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Fall 2020

# We are BRAVE: Expanding Reproductive Justice Discourse through Embodied Rhetoric and Civic Practice

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## Citation Details

Hunte, Roberta and Ming T'ien Duffly, Catherine, "We are BRAVE: Expanding Reproductive Justice Discourse through Embodied Rhetoric and Civic Practice" (Fall/Winter 2020). *Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric*, 20(2), 102-120.

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# ***We are BRAVE:***

## **Expanding Reproductive Justice Discourse through Embodied Rhetoric and Civic Practice**

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*In this article, we share the example of our recent community-based performance project on reproductive justice, We are BRAVE, to serve as a model of how community-based performance can be an embodied strategy for social change. We draw from the work of scholars of feminist rhetoric, community-based performance, and reproductive justice. In sharing the example of We are BRAVE, we show how using community-centered, performative storytelling as embodied rhetoric can be an effective mode of public and political persuasion.*

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**A**ziza and Charlie begin their movement piece on the floor. Charlie rises to assist Aziza into a backbend. She then assists Aziza into a fully standing position. They move in focused silence with intention and grace, now leaning on each other, now leaning away, now facing each other, right arms interlocked, eyes raised to the ceiling. They end their sequence and

move to rejoin the circle of watchers who will describe what they have just seen.

We are in a workshop, early in the process of creating a community-based theatre piece about reproductive justice. For this workshop, we spent the first bit of our time discussing and creating lists—one with definitions and phrases about reproductive justice, one with images that spring from those definitions. Watching Aziza and Charlie's movement sequence, the group makes connections to those earlier lists—seeing in their movement sequence images like “support,” “power,” “connection” and “dignity.” Reproductive Justice has been defined by the leading national women of color collective, SisterSong, as the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and to parent one's children in safe and sustainable communities. Our project has begun to think together about how to translate these concepts of a political movement into embodied stage representations. This early workshop is the beginning of a year-long process that lead to the development of an hour-long performance, *We are BRAVE*, created for a community organization, Western States Center, as part of their ongoing effort to organize around abortion access for all in Oregon.

From 2016 to 2017, we—authors and collaborators Roberta Hunte and Catherine (Kate) Ming T'ien Duffly—partnered with Western States Center, a progressive political advocacy resource for non-profits in the Pacific Northwest, to create a community devised performance about reproductive justice. The Center had an initiative focused on reproductive justice movement building among organizations of color in our region. This organizing work was a catalyst for one of the country's most progressive pieces of reproductive rights legislation to support abortion access, all gender reproductive care, and postpartum services for all postpartum people regardless of citizenship. Notably, this legislation was led by people of color in collaboration with mainstream reproductive rights organizations, including Planned Parenthood and NARAL Oregon.

We set out to devise a forty-five to sixty minute performance based on story gathering workshops with Western States Center constituents and students from our respective universities, Portland

State University (PSU) and Reed College. *We are BRAVE* reflected on participants' personal experiences and included stories about trans pregnancy and health care, racism and xenophobia in maternal care, a timeline of reproductive justice history, family separation and domestic violence as a reproductive justice issue, as well as about abortion. In line with SisterSong's guiding definition of reproductive justice, our project sought to move the conversation beyond limited discursive lenses focused primarily on women's rights to abortion, to a focus on bodily autonomy especially in queer, trans, immigrant, and people of color narratives.

This article is a case study of *We are BRAVE*, which used performative storytelling as a tool for activists and educators to expand the discourse of reproductive justice in Oregon. We draw from the work of scholars of feminist rhetoric, community-based performance, and reproductive justice. In sharing the example of *We are BRAVE*, we aim to show how using community-centered, performative storytelling as embodied rhetoric can be an effective mode of public and political persuasion. This case study examines elements of the community-created script to demonstrate how we knit together intersectional narratives of reproductive (in)justice that challenge and expand a mainstream discourse of reproductive rights and move towards a broader vision of reproductive freedom. The *We are BRAVE* project was a form of cultural work that went alongside other grassroots organizing efforts to persuade both legislators and constituents to think about the significance of abortion and to engage with more complexity around intersecting identities and issues that impact our reproductive lives. This strategy was used to frame groundbreaking legislative work. We will explore how this embodied rhetorical strategy could be a model of productive political change.

## **EMBODIED RHETORIC AND CIVIC PRACTICE IN CONVERSATION**

Embodied knowledges—the way a body carries meaning through discourse and the ways in which bodies are positioned vis-à-vis distributions of power across groups—impact and inform the body's rhetorical power. Embodied rhetoric, as defined by A. Abby Knoblauch (2012), is “a purposeful decision to include embodied knowledge and social positionalities as forms of meaning making within a text itself” wherein “embodied knowledge” is the experience of “knowing

something *through* the body” (52). Maureen Johnson et al (2015) further develop the concept of embodied rhetoric through a feminist rhetoric lens, arguing that rhetoric and bodies are inextricably linked. They argue that “our bodies inform our ways of knowing,” and that “the body carries signifying power” (Johnson et al. 2015, 39-40). Not only do we make sense of the world through our bodily engagement with it in a phenomenological sense, but also that bodily signification connects the individual “to others in complex arrangements characterized by power distribution, access, and mobility” (Johnson et al. 2015, 40). Embodied rhetoric can bring together multiple ways of knowing as an important mode of engaging marginalized communities through the experiential, participatory, and embodied commitments of both performer and audience. As Knoblauch (2012) writes, “an embodied rhetoric that draws attention to embodied knowledge—specific material conditions, lived experiences, positionalities, and/or standpoints—can highlight difference instead of erasing it in favor of an assumed privilege discourse” (61). An embodied rhetoric includes not only text, or words spoken, but also physical gesture and movement that convey meaning and influence on top of and in addition to words.

*We are BRAVE* enacted an embodied rhetoric through the content of the performance, which was rooted in a politics of reproductive justice that relies on respect for bodily autonomy and a body’s inherent knowledge. The project also enacted an embodied rhetoric through its creative approach, which was rooted in the embodied knowledge and experience of the ensemble members. In this section we detail our working process as well as the goals of Western States Center and how our process and their goals intersected.

Over the course of a year, Roberta and Kate met with a group of participants that fluctuated in size. While a total of fifteen people contributed to the project (including the directors, a designer, and a dramaturg), there were usually no more than nine people in the rehearsal room on a given day, and six performers in the piece. Of the collaborators on the project, several had little to no experience as performers or creators of performance. Most of these were the Western States affiliated members of the group (including participants Eugenio, Charley, Marina, Marilou, Carina and Roberta). Some

participants were Reed College and PSU students with an interest in community-based work but little knowledge of the reproductive justice movement (Juliana, Aziza, and Jasmin). At least one member (Trystan) had training as an actor and is a transgender rights activist focused on transgender families. Roberta, an assistant professor at the School of Social Work at PSU, had participated in Western States' BRAVE organizing efforts for multiple years. Kate is an associate professor of Theatre at Reed College. She is a community-based theatre scholar and practitioner who was new to reproductive justice as a movement and had no prior relationship with Western States Center. Given the makeup of our group, our process was structured with two goals in mind: 1) create an ensemble of collaborative artists who were both well versed in the tenets of reproductive justice and trained in the craft of devising and performing; 2) collectively create a performance piece that was rooted in the embodied knowledge and experiences of the ensemble and responsive to the needs of Western States Center. These needs were complex, and it is worth detailing them here to demonstrate their investments in reproductive justice, their commitment to cultural work as an aspect of their organizing, as well as to give a sense of some of the challenges and successes within our collaboration.

Western States Center launched the initiative, BRAVE (Building Reproductive Autonomy and Voices for Equity) in 2013. As an organization that provides resources and builds connections among community-based groups working for racial, gender, and economic justice, Western States Center wanted to change the conversation in Oregon about reproductive rights by centering the voices and policy concerns of people of color. They launched BRAVE as a way to proactively connect reproductive justice issues with issues of immigrant rights, transgender rights, youth movements, and health equity. In contrast to *pro-choice* movements that have a narrow focus on abortion, *reproductive justice* is an intersectional movement that seeks to address the myriad ways in which race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality intersect. This shift creates an "inclusive vision of how to build a new movement," writes Loretta Ross (2007, 4). This intersectional concept of reproductive justice was central to the mission and organizing framework of BRAVE. Western States Center created a cohort of people of color and people of color led organizations who came together for over three years to talk about

how abortion and other reproductive justice issues affected their lives, communities, and organizations' work. Their agenda worked at the level of policy change, community organizing, and cultural change. Thus, they intentionally sought out a collaboration with artists to enhance their cultural change efforts.

A close working and collaborative relationship between Western States Center and partners Roberta and Kate was key to the success of this project. This relationship was rooted in the previously established relationship that Roberta had developed over years of connection with Western States Centers' organizing efforts. Roberta has been connected with Western States Center's organizing work since 2009 through her work as a board member of a partner organization of the Center. She joined their first cohort of BRAVE leaders in the fall of 2013. Her connection with the Center's work and staff was born from a long-standing commitment to its political work in the community. Participation in the cohort deepened that connection. Roberta, in partnership with staff and other BRAVE participants hosted webinars on Reproductive Justice and co-facilitated workshops on racial justice and movement building for BRAVE and other groups. Roberta's close relationship with Western States laid a foundation of trust for working on this theatre project, trust that was both extended to Kate as Roberta's collaborator, and also through the relationship developed through the embodied work of performance.

When we embarked on the project, we decided to use a devising process, rather than working with a playwright and performing from a preexisting text because we wanted to include the input from our community collaborators from the beginning and throughout the process. With one Western States' staff member and six other participants who had been active within the BRAVE organizing efforts for abortion access, we hoped to remain in touch with the vision and the needs of Western States Center as we moved forward in our process. As co-directors, Roberta and Kate structured rehearsals as workshops in which we started with a key idea and a testimony or story shared by the participants. We then gave the participants prompts to guide their creation process (often we participated in these as well). Each of the scenes was created from a testimony told

by or selected by the participants, and all of the choreography of the scenes was generated by the participants. The final piece included a series of varied scenes that dramatized different issues pertaining to reproductive justice. The piece consisted of *ensemble scenes* and what we have called *testimonial scenes*. The ensemble scenes involved the entire ensemble and addressed the discourse around abortion and Reproductive Justice. These scenes set up some of the larger stakes of the performance—they included the staging of a timeline of reproductive history in the U.S. The *testimonial scenes* provided individual accounts based on the experiences of the members of our group. We will examine two of these scenes in the following section. In selecting these scenes, we sought to demonstrate the intersectionality of reproductive justice issues and showcase the expansiveness of reproductive justice beyond a narrow focus on abortion. Thus, the rhetorical tactics of *We are BRAVE* included both the words spoken by the cast and also the physicality and movement of the cast. That is to say, the cast's performance included both spoken words and physical movement, and it was the combined signification of these words and actions that imbued *We are BRAVE* with its rhetorical power. The cast of *We are BRAVE* embodied the lived experiences they were representing, while the experiences they were sharing were also lived by those performing bodies.

Ultimately, we created an hour-long performance that was performed at three Western State Center events: a reproductive justice conference—an event intended to educate and build up Western States' legislative day of action in support of their proposed policy—and at their annual community organizing conference. All of the events had organizers, constituents, and policy makers in attendance. None of the performances took place in theatre spaces. The responses were resoundingly positive. Western States Center representatives expressed their enthusiasm about the work and shared positive responses from community members and policy makers.

*We are BRAVE* had the rhetorical goal of shifting reproductive justice discourse as well as specific policy change. Knoblauch writes, “[e]mbodied rhetoric, when functioning as rhetoric, connects the personal to the larger social realm, and makes more visible the sources of all of our knowledge” (2012, 62). The work of *We are BRAVE*

was to bring individual embodied stories of reproductive injustice out of the individual experience and link them to the collective for the purpose of movement building. Through our intimate, embedded lens of collaborating artists, we sought to make connections between the embodied experiences of the participants, paired with Western States Center's policy goals, to shift the consciousness of what is possible for both reproductive communities and within the dominant discourse of reproductive justice. Now, with the critical distance and vantage point of scholarship, we reflect back on the ways in which we were successful at this and where we faced challenges. In particular, we look at the ways these embodied rhetorics were in conversation with our community-based performance model of civic practice.

We based our approach on Michael Rohd's model of civic practice which he defines as "projects that bring artists into collaboration and co-design with community partners and local residents around a community-defined aspiration, challenge or vision" (Center for Performance and Civic Practice, n.d.). Rohd distinguishes civic practice from social practice. Social practice is an umbrella term that can cover an array of varied approaches to creating artistic work through a collaboration between artists and non-artists. As Rohd has articulated, "the useful distinction between social practice and civic practice is the starting action of a project and the relationship between artist and (self-defined) non-arts partner" (September, 2012). For Rohd, and for us as we embarked on this project, this distinction is crucial. As Rohd argues, when "the initiating impulse—the voice that puts out the call, so to speak—is the artist [...] [t]he non-arts partner has a choice—listen, respond, or not." But, he claims, in social practice work, as opposed to civic practice work, "rarely does the invitation to conversation, to co-creation, come from the partner" (Rohd July, 2012). With the project, *We are BRAVE*, we sought to engage a civic practice approach in which we developed a collaborative project rooted in a relationship with Western States Center and founded on deep listening to our partners' desired outcome.

As Western States Center worked toward policy change through their organizing efforts with BRAVE, they wanted to simultaneously employ a cultural organizing tactic. They asked us to create a theatre piece based on the gathered testimonies, interviews and

workshops with members of BRAVE. For our part, we sought to create a performance grounded in a reciprocal relationship with the Western States Center. Because the performance was to be rooted in the intersectional concept of reproductive justice, we knew that we wanted to share reproductive stories that were rooted in the embodied experiences of our performers—whether directly through their own experiences or through experiences of others with the same or similar “material conditions, lived experiences positionalities, and/or standpoints” (Knoblauch 2012, 61). The act of performing reproductive stories functioned as a kind of public, embodied rhetorical device that enabled storytellers to activate their stories, to be heard, and to see themselves as part of a broader social justice movement. It simultaneously engaged audience members through empathetic connection during the performance and via talkback discussion.

### **EXAMPLES OF EMBODIED RHETORIC IN *WE ARE BRAVE***

The four *testimonial scenes* in *We are BRAVE* included the story of a Latina immigrant navigating the US health care system as she has her first baby and the ways a lack of language access limited her options during childbirth; the story of a mother navigating the judicial system to try to retain custody of her kids while fleeing domestic violence, through the perspective of her child; a black woman’s late term stillbirth due to medical neglect; and a trans man’s experience with pregnancy and miscarriage. In a later iteration of the performance, due to a change in our cast, we swapped out the story of a trans man’s experience with pregnancy for a trans man’s experience with breast cancer. To demonstrate some of the ways embodied rhetoric was enacted through our relationships with participants and through the performance of reproductive justice narratives, in this section we look at two of the four testimonial scenes we included in the performance.

When we began working on the *We are BRAVE* project, Western States Center specifically asked that we include narratives that centered trans people. The organization had worked to center the experiences of people of color in reproductive justice movements from the beginning, and in the second year of this work, they expanded the scope of the project to include reproductive justice for

trans and gender nonbinary people. As we were in the early stages of our process, one of our group members shared a podcast with us that introduced us to the story of Trystan's journey as a parent. Trystan and his partner, Biff, first choose to adopt Biff's sister's daughter and son, and then decide for Trystan to become pregnant, ending with his experience of miscarriage (*The Longest Shortest Time* 2015). He has since had a beautiful baby.

From the podcast, we crafted a monologue about Trystan's experience of miscarriage and his desire to have a child. We then met with Trystan and Biff and received permission to include their story in our piece. The monologue discussed Trystan's desire to become pregnant and his grief at the loss of the pregnancy. Trystan, a trained actor and storyteller, was so enthusiastic about our project that he joined our ensemble and reworked the monologue into something that brought out the nuances of his story. Trystan's rhetoric brought forward the personal process of becoming pregnant, the need for gender affirming reproductive care, and challenged misperceptions about transpregnancy. His embodied rhetoric normalized an experience that for many is invisible. Speaking of the pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage in his monologue, Trystan says:

Turns out taking testosterone doesn't stop you from ovulating, it stops you from menstruating. I thought there was no way I was fertile unless my period came back at least once. Nope. I ovulated. I conceived. I was pregnant.

I'm scared that people will think I lost the pregnancy because of testosterone. I didn't. 1 in 4 pregnancies end in miscarriage. There's no reason to not expect a healthy pregnancy next time. You know, after the miscarriage, a nurse said to me, "When you're ready, I invite you to let yourself feel grateful for your body, for recognizing that something wasn't working and for not putting you or your future child in danger." After a lifetime of feeling like my body had betrayed me, that was a powerful thing to hear. I was able to hear what she was saying to me in that moment and it was the first time I was grateful for my body (Duffly et al. 2017, 21).

Co-author Roberta wrote a monologue about her experience of medical neglect as a black woman, which resulted in unmitigated preterm labor at twenty-two weeks, placental abruption, and stillbirth. While the monologue was being written, Roberta was also in her second pregnancy and was pushing the hospital where she experienced fetal loss to reconsider its medical procedures that missed her preterm labor. The day before the opening performance of *We are BRAVE*, Roberta had an emergency surgery to prevent preterm labor of her son at eighteen weeks. With appropriate care, she was able to successfully deliver her son at thirty-seven weeks. As an artist, the creation of the monologue was an embodied experience. It was the complex experience of creating something on stage that she had experienced, and, in some ways, was in the midst of for a second time. Reworking the script and working with actors to dramatize the experience around the stillbirth externalized grief that she struggled to articulate. The piece is written as a conversation with her daughter about her birth story:

Do you remember the night you were born? I didn't know the aches in my legs and the burning in my bladder were signs of labor. Labor isn't supposed to come at 22 weeks. At the hospital, the doc didn't come see us. The nurse said I was fine. You were fine. She said, "It's normal." They gave me pain meds to calm the aches. They said, go home. We went home, I fell asleep. When I woke up a few hours later, I knew something was wrong. I called the emergency doc again. She said: "You're fine. You don't need to be here. You have gastrointestinal distress." [chorus: SLAP] I can barely talk. I say: "No... I am hurting. I need to come in." "Is there a 24 hour pharmacy near you? I can order more meds." [chorus: SLAP] "No... I need to come in." "Fine, come in. Don't come up to maternity. Your problems aren't with your pregnancy." [chorus: SLAP] [chorus gesture: wake up with intake of breath and three quick outbreaths] [...]

I made it to the ER desk. I was collapsing. I remember nurses. Vomit. Being run upstairs in a wheelchair and then blood. [chorus gesture: repeatedly but slowly brings hand up from crotch to see that there is blood on the hand, breath in.] My seat was blood. Chunky blood. I was having a placental abruption. I saw the doc

for the first time then. She checked my cervix and saw my sack falling through. “This pregnancy is unviable.” That was it (Duffly et al. 2017, 14).

In reworking ideas, Roberta tried to capture nuanced personal moments while giving the experience a political context that framed key political concerns. Externalizing the story meant that Roberta did not have to embody those emotions. Her personal story on the stage became a story that could be related to by other black women, other women of color, and others who had experienced pregnancy loss and medical neglect.

The *testimonial scenes* in *BRAVE* brought up questions of bodily autonomy, medical ambivalence, differential access to care, family protection, and calls for greater inclusion in the medical process from different vantage points. These choices offer rhetoric that is both intersectional and nuanced. We wanted to bring experiences into conversation with each other while at the same time move beyond an essential universal narrative. These narratives were contrasted with different abortion related vignettes that discussed public opinions about abortion and personal realities of the experience. The effort was to dramatize how people encounter oppression in the bodies they are in when accessing care to bring children into the world, to access care to not have children if they are pregnant, and to protect their children.

Our approach in the creation of *BRAVE* and the establishment of relationships through workshop and rehearsal was similar to what scholar Dwight Conquergood (2013) advocates for in embodied research, an approach “grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection” (33). As we described at the beginning of this essay, our workshops and rehearsals with participants centered around their experiences and translating those experiences into embodied representations. An early rehearsal invited participants to brainstorm together around issues surrounding reproductive justice, and then create embodied tableaux, and then small scenes based on these issues. We gave short writing prompts such as, “What is one message you remember having received about bodies and reproduction?” and invited participants to work in pairs

to stage to their partners some aspect of their response. Our goals were to find a semi-structured way to invite participants to share their own experiences and experiences of loved ones to get a sense of what kinds of questions the group felt were important to ask and what kinds of stories are important to be told about reproductive justice. We had participants “give” their stories to other participants to find new ways of representing those stories. Thus, the experiences and stories were shared across bodies within the group. In this way, the group, not solely Roberta and Kate, painted a picture of the whole field of reproductive justice through devised movement, monologues, and scenes.

This approach resonates with the work of scholars who advocate an embodied, engaged approach to scholarship as a means of understanding another. For example, Black Feminist performance scholar, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones (2002), has written about the embodied approach of performance ethnography: “[t]his method builds on two primary ideas: 1) that identity and daily interactions are a series of conscious and unconscious choices improvised within culturally and socially specific guidelines, and 2) that people learn through participation” (7). To participate in a practice of embodied research is to value ways of being in the world that fall outside of the logocentric approach valued in academia. By participating bodily in the practices of another, one learns about those practices in a way one could not understand through less embodied modes of research. Throughout our rehearsal period, we worked hard to participate in the humble, open manner that Conquergood (2013) advocates for scholars: “placing oneself quietly, respectfully, humbly, in the space of others so that one could be surrounded and ‘impressed’ by [their] expressive meanings” (36). In bringing bodies to the center of our project, we cultivated temporary community around a shared embodied experience. Each participant brought their unique knowledge and way of thinking into conversation with the unique embodied knowledge of the other members of the group.

## **PROJECT LIMITATIONS AND IMPACT**

Despite our success in achieving our goal of creating a deeply embodied ensemble of mixed experience and a piece that seemed to serve the needs of Western States Center’s campaign, as we reflect

back with critical distance, we note that we did not succeed in creating a truly civic practice in the mode of Michael Rohd. Western States had asked us to create a performance, but we were not able to get clear guidance from them on what they wanted that performance to look like or do. We knew that to be successful we needed to be able to work closely with Western States but feared overburdening their already overworked staff. In response to this concern, we used a devising process that we hoped would allow ourselves to be nimble and to evolve as we learned more from our non-arts partner about what they wanted and needed, and they, in turn, learned more from us about what we could offer. With a non-arts partner who did not share our artistic commitments, nor our knowledge about civic practice, we were ultimately not full partners in the creation process.

While Western States Center desired cultural organizing, their capacity to join in the collaborative process was limited due to understaffing and the demands of pushing a bill through the legislative process. Nevertheless, we wonder now how the process might have been different had we been able to collaborate more deeply in the process. For example, the project did not need to be a theatre piece. But with a more intensive planning process, the work could have taken on any number of forms: we might have created a workshop that could be reproduced in multiple contexts, geared toward the audience/participants telling their own reproductive justice story; we might have created video content for their website; or even structured or facilitated meetings with their stakeholders and policy makers. Further, we were also learning our craft. We have developed more of a workshop method for devising that increases the efficiency of our process. Non-profits do not have a wealth of excess time to develop new ways to tell their stories. Learning to do devising work effectively and in less time is an important part of the process. Roberta's close participation in the BRAVE cohort and participation of a Center staffer in the first iteration of the project were necessary to help bridge our growth curve in this project and limited time available from the Center.

We focused on creating a collaborative, embodied process that drew on the lived experience of our individual participants. The piece we created was a democratic process in which the voices of

the participants were heard, their stories incorporated, and the embodied knowledge highlighted in the creation of the work. While we weren't able to fully collaborate with Western States Center in a dialogic way, we did succeed in including the embodied knowledges of reproductive justice stakeholders, creating a piece that ultimately did live up to Western States' expectations and assist their policy change goals.

For the Western State Center's BRAVE project, the performance was one part of a much larger organizing campaign to secure abortion access for more people in Oregon. This organizing effort was ultimately successful. In 2017, their efforts resulted in the passage of the Reproductive Health Equity Act, which *Mother Jones* magazine referred to as "one of the most progressive pieces of health legislation in the country" (Lockhart 2017). The measure "requires health insurers to cover a range of reproductive health services—including abortions and contraception, prenatal and postnatal care, and screenings for cancer, sexually transmitted infections, and gestational diabetes—at no cost to patients, no matter their income, citizenship status, or gender identity...Should *Roe v. Wade* be overturned, the measure also prepares to insulate the state from repercussions by codifying a woman's legal right to an abortion in the state" (Lockhart 2017). It would be hard to point to the ways in which the *We are BRAVE* performance directly contributed to BRAVE's policy win. However, there are ways in which the performance indirectly contributed to their campaign. For example, the piece was performed at key events for the BRAVE campaign, contributed to the momentum of their organizing, and provided both substantial, meaningful content and a reason to gather supporters during their campaign. It provided a touchstone that gave people something to resonate with emotionally, to see their stories being represented, inspiring their further commitment to the efforts of the organization.

Finally, for the actors and creators of *We are BRAVE*, it also had a lasting impact. The group of participants were coming at this work from diverse vantage points. For some, their participation in the project was eye-opening in the ways it educated them about reproductive justice. For others, participating in a creative process was a new means of addressing an issue. For those group members

who were able to share their own stories, it was powerful to have those stories heard, and in being heard, validated by audiences. For all participants, approaching the subject of reproductive justice and expanding the conversation far beyond abortion allowed for a nuanced and expansive engagement in the subject.

## CONCLUSION AND TAKEAWAYS

The *We are BRAVE* project was, in some ways, particular to the Portland, Oregon political and cultural landscape. In the Midwestern or the Southern regions of the United States, it is possible that the reception of performances like *We are BRAVE*, not to mention participation in such performances, may be viewed with more skepticism or hesitancy. However, aspects of the project are applicable in other contexts. Multnomah County does have a strong reproductive health mandate and a pro-choice movement. It is the most progressive county in Oregon. That said, Oregon is a state that regularly has anti-choice, anti-queer, and anti-immigrant measures on its ballot. The reproductive rights movement in Oregon also needed to diversify and unify within the state's diversity around common objectives. To do that required organization across communities. The purpose of *We are BRAVE* was to engage Western State Center's base in broader conversation at the emotional and intellectual levels. Theatre is excellent at facilitating that connection. Storytelling was an initial part of the Center's organizing, and the theatre piece was an extension of this. This project was used to educate the Center's base and potential legislative allies on how experiences knitted together across communities of color and genders. They were trying to connect the stories in a new way for people to understand why this matters and to support mobilization efforts. Furthermore, the Center was not trying to move everyone with these stories. They were trying to strategically connect with and affect the people they *needed*; in this case, that meant legislators and Western States Center constituents who didn't yet see reproductive rights as "their issue."

BRAVE leaders wanted members of the cohort on the stage. Doing so further contributed to the collective and personal impacts of the narratives. Using actors could give a level of confidentiality and emotional resonance that one could want in doing broader outreach work in different contexts. However, professional actors are often

not performing their own testimonies. Our community actors were also powerful advocates off the stage, and the process offered complimentary ways to advance their organizing efforts.

While this project was site-specific and rooted in the experience of the group that created it, there are several recommendations that we can make for scholars interested in a community-centered approach to address issues of reproductive injustice, drawing upon rhetorical training. The work of community engagement is time intensive and highly relational. Being prepared to adapt one's process and project in collaboration with community partners is key. This openness to adaptation can mean adjusting one's original ideas to more closely align with the needs of the community partner, as opposed to adhering to the scholar's original plan or vision. Furthermore, because this work is so relational, it is time intensive and doesn't necessarily map onto an academic calendar, or even onto the expectations of scholarly output. This project took authors Kate and Roberta over two years from initial conception to final performance, and this article will be published around five years after the start of the project. For rhetorical scholars who do community-based work, it is important to be able to bring that work back to their scholarly community, to make it legible in an academic context and, in so doing, undergo a process of translation so that work can be (re)contextualized within their field of study.

Finally, our key observation and recommendation for other scholars undertaking this work is that, to most successfully bring together scholarship with civic engagement, engagement in community must become a part of the scholar's life, not simply a component of a specific project. When a scholar creates regular and lasting ties with community members and community groups, collaborations that arise from those relationships have deeper and more numerous ties that allow for truer collaborations built on trust established durationally. Thus, we might more appropriately view the efforts of the community engaged scholar as a durational practice, one which includes a view from the ground level and the practice of mundane and daily efforts to make community engagement a part of the scholar's life that both precedes and succeeds the individual instances of scholarly output expected of us by our institutions.

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