

Freedmen's Town Lives!

Residents, Artists, and Activists Draw Strength from International Connections

BY SEHBA SARWAR

9 am DECEMBER 1, 2012: I AM STARING AT A DOME CONSTRUCTED from curved metal rods by friends and volunteers before dawn. Behind me are the shotgun houses on Victor Street in Houston's Freedmen's Town and beyond them highrises glint in morning sunlight. We'll decorate the dome with Pakistani and Indian fabrics. In a few hours, Voices Breaking Boundaries (VBB) will start up Homes and Histories, our living room art production. The streets are about to come to life.

VBB has been creating living room art productions in Houston neighborhoods for more than five years. The productions juxtapose Houston histories with those of Karachi, Pakistan, my home city, and we use art to transform homes. We've already worked in First, Third, and Sixth Wards; Montrose; and the East End. Freedmen's Town, established by the first freed slaves of Texas in the mid-1800s, had been on my list for some time, but I knew that the neighborhood would pose challenges since most original residents have had to move away. Townhouses have replaced nearly all of the row houses that once defined the neighborhood. As Lisa Gray noted in a 2011 *Chronicle* article, "Hardly anyone calls it Freedmen's Town or the Fourth Ward anymore. Now it's just Midtown."

The narrow streets are among the only traces of history. I had to accept that we would not be able to find an old house to host VBB's living room art production. But working in a new home in a neighborhood as politically charged as Freedmen's Town would be problematic. So we created a living room, in the street.

We also sought to find strength and perspective in linking the struggles of the Freedmen's Town community to the African Diaspora along Pakistan's coastline. No single name defines that diaspora—Sheedi, Baloch, or Makrani are common labels, depending on whom one talks to—and little substantive research has been done about it. Preparing for the event in Houston required fieldwork.

In July 2012, I visited Sheedi/Baloch neighborhoods in and outside Karachi including Lyari, as well as Tando Bago, the village that's home to Pakistan's largest black community, and another village, Badin, where I met with Iqbal Hyder, a Sheedi activist who has started a non-profit. In Karachi, I spent some time in Lyari, one of the oldest townships, which serves as home to the city's largest Baloch community (as the black community calls itself there). The voices in both the urban and rural spaces echoed the anger one hears from the Freedmen's Town community. Citizens struggle for better health, education, and basic living conditions, while understanding that their concerns are overlooked by governments.

1 pm VBB's team works furiously to cover the dome tent poles with fabrics. Volunteers set up a food and performance area in the shared driveway of my friend Christine Diaz's townhouse. On the streets, a crew sprays glue on the backs of photographs—historical images shot by Houston's Paul Hester, more contemporary ones by Lyari's Akbar Baloch—to stick them onto the

a Women singing in Tando Bago, Sindh.

Photo Sehba Sarwar.

b Freedmen's Town house, 1984.

Photo Paul Hester.

c Voices Breaking Boundaries VideoDome.

Photo Burnell McCray.



asphalt. During the show, audience members will be able to listen to conversations with older Freedmen's Town residents and learn about the brick streets that were laid down over one hundred years ago, and that are now threatened by plans by the City. I also know there will be references to past battles, such as the loss of Allen Parkway Village.

The Gregory School, the first "colored" public school in Houston and now a library that serves as an archive for African American history, opens its doors, as does the R.B.H. Yates Museum. The latter is in a large 1912 home with high ceilings and two entrances—one for residents, and the other leading to a separate room that was made available to black businessmen, musicians, and others visiting Houston who were not served by white-only hotels. The R.B.H. Yates Museum Foundation owns two more historic homes with similar layouts on the corner of Wilson and Andrews Streets, but they have yet to procure funds to restore the spaces.

5:30 pm The performances by KoumanKele dance troupe and Wharton K-8 students have ended, QR coded videos created by Robert Pruitt and Autumn Knight have been viewed, the burlap sack installation by Kaneem Smith has been removed, and Skype conversations about migrations with Babette Niemel, an artist in Amsterdam, are over. We sit on the grass at sunset sharing stories: on one street residents told volunteers to leave the photos glued to asphalt, while on the eastern end, residents asked us to stop littering. As I watch my friends unscrew the dome, I wonder what was learned through the experience. There are many commonalities between the two neighborhoods we explored: distrust of visitors; need for more infrastructure; concern about safety and drugs; and

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anger at police and government.

I'm not sure if VBB's show truly gave voice to the communities or if we just scraped the surface of deeper issues. I do know, however, that the process was a learning experience for everyone who participated and attended. While much of Freedmen's Town has either been burned or torn down, it's clear that the community is not gone, its history is not lost, and the struggle is not over.

As we pack, we talk about how the biggest challenge is connecting new residents of Freedmen's Town to the neighborhood's history so there can be a collaborative celebration. In Pakistan, there's an urgent need to create a quota system for the Sheedi/Baloch community so they can gain access to education and basic living amenities. Awareness is important, so for now VBB will launch videos on an interactive website. Freedmen's Town and Sheedi/Baloch members that participated in the project will be offered honoraria. And most importantly, we will stay connected to both communities; there are many more stories that remain untold.

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VOICES BREAKING BOUNDARIES HAS SOUGHT TO INCITE SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH ART SINCE 2000. LEARN MORE AT THEIR WEBSITE, VBBARTS.ORG.