

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,



Víctor M. Macías-González, PhD

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

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