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This Painting Is Nice, but Is It Actually Fighting for Social Justice?' Exploring the Challenges and Dilemmas of Participatory Art and Storytelling for Social Justice (abstract)

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2015 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

Oct. 1-3, 2015, Dayton, Ohio

For the archive of the conference, see http://ecommons.udayton.edu/human_rights/2015/

Research Panel: Visualizing Rights

Presenter: Katherine Fobear, University of British Columbia

Title: “This painting is nice, but is it *actually* fighting for social justice?” Exploring the Challenges and Dilemmas of Participatory Art and Storytelling for Social Justice

Abstract: Recent writings on social justice and human rights have spoken about the power of participatory art in providing new platforms for marginalized communities to express themselves outside the confines of hegemonic and unequal power structures inherent in state and academic institutions. Participatory art helps individuals to express themselves and articulate the sometimes inarticulable aspects of their lives. It allows individuals to also have a new way to engage with the public on an emotional and intimate level that might otherwise be smoothed over in policy or academic reports on social injustice and inequality. In this paper, I will explore the challenges of creating and implementing a participatory mural project with lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans refugee in Vancouver, BC. While there has been significant work on how researchers should ethically engage with marginalized communities in participatory artwork, there has been little work on the challenges activist-scholars-practitioners face in working with community members’ stories and artistic works in both an academic and non-academic setting. This piece will explore the challenges of showing the meanings behind LGBT refugees’ stories and their agency in their telling of their story. It will also address what storytelling and art for social justice means on the ground and what we must consider when engaging in community artwork projects.

Keywords: Participatory art, social justice, storytelling, refugee, queer

Biography: Katherine Fobear is a support worker for Rainbow Refugee. Rainbow Refugee Committee (RRC) is a Vancouver based community group that supports and advocates with people seeking refugee protection because of persecution based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status. Rainbow Refugee Committee engages in outreach, advocacy and public education on LGBTQ/HIV+ refugee issues. Katherine is also a PhD Candidate at the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice and the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia. Her work focuses on the oral histories and participatory photography of LGBT refugees living in Vancouver.