Indexicalities and Identity (Re) Construction in Deathscape: Materiality, Placement and Symbolism

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Abstract

Deathscape is a multidimensional place as it serves as a microcosm reflecting larger social, political, and economic realities. Further, it is considered as a semiotic space, composing various linguistic codes that are formally or semantically formed. With this, the present study analyzed the 521 epitaphs from Sta. Barbara Public Cemetery in the Philippines Through the Place Semiotic Framework proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2003) and Van Gessep's (1909) concept of liminality. Based on the analyses, the researchers conclude that cemeteries function as sites for identity reconstruction through their intertwining elements, such as materiality placements, and symbolism. These elements serve as indices of the communal root and values, socioeconomic status, and emotional entanglement between the dead and the living. Generally, more advantaged families seek more elaborate grave markers, whereas simpler ones reflect socioeconomic constraints, which, in turn, deduce social hierarchies even in the context of death. Meanwhile, permanent symbols such as religious icons, architectural and linguistic entities, inscriptions, and temporal elements, such as flowers, reflect profound cultural and spiritual values, representing memory's transcendence and persistence. Through indexicality, deathscape also shows liminality as identities are reconstructed and preserved, not as they were; they exist in between and are rearticulated based on memory and materiality and reconstructed through multimodal narratives being inscribed. With this, cemeteries go beyond merely resting places for the dead; they are dynamic social spaces, and epitaphs are elements that maintain enduring connections despite human mortality.

Keywords: Deathscape, Identity Reconstruction, Indexicality, Semiotic Framework, Semiotic Space.

Introduction

A cemetery, as an area for linguistic landscape (henceforth referred to as LL) analysis, or more broadly as a semiotic space, is a cultural entity and text representing the collective work created by the participants in a specific community. Further, cemeteries serve as a microcosm of society's macrostructure as they mirror power structures, prejudices, and identity (1). They embody the values and beliefs of the living and stand as a visual and spatial expression of death. Recent studies in anthropology discussed the significance of cemeteries as a locus expression of communities that display not only the connection between the living and the dead but also the past and present and, ultimately, offer a compelling manifestation of the intertwining elements of language and culture. Deathscape semiotic space consists of multiple objects, which can be interpreted from multiple levels and perspectives. A gravestone is an entity comprising various co-existing permanent elements (linguistic and architectural entities) and temporal elements (ornaments, such as flowers as signs of emotional entanglement). Collectively, these sepulchral objects create various codes that are shaped both formally and semantically according to the subjective criteria established by the author. Moreover, scholars extrapolated three fundamental features that semioticians emphasized in characterizing cemetery space as a semiotic landscape: (i) it is a delimited space that is directly connected to context; (ii) a space as a result of the collective consciousness of the people in a particular community; and (iii) the space that offers information concerning external reality (2). Presently, the global and local trends in the (LL) highlight the multidimensionality embedded in the interplay of sociopolitical, economic, and ethnolinguistic foundations (3). Furthermore, studies were contextualized vis-à-vis code preferences, inscription systems, and emplacement practices between the marginalized and dominant groups, which reveal the disparity

in power dynamics and the constructs of language politics and policies (4). Studies posit that ethnolinguistic group's experiences in LL constitute the sociopolitical and psychological aspects of bilingualism, and the signs are the results of social and political realities (5). Meanwhile, discursive defiance at the grassroots level emerged despite the official language policy formulated and implemented to unify multiethnic populations (3). Scholars furthered that this happens due to pragmatic factors. This defiance becomes evident in the linguistic and semiotic representations of signboards. On the same note, public signs, such as LL materials, are considered media for public contestation and negotiation of social rootedness (6). Generally speaking, studies in LL speak about the macrocosm of the social realities determined by social, political, and pragmatic factors. They are geared towards deconstructing the imbalance of power dynamics between dominant and marginalized communities. They are explored to reveal the extent and manner in which dissonance has fragmented public spaces. What remains unaddressed in LL studies in the Philippine context, however, is the fact that, despite being inanimate, signages serve as active agents, and they do not only convey ideologies but also serve as a tool for identity reconstruction and transmit messages that are reinterpreted by the intended receivers. Bringing together the spatial and linguistic processes of meaning-making and construction is a multidisciplinary approach that informs linguistic landscape studies. On this note, LL foregrounds identity construction involving cultural and social landscapes. In the context of the present study, analyzing the deathscape offers a perspective on indexicalities and identity reconstruction associated with death (7). Beyond serving as final resting places for the dead, cemeteries are rich resources for investigating how language, memory, identity, and religious and cultural practices intersect (8-11). This interplay is explored through the materiality, placement, and symbolism of graves. Other literature underscored that analyzing indexicalities, materiality, placement, and symbolism in cemeteries has been a focus in linguistic landscape studies. The materiality of graves was examined and it found that signs are semantically interpreted through their physical features and materials used in making the gravestones (12). The study furthered

that regional and national identities of the community are reflected in the inscriptions. Moreover, using textiles in graves also signifies a ritualized form of identity expression through material culture, which, in turn, highlights human idiosyncrasies (13). Subsequently, physical space and arrangements of graves are reflective of social hierarchies and emphasize that deathscapes affirm identity construction, communal rootedness, and cultural and religious belongingness (14). In addition, grave placement can either foster social cohesion or promote social disparities, which contribute to the construction of new social groups in a multicultural community (15). Another critical element of identity construction is the symbols used in the deathscapes. Scholars have explained that memorial symbols, such as skulls, hourglasses, crosses, and crossed bones, reflect religious affiliations and elucidated that they carry messages that sometimes carry multiple messages, resulting in contestations (16). In addition, symbols carry the identity of the dead and their connection to their cultural heritage (17, 18). Despite the focus on these aspects, there remains a gap in understanding how specific indexicalities— those features that point to broader meanings— inform the liminality of identity of the deceased. By investigating the relationships between the symbols, placement, and symbolism of graves and the social narratives they represent, this study analyzed how materiality, placement, and symbolism present in the linguistic landscape of Sta Barbara Public Cemetery index identity in the context of death. By expanding its scope to cemeteries, this study offers knowledge of language use in many public settings, which can contribute to the broader field of LL studies. Lastly, this work can contribute to the current discourse on deathscape, as it is one of the emerging topics in LL studies.

Theoretical Framework

The researchers utilized the Place Semiotics Framework (19). Drawing from the earlier works on linguistic anthropology, symbols are culturally and socially constructed (20, 21). Likewise, visual semiotics framework put forward that images derive their meaning relative to their positions and location in the world (19, 22). Place Semiotic Framework comprises three key elements: code preference (symbolism), inscription (materiality), and emplacement (placement). Code preference

refers to how signs represent the geopolitical world through the choice of languages, their graphic representation, and their arrangement if more than one language is contained on a sign (23). These elements also entail icons, motifs, and religious symbols (Christian crosses, Islamic crescent moon, and indigenous symbols, among others). Similarly, scholars viewed that symbols are conveyed through spatial relationships, such as center margin, top, down, left, and right (24). With this, the positioning of signs within the space indicates which symbols are primary and secondary. Therefore, this concept is elucidating, especially in identifying which symbol is more favored. As discussed, code preference can be further reflected in inscription or materiality (19). This element entails fonts, materials used (wood, stones, metal), the shape of the grave, the inscription of the tombstones, and positioning, which contribute to its presentation in the material world.

Place Semiotics underscored the significance of sign emplacement or physical placement of signs or images. Likewise, signs can be decontextualized (appear the same in various contexts), transgressive (being displayed in an 'appropriate' location), or situated (meanings are derived relative to specific locations) (19). Emplacement considers the spatial context of signs and their relationship to socio-political realities, highlighting the significance of where signs are situated in the physical world. Regarding identity construction and reconstruction, researchers construed that that identity engages in a dialectical process and identity construction was regarded as a co-constructive interaction between individuals (notions about oneself) and social structures (notions of social/external discourse that shape one's identity) (25). Furthermore, identity is constantly constructed and reconstructed through interactions of individuals in a society, and people project an identity while also being subjected to one by external perceptions (26). On this note, deathscape serves as a material space of identity reconstruction where symbols, objects, and materiality index social identity posthumously.

Also, the concept of liminality informed the study. Liminality exists in transitional states, where individuals are 'in-between' identities. In the context of death, it reflects a liminal identity shift as the dead enter a liminal phase where the living reinterpret their identity, and the mourners undergo an identity shift as death reshapes their perceived self-identity (27). Extant studies utilized place semiotics and identity construction frameworks to understand the dynamics of language use in multilingual settings. In the same case, further elucidation and exemplification of Scollon and Scollon framework were discussed (28, 29). While studies provided compelling results in advancing understanding of its construct, it has not been well explored in the context of the Philippine deathscapes. Therefore, the present study finds its use significant in the investigation.

Methodology
Data
The researchers took pictures of the 700 graves with their epitaphs in Sta. Barbara Public Cemetery. The researchers did not include graves without grave markers, the physical objects placed at a gravesite. Furthermore, while they seem interesting, the researchers did not include the graves that do not have readable markers, as it is hard for the researchers to transcribe the data; hence, it may affect the coding and the analyses. Also, graves that use tarpaulins were not included because these only serve as temporary grave markers. Therefore, the data in this study consisted of 521 epitaphs written on the grave markers of deceased locals of Sta. Barbara. Specifically, the researchers included manually carved epitaphs, manually written epitaphs, and epitaphs consisting of two or more names. These elements were included because they are essential in analyzing the linguistic landscape of the locale.

Research Locale
The researchers gathered the data from a Public Cemetery in Nueva Ecija. The researchers chose this locale for several reasons. Its accessibility to the researchers facilitates data collection, which ensures a broad representation of epitaphs for analysis. Moreover, as a final resting place for individuals from diverse backgrounds within the community, studying epitaphs in this locale provides ideas into socio-cultural values and social dynamics. Thus, the choice of Sta. Barbara Public Cemetery, as the research locale, aligns with the study's objectives, which offer a rich and representative dataset for exploring the linguistic landscape. Photographs of graves and epitaphs were taken during five visits to the cemetery from

May to June 2024. Taking photographs is considered an essential tool in LL studies because it facilitates data gathering by reducing time and offering effective preservation (19). The researchers decided that any personal information included in the epitaphs ought to be hidden to protect the privacy of the deceased and the bereaved families. Names, nicknames, and dates of birth are all included in this. Nonetheless, since they preserve anonymity, terms of endearment—that is, expressions of love, affection, or fondness—that are specific to the departed were kept.

Data Analysis

The researchers utilized textual and visual analyses to examine how indexicalities shape identity reconstruction in Sta. Barbara Public Cemetery. The textual analysis focused on the linguistic features of the epitaph, such as the placement of names and font size, to determine their role in indicating prominence and significance in the overall composition (22). This approach was employed to analyze how inscriptions serve as indexical markers of identity, which reflect aspects such as social status, religious affiliation, and cultural belonging. For instance, the positioning of the deceased can be correlated with their familial importance and social standing. Moreover, visual analysis was employed to analyze motifs (e.g., crosses, statues, flowers, and colors) and their cultural, religious, or ideological meanings in relation to identity construction. Visual semiotics includes analyzing the material aspects of representation, which entails how signs, graphics, and images are placed and structured to create meaningful visual interpretations (26). For instance, the presence of a cross and bible verses could signify Christian beliefs, and flowers embody the love and eternal memory of the deceased. These visual elements complement the linguistic content of the epitaph and, when placed together, create a narrative that further reinforces the deceased identity and social positioning.

Results and Discussion
Materiality or Inscription

Materiality is more than a mere devoid of meanings, as it carries significance imbued with symbolic and interpretive representation (30). This notion is particularly evident in the context of deathscapes, as humans or the bereaved remain particular who represent an idiosyncratic form of enduring objects they require in the tombstones or gravestones of the dead. The physical properties of the objects affect how they are interpreted and reinterpreted, as the inscriptions, materials, and positioning are deliberately selected. Hence, material objects and their spatial arrangement have connections (28). In these light, sepulchral artifacts, memorials, and mementos are tangible expressions of human activities manifested in material and inscribed forms. The interplay between the materiality, space, inscriptions, and the people who remember the dead reflects the dynamic human relationship. All of these constitute maintaining social bonds beyond death and serve as a vehicle for reinforcing and legitimizing values, social distinctions, and hierarchy. As discussed, code preference moves beyond the linguistic dimensions of the inscriptions, as it also entails the physical and material properties, which serve as markers of identity and socio-economic status (19).

Figure 1: Types of Graves

The types of graves and epitaphs provide an understanding of the socio-economic status within the community. It is important to note that the cemetery in Sta. Barbara is not government-subsidized. Therefore, the people in the community must buy spaces for the grave and provide their epitaphs. On this note, graves that are housed and separated from the others (such as in Figure 1A) indicate a higher economic status. Meanwhile, stacked (as seen in Figure 1B) graves often denote economic limitations where families or communities cannot afford individual burial plots. This reflects lower socio-economic status and a practical need to economize death, much like in life.

Figure 2: Samples of Grave Markers

The epitaphs' materiality also acts as a visual representation of socio-economic disparities. Usually seen on less expensive materials like cement or wood, handwritten or manually carved epitaphs (in Figure 2A) imply lesser economic standing because they are less costly than professionally engraved or marble epitaphs. Such inscriptions show a family's inadequate financial means as well as their restricted access to the durable and aesthetically pleasing solutions that richer families may purchase. Correspondingly, cement graves (Figure 2B) offer a balance between affordability and durability, often seen in middle to lower socio-economic classes. Tiled graves (Figure 2C) and pebble-made graves (Figure 2D) indicate middle to upper-middle-class status, where families opt for a more decorative burial option that remains within financial reach. Thus, each type of grave and epitaph serves as a marker of socio-economic status and reflects both cultural practices and economic realities within communities. The use of materials such as tile and concrete, commonly associated with middle- to lower-middle-class status, provides a practical middle ground. Cement graves are affordable and durable, making them a reasonable option for families seeking a balance between financial limitations and the desire to create a respectful memorial. Tiled graves and pebble-made graves, depending on their design and quality, can also signal a middle- or upper-middle-class standing, as they offer a more decorative choice. These insights align with Prof. Tesoro's findings in her study of grave markers in the *Katagalugan* regions (31). Prof. Tesoro explained that grave markers are often designed more for aesthetic appeal and status display than for religious or spiritual reasons. She further explored the concept of well-being (*ginhawa)* and identity, emphasizing that within Catholicism, there is a focus on the *ginhawa* of both the deceased and their grieving families. In this context, the cemetery functions not only as a final resting place for the dead but also as a social landscape where socio-economic status is visibly marked. Beyond personal expressions of grief and remembrance, graves and epitaphs become declarations of an individual's or family's financial standing. Wealthier families often invest in more elaborate and costly markers, while those with fewer resources opt for simpler and less durable options. Akin to the socio-economic disparities that prevail in the living community, grave markers, in one way or another, reflect this stratification, which reinforces and legitimizes social divisions within the cemetery's landscape.

Code Preference or Symbolism

Historically, the Christian belief in the Resurrection of the Flesh necessitated a

designated resting place for mortal remains, typically the churchyard. Burial is a ritual act involving a fixed spatial location, a central element of funeral customs, and highlights both similarities and differences between Catholic and Protestant burial practices over time (28). Christian burials were not merely acts of interment; they were accompanied by objects such as coffins, clothing, and grave goods that symbolized the deceased's place in the temporal world, completing the naked body before the soul ascended to meet its creator. In the present study, the graves and epitaphs in Sta. Barbara Public Cemetery are characterized by the elements and symbols in the epitaphs. Visual semiotics, which includes the material aspect, refers to the ways in which signs, images, graphics, texts, photographs, and paintings are produced to create meaningful wholes for visual interpretation (19).
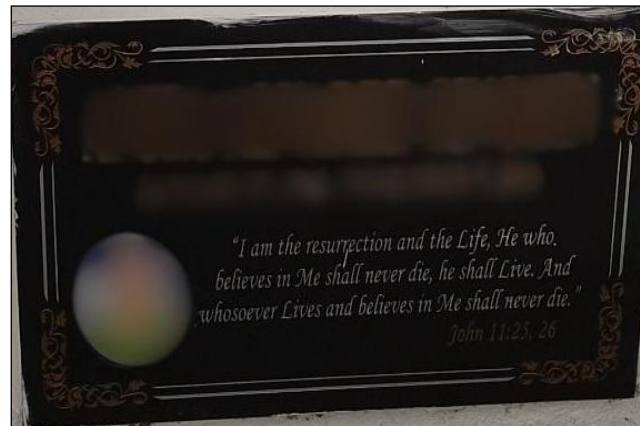

Figure 3: Sample of Epitaph Emphasizing the Name of the Deceased

Banking on the visual semiotics framework, which considered that placement of the names, either at the topmost or in the center of the epitaph with a larger font size, connotes their prominence and significance in the overall composition (27). They furthered that this type of positioning is described as the "ideal" section of visual composition, as it draws the viewers' attention to the most significant information. The birthdate and date of death are typically located beneath the name, .

suggesting they hold secondary importance in the visual hierarchy. This arrangement is consistently observed among the epitaphs collected from the research site. As presented in Figure 3, despite the lack of a standardized format, this pattern reflects a common visual grammar in the locale where the most emotionally and symbolically significant information, the name of the deceased, is foregrounded.
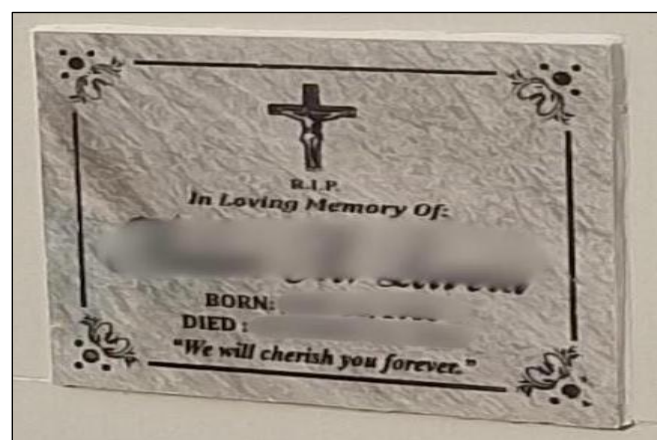

Figure 4: Sample of Epitaph Expressing Affection

Meanwhile, other epitaphic features, such as messages from the family, proverbs, or expressions of affection, are included as supplementary information in various formats,

either as text, images, or a combination of both. These additional elements, as shown in Figure 4, serve to further personalize the epitaph, reflecting the individuality of the deceased while adhering to broader visual conventions that emphasize salience and meaning. Furthermore, messages such as "*We love you,*" "*We will cherish you forever,*" and "*Your memories will remain in our hearts forever*" are the most prevalent written symbols that depict the never-ending emotional connection between the dead and their loved ones, which transcends beyond the physical separation. These symbols ascribed in the epitaphs serve as the declaration of love and remembrance that while bodies are physically absent due to human mortality; connections are still unbroken, suggesting an eternal continuity through memories. On this note, these messages reaffirm a sense of comfort and solace to the bereaved. In a broader cultural sense, these phrases are reflective of the social values surrounding family connections, as they serve as a communal importance of remembering and honoring the dead.
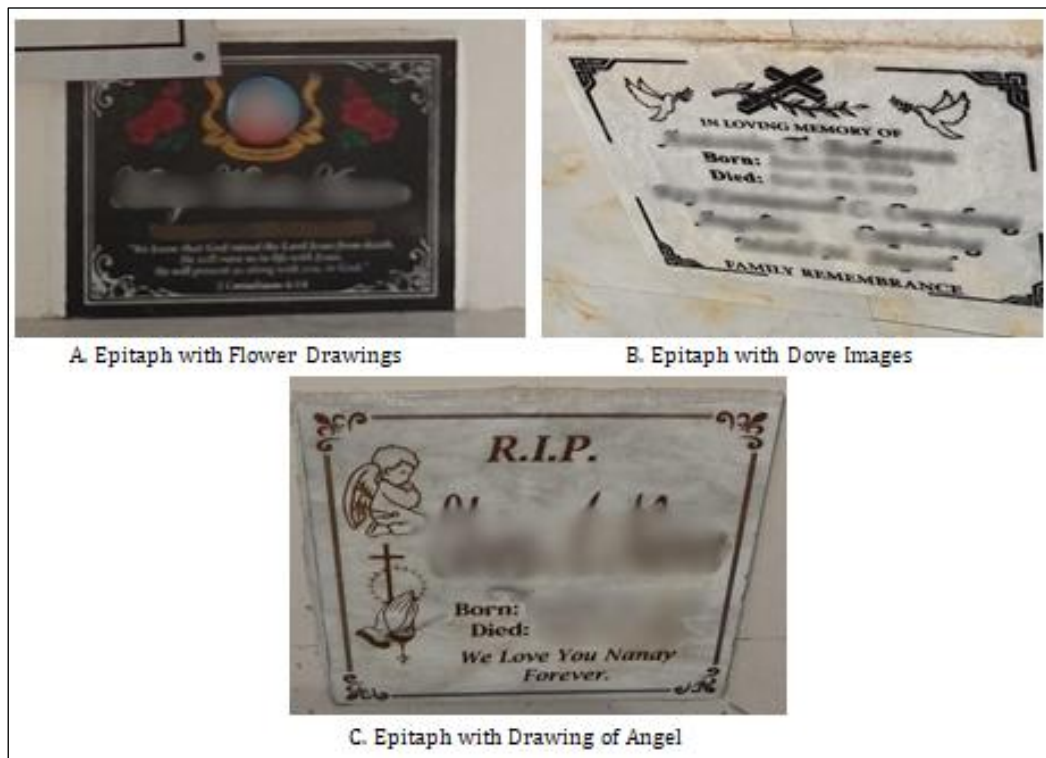

A. Epitaph with Flower Drawings   B. Epitaph with Dove Images

C. Epitaph with Drawing of Angel

Figure 5: Sample of Epitaphs Using Drawings

Furthermore, the usual elements that can be seen in epitaphs are flowers, doves, and angels (Figure 5). The use of drawing of flowers in epitaphs contrasts with fresh flowers in terms of temporality and permanence. Drawn flowers, whether etched in stone or sketched with ink or pencil, freeze a particular moment in time. These depictions remain static once created, which symbolize permanence and preserving the essence of the flower. They serve as enduring symbols of remembrance, which summarizes a timeless connection between the deceased and those who mourn them. Furthermore, the dove, a universal symbol of peace and the soul's journey to rest, indexes peace and spiritual support. Similarly, an angel indexes protection, guidance, and a connection to heaven, which signifies the deceased's passage to a higher existence or a peaceful afterlife.
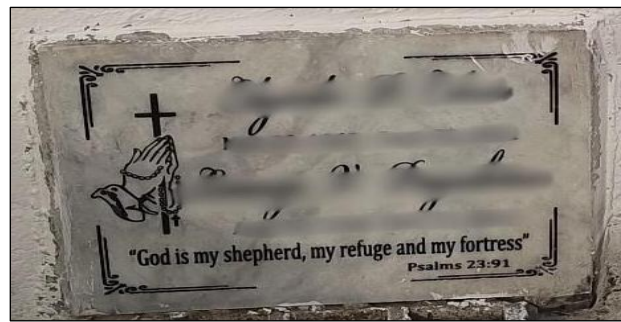
Figure 6: Sample of Epitaph with Bible Verse

Other epitaphs ascribed verse from the Holy Scripture, as shown in Figure 6. The text *"God is my shepherd, my refuge, and my fortress"* foregrounds the religiosity of the dead and the bereaved. Related studies state that Bible and religious texts are among the most favored sources of quotations ascribed in the epitaphs (32). Specifically, the four Gospels in the Bible (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) supplement a promise of resurrection with a positive perspective on life after death. Furthermore, while direct biblical quotations are fragments from Psalms and Gospels, they are used in epitaphs and rendered with varying degrees and precisions, and they are centered on the eschatological themes that connote hope for eternal life with the creator (30). Such text inscribed in the epitaphs stands as the spiritual affirmation in the context of death and positions that the dead's virtues and beliefs guide them to sustain life after death.

A. Epitaph Sample with INC Logo

B. Epitaph Sample with a Cross

C. Epitaph Sample with an Image of Jesus Christ

D. Epitaph Sample with an Image of Mama Mary

E. Epitaph Sample with INDB Initials

Figure 7: Samples of Epitaphs with Symbols of Religious Affiliations

Moreover, other epitaphs, as seen in Figure 7, foreground the dead's affiliation and denomination. The use of the image of the Virgin Mary. Jesus Christ, cross, Iglesia Ni Cristo (INC), and Iglesia ng Dios na Buhay (Church of the Living God) or INDP in epitaphs serve to distinctly signify affiliations and beliefs. The image of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and the cross evokes a personal and intimate connection that indexically aligns with Catholic religious identity. The *Iglesia Ni Cristo* logo and abbreviation *"INC"* distinctly mark membership and devotion within the *Iglesia Ni Cristo* community. Similarly, mentioning *"Iglesia ng Dios na Buhay"* in epitaphs or discussions indexically links individuals to the specific teachings and beliefs of this religious organization. These indexical references not only define individual and communal religious identities but also reinforce shared spiritual connections within their respective religious communities.

Figure 8: Sample of Epitaph with the Deceased's Photo

Figure 8 shows that some epitaphs also use pictures of the deceased individuals. Photographs on epitaphs serve as connectors to specific memories and experiences of the deceased. These images transport the audience back to moments with the departed. The personal connection they facilitate is invaluable and allows the bereaved to feel a continued presence and intimacy with their loved ones. Photographs hold significant emotional value. It symbolizes remembrance while reinforcing bonds that transcend physical absence. Moreover, the use of photographs in deathscapes reflects the temporality of the mortuary landscape. Traditionally, burial markers are considered static and monumental and a fixed tribute to the deceased (33). However, this contemporary personalization of epitaphs shows the dynamic and processual nature of deathscapes, where meanings and practices change over time, reflecting societal transformations. On this note, deathscape, as a material culture, is constantly shaped through refiguring and lived experiences, and the use of photographs as symbols encapsulates the past and present as well as the emotional and visual representations. The various elements found in epitaphs, from floral depictions to religious symbols, photographs, and inscriptions, serve roles in commemorating the deceased. Further, they serve not as mere relics as these elements act as mnemonics that actively engage the living in remembering the deceased with their narratives, relationships, and identities. Likewise, these elements are not merely decorative but hold deep symbolic meanings that encapsulate temporal permanence, spiritual beliefs, socio-economic status, familial bonds, and personal memories. Together, these elements transform epitaphs into deep narratives of life,

faith, relationships, and memories, which ensure that the essence of the departed is honored and preserved across generations. Gravestones and epitaphs are multimodal media as they are often decorated with various symbols besides the text being engraved (34). In the context of deathscapes, the arrangement of objects, texts, and other symbols creates relational space that influences how people interact, interpret, and construct the space as a mode of reconstructing meanings and identity, and ultimately, they shape how individuals use the space as a remembrance. Symbols ascribed in the epitaphs serve as semiotic resources that negotiate identity across life and death. This aligns with the concept of modality, where real or truthful representations are presented based on the cultural conventions of the society (27). With this, a polished and elaborated grave and iconography may index social status, familial devotions, and religious beliefs. A cemetery is not merely a container space that holds objects together. Rather, it is a relational space where objects, individuals, communities, and shared history are intertwined to create more profound meanings that reflect the communal and familial consciousness established between the dead and the bereaved.

Emplacement or Placement

As mentioned earlier, decontextualized signs have consistent meaning regardless of the context, and they do not change their interpretations based on where they are placed. In the context of deathscapes, the phrase *"Rest in Peace"* is a universally accepted expression of mourning and death. Regardless of the place and context of usage, this always conveys the same sentiment of respect and remembrance.

Figure 9: Sample of Epitaph with Multiple Names

As shown in Figure 9, it is noteworthy that stacked graves as a mode of placement in the physical world denote a physical closeness that often signifies a shared familial bond, such as spouses buried together or family members interred in adjacent or stacked plots. This layout conveys a deep bond and group memory among the family. In a similar vein, combine burials, in which several people are interred in the same plot or building, serve as a reminder of family relationships, whether they are siblings buried together or parents and children. Moreover, epitaphs that incorporate names into a single inscription (Figure 9) specifically recognize and honor the kinship ties among people. Thus, the characteristics of graves and epitaphs serve to indexically depict and perpetuate familial relationships, which indicate that the ties that bind loved ones are valued and remembered long after they pass away. Generally, symbols on epitaphs such as cross, angels, doves, and flowers may be considered as decontextualized entities, that are regardless of their placement, their motifs are interpreted in the context of death. Across religion, culture, and physical space, these symbols connote peace, love, resurrection, and divine providence. They are considered as having stable meanings.

Identity (Re) Construction through Indexicality

In the Philippines, deathscape serves not as a mere passage and final resting place for the dead as it is also considered a dynamic and active social and cultural space, where the identity of both the living and deceased are reconstructed, remembered, and renegotiated. Based on the indexicalities found in Sta. Barbara Public Cemetery, such as grave markers, epitaphs, religious icons, photographs, crosses, and materials used in construction index broader sociocultural meanings that reflect not only the dead but also the class, religion, family, and belongingness. Notably, deathscapes demonstrate the liminality of identity formation, where the deceased is positioned in a transitional state that is neither entirely fixed nor totally erased. Banking on the concepts of the liminality of the identity, it can be concluded that deathscapes serve as thresholds and the dead exist between two states: presence and absence, remembrance and forgetting, and life and afterlife; they are in-between space, and their identities are rearticulated not as who they were, rather based on how they are remembered, where they are buried, and how they are materially represented (24). In this light, deathscapes are powerful liminal spaces where identities are in flux, and they are continuously shaped by the beliefs, actions, and material practices of their loved ones and the living. Consequently, material culture is significant in the process. The choice of materials for construction, such as marble, cement, and wood, is reflective of the socio-economic status and class divisions that persist even in the context of death. In Sta. Barbara Public Cemetery, the material choices index the deceased or the family's financial capacity. This context echoes the colonial stratifications during the Spanish colonization in the Philippines, where the elite families were buried in the church crypts, whereas the impoverished were placed in unconsecrated grounds (35). In the present, deathscapes continue to reflect the hierarchy and societal structure. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the materiality

of the graves engages with liminal identity works, as the underprivileged families in the community asserted their dignity and individuality by making modest and meaningful grave markers. Furthermore, religious icons, such as crosses, the Virgin Mary, angels, verses from the bible, and names of the religious affiliations exemplify the deceased collective spiritual narratives that consequently situate them in the Catholic and non-Catholic belief system, thus offering posthumous meaning and connections. The Philippines is a widely known Catholic country; Christianity offers a framework for rationalizing death as a passage. However, Filipino religious practices often utilize syncretic elements, such as food offerings (known as *atang*) found in front of the tombs and prayers, which reinforce the culturally varied and liminal nature of identity in the country's deathscape. This underscores the intersectionality of spiritual and cultural identities, which further affirms that identity after death is a continuous negotiation. Meanwhile, the language used on epitaphs adds another layer to this liminality as they reflect the cultural affiliations and class positioning of the deceased. The linguistic choices utilized become performative as they reflect the desired memory of the dead while also serving as a conduit for identity reconstruction by the bereaved. The words ascribed in the tombs straddle grief and public memory, loss, and cultural and religious affirmations. On the other hand, the spatial arrangement of graves, such as stacked or adjacent, demonstrates the Filipino culture of familialism, which asserts a collective identity that transcends death and reinforces a physical map of relationship and continuity. Consequently, this emphasizes both cultural performance and material assertion of shared belonging and memories. Banking on the perspectives of memory studies on collective memories, cemeteries are considered repositories of personal and collective narratives (36). In Sta. Barbara Public Cemeteries, it uses different materials and spatial and symbolic elements to reconstruct identity, and each contributes to a changing narrative about the dead and the society where they lived. In this light, symbols can either preserve or erase memory and like identity, it is also unstable in the context of deathscape, as it relies on rituals of maintenance and visitation. With this, a deathscape also serves as a ground for memory politics, where identities are sustained through continuous remembrance while others drift into obscurity as time passes. Capitalizing on the prior discussion, Sta. Barbara Public Cemetery serves as a microcosm of the broader Philippine context. It is not a static space of finality but rather a liminal place where identities are constantly shaped, remembered, and negotiated. Through the perspectives of indexicality, material culture, liminality, and memory, deathscape serves as a space for identity reconstruction. Lastly, epitaphs are composed of various forms of indexicalities that are reflective of more significant cultural heritage and social realities that prevail at the present (37). The visual signs extend beyond the individual social narratives, which constitute the plurality of human identities (38-40). Deathscape in Sta. Barbara Public Cemetery integrates socio-economic status, religious principles and beliefs, familial connections, and memory to honor the dead and preserve their identity dynamic despite their absence in the physical world.

Conclusion

Deathscape as a semiotic space offers various meanings that can be deduced formally or semantically. It embodies meanings that can be constructed and reconstructed from multiple levels and perspectives. Place semiotics framework of Scollon and Scollon, drawn from the earlier works of Van Leeuwen's visual semiotics framework, posited that visual images derive their meaning relative to their positions and location in the world and can be analyzed through their symbolism, materiality, and placement. Banking on this theoretical underpinning, the researchers analyzed the linguistic landscape of Sta. Barbara Public Cemetery revealed that graves and inscriptions on the epitaphs reflect the complex interplay between emotional connections, societal realities, and cultural and religious representations. The social standing of the dead is implied by the tombs' materials and aesthetics. More advantaged families invest in more lavish graves and epitaphs, whereas families with relatively lower resources tend to have more subtle and simple ones. This highlights the distinctions among members of the community based on their socioeconomic status. Moreover, profoundly ingrained cultural, spiritual, and social values are reflected in the physical and symbolic

components of gravestones and epitaphs. Together with floral representations and inscriptions, religious symbols like crosses, angels, and doves are used to communicate ideas of religious connection, spiritual convictions, and enduring remembering. Similarly, the deceased's name is placed in salient visual places inside the epitaph, usually at the top or middle, indicating its symbolic significance. By contrasting spiritual transcendence with temporal persistence, the tangible selections—such as stone sculptures of flowers or religious passages—emphasize both the eternal and material aspects of remembering. Together with the design and inscription, these material and visual characteristics provide a "relational space" in the cemetery that connects the community, the deceased, and those in mourning. Based on the indexical elements observed in the research locale, its deathscape illustrates the liminality of identity formation and reconstruction, wherein the deceased occupy transitional states that are neither entirely fixed nor completely erased. They exist between dualities and in-between spaces where identities are not preserved as they were but reconstructed based on the memory of the living, how they are buried, and how they are materially represented. On this note, deathscape is in constant flux and is continuously shaped by the memories and material practices of the living. As a result, gravestones and epitaphs are more than just embellishments; they are multimodal media that tell narratives about identity, relationships, faith, and life. Cemeteries themselves transform into dynamic landscapes of remembrance rather than merely container places, where the shared consciousness of the departed and their loved ones endures and is continuously transformed over the course of generations. This recognition highlights the significance of cemeteries not just as places for the dead to rest but also as dynamic social landscapes where identities are continuously created and changed by the signs and symbols left behind.

Abbreviations

INC: Iglesia ni Cristo, INDP: Iglesia ng Diyos na Buhay, LL: Linguistic Landscape.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this research article.

Ethics Approval

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