Race, Space, and the Built Pedagogical Environment

On August 17, 2020, a veteran English teacher at a high school in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) took a stance by customizing her teaching space with a political message. Isolated from her classroom and the community in which she taught, she decided to teach her first day of Zoom classes wearing a shirt that read “I Can’t Breath,” a reference to the dying words of two Black men murdered by police: Eric Garner of New York and George Floyd of Minnesota. The next day, a father unhappy with her politicized teaching space posted a screenshot of her on social media; within days, the teacher was harangued online for “indoctrinating” students. Not long after, her address was also shared and she received threats against her life, eventually forcing her out of her home and away from her job. In the aftermath, the school’s executive director voiced his support for Black Lives Matter (BLM), but added that he wanted his teachers to teach in a way that fostered “a safe space to have courageous conversation” (Agrawal, 2020). Apparently, the teacher’s display of iconography that affirmed Black lives violated the norms of what constituted a “safe space” at her school.

This incident troubled me because I also wore shirts in solidarity of BLM, immigrant rights, and other causes when I taught high school. More than just t-shirts, though, I turned my classroom space into a gallery of social justice causes. For example, I often displayed the protest signs I had made or collected while engaging in activism:

Figure 1. Activist Signage in My Classroom.

I had subscribed to the idea of teaching “through” the walls because I learned earlier on in my career that students were always observant. They noticed when I got a haircut, when I lost weight, and, of course, when I posted something new on my walls. Rather than generic posters celebrating mostly White “heroes” or Pinterest-worthy bulletin boards (Ferlazzo, 2018), my classroom was different. This difference is reflected in my collaboration with my students to create a shrine to victims murdered by police and other state-sanctioned actors. In doing so, students researched different extrajudicial killings, resulting in the aforementioned shrine that featured both local and national incidents. Not only did we say their names (Brown et al., 2017), but we honored their memories.

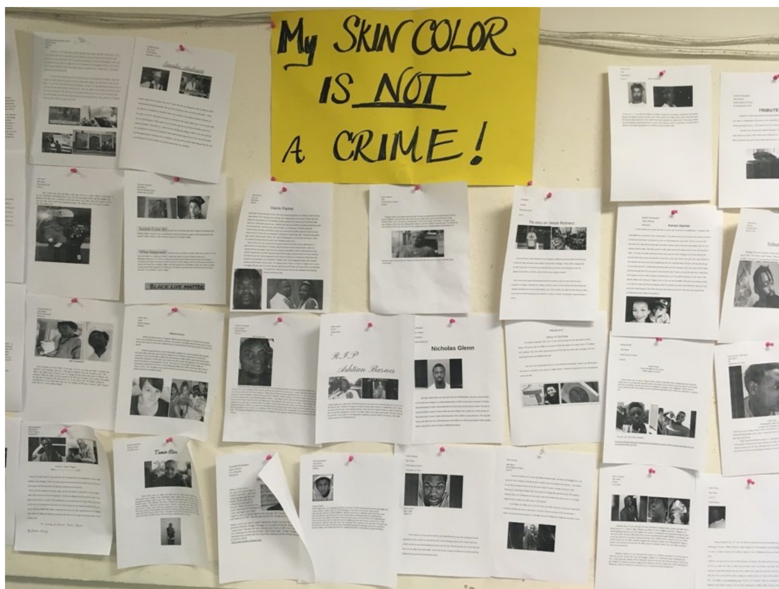

Figure 2. Shrine to Victims of Extrajudicial Violence in My Classroom.

The aforementioned incident captivated me also because I had seen more politicized teaching spaces in my ethnographic work at a South Central LA high school, which had gone a step further than my classroom by adorning its myriad hallways with political iconography. In making this connection, I wondered how the father who complained would feel about his child having to walk through its hallway. Would he be glad that his child, sheltering in place, was learning in the ostensibly apolitical learning space that was his home? Would conservative pundits call to have the school’s hallways whitewashed, as happened to political street art in LA (Schrank, 2009)? Or worse, would they want to close the school

altogether, foreclosing the radical possibilities of school-community activism (Ewing, 2018)?

I begin with these stories as a way to contextualize my ethnographic study of the public pedagogies of race at Biddy Mason High School (BMHS), located in the heart of South Central LA. Drawing on Monahan's (2002) idea of "built pedagogy," I argue in this conceptual paper that BMHS's hallways exemplify what I call the "built pedagogical environment."

Theoretical Grounding

In analyzing the hallways of BMHS, I look for grounding and guidance in the literatures on (a) public space and the built environment, (b) public pedagogy and public art, and (c) Monahan's (2002) theorizing of "built pedagogy." After examining these elements, I offer the contribution of the "built pedagogical environment" to understand how design choices of schools speak to racial politics.

Public space and the built environment. Historically, public space has been a concern of scholars across countless disciplines. Long before the "spatial turn" in the social sciences (Carpio, 2019), scholars have been interested in public space. Rather than recap the vast literature on public space, I offer my conceptualization of public space as the physical space that exists in the gaps between domestic space (e.g., homes and apartments) and private space (e.g., institutional spaces like businesses and governmental organizations). Within the school setting, hallways, much like sidewalks, constitute a uniquely public space. Hallways, of course, are not naturally occurring phenomena; they are taken-for-granted spaces in human-made educational environments. In practice, they have been understood as transitory and non-educational spaces (Van Note Chism). In critical scholarship, they have been discussed as hostile spaces in which peer-to-peer bullying happens (Crocco, 2002) or as an expansion of carceral space due to the presence of police officers (Nolan, 2008). But what if hallways were *built* with social justice in mind?

The built environment is a term used to refer to the environment created or altered by humans, in contrast to bioecological understandings of the natural environment. Architectural scholar Tom Bartuska (2007) defines the built environment in four parts: (a) as "everything humanly made, arranged, or maintained," (b) as "the creation of the human mind [...] intended to serve human needs, wants, and values," (c) as a means to "mediate or change [the] environment for [human] comfort and well-being," and (d) as shaped by and shaping of "human-environment relations" (p. 5). Thus the built environment is inclusive of

both the urban and the rural, the public and the private. Today many scholars make reference to the built environment in their work, often with different ideas about how it influences human action (Gieryn, 2002).

There is also emergent scholarship that seeks to understand the built environment from non-dominant viewpoints. One such example is urbanist Margaret Crawford's analysis of Mexican-American home design in East LA. She and colleagues (1994) call attention to different aspects of East LA homes, such as fences, *yardas* [front yards], and religious alters. In doing so, they note the racialized and gendered practices displayed in these different spaces, as well as how these spaces oscillate between operating as public and private spaces, depending on who is using them and when. Through attention to these different spaces, they offer a subaltern understanding of East LA's built environment and uncover "East LA's lived politics of the everyday" (p. 19). Ethnic studies scholar Genevieve Carpio (2019) provides another example of analyzing the built environment from a subaltern perspective. She illustrates how a popular mall perpetuates a fictionalized account of Southern California history: "Through visual consumption, the built environment of the food hall presents a regional landscape with small ranches and enterprising families reminiscent of Jeffersonian mythology" (p. 229). In this way, the mall's design choices facilitated the erasure of the "multicultural work force who produced these fruits" and served up instead a "visual chorus" of the "Anglo fantasy past" (p. 229). In this article, I take direction from both of these scholars in my analysis of the hallway iconography of BMHS.

Public pedagogy and public art. In their comprehensive review of public pedagogy scholarship, Sandlin and colleagues (2011) found great variance in how public pedagogy was defined and operationalized. They note that public pedagogy was conceptualized to think both about the re-entrenchment of hegemonic power dynamics as well as the resistance to such dynamics. For Henry Giroux (1998), one of the pioneering scholars in the literature, a public pedagogy framework allowed scholars to understand how a Gramscian common sense is achieved through the pedagogy of non-schooling structures and institutions. Giroux (1998) analyzes how popular Disney films like *The Little Mermaid* and *The Lion King* perpetuate oppressive gender and race-based stereotypes. Similar accounts track the oppressive pedagogies present in other elements of popular culture such as children's literature and sporting events (Sandlin et al., 2011).

Importantly, other scholarship has focused on the critical resistance possibilities that emerge from enacting public pedagogies. Windle (2008), for example, examined how sites of public memory can record the negative consequences of capital-driven urban renovations. Similarly, Carrillo and Mendez

(2019) argue for the public pedagogical value of a podcast, which disseminated political knowledge from a Latinx-centered epistemological stance. Whereas Carrillo and Mendez, as well as Windle, decided to call this activist work "public pedagogy," others (Sandlin & Milam, 2008) would term such workings "critical public pedagogy." Nevertheless, Sandlin et al. (2011) identified a general consensus in which public pedagogy could be understood as a "a concept focusing on various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning occurring beyond formal schooling..." (p. 338). With that definition in mind, I turn to literature on public pedagogy and art.

The study of the public pedagogy and art focuses largely on the work done by public artists. Geographers Nick Schuermans and colleagues (2012) advocate for a "public pedagogy turn in geographical studies of art" (p. 680) and define public art as "artistic practices not on display in museums and galleries, but performed or materialized in streets, squares, and other public spaces" (p. 657). In outlining their approach, they depart from the aforementioned tradition of Giroux and draw, instead, upon the framework of Gert Biesta (2012). They credit Biesta for conceptualizing public pedagogy as a pedagogy for the public sphere; in doing so, they advance an understanding of public art as ways artists engage in place-making by "intervening in localized struggles for more freedom, more equality, or better citizenship rights" (p. 679). Other scholars (Caris & Cowell, 2016) similarly draw on Biesta's ideas to examine the role of the public artist as "reluctant public pedagogue." Adopting this understanding of public pedagogy, the authors advance a view of art as a "mode of human togetherness that interrupts the rational order, creating a community in which freedom might appear and people might speak with their own voice..." (p. 472). Next I turn to a type of public pedagogy that is embedded into the school space.

Built pedagogy. In his study of LAUSD schools, science and technology scholar Torin Monahan (2002) examined the ways in which technology was incorporated into traditional school spaces. Seeking to understand which structures contributed to the most equitable learning environments, he noted how schools relied on technology to meet student needs in times of crisis. Having noticed the emerging physical embeddedness of technology in schools, Monahan coined the term "built pedagogy," to refer to "architectural embodiments of educational philosophies" (p. 5).

In further excavating the relationship between school and technology, Monahan (2002) adds, "Educational architecture literature grounds itself in a conviction that the design of built spaces influences the behaviors and actions of individuals within those spaces. To a certain extent, these spaces embody the pedagogical philosophies of their designers [...]" (p. 5). To further flesh out this

idea, he notes that the relationship between spaces and pedagogy falls somewhere on a "continuum between discipline and autonomy" (p. 5). As an example of this dynamic, he contrasts a discipline-rigid design with "desks bolted to the ground" with an "open" design in which the space is "left open to interpretative use" (p. 5) Such an analysis of space and control is consistent with philosopher Michel Foucault's (1991) analysis that "discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space" (p. 141).

Methods

Though a conceptual paper, the analysis presented here emerges from a larger study in which one method of data collection was spatial ethnography. To do this work, I employ urban planner Annette Kim's (2015) framework of spatial ethnography to "joi[n] together social science research and physical spatial analysis" (p. 8). In my project, spatial ethnography involved examining existing school maps and art displays, interrogating the history of the physical structure itself, and documenting spatial patterns that emerged over time. In this article, I will devote my analytical gaze to the varying iconographic content of the walls, focusing on official school-sanctioned wall content and DIY content added by students and teachers.

A note on research context and researcher positionality. BMHS is a relatively new school that was created after a series of educators applied to the district's pilot school program, which provided for greater local autonomy with regard to teaching and school planning. As part of its design, it was divided into three small, career-focused academies. As one campus, BMHS boasts significant assets for its students, including specialized pathways, advanced placement courses, and community partners. Demographically, the school largely reflects the demographic transition taking place in South Central, as Latinx students make up 80% of the student population with the remaining 20% being Black students. I have been involved in different capacities at the school since the 2018–2019 school year. In that time, I have reflected on my positionality as a researcher at BMHS. Racially, as a light-skinned Puerto Rican, I am constantly read as a racial-ethnic outsider because I neither look like the community nor speak Spanish in the same way as the community.

Geographically, I am an East Coast transplant who recognizes the ways in which race and place interact differently across regions, especially in Southern California (Carpio, 2019). As a South Central resident myself, I often frequent the same places as students and staff, furthering the immersion of my research. Next, I examine the racial politics emplaced in the hallways of BMHS.

Activist iconography in the hallways of BMHS. The hallways of BMHS were emblazoned with activist iconography in the form of murals featuring quickly-recognizable community leaders and organizational logos, as well thought-provoking quotations and slogans. Many of the quotations had an explicit educational reference such as the following of abolitionist Angela Davis:

Figure 3. Angela Davis Iconography.

The words, which appeared in mid-vocalization, read "We have to talk about liberating minds as well as liberating society." The emplacement of a Black woman makes a statement by contributing to what anthropologist Savannah Shange (2019) has called the "remaining-ness" of Blackness present in communities with shrinking Black populations. Still, the radical Black politics of Davis is left unstated, including her work to abolish prisons and reform schools that, due to their commitment to carceral policies and technologies, act as "prep schools for prison" (Davis, 2003, p. 39).

The persistence of a Black presence is articulated also in the naming of the school after a Black LA activist and the presence of Black liberationist symbols in its hallways. In particular, the symbols of BLM and the Black Panther Party (BPP) can be found on multiple walls in the corridors of BMHS. One such wall in particular is deserving of greater inspection:

Figure 4. Collage of Liberationist Symbols.

Present in this collage of critical symbols are the logos for the aforementioned BLM and BPP, along with others representing the Puerto Rican-based Young Lords Party, the American Indian Movement, the Chicano-based Brown Berets, and the Filipino-based Delano Manongs farm worker movement. These icons are joined by the word "peace" spelled out in hand-letters, a display that is evocative on the hand, of gang gestures, and, on the other hand, of Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" painting found on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, Italy. The multi-colored hands, along with the range of racial justice movements, also put forth a progressive vision of solidarity in a multiracial society. This *all hands on deck* approach to activist art is understandable, especially when considered through the liberal politics of solidarity (Shange, 2019) or the didactic inclinations of teaching institutions. But one could also argue that it represents another installment of what Black Studies scholar Jared Sexton calls "people-of-color-blindness": "a form of colorblindness inherent to the concept of 'people of color' to the precise extent that it misunderstands the specificity of antiblackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy" (p. 48). Shange (2019) made a similar critique of a photograph, entitled "Our Lives Matter," that was posted on the website of her school research site, arguing that "This mode of racial solidarity cannibalizes Black suffering [...] [by] set[ting] Black death in stasis, already a fact, a cautionary tale that might ward off state execution" (p. 3). While not treating Black suffering in quite the same way, BMHS's activist iconography enact a "pedagogy of coalition" (Sasaki, 2002) that risks an analogous erasure, especially in a school where 80 percent of students do not identify as Black.

The official, school-sanctioned activist iconography was often complemented by the less political creations of students and teachers. Students, for example, regularly placed posters advertising racial affinity events:

Figures 5 and 6. Student posters for Black and Latinx affinity events.

These posters could be found throughout the walls of the school grounds. Importantly, there usually did not exist much cross-pollination in the signage, indexing an absence of the solidarity spoken to in the aforementioned collage of critical symbols. A dérive (contemplative drift) through the corridors of BMHS would lead to student class assignments on display in the hallways as well, many of which did not live up to the activist messages of the official hallway iconography:

Figures 7 and 8. Student-created Posters.

Here, viewers come across an image of Martin Luther King, Jr. delivering a colorblind message of hope; and on the right, we have a stereotype-laden image of what looks to be a Latinx gang member in danger of being stabbed. These two posters appeared to be part of the same class assignment, focused on creating public service announcements for the hallway, not unlike billboards visible from the street (Hickey, 2010). At first glance, the posters seem at odds with one another, given the indexing of colorblindness on the hand and racial dog whistling on the other. However, both reveal an assimilationist (Kendi, 2017) public pedagogy of race produced by the students. This disconnect from the more left-leaning images picture above suggest two things: (a) the existence of competing racial politics in the hallway iconography, whether DIY or official, and (b) the uneven endorsement of the school's iconographic racial politics.

Teachers, too, involved themselves in the routinized performances of racial pride. It was a BMHS tradition to engage in DIY decorations of public spaces, especially such as classroom doors. Here are two evocative examples from classroom doors:

Figures 9 and 10. Racial Pride on Teachers' Classroom Doors.

The door on the left features an African color scheme of red, yellow, and green. A Black woman's face sits in the top third of the door, wearing bold red lip stick and natural hair, the textured afro achieved with curled strips of Black construction paper. In the next partition of the door, reads the words "Black History Matters," a clear reference to BLM. In the final third of the door, a light brown fist is at the center, with the names of Black women activist sprouting out of the fist in a comic book-effect. On the right is an all-Black door, with an eye-catching altar filling up the door's bottom half. Upon closer inspection, the altar contains many references to indigenous Latin America, including three identical images of a Mesoamerican ouroboros (a dragon-like beast), two identical images of Quetzalcoatl (a serpent-like deity most associated with Aztec culture), and a single image of the Temple of Kukulcán, located in the Mayan city of Chichen Itza. The top half of the door displays the word "Latinx" followed by definition that reads, "people of mixed descent." Below this definition are two more definitions emphasizing the different racial and ethnic categories of which Latinx is inclusive. Finally, in the center are two images of Mexican science researchers. Together, these DIY racial installations were more political than the student examples from earlier, but still not demanding of radical action or change. Diversity is celebrated, but not interrogated.

Toward a Theory of the Built Pedagogical Environment

As can be seen on the many walls of BMHS, the school made a deliberate attempt to facilitate greater consideration of the racial politics that have shaped the lived experiences of the students, families, and staff in the wider BMHS. Returning to Bartuska's (2007) framework of the built environment, I now outline the concept of the built pedagogical environment. The built pedagogical environment represents the constellation of design decisions made with the intent to influence the entirety of the schooling experience, from teaching and learning to efforts at fostering community and connection across the campus. This includes, of course, individual teacher's classrooms and the contents plastered on the walls. But it also includes decisions about the artistic installations throughout the school grounds, ownership and use of hallway wall space, the arrangement and adaptability of furniture in social areas, the delineation between uses of school space, the carceral logics imbued in the space (e.g., police officers, metal detectors, surveillance cameras), the presence (or absence) of gender neutral bathrooms, the presence (or absence) of a parent/community space, community-relevant translations of key school displays, and the location and naming of the school site itself. Through a consideration of the built pedagogical environment, researchers can reach greater clarity regarding the public pedagogies of school

sites, as well as the ways in which students and teachers reproduce, and/or resist the content of such public pedagogies. As design research and principles continue to gain more attention in social science research, schools must not be left out of this critical investigation of power, agency, and space.

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