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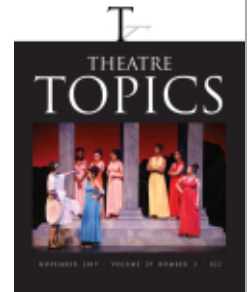
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Every Girl's a Hero: Reevaluating the Ethics of University/ Community Partnerships

Monica Cortés Viharo

Introduction

In spring 2015, approximately forty MFA and undergraduate students from the University of Washington School of Drama and I embarked on a yearlong community-based performance (CBP) project.¹ Our guides through the endeavor were award-winning performance duo PearlDamour (director Katie Pearl and Pulitzer-honoree playwright Lisa D'amour) and their associate Ashley Sparks. We were charged with observing and building a relationship with an organization in the community surrounding our university, the University District (U District), and then devising a performance piece reflecting that community back to itself.² While the neighborhood is home to individuals of varied socioeconomic standing, this project evolved to focus on homeless adults and teens as well as intravenous drug users living in the U District and the service organizations addressing their needs. Students voted to work with three local organizations: the Elizabeth Gregory Home (EGH), a drop-in day center and transitional housing facility for homeless women; ROOTS (Rising Out of the Shadows), a young adult overnight shelter; and the People's Harm Reduction Alliance (PHRA), a peer-run organization that promotes safer drug use through a needle-distribution program. My cohort worked exclusively with the EGH. Each cohort performed their devised piece for their community partner in their location, and then the three pieces were woven together into a play titled *Skies Over Seattle* and performed for the public in a conventional theatre space (fig. 1).

While transformative for the university participants and seemingly the community members as well, this project exposed some of the ethical complexities involved in such partnerships. During a devising session with my fellow theatre students, we watched video-recorded interviews of EGH clients. At the same time, an actor was changing her clothes near where the images were being projected. We were all surprised and moved when part of the projection showed up on her back, which we incorporated in our final performance piece, *Every Girl's a Hero*. Projecting women's faces on set pieces and textiles and playing their recorded voices created the recurring motif of community-building through small acts of kindness. But this moment was also symbolic of our approach to community-engaged work. Because the homeless women we met did not live lives that corresponded with our rehearsal schedule, we felt we could only include them in our piece as video or audio recordings. But if we had changed our conception of the timeline and structure for devising a theatre piece, we could have grown their participation to be more multidimensional. Both Pearl and Sparks noted that the strict schedule of the UW MFA programs frustrated and stymied students' ability to build rapport with community partners. For example, the prime hours for working with the ROOT community were during the evenings, but MFA students had rehearsals during that time. These students could not change their schedule to one that best suited their community partner (Sparks) (fig. 2).



Fig. 1 Postcard for *Skies Over Seattle*, designed by Katrina Earnst (2016). (Source: Courtesy of the University of Washington School of Drama.)

This experience was the most inspirational and gratifying aspect of my graduate education, but did my expanded education take place on the figurative backs of these women? Did we truly create a partnership with these vulnerable populations that was equally valuable to all parties? What would it look like to do so? The inevitable imbalance of power in university and community partnerships is well documented (Dolgon et al. 163–64). My interest is in how artists, students, and universities can be nimbler in their approach to art-making to bolster collaborative partnerships where community members experience agency and authorship.

Early practitioners of service learning and community engagement cite “critical reflection” as the necessary component for moving civic action beyond the realm of volunteerism (ibid. 3). In this essay, I interrogate the U District project to assess its impact as what PearlD’amour called a “community-engagement experiment.” Utilizing my own participant observations as well as post-production interviews, I attempt to ascertain a pedagogical mode that forges alternative societal structures between universities and community organizations—an imagined scaffolding that could, over time, yield more equitable civic relationships.

Naming the goals of the project provides benchmarks by which I will evaluate its efficacy and understand the decisions made that impacted the structure of our community partnership. Pearl recalls the School of Drama proposing the collaboration in order to “connect students to the community.” She goes on to state that “there was this sense that the University of Washington was in the U district, but especially [that] the MFA students never left campus.” Pearl also cites a pedagogical goal: “I think there’s an awareness that the professional theatre world is changing, that there’s a need for graduating students of MFA programs to have experience in creating devised, ensemble-generated work.” Lastly, Pearl identifies a third goal centered on community building, or in her words, a “desire to de-rarefy the theatre experience.” She asks, “How as theatre artists are we participating in our communities? And might that be the beginning; planting the seeds of a longer relationship for the Drama School and different community organizations?”

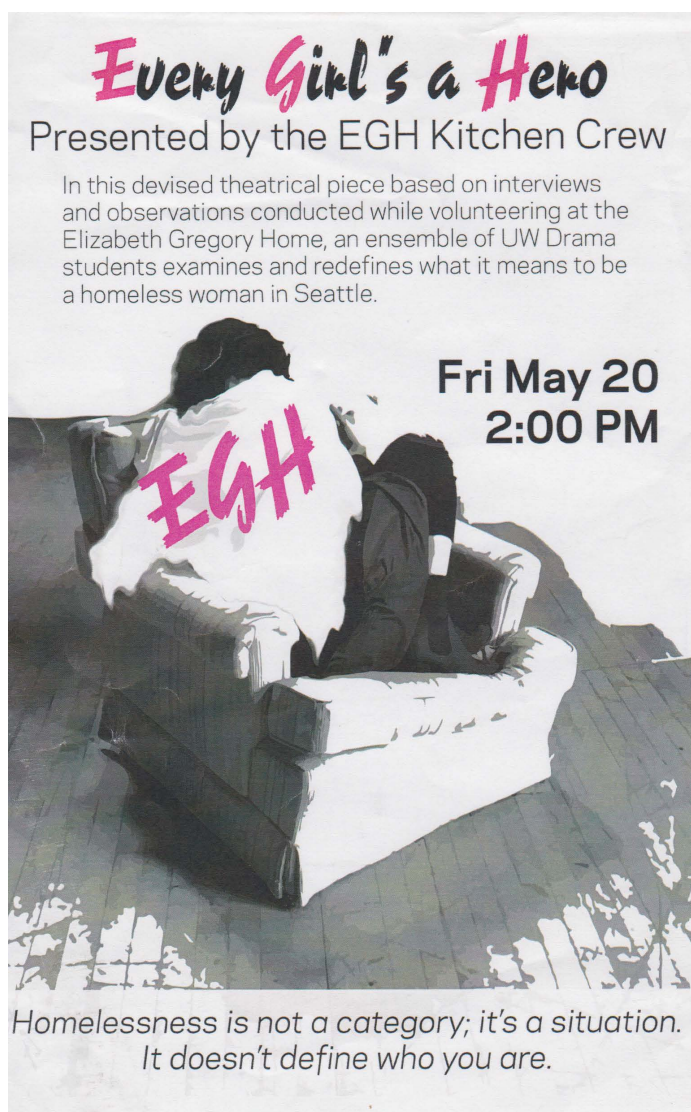


FIG. 2 Flier for *Every Girl's a Hero*, designed by Katrina Earnst (2016). (Source: Courtesy of the University of Washington School of Drama.)

These three distinct goals lend themselves to embodied practices with disparate methods and objectives. Looking back, I would identify performance as research (PaR)—also known as practice as research in performance, or practice-based research (PBR)—as the means to raise students' awareness of the U District beyond campus and arm them with tools to create a devised ensemble piece. Baz Kershaw defines PaR, which he refers to as “performance practice as research,” as “the use of practical creativity as reflexive enquiry into significant research concerns (usually conducted by artist/scholars in universities)” (qtd. in Riley and Hunter 4). He goes on to describe this approach as “methods and methodologies in search of results across disciplines: a collection of *transdisciplinary* research ‘tools’” (5). Mark Fleishman, a member of the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR) Performance as Research Working Group, further expands on Kershaw by stating that PaR is “research that is carried out through or by means of performance, using methodologies and specific methods familiar to performance practitioners, and where the output is at least in part, if not entirely, presented through performance” (28). Similar to Diana Taylor, who calls for the archive (written word) and repertoire (embodied act) to work in concert to produce more complete and nuanced

epistemological experiences, Fleishman frames PaR as different from other research methods because it opens up “new ways of thinking and new subjects for exploration that traditional scholarship does not or cannot gain purchase on” (29).

More specifically than PaR, I conclude that the EGH project was primarily a work of *performance ethnography*, a form of research and cultural exchange practiced by artists and scholars such as D. Soyini Madison (2012), E. Patrick Johnson (2011), and Joni Jones (2002). Jones writes, “[p]erformance ethnography translates fieldwork experiences into performances among the researchers, artifacts from field work, and audiences” (7). Our performance was an attempt to translate and share our field research conducted through interviews and observations while working at the EGH. Although our performance was a work of art meant to entertain, its main purpose was to “explore bodily knowing” and “share knowledge of culture” (*ibid.*). While PearlDamour never used the term *performance ethnography* to describe the project, I am characterizing it as such because our questions did not involve a specific intervention, but were instead an exploration. We were not interested in what the neighborhood was, could, or should be, but in the ever-changing now of this place. This was a crucial stance to avoid the “missionary” dynamic, in which a well-intentioned though naïve benefactor dictates outcomes or material benefits.

In contrast, the third objective of this collaboration can be seen as community building. While PearlDamour did not set out to create a project to fit a strict definition of CBP, I still find it instructive to point out the moments in which CBP tactics were and were not employed. As a method used to facilitate community engagement, in CBP, professional artists partner with community members to create a performance addressing a topic of concern for that community. The partnership benefits from the skills and talents of trained artists and the local insights of community performers, and in the process, all participants (both professional and amateur) build relationships and understanding. Scholar and practitioner Jan Cohen-Cruz describes CBP as “social doing in one’s particular corner of the world and an artistic framing of that doing for others to appreciate” (13). This method foregrounds reciprocity for all involved, over the research objectives of the scholar-practitioner.

While PearlDamour described the intent of the project as a performance and community-engagement experiment, I propose that in practice it included aspects of both PaR and CBP. As a form of PaR, theatre students used techniques of performance ethnography, such as interviews and participants’ observations, to research this community. But unlike PaR, the result of the research was a theatrical offering performed for the community and a community critique through a post-show discussion—aspects that are a hallmark of CBP. While this hybrid approach provided artistic and personal rewards for the university participants, it also led to a tension between creating an equitable partnership and creating a work of artistic merit. When we worked more on the PaR end of the spectrum, we exerted more artistic control and avoided the logistical challenges of incorporating community partners into all aspects of the process. When we worked on the CBP end, we collaborated with our community partners to address logistical roadblocks and valued sharing creative control over ensuring the artistic quality of the piece. Scholar and CBP practitioner Richard Owen Geer asserts that a CBP production must be “of the people, by the people, and for the people” (*qtd. in* Cohen-Cruz 2). Applying these criteria to *Every Girl’s a Hero* reveals some of the mixed agenda for this project: our piece was “of the people” because it included verbatim interviews and audio and video recordings of EGH community members, but not “by the people,” since we created the work. The show was “for the people” because it was created specifically for the EGH and not the public at large, yet was presented both in- and outside their physical space for a heterogenous audience. Therefore the question of authorship and ownership of the work is a complex one, which I will examine by discussing the process in more detail.

Positionality

As I am employing an auto-ethnographic approach to this case study, it is necessary that I share some autobiographical details. This type of creative project requires a personal immersion within the community, and as such an awareness of my positionality is paramount. I come to this work from a position of both privilege and marginalization. As a woman of color in her mid-forties, I encounter daily the performance of power and difference. My sheltered upbringing in a middle-class suburb was mitigated by an awareness that my family was different. My father illegally immigrated to the United States from Mexico, married a US citizen, and raised a family in an English-only household. He never spoke his native language at home for fear my siblings and I would learn to speak English with a Spanish accent. For him, his accent added to a performance of Otherness that belied his status as a naturalized citizen. Therefore like many children of immigrants, I was raised with the subliminal message that to succeed I must assimilate and sacrifice my native language and culture. My mother's Latinx and Native American roots and her upbringing in extreme poverty marked by domestic violence and alcoholism were ever-present reminders that we were not like our fellow suburbanites. Alongside this marginalized identity, I inhabit a position of privilege by virtue not only of a stable suburban upbringing, but also by my undergraduate and graduate education at highly respected universities. I have never been homeless nor struggled with food insecurity.

As a graduate student attending a large public university, I seek to use both my position of privilege and marginalized identities to co-create art with community partners. As an artist/researcher, I am drawn to community-engaged projects as a means of exploring the performance of identity, power, and privilege, and investigating models of social connection that resist or at least trouble normative paradigms. In other words, I study how to build community and share, celebrate, and reclaim cultural identity through performance. I joined my doctoral program after two decades as a professional actor, educator, and public-speaking consultant, eager to pursue research at the intersection of theory and practice. To that end, I am also earning a certificate in public scholarship, also known as community-engaged scholarship or community-based participatory research. These methodologies challenge scholars to work in partnership with community members, thereby compelling them to confront societal structures impacting that community.

PearlDamour: Ethics and Aesthetics

During their project with the School of Drama, Pearl and D'Amour were completing their own performance ethnography and community-based performance project called *Milton*. Working with five towns named Milton in Massachusetts, North Carolina, Louisiana, Oregon, and Wisconsin, they attempted to address the question, "What does it mean to be an American?" They describe their inspiration as "traveling to towns we'd never need to go to and talking to people we'd never have a reason to meet" (PearlDamour, *Milton*). In each location, they used interviews with residents to produce a theatrical piece for the town. While residents did not perform in the devised piece in each city, local musicians provided "opening acts" for the show. To facilitate a deeper community connection and a lasting impact, PearlDamour also partnered with community members to develop a civic event in conjunction with their performance. In Milton, Massachusetts, the community chose to host "Courageous Conversations toward Racial Justice," a series of civic dialogues on race, and in Milton, North Carolina, the town produced a street fair. Both of these events continue to this day. Pearl described their performance in each location as "context for the community collaboration" and "the community collaboration as context for the performance." In other words, the series of events created an "ecosystem of reflection, conversations, celebration, excavation." PearlDamour's goal for the School of Drama partnership was "to bring the ethics and aesthetics of the *Milton* project to this experience," and to see if *Milton* could "provide a template in any way for this work to continue. How can *Milton* serve the theatre community beyond its initial life?"

With the sensibilities of *Milton* as their model, PearlDamour invited students in the larger U District project, *Skies Over Seattle*, to spend time serving their community organizations in order to build rapport, observe the culture, and then reciprocate that hospitality with a performance. In *Milton*, PearlDamour produced theatrical pieces that required the skills of trained performers, so they chose not to include community performers—a model also used in the *Skies Over Seattle*, in which only theatre students performed onstage. This decision came from not only a desire to create a performance piece with high artistic value, but also to mitigate the logistical challenges of fitting community performers into a traditional production timeline. Ruth Herold, the executive director of the EGH, confirmed that “because of the transitory nature of the women’s lives,” performing with us would not have been realistic for everyone. Additionally, she shared, “[s]ome folks who may appear okay are pretty mentally ill, so things could become a challenge in ways that might not be expected.” But Herold did identify a population of women in the transitional housing program who would have had the stability to participate more actively. Excluding our community partners had the unfortunate effect of leaving us to speak for them, rather than collaborating with them; they were the inspiration for the devised performance, but were not involved in the devising. Thus fashioning a more inclusive creative process would have been possible had we reimagined the traditional framework for producing a show and performing in it.

The EGH Project Description

Every Girl’s a Hero, the culminating devised piece from my cohort, was specifically about and for the EGH community. This collage of scripted scenes and movement pieces, interspersed with audio and video recordings, told the story of a woman coming to the EGH. Through a deconstructed chronology, the audience learns that she has left an abusive relationship and her children. Her journey begins outside the doors of the EGH, where she stands in the rain and dresses in clothes others have discarded. Eventually she enters the EGH, tells her story, and works in the kitchen to feed the literal superheroes she meets there, who happen to also be homeless women.

These characters were composites of EGH staff and clients, developed using their responses to the question, “If you could have a superpower, what would it be?” The superheroes included The Genie, who grants a limited number of wishes per day, such as providing warm blankets and fresh produce; The Jaguar, a tough woman who protects all the ladies; and The Ph.D., a highly intelligent woman who lost her “secure” government job and now uses her brainpower to turn everyday items into much-needed resources. The protagonist’s story culminates while under the tutelage of these heroines, as she becomes The Siren, a woman who cannot be silenced and whose beautiful singing voice overpowers others.

Every Girl’s a Hero was performed once onsite at the EGH in mid-May, and then as part of *Skies Over Seattle*. *Skies* took place in the Floyd and Delores Jones Playhouse Theater in the U District and ran for two evening performances and one Sunday matinee. All performances were free, open to the public, and attended by a mix of staff and clients from our partner organizations, as well as theatregoers with no connection to the project. Post-show discussions followed each night of *Skies* and the one-time performance of *Every Girl’s a Hero* at the EGH.

The Devising Process

Although as students we lived and worked in the U District, there was a context of the local community that we did not access due to our level of enfranchisement and privilege, so we began the devising process by conducting ethnographic research in the vein of PaR. PearlDamour associate Sparks and I arranged meetings with ten U District organizations, including churches, businesses, a student-athlete study center, and even a needle exchange. While we knew we would only

partner with three groups for *Skies Over Seattle*, we wanted to interact with a variety of U District constituents. Encountering the amalgam that is the U District, including the 117-year-old wooden schoolhouse turned community center, the occult book and gift store, and the many frozen yogurt shops, troubled our assumption of the homogeneity of the local community. Sidewalks dotted with groups of homeless youth, often the same age as the undergraduates in our group, stood in stark relief to the picturesque university campus, the base of operations for one of the largest employers in the state (America's Career InfoNet). Through these interactions, we came to view the area as a network activated by the heterogeneous residents of this shared site—or in the words of Helen Nicholson, it gave us an understanding of the community as a “messy imprecise place” (qtd. in Duffly 285). Our embodied experience fostered a more nuanced understanding of living in extreme poverty amid plenty. Sharing our newfound insights with our community partners could have turned our devising into the type of dialogic exchange one finds in CBP. For example, a costume designer on our team set up a “mending party” at the EGH where students worked with EGH clients to alter donated clothes. This group activity would have been an ideal space to discuss what we were learning through this process and create a stronger collaboration. I believe we did not do this for fear of going too deep, too fast with these freshly established relationships.

Instead of discussing our observations with the women of the EGH, we inserted our moments of discovery and scenarios that highlighted the unequal distribution of wealth into our piece. Ironically, the student residents of this neighborhood are often more transient than the homeless population, who are permanent residents and navigate the city as such. Due to our transience—because we have the means to participate and leave the community at will—we exist outside the social structures at work in this community. Our outsider status presented both the constraint of never truly understanding the lives of EGH women and the opportunity to provide a platform for the stories these women wanted to share.

When we first met Herold, she stated that many of the women she worked with wanted to tell their stories because they were tired of being “invisible” in our city. As we spoke with and eventually interviewed EGH clients, the desire to be seen and heard was a recurring sentiment. Herold describes the immediate impact of our performance as such: “When I was in grad school, we had a professor who talked about the importance of being H-S-L, which is the Heard, Seen, and Loved. I think at your performance, that’s what they experienced. Many were in tears, just feeling that being seen was so beautiful. There were a number of you that were in tears as well. That kind of experience, it’s just not something that folks get every day.”

Perhaps the reason the women of the EGH felt “H-S-L” was because we spent time working in their community for months prior to devising our play. During our year-long collaboration, the actual devising process, which included interviewing EGH clients and evening rehearsals, did not happen until the final three months of the project. Prior to this, we spent the first two quarters of the academic year (fall 2015 and winter 2016) fulfilling volunteer or “work exchange” hours at the EGH. Catherine Ming T’ien Duffly designates *work exchange* “as a dialogic, sharing process” that acculturates artists to their new surroundings, while simultaneously calling attention to their status as outsiders (286). I use the term here to highlight the reciprocal nature of our work at the EGH.

By the winter quarter of 2016, we began to feel less like outsiders at the EGH. We now knew peoples’ names, their position in the community (that is, staff, client, or volunteer), and a bit about their backgrounds. Michael Monicatti, an undergraduate drama student in the EGH cohort, described this subtle shift by stating that

once I knew where things were, and I knew who on staff to go to for stuff . . . before then I didn’t feel confident taking up space. And with that confidence I was able to strike up conversations to begin to foster relationships with clients. Me gathering my bearings helped me. Being ready to approach people casually instead of in any kind of formal structure that was present when we

first started with the PearlDamour workshop and moving away from that was something that was more process-oriented than product-oriented. I was talking to people instead of looking for certain answers to certain questions.

As Monicatti describes, while we may not have been full-fledged members of the community, we were able to navigate the EGH's space without asking for help and conducted familiar tasks.

Pearl described the methodology of *Skies Over Seattle* by stating that "the research and development for this project is just about spending time in the community, it's just about volunteering, it's about not actually leading with your art making, but leading with just being a human being." Therefore, while the tasks we completed, such as washing dishes, cutting vegetables, and unloading boxes, may have aided the EGH in the moment, doing so alongside EGH clients and staff also benefited us. We learned about the community, and in the process, they learned about us.

It was at this point that we began to record interviews during our shifts. We explained to the clients and staff of the EGH that we were creating a play inspired by their stories and the EGH in general, yet would not use anyone's name in the piece. While we always asked permission to record an interview, we did not ask interviewees to sign consent forms. In retrospect, this was a failure on our part and another step that could have contributed toward redistributing the balance of power. According to Herold, she asked the women at several group meetings about having us in their space. Those who were present agreed; yet due to the drop in nature of the EGH, she states that having "the same people come five times in a row would be a miracle." Therefore she appreciated that we obtained consent from interviewees after months of working side-by-side with them. Herold observed that "the fact that you all were willing to go in and roll your sleeves up and do things with people . . . I think that was an effective way of getting consent in an authentic way." Spending months building rapport and trust with the community proved successful; moreover, we created composite characters so that no one person was singled out, and EGH clients reported that they enjoyed seeing elements of their stories performed.

On the other hand, a failure of this approach was that our interviews only provided a one-way communication path. We did not share our impressions of the EGH, nor did we set up a mechanism by which the women could express their thoughts about interacting with us. Without this type of exchange, the women were in essence *objects* of our study rather than *collaborators*. Had we created space for dialogue, we could have built a more equitable relationship and gained a deeper sense of the impact we were having on one another.

In our periodic evening and weekend workshops with PearlDamour, we used our interviews, observations, and outside research to begin devising. Members of PearlDamour often led guided meditations, writing exercises, and discussions of assigned readings, including "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (McIntosh); excerpts from *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (Lakoff); and *Invitation to the Party: Building Bridges to the Arts, Culture, and Community* (Walker-Kuhne). We also participated in group activities such as a "privilege line," where students stepped forward or moved back in response to statements of privilege or marginalization that describe their lives. In the final stages of the devising process, we met in our teams every Saturday of the spring 2016 quarter without PearlDamour. In these sessions, group members took turns leading exercises such as improvisation or Viewpoints, and voted on what should be accomplished and who would lead the next rehearsal. I now can perceive the ways in which we could have brought our devising into the EGH's space, including asking the women to suggest music, props, clothing, and other items that represented the EGH.

While observing and gathering information, performance ethnographers must work through some of the "ethical and political dilemmas of fieldwork and representation" (Jones 7). An example of such an issue arose during the devising process when I expressed my discomfort with the songs

chosen to underscore many of our pieces. The rock and pop songs from the 1960s to the present did not seem to fit the aesthetics of the EGH. Then I realized that all the songs were by white and mostly male artists. I was not privy to the demographic data on EGH clients, but being there I had seen and interacted with so many women of color that the song choices just didn't *feel* right. In our devising sessions, we often came to consensus easily, and as I was one of the few people of color on the team, I did not want to make waves. But the sense that we were not accurately representing the EGH experience kept gnawing at me. When I broached the subject, some students were defensive, while others recognized my concern; this discussion opened up a door. More people brought music in, and we ended up with a soundtrack that included many powerful female artists and people of color. We even discussed the importance of making our main character an African American woman, which we did. We heard constantly how the intersection of race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and class compounded the challenges of homelessness, and we wanted to express our understanding of that reality in our piece. In this instance, I was a woman of color in a privileged decision-making position, and I found that I had to use my privilege to pose ethical questions of representation no matter how uncomfortable those confrontations might be. In retrospect, I wish we had gone one step further to facilitate a conversation with the women of the EGH about the show's music and soundscape.

Performance as Research

This performance-based study was about the experience of being *in* community with our neighbors. *Every Girl's a Hero* was an attempt to share the aesthetics and feeling of being participant observers at the EGH, and our own awkward transition from EGH outsider to insider. Our performance was an offering to the EGH to thank them for letting us into their community, or what Pearl calls "reciprocal exchange as a form of hospitality." She asserts that the role of the performance piece was to reaffirm the community "by reflecting it back to itself in such a way that it helps them see different aspects of their own community that they're not used to seeing because they're too close to it." For these reasons, our play, while not shying away from naming the struggles of the women we met, was a celebration of their resilience and dedication to one another.

In terms of PaR, the EGH project achieved the goals of educating graduate students about our local community and bringing us physically into that community. Monicatti, my fellow participant, admitted that prior to this project, he walked by the EGH without noticing it. Like him, I was unaware of the home prior to this project; yet since its completion, EGH's director and I have continued the relationship. For example, we collaborated to bring scenes from a production of María Irene Fornés's *Mud* to the EGH. The performance was followed by a group discussion of the production's themes, including poverty, domestic abuse, literacy, and access to health care. Nicki, the EGH client I worked with most closely, attended and enthusiastically encouraged other clients to do so as well. Nicki greeted me as an old friend and I was so happy to see her. We were able to reengage with each other because of the deep rapport we had built.

The goal of providing theatre students with the experience of devising ensemble-generated work was also achieved. Motivated by this experience, I arranged a panel discussion, "Every Girl's a Hero: Volunteering and Devising to Build Community," for the Network of Ensemble Theater (NET) National Gathering and Symposium in June 2017. The panel brought together faculty and undergrad- and grad-student participants with Herold to discuss our collaboration. I can attest to the goodwill and affinity that these individuals felt for me and our shared experience. They were willing to sacrifice a portion of their Saturday, because all recognized the importance of discussing this work in a public forum. Filled with the joy of a family reunion, the panelists' gratitude for the EGH experience overshadowed the challenging aspects of the yearlong commitment. As the panel's moderator, I played a video recording of *Every Girl's a Hero* and facilitated conversations about the

logistics of the partnership. A grad-student panelist shared that since the project, she had become the victim of domestic violence but gained strength during those trying times by recalling similar struggles that EGH clients had shared. Herold reiterated the importance of community connections generated by the onsite performance of *Every Girl's a Hero*.

Community-based Performance

Evaluating the success of this project from the lens of CBP, however, becomes thornier. Inspired by the stories of EGH clients and staff as well as our own observations, my fellow students and I used our artistry to express collective meaning about the pressing issue of homelessness in the U District. While devising the piece, we considered EGH staff and clients our primary audience. We wanted to show them what we saw when we spent time there, how being part of their community made us feel, and see if we “got it right.” Our secondary audience was those unfamiliar with the EGH. We had become champions of the organization and wanted others to know about the work it did and the amazing women it served. Still, we were not going to handhold the audience; they would have to come along for the ride and learn EGH’s lingo and insider information.

Nonetheless, Cohen-Cruz states that unlike other forms of performance, in CBP, the process (ritual) must be as effective and gratifying for the participants as the product (art). As she writes, “[i]n mainstream theater it doesn’t matter how horrible the rehearsals are if critics deem the show a success; such a measuring stick does not fly in this field, which is equally for participants as spectators” (109). Therefore, to assess the success of this venture as a form of CBP, I must consider the process as well as the artistic outcome.

In a classic CBP project, the women of the EGH themselves would have participated in the devising and performed with us, creating and executing art in a reciprocal way that benefits both professional artists and community performers regardless of the quality of the final product. Cohen-Cruz notes that community members have a “primary relationship to the content, not necessarily the craft” (3). Typically, this means that during the devising process, the community partners provide the content by sharing their lived experience and knowledge. Artists, or in our case theatre students, contribute their craft to shape and frame the show’s content. We highlighted our community exchange by creating composite characters that told how various individuals came to the EGH, including our story as newcomers. In fact, when the women started calling a long-haired male actor “the boy with the hair,” we used that name in our script to underscore the community collaboration that shaped the final performance product. Nonetheless, the women did not always have a say in our interactions with them. They could refuse to be interviewed, but we were in the space whether they liked it or not. We should have gone out of our way to create alternate ways for the women to participate and voice their desires and changed our production timeline to obtain critiques on the work in progress before the final performance.

In part, this omission reflects a tension between process and product. As an ensemble, we were stuck in the mindset of conventional theatre: our community partners were the audience, and you do not allow the audience to see the show until it is ready. But if we had thought of them as our collaborators, we would have brought them in earlier to critique our work. I only arrived at this realization after receiving feedback from the EGH women following our performance. During the post-show discussion at the EGH, both clients and staff felt comfortable enough to critique our performance. One client pointed out a critical aspect of the day shelter that she felt we had missed: “So the one thing I noticed that wasn’t in there was, which I don’t know if you guys know this or not, but there are a lot of women who come here, even myself when I was a client before volunteering, who have dogs. Homeless people . . . sometimes the dog is the only one they trust ’cause they feel so vulnerable out there.” Not only did she want to make sure that EGH’s clients were seen and heard, but also that those aspects that make the EGH special and unique among day shelters were

honored. Had we altered our process to receive this critique earlier, we could have implemented suggestions from the community on how best to represent the key role of pets.

During our post-show discussion, some clients also noted that the EGH is only one of two shelters in the city that lets clients sleep in the facility. They told us that to stay safe on the streets they stayed awake all night. Others mentioned using food stamps to buy energy drinks for this purpose. Therefore being able to sleep during the day was key to the women's survival. These small but important details about navigating homelessness in our city helped us to understand the role that the EGH played in the community. Again, had we created a space for this feedback while devising, we could have better represented what the EGH means to the community.

The EGH also serves a large population of transgender women, and one client asked why we did not have a transgender character in our play. We struggled to respond to this critique, and grappled with the ethics of portraying a transgender woman onstage when we did not have a transgender actor in our group. We were not sure whether having a cisgender woman play such a part would have been appropriate. But we could have asked the transgender clients their opinions. This is one of the difficulties of this work. While we reached a level of comfort with many clients and staff members, there were certain lines we did not cross, perhaps because we did not want to jeopardize these newly minted relationships. In retrospect, we should have brought our devising "rough drafts" to the EGH community to hear its concerns early on, and in doing so find out who in the community would be interested in participating in the devising process and how.

Conclusion

I consider PearlDamour's *Milton* a hybrid model of both performance ethnography and CBP for the EGH project and the larger *Skies Over Seattle* collaboration. Using an ethnographic approach, they spent time in the communities in order to produce a performance piece as an offering to each town. Pearl recalls PearlDamour's desire to "participate in something that was led by the town, and just our presence, our energy, our interest could be the catalyst for making something happen that could last beyond the confines of our project." Through the EGH project, my cohort did something similar. At the request of EGH's executive director, a member of our group, Sean Ryan, created a video on the EGH website to promote its services, which remains there to this day ("Our Mission," "Our History").

Had we only conducted performance ethnography and not created a CBP piece for the EGH in its own setting, we all (students and EGH's clients and staff) would have missed out on a precious moment of mutual respect, understanding, and heartfelt exchange. But if we had only led with our art-making and focused our interactions on collaboratively devising a CBP with the EGH, we would have missed out on the rapport building that developed as we worked side by side in the kitchen. Yet working in such close proximity, we began to forget the vulnerable situation these women were in and did not enact due diligence by asking them to sign a consent form when we interviewed them or getting them more involved in the creative process in a way that worked for them. Because we were unclear about the level of artistic collaboration we wanted to pursue, we overlooked the opportunity to gain insightful critique from the women of the EGH. Their feedback not only would have improved *Every Girl's a Hero*, but also may have intensified their reception of the show because they would have experienced a sense of authorship.

Despite the pitfalls of the EGH project, I would do it again and employ what I have learned to create more equitable and ethical partnerships. Learning about the U District, the women of the EGH, and homelessness was a valuable yet secondary outcome. Community engagement is more than just working with community partners; artists and educators must carefully choose the methods they employ, and if necessary, reenvision the artistic process to ensure that all stakeholders experience authorship and agency in addition to a quality performance product.

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Notes

1. While the project was originally conceived for MFA and undergraduate students, I was invited to participate due to my scholarly interest in documentary performance and public scholarship.

2. The University District, or U District as it is most commonly known, is of mixed retail and residential area and one of the oldest neighborhoods in Seattle. The U District covers 1,948 square miles (“University District [U District] Neighborhood in Seattle”), and as of 2016 is home to 26,977 individuals, who experience a 35 percent higher population density than the city in general (“University District, Seattle, WA Demographics”). The ratio of male-identified residents to female-identified is 1:1. The ethnic makeup is 54.02 percent white, 32.42 percent Asian, 6.6 percent Hispanic or Latino, 2.53 percent African American, 0.73 percent Native American, 0.23 percent Native Hawaiian, 0.737 percent mixed race, and 2.7 percent other race (*ibid.*). The median age is 25.6 years, 28 percent lower than the rest of the city (*ibid.*). A recent influx of tech industry workers, newly and more densely constructed housing, rising property values, and pressures of gentrification threaten to displace the local populations that have lived here for generations. Between 2015 and 2016, rents in the district have increased by over 16 percent (Balk n.p.). Due to these factors, university students often struggle to find affordable housing in the area and have witnessed a proliferation of homeless encampments as many homeless/unsheltered people convene to access services. “The Ave.,” the nickname for the main street that runs through the neighborhood, includes businesses common to large college towns, such as used bookstores, tattoo parlors, record stores, and smoke shops. While community anchors occupy some storefronts, others have new renters every few months.

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