The Hokianga Community Drawing Project: *te ao hurihuri (at the end of the beginning)*

"When we do not have the words to say something, drawing can define both the real and unreal in visual terms" (Kovats, 2007: p. 8).

This paper considers the theme of *Home* through a collective drawing project that took place in Northland, Aotearoa New Zealand in 2023. The Hokianga Community Drawing Project was used as interlocutor to garner community perceptions of *home* in response to the provocation that climate change is challenging notions of belonging, community, migration and displacement. It introduced a participatory drawing methodology as a non-textual strategy to empower participants to disclose, express and narrate a 'nuanced depiction of [their] lived realities' at a time of climate crisis (Literat, 2013).

In the recent Environment Aotearoa 2022 report, it was noted that 'dealing with climate change is having a range of profound impacts on people and communities (Allott , 2014). To help communities face these impacts, it is of primary importance to understand how the hazards and environmental risks are perceived at community level.

The Hokianga region experiences climate change in the form of severe and more frequent flooding, storm surge and heavy rainfall events. These destructive impacts have cultural significance for its resident Māori population because of the complex legacy of colonisation, an intrinsic bond with the natural world and economic vulnerabilities that affect capacity to deal with climate threats. Māori also retain a multi-generational perspective of responsibility to ancestors and to future Māori yet to be born. According to King et al, the Māori of the Hokianga are particularly at risk due to limited employment opportunities and resourcing constraints that curb their abilities to adequately reduce risk and exposure and future-proof infrastructure. Reliance on supplementing household supplies through fishing, hunting and gardening are also adversely affected by climate change (2013).

The Hokianga Community Drawing Project took place with two communities located to the north and south of the Hokianga ferry link in the Northland region of Aotearoa New Zealand. It was carried out with the bi-cultural community who are predominantly Māori with a significant minority of *Pākehā* (Māori term for the white colonial settler population of European descent) (Stewart, 2016). This collective drawing project was delivered in the historic town of Rawene during a four-week artist residency, with the aim of uncovering lived experience connections between people, place and location despite the politics of biculturalism that I encountered as a white European stranger in their midst. The intentions for this work were to re-envision the concept of *home* as the way we live with each other in our environments through the lens of climate change impacts.

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Background

Located in the far North District, the Hokianga is an area surrounding the Hokianga Harbour, which is a large, drowned valley on the west coast of the Northland region of North Island. It is one of the most socially and economically challenged areas in Aotearoa. It is very rural, isolated and feels deeply and visibly engaged with its past because of significant indigenous and colonial heritages: being recognised for its connections to first settlement in 800AD by the Polynesian explorer, Kupe, and then more recently as a prime location for European settlement.

In Aotearoa, the dominant settler culture, which began less than 200 years ago, has dramatically altered the social demographics of the population to establish a western European cultural mainstream. Contemporary New Zealand culture is underpinned by a 'strongly individualistic streak', where a 'do-it-yourself' spirit encourages 'self-reliance, inventiveness and bravery' (Evason, 2016). This originates, perhaps, from the inherited experiences of migration that has produced a global minded society with liberal social attitudes and no formal class structure. New Zealanders consider their society to be strongly egalitarian where everyone has equal opportunity to better themselves. However, compared to the white majority ethnic disadvantages are visible among Māori society. They earn less, have poorer health and lower economic standards of living (van Meijl, 2020).

The Māori worldview perceives the interconnectedness of all things as integral to spiritual, social, and environmental relationships. Māori are deeply rooted in the values of balance, continuity, unity and purpose. Their knowledge base stems from 'evidence, cultural values, and world view' (Hikuroa, 2017). It follows traditional, place-based knowledges developed in ongoing processes of observation and interpretation, guided by inherited traditional values. Māori have a close relationship with land and sea that is governed by elemental cultural principles actioned through practical values of *whanaungatanga* (kinship), *manākitanga* (hospitality), *kotahitanga* (unity) and *aroha* (love). They value and uphold ecology as kin, aligning their needs with the plural natures of other beings.

Biculturalism is an ideal of restorative justice for indigenous people who continue to evolve their culture in response to the fracturing impact of colonisation. Biculturalism in Aotearoa tackles ethnic disadvantages that have arisen due to the loss of ninety-five percent of Māori land and the forcible suppression of Māori culture by establishing a legal obligation to Māori people despite the dominance of *Pākehā* (Eketone, 2015). The reality of what this means is complex in a place where the history of human habitation and the beginnings of cultural conflict are still relatively recent (Stewart, 2016). Nevertheless, the need to move towards decolonisation involves both the sharing of power and a relinquishing of power, which requires new thinking and active change from *Pākehā*. Furthermore, whilst adapting to contemporary New Zealand culture, Māori maintain an equivalent and parallel reality resulting in constant navigation between 'two worlds': described by Jones and Jenkins (2008) as being both 'absolutely different and never absolutely different from Pākehā'. This 'doubled position' regarding their identity means that Māori recognise ethnic boundaries more than settlers do.

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According to Casey and Davies (2017), collective drawing has the capacity to 'initiate relationships with environments and phenomena'. It uses the 'visual voice' in an arts-led, participatory method to yield culturally relevant perspectives (Yonas, Burke and Miller, 2013). Through processes of visual conceptualisation and subsequent reflective discussion participants are empowered to express, perhaps, hitherto unvoiced thoughts. To this end, the Hokianga Community Drawing Project sought to deploy the creative agency of collective drawing to achieve a non-textual rendition of how the climate crisis is affecting communities in the Hokianga.

Despite these intentions however, I had yet to comprehend how the reality of being a 'white, European stranger'[1] in a Māori dominated community would hamper my attempts to engage with local level social institutions such as schools and environmental and political groups (Costello, 2018). Sadly, all my initial communications with school, environmental organisations and the local authority that I had initiated months before taking up the residency were either rejected or remained unanswered. The uncomfortable issue of my temporary presence in the community pivoted around whether I had a right to be in this land and the relationship between my own comfortable life and the dispossession of Māori from their land and culture. Of course, building the relationships to become a participant in a such a community that allows greater insight would require much more than the four-week timescale afforded me. However, a small paradigmatic shift that I could make was to create space for any level of interaction with the community by moving my drawing project onto the street and see what would happen.

This approach introduced an element of risk and vulnerability to the project. Fortunately, it paid off and I found myself warmly invited to present my project at a rousing, bi-cultural women's health promotion evening run by the local health board. This interaction proved to be a beneficial opportunity to be 'seen' publicly, and for the story of my project to be freely encountered, engaged with or disregarded. Additionally, two community galleries invited me to deliver multiple drawing sessions to their members [Fig1], and I received further offers to run street-based workshops at a second-hand book sale run by the local library and a weekly produce market.

[1] *Pākehā: The real meaning behind a beautiful word*. 'It was thought that the people who came on the ships with their fair skin had come from … the skies'. The word *Pākehā* comprises of **pā** – to make contact **ke** is related to the word that means 'different or unique', and **hā** – is to share and exchange the breath which is the purpose of the hongi (where noses are rubbed as an acknowledgement of connection to each other). See blog post for more details https://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2018/09/14/pakeha-the-real-meaning-behind-a-beautiful-word/

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Fig 1 *Drawing workshop at No1 Parnell Gallery, Rawene*

Fig 2 Drawing activity at Woman's Health Promotion Event, Rawene Campus

Written by Laura Donkers in February 2024 for Drawing Conversations 5: What and Where Is Home?

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The workshops make use of very simple materials which were safe to handle and durable enough to withstand the rigours of the workshop environment. These were a primed canvas roll (10m x 1.5m) and home-made charcoal from the local *Manawa* (mangrove trees), which proved also to be a valuable means for initiating discussion [Fig2].

Fig 3 Mangrove at Rawene

Mangrove trees are a feature of the locality as they dominate the intertidal fringes. They are either respected or disliked according to fundamental differences in Māori and *Pākehā* perceptions regarding the *mana* (prestige and power) of *Manawa* trees as ancestors which also encapsulate the *hau* (essence) of the location. They are often wrongly thought of as a troublesome, undesirable plants by farmers and the yachting fraternity, as well as a real estate industry that is obsessed with offering uninhibited coastal views. Less understood is the enormous botanical wealth of mangrove forests for their central role in the seafood chain; their capacity as a breakwater; and their storm and earth stabilising properties at a crucial time when storm surge, flooding and extreme rain fall are causing severe coastal erosion [Fig3].

Outcomes

In terms of evoking connection to the Hokianga landscape the image of the *Manawa* Forest was used then as a key compositional framework to help participants feel their way into contributing towards the visual, collective terrain of the drawing. At the public workshops, I invited passersby to contribute a drawing or even just some marks if they expressed doubts about their drawing skills. These invitations to contribute were mostly accepted and had cumulative impact as participants displayed the simplicity and openness of the activity to onlookers who quickly joined in. This process induced the creation of a collective visual record of significance and meaning through personal, shared perspectives of daily life in the Hokianga.

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Fig 4 Drawing workshop on the street outside Village Arts, Kohukohu, Northland

One of the many significant interactions I had was with a Māori council worker who was emptying the bins. As she passed by the drawing table that I had set up on the street she glanced towards the drawing, and I invited her to contribute. Despite responding with the common phrase ‘but I can’t draw’, I suggested that she use the Manawa charcoal to see what sort of marks it would make rather than worry about having any responsibility to produce a drawing. Interestingly, raising the subject of the charcoal sparked a lively discussion about how I had made it and why I had chosen Manawa specifically. She was interested in participating but said she had to work and then left. An hour later she returned to talk some more and express how much she liked the idea of ‘mark making’ as opposed to needing to draw something. She then picked up a piece of charcoal. The session was busy with contributors who were encouraging other passerby to join in, so it was sometime later that I realised that the council worker was still present and deeply engaged in making her marks [Fig4].

She had chosen to draw the letters HOKIANGA on the last empty space at the extreme left-hand edge of the canvas. When I noticed this, I explained to her that although she was making the final marks of the drawing when it would be exhibited as a finished work her ‘marks’ would be seen as the beginning of the drawing. She was amazed and started discussing this excitedly with another Māori woman who was also drawing. They shared a phrase with me *‘te ao hurihuri’* that literally means ‘revolving world’ and explained this as an important Māori concept that provides meaning beyond ‘day to day’ activities connecting the contemporary world and modern practices with Māori cosmology and genealogy. Although at the time I could not really

comprehend the significance of this, I could tell that this revelation had elevated the importance how she felt about contributing to the drawing.

Contemporary Māori artist, Hiria Anderson (Rereahu, Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Apakura), used the title 'Te Ao Hurihuri' for her 2020 exhibition on the impact of Covid on her community.[2] She added a sub-title of 'At the End of the Beginning', which, while true to the original idea of a revolving world refers more to a new start: regeneration rather than a process of repeating what has gone before.

As we come to witness the life-altering impacts that climate change is bringing to all our lives there is a need for exchange and dialogue to generate new connections and understanding between people and cultures. Climate change is forcing people to change their perspectives and understanding around how they are living and its intrinsic link to wider social issues of housing, environmental degradation, access to public services and poverty. Essentially our concept of *home* as the way that we live with each other in our environments is being regenerated through the impact of climate change.

Conclusion

Lived experience as a foundation for drawing captures what has been sensed, felt, thought about and performed (Dilthey, 1985).[3] This opens up capacity and dialogic potential to reflect on the impacts that locally experienced extreme weather events might be having on property, travel plans, infrastructure, supply chains and livelihoods. I hoped too that it would also reveal to its contributors some of the complexities of the Hokianga as a spiritual, visceral, domestic, cosmological, ancestral and protected place. Participation in the large collective drawing was

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[2] Anderson herself writes: *"Phrased by our ancestors, 'Te Ao Hurihuri' literally means 'everchanging world'. But the term goes deeper in its reference to Māori cosmology and whakapapa, as well as to the modernity that, for better or worse, has impacted Te Ao Māori in these times of COVID. The exhibition subtitle "At the end of the Beginning" is a line spoken by Winston Churchill. Addressing his nation at a pivotal moment three years before the end of World War Two, Churchill said: "It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps ... the end of the beginning". Just as World War Two defined Churchill's generation, COVID-19 is our pivotal moment in global history. Even bearing in mind the fading of collective memory it will define us until the last person to experience these times is dead. The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 faded from collective consciousness also ... until now. I zoom in to my own little world and I try to describe in paint what I see happening around me. The paintings I make are impressions of pre- and post-lockdown life. They are quiet moments in time, but they arrive on the back of life-altering moments where people are forced into change and there is no turning back. The only way is forward. Life on earth sometimes depends on a forceful or catastrophic act of regeneration to begin again. Te Ao Hurihuri."* https://www.timmelville.com/exhibition/te-ao-hurihuri-at-the-end-of-the-beginning/

encountered by the community at common meeting places, along daily thoroughfares, at street-level, community events and markets providing an unusual opportunity for free expression and conversation that traversed age, gender, race and economic boundaries.

The finished drawing disclosed a collective visual expression of *home* by the community, which navigated bicultural differences to uncover solidarity, appreciation and respect for the diverse cultural identities of the population. It achieved a restorative function through shared emotional connection to location, place and community expressed via the medium of collective drawing [Fig5].

While creative projects in themselves cannot alter the impacts of environmental and ecological destruction, they can uncover shared emotional connections to location, place and community. They can also promote dialogue with the people who are motivated to speak out and protest environmental calamity and injustice; or who bear witness to it, or advocate for those who live with its consequences. Thus, collaborative drawing projects produce documentary evidence that can stand in solidarity with people to let them know that their voices have been heard, amplified and validated as worth listening to, and as a form of visual testimony for the public to connect with creating a vision of insight, knowledge and experience of climate change that is both personal and universal.

Fig 5 *Finished section - at the end of the beginning*

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