to hunger and food access. In the same vein, Clair (1993) attended to what she termed the sequestered stories of those who live at the margins, and whose stories are often overshadowed by master narratives. Another case in point is Tretheway’s (2001) account of the way in which midlife, professional women navigate their identity in the workplace against the master narrative of decline. This project seeks to privilege those voices and adopt a nuanced understanding of narrative’s agentic capacities.

However, I not do mean to underestimate the power of narrative to evince change. As Harter, Japp, and Beck (2005) expressed, “master narratives may appear monolithic but because they are a bricolage of components, they have tensions, fissures, and gaps that can be exploited by those who want to challenge their power” (p. 24). Narrative does hold the promise of change. Charon (2006), for instance, urged health scholars and practitioners to consider not only narrative silences (i.e. absences or gaps in stories), but also narrative voice (i.e. those who participate as active agents in constructing their worlds). Lindemann-Nelson (2001), working with groups such as Gypsies, mothers,
nurses, and transsexuals, defined counternarrative as “a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect” (p. 6). In work with individuals living with disability, Harter et al. (2006) supported the power of counternarratives to enable individuals living within differently abled bodies to transcend mind/body dualisms, and instead embraces an ethic of inclusion and equality. That is to say, how do individuals who have traditionally been relegated to the fringes of society use narratives as sources of empowerment to engage in the process of rewriting their own life story? This is indeed a central question of this project as I seek to privilege the voices of those living with food insecurity. In this same vein, I now turn to literature that reflects the creative and resilient ways in which individuals may organize for issues of social change.

**Contradictions in organizing.** Ashcraft (2006) positioned organizations as sites rife with tensions. In a post-bureaucratic society, organizations must increasingly renegotiate identities in various ways. This view of feminist organizing embraces ambiguity in organizing and embraces, not eschews, irrationality as an alternative organizing logic. In a special issue of *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Ashcraft and Treheway (2004) set forth a call for applied research which attends to tension explicitly. They go as far as asserting that, “scholarship that denies the powerful presence of tensions neglects the basic character of organizational life” (p. 171). From a structuration standpoint, this reflects Giddens’ (1984) duality of structure whereby structure and agency are mutually reinforcing entities and are produced, and reproduced within various forms of organizing. NSLPs must operate within particular structures
governed by federal, state, and local legislation. However, within this structure, stakeholders may find ways to creatively navigate this structure. In other words, structure is what makes agency socially recognizable (Banks & Riley, 1993).

Within communication studies, this approach has been theorized in terms of paradoxes (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Stohl & Cheney, 2001), contradictory logics (Ashcraft, 2006), and animating forces (Cooren, Matte, Benoit-Barné, & Brummans, 2013). Communication scholars have examined tensions within diverse contexts such as volunteering (McNamee & Peterson, 2014), correctional facilities (Tracy, 2004), feminist community groups (Ashcraft, 2006), information communication technologies (Jian, 2007), and farm cooperatives (Harter & Krone, 2001, 2004), and non-profit marketization (Sanders, 2012). After reviewing literatures related to food insecurity, narrative approaches to health and organizing, and alternative forms of organizing, my positioning of bodies as central to inquiry should be clear. The next section related prior work on embodiment to this current study.

**Centrality of the Body: Beyond the Cartesian Split**

The work of feminists and poststructuralists led the charge in bringing bodies to the forefront of academic inquiry, even as narrative inquiry embodied experiences as central to the meaning making process. As McKerrow (1993) offered, "Before the subject is the body" (p. 52). That is, before subject positions are formed, as is central in poststructural thought, the bodies are present. The maxim, “we do not have bodies, we are our bodies” (Trinh, 1999, p. 258, emphasis in original) is apt to my line of thinking. In stating that we do not have, but are bodies, I take this to mean that bodies are not merely
something one possesses. Rather, bodies are vessels through which we experience the world. Laura Ellingson (in press) consciously referred to the body as the body-self, in order to dislodge the mind/body split. As Ellingson stated, “we enact our body-selves in everyday life, and as such, we do bodies” (Ellingson, in press, p. 3).

Scholars in this line of inquiry offered a view of the body as a discursive text upon which cultural and social meaning is inscribed. Further, in line with a feminist framework, the body is a “locus that legitimates and normalizes certain discourses and practices as ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’” (Calás & Smircich, 1996, p. 236-237). From a rhetorical perspective, bodies are productive sites of rhetorical argument because “they have the capacity to contest the assumed values too often taken for granted when bodies are visible and observed” (Butterworth, 2008, p. 260). Bodies argue. The body makes arguments for what and what does not count as healthy, legitimate, “normal,” or not.

However, as Hauser (1999) cautioned, bodies are incongruous, thus problematizing the capacity of bodies for agency. He argued, “The body is an ambiguous form of signification. Arguments are warranted assertions. They are claims supported by evidence and reasoning. But the body, as a corporeal entity, is an organism; its biological status is not symbolic” (p. 2). Thus, thinking about the body rhetorically means attending to not only its discursive and symbolic qualities, but also its biological and corporeal qualities. After all, bodies, as Butler (2011) reminded us, are composed of multiple materialities. Our bodies are at once an object and an agent (Featherstone, 2006). That is, the bodies act as both an object to be consumed by others in as much as it is also the vessel through which we see and understand the world. Ultimately our bodies can be
viewed as a text which is made up of, or constituted by, the rhetorical and communicative practices surrounding it (Coleman, 2008).

I also acknowledge the body’s capacity to exceed rational discourse. Bodies, as DeLuca (1999) argues, are “excessive,” in that “bodies simultaneously are constructed in discourses and exceed those discourses” (p. 20). In this way, embodiment falls in line with a feminist and narrative approach in that it goes beyond a binary of reason/emotion and opens up space for alternative rationalities. Bodies, as Hawhee (2005) termed, is a “bodily art.” In framing this study as one that focuses on the centrality of bodies, I understand bodies as at once an artistic endeavor inasmuch as it is an empirical endeavor. I seek to understand bodies in terms of both physiological capacities and also social and cultural capacities. Thus, bodies, as I surmise, are canvases onto which meaning is inscribed. For a study of food, this has particular significance. In a Foucauldian (1988) sense, food is a technology of the self. Food practices both express and construct subjectivity. These practices shape bodies in ways that are then interpreted by others. Food is both produced and consumed by and through bodies.

Food and the Body

Almost half a century ago, Henderson (1970) argued for a communicative view of food, forcefully submitting that “the study of food has undergone a curious, varied and altogether unsatisfactory and incomplete analysis as a prime factor in the development of peoples and cultures” (p. 3). Her call went relatively unheeded until recent years. More contemporary scholarship has seen a relative rise in the amount of scholarship pertaining to food and communication (see for example Cramer, Greene, & Walters, 2011). I
employ food communication here in this project as an overarching body of literature due to its ability to chain together the symbolic and the material in unique ways. This is especially important in a study of food insecurity. Food is more than just a biological process. Like others who have taken an interest in the communicative function of food, I understand food to be an inherently communicative process (Cramer, Greene, & Walters, 2011a). Food is a social endeavor. As Bakhtin (1984) reminds us, each time we take food into the body, we take in the world. Food is a “coded edible” that informs identity, telling us who we are, and who we may become (Abrams, 2012). Indeed food is coded with meaning that guides our social behaviors. From what we eat, to how, and when, food follows ritualistic norms and rituals that are culturally determined. Ultimately I hope this dissertation highlights the ways in which organizations serve to circulate this power regarding the body, and the food it consumes.

Food chains together the symbolic and the material in unique ways. Food is more than “mere sustenance,” it circulates both materially (for example in our bodies, tables, schools, stores) as well as symbolically (for example in movies, television shows, sport). Anthropology has been perhaps one of the most avid supporters of food as a social and cultural item. For example, Claude Levi-Strauss’ (1983) The Raw and the Cooked serves as a foundational text for supporting food’s social and cultural aspects. While it is true that we are never outside of discourse, Kenneth Burke also convinces us in Permanence and Change (1984) that we are never outside of the material elements constituted in everyday life. Burke acknowledges both the interpretative nature of the universe as well as the biological.
Food, like bodies, spans material and discursive boundaries. For example, in a convincing argument Nestle and Nesheim (2012) make the claim that even the calorie, a unit of energy used to determine the body’s needed food intake, is political. What counts as a calorie is not only biologically determined, but also symbolically constructed. Thus, even the most highly scientific elements of food are imbued with the social. Food, and its attendant meanings, are intersubjectively constructed. Therefore, I posit that food is needed for not only physical survival, but also social survival. Food presses upon the limits of rationality. It cannot be understood singularly as a biological process. Food is much more than this. It is at once necessity, and also pleasure. It struggles to both conform and break free of these norms.

Food, as an extension of bodies, is a performance of our cultural selves (e.g., parenthood, for example, is performed through the production of packed lunches). Further, food is an aesthetic performance. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1997) compared the sharing of the meal to writing a poem. She writes “the rules of the menu are not in themselves more or less trivial than the rules of verse to which a poet submits (p. 53). Food presses upon the limits of rationality. It cannot be understood singularly as a biological process. Food is much more than this. It is at once necessity, and also pleasure (Lupton, 1996). It struggles to both conform and break free of these norms. Food presses upon the limits of rationality. It prompts us to reach beyond traditional logics in order to understand. It calls upon us to sense. This is what Stewart (2007) called exercises of attunement, which “work not through meanings per se, but rather in the way they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of
all kinds” (p. 3). Thus, the way individuals organize around food is a significant site in understanding feminist and alternative ways of organizing.

**Research Questions**

Below, I articulate the general research questions informed by my theoretical commitments that guided my study of RA and the ways in which the group does (or does not) employ alternative forms of organizing to address food insecurity in Appalachian Ohio.

RQ1: What mobilizing narratives about food are composed and circulated by Rural Action?

RQ2: How does the communicative labor of Rural Action foster stakeholders’ capacity to act?

RQ3: How does the communicative labor of Rural Action foster social movement outcomes?

As I spent time in the field, I found myself moving beyond the initial literature review and delving deeper into narrative and aesthetic inquiry. I found this abductive experience meaningful in ultimately deepening my analytic engagement with the discourses of the settings I entered. In the next chapter, I detail my inquiry practices.
Chapter Three: Methodological Commitments…The “Prick” of Research

Spoons clank against the enamel of coffee mugs. Faint chatter of friendly conversation fills the space. The smell of the yeast of cooked bread permeates the air and lingers heavy. Keith opens his laptop, loading a photo. He turns his laptop, revealing a photo of an enthusiastic group of boys in an overgrown school garden. The space is overrun with weeds and thorns as they playfully chase each other. He explains:

So this is just a thistle weed. And there's these boys figuring out that it's prickly. That's what I like about having kids in the garden. Yeah you can try and say, "We need to enrich the soil," "we need to draw a line and drop seeds in it," but there's also this natural, wonderful world there to be found. So these guys are just challenging themselves, kind of reveling in the prick and the pain of getting stabbed by a thorn. They're just being silly but they're coming to have this really real experience with nature. I love that kind of stuff.

The prick of a thistle weed on the skin. The prod of a spade piercing the earthen soil. The poke of a shovel making way for new life. These are all experiences I wish to call into greater focus for this dissertation.

For this project, I relied on an ethnographically inspired research design. More specifically, in line with my theoretical sensibilities, I conducted a feminist ethnographic study. This approach attends primarily to the relationship between the knower and the known and, with such an approach, issues of power are front of mind (Sanger, 2003). In this way, I was implicated in the field as a co-traveler who shares the experience along with her participants (Kvale, 1996). I found this design appropriate for several reasons.
First it allowed for attention to and privileging of the lived experiences of my participants. Acknowledging the dialogic positionality of researcher and participant strives to minimize hierarchical relationships, thus contributing to the co-construction of knowledge. Secondly, in this same spirit, feminist ethnography strives to move beyond the ocular. That is, rather than “seeing,” or “observing,” feminist ethnographers may privilege “understanding” and “listening.” In this way, feminist ethnography is a practice that explicitly accounts for the senses, such as those recounted above – what DeVault (1996) suggested as a “bringing in” of that which has traditionally been under erasure. This approach is in line with my feminist and narrative sensibilities because it relies on alternative ways of coming to knowledge, presenting data, and representing participant voices. Such a design takes seriously the contingency of research and acknowledges that communication may not be understood outside of social, cultural, economic, and legal forces. In this way, ethnographic practice is an orientation towards research that involves the emplaced experiences of both researcher and participant.

An example of this living out of this sort of methodology was evident in my field notes:

More often than not, when I ask if participants have anything else to add, they respectfully decline. They are ready, as I am, for the interview to be over. The same was true for Beth and I. We are both mentally and emotionally exhausted. The signs are written all over our bodies – droopy eyes, fidgeting, looking at watches. Beth still had more, though. “I have one more thing,” Beth quietly offered up. I turn the recorder back on. Beth wanted me to know what it was like
to serve in her position. She told me the story of a mother struggling with heroin addiction. “Beth,” the mother said to her, “I would not buy my child a quarter bag of chips if I thought that meant I would be short on my next fix.” My heart collapsed. I reached gently for the recorder to switch it to the off position. The silence, pregnant with meaning, deserved to be filled. Before I could even think about the words about to leave my body, I told Becky that my mother also struggles with addiction. There was an immediate connection between us. “Thank you for sharing that with me,” she said reverently. She went on, “my sister was also an addict for many years. It just makes me so angry when people prejudge the people from this area” (Kristen, 7/15/16, author, field notes).

In that moment, my willingness to connect and share with my participant created a connection that better helped me to understand the lived experiences of my participants. This, to me, is part of the beauty (and agony) of ethnographic research. It does prick, like a thistle, but also creates moments of intense understanding that cannot be replicated.

My methodological approach for this project is undergirded by an ontology rooted in constructivist/phenomenological thought. That is, my approach, while grounded in theory, was largely emergent. In the course of my project, I allowed myself to remain open to the pricks, pokes, and prods of the research process. Many times this took me in unexpected directions. For example, I did not think that aesthetic theory would figure as prominently into this project as it did. However, when I entered the field, and as I began hearing the way participants talked about food, as luscious, beautiful, and ripe, I realized I could not do a project such as this justice without attending to such a line of inquiry.
Further, following in the same vein as Frank (2005), I strived to remain faithful to a dialogical approach to research – one that sponsors an ethos of unfinalizability. In a comprehensive discussion of a dialogical approach to research Frank (2005) maintained that, “Dialogue depends on perpetual openness to the other’s capacity to become someone other than whoever she or he already is” (p. 967). Similarly, Ellingson (2017) maintained:

When we do qualitative research, we capture details of only tiny slices of time, yet we present our findings as though we have faithfully represented who our participants are and what they do, or at least how they were and what they did during our period of data collection (p. 25).

For this reason, qualitative research can be messy. “Active participation of scholars in ethnographic inquiry gives us insight into what can be messy, embodied interaction in which body, mind, emotion and spirit interrelate in communicating about health” (Zoller & Kline, 2008, p. 119). This project is no exception. There were adjustments that were made along the way as I collected data and began to analyze it.

Utilizing multiple methods of inquiry, I practiced what Ellingson (2008) termed crystallization. This method design is inspired by an ethos that understands research as existing on a continuum. As Ellingson maintained, “crystallized projects span multiple points on the qualitative continuum in order to maximize the benefits of contrasting approaches to analysis and representation, while also being self-referential to their partiality” (p. 10). For this project, I braided together multiple modes of inquiry in order to produce richness that is indicative of rigor in qualitative work (e.g. Tracy, 2010),
including: (1) participant observation, (2) participatory interviews, (3) document analysis, and (4) participatory sketching.

**Discourse Collection Practices...Getting Dirty**

Utilizing multiple methods of inquiry, I practiced what Ellingson (2008) termed crystallization. This method design is inspired by an ethos that understands research as existing on a continuum. As Ellingson maintained, “crystallized projects span multiple points on the qualitative continuum in order to maximize the benefits of contrasting approaches to analysis and representation, while also being self-referential to their partiality” (p. 10). For this project, I braided together multiple modes of inquiry in order to produce richness that is indicative of rigor in qualitative work (e.g. Tracy, 2010), including: (1) participant observation at RA office, meetings, and sponsored events; (2) participatory interviews with RA staff and community volunteers; (3) document analysis of RA promotional and educational materials and artifacts; (4) participatory sketching.

Gaining access was an exercise in trust building. I first heard about Rural Action on during a segment broadcast on a local NPR segment. “An organization that is utilizing local produce in school lunches,” I thought to myself, “I need to find out more.” Over the next year I began meeting with members and staff of Rural Action to learn more. I attended holiday open houses sponsored by the organization and became involved in a school lunch advisory group sponsored by the group. Through my involvement with the group I was entrusted with financial details such as billing and collecting payment. After receiving a letter of support (for a copy of the letter of support see Appendix A) from program director Timothy, I obtained approval from the Ohio University Institutional
Board Review on May 6, 2016 under project number 16-X-146 (for a copy of approval letter see Appendix B).

Before each interview, all participants were informed of my research (for informed consent form see Appendix C). I explained that they could stop the interview at any point and ask any follow up questions. Even though each participant gave me permission to use her/his real name, I changed all names as they appear here in the dissertation. For the sake of added protection, I gave each participant a pseudonym. No other identifying information is connected to the individual. When conducting field observations, each time I would enter a space, although public, I would tell individuals there that I was conducting research for my dissertation project, so as to identify my purpose for being there. All participants were over the age of 18 and fully able to give consent.

My data collection period lasted from May-December 2016. For six months prior to this, I immersed myself in pre-field work, where I worked on two projects that oriented me to my field. One such study interviewed parents regarding their children’s school lunch program, and the other was a performance project in which I prepared and consumed meals with families in Appalachian Ohio. While that data is not specifically included in this project, it did influence my thinking regarding issues of food insecurity in the region and allowed me access to a broader range of stakeholders that I would not have had access to otherwise.

In total, I completed 28 interviews. This produced 369 single-spaced pages of data. Interviews ranged in length from 86-26 minutes, with an average time of 52
minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and consent was obtained from each participant individually. Additionally, I completed 87 hours of field observation and produced a combination of head notes, scratch notes, and narrative notes (for a field log, see Appendix D). My field notes totaled 50 pages of written text. Some of my notes were also audio-recorded, as I did not have pen and paper readily available at all times. I also asked members at the auction, as well as participants, to write six-word memoirs regarding their experiences with food. I obtained 8 memoirs in total.

**Writing myself into the field.** In line with ethnographic research, I must acknowledge my own positionality within this project. I attempted, throughout the collecting and analyzing of data, to remain viscerally and corporeally present in my research. I acknowledged the discomforts I experienced, as I did in the following field note:

I arrive and meet Tom, who is carrying recycled produce boxes. He tells me that he forgot to tell me, but that “we don’t wear shorts at the auction. Because of the Amish.” We usually wear long pants. “Don’t worry about it today,” he assures me. I immediately feel self-conscious -- my legs a marker of my out of place-ness.

(Kristen, 6/6/16, author, field notes)

I note in this field note my sense of feeling out of place and uncomfortable. Rather than ignore this, I wrote about it. I also acknowledge my own privilege within this project as someone who has never experienced food insecurity. I do, however, feel connected to my participants through in the process of being othered. I am multiracial and have continually struggled with issues of identity, much like individual living within
Appalachia do on a regular. It was important to me throughout the process of this dissertation to write myself into the story, rather than erasing myself. This was a process of which I had to be constantly aware.

**Sensing the field.** Based on Pink’s (2009) offering of the term sensing, rather than observing, for what is traditionally known as participant observation in ethnographic work, I outline in this section such an orientation to my proposed field practice. Rodaway (1994) described sensing as a two-pronged process, as “both a relationship to a world and the senses as themselves a kind of structuring of space and defining of place” (p. 4). To sense, then, is an act of identity construction as we orient ourselves towards self and other. Further elaborating on this, I believe it crucial to attend to embodied experiences in the field. As Conquergood (1991) maintained, “ethnography is an embodied practice; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing” (p. 180). Through the act of sensing, rather than simply observing – what Rosaldo (1993) termed the ethnographic “eye” – we may attend to the whole bodies, and thus enriching ethnographic practice. As Pink (2009) ascertained, “we can, by aligning our bodies, rhythms, tastes, ways of seeing and more with theirs, begin to become involved in making places that are similar to theirs and this feel we are similarly emplaced” (p. 40). Following in the footsteps of Ellingson (2017), who urged qualitative researchers to move past the mind/body split by integrating bodies more explicitly into research design, I note explicitly the way my body acted, and was acted upon, in the field.

First, I immersed myself in the field by acting as a volunteer within RA, and helping in any way that I can. I participated in a variety of activities, including attending
staff meetings, fishing at a local lake during a team building day, doing accounting work for the auction, including billing, working the register at the auction once a week, and tending to a school garden. I attended all staff meetings, team building days, and auctions twice a week. As Lindlof and Taylor (2011) noted, in participant observation, the researcher is the instrument. As such, this role in one that is performed and negotiated between researcher and participant. There are four so-termed “master roles,” including complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For this project I acted as a participant-as-observer, which is marked with an informed reciprocity. While in the field, I kept multiple methods of field notes, including jottings, sound recordings, long-form narrative notes, day-to-day logistical notes, and photographic diaries to capture my experience. Taking various styled of notes helped me to present my data in multi-sensory ways.

John Dewey’s (1960) concept of being “along with” is important in my sensing of participant observation. For Dewey, representation was not enough for an active robust democracy. We must also participate. The act of coming to knowledge is an act of doing. He maintained more than fifty years ago that “knowing is not the act of an outside spectator but of a participator inside the natural and social scene” (p. 157). I also acknowledge that my field was not static. Therefore, my observations were not limited to only the RA office, but rather any of the areas in which RA may have reach, including community gardens, schools, and food processing centers.

The calling forth of stories. After an initial month in the field, I began the interview process. For this I engaged in participatory interviewing that included both
narrative and ethnographic style interviews. Narrative interviews ask participants to draw upon stories from their own lives to bring to light salient topics and theoretical issues (Tracy, 2013). I utilized ethnographic interviews (for a sample interview protocol see appendix D). For example, as I would help to set food out on the auction floor, I would often talk to the auction manager about the inventory and important events occurring. These interviews occurred “on the fly,” and were more informal interviews in order to better understand day-to-day practices (Tracy, 2013).

Acknowledging the extent to which RA relies on networks of collective action, I spread a wide net for interview data. Various community partners work closely with RA to allow the organization to act for social change. There is even a shared use position in which Rachel, works for three different organization, including RA. These are groups that Tom Redfern refers to as important “arms” of RA’s FTS program. By utilizing a snowball sampling method, I was able to interview a variety of participants. These included RA staff, AmeriCorps volunteers, community members, social workers, school administrators, and farmers (for a full list of interview participants see Appendix E).

Interviews were semi-structured and emergent in nature, which meant that interviews may occur spontaneously and informally in the field. During interviews I attended to the embodied nature of the process. As Ellingson (2012) submitted, “Interviewer researchers must reject the mind/body split and embrace our participants and ourselves as whole persons who are bodies, not who have bodies” (p. 525).

Attending to my body in this way allowed me to be open to the experience of the interview itself. I strove for reflectivity and thick description in my presentation of
interview data. For reference, I have included sample interview protocol that will take into account this embodied style of interviewing my being flexible and open to change (see Appendix D).

**Working with the tangible.** I also collected both internal and external documents for analysis. Fitch (1994) noted that document analysis increases analytical rigor due to public accessibility of these documents. RA produces a number of educational materials, such as recipe books that demonstrate for individuals how to cook the fresh produce they may purchase from Chesterhill Produce Auction and a seasonal vegetable guide that informs readers of what vegetables are in season when. As part of my project, I analyzed these materials. Based on this analysis, part of my final offering to the organization is recommendations on the ways in which they may improve these materials. Out of this analysis, for example, came a project I worked on called “Know Your Farmer.” Inspired by the USDA strategy of connecting farmers with their community, I worked with RA to come up with interview questions which will eventually be used for highlighting a different local farmer so that auction buyers may learn more about the lived experiences of farmers and their families.

Additionally, I plan on designing promotional materials for RA, which considers food service managers as a key stakeholder. These materials will be designed with the idea of informing these managers of the benefits of purchasing produce from RA for their school cafeterias. In my initial interactions with RA, staff indicated to me that one challenge is getting food service managers to see the value of purchasing produce. As an extension of this project, I have, though combining my teaching and research, designed a
final project for my group communication class in which 5 groups of students are currently partnered with program areas of RA to address social problems. While this is still ongoing, I consider this an exciting and important part of the engaged nature of this research and an exciting extension to be carried out in the future.

**Participatory sketching.** Finally, in order to represent my data in multi-sensory ways, I considered the multiple, storied forms that research may take. As Harter (2013) championed, creative analytic projects (i.e. those that employ aesthetic modalities) have the capacity to bolster engaged communication practice. Following this call, I engaged in participatory storytelling. To accomplish this, I asked interview participants as well as auction-goers to write six-word memoirs about their relationship with food. Some examples included: “Seed in soil, anticipate the feast,” and “It’s all how you grow it.” Some were emailed to me, others were sketched on site at the auction (see below).
This allowed for a more dialogic means of data collection in that it shifts the impetus to the participant. Willer (2012) conducted a similar study where she asked 42 young girls to draw pictures of social aggression. She found that the act of drawing helped girls to process their feelings about social aggression and articulate them through different communicative mediums. In using this as inspiration for my own work, I was, through the use of these drawings, able to more comprehensively understand the communicative representation of food among my participants.

Data Analysis

Within this project, I do not seek to arrive at any one “truth.” Rather, I acknowledge that I, along with my participants, intersubjectively created knowledge alongside one another. For that reason, I found that a method of data collection that
builds upon Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) constant comparative methodology (i.e. continuously comparing instances within and across interview themes) to be most appropriate. This method offers a progressive system for data analysis that allows for flexibility in the process. This constant comparative method (i.e. identifying action words and gerunds rooted in the data) allows researchers to “stand within the research process, rather than above, before or outside of it” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 185). In this way, data analysis began from the moment entered the field. I went through several rounds of open coding, keeping in mind key theoretical commitments. Next, after comparing codes and themes, I engaged in a second round of focused coding to produce a more coherent account of what may be going on in the field. After synthesizing data in this way, I then began the writing process. My primary analysis was guided by Tracy’s (2013) analytic approach. In line with this approach, I began first by engaging in a “data immersion phase” in which I “marinat[ed] in the data” to see what inclinations, impressions, and perspectives came to light (p. 188).

First, I created an Excel spreadsheet to organize my data (example below), which contained emerging themes and examples from the data as I noticed them. I then, utilizing Charmaz’s (2006) method, identified action words and gerunds. Examples of such included “self-sufficiency,” “sustainability,” and “resilient.”
I next engaged in a second round of coding (Tracy, 2013) in which I began to condense themes. Examples included food as pathogen, which later organically morphed into a discussion in chapter five of the ways in which our aesthetic value of food may impact our understanding of risk in terms of healthy and safety. Ultimately, for my three analysis chapters, I focused on three major themes (that are then divided into sub-themes): origin stories; the aesthetic value of food; narrative resilience. The last chapter takes a more grounded theory approach to data analysis, as it represents my attempt to develop a preliminary theory regarding the value of thinking of resilience narratively.

Finding the “I”

Most important of all, until I wrote these lines I did not know who “I” was, who was
telling the story.

- Didion, 1976
Joan Didion penned this line more than 40 years ago. I firmly believe writing is, an important means through which we come to knowledge – a form of inquiry in and of itself (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). In this way, this project was as much about me coming to understand my own place in the world as it was about advancing theoretical arguments and enriching the lives of those around me. In the Burkean sense, I seek to approach research from a comic frame, which is established upon humility, empathy, and understanding (Conquergood, 1992). This demands that our bodies remain answerable to our participants, our discipline, and our selves. The answerable body does not retreat from moments of difference, but demands that we remain accountable to them (Okamoto, 2016).

**Weaving Together of Discourses**

For this reason I am inspired to present my work with a narrative and aesthetic quality that honors the essence and spirit of those who have been generous enough to allow me into their lives. I committed in this project to presenting data in alternative ways so that the “I” is found and the “we” is honored. For example, in chapter six I offer a composite narrative. I present this narrative alongside thematic analysis in order to bring to life the experiences of my participants. Over the course of two years, I prepared meals, shared dinners, drank coffee, shoveled dirt, and hauled produce with multiple people – all of whom impacted my way of thinking about rural food insecurity. The composite narrative is a way for me to gather these multiple voices together in one space to make a coherent narrative for you, the reader. As Ellingson (2005) offered, “the process of constructing a composite narrative involves “the partial decontextualization of the
interactions and recontextualization of them into different times and in differing juxtapositions” (p. 156). Chapter six, along with other multimodal ways of representations strives to honor the nature of crystallized research. As Ellingson expressed, “Crystallized texts include more than one genre of writing or representation. Crystallization depends on segmenting, weaving, blending, or otherwise drawing upon two or more genres, media, or ways of experiencing findings (p. 605).

In line with my commitment to engaged scholarship I strove to uphold Conquergood’s (1995) charge for engaged scholars to strive for praxis with “a combination of analytical rigor, participatory practice, critical reflection, and political struggle” (p. 85). I will therefore adopt an approach built upon narrative ethnography, which

Asks the researcher to be more inclusive in thinking about what constitutes appropriate data and how they should be analyzed. It prompts new questions about the storying process, directing attention textually outward as much as textually inward. (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 262)

To this end, moving forward, I will strive to make my work accessible to multiple individuals through attention to multimodal forms of analysis. I hope to write in such a way that is academically, artistically, and ethically compelling.

As I noted at the end of Chapter Two, while in the field, and as some experiences became salient, I found myself digging deeper into existing literature (see similar methods by Way & Tracy, 2012). The three analysis chapters are written in such a way as to privilege the voices of participants and my experiences in the field as woven together
with, informed by, and ultimately informing academic theory. Such a reflexive stance acknowledges that “themes” simply don’t emerge from the “ground” up—they are sensed from my standpoint including my theoretical standpoint.
Chapter Four: The Temporal and Spatial Dimensions of Origin Narratives:

Mobilizing Action, Moralizing Bodies

Outside of Appalachia, the words all have terrible connotations. We are rednecks, we are hillbillies, we’re inbred, we’re crackers, we’re illiterate, we’re uneducated, we are people that dwell in hollers and chew tobacco and smoke cigarettes, and we are the people who keep the cigarette industry booking, we’re the cancer belt of America, the Bible belt of America, it’s just – it’s hard. It’s hard because not everybody lives up to any of that. I think that if you’ve never been here, if you’ve never known someone from here, I can understand how it would be easy to think some of those things but I think after you’ve spent some time here, it would be very easy to see that we’re actually very easy people to get to know and that – those stereotypes don’t represent many of us. (Talia, 9/12/16, Rural Action volunteer, personal interview)

Talia is a native Appalachian. Her family owns a 300-acre cattle farm in Southern Ohio. She is now pursuing her Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine degree and desires to provide healthcare to a region that has long experienced geographic isolation from medical infrastructures and an uneven distribution of health-care providers across rural settings. Phrases and clauses such as folks “down here,” “insular” people, and “prideful” people populate my transcripts. These phrases effectively point to a tension between us/them and outsider/insider that Rural Action must attend to. As Roger, a member of the Rural Action Board of Directors, told me:
And I think the other issue down here that I think is very much a regional thing is Appalachians are very insular people. They don’t like or welcome outsiders coming in. And the fact is, you or I could go into a place and not be accepted, not be able to earn things because you and I aren’t from here. (Roger, 8/2/16, Board Member, personal interview)

These are the historical and social contexts against which Rural Action organized. As Roger suggested, there is a sense of insularity often attributed to this region. From the perspective of a non-profit context, I ask what work goes in to representing this so-termed “cancer belt of America,” as Talia noted above? How does Rural Action serve to address this outsider/insider tension elucidated by so many of my participants? In this chapter, I argue that Rural Action’s origin narratives aid in understanding the ways in which these representations merge and converge across temporal and spatial dimensions.

**Rural Action’s Narrative Framework**

Rural Action, like all organizations, is composed within and through storytelling. Catherine often cites the words of Thomas Berry to emphasize the narrative challenge facing Rural Action: “It’s all a question of story. We are in trouble now because we do not have a good story.” Berry’s quote is cited in annual meetings, organizational literature, and multiple external publications related to Rural Action’s work. These words function as a central organizing principle that gives rise to Rural Action’s work. If we are to take this narrative framework seriously, then I ask: What story does Rural Action tell? How does its past story impact the story that it will tell now and in the future? How will I aid in the telling of this story? These are the questions I grapple with in this chapter. I
first begin with outlining Rural Action’s origin story. I next move on to explicate how this story lingers and spills over into everyday organizational communicative acts. Finally, I comment on the ways in which these stories may merge and converge to simultaneously mobilize action as well as moralize bodies. Ultimately, I argue that awareness about and appreciation of sense of place is key to understanding and analyzing these origin narratives espoused by Rural Action. I begin with a brief survey of work related to organizational storytelling.

The Storied Existence of Organizations

As organizational scholars have reconciled, stories are part and parcel of organizational life (e.g. Fisher, 1984; Kelly, 1985; Mumby, 1987). This concept has been explored in myriad contexts germane to organizing practices such as identity construction (Bird, 2007), organizational diversity (Barker & Gower, 2010), and organizational change (Wolfe, 2016). Moreover, stories are political. Stories are not neutral. They do not wait idly by for organizational members to find them. As Harter et al. (2013) maintained, “stories have strings attached – they demonstrate what counts and the peril of missing it” (p. 153). Similarly, Browning and Morris’ (2012) defined organizational storytelling by outlining four key features: they “(1) foreshadow a problem, (2) provide a sequential rendering of actions in the face of complications leading toward resolution, (3) achieve closure, [and] (4) invite or pronounce moral implications” (p. 32). As I will elaborate, origin stories are one unique feature that has bearing on organizing processes. Specifically in the case of Rural Action, the origin narrative of the organization comes to
moralize members in particular ways, to commit specific actions. These stories also help members to unpack and make sense of what is going on around them.

From the perspective of structuration theory, Giddens (1984) considered stories as a form of signification that helps the organization to make sense of organizational actions. As Amsterdam and Bruner (2000) offered, “in some profound, often puzzling way, stories construct the facts that comprise them” (Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000, p. 111), thus supporting Mumby’s (1987) assertion that stories constitute a shared reality of its members. Take for instance, Boje’s (1991) analogy that,

Stories are to the storytelling system what precedent cases are to the judicial system. Just as in the courtroom, stories are performed among stakeholders to make sense of an equivocal situation. The implication of stories as precedents is that story performances are part of an organization-wide information-processing network. Bits and pieces of organization experience are recounted socially throughout the firm to formulate recognizable, cogent, defensible, and seemingly rational collective accounts that will serve as precedent for individual assumption, decision, and action. This is the institutional memory system of the organization. Although individuals are limited information processors, each person retains a part of the storyline, a bit of interpretation, story performance practices, and some facts that confirm a line of reasoning. (p. 106)

This current study enables in situ examination of organizational narratives via case study. Indeed stories relay, retain, and remember organizational history. Stories are a key element in storing organizational memory.
One area in which similar work has been done is in the study of organizational narrative repetition. As Dailey and Browning (2014) defined, narrative repetition “refers to the retelling or circulation of organizational stories” (p. 22), calling upon scholars to use this framework to further explore organizational life. They argued that narrative repetition produces three dualities: control/resistance, differentiation/integration, and stability/change. For instance, members of an organization may utilize narrative order to reinforce particular behaviors, or to push back against norms or actions. The point is that in each retelling of a story, organizational members may come away with, or take up a narrative differently. That is, narratives are not static. They shift and change across temporal and spatial dimensions. Where I diverge slightly from Dailey and Browning’s work is that rather than viewing narrative repetition as strategic or intentional, I take a view of narrative repetition that is more organic. Rather than something organizational members used, I witnessed narrative repetition as more of a discursive force that guided actions and behaviors in particular ways. More than a tool, in the tradition of poststructuralism, I view narrative repetition as what Butler (1988) would term a citational act, or an iteration of a performative act. I am interested in the rest of the chapter in how origin narratives get taken up by organizational members and reiterated over time. Using Rural Action as a case study, I argue that the organization’s origin narrative serves to both mobilize action as well moralize bodies. I continue by situating Rural Action within its own historical context. Appalachia becomes a character in her own right and is important to Rural Action’s origin story.
Appalachia: A Space Contested

Appalachia represents contested space. Indeed, the history of Appalachia is intimately intertwined with history of resistance and struggle – resistance against exploitation of bodies and resources (Fisher, 1993). Railroads and coal mines, once thriving pillars of industry, now stand as relics of loss and extraction. This theme of resistance is noted in early language describing the area. One early settler of Virginia’s New River Gorge, significant for its convergence in the foothills of Virginia, dubbed the area “ye Valley of Contention and Strife” (Williams, 2001). This contention carries over into disagreement about how, if at all, to demarcate the area itself.

The borders of Appalachia are also contested, causing some historians to view the area as a work of social fiction, rather than a geographic zone. As Gloria Anzaldúa agreed, borders are arbitrary. As she stated in *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. (p. 25)

In speaking of the US/Mexico border, Anzaldúa makes the point that borders serve to divide, for indeterminate reasons, in order to maintain false sense of order. Even if borders are arbitrary, they are real in their consequence.

For the people of Appalachia, these borders often serve to sequester. Indeed, the Appalachian territory was established as an arbitrary border to delineate the Carolina and
Pennsylvania colonies from the emergent and less prosperous colonies of Virginia and Maryland. This in turn has produced material consequences such as unequal access to resources such as food and education. As Williams (2001) powerfully asserted:

...Appalachia, more than most of the regions into which the United States is customarily divided, is a territory of images - a screen upon which the writers, artists, and savants of five or six generations have projected their fears, hopes, regrets and enthusiasms about America present and past. The region has been seen as both the essence of America and a place apart. (p. 175)

This image of a screen that Williams (2001) evokes is compelling. It speaks to a communicative understanding of borders. Borders are not only physical, but also constructed within and through our communication.

In many ways this story is what aided in organizing Rural Action. This organizing force prompted Susan, Communication Director for Rural Action, to create a personal mission statement, which states that she will strive to allow individuals to “stay here in this region and provide for their families” (Susan, 7/22/16, communication director, personal interview). This mirrors what Athens resident and author of *Hope and Hard Times* author Ted Bernard defined as an ethos of sustainability. He posited that sustainability is:

Putting in place the age-old desire to live richly, equitability, and peaceably with each other and with our natural surroundings so that our ‘home’ may offer itself to the imaginations and tables of generations to come.” (Bernard, 2010, p. 39)
In what follows I analyze the ways in which personal missions such as Susan’s, and other organizational operations, are impacted by Rural Action’s origin narratives in two ways: mobilizing of actions and moralizing of bodies. I begin by narrating Rural Action’s origins.

**From AOPIC to Rural Action**

As I sit in Catherine’s living room surrounded by her fiber art and other personal collections from her travels to the Philippines, she explains to me her motivations for forming Rural Action – a motivation birthed from the very place we are now seated in New Marshfield, Ohio. Located seven miles from Athens, New Marshfield is the county seat and home to Ohio University. While only seven miles separates these two towns, the distance is immense. What was once known as Marshfield became New Marshfield after a new Post Office was established. It was once a central stop on the B&O rail line until it was disbanded in the 1980s (Interstate Publishing Company, 1883). Again, we see the impact of industry lost. Rural Action as it is understood today was born of an initiative called the Appalachian Ohio Public Interest Campaign (AOPIC) in 1982. The group was embedded within a larger statewide Ohio Public Interest Campaign. This organization espoused an activist orientation – a vestige of protest spawning from Vietnam-Era protests. AOPIC played an active role in the Indochina Peace Campaign (IPC), which formed to mobilize anti-war efforts. This included campaigning for candidate George McGovern over incumbent Richard Nixon. During this time, the group was strongly political. They took actions such as testifying before Congress regarding issues such as water quality and surface mining.
Unsatisfied with representation of Southern Ohio interests, in 1989 AOPIC began its three-year drift away from OPIC. Between the years of 1989-1992, the group, struggling to find its own identity, became the Appalachian Public Interest Center (also known by the same acronym AOPIC), rather than Campaign, in order to encourage further representation for Appalachian Ohio interests. As one writer for the Appalachian Regional Commission wrote, “Always clear about what they were against, they began the more difficult task of articulating what they were for” (Baldwin, 2007, original emphasis). Tired and weary from fighting imminent social and environmental threats, from 1989-1992, the group began to focus on creating sustainable, long-term solutions to these problems. Rather than being, as founder Catherine stated, “largely reactive,” under Rural Action, the group became more proactive, attempting to preventatively address problems rather than waiting until they arose.

In 1992, the group completely split from OPIC, or what is now called Citizen Action, and became known as Rural Action. Today Rural Action may be seen as a network of various interests represented by member-based groups organized around particular initiatives such as agriculture, heritage, arts and housing. Each committee must consist of at least five paying members.

Rural Action’s origin narrative is rooted in a sense of place – Appalachia. This point is exemplified in Catherine’s recounting to me that:

So when Rural Action was transitioning from AOPIC to Rural Action, what really drove me was that living out here in New Marshfield, if you just go over the hill past the cemetery there, you’d enter poverty land. It’s really poor. And well my
kids went to school down there and I was a part of the garden club down there, I
had a 4H Club down there and I would hear my neighbors in New Marshfield talk
about the alien territory of the university, and how all the kids in my 4H Club
were afraid to even go to town or would not even step foot on university property
and I’d have to walk them there and introduce them to the campus because they
were afraid. And then I’d hear my husband, who was a faculty member, I’d hear
myths about people out there, you know, how they were uncaring, people who
were rough, just all kinds of mythology and I would sit and live in these two
worlds…(Catherine, 9/26/16, founder, personal interview)

The push and pull of lack and want. The competing forces of what was and what is and
what can be. On the one hand, Rural Action’s origin story may serve as what Hart (1992)
and Jacobs (2002) originally designated a “mobilizing narrative,” or an organizing force
that, through communicative practices, guide everyday actions of the organization and
ultimately produces material consequences. As Harter, Broderick, Venable, and Quinlan
(2013), relying on Miller at al. (2005), defined “mobilizing narratives create collective
identities for advocacy-based organizations and function as strategic resources for
organizations that work toward social change” (p. 153). On the other hand, while the
origin narratives recounted by Rural Action narratives may mobilize for action, they also
moralize bodies in particular ways. In both cases, sense of place is central to Rural
Action’s origin narrative. These moments must be taken seriously for, as Dailey and
Browning (2014) asserted, “in addition to binding an organization to its past, repeated
narratives also create a fixed course for a company’s future” (p. 33). While I do not think
that narratives necessarily “fix” a company’s future, I do argue that repeated narratives impress particular courses of action for organizations over time. In the next section I explore the ways these narratives simultaneously compete with one another, as well as converge across temporal and spatial dimensions.

Rural Action’s Competing and Converging Narratives

These two origin narratives of AOPIC and Rural Action simultaneously compete and converge over time. On the one hand, we see an origin narrative defined by resistance – that illustrated by AOPIC. On the other, we see an origin narrative defined by resilience – that illustrated by Rural Action. These narratives at times come into conflict. At other times they may complement one another. However, ultimately, I argue that these narratives converge to inform the narrative told by Rural Action today. Seeger and Sellnow (2016) referred to this process as one of convergence. Convergence may be understood as, “the development of a coherent, unifying story that subsumes many other stories, themes, perspectives, and pieces of information” (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016, p. 144). This convergence spills over into the way staff and members talk about the organization today.

For instance, because of Rural Action’s activist beginnings, there is now tension between what the organization was, and is, today. As Catherine, Director Emerita and founder of Rural Action, told me in a meeting:

Some members got really ticked off about that [not taking a stand on controversial issues] because AOPIC was very, very out front and very controversial but they could do that because they had the 501(c)(4) and I think a lot of the activists [in
the area] who knew about that activism and – but they didn’t know about the legal status, you know, and so they considered it a betrayal, like we had somehow gone back on our heritage. Well if they had asked, and we could’ve simply explained that to them, we can’t do that, stuff you can do and you can’t do.

As Catherine highlights, the activist underpinnings of the organization are deeply rooted in organizational memory to the members, to the point where it became a “betrayal” of its heritage. AOPIC, she defined, was “very out front” and “controversial.” This is in stark contrast to Rural Action’s current stance, which is predicated around their 501(c)(3) status. This represents a convergence between AOPIC’s origin narrative and Rural Action’s.

In that same conversation, I go on to ask Catherine, “In doing interviews, people have expressed to me that Rural Action is so-called apolitical, they don’t take specific political stands on things….” She quickly responded, cutting me off: “You can’t and have a 501(c)(3) – you can’t do that. She goes on to explain:

Yea, you can’t do it. You can – you can educate around an issue but you can’t take a stand for or against a certain candidate, you can’t do that. But you can certainly educate around an issue. We had both a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4) which allowed us to do – we took strong – we sponsored candidates, we ran candidates statewide so but that takes – to make that leap, and Rural Action has considered doing that, I don’t know if they’re considering it now but we have in the past considered also taking on a 501(c)(4) which would allow us to enter into the political fray. I would imagine if Donald Trump gets elected, they might choose a
501(c)(4) also. I’ve not even said that to anybody but I would not be surprised because – but we can certainly educate on the issues and I was always very careful to not get the organization in legal trouble. So my personal style, although I’ve always been an organizer and I’ve spent a lot of time on picket lines and, you know, being out there in the streets, I was very careful as a director to not try to call the organization’s integrity into question. I did a lot of education around controversial issues but I didn’t ever – and I think [the current CEO] is following the same path.

In this excerpt from my conversation with Catherine, I noticed another competing narrative emerging – that of an extreme opposition to a political candidate. This opposition, now that the 2016 presidential [election] has passed, may prompt another rupture point in Rural Action’s narrative, causing them to reorganize as a 501(c)(4). The results have yet to be seen, even as I pen this dissertation.

Further more, in this excerpt, Catherine highlights some of the tensions inherent within nonprofits. Nonprofits are rife with contradictions (Sanders, 2012). They must balance an existence in a liminal space, or what Van Til (2000) termed a “third space,” between private and public interests – between marketization and social good. Sanders (2012) positioned nonprofits as inherently paradoxical, penning, “because of its tension-filled and contradictory position in society, the nonprofit sector is guided by an organizing tension that is an ontological feature of all organizations that are dedicated to fulfilling social missions and building civil society within market economies” (p. 182). Put another way, contradictions are an inherent part of nonprofit organizations. Because
nonprofit organizations operate within particular market structures, we cannot understand a mission of social justice apart from a structures mandated by financial imperatives. Rural Action indeed operates within this matrix.

Catherine refers to this convergence as a “dance.” she indicated to me during our conversation:

So some of these issues that you [nonprofit organizations] start working on at first you’re dealing with a real injustice and you begin to take – you want to call attention to it so that’s activist usually. And so you get some attention, and you develop a small plan to begin to remediate whatever you’re dealing with and that still has an activist edge to it. But as you begin to notice how – which assets is there that you can begin to develop, to make some progress on the issues, slowly, slowly, slowly you move towards development and there – there you need money and when you go into that money world and you’re dealing with bankers and – you, it’s a different world. And so best as you can, you try to bring everybody along so that it’s not just the educated ones or the staff who have to do that work. You try to make sure that it’s a group effort as much as possible. But rural action has moved now where they’re doing much more work in entrepreneurship. It’s much more into development. But, I don’t think we will ever be devoid of the activism because when you’re in an area like we are and we’re such – where there’s still so much that needs to be done, you can’t start at the development stage, you can’t – I mean that’s when things fail if you – so. So anyway, it’s a
dance. And I think it’ll – if it’s a healthy organization it’ll continue to do that
dance.

This tension, expressed by Catherine as an “activist” and the “money world” is precisely

It makes sense then that origin stories would compete for moments of
convergence throughout the lifetime of the organization. Taking this point seriously, I
continue by offering data from my time with Rural Action which points to moments
when Rural Action’s origin story converges with, and also competes with present-day
communicative actions. While some of the discourse supports an origin story that
emphasizes resistance, other discourse bolsters an origin story that emphasizes resilience.
I elaborate below.

**Origin stories mobilize.** Origin stories linger. They hover. Like vapor they seep
into the pores of an organization, guiding actions. As Catherine demonstrated, there are
material constraints associated with the communicative designation of 501(c)(3) or
501(c)(4). A 501(c)(4) designation allows an organization to lobby for particular causes
and/or candidates, while a 501(c)(3) does not. Members and staff continue to live out this
tension between activism and community development. Vestiges of Rural Action’s
activist beginnings were seen in many of the interviews I engaged in. For instance, Ann, a
Rural Action board member, commented on the blurred line that often exists between an
activist and community programming organization. When prompted to comment on the
programming of Rural Action, she conveyed to me:
Ann: Yea, it’s – it’s just – it’s, you know, yea. And it’s hard to differentiate them at times from being – they don’t – they’re not a lobbying organization. They’re actual feet-on-the-ground kind of day-in day-out educators and program planners and initiators and so I think that’s something that you do have to get in the office and kind of see it happen and – to know how much they are doing.

Kristen: Yea. Why do you think they’re reluctant to take on that title of lobbyist?

Ann: Because I think it can be polarizing and I think it’s not an organization that wants to polarize any particular population group. Their original mission was to focus on sustainable economic and community development in this region and for everybody that lived in Appalachia, Ohio, and if you start lobbying, you immediately become political and polarizing and I think they – they want to avoid that. Now is there perception in the region that they are more, and they are, more liberal leaning? But I think that’s because of the program areas in which they work versus anything else. But I – it’s not handled in a way that that seems political and I think that’s a good thing. (Ann, 7/11/16, former member of board of directors, personal interview)

Here Ann comments on the ways in which Rural Action’s message may be distorted. I argue that this exemplifies spillover from Rural Action’s origin story as an activist organization. This spill over would be considered by Pragmatic thinker J. L. Austin (1965) to be a performative utterance. In this foundational work, *How to Do Things With Words*, Austin argues against a positivist view of language; language does not merely
reflect reality, but it creates and constitutes it as well. This is how I view origin stories.

From a pragmatic point of view, language produces consequences.

For Rural Action, this may have consequences in terms of being unable to present a coherent message about food insecurity and sustainable agriculture. Ultimately, this may impact things like grant funding and other partnerships. Later when I asked Ann how she would describe Rural Action to the unfamiliar, with a laugh, she responded:

Oh my gosh, isn’t that the $64,000 question. That was one of the things I did ask for when I was on the board, and they seemed to be working on it, is the 10-minute dump speech so that folks know. And boy it’s really hard to describe what they do and how they do it. My talk is usually that it’s an organization focused on improving the region from the grassroots level in a specific region that are often neglected or under recognized for their overall value. (Ann, 7/11/16, former member of board of directors, personal interview)

Because members may have a difficult time describing the work of the organization to the surrounding community, Rural Action may have a harder time raising funds in order to fund the grassroots level project that Ann speaks of here. This is an example of how words may “do things.”

Further, Maura, an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer for Rural Action, shared with me some disagreement that came about within Rural Action as a result of a local legislative initiative to ban plastic bags in stores. When I asked Maura how she would describe opportunities for improvement for the organization, she was somewhat reluctant, carefully weighing what the organization is and does. She somewhat hesitantly
commented:

So I don’t know if it’s necessarily a bad problem but I think it’s one that we’re not an environmental group. I mean things that we do are environment based and like I think zero waste has been – is obviously an environmental thing and I mean sustainable agriculture, to me that’s not super environmental, I mean… It can be, sure, but I mean we don’t advocate organic as a rule. We don’t advocate for or against GMO as a rule. We really don’t advocate anything as a rule. (Maura, 7/13/16, AmeriCorps VISTA, personal interview)

She goes on to tell me how this was played out in a recent controversy over legislation that would require patrons in Athens County to pay ten cents for each plastic bag used. For this issue Rural Action’s Zero Waste program became an opinion leader on the so-called “bag ban” by virtue of the group’s prominence within the community Maura went on to tell me:

There was a little bit of pushback internally just about like well why did we do that, like we don’t do that. And I think the answer was like we’re the premiere like zero waste like people know us for this… We immediately – people expect us to have a stance and we weren’t 100% for it. I think she [the zero waste coordinator] also felt that like letting people know that we are not like – like we have some concerns and like being the leader that voices those concerns was important to them. So I don’t know. I don’t know if they’ll become more – I think – I don’t think they will because I think the new CPO (chief programming officer) is really community development based so I think if he does – if he ends up taking
like an active role in programming which I don’t really know what his things will be, I don’t know what any of his work plan is but if he does I don’t think it will be as political. But politics are hard. I used to want – I wanted originally to do lobbying so ending up somewhere where as a rule we don’t lobby is interesting. But I mean we do in small ways like but… (Maura, 7/13/16, AmeriCorps VISTA, personal interview)

In this quote we see the precarious line that must be toed between being an “environmental group,” as Maura alluded, and a “community development” organization. How do you separate the two? Is there a distinction? I saw this tension played out as members negotiated their day-to-day activities.

These observations highlight some of the consequences that come with being politically vocal when doing the work of social justice issues. There are material constraints come with organizing as a non-profit around social justice issues. While origin stories may serve to mobilize resources for action, they can also moralize bodies. The next section elaborates on this.

**Origin stories moralize.** Not only do origin stories mobilize particular resources (or not), they also moralize bodies. Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson’s (2003) conceptualization of aesthetic labor is helpful here, which they define as “the mobilization, development and commodification of embodied ‘dispositions’” (p. 37). Put another way, organizations tend to attract particular employees based on embodied capacities and attributes that get communicatively reinforced throughout the organization. Extending this further, I argue that origin stories work to moralize bodies to act, think,
and do in particular ways. For instance, during a day of team-building with the Sustainable Agriculture team, I exchanged a conversation with a Rural Action staffer Kevin, noting in my fieldnotes that:

I talk to him [Kevin] about perceptions of non-profit volunteers. He says that being a non-profit for an environmental organization leads to the perception of a bunch of “hippies,” especially when compared to the corporate sector. We talk about the upcoming election. He expresses dissatisfaction with Trump, and makes some choice comments. Timothy [the program coordinator] quickly ends the conversation and makes it a point to say that, “we don’t talk about politics in the office.” (Kristen, 6/15/16, author, field notes)

Kevin alludes to the fact that there are certain assumptions associated with members of nonprofit organizations organized around issues of social justice. He describes this perception as “hippies.” Along with this communicative designation of being an “environmental organization,” comes particular assumptions – a way of acting and being in the world.

Bodies become moralized to act in particular ways. This represents a form of aesthetic labor wherein the bodies of members are disciplined to perform in according to the aesthetic set forth by the organization. In the case of Rural Action I witnessed this to mean, for example, carrying reusable water bottles instead of using plastic cups and eating limited animal products. Wolkowitz (2006) talked about this concept in terms of “body work,” saying that:
Our bodies are built out of and through our roles as paid workers, and the organized bodies of employees in turn contribute to the making of the corporation and its profits; we monitor and manage our own bodies with work obligations in mind and feel its effects in fatigue and impairments as well as satisfactions.” (p. 55)

Through the paid work of Rural Action, bodies are disciplined and comported to behave in particular ways.

Notice in this field note too how Timothy, the program manager and leader of the group, quickly truncated the conversation, saying, “we don’t talk about politics in the office.” While this could be because I was perceived as an outsider and known researcher, I suggest that this is yet another way in which we see the vestiges held over and traced by origin stories. Further, it is also interesting to note here alongside this example, Maura, who I quote above about the bag ban, explicitly saying that Rural Action is in fact not an environmental organization, but rather a community development organization. There is disparity in the language used to describe the group among its staff members. This, I argue, represents the playing out of the origin story and demonstrates that power it holds over its members. Origin stories not only carry material consequences for how the organization functions and operates, but also how it’s people do as well.

These ideas expressed above, of how a “non-profit” worker is “supposed” to act, get carried over through processes of socialization until they become intimately entwined in the discourse of the organization. For example, Maura recounted to me how she felt the need to hide her food habits, saying:
So for a while when I moved here I remember we had – there was another Vista that worked with me and she was very like ‘sustainable’ food and all of this and I’ve become more and more like that but really I got into it more for like community development things and not so much like everything’s organic and everything has to be, you know, sustainability grown and I would get coffee at McDonald’s and then I’d bring my own mug and I’d pour it into my mug in the car and walk in so that she wouldn’t know. (Maura, 7/13/16, AmeriCorps VISTA, personal interview)

Supporting a corporation like McDonalds, to Maura and her coworker, is seen as antithetical to the mission of the organization. Rather, “sustainability” becomes a moralizing narrative that guides the behavior of organizational members.

Richard, a member of a partner organization who works closely with Rural Action to bring donated food from the auction to people in need, recounted the same sentiment to me, stating:

I’m always trying to be cognizant of that [where I eat] ‘cause I know that if people see me at – if they see me at the farmers market or at the produce auction or something like that, then they see me out in town or something like that, I always kind of give that like some thought. I’m like, okay, I’m representing the Donation Station so I probably don’t want to be going to like – go to like Wendy’s, you know, I try not to be caught too much like going to Wendy’s or something like that…You always try to make sure like, okay, like you’ve always got to like think about it. It’s like okay, I’m representing [my organization] so I’m
probably not going to want to tell everybody to eat local and then to go to like Applebee’s. (Richard, 6/22/16, volunteer, personal interview)

Much in the same way Maura felt as if patronizing McDonalds, being a corporate food giant, was contrary to the mission of the organization, Richard also felt the same about Wendy’s and Applebee’s.

There where times I felt moralized as well. During a cookout with Rural Action staff, I penned in my field notes the following about my eating habits.

When we arrive and begin to unload food, Paige asks me if I eat meat. She has an assortment of vegetarian products, including hemp veggies patties and vegan mayo. This has been a common theme about whether or not I am vegetarian. Several times throughout my fieldwork I feel out of place for not being vegetarian. I quickly qualify to others that I do not, “eat a lot of meat.” I somehow feel the need to continuously justify my decision. Through food I become moralized and disciplined.

Not only does the origin story of Rural Action mobilize for action, these competing and converging narratives also serve to moralize bodies as well, from food consumption to clothes members wear.

By virtue of being associated with Amish farmers, women are disallowed from wearing shorts at the produce auction. Timothy, the auction manager, told me in an interview, “so I have to [tell] young women how to dress over it which is, you know, isn’t really that fun.” Here Timothy refers to Amish dress codes, guided by sumptuary laws, which mandates plain dress in order to emphasize humility and modesty. This means, in
part, that there can be no buttons or pockets on clothing and for women no clothing may be worn that reveals an ample amount of skin (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, & Nolt, 2013). I encountered this in my fieldwork. On my first day at the auction in early June, I recorded the following:

I arrive and meet Timothy, who is carrying recycled produce boxes. He tells me that he forgot to tell me, but that “we don’t wear shorts at the auction. Because of the Amish.” We usually wear long pants. “Don’t worry about it today,” he assures me. I immediately feel self-conscious. My legs are a marker of my out of place-ness. (Kristen, 6/6/16, author, field notes)

The Amish are an important, as Timothy stated, “asset base” of the produce auction. Thus, he acknowledged the need to work with the Amish and to respect their traditions; A relationship he described as a “two-way” street. This means, in part, that volunteers at the auction, especially women, are disciplined to dress in particular ways. From food that is consumed, to clothing worn, members’ bodies are disciplined in particular ways.

**Origin Stories Are Rooted in Sense of Place: The Paradox of Insider/ Outsider**

I end this chapter with a discussion of the ways in which we as communication scholars should attend to not only how and why stories are told, but also where (and from where) they are told. Throughout my work there was an expressed tension felt between “outsider” and “insider.” As a perceived “outsider,” I often noted my own discomfort. What ownership did I have over this story? What obligation did I have in telling this story? These thoughts continuously raced through my mind. In sum, communication scholars should attend to the place in which narratives are embedded. Not only is what is
said and how important to storytelling, but also the place which birthed that story. While this is not completely novel, it is important to note the vitality harnessed within a place that reverberates around, between, and through a story. It is this sense of place that breathes life into organizational origin stories. Ann perhaps summarized this best when she described to me her relationship with Appalachian Ohio, musing that:

   Yea, and I’ll be honest, I was not born and raised here. I was born and raised in Pittsburgh so I’m kind of an urban Appalachian. I lived in Indiana for a while, came back to Columbus and, like I said, came here as part of that back-to-the-land movement, had no – I was young and didn’t make any sort of Appalachian connections culturally. (Ann, 7/11/16, former member of board of directors, personal interview)

She and her husband went on to start a feed store in Morgan County, one of the most impoverished counties in Ohio, where more than 20 percent of the population lives at or below federal poverty level (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, 2013).

   In an extended narrative, she went on to tell me about her experiences running a business that:

   I think there’s a definite need for folks when they are here, whether just moving into the region or visiting the region or reading about this region, and this is not only Appalachia, Ohio, but Appalachia in general, there’s this tendency now to feel that folks feel deprived, they feel alienated, they feel less than embraced by the mainstream of the country. And that’s, I think, an impression that folks from outside the region have. So I have been involved economic development wise
with – my husband was a commissioner, my daughter’s father in law, my son in law’s father was a commissioner and my son in law is a commissioner now and my grandson who is six says when he grows up he wants to be a county commissioner. And when they have traveled, the Appalachian region, you deal with a lot of folks that come in here and what they see is ‘I can save you,’ because I have the perfect idea that’s going to make this area better, more productive, more economically viable, whatever it might be. And they use that term that – basically they act like they can save us. And what I learned from being in business, the first question is do you want to be saved because there – there are very distinct cultural characteristics that make up the region and folks are very proud of those. And you’d better ask first. And we had – we were successful I think in our – our feed mill business and got out of it primarily because agriculturally things were changing and we as individuals wanted to do something different. So it wasn’t – and – but while we were there, we had a really strong connection to the community and to our customers, and I think they were appreciative of the fact that we made every effort to embrace what they wanted and not impose what we thought was the way to go….I think that’s what happened, you know, hundreds of years ago when coal miners came in. Not the miners themselves but the companies, you know, wow, we can save this area but where did the money go? The money left. So it’s always been extraction, it’s been come in, take away, come in, take away, and when you have that extraction economy that doesn’t stay there, it leaves people skeptical and mistrusting of
folks coming in and that’s very much a part of their culture so you have to get to know them before you pass judgment. And I think that’s critical and not often done. That’s my stump speech on that. (Ann, 7/11/16, former Board of Directors member, personal interview)

This “economy of extraction” that Ann highlights is key to understanding Rural Action’s origin story.

The origin story is inextricably tied to this sense of place. There is, in general, a distrust that is spawned from years of resource extraction in the area. This must not be ignored. Lara comments on this further when I ask her explicitly about the outsider/insider divide. She recounted to me:

Oh yea. I mean again, you know, my grandparents grew up in the region but I was born in Cleveland because again a lot of that transition that’s happened, you know, not just in recent decades but for a good century and a half where folks have relocated into metro areas whether it’s folks from Kentucky going up to Cincinnati or people from southeastern Ohio, you know, moving to areas like Columbus or Cleveland. So there’s that sense of legacy sometimes but there’s also the sense that if you weren’t, you know, if you skipped a generation, which sort of happened in my case, you’re – you’re still an outsider. And I think again the access to – to educational resources, great divides there, the – the lack of investment in the public school system or the way investment happens at a state level is greatly affected, southeastern Ohio school districts, so there’s just – I would say this sense of divide, not just from other you were born and raised here
but also even folks who have grown up in the region if they’ve had more access to educational assets, if they’ve gone to college, you know, and then they come back to their communities everyone is like well why are you back here? You know, get out So that’s – it’s – there’s class issues at work, you know, beyond just that sense of insider/outside. (Lara, 7/13/16, nonprofit organizer, personal interview)

Bryan indicated similar thoughts to me. He told me in passing many times that he will never be considered a true “local.” He elaborated that this history of extraction has:

Created maybe a desire to isolate themselves [the people of Southeast Ohio] from some of these and a dislike for outsiders, or the lack of trust, maybe not dislike but lack of trust. You know, I’ve been here over 40 years and I’ve told you before, I’ll never be local. (Bryan, 7/7/16, program manager, personal interview)

Even though Bryan’s daughter was born in Appalachian Ohio, it is still hard for him to be accepted as a true “local.” These considerations of place must be taken into account when considering community-based groups that organize around a mission of social justice.

What does it mean to organize around a sense of place? What obligations arise as a result? Krista’s comments highlight this point vividly. She indicated to me:

Well, I think it has an obligation to – to do all the things it said it’s going to do so which I think rural action does a really good job of implementing, you know, we’re mostly grant funded and I think rural action does a really good job of number one listening to community members and not just making some program without any input from people that are going to be affected by the program or participate in the program. So I think they have an obligation to do that and I

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think they do a really good job of doing that. Yea, and since – since we are grant
funded, we have an obligation, I mean, to the funders as well but mostly just to all
of the people around here that support them and I think everybody that works here
really feels connected to I mean a lot of – a lot of the people that work here are
from here and are really invested in this place and a lot of the people that have
come from other places realize how special this area is or at least for me.

This outside/insider tension produces material consequences for non-profit work.
Roger, a member of Rural Action’s board, recounted to me what happened after the
organization successfully secured a $500,000 Promise Neighborhood grant from the US
Department of Education. Results, as he indicated, were not as he expected. He told me:

We announced that. We got the grant, we announced that OU is pleased – we’ve
got this grant that’ll support – and we had people in Trimble help us write the
grant. The people in Trimble were so mad. The reaction was, what do you mean
coming in here and telling us how to raise our kids and trying – and we, I mean it
caught us totally off guard. We stepped back, we found an organization out there,
Bridge Builders, and we made them the face of the grant. And then the people
were okay ‘cause it was Trimble people. (Roger, 8/2/16, board of directors,
personal interview)

This sense of place, rooted in Appalachia, produces material consequences for
how Rural Action may operate. Primarily, this means being cognizant of the
outside/insider tension that is rooted in the history of this space, here in Appalachian
Ohio. This is of import for nonprofit organized around a place-based mission. Scholars
and practitioners must consider the historical contexts against which the need for nonprofit work arose and take seriously the uniqueness of such a setting.

Summary

I have maintained in this chapter that origin stories are important for understanding Rural Action’s organizing practices. Origin stories at once mobilize and moralize. They mobilize particular resources for action (or inaction). Such is the case with Rural Action’s activist beginnings. Rural Action presents two competing and converging narratives: That represented by AOPIC and that represented by Rural Action. While the AOPIC origin story represents a story of resistance, the Rural Action origin story represents a story of resilience. These narratives permeate the everyday communicative acts of the organization, such as the assumption that “we don’t talk about politics.” The origin story of the Rural Action organization enables and constrains particular modes of action such as whether or not to support a legislation requiring patrons to pay ten cents for plastic bags at local stores.

For organizations such as Rural Action, who organize around food-based problems, this becomes even more complicated. For instance, Sanders (2012) articulated that non-profit life is rife with contradictions. If we are to trace the study of food back to antiquity, we see that food is intimately tied to issues of ethics. For instance, in Plato’s (1988) longest dialogue, Laws, he comments on the relationship between food and ethics. Plato argued that issues of diet are directly related to issues of the soul. Put another way, what we take in to our body affects the soul. Food, then, becomes intertwined with issues related to virtue. In order for a polis to be virtuous, the soul must be edified.
Summarizing Plato, food contributes to an ethical transformation of self. By taking outside substances from the world internally into our body, food has the capacity to transform. Indeed, during food consumption bodies occupy a liminal space that is located between the external and internal. Food is both capable of edifying the soul, and also polluting it. When the food that you eat is also tied to the land that you live on, such as is the case with the local food movement, this becomes an interesting tension to explore. In the following chapters I will outline more tensions that occur.
Chapter Five: “First, You Feast With Your Eyes:” An Aesthetic Approach to Food and Risk

I am surrounded by ripe strawberries – verdant and crimson. Sugar snap peas, cartilaginous and sweet, lie carefully in a bunch on the auction floor. Timothy and I pick one up. I fumble the pod between my thumb and forefinger, bringing it up to my mouth. The crunch as I bite through the fibrous exterior eventually gives way to the honeyed flavor of the peas inside. “God that’s good,” Timothy remarks with reverence in his voice. Katherine responds in almost sensual agreement as she presses her lips together over the pod, “Oh wow, they’re really good today.” We go on, plucking peas out of the box with a childlike fervor akin to fingers in the cookie dough as mom prepares them for company.

I take in the scene playing out before me, noting the way patrons act in this space. Auction buyers walk each aisle, visually scanning the produce, searching for the most aesthetically appealing items. A cafeteria worker brings cantaloupes up to her nose, inspecting them for a sweet aroma and confirming the hollow “thud” when tapped. A restaurant owner picks up a bushel of strawberries, searching for any sign of blemish. A child tosses a blueberry into her mouth like a gumball. All the senses are at play, helping buyers to discern the food’s value.

During my fieldwork with Rural Action, I came to experience, understand, and communicate food through the senses. The “thud” of a cantaloupe. The sight of a strawberry’s blemish. The honeyed flavor of a sugar snap pea. The sound of the cantaloupe communicates its freshness to customers. The sight of a blemish signals
possible impurity. The sweetness of the sugar snap pea relays a pleasing taste to the palate. These experiences aid in making sense of and discerning food’s value. Whether or not it is safe to eat. Whether the food will satisfy our craving. Whether or not the food has been tampered with.

In other words, food possesses aesthetic qualities that aid us in understanding it’s place in our symbolic and material world. I consider food to be an “ordinary affect,” in the sense that cultural anthropologist Kathleen Stewart defined. She surmised that ordinary affects, “work not through meanings per se, but rather in the way they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds” (Stewart, 2007, p. 3). I premise the following chapter on an understanding of the affective as rooted in the quotidian; the affective is a series of “social worldings” that help us make sense of our everyday activities. If, as Kathleen Stewart surmised, affect is rooted in the everyday, then food must also be given consideration as such. In the present chapter I reflect on the aesthetic qualities of food and then, in turn, relate this to the ways in which our aesthetic perceptions may serve to enable or constrain our perception of risk related to the foods we consume. I examine disparate discourses from multiple stakeholders in order to comment on the ways in which aesthetic sensibilities contribute to participants’ relationship with food. I begin with a brief overview of aesthetic thought. I then present the ways in which food’s aesthetic value is tied to its economic, nutritional, and temporal value. I conclude with a discussion of how food’s aesthetic value shapes our perception of risk and the implications more broadly for Rural Action and other groups organized around a food-based mission.
Art in the Everyday

The study of aesthetics may be traced back to antiquity, where an understanding of aesthetics was divided into five categories, including: painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry (Kristeller, 2008). Of these, there was a perceived hierarchy, with poetry being held in highest regard and painting, sculpture, and architecture seen as subordinate. Additionally, during this time, art was seen to be teachable. Art was something to be learned, rather than an inherent quality, or “knack” one possessed. This understanding is counter to notions of art as morally virtuous, ineffable, or associated with that of sublime. There was dispute, even in classical times, of what constitutes beauty. This debate lingers today. Given that aesthetics is a contested term, I offer a broad understanding of aesthetics, supported as the study of objects or phenomena concerning beauty. Further, as I alluded earlier, I consider affect to be intertwined with the quotidian. As Seigworth and Gregg (2010) penned, “affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon” (p. 1). Most studies of aesthetics may be divided into three schools of thought: epistemological (how do we know something is art), ontological (what is the nature of art), and experiential (how do we experience art). While there has been much work debating the merits of each, for the purposes of this chapter, I tend to subscribe to the latter, which, following a Deweyan perspective of aesthetics, understands art as an experience.

In Art as Experience, John Dewey’s (1980/1934) most comprehensive treatise on aesthetics, Dewey defined art as that which “idealizes the qualities found in common experience” (p. 10). Dewey surmised that the prestige of some art inhibits our ability to
have a genuine experience with it, and thus strived to position everyday experiences as aesthetic. This is contrary to traditional notions of aesthetics found in antiquity, which valued “fine arts” or “Beaux arts.” Dewey would say that reducing understanding of aesthetics to that of the “fine arts” is limiting and tends to separate art from other forms of human effort, thus separating art from everyday human experiences. The goal for Dewey, then, is to synthesize art with quotidian acts – the laughter of a child, a conversation with a longtime friend. Dewey is concerned with common experiences that unite us in our humanity. Rather than a subjective, individual response, Dewey imagined art to be an integrated and communal response to all kinds of phenomena. For Dewey, the process of living itself is artful. Dewey’s concept of art as experiential is particularly germane to an examination of food in that food is at once a biological necessity as well as, as I will argue in this chapter, an artful experience.

Relying upon Dewey’s theoretical perspective, Italian epicurean scholar Nicola Perullo (2016) sought to enlarge our understanding of food in his book *Taste as Experience*. He called the study of food “marginal” for its inability to be understood only in terms of theory. I thus take seriously Perullo’s (2016) call for a sense-based approach to the study of food. Indeed the senses are key to our ability to discern the world around us. Dewey also advocated for a multisensory approach. He stated, “the senses are the organs through which the live creature participates directly in the on-goings of the world about him [her]” (p. 22). By privileging the senses in a study of food, I seek to dislodge the mind/body split. Rather, I seek to understand through an embodied perspective, favoring a synthesis of the two.
Further, food is enmeshed within cultural, social, and political factors. In other words, food is contextual (Pezullo, 2016). Food is more than solely a biological or chemical process, but rather, an “intertwining of bodily and mental processes in constant interaction with the surrounding environment” (p. 5). Food exists in and because of an interactive process with it’s surrounding environment. It represents a cycle from inception through death. This mirrors Dewey’s (1980/1934) assertion that, “the first great consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it” (p. 12, original emphasis). A study of food must therefore take seriously its surroundings. What meanings are attached to food, for example, in an area that experiences a lack of it? How does Appalachian culture, for instance, play into my participants’ understandings of food? Next I turn to a discussion of food as an aesthetic experience, relying on participant voices to illuminate this point.

**Food as Aesthetic**

Most fulfilling is being able to help people, you know, to like feed people, to see **beautiful** food being produced, to see people happy, you know, to put money in farmers’ pockets is the most fulfilling I think. (Timothy, 7/6/16, program director, personal interview)

It is no coincidence that Timothy, Rural Action’s Sustainable Agriculture Program Director and Auction Manager, chooses to use the adjective “beautiful” to describe the food he helps to deliver to the people of Southern Ohio. Sibley (2008) related that aesthetic qualities are conveyed in our everyday communication through words such as “balanced,” “vivid,” and “delicate.” Indeed, in everyday parlance, we talk
about a “balanced” meal, a “vibrant” strawberry, or a “delicate” egg white. One particularly illuminating project I was able to engage in with participants was the writing of six-word memoirs. These memoirs lucidly captured food’s aesthetic qualities. My participants used words such as “vibrant,” “color,” and “sweet” to describe their own relationships with food. As participant Carmen wrote in her memoir, “Learning to crave nature's sweet flavors.”

Food is aesthetic. By this I mean to say that there is beauty to be found in its production, consumption, and distribution. According to philosopher Paul Ziff (1964), to aesthetically appreciate is an “act of aspection,” which may mean to “study, observe, survey, inspect, examine, and scrutinise” (p. 620). From a sensorial perspective, food is experienced with all the senses. On a hot summer day ice cream is felt on the mouth as it slowly coats the throat upon first bite. Garlic lingers on the hands long after preparation. Vibrant red tomatoes, the color of crimson blood, catch the eye in the produce aisle, calling for us to purchase. The crunch of a fresh apple may be heard several feet away. Food demands to be experienced, if we allow it. Food is aesthetic.

An understanding of aesthetics must take into account the senses. From the perspective of Western aesthetics, sight, touch, and sound were considered superior to taste and smell. Indeed the concept of “taste” was only endorsed in a metaphorical sense – in the sense that one has a “taste” for beauty (Pezzullo, 2016). Early philosophers such as Plato, Kant, and Hegel took this stance. As an example, Hegel (1975), in his foundational work *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, decreed that, “the sensuous aspects of art is related only to the two theoretical senses of sight and hearing, while smell, taste,
an touch remain excluded from the enjoyment of art…” (Hegel, 1975, p. 38-39).

Although the distal senses have traditionally been treated by Western philosophy as subordinate to the proximate, more modern thinkers adopted a view of aesthetics which took seriously all the senses. In the 1700s, German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten coined the term “aesthetics” to describe “the science of sensible knowledge” (Perullo, 2016, p. 17), thus leaving room for the study of food aesthetically. Cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas (1996) supported the intangible nature of aesthetics, writing that, “aesthetic pleasure arises from the perceiving of inarticulate forms” (p. 47). In this present study I focus on the everyday experiences of food in order to narrate, as Perullo (2016) advocated, a “taste of experience.” By doing so, Perullo argued, we are able to qualitatively access value and quality of food. Thus, in this chapter I elaborate on the ways in which Rural Action members rely on aesthetic understandings to access both economic and nutritional value of the food consumed by those they serve.

Before every auction sponsored by Rural Action, buyers will visually scan the produce, searching for the most aesthetically appealing items. Customers bring cantaloupes up to their nose, checking for the sweet aroma. Restaurant owners pick up purple onions to make sure they are not mealy, but fresh. For bidder Corey, touch and sight are important in deciding what products she will buy. She indicated to me:

I pick up a bean and snap it to see if it’s been picked today, if it’s been picked a week ago. You know if it’s just a piece of rubber in my hands, I don’t bid on it. So whether it’s in a pretty box or not, I don’t care. But it needs to be sort of clean, you know, and it also needs to be from feel what I think is within the last day or
two, you know. So I – and I’ve been stuck with a couple of things, you know, that I didn’t – I didn’t test properly. But so that – the presentation as far as the container is not important to me. I’m more interested in the touch and the feel of the product.

Here, Corey relies on sense of touch to determine whether or not she will purchase product from the auction. For her, ascertaining food’s value is tactile. “Rubbery” beans will not suffice. As Timothy, the auction manager, stated to me in an interview, “Our ultimate regulator’s the consumer” (Timothy, 7/6/16, program director, personal interview). The process of the auction is as much aesthetic as it is an economic enterprise. Communal, together, individuals assess how much they are willing to pay for food. Relating back to Dewey’s assertion that aesthetic value is assessed and determined intersubjectively rather than individually. Timothy goes on to tell me:

The people are going to make the best money who are presenting their food the best. So we’re educating on that and they’re educating themselves on that. So if you bring something in in a crappy little box, you could sell it but if you bring in a nice package, well graded, well sorted, clean, you’re saying what it is and you consistently do that, people get to know your number, whatever, and that’s what’s going to stop. So the better presentation, the better the price. Maybe not every time but having that consistency, you’re going to be looking for. (Timothy, 7/6/16, Auction Manager, personal interview)

Rural Action and its partners, as I will elaborate later in this chapter, are working to train farmers of visual presentation of food in order to garner the most money. If, then, one of
Rural Action’s goals is to provide community members access to healthier food options, then how do they make healthier options desirable to community members? I explore these issues in greater detail as the chapter unfolds. Having established my participants’ reliance on aesthetic sensibilities to make sense of food in their own lives, in the remainder of this chapter I concentrate on the ways in which food’s aesthetic value relates food’s economic, nutritional, and temporal value. This triumvirate, I argue, may ultimately help us to discern the role aesthetics may play in other groups who organize around a food-based mission.

**Food’s Economic Value**

My participants relied on aesthetic sensibilities in order to determine food’s economic value. In other words, aesthetics played a role in determining how much individuals were willing to pay for food presented to them on the auction floor. Bryan alludes to this in a conversation we had in his office. As a former chef, Bryan is attuned to the importance of aesthetics. He indicated:

> So fair prices are instrumental. So we thrive for that. And then again also to look at if we’re processing, looking at using some of the products that are not the prettiest. You know, one of the sayings in food services is first you feast with your eyes. Well the same thing goes at the market. When you’re at the farmer’s market you see these gorgeous bits of whatever type of produce and the stuff that may be scarred a little bit or whatever is held back and that’s sold to restaurants frequently because they’re going to chop it up, cut it up anyway. And so if we look at that item for processing, it gives a market for items that often would end
up in animal feed or compost. And the more money they can capture out of their work, the better off they are. (Bryan, 7/7/16, former program manager, personal interview)

Here we see how a food’s outer appearance may increase or decrease the amount a customer is willing to spend. This is something that Rural Action is well aware of. Each farmer goes through training on how to market produce. For example, cleaning dirt from produce, or trimming tops from root vegetables to make them more visually appealing. When talking with a long-time patron of the produce auction, Corey indicated that visual appearance influences whether she buys from a farmer or not. She reflected:

There’s one guy out there that sells his potatoes, I mean he must dig them out of the ground and put them in the bags ‘cause they’re always dirty. So I tend not to buy his unless they’re really cheap because that gets dirt all over the coolers, all over other food, you know it’s not like it can’t be washed off but, so his are the last I buy. (Corey, 9/14/16, auction patron, personal interview).

The physical appearance of a farmer’s potatoes influenced whether or not Corey would purchase them. Often, as she indicates, this farmer’s potatoes were a last resort.

Karen is a culinary arts instructor at a local community college. She partners with Rural Action to process food from the auction which is then supplied to schools. She indicated a similar sentiment to me. As she gives me a tour of their processing facility, she bluntly stated the importance of this training for farmers, indicating:

One of the things we’re discussing is doing a, you know, like a training for the farmers on making their produce more marketable because when you have to
spend so much time like cleaning dirt off of things that could’ve been like knocked off in the field a little bit more, it’s going to open up more possibilities and it’s going to open up more possibilities for the schools to buy just directly rather than having to have it processed here. But if a school were to receive like a bin of green beans that are covered in dirt, they’re not going to use that product. So they might be willing to cut it but they’re not willing to like clean it, pick worms off of it, that stuff. (Karen, 6/17/16, Executive Chef, personal interview)

One of the biggest barriers for Rural Action in partnering with schools has been delivery. Tonia, the food service supervisor for the local school district confirmed this when speaking to me. When I asked her about some of the challenges she had experienced working with Rural Action, she affirmed:

Some of the challenges have been like delivery, making sure that the frozen foods are still frozen. They’re delivered in a clean truck with, you know, covered truck, things like that. We’ve had some issues with some of the things coming in in the backseat of somebody’s car and, you know, I have to be very careful about food safety and, you know, that’s one of the challenges. And they are very aware of my, you know, what my concerns about that and they’ve been taking great strides to correct it. (Tonia, 6/9/16, Food Service Director, personal interview)

I found a difference in the way institutional purchasers interacted with produce than did individual buyers. For example, Reed observed the following from his time working at the auction:
Yes, I’ve seen that happen a good amount at the auction. Yea, I honestly I will never understand it. Well like I can kind of see it because I think people think too much about what – people look at that kind of stuff too much like they look at a – too much like they look at like a supermarket ‘cause I think like the floor manager, we were talking about it and he was even saying he’s like you’d go into like Kroger’s and you see like that the stuff doesn’t that it’s like he’s a very meticulous about like making sure everything is very much organized and everything like that. ‘Cause he, his concept, pays at least like the way that he rationalizes it is if you’d go to like Kroger’s or you’d go to Walmart or something like that, everything’s going to be like the rows are going to look nice, everything’s going to look all good like that. I think people use that – too much of that like the supermarket is the standard of what your food should look like to where honestly I think like a farmer’s field is what your food should look like. That’s what your – yea, that’s what your food should be. Like the supermarket makes it look like way too – too like cleaned up kind of to me. Like I’ve heard people like complain because they’re like oh this food had dirt on it. And I’m like, you know where food grows at. I’m like, you know – like if you go out to a farmer’s field, it’s growing in dirt. I’m like that’s why it has dirt on it or like that’s why like a winter squash will have like mud on it and I’m like yea, you’re not going to use – you’re not eating the shell of a winter squash so you’re – if it has mud on it, you’re fine. You can wipe it off. (Reed, 6/22, auction worker, personal interview)
Unlike Karen and Tonia, who are responsible for supplying food to mass audiences, Reed is not as concerned with food’s appearance. Grocery stores, as Reed said, makes food appear too “cleaned up,” and thus, he is more skeptical of it.

Interestingly, I noted instances wherein individual values came into conflict. For example, early in the season, before the weather turned warm enough to support stone fruits, peaches arrived at the auction from Florida. Walter, the auction manager, automatically placed these items on the floor to be auctioned off last because they were not brought in by regular vendors. As the auctioneers reached the peaches, one of the bidders exclaimed in disbelief, “FLORIDA,” expressing disapproval. Another bidder also chimed in stating, “How is that local?” Even for all of the outward disapproval, the peaches ultimately sold at a high price. They were by far the most expensive items sold that day. Here we see a collision between value placed on local foods and value placed on particular types of produce. Freestone peaches, for example, are found in the Southern United States. Individuals at the auction were willing to pay more for produce seen as rare.

A few days later, as I am in the Rural Action office helping with administrative work, I overhear a call taken by administrator Phyllis. Phyllis received a call from a buyer specifically wanting peaches from South Carolina or Georgia. She answers the caller’s inquiry, advising that she cannot guarantee that the produce will be at the auction this week. She ended the call, turned to me with an exasperated tone, and stated to me that she normally receives calls from the unknowledgeable, the elderly, and the Amish. I
wondered, then, is how produce looks more important than where it comes from? Does the aesthetic value of food override its political and/or moral value?

In a similar way to this contradiction, Jeff, a farmer who sells at the Rural Action produce auction, indicated to me how food is not always assessed based on its aesthetic value. Some customers, as he indicated to me in an interview, purchase based on familiarity. Customers want what he terms “run-of-the-mill” produce. At times, this may trump food’s aesthetic qualities. He elaborated:

I grow pretty run-of-the-mill produce because that’s what people want. They want green beans that are string-less, they don’t want some fancy variegated variety. They don’t want purple beans. I grew – last year I grew a bunch of striped beets, do you know what I’m talking about? I grew like half striped and half red and I would cut them in half so people could see how they were striped and people’d come up and they’d be like, wow, those are beautiful, and I’d be like, yep. And then they’d be like, so do they cook the same? Yep. Do they taste the same? Yep. Are they just as healthy Yep. Cool, I’ll have a bunch of the red ones. Right? So like I don’t try and set myself apart because [of] what I grow, I try and have really high quality like I’m not afraid to throw away junky produce and compost it. I eat it myself or whatever. (Jeff, 8/9/16, auction farmer, interview)

In this case, having “standard” produce is more of a priority for Jeff’s business than its aesthetic value. In order to make a living, Jeff must produce food that is familiar to customers.
In sum, for participants I worked with, aesthetic sensibilities were important for discerning economic value for food they purchased at the auction. At times, values collided, prompting auction customers to decide, for instance, between purchasing local produce, or hard to find produce. Having established the ways in which participants relied on aesthetic sensibilities to place monetary value on produce, I now turn to the ways in which my participants relied on the same logics to determine food’s nutritional value.

**Food’s Nutritional Value**

In addition to understanding economic value aesthetically, individuals I interviewed also relied on aesthetic logics to assess food’s nutritional value to their own wellbeing. In general, I argue that, for individuals I interviewed, assessing food and its relationship to health, is an aesthetic endeavor. As chef Aaron told me in an interview, how he assesses “healthy” food may change depending on the day. Context is important. He said:

No, it’s – I mean healthy food is going to be different for everybody, I think, you know, everybody has their own idea of what healthy food is. I mean, but for me, I mean it depends on – on the day and what I’ve done, you know, if I’ve been working out, healthy food is going to be a lot of protein, you know, or if I go to the gym in the morning and I get done, the healthy food that I want is going to be a bunch of eggs, you know, something like that. On a day when I’ve had a long day here and long night here and I get home at 11:30, healthy food to me is like beer and like potato chips and like French onion dip, like ‘cause that’s what –
'cause like I’ve been – I was here eating whatever and I just get home and I just don’t want to do anything, like yea, I’m going to drink some beer and have chips and French onion dip while I watch TV before I go to bed or something, you know. And like it – is it in the big scheme, is it really healthy? Not all the time but once in a while, I mean, and for me it’s healthy because I just need something to… (Aaron, 6/16/16, Executive Chef, personal interview)

Aesthetics, for Sibley (2008) may be considered, “an ability to notice or discerning” (p. 495). That is to say, we rely on surrounding context to determine what “healthy” means in that particular moment. This supports Harter, Japp, and Beck’s (2005) argument that reconciles health narratives as subjective and contingent, not monolithic, experiences. More specifically related to the Appalachian region, Talia indicated to me, that for people in Southeastern Ohio, the issue of health is not a “black and white topic anymore, especially in this area. I think it’s a rather gray term and I think that healthy is eating as healthy as you can in that moment for what you have to spend.” Just as art is subjective and open to interpretation, so is our understanding of food as it relates to health. Like a painting, we assess, discern, and make sense of food role and position in our own life at that moment. Taking into account context related to class and culture exemplifies John Dewey’s call to view aesthetics holistically, not singularly.

Additionally, individuals I spoke with relied on aesthetic cues in order to assess how a food may impact their own bodies. For example, when I asked Danni about how she understands healthy eating, she responded saying:
I don’t know. I definitely think that food is like the first medicine or whatever. I like to think that whatever you eat and put inside your body is ultimately I mean it’s a part of you, and it pleases you, just how you feel and interact with the world and it’s your health. And I definitely try to eat well and cook, and I garden and I use my produce from the garden as much as possible. Try to eat organic, pesticide free things. But yea, food is really important to me. (Danni, 6/20/16, School Garden Coordinator, personal interview)

In our discussion, Danni described food as “the first medicine,” meaning that it has the ability to heal and strengthen. She also indicated that fact that food can also bring pleasure, indicating the intimate relationship she sees between food and bodies.

For those without enough to eat, socioeconomic status may play a role in how health is viewed. When I asked Alexis, a former AmeriCorps volunteer stationed in a local school system, how she defined healthy, she conveyed to me:

I don’t think I’ve ever contemplated on what I think healthy means, maybe in some capacity but I guess I would say like to me the word balance comes into play when I think of healthy, and I think that means something different for everyone. And it – so many times of course the people who are more well off have more of an advantage when it comes to balance and like time and having like the same thing as I was saying the luxury to choose their foods, get those – more vegetables when they go to the store or fruits or whatever, but I think balance like if you’re – if you are not as well off and you don’t have as many
resources, can you still go on a walk every day. (Alexis, 6/14/16, auction volunteer, personal interview)

For many of my participants, especially older participants between the ages of 60 and 80, one answer to this challenge is the knowledge of learning to cook, which is itself an aesthetic endeavor. Many referred to cooking as a “knack,” or a skill, which is how the ancient Greeks thought of aesthetics (Kristeller, 2008). As Ann, a 65 year-old farm extension worker and former member of the Rural Action board of directors, bluntly stated to me in an interview:

We don't have a lot of people that cook anymore. I think that's, for me personally, that's a big issue. It was the lack of, you know, good old, for lack of a better term, home economics in the schools and that's been gone in our schools for well over 10 years, maybe longer. And as soon as that was gone, there wasn't any reason - they teach how to write a check but not what to buy. I know, so I think that's played a role. I hate to sound like the old person that had that opportunity and then, you know, blame it on young people but they're very busy and even those that may be struggling with unemployment, use the food banks and a lot of times what they have available, excuse me, is more processed, it's packaged or canned and not necessarily fresh. (Ann, 7/11/16, farm extension agent, personal interview)

Corey, 67, expressed a similar sentiment to me in a story. When I asked her about problems of food insecurity in the area, she began:
Another issue is I don’t think it’s just for this area but everywhere, people don’t know how to cook. They don’t know how to prepare foods so if there’s not a fast food place around, they think they can’t eat. Do I have time for an example?

She continued her story, telling me:

So about three or four years ago, there’s El Derecho that came through [the county] and wiped out electric. It [the electric] stopped for three or four days…Anyway, that Saturday, we still didn’t have electric, but [Main Street] was just starting to get electric back so the farmers market was on, they were open, the farmers had stuff there and then the McDonald’s got power, and the Arby’s got power, and that kind of stuff. The lines of people trying to get into McDonald’s and Arby’s ran down the street for miles, you know. And I thought, why don’t you go to the farmers market, get a couple of apples, get some tomatoes, get some cucumbers, get something, get a loaf of bread, you know, and first of all, it’s cheaper, it’s better, you know, and you don’t have to wait in line for hours burning up gas that you don’t have, you know. But that was an example. I think people never – I mean McDonald’s got power and people ran to it like it was the only place in the world to get food. I’m not sure it qualifies as food but, you know, people didn’t think about getting something raw, or fresh, and feeding their kids that. It was shocking really. But anyway, so I think there are two issues.

There are definite food deserts. There are people that don’t know how to cook and I think we can blame the schools for taking that kind of stuff out of the secondary
schools too. They don’t teach kids how to cook. (Corey, 9/14/16, auction patron, personal interview)

Like Ann, Corey also believes that teaching cooking skills is a way to provide nutritional food to individuals who are economically limited. This loss of a skill, or a return to the past, is the focus of the final section of this essay. Next, I turn to a discussion of how my participants relied on aesthetic sensibilities to access food temporally.

**Temporal Value**

Finally, I argue that time, temporal reasoning, for my participants, becomes an aesthetic marker for making sense of risk related to the food they consume. more globally, this is evidenced by such phenomena as the “slow food movement” and the like, where temporality becomes an indicator of food’s value. While an extended discussion of the Slow Food Movement is outside the scope of this project, I mention it as a sort of litmus test for understanding, culturally, our fascination as a society with a return to the past in order to address present exigencies. Food that takes more time to grow, prepare, and consume, in this thought, is deemed better fit for consumption, more aesthetically pleasing. Broderick (2015) refers to this as aesthetic presence. Aesthetic presence, Broderick (2015) ascertained is, “an embodied and emotive pragmatic orientation to a dynamic quotidian present within a specific time and place, which sees certain moments of our lived experience as abundantly ripe with potential” (p. 38). In particular, the Amish farmers I worked with during my dissertation are particularly illustrative of this. In many ways, the aesthetic of a produce auction, broadly, is built upon this concept of slow food. The face of this return to the past, for the auction, is the Amish farmer. As the
auction manager stated to me:

So they just – they see us as a partner in the produce auction I think is the main – you know, it’s like there’s – so they are like a homogeneous community on the outside but there’s, you know it’s like anybody else it’s pretty hard to say the Amish. There’s a group of Amish that I’ve worked with, you know, a few individuals that I’ve worked with since 2004 that get the philanthropy, they get, you know, that we’re trying to do community development to help everybody, they get the idea that we want to put more food out in the world and get more people farming. But that’s not universal across the community. But so we’ve always had agreements. When we agreed to do the produce auction in 2004, you know, there was the original entrepreneur, there was Amish people because it’s an Amish concept, you know, like a plain people concept, like a horse and buggy concept or it wouldn’t be a produce auction. If you hear the term produce auction, there’s a horse and buggy there or it’s not working. (Timothy, 7/6/16, program manager, personal interview)

Timothy, and other Rural Action staff, refers to Amish farmers as ”horse and buggy” farmers.” As he goes on to say, without this image, there would be no auction. The image of the Amish farmer as “plain” and “simple” is key to instilling confidence in the product. Many of my participants would remark to me that they had more confidence in foods that were grown by the Amish because they did not use methods such as genetic modification and insecticides. As Katherine explained, “Since a lot of the – our farmers that sell are Amish, they are very minimal in what they do to the food just as like practicing their
beliefs” (Katherine, 7/6/16, program director, personal interview). Since the Amish do not believe in the use of technology, their produce, according to Katherine and many Rural Action members, is considered to be more pure, and thus healthier.

I reflect on this information in my field notes, commenting in an extended excerpt:

As I make my way down the gravel road toward the auction I see a horse drawn cart in front of me. Slightly late, I glance at the digital clock on the dash. My eyes shift toward the odometer. Three miles per hour, the green numbers flash. I let out a long sigh, expressing my frustration. “Get it together,” I say to myself alone in my car. This is part of the process. Slow food. Literally. I let out an audible chuckle. I wrestle with the meaning of temporality in our understanding of food. How does time/space/place aid in communicating food? Time seems to be laden with meaning. More/extended time seems to equal better. (Kristen, 6/6/16, author, field notes)

As I was behind a horse and buggy bringing food to auction, I was given a moment to pause to reflect on food’s temporality. The aesthetic of the horse and buggy, for customers, was a marker of “slow,” which in turn, equated to better and more trustworthy many times. Malcolm’s words support this. He remarked:

I’m not skeptical of it at all. No. I know it’s been – I know it’s been grown lovingly and with good care by somebody who knows what they’re doing as a general rule, and they’re making good stuff that tastes good. Food tastes good if you buy it here. If you go into there, the Big Mart, it’s traveled 1,500 miles.
That’s what they consider local. How can it taste good? Take a tomato out of a
garden and bite into it and know what a tomato really tastes like instead of that
cardboard thing that you get in the store. And if you’re trying to get a tomato in
December, guess what, it ain’t no good. You should be using something that you
canned at that time of the year because tomatoes aren’t local at that time.

(Malcolm, 6/17/16, auction volunteer, personal interview)

Not only does he have more confidence in who is growing his food, but Malcolm also
asserted that it tastes better as well. The miles food travels to get here is an indication of
how good it will taste, supporting an aesthetic sensibility. For the final section of this
chapter, I will synthesize the triumvirate of economic, nutritional, and temporal value
into a discussion of risk and aesthetics more broadly.

The Aesthetics of Risk

How, then, do Rural Action members rely on aesthetic sensibilities to understand
risk? This final section will explore the ways in which members rely on aesthetic
sensibilities in order to assess food’s potential risk. Harter et al. (2008) advocated for the
fusion of both instrumental logics (e.g. task routinization) alongside aesthetic sensibilities
(e.g. imaginative possibilities) in the sensemaking process. Following Dewey’s
conception of aesthetics, they surmised that, “An aesthetic experience is knowledge
producing insofar as it offers a heightened sense of reality pregnant with possibilities, a
greater depth of insight, and fuller and richer interactions” (p. 426). Thus, aesthetic logics
are important for understanding the way we make sense of organizing practices. Related
to the ways in which individuals organize around food, the same holds true. Relying on
discourse from multiple organizational stakeholders, I seek in this closing section to relate the ways in which aesthetic sensibilities relate to Rural Action members’ perception of risk.

Every act of consumption involves a form of risk because by doing so, we expose our bodies to the outside world (Shugart, 2008). If we are to take that food consumption is an act of risk, then we must examine further the origins of such risk. This is evidenced in my fieldwork by signage posted around the auction floor that reads, “no sitting on auction floor in order to create a safe food system.” In World at Risk, Beck (2007) wrote of the paradox of agency, stating that the more advanced we become as a society, the more at risk we become. In essence, our rate of innovation is outpacing our ability to keep up with it, and is, in turn, perpetuating our risk. Further, the more technology we have at our disposal, the more we put ourselves at risk. As Malcolm, an auction volunteer, told me when I asked him about how he understands food safety, he told me:

Well, if I bite into an apple that I buy in the grocery store I know it’s been sprayed with all kind of stuff so I just don’t want it. I would rather buy a second blemished from [a local farmer] at the farmers market and generally eat the blemish. It’s like spending 26 years in Florida and you have citrus canker down there and you’re used to seeing oranges that are just not – an orange is not orange. Trust me. You get this pretty little orange thing in the grocery store, things have been done to that thing. Number one, when it came picked green, it was dipped in Clorox water, bleach water, and that helps take care of the citrus canker, but all the ones that have cankers on it, they can’t sell. If you lived in Florida, you’d know they’re
healthy and there’s not a darn thing wrong with them and that citrus canker’s not going to hurt you. So, you know, I have – I had a kid one time I put out – this is my own neighborhood, I put out a banana that had a blemish on it. He wasn’t going to touch it. Had to be perfect. I says, you know what? I’m sorry for you because food isn’t perfect. It’s nature. Nature doesn’t make everything pretty and beautiful. Man can do it sometimes but would not touch it. So somebody else’ll eat it. Sorry. (Malcolm, 6/17/16, auction volunteer, personal interview)

Many of my participants relied on aesthetic sensibilities in order to access the safety of the food they consumed. Many times this meant food that was less aesthetically pleasing was determined to be more risky. Beck (2007) would argue that we are now able to intervene all too powerfully in matters as it pertains to our health and environment, creating what we would call an “ambivalent success.” There is now a vanishing line between life and death, where rationality, as it is understood by modernity is undermined by its own efficiency. This was evident in many of my interviews with Rural Action members. Technologies such as insecticides and genetic modification were seen as deterrents to healthy food. Many participants expressed more confidence in the local food system due to lack of technology, relying on instrumental rationalities to assess food’s risk. As an exemplar, Danni told me she is more confident in local food because she:

- Can directly talk to people that grow it. Not – local food doesn’t mean doesn’t translate to organic, doesn’t organic to pesticide free or chemical free. Often times they go – they’re lower skill and they aren’t having to use as much of that on a like a commercial standards and like things that are – I mean also I think about
food in my house of course and I don’t understand why we’re shipping in strawberries from California when we have strawberries growing five miles away or here in Athens. So I mean I think about that definitely a lot in terms of not just like that it’s local and I think it’s better tasting ‘cause it wasn’t picked before it was ripe and it just kind of loses its flavor but that it’s coming from super far away and things are being shipped in and shipped out and it’s totally doesn’t make any sense. I think people are becoming a little bit more educated and aware of that now. But yea, I definitely try to buy local whenever I can and grow food whenever I can, whatever I can grow. (Danni, 6/20/16, auction volunteer, personal interview)

Here we see the collision of both aesthetic and instrumental rationalities. In making food decisions Danni considers not only taste (aesthetic rationalities), but also the distance the food has to travel and how it is grown.

In line with Danni, Tori also expressed to me a similar sentiment, indicating that she favors locally grown food to corporately grown food. She asserted definitively:

I never worry about food safety from the auction. Maybe I should be I don’t. And that’s because I know the growers and I know that they keep their soil very pure, I don’t have to worry about a bunch of pesticides, insecticides on any of the stuff that I buy. When I buy an apple from the grocery store, I wash it like crazy, and I try not to eat the peeling even though like the peeling on an apple because a lot of that with the chemical sprays are soaked into the skin. Same thing with peaches. If I’m buying something like from the farmers market or from the produce auction, I
never worry about it. It’s off my mind ‘cause they really value food in its entirety and like what it can do, whereas the growers that often supply for the super market chains are more fiscally-minded. (Tori, 6/12/16, auction volunteer, personal volunteer)

Tori indicates that she has more confidence in local food because she worries that supermarkets are more “fiscally-minded,” or concern with profit over consumer well-being. Additionally, both Danni and Tori have more confidence in local food because of personal relationships and access they have to local farmers. This personal relationship is, according to Bakhtin, an aesthetic relationship. For Bakthin (1990), an aesthetic event is marked by being in the presence of the Other. Through this interaction, one is consummated by the Other. From this consummation, he concluded, is precisely where aesthetic activity begins. He surmised:

Aesthetic activity proper actually begins at the point when we return into ourselves, when we return to our place outside the suffering person, and start to form and consummate the material we derived from projecting ourselves into the other and experiencing him from within himself. (p. 26)

Aaron, an executive chef, offers an interesting juxtaposition to Danni and Tori. As a chef, Aaron is concerned with not only his personal safety, but also the safety of his customers as well. Thus he told me he is more certain of foods he purchases from large purveyors rather than small local farmers. He indicated to me that, “I watch people at the auction like pick stuff up and eat it right off the auction floor and like, you might be okay but…” He continued on, telling me:
I think the risk from buying from the produce auction may be a little bit higher. Buying, I mean, the – the big purveyors are – are really good with recalls and where they’re purchasing their food from, I mean, a lot of them know exactly what farm the stuff is coming from, maybe not my personal sales rep but the company as a whole, but we just got – we bought bags, would buy the bags of, would buy the cases of the little bags of chips to use for like box lunches and we just got a call that they’re having an immediate recall on all these bags of chips. If we had any, we just have to send them back, they’ll give us a credit because the factory where they were bagged had a peanut contamination and the bags don’t say anything about may contain peanuts so they were recalling all of them because somebody with a peanut allergy could eat some barbeque chips and end up having a reaction because of some – I mean that’s pretty crazy that they go – I mean that as fast as – I mean the chips came in and it was like four days later that we got this call that they – like anything with this date on it had to – had – and it’s really good that the company who produced them caught it and was aware of it and, you know, all of that stuff but I don’t think if there was some kind of contamination one of the growers for the produce auction’s farm how fast would they be to get the word back to rural action, to then get the word out to anybody that – and then having to – they have to go through all of their, you know, the excel spreadsheet that’s 5,000 lines long to figure out who – who bought anything from that grower. I mean, yea, it’d be a lot and the risk is I think minimal as it is but I mean there’s – I think, but it’s a little bit higher than it would be buying
from a mass grower, you know instead but is it? I mean as fast as they can contact and take care of everything whereas you have to wait for, you know, grower B to get his buggy to you ‘cause they don’t have – he doesn’t have a phone or anything. He has to get to the nearest place with a payphone to be able to, you know, to make a call and try to get the, you know, information to somebody. So I mean who – that could be a day before he could even call, you know. You know, that was on Monday, we get contact, he gets to rural action contacted on Tuesday by the time rural action goes through everything it’s Wednesday or Thursday maybe and we’ve been open for two days and been selling asparagus that may be, you know, they could have been used – had something sprayed on it or was, you know, laying near the chickens, the chicken got out and the chickens were running all over the asparagus and, yea. (Aaron, 6/16/16, executive chef, personal interview)

This is in contrast to Danni, who puts more confidence in local food as opposed to food purveyed by large retailers or growers.

Summary

I return now to the heart of this project. What potential does this suggest for those interested in social change? For this, I rely on the work of democratic theorist Chantal Mouffe, who supported aesthetics as a form of resistance able to prompt social justice. As she submitted in *Agonistics*, “I am convinced that artistic and cultural practices can offer spaces for resistance that undermine the social imaginary necessary for capitalistic reproduction” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 88). If we are to take Mouffe seriously that aesthetics
may prompt social change, then organizations with missions of social justice must take seriously the concept of aesthetics. For Rural Action, this means understanding that individuals do indeed “feast with their eyes.” Thus, an aesthetic orientation towards their work, I argue, will only bolster the work they do in generating economic profit to an otherwise struggling area. On the one hand, I have presented the voices of individuals such as Danni, who is concerned about where her food comes from and how it is grown. Conversely, it is also important to note that individuals are also relying on instrumental rationalities, such as Tonia, the food service coordinator, who is less concerned about where her food is coming from, and more concerned with how it is delivered. These two points of few represent an intermingling of both aesthetic and instrumental rationalities. In order for Rural Action to thrive, each must be given weight.
Chapter Six: “As Resilient as an Ironweed:” Narrative Resilience in Non-Profit Organizing

Today is unseasonably warm for Appalachian Ohio in the spring. Outside her home in a patch town, Rosemary runs amidst the gob piles – the spoil leftover from the extraction of coal. “Rose!” her grandmother Annabelle calls from the back door.

“Dinner’s ready, come quickly.” She comes home covered in dark, tarry soot to greet her grandfather who, in similar fashion, is also covered in a thick layer of ash from his work in the coalmine. “Child, you are filthy!” Annabelle scolds. “Sorry, Gama.” Gama is a term Rose uses to refer to her grandmother – a hybrid between Grandma and Ma. Annabelle assumed the role as Rose’s adoptive mother when Rose’s mother Sue surrendered her after her birth.

As the sun sets on this Spring day, a chill enters the dining space as a cool breeze blows through the drafty, weatherboard home, sending a chill down the spine. Annabelle looks over at Rose across the table, her eyes gaze downward. She squints her eyes with a wince as the memory comes flooding back to her – the day Rose came into her life. She remembers the day vividly. She remembers the light rain that fell, the glow of the crescent moon that somehow became dimmer as the night progressed, the soft touch of Rose’s hand as it cradled her index finger for the first time. Her daughter Sue, having just given birth to her third child, arrived unannounced one evening, with Rose swaddled in her arms – one threadbare canvas bag hanging impatiently by her side. “Here’s your girl,” Sue said. “I won’t take this one back.” All through her pregnancy, Annabelle sensed something was wrong. Sue would often complain that the baby, Rose, made her sick.
During Rose’s birth, Annabelle heard Sue say she wanted nothing to do with the new child. She knew it was really only a matter of time before Rose and Sue would show up on her stoop. She loved Rose as if she were her own daughter. Now, 12 years later, neither could imagine a life otherwise.

The family sits down to a dinner of navy beans and cornbread, with sliced tomatoes from their garden outside. A flutter of black catches her eye. She quickly makes her way to the kitchen window and stares intensely. “The crow’s back,” she yells from the window. The ground is now beginning to thaw from the long winter past. The crow works furiously, intent on making a groundhog its latest prey. “Well,” she says, “I guess he found his own supper.” She looks down again at her plate, and is thankful – thankful she does not have to make the groundhog her prey for dinner like the crow out the window, and like she did for numerous meals growing up.

Thomas, Rose’s grandfather, enjoyed the bottle. He would frequently stop after working in the coal mine for a drink, or two, before coming home. He was easily angered and slow to forgive. Rose and Annabelle both proceed with caution when in his presence. As he bit into the cornbread the center was still raw and gooey. He chucked the square across the room, missing Rose’s head by an inch. He proceeded into the bedroom where he remained for the rest of the evening. Rose and Annabelle remained at the table, seemingly unfazed by this occurrence. They went about their meal. Annabelle continued, “How was school today, Rosie?” Rose had been an A student since she began receiving marks in First Grade. Excelling in school, Rose had ambitions of becoming a nurse. As she watched her grandfather suffer from Silicosis, she did everything she could to help
him, including administering his antibiotic medications to treat respiratory infections when they would arise. Nothing pleased Annabelle more than to hear about Rose’s hopes and dreams. It renewed and sustained her to learn about Rose’s plans to open a clinic in their town to treat the people of her area. As she listened again to Rose’s plans she paused and said, “See that ironweed there, Rose? You’re as durable and sturdy as that weed will ever be. No matter how many times you run it over, it will keep coming back.” She reached over, stroked Rose’s silk black hair gently as they finished their meal together, looking forward to the future and how they could help make it better.

What makes some people seemingly thrive in adverse situations? What, for instance, prompts Rose to dream of beginning her own health clinic despite her less than ideal situation? The story recounted above is fictionalized. It represents a composite narrative woven together by my interactions with participants over the last two years of working, sharing meals, celebrating, and grieving alongside them. In composing this composite narrative I wrestled with the ethical responsibility of my role as listener – what Della Pollock (2008) calls the “listener as storyteller” within the oral history tradition. I took solace in the words of ethnographer Michael Taussig (2011), who calls “the first phase of inquiry – that of the imaginative logic of discovery – which in the case of anthropologists and many writers…lies in the notebooks that mix raw material of observation with reverie” (p. xi). That is certainly how this story, the one featured at the opening of this chapter, emerged.

However, one story in particular sparked this narrative account for me. Talia, a native of Southeastern Ohio, grew up on a cattle farm. On a warm day we sat outside on a
porch and drank coffee. When I asked her what other people may say about individuals from Appalachia, Talia told me the following:

I think they would say that we’re a durable people. And that we’re very sturdy and resilient and they think that – I have actually heard us described once and it was my great, great grandmother was in a nursing home up in Collinsville, and she was 104 when she passed away. And she wasn’t in very good health and she was painting up until she was 100. And she told me once that our family was as resilient as the ironweed growing in the hillside on our farm. And it kind of made me chuckle because I didn’t really understand it. I was like, ha, ha, okay, grandma, but now like looking at it, my family in particular’s been in this area since 1820 and probably before that but that’s just the first time we have them on record being here. And people from Appalachia are very durable…and we have roots that are strong. (Talia, 9/12/16, AmeriCorps Member, personal interview)

Durable. Sturdy. Resilient. These words populate my transcripts over and over again. What about the people of Appalachia that leads to this discursive reality? As Talia told me this story over a cup of coffee, I began thinking of the symbolism of the ironweed. I could not help but smile at the irony as I read a description of the weed. According to the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (2017), research on the ironweed has shown that even after, “nine successive years of mowing on two dates during the year caused no significant stand reduction of tall ironweed.” This image is powerful and evocative. It is telling of the discursive reality created within and through the stories the people of Appalachia tell.
A common thread throughout all of my interviews is the theme of resilience. In nearly every one of my interviews, participants used the word resilient to describe the people of Appalachia. It arose organically, borne of the data, and eventually became too prevalent to ignore, demanding to be explored. Thus, I devote this chapter to more fully unpacking the meaning of resilience as told by participants. What I conclude is that my participants demonstrate a commitment to what I am describing as narrative resilience. This view of resilience looks to not only “overcome,” or “bounce back,” but adopts a pragmatic orientation to integrate tragedy as well as triumph, acknowledging the frailty and vulnerability of the human spirit as well as its strength. I begin with an overview of resilience literature, emphasizing its historical trajectory. Then, using discourse from participant interview and field data, I outline the ways in which my participants demonstrated narrative resilience. I conclude with implications for narrative resilience as a theoretical concept.

The Road to Resilience: Overcoming, Bouncing Back, and Constituting

In general, the resilience literature agrees that resilience is a product of both nature and nurture (Buzzanell, 2010). That is, resilience is a product of inherent individual traits as well as fostered within and through collective and social means of learning. Clinical Psychologist Glenn Richardson (2002) described resilience as, “the process of reintegrating from disruptions in life” (p. 309). This is common across much of the literature related to resilience. Much of the resilience scholarship is focused on individual responses to adversity. The field of Psychology, for instance, has examined resilience as a personality trait associated with overcoming adversity. Tugade and
Fredrickson (2004) offered this definition of resilience: “the ability to bounce back from negative emotional experiences and by flexible adaptation to the changing demands of stressful experiences” (p. 320). The use of terms such as ‘reintegrating,’ and ‘bounce back’ in the definitions cited above imply a status quo view of resilience where the individual works to maintain homeostasis within the system. A communicative view of resilience takes us a step further.

Within the field of Communication, early scholarship on resilience focused on crisis management in response to natural disasters. Scholars have since shifted attention from one-time events, to a focus on resilience across the lifetime; resilience is now understood more widely as a phenomena that occurs within and through everyday life events. Even as early as 2002, scholars were interested in positioning and theorizing resilience as an everyday trait, as opposed to a singular response. For instance, Richardson (2002) described resilience as an innate trait that individuals possess. In other words, resilience is not something that appears once and then flees – it is there all along and can be fostered. If we take that resilience may be fostered, then communication is a key component in this process that must be taken seriously.

What then, does a communication perspective offer to the study of resilience? One way of understanding resilience is the ability to cope. If we are to understand resilience in this way, then we are concerned with the ability to “bounce back.” That is, the ability to overcome a given obstacle, adversity, or challenge as quickly as possible and return to status quo. The trouble with this understanding is that it assumes a static view of resilience. What happens, for instance, if individuals do not “bounce back” to the
same place? Should they? Is that even possible? If we are to take a communication approach to resilience seriously, we understand that resilience is constituted within and through our communicative acts. The ways organizations, groups, and individuals communicate about others matters to when and if others are deemed ‘resilient.’ This process is not only symbolic. Whether a group is seen as resilient may in turn enable or constrain access to particular resources. For example, access to assistance programs such as SNAP, Medicare, and Medicaid, is often predicated by whether or not a person or family is “deserving” of such benefits (Pine, 2017). The language of “entitlement programming,” or “government assistance” for example, supports this point. Whether someone is “entitled” to benefits communicates a different view than someone in need of “assistance.”

In adopting a communicative view of resilience, I align with McGreavy (2016) in asserting that, “A primary problem with resilience is that it ignores its own discursivity, which constrains how we might come to know and do resilience differently” (p. 105), thus focusing on the communicative nature of resilience. Patrice Buzzanell (2010), a champion of a communicative perspective on resilience, outlined five processes that comprise the communicative constitution of resilience: crafting normalcy, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and using communication networks, putting alternative logics to work, and foregrounding productive action and emotions. Buzzanell argued for a communicative perspective of resilience, insisting that, “It is fundamentally grounded in messages, d/Discourse, and narrative” (p. 2, emphasis added). I am greatly indebted to Buzzanell’s definition of resilience, which inspired me to further work through the
concept of resilience. Building upon Buzzanell’s framework, in this chapter, I contemplate how a narrative orientation deepens our communicative understanding of resilience. Within these pages, I begin to develop a new concept that I am terming narrative resilience. More than simply a narrative study of resilience, narrative resilience is a theoretical framework for understanding resilience more holistically. Narrative resilience, as I will explicate in the remainder of this chapter, consists of three elements: a pragmatic orientation; an integration of historical context; a conviction of heroes past and present. I explore each of these in detail below. Before getting there, however, I outline the common tenets offered by a narrative perspective.

“**We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live:**” A Narrative Perspective

In an autobiographical account of her life as a journalist, Joan Didion, in her essay *The White Album*, penned this evocative phrase: “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” It is within and through narrative that we attempt, however feeble, to understand life’s miscues, missteps, and worse. So how, then, does a narrative perspective offer a communicative understanding of resilience? Narrative is a unique form of study and orientation. It is at once relational, conditioned, and indeterminate (Harter, 2013, p. 10, original emphasis). That is, the meaning of a story is co-determined by multiple parties; meaning of a story is intertextually understood. Narrative understanding is conditioned in multiple ways depending on context. Finally, narrative is indeterminate in that it is ever-changing and shifting. No story is understood the same way twice.

Following in the vein of narrative scholars such as Arthur Frank, Joseph Campbell, Rita Charon, and Jerome Bruner there are a few elements common to my line
of thinking here. First is that narrative is consequential. By this I mean that narrative produces material and symbolic consequences. Through the process of emplotment, we make sense of events in our lives via particular spatial and temporal sequences (Ricouer, 1981). Frank (2010) positioned narrative in deceptively simple terms as, “one thing happens in consequence of another” (p. 25). This is important to an understanding of resilience. Indeed, like narratives, resilience is often spurred by moments of rupture -- a phone call in the middle of the night, a diagnosis of illness, notification of job loss. These moments demand a response. They divide life into a before and after. Second, these thinkers view narratives as unfinalized. Narratives are fluid and ever changing; they are not static, singular moments in time. A narrative orientation gives equal weight to process and outcome, providing room for the next chapter to be written. Stories and their telling allow us to see anew. How may these assumptions be useful to a communicative understanding of resilience? By understanding resilience as a sensemaking process, we open space to envision otherwise. Narrative “is knowledge producing insofar as it offers a heightened sense of reality pregnant with possibilities, a greater depth of insight, and fuller and richer interactions” (Harter, Leeman, Norander, Young, & Rawlins, 2008, p. 426). A narrative perspective offers individuals alternatives – opening doors rather than closing them. Narrative illuminates the agentic capacities of individuals, allowing them to write (or rewrite) their own story. To demonstrate the unique features of narrative, I employ the use of an extended case study drawn from my conversation with Beth. Beth is a social worker in the local school district in which I was embedded and also a native of Appalachian Ohio. In telling me about her work with vulnerable children, she
demonstrates the features of narrative I wish to highlight in this chapter.

**The dropped stitch.** Narrative involves the introduction of the unexpected. Jerome Bruner (2002) described narrative as arising when “something goes awry” (p. 34); Kenneth Burke (1969) would term this same narrative feature as Trouble with a capital T. Storytelling is a human tendency to make sense of expectations gone “awry.” “A central feature of storytelling is its ability to deal simultaneously with continuity and disruption, the dropped stitch, the not always so,” surmised Harter, Pangborn, Ivancic, and Quinlan (2017). For my participants, resilience arises amidst these unexpected circumstances. Beth, a social worker in the local school system in which I was embedded for this project, told me a powerful story of her own experience with the dropped stitch:

I worked with who was a recovering heroin addict and she said, and she was recovered at the moment, and she said, Becky, I would not buy my child a quarter bag of chips if I thought that meant I would be short on my next fix. That’s what heroin addiction’s like. And she very much loves her children. Loves her children. It was so sad to hear that, but when your body needs that to survive and the parent’s in survival, everything else is no longer important. And unfortunately their children get caught up in that mix and – and the parents typically always have their kids with them because they feel like that’s what they’re supposed to do. Their kids are always supposed to be with them but then they’re in those environments. And so they don’t – it’s a double edged sword, you know, it’s like no you can’t – can’t take your kid to the – there while you’re doing that. But to them, they have their kid with them all the time so that makes them a good mother
or – or whatever. But, yea, the testimony from the mom who said I would not buy a quarter bag of chips if I thought that would make me short on my next fix made me – like kind of hit home like oh my goodness, that has to be the worst feeling of a – of struggle and need. (Beth, 7/15/16, social worker, personal interview)

In this case, addiction presented itself as Trouble. The mother that Beth describes experienced expectations gone awry when addition came knocking. How, then, does one respond in the face of such Trouble? This question is the impetus for narrative resilience.

**Symbiosis.** Narrative is contextual. It responds to particular places, times, and situations. As Harter (2013) wrote, “The physical space in which action unfolds (and its symbolic meanings) enlarges or restricts possibilities for participants, process and outcomes” (p. 10). Frank (2011) referred to this process as symbiotic, stating that, “stories work with other things – first with people, but also with objects and places” (p. 37). Beth demonstrates a narrative perspective of resilience by taking an extended perspective of some of the contextual factors that may impact the families with which she works:

I think one of the biggest misconceptions that I have to deal with on a regular basis with helping families is that everybody is lazy, and they abuse the system, and everybody just wants a handout, that people – I hate that some people feel that everybody’s born with the same opportunities in life. I don’t think that’s true. It’s obviously not true, it’s not even a thought and so I just, yea, that – I mean families really do try hard but there’s so many other barriers that just the survival and meeting basic needs can be very challenging. A lot of families I work with
have disabilities and – or grew up in the cycle of poverty and it’s really hard to get out of that, or had kids young and so there’s just lots of barriers and I would never think that any – any family that I’ve ever worked with really wants to live the struggle. They’re just trying to find a way to better their lives for their kids. So that’s probably the misconception maybe. (Beth, 7/15/16, social worker, personal interview)

As Beth acknowledged, even though individuals in the region may struggle with issues of (dis)ability and even dependency, there are even still structural issues that contribute to this positionality. Rather than placing the impetus on the individual to be resilient, or to “bounce back,” narrative resilience takes into account the ways in which contextual factors may impact one’s ability to be resilient.

**Perpetual generation.** Finally, narratives are indeterminate, meaning that stories are never finalized. Rather, they are generative. They have the ability to create anew with every telling. They allow us, as Harter (2013) surmised, to imagine otherwise. In an extended account, Frank (2005) terms this feature of narrative perpetual generation:

One story calls forth another, both from the storyteller him or herself, and from the listener/recipient of the story. The point of any present story is its potential for revision and redistribution in future stories. This principle of perpetual generation means that narrative analysis can never claim any last word about what a story means or represents. (p. 967)

In talking with Beth, she indicated to me how she approaches her work as a school social worker, stating:
Every family has their own struggles and, you know, part of our culture I think, I mean we do have hard working families or families that really do try to be independent and try to, you know, just sustain on their own, and it’s just – it’s difficult. I mean trying to – I mean we are a small communities, you know, really lean on each other and that’s important and I really try to utilize that that everybody’s kind of a friend of a friend and – but some families are, they – they, you know, families have a lot of pride and that can be challenging just to make them feel like I’m just here to help, I’m not judging, I mean if you need something I mean this – and a lot of with parents how I approach it with my room and what’s available is that it’s a revolving door, you know, if you need something from my room, just ask and, you know, we can get you what you need.

(Beth, 7/15/16, social worker, personal interview)

Here, Beth demonstrates how she takes students on their own terms, acknowledging that the story they are living in at that moment may not be THE defining story of their life. A narrative orientation looks for plurality, rather than unity of meaning. Narrative resilience does not function to bring us back to the same place. A narrative approach to resilience privileges resilience as dynamic and ongoing. The remaining sections of this chapter are devoted to outlining three feature unique to narrative resilience: a pragmatic orientation, integration of historical context, and an appreciation of stories’ heroes. Utilizing participant discourse, I highlight each of these in turn below.
Narrative Resilience’s Pragmatic Origins: Realistically Ever After

I define narrative resilience as a place-based way of being in the world that relies upon not only tragedies but also triumphs as catalysts for change. While previous scholarship on resilience has focused primarily on overcoming adversity, narrative resilience exists in dialectical tension with its surrounding environment, acknowledging that resilience is not a matter of triumph, but integration. Borrowing from the language of Laura Ellingson (2017), narrative resilience adopts an ethos of “realistically ever after,” which disrupts dominant narratives. For Frank (1996), dominant narratives may include restitution narratives (i.e. overcoming or bouncing back) or tragedy narratives (succumbing to hardship). Building on this, rather than attempting to surmount adversity, narrative resilience takes tragedy as a common part of the human spirit and strives to incorporate these moments into everyday life and prompt forward.

The concept of narrative resilience takes at its center a pragmatic orientation. Narrative resilience, as I stated before, embraces triumph as well as tragedy to form a “realistically ever after” orientation. As participant Jeff termed, this is a “tempered reality.” He told me in an interview:

So that’s what I mean when I say it’s tempered like the reality of – of any – of any like if you think of what you’re doing as a social movement, it has to work – has to stand on its own two legs if it’s going to be integrated into any kind of sustainable society. It’s the same – just not in the environmental sense, I mean, but like if it’s going to survive, if you’re doing something because you’re going to change the world, it has to be designed to survive. So that means it has to actually
provide a living which means like, you know, raising your own chickens, and all that stuff’s going to go on the side line until you figure out how to make money on the carrots. So that’s a long-winded answer. (Jeff, 8/9, farmer, personal interview)

Rather than assuming that individuals must always “bounce back,” narrative resilience asks us to acknowledge that not every story ends in a happily ever after. Ellingson (2017) referred to this as “next chapter” stories, which acknowledges the unfinalized nature of stories. These moments may be considered “narrative jolts,” which Sharf et al. (2011) described as, “a pause in the scripts,” that disrupt our taken-for-granted assumptions. As it turns out, this “get real” orientation is key to resilience studies. As Coutu (2002) stated in a review of resilience studies in business, “resilient people have very sober and down-to-earth views of those parts of reality that matter for survival” (p. 48). Buzzanell (2010) agreed, stating that, “‘negative’ emotions, expressions in interactional and mediated forms, and organizing processes can act as contributors to individual/group well-being as well as catalysts to social change” (p. 3). If we are to take this charge seriously, then narrative is key, for narrative celebrates moments of human vulnerability and allows us to envision otherwise.

A caveat, to the above; we must be cautious to avoid stories that are monolithic – stories that highlight one emplotment. In Frank’s (1995) summation, our stories tend to cluster around three types of narratives: restitution narratives, chaos narratives, and quest narratives. One of these narratives tends to guide our understanding of adversity, impacting how we respond to challenges such as illness and pain. For example, in the
case of breast cancer survivors, there tends to be one acceptable narrative related to survival – more specifically, the survival of white, upper-class women. Other narratives related to breast cancer stories are often sequestered (King, 2008). This is contrary to narrative resilience.

Instead, what I argue for is a perspective of narrative that takes into account a diverse array of narratives, noting the import of each, what Clair et al. (2016) would term “poly-narratives.” The collection of these disparate narratives coalesce to inform what Clair and her coauthors penned as Extended Narrative Empathy (Clar et al, 2016), which “encourages the practice of collecting multiple narratives and including background stories (e.g. historical, political, and cultural) to inform the interpretation” (p. 475). In developing my theoretical position on narrative resilience, I take seriously this call to empathy, fostered by taking into account multiple and diverse perspectives to inform a holistic view of what it means to thrive in less than ideal circumstances.

Lara, a non-profit organizer and Rural Action partner, captures this pragmatic orientation explicitly. It was during her interview that I first began thinking of resilience in relation to Rural Action’s communicative labor. In her statement, Lara told me about the “untold story of Appalachia,” stating:

You know, to me the untold story is how do we – how do we create a narrative that has enough meaning and pragmatism I guess to see that there are other opportunities that it’s not going to be easy but if we can shift some of that dependence on outside corporations creating jobs for ourselves and now create maybe more opportunities for ownership, especially ownership that’s linked
within sectors, linked within stronger entrepreneurial support networks, I think that’s the story that we really need to tell, and it’s happening. (Lara, 7/13/16, non-profit founder, personal interview)

Similarly, Caroline, an employee at the local health department represented this pragmatic approach to resilience to me in an interview, stating:

I think that there is a lot about culturally about the Appalachian region, the… and the independence and the love of community in place that is often overlooked that’s such a huge, huge factor in, you know our community that – that is utilized. You know, think about what we’ve done and not, you know, here necessarily at the health department but in general in terms of like we don’t have a lot of money. We are one of the poorest counties in Ohio and we have a lot happening in terms of health in our community because we work together, because we care, because we, you know, are resilient on an individual level and as a community in the county so I think that is huge beyond any stereotype that – negative stereotype that might exist. (Caroline, 6/1/16, health department employee, personal interview, emphasis added)

This focus on independence is key in understanding the pragmatic orientation I want to outline in this chapter. Much of the communicative labor taken on by Rural Action involves this concept of independence and self-sufficiency. Take for instance communication director Sharon’s comments that:

I think, you know, the idea that people are kind of hearty here, I can agree with that that they are kind of self-determined, that they want to do things their way,
you know, are also stereotypes. You know, I see that and so I, you know, I don’t think that’s a bad thing. (Sharon, 7/22/16, communication manager, personal interview, emphasis added)

This idea of self-sufficiency is reflected and reinforced through the discourse of Rural Action. For example, Rural Action terms itself a social enterprise, which, according to Rural Action’s (2016) webpage, social enterprises are “business ventures that generate profit while also creating positive environmental and social impacts in communities.” Rural Action frequently posts this through social media accounts. Take for instance this Facebook post appearing on the organization’s website on December 14, 2016:

![Rural Action](image)

**Did You Know? Since its founding, Rural Action’s role as a social enterprise incubator has produced initiatives and organizations such as: ReUse Industries, Chesterhill Produce Auction, Zero Waste Event Productions, Ohio Forestry Cooperative, WoodRight Forest Products? Rural Action has also helped many local entrepreneurs grow their own Appalachian Ohio based businesses!**

*Figure 6.1: A Recent Social Media Post*

One of Rural Action’s answers to such exigencies such as food insecurity is gardening. This is often accomplished through AmeriCorps volunteers who spend their year of service in public schools located around Southern Ohio. One member, Phillip, expressed this to me regarding school gardens.
So I know one thing that we try and do is to try and teach gardening to kids so they can help their parents and we can re-instill that because that was a huge thing. I mean there’s some people that are still growing seeds, some of the first seeds that were planted in this area and they’re still continuing to plant them and harvest the seeds and save them and pant them again from generations, so it’s another way that I think we’re trying to help is bring that back to teach kids and to continue that and be able to provide for themselves. (Phillip, 6/7/16, AmeriCorps Member, personal interview)

For Rural Action, exhibiting a narrative resilience is intertwined with ideas of self-sufficiency and independence. I do not approach this without caution, however, and will return to possible criticisms at the end of this chapter. Having established the pragmatic orientation of narrative resilience, I now turn to another feature important to understanding resilience: historical context.

**Gobpiles and Coalmines: Placing Rural Action within Appalachia**

It would be hard to imagine Rose’s story, recounted in the opening moments of this chapter, separate from the gobpiles and coalmines. Historical context is vital to understanding how, and in what capacities, one may be resilient. Tied to a pragmatic approach, narrative resilience, as demonstrated by my participants, takes seriously historical context and looks to integrate that history into responses to current exigencies. By taking seriously historical context, we shift attention away from the individual, towards larger structural issues such as economic inequality due to a dearth of jobs. This is especially important in a region such as Appalachia.
Latimer and Oberhauser (2005) wrote that Appalachia may be characterized by “uneven development of its human capital and economic resources” (p. 269). My participants were keenly aware of what one participant termed, “history of extraction,” that has long defined the area. When I asked Phillip, a native of Pittsburg, how he would describe the Appalachian culture, he acknowledged this history of exploitative practices, saying:

So I resonate a lot with some of the positive values that Appalachians have. ‘Cause there’s definitely a lot of assets that people don’t notice, one I guess is their resilience in doing things for yourself. I really like that and just being able to, you know, fend for yourself and be able to do things. Let’s see what else, and then just being open and welcoming to people. If you’re open and welcome and willing to put yourself out there and they realize that you’re not someone trying to swindle them or cheat them because historically that’s been a large – a really hard issue that’s happened to this area. (Phillip, 6/7/16, AmeriCorps Member, personal interview)

Similarly, when I asked Timothy, the Sustainable Action program manager what it was like to work in the region, he responded saying:

I mean we don’t have, you know, it’s not flat so it’s harder to do any kind of distribution. It’s not like – it’s rural, you know, so we don’t have huge population centers and marketing centers but I mean the terrain, so the geography has always been kind of like it’s some people describe it like the curse of the natural resource, so I mean we had coal, you know, and just the basic economic geography of the
coal would go to where the rivers came together to make a big city like Pittsburgh, or Youngstown, or Columbus, or Cleveland, so the coal was going to where the geography and the history had made a population center. So we didn’t have that – those bigger ones so when you’re shopping your wealth, you know, away to where it’s value added, you know, you basically are at the bottom of the food chain. So we’ve always been like at the bottom of the food chain in terms of, you know, coal and oil, even timber. Most of the timber is just shipped out of here too, without being value added. So – so it’s just that – the fact that big cities – not that many big cities blossomed around here so it went to where they were to make the wealth for those communities like Cleveland, Pittsburgh. These places were built on like coal communities like this. And it gets back to like the value adding and the product, you know, to try to get that ultimate dollar. Then even when you look at – some people don’t want to hear this but like even OU and Wayne National Forest and all the parks, these all have one thing in common. They don’t pay taxes. So we don’t have much of a tax base. We can talk about the geography but so the geography was kind of with the history so OU is the leading employer, they don’t pay taxes on their land, they bring in most of their higher paid employees, they employ less and less, so it’s just, you know, it’s a struggle when you don’t have industry, don’t have like – so I think the, you know, the fact that the tax base is so low. (Timothy, 7/6/16, program manager, personal interview)
Both Phillip and Timothy acknowledge the history of the region, adopting a narrative approach to addressing problems in the area, while at the same time acknowledging the need to make the area more economically robust.

A farmer and grower of the Rural Action auction further highlighted the ways in which Rural Action strives to make the area more economically viable, stating:

“I think the story that they [Rural Action] tell about the area is that this is a(n) economically disadvantaged area and that agriculture is one avenue through which we can develop socially and environmentally sustainable work for people. And they’re struggling with finding ways to make it so. I think that’s a story that they tell. And I think that’s pretty accurate to what they do. Yea. I would love to see them do more but I understand that they’re limited. (Jeff, 8/9/16, farm owner, personal interview)

Here Jeff acknowledged that the area in which he grows is “economically disadvantaged,” and highlights the ways in which Rural Action demonstrates narrative resilience through developing “socially and environmentally sustainable work for people.” The emphasis in Jeff’s statement on sustainability is important. I argue that by acknowledging historical context, and in line with the tenets of narrative resilience, Rural Action is able to, as Buzzanell (2010) would term, “put alternative logics to work” and imagine alternative solutions to endemic problems. Acknowledging its historical context allows Rural Action to demonstrate narrative resilience through demonstrating creative alternatives. Similarly, Catherine agreed that:
The key to moving towards sustainable systems is to then partner with other organizations who are stronger in a certain area than you are and try not to be competitive or fight one another but to try to build strong coalitions. (Catherine, 9/26/16, founder, personal interview)

The commitment to now being “competitive” and “building strong coalitions” exemplifies Rural Action’s narrative resilience through their pragmatic orientation of wanting to partner with organizations to make changes in the area in order to create “sustainable systems.”

Rachel, Rural Action’s food access coordinator, underscores these alternative logics. In our interview Rachel situated the issue of food insecurity in terms of “endemic poverty,” stating:

And that’s like – to me that’s the one and only I mean I would say – I don’t know when it all began because poverty has always been around right but really with the collapse… I don’t know, in the extract-based economies left here, timber, mining, etc., there’s all these people here, no jobs, have no jobs. Although, to counter that, I think it depends on whose definition of poverty you’re talking about because living in poverty around here also some own land. Is that – I mean, is that a form of poverty to be a landowner? I don’t own land but I’m not – I don’t live in poverty. So I think it kind of just depends and I also think that it depends on again like what are you trying to push at people because I think about like imperialism and standards of living with imperialism and oh you people are poor, or oh you don’t have a religion, we’re going to make you have a religion and then
we’re going to enslave you to make you do things for money that you didn’t need before we came here. (Rachel, Food Access Coordinator, 6/23/16, personal interview)

In this interview excerpt, Rachel demonstrates narrative resilience by offering an alternative form of what it means to be in “poverty,” acknowledging that some people can be landowners, which in the American tradition symbolizes freedom and success, and still be considered impoverished. Rachel reconciles historical struggles endemic to the region into her understanding what it means to be resilient. The fact that many people own their own land in Appalachian Ohio is a resource upon which Rural Action focuses many of their communicative efforts. For example, since many people in the area own land, Rural Action is focusing efforts on the harvesting of Ginseng. As the founder told me of the origin of Rural Action:

These would be what you almost all hardscrabble farmers, people who didn’t have very much money but they had inherited a little piece of land, but the value of that land was – the fact that they had a Ginseng patch and they knew it could bring in good cash (Caroline, founder, 9/26/16, personal interview).

She went on to tell me that one of her daughter’s boyfriends was able to go to college because of the money his parents were able to make on their Ginseng patch located on their family land. This, I argue, is an exemplar of narrative resilience, as Rural Action works to reconcile past historical struggles to address present exigencies. This work continues today. As a local farmer told me, Rural Action has been vital in helping him harvest ginseng on his land, telling me:
Well, they’ve just helped me facilitate the ginseng planting which so far is really low cost, low input has the potential to be high – high yield, financially and we’ll see. That’s, you know, too far out to see. (Jeff, farmer, 8/9/16, personal interview)

Embedded within the historical context of a region are social actors. The next section explores how social actors play an important role in narrative resilience.

**Social Actors: Heroes as Key to a Resilient Community**

Based on ethnographic integration, I came to realize that my participants relied on the successes of those who came before. These individuals, in a narrative sense, were portrayed as heroes in the stories my participants told. More specifically, in interview discourse, these individuals were termed “back-to-the-landers.” As an example, a local entrepreneur stated to me in an interview that:

So a lot of history both in sort of public service work around food, you know, and a lot of it I would say directed more to entrepreneurship and how do we create a healthy more localized food system, so access I would say creating more opportunity both for employment but also for the availability of healthy and affordable food are some of the foundational work I would say of many of the non-profit partnerships we have in the region. Yea, I mean I think, you know, in some ways it does feel like a family dynamic because so many people of my generation particularly folks who maybe came to school here in the 60’s or 70’s or grew up in the region, a lot of us I think have through necessity developed either entrepreneurship skills where we have started businesses, lots of people in my generation were kind of the grandmothers, grandfathers of the organic
movement in southeastern Ohio, a lot of kind of back-to-the-landers so to speak
who are now, you know, running large organic operations. So, you know, some of
it has been driven I would say though economic need that folks have tried to
figure stuff out and then I think the – the social challenges that we’ve faced in the
region has also encouraged lots of more activists to figure out, you know, what
are – what kind of non-profits, what kind of changes do we need to make maybe
within agencies to – to really work our collective impact to figure out how to
work more collaboratively. (Lara, 7/13/16, personal interview, local business
owner)

Lara’s comments exemplify how my participants positioned entrepreneurship as a form
of narrative resilience, specifically pioneered by the “back-to-the-land” movement.

Rather than focusing on the challenges in the area, participants defined resilience
as a series of successes. Ann is an example of this movement, and a central character in
this story of narrative resilience. She narrated her own story to me during our
conversation, telling me that:

I attended Purdue University. I actually was focused in Psychology but ended up
as part of the back-to-the-land movement here in southeast Ohio in the early 70’s
so my husband and I were in – self-employed for 20 years. We were in the feed
mill business and then after we sold that business, I got involved with community
development in regards to tourism here in Morgan County. And that particular
position, at the time, this is in ’99, 2000, was funded through a grant that OSU
facilitated. And then in 2007, 2008, I believe, one of those, the grant funding
ended and I transitioned to being a full-time OSU employee as a program assistant in the 4H, ag and a little bit in the community development areas. So I stayed within those – within that area with the newest portion of my appointment being with 4H. I had not been involved with that before. So – and that’s where I’ve been ever since so I’ve been there 16 years doing that.

Ann’s story is indicative of many others in the area. Often out of necessity, individuals in Southeastern Ohio began their own businesses as a way to address social circumstances. Acknowledging historical context, I view this as a form of narrative resilience because of the way these individuals were able to creatively integrate their circumstances into their everyday actions and situations. For Ann and her family, their solution was to begin a feed mill business to serve the people of this agricultural region.

Because the surrounding community lauds these so-called “back-to-the landers” as heroes, this may create an outsider/insider tension. If you were not part of this movement, or not native to the area, there is a sense of skepticism regarding motivation. As Lara, who was born in Cleveland Ohio, but whose grandparents were from Southeastern Ohio, told me:

So there’s that sense of legacy sometimes but there’s also the sense that if you weren’t, you know, if you skipped a generation, which sort of happened in my case, you’re – you’re still an outsider. And I think again the access to – to educational resources, great divides there, the – the lack of investment in the public school system or the way investment happens at a state level is greatly affected, southeastern Ohio school districts, so there’s just – I would say this
sense of divide, not just from other you were born and raised here but also even folks who have grown up in the region if they’ve had more access to educational assets, if they’ve gone to college, you know, and then they come back to their communities everyone is like well why are you back here? You know, get out So that’s – it’s – there’s class issues at work, you know, beyond just that sense of insider outsider. I mean you look at Appalachia’s history and I’m sure you’ve done a lot of research on this as well, yea, I think – I mean Appalachian people have a lot of skepticism about outsiders coming into the region yet have been very dependent on that paradigm as well. So there’s – there’s a lot of… there’s a lot of resentment, there’s, you know, as I say, a lot of co-dependency in some ways that’s just entrenched. (Lara, 7/13/16, non-profit founder, personal interview)

This codependency that Lara refers to is representative of the ways in which narrative resilience may be instructive when addressing social problems. By recognizing the point that there is a level of skepticism prompted by historical context, Rural Action is better able to prompt social change. Rural Action, for example, began work developing the produce auction by stationing a member in the community to hear concerns, in order to foster trust.

Similarly, Alexis summarized this sentiment articulately. When I asked her to describe the people of Appalachia, she told me:

I would say strength and resilience. People in Appalachia have amazing strength and resilience in harsh situations they live in. Self-sufficiency often but I also think that misunderstood comes to my mind like from outsiders. Poverty comes to
mind, yea, those are the main things I think that come to mind. (Alexis, 6/14/16, AmeriCorps Volunteer, personal interview)

As a purported outsider herself (Alexis was born in a suburb of Akron, OH), Alexis understands the feeling of being on the outside. She was assigned to work in one of the most schools in Ohio, checking for head lice and working to revamp the school lunch program. There were times, however, when she did not feel that far removed from the children and families with whom she worked.

Displaying what Clair et al. (2016) would term extended narrative empathy, Alexis recounted a sobering story to me – a story that changed the way she viewed the individuals in Appalachia:

I originally – when I first applied, I almost felt guilty ‘cause I’m like I come from a privileged family, I just do, it’s just the way it happened for me, it’s what I was born into and I’ve never had to worry about where food came from. Going through college four years, my dad always helped me like I don’t have any school debt or you know, college debt, nothing like that. I’ve just always been very fortunate. And through AmeriCorps service, I decided because of my stipend and I was like, I told my dad, I’m like dad I’m going to try to make it on my own. I don’t want you to supplement me with extra money. I’m just going to get my own food, I have food stamps now, you know, and I get about like $194 a month or something like that. I think that’s the number. And like okay with this, and with the -- I guess it’s like a little less than a thousand a month that I get from my stipend. I’m like, I can make this work. And so I have done a great job balancing
and trying to be conservative in areas that I need to be conservative, but it’s been really interesting with the food stamps because I’ve struggled with guilt like do I need this? Like do people need this more than I do? Probably. But I’ve been offered this and I’m going to take it because I feel like I will put me in a bind if I don’t have enough money for food. I mean my rent is like $600. And I’ve been really grateful ‘cause it turns out that like as time has gone on, it’s just I’ve needed that food money more and more and actually to be quite honest, I’ve found myself in a really rough situation about a month ago. I overspent what was even in my account at all and I had zero dollars in my wallet, in my account, completely. There was no savings, there was no checking left, like it was just – and I was actually [at a diner] and I spent some money to get food because I didn’t have food at my house, it was like, I don’t – I don’t know what to even make myself out of the food that I do have. And was hungry and I don’t even know if it was that I was hungry, I just felt like in a panic like I need food, I just like don’t really have anything for lunch today. And when that happened, the girl told me like I’m sorry, but this – like it didn’t cover this. It was only a matter of cents that it didn’t cover, like point something, whatever, but I was like why would it do that and then I looked at my bank account, zero dollars. And it – I was definitely – I was driving to The Plains and I felt – I don’t feel that far off for some – where some of these people are, absolutely I have like a total comfortable cushion to fall on. My dad and my parents would help me in a second. I didn’t – I decided not to call for help because I wanted to like go through that and I was like
I made this decision to spend month wherever I did and I got myself here and I need to like just let it happen and like experience that. And it’s not at all to say that I was like those people, it was not at all to say that I really know what they’re going through at all, I don’t know. I have no idea. I think that I would probably – I think I would just – that would be the most painful thing to go through like – like trying to make a living based on like nothing almost sometimes in many of their cases. But I’m just saying that I really felt something that I bet you is really familiar to what they feel, you know (Alexis, AmeriCorps Volunteer, 6/14/16, personal interview).

Many of the nonprofit workers I came into contact with were on food stamps. The stipend (never more than $12,100) from the AmeriCorps program often necessitated that individuals augment their income with assistance programs such as SNAP, flipping the script on who requires government aid. In this case, the co-dependency that Lara spoke of before allows Alexis to develop an empathetic understanding. This back and forth exchange, I argue, is key to narrative resilience. It requires a give and take of both parties. It is a collective, not an individual endeavor.

**Conclusion and Summary**

In sum, I have articulated in this chapter the ways in which Rural Action participants articulated a narrative resilience. Narrative resilience, as I understand and define it here, is marked by the following: a pragmatic orientation, an integration of historical context, and an appreciation for local heroes. Taken together, these elements understand resilience to be a communicative construct. Building on Patrice Buzzanell’s
theorizing of resilience, narrative resilience is concerned with integrating triumphs, as well as tragedy. Resilience understood in this way lies in a dialectical tension. It demands that we “get real,” and then asks, “now what?” – the “now what” for Rural Action exists within the model of social entrepreneurship. This is something I remain cautiously optimistic about. While the concept of developing social enterprises has much potential, I also recognize its potential to draw attention to the individual and away from larger social structures. If the success of the home garden or business, for instance, is predicated around the individual, then so too with the failure. Within the communication literature, the concept of social entrepreneurship (SE) is not without critique. Take for instance Dempsey and Sanders’ (2009) argument that while popular representations of SE may depict one statement on what constitutes meaningful work, it often privileges extreme self-sacrifice. They urge scholars to understand SE in light of dominant cultural forces that have prompted the marketization of the non-profit sector in recent years. I worry that if Rural Action becomes too entrenched within market logics, that it may lose its ability to evince social change because of expectation to make a profit. However, this does not take away from the fact that material resources are needed in order to address large social ills such as food insecurity. For that, social enterprise is needed and has the potential for much good.
Chapter Seven: Slowing Down and Taking a Breath

As I make my way down the gravel road toward the auction I see a horse drawn cart in front of me. Slightly late, I glance at the digital clock on the dash. My eyes shift toward the odometer. Three miles per hour. I let out a long sigh. “Get it together,” I say to myself alone in my car. This is part of the process. Slow food. Literally. I let out an audible chuckle. (Kristen, 6/6/16, author, field notes)

Figure 7.1: A Carriage at Market

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With bleary eyes, numb fingers, and a full heart, I sit down to write this final chapter. Throughout this project, I continually had to remind myself to slow down, take a pause, and breathe. I had to remind myself to be present in thought and action. I believe this to be one of our greatest privileges as thinkers and researchers – to have the space to ponder ideas and concepts. This project has taught me that food creates a gathering space to do just this. I can still recall nightly dinners gathered around the table with my Father. Growing up, it often felt as if it was us against the world. No matter what, we sat down to a hand made dinner together nearly every night. I used to take these moments for granted. He would question, “How was your day?” I would reply, especially in my teenage years, with a terse, “fine” and go about consuming the homemade meal in front of me. I would hurriedly rush through the meal in an effort to move on to the then seemingly more important things – like meeting friends at the movies, or finishing up homework for school the next day. It was not until I became older that I understood the importance of these family meals. It was around the dinner table – for me a ragged butcher block with jagged edges and only three chairs - that I learned about myself, who I was, and who I was to become. Some of the most significant moments of my childhood occurred around this haggard table. When I learned of my admission to college, my Dad and I sat down and celebrated around that table. When I learned that I was in danger of not passing English class, my dad sternly sat me in one of our kitchen chairs and explained to me the importance of education. That table still sits in my office at home reminding me of these memories, lessons, and experiences.
At the heart of my project was that of food – how we interact with, organize around, and communicate about such issues. Throughout my time dedicated to this project, I attended cookouts, prepared tamales, drank coffee, and shoveled dirt in the garden. All of this action took place around food. As I begin to conclude this chapter of my professional and personal life I am left with a feeling of immense gratitude, a sense of accomplishment, and also fatigue. My hope is that this project continues to live on within and through the words and stories of my participants. In the remainder of this chapter I tease out the theoretical and practical applications inspired by this project. I first, however, begin by revisiting my research questions and explicitly address each in turn.

**Fitting the Pieces Together**

It is hard to even know where to begin. With a project of this length, it is a daunting task to begin fitting the theoretical and practical pieces together into a coherent coda. I approach such a task with an ethos of unfinalizability – acknowledging that questions still linger. That is okay. For me, that is the spirit of qualitative research -- it is continually in progress. With this in mind, I present my original research questions and answer each in turn below:

**RQ1:** What mobilizing narratives about food are composed and circulated by Rural Action?

**RQ2:** How does the communicative labor of Rural Action foster stakeholders’ capacity to act?

**RQ3:** How does the communicative labor of Rural Action foster social movement outcomes?
Mobilizing (and Moralizing) Narratives About Food

Research question one asked what mobilizing narratives about food are composed and circulated about food. What I found, based on my reading of various discourses through a poststructural feminist lens was that these discourses were both mobilizing as well as moralizing. A poststructural lens encouraged me to move beyond taken-for-granted assumptions and dig deeper. For example, the way we understand what constitutes “healthy” food may mobilize action, such as the auction forming to introduce fresh produce to a local market that would otherwise not have access to such resources. On the other hand, communication about “healthy” food may also moralize bodies as well. From a Foucaudian standpoint, bodies become disciplined to act and react in particular ways. Take, for instance, my exemplar in chapter four about Mara who poured her McDonald’s coffee into a personal mug in order to feel more accepted in her office.

Additionally, another narrative that circulates within and through Rural Action discourse is that of “local is better.” This narrative may exclude those, for instance, who do not have the means to purchase such foods. As a counterpoint, in chapter five, I offered the story of Aaron, a head chef at a local restaurant. In a move inspired by Clair et al.’s (2016) concept of protagonist inversion (focusing on an alternative character, making them the focal point), I began to question this narrative. When is local not always better? Aaron places more confidence in large corporate vendors because of the systems in place to protect health and safety – such as recalls. With local produce, such as that which comes from the auction, it may take days to be notified of any potential
contamination. While the dominant narrative was certainly, local is better, there are exceptions.

**Capacity to Act**

Communicative labor, as defined by Dempsey, is an organization’s representation of stakeholders and service recipients. Research question two specifically asked how Rural Action’s communicative labor may (or may not) foster the organization’s ability to act. Through interviewing not only Rural Action staff, but also members and various constituents impacted by their services, what I found is that Rural Action’s communicative labor is fostered within and through a narrative of resilience. I specifically took this up in chapter six, when discussing narrative resilience. Rural Action relies upon a framework of resilience in order to garner support for causes. Intertwined with this narrative of resilience is also one of self-sufficiency. For example, Rural Action implements programs such as home gardening and ginseng procurement, which promote the idea that the individual should take ownership of her/his own circumstances. This narrative guides Rural Action’s efforts to represent the voices of the people they serve.

Further, this study sought to address Dempsey’s (2009) direct charge, which set forth that:

The development of richer conceptions of immaterial and communicative labor requires an increased understanding of the conditions of formation, from the daily organizing practices of key players like NGOs, to the broader social and economic realms within which these representations are reshaped and rearticulated. (p. 341)
In doing so, I offer organizational origin stories as one means to better understand how these representations become “reshaped and rearticulated.” Origin stories guide actions of members. In the case of Rural Action, they may both compete and converge to inform the organization’s capacity to act. This was seen, for instance, in my discussion in chapter four of the “bag ban,” where Rural Action was conflicted between taking a stand and remaining neutral.

I spent a great deal of time focusing on the importance of place in this project. Indeed, Appalachia remains a main character in the storied experiences of my participants. Appalachia, especially Appalachian Ohio, is defined by a history of, as my participants termed, “extraction.” In turn, this often prompts suspicion on the part of individuals who live here, in turn creating an outsider/insider dichotomy. When considering the communicative labor of Rural Action, I argue that placeness is an important factor that must be taken into account. In her work on communicative labor, Dempsey (2009), offers a critique of representational practices by NGOs, referring to them as “active processes of invention” (p. 340). She goes on to comment specifically on use of place in NGO discourses, arguing that, “such romanticization denies the politics operating at this scale, including the extent to which localities might be characterized by conflicting interests” (p. 340). As such, I encourage Rural Action to carefully consider the way in which place is used in the representational practices of the organization.

**Consequences of Acting**

Finally, question three asked what consequences arise as a result of Rural Action’s capacity to act. Ganesh (2015) proffers three outcomes resulting from social
movement outcomes: instrumental, affective, and constitutive. Instrumental outcomes are those that relate to formal goals of the movement, while affective and constitutive goals are more rooted in the realm of rhetorical practices. Affective goals are “the emotional and consummatory aspects of social movement organizing” (p. 484). Constitutive goals are rooted in the creation of particular identities and subject positions within and by social movements. Taking affective and constitutive outcomes into account when considering Rural Action, I consider the following: what affect is established and what subject positions are produced as a part of the group’s organizing practices?

Based on my discourses collected and analyzed within and through the organization, one of the most significant outcomes of Rural Action’s organizing practices is the creation of a unique subject position defined by entrepreneurship – the home gardener, the ginseng procurer, the Amish woodworker. All of these are images reinforced within and through the Rural Action discourse. Over time Rural Action has shifted from an organization defined by activism, clearly outside of the capitalistic model, towards a model rooted in social entrepreneurship, which embraces a capitalistic structure of profit making.

As Clair and Anderson (2013) argued, nonprofit organizations often maintain an “illusion of neutrality,” meaning that they often portray themselves as standing outside of the capitalist landscape. However, nonprofits are rarely, if ever, neutral entities – they provide support for the capitalistic structure itself, whether through providing material assistance, or accepting funding from government and private entities. I am not suggesting here that Rural Action, or nonprofits in general, should eschew capitalism.
Indeed, I view this has a reciprocal interaction. Capitalism relies on assistance from nonprofits to support marginalized individuals and nonprofits rely on capitalistic structures for funding. Indeed, as Rural Action continues to advance its mission, I recommend that it remain cognizant of how it relies on these capitalistic structures.

Nonprofits are inherently contradictory and tension-filled (Sanders, 2012). From the perspective of poststructural feminism, this tension is not something to be eliminated. Rather, tensions are part and parcel of the organizing practice itself. It is important to not dismiss organizations for operating within capitalistic structures. It is not always feasible, nor is it always desirable, to operate from a separatist point of view.

**Limitations**

A project such as this is not without limitations. First, I acknowledge the emergent nature of my work, as presented here. Over the course of this project the research questions and theoretical frameworks shifted. Originally I sought to answer four research questions. Once I got into the field, these questions shifted slightly, and I narrowed my questions to three. I originally set out to research school lunch programs more explicitly than I presented here. Even though I was granted access to schools, as I spent more time in the field I came to realize that this project was more about rural food insecurity more broadly. Therefore, I expanded by participant pool to include not only those impacted by school lunch programs (i.e. food service manager, school nurses, and social workers), but also chefs and AmeriCorps volunteers. Further, I also acknowledge that the participatory sketching was not as successful as I had hoped, I was only able to
collect six sketches, probably do to the fact that the auction was often hectic and did not lend itself well to sketching for participants.

**Practical Implications and Directions for Future Research**

From a practical standpoint, this dissertation enhances understanding on nonprofit organizing practices through the case study of Rural Action. Tracing Rural Action’s history, as I did in chapter four, provides contexts for the ways nonprofits evolve over time. This dissertation also highlights the importance of that history in understand the social outcomes and actions of the organization. I encourage further research by communication scholars concerning the ways in which this these origin stories are taken up by the individuals whom the nonprofit organizations serve through processes of interviews and observation.

Also, chapter six, while highly theoretical, sheds considerable light on how aesthetic sensibilities may impact the very material outcomes. How, for instance, does aesthetic assessment of food impact what foods we will purchase? Individuals, by nature of “feasting with their eyes,” may purchase particular foods based on color, texture, size. How may Rural Action leverage this finding in order to encourage more purchasing from consumers, and in turn increase auction profits? Some of these issues are being addressed by the organization, such as farmer training, which encourages growers to wash and display their produce in pleasing ways. However, a further step the organization may take is to educate consumers on how to prepare “seconds” (foods that may be past their prime or less than desirable for a mass market) in ways that are visually appealing.
Final Thoughts and Winding Roads

As I drive home from a dinner in Amesville the air is thick and soupy -- chewy. Almost similar in consistency to the tamale filling I have just consumed. A series of strong thunderstorms has left behind an eerie mist that seems to rise forebodingly above the valleys and blanket the land below. The fog, for me, is a reminder of the deep, often ambivalent, connection between people and land in Southeastern Ohio. This connection represents the simultaneous possibility for destruction and abundance. This moment is haunting in its beauty.

Figure 7.2: After the Storm

The landscape is a main character in the story my participants tell. While some tell stories of bounty, others tell stories of absence. The landscape seems to have a magnetic force. It pulls from afar, holds in place, and occasionally calls home if led astray. As an academic, I am envious of this connection. A connection I will seemingly
never feel to a place -- a life lived in transit. I will always feel forever indebted to those who allowed me to become part of their story. My story will always be intertwined with theirs.
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Bloomington: Indiana University Press.


http://doi.org/10.1080/10410230903242192


http://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2011.634816

April 18, 2016

Kristen E. Okamoto
4 Westfield Pl
Athens, OH 45701

Dear Kristen:

We are pleased to invite you to visit our offices to work with and study Rural Action for your dissertation research for the 2016-2017 academic year.

In your capacity as researcher, we welcome you to interact with, interview, and observe Rural Action staff and events. This includes attending RA-sponsored events, interviews with staff and RA members, and observations as a volunteer.

We are looking forward to working with you on your study and are eager to review your research findings.

Best Regards,

[Signature]

Tom Redfern
Director of Sustainable Agriculture and Forestry
Appendix B: IRB Approval

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<tr>
<td>Compliance Contact</td>
<td>Rebecca Cale (<a href="mailto:cale@ohio.edu">cale@ohio.edu</a>)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary Investigator</td>
<td>Kristen Okamoto</td>
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<td>Project Title:</td>
<td>A Poststructural Feminist and Narrative Analysis of Food and the Body: Community Organizing for Social Change in a Farm to School Initiative</td>
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<td>Level of Review:</td>
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The Social/Behavioral IRB reviewed and approved by expedited review the above referenced research. The Board was able to provide expedited approval under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) because the research meets the applicability criteria and one or more categories of research eligible for expedited review, as indicated below.

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**Waivers: None**

If applicable, informed consent (and HIPAA research authorization) must be obtained from subjects or their legally authorized representatives and documented prior to research involvement. In addition, FERPA, PPRA, and other authorizations must be obtained, if needed. The IRB-approved consent form and process must be used. Any changes in the research (e.g., recruitment procedures, advertisements, enrollment numbers, etc.) or informed consent process must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented (except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects).

The approval will no longer be in effect on the date listed above as the IRB expiration date. A Periodic Review application must be approved within this interval to avoid expiration of the IRB approval and cessation of all research activities. All records relating to the research (including signed consent forms) must be retained and available for audit for at least three (3) years after the research has ended.

It is the responsibility of all investigators and research staff to promptly report to the Office of Research Compliance / IRB any serious, unexpected and related adverse and potential unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

This approval is issued under the Ohio University OHRAP Federalwide Assurance #00000095. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Compliance staff contact listed above with any questions or concerns.
Appendix C: Informed Consent

Ohio University Adult Consent Form With Signature

Title of Research: A Poststructural Feminist and Narrative Analysis of Food and the Body: Community Organizing for Social Change in a Farm to School Initiative

Researchers: Kristen E. Okamoto

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study
This study is being done to address food insecurity in Appalachian Ohio.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer a series of interview questions about your experiences with Rural Action.

You should not participate in this study if you are not a member of Rural Action, or do not receive their programming.

Your participation in the study will last no more than two hours.

Risks and Discomforts
Risks or discomforts that you might experience are possible emotional distress from discussing topics such as hunger and poverty.

Benefits
This study is important to science/society because food insecurity is one of the greatest health disparities facing rural America.

Individually, you may benefit by better understanding community action surrounding food insecurity.

Confidentiality and Records
Your study information will be kept confidential by being stored on a password protected computer that is only accessed by the primary researcher (Kristen Okamoto). Additionally, your information will not be
recorded using any identifiable markers (i.e. name, SSN) and will be destroyed after August 2018.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU;

Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the investigator Kristen E. Okamoto, 704-806-9825 or the advisor Lynn M. Harter, 740-593-4830
If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Chris Hayhow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740) 593-0664 or hayhow@ohio.edu.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:
• you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered;
• you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction;
• you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study;
• you are 18 years of age or older;
• your participation in this research is completely voluntary;
• you may leave the study at any time; if you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature ________________________________ Date __________

Printed Name ____________________________________________

Version Date: [insert 05/12/16]
# Appendix D: Field Log

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Total 87
Appendix E: Sample Interview Protocol

Demographic Information:

Name:

Preferred pseudonym:

Occupation:

Age:

Gender identity:

Primer Question:

• Could you begin by telling me a little about yourself?
• What is the importance of food in your own life?
• To begin, generally, how do you believe food plays in to creating healthy communities?
• How would you describe the relationship between food and the communities living in Southeastern Ohio?
• Could you tell me about a meaningful memory you have involving food (this may be a meal, an experience, a trip)?

Occupation/RA Questions:

• How would you describe your role within the community?
• What would you say are the most meaningful/significance issues that your organization addresses?
• How does it address these issues?
• Can you tell me about AceNet’s partnership with RA? Why was it started? How does it work? Can you walk me through the process?
• Why do you believe this work to be important?
• How would you describe your role with Rural Action?
• Can you describe for me what you do on a regular basis? What does a typical day look like?
• What about your job is most fulfilling? What is most challenging?
• What do you believe to be RA’s role in the surrounding community of SE Ohio?
• How would you describe the work of RA to others?
• Could you tell me about a meaningful experience you have encountered with RA?
Food, Community, and Health:

- Do you believe there is a connection between food and community? If so, can you describe this relationship for me?
- What does the term “healthy” mean to you?
- What do you believe is the role of the community in contributing to healthy eating?
- What risks are associated with the foods we eat?
- What issues concern you regarding the safety of your food?
- Where do you get information regarding food safety?
- How do you ensure that your food is safe?

Food Insecurity

- Athens and its surrounding region face severe food insecurity. Based on your work, what factors do you believe contribute to this?
- What words come to mind when people think about the term Appalachia?
- What sorts of things are associated with food insecurity?
- Who are the key actors in this movement?
- In your opinion, how does RA work to address these issues?
- Is there a story that stands out to you about regarding your own or others you may know experiences with food insecurity?

School Lunches

- As someone who has worked directly in schools, why are school lunches important?
- What sorts of food items are served in lunches?
- What is RA’s role in the surrounding school lunch programming?
- Why has RA chosen to target school lunches as part of one of its initiatives?
- What role does the USDA play in school lunches?
- What sorts of barriers are there to school lunch reform?
- How is RA addressing these issues?
- What suggestions would you make for improving the program?
- Who else should I talk to about these issues?
- What story does RA tell about our region?
## Appendix F: List of Participants

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<th>Title/Role</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>Former Program Manager</td>
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<td>Megan</td>
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<td>Linda</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Shared Use Position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Former Member of Board of Directors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tammy</td>
<td>Food Service Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>AmeriCorps Volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cara</td>
<td>Live Healthy Kids Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Director of Donation Station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dandelion</td>
<td>Director of School Gardens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christa</td>
<td>County Health Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>AmeriCorps School Volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>AmeriCorps School Volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>Founder of ACEnet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Head Chef – Hocking College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Head Chef – Rhapsody Restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky H.</td>
<td>School Social Worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Communication Director – O’Bleness Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky R.</td>
<td>Owner of Green Edge Farms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrine</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Farmer – Homecoming Farm</td>
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