

# Reading Place

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**A Visual Guide to Reading Place-As-Text for  
Students and Adult Learners**  
*(a DRAFT Framework VERY MUCH in Progress)*

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# “Landscape is not just the trees and fields; it’s also the people...the storytellers” Dr. Rolando Heris

*MSPoE* begins with a stirring reconsideration of Bloom's Taxonomy, shifting the original nouns into active forms that center the learner; the revised hierarchy, based on the work of Michael Pohl, now culminates in "**evaluating**" and "**creating**." The thesis of the program contends that by using higher-order thinking skills, we can **not only** evaluate a landscape as social text, but we **can also** create our own interrogations into the complexities of relevant places in our own school communities.

I was inspired by this opening charge, and during my week on campus, I designed a rough framework for **reading place as social text** that uses inquiry strategies to tease out the nuance, contradiction, and inherent value of social landscapes. Using this framework, teacher or student facilitators can conduct their own investigations.



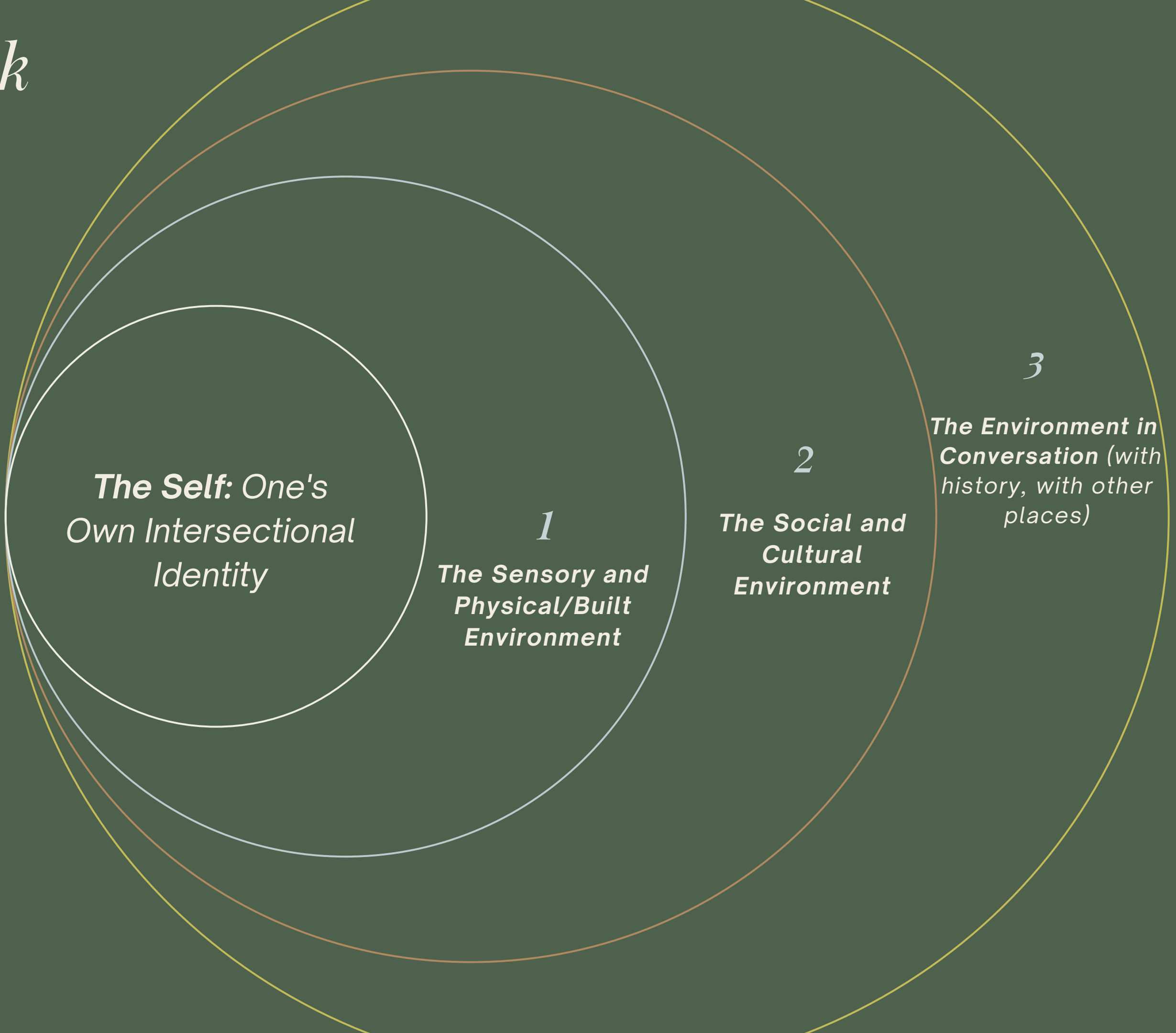
Blues Trail Marker with CSA Monument. Cleveland, MS. 7.10.23

# Draft Framework

Thanks to my experience at the Delta Center, I believe that it is imperative for learners to understand the *SELF first* in order to understand the bias and lens--the given circumstances--through which we originally encounter an environment.

Once learners have the critical vocabulary to discuss their own identities and biases, a facilitator can lead them through **the three different proposed layers of "place"** that I have articulated here, based on my work with the Delta Center.

**Activities to engage learners** in an interrogation of multiple layers of their personal identities could include: identity webs, collaging, jigsaw discussions and journaling, and Socratic Seminars rooted in critical readings.



# *A Word on Community Engagement...*

Dr. Herts and other program speakers discussed the importance of building trust and authentic relationships with community members as a prerequisite to any community engagement work. As filmmaker Roderick Red put it during the screening of his film at the Delta Health Center, "[communities] must be approached with care."

Because of the limited scope and timeline for this version of the assignment, I will not include information on the process of community engagement.

Finally, I feel that I should learn more from seasoned community liaisons before including suggestions or protocols in my own work.



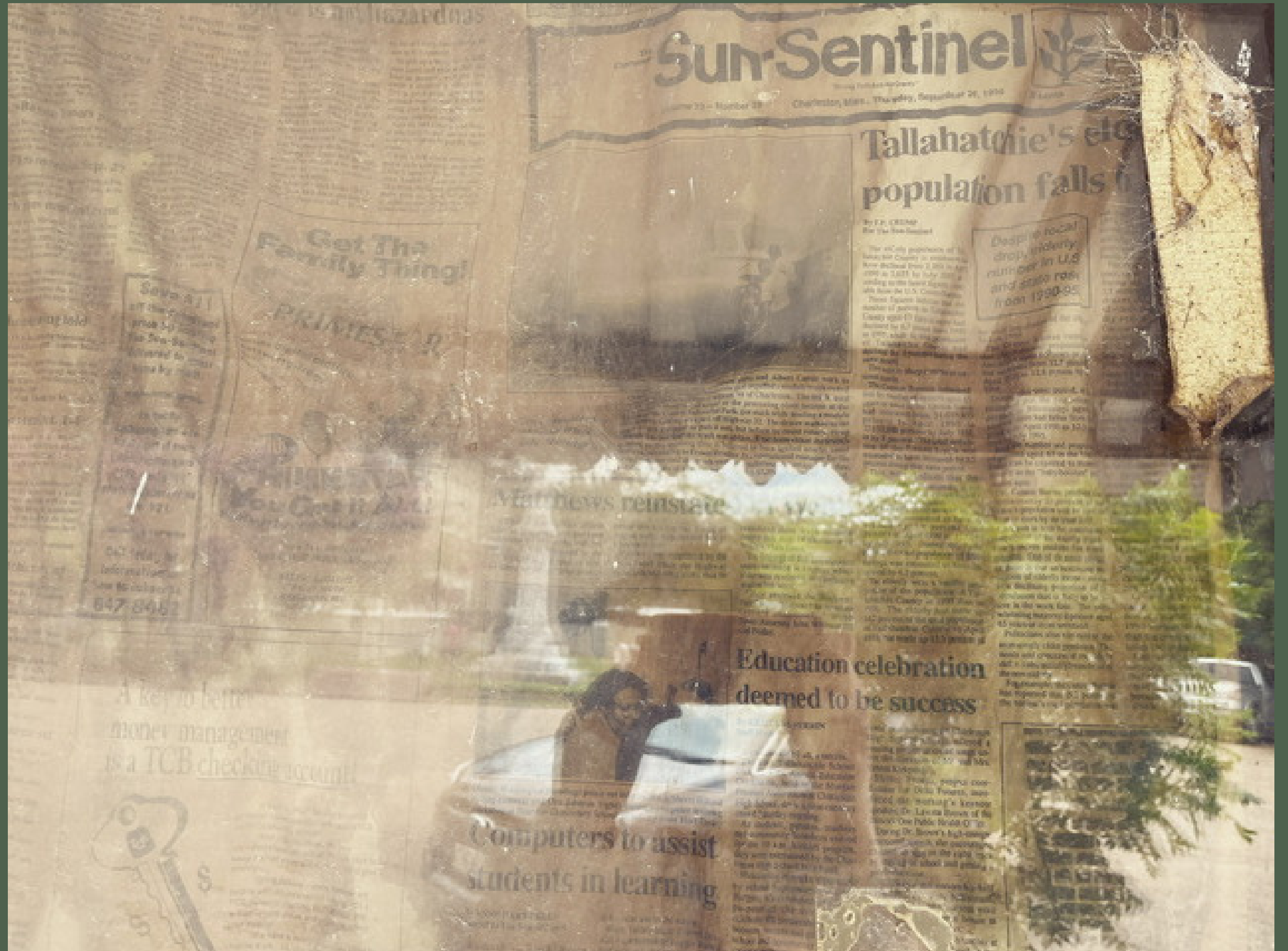
*Delta Health Center. Mound Bayou,  
MS. 7.13.23*

# Artist Statement

The following slides move through each level of the proposed framework.

For each subelement of the framework, I have developed draft critical questions for educators/facilitators to use in an exploration of place as text. The questions were inspired by my experience in the Delta but are content-neutral in order to promote transfer.

Paired with these questions are photographic images I captured during my time in the program. The images reflect my own identity, vision, and orientation; just as with the interrogation of place, they are (literally) filtered through the lens of personal experience.



Self-Portrait with window near Tallahatchie County Courthouse. Summer, MS. 7.14.23



1

*The Sensory and  
Physical/Built  
Environment*

# *Physical Landscape: Potential Questions*

- Where is the water source for this place?
  - Is vegetation clustered or dispersed?
  - What biodiversity is apparent?
  - What (non-manmade) sounds can you hear?
  - What words would you use to describe the climate (or weather) that you experience in this place?
- Is there evidence of agricultural production or intentional landscape design?
  - What smells do you notice?
  - What sources of shade are available?
  - What adjectives would you use to describe the terrain and the soil quality?



*Cypress trees in muddy waters outside Sumner, MS. 7.14.23.*



*Agricultural fields seen from a Greyhound Bus enroute from Memphis to Cleveland, MS. 7.10.23*



Mississippi River near the 1927 levee break site in  
Mound Landing, MS. 7.11.23



# *Built Environment: Potential Questions*

- What signs, markers, and adornment are present? What information do they provide?
- What signs, markers, and adornment are ABSENT? What information is missing?
- What is the age of the built environment? How do you know?
- Is there evidence of renovation or renewal? What do you see that makes you say that?

- What function(s) do these buildings or rooms serve? How do you know?
- What adjectives would you use to describe the proximity and number of manmade structures in this place?
- What modes of egress are apparent? Are these modes accessible to all?



*Clarksdale streets at dusk.  
Clarksdale, MS. 7.15.23*



*Chinese Cemetery Sign.  
Greenville, MS. 7.12.23*



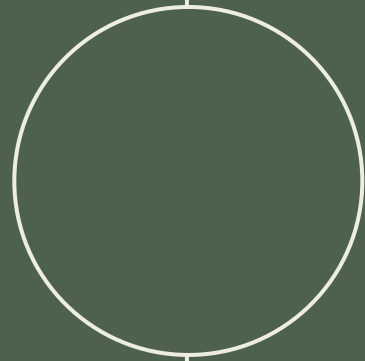
*Benji Nelken's Office.  
Greenville, MS. 7.12.23*



*Andy's Store, Cleveland, MS. 7.15.23*



Clarksdale High School Mural (facing Ground Zero).  
Clarksdale, MS. 7.15.23



*The Social and  
Cultural  
Environment*

# Community Storytellers: Potential Questions

Emmett Till Courthouse Panel.  
Sumner, MS. 7.14.23



- What did you know or understand about this speaker before you heard their story? How were your perceptions upended or confirmed?
- Are you a guest in the storyteller's space? Or are they a guest in your space?
- What commonalities of identity do you share with the storyteller? How might these shared identities impact your interpretation of their words?

- What differences of identity do you share with the storyteller? How might these divergent identities impact your interpretation of their words?
- How might audience composition and the occasion impact the tone or delivery of the storyteller's message?
- **If multiple panelists:** where to variations and tensions emerge in different versions of the story?



Lula Orsby, Charles McLaurin, Maggie Daily Crawford. Cleveland, MS. 7.14.23



Hebrew Union Congregation.  
Greenville, MS. 7.12.23



Reggie Barnes. Cleveland, MS. 7.11.23



*Caretaker Cathy Wong. Chinese Cemetery of  
Greenville, MS. 7.12.23*

# *Social Observation: Potential Questions*

- Who do you believe this space is designed for? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Are there people who look like/present similarly to you in this space?
- How do people engage with technology or social media in this space?
- What adjectives would you use to describe the social behavior of people while they are in this place?
- Who is active in this space? Who is a recipient of that action?
- **If a place of business:** do the people who patronize this business look like/present similarly to the people who work in this space?



*View from Room 306, National Civil Rights Museum.  
Memphis, TN. 7.15.23*



*Stax Records Museum. Memphis, TN. 7.15.23*





Memphis Birthday Girl. Ground Zero. Clarksdale, MS.  
7.15.23



*Keenan, Duck Master at The Peabody Hotel, and  
Tourists. Memphis, TN. 7.15.23*



French Tourists Take A Family Photo. National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, TN. 7.15.23

# Museums : Potential Questions

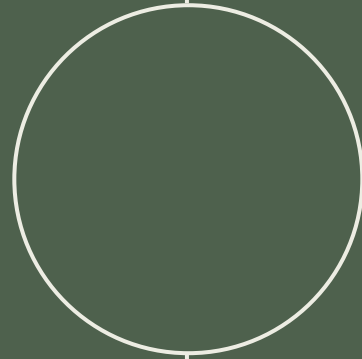
- Use Built Environment and Social Observation questions to get started
- What is the story that is told in this place? What is the core message? **Note:** make sure to answer in one full sentence.
- Whose (which type of person's) experience is centered at this museum? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Does the museum use artifacts or other methods of interpretation? How are the collections presented and organized?
- Is the physical museum space accessible to all? What supports (ramps, translation, assistive technology) are provided?
- What is the COST of visiting this museum? Is there a sliding scale of payment?
- What are the hours of this museum? Who might be the intended or ideal visitor?



Stax Records Museum. Memphis, TN. 7.15.23



Greenville History Museum. Greenville, MS.  
7.12.23



*The Environment  
in Conversation*

# ...With Preservation and Memorialization: Potential Questions

- What **story** is explicitly memorialized in this place? What is the mode of memorialization?
- Where are these monuments located? What are adjacent spaces used for?
- When was the monument, memorial, or archive built? Who designed it and who paid for it?
- Does his monument, memorial, or historic structure have a maintenance cost? Who pays that cost?
- Does the monument or structure tell a story specific to THIS place? or does it respond to a more national or global event?
- **If there are multiple monuments or preserved structures:** how do these memorials "converse" with each other? Where do their stories intersect?
- **If there is public recognition of the memorial** (wreath-laying ceremony etc...): who participates in these commemorations? Who organizes them?
- What parts of this monument feel relevant to our current time or to current events?



*Tallahatchie County Courthouse.  
Sumner, MS. 7.14.23*



*Hebrew Union Congregation.  
Greenville, MS. 7.12.23*

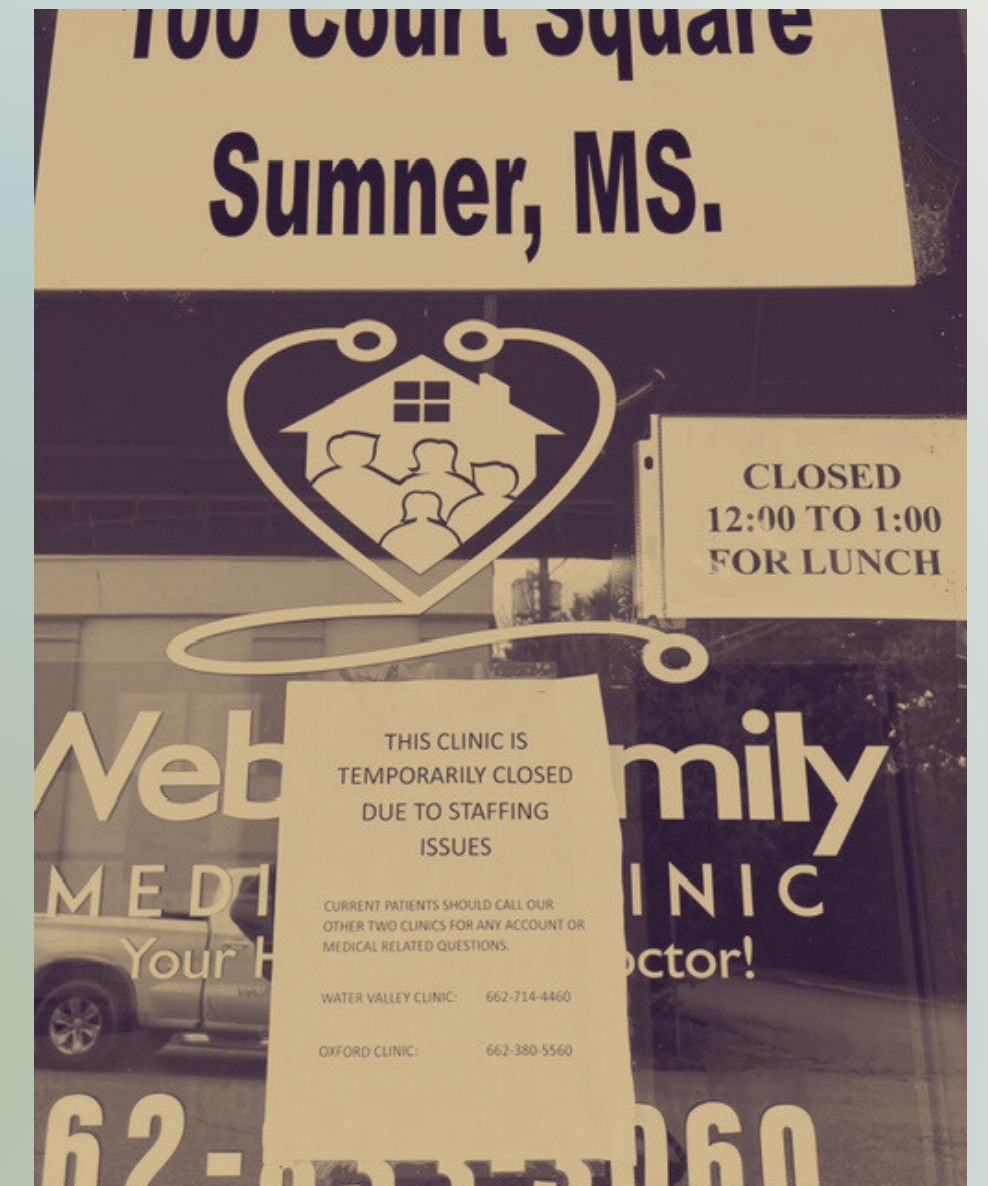


*Bryant's Grocery. Money, MS. 7.14.23*

# *...with the Future: Potential Questions*

- Who lives in this place now?
- Is this place still achieving its intended use?
- What stories can current demographic data tell us about this place?
- What stories can home prices and property values tell us about this place?
- How vulnerable will this place be to climate change?
- How did climate-related natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic impact this place's landscape, economy, and demographics?
- What is technology access like in this place? What is the availability of high-speed broadband? Where can you have your tech repaired?

*Scott (Bayer) Company Store. Scott, MS. 7.11.23*



*This Clinic is Temporarily Closed. Sumner, MS. 7.14.23*





*Empty Street. Greenwood, MS. 7.14.23*

*REFLECTION &  
NEXT STEPS:*



Some of my next steps for this work are in the realm of the expected: I want to get feedback from trusted colleagues and mentors about my ideas and practice using the framework with students. Since I believe student voice is import, I also want to solicit student feedback to help revise and develop some of my questions-- ideally, I'd like to consolidate my questions to 5-6 particularly rich questions per domain. I want to continue researching place-based analysis strategies and extend this work to consider how place-based observational frameworks can be leveraged to develop a more equitable peer observation and teacher evaluation model in my school.

However, some of my next steps are more thorny. I keep asking myself: *Why place? What will unpacking and interrogating a place as text help my students to know and do? What real-world power will they gain from such practices?* I think these are common questions in the humanities. *My students want to know How can I use this in the real world?* To them, the end goals of STEM disciplines feel tangible and apparent: make a vaccine, develop climate solutions, build safer buildings, develop algorithms. Why read a novel? or analyze poetry? or interrogate the narratives of history?

I'm still trying to come up with some strong answers to these questions that work for me Dr. Herts and other program speakers discussed the importance of building trust and authentic relationships with community members that will make sense to sixteen year olds.

One potential response comes from Charles McLaurin who urged us to "teach young people purpose." Creation is a purpose (and a thread woven between this week's speakers). Dr. Rolando Herts declared that "we are all co-creators and co-conspirators...it's all iterative; it's all synthesis" and Benjamin Saulsberry, Public Engagement and Museum Education Director for the Emmett Till Interpretive Center urged us to "Give young people the chance to be creators of a curriculum." By tasking young people with creativity, we give them a purpose they might not has understood before.

However, Roderick Red described the importance of telling stories "from your own point of view," and I believe that a defined point of view might not be possible to articulate without an understanding of the (geographical, temporal, social) places that produce us. This understanding helps us to have "pride of place," as Dr. Herts called it, and this pride encourages us to see ourselves and our stories as inherently worthy. I imagine many of my students feel like Lula Ornsby and Maggie Daily Crawford and believe their stories are not valuable because they don't fit a certain narrative or they are not generated by a particular, "bonafide" space or place. Perhaps teaching students to read their places as social text is a first step to recognizing the inalienable value of their own narratives.



Emmett Till Memorial Marker. Summer MS. 7.14.23

Keep Movin'

~ Charles McLaurin