

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

By Roberta Hunte and Catherine Ming T'ien Duffly

ABSTRACT

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. 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. 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.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

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 Center's 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 extended to Kate as Roberta's collaborator, but also through the relationship developed through the embodied work of performance.

TAKEAWAYS

- **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 multiple ties that allow for truer collaborations built on trust established durationaly.
- **Be 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.
- The BRAVE link below is a sample storytelling workshop demonstrating our method.

ADDITIONAL LINKS

- [Western States Center](#)
- [SisterSong Collective](#)
- [Center for Performance and Civic Practice](#)
- [We are BRAVE Toolkit](#)

CHALLENGES

- **The work of community engagement is time intensive and highly relational.** It doesn't necessarily map onto an academic calendar, or even onto the expectations of scholarly output.
- **All of this work must be understood within its immediate context.** 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.