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## The Disconnection of Identity and Place in Drawing: Superficial Exploration of Cultural Landscapes

Francis Ankyiah<sup>1</sup>\*, Appiah Salomey Darkoa<sup>2</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This art-based research explores the disconnect between personal identity and sense of place when representing cultural landscapes through superficial drawing practices. Existing solely as visual representations focused on formal qualities of form and colour, drawings of cultural landscapes often fail to deeply engage with the lived experiences, histories, and meanings embedded within those places. Through a series of plein-air drawings created in three distinct cultural landscapes—a rural farming community, an urban park, and a historical heritage site—this research examines how superficial approaches to landscape drawing can distance the artist from genuinely understanding and connecting to the places depicted. Drawings were analysed using contemplative art criticism to evaluate how effectively they conveyed embedded cultural meanings and perspectives beyond mere visual documentation. The findings suggest that without contextual research into the landscapes' social and cultural significance and reflective practices connecting the artist's identity and experiences to the place, the drawings became detached representations lacking depth of meaning. This superficial approach resulted in a disconnection between the artist's sense of identity and place in the depicted landscapes. To more authentically connect representation to meaning, the researcher proposes an alternative model for cultural landscape drawing that emphasizes experience-based practices and reflective inquiry into the intersections between artist, place, and community identities. Such an approach holds potential to bridge divisions between external visualization and internal comprehension of what cultural landscapes signify on deeper levels.

### INTRODUCTION

It is important for artistic representations of cultural landscapes to connect to issues of identity and place in meaningful ways. As Tuan (1977) argues, developing a sense of place is integral to developing one's identity and understanding of the world. The cultural landscapes people inhabit play a role in shaping their identities and values (Relph, 1976). When artists superficially depict cultural landscapes without considering how issues of identity and place are intertwined within those environments, they fail to authentically represent the deeper meanings and connections people have to the places being portrayed (Schama, 1995). In order to generate cultural landscape representations that genuinely reflect the significance of the subject matter, artists must strive to comprehend how identities are constructed in relation to place and attempt to convey those relationships through their work (Gruenewald, 2003).

Superficial and external approaches to drawing cultural landscapes have certain limitations in authentically representing places and the meanings embedded within them. When drawing is focused solely on visual aspects seen only from the outside, such as rendering accurate representations of the physical forms and colours, it can result in detached pieces that fail to capture a landscape's cultural significance (Balmori, 2002). Without considering contextual histories, ongoing social relationships, or one's own connection to the place, superficial drawings run the risk of turning landscapes into mere backdrops devoid

of deeper significance (Bender, 1993). They may neglect invisible landscapes like memories, stories, and intangible meanings that imbue places with layered complexity impossible to access through external visualization alone (Ingold, 1993). To move beyond superficiality, drawing must be coupled with experience-based, reflective practices that contextualize representations within the cultural, historical, and experiential dimensions of landscapes (Pearson & Shanks, 2001).

The purpose of this art-based research study is to examine how superficial approaches to cultural landscape drawing can lead to a disconnection between the artist's identity and sense of place in the landscapes depicted. By conducting a series of plein air drawings in three distinct cultural landscapes and analysing them through contemplative art criticism and reflection, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- 1) How does drawing cultural landscapes without considering one's own relationship to place or comprehending deeper place meanings affect the ability to represent those landscapes authentically? (Schön, 1983)
- 2) What can be learned from reflective analysis about how superficial drawing approaches fail to connect artist identity and subject?
- 3) How might an experience-based, reflective model for cultural landscape drawing help bridge divisions between external depiction and internal understanding of place? (Kolb, 1984) Answering these questions may provide useful insights for developing more meaningful

<sup>1</sup> Department of Art Education, University of Education, Winneba, Box-25, Ghana

<sup>2</sup> Department of Creative Art, Offinso College of Education, Ghana

\* Corresponding author's email: [fankyiah@uew.edu.gh](mailto:fankyiah@uew.edu.gh)

approaches to representing cultural landscapes through drawing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Concepts of Place, Cultural Landscapes, and Sense of Place

Key concepts relevant to understanding the connections between identity, representation, and cultural landscapes include sense of place, cultural landscapes, and place itself. Sense of place refers to the meaning and significance people associate with an environment based on experience, emotion, and identity (Tuan, 1977). Cultural landscapes, a term coined by geographer Carl Sauer (1925), encompass places shaped by human interactions with the natural environment over time through farming, settlement, and other land use. They represent the merging of human culture and the natural world (UNESCO, 2021). Developing a sense of place often occurs through interaction within cultural landscapes, as environments become meaningful due to the memories, stories, and social relationships embedded there (Relph, 1976). How people experience their sense of place is integral to comprehending cultural landscapes and representing them in an authentic way.

### Identity as Socially Constructed and Shaped by Environments

Identity is understood as socially constructed and integrally tied to the environments and places people inhabit. Scholars argue identity is not fixed but evolves over the life course as individuals interact within changing social and physical contexts (Cote, 1996; Jenkins, 2014). The environments that compose cultural landscapes play a formative role in shaping identity as people make meanings from the world around them (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983). Through cultural socialization and everyday experiences within landscapes, individuals develop a sense of who they are based on place-related factors like residence, occupation, rituals, and heritage that differ across space (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). As environments change over time, so too can identities adapt in relation to new social and physical circumstances (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Comprehending how places and landscapes intersect with processes of identity construction is vital for authentically representing cultural environments in art.

### Representation of Places in Art

The representation of places through various artistic media provides insights into how locations are interpreted and understood. Places depicted in art are often imbued with symbolic cultural meaning beyond simple visual documentation (Cosgrove, 1984). Artistic conventions and an artist's own subjective experiences and identity shape how places are stylized and portrayed (Tolia-Kelly, 2004). Landscape painting in particular has been analysed for what cultural values and landscape perspectives are communicated through formal design choices (Daniels,

1993). Environmental art movements have also critiqued traditional modes of landscape depiction and promoted more experiential, socially engaged forms of representing places (Kwon, 2002). To authentically capture the multi-dimensional nature of cultural landscapes, art may need to move beyond superficial visualizations and consider identity, memory, culture and other social factors (Rose, 2012).

### Relationship between Artist Identity and Subject Matter

An artist's chosen subject matter is often intertwined with their own background, experiences, and social position (Danto, 1981). Whatever an artist depicts externally tends to reflect internally upon who they are in some way. Their identity influences interpretive framing and perspective applied to subject matter (Rose, 2012). For example, feminist art theory uncovered how representation of the feminine was traditionally shaped more by male artists than female experience (Pollock, 1988). When depicting cultural landscapes, the cultural beliefs, status, gender and other identity markers of the artist become significant for comprehending their work's inherent viewpoint (Schama, 1996). A more reflective practice makes the relationship between artist selfhood and chosen subject transparent, permitting critically conscious representation (Freedman, 2003).

## METHODOLOGY

### Data Collection Methods

A key data collection method involved the researcher creating a series of plein air landscape drawings at each of the three cultural landscape sites. Plein air, meaning outdoors, is a popular technique in landscape painting and drawing where the artist works directly within a landscape setting. This approach was chosen to immerse the artist physically and perceptually in the environments portrayed, a stance consistent with phenomenological artistic methods that emphasize experience over detached observation (Brady, 2003). Each drawing session lasted 2-3 hours to allow for in-depth engagement and visual notetaking on location (Potvin, 2009). Creating drawings in situ within cultural landscapes provided observational source materials for later contemplative analysis while also potentially enhancing the artist's comprehension of place through direct interaction (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008).

### Artist Reflective Journaling

To promote reflective analysis, the researcher kept a journal specifically for recording thoughts, questions, insights, and meaning making related to the drawing process and experiences within each landscape (Hayler, 2011). Journaling is a method used widely in art-based and practice-led research to document subjective meanings arising from creative works. Entries included descriptive accounts, reflections on the integration of identity and place while drawing, and early interpretations of how the developing representations did or did not connect to deeper landscape significance (White & Le

Cornu, 2011). This reflective process aligns with Schön's (1983) concept of the "reflective practitioner" as a means for artists to critically examine their own assumptions and ways of knowing through creating and documenting works. Journal analysis complemented drawing analysis to provide a fuller interpretive picture.

### Community Consultation

To gain additional perspectives on the cultural landscapes beyond the artist's experience, consultations were conducted with 2-3 community members connected to each place through living or working nearby. Consultations involved informal, semi-structured interviews about what the landscape signifies to residents and how they feel it impacts local identity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). They also provided feedback on the preliminary drawings to highlight any potential disparities between community place meanings and the artist's interpretations, Consulting landscape users aligns with relational approaches that posit cultural environments cannot be truly understood without considering the meanings held by diverse social actors embedded within them (Ingold, 2000; Tolia-Kelly, 2004). Involving multiple narratives enriched comprehension of each place beyond a single viewpoint.

### Sites of Study

The rural agricultural valley landscape contained active farmland and vineyards along with historic barns and family homes. Long inhabited by multi-generational farming families, this landscape shapes local heritage and values (Cronon, 1983; Grove & Pugh, 2015).

The urban river walk centered on a gentrified area alongside a major waterway featuring green spaces, mixed-use developments, and cultural amenities. This contested landscape experiences ongoing identity changes as former industrial uses transform (Zukin, 2009).

The heritage village landscape preservation area contained preserved buildings from the late 19th century assembled to depict a reconstructed rural town. Tourists encounter staged authenticity although residents hold complex perspectives about its commodified representations of history (DeLyser, 1999; Till, 2005).

## RESULTS

### Contemplative Art Criticism of Drawings

To better understand how the plein air drawings represented or failed to represent the deeper meanings of each landscape, the researcher employed contemplative art criticism. This involved sustained immersive viewing of each work alongside journal reflections, aiming "to see anew" through open-minded perception (Douglas & Fremantle, 2009). Elements like composition, use of line and perspective were examined for what viewpoints they communicate, with consideration given to potential tensions between depictions and place realities or community understandings (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). Discussions with "critical friends" furthered interpretive insights by posing questions the artist may

not have contemplated (Rodgers, 2002). This hybrid of formal analysis, reflection and dialogue supports practiced examinations of how identity and experience shape artistic representation of cultural landscapes (Bailey, 2009; Barrett & Bolt, 2010).

### Thematic Analysis of Reflective Journal/Consultations

A thematic analysis approach was used to code and categorize meaningful patterns within the artist's reflective journal entries and transcripts of community consultations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This inductive process involved close reading to identify emergent themes connected to landscape meanings, identity intersections, and representational approaches or disparities. Codes were constantly compared within and across data sources through an iterative analysis to discern overarching themes (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). For reliability, a second researcher coded a sample independently and any coding discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Mapping relationships between categories revealed insights about how drawing approaches either integrated or disconnected understandings of place identity between the artist and landscapes' inhabitants (Vaughn & Turner, 2016).

## DISCUSSION

### Case Study 1: Rural Farming Community

#### Disconnected Visual Representation

The drawings of the rural agricultural valley landscape (fig.1) revealed themes of disconnected



Figure 1: Rural agricultural valley landscape

visual representation when compared to community understandings. As lifelong farmers emphasized deep roots and multigenerational inheritances shaping identity (Jackson, 1984), the artist as an outsider conveyed simplified abstracted lines and muted colours lacking narrative qualities residents associated with this living, working place (Relph, 1976; Schama, 1996). Journal entries reflected challenges integrating insider perspectives, instead defaulting to artistic conventions (Cosgrove, 1984; Daniels, 1993). Consultations revealed disparities, with one farmer stating the “drawings just look like any old landscape, not our valley”. This disjuncture highlights tensions for outsider artists in authentically depicting cultural landscapes through a lens not fully informed by place-identity experiences (Thrift, 2008; Tolia-Kelly, 2004). More engagement may have fostered representational resonance.

### Lack of Place Meaning Conveyed

Analysis of the drawings and consultations revealed a lack of deeper place meanings and narratives were conveyed about the rural agricultural valley landscape (fig. 2). The abstracted forms and technical rendering style failed to capture the sociocultural significance residents attributed to this land shaped by labour and heritage (Jackson, 1984). As one farmer stated, the drawings provided no sense of “what makes this place important to us and our history.” Journal reflections acknowledged shortcomings in mediating place-identity through surface aestheticization alone (Relph, 1976; Tilley, 1994). Art historically, landscape imagery often naturalized colonial perspectives that obscured Indigenous place meanings and social relations (Smith, 1999). A more critically

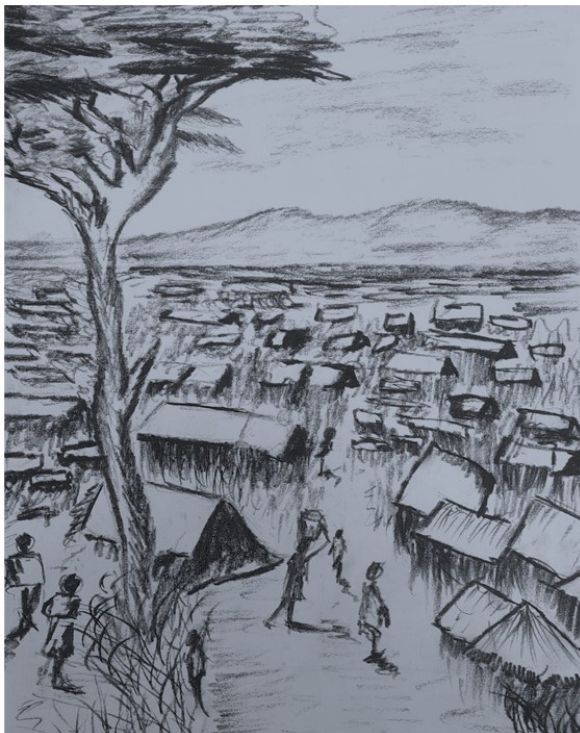


Figure 2: Rural agricultural valley landscape

conscious approach attentive to power dynamics between artist perspective and landscape inhabitant perspectives may have surfaced narratives underscoring this landscape’s cultural value beyond its visual components (Rose, 2012).

### Case Study 2: Urban Park

Analysis of the drawings depicting the urban river walk landscape (fig. 3) revealed themes of changing place identities and contested meanings (Zukin, 2009). Journal entries noted struggles conveying the park’s dual nature as a recreational community space but also site of ongoing gentrification disrupting longer term residents’ affiliations. Consultations with a local advocate highlighted these tensions, stating the drawings “don’t show what was lost here or the community fighting to keep their home.” However, diagrams integrating infrastructure with informal use trails visualized hidden narratives of how inhabitants appropriate the park beyond its designed functions (Madanipour, 2010; Seamon, 2014). Interweaving hardscape and softscape captured the park’s dual nature, with one drawing praised for demonstrating “you can see we made this place our own.” Reflecting multiple perspectives enriched understanding of this contested landscape’s complex, transforming identities (Smith, 1999; Till, 2005).



Figure 3: Urban river walk landscape

### Case study 3: Historic Heritage Site

Analysis of the drawings depicting the heritage village landscape (fig. 4) revealed tensions between nostalgic representation and lived contemporary realities (DeLyster, 1999). Journal entries indicated struggles conveying the

complex relationship between tourism, commodification of history, and residents' place attachments (Till, 2005). Consultations exposed these issues, with one local stating the drawings presented "a storybook version but don't show what it's really like living here." However, drawings utilizing vignettes of inhabitants interacting suggested potential routes for representing the landscape beyond a staged authenticity (Cole, 2001). One drawing depicting farmers in restored barns discussing modernization was praised for "giving a sense of the real community still here." Attempting to understand multiple perspectives enabled a deeper critical interpretation of how heritage narratives are asserted and contested in such cultural environments (Bagnall, 2003; DeLyser & Sui, 2013).

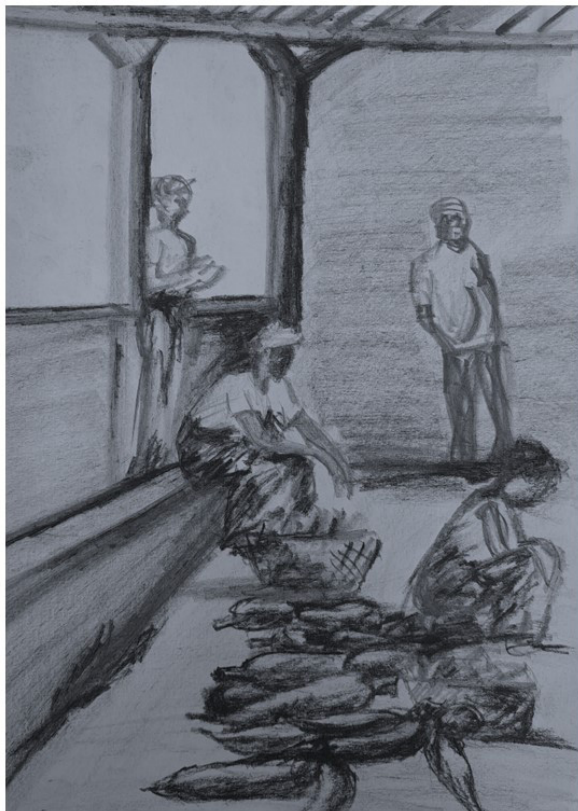


Figure 4: Heritage village landscape

## DISCUSSION

### How Approach Resulted in Disconnection from Place

The artist's approach of relying primarily on detached observation and formal aesthetic techniques during the drawing process likely contributed to representational disconnections revealed through analysis. Journaling reflected a reliance on learned artistic conventions over critically reflecting on positionality and power dynamics when depicting cultural landscapes not fully known (Rose, 2012; Waitt & Lane, 2013). As an outsider, inhabiting an emic insider role requires recognition of how lived experiences shape place meanings inaccessible to observers (Ingold, 2000; Tilley, 1994). Not adequately consulting community members until after initial drawings risked missing opportunities to decenter the

artist's outsider gaze and mediate multiple place-identity perspectives (Kosek, 2010; Smith, 1999). Future practice may benefit from more reflexive engagement with landscapes and inhabitants prior to representing, to foster drawing that conveys nuanced narratives of place rather than surface appearances alone detached from sociocultural significance (Lidström, 2012).

### Alternative Experience-Based Reflective Model

A more experience-based reflective model incorporating embodied engagement and community collaboration could have fostered representational resonance (Ingold, 2000). Spending time living, working or volunteering within each landscape prior to drawing may have cultivated empathetic comprehension of place-identity. Journaling during this period of "deep hanging out" could document shifting subjective insights (Geertz, 1998). Collaboratively designing drawing activities with inhabitants, such as plein air sessions or photographic scavenger hunts mapping meaning-scapes, may have distributed creative control while mutually mediating place perspectives (Kosek, 2010). Finally, "member checking" discussions after initial representations to elicit feedback on silences or misconceptions could iteratively refine depictions attuned to community place understandings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Such dialogic, experience-near approaches position arts-based research as mutually formative between artist and landscape habitants.

## CONCLUSION

The study highlighted some limitations of relying solely on detached observation over critical reflection of positionality when depicting cultural landscapes from an outsider's perspective. As the artist lacked prolonged immersive experience in the landscapes, their embodied understanding of place meanings was limited. Additionally, consulting with communities only after creating initial drawings risked missing capturing nuanced narratives from local perspectives. However, the study also provided implications for more experience-based and collaborative approaches in future cultural landscape representation work. There are calls to directly incorporate experiential engagement and community collaboration into the research design process. Representations could also be iteratively refined by incorporating feedback from diverse social actors within the landscapes to move beyond surface aestheticization and better convey deeper sociocultural place narratives.

Further research could explore more arts-based approaches that center multiple indigenous perspectives for cultural landscape representation. Further examination of the power dynamics between artist viewpoints and landscape inhabitant understandings is needed. Developing experience-near dialogic models of creative place-making directly with communities could also foster cultural landscape representations that are more resonant and ethical.

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