

# LANDSCAPE LITERACY:

## TEACHING TO READ THE WORLD THROUGH A CURRICULAR-SPATIAL ANALYSIS

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### *Abstract*

Life landscapes is a concept that draws attention to ways in which people, places, and spaces are engaged in continual dialogue, through explicit and hidden curriculum to shape identities, values, and worldviews. Explorations of life landscapes, offer an approach to Paulo Freire's *liberation education*—that is, an approach to reading, and teaching to read, the world. An understanding of “the world” as comprised of social spaces with *curricular* dimensions, invites an exploration of socio-spatial experiences, an analysis of systems and geographies of inequities, and an opportunity to think with complexity about strategies for social change. This article brings together two critical discourses—the hidden curriculum in education and critical spatial theories. Theorizing a relationship between the hidden curriculum and the production of space, the author offers *curricular-spatial analysis* and *landscape literacy* as two interrelated elements of a praxis-oriented framework in service to liberation education, which may open new possibilities for reading, and teaching to read, the world. Critical reflections on life landscapes serve as portals to deeper discussions about identity, positionality, and culture. Opportunities to interpret ways space is organized and experienced may offer possibilities to cultivate *landscape literacy*, that is, to understand and

disrupt the socializing function of space. As a practice of reading the world, the author offers reflections on her own life landscape as a means to explore socio-spatial dimensions of an underexamined space—living rooms; “living roominations” conceptualizes a way of *ruminating* in service to landscape literacy.

*Keywords:* liberation education, hidden curriculum, spatial theory, curricular-spatial analysis, landscape literacy

## LIFE LANDSCAPES: AN OPENING

The material culture of living rooms, much like kitchens, dining rooms, and other domains of home, are important socializing spaces. Material objects and spatial arrangements are an important part of social life; they not only contain artifacts of culture, but are themselves cultural artifacts (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013). Cultural norms, communicated through material objects, spatial arrangements, and day-to-day routines transmit ideologies and value systems in ways that are often unacknowledged. Drawing attention to social and spatial dimensions of lived experiences offers opportunities for a fuller understanding of the social world (Schwalbe, 2005), our lives in social context (Mills, 2000), and what Kluckhohn calls, “social legacy” (as cited in Geertz, 1994).

Life landscapes is a teaching and learning tool that draws attention to ways in which people, places, and spaces are engaged in continual dialogue, through explicit and hidden curriculum, that acts to shape identities, values, and worldviews across time. It invites memories of social and spatial experiences, which function as portals to deeper discussions of identity, positionality, and socialization. As educators committed to social justice, explorations of life, and other social landscapes, offer a framework for Paulo Freire’s *liberation education*—that is, an approach to reading, and teaching to read, the world.

### LIVING ROOMINATIONS...

*Much of my socialization as a child took place in my parents’ living room. After completing a Ph.D. program, my dad was offered a faculty position in history, specializing in Latin America at the University of South Florida. In 1970, my parents, expecting me within a couple of months, left their home in New York. My mother, of English and Scottish descent, grew up in Sunnyside, a predominantly white, European, lower middle-class neighborhood in Queens. My father, of Venezuelan, Puerto Rican, and Cuban descent, grew up in between Washington Heights and Harlem, a predominantly Latin American working-class neighborhood in Manhattan. They bought their first*

*house in a mostly white lower middle-class neighborhood in Tampa, Florida.*

*My dad built and stained a large floor-to-ceiling wooden bookshelf that covered the entire wall of our living room. It stored a record player, a reel-to-reel tape recorder, speakers, rows of albums, shelves of books, an encyclopedia set, family pictures, and a red lava lamp. Dozens of political posters from the Organization of Solidarity of the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL), Dia Internacional de la Mujer, and the Black Power movement in the United States, provided the artwork with which I grew up. There was always music playing in our living room, people hanging out, eating, and talking.*

*I was socialized in a Left political ideology by the built environment of my living room. Messages communicated by the presence of history books, posters of resistance and solidarity, and the sound of “protest” music taught me to value literacy, revere “third world” liberation movements, and appreciate popular culture in service to social justice.*

*For a period of years our living room was a social and political hub for a handful of public school teachers and administrators and a group of history and women’s studies faculty. Weekends and evenings filled our living room with heated discussions, passionate debates, and late night strategizing sessions. Like my parents, their colleague-friend-comrades were mostly first generation college graduates and identified as “hippies,” Marxists, feminists, labor organizers, and scholars who largely believed education was a path to equity, social justice, and ultimately revolution. As a child, I was socialized in this living room by conversations critical of U.S. imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy, socialized by plots and plans to wield influence over academic departments, to boycott right-wing speakers on campus, and to organize farm workers in rural parts of Florida. I was socialized to pay attention to injustices, to recognize sources of inequity were often concealed, and to believe that change was possible. The living room of my childhood landscape gave form to my worldview, a critical lens that drew my attention at a young age, to power and powerlessness.*

As community and classroom educators committed to social justice, we are obliged to teach ways to read the world—to reveal, understand, and intervene in dominant social forces that shape everyday life. An understanding of “the world” as life and social landscapes with curricular dimensions invites explorations of socio-spatial memories and experiences, inquiries into systems and geographies of injustices, and the radical imagination to conceptualize strategies for change. Paulo Freire is among one of the major contributors to critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011) and popular education—a philosophy and methodology associated with social movements in Latin America and in the United States (Wiggins, 2011). Popular education, or liberation education, values knowledge acquired through lived experience and engages *conscientização*, or consciousness-raising as methodologies for teaching and learning (Freire, 1968). Bringing together two critical discourses—the hidden curriculum in education and critical spatial theories—brings to bear relationships between the material and the ideological. Grounded in critical theories, an integrated framework offers analytical modes designed to open possibilities for reading, and teaching to read, the world, that is, the world as everyday spaces that function as mechanisms of socialization.

## **THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM AND THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF SPACE**

Critical theorists in education argue the social function of schooling is to reproduce systems of stratification (Apple, 1982; Giroux, 2011). Schools reproduce power largely through the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1982; Bernstein, 1976; Bourdieu, 1973; Margolis, 2001; McLaren, 2015). Dominant ideologies and value systems are communicated through cultural norms, institutional policies, pedagogical methods, teaching materials, and daily routines in ways that are tacit and go largely unacknowledged. Students acquire knowledge from sources beyond the “official” curriculum and learn “hidden” messages communicated in schools that tend to make the deepest impact on shaping students’ values and worldviews (Shapiro, 2012). Critical theorists aim to expose that which is hidden, revealing

curriculum as a product of ideology that serves as a means of socialization and a mechanism of social reproduction.

Much of the critical scholarship on socialization and the hidden curriculum focuses on pedagogy. Less attention has been given to the material environment and spatial arrangements by which dominant ideologies are reinforced (Costello, 2001). While critical theorists in education claim schooling does not serve a reproductive function in isolation from other social institutions (Apple, 1982; Giroux, 2011), scholarship on the hidden curriculum has been largely limited to educational settings. Focusing mostly on pedagogy and limited to educational spaces, the scholarship on the hidden curriculum is underutilized as a way to reveal and disrupt power.

Critical scholars like Lefebvre (1991), Delany (2002), Friedman and van Ingen (2011), and Soja (2010) claim the *production of space* is essential to understanding the (re)production of power in everyday life and engage *spatial inquiry* to understand ways in which systems of power are produced and reproduced by space. The idea that space is socially produced has become a foundation of contemporary cultural geography (Friedman & van Ingen, 2011). Long associated with fields like geography, architecture, and urban planning, spatial theorizing has expanded into disciplines like anthropology, cultural studies, and critical race studies (Soja, 2010). This discourse is critical because space is often considered a neutral setting and passive stage in which social activities and history unfolds (Friedman & van Ingen, 2011). In this paradigm, space is deemed inconsequential and dimensions of power remain undetected. Forces of social reproduction, passing as “innocent” spatiality of social life, are often difficult to detect, and thereby difficult to disrupt (Soja, 2010). Space as *landscapes of power*, products of ideology, and mechanisms of social reproduction, have been less acknowledged by critical educators.

A critical understanding of socialization demands a broader spatial analysis of the hidden curriculum across social institutions and landscapes. Delinking curriculum from its place in schools and acknowledging curricular dimensions beyond educational landscapes exposes the presence of power across all social landscapes. To acknowledge curricular dimensions of social landscapes is to invite

critical theorists in education and curriculum studies to take a “spatial turn” (Soja, 2010, p. 13)—that is, to use spatial inquiry as a framework for revealing and transforming systems of power.

Educational and other social landscapes can never be value-free. Rather, they function to communicate socializing messages and maintain social hierarchies hidden in plain sight. The hidden curriculum conceptualized through a broad spatial analysis offers new possibilities for detecting the sources of power and limiting its reach. In other words, the hidden curriculum—across social spaces—may reveal how landscapes of power function as mechanisms of socialization. “Reading” social landscapes provides a way to discern embedded hierarchies by which structural inequities based on race, class, and gender are produced and reproduced in space. The spatial arrangement of desks and chairs in a classroom, statues, monuments, and buildings on a college campus, constructed roads and highways in a city, the red line on a map marking where banks will not invest, built fences and gates in neighborhoods, and walls on borders—all convey explicit and implicit messages that serve to “teach” social hierarchies and value systems upon which the normative foundations of hegemony are derived. Space regulates bodies, communicates dominant values, and socializes the imagination. By engaging these distinct critical discourses the overlapping and mutually beneficial opportunities for social justice inquiry and action become more apparent and potentially more strategic.

Landscape *literacy* offers a way to conceptualize an understanding of “the world” as material and ideological. Drawing from the critical notions of *social justice literacy* (Sensory & DiAngelo, 2017), landscape literacy aims to deepen an understanding of socio-spatial dimensions of lived experiences, foster a practice of revealing the hidden curriculum of everyday spaces, and inspire action for social and spatial justice. Landscape literacy in this context refers to the cultivation of a practice of *reading* the world through a critical curricular-spatial lens in service to liberation education.

## LIVING ROOMINATIONS...

*In the mid 1990's after graduating college with a bachelor's degree in Anthropology, I joined a regional social justice organization. The "office" was a Victorian house built in 1888 and functioned as a place for many local and regional organizations to gather for political trainings and meetings. Dedicated to building the collective power of communities of color through non-profit community-based organizations and direct action organizing, the house was located in a multiracial and multilingual working-class community in Oakland, California.*

*The living room walls remained largely empty of decoration, always a blank canvas waiting for what would invariably be covered by flip chart paper of brainstorming sessions, project plans, action ideas, and fundraising strategies. Markers, tape, and food were always present and training sessions frequently ended by people playing music, singing, and sometimes even dancing.*

*I was socialized in an Alinsky model of community organizing steeped in Left political ideology by the built environment of this living room. The very living room of a house as "office" space taught me the meaning of community-based work. Messages communicated by the presence of pages and pages of paper posted on empty walls that charted strategic pathways to action, taught me to value issue-campaigns. The ever present visibility of fundraising efforts socialized me into a central task of organizing in non-profit structures. The abundance of material objects for thinking, eating, and communing taught me to value strategizing, food, and music as a means of community-and movement-building.*

*As a young woman in my mid-twenties, I was socialized in this living room as a community organizer and popular educator through rigorous leadership and organizing training informed by anti-capitalist, anti-racist, feminist ideologies. The leadership of the organization, like me, was mostly second-generation college-educated people of color trained to mount local "fights" to expose pressing issues, identify demands, and institute policy change at the local level. I was socialized in this living room to pay attention to decision makers, to identify ways of disrupting "business as usual," and to build a community-based organization to confront local power brokers.*

## READING AND TEACHING TO READ THE WORLD: A THEORETICAL AND PRAXIS-ORIENTED FRAMEWORK

Theorizing a relationship between the hidden curriculum and the production of space offers an opportunity to conceptualize an approach to Freire's (1968) liberation education. *Curricular-spatial analysis* and *landscape literacy* are two interrelated elements of a theoretical and praxis-oriented framework I offer in service to: teaching to read the world, valuing knowledge acquired through lived experience, and consciousness-raising.

As a theoretical framework curricular-spatial analysis provides a critical lens *to read the world*. It draws attention to the vast multifaceted curricular dimensions of social landscapes and acknowledges the production of space as in part, a curricular project. Through this framework, curriculum is acknowledged as a mechanism of socialization beyond educational settings and more broadly as a permanent dimension of social space across landscapes and explores how *critical* curriculum might disrupt and transform systems and geographies of domination. An understanding of the production of social landscapes as in part a curricular project, expands an understanding of curriculum. Curricular-spatial analysis is premised on three curricular dimensions of social landscapes: curriculum as lived experience, curriculum in service to power, and curriculum as a means to social change.

Curriculum as lived experience invokes the concept of life landscapes as social and spatial memories and experiences. It emphasizes the study of narrative as valuable, educative, and transformative. The lived curriculum of life landscapes draws attention to the cycle of socialization and ways in which people negotiate, disrupt, and resist forces of social reproduction. Curriculum in service to power, suggests that the production of social landscapes, through hidden curriculum, functions to (re)produce social hierarchies, regulate bodies, normalize dominant ideologies, manufacture consent as a function of socialization. Social landscapes are revealed as racialized, gendered, sexualized, and class productions. Curriculum

as a means to social change, that is, curricular strategies for action, acknowledges various forms of curricular strategies, interventions, or projects designed to contest the hidden curriculum, popularize counter-narratives, disrupt social and spatial inequities, and enact social justice.

As a praxis-oriented framework, landscape literacy is an approach to *teach to read the world*, that is, to “read” space as in part a curricular project, as a social text. It acknowledges spaces are perceived and experienced in a plurality of ways. In service to liberation education, this approach acknowledges people possess spatial sensibilities and enact spatial practices everyday. Shaped by “day-to-day” routines of inhabiting and traversing everyday spaces, sensibilities and practices may occur in ways that are often unconscious, go largely unacknowledged, and thereby, underexamined. Landscape literacy responds to potentially dormant socio-spatial sensibilities and aims to “activate” awareness and inspire critical analysis.

Guided by a three part *spatial taxonomy* for teaching and learning, landscape literacy engages *spatial sensibilities*, expands *spatial awareness*, and cultivates *spatial analysis*. Landscape literacy acknowledges lived and embodied *spatial sensibilities* by inviting reflective explorations of life landscapes—people, places, and spaces that act to shape identities, values, and worldviews across time. Accounts of social relations, spatial arrangement, and material objects that make up school, neighborhood, and town settings, draws attention to commonly unexamined dimension of lived experiences. Acknowledged spatial sensibilities, derived from reflections on lived experiences, or life landscapes, serve as portals to deeper discussions of identity, positionality, and culture.

Landscape literacy expands *spatial awareness* by drawing attention to how social landscapes, through the hidden curriculum, function as a mechanism of social reproduction. Drawing attention to the hidden curriculum of social landscapes invites analysis on the ways built environments and spatial arrangements communicate socializing messages that are often difficult to detect. Opportunities to “read” built environments of classrooms, coffee shops, grocery stores, parks, retail stores, airports, and other public spaces, invite critical interpretations

of spatial arrangements. Spatial awareness, derived from opportunities to read social landscapes, opens possibilities to reveal and examine the presence of power in everyday spaces.

Landscape literacy cultivates *spatial analysis* by offering opportunities to apply spatial awareness and produce new realities, that is, to imagine, what else is possible and how *critical* curricular approaches may open opportunities to disrupt systems and geographies of domination and thereby enact social justice. Conceptualizing educative and action-oriented strategies to raise consciousness and take action, invites opportunities to design and enact plans to engage family, community members, neighbors, coworkers, or peers in curricular strategies for social change. Spatial analysis, derived from a practice of “re-writing” the word through critical curriculum, opens possibility to confront and transform social inequities.

Curricular-spatial analysis and landscape literacy, a theoretical and praxis-oriented framework, offers sustained implications for liberation education. It may support educators in designing curriculum for social justice and open new possibilities for critical inquiry and collective action for social change.

## **LIVING ROOMINATIONS...**

During my thirties I became Director of Sisters in Action for Power, a grassroots community-based organization located in Portland, Oregon. For the next decade I worked with middle-and high-school girls of color ages 10-18 to lead local issue-campaigns through direct action organizing. Sisters in Action operated out of a small house in NE Portland, a historically African-American neighborhood, during a time of early gentrification.

In the afternoons, the living room served as a social and political home-base for girls participating in a comprehensive educational program in which they learned to research and analyze community problems, craft meaningful solutions, mobilize families, and institute local policy change.

The living room was divided in two halves: one with couches and a dozen roving bean bags; the other with a long conference table, chairs, and a dry-eraser board. The walls were covered with framed pictures of girls facilitating meetings, leading actions, and featured in local media clippings. In a corner was a shelf with dozens of notebooks and journals kept by youth leaders. Over the bookshelf were charts and graphs that tracked girls' accomplishments in fundraising, membership recruitment, and completed trainings.

The spatial arrangements of Sisters in Action's living room was conceived as a space to socialize girls into a culture of agency and political activism. Couches and beanbags communicated a laid-back setting in which girls were invited to be themselves, to be at ease, and to be in communion with one another. Material objects typically associated with classrooms, were meant to communicate a teaching and learning space. The presence of photographs of the girls "in action" were intended to inspire young women to see themselves as political community leaders. Notebooks, journals, charts, and graphs taught girls to pay attention to the activities and tasks necessary to build a community-based organization and make institutional change. Over the years they engaged issues related to gender violence in public schools, inaccessible public transportation, the depletion of local public housing, gentrification, and No Child Left Behind.

The living room of Sisters in Action also provided a setting for my own socialization. Designed to support girls' leadership, the spatial arrangements taught me to value youth-led programming, to step back as an adult-mentor, and make room for youth leaders to lead. The relationships formed and the knowledge acquired from girls and their families, served to inform the strategies through which to implement larger abstract theories of social change in "real life." Critical theories of power served to inform approaches to grassroots leadership development, a framework for participatory action research, and a model for community organizing. Through my experience as educator-organizer, guided by the philosophy and methodology of liberation education, I learned the value of curriculum as a mode of and means to social change.

## CURRICULAR-SPATIAL ANALYSIS AND LANDSCAPE LITERACY A FRAMEWORK FOR COURSE DESIGN

In the spring of 2017 curricular-spatial analysis and landscape literacy served as a framework for the design of an undergraduate course I taught on cultural foundations of education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). A required course for students in an elementary education program and an elective for students pursuing other degrees, the course was modeled in the tradition of Freire's liberation education and served as an approach to teaching to read the world. Organized by four themes, students were invited to engage a social and spatial analysis of interconnected and multidimensional aspects of identity, schooling, and society. Course themes included: social and spatial experiences (identity and positionality), social and spatial inequities (oppression, power, and privilege), the hidden curriculum across social landscapes (socialization and hegemony), and inquiry and action (research and curriculum for social change).

At the beginning of the term, to establish a practice of reading the world, I invited students to select a space, on or near campus, where we would meet for class on designated days. The first 15 minutes were dedicated to observing, analyzing, and interpreting built environments. Students catalogued and analyzed color schemes, physical materials, objects, and spatial arrangements. They discussed how built environments invoked emotions, communicated rules, served to include and exclude activities and people, and functioned to teach inhabitants about race, class, and gender in implicit and explicit ways.

The first assigned project invited students to explore their life landscape. Students shared stories of how parents, grandparents, siblings, mentors, and best friends instilled beliefs and values. Projects recounted how spaces like elementary schools, churches, neighborhoods, and countries of origin shaped their worldview. Another project invited students to research and analyze education reform and the impact of reform on spatial arrangements in schools and districts. They studied the "the right to remain in school" resolution, Title IX, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the

Individuals with Disabilities Act, and No Child Left Behind. In another project they interviewed UNCG students most negatively impacted by inequities in education. The purpose of this sample inquiry project was to learn about students' experiences on campus by investigating spaces/places those students felt most, and least welcomed, and why, and to learn about their vision for a college landscape that communicated equity and inclusion. The final project invited students to imagine curriculum as a means of social change. Students designed lesson plans to teach elementary children about gender and a community workshop to educate girls on sexual assault. One student developed an action plan to demand more faculty of color; another student, born and raised in a predominantly Mexican community developed a plan to engage her family in discussions at the kitchen table on anti-blackness in the Latino community; another student, born and raised in a rural white community developed a plan to engage her family and neighbors in discussions on her porch about racism and white privilege.

Enacting spatial sensibilities through reflections on life landscapes served as an entry point into discussions about positionality and socialization. Explorations of the social function of schooling in relation to other mechanisms of social reproduction, opened possibilities to expand spatial awareness. Opportunities for students to develop their practice as educators, across disciplines, served to cultivate spatial analysis through curricular and pedagogical strategies for inclusion and equity across social landscapes. In reflecting on Freire's liberation education students wrote:

“I believe that to read the world is to be aware of your surroundings and be able to dissect and breakdown everything. Reading the world means looking at a greater picture, looking at situations around the world and looking for true intentions, applying what you read and learn into real world situations and distinguishing them from stereotypes.”

“You have to learn how to read what's on the surface, but also analyze it in a sense that considered the world and where socialization is at for the current time. It is important to do more than just read words, but also read “world”, as in going deeper

than what occurs on the surface. Look at socializing messages and hidden curriculum, social hierarchies, anything that can alter a meaning.”

“Read the world to me would mean how we’re able to view how spaces work against/for us. We can critically analyze why the world works the way it does. It also can mean—to view words as a way of connecting to the world.”

“To me, reading the world means being more than just book smart. Being intelligent and functioning as a member of society is so much more than being able to regurgitate quotes and readings. You must be able to think critically, understand the happenings around you from both an internal and external perspective, and pull apart layers of concepts. Pulling apart layers means not only observing things for face value, but pulling it apart in such a way that all angles are considered.”

## LIVING ROOMINATIONS...

*As I write this paper my attention is drawn to the living room in my dad and stepmother’s home where I have been living, along with my 96 year old grandmother, since starting a doctoral program over two years ago. My dad is nearing fifty years as a professor of history and my stepmother is a professor of law—both came from working-class backgrounds and now work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Their house is located in an affluent, mostly white neighborhood twenty minutes walking distance from the campus.*

*The living room has a large television mounted on the wall, built-in shelves that store family pictures and rows of books; the walls are decorated with framed pieces of Latin American art. Messages transmitted by the presence of history and law books communicate many of the same messages I received as a child. The framed art as material culture, communicates middle class values while honoring our Latino background. The television, mostly fixed on the news, schools me on local, national, and global events.*

*Living room conversations largely revolve around the nature of these political times. Vacillating between critiques of neoliberalism, white supremacy, and a desire to do our part in making the world a*

*better place—we strive to keep each other grounded and hopeful in uncertain times. Periodically my family will reflect on the working class neighborhoods from which they were raised and trace the events and circumstances that led to upward social mobility. These stories are not recounted to affirm a trope of the American dream—rather, they are shared as evidence of happenstance and reminders of where we come from.*

*When I arrive home from class, my dad and stepmother listen to my accounts of student life and challenges in navigating academic expectations. Much of their insights function to demystify what I experience as a new world. I am keenly aware of ways I am being socialized into academia, to become an educator-researcher, to pay attention to scholarship, and to value cultural practices within higher education.*

*It has been two years since I was introduced to theoretical ideas regarding the production of space. Recent reflections of living room space, a component of my life landscape, has functioned as a lens to trace and contextualize the origins of my own inquiries and praxis. A work in progress, I offer curricular-spatial analysis and landscape literacy as critical, practical tools for these complex times in service to liberation education and a more just society.*

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