

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.<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> Racism refers to "ideas or practices that establish, maintain or perpetuate the racial superiority or dominance of one group over another."<sup>3</sup> 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*."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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.

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

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realites, and Future Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 9.

<sup>5</sup> 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.
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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,



Dr. Christopher Stuart Taylor, PhD