

LA CROSSE

Dear City Plan Commission,

I write as the Executive Director of *Hear, Here* requesting financial support from the Capital City budget for FY2021 and FY2022. The yearly cost of *Hear, Here* is only \$6984. UWL Foundation will cover \$2520/year. The remaining \$4464/year (or \$8928 for two years) is requested from the City of La Crosse.

Hear, Here began in Downtown La Crosse Wisconsin in 2015 and has since won national and international awards. The way it functions is that street level signs are placed where stories are told with toll free numbers on them. When a visitor calls the number, they hear a story of the exact location where they stand. If users stay on the line, they can contribute their own story, which will be added to the project if it fits the objectives.

The purpose of the project is diversity and inclusion. We record stories from historically underrepresented people in La Crosse (Hmoob, LGBTQ, People of Color, Ho Chunk, those who experience homelessness). The overall purpose is for everyone to hear one another so that we can come together to create a more just society. Along with the phone system the project also had a website (www.hearherelacrosse.org) and brochures. The project began in 2015 with 28 stories in the downtown, with story donations we are now at 70 stories.

The numbers for this project are impressive. Over the last five years the downtown project has had over 10,000 individual calls from people in all 50 states. The website had had over 17,000 individual hits from people in 23 different countries around the world. We have printed 1000 brochures a year for the past 5 years for a total of 5000 brochures circulating.

The numbers show the importance of the project to the local tourist economy. Heritage tourism projects like *Hear, Here*, are consistently among the most popular and lucrative forms of tourism, ranking as one of the top three economic sectors across the U.S. People who travel to experience the places that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present typically stay longer and spend several times more money than other visitors, creating a larger economic impact for host to communities.

Hear, Here has been a fruitful partnership between the City's Heritage Preservation Commission and the University of Wisconsin La Crosse along with numerous other organizations including Downtown Main Street, Inc., La Crosse Public Library Archives, and the School District of La Crosse all of whom use the project for education purposes of K-12, community members, and college students. In addition to these partnerships the project has been reviewed by parties outside the project four times (I have attached these for your review).

I have been well supported throughout the development and launch of this project, with 23 successful grants in support of *Hear, Here*. I continue to write grants to support new elements of the project as they arise. However, most grant funding is for starting and for contributing new aspects, not for sustaining projects. For ongoing projects like *Hear, Here* it is imperative to have a yearly budget line. As the City invests in *Hear, Here* I commit to the continued stewarding of the project for the benefit of the city, all the partnering organizations, local users of the project and tourists.

Thank you for your time in reading this letter. I look forward to working with you further.

With kind wishes,

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Hear Here La Crosse 2015 Project Evaluation

By Shawn Micallef Lecturer: University of Toronto

Co-Founder: [murmur] location-based oral history project

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Summer 2015

The Hear Here project had just completed the first iteration of their audio documentary project when I visited La Crosse in April 2015, launching with approximately two-dozen sites in and around downtown. The project is an effort to go beyond traditional historic plaques that list dates, momentous occasions, and eminent individuals by creating an accessible layer of public, lived history on the streets of La Crosse. Hear Here is very much in the tradition of oral histories where people recount their lived experience and anecdotes of past events from a personal point of view. But where those accounts often linger, or languish, on dusty archive shelves, Hear Here makes them accessible by bringing that archive out onto the streets. It's an important effort, not just because of that accessibility, but heretofore unheard or overlooked voices are brought forward and given a public airing, allowing a more fulsome view of the history of La Crosse, or wherever a project like this is set up.

Often the civic mythology presented by “official histories” leaves many people out, serves to highlight one group or view more than others, or tells a marginalized group’s story from a dominate group’s perspective. Oral histories can add a multitude of other perspectives to this mythology. While not exhaustive, Hear Here and projects like it do not claim to be, instead offering an open portal for individuals to contribute if they feel a story is worth telling or if some particular aspect of history isn’t represented. Hear Here is also emphatically not a historic plaque project, nor claims to be, and in the tradition of oral histories the stories included in the project are not rigorously fact checked the way a historic plaque or piece of historical journalism or scholarship would be. The content people share with the project is taken for what it is: a story they choose to tell that represents both themselves and the place. As presented, Hear Here stories are conjectural and from an individual point of view and it is up to the listener to decide how to receive the story, as they would any piece of literature or opinion they came across in the public realm of ideas. The listener knows inherently the moment they hear a Hear Here story that the voice speaking to them is not one of official authority or representative of an official narrative, but a personal recollection or account. In this sense Hear Here is respectful of the listener’s intelligence, letting them weigh each story on its own merit. Should they disagree with a story they can leave their own story with a counter or different narrative. As well, the Hear Here participants did research around each story and the material they found for each is available to the public in open files at the Murphy Library’s Special Collections desk should more context be desired. However it should be noted these are not “man on the street”

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interviews that a local television news organization might solicit on a given issue or the comment section on online newspaper articles. Instead there's a much longer engagement process with those who give their story and, generally, by the time the microphone is turned on the storyteller has had a chance to think quite a bit about their story they will tell.

From a listener's perspective, Hear Here is at its heart both a flaneur and psychogeographic experience. A flaneur is a person who explores an urban space, existing and interacting with it but remaining slightly aloof, maintaining an outsider's perspective on the place or space while observing, listening, and overhearing. The flaneur was an urban character embodied by romantic poets like Baudelaire in mid-nineteenth century Paris and philosopher-explorers like Walter Benjamin in twentieth century Paris. Both walked that city's streets and observed its buildings, histories, and people, and wrote from that perspective. The same technique can occur in La Crosse with Hear Here, where the stories are a window in to the place and the people that live there, literally overhearing their thoughts as if the storyteller was on the street corner and they stopped to listen in on somebody telling a story to their friend. The flaneur wanders the city without a specific agenda other than exploring and experiencing it.

Psychogeography is a somewhat similar technique used to explore urban spaces pioneered by Guy Debord and the Situationists in France during the late 1950s and 1960s. The Situationists felt, among other things, that modern society had turned people into little more than cogs in the machine that repeated the same patterns, lulled into a state of obliviousness to the city around them. They attempted to break out of their daily routines and better know their geography by intentionally trying to get lost in the city they inhabited. They would go on smell walks of Paris, following a distinct smell to its source. In other instances they would negotiate Paris using a map of London, deliberately trying to get lost so they would see the city they thought they knew from a different angle. Even the slightest shift in how we approach the places we know well can give added understanding, what Bertolt Brecht called a *Verfremdungseffekt* or "distancing effect:" taking what's familiar and making it strange. By removing ourselves from our habits and usual context, and letting some unpredictability seep into our routine, a new appreciation for a place can emerge. Stories do this well: they take us out of the present context and into a fourth dimension, backwards in history, even if just a few days, adding a new layer to a spot that might otherwise be overlooked. As a psychogeographic experience, Hear Here allows people to access that emotional, human layer of memory about a place via mobile technology, but the technology is always at the service of the experience, facilitating a direct connection between the listener and the storyteller. By using their personal mobile devices, listeners do not have to learn how to use a new piece of equipment so that the familiar piece of technology can disappear the way it does when calling a friend or loved one: unless it's broken, the users don't think about the phone, just the person they're communicating with. There's a

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direct and intimate connection between storyteller and listener.

At their core, Hear Here stories are able to convey the emotional attachment people have to place: once a story is heard, even if it's one the listener may disagree with, they now have a stake in that place. They know the story. Hear Here is also a way of distributing “unofficial” stories and histories of a place, thereby providing a way for overlooked voices and memories to reach an audience and democratize a city's official narrative, and giving a sense of being “in” on special knowledge to the listener. The storyteller and the listener never meet, but they share an intimate moment on the street. Stories are some of the most personal things we own, and sharing them, placing them on the relevant streets and engaging in the personal experience of a place, making it public, can build stronger ties between citizens and their city. The listener doesn't know what the story will be about when they call, only that it's attached to the place in which they stand. Once heard, even if it's a story that didn't particularly interest the listener, it can fill up the mental map of an otherwise anonymous space. If the story resonates with the listener, it almost becomes their story, as they recall it when they pass through again and again as they would a story of their own, and perhaps even share it with others.

The official history, while important, may not relate to how life is lived today and by including contemporary stories there's an increased sense that “things happened here,” not just long ago but last week, even. A living history where the city is not a museum piece set in amber and one where its citizens today are also part of the story. History will, ultimately, decide what is remembered in perpetuity, but Hear Here adds more material and more voices into the mix. Hear Here stories also give meaning to the place the story is set and the lives of people involved. “We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” wrote Joan Didion in her 1979 collection of essays *The White Album* that, in part, helped establish a sense of place and identity in California. “We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices.” Without stories humans feel lost and detached from their surroundings, and without stories that mean something to the people that live there now, contemporary connections may remain loose.

In La Crosse, there was some criticism from local officials and business owners that a handful of stories — two in particular — did not paint the city in the most positive light. One involved a drinking session at a bar on Pearl Street and a conversation that had racial overtones while another involved a man named Shaudel who recounted a story that involved police brutality. The latter in particular was of heightened concern, particularly in the wake of Ferguson and other racially charged cases of police brutality. In one meeting I had with local officials during my visit concern expressed around Shaudel's story was that it might incite a response from other folks who have had the same kind of experience or were angry about what happened. This was a curious response to

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a story, suggesting the story would incite a response rather than the incident itself. Ignoring or actively suppressing such stories only serves to increase tension, but more importantly, talking about this tension, a tension that is not unique to La Crosse, starts a conversation about police activity and race early. Indeed, a city that is having this conversation before things come to a head would be a newsworthy event, and a best practice to follow. As for Shaudel's story itself, the storyteller is exceedingly generous and almost apologetic about the event when he has no reason to be other than, perhaps, affection for a place he calls home. As well, the project was explicitly billed as a storytelling project in the oral tradition rather than a tourism-style civic booster project so these kinds of honest stories were possible.

By in large the stories in the first iteration for Hear Here could be considered "positive". Looking at the promotion material for the initial Hear Here call for stories the language used ranges from neutral to positive, asking for voices to speak about places and experiences "as varied as the people and places of downtown La Crosse," with given examples that include a marriage proposal or lunch with mother at Doerflinger's Department Store tearoom. "We all have a story to tell about downtown. What's your story?" The call for stories was clearly open to any and all, but there was no overt call for stories that weren't positive in nature. That two storytellers chose the stories they did should be respected, and in further iterations of the project perhaps the call could indicate a wider range of stories to represent even more of La Crosse's history. That is, provide some example of a story that isn't entirely positive, but one that city could learn from in order to be a better place. In my experience working on the [murmur] project in cities in North American and Europe, people by in large tend to choose to tell stories of a positive nature even when given a breadth of examples. It

As for the project's impact, Hear Here made a tremendous splash in La Crosse when launched. Media coverage was excellent and accounts of the launch party, with hundreds in attendance, suggest Hear Here is satisfying a thirst in La Crosse for stories about itself and creating community. During my visit to La Crosse I met with a number of local stakeholders who were involved in the process that represented a cross section of the city and most expressed very positive feelings about both that process and the outcome suggesting the project is strengthening La Crosse's civil society. Visibly, the Hear Here project has a subtle yet distinct presence around downtown with the signs strikingly places on sidewalk poles. The older "RKO Pictures" style logo evokes the earlier days of telecommunications when new and novel ways of communicating were experimented with, an effective metaphor for what Hear Here is doing now with mobile technology and storytelling. One issue going forward might be the material used in manufacturing the signs. At least one sign was already bent in late April, the plastic being relatively easy to bend or break. Perhaps an aluminium or steel material could be used in future iterations, though costs will likely rise.

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There were also some issues with the audio in some of the stories not being of high enough quality. For a project like Hear Here, there will sometimes be a compromise between getting a good story and sound quality as recording in situ, that is, where the story takes place, makes for much better storytelling as storytellers are not professionals and the setting can both put people at ease and remind them of details germane to the story they might otherwise forget. The length of some stories could be shortened with some light editing to get to the core of the story as listeners will be out in public and a longer story competes with more listener distractions on the street. That said, the quality of stories Hear Here collected for the first iteration were some of the best I've listened to in my 12 years working on and around oral storytelling projects.

Hear Here La Crosse is at its heart a free speech project that lets citizens themselves contribute to the on-going living narrative that is the city's history. Though in a few cases it may not be feel good stories, it's an honest take on the city, an approach that is inclusive of all its residents and their varied experiences. We are all better off with more information when making a decision, and any city, La Crosse included, is better when it knows more about itself.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Shawn' or similar, with a stylized flourish at the end.

19 February 2016

Dear Members of the AASLH Leadership in History Awards Selection Committee:

Please accept this critical review of Dr. Ariel F. Beaujot's *Hear, Here (HH)* project in nomination of the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH) Leadership in History Awards program. I am familiar with her work—we have worked together on a number of diversity initiatives—and I can assess the outcome and effect of the project on our community, the department, and our students. As a senior member of the department and a member of the Dean's staff, I regularly assess her work. I also have experience working on public history projects like the Paso al Norte Immigration History Museum.

HH is an innovative public history project that provides our Policy and Public History students with training in the digital humanities, public history, economic development, and heritage tourism. It engages a number of institutional partners, businesses and public officials (Downtown Main Street, Inc., the city's Heritage Preservation Commission, city council members and the mayor) to develop an interactive, location-based mobile phone documentary project about the experience of immigrants, women, people of color, and LGBTs in one of Wisconsin's premier revitalized downtown districts. It responds to emerging trends that call for more inclusive narratives of the past to overcome the erasure of minority voices and experiences. *HH* recovers orality, storytelling, and eyewitness accounts as ways of retrieving unwritten histories. It empowers and records the voices of people missing from official history, and reveals how they experience micro-aggressions, repression, and efforts to suppress their stories. The project contributes to the local economy, as it turns downtown La Crosse into an arts and cultural destination and fosters an inclusive sense of community.

HH has many laudable achievements, but I want to call special attention to how it has helped the community to engage with issues of diversity. This echoes the observations of the program's external evaluator (Shawn Micallef, U. of Toronto). Until the late 1980s, La Crosse was 99% White. This meant that class—not race—was the driving force of community conversations and the historical narrative. Race was ignored and if it surfaced at all, it was not in the best light. As a gay Mexican-American, I can attest to the long-term lack of community engagement with topics of diversity. Shortly after arriving in 2000, I was shocked to hear how University officials reacted to the inclusion—in a course catalog—of a historical photograph featuring African Americans. Fearing negative retribution, the Chancellor ordered office staff to excise that photograph from all 10,000 booklets. When I went shopping, I received a hostile welcome at local establishments, and I received harassing phone calls from the local chapter of the KKK. The town did not deal well with the growing Hmong, Black, and Latino population. Despite hostility to diversity, Beaujot made it a centerpiece of her project. She recognized *HH* offered her students experience with topics important to future employers like cross-cultural knowledge and an opportunity to contribute to the greater good. Students were excited to participate in a project that garnered much media attention, with live broadcasts from the opening receptions that attracted hundreds of town notables and business people. These events garnered support for the project and Beaujot surveyed attendees to identify topics that they would like to see discussed in the future.

From the outset, *HH* prompted important discussions and created an awareness of a past (and a present) that many members of the community ignored (or denied): marginal and vulnerable groups regularly experienced hostility around town. When someone vandalized one of the project's signs, and a business owner objected to the vandalized sign's replacement (and lobbied to excise mention of race from the project, claiming that his business was labeled as a racist establishment), *HH* became the talk of the town. It became the subject of a number of editorials; it was discussed by various city and county boards. Overwhelmingly, however, it had positive community response that prompted politically-charged discussion about the treatment of African-American college students at a local bar—and forced a much-needed community conversation on race that included workshops sponsored by the city of La Crosse Human Rights Commission. Thus, one of the most important aspects of *HH* has been how it has served as a catalyst for meaningful conversations around race and the continuing perception that La Crosse is first and foremost a White college town and that non-Whites do not belong in the community. I currently serve

on a local social justice interfaith coalition that addresses the needs of Latinos, who are poised to become 5 to 7% of the population in the next decade. Our local public schools are only 75% White (the state's White population is presently 89%). *HH* has prompted business owners and their patrons to engage with a demographic reality that many had ignored—and to recognize the diverse historical roots of the town and the legacy of discrimination and race-based hostility.

Another aspect of the project that merits attention is Beaujot's assessment protocols. She monitors visitor interaction with the project to improve it, and the project website and phone system tracks visitors and provides businesses and boosters with data on visitor behavior and their responses to the project. In the first seven months of the project, there have been nearly 6,000 visits to the website, with 55% of the visitors from the U.S. Data shows international engagement from over 102 different countries, with the majority of users from Russia, Brazil, China, Japan, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands. Of the visits, 4,829 have been from new rather than returning users. The phone system shows a total of 2,441 calls in seven months. Of these, 891 have been from outside the local (608) area code. Tourists from 42 different states—including California, Hawaii, Florida, North Carolina and Kentucky—have interacted with the project during their visits to La Crosse.

Beaujot's assessment of the project demonstrates how a humanities project contributes to economic development. Creating awareness of its complex, diverse past enriches the city, and helps entrepreneurs to design inclusive development strategies that attract the "creative class" deemed essential to the growth and marketing of locales like La Crosse, thus enhancing the quality of life of the ideal mid-size city. *HH* presents our community with a chance to recognize how community heritage projects can expand the customer base and can increase interest and pedestrian traffic downtown. Users of the project are asked four questions (issues with technology, what type of issues did the project help users or the community to discuss, how the project represents the community, and whether there is another topic that the project could cover). Responses show great support and interest in the project, and have offered some useful suggestions for follow up. However, Beaujot may want to modify the assessment survey to measure whether visitors intend to patronize a downtown eatery after they conclude their visit, or to ascertain whether those engaging with the project are out-of-town visitors lodging overnight in town. She could also ask what brought them to town and what type of attractions interested them. This will garner continued business support, funding (and expansion) of the project.

In closing, I would like to comment on how the project has been a transformative experience for our students and how it has served to identify public history as a career choice for some of them. Students are excited to be contributing to community change and to be able to contribute to a tangible project. Student feedback reinforces the transformative experience her classes provide, and I think that her scholarship has brought the department into the community's spotlight. Hotels, tourist attractions, and other downtown businesses distribute promotional materials for *HH* and Beaujot is a frequent guest of local festivals and cultural events. North-side councilman Ryan Cornett has commissioned Beaujot to develop a project akin to *HH* in his district that he envisions as contributing to neighborhood revitalization. Interest in the project is growing across the country—and abroad; perhaps she can include a more detailed overview of the project's specifics so that others can easily replicate it elsewhere. There is no doubt that many recognize its significance. I have been so impressed with her work that I have asked her to consider developing a summer research opportunity program for minority students based on *HH*. Beaujot's work has established a gold standard for our department—and our region—and I look forward to her continued contributions to make the past meaningful to our community, to serve as an engine for inclusive economic development, and as a catalyst of positive social change.

Sincerely,



Victor M. Macías-González, PhD

Professor of History and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies,

CLS Faculty Fellow for Enrollment, Strategic Recruitment, and Retention Initiatives

HEAR, HERE: VOICES OF DOWNTOWN LA CROSSE

PRODUCER/PROJECT DIRECTOR: Ariel Beaujot, Associate Professor, Public and Policy History Program, Department of History, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL), 403A Wimberly Hall, 1725 State Street, La Crosse WI 54601 608-785-6798, abeaujot@uwlax.edu.

WEBSITE: <http://www.hearherelacrosse.org/>

We're looking at the west wall of the Pump House where a mural was unveiled in June of 2014. . . . it represents basically the people of La Crosse, you can see someone rowing in the water, you can see images from Oktoberfest, a medical doctor. . . . There's someone on there that is still a young person, there's people that have passed on. . . . right in the center . . . that's actually in Ho-Chunk tradition one of my grandsons, Levi Blackdeer. . . . I was just awestruck that [John Pugh, the artist] had taken that particular image because [that] was from when my grandfather was granted the Medal of Honor for being a code talker during WWII. So I remember that exact moment in time when that picture was taken . . . there's even a picture of three Hmong elders who are actually elders that I recognize.

My name is Tracy Littlejohn, I am a member of the Ho-Chunk nation, and I was born and raised here in La Crosse."

Tracy Littlejohn's comments about an important place for her in downtown La Crosse, Wisconsin, is one of 38 stories captured so far for *Hear, Here*—a public history project. *Hear, Here* began in 2014-2015 in UWL public history and photography classes. Project Director Ariel Beaujot—with nine student and three community researchers—set out to widen the public view of downtown La Crosse. "Every person and every place has their stories. And a community is made up of multiple stories. With this project, we bring to the fore voices that are often overlooked when the history of downtown is told—intimate, neighborhood-level voices that tell the everyday stories that make up our city." The project debuted on April 12, 2015 and is ongoing.

My emphasis is on the *Hear, Here* website (www.hearherelacrosse.org/) as I have not been in La Crosse to experience the other major project component: the orange *Hear, Here* markers on the streets of

downtown. Still the website and signage system have overlapping content and shared purpose, so there are occasional references to markers.

The entire *Hear, Here* project has received considerable recognition, in particular, a 2016 Leadership in History Award from the American Association of State and Local History. While the markers have received the most attention, the website is the component that can be and has been shared most widely. As of November 30, 2016, there were 38 stories on the website and 37 on markers (with a goal of 60 stories by 2020). By December 6, 2016, there had been 8,532 distinct users for the website with 48 percent from the U.S. and the remainder from 111 countries. There have been 4,077 calls accessing a story. Forty percent came from beyond the 608 regional area code. Users represent 47 states.

The *Hear, Here* homepage is based on a street map. Users can use an actual street map or an abstracted version that may work better if you are neither in La Crosse nor familiar with it. Each point on the map leads to the storyteller's name, a sentence about content, access for the audio and a number to use to hear the story by phone. A further link leads to a transcript. Kathleen Hawkes' photography students have provided images to support each story. A narrative on the home page explains project intent.

Other than editing for length and occasional re-ordering, stories come from the primary source without elaboration. Thus far 28 stories come from *Hear, Here* interviews and 10 from an on-going Oral History Program conducted by other UWL historians. Interviews can be 1-2 hours long. But, listeners may be on their feet. There can be street noise and uncomfortable weather. Although some early postings were 6-7 minutes long, most users disconnected after about two minutes. Current standards are more realistic. Stories are complete (not a series of unrelated bullet points) and about two minutes in length.

Other webpages give background and credits, archive media coverage, and explain how to participate in the project. About 15 new stories have been accepted. Producers are working on a new project for the La Crosse north side. Three communities are interested in licensing.

I reviewed the website on several different systems. I easily learned how the interactive components worked. Transcripts were easy to access. When accessed with Google Chrome and FireFox, I was consistently able to use the audio, although this was not always the case with Explorer. I appreciated hearing speakers in their own voices. (Some audio for markers has been re-recorded for clarity.) Descriptions of photographs should be accessible by rolling over the images but that feature did not work for me. Full interviews and other project- specific materials are now in Special Collections at UWL's Murphy Library. They will soon be available to the public. Materials from the Oral History Program are also in the Special Collections and already available.

Hear, Here has been well planned and implemented. To determine who was missing from the record, researchers spent the first summer analyzing the existing oral history collection. Racial and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ community, the homeless and others were identified as gaps. Producers then sought representatives of these groups to interview. Students received additional training on interview technique. Interviewees provide informed consent forms. They may review their story and withdraw it if concerned. They may also be anonymous. Newcomer "Jane Doe" made this choice because she was uncertain about public response to her remarks on drinking and violence.

A few additions—a short La Crosse bibliography, list of storytellers, names of interviewers, dates of interviews and time period for events in the stories—would make the website more usable. Most importantly, the project assumes mainstream history is well-known but that is surely not true for most out-of-area listeners and probably not for many local residents. A short overview of general La Crosse history would show how *Hear, Here* stories fit in a larger narrative and also bring something new.

Downtown is a place where people have lived, worked and had fun for a long time, despite some harsh realities. Reviewed collectively (easy on the website), strong themes emerge in the voices of people who have a direct stake. Notable for me were the effort to preserve and strengthen downtown, the variety of work there, its role as a place of entertainment and the serious issues of homelessness and harassment.

Some efforts to help downtown falter while others succeed. Business owner and preservation advocate Chris Kahlow told about a developer who wanted to remove some historic row houses. “[He] . . . had to apply to the Preservation Commission. I argued that historic preservation and remodeling, rehabbing, was good economic sense and it was good for the community. The developer argued that it was too costly, which is the usual argument The developer won, and of course I felt very sad So [on demolition day], I . . . bought a brand-new silver chain and a lock and chained myself to the building. . . . the press came, and the contractors called the police. . . . [The police] knew I just was trying to make a point They . . . asked if I would just [go] to the other side of the building so that the debris wouldn’t injure me. . . . I unchained myself, and they watched me . . . chain myself onto that side of the building. . . .”

Anne Snow, a La Crosse Children’s Museum founder and now Executive Director, had a better result. “I had lived in New Orleans where there was a really great children’s museum. . . . when we moved here it was winter and there wasn’t a lot to do with a three-year-old and a one-year-old. So I really started because I missed [the museum] we had liked. . . . Charles and Marjorie Collins owned the [former Leath Furniture] building and they were actively trying to sell it [We] asked if we could see the space to help ourselves envision the museum. . . . by the end of the tour they just handed us the key and said, ‘. . . we think this would be the perfect home, if you can use it, it’s yours.’ ”

Stories about working downtown also reveal a lot about community character. Jake Hoeschler’s uncle Frank had extensive downtown property. “His slogan was, “We’re bullish on La Crosse. . . . in his buildings he had German scenes . . . [and a] plaque on the side of the building in German about ‘going forward La Crosse’ But it was always in German.” In WWII, someone called the police station and said . . . “that ‘Bunder’ has a swastika on top of the building and on top of the American flag.” But Jake had keys for the buildings and was able to show the police that the figure was a bull, not a swastika.

Christina Hotchkiss has spent years working in downtown bars: “[One owner] would call me and yell at me. When you’re the manager, you might as well be his child. And he can boss you around like your dad.

He would call me at one in the morning on days that I didn't have to work, "Christina, get down here. Change the soda tank. Nobody knows how to do it." . . .

Downtown has always been a place for entertainment, some of it rough. William Koch described an early era of licensed prostitution and knife fights. Something of that echoes in Jane Doe's tale of a jury case in the 2010s. A fight had left one combatant with a jaw cracked in three places. ". . . his mouth was wired shut . . . The charges were disorderly conduct and assault. . . .When [the jury] first polled . . . the majority felt like it was just a bar brawl . . . I, of course, was like 'Well I'm new here, explain this to me. Because what I hear all of you saying is this isn't a big deal because he was drunk that violent behavior is okay as long as you're drunk.'" The jury was appalled at this interpretation. They found the defendant guilty of disorderly conduct but still weren't able to agree on the assault charge and it was dropped.

Most late 20th century stories didn't end in violence however adventurous for someone. Barb Kooiman went into a "seedy" club in the 1970s and was immediately offered a job as a stripper. \$15.00 an hour. Her minimum wage job paid \$3.25. She thought about it. Jane Schley went downtown during one Oktoberfest. ". . . I was in The Popcorn, and it was literally wall-to-wall people. . . . before you know it, I am getting squished out into the street. . . . this cop says, "HEY! Back in the bar! No public consumption!" Which during Oktoberfest is pretty funny. . . . I said, "Officer, would you like to help me get back in there?" and he goes, "[Are you] being smart with me? I could haul you in you know." . . . that was my one and only brush with the law in La Crosse

Homelessness is a rare theme for a project like this. Toni Asher grew up in La Crosse and now directs the regional arts center. "This part of La Crosse was mostly industrial. . . . So it was very different than the arts district it is today. . . . in the early 2000s . . . shortly after I'd open, I'd have people start coming in and it would be the homeless people that slept under the grain elevators at night, and they would wait until I'd open up so they could come in and use our bathroom to wash up. . . . yes, there's people who sleep outside in the cold weather year round. They hang their clothes on a rusty nail under a bridge,

they're sleeping on a dirty old sleeping bag and that's all they have, and they're part of our community too."

John McCue was on his way to work with a band. He describes himself at that time as "... a hobo. . . . A hobo is not a bum . . . he or she is looking for work. . . . I hadn't eaten for a couple days and I walked past this place called the Tosa Club. . . . a lot of those clubs have lunch and then they wouldn't be too busy until supper...so the only guy in there was the bartender. [I said] I'm broke, I got a job here you know, I can come and pay you back if you'll front me . . . a hamburger and French fries. He says 'Okay, no problem'. . . . After I got paid . . . first thing I did was go down and . . . put the money on the table . . . He said, 'I never thought I'd see you again.' Basically, I like this area . . . and it could very well have been the kindness of that, of that one guy."

As intended, *Hear, Here* includes stories from underrepresented minorities: Black, American Indian, LBGTQ, foreign nationals and religious minorities. (But not yet, for example, the 4.6 percent of the population that is Asian—mostly Hmong.) Sometimes minorities cannot count on even-handed treatment from all neighbors. Maureen Freedland told about challenging a Ten Commandments monument in a public park. "My parents came here as Holocaust survivors, they came here for religious freedom. . . . That's why it's so important to me I'm a member of the La Crosse County Board. . . . this Ten Commandments Litigation was brought up as a factor against me in my first campaign. . but I won . . . I feel like my position and my willingness to fight for the Constitution was recognized as important and that's part of why I did win that election."

Reaction to certain stories from Black residents prompted the biggest challenge for the project to date. Shaundel Spivey was graduate student on his 21st birthday in 2012. "my story starts with me coming out of this abandoned building . . . that used to be known as the Cognac Club. . . . We . . . saw two men fighting: a Black man and a White man and then eventually a group of White men and a group of Black men started fighting . . . then I remember fast-forwarding to, like, seeing the cops come and clear out the

place and everybody was running and the cops really only arrested the Black guys, and one of those dudes was my brother. . . .”

The marker for Spivey’s story was vandalized, then stolen twice. One store owner feared the stories would cause other Black residents to react violently. (They did not.) Others expressed concern that any mention of race put the city in a negative light. One of the strengths of *Hear, Here* has been response to this negative criticism. Ariel Beaujot and her students looked for the roots of these fearful reactions. Mostly forgotten by residents was La Crosse’s history as a “sundown town” that had strongly discouraged Black migration into the city. UWL and the city’s Human Rights Commission brought sociologist James Loewen to La Crosse for discussions about sundown towns that were widely attended. The mayor made a formal apology. The city council pledged to address equity more vigorously in the future. The media webpage includes the research and coverage engendered by the controversy and response.

Susan McLeod, retired Director
Chippewa Valley Museum
Eau Claire, Wisconsin

Review of *Hear, Here La Crosse:*
Our History, Our Knowledge, Our Future

June 14, 2018

Introduction

I am writing to provide a critical review of the *Hear, Here* (HH) project, founded by Dr. Ariel Beaujot. I fundamentally believe in the project's social justice drive for change and Dr. Beaujot's personal and professional call to action for equity in and outside of the academic environment.

I first met Dr. Beaujot as an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto. She was my professor in a series of innovative, life-altering, upper-year courses in the Historical Studies Department. These courses, which touched on issues of race, diversity, inclusion, and equity within a historical context, encouraged me to *think*. More specifically, I had to think critically about myself and the world around me. I cannot underestimate how crucial this point is, particularly as it applies to Dr. Beaujot's diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism approach to the *HH* project. It is clear that her vision, which I first experienced as an undergraduate student, and which subsequently propelled me towards a successful career as a diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism professional, underlines the beauty and scope of the *HH* project.

One of the key values of this project is that it moves beyond the scope of a particular discipline and audience. Students benefit from the education and skills they develop as public historians; the *HH* project serves as an effective marketing campaign for the city and tourism industry, highlighting a number of sites of interest for local and international visitors; the university increases its profile as a 'hands-on' institution with a keen interest in *praxis*; and the instructor, Dr. Beaujot, is able to share with the university and the wider La Crosse community a rare and unique skill-set and well-developed, human rights-based pedagogical approach.

An Anti-Racism Analysis Approach

In addition to a diversity and inclusion approach, I have applied an anti-racism lens to this analysis of the *HH* project. The Government of Ontario's (Canada) Anti-Racism Directorate defines anti-racism as "taking proactive steps to fight racial inequity." It is unique from an inclusion or diversity approach as "it acknowledges that systemic racism exists and actively confronts the unequal power dynamic between groups and the structures that sustain it. Anti-racism involves consistently assessing structures, policies and programs, and through monitoring outcomes, ensuring they are fair and equitable

for everyone."¹ Systemic racism exists "when institutions or systems create or maintain racial inequity, often as a result of hidden institutional biases in policies, practices and procedures that privilege some groups and disadvantage others."² Racism refers to "ideas or practices that establish, maintain or perpetuate the racial superiority or dominance of one group over another."³ As an expert in this field, I expand this definition to address the racism triangle, which describes three inter-connected elements – power, prejudice, and discrimination – that must exist in order for racism to exist. In Western society, only those exhibiting White phenotypic characteristics generally wield societal power due to legacies of slavery, colonization, and capitalism, and thus are the only group that can be defined as fundamentally 'racist.' The *HH* project does well to acknowledge this triangle and systemic racism without explicitly calling the city or any of its citizens 'racist.'

It is crucial to identify and clarify this distinction between diversity/inclusion and anti-racism, particularly to contextualize this review of the *HH* project. Anti-racism is grounded in activist drivers for systemic change and rooted in challenging the oppressive structures of White Supremacy and systemic racism. Writing in 1881 on systemic anti-Black racism, Frederick Douglass stated that "in nearly every department of American life [black Americans] are confronted by this insidious influence. It fills the air... [the black American] has ceased to be a *slave of an individual*, but has in some sense become *the slave of society*."⁴ At the turn of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois argued that White Supremacy was "all but world-wide. Africa was dead, India conquered, Japan isolated, and China prostrate...The using of men for the benefit of masters is no new invention of modern Europe...But Europe proposed to apply it on a scale and with an elaborateness of detail of which no former world ever dreamed."⁵ This provides the historical context and environment that the *HH* project is challenging. Dr. Beaujot's project is actively challenging these systems rooted in United States history: it is an activist anti-racism approach.

'Anti-racism' may appear to be quite a divisive and confrontational positioning for a student-led project in a university setting. However, the *HH* project is a much needed bastion for change. At its core, the project provides a fundamental understanding of racialized power dynamics in our historical and present-day society. Anti-racism also provides valued context to the work of the *HH* project and the courage of Dr. Beaujot, her students, and supporters in creating and maintaining the project; challenging racist systems is (physically, psychologically, and emotionally) dangerous. The lack of 'diversity' (racial representation) in La Crosse has hidden much of its racist history from common knowledge; however, as a Sundown Town, La Crosse's history is steeped with racial injustice. Injustice that is built into the core of the city.

¹ "A Better Way Forward: Ontario's 3-Year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan," March 2017.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 9.

⁵ Ibid.

It is critically important to understand how the *HH* project is in fact a model of anti-racism as it uncovers a history (and present-day reality) of racial injustice by rooting it within systemic racism and White Supremacy paradigms. This viewpoint frames how delicate and monumental this project is within a city and state that to this very day is characterized by its institutional, interpersonal, and societal racism. *HH* has uncovered that La Crosse does not simply have a diversity problem, but a systemic racism problem. The anti-racist paradigm employed by *HH* has created, and will continue to create, tension with the accepted and much more palatable rhetoric of 'diversity' or 'inclusion.'

Existing Reviews

Previous reviews and evaluations of the project did speak to *HH's* diversity impact. Shawn Micallef's 2015 project evaluation wrote of 'racial overtones' of one of the stories and described in some detail the trauma described by Shaundel Spivey who was a victim of anti-Black racism and police brutality. Shawn described how local La Crosse officials and business owners were concerned with how his experience, "might incite a response from other folks who have had the same kind of experience or were angry about what happened." Shaundel was described as a "storyteller" and "exceedingly generous and almost apologetic about the event when he has no reason to be other than, perhaps, affection for a place he calls home."

I am concerned that this project may be consumed by the audience as mere 'stories' by 'storytellers.' This is an effective way of reinforcing White Supremacy by dehumanizing the racialized 'Self' and their lived experiences as fictional 'stories.' This is a form of White Violence precipitated by White Fragility – the inability for Whites to understand, or choice to not understand, how a Person of Color's socially constructed 'race' and phenotype could warrant unfathomable and unreasonable violence. The consumer is given the opportunity to move from fact to fiction of the presumed 'make believe'; a story that could be dismissed as 'something that happened to *someone*' but is not the reality of life in La Crosse. I find the first-person oral histories to be quite effective in humanizing the realities of race and racism in La Crosse; however, an anti-racist and activist viewing of *HH* will force the consumer (the listener) to 'hear' and experience the historical and present-day atrocities faced by People of Color as more fact than fiction.

Dr. Víctor M. Macías-González' 2015 review goes in to great detail of the project's diversity impact on campus and the larger La Crosse community. He describes how up until the 1980s, the city was 99% White (even today that number is still above 90%) and shares his own experiences with a White Supremacist society and interpersonal racism as a self-described gay Mexican-American. Dr. Macías-González wrote, "When I went shopping, I received a hostile welcome at local establishments, and I received harassing phone calls from the local chapter of the KKK. The town did not deal well with the growing Hmong, Black, and Latino population." Dr. Macías-González'

pointed out that Dr. Beaujot made diversity “a centerpiece of her project” despite real threats to her physical well-being. It is appreciated that the author located his Self and marginalized identity throughout; one of the project's greatest strengths is how it is experienced by the individual consumer.

Overview of the *Hear, Here* Project

By virtue of its mission statement, the *HH* project focuses on the under-represented and (in)visible population of La Crosse; the “9.8% made up of Black, Hmong, Ho Chunk and other ethnic groups” that have been silenced throughout the city's history. The project is designed to see “itself as a vehicle for all stories in the community – both those that praise and challenge traditional views. It is an opportunity for people to have public conversations about how we might create a more ideal and just city.” By design, the project *is* inclusive; it represents the diversity of the city, but also has the anti-racist framework of actively challenging existing systems and ways of being that have been normalized throughout the city's history. The focus away from the 90.2% White population is a clear indication that this project is framed through an essential race-based lens.

Project Objectives

The *HH* project focuses on six key objectives that demonstrate a diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism approach:

1. Represent all populations and experiences, especially those that normally are not represented.
 2. Promote relationships between people and downtown spaces
 3. Generate community involvement and sustainability of the project.
 4. Create a safe space for sharing stories.
 5. The project is as accessible as possible
 6. Maintain a constructive atmosphere for the discussion of controversial topics.
-
1. “Represent all population and experiences, especially those that normally are not represented”:
 - This objective mainly focuses on the diversity and representation of the La Crosse community. It is a quantitative approach to the over or underrepresentation of population groups in the city.

2. “Promote relationships between people and downtown spaces”:
 - Objective two provides an inclusion framework as it creates a physical space of ‘being’ for the presenter to deliver their message in a way that provides a contextual understanding of what transpired at said location.
3. “Generate community involvement and sustainability of the project”:
 - Professor Todd L. Pittinsky of Harvard University created a concept known as 'Allophilia'. This term could be characterized as one of 'true' inclusion as we move away from the rhetoric of tolerance, which has historically divided populations. One of the key components of Allophilia is the idea that in order for one to move beyond tolerance and become truly inclusive, there must be engagement and enthusiasm in difference and different populations. Objective three actively forces students to engage with surrounding communities.
4. “Create a safe space for sharing stories”:
 - This objective empowers the speaker from what noted Black Canadian historian, Dr. James W. St. G Walker, described as the 'Victim' or 'Client' – individuals presumed to be lacking agency and at the mercy of dominant actors of oppressive structures – to that of an agentic autonomous being possessing situational power and control over their being and Self.
5. “The project is as accessible as possible”:
 - One area that is often overlooked in the diversity and inclusion discussion, is that of accessibility. Dr. Beaujot has done an excellent job in understanding the importance of producing accessible learning for all individuals. Moreover, her use of the objective measurable of an active offer ("contact us if you were unable to participate in the project") is an accessibility best practice.
6. “Maintain a constructive atmosphere for the discussion of controversial topics”:
 - This objective may arguably be the one that challenges the boundaries of diversity and inclusion the most; however, it fits within the activist anti-racism paradigm and challenges systemic racism. The *HH* Board does not accept stories that "include hate speech against a person, group or community so that no one feels jeopardized by the project," but will not "exclude stories that may cause controversy." In fact, one of the measurables of this objective and the project is characterized by Dr. Beaujot as "controversy means we are doing something right." It is a very delicate balance of challenging norms and making the 'uncomfortable, comfortable' through dialogue. Diversity and inclusion circles may tend to err on the side of caution to 'play it safe' and not offend individuals by challenging White Fragility. The problem with that is 'diversity' becomes a space to placate White fears of culpability and discomfort. This in turn reinforces a power dynamic of the continued exclusion of marginalized voices under the auspices of diversity and inclusion work. Dr. Beaujot's anti-racism positioning must be applauded for challenging these systemic norms by inviting controversy

and discomfort with the purpose of education and social justice. She has stepped beyond the circles of status quo and in-group bias, and the *HH* project becomes an activist medium for change. Dr. Beaujot has successfully maneuvered a public history positioning of how learning happens on the edges of discomfort.

Concluding Thoughts

As a Black, cisgender, heterosexual Canadian male, I found this project to be insightful, informative, and courageous. As a White-presenting individual, Dr. Beaujot has created a platform for marginalized voices to be heard, without the filter of a White Savior selfishly censoring the language and viewpoints for mere self-preservation. Dr. Beaujot was challenged and threatened for her work and she did not curtail her fight for social justice and fight against racial injustice. These efforts did not go unnoticed. There was a sizeable crowd gathered at the "Last cheer of Hear, Here: A Celebration of New Stories" on April 28, 2018.

There are a number of diverse themes for the project stories that reach a wide audience. These include: homelessness, Hmong and/or Indigenous peoples, People of Color, the built environment, the river, the Red Light District, the LGBTQ* community, poems, monuments, law enforcement, ability and disability, and bar culture. It is clear that the project is diverse in its scope and reach. This is a clear indication of Dr. Beaujot's ability to provide a platform for all voices, including the views and interests of her students, to create a product that does not marginalize nor does it exclude. This is inclusion in practice.

In terms of areas for improvement, I did find that some of the experiences and stories could have had a more intersectional approach. For example, stories on the Red Light district could, and should have, addressed the homophobia that underlines many jurisdictions' desire to police the sex industry. One comment by a particular group leader at the 'Last cheer' event did provide a cursory example of this possibility; however, a much more comprehensive analysis was needed. These stories have the power to weave together diverse points of view and normalize 'difference' as a fundamental feature of La Crosse history. A story, location, or event that may not seem to relate to a 'diversity' issue (for example a story on "the river" or "monuments") could underline race and racism as grounding features of La Crosse. That being said, many of the *HH* project stories do provide this added dimension of diversity; however, there needs to be a continued push for its normalization across La Crosse culture and society. It must also be noted that these projects are created by undergraduate students who may or may not have been exposed to intersectional theories and have the ability or knowledge to analyze and present the content using an intersectional approach. Nevertheless, intersectionality is a key guiding principle of diversity, inclusion, and most notably anti-racism (as indicated by the ground-breaking work of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw).

I will conclude by saying that I have been moved by the *Hear, Here* project and the anti-racism work of Dr. Beaujot. The choice to incorporate Shaundel's trauma of anti-Black police brutality, at a time in United States history that where anti-police

demonstrations were at its peak, was not only brave, but telling. By incorporating experiences of migrant abuse, at a time of anti-immigration policies, was not only brave, but telling. These are telling in the fact that Dr. Beaujot will stand up for what is right. She will stand up for what is right as a racial conduit: a White person in a position of power who creates spaces for Communities of Color without policing their voices. She will stand up for what is right as an accomplice: a White person that is willing to lose everything (career, reputation, and ultimately their life) in the fight for racial equity.

Hear, Here is not a diversity project, it is an anti-racist medium for change. We are all grateful for this work.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Christopher Taylor". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Christopher Stuart Taylor, PhD