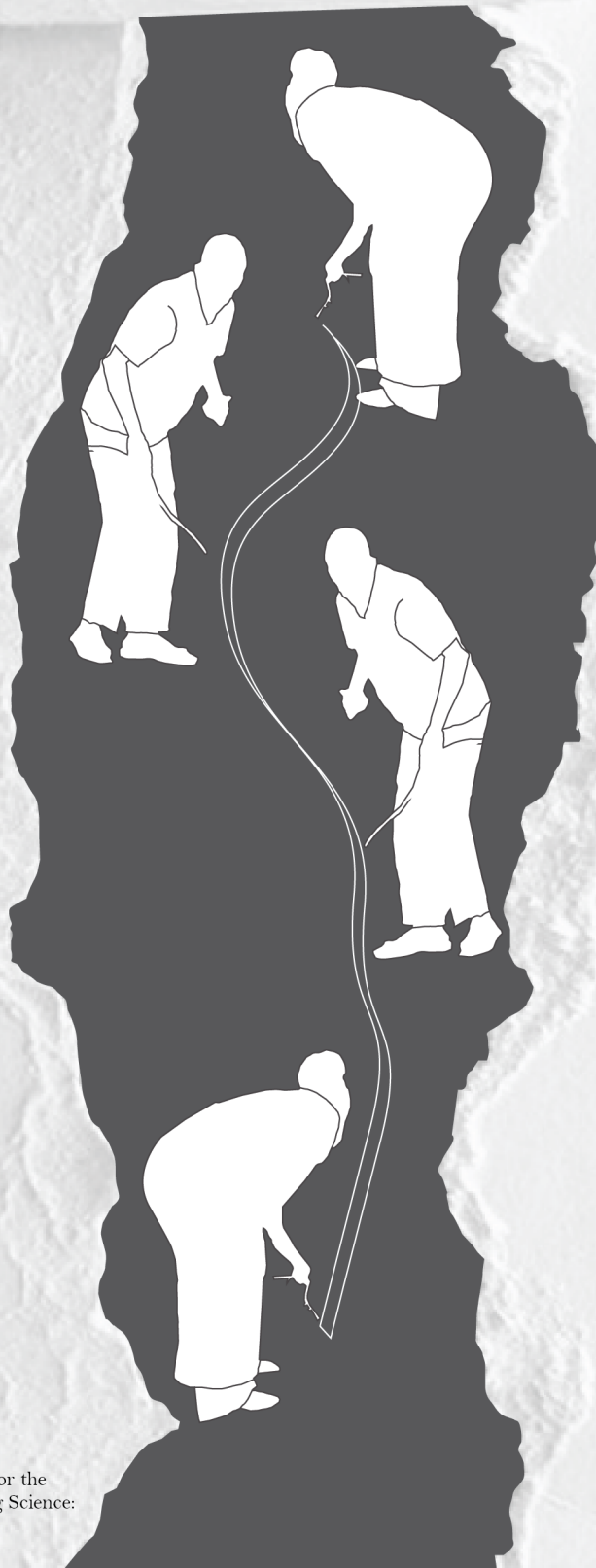


POST-REPRESENTATIONAL CARTOGRAPHY

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF EMERGENT CARTOGRAPHIC PRACTICES IN
DECOLONIZATION AND (RE) ESTABLISHING SOCIO-SPATIAL JUSTICE

DAVID NJENGA
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June, 2025
Dissertation presented in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor in Engineering Science:
Architecture

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And (Re) Establishing Socio-Spatial Justice

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Abstract

This research explores how traditional Western maps have shaped power and inequality in postcolonial Coastal Kenya. It shows that these mapping practices—often seen as neutral or technical—have actually played a role in continuing colonial legacies by ignoring or erasing Indigenous ways of understanding space and place. For many local communities, this has meant being left out of decisions that affect their land, culture, and future. The study offers a new way of thinking about maps—not just as tools for showing where things are, but as powerful social and political practices. It introduces cartography as something relational and active: a process of working together to create shared understandings of space that reflect lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and community values. This perspective is grounded in a decolonial approach that challenges the dominance of state-driven, top-down forms of mapping. Working with communities in Mida Creek, Kisiwani Island, and Lamu, the research uses creative and participatory methods such as counter-mapping, storytelling, sound-based mapping, drawing on the ground, and art-based workshops. These methods centre local voices and knowledges—oral, sensory, embodied—that are often dismissed by official mapping systems. Together, these activities help communities reclaim their spatial identities and imagine new futures. This research contributes by offering a critical reconceptualization of cartography as a relational, performative, and decolonial practice. It shows how alternative mapping can be a powerful tool for justice, solidarity, and healing—helping people resist historical erasure, share knowledge, and shape more inclusive and equitable ways of living and governing space.

Chapter Five: Experimental Cartographies and Post-Representational Practices: A Case Study from the Life Between Ebb & Flow Residency

This chapter extends the discussions of the preceding chapters by engaging with a distinct moment in this PhD research, where the theoretical and practical commitments to post-representational cartography were mobilized in a new and unfamiliar setting. While the thesis overall has adopted a moderate stance within post-representational cartography—one that seeks to balance representational and non-representational modes of mapping—I found it necessary to experiment with approaches that lean further towards the performative and non-representational end of the spectrum. This chapter narrates and reflects on such an exploration, in which cartographic agency was activated as a means to gain insights into what alternative, more performative cartographic practices might look like, and how they might resonate across disciplines beyond Urbanism.

An opportunity for this experimentation arose through my successful application to a call to participate in an artistic research residency entitled Life Between Ebb & Flow — Mangrove Ecologies. The residency, organized by Kuchanua (Switzerland), sought to bring together two Kenyan and two Switzerland-based artists to collaboratively explore mangrove ecologies as both a material and metaphorical framework. The project, supported by a network of partners including Critical Urbanisms at the University of Basel, EPFL+ECAL Lab, Planisphere (Switzerland), and the Lamu Youth Alliance (Kenya), was made possible by Synergies, an initiative of the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia that fosters exchange between art, science, and technology.

Unlike my earlier cartographic engagements, which were collectively conceived with local communities around their own mapping needs, this project presented a different dynamic. Here, I entered an existing project framework, one where mapping was not initially envisioned as a central concern. Nevertheless, I proposed counter-mapping as the primary methodological contribution I would bring to the collaborative process in a more performative sense. Here, I explored the dialectical relationship of the Lamu island community with the mangrove ecosystem through alternative mapping that embraces both representational and non-representational forms of cartography. This positioned me alongside artists with varied disciplinary backgrounds—some of whom were based in the Global North—and within a project funded and largely conceptualized through institutions in Switzerland.

This chapter, then, offers a critical reflection on this residency as a site for experimental, post-representational cartography. It traces how mapping practices were mobilized in a context where they were not initially intended, the negotiations that emerged in the process, and what this experience reveals about the possibilities and tensions inherent in transdisciplinary, cross-cultural collaborations. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on the performativity of cartography and the potential of non-representational approaches to foster alternative ways of knowing and being in place.