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My time in Aruba has been a whirlwind of wonder.

My time in Aruba has been a whirlwind of wonder; from wondering how to narrow down my research to wondering how to get to school without a car, it has been a real adventure to say the least. From boat excursions in the first 24 hours to hitch-hiking across the island, this field research programme in Aruba has been without a doubt one of the most formidable experiences in my life. I'm really grateful for the time I've had here because it has taught me a lot about the world and a lot about myself.

Every day I am more and more astounded at the warmth of the people here in Aruba who really have enriched my time here by teaching me so much about culture and community on the island. I'm thankful for all the mentors who went above and beyond to help us, especially Eric, Jocelyn and Carlos for helping make Aruba home for a little while. I'm so glad to have the experience to learn so much in such a short amount of time while forming bonds that I know

will last a lifetime. A big thank you to Clifford Rosa at Stichting Rancho for letting us be a part of his community through volunteering and to sharing the beautiful culture of Rancho with us. I am so lucky to have the chance to have made such great friends here who have shouldered both the ups and downs with a smile and drink in hand. Shoutout to Alexandra, Andrew, Abi and Ray who are the sweetest Arubans ever and the best reasons to come back to this beautiful island.

I feel it has been a journey with a lot of growing pains but in the end I will say that I am so extremely proud of what we've accomplished here. Although it took a lot of workshopping to get to a feasible research idea, I am so proud of the way everything eventually came together in the end. I am thankful to everyone who participated and to all of those who helped in even the smallest of ways. Special thanks to my AFY research assistant, Tajikah Richardson, who also

became a huge inspiration for my research project. Overall, I am just blessed to have the opportunity to experience such a transformative journey here in Aruba and I really hope I can come back soon.



Framing culture: exploring the perceptions of the Aruban cultural identity and the role of murals in representing it

Jasmine Coelho

Identity

*Truth is, I'm not fully secure in my identity,
for my whole life I've been told I'm not that pretty.
It's not because I'm conventionally unattractive,
it's because of my complexion,
that's it.*

*I'm not fully secure in my identity
because society has an image of what black is supposed to be,
a mold I should fit into.
Narrow minds who see me as someone who is trying to be white
because of what I'm into.*

*I will be honest,
it has crossed my mind that it would be easier if I were white,
that I wouldn't have to fight
for the right to be free.
Wouldn't have to struggle to love all my features
and culture unconditionally.*

*Although I'm not fully secure in my identity,
I'm happy with how far I've come,
I'm happy with the black person I'm becoming.*

*I'm no longer that little black girl filled with hatred,
no longer that girl who hated her 4c hair and needed it
straightened,
no longer that girl who hated her lips,
the same lips that are speaking so eloquently.*

*No longer that girl who couldn't look in the mirror and see her own
beauty.*

*So although I'm not secure in my identity
I'm finally becoming a person I can be proud of,
I'm becoming the very black excellence that I've always dreamed of.*

*So no, I'm not fully secure in my identity
but one thing my people have taught me
is that I am strong.*

*My people did not march, protest, survive and persevere
for me to get bossed around.
I no longer will allow anybody to police me on my blackness,
on whether I'm pretty for a black girl
or whether I'm well spoken for a black person,
because I'm ready to be fully secure in my identity.*

Tajikah Richardson

Introduction

Asking an individual to describe what makes them who they are would result in them outlining their identity. As a complex concept, identity is the shifting frame we use to interpret the world and the way we frame ourselves to be interpreted by the world. Influenced by factors such as ethnicity, religion, history and culture, identity is multifaceted and constantly changing. Identity is dynamic. The three truths that exist in identity are where we come from (past), who we are now (present) and who we want to become (future). Identity is malleable. From these truths, we understand that there are core influences of cultural heritage that form a foundation that constitutes who we are. This is the starting point from which many start to negotiate their identity. As social creatures, human beings need each other and so we formed a community. Within the community, we also have a quest to find our place and how we relate to others within and beyond our community. The cultural identity that is shared by the community fulfils our search for belonging.

The manner in which cultural identity is formed is based on the shared conceptual maps, culture, of a community and how it is represented. Stuart Hall, a Caribbean-born cultural theorist, explored the complexities in cultural identity construction and the role of representation in this process. Many people use their cultural heritage as the foundation for their cultural identity and the representations of this heritage can affirm and negotiate their cultural identity. Hall (1990) institutes a framework for understanding cultural identity based on the principles of similarity and difference. Hall (1997) posits that representation, a means to communicate cultural identity, is imperative in shaping our perceptions of our cultural identity. He proposes that the collective community searches for a cultural identity rooted in the shared history and ancestry based on migration that negates all superficial differences that can occur (Hall, 1990). Additionally, the collective community positions themselves in opposition

to other cultures, migrant or otherwise, in a way to better understand their own cultural identity (Hall, 1990). Hall ties this framework together with the concept of representation which is the “signifying practices and symbolic systems that discursive constitute and (re) produce meanings and subject positions” (Moss, 2010; Hall, 1997; Woodward, 1997). While representations can come in many forms, the visual language of art has the ability to capture the complexities of cultural identity using cultural codes emblematic to a community. Murals, especially, offer a unique insight into the “concerns of a community” through an expressive yet accessible technique (Barnett, 1984).

One such concern is the negotiation of cultural identity which is captured in the powerfully poignant words of Tajikah Richardson that is used to begin this paper. Tajikah, a third-generation Aruban, shares her struggles to find her place within her community and in relation to others in her community. As she addresses her concerns with beauty standards, conformity and political consciousness, she positions herself in opposition to other members of the Aruban community in order to establish points of similarity and of difference. She addresses questions of race in a pluralistic society built on centuries of cross-cultural exchange that have shifted what it means to be Aruban. She finds her place among others who share her struggles, speak her language and celebrate her traditions. Tajikah also finds her place in what she is not. She expresses the characteristics that sets her apart from others in her community and uses this difference as a celebration of plurality within herself, and within her community. Her poem highlights the dynamism of cultural identity as transmutable names we give ourselves that are in a constant state of development. Through her vulnerability, Tajikah captures the uncertainty that comes with the dynamism of cultural identity that triggers continuous negotiation of one’s place in the society. Tajikah’s sentiments in her quest to conquer her cultural identity have been immortalised on the walls of the city she calls her home, San Nicolaas.



Tajikah by SEPC for Aruba Art Fair (Source: Researcher)

She becomes an emblem, a visual cultural code, that refers to the struggles of Aruban youth to negotiate their cultural identity in a plural society which is in constant flux.

The cultural identity of the Aruban people is represented in the mural movement started in 2015; it captures the creolised culture of Aruba that can only be understood as a stew pot of cultures. Unlike a melting pot, the different elements of culture that constitute the Aruban cultural identity are not indistinguishably mixed into each other. To the trained individual, the different ingredients are recognizable and dominant flavours can be traced to each ingredient (German, 2003). With each additional cultural ingredient, the flavour of the Aruban cultural identity changed, and it tastes different to each person. In an attempt to reconnect the Aruban people to their cultural heritage and identity, the Aruban government commissioned the establishment of cultural disseminating institutions such as museums; however, these remain accessible to a certain demographic, while having no effect on the wider majority. The mural movement in Aruba led by ARTISA paved an accessible and engaging way to (re) connect the community to their history and cultivate a connection to

their cultural identity (Bolívar, 2023). The murals offer a site for cultural expression based on significant cultural codes that constitute the Aruban identity. This formed a crucial (re) education programme as the education system in Aruba does not educate local students on their island's history. In this capacity, the murals are a tool of refusal to conform to the inadequate education curriculum and offer space to cultivate a new society based on a cultural identity linked to narratives of heritage.

Grounded in the cultural identity theory and the works of Stuart Hall on representation and cultural identity, this research aims to explore the perceptions the Aruban community have on their cultural identity. These perceptions were captured using photovoice method, a participatory action research method, which localises the data within the lived experiences of the community. Additionally, the research questions the role of murals as a mode of expressing cultural identity as a tool for reconnecting Arubans to their cultural heritage and as a tool for (re) education. The ideologies that contribute to the Aruban cultural identity are contextualised into themes that highlight the enduring and changing aspects of Aruban identity. This contributes to efforts in heritage conservation on the island and celebrating intersectionality in the community.

Creolisation of Aruba

Aruba, like most Caribbean territories, has been influenced by migration that has shifted the demographics, social structures and economic development and has led to creolization. Migration and creolization are inextricably linked as historical processes that have led to the cultural development of many Caribbean cultures, like Aruba. Creolization is defined as the “cross-fertilization between different cultures as they interact” where members of a culture adopt select elements from “incoming or inherited cultures” by ascribing them a new cultural meaning (Cohen,

2007). With each cultural encounter triggered by migration, the Aruban cultural identity shifted into a new cultural variation that superseded the previous cultural form.

Migration is the inception of culture on the island of Aruba as even the first inhabitants of the island, the Caiquetio Arawak people migrated from Venezuela in 850 BCE. The Amerindian culture thrived until the arrival of the Spaniards in 1499 which marked the first European encounter of colonisation. The island was taken over by Britain and then the Netherlands who took control in 1636 through the Dutch West India Company (WIC) before turning Aruba into an official colony in 1754 (Alofs, 2008). The cultural exchange between the local Amerindian population and the European settlers diversified in 1863 when the abolition of slave trade introduced a newly found peasant culture in absence of the plantation economy (Alofs, 2008). This incited a cultural shift with the introduction of a new cultural demographic as the “colonists, Indians, and blacks intermixed forming the traditional Mestizo-Creole population” (Alofs, 2008).

Migration incited further cultural development in Aruba around the 1920s after the economic structure shifted from plantation-focused (*cunucu* culture) to wage based labour force. With the introduction of the oil industry on the island, a process of rapid industrialization took place, especially in San Nicolaas where the oil refinery and main port were situated. With a lack of skilled industrial labourers within the native population, the demand for labour attracted a multitude of “industrial labourers, merchants, and civil servants from the Caribbean, Europe, the Americas, and China” (Alofs, 2008). This saw the island’s population increase from 9,000 to 55,000 in about 30 years (Razak, 1995). The traditional population was surpassed by the Afro-Caribbean migrants in economic and socio-cultural status and the traditional economically elite position was adopted by the Lebanese, Jewish and Chinese migrants (Alofs, 2008).

With the decline of the oil industry, Aruba was forced to shift to tourism, at that time, as the secondary economic sector. Tourism in Aruba represented this revolutionary change that established a cultural connection with the wider world and integrated the Aruban economy with that of the International market. With tourism as a budding sector with promising potential, the second wave of migrants from the Caribbean, the Americas, the Netherlands, and the Philippines came to the island (Alofs, 2008). In addition to the labour migrants, the tourists who mostly came from North America brought with them Americanism and consumer culture. With an economic structure reliant on extraversion, the Aruban people needed to be culturally flexible and open to adapt easily to the influx of external cultures.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in cultural identity theory by Collier and Thomas (1988), which explores “how individuals use communicative processes to construct and negotiate their cultural group identities and relationships” (in Cultural Communication, 2014). This theory posits properties of cultural identity which act as starting points for deconstructing how identity is communicated within a cultural group. These properties include avowal and ascription, modes of expression, components of identity (individual, relational and communal), aspects of identity (affective, cognitive and behavioural as well as enduring and changing), content and relationship levels, and salience or prominence (in Cultural Communication, 2014). While these properties are of equal importance and all contribute to a richer understanding of cultural identity, this research draws on the properties of expression, avowal and ascription, and the enduring and changing aspects of identity. These properties are used to theorise the concepts of murals as a mode of expression, the perceptions Arubans have of their cultural identity as a process of avowal, and the intersectionality within the Aruban cultural identity as enduring and changing elements of their identity.

Murals are theorised to be a mode of expression that can be used to frame cultural identity, as they tap into a system of representations based on shared cultural codes. The modes of expressing cultural identity refer to the manner in which core symbols, the “expressions of a group’s cultural beliefs and theories about the world around them”, are communicated (in Cultural Communication, 2014). Murals in this context, take the shared cultural codes and translate them into a visual expression of cultural identity. Stuart contextualises the connection between cultural identity and representation as mutually influential. Hall posits that representation is the framework in which cultural identity is constituted. Representation “connects meaning and language to culture” by working with symbols that have been cultural meaning attributed to it and translating it with language (Hall, 1997). Hall uses a constructivist approach to advance that the meaning that is found in representation is constructed both in and through language (Hall, 1997). Murals are based in a visual language that tap into a culturally established *system of representations* that hold specific meaning to the cultural group and their identity (Hall, 1997). This system is based on a set of signs that come to symbolise a wider set of meaning that individuals can use as points of reference (Hall, 1997). This system taps into the shared conceptual map of a cultural group and provides a pool of knowledge that language can translate into an interpretable, *common language*, like art (Hall, 1997).

The ability of murals to effectively represent cultural identity are dependent on the perceptions that Arubans have constructed of themselves during the process of avowal. The process of avowal involves the way in which members of a community articulate their view on the group identity based on self-identification (in Cultural Communication, 2014). The perceptions the Aruban community have on their cultural identity will be based on what is represented in the murals and what they believe is representative of their cultural identity. This is based on the individual concept of cultural identity where the

individual member interprets the group identity based on subjective experiences. The individual concept of cultural identity in turn creates, affirms and negotiates the shared cultural identity. By exploring this property of cultural identity, it highlights how the construction of an Aruban cultural identity is based on cultural codes that represent how Arubans see themselves. This will contextualise the murals within varying discourses surrounding Aruban cultural identity. Murals as tools of “ideological storytelling” capture the nuances of cultural identity within a specific narrative context (Poon, 2016). The discourse in which a mural is situated will reflect the discourse that each participant situates themselves and their culture in. This can also be used to offer insight into the overlapping nature of cultural identity, influenced by multiple discourses that contribute to a more holistic understanding of the Aruban cultural identity. By recognizing the opportunity for this multiplicity, the potential to capture intersectionality in the cultural identity is greatly increased.

This intersectionality is important to explore within the research as it highlights the enduring and changing aspects of the Aruban cultural identity and how the murals capture these shifts. Cultural identity as a dynamic concept is at liberty to different factors of social, political, economic and contextual influence. This is ratified by Stuart Hall’s understanding of cultural identity as a place in which we position and are positioned in relation to others. Hall (1990) advances that cultural identities are the “points of identification” that are contextualised within “discourses of history and culture” but are positioned rather than essentialised. In this philosophy of interpreting cultural identity, the boundaries of similarity and difference between members of the same and different cultural groups are constantly being revisited. The acknowledgement of this highlights points of *enunciation*, the lived experiences, from which individuals express their cultural identity and the contexts in which it changes (Hall, 1990). Furthermore, this theory grounds the cultural identity within a historical

context of production while highlighting the possibility of negotiation as cultural identity is in a constant state of *play* with history, culture and power (Hall, 1990). The enduring aspects of cultural identity will inform a deeper understanding of what elements of Aruban cultural identity serve as “stable, unchanging, continuous frames for reference and meaning” (Hall, 1990). The changing aspects of cultural identity will illuminate the negotiation of cultural identity based on *positioning* (Hall, 1990). This is imperative when exploring a pluralistic culture with a large variety in demographics that position each individual differently in context and in representation.

Literature Review

Cultural identity through murals

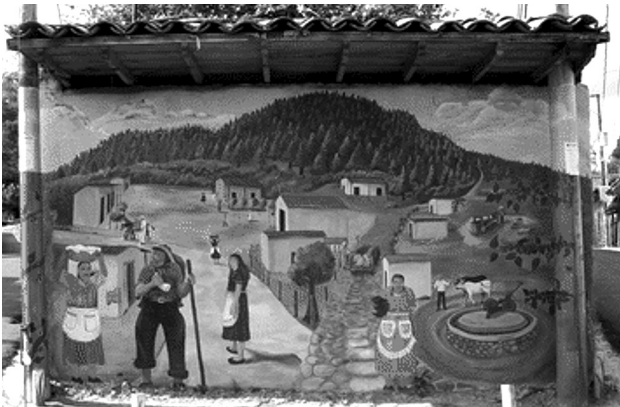
Cultural identity and murals have their meaning constructed within and through each other. Murals use imagery inspired from the expressions of cultural identity to represent it while cultural identity uses murals as a site for constructing, affirming and negotiating cultural identity. Mural movements across the world have been used to communicate cultural identity through means of heritage celebration, education and advocacy for change.

Murals serve as an ideal mode to express cultural identity because it is considered an art of the people. Beyond the ivory tower of gallery art but rooted in a rich artistic history in its own right, murals are a bridge between what is considered “high art” and “low art” (Moss, 2010). While murals rely on a repertoire of artistic skill, they remain accessible to the general public in both physicality and subject matter which make it “communal art” (Moss, 2010). Barnett (1984) advances that murals are a “movement of authentic people’s art” as it is close to the people and reflects the “concerns of the community”. Community murals are created in tandem to everyday human experience that infuse it with the essence of the local culture. They are a

“mirror of life” as they are infused with “local cultural essence and character” (Sadatiseyedmahalleh et al., 2018). Murals offer referents for cultural identity through tangible and intangible elements infused with shared cultural codes (Escorteganha et al., 2013). Murals reference a “system of representations”, a set of wider meanings symbolised by culturally agreed upon signs, to communicate cultural identity to and beyond a community (Hall, 1997). These signs hold great value to a community as they are symbols of shared history and experiences that contribute to their cultural identity. In an interview with Mónica Lettieri (2001), the Chicano artist Leo Tanguma spoke on the use of murals as a means to reconnect the Chicanos with their Mexican heritage while acknowledging their contemporary cultural identity in America. Tanguma referenced the use of cultural symbols, which have been “taken away and neglected”, to trigger communal contemplation on their cultural identity. He argues that Chicano artists illustrate their “cultural and historic symbols in great public view” with murals in order to “stimulate the community to discover their own past” (Tanguma, 2001). These symbols are publicly displayed through murals as a way to reconnect people to their cultural heritage.

Murals also act as a site for empowerment by celebrating cultural heritage through ideological storytelling. Interpreting the images that constitute murals can prove to be extremely useful in “revealing implicit values and ideologies” that inform cultural identity (Moss, 2010). These ideologies act as factors such as ethnicity, history or religion that influence the construction, affirmation and negotiation of cultural identity. As a mode of expression, murals actively communicate cultural identity by using “ideological storytelling” to narrate the lived experiences of the community (Poon, 2016). The ideology that is used in murals can be grounded in community empowerment through the celebration of heritage. A study on the mural movement in El Salvador highlighted the role of murals in mediating a connection to the heritage of the people

within the tumultuous time of the revolution. Murals referenced cultural symbols in an attempt to “construct a shared cultural identity as it actively defines, interprets and debates the nation’s historical meaning” (Heidenry, 2014). Contextualised within the struggle to negotiate national identity at a time of conflict, murals became a point of reference which the people could return to.



Walls of Hope. Memorias de los Niños de Ayer (2008) in Morazán (Source: Rachel Heidenry 2012)

As “touchstones for identification” the murals in El Salvador relied on the cultural imagery relating to Salvadoran history to “reclaim local identities, subvert contemporary struggles and exert political power” (Moss, 2010; Heidenry, 2014). Murals provided a forum for celebration of heritage to empower the community with imagery of peace in a time of struggle.

Murals can also make a commentary on the struggles of cultural cohesion within the community in order to advocate for change. Murals can be used to unpack the process of negotiating cultural identity positioning within a multicultural arena. As public art, murals become innately connected to the social discourse of a community and

can be used as a tool to advocate for social coherence. A study conducted in Malaysia on murals as a unique source of tangible cultural heritage, proposes that they can be used to celebrate pluralism and cultural cohesion within a multicultural society (Poon, 2016). The author, Stephen Poon, argues that in Malaysia, “multi-ethnic imagery” based on the “multicultural experiences” that occur on the group of islands serves to celebrate and advance “cultural harmonisation” (Poon, 2016). This is because murals can be referents for identification that can validate cultural identity and individual positioning within it (Hall, 1997). This not only advocates for the mediation of cultural tension but highlights intersectionality that is present within the interpretations of cultural identity.

Mural movement in Aruba

Mural movements are characterised by their relation to the struggle of negotiating cultural identity and it is no different in Aruba. With little published literature on the subject of murals in Aruba, news articles and interviews with key informants were used to explore the development of the mural movement in Aruba. Unlike many mural movements, what Aruba faces is not a political struggle to negotiate identity but rather a cultural one. The Aruban mural movement began in 2015 when the Aruban Government implemented a cultural action plan to re-brand San Nicolaas, the site of the oil-refinery, from a post-industrial ghost town into a cultural capital (Bolívar, 2023; Geronimo, 2023). The government worked collaboratively with Art Is Aruba (ARTISA) to plan ways to remodel the cultural landscape of the city and the Aruba Art Fair was born. Aruba Art Fair had its debut in November 2015 hosting muralists from across the world in San Nicolaas for a multi-day festival of art, music, food and community (Bolívar, 2023).

Each year the muralists are invited to create a mural based on a theme relevant to the community such as conserving

nature, community vices and local heroes. Inspired by the mural movement in Colombia, the Aruban mural movement aims to address the Aruban “concerns of community life” (Barnett, 1984). The artists are invited to conduct in-depth research into the cultural motifs that can be used to construct a telling narrative that aligns with the theme. In this way, the murals are used to raise awareness on local challenges such as the problems of gambling addiction. The Czech muralist, Chemis, used his work *House of cards* to problematize gambling as a vice in the community.

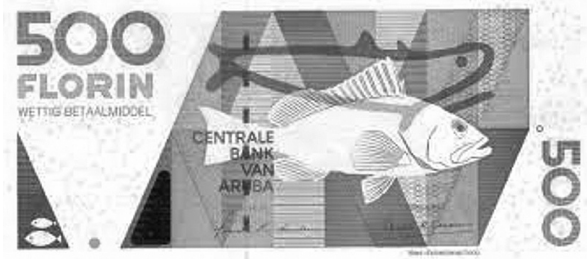


House of Cards (2015) by Chemis for Aruba Art Fair (Source: Chemisland)

The location of the mural itself holds great significance as murals are contextualised within their environment. This mural by Chemis is painted on what used to be a Casino for the people of San Nicolaas. By placing the mural in that location, the mural becomes part of the “historiography and performed layered extension” of communal cultural identity (Heidenry, 2014). Murals affect the public landscape embedding their iconography onto existing cultural sites to make a commentary that aims to trigger meaningful contemplation.

The mural movement, as a rebranding project, also has an explicit goal of (re) education for both the incoming tourists on the local culture and the local people to connect them with the history that constitutes their cultural identity (Bolivar, 2023). The current education system in Aruba, as part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, is close to an exact copy of the curriculum studied in the Netherlands. This curriculum narrowly focuses on the history of the main-land Netherlands with little to no exploration of history in the Netherlands Antilles, let alone Aruba (Geronimo, 2023). This has caused a rift between the local people and their history. Hence, the Aruban mural movement uses murals in an educational capacity to educate the public on the history of San Nicolaas, the old port that welcomed multiculturalism in Aruba. The murals take different elements of the city’s history and use cultural codes to portray the narratives of Aruban history in an engaging way.





Now you see me now you boat by Juan Vera for Aruba Art Fair (Source: Researcher)

This mural by Juan Vera uses the iconography of the *boto crioyo*, the traditional Aruban fishing boat, that is moulded using a 500 Florin note, the currency of Aruba (Cherouny, 2023). This mural references Aruba's traditional history of fishing which served as the primary economic activity prior to the establishment of an extraverted economy in Aruba. It celebrates a cultural motif symbolic of ingenuity and adaptability in a reminiscent capacity as the skill of making the *boto crioyo* has been lost to time (Rosa, 2023). This mural, like many others, takes these narratives of history and displays them as educational anecdotes that celebrate heritage and in turn shape cultural identity construction.

Methodology

Research Design

In order to research the perceptions the Aruban community have on their cultural identity and the role of murals in representing this, a qualitative community based research centred around the lived experiences of the participants has been implemented. This was facilitated through the use of the photo-voice research method that is a participatory action method (Wang & Burris, 1997; Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Sutton-Brown, 2015). Within this research method, participants use photography as a means to capture their perspectives on specific topics relating to the community. The

photographs are then used as prompts for discussion in hopes to trigger critical dialogue and social change (Wang & Burris, 1997; Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Sutton-Brown, 2015).

As a creative research method, it is ideal for the context of this research as it captures the artistic role that visual language can play in the process of representing culture. Moreover, it is accessible to individuals who may be limited in literacy or verbal skills who are interested in participating (Wang & Burris, 1997). The most imperative choice for implementing this research method is because it is empowering to the participants who are given an active role in the research process as core producers of knowledge. It also ensures ethical considerations as the data is controlled by the participant. This aims to attain rich and detailed data on the perceptions the Aruban community has based on lived experiences rather than imposed by the researcher or external theory (Sutton-Brown, 2015).

The disadvantages of the photo-voice is that is a subjective methods that limits the generalizability of the results to a wider group, however, as a qualitative research, this limitation is recognised but inconsequential (Wang & Burris, 1997). This is due to the nature of the study as a qualitative community based research project that does not aim to make generalisations or eliminate the biases in subjective experiences as this dilutes the potential for attaining a thick description analysis. However, a disadvantage of implementing the photo-voice method in this research is the potential for discomfort to arise in sharing photographs or experiences out of fear of being perceived differently. It is then the role of the researcher to ensure that a safe and comfortable environment is established and maintained throughout the study.

Sample

The sample consists of 15 individuals who identify as Arubans, aged between 18 and 65, who are interested in sharing their perceptions on their cultural identity and the

role of murals in representing it. The choice to welcome participants who identify as Aruban rather than strictly native or generational Arubans serves to not exclude any participants who have adopted the Aruban cultural identity as part of their own. This inclusive approach is representative of the creolised culture of Aruba.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling based on social interactions such as hitchhiking, social events and volunteering throughout the island. The potential participants were thinned out based on availability to commit to the two part research process of photo-voice as well as questions of feasibility. Hence the first random 15 participants who confirmed availability were chosen as participants for the study.

Data collection

The data collection process involves two phases that are part of the photo-voice research method. In the first phase, the participants are given a set of instructions which asks them to take a photograph of a mural they feel best represents the Aruban cultural identity from their perspective (Appendix 1). They are asked to submit this photograph within a four-day period after receiving the instructions which designates ample time for reflection while ensuring time is used efficiently. In the second phase, the participants are invited to join a focus-group to discuss the data collected in the first phase. The 15 participants are designated into 3 focus groups of 5 participants each, excluding the researcher, determined by their time and date availability. The focus-groups were held in a private and comfortable space that is accessible to all participants and was audio-recorded with consent from the participants. The focus-groups used the photographs taken in the first phase as prompts for discussion on the chosen murals, how it relates to Aruban cultural identity and the roles of murals in representing this. This was followed by an open conversation for comments and reflections relating to the choices of other participants.

The advantage of using a focus-group in opposition to a one-on-one interview succeeding the photography phase is a shift in the power dynamics between the researcher and the participant. Moreover, the juxtaposition of different perceptions is used in the hope to prompt dialogue and encourage meaningful reflection beyond the knowledge and experience of the participant or researcher. This does, unfortunately, increase the potential for discomfort with sharing photographs or experiences as the audience is larger and may threaten confidentiality. Therefore, the participants must all be made aware of the confidentiality clause in their informed consent forms. Additionally, the researcher must actively ensure to the best of their ability that a safe and comfortable space is established and maintained throughout the study.

Data Analysis

The data from the photographs and audio-recordings were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. This method of analysis aims to identify the patterns that occur in the data and designate them to themes and categories. This aids in the processing of large amounts of data with a rigorous analysis that aims to root themes within data and supporting statements. This method allows for transparency as there is clarity in the analysis and evaluation of raw data into the themes. Thematic analysis can be criticised as being reductive in aims to oversimplify complex perceptions, however, this method allows for in-depth analysis without compromising the parameters of feasibility for a 10 week research period.

Ethical considerations

This research ensures ethical guidelines for research involving human participants are enforced at every stage. These include obtaining informed consent, protecting confidentiality and actively taking measures to protect the well-being of the participants (Appendix 2). This active

effort can be exemplified by addressing trigger warnings and mediating discussion to minimise/ avoid potential harm to the participants. As an ethnographic study, it is important to ensure the reflexivity of the researcher which will include the reflection of positionality in relation to each stage of the research process.

Reporting of findings

Each of the participants submitted one photograph of a single mural which resulted in 15 murals ranging in subject-matter and location. A majority of the participants chose murals from San Nicolaas (11/15 murals) which is expected as it is the site of the Aruba Art Fair and has many murals to choose from. The other 4 murals were chosen from different areas across the island such as Rancho, Oranjestad and even Arikok National Park. The subject-matter of the murals ranged from flora and fauna and socio-cultural emblems to historical events and members of the community. The participants agreed that the personal connection to the subject matter of the mural further ratified the mural as a representation of their cultural identity as it mirrored their lived experiences and histories. It is important to note that no participant chose the same mural.

The focus-group discussions produced rich data, based on complementary and contrasting opinions relating to the chosen murals and their role in representing Aruban culture. Some participants acknowledged the role murals play in shaping their perceptions of their cultural identity as a source of pride and celebration of heritage. Other participants admit that a lack of awareness on the subject matter of the murals may render them inconsequential beyond aesthetic value. Several participants nodded to the use of murals as a tool to educate the tourists as well as Aruban people on local culture and heritage. This was explicitly suggested as a supplementary tool to the education system in Aruba which neglects to inform students on the history of their island beyond superficial anecdotes.

Discussion of findings

The results of the photovoice research have revealed that while the participants chose murals that best represented Aruban cultural identity based on their subjective experience, there are recurring and overlapping categories. The murals chosen highlight elements such as multiculturalism and indigenous pride that constitute the Aruban cultural identity. They also emphasise the relations between the local community and the island as a habitat, their history and the global economy as factors that contribute to the negotiation of their cultural identity.

The perceptions that the Aruban people have of their cultural identity is largely influenced by their subjective experiences as members within a plural community. Deriving from different ancestries, the characteristic that constitutes the Aruban identity most frequently brought out is **multicultural**. After centuries of exposure to cultural influences that creolised Aruba, there is a unanimous perception that the community is multicultural, boasting over 100 nationalities that coexist on the small island. This recurring theme was more prominent in some of the murals chosen and more subtle in others but the layer of multicultural exchange was present in all murals.



Mural of young children by Nigel Matthew for Aruba Mural Projects

The nature of multicultural exchange is rooted in the personal experiences of each participant who have lived the pluralism on the island in subjective ways. Participant 3 chose the mural of young children by Nigel Matthew as it captures the experience of children celebrating a festival together. Each child is wearing a hat that represents an animal that is important to Aruban culture to represent the diversity of the fauna on the island. Even without colour, it is evident that the children are from different ethnicities yet they are not defined by it. There is an emphasis on the cultural cohesion of the children as the future of Aruba, all raising their flags in collaborative celebration. This mural encapsulates the feeling of Aruban students who come from different backgrounds but find themselves in cultural exchange in schools, religious institutions or even at local festivities. This is exemplified by the “**one** happy island” slogan that celebrates the pluralism that exists on the island as a result of this cultural flexibility. This cultural adaptability represents the changing aspects of Aruban identity towards pluralism.

From a young age, Arubans are taught cultural flexibility, rooted in a history of extraversion, where the community had to adapt to the incoming cultures brought about by industry. After the transition from the *cunucu* lifestyle, a plantation based economy, to a wage based economy, the Aruban community had to adopt extraversion as their economy became reliant on the external world to earn a living. This began with the high demand for skilled labourers to fulfil the demand of the American oil industry which attracted a diverse work-force. Participant 14 chose a mural of two different workers, a refinery worker and an aloe vera farmer, in a loving embrace. This highlights the role of industry in attracting, integrating and assimilating incoming cultures with a warm embrace.



Mural of the San Nicolaas embrace by Chemis for Aruba Art Fair

The mural also highlights the creolisation that came through finding love which could only have happened through the industries that brought together people from other cultures. It is more than a merger of industry, it is a merger of culture. This participant shared their experience with this as a third generation Aruban, with ancestry in Colombia, whose predecessors met because of the oil refinery. It historicised the role of industry within a social context as a site for creolisation and assimilation.

The decline of the oil-industry resulted in the growth of the second largest sector in Aruba, the tourism industry. With tourism came globalisation as the Aruban economy became intertwined with the global market and heavily relied on it for economic stability.



Welcome to Sunrise city, San Nicolas; artist unknown

Participant 11 chose the mural Welcome to Sunrise City because it captures the impact of industry on the Aruban history and culture. As an elderly person in the community, they experienced the transition between the closing of the oil refinery to the building of the hotels and how this impacted the role of the Aruban workforce. Entering the service industry gave the people more economic opportunities but introduced a tourist culture that existed in parallel to the local culture. The local culture became synonymous with service to the tourists as it was necessary for economic survival. The participant chose this mural because it highlights the culture of servitude that has become a prominent feature in the Aruban cultural identity that is extended by a welcoming nature, open mindedness and jolly attitude. This is alluded to in the “one, **happy** island” slogan that celebrates this culture of extraversion.

However, this process of extraversion through industry began earlier than when many believe it did. While many are aware of the impact of the oil industry, the development of other industrial sectors is lost on many. A lack of education on their industrial development has caused a disconnect between the community and their history.



King of the streets by Chemis (Aruba Art Fair)

Participant 8 picked the mural King of the Streets because it captures the industrial history of Aruba and proposes that it aids in a better understanding of the Aruban cultural identity as it proves creolisation through migration even prior to the oil refinery. This mural takes a journey from the traditional economies of fishing (boat on the shirt) and agriculture (traditional farmers hat) to the modernised industry like phosphorus (bat), gold (necklace), aloe vera farming and lastly, the oil industry (pipes beneath the chair). The mural uses cultural codes, emblems, that reference the development in history as markers of significant cultural shifts. Industry brought with it migration of people from across the globe who were in search of economic promise. This began much earlier than migration attributed to the oil refinery, which is taught in Aruban schools. *The King of the Streets* mediates a connection between the modern and the traditional in a cohesive collaboration that pays tribute to the traditional Aruban ways of life, while acknowledging the impact of modernisation on the people.

The connection to traditional Aruban culture is exemplified in the celebration of indigeneity which is an enduring aspect of Aruban cultural identity. The connection to the indigenous peoples of Aruba, the Caquetio Arawak peoples, is a source of cultural pride for many Arubans. Notably, the Amerindian heritage through ancestry appears to be lost in the contemporary Aruban community. However, what remains is the symbolic connection to the indigenous peoples as a way to root their cultural identity within a distinguishable starting point.



Cave painting by Caquetio Arawaks in Arikok National Park

Participant 2 made reference to this indigenous pride by choosing to submit a photograph of the indigenous cave paintings found in Arikok National Park as their mural of choice. Their reasoning for this is that it not only fits within the definition provided of a mural but it also represented the starting point of culture on the island. This indigenous pride serves as a means to make sense of the disruptions of migration and creolisation that have taken place on the island by finding unity in a shared common history. The connection to the indigenous is not only based on shared direct ancestry but paying tribute to the indigenous peoples of the island that has now become home to many other cultural groups.

This is shared through the many traditions that are expressions of Aruban cultural identity which may have found its inception with the indigenous peoples or picked up from incoming cultures but have become a prominent feature nonetheless. An example of this is the rooster which is an animal that plays different roles in the traditions of Aruba. Participant 12 chose a mural depicting a rooster because of the connotations it has to the *cunucu*, traditional, agricultural lifestyle which is emblematic of Aruban history.

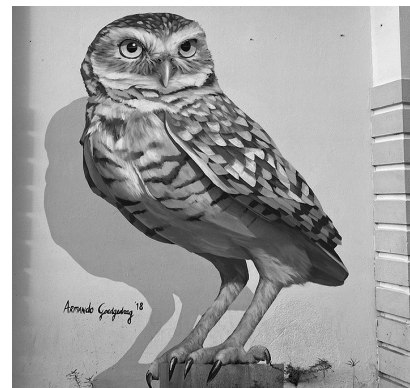


Mural of a rooster on the National Library of Aruba; artist unknown

The rooster is also present in other shared practices such as cock-fighting which is another traditional sport and pass-time for the community. The traditional festival, Dera Gai, meaning “to bury the rooster” is centred around the decapitation of a

rooster whose blood would make the earth fertile for the next planting. Dera Gai is a mediation of Christian and Pagan influence as it celebrates St. John the Baptist with other Pagan emblems from the Arawak peoples to highlight the creolisation of religious practices in Aruban traditions.

Aside from the rooster, other local flora and fauna were suggested to be a unifying cultural factor as a clear connection to the island. The love for the island is the very thing that bonds all the members of the cultural identity and is exemplified through the pride in the local flora and fauna that exists on the island. Multiple participants made reference to the endemic species that share the island with the local communities and some went on to speak on the importance of conserving these species as a means to strengthen their ties to the island. Participant 6 chose a mural of the Aruban burrowing owl, or the Shoco as it is commonly known. The *Shoco* is the national bird of Aruba and is a cultural emblem for national pride. An endemic species to Aruba, the Shoco has experienced a threat to their natural habitat by off-road vehicles driven as a tourist activity in the Arikok National park. They elaborated on the species as the Shoco have a strong attachment to their nests that are burrowed in the land as they rarely leave them, according to participant 6 just like Arubans would do.



Shoco Owl by Artmando (Aruba Art Fair 2018)

Participants 1 and 9 also made references to beloved animals in Aruban culture, the turtles, as representatives of Aruban people but in very different ways. Turtles within the Aruban culture have come to symbolise different things ranging from the conservation efforts of the people to a delicious traditional dish. Participant 1 chose a mural that shows 3 turtles swimming in different directions to symbolise the different pathways taken by the Aruban people but the coexistence within a bale. These different pathways include the path to Europe, specifically to the Netherlands, which is a popular destination in the pursuit of higher education as Aruba is still a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The characteristic of the turtle that this participant associates with Aruban culture is that despite the different paths that Arubans take, they can still always find their way home like the turtles do.



Mural of migrating turtles by Ice One (extended by Aruba Art Fair)

In contrast to this, participant 9 uses the emblem of migrating turtles to represent the brain drain of Aruban youth who commit their skills to attaining a Dutch way of life at all costs and inevitably losing connection to their land. In this interpretation, as a student geared towards studying in the Netherlands, this participant alluded to the pursuit of a “better” life that is attractive to many Aruban youngsters. This is especially influenced by the educational system instituted in Aruba that prepares the Aruban students for academic life abroad by teaching in Dutch in the higher levels of school. At the promise of a better life

than what is offered on the small island, many leave to find better opportunities resulting in brain drain.



Mural of hyper realistic turtle by Artmando (Aruba Art Fair)

In the group-discussion, the factor that contributed to attracting many emigrated Arubans to return manifested in the sense of community that they feel on the island. This bond transcends superficial differences and is seen in the celebration of the community. Community is the core of the Aruban cultural identity as it represents true cultural flexibility that has been mediated by industrialisation on the island built upon a connection to shared indigenous heritage. The way in which community is represented in the murals is exemplified in the depictions of local community members.

Participant 4 chose a mural of a local quenepa peddler, Aruban fruit, who, although he suffered from drug addiction, was admired for his hustler way of life. The muse of the mural, Sky, was a recognisable member of the community in Rancho and after his passing, the community decided to paint him on a mural in tribute. The participant chose this mural because it represents the struggles that many Arubans face, such as drug abuse, gambling and health problems, and the role of community in mediating the effects. Sky received a lot of help from people in the community who would help him by purchasing his quenepa and offering him support through other means. Participant 4 emphasised that community played the most important role in how they perceived Aruban culture.



Mural of Sky by two local artists in Rancho

This notion was advanced by Participant 15 who chose a mural of a local Aruban musician, Ataniro, known for producing music in the local language of Papiamentu. As an icon of the Aruban community and making music in Papiamentu, the language of his people, Ataniro represents pride in Aruban culture. Papiamentu, an alternative mode of Aruban cultural expression to murals, is a culmination of the creolisation process that has resulted in the unique Aruban culture of today. The palette of the mural uses the colours of the Aruban flag in allusion to this cultural connection to his community. Hence Ataniro's choice to produce music in Papiamentu is seen as a tribute to the Aruban people. He represents the love for the community and the sense of belonging that comes with speaking the language.



Mural of Ataniro by Mr. Lowe (Aruba Art Fair)

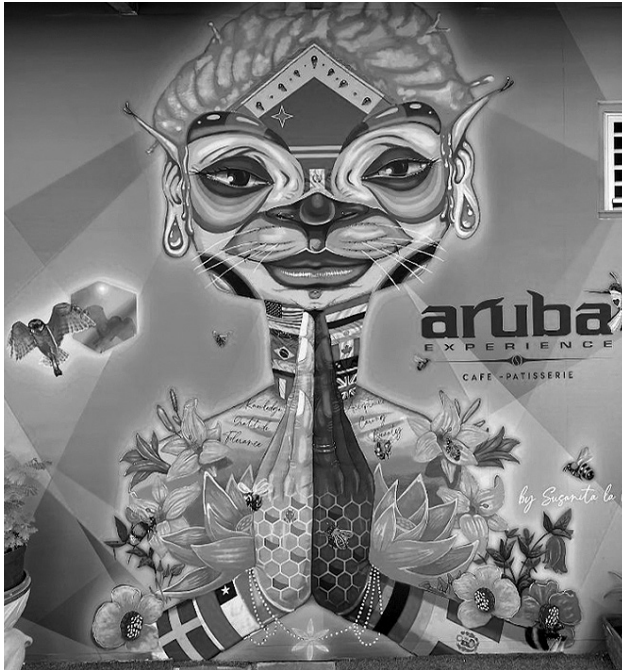
The importance of language as a representation of community was brought up by participant 7 who submitted a photograph of the mural with a single word written, *Wekulcha*. According to the participant who had a long history with the city of San Nicolaas, the term is slang in the city for Our Culture. This term represents the creolisation of Aruban culture with San Nicolas as the site of cultural encounters since its role as the main port of the island. San Nicolas was the welcome mat into Aruba during the time of the oil refinery as many came into the island through the port and settled in the city to be close to the refinery. When the oil refinery closed the people stayed in San Nicolaas. *Wekulcha* is a tribute to the different cultural amalgamations that are represented in the San Nicolas community with heritage outside of Aruba but now call the island their home. It celebrates multiculturalism while maintaining Caribbean heritage as a core element of the community's cultural identity.



Wekulcha in San Nicolaas by Rudyomar Leysner for Aruba Mural Projects

This raises an interesting element of the Aruban cultural identity as intersectional on the communal and individual level. The ability to acknowledge each facet of cultural identity expression is welcomed and encouraged within the multicultural arena of relations. Through globalisation, Aruba has become the home to many expatriates who have opted to move to the island and build businesses and eventually a life

there. By doing so, they do not neglect their cultural heritage but rather negotiate the assimilation process into their cultural identity formation in order to belong within the Aruban community. Participant 13 chose a mural that highlights this cultural negotiation by juxtaposing numerous national emblems of other countries, such as flags, in cultural harmony with the emblems of Aruba such as the local flora and fauna.



Mural at Aruba Experience, Oranjestad by Susanita La Billa

This mural highlights multiculturalism in a manner that acknowledges the variety of distinctive cultural groups that exist on the island without compromising their value as expressed aspects of cultural identity. This further emphasises the methodological choice to open the research to any participants who identify with the Aruban cultural identity. Within the discussion, this brought about reflection for those

who feel a sense of belonging within the Aruban community yet still have a strong attachment to their heritage and ancestry. This reflection concluded that cultural identity in its multiplicity can be expressed in different ways but does not devalue the other aspects not expressed at the time. The mural highlights that all aspects of cultural identity can be affirmed through coexistence in splendour.

This cultural coexistence is something considered to be an enduring aspect of Aruban cultural identity as the community consists of individuals with subjective experiences and unique backgrounds that are all connected by their love for the island of Aruba. Participant 5 selected a mural that depicts three children with distinctly different ethnicities building a sandcastle that resembles the oil refinery.



Mural of children building a sand oil-refinery by Chemis (Aruba Art Fair)

This mural highlights cultural harmony, beyond coexistence, as an active collaboration to build a future for Aruba. It pays

tribute to the history of collaboration that has creolised the culture and advanced the economic development on the island through the oil refinery.

However, by depicting it in sand, it shows that the future is not set in stone but rather malleable and requires active effort from each child to contribute something worthwhile to the future of Aruba.

A future built by the Aruban youth is one to look forward to when it is infused with the strong values of cultural identity shared by the likes of Tajikah Richardson. Participant 10 chose the mural Tajikah, the very mural referenced at the beginning of this research, for the exact reason that it was used to begin this work. As a dynamic concept, the Aruban cultural identity is subjective to the experiences of each person and the voices that illuminate the negotiation of its complexity deserve to be celebrated. Hence, Tajikah is a representation of this ever-changing understanding of Aruban cultural identity that is influenced by shifting frames of lived experiences. She is a representation of the Aruban cultural identity.

Conclusion

The quest to explore the perceptions that the Aruban community members have on their cultural identity and the role of murals in representing this has resulted in a rich and holistic understanding of characteristics of importance to the community. Murals as tools of representation have proven to be a crucial entry point to deconstructing cultural identity by translating the cultural emblematic codes of the Aruban community into an interpretable visual language. As a cultural outsider, it has provided me with a means to begin to understand the lived experiences and histories of the community without having experienced them for myself. The murals shared by the participants of this study highlight the manner in which subject experience has informed the individual conception of cultural identity which in turn shapes the shared cultural identity.

Grounded in tribute for those who came before, the Aruban

community has built their identity from the foundation of the indigenous peoples who brought the first culture to the island. From then, imperative historical moments, such as industrialisation and globalisation, triggered cross-fertilisation of culture into the unique amalgamation that is expressed today. Within this amalgamated cultural identity are the many layers of cultural existence that coexist. Each individual is in an active role of negotiating these layers based on how they are positioned or how they position themselves. And while at certain times some elements of their identity may take precedence, each layer is imperative to constituting a whole. This highlights the intersectionality that exists within the Aruban community as there are different groups of people who can adopt the cultural identity of Aruba without compromising other aspects of their identity.

Through the representations of the murals, a strong connection is found between the Aruban people and the island, traditions and community. The element of community especially has proven prominent as it illuminates the adaptability to mediate multiculturalism from centuries of creolisation. The negotiation of the Aruban cultural identity is a testament to the cultural flexibility and inclusivity that constitutes oneness on the island. The ability to welcome this change is an enduring aspect of the Aruban identity where the sense of community and belonging is at the core of their culture.

Murals as a mode of expressing the properties of Aruban cultural identity have become a source of cultural pride and intangible cultural artefacts. While the awareness of the Aruban mural movement is still growing, the aim of the murals to (re) educate the locals and tourists has caught on and is making a significant impact. With further collaboration with the local community, such as through school field trips or free virtual mural tours, the murals can become more effective as a didactic tool. By understanding the stories of heritage and empowerment embedded by the murals into their surrounding landscapes, the Aruban community can use the murals as a way to construct, affirm and negotiate their cultural identities further.

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