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# **Making Murals in the Marshall Islands and Hawai'i – an exploration of the possibilities and limits of artistic agency in a community arts education project.**

Shari Sabeti, University of Edinburgh.

## **Abstract:**

This article explores the painting of two murals as part of a community arts education project aimed at understanding Marshallese children's experiences of displacement and belonging. It describes the process and outcome of mural making workshops conducted in two schools: one in Honolulu attended by migrant Marshallese children; the other with a community of Marshall Islanders, internally displaced as a result of the effects of nuclear testing on their home atoll. Engaging with anthropological approaches to art (Gell 1998; Schacter 2014), the article seeks to address important questions around the agency of these murals in the context of community arts education. What do these murals do, both in the process of coming into being, and as finished products? How did the images depicted on them take shape? In what ways were the artist's intentions, and the children's input, enabled and limited in this process? Paying detailed attention to these questions, the article argues for a nuanced understanding of what a successful community mural-making process might look like.

## **Keywords:**

community arts education; Marshall Islands; displacement; nuclear legacy; artistic agency.

## **Author Biography:**

Shari Sabeti is a Chancellor's Fellow at the School of Education, University of Edinburgh. Her research interests focus on arts and cultural heritage education across a variety of sites, including museums, schools, community and commercial contexts. She has written about creative writing, literary and visual adaptation, and gallery education practices, paying close attention to the perspective of artists and creative practitioners through ethnographic and arts-based methods.

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## **Making Murals in the Marshall Islands and Hawai'i – an exploration of the possibilities and limits of artistic agency in a community arts education project.**

Shari Sabeti, University of Edinburgh.

### **Introduction.**

It is a sweltering Saturday afternoon in May 2017 and I am standing looking along a stretch of road in downtown Honolulu. The pavement is peppered with figures holding thick pens up to a long grey wall. Fluorescent traffic cones are interspersed at regular intervals along the road side to prevent them straying into the busy traffic and to warn drivers that there are children around, that there is something going on. Underfoot dry leaves, gathered at the edges of the wall, crunch as the children move along its perimeter. It is otherwise surprisingly quiet. The wall rounds a corner between two major roads and as it swerves it diminishes in height until it is only a foot or so off the ground. Along it, painted in black, are large outlines of a face repeating itself. There is a mouth, a nose and there are eyes but one face becomes another. These faces stare out like masks. As the wall shortens they appear to sink into the ground, their mouths, then their noses disappearing into the pavement. Above them a steel mesh fence rises and borders the campus of Central Middle School<sup>i</sup> one of two public middle schools in the business area of the city. Each figure concentrates hard as they place dot, after coloured dot, into neatly outlined spaces on the wall's surface. I too, take part in this pointillism, choosing a blank space to fill with coloured dots of my own. I experiment with making them bigger or smaller, closer to each other or further apart. I move into and away from the wall to look at my handy-work from a variety of perspectives, but also to look at the mural we are making together. At what distance do the dots become a colour? At what point do the spaces become a face? What does it look like from the other side of the street? Sometimes the wall is the size of your body; sometimes you have to reach or bend to paint on it. It is hard to keep to the dots, to resist the urge to write something with my paint pen, but there are rules to follow. In fact, there are two rules: only paint dots and never paint two juxtaposing sections in the same colour. It has been hard work getting to this point and I, like the others, find something relaxing and therapeutic about applying one dot after another into spaces on a wall. At the end of the afternoon, on a tiny, discrete piece of grey too small for a face, we sign our names in a colour of our choice and we are finished.

### **The Marshallese Arts Project.**

This was the last of three mural painting workshops held in different locations and forming one strand of an arts education project funded through the UK Research Councils' Global Challenges Research Fund. The broad aim of the project was to use the arts, and in particular arts education practice, to explore experiences of displacement, belonging and identity in three distinct communities of young Marshall Islanders.<sup>ii</sup> As well as mural painting, the project team conducted poetry workshops and photo walks with the children. These participatory arts-based activities were led by three artists: Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, a Marshallese poet and activist; Solomon Enos, a native Hawaiian multi-media artist; and Christine Germano, a Canadian educator and photographer. Like the other projects discussed in this Special Issue, the premise of our methodological approach was that the

arts provide a 'transformative and relational' space in which to explore issues of displacement, and that artistic outputs are in turn able to 'reach a wider population, beyond academic communities, connecting ordinary citizens, artists, migrants, practitioners, researchers and policy makers' (O'Neill 2011: 30). Poetry, painting and photography were also regarded as particularly fruitful and appropriate ways of engaging with children, the main focus of this project. The murals which form the subject of this article were meant as public facing legacies to document the work of these children and highlight their under-represented voices. The process of mural making itself was also conceptualised (as mural painting often is) as both democratic and community building (see, for example, Conrad 1998).

This article will focus in detail on two of the murals produced in collaboration with Enos: one painted in Honolulu with Marshallese children whose families had migrated to the United States; and an earlier mural painted at Ejit Elementary School in the Marshall Islands, with children who were descendants of the Bikini atoll community displaced by the effects of nuclear testing in the 1940s. Through ethnographic vignettes, observations and interviews, it will describe the process of mural making and the claims participants made about the murals produced, focusing in particular on how the artist conceptualised his role in that process. It contributes to critical understandings of participatory and arts-based methods in the context of migration research by taking a sideways approach: I look at the mural painting workshops through anthropological debates about art (Gell 1998) and, more specifically, street art (Schacter 2014). I aim to elucidate the ways in which Enos understood and enacted notions of participation, community, and public legacy, and where the limits of his (and the children's) artistic agency were reached. Before I go on to do this, however, it will be necessary to explain some of the historical context for the project and the very specific case of the Marshall Islands with respect to displacement.

### **The Marshall Islands and Displacement.**

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is situated in the North Pacific Ocean and is comprised of twenty-nine low-lying coral atolls and five volcanic islands. It has a long history of occupation and colonisation and in 1947, following the defeat of Japan in the Second World War, it came under the control of the United States (US) as a United Nations Mandated Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. In 1979 the Marshall Islands became self-governing, and in 1986 entered into a Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the US which gave its citizens the right to live and work in the United States without a visa or resident card. The COFA (which is due to end in 2023) has resulted in over one third of the population of the RMI (approximately 22,000 people) relocating to the US in the last three decades (Duke 2014). The most popular destination is the state of Hawai'i where an estimated 9,000 Marshallese currently live; 44% of these are fourteen years of age or under (US Census Bureau, 2015). While COFA migrants are entitled to education and housing, other rights, for example accessing the healthcare system or the right to vote, are not necessarily extended to Marshallese born outside the US. As a result of overburdened resources and services in Hawai'i, many Marshallese (as well as other 'Micronesians') have become stigmatized in the media, live in abject poverty and suffer daily discrimination

(Lyons and Tengan 2015; Ratliffe 2018). Not only is the reality of life as a COFA migrant difficult, but the arrangement itself (as I go on to show) is based on what is essentially an exploitative relationship between the two nations and has come at considerable cost to the Marshallese.

Between 1946 and 1958 the United States tested 67 atomic and thermonuclear bombs in the northern atolls of the Marshall Islands. The most famous of these tests was Castle Bravo, the hydrogen bomb detonated on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1954 at Bikini Atoll. This bomb was 1000 times more powerful than the Hiroshima atomic bomb, and two and half times stronger than was expected. The people of Bikini had been evacuated in advance from their islands with the promise that they could eventually return; however, the enormous fallout from this test also contaminated nearby inhabited atolls – including, Rongelap, Ailingae and Utirik. In 1972 Bikini islanders were resettled on Bikini but were removed again (this time to Kili and Ejit) in 1978 when radiation levels were revealed to be too high (Barker 2004: 45). Bikini is now deemed to be uninhabitable for an estimated 30,000 years.

The testing in the Marshall Islands has severely damaged the health of nuclear fallout survivors and their descendants. These communities are rife with cancers, birth defects and other hereditary diseases at levels that are far higher than those found in unexposed Marshallese communities (see Johnston 2015). In addition, Marshallese today are faced with urban overcrowding in southern atolls, the depletion of their natural resources, a dependence on imported Western food, and a poor health and education infrastructure. The Compact of Free Association established a \$150m fund to compensate the Marshallese for damage done by the nuclear testing program. In exchange the Marshall Islanders had to abandon various lawsuits they had brought against the US government, and to agree to the continued use of Kwajalein island as a military base and ballistic missile testing range. The Marshall Islands are now also blighted by rising sea levels, king tides and fierce storms that are destroying buildings near the shoreline, subsuming seaside graveyards and damaging indigenous plants, such as coconut palms, on which many Marshall Islanders still depend for their livelihood. As a consequence of this they are faced by the prospect of a further, mass displacement as their low-lying islands disappear into the sea. As Ataji Batos, a Marshallese senator has noted bitterly of their relationship with the United States, ‘We’ve got the trust, and they’ve got the territory’ (cited in Gard 2017: 5).

#### **‘Aloha is lakwe and lakwe is Aloha’ - the Honolulu mural as symbol.**

Central Middle School has a diverse population of approximately 420 students and approximately thirty per cent of the school population are of ‘Micronesian’ origin – with children identifying as Chuukese or Marshallese in background. The majority of the children who attend this school live in government housing projects, affordable housing complexes, and/or multi-generational homes. Others reside in temporary or homeless shelters. Some, according to the School Principal, are ‘unsheltered, and are living inside parks or on the side of the street’ (Interview, May 2017). The painting on the perimeter wall of the school, with which twenty-five Marshallese children were involved, was regarded by the project team as

the most successful of the three murals made. Some of that success derives from what the mural looks like: it is attractive, pleasing to the eye (see Figure 1). It is 'ornamental' in the two ways described by Rafael Schacter in his work with street artists: it is both an 'accessory or adjunct – a secondary element on a primary surface', in this case the perimeter wall of the school; and it has 'underlying decorative principles', a value has been placed on 'unity, proportion, scale, contrast, balance and rhythm' (2014: 21-22). Our feelings of success also derive, in part, from the struggles involved in completing it: in organising the event of its painting; in persuading the school it was a good idea; and in getting the disaffected children we had worked with to spend their Saturday back at school applying dots to a wall. Sitting behind a makeshift desk loaded with rows of paint pens that morning, I had no idea if any of them would turn up.



Figure 1: The Honolulu mural.

But the mural, like other examples of 'ornament' Schacter writes about, is not just decorative, it is also communicative – it is trying to say something. The artist, Solomon Enos, explained it from his perspective as a coming together of the Hawai'ian greeting 'Aloha' and its Marshallese equivalent, 'lakwe':

And this could be like a temporary title for the mural, "Aloha is iakwe and iakwe is aloha" cause they're really saying the same thing. My understanding of "iakwe" translated is, "Wow, you're really beautiful, like a rainbow", or maybe another way to say it is, "Wow, you are no less mysterious than a rainbow"... "Aloha" is "You are in the presence of the breath", again in the presence of another living creature, "You are in the presence of a consciousness, how unique and wonderful. You are in the presence of a mystery. And we're all mysteries." And so, it's really the merging of those kinds of ideas, it's "Aloha is lakwe", and those continuous faces are infusing this idea with a sense of the collective – we actually really *are* a collective organism. And the illusion is that we are individuals.

*(Interview, May 2017)*

For Enos the mural could be read as symbolic: it refers to the collective identity of Hawai'ians and the Marshallese as Pacific islanders with equivalent understandings of sociality. For him, the racial tensions experienced by Marshallese in contemporary Hawai'i are a contradiction of this and he drew on his own native Hawai'ian ancestry when speaking about the general aims of his work:

I'm trying to translate and to help to visualise some of my ancient wisdom, and to translate it in such a way that it can be applied today. One simple thing, for example, would be simply: one of the most powerful technologies we have is empathy. And in Hawai'i when you live on an island, or especially when you're travelling in a canoe, doesn't matter how amazing the canoe is, if the people on the canoe hate each other, that canoe's not going anywhere.

*(Interview, May 2017)*

The design of this mural, then, attempts to weave the Marshallese and Hawai'ians together in empathy, to put them into relation with each other through a depiction of their traditional greetings which contain indigenous knowledge and wisdoms based on a non-Western, non-individualistic sense of identity. The brows on top of the continuous faces echoed *iakwe* and were meant to represent 'a series of rainbows', Enos told me. The mural is not only beautiful in its form, but behind it there is also a beautiful idea.

In his book, *Ornament and Order*, Schacter argues that the ornamental nature of what he terms 'independent public art' can be either 'consensual' (as 'street art' often is) or 'agonistic' (as is common with 'graffiti'). Consensual ornamentation's actions:

will all be linked by a desire for inclusion within the public sphere as a whole, by a certain conceptual openness that seeks a harmonious relation with its recipient, and a visual decipherability (rather than visual fixity) which often (but of course not always) works through a figural rather than textual modality (2014:47).

On the other hand, 'agonistic ornamentation' shows only:

a desire for a very partial rather than wholesale inclusion in the public sphere, a conceptual and formal obfuscation which if not simply dissensual, illustrates a combative modality of communication, and a style which often (but again not always) works through textual rather than figural form (2014: 48).

The Honolulu mural clearly fits neatly within the former category in literal and symbolic ways; while it can be interpreted as a critique of the current state of play for Marshallese migrants, it also attempts to persuade its audience/the public, of an alternative. It is also 'consensual' in the shape it assumes, working with the long wall and following its contours. Furthermore, the mural was not the outcome of illicit activity (the subject of Schacter's ethnography) but a commissioned, carefully controlled, legal practice carried out with the permission of the school, and in broad daylight. In this broader sense, then, it was also consensual.

### **The Honolulu mural as dynamic index of agencies.**

So far, I have discussed Enos's eloquent explanations of the mural's symbolism, but within his account of the making of the mural, there are also claims about its dynamism. Works of art, as Alfred Gell has argued, are not static, representational objects; art is a 'system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' (1998: 6). The nature of the art object is a function of 'the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded' (1998: 7). In the case of a collaborative, community mural, this is perhaps an easy concept to grasp as questions that explore Gell's 'art-like relations' abound. Who made, and who owns, this mural? How did it come to exist, and what inspired it? Why has it taken the particular form, colour, shape that it has? What relations has it brought about? What does it do, both in the process of coming into being, and now that it is complete? Who is acting through it, and when? Who is being acted upon and how?

In Enos's account of mural making, some of this 'action' resides in the process itself. The simplicity of the technique he employs (drawing outlines which are then coloured in by a community like a giant 'colouring book') serves a dual function: it makes participation in the artwork accessible to members of that community and it is a means of collective action. He said:

it becomes an example of how individually what we might do might not seem significant but collectively look at how beautiful it is.

*(Interview, May 2017)*

The way in which the artist conceptualises, and plans for, what he claims is happening, and in particular, how he operates the concept of 'beauty' in all of this, is important. The work of an individual (painting dots) is a compulsive and contemplative process but it appears (as outcome/product) to be simple and bland. However, the 'beauty' only emerges when everyone's dots are looked at together. The coming into being of the beautiful, in other words, is orchestrated by the artist for a particular reason: the beauty of the mural is a *result of* the kind of collective social action in which individuals play a part in the service of the whole they are not able to see until it is complete. And, despite their absorption in the individual task of dot painting:

everybody [is also] collectively looking at each other in the peripheral vision, painting the mural, saying, "Wow, everybody is here painting the mural!". It's safe, it feels good.

To use Gell's terminology: the index (the beautiful Honolulu mural) contains a variety of artists' agencies (Enos's, the children's, the project team's, the teachers', indeed all those who painted dots on the wall) but in the process of being painted the *idea of making a mural together* has also exerted some influence on all of us who painted it. Both the physical presence of others (in our peripheral vision), and the work of those others (in filling in dots further down the wall) formed part of the mural making experience. Furthermore, the mural's agency is redoubled once it is complete, for it will become, as Enos explained, 'months later, ... years later...this beacon for: "See? We can make beautiful things".' It will continue to act on those who have made it, reminding them of that process and its



outcome, but the 'we' also suggests others/the public who drive or walk by the wall in the future. 'As an artist', he told me:

I can create all sorts of eye candy, or like a flower, I can create something beautiful, that draws people in. And when they get close, we can have an exchange, then they can take a little bit of pollen and pass it on.

*(Interview, May 2017)*

Here he envisages artwork as a kind of Gellian trap; the mural is deliberately attractive and therefore has the potential for engaging passers-by:

Anthropologists have long recognized that social relationships, to endure over time, have to be founded on 'unfinished business'. The essence of exchange, as a binding social force, is the delay, or lag, between transactions which, if the exchange relation is to endure, should never result in perfect reciprocation, but always in some renewed, residual, imbalance. So it is with patterns; they slow perception down, or even halt it, so that the decorated object is never fully possessed at all, but is always in the process of becoming possessed. This, I argue, sets up a biographical relation – an unfinished exchange – between the decorated index and the recipient (1998: 81).

And yet, Enos aims, not just for an exchange with the recipients or viewers of the mural, but for a transmission of its message. He wants the 'pollen' to be passed on. The beauty of the mural is threefold: it contains a beautiful idea about Pacific empathy; it is the outcome of an empathetic process, and it is strategic – it will attract others (from outside the original process) into that empathetic understanding of collective humanity.

But Enos also wanted the children's voices to be directly present in this mural; the dots that form part of its decorative pattern were not what he originally intended. In the murals painted in the Marshall Islands, as I will go on to show in the next section, the children wrote poetry and messages onto the walls. However, in downtown Honolulu the risk of anything resembling graffiti was too great and at the principal's request Enos asked the children to paint dots rather than words into the spaces. Its situation as a *school* wall, and a school notorious for its more troubled community of youth, also played a part in how the mural turned out. As Schacter notes graffiti has remained, a 'politically volatile visual form within the domain of the street' (2014b: 162) making visible tensions around 'notions of public and private space, of use-value and commercial rights' (2014a: 42). The very fact that the children were given permission to make marks on school property at all was remarkable and exciting for many of them, despite the highly controlled nature of the activity (no mess pens, strict rules, the colouring book template). In the workshops that preceded the mural painting and guided by the Marshallese slam poet, Kathy Jetnir-Kijiner, these children wrote candid poetry about their experiences of racism, bullying and belonging. However, such raw and emotional outputs, as well as the presence of text (rather than images) on the school's external walls, was perceived to be perhaps *too* agentic, not so much a 'technology of enchantment' (Gell 1992) but a direct and 'ugly' assault on passers-by. Enos had to carefully orchestrate the creative process to ensure a harmonious relationship with the public, and the school, without undoing the aims of the project.

### **Faces, Flags, Bibles and Bombs – the Ejit Mural.**

Sitting on a chair in the shade of one of the school buildings at Ejit Elementary School in the Marshall Islands, I survey the scene around me. Buildings are arranged around a small, square patch of grass which is clearly worn out in places. The school is composed of the remnants of old farm buildings and one newly built block. The new block contains two small classrooms and a staff office. A stone plaque on the white wall depicts the flags of the Marshall Islands and United States side by side and informs me that: 'Project Funds [were] Provided by the Compact of Free Association as Amended between The Republic of the Marshall Islands and The United States of America'. A steel mesh fence surrounds the school – another donation it seems, 'given to the people of the Marshall Islands by the U.S. Navy Seabees'. I sit opposite another chair, empty and awaiting the arrival of the School Principal who has agreed to join me for an interview. It is windy today and the Marshallese flag on the pole nearby blows this way and that; later on, when I listen to my interview recording, I can hear the sound of its thick material ruffling and unruffling at various points throughout our conversation. What draws my attention, however, is Solomon Enos who is sitting under a black awning by one side of the school, nothing but sea in the distance. He is surrounded by children in orange school t-shirts intently watching what he is doing. One child sits in a chair opposite him across a white plastic table; she is perfectly still. He is drawing her portrait. There is a look of intense concentration on his face; his eyes flit constantly between the child he is observing and the white page he is drawing on; sweat pours down his brow. He draws face after face as children line up to have their images rendered. In awe of his energy and attentiveness, I am relieved to see the Principal walking across the grass, her *muumuu* flying in the wind, apologising to me for the delay.

Back in Honolulu and reflecting on the project as a whole, Enos told me:

The other thing I was able to do [in the Marshall Islands] which was really important, I think, [...] was to sit one-on-one with each child and spend about six to seven minutes doing a portrait just for them. And as I did their portrait I talked about Hawai'i and how we have "Aloha" meaning "You are in the presence of another face, you're in the presence of another mystery...". So when I sat and I did their portrait, I said, "Wow! Look at how beautiful you are. Look at your nose and look at your eyes and look at how unique...and when I'm drawing your nose, I'm drawing your ancestor's nose, and I'm honouring – I want to honour all the people who made you who you are. And when I'm looking at you it's like I'm seeing a thousand million people". [...] And having that interaction on top of everything else we did, of drawing those faces was also research for me, because I incorporated all those faces into the mural we did at Honolulu.

*(Interview, May 2017)*

In the light of his comments, the Honolulu mural can be regarded as the end point of both a research and artistic process: the merging portraits of Marshallese children, drawn one after another, are the prototypes for the last mural painted. While Enos's agency (as well as the

children's) was limited in some ways in the painting of the Honolulu mural, the birth of this pan-Pacific image, deliberately conceived to unite Hawai'i with the Marshall Islands, can be traced back to both his experiences and his own particular artistic vision. Enos conceived the Honolulu mural to bring communities together; in Ejit, however, he found that there was no need for this kind of action. Not only did the islanders already have a strong sense of community, but they *also* had an image which did the work of community building for them.

### **'Everything is in the Hands of God'.**

The Elementary School on Ejit island has approximately 60 students (K through to Grade 8) and is a focal point of the tightly knit community of three hundred Bikini descendants who have been displaced there by historical nuclear testing. While the school is part of the RMI Public School System (PSS), islanders affected by nuclear testing are also represented by a council, and legislative leaders commonly referred to as 'KBE local government' (Kili, Bikini, Ejit) and a 'Bikini Town Hall' situated on Majuro atoll. The Ejit community (composed, the Principal told me, of the families, the church and the school) has to follow the edicts of the RMI Ministry of Education but can also call upon the local government for assistance, resources or support. There is one Protestant Church on the island that is attended by the whole community at least twice a week. The Principal, like most of the other teachers at the school, lives amongst the children that she teaches. Indeed, one of the children described the relationship to school in this way: 'My teachers are like my parents and my parents are like my teachers.' Like other schools in the RMI, the students here all wear a printed t-shirt carrying the school slogan and an image on the back. The school shirt here was designed by the first Head Teacher of the school and is bright orange; the Principal elaborated:

Orange, like their shirt, reminds them of the Bravo shot – the explosion. When it exploded it was like an orange light. So, it reminds them of how the bomb exploded in the area of Bikini, and the design is a reminiscence of the first day of the Bomb.

*(Interview, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2017)*

The image on the back is of a mushroom cloud rising out of the Bible which is draped in the Marshallese flag. Above it in white are the words: *Men Otemjej Rej Ilo Pein Anij* (Everything is in the Hands of God). This design, the Principal explained, was adopted so that the children never forget where they come from and why they are no longer there. 'Every March 1<sup>st</sup>,' she explained, 'they will remember that it was the day it happened'. 'Everything is in the hands of God' is the response that Chief Juda is reported to have given when Commodore Ben Wyatt asked him if the Bikini people would be willing to leave their island so nuclear testing could begin, 'For the Good of Mankind and to end all world wars' (Niedenthal 2001: 2). What this image literally depicts is the way in which the event of the bomb itself is situated within, and attributed to, the Christian belief of Bikini islanders:

We always tell them [the children] to think about it, about how they were migrated here. If it was not for their ancestors, they wouldn't be here. Because their ancestors had a good idea that everything is under God's hands, *Men Otemjej Rej Ilo Pein Anij*. So, everything is in God's hands; they never think of anything else.

*(Interview with School Principal, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2017)*

While postcolonial critiques and commentaries on what happened at Bikini atoll tend to imply that the Americans used the islanders' Christian beliefs (in turn a result of nineteenth century American missionary expeditions) against them (see, for example, Dibblin 1988: 21; Kiste 1974: 28), this is not the way the community itself sees, or represents, what happened. That is not to say that the consequences of the bomb (health effects, displacement, poverty) are not considered to be injustices suffered by the community, nor that there isn't a deeply felt sadness for their lost homeland. But for them, the image is not an ironic critique of their own religious beliefs and faith, nor is it one of anger: it is a fact of life, a symbol of their identity as Bikinians and a reminder of why they are where they are and why that place is not home or *lamoren* (mother/home land). When we first arrived at the school, we were taken aback by this image; placed on the back of an elementary school t-shirt, it was - for us - an example of what Schacter describes as an 'agonistic' ornament. However, we came to understand how this image worked in, and for, the community as the claims that were made for its agency became evident. It is important to the adults in Ejit that the younger generation do not forget their history, something that they are anxious will happen without constant reminders. Hence, the work of the teachers often focuses on constructing family trees; on encouraging the children to ask questions:

About why, how, when and where...how do they feel about moving away from their own land...?

*(Interview with School Principal, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2017)*

Given that the children at the school had all been born in Majuro atoll and none had ever visited Bikini, I asked the Principal about their relationship to it as a place; she replied:

Well, they're kind of young and they are not really thinking about it, but when their parents talk about it, they will know that they're still there.

The Principal also told me that some of the children 'go on the internet and they see'. If one types 'Bikini atoll' into an internet search engine images of nuclear detonations and the massive crater left by the Bravo shot abound. The orange image of the Bravo shot, the 'dirtiest' and largest of the bombs detonated on Bikini atoll, is striking but it is important to note that it took place in 1954, eight years *after* the Bikini islanders had been evacuated from their islands. Though it vapourized three out of the twenty-six islands that comprised Bikini atoll and spread its fallout over other inhabited atolls, it was not the initial reason why the 167 Bikinians living on the atoll were removed. It is, however, the reason why none of them can ever go back. In this sense, the orange mushroom cloud is a symbol, not of their original displacement, but their permanent exile from their land. As Senator Jeton Anajain of Rongelap atoll (which was *not* evacuated in 1954 but contaminated by fallout from the Bravo shot) explained to a US Congressional Committee in 1985:

Land ownership is uniquely significant under Marshallese custom. The ownership of land is vested in the family, including in unborn generations. Landless people are outcasts, second-class citizens. When my people of Rongelap, and others like us, are uprooted from our traditional islands the fabric of our social structure is torn... Our lands are unreplaceable and without price. There *are* no comparable sales since there are no sales... (cited in Dibblin 1988:67)



additional spaces for the children to write into. In the latter, the human face doubling as the mushroom cloud is split into halves that seemingly represent ‘death’ (a skull, nuclear weapons, barbed wire) and ‘life’ (a fleshed-out profile, fruit, plants, water). For Enos such an image symbolised the possibility of growing a future out of a legacy of death and destruction, of telling what he described as ‘the next story’. The colours chosen still follow the thematic scheme of the children’s t-shirts and emphasise the man-made nuclear blast but for Enos at least, the idea of a different future, seemed important.



Figures 5-7: The Ejit mural.

When the children were given the opportunity to pick up paint pens, the majority of them chose to *write into* the spaces provided by Enos’s outlines of trees and birds. Overall, there were three types of writing: some inscribed the poems they had written in Jetnil-Kijiner’s workshops (most were in Marshallese); others wrote stories or memories about their families or ancestors; and a surprising number of them wrote messages either to each other, their community or to us, the project team (see Figures 6 and 7). Not only were the images represented chosen by members of the school community but the children’s desire to break out of genres such as poetry or story, to write more immediate messages to others present at the mural painting itself is noteworthy. As a result, several influences are visible on the wall: the Principal’s; the children’s; the history of this community and the icons/images of their displacement and exile; and the project itself – the wall acting as a document of the exchanges that took place within it.

### Conclusion.

Timothy Drescher, discussing the evolution of community murals in the United States, draws a historical distinction between public art and murals; public art, he argues, is done ‘for people, not by them or with them’ (cited in Embrey 2014). Murals, on the other hand, came about through democratic processes of meeting with the community and collectively deciding what was to be represented. However, in the light of recent shifts in funding from government to private foundations, such participatory or democratic processes have disappeared. It is now the artist who designs and plans, ratifies with the funder and then checks with the community; this is not ‘participatory’ in the same way. As a result, he argues, we now have depictions of ‘multicultural handshakes, doves, rainbows’. ‘I don’t

have a problem with those images,' he goes on, 'It's what's *not* there that's the problem' (emphasis in original; cited in Embrey 2014). While it is tempting to see the Honolulu mural in this way - its rainbow colours and pleasing pattern make it the most 'consensual' and the most 'beautiful' of the murals – it is also important to acknowledge that Enos was operating in a field that he was not entirely in control of. The mural in Honolulu does indeed decorate the school wall; it arguably also presents a particularly harmonious image of the school and its migrant population within the broader community, rendering them unthreatening. The relations involved in its process of coming into being (the project, the artist, the school, the Principal, the city of Honolulu and the status of Marshallese migrants within it) though instrumental in making it look as it does, appear to disappear in its final iteration. The children's participation in its painting was, in many ways, a limited one and words from their poems were not inscribed on the wall. One can't help but reflect on the irony of this. The city of Honolulu is both a place where Marshallese children are marginalized (regarded as 'troubled youth' in a difficult school) *and* the city in which Enos has his primary reputation – the place where his oeuvre is at its most visible. And yet he had a strong belief in the democratic *process* of mural making as intrinsically educative and transformative. He told me that when you engage in mural painting you are:

Entering a space where we as educators are concave instead of convex...my job as assistant, educator, artist, whatever - is really to bend and to flex in such a way that I can help to accommodate whatever excites them, about life, about the future, about their narratives, about their stories...

*(Interview, May 2017)*

In contrast to the Honolulu mural, the Ejit mural replicates the relations between the mural makers on the wall itself. Furthermore, its central image is fixed; there is no room for the 'visual decipherability' that makes street art 'consensual' within a Western context (Schacter 2014: 47). The children's writing is full of phrases about Bikini and their lost homeland; images of beauty sit side by side with those of death and destruction. However, it is also worth noting that the island of Ejit, unlike the Honolulu highway, is not a 'public' space. The murals painted by that community are important for their potential influence *on that community* (the school children) and their future. This future is not about *return* to Bikini (a fact rendered impossible for them) but about *not forgetting* and *staying together* - what has come to replace the land they have lost. The image of the Bravo shot, an emblem of their community and their school, and a reminder of their present exile, occupies centre stage on both walls of the mural. While the explosion marks a pivotal historical event, the visual power of the image is also part of local folklore: those that remember the 1<sup>st</sup> March 1954 call it 'the day of two suns' and describe the beautiful colours visible in the sky that morning (see Dibblin 1988: 25). If the bikini bathing suit, as Teresia Teaiwa has written, 'manifests both a celebration and a forgetting of the nuclear power that strategically and materially marginalizes and erases the living history of Pacific Islanders' (1994: 87), then the Ejit community are doing the very opposite with this image of the Bravo shot which they insistently reproduce all over their school. If the Honolulu mural resulted in the birth of a new image – the interconnecting Pacific faces - in the case of Ejit, the entire project team, including Enos, was confronted with an *already existing* image with its own community determined educative aims, its own locally inscribed 'beauty'. The orange mushroom cloud is not an image of their past, but a symbol of their present state *and* an important agent in



bringing about a desired future – one in which they stay together. This image acted on all of us, shook us out of our project frame and perhaps ensured that we responded differently to that community, however uncomfortable it may have felt at the time.

When asked about his perception of differences between the children and schools he had worked with, Enos said:

Same little quirks, same little kind of energy, variations on it. But ...there's a definite sense of the children in Majuro [and Ejit] are home. The children in Hawai'i do not feel completely at home. And that's the gut right there. And helping resolve that is ... why we're telling both stories at once and helping tie both stories together.

Given the predicament of the community on Ejit, Enos's comments may seem odd – these children were not 'home' in the Marshallese or Bikinian understanding of that concept. Indeed, even in material terms, the expiration of the COFA and the uncertainty about the land lease on Ejit was a worry for the teachers and community members who tended to reference it repeatedly. Even if they were able to remain, the size of the island was going to present problems, both for how they accommodated their living *and* deceased populations - burial rights and space being a particular issue. And yet, Enos's comments ring true in other ways. These children had a sense of confidence, identity and belonging that those in Honolulu did not have; they had an image through which they connected with each other, while those in Honolulu did not. Perhaps the murals we made together have contributed something of relevance to both communities, whether that is in shaping and building a set of future relations through the new image of interlocking faces, or in reaffirming already existing ones to place and land through reproducing the mushroom cloud. And while the murals may be complete, they are also not yet finished. What will the murals go on to do, or be as they are continually made, and remade in and for those communities, and perhaps for other publics?



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The image of the Bravo shot in Figure 2 was taken by the United States Department of Energy and is in the public domain. The photograph in Figure 4 was taken by Polly Atatoa-Carr; all other photographs were taken by the author.

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<sup>i</sup> I have chosen not to anonymize the schools involved in the project; they have given their permission in advance for this. Images of children have been used with their consent.

<sup>ii</sup> This paper will discuss only two of the mural-making workshops. The third was conducted at a co-operatively funded school in the capital of the RMI, Majuro.

<sup>iii</sup> The phrase 'Men Otemjej Rej Ilo [P]Bein Anij' also appears on the 'Flag of the People of Bikini', adopted in 1987, tying their identity to the event of their displacement and identifying (through the visual echoes of the United States flag) the debt owed to them forever by that nation (see Niedenthal 2001: 140).