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# A symbolic representation of Wellington: how participatory painting processes enabled a more inclusive urban narrative

AMBER KALE

*In this article I examine how a participatory painting project in Wellington enhanced cross-cultural understanding between former refugee and host-society participants and enabled a more inclusive urban narrative. In light of the current global humanitarian crisis, a climate of fear has arisen around refugees, which is often exacerbated by the media perpetuating misinformation and negative stereotypes. To counteract misrepresentation, the painting project provided a space for participants to share their lived experiences of home, belonging, and public visibility. A scholar activist orientation was employed, informed by a participatory action research epistemology. These philosophical foundations influenced a qualitative multi-method methodology consisting of painting workshops, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and public feedback. Through the process of painting a collaborative mural, participants used symbolism to deconstruct language barriers, elicit new ideas, and co-construct a more inclusive narrative whereby differences were negotiated rather than excluded, oppressed, or assimilated. In this manner, social unity was achieved in such a way that it that did not over-ride diversity.*

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, I examine how a participatory painting project in Wellington enhanced cross-cultural understanding between former refugee and host-society participants and enabled a more inclusive urban narrative.<sup>1</sup> In particular, I focus on the way in which symbolism was used to deconstruct language barriers, elicit new ideas, and challenge normative assumptions of belonging. This focus on inclusivity is particularly significant in light of the current global humanitarian crisis, in which a climate of fear has arisen around refugees.<sup>2</sup> KhosraviNik (2010), McKay, Thomas, and Blood (2011) and O’Doherty and Lecouteur (2007) claim that the media has played a role in exacerbating this climate by perpetuating misinformation and negative

refugee stereotypes. These actions have resulted in refugees being homogeneously labelled as illegitimate, illegal, and a threat to national security. Such labels are problematic as members of resettlement nations are building a skewed perspective of refugees, which is leading to discriminatory practices within processes of social integration (Beaglehole 2013; Ford 2012).<sup>3</sup>

In New Zealand, the stigma associated with refugee status is further compounded by ethnic discrimination. In Sibley and Liu’s (2007) identity research, many participants from the dominant Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) and Māori (indigenous New Zealanders) ethnic groups claimed that New Zealand is a bicultural nation as stipulated in the historic Treaty of Waitangi, and that other ethnic groups do not have the same claim to belonging as themselves.<sup>4</sup> This unequal ‘right’ to belong occurs despite the fact that United Nations (UN) quota refugees in New Zealand initially obtain permanent residency, which confers the majority of citizenship rights (Immigration New Zealand 2016; Kibreab 2003).

To explore effective ways to counteract negative stereotypes, challenge normative and exclusionary assumptions of belonging, and enhance equitable social outcomes for former refugees in New Zealand, the painting project aimed to create a space and a process for diverse Wellington residents to interact and learn from one another. This relationship-building approach was particularly significant as my prior research for a Wellington refugee organisation had found that enhancing former refugee and host community interaction was pivotal in establishing mutually beneficial relationships and building social capital (Kale & Kindon 2016). Through the co-production of a collaborative mural, participants explored how concepts of home, belonging, and visibility within public space are imagined, normalised, and contested within everyday practices of inclusion and exclusion. During this process, differences were negotiated rather

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Amber Kale a Wellington-based human geography scholar, portrait artist, and refugee rights advocate. My recent Masters’ research at Victoria University aimed to build upon my academic, artistic, and activist pursuits by using collaborative, participatory painting methods to explore processes of former refugee and host-society integration in Wellington city. I have previous experience resettling a former refugee family through the Red Cross Refugee Resettlement programme; evaluating a Wellington driving programme for refugee-background women; and involvement in a political campaign to raise New Zealand’s annual refugee quota.

than excluded, oppressed, or assimilated, and a multilayered narrative was produced which challenged viewers to reconsider shared localities as having multiple meanings, uses, and value to diverse people (Cresswell 2004).

At the beginning of this article, I briefly discuss the scholar activist orientation and participatory action research (PAR) epistemology that influenced the painting project's qualitative multi-method research methodology. I then explore how research participants used symbolism throughout the project to deconstruct language barriers and enhance cross-cultural understanding; and how they negotiated the representation of diverse experiences and identities within a collective artwork. I argue that the depth of meaning and understanding achieved through symbolism showed that collaborative painting praxis has great potential for challenging normative assumptions of people and places, and counteracting negative stereotypes. Such creative participatory processes are also important in enhancing emotional, social, and geographic connections, and co-constructing a more inclusive urban narrative.

### PAINTING AS PARTICIPATORY PRAXIS

As levels of global displacement continue to rise there is an increasing need for social research to actively challenge political, social, and media rhetoric that incites racism and xenophobia, and to address policies and practices that discriminate against, oppress, or marginalise former refugees and other vulnerable social groups (Schiermeier 2015). Pivotal to this activist orientation is making academic research more inclusive of, and accessible to, the general public, and finding innovative ways to engage in cross-cultural dialogue on sensitive and controversial issues. Such community-based research is important as dominant academic and non-governmental organisation (NGO) research approaches have often been criticised for being 'dissociated' from the communities most impacted by the issues they investigate (Alexander and Jarratt 2014; Choudry 2014).

To address this dissociation, participatory research aims to engage communities in research processes to inform culturally appropriate methods, ensure fairer representation in dissemination, and produce more effective social development solutions. PAR places emphasis on the relational *processes* and sociospatial *outcomes* of participation, focusing on the interactions between people, places, and resources; the power dynamics which shape and are shaped through these

interactions; and the ways in which applied theory is embodied, practised, challenged, and re-modelled (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007; Pain and Francis 2003). PAR also strives to create a space where researchers and their fellow community members can learn from one another, create new knowledge together, and work towards common or mutually beneficial goals (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007; Kinpaisby 2008).

Social scientists have further explored collaborative research praxis through 'scholar activism', which is a social development orientation whereby scholars aim to affect constructive change through research (The Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010). Scholar activism builds upon a historical trajectory of grassroots social movements; critical race, Marxist, feminist and PAR theories; and social justice activism which challenge dominant hegemonic voices and unequal postcolonial power structures (Cahill, Sultana, and Pain 2007). In these sociopolitical understandings, scholars are not simply distant observers of society who think and act in an isolated academic vacuum – rather they are inextricably a part of society, interacting with other individuals and groups on a daily basis, drawing upon shared ideologies and cultural norms to shape their perspectives of the world, and producing research which could have a profound impact upon the people and places being studied (Dowling 2016).

Researchers using these collaborative participatory approaches have recently focused on incorporating visual methods such as photography, drawing, video, hypermedia, and social media into their research, to explore the diverse beliefs and realities of unique individuals and groups (Berg 2008; Kindon 2003; Pink 2007; Rose 2012). One of the benefits of visual methods is that, for participants who speak little or none of the official language in their country of residence, or who have suffered trauma and cannot find the words or the will to verbally or textually convey their stories, visual methods offer alternative channels of communication which can be both expressive and therapeutic (Afonso and Ramos 2004; Heusch 2002; Pink 2007; Pugh 2003; Ramos 2004; Rose 2012). They also offer productive ways of engaging wider non-academic audiences.

Photography is currently the dominant visual method for documenting everyday life experiences in research, as a camera can capture an instant realistic-looking image and can easily be used with minimal training, making it an effective tool for participatory research (Oh 2012; Pink 2007; Rose 2012). However, people may not consent to having their photo taken, distant places and times may not be accessible (in particular this is

often the case for former refugees), and ideological, supernatural, and metaphysical concepts are not directly visible.

Taking these representational limitations into account, and building on my own experience as a professional portrait painter, I decided to explore painting as an alternative visual participatory method. Afonso and Ramos (2004) and Canal (2004) argue that, whilst hand drawn or painted images take longer to create and, without a high degree of technical accuracy cannot capture the realistic-looking representation that a photo can, sketching and painting can symbolically represent the people, places, times and phenomena that evade the camera. Thus, a painting can represent multiple non-linear viewpoints and provide insight into ones thoughts, memories, beliefs, and experiences. Academics and artists have also been using mural painting and street art as a tool to enable marginalised groups to actively participate in social life and transform their cities, bridging social gaps between people of diverse ages, abilities, ethnicities, and social status (Golden, Rice, and Kinney 2002; Hicks, Carroll, and Shanker 2017; Lorenz 2015; Walker and Hansen 2017).

Yet, a significant challenge with using painting (and other visual methods) is that an image on its own only shows a partial, framed depiction and neglects the sequence of events prior to or post image, and the social dynamics at play in the creation, distribution, and interpretation of imagery (Chappell, Chappell, and Margolis 2011; Crang 2010; Oldrup and Carstensen 2012; Pink 2007). In this manner, the embodied *processes* of painting that imbue the image with meaning and sentimental value are neglected (Brodsky 2005). To address this gap, I aligned with existing dominant visual methodology frameworks to build upon 'social context' theory, whereby the term *visual* is not exclusive to seeing, but includes imagery as part of a multi-method approach. Thus, I supported the painting method with participant meetings, interviews, and a public exhibition to explore the emotional energy invested in the mural and the sociospatial context it was produced and viewed within.

## THE PAINTING PROJECT

### Participant Selection

Through a process of community networking and handing out flyers, eight participants volunteered to be involved in the project: Five from the Wellington host-society and three whom identified as former refugees. Participants

were aged in their 20s to 50s. Binyam and Yordanos both emigrated from Sudan over a decade ago though their families were originally from Eritrea and Ethiopia. Sarah\* had recently emigrated from Iran. Tayyaba was from Pakistan though lived in various countries as a child. Nic and Ken both came from recent immigrant backgrounds, with their parents moving to New Zealand from Canada and Japan respectively, whilst Hilary, Jamie, my research assistant Nick T., and I identified as Pākehā from much earlier immigrant families.

Along with Nick T., Yordanos was completing her undergraduate degree at the time of this project, whilst Sarah\* had just begun English classes and hoped to find work based on her background as an art teacher or through her diploma in mathematics. Ken worked for a local architecture firm, Nic worked with an arts and theatre group, and Jamie worked at an art supply store. Binyam owned an Eritrean/Ethiopian restaurant in Wellington, whilst Hilary was a mum with a law degree who volunteered on a suburban community council and worked part time. Tayyaba was the chief executive officer of a local refugee NGO, and was the only host-society participant who initially reported being in contact with former refugees, whilst Yordanos was the only former refugee who reported having host-society friends. Thus, the project facilitated encounters that, for the majority of participants, may not have otherwise been likely to occur.

### Data Generation

The project ran from the start of October until the start of December 2016. In order to understand how normative assumptions of home and belonging shifted over time, I implemented the project in the following stages. I held an initial half-hour long meeting at Victoria University in Wellington to inform participants about the research and their rights and responsibilities, and to enable individuals to voice any ideas or concerns and negotiate methods that were culturally sensitive and respectful of the diverse beliefs, needs, and interests at play (Dowling 2016; Howitt and Stevens 2016; Kindon 2016).

Following this meeting, I conducted half-hour long semi-structured interviews in pre-agreed-upon locations consisting of participants' homes, the university, cafés, an art studio, and an art school. Pre-written questions aimed to elicit participant's existing knowledge on refugee resettlement processes and their personal experiences and understandings of home, belonging, and public visibility. Impromptu follow-up questions were intended to pursue

more in-depth narratives on these topics, and to encourage interpretive dialogue (Dunn 2016).

Nick T. and I then facilitated five painting workshops over five consecutive weeks, for 2 h each Sunday, in a private University seminar room. In the first two workshops we (the researchers and participants) introduced ourselves then took turns speaking about individual experiences and ideas relating to themes of *home* (be this a house, city, country, or person), *belonging* (concerning feelings of welcome, acceptance, comfort and safety), and *visibility in public space* (questioning aspects of urban presence, representation, and identity). Whilst sharing pre-prepared food that I served to make the workshop space more sociable and welcoming, we considered how to symbolically represent our experiences and ideas through sketching. We then negotiated how these individual sketches might connect together as a unified work (Figure 1). Once the group had a blueprint of how ideas would flow together, we sketched up the mural on a sheet of canvas measuring 100 × 140 cm.

The following three workshops focused on painting the canvas (Figure 2). Acrylic paint was used due to this medium being easy to mix and apply in a wide variety of ways, as well as fast-drying and cost-effective. I demonstrated how to mix and apply paint throughout the workshops, to provide some basic skill training; however, a creative and innovative approach was encouraged where participants worked in their own styles and experimented with their own techniques.

I then conducted post-workshop interviews (following the same format as the pre-workshop interviews) to explore whether participants had gained new knowledge about each other throughout the painting process; whether their understandings of home, belonging, and visibility within public space had



FIGURE 1. Sketching ideas.  
(Source: Image supplied by the author).



FIGURE 2. Painting the mural.  
(Source: Image supplied by the author).

changed; and whether they felt more connected to the other participants and Wellington city.

Upon completion of the interviews, we held an exhibition opening night at a local Wellington café to present our mural to the public (Figure 3). In keeping with my scholar activist orientation, the aim of this exhibition was to make rigorous academic research more accessible to the general public to actively challenge negative refugee stereotypes and to take a stand against dominant media and political rhetoric and social practices that discriminate against, oppress, or marginalise former refugees and other vulnerable social groups.

Most participants did not feel comfortable speaking publically at this event, so I did a short presentation that drew upon participant quotes, and left time for participants to interact with audience members if they wished to do so at the end whilst we shared food and drinks. I left the mural and a pre-prepared comment



FIGURE 3. The exhibition presentation.  
(Source: Image supplied by the author).

book with information about the painting process on display in the cafe for a week to reach more viewers and to record anonymous public feedback to inform the project analysis.

## THE USE OF SYMBOLISM

### Enhancing Cross-Cultural Communication

From my analysis of the data generated from this multi-method methodology, symbolism emerged as a significant tool used by participants to enhance social communication and connection. Throughout the painting workshops, the use of symbolism was instrumental in deconstructing language barriers and enhancing group dialogue. Sarah\* mentioned that whilst she generally understood what other participants were saying, her limited English vocabulary at times hindered her ability to share her ideas. Yet when it came to sketching, she was able to communicate some of her experiences and feelings figuratively, as illustrated through her explanation of her sketch below (Figure 4).

**Sarah\*:** It's a home and this is a lady like me, and she has to leave her home and her country. And I just wanted to show, this is her shadow, it still links to her home, her country. And just I wanted to show, she's going to make new life. I draw this tree just because I wanted to show it is life, a new life for her.

**Yordanos:** That's really cool.

**Amber:** And what about the mountains and hills in the background? Is that something from your country?

**Sarah\*:** Just to show, from here to here, it's like, I mean she can make her own life



FIGURE 4. A link between home and a new life. (Source: Image supplied by the author).

everywhere but just she had to leave her family and her country. But er, how should I say, it's hard to explain in English ...

**Yordanos:** Like there is still a connection.

**Sarah\*:** Yes! It's like life is very the same but it's different.

Talking through the image helped Sarah\* to share more of her story as it prompted questions and suggestions. The symbolism was also a key way to make her experience memorable. After the workshops Yordanos said, 'I remember the drawing ... Sarah\* drew a woman walking away, and from that I got to know more about her, where she was from, and how her family is still back home'. Sarah\* later represented these same experiences in the mural through a person being 'up-rooted' – where his leg was connected to the ground but then severed half way up, showing displacement and the need to put roots down in a new location (Figure 5). A camera could not have captured these particular images, and as acknowledged by Sarah\* herself, nor could words always portray her story. Therefore sketching was an effective medium in enabling an alternative, expressive form of cross-cultural communication (Afonso and Ramos 2004; Canal 2004; Heusch 2002; Pugh 2003; Ramos 2004).

### Constructing a Shared Group Identity

Symbolism was not only used to communicate personal experiences as shown in the example above, but also to construct a shared group identity. When discussing experiences of 'home' in the first workshop, Yordanos shared a story about apples and the inaccessibility of food in Sudan, and how food linked to a feeling of comfort as



FIGURE 5. Feeling uprooted. (Source: Image supplied by the author).

it was a basic human necessity. Ken then added how the availability of food contributed to people's health and safety, and Nick T. mentioned that Wellington's weekly night markets were a good way to showcase different cultures and cuisines and bring different people together. Discussions of coffee followed a similar trajectory, beginning with one participant saying that coffee made them think of home, then extending to other participants sharing the multiple diverse ways coffee is made and used around the world. Drawing upon these discussions, participants decided to paint an apple and coffee on our mural to symbolically represent the common value we placed in these resources (see Figures 6 and 7).

A shared group identity was also shaped around the weather, as during our workshop discussions of home, the wind emerged as a key feature of life in Wellington. Despite participants' diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, individuals could relate to one another's stories of the wind through their own similar climatic experiences. To collectively illustrate these nuanced sociospatial narratives, we chose to symbolise the wind on our mural through the windmills that are visible on the surrounding hills, umbrellas being blown inside-out, and hair being blown across faces (Figure 8). After travelling out of the city over the weekend Yordanos said, 'Flying

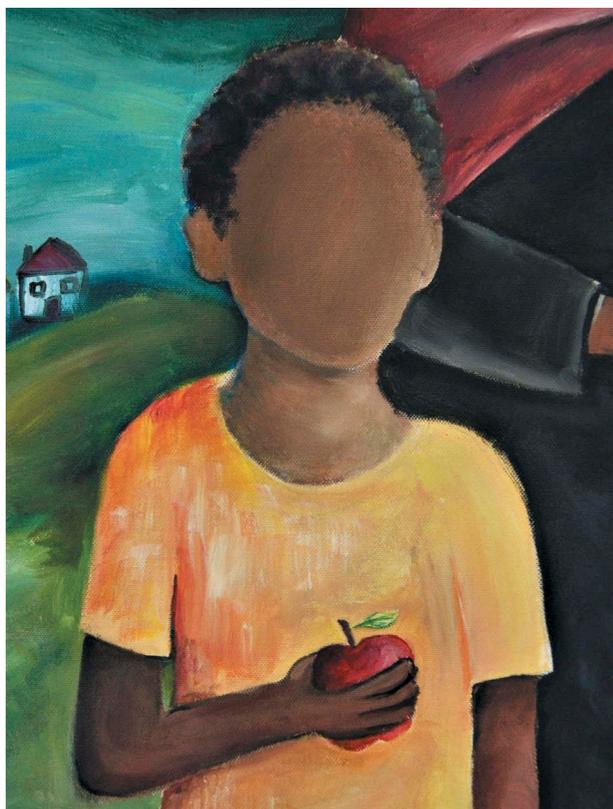


FIGURE 6. Yordanos' apple.  
(Source: Image supplied by the author).

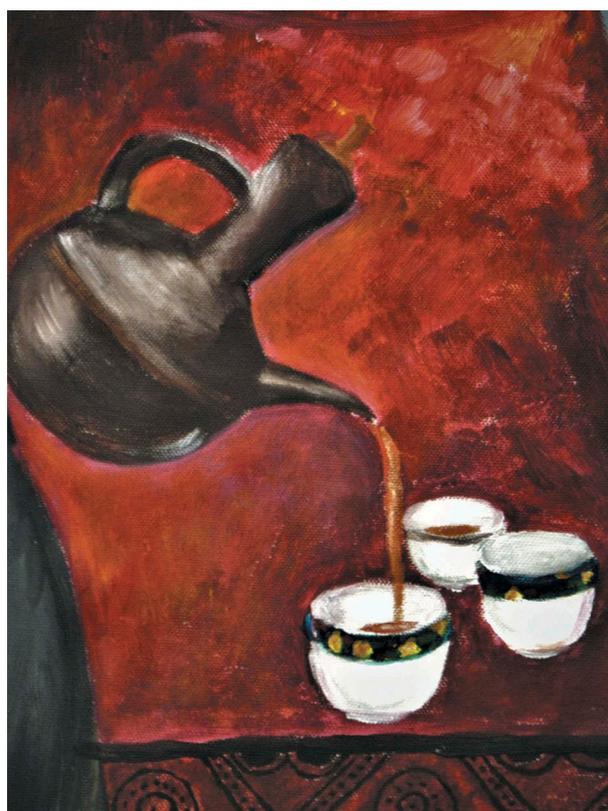


FIGURE 7. Ethiopian coffee.  
(Source: Image supplied by the author).

into Wellington on Monday I saw the windmills and was like yeah, I'm back. I'm back home'. This comment highlighted how the windmills contributed to a common Wellington identity as they were a familiar geographical and social reference point which participants could orientate themselves around and connect through.

Participants also chose to paint Wellington's well-known 'bucket fountain' sculpture on the mural to symbolise a common affiliation as 'Wellingtonians'

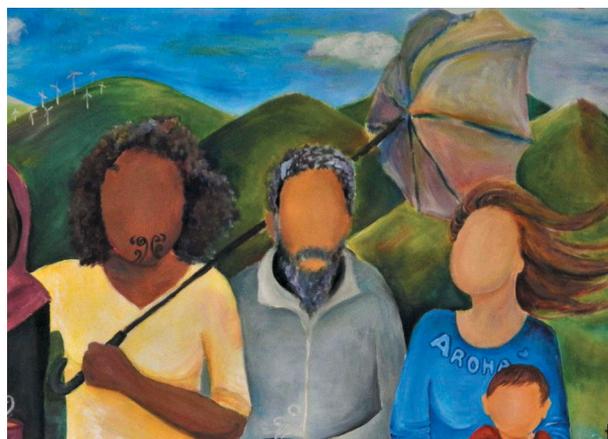


FIGURE 8. Windy Wellington.  
(Source: Image supplied by the author).

(Figure 9). The fountain was installed on Cuba Street in 1969 by architects and town planning consultants Burren and Keen to attract residents to a dwindling retail area. Whilst it is viewed as ‘embarrassing’ by some locals, it has also attracted its own fan-base due to its unique quirks – such as when the water misses the buckets and drenches pedestrians (Harper and Lister 2007).

This specific city icon was selected by participants to represent *all* residents of Wellington, as opposed to the iconic government building the ‘beehive’, which participants perceived to be exclusive to ordinary New Zealand citizens and residents.

**Amber:** ... Wellington in the background – do you mean the city?

**Yordanos:** Like something we can relate to that symbolises Wellington. Something we can connect with, like the beehive.

**Nick T:** Or the harbour, something a bit more natural.

**Yordanos:** Yeah, cause when I think of the beehive I think of the government.

**Nick T:** Yeah.

**Group:** (*Laughing*)



FIGURE 9. Our representation of the bucket fountain. (Source: Image supplied by the author).

**Yordanos:** Like Cuba Street for me I can connect with it more just because there are so many different stores within the street. Something we can all relate to ...

**Nick T:** The bucket fountain!

**Yordanos:** Yeah!

Whilst most participants agreed that the bucket fountain was something the majority of Wellingtonians could ‘relate to’, there were also extensive negotiations on the fountain’s value and ‘appropriateness’ as a city icon.

**Jamie:** It’s interesting, like, bucket fountain again, someone stole one of the buckets last year and I mean I was really pissed off about that...

**Nick T:** Were you?

**Jamie:** I was like, you, why would you do that? It’s a sculpture that everyone loves and then someone just decided to take it away, take part of it, and it was quite interesting. Then when it came back someone had done a mural inside it and painted inside it.

**Nick T:** Ah o.k. I didn’t know about that.

**Jamie:** ...And I kinda felt like oh well that’s vandalism, even if you were trying to do this painting, its vandalism. They put the bucket back but they haven’t changed it, the painting is still there. It’s interesting in a way, you could think of it like with all the corporate stuff coming in, it’s like someone’s tried to grab this icon and been like no we were here first, cause Cuba Street is so creative.

**Nick T:** I’m going to be honest, I don’t like the bucket fountain.

**Group:** (*Laughter*)

**Nick T:** I just have to say it, I think it’s pretty ugly and it’s a poor use of space. Like you know next to it there is the children’s play area and tuatara? We could better utilise that space.

**Jamie:** I totally agree, like you’ve got Plum café and people sprawl out, then the playground and bucket fountain, it’s all disjointed. I think the bucket fountain for me, growing up in Kapiti you go to Wellington for the day and you’re like ‘oh look at the buckets!’

**Nick T:** Yeah and people have grown up with it and its famous ...

**Hilary:** It’s ugly and it’s not a great use of space ...

**Nick T:** It’s weird.

**Jamie:** It is weird.

**Hilary:** ... it’s all those things but it’s kind of like ...

**Nick T:** It's appropriate.

**Hilary:** Yeah, it's got a whole lot more attached to it and would be weird if it was taken away.

**Nick T:** Yeah and I absolutely think that's why it's still there.

Despite participants' contrary views of the bucket fountain and initial uncertainty as to what or whom it represented, the group eventually came to a consensus on why it was significant to us, as current Wellington residents. As Jamie mentioned above, the painting that mysteriously appeared on one of the buckets was perceived to symbolise a resistance to the artistic Cuba Street transitioning to a more 'corporate' locale. Nic also raised this issue, saying,

It's interesting with the bucket fountain what it is and what it represented at the time, but then what that area is transitioning into at the moment and does it still feel like home anymore? Like how corporate that area is and Vodafone moving in ... it [the fountain] got put in in the 1960s and had that warmth and gentrification and now that process has happened and creative people are slowly getting pushed out of that area.

These ongoing discussions regarding tensions between government, corporate, community, and individual identities served to construct an in-group understanding of the dynamic power relations at play in the city, where changing landscapes can be forced upon people or force people out, but also where such changes may be negotiated or resisted (Massey 1991; O'Neill and Hubbard 2010; Tolia-Kelly 2008). Building on this interplay of structure and agency, we came to see the fountain as a symbol of resistance to globalisation and processes of homogenisation, and its inclusion in our mural represented a way to reclaim the city as a place that reflects the creative and diverse people living there.

After these discussions, in her post-workshop interview, Yordanos said,

I've realised that I actually do belong more. Because just talking about trying to think what it was in Wellington that we can relate to, it made it more concrete for me in a way, my idea of belonging in Wellington. Like you know when we were talking about the little bucket thing, usually I think that's just a bucket, but it's part of Wellington and it shows the connection I have with the city.

Thus, symbolism was a significant tool in constructing a shared group identity which helped individual's to connect to one another and the city and to feel as

though they belonged. The use of symbolism was particularly effective at achieving these sociospatial connections in a manner which acknowledged participant's unique experiences and knowledge, and which provided a process for education, negotiation, and eventual consensus.

## A Multilayered Narrative

As is evident in the sections above, symbolism was being used in two different ways throughout the project: to communicate individual experiences to others to highlight diversity and elicit dialogue, and to represent multiple nuanced experiences and discussions in a cohesive manner to highlight commonalities. Thus, a multilayered narrative was produced in the mural. This narrative challenged participants and viewers to reconsider shared resources and localities as having multiple meanings, uses, and value to diverse people; whilst simultaneously having the capacity to act as reference points which individuals could orientate themselves around, forge common identities from, and connect through (Author 2017; Cresswell 2004). Such depth and complexity was important to explore how concepts of home, belonging, and visibility within public space are imagined, normalised, and contested within everyday practices of inclusion and exclusion, and to counteract negative refugee stereotypes and challenge normative and exclusionary assumptions of belonging in New Zealand.

## THE CHALLENGES OF VISUAL REPRESENTATION

### Multisensory Reflections

Whilst symbolism enabled participants to develop a shared sense of home and enhanced individual sentiments of belonging, unique city symbols like the bucket fountain remained somewhat difficult to represent for Sarah\* as she had only recently arrived in New Zealand and was not familiar with Wellington. The seminar room that we used as a workspace may have contributed to this translation barrier, due to a lack of visual stimuli. Participants did find inspiration through online searches where they could draw upon existing shapes, colours, and styles of imagery; however, to inspire more creative thinking, Sarah\* suggested venturing out into the city more throughout the research process. In this manner, participants could take sketchpads or cameras and capture different images around the city to later represent in the mural. Similar ideas have been explored in O'Neill and Hubbard's (2010), and Tolia-Kelly's (2008)

participatory arts projects which involved walking, mapping, and sketching in different locations in Britain.

Participants also found it difficult to represent other sensory experiences visually – such as different smells, sounds, tastes, and feelings. In the finished mural, symbolism was used to show sound through musical notes; smell and heat through steam coming off the cups of coffee; and wind through the inside-out umbrella, windmills, and blowing hair. However, to capture a more holistic sensory experience, painting may be better explored as part of a multisensory methodology where it is combined with other activities which enable participants and audiences to engage in more embodied forms of knowledge production (Pink 2009).

### Identity Negotiation

Representing unique identities and experiences collectively also came with its challenges. In particular, tensions arose regarding representations of ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality. In the pre-workshop interviews all participants stated that Māori and/or Pākehā had a greater claim to belonging in New Zealand, or were perceived to have a greater claim to belonging, than other ethnic groups. As noted in the introduction to this article, this ‘privilege’ had historical justifications, based upon either ‘being here first’ or being recognised through the Treaty of Waitangi (Sibley and Liu 2007). Thus, Pākehā as the dominant ethnic group were generally acknowledged to be overrepresented in public life.

Yet not all Pākehā are equal or in positions of power. Several participants mentioned how leadership positions in New Zealand are male dominated, and in response to the over-representation of men in public life, the three men in the group each tried to downplay the need to represent men in the mural. There was further opposition to an image that might represent a heterosexual nuclear family, as participants worried that this might exclude non-heterosexual sexualities, as evident in the dialogue below.

**Nick T:** I like the idea of it being women and children so it doesn’t come off like a nuclear family, you know. You don’t want that.

**Hilary:** No.

**Nick T:** And women would be really good as well as they have more culturally appropriate symbolic clothing than men do I think.

**Amber:** Mmmm, but it would be good to represent men as well, because it’s Wellington in general ...

**Hilary:** Yeah.

**Nic:** Part of it is like posing a question to the audience like what is their identity? I think most people could identify with women ...

**Ken:** I think six women.

**Nick T:** I like the idea of women only.

**Hilary:** That’s really interesting, I prefer to have men.

**Tayyaba:** Me too.

**Amber:** Me too.

**Group:** (Laughing at the men wanting to only depict women and the women wanting to depict men as well).

**Hilary:** Even if it’s a boy...

**Amber:** Yeah a little boy or an old man so it doesn’t show a nuclear family if we mix up ages, to avoid that heterosexual normative family.

**Hilary:** Yeah, an old man, a little boy...

**Nick T:** I can change my mind.

This discussion illustrated the multiple intersecting identities which can shape an individual’s unique experiences of ‘belonging’, and which require constant renegotiation in relation to changing sociospatial dynamics (Ting-Toomey 2005). It also highlighted how unique sociocultural imaginings and normative assumptions can shape individual ways of seeing and representing the world. Throughout the workshops there was a perceived need to atone or compensate for gender and sexuality-based inequalities by those who were considered ‘privileged’ in Western societies – generally white, heterosexual middle-class men. Whilst feminist, queer, indigenous, and minority rights movements are important in challenging repressive patriarchal systems and negative discrimination, new repressive structures can also emerge which restrict certain interactions and obscure other identities as illustrated above. Nic also highlighted this in his post-workshop interview when he said, ‘I guess I often feel that my voice as a white male is not that important’. In a similar manner, Nick T., Nic, and Ken’s emphasis on women being more ‘relatable’ subtly replicated dominant ideas about women being non-threatening, and may perhaps have played into dominant ‘fears’ of male refugees as posing more of a threat (Rettberg and Gajjala 2016).

To compromise on the varying stances of *who* we ought to represent, the group settled on painting a mother with her child to illustrate the value participants placed on family in creating a sense of home and belonging.

We then represented the males in the image as a young boy and an old man, to avoid inadvertently depicting a heterosexual nuclear family (Figure 10). We also agreed on painting a Māori woman (identifiable by her facial ‘moko’ or tattoo), and a woman wearing a hijab, to showcase diversity in cultural and religious identity. Due to heightened fears of terrorism often linked to Muslim extremists, an increasing number of European nations have banned, or discussed banning, the wearing of various types of head scarves either nationally or in specific regions or public spaces (BBC News 2017). Thus, the hijab is particularly symbolic in terms of ‘negotiations of belonging’ within integration.

To acknowledge such diverse, complex, and changing identities and politics, we decided to leave the faces in the mural blank so that audiences would not get distracted by specific features captured by a moment in time, or by biological features that may be associated with particular ethnic groups.

**Amber:** Do you guys reckon they should have faces?

**Ken:** Blank.

**Amber:** So they could represent anyone?

**Jamie:** It could be blank or an object or something, I dunno.

**Ken:** Or a hole so people could put their faces through it!

**Group:** (Laughing)

**Jamie:** Well that’s true, you could have one of those, where you insert, put your head through it.

**Ken:** That’s not big enough though...

**Amber:** Yeah not enough space on the mural, though if we left it blank people could look at it and put their own identity to it.

**Jamie:** Exactly.



FIGURE 10. Diverse identities in Wellington. (Source: Image supplied by the author).

We hoped that viewers would see the image as representative – to imagine that those people depicted could be any one of us at various stages or transitions in our lives. In this manner, the figures were more widely relatable to diverse audiences.

Despite the initial tensions regarding identity representation, participants generally agreed that a collaborative mural was an effective approach to explore integration. Yordanos said, ‘We were all working together. We weren’t off in a corner trying to come up with ideas or anything, we all were working together, we were talking.’ Thus, the value of *co*-producing an artwork was that painting enabled individuals to contextualise their unique experiences in relation to the beliefs, feelings, and actions of others, as part of an evolving, intersubjective, sociopolitical narrative. In this manner, the finished mural portrayed a holistic view of the various factors and interrelations at play in processes of former refugee and host-society integration.

When I asked what the most challenging part of collaborative painting was, Ken said, ‘I guess committing to ideas, especially with everyone else there ... because you kind of don’t want to sit back, but you also don’t want to intrude on other people’s ideas or whatever. But we got there in the end’. Thus, having to negotiate ideas and symbols encouraged individuals to consider the position of others and to generate *shared* sociospatial understandings that were more inclusive of diversity.

## CHALLENGING HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE

### Art as Sociopolitical Voice

This collaborative, participatory approach to painting, combined with the use of symbolism to enhance cross-cultural communication, enabled participants to have a say in how they were being portrayed to the wider society – to have a voice. Through focusing on painting as an embodied, intersubjective, and contextualised practice, the mural we produced was not a static representation of a moment in time, but rather existed as a dynamic social medium through which experiences could be shared, knowledge could be constructed, and perspectives could be altered (Brodsky 2005). Thus, in a similar manner as to how we perceived the bucket fountain sculpture as a way to reclaim the city from homogenising processes, our mural became a form of sociospatial and political agency which enabled us to publically present a counter-narrative to dominant discourses about refugees. Such an outcome is similar

to the counter-narratives being produced by elderly street artists in Lisbon (Lorenz 2015) and prisoners in Lithuania (Hicks, Carroll, and Shanker 2017), where marginalised and misperceived individuals are raising their voices and visibly reshaping their identities and the identity of their cities through visual story-telling and urban transformations.

Such symbolic research dissemination was particularly important for individuals like Sarah\*, who wished to remain anonymous to protect herself from public scrutiny, yet still perceived it to be important to educate society on the experiences of refugees to counteract negative stereotypes. As viewers of Sarah's\* figurative artwork, we may not comprehend the exact extent of her journey as a refugee, but we can see that she feels uprooted and displaced. From this portrayal we can learn a little more about what Sarah\* has experienced, and for those of us who have ever felt uprooted, disconnected, or unsure of the future ourselves, we can empathise with her through our common feelings and emotions. Thus, Sarah\* is no longer represented simply a statistic or under the label 'refugee' – she is a person, someone with a story to share, someone who *feels*, and someone who we can relate to.

The comment book, which I left on display alongside the mural after our exhibition, highlighted the potential for such figurative art-based research dissemination to capture public interest and generate social support and wider dialogue on key integration issues. One person said, 'I thought it's [a] creative and insightful way of capturing interaction between former refugees and the host communities. As a former refugee, I can relate to some of the points you made as well as the portrait itself'. Another comment said, 'I think the painting is really good and after looking at it I was really interested to learn more and find out what all the symbols meant'. This curiosity is a key step in creating a more inclusive and equitable society, as it can enhance cross-cultural interaction and understanding and act as a catalyst for individual, social, and spatial change (Harvey 2003; Lefebvre 1991; Wilson 2016).

### Self-Confidence

However, painting also restricted social and political agency for some participants who were less confident with their technical painting skills and their ability to symbolically represent their ideas. Hilary claimed that,

I think it's more than writing which is great, it engages people in a different way. But I suppose what comes in with the painting a little bit is judgement and concern about not

being good enough to do that. I know that's what I felt a little bit, which I guess isn't that helpful necessarily, it's quite a fear. I guess it's about feeling okay to express in that form. It's something that I love to do but I struggle to do it well enough to be public about it.

The majority of participants claimed that, despite doubting their own artistic skills, the emphasis I put on 'just having fun' and there being 'no wrong way' to paint helped them to overcome some of their initial hesitations. Tayyaba said

As I was doing it I just thought 'Oh man, I'm so bad at drawing.' But as you let go of that and just have fun and you know, play around with the colours, it's a good experience, just letting go of those confined barriers in your life.

Yordanos also claimed that,

It was fun. Like I'm not really a social person, I don't go out of my way to join clubs or anything like that because I feel like there's a pressure, I dunno, I feel like there is pressure if I did that. But with a workshop like this where everyone is different and we share our own stories, it makes it easier for me to participate.

Painting and symbolic forms of expression will not be suitable for everyone, and individuals will need to explore their own levels of comfort and set their own personal challenges within research processes. However, the participants who attended the most workshops in this project reported feeling less pressured and less concerned about the judgement of others. Such reflections support other studies which have noted that time is significant in establishing trust and empowering individuals within participatory arts-based research (Ferguson 2011; O'Neill and Hubbard 2010).

Whilst this painting project was too small to create wide social change in regard to the way in which Wellingtonians and other New Zealanders welcome former refugees, the new knowledge and sociospatial connections participants developed throughout the painting process did help them to feel more appreciated, welcome, and confident in participating in a multicultural society. There is potential for similar cross-cultural projects to be implemented on a larger scale through more comprehensive, longitudinal studies. Such projects could involve participants from different neighbourhood groups working together, or groups in different cities collaborating to share their artwork through a nation-wide exhibition. Thus,

participatory research processes which utilise painting and symbolism as tools for communication and social connection could enhance cross-cultural interaction and education in New Zealand, and counteract negative stereotypes being perpetuated through dominant media, political, and social rhetoric.

## CONCLUSION

The process of uniting unique experiences and identities symbolically within a collective artwork reflected the challenges of wider processes of social integration, whereby unity is often pursued at the expense of diversity. Whilst the polysemic approach that we used in the painting workshops required negotiation and some flexibility from participants, the finished mural portrayed an inclusive, multilayered narrative. This narrative told a story of differences and similarities, encounters and interactions, shared geographic and social landmarks, and a vibrant experience of a welcoming multicultural home and city.

The mural also illustrated a collaborative journey to portray the complexity of this city through a shared creative process. Thus, as other urban art projects with marginalised individuals have shown (Golden, Rice, and Kinney 2002; Hicks, Carroll, and Shanker 2017; Lorenz 2015; Walker and Hansen 2017), participatory painting offered an effective way of challenging normative assumptions of people and places, deconstructing negative stereotypes, and enhancing emotional, social, and geographic connections between participants. In this manner, the project began to address Putnam's (2007) challenge for diverse societies to create a more capacious sense of 'we'. The depth of symbolism also added intrigue for those who viewed the mural, sparking an interest in refugee integration which could potentially act as a catalyst for wider cross-cultural interaction, education, and social and spatial change.

## NOTES

- [1] The term 'host society' is used to refer to settled Wellington residents who, upon the arrival of newcomers, have the responsibility of making space for them and enabling them to also become good 'hosts' (Kale 2017).
- [2] The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who, 'Owing to wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [sic] nationality

and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [sic] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his [sic] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it' (UNHCR 1996). Despite the masculine pronouns, this statement applies to all genders. Individuals who meet this definition are eligible to be selected by the UN to be resettled in a host country which is signatory to the convention. The term 'former refugee' is used within this article to acknowledge a change in status from being a refugee to a New Zealand permanent resident upon arrival.

- [3] 'Social integration' is a process of newcomers and long-term residents coming together to share their cultures and ideas, to learn from one another, and to acknowledge how diversity can enhance our communities and inspire future innovation and development (Strang and Ager 2010). This definition is in contrast to 'assimilation', which is a process of newcomers replacing their prior traditions, cultures, and ways of life with the culture and etiquette of their new home (Blunt and Dowling 2006).
- [4] The bilateral Treaty of Waitangi was signed in 1840 by Captain William Hobson and several other English settlers, and between 43 and 46 Māori chiefs (Waitangi Tribunal 2016). The treaty is considered a legal foundation for New Zealand sovereignty and provides an emotional foundation for 'nationhood' (defined as a collective sovereign identity) (Sibley and Liu 2007).

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