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Connecting the Dots: A self-awareness

Like every other morning at 7:45AM, the concrete, slender hallways of my elementary school were crammed with tiny chattering learners from beige brick to beige brick. In my uninspired navy dress and white polo uniform, I inched into a corridor packed with my schoolmates on my way to class, becoming one with the sea of dark, blurry faces in matching low-cost garb. Slowing down to avoid trampling some smaller students, I unknowingly blocked the path of a younger, Black male whom I could tell was in far more of a rush than me from the urgency in his voice. In order to bring the wrongdoing to my attention, he roared, “Get out of the way, WHITE girl!” certainly loud enough for others to hear, but not pay any mind to. Managing to twist my view enough behind me to verify the source of such an outburst, I was offended and taken aback. I snapped at him, “I am NOT a White girl!” Clearly my skin was not like that of the handful of Anglo students who attended the school because their parents were employed there as teachers. I was appalled that this African American student could view me as anything other than Brown, Chicano, or Latino. To me, it seemed that this fellow student of color was completely ignoring the color of my skin and our shared marginalization that ensues. I felt confused by being “othered” into a group – Whites - which I could never feel a part of. After all, my classmates were mostly African American students and I had never experienced this type of conflict with any of them before; they understood that I was not White.

Although I was raised in the predominantly Latino neighborhood of Denver Harbor, located on the east side of Houston, Texas, I attended elementary school at the nearest one that offered a Vanguard program, which was centered in the upper-lower class neighborhood of Pleasantville and whose majority population was African American. My classes, though, were not populated by solely African American students, and did not reflect the rest of the school’s, as

not every classroom was a “Gifted and Talented” class and did not require an audition and high test scores for admittance. In other words, the students in this type of program reflected a slightly more heterogeneous student body. Because of this, I remember that a clear distinction existed between the attitudes and perceptions of my classmates and of those who did not experience much interaction or even contact with students of other ethnicities. What I did not comprehend at that time, however, was that my classmates and I stood apart from the majority of the school. While most classrooms were made up of mostly, if not all, African American students, ours was far more diverse, speckled with a few Latinos, Anglos, and even an Asian and Indian heritage student. In addition, my classmates and I had been in the same classrooms since the first grade, and through building relationships and learning with each other, had grown into more accepting learners who were more capable of understanding the differences among ethnic groups at an early age, compared to the others students in the school, such as the young man in the hallway. In a way, this anecdote reflects the basic conflict that occurs when two neighboring communities that are ethnically divided are in contact with one another.

The Escalating Issue: The Future is Here!

Taking into account the consequential results of the most recent national census, it is now more than ever essential to understand the obstacles that continue to afflict race relations within the United States and its major urban centers in particular, as these are the domains of major concentrations of various ethnic groups and diverse contact among them. As scholars such as Mindiola, Niemann, & Rodriguez (Black-Brown Relations, 2002) have foretold, the majority-minority group has shifted immensely over the last decade, from African Americans to Hispanics “or other Latino groups,” as the Census specifies. While this is true for the country only as of recently, this transformation started in some larger urban centers, Houston being one of them,

within the last two decades, potentially displaying a more dramatic shift than throughout the rest of the country (Mindiola, et al., 2002, p. 2). How has this shift in population paradigm affected intra-group relations in Houston? In this study, I deal specifically with two ethnically divided communities in Houston: a predominantly African American neighborhood located on the east side of the city's downtown called Fifth Ward and the Ward's eastern, chiefly Latino neighboring community, Denver Harbor. I argue that although systematic political structures, such as lack of zoning laws and control of housing markets, as well as social biases do exist to keep both communities impoverished and in competition, opportunities for commonality and cooperation between them are available through community building and religious organizations.

Theoretical Framework

This research is situated within the greater dialogues on geography as well as border theory. David Harvey and Edward Soja, for example, discuss the significance of viewing the geography or "spatiality" of justice as an essential component of justice itself, how justice and injustice are socially constructed and evolve over time. An urban planner, Soja sees this socio-spatial dialectic as a progressive linking of the search for spatial justice to struggles over what has been called the "right to the city," the politically charged idea about human rights in an urban setting, and the need for those most negatively affected by the urban condition to take greater control over the social production of urbanized space. Border theory comes into play as I discuss the communities' contact zone. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa describes this conflict as *un choque*, a cultural collision of two incompatible and opposing versions of reality that are learned and communicated from their respective cultures. This *choque* is the result of a swelling tension between two groups. Mary Pat Brady's take goes a step further by calling the border a "machine of abjection," producing a difference, suggesting that a person can be formed

in one temporality so that when he or she crosses a border that person transmogrifies into someone who is either more or less advanced, more or less sophisticated.

Blacks and Latinos in Houston, Texas: Historical Context

To understand the current situation of the two communities, it is helpful to review the history of both ethnic groups in Houston. Although Texas was once a part of Mexican territory, it is interesting to note that Mexicans and other Latinos have only a relatively recent history in the Houston setting. According to De Leon (2001), the Mexicans held prisoner after the Texas Revolution helped develop the city of Houston from the very beginning, “clearing the swampy grounds around the city when it was founded... along with black slaves, endur[ing] insect stings and malaria, snake bites, impure water, and other hardships which no white man could have endured” (p.5). However, these Mexican men did not all stay, as the federal census of 1880, 40 years after the annexation of Texas into the union, reflects only ten Mexican born persons in the city (De Leon, 2001, p. 6). Not until the very late nineteenth century, and into the first decade of the twentieth century, did this relatively small population begin to see an increase in their numbers due to the increase in available jobs in the growing metropolis. In fact, “public advertisements could be found specifically designating Mexicans as desirable hands, even for jobs previously the domain of blacks...” (De Leon, 2001, p. 7). The African American population during this same time period, then, was already much greater than that of the Mexicans, as their populations were brought to the area before the Texas Revolution. In *Houston: A History and Guide* (1942), the authors describe the first record of African Americans in Texas as that handful that “sailed from Alabama in 1822 on the *Revenge* as part of the masters’ cargo,” and landed at Galveston Island (WPA Writers Program, p.18). More specifically, the writers contend, “the first Negroes in Houston were brought as slaves by

planters, and most of them spent their lives in the cotton fields along the river bottoms...several had [even] participated in the Texas Revolution..." later in the *History and Guide* (WPA Writers Program, 1942, p.172). In the years following the Civil War, the growing city of Houston experienced a slow increase in the number of freed slaves residing within the city, as the Ku Klux Klan held numerous positions in office and threatened the African American residents. Like with the Mexican immigrants, the African American populations instead experienced much higher growth with the expansion of Houston as an economic power in the railroad and oil industries in the first decades of the twentieth century (De Leon, 2001, p. 11). It is during these decades that the city finally became divided into the ethnic communities that are still visible in Houston today, two of which are the focus of this study.

Denver Harbor, Houston

One of the areas of Houston inhabited by Mexicans and, later on, Mexican Americans and other Latinos was the Second Ward. While the community of Denver Harbor resides slightly to the northeast of the historical borders of the Second Ward, more recent city council districts unify the two as a single representative area, reflecting the evolutionary growth of the Latino community in East Houston (De Leon, 2001, p. 11). Originally settled by Polish immigrants, Houston's industrial boom in the early twentieth century attracted Mexicans and other Latino workers who were willing to work for a lower wage than their Anglo counterparts. Eventually, this attraction forced most, if not all, whites out of Denver Harbor. Lin describes how "[racialized] and ethnic neighborhoods in the early part of the twentieth century were largely "invisible" to the Anglo middle classes and elite of Houston, since they generally inhabited unwanted land adjacent to downtown and on the industrial east side of the city" (1995, p.633). From her statement, we observe not only the distinction of segregated residential spaces,

but also the elitist reasoning behind it. Later, with the building of major highways, Lin elaborates on this issue, stating that “in Houston, the building of the highway system privileged interest of middle-class Anglo suburbanization at the cost of near city minority neighborhoods, which did not have the political clout to contest these land-use decisions.... Minority enclaves were not just ‘in the way,’ but ‘invisible’ to the southern Anglo industrialists of Houston” (1995, p. 634). Furthermore, Denver Harbor has been historically populated by low-income families, who primarily work in unskilled labor positions. In my interview with a former community leader, Rigo Arguera, the preacher described the economic situation of the people residing in Denver Harbor, stating that “the inhabitants in the neighborhood constantly struggle with money; the region is clearly part of the lowest of low class communities in Houston and has been for a long time.” In particular, he recalls that during Bob Lanier’s reign as Mayor of Houston (1992-1998), some developments were made to the neighborhood, such as repaving streets and rebuilding the community library, but other than that, little attention was paid to the dilapidated section of the city. In other words, this community has experienced a very low amount of economic growth and progress in the recent past. To get an idea of the size of the population of Denver Harbor, the City of Houston website provides information from the Federal Census. As of 2000, the total amount of people living in Denver Harbor was 19,684 (“Super-neighborhood Demographics”). Separating this Latino community from Fifth Ward is the north-south railroad tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company.

Fifth Ward, Houston

The primarily African American community of our focus, then, is the Fifth Ward. This neighborhood is located directly to the east side of down town. After the Civil War, the area was mostly settled by freed slaves, but also by Anglo residents, interestingly, as they boasted roughly

equal parts of the ward's population (Kleiner). Of course, this demographic did change after the early-to-mid 1920s, when hundreds of Creoles migrated to the city. In particular the, "many Creoles who were left devastated and homeless after the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 relocated from Louisiana to Houston... spoke Creole French and enjoyed their food, music and culture together" ("Frenchtown and the Silver Slipper"). Their concentration within Fifth Ward became known as Frenchtown, and contained 'shotgun' houses imitating and embracing the style of those left behind in New Orleans ("Frenchtown and the Silver Slipper"). This type of solidarity within the community allowed for some economic advancement to take place. For example, many Black-owned businesses that were erected by 1925, including a pharmacy, a dentist's office, an undertaking parlor, a theatre, and several barbershops, multiplied (Kleiner). In "Fifth Ward, Houston," Kleiner describes the employment market for the African Americans in the neighborhood stating that "working-class blacks were primarily employed within walking distance of the ward; many worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad or at the Houston Ship Channel." Clearly, these positions were held by mostly males, as Kleiner also relates that, "others commuted across town to work as domestics and servants for wealthy Houstonians" ("Fifth Ward, Houston").

It was not until the 1960s and afterward that the African American neighborhood truly started to fall apart. Throughout the city, the neighborhood had a reputation for being rundown and crime-ridden. According to Kleiner, "*Texas Monthly* described it as 'Texas' toughest, proudest, baddest ghetto'" ("Fifth Ward Houston"). Nevertheless, during the time that Lee Brown served as Houston's mayor (1998-2004), and the city's first African American mayor at that, some improvements were also made in this community. For instance, Brown's Clean Neighborhoods Program was implemented to develop the deteriorated areas of the city by

initiating intensive cleanup and improvement projects, as well as motivating local leadership and residents to work together to sustain the litter problem and associated concerns (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2000). In terms of population size, the City of Houston cited slightly over 22,000 residents living in Fifth Ward in 2000, slightly higher than that of Denver Harbor. It would be interesting to study if and how the demographics have changed in both communities since then; however, that information is not yet available.

A Space for Making Contact

The north-south railroad tracks demarcate an unnatural borderspace, where an ethnic distinction exists between the two sides. Further tying into Anzaldúa's explication of border theory, she describes specifically that "the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other; where people of different races occupy the same territory..." (1999, preface to 1st ed). The distinction is evident while straddling these tracks; adjacent to the east is the Latino supermarket *Fiesta Mart* and to the west is the humble Nickel Sandwich Grill, a Cajun Barbecue restaurant serving some traditional meals of the Creole immigrants to the neighborhood. However, this is not to say that the people on opposing sides of the tracks remain rigorously separated. In fact, it is along these railroad tracks that much of the intercultural exchange takes place. For example, many Fifth Ward residents often crossover to shop at the *Fiesta Mart* for groceries, while a smaller number of Denver Harbor residents cross the tracks to take advantage of free or low-cost medical and counseling services at the Lyons Avenue Health Center a few blocks away. Anzaldúa recognizes that these borders are mere productions of our collective imagination. While she elaborates that "borders are set up to define places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them," she also acknowledges that "a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary"

(1999, p. 25). While the railroad tracks are marked as the “unnatural boundary” that separates the two communities, it is important to recognize that the area surrounding also provides a meeting ground.

Keeping them Down: Perpetuated Oppression

And so I ask, what is it that has perpetuated the ethnic divisions and impoverishment of these two communities? After all, they seem to share various similarities as far as employment and overall living standards are concerned. Sadly, part of the answer lies in the political mazes of controlled housing markets and uncontrolled zoning, as well as in social biases that continue to hinder the two communities’ advancement. In terms of the political structures involved, the primarily elite-run city planning or housing market has consistently hampered the development of these communities. As previously mentioned, the building of Houston’s highway systems negatively affected these neighborhoods. As Lin describes the situation, “in “free enterprise” Houston, there was no master-planned urban renewal in the fashion seen in some northeastern cities, but federal funding was certainly utilized to demolish deteriorated neighborhoods (particularly African American ones) to build highways and public housing.... Fifth Ward was similarly divided by the construction of Interstate 10” (1995, p. 634). Unfortunately, the inhabitants and their needs were essentially ignored. In a similar vein, the construction of the Gulf Freeway in 1953 destroyed the Fourth Wards vitality, shifting the center of African American economic and cultural life to the Fifth Ward (Lin, 1995, p. 640). What is significant here is that those citizens that did leave the Fourth Ward were constrained to moving to the Fifth because of the lack of African Americans’ opportunity to live elsewhere in the city. As Charles notes, “scholars generally agree that all levels of government, as well as the real estate, lending, and construction industries, played critical roles in creating and maintaining a dual housing

market that constrained the mobility options of blacks (2003, p. 181-182). Olzak, Shanahan, and McEneaney agree that, “variation in residential isolation of various racial and ethnic groups is related to efforts by Whites to restrict minority communities to less desirable neighborhoods” (1996, p. 592).

Anzaldúa also marks this actively domineering role of whites as characteristic of the borderlands. Expressing her personal relationship to the borderland experience, she explains that “the whites in power want us people of color to barricade ourselves behind our separate tribal walls so they can pick us off one at a time with their hidden weapons; so they can whitewash and distort history. Ignorance splits people, creates prejudices. A misinformed people is a subjugated people” (1999, p. 108). By controlling housing in this particular borderspace, the elite have managed to systematically cultivate and exploit the ignorance of the two communities, restricting them to a lack of recourse for upward mobility. This is certainly exemplified by the “evidence of racial bias in nearly every other aspect of the lending process, including private mortgage insurance, redlining by home insurance companies, [and the] methods of advertising and outreach” (Charles 2003, p. 194). To better understand his point, the author provides statistical information. He notes that, in lending, “blacks and Hispanics are 56% more likely than whites to be denied a conventional mortgage loan, which amounts to a minority denial rate of 17%, compared to a white rate of 11 %” (Charles, 2003, 194). These figures certainly reflect how discriminatory practices that permeate throughout the housing market have restricted the opportunity for these minority groups to better their situation.

Intra-group Bias: a Relationship based on Fear

At the same time, social attitudes also have impacted the amount of intracommunity relations. When asked about the relationship of the two neighborhoods in our interview,

community leader and preacher Rigo Arguera nearly scoffed, replying “What relationship?” He admitted, “the Hispanics of Denver Harbor are literally afraid to go into Fifth Ward, as are the Blacks of coming into Denver Harbor.” No doubt, this fear springs from the negative stereotypes each group has about the other. At the same time, gang violence is rampant in both communities, as are random acts of robbery and assault, which rightfully lead people to want to stay away from these areas. Moreover, the competition for advancement of their respective communities has furthered the segregation of the groups. As Olzak, Shnahan, and McEnenay suggest, “resource mobilization and competition theories suggest that decreases in levels of residential segregation and decreases in economic disadvantages for minorities increase competition for jobs, housing, schools and other resources” (1996, p. 592). In other words, because both communities see the greatest need egocentrically, they are in an unending battle to promote these needs at the expense of the other. Marschall and Stolle reaffirm this position, stating, “generalized trust has long been recognized not only as an important attitudinal prerequisite of such collective solutions, but also as a resource that produces a host of societal and individual benefits ranging from economic development and institutional performance to individual health and happiness” (2004, 125-126). Better said, the lack of mutual feelings of community between Fifth Ward and Denver Harbor pose an obstacle to the possibility of advancement as neighbors.

Cooperating for Progress

Although these Latino and African American neighbors face numerous obstacles and hindrances to their upward mobility and progress, there are available opportunities to find common ground and cooperate in order to achieve a better quality of life. In particular, these moments of solidarity and growth are visible in the community programs and religious

organizations who labor to educate, revitalize, and promote their neighborhoods. Community programs that are involved in reaching out to the residents of these areas help improve standard of living by offering health services, such as the Lyons Avenue Health Center and Project MOVE, which supplies school-based health care, health education and mental health counseling to children in both communities (Texas Medical Center, 2002). Another public organization implemented to empower the neighborhoods and promote solidarity is the Fifth Ward/Denver Harbor Community Technology Center which aims to “create educational, economic and personal opportunities for low-income and vulnerable persons and communities in which they live” (Technology for All, 2010). More specifically, this hub gives youth and adults access to technology, workforce development training, after-school programs and project-based learning. By educating residents from both Denver Harbor and Fifth Ward, this technology center not only teaches life skills necessary for life’s responsibilities, but also presents a space for building positive intercultural relationships.

Religious organizations also work to unite the two communities and to help build each other up. In my interview with Rigo Arguera, the former community leader discussed the ties between his ministry, the Lyons Church of Christ in Denver Harbor, and its Fifth Ward counterpart. In addition to working together to provide benevolence ministries, such as providing free food, clothing, and school supplies in both communities, church services would often be held together, followed by some food-centered fellowship to encourage friendship and a neighborly atmosphere. These community and religious organizations are keys to promoting not only personal and neighborhood empowerment but also solidarity because of the interactive space that they provide. However these mentioned are similar to only a handful of other organizations; many more of these spaces are still needed to further bring people together.

Suggested Areas for Improvement

While there are a number of organizations in both communities who aim to help their respective communities, they seek to engage only their specific needs. For example the Fifth Ward boast more and stronger establishments such as the Julia C. Hester House in Fifth Ward, which has been serving the community since the late 1940s (Julia C. Hester House, 2011). Similarly, other interviewed community leaders also acknowledged the lack of community support from the Denver Harbor religious organizations when compared to those in Fifth Ward. In the Houston Profile Project, the Baylor researchers' assessment of religious and lifestyle practices concluded, "Religious leaders in Fifth Ward are more concerned and responsive to needs of the community than the Denver Harbor religious leaders. There is a desire among protestant Hispanic churches to respond but there is little organization or direction to their efforts" (2004, p.53). At the same time, opportunities to help women particularly in these communities also call for strengthening and intercommunity cooperation. For example, the recently held "Día de la Mujer Latina Health Fiesta" that targeted the health education and concerns of Denver Harbor did not reach the Fifth Ward population (Our DH Streets, 2011, May 18). While these certainly exemplify positive vehicles for community-centered growth, more work needs to be done in order to further promote solidarity between these neighbors.

Conclusion

By strengthening the established methods of community support and promoting cross-community support between them, there is further opportunity to bolster the historically divided and impoverished communities of Denver Harbor and Fifth Ward, Houston. While the systematic structures of the development and housing markets of Houston as well as prejudiced biases have played their equal share in maintaining the Fifth Ward and Denver Harbor in continual conflict and separation, there is yet potential for solidarity.

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