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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

Editor & co-owner, Spacing Magazine

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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.