

# Freedmen's Town Versus Frenchtown: A History of Two Black Settlements in Houston, Texas

LYNDSEY DEATON

With names signifying “freedom from slavery” in one case and referencing Creole ethnicity in the other, the founding characteristics of two black settlements in Houston, Texas, foreshadowed the different prospects their residents would face over the next century and a half. Both Freedmen’s Town and Frenchtown have been studied individually and with regard to patterns of spatial oppression. This article, however, attempts to show how different orientations toward race adopted by the two communities qualified the operation of spatial oppression in them since the late-nineteenth century. In doing so, it will reflect on the hidden workings of discrimination and economic injustice through four critical planning periods: post-Civil War Reconstruction, the Great Depression, the era of “white” flight, and the era of gentrification. The article will conclude by discussing the continued operation of these forces under hypergentrification.

At the corner of Valentine and Ruthven Streets, the new midrise apartment blocks seem out of place, an architectural contradiction within downtown Houston’s Fourth Ward. Monolithic brick boxes reflecting new city-imposed densities and a desire for middle-class amenities, they seem cut-and-pasted into the historic fabric of the street and loom over the area’s older gable-roofed dog-trot houses. But their incongruity goes beyond mere spatial form; the new apartments reject the neighborhood’s entire historic pattern language of public pocket parks and alleyways in favor of a private development model that views urban space as an investment commodity (FIG. 1).

This contradiction is neither rare nor organic; indeed, it represents the outgrowth of overt collusion between government agencies and private investors intent on monetizing the latent economic potential of historically neglected communities. Scholarly work by Lo-



**FIGURE 1.** Apartment blocks (top right) encroach on the historic fabric of dog-trot houses in Freedmen's Town, usurping the traditional patterns through processes indicative of hypergentrification. Image from Google Maps, 2019.

retta Lees et al., Bethany Yi, and Jeremiah Moss has referred to this phenomenon as “hypergentrification,” both because it is related to older patterns of gentrification and distinguished by a new intensity and aggressiveness toward commandeering class-based space.<sup>1</sup> Yet, little work has been done to date to investigate hypergentrification’s place within historical dynamics of spatial oppression or to understand the factors that influence it. I will attempt here to contribute to this discourse by showing how a community’s orientation toward ethnicity may play a role in mechanisms of spatial oppression, and ultimately affect its ability to withstand such pressures.

To investigate these issues, I will compare two communities in Houston that have displayed stark contrasts in how they have portrayed themselves within a predominant context of anti-black racism. Thus, Freedmen’s Town has historically embraced race-consciousness, while Frenchtown has advertised itself according to a color-blind mentality, if not a separate self-differentiation based on Creole heritage.<sup>2</sup> I will investigate these portrayals with reference to their economic implications over four critical planning periods, starting with the era of post-Civil War Reconstruction when the communities were established, and moving forward to the present day.<sup>3</sup> With regard to each period I will ask two main questions: How did the structuring of ethnicity contribute to the way these communities were spatially oppressed? And what did their built environments illustrate about the relationship between power and race?

Houston’s black settlements have been influenced by a series of legal structures, as well as by social norms, resulting in a present-day geography that embodies longstanding traditions of spatial oppression. I will reflect here on how this condition was forced on them, and how the communities of Freedmen’s Town and Frenchtown continue to grapple with longstanding patterns of spatial injustice in the form of hypergentrification. My analysis discussion will use spatial metaphors to expose past processes of spatial oppression and show how racialized space remains an issue for scholars of urban sustainability and environmental justice. Responding to Dorceta Taylor’s call to engage “theoretical frames that are tested” and move past mere explanations, I will also engage contemporary theoretical/critical texts to drive the discussion toward a deeper awareness of racialized space in the built environment.<sup>4</sup>

In questioning how historic layers of racial oppression continue to act on space, I will argue that landscapes may be infused with deep meaning, despite the intentional amnesia of those in power. This is also, by design, a profitable amnesia, because there is money to be made through cycles of neglect and exploitation that employ a *rational* lens to strip deep meaning from the history of racialized space.<sup>5</sup> As I move through my interpretation of the forces shaping Freedmen’s Town and Frenchtown, I will therefore seek to regularly ground my analysis with phenomenological references, as a reminder of the moral stakes that are often overlooked.

In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick illustrated the humanness of such a rigged geography. Through an “interdisciplinary analysis of black women’s geographies in the black diaspora,” she revealed “that the interplay between domination and black women’s geographies is underscored by the social production of space.”<sup>6</sup> Borrowing her lens, I will cast the geographic struggle over place in these two traditionally black areas of Houston as an extension of the madness of ownership incited by the pathology of slavery. As McKittrick observed, this involves adopting two attitudes:

*First, . . . recognizing the ways in which the social production of space is inextricably tied up with the differential placement of racial bodies. And second, through signaling a different sense of place, one which does not exactly duplicate the traditional features of geographic ownership that we seem to value so much.*<sup>7</sup>

McKittrick’s analysis used metaphors to reinforce the active process of spatial oppression working between bodies and place. And she observed that marginalized people’s everyday experiences are lived in spaces that have been formally mapped and organized “according to systems of power-domination, systems that have a stake in the continued objectification of social spaces, social beings, and social systems.”<sup>8</sup> To reinforce the stakes implicit in this legacy, Christina Sharpe employed the metaphor of “a wake.” Her *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* thus described how the repercussions of a history of racial enslavement are far, wide, and largely unaccounted.<sup>9</sup>

*[T]o be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding. To be “in” the wake, to occupy that grammar, the infinitive, might provide another way of theorizing, in/for/from what Frank Wilderson refers to as “stay[ing] in the hold of the ship.”<sup>10</sup>*

Staying with Sharpe, I will not presume to offer answers to the problem of racialized space. Rather, I will investigate it by questioning the very possibility of assimilated space in light of what she called “slavery’s denial of Black humanity.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, present trends of hypergentrification in Houston’s historically black neighborhoods will never be able to create assimilated spaces; in keeping with precedent, the spatialities created by their historic populations will always be displaced, if not erased.

Together, Taylor, McKittrick and Sharpe also suggest a critical approach that considers the traditional archive (maps, government records, etc.) to be flawed in its depictions, because its very purpose has been to hide this powerful history. Yet, in keeping with their previous work, I have also chosen not to reject the traditional archive, but to reveal its limita-

tions, and supplement it with metaphors, narratives and questions that point to its hidden dimensions.

## THE COMMUNITIES: FREEDMEN’S TOWN AND FRENCHTOWN

Houston is one of the largest American cities by land area, and it is the most “sprawling” American city.<sup>12</sup> According to leading urban scholars like Saskia Sassen and Neil Smith, its pattern of exceptional physical extension is also a key ingredient in the creation of segregated urban landscapes.<sup>13</sup> Their research has likewise shown how the economy and spatiality of a city are deeply interlinked and must be considered together as a single system.

Houston’s largeness is even more unusual considering how new it is. Incorporated in 1836 with a population of just more than 1,000, Houston reached the top ten most populated cities in America only recently — in the late 1960s — with just under one million residents.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it surprised geographers by quickly taking the lead in spatial area among American cities. Today, Houston’s urban area has also outgrown its “proper” city boundaries, and is defined as the Greater Houston Metropolitan Area (GHMA), whose population was estimated in 2019 to be just shy of seven million.<sup>15</sup> Assuming net migration equal to that experienced during the 2000–2010 U.S. Census period, the population of the GHMA is projected to reach approximately ten million by 2030.<sup>16</sup>

Houston has played a pivotal role in American history through its economy, political geography, and unprecedented spatial growth. The city’s cultural past and geographic location mean that it mixes attributes of Southern, Spanish and Creole society, as well as a distinctly Texan one, in ways often beneficial to the growth of its economy. And the story of Freedmen’s Town and Frenchtown illuminates how the city has flickered between these identities throughout its brief history, while maintaining deliberate and formal policies to enforce the marginalization of black residents.

At first glance, Houston’s racial geography may seem dispersed, or even integrated. Its ethnic enclaves are scattered around the historic city center in a pinwheel fashion. But a closer investigation of the city’s spatial growth over the past two centuries reveals a different story. These ethnic enclaves were the result of specific political and legal mechanisms that pushed black refugees from the antebellum plantation economy out of certain existing neighborhoods, while black community institutions drew them together in others. The dialectic created a landscape of peripheral black settlements by the end of the nineteenth century, and as these settlements grew in solidarity and economic power throughout the twentieth century, they were strategically bifurcated, fractured, and displaced to varying degrees based on how they portrayed themselves ethnically.

Freedmen's Town, located in the Fourth Ward, was arguably the first black settlement in Houston. Indeed, it was home to a small number of free black people before the Civil War. In the years following emancipation, however, it came to be populated by former slaves from the surrounding plantation economy who sought refuge there. This direct association with the legacy of slavery fostered both a race-consciousness identity and a progressive sense of racial equality. As it grew in size and influence as a community, it then developed strong institutions that reinforced its role within Houston and the region (FIG. 2).

However, Freedmen's Town has also (perhaps intentionally) experienced some of the worst effects of government-imposed spatial restructuring. During the mid- to late twentieth century this involved the use of eminent domain to seize land — first to implement centralized post-World War II urban renewal, and second to construct region-serving state highways. In addition, the community was victimized by the possibly criminal failure of local government to use the National Historic Preservation Act to recognize its critical role in the nation's history. Freedmen's Town never recovered from these disruptions, which opened further opportunities for forced displacement.



**FIGURE 2.** *The Antioch Baptist Church was the social and spatial cornerstone of Freedmen's Town as an emerging settlement. Few images of Freedmen's Town prior to the mid-nineteenth century exist, alluding to intentional erasure. Source: Texas Historical Commission, n.d.*

Frenchtown was also a historic community. However, its formation outside the original core of the city set its development on a different track. The creation of the new Fifth Ward in which it was located was originally meant to establish an area of separate settlement for black refugees, with a separate black leadership. Unlike the city's existing Third and Fourth Wards, which reflected prevailing patterns of urban socio-economic diversity, the Fifth ward was also built around an industrial railroad depot. Its residential neighborhoods thus catered to a primarily working-class population.

The community identity of Frenchtown also later shifted to accommodate a large influx of Creole migrants in the early twentieth century. These migrants had been free persons before the Civil War, and they brought with them a distinct and insular ethnicity embodied by Zydeco music, Catholicism, Euro-centric racial characteristics, and Creole-French language. Although this color-neutral orientation insulated the residents of Frenchtown for a number of decades from the worst aspects of spatial oppression, in the years after World War II Frenchtown, too, was subject to the damaging impact of eminent domain seizures for highway construction. Physical fragmentation in turn led to a loss of cultural solidarity, and the remaining community largely dissolved in place from cultural mixing and abandonment. According to one newspaper account, at the beginning of the twenty-first century Frenchtown had been "scarred by decades of deterioration and neglect."<sup>17</sup>

#### 1865–1890: RECONSTRUCTION AND ESTABLISHING BLACK SETTLEMENTS

Houston was incorporated in 1837, at a time when Texas had declared itself an independent republic, but before it was annexed by the United States. The state then seceded from the Union during the Civil War, and during the era of Reconstruction that followed, it experienced a period of immense financial pressure.

For blacks, the period between Texas's declaration of independence from Mexico and the arrival of federal troops following the defeat of the Confederacy was one of increasingly violent manifestations of oppression. Conditions of enslavement had been uncharacteristic of the Texas territory when it had been a Spanish possession in the eighteenth century, and Mexico technically outlawed racial slavery in 1830.<sup>18</sup> But following the creation of the state of Texas in 1845, the rights of an original, small free black population were increasingly eroded by the need to totally subjugate a growing new population of enslaved blacks.<sup>19</sup>

In Houston, black businesses during this period found themselves fighting to retain their economic rights. Reaching back to Sharpe's metaphor of a wake, the near reversal of social conditions brought about by Texas's embrace of slavery placed all future rights in jeopardy, emphasizing that the seat of "true" power was a construct of race.



**FIGURE 3.** No black settlements are depicted in this lithograph; only an African-American Church is noted in the legend. Augustus Koch, “Bird’s Eye View of the City of Houston, Texas, 1873,” lithograph (hand-colored), #20032403, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

Conditions in the area degenerated, reaching their nadir in 1860, as enslaved people in Harris County (where Houston is located) and surrounding counties, reached 49 percent of the total population.<sup>20</sup> And so entrenched in the agricultural economy was Texas’s landowning society, that they refused to acknowledge President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. The city was finally forced to adhere to it through Union occupation on June 19, 1865 (now celebrated as Juneteenth).

Following emancipation, black refugees fled to Houston from regional plantations in the hope of finding shelter, federal assistance, and work opportunities. As the agricultural sector reengineered itself away from a reliance on slave labor, the municipality was overwhelmed with black “freedmen.” The increasing number of refugees soon created a sense of animosity among Houstonians. City officials further spread fear that the city could not absorb such a huge influx of people (re: labor), and they warned of vagrancy and rising crime.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, at the same time the United States was “unenslaving” black people, Houston set out to strip black residents of many of their preexisting rights. This effort took the form of strict legislation called the Black Codes that limited the legal place of all non-whites in society. The new codes applied across racial lines and didn’t differentiate between previously “free” and enslaved populations, and they established an inferior position on voting, settlement, property ownership, worker rights, and many other measures. According to the historian Cary Wintz, “More than any other single factor, this [segregation] determined the nature of black Houston.”<sup>22</sup>

Spatially, the shortage of available housing also drove overcrowding and forced refugees to occupy inadequate structures such as stables, warehouses, and abandoned buildings. Such deplorable and unsanitary conditions ignited fear of a health crisis, fire, or other calamity. With no central planning, in a climate of resistance to further refugee settlement, black people had little choice but to form their own communities on the outskirts of each existing ward in the city, as detached reflections of the inner, “white city.”

As part of the traditional archive, official maps dated through the 1870s failed to depict this new landscape of black settlement — even though it was referenced in newspaper articles and written accounts of the time (FIG. 3). Yet this very invisibility corresponded with the desire of city officials and real estate speculators to maintain a national reputation for civility. Contrary to struggles over actual space, their interest was to reinforce the image of Houston as predominantly “white.”

According to census figures, the number of black residents of Houston tripled in the years after emancipation, and represented 39.3 percent of its growing population in 1870. Scholars agree, however, that this figure failed to account for transience, as many freed blacks who initially came to the city were “encouraged” to return to their plantations.<sup>23</sup> With few other resources to draw on, this new population had to support itself through family ties, churches, and fraternal organizations.

As Tyina Steptoe further observed in *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City*:

*The spatial dynamics of Houston influenced black community-building efforts. Since they lived in several different neighborhoods, by necessity black migrants had to create and maintain businesses and institutions across the sprawling city. The wards had their own black business and entertainment centers, most notably West Dallas Street in the San Felipe district, Lyons Avenue in Fifth Ward, and Dowling Street in Third Ward. The geographically dispersed population meant that black Houstonians were not historically confined to one part of town like their peers in some northern industrializing cities.<sup>24</sup>*

As mentioned above, Freedmen's Town formed on the outskirts of what is now the Fourth Ward. Its site lay along San Felipe Road (now West Dallas Street) — a major connector between the Brazos River plantations and the city center. At the time, much of the Fourth Ward consisted of sparsely populated farmland (because it was susceptible to flooding) that was owned by white people whose fortunes had been devastated by the Civil War. This group saw the area's development as an economic opportunity, and they set about subdividing their lands to rent to the city's rapidly growing black population. White landlords were also well aware that successful businesses were more likely to continue to pay rent. This may be one reason why Freedmen's Town solidified into an enduring community while black settlements elsewhere on the outskirts of the city did not.

From its earliest days, Freedmen's Town was built around social institutions, one of the first of which was the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, founded there in 1866 (REFER TO FIG. 2).<sup>25</sup> But economic and institutional growth soon led to the founding of the first school for African Americans in Houston (the Gregory Institute in 1870<sup>26</sup>), a public high school (Colored High School in 1876), a library (Carnegie Colored Library in 1913), and a hospital (Union Hospital in 1918). So influential would Freedmen's Town become to Houston's black community that it eventually came to be known as the "mother ward."<sup>27</sup> The archive further suggests that, despite official municipal neglect, basic community infrastructure and services were constructed and installed by local residents and businesses themselves.

In Freedmen's Town, in addition to churches, lodges and fraternal orders played a particularly important role in local civic life. At first, they were necessary solutions to incomplete social services such as support for funerals, but later they became architectural symbols of a progressive society. Thelma Scott Bryant (TSB) was born in Freedmen's Town in 1905 and recalled the prominence of the settlement in an interview with Patricia Smith Prather (PSP), director of the Texas State Traiblazer Association for the City of Houston's Oral History Project:

*PSP: So, everything we are talking about in this interview has to do with your moving around in a black-owned, black world [Freedmen's Town]?*

*TSB: Yes, and we want to remember, too, that the lodges played a big part in furnishing the social life. . . . At that time you had just worlds of lodges and even though they were established for the purpose of furnishing burial money for you when you died — like give you some money for when you were sick, what they called sick benefits — they also had this social side. And so, they would give dances, too. I can remember going, when I was a little girl, to a square dance, and this lodge had it at the lodge hall.*

*PSP: O.K., you know, the 1920s, as we look over it, was a pretty impressive time for blacks because they had only been out of slavery for a little over fifty years and they had built these fraternal halls and so forth and so on. I know that in about 1926, they built the Pilgrim Building. Can you tell us a little bit about the Pilgrim Building and the importance of that?*

*TSB: Yes, well, before the Pilgrim Building, see, the first doctors' offices and businesses were in one of these large buildings called the United Brothers of Friendship. . . . That was on Milam and Prairie. But many of these tenants moved from that building about 1924 or 1925 into the Oddfellows building which was on Prairie and Louisiana. . . .*

*[T]he Pilgrim Building was a four-story building located on the corner right across from the high school on the corner of West Dallas and Bagby. It was like in a triangle, you might as well say, and you had businesses downstairs, and you had the Pilgrim Lodge . . . occupying most of the space on the second floor. You had the Franklin Beauty School there . . . [and] you had mostly the doctors' offices and other professionals, and on the fourth floor was the dance hall. And that is where the big bands played like Cab Calloway and Jimmie Lunsford and all.<sup>28</sup>*

Meanwhile, the first social institution in the black settlement area that came to be known as Frenchtown was "Toby's Church," located at Vine and Shea Streets on the edge of Buffalo Bayou.<sup>29</sup> It would become a unifying landmark for hundreds of newly emancipated blacks. According to David Ponton,

*Prior to the start of Reconstruction, what became known as the Fifth Ward was a small residential village on the outskirts of the city. Domestic and foreign-born white folks made homes along mud roads, but "by 1870" the demographics of the area shifted and "561 white and 578 black residents" called Fifth Ward home, becoming the only one of the five existing wards where black people composed a majority.<sup>30</sup>*



**FIGURE 4.** The damage from the fire of 1912 was exacerbated by city neglect — unmaintained streets, no fire station, and no code enforcement. “Aftermath of the Fifth Ward Fire,” February 21, 1912, George Fuermann Texas and Houston Collection, University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.

Residents of the Fifth Ward were mostly unskilled laborers who worked at its growing railway depot, at the city’s eastside shipping channel, and as domestics in the homes of wealthy Houstonians. Railroad companies paid working-class wages that resulted in a landscape of shanties and shotgun houses; and perhaps because it lacked the socioeconomic diversity of the Fourth Ward, the area was only able to provide limited services and infrastructure for itself. For example, its houses had no bathtubs, running water, or sewer service.

By the 1880s the Fifth Ward had become nearly all black, and as it grew, political tensions also rose. In keeping with the Texas spirit, local community leaders twice threatened to secede over the lack of municipal services (in 1875 and 1883). However, little was done — perhaps because this was the only ward where black Houstonians officially served in political offices. Nevertheless, the official record documents the struggle between residents and the city as a product of black people’s own inability to maintain “their” community. And through cycles of neglect and renewal this view helped establish a reputation for poor management that was used to support official calls for limits on autonomous governance. McKittrick has argued this very dynamic was a legacy of enslavement.

*Black geographies were (and sometimes still are) rendered unintelligible . . . unruly deviant bodies do not have the capacity to produce space and effectively participate in geographic progress; unruly deviant bodies should be kept “in place.”<sup>31</sup>*

Conditions continued to deteriorate until 1912, when the Great Fifth Ward Fire, the largest in Houston’s history, consumed ten institutions, thirteen industrial plants, and 119 homes, resulting in more than \$3 million in property damage

(FIG. 4).<sup>32</sup> The extent of the damage was at least partly attributable to the city’s refusal to provide accessible roads, fire and police services, and water mains in the area. Nevertheless, outside interests were able to profit from it. The destruction opened up the settlement to outside investors, as the area’s black residents, who were typically barred from obtaining homeowner’s insurance, looked for other ways to reconcile their losses.

Fifteen years later, another displacement, the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, further fortified the Fifth Ward’s changing cultural profile. As Creole evacuees from Louisiana fled to Houston, they were directed to settle in the Fifth Ward by the city’s white upper-class government. There is deep meaning in this assumed compatibility of marginalized peoples — black refugees from Texas’s former plantation economy and the newly destitute Louisianans. Yet, at the same time that it reinforced the Fifth Ward’s position as a marginalized community, it also tempered the area’s former race-conscious political identity through the addition of a strong new sense of Creole ethnicity.

Emphasizing their ethno-racial distinction from black Houstonians, these new migrants initially coalesced to form a tight new community within the Fifth Ward — Frenchtown. And the diaspora also brought a surge in prosperity, which soon established a lucrative new “black” economy, even if it had many differences from that which had preceded it. The change in community character, however, does beg questions about how the city’s power structure “rewarded” a new sense of ethnic identity in the area — one that distanced itself from its previous heritage as a place of refuge from the former slave economy (FIG. 5).

By the late 1920s Freedmen’s Town and Frenchtown had thus both developed into bustling black settlements with productive economies. They were critical features of the



**FIGURE 5.** *Our Mother of Mercy Church in Frenchtown was only the second African-American Catholic Church in Houston, and represented a departure from the norm among the typically Protestant black community. Source: The Josephites, c/o Houston Chronicle, 1929.*

city's growing landscape. Freedmen's Town, in particular, now contained one-third of Houston's population. Its main commercial strip (along West Dallas) housed jazz clubs, restaurants, and other business and was known regionally as the "Harlem of the South."<sup>33</sup> Frenchtown, too, had made a name for itself.<sup>34</sup> Its main commercial strip (along Lyons Avenue) was home to more than forty businesses, and was described as "one of the proudest black neighborhoods [in the U.S.]."<sup>35</sup> Going into the Great Depression, both communities were economically prosperous — even if Frenchtown had already gone through one major episode of destruction and renewal.

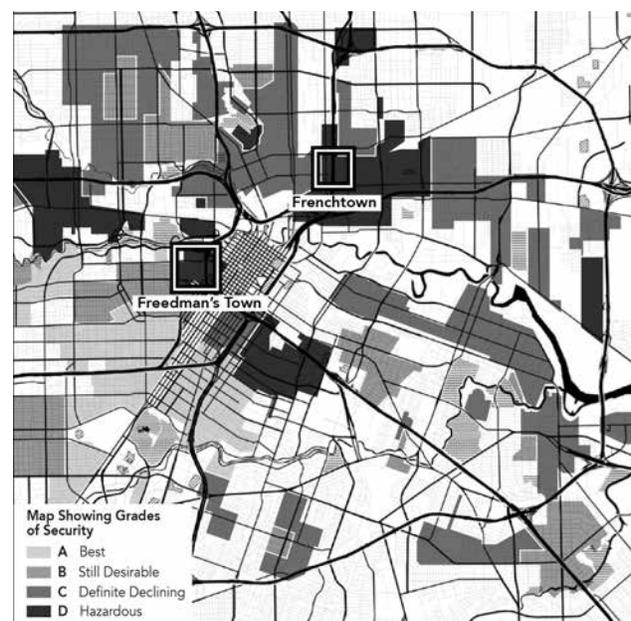
#### 1929–1950: REDLINING AND EMINENT DOMAIN

The Great Depression, which lasted from 1929 through the early 1940s, was an era of significant economic strain in Houston. As banks closed and employees were laid off, its minority communities were the first to suffer from economic shock (and arguably suffered some of the harshest consequences). However, after Franklin Roosevelt was elected president in 1932, his administration attempted to reignite the American economy through a variety of programs that increased government spending. These sought to intervene in the national economy in several ways: by hiring large numbers of unemployed workers, by stimulating trickle-down spending, and by lowering the cost of products (especially homes) through government-subsidized lending.

In *Crabgrass Frontier*, Kenneth Jackson has described the severity of the economic downturn caused by the Depression on the processes of suburban expansion that had begun in the 1920s. In particular, he documented how residential construction plummeted 95 percent between 1928 and 1933 — and how in 1933 more than half of all mortgages were in default.<sup>36</sup>

To restart the housing industry and transform mortgage and security lending, the federal government created a series of new programs and agencies, including the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC). Among other actions, this agency developed spatial metrics for determining the economic viability of mortgages. For minority populations, however, this soon translated into a process of "redlining," which involved denying applications for mortgage loans in certain areas of the city based on race and other factors.<sup>37</sup> The effect of this notorious practice was ultimately to cause property values in redlined districts to decline sharply, provoking their residents to seek to move away, further limiting the city services available within them.

Redlining practices were institutionalized in Houston and made visible through the city's Residential Security Maps (FIG. 6).<sup>38</sup> These translated race into descriptive neighborhood qualifiers such as "A: Best," "B: Still Desirable," "C: Definite Declining," and "D: Hazardous." But these maps were only one of many official tools used to enforce segregation by denying equal opportunity to mortgage lending for black people. Others included the 1936 "Federal Housing Administration (FHA) Underwriting Manual," the 1938 guide "Planning Profitable Neighborhoods," and the 1939 report "The Structure and Growth of Residential Districts in American Cities."<sup>39</sup> As Susan Rogers has written, the policies contained in such documents ultimately also led to white flight from the urban core and reinforced Houston's pattern of sprawl.<sup>40</sup>



**FIGURE 6.** *This HOLC map from 1930 shows both Freedmen's Town and Frenchtown as uninsurable settlements by coding them "D: Hazardous." Drawing by Ryan Al-Schamma, 2020, from Google Maps and U.S. Census documents.*

As clearly shown in Figure 6, despite their surging populations and bustling economies, both Freedmen's Town and Frenchtown were demarcated "D: Hazardous." The implication of this designation for residents of these areas was that it was extremely unlikely they would qualify for government-backed mortgage programs. And during the Depression era it was extremely unlikely they could find alternate sources of financing. Yet, interestingly, only the economy of Freedmen's Town was stifled by these policies, while that of Frenchtown appears to have at worst stagnated and at best maintained an inconspicuous level of growth. This economic impact along ethno-racial lines recalls research by Keith and Herring, among others, on the differential treatment of black Americans according to the relative darkness of their skin.<sup>41</sup>

Up through the 1920s, then, both Freedmen's Town and Frenchtown had been growing and economically vibrant communities. But several sequential, or possibly overlapping, forces combined in the decades that followed to send Freedmen's Town in particular into rapid decline. Although the historical record is not clear on the specifics, the major impacts appear to have been segregation, municipal neglect, and economic downturn. But even more damaging perhaps was that over the next two decades the image of black settlements merged with their changed material reality to produce an entangled image of black blight. Yet, it was abuse and neglect, not black bodies, that had set this process in motion.

Redlining brings a key concept into focus. In addition to the actual historical consequences of race-based slavery, new policies continued to form in response to its legacy that created their own entourage of consequences. In alignment with Sharpe's concept of "residence time," each of these might be considered a reverberation, a further disturbance in slavery's wake. But the HOLC policies clearly also initiated a new set of social and economic consequences, which reinforced existing and overlapping layers of spatial oppression.

As part of an effort to stimulate the local economy (but later to provide housing for the families of soldiers returning from World War II), the city of Houston next procured federal funding to build a series of public housing projects sited largely in black settlement areas. And the Housing Authority of the City of Houston (HACH) used its powers of eminent domain to acquire land for this effort. Thus, in 1938, it razed the homes in a large area of Freedmen's town to build San Felipe Courts — a "whites-only" housing project (FIG. 7). City reports cite "slum clearance" as justification for displacing about 1,300 black residents, but according to Zachary Montz, the intent was simply to "clear Negroes out of this area."<sup>42</sup>

The image of black blight in Freedmen's Town was a common feature of reporting by most major media outlets at the time. For example, the *Pittsburgh Daily Post* emphasized the decayed condition of the area's buildings in its coverage of a gruesome trial playing out there:

*The shutters are hanging on the houses by strings and wires. Here and there the chimneys have toppled in. Almost all of the houses are built on strong stilts to protect them from the water.*<sup>43</sup>

However, the condition of Freedmen's Town did not reflect the desires of residents. Rather, it was a consequence of municipal neglect and concentrated poverty. According to Ponton,

*The streets flooded during rains because the city refused to install drainage on the streets; in fact, the streets only existed because Black residents manufactured and laid the bricks that defined them.*<sup>44</sup>

Montz has further noted that the San Felipe Courts project "was only the beginning of a planned racial transformation of the [Fourth] Ward."<sup>45</sup> Specifically, the HACH directed and planned for the "elimination" of "Negroes" from the Fourth Ward over a period of twenty to twenty-five years.<sup>46</sup> But once completed in 1944, San Felipe Courts had already enabled the seizure of 25 percent of Freedmen's Town for exclusively white residents.

The literature on Frenchtown during this period is thin, but it suggests that its residents were relatively more insulated from the effects of Jim Crow segregation, municipal neglect, and economic downturn. Steptoe hinted at one plausible explanation for the disparity: Frenchtown residents didn't see themselves as black. After the 1927 flood, the influx of Creole migrants had transformed its image.

*[T]he Louisianans moving into Frenchtown did not acknowledge a racial heritage originating in the slave society that British settlers established in colonial Virginia. They linked their history to French and Spanish rule over colonial Louisiana and the distinctive racial order*



FIGURE 7. The San Felipe Courts Historic District is today listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Photo by Ed Uthman, original converted to grayscale, 2010.

*that developed there. Black East Texans and people of color from Louisiana thus came from societies with different racial histories. Consequently, these groups did not share the same constructions of racial blackness.*<sup>47</sup>

While there is little evidence to suggest that white Houstonians similarly bought into the Creole's categorization of race, some accounts point to the relative favorability of its cultural exports. In a 1955 *Houston Post* article, Marie Lee Phelps thus employed the voice of a travel agent to describe Frenchtown.

*Here in an atmosphere as foreign as French pie and rub bo'd [sic] music live about 500 people of French and Spanish descent. They come from Saint Martinsville, Lafayette, LeBeau, Louisiana. They call themselves creoles. Most of them have very fair skin, lustrous, expressive eyes, beautiful black hair. I was struck by the patrician features of those I met, the long nose, the thin, sensitive lips.*<sup>48</sup>

In addition to objectification and generalization, Phelps's article clearly implied that Frenchtown residents were simultaneously superior to other marginalized races and novel because of their relatively white characteristics. Yet such a narrative also reinforced a dialectic of racial commodity that highlighted the value of "whiteness." And, as Sadiya Hartman has observed in the context of antebellum legal structures, "these taxonomies produce racial value, such that the reputation of whiteness itself becomes a form of property."<sup>49</sup> In order to praise the Fifth Ward, Phelps thus had to acknowledge the Creole people as the product of interracial relations — namely, by calling out their white characteristics.

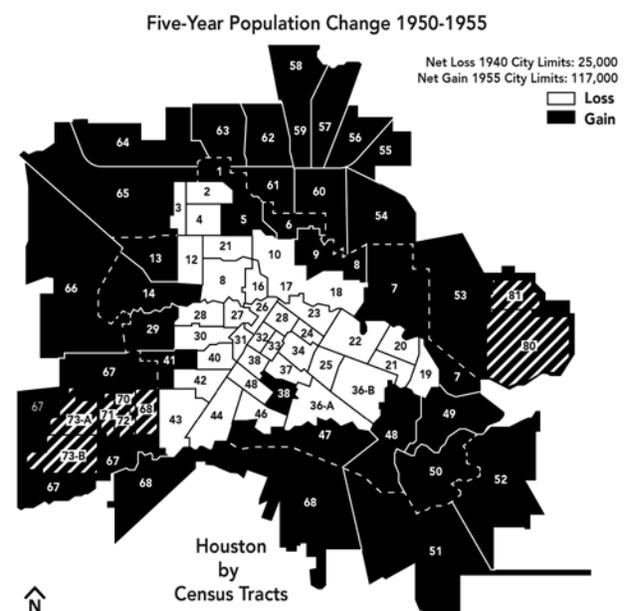
Such mixed characteristics, however, meant that although Frenchtown, too, was documented "D: Hazardous" in redlining manuals and procedures, it was not selected as a site for public housing construction or rigorous campaigns to eradicate black blight. Instead, in 1947, the Brown & Root construction company bought 133 acres just south of Frenchtown in the Fifth Ward to build their worldwide headquarters.<sup>50</sup> This in turn encouraged other large industries, like TESCO, to move into the area (note that Frenchtown had always been an industrial area). And new business investment encouraged the city to pave and curb the Fifth Ward's streets, upgrade and maintain its sanitary and storm sewers, and generally tend to its needs in the years immediately after World War II.

Frenchtown thus skirted the image of black blight — perhaps because its residents managed to convince white Houstonians that it was not really a black community. Perhaps their tradition of color-blindness proved appealing during a period of violent anti-black racism. Or perhaps new industrial investment in the area was momentarily able to divert attention from the presence of black bodies there.

## 1950–1968: THE ERA OF "WHITE" FLIGHT

In the years following World War II Houstonians gave similar reasons for moving out of cities to suburban areas as other Americans. For some it was the polluted environment of the city and the expectation of a clean new one nearby in the suburbs. For others it was a desire to live in an affordable, detached single-family house rather than an apartment. Still others were concerned with the perception of rising crime in the city. (FIG. 8)

Interestingly, both black and white Houstonians expressed similar sentiments with regard to the desirability of suburban life. However, white Houstonians also associated conditions of urban blight with presence of black people — or at least they associated them with lower property values and sought to invest in homogenously white communities. Their demands were supported by private developers, backed by the Federal Housing Authority. In 1948 the Supreme Court's ruling in *Shelley v. Kraemer* had struck down the legality of racially restrictive deed covenants, rendering them unenforceable in state courts.<sup>51</sup> But until 1968 FHA officials still accepted unwritten agreements to support existing traditions of spatial oppression through segregation. According to Gwendolyn Wright, "The FHA preferred controlled, segregated subdivisions in suburban areas to more complex and diverse urban development."<sup>52</sup>



**FIGURE 8.** The "flight," or mass exodus, of residents relocating from the inner city to the suburbs, eventually led Houston to expand its city limits. Drawing by Ryan Al-Schamma, 2020, based on *Houston Post* c.1955.

There can be no doubt therefore that the flight of middle-class Houstonians to the suburbs was in part a racialized endeavor. But the phrase “white flight” that is typically used to describe this movement fails to take into account the roughly one-third of black Houstonians who also fled the central city starting in the 1950s. Furthermore, these black Houstonians were predominantly middle class, and their departure from older black urban areas drained them of a significant portion of their human capital.

In effect, relatively well-off black families sought to distance themselves from older black communities to mitigate the impact of spatial oppression. Specifically, according to Ponton, they were seeking options to the city’s “racially restrictive deed covenants [that] had limited the places where black Houstonians could live, but especially the places where they could own homes.”<sup>53</sup> This movement was a uniquely racialized aspect of planning history in Houston, because many U.S. cities experienced only the flight of white middle-class residents.

As this era began, settlements of black people in rural areas near the city were typically composed of sharecroppers and tenant farmers who mortgaged affordable small parcels of land (one to two acres), such as in Sunnyside-Chocolate Bayou. Such settlements were popular because they were close to livelihood opportunities but also offered a chance at homeownership and the ability to raise crops and livestock. But the trend for black families to move out of the city to such small parcels received a boost in 1920 when the Wright Land Company established Acres Homes just ten miles northwest of the then Houston city limits. By 1957 Acre Homes had become “the largest all-Negro Community in the United States,” with almost 20,000 residents.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, the flight to suburbia had powerful side effects — notably the need to pave new routes of travel to and from the city for new suburban populations. And it is here that the “abandon-in-place” theme typically associated with the era of “white” flight reveals a different set of conditions, not only of rejection, but of lack of agency, that affected historically black neighborhoods. “Abandonment” implies that something was formerly adopted, owned, and cared for, and that it was subsequently left to fend for itself. But communities like Freedmen’s Town and Frenchtown had never been adopted and cared for by municipal authorities. The change they experienced in the 1950s therefore was less one of before/after than an escalation of preexisting neglect.

The escalation, however, allowed these communities to now appear sufficiently cast aside that the needs of their remaining residents were no longer relevant. By economically segregating the city, the government had created the justification for promoting the neglect of black communities. It could now capitalize on that neglect by seizing the underlying land for highway construction. In other words, black communities in the heart of the city became what McKittrick has called “invisible geographies.” Although they were not really invis-

ible, they were economically and politically “invisible” due to their affiliation with black bodies. (FIGS. 9, 10)<sup>55</sup>

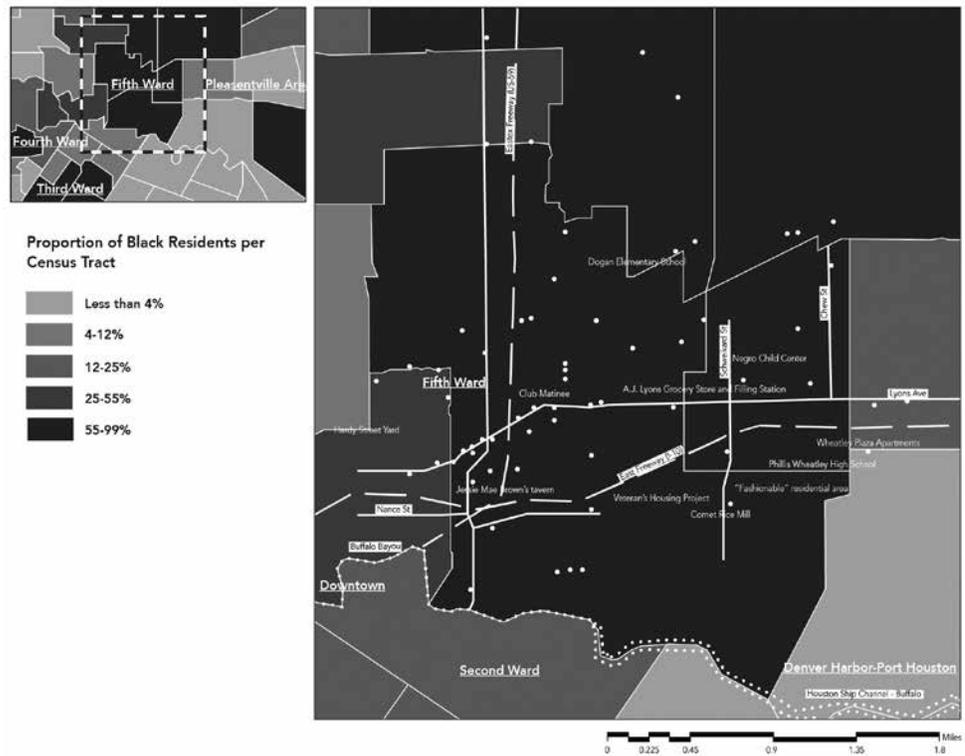
As part of this movement, in 1962, the City of Houston used the legal mechanism of eminent domain to demolish one-third of Freedmen’s Town to clear a path for the Gulf Freeway (I-45), connecting the downtown business district to areas south of the city. And while suburban settlements between Houston and Galveston benefitted greatly from the highway (land values there jumped as much as 67 percent), its construction erased important community spaces and cultural institutions such as the Colored Carnegie Library, which were never replaced. The project also ruptured the area’s internal circulation. No longer was the Fourth Ward a safe pedestrian community; it was now split by a raised superhighway carrying high-speed traffic. And any mitigating measures such as the construction of new pedestrian paths, safe crosswalks, and landscape barriers, measures which are today considered fundamental to urban design, were seen as idealistic and inappropriate in an area of “black blight.” As Wintz has explained, the highway thus ultimately displaced (in addition to the San Felipe Housing project) 40,000 residents and led to the community’s decline, even as the surrounding city experienced an economic boom.<sup>56</sup>

Although Frenchtown had not experienced the same abuse, neglect, and economic decline as Freedmen’s Town during the Depression, it was not as lucky in the era of “white” flight. Like the Fourth Ward, the economy of the Fifth Ward was also disrupted at this time by land seizures to enable the construction of highways designed to support commuting to and from the suburbs. As the sociologist Jan Lin has written:

*In Houston the building of the highway system served the interests 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.<sup>57</sup>*

In 1952, the process of carving up the Fifth Ward began with construction of the Eastex Freeway (US Highway 59) directly through Frenchtown (FIGS. 11, 12). Formerly the site of homes and businesses, the north-south path it traversed was transformed into a concrete flyover without pedestrian infrastructure or noise mitigation.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the highway completely bifurcated the community, creating a series of dead-end streets that severed ties between residential neighborhoods and businesses.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Houston did not provide enough public housing to accommodate displaced residents, even though many could not afford to relocate on their own. The city’s only gesture was to build the Wheatley Plaza Apartments, which accommodated only some 108 families from both the HWY 59 displacement and the demolition of a veterans project also in the Fifth Ward.

**FIGURE 9.** The Fifth Ward census tracts in 1960 show that Frenchman’s Town was still a homogenous black settlement. Drawing by Ryan Al-Schamma, 2020, from Google Maps and U.S. Census documents.



**FIGURE 10.** Likewise, the Fourth Ward census tracts in 1960 show Freedmen’s Town as a homogenous black settlement. Drawing by Ryan Al-Schamma, 2020, from Google Maps and U.S. Census documents.



A few years later this initial act of destruction was then followed by construction of the east-west East Freeway (Interstate 10), which lopped off the prime residential area of the Fifth Ward just south of Frenchtown. Surrounded by highways, this once proud neighborhood subsequently became so ambiguous, abused and neglected that the city literally converted it to a dump. According to one author,

*These two freeway systems literally crucified the area by creating large freeways in a cross pattern through its heart. This massive cross disrupted community life during its construction and permanently destroyed many black homes and businesses. . . .<sup>60</sup>*



**FIGURE 11.** View of the Lyons Avenue business district near Jensen in Frenchtown, looking toward the new highway overpass in the background. Photo by Dan Hardy, HP Staff/©Houston Chronicle, 1956, reused with permission.



**FIGURE 12.** View of the Lyons Avenue business district in Frenchtown looking away from the highway to the west. Photo by Dan Hardy, HP Staff/©Houston Chronicle, 1956, reused with permission.

Following the demolition of much of Freedmen's Town and Frenchtown to enable highway construction, both communities fell into steep decline, giving full expression to the ongoing tradition of spatial oppression. Once cohesive communities were fractured. Businesses were detached from consumer markets. Middle-class residents flew toward the promise of suburbia. And over the next several decades the areas accumulated qualities stereotypical of ghettos.

In a popular magazine article titled "Only the Strong Survive," Richard West described his experience living in Frenchtown for three months in the late 1970s. The article described how members of a broken and abandoned community still clung with pride to their identity as Creole-Texans through cultural attributes such as music and cuisine. However, as typical of the memory of most Houstonians, the article also captured an image of black blight without highlighting the longstanding traditions of spatial oppression that had created ghetto-like conditions out of a once thriving, self-sustaining economy.

*... I lived in the heart of the ghetto. Much of what I found there I expected: bitter poverty, crime, broken families, the dark underside of life. But I also found a community determined that life should win over death, hope over despair, pride over poverty. It's true that in the ghetto only the strong survive. . . .*

*The Fifth Ward is different from New York's Harlem or Boston's Roxbury with their anonymous rows of tenements that soar skyward and mile upon mile of all-embracing poverty. There are pockets of affluence with well-kept homes, clean streets, trees and space — middle-class neighborhoods free of garbage and burned-out buildings. But not many. For ninety per cent of the area, poverty is the first fact of life, and physical ugliness is the most dominant visual impression.<sup>61</sup>*

According to Ponton, it was "White racism, not black bodies, [that] caused declines in neighborhood desirability and ultimately, material decline. White flight and fear created 'black spaces.'"<sup>62</sup>

And, of course, after public housing construction and highway development eviscerated much of their historic fabric, Freedmen's Town and Frenchtown remained subject to ingrained attitudes of spatial oppression. As a result of ongoing patterns of neglect, both subsequently became firmly ensconced in the public imagination as ghettos. As both communities continued to degrade in place, they nevertheless remained inhabited by black bodies. The systems of institutionalized power simply turned their backs on them, rendering them "invisible" — until that very invisibility created a site of opportunity (FIG. 13).



**FIGURE 13.** Affluent single-family homes from the mid-twentieth century began to degrade in place in the early 1980s, as Frenchtown suffered from the compounding effects of municipal neglect, negative migration, and the beginning of market speculation. Photo by Carlos Antonio Rios/©Houston Chronicle, 1980, reused with permission.

## 1990–2010: NEW AFFLUENCE

As the previous sections have shown, ingrained patterns of racial violence and discrimination initially forced the area's black residents to concentrate in Freedmen's Town and Frenchtown. This created a field for systematic neglect, which depressed property values in these areas through the end of the twentieth century. But as prosperity increased in Houston and the city gained significance as a center for the global oil trade, the workings of the capitalist economy turned neglect into economic opportunity. As central Houston transitioned to an increasingly postindustrial economy, these areas, like those in other cities across America, were rediscovered, and their proximity to sites of white-collar employment opened them to development opportunism and gentrification.

There are two contrasting views of gentrification: positively, as a means to revitalize deteriorating built environments and increase public revenue by increasing tax collection; or, negatively, as a force that weakens deep-rooted cultural traditions by removing existing residents of an area when they can no longer afford to pay their rents.

*Unlike neighborhood revitalization, the process of gentrification has adverse effects. . . , not only altering the historical culture and character of urban neighborhoods, but also economically overburdening existing residents and potentially displacing them.*<sup>63</sup>

But not all areas respond to gentrification in the same way, and it must be studied in context. In Houston, one study thus pointed to four key elements in the process: disinvestment and reinvestment, loss of affordable housing, physical upgrading of residential neighborhoods, and upward movement of residents' socioeconomic status.<sup>64</sup> Gentrification in Houston has also been influenced by housing market pressures, broad economic shifts, and spatial oppression based on race. And while some argue that positive gains (like service improvements) may result from gentrification, studies also show that minorities and lower- to middle-income residents typically gain less from these improvements than higher-income residents.<sup>65</sup> Increases in property values and the loss of preferred services may also displace existing residents and threaten a community's ability to retain racial and economic diversity.

At the end of the 1990s HUD demolished 677 of the 963 units in the Allen Parkway Village public housing project in Freedmen's Town. Combined with ongoing neglect of infrastructure and poor municipal service provision, this created a vacuum into which commercial developers stepped. These developers not only had access to the capital needed to build new units, but they were able to negotiate partnerships with the city that relieved them of the burden of providing new infrastructure and services for the area. As a result, many of the area's original single-family homes and much of its

public, low-income housing have now been demolished and replaced with midrise apartment blocks and new commercial structures.<sup>66</sup> The area has even been renamed "Midtown" to celebrate its successful economic transformation.

The press release quoted below sums up the sentiment of race-consciousness among black residents of the area in 1999, as this attitude represented both a product and agent of targeted spatial oppression.

*While so much controversy surrounds other entities that have squandered millions of dollars for affordable housing for Freedmen's Town, a grassroots nonprofit that is community based quietly keeps focused on fulfilling its goals and objectives. FREEDMEN'S TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. (FTA) will break ground this Thursday, March 18, 1999 at 10:30 a.m. in the 1300 block of Saulnier St. in the historic FREEDMEN'S TOWN neighborhood.*

*Houston's oldest Black community has grassroots representation from its civic nonprofit to the homeowner's association, yet city government constantly excludes this vibrant community and its taxpaying citizens from every phase of planning and development directed at possible displacement of longtime residents. Demolition is more visible than affordable housing in FREEDMEN'S TOWN these days. But this is the city's form of providing city services to the always neglected area founded by freed slaves in 1865.*

*"You would think that we are invisible," says Gladys House, founder of FREEDMEN'S TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. "Despite documented proof that the city should really listen to and act on what we have to say, our voices and needs go ignored."*

*But FREEDMEN'S TOWN is not waiting for the City of Houston to deliver justice to its doorsteps. Residents channel their resources and move slowly and quietly to revitalize their neighborhood. They would like to move faster, but limited resources prevent such. After all, grassroots citizens are not a part of the clique that wastes millions on salaries while breaching its contract with the city. Private funding is obtained with much effort to cover interim and permanent construction of housing in FREEDMEN'S TOWN for affordable housing.*

*"The delays and runarounds some banks give us are amazing," attests House. "Yet the city blindly gave and allowed millions of our affordable housing dollars to be wasted on salaries for a group formed overnight; but no one is going to jail for such a waste." Gladys House, as developer and builder, says she is pleased to be able to provide new affordable housing for her neighbors who were displaced and buying back into the community.*

*Each of the new homes is 1670 square feet, 3 bedroom, 1-1/2 baths, garage, and two-story. These homes start at \$75,000. House keeps these homes affordable by keeping the plans simple, she says. She is the “middle man” so to speak and monitors FTA’s rehab and new construction very closely. House is an apprentice carpenter and admits she must get in the mood to do carpentry work at times. FTA has plans to build 16 additional new homes starting this June for low to moderate income families as well. House says the working-class poor is an untapped market.<sup>67</sup>*

Both Freedmen’s Town and Frenchtown are presently considered gentrifying areas according to typologies outlined in a Houston study (FIG. 14).<sup>68</sup> This means these communities were gentrifying from 2000 to 2010, 2010 to 2016, or during both time periods. However, the process is largely complete in Freedmen’s Town, while in Frenchtown commercial developments and multifamily housing have been replacing deteriorating houses since the mid-1990s, but at a much slower rate.

One reason for this disparity is that it appears that Frenchtown has been able to partly protect itself by establishing a nonprofit-private partnership called the Fifth Ward Community Development Corporation (FWCRC) to support revitalization without displacement. This has so far helped residents gain access to special mechanisms that support “naturally occurring” (privately held and not subsidized) affordable housing. But it is also the case in Frenchtown that the ethnic bond maintained through a race-blind and ethno-racial construct has mitigated the pace of gentrification. Meanwhile, the grassroots, race-conscious model of the Freedmen’s Town Association has largely failed to curb speculation.

## THE FUTURE: HYPERGENTRIFICATION

Kathryn McKittrick has described how black geographies feature multiple paths that act on multiple scales. These occur both within and outside traditional space, and they may be visible, invisible, subjective, connective or fragmented.<sup>69</sup> To understand these geographies involves questioning the order behind their production, seeking sources beyond official archives (which may or may not record their presence), and charting the course of influence and invisibility from which they derived. It is far easier to unlock subaltern geographies of the past than to reveal them in the present. However, clues from the past, such as patterns of spatial oppression, may suggest paths for present investigations.

In Houston, spatial oppression across a variety of ethnic orientations has been an ongoing feature of anti-black racism through four distinct periods of municipal planning since the late nineteenth century. Each period has been defined by different economic tensions, but these have always led to a disproportionate marginalization of the two black communities described here. In response, Freedmen’s Town has maintained a race-conscious perspective, while Frenchtown, as Steptoe noted, has at times rejected constructs of racial blackness, especially after the arrival of Creole immigrants there.<sup>70</sup> Sadiya Hartman has likewise revealed the economic and social value of embracing Euro-centric ethnicity (Creole culture) in America’s history, demonstrating how proximity to blackness typically creates a higher degree of marginalization.<sup>71</sup>

In the course of my study I have taken care to ensure that the archives I have consulted with regard to Freedmen’s Town and Frenchtown were either not authored by structures in power or, when necessary, that their role in doing so was studied to reveal deeper meanings. Official government



**FIGURE 14.** Historic shotgun style houses line the original, community-constructed brick roads of Freedmen’s Town in Houston’s Fourth Ward, contrasting sharply with the glass skyscrapers of the city center beyond. Photo by Leah Binkovitz, 2016.

sources intentionally, and as a matter of procedure, typically omit accounts of social customs and everyday lived practices. And by doing so they produce rational (mis)conceptions about the past, ones that limit emotional connection with people's past lives. Houstonian's collective memory is thus rendered incomplete by erasing a reality of suffering and injustice. But the problem goes beyond this; society appears reluctant to remember this aspect of the past. And it is here that McKittrick has emphasized the continuing significance of the pathology of slavery. In fact, the history of the built environment has been archived and documented by the very same systems and institutional powers that once upheld the conditions of slavery.

During Reconstruction, patterns of spatial oppression corralled black Americans into separate settlements through policies like the Black Codes. By limiting the mobility of black people and disincentivizing white Houstonians from entering these spaces, they thus fortified a structure of racial segregation. Freedmen's Town embraced such a race-conscious perspective, developing separate social institutions and an insular economy that rivaled those of white Houston. Conversely, the progressive independence of black residents in the Fifth Ward led to extreme municipal neglect, and ultimately a devastating fire eradicated the early community. From its ashes Frenchtown emerged as a reflection of a new migrant population who were encouraged to settle in the Fifth Ward after 1927 following the Great Mississippi Flood. And these migrants, a diaspora of Creole Louisianans whose traditions did not include the experience of slavery, brought a new color-blind mentality with them.

When the bottom dropped out of Houston's economy during the Great Depression, leaving black tenants without the ability to pay rents and prosperous black businesses bankrupt, the power structure turned on Freedmen's Town, however. And this resulted in structural disinvestment through redlining, and eventually to the use of eminent domain to seize more than half the community for a whites-only public housing project. Meanwhile, Frenchtown did not suffer the same degree of divestment. While it was also redlined, the mechanism of eminent domain was not used to seize property there until much later.

After the 1950s patterns of disinvestment and neglect also combined to push both middle-class whites and blacks out of Houston's inner wards. These populations chose to settle in nearby suburban and rural communities that advertised cleaner, safer environments, and that offered blacks the opportunity for homeownership. Yet in addition to draining older communities of essential human capital, the flight to the periphery also instigated construction of three major highways that bifurcated both Freedmen's Town and Frenchtown. Highway development sealed the fate of Freedmen's Town as a derelict community. But Frenchtown's history as a vibrant working-class community and the continued presence of jobs in nearby industrial parks slowed its decline.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Houston's economy transitioned away from a reliance on ranching and real estate speculation toward finance, professional services, and the oil and chemical industries. But a series of economic shocks again dealt a damaging blow to the area in the late 1980s. Land speculators seized the opportunity to buy land at bargain prices and exploit the potential rent gap. Freedmen's Town was the first area to be identified by outside real estate interests as a site for such profitable gentrification. Despite a grassroots campaign to reveal how this was just the latest outgrowth of longstanding practices of spatial racism, they bought large areas of single-family homes and developed a series of middle-class apartment complexes in their place. They subsequently managed to rename the community Midtown.

Meanwhile, however, a nonprofit-private partnership was formed in Frenchtown that managed to slow the progress of gentrification there through the 2000s by creating opportunities to build and rehabilitate affordable housing in place. More recently, however, widespread flooding caused by Hurricane Harvey in 2018 forced many residents to sell their homes at a loss and move out of the community. And this has encouraged new interest by out-of-town speculators with little interest in engaging with the historic community.<sup>72</sup> According to Robert Bullard, such trends illustrate how, once established, racist attitudes may persist for generations. "Although many of the overt manifestations of racial discrimination no longer exist in the South, more subtle and sophisticated forms of denial have been used to produce similar results."<sup>73</sup>

Today, a new force, hypergentrification, is threatening the memory of both Freedmen's Town and Frenchtown. To disambiguate, gentrification typically proceeds by means of piecemeal architectural renovation aimed at upgrading the physical characteristics of a place to conform to middle-class standards. Hypergentrification, by contrast, involves the wholesale transformation of a neighborhood following collusion between government agencies and private capital to create entirely new conditions of economic investment. As such, hypergentrification is premised on the complete displacement of existing residents and the erasure of previous socioeconomic structures. It uses the tool of scale to capitalize on low-valued property to re-form entire districts, while discarding — or worse, commodifying — their former social capital and historic context.

Large areas of what was once known as Freedmen's Town today offer a clear example of this process. As part of an earlier displacement, the buildings of the post-World War II urban renewal district of Historic Oaks once retained a scale congruent to Freedmen's Town's original pattern of dog-trot houses. And although Historic Oaks' block pattern undulated against the area's older grid, they maintained similar dimensions. Today, however, new apartment blocks in the area, in a manner typical of hypergentrification, dominate all surrounding forms, replacing them with a new monolithic ar-

chitecture. Meanwhile, private parking garages have replaced alleyway infrastructure, and private courtyards have replaced public pocket parks (FIG. 15).

In *Uneven Development*, Neil Smith poignantly noted how “periods of crisis are also periods of dramatic restructuring.”<sup>74</sup> By analyzing four periods of economic crises, I have tried to show how dramatic restructuring in Houston has always been based on the establishment and maintenance of racial boundaries. Power structures, traditionally controlled by upper-class white Houstonians, have established all the rules for planning and architecture. White settlement areas have thus been the primary beneficiary of urban policies and the proceeds of economic development, while black settlements have been subject to a tradition of neglect, and their residents repeatedly displaced.

Considering this structural imbalance, one may ask, what is the possibility for a different future? The historical analysis here tells of communities that have learned to distrust, that have been stripped of human capital, and that have lost solidarity. And while an earlier era of gentrification may not necessarily have been directly tied to displacement, the present one of hypergentrification is premised on it, and can only lead to erasure. This analysis reveals the impossibility of future assimilated space when operating under traditions of spatial oppression. As McKittrick has written,

*Finding and recognizing black geographies is difficult, not only because socio-spatial denial, objectification, and capitalist value systems render them invisible, but also because the places and spaces of blackness are adversely shaped by the basic rules of traditional geographies.*<sup>75</sup>



**FIGURE 15.** *These encroaching apartment blocks erase the spatial patterns of historic Freedmen’s Town in favor of privatized public spaces and commodified amenities. Image from Google Earth, 2019.*

Especially during periods of economic crisis, Houston neglected the needs of the residents of Freedmen’s Town, and this eventually led to their displacement. Operating more slowly, these same forces have led to the increased marginalization of Frenchtown. Houston’s policies and planning practices thus continue to be a vehicle for spatial oppression. These practices have long relied on the creation of economic opportunity as the rationale for a deeply institutionalized racism, especially as enacted against black Houstonians. This process continues today as hypergentrification. If Houston’s communities are ever to progress toward spatial equity, institutions of power cannot continue to take advantage of marginalized communities under the guise of economic development.

## REFERENCE NOTES

I would like to thank the editors, Dr. Nezar AlSayyad and David Moffat, for their critical but always supportive comments that helped me push through the archive toward a clear focus, and Dr. Faith Barter, who guided my close reading of African-American literature and legal constructs within the context of the early and mid-twentieth century.

1. Lees et al., *Planetary Gentrification* (London: Polity Press, 2016); B. Yi, “Now Is the Time!: Challenging Resegregation and Displacement in the Age of Hypergentrification,” *Fordham Law Review*, Vol.85 (2016), p.1189, available at <http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol85/iss3/11>; and J. Moss, *Vanishing New York: How a Great City Lost Its Soul* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018).

2. In this paper I rely on Robert Bullard’s characterization of a black community/settlement as “a highly diversified set of

interrelated structures and aggregates of people who are held together by the forces of white oppression and racism.” The quote is from R. Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), p.4, as cited from J. Blackwell, *The Black Community: Diversity and Unity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p.xiii.

3. Discussions of the economic potential of skin tone can be traced to Verna Keith and Cedric Herring’s seminal article that demonstrated there was as much socioeconomic inequality *within* the black population as there was between blacks and whites as a whole. V. Keith and C. Herring, “Skin Tone and Stratification in the Black Community,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.97 No.3 (1991), pp.760–78.

4. D. Taylor, *Toxic Communities, Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), p.280.

5. I use the term “rational” as a distilled version of “neoliberal” so as to not commandeer the discussion too far from the framework. But it is important to understand the ideological implications of rationality in the context of neoliberalism. Rationality is a form of logic that uses cost-benefit analysis as a premier mode of evaluation, and that has traditionally negated moral, ethical and emotional arguments.

6. K. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p.5.

7. *Ibid.*, p.5.

8. *Ibid.*, p.6.

9. Sharpe deftly enabled the meaning of “wake” to take on many forms, both figurative and literal: disturbances in the ocean’s surface following the passage of a ship, funerary reflection on lives lived, the act of consciousness (being awake).

- C. Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp.21–22.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.13–21.
11. *Ibid.*, p.14.
12. R. Ewing and S. Hamidi, “Measuring Sprawl 2014,” Metropolitan Research Center, University of Utah, 2014, p.7.
13. S. Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); and N. Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, 3rd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008 [1984]).
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15. K. Bentle et al., “Charts of Metro Areas that Gained and Lost the Most People and How the Chicago Area Compares,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 18, 2019, provides this estimate in an analysis of U.S. Census Bureau population estimates available at <https://www.chicagotribune.com/data/ct-met-viz-chicago-metro-population-change-how-it-compares-04182019-htmlstory.html>. Historically, Houston has always also had a proportionally large population of informal, illegal and undocumented residents, compounding the complexity of its spatial geography. However, the impact of legal status intersects politically with the larger discussion in this article.
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20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p.15.
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24. T. Steptoe, *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).
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## Field Report

# Hybrid Place: A Reading of Cuetzalan, Mexico

TANU SANKALIA

This essay explores the idea of cultural hybridity in the hill town of Cuetzalan, Mexico. It focuses on two entities within the town: the *tianguis*, or informal Sunday market, and the Santuario de Guadalupe, also known as the Iglesia de los Jarritos, or “Church of the Clay Pots.” Hybridity, the essay shows, is not a facile outcome of the intermingling of different cultures, but the result of historical political struggle — in this case between the indigenous Nahuatl Indian population and the mestizos who moved to the Sierra Norte de Puebla during the nineteenth century. I conclude that by embodying socio-political and aesthetic oppositions, in tension with one another, hybridity creates stimulating places and facilitates the survival of marginal cultures.

*An extremely magical town with brooks as ancient as most ancient things upon this Earth, with a pyramid that precedes the time of the Aztecs, with eaves that touch each other and narrow cobblestone streets, with churches of limestone walls and many indigenous people who still speak Nahuatl, with corners to daydream, and people with big hearts.*

— Orazio Bio Castillo<sup>1</sup>

Nestled on the windward side of the Sierra Norte mountains in east-central Mexico, at 3,214 feet above sea level, the hill town of Cuetzalan is engulfed in clouds year round, while torrential rains soak the surrounding lush green countryside. The town itself is compact, about two square kilometers, or a fifteen-minute walk from one side to the other (FIG. 1). Its steep, winding cobblestone streets are flanked by stately stone-masonry buildings that are covered with stucco, painted white, punctuated by wooden balconies with cast-iron railings, and capped by red tile roofs (FIG. 2). Its central square, *el zócalo*, is anchored by the grand, rustic, stone-finished Iglesia de San Francisco de Asís and the staid white Palacio Municipal, while Cuetzalan’s other significant historic landmark, the

*Tanu Sankalia is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art & Architecture and Director of the interdisciplinary program in Urban Studies at the University of San Francisco.*

**FIGURE 1.** Aerial view of Cuetzalan, showing the location of the tianguis and El Santuario de Guadalupe. Google Earth image.



elegant Neogothic Santuario de Guadalupe, is located a little distance away, on the edge of town (FIGS. 3, 4). Along the way stands the Casa de Maquina or the Maquina Grande, a large stone edifice built in 1898, a marker of the prodigious coffee industry that flourished in the region in the early twentieth century (FIG. 5).

Cuetzalan was built and settled in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by mestizos, who came from the regions of Puebla and Mexico City, but also by the local indigenous Nahua Indian population.<sup>2</sup> Over the decades — despite racial, cultural and political differences that led at one point to armed conflict — the Nahua and the mestizos

have been able to carve out a shared culture. A part of this culture can be seen in the syncretic cult of the plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl and San Francisco, the town's patron saint. And it can be seen in the festivals and ritual dances of the Nahua that permeate the spaces of the neocolonial town. The intermingling of Nahua and mestizo cultures can likewise be witnessed in the temporal practice of the informal market, the *tianguis*, held every Sunday on the *zócalo*, as well as in the town's buildings, of which the Santuario de Guadalupe, completed in 1895, and also known as the Iglesia de los Jarritos, or "the Church of Clay Pots," is a striking example.

In recent times, the fog-covered setting, the Neocolonial stone architecture, the cobblestone streets, the *tianguis* held every Sunday, and the Nahua with their customs have all unwittingly conspired to turn Cuetzalan into a tourist destination. Thus, in 2002, the Mexican government named Cuetzalan a *pueblo mágico* [magical town], and included it in a national initiative that promotes towns across Mexico that promise a "magical experience."<sup>3</sup> Yet, while the beauty and mystique of Cuetzalan are unmistakable, government plans such as the Programa Pueblos Mágicos [Magical Villages Program] have been unable to produce much more than a tourist experience of place. Beneath this veneer, what has struck me, however, on my visits to Cuetzalan is not just the collision of cultural differences, but also a mixing of time. And, in turn, this has made me recall Néstor García Canclini's conception of "multitemporal heterogeneity," according to which one may simultaneously experience several pasts as well as the present.<sup>4</sup> Renato Rosaldo has likewise written about how Latin American nation-states consider themselves as "being caught between traditions that have not yet gone and a



**FIGURE 2.** Cobblestone streets and Neocolonial buildings of Cuetzalan. Photo by author.



FIGURE 3. *The Iglesia de San Francisco Asís in the background, and the Palacio Municipal in the foreground. Photo by author.*



FIGURE 4. *El Santuario de Guadalupe — entry gate and steeple. Photo by author.*

modernity that has not yet arrived.”<sup>5</sup> Such a hybrid position of “in-between-ness” — past-present, colonial-indigenous, tradition-modernity — is not entirely alien to me, given my own foundational experience of having lived in India. It was also why, as a subject of the global South, I was keen to find out how hybridity may be constituted in a Latin American town such as Cuetzalan.<sup>6</sup>

If the Nahuatl and mestizos jointly created the town of Cuetzalan, and if they fashioned through conflict and negotiation a shared culture of everyday life and architecture within it, how can this shared culture be seen through the lens of hybridity? How can “hybridity thinking” help uncover an old hybridity (as opposed to newer forms produced by globalization), one that may “be concealed under homogeneous identities” such as the Magical Villages Program, or under an overarching national culture based in Spanish mestizo traditions?<sup>7</sup> By focusing on the lived space of Cuetzalan’s *tianguis* and the architectural motifs of the Santuario de Guadalupe, my goal here is thus to show how hybridity actually links to “concrete realities of the physical environment.”<sup>8</sup>

Since the 1970s, anthropologists, ethnographers, and political scientists have conducted research on the Nahuatl Indians, their villages, customs, and resistance to mestizo culture.<sup>9</sup> After tourism took hold in the Sierra Norte region during the early 1990s, scholars have tried to understand its impacts on Nahuatl culture.<sup>10</sup> Yet, there has been little scholarly work, especially in English, on the architecture and urbanism of Cuetzalan — a condition that I hope this essay will begin to address. The essay is based mainly on fieldwork conducted during two trips to Cuetzalan, the first in July 2016 and the second in January 2019. And it is further informed by primary source material I was able to collect during my visits, interviews, and subsequent research using secondary sources.



FIGURE 5. *The Maquina Grande. Photo courtesy of Ernesto Casas Chavelas.*

## HYBRID CULTURE, HYBRID PLACE

To get at the question of how hybridity can serve as a lens to understand the shared culture of the Nahua and the mestizos in Cuetzalan, I begin by revisiting some key ideas that frame the concept of hybridity, and by adding several other insights relevant to my analysis. At the outset, I must acknowledge that not only is hybridity not a new concept, but scholars have, in fact, asserted that it has now become “ordinary” — just another part of everyday life in a postcolonial world of expanding globalization and pervasive multiculturalism.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Homi Bhabha, in a foreword to Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood’s recent edited volume *Debating Cultural Hybridity*, argued that the preponderance of hybrid culture has resulted in a hijacking of the concept by “neoliberal globalistas,” as it is turned into “a ubiquitous form of cultural universalism, the proper name of a homogenizing pluralism.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, despite these negative connotations, Bhabha fervently defended hybridity as a concept that is truly liberating, because it also represents a politics of the minority — an important consideration when examining power relations between the indigenous Nahua and the colonial mestizos in Cuetzalan.<sup>13</sup>

Terms such as transculturation, syncretism and hybridity are indeed central to the understanding of culture in the Latin American and Caribbean region. According to Jossiana Arroyo, syncretism is the creation of new cultures through the combination of two or more religious or social practices; moreover, she argued, “All cultures in Latin America are syncretic — a fusion of European and indigenous or African elements.”<sup>14</sup> For Néstor García Canclini, hybridity — or “hybridization,” as he has called it — is an all-encompassing term. It consists of “sociocultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate forms, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices [emphasis added].”<sup>15</sup> Canclini further observed that “discrete structures” are not necessarily “pure points of origin,” but can be hybrids in themselves.<sup>16</sup> Considering the vast range of hybrid cultures, from “syncretic religions” and “eclectic philosophies” to “mixed languages and cuisines, and hybrid styles in architecture, literature and music,” Peter Burke has likewise stressed the importance of not assuming that hybridity has similar meaning in all cases. According to him, hybridization can be differentiated through the categories of “practices, artefacts, and people.”<sup>17</sup>

Canclini has claimed that given the fundamental mestizaje nature of Latin American society — its mixed-race quality — hybridity cannot be ignored in analyzing social developments and cultural forms.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Boaventura de Souza Santos has critically reexamined the historiography of mestizaje — from the formative, subaltern consciousness of José Martí’s *Nuestra América*; to the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade’s idea of “anthropophagy” (the ability of Latin American subjects to devour everything alien to them); to Fernando Ortiz’s idea of “transculturation,” defined as a four-

century synthesis of European, African and Asian cultures in Cuba. And he has pointedly asked, “Who hybridizes whom and what? With what results? And to whose benefit?”<sup>19</sup> De Souza Santos also argued that indescribable violence and loss of life were masked behind “the façade of a benevolent mestizaje” that became the self-serving narrative of white mestizos.<sup>20</sup> He thus distinguished between a white mestizo/colonial mestizaje and a dark mestizo/decolonial mestizaje, and claimed that crucial differences between the two have never been fully examined. To examine such differences is beyond the scope of this essay, but the tensions that underlie processes of hybridization in Cuetzalan have played out historically in the tenuous relationships between the Nahua and mestizos of the region. Moreover, to recognize the hybrid culture of Cuetzalan from the perspective of the Nahua Indians — from the bottom up, outside the confines of an all-encompassing Mexican national culture — might lead to a decolonization of existing mestizaje narratives.

In Latin America, hybrid practices have often been an outcome of colonization — “imposed rather than willed” — and have therefore at times been accompanied by “fracture and fragmentation.”<sup>21</sup> Despite the attempts of colonizers to view Latin America as a *tabula rasa* on which they could inscribe their utopian projects, they could never entirely erase the past.<sup>22</sup> This has produced a temporal mixing, or the notion of “mixed times” — *tiempos mixtos* — in which one may see the “co-existence and interspersed of premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity” in everyday life.<sup>23</sup> Canclini has referred to this condition as “multitemporal heterogeneity” — in which many pasts and the present can be witnessed at once. In a related vein, Duanfang Lu, in her reading of ethnic identity and urban form in Vancouver, has stressed the importance of the temporal dimension in studies of hybridity, an approach that may help bring out the “complexity of opposites and dominations in a specific place.”<sup>24</sup> To privilege only the spatial dimension in the study of hybrid places is to overlook history as well as how the past permeates the present. For example, in examining the lived space of the *tianguis* in Cuetzalan, it may not only be the collision of visual difference in space that is constitutive of hybridity; hybridity may also be constituted by the history of political struggle between the Nahua Indians and mestizos, especially if hybridity is seen as a long historical process. Indeed, the construction of hybridity, I claim, is not a phenomenon that can be achieved instantly.

Linguistic hybridization involves conscious, intentional acts as well as unconscious, organic processes. Pnina Werbner has observed that this is a long historical process by which all languages evolve.<sup>25</sup> And she wrote that if we were to apply this logic to culture, or architecture, “we may say that despite the illusion of boundedness, cultures evolve historically through unreflective borrowings, mimetic appropriations, exchanges and inventions.”<sup>26</sup> Hybrid artifacts, or hybrid buildings, born from an unconscious or organic hybridization, serve as a substrate on which intentional, de-

liberate acts can thus “shock, change, challenge, revitalize or disrupt.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, hybrid buildings, as Andrzej Piotrowski has shown in his study of historical churches in Armenia, Turkey and Greece, are also the outcome of “suppressed or unconscious processes of cultural negotiation.” Hybrid buildings, he thus argued, are not the product of creative genius, or “conscious expressions of symbolic intentions.”<sup>28</sup> Instead, they carry subtle signs that project conflicted values that are “too complex or nascent” to find explicit expression, and are often “idiosyncratic manifestations of cultural negotiation.”<sup>29</sup>

As I will demonstrate, the distinction between conscious and unconscious acts of hybridization, and their idiosyncratic display, provides a useful way to understand the hybridity of buildings in Cuetzalan, especially the Santuario de Guadalupe.

#### CUETZALAN — PAST AND PRESENT

Cuetzalan gets its name from a bird with red feathers, the *cuezali* — which is also a Nahuatl word meaning “red bird.” The suffix *lan* denotes place — much as the originally Persian word *abad* does in South Asia (as in Islamabad, Ahmedabad). The name of the town thus designates the place of the red bird, or the “place where the red bird abounds.”<sup>30</sup> And for some, it has also come to mean “handful of precious feathers” — or, more plainly, just “beautiful place.”<sup>31</sup> From 2010 data, there were only about six thousand residents in the main town of Cuetzalan.<sup>32</sup> In the last few decades, though, the town has grown beyond its initial historic core, as newer, generic, brick and concrete buildings have crept into the surrounding landscape. The municipality of Cuetzalan del Progreso, of which the town of Cuetzalan is the main seat, covers an area of 735 square kilometers, with a population of about 47,000 in numerous villages and towns spread across a neighboring expanse of mountains and forest.<sup>33</sup>

Cuetzalan, from its very founding in the late nineteenth century, has been both a mestizo and a Nahua town. Hybridity runs in its roots. Before the Spanish conquest, the Totonacs, an older indigenous groups who made the Sierra Norte their home, had been pushed to the north and central parts of the state of Veracruz, as Aztec dominance spread outward from Tenochtitlan (present-day Mexico City).<sup>34</sup> The people who took over the lands of the displaced Totonacs were the Nahua, the group that occupies the lands of Cuetzalan del Progreso to this day. The Nahua are linguistically Nahuatl, with Aztec ancestry, but still share some cultural traits with the Totonacs in terms of family structure, dress, and ritual life. This may be seen, for instance, in the dance of the *voladores* that is enacted in front of the main church on the *zócalo*.<sup>35</sup>

The ethnic composition of the Cuetzalan area changed during the mid-nineteenth century, however, when a large population of nonindigenous colonists — mestizos — migrated to the region. In the early 1800s, most of these migrants were maize farmers who cultivated land vacated by the

Nahua or who rented plots from them.<sup>36</sup> But this changed in the 1850s when clergymen and other wealthy mestizo families moved into the region, followed by a group of about one hundred Italian families from Calabria. These later migrants had markedly different interests: to own land, raise livestock, and grow coffee. And the pursuit of land — looking for the best pastures in the *tierra cálida* — brought them into conflict with the indigenous Nahua. Land holdings among the Nahua had been communal, not based on individual property rights, and these traditional structures conflicted with the demands of the incoming mestizo migrants in the 1850s. During this period, the government’s goal of bringing economic development to the Sierra Norte through private enterprise thus led to “The Confiscation of Rural Estates and Urban, Civil and Religious Corporations Act” [Leyes de Desamortización de Bienes], commonly referred to as Ley Lerdo, or the Lerdo Law. Enacted in 1856, the law resulted in the confiscation of land from indigenous collectives, promotion of private ownership, and monetary support for the cultivation of tropical cash crops such as coffee, sugar and tobacco.<sup>37</sup> These economic and legal reforms, followed by land appropriations, disregarded historical communal landownership patterns, displaced indigenous groups, and produced significant changes in the social and economic structures of the region.<sup>38</sup>

Cuetzalan was officially founded on March 28, 1861.<sup>39</sup> A few months later, in May 1861, *mojoneras*, or markers, were laid down to define the land that belonged to the town.<sup>40</sup> In the wider area of the municipality of Cuetzalan del Progreso, however, traditional Nahua patterns of communal landownership were harder to disrupt, and cultivation collided with the mestizos’ desire to own land and cultivate coffee. There ensued a thirty-year armed insurrection over property rights that began in the 1860s, led by Francisco “Pala” Agustín Dieguillo, of the Nahua, against non-Indians [*gente de razón*]. For various reasons, however, “Pala” Agustín — who would also serve as president of the Cuetzalan municipality for eleven years in the late nineteenth century — was not intent on entirely expelling the *gente de razón* from the municipality. Neither did the struggle he led turn into an all-out *guerra de castas* [caste war]. However, it did achieve the goal of limiting the privatization of communally held land and protecting the large swathe of territory that the Nahua had carved out against settlement by an ambitious group of mestizos.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately the Nahua struggle between 1868 and 1894 limited access of mestizo coffee planters to the commons of Cuetzalan del Progreso, and it delayed the production of coffee in the area until the late 1890s. And when coffee-production did finally begin there, it would be the Nahua who farmed the coffee plants, limiting the mestizos to coffee processing and trade. The conflict over property rights between the Nahua and the mestizos had the effect of ensuring equal access to the town of Cuetzalan for the Nahua.

By 1875 Cuetzalan had been formally recognized as a town in the state of Puebla and as capital of a municipality,

a change in status followed by a phase of significant urban development. Its “Porfiriato” urban planning and architecture — realized during the rule (1876–1911) of Mexico’s 27th president, Porfirio Díaz (1830–1915) — had distinctive French Neogothic leanings, a style in considerable vogue in Europe during this period.<sup>42</sup> Eventually the municipality of Cuetzalan also became one of the most prosperous in the state, fueled by its prodigious coffee harvests and by the hard labor of the Nahua coffee farmers. As Guy Thomson has written, “The immense Gothic parish church, the sanctuary to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the imposing town hall with its statuary of noble savages wearing improbable headdresses, the numerous graceful merchants’ residences, and the Gothic coffee warehouses still bear witness to the town’s greatness.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, by the turn of the nineteenth century, the *gente de razón* had sunk deep roots in Cuetzalan, and, with the Nahua, they realized a number of goals (agriculture and trade among others), from which they could draw mutual economic benefit. The *tianguis*, now held every weekend, is part of this negotiated, shared culture in Cuetzalan.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Sierra Norte region was still quite remote, and it was not until the 1950s that a paved road was built connecting Cuetzalan to other nearby towns of the Mexican *altiplano*, and further on to Puebla and Mexico City. However, in the late 1980s, a winter freeze destroyed coffee production in the area, and forced locals to turn to tourism to support themselves. As projects were developed to attract city dwellers, tourists began to trickle in for weekend getaways to explore caves, canoe down waterfalls, visit the nearby archeological ruins, and experience the distinct culture of the Nahua people.<sup>44</sup> Eventually the town’s architectural uniqueness and proximity to nature then led to it being included in the Programa Pueblos Mágicos initiated by the Secretariat of Tourism (SECTUR).<sup>45</sup>

The intention of the Programa Pueblos Mágicos is to promote domestic and international tourism by showcasing a “real” and “authentic” Mexico, beyond its popular beaches and archeological sites.<sup>46</sup> Local reactions to it have been mixed since its inception. While many villagers acknowledge the economic opportunities the program has generated, others see the influx of tourists as threatening to local culture, and as reinforcing inequalities and existing social divisions.<sup>47</sup> Scholars have also pointed out that not only does the program invent traditions and stage authenticity, but it has led to a top-down governmentality, where the identity of places — the continuity and/or transformation of traditions — is now determined by policies emanating from Mexico City, not from local communities themselves.<sup>48</sup>

Studies related to tourism in Cuetzalan, and to the Magical Villages Program, present a complex picture. In the face of ethnic and ecological tourism, they argue that Nahua culture has embraced yet another dimension — as it did when challenged by the mestizo migrations of the nineteenth century. As Luisa Amador-Greathouse has thus written, “Tour-

ism has focused new attention on indigenous people and has provided them with a ‘stage’ where their language, customs, culture and traditions are displayed with pride and esteem.”<sup>49</sup> Tourism has also ironically been instrumental in preserving minority languages and culture, and has, in fact, paved the way for a rapprochement between mestizo and indigenous populations in the area. Mestizos are thus delighted that tourists come to Cuetzalan to experience Nahua culture and in the process provide them with business. The result has also been to sustain a hybrid identity of place that is equally expressive of Nahua and mestizo traditions.

On the other hand, in her analysis of tourism in Cuetzalan, Gabriela Coronado has argued that historical political struggles and contemporary social conciliations are processes that “may simultaneously bring collaboration, conflict and negotiation, none of which are easily recognized when the sanitized terms such as ‘authenticity’ and the ‘host-guest paradigm’ are used.”<sup>50</sup> Her observations underscore the superficial bent of the Magical Villages Program and its inability to reveal the historical social divisions or cultural conflicts and negotiations that are at the center of the hybrid experience of the town.

#### THE SUNDAY TIANGUIS

*Tianguis* are temporary markets that can be found in many cities across Mexico. Their origin lies in the practice of barter, *el trueque*, that dates back to interactions between Spanish colonists and indigenous groups. The *tianguis* are today packaged as a selling point in the Magical Villages Program and exoticized in the popular press.<sup>51</sup> Yet they still also represent a living practice that is internally focused — in other words, one that is not “staged” for tourist consumption.

The word *tianguis* is a Spanish-Nahuatl hybrid derived from the Nahuatl word *tiyanquitzli*, or “place for trading.”<sup>52</sup> In his study of Mexico City’s *tianguis*, Joseph Heathcott observed that these temporary markets “survived the otherwise brutal [Spanish] conquest relatively intact, providing a space of exchange between indigenous and Spanish communities.”<sup>53</sup> During the Porfiriato, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially in Mexico City, the *tianguis* likewise withstood attempts by authorities to clear them away as an archaic practice no longer in keeping with a modernizing republic. Then, in the twentieth century, as cities expanded rapidly and authorities were no longer able to keep pace by building formal markets, or *mercados*, *tianguis* were once again seen as viable alternatives. Today, in most cities across Mexico, *tianguis* operate within the regulatory regime of city municipalities and serve as a vital resource for residents looking to buy everything from food to household goods.

In Cuetzalan, the *tianguis* takes place on the edges of the *zócalo* and along its adjacent streets (FIG. 6). The Iglesia de San Francisco de Asís, a Renaissance-Gothic hybrid church,



FIGURE 6. *The tianguis on the zócalo. Photo by author.*



FIGURE 7. *Nahua women at the tianguis selling beans, flowers, and fresh vegetables. Photo by author.*

built in phases between 1905 and 1962 as a renovation of an earlier chapel, serves as a backdrop to the *tianguis*. Adjacent to the church is the Palacio Municipal, which was first built in 1875, but then significantly renovated between 1937 and 1941 with funds from taxes imposed on coffee. The building's plain, white, Neoclassical exterior is similar to the 1735 Basilica of Saint John Lateran in Rome, on which it is based.

The Nahua come to the Sunday *tianguis* from nearby villages carrying goods wrapped in large cotton sheets on their backs. Even before the inception of the town, the Nahua would come to the same location where the *tianguis* is now held to exchange their products. It is almost as if the town grew around the *tianguis*. For years, *el trueque* mostly took place with regard to local products such as coal and wood; turkeys, chickens and pigs; spices and dried fish; chili peppers, corn, beans, tomatoes and squash. However, over the last several decades traditional market practices have grown to accommodate more standard forms of buying and selling, with barter continuing marginally. Vendors from surrounding towns come to Cuetzalan, set up their stalls with temporary tarp awnings, and stock their tables with all sorts of wares.

Almost anything one needs can be found at the *tianguis* — vegetables, fruit and meat, household goods, personal items, fresh-cut flowers, and cooked food (FIGS. 7, 8). While many products are local, Chinese-made goods have also made their presence, much to the dismay of some observers who see the older traditions of the *tianguis* being replaced by a generic globalized marketplace.<sup>54</sup> The cultural differences between the mestizo merchants who live in Cuetzalan and the Nahua who live outside are stark, and have been part of the underlying friction between the groups that continues to this day (FIG. 9).<sup>55</sup> Yet the *tianguis* functions as a negotiated space of commerce, facilitating a condition of cultural intermingling. This can be witnessed in the simultaneity of barter with more regular forms of buying and selling; in the Nahua dressed in traditional attire often mixed with contem-



FIGURE 8. *The tianguis spreads out on the neighboring streets; flower vendors. Photo by author.*



FIGURE 9. *Nahua woman (facing) selling local fruit (zapote and guayaba) and carved bamboo mugs; mestizo woman with back turned selling purses, belts, and other mass-produced personal goods. Photo by author.*

porary clothing and the mestizos in their modern apparel; in the sounds of spoken Nahuatl and Spanish; in the diverse tapestry of merchandise and food; and in the informal architecture of the *tianguis* against the backdrop of the town's formal Neocolonial architecture. But these visual and aural signs of cultural hybridity that come together in the *tianguis* are evident today only because of the historical political struggle of the Nahua, which gave them a claim to the town and to political representation in the municipality.

The very presence of the Nahua and their historical traditions of exchange are a crucial reminder of the origins of the *tianguis*, and how it has functioned, and continues to function, as a negotiated space. The past of the Nahua Indians and their complex relationship with the mestizos permeates the present, producing the sense of mixed times — of past and present — where, as Canclini has put it, “traditions have not yet disappeared and modernity has not completely arrived.” The *tianguis* thus functions as an “interstitial” space — between times — and as a “third space” outside colonial, national discourses (the Porfiriato) or those of the state (the Magical Villages Program). As Felipe Hernández has pointed out, “hybrid synthetic manifestations imply the existence of another dimension in which synthesis never occurs, in which elements remain apart, and, perhaps, not in a harmonious coexistence but in a permanent struggle for survival.”<sup>56</sup>

The staged authenticity that the Magical Villages Program seeks to promote to tourists cannot be equated with such deeper forms of hybridization. And neither can a pastiche of different elements and styles, brought instantly together in lifestyle malls, theme parks, or nostalgic places, reflect hybridity. The reality is that hybridization is a longer, sometimes difficult process that does not always produce a synthesis of two or more cultural or aesthetic practices in a new whole. It may rather represent an ever-present simultaneity reflecting an enduring conflicted relationship.

#### EL SANTUARIO DE GUADALUPE OR LA IGLESIA DE LOS JARRITOS

Mestizo families and the Nahua Indians built the Santuario de Guadalupe at the end of the nineteenth century, at a time when economic prosperity came to the region under the Porfiriato. According to Emma de Los Angeles Gutierrez-Manzano, the *cronista*, or local historian, of Cuetzalan, a powerful group of mestizos wanted to make something significant to announce Cuetzalan's importance in the region.<sup>57</sup> And after the parish church on the *zócalo* was severely damaged, the town needed another place for worship.<sup>58</sup> An influential group of women, wives of mestizo coffee plantation owners, raised funds for the construction of the sanctuary church.<sup>59</sup> The Nahua also contributed money and labor, as did the residents of four towns surrounding Cuetzalan.<sup>60</sup> Leading the construction effort was Jesus Flores, the mestizo presi-

dent of the Cuetzalan municipality between 1887–1899 and 1901–1904, and a coffee plantation owner who also donated considerable sums of money to the effort. It bears noting also that during the 1890s Cuetzalan had become a “Flores fiefdom,” and that Manuel Flores, a relative of Jesus Flores, was central to the seizure of communal Nahua lands that led “Pala” Agustín and followers to armed insurrection.<sup>61</sup>

The construction of the church began on December 12, 1889, its design based on the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, completed in 1866, in Lourdes, France.<sup>62</sup> The decision to copy this structure was purportedly made by the same influential group that led the building initiative, and was consistent with the prevailing aesthetic of the time, which emerged from cultural connections forged during the late nineteenth century between Mexico and France. G. Marcos Barrios Bonilla, a former *cronista* of Cuetzalan, has suggested that the style of the sanctuary was also a way for the mestizos to assert their influence over the indigenous population.<sup>63</sup> The construction was completed in six years, and the first holy mass was held there on December 15, 1895.

The Santuario is located at the end of a long street, the Calzada Guadalupe, and one enters the church grounds through a portal there that houses a small parish office. Within the church compound is a generous central walkway flanked by cemeteries on both sides. The church is unmistakably Neogothic in style, with an outwardly light and slim mass (FIG. 10). It is built entirely of stone, embellished with stucco and paint. Its soaring central steeple rises fifty



FIGURE 10. *The Santuario de Guadalupe or the Iglesia de los Jarritos.* Photo by author.



**FIGURE 11.** Interior view of the Santuario de Guadalupe. Photo by author.

feet above a modestly scaled front facade featuring eight pointed arches, and is capped by a belfry and spire flanked by significantly lower complementary pinnacles. Inside, the nave is split by a single aisle (FIG. 11). And this structure is expressed on the facade by the steeple, which produces a distinct and singular verticality. Stone flying buttresses, underscoring the structure's Neogothic pedigree, provide the nave with its structural integrity.

A striking feature of the church is the ornamentation on its spire, which is entirely anomalous to its otherwise consistent Neogothic style. Stone crockets adorning the spires of Gothic churches are usually carved in the form of foliage or floral elements. But this ornamental detail is here oddly replaced by strings of clay pots (FIG. 12). Numerous Neogothic churches across the world do not employ crockets as decorative elements, but the spire of the basilica in Lourdes does feature them (FIG. 13).<sup>64</sup> And during construction of the Santuario, strings of clay pots were ingeniously attached in place of them, using metal wires attached at the base

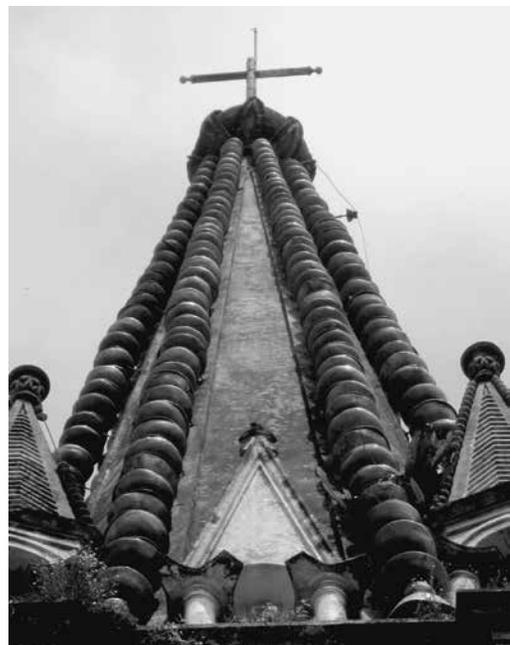


**FIGURE 13.** Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, Lourdes, France. Notice the main steeple with crockets. Photo from Wikimedia commons.



**FIGURE 12.** The spire of the Santuario de Guadalupe with its clay pots, or jarritos. Photo by author.

and tip of the stone spire, further attached with slim metal brackets. The result are eight vertical lines of ornamentation, each occupying a facet of the octagonal spire, which appear like beads on a string, decreasing in size as the spire tapers toward its summit (FIG. 14). In addition, the strings



**FIGURE 14.** View of the spire of El Santuario de Guadalupe, showing how its clay pots diminish in size toward the top. Photo by author.



**FIGURE 15.** Detail of a complementary pinnacle with jarritos motif. Photo by author.



**FIGURE 16.** Inside the church, behind the altar, a replica of the steeple made in wood with the jarritos motif. Photo by author.

of pots are repeated on the smaller complementary pinnacles, forming a distinct repetitive motif (FIG. 15). And inside the church, at the altar and along the retablo, are replicas in wood of the spire itself (FIG. 16). The decorative feature of the clay pots, used as substitutes for floral crockets superimposed on the steeple, give the church its other name: Iglesia de los Jarritos, or “Church of the Clay Pots.”

How this strange superimposition of local elements found its way on the steeple, who made the decision to do it, and why, are questions with only provisional answers.<sup>65</sup> According to Gutierrez-Manzano, the decision to use clay pots was a practical one. The pots were readily available and were extensively used in the region during the nineteenth century for storing water and food. Furthermore, the laborers who built the church were mostly Nahuatl, and they were able to engineer this adornment to the steeple using their own traditional expertise. The use of floral crockets, made out of stone or plaster, was thus simply abandoned in favor of them, she believes. Nonetheless, as an acknowledgment of the original from Lourdes, crockets with a leaf motif *were* used to ornament a miniaturized replica of the steeple, built from wood, located on the pulpit inside the church (FIG. 17).

What we see in the Santuario is a process of “appropriation and adaptation” — the appropriation of the Neogothic church from Lourdes and its adaptation to Cuetzalan with the use of unusual decorative features. Yet the question lingers: was the use of the clay pots a deliberate act to achieve a



**FIGURE 17.** The spire of the pulpit inside the church with crockets similar to the Gothic foliage motif seen at the church in Lourdes. Photo by author.

kind of syncretism on the part of the Nahua, or merely one of “making do”? The anthropologist Richard Haly has pointed out, following extensive fieldwork with the Nahua in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, that “the political and economic hegemony enjoyed by the Cuetzaltecos [the mestizos of Cuetzalan] has been gained at the expense of the Nahuas — as *prima materia*: land and labor — consequently anything marked ‘indio’ [Indian] is, by definition, inferior.”<sup>66</sup> Therefore, were the clay pots a lesser option? And was it through the *jarritos* that the Nahua were trying to achieve a “representative” stake in the church?

Cuetzalan’s *cronista* disavows the significance of the clay pots as a sign of resistance, and believes they were used for more practical reasons. But it is here that Andrzej Piotrowski’s observation about hybrid buildings may be relevant: that complex design decisions are “far more than the pure pragmatics of problem solving or the conscious expression of symbolic intentions.”<sup>67</sup> They are instead often the result of conflicts and negotiations that are too complex to explicitly convey in well-constructed narratives. This is why, he believes, they may take on such idiosyncratic forms. Writing on Spanish-Nahua interaction after the conquest, Richard Lockhart has also pointed out that “whenever the two cultures ran parallel, the Nahua would soon adopt the relevant Spanish form without abandoning the essence of their own form.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, what we see is hybridity constituted through a taut opposition of elements. The meaning of the *jarritos*, one can conclude, hovers somewhere between a conscious act of representation and that of practicality or making-do.

In Mexico, the question of cultural mestizaje must also be framed in the context of an imagined national culture. Mestizaje, particularly from a cultural perspective, according to Haly, is “a syncretism of Spanish institutions: Roman Catholicism, literacy and constitutional government with indigenous *prima materia*.”<sup>69</sup> Thus the “Spanish” is dependent on the “other” of the Nahua to forge a viable mestizaje — just as much as the Nahua is dependent on the Spanish. However, this union becomes problematic in the context of national culture, where the scales tilt invariably toward a dominant Spanish identity in constituting mestizaje, given the status of Spain as an independent nation compared to the marginal position of the Nahua Indians. It is within this “somewhat one-sided discourse on acculturation,” Haly has argued, that the Nahua might adopt Spanish practices to resist a dominant national culture without abandoning their own. And, while nationalists are keen to identify the faithfulness to Spanish practices, within mestizaje the Nahua would interpret these signs “from their own, equally ethnocentric, point of view.”<sup>70</sup> This could well be another possible reading of the clay pots against the Neogothic style of the Porfiriato — a style that tended toward the construction of Mexican national culture in concurrence with modernity.

## HYBRIDITY AS AN EXTENDED PROCESS

Hybridity in Cuetzalan finds expression in the Sunday *tianguis* held on the *zócalo* and in the Santuario de Guadalupe or Iglesia de los Jarritos. The *tianguis*, as a hybrid practice, was constituted historically through political struggle. Thus, the armed insurrection during the second half of the nineteenth century, led by Agustín “Pala” Dieguillo ensured property rights for the Nahua, kept the private landownership of the *genté de razon* at bay, and most importantly, provided access to the town of Cuetzalan where the Nahua could come to buy, sell and exchange goods. The Iglesia de los Jarritos, as a hybrid artifact, with clay pots strung along the spire of an otherwise Neogothic church, likewise presents a powerful sign of the interaction of the Neocolonial, Porfiriate aesthetic leanings of the mestizos with the indigenous material sensibilities of the Nahua. As a whimsical choice and application, the meaning of the strings of pots hovers somewhere between rational problem solving and symbolic representation.

The Nahua possessed a centuries-old political consciousness around ideas of communal property — the commons — supported through the agency of gods, supernatural beings, and ancient rituals. They were an integral part of the nineteenth-century modernity that produced the town. What may be concluded, therefore, is that hybridity in Cuetzalan is not the facile outcome of a superficial intermingling of premodern Nahua culture and the positivist modernity of the mestizos with their allegiances to the Porfiriato. Hybridity here must be seen as the outcome of a long process of political struggle, realized in the negotiated space of the *tianguis* where oppositions and differences may remain un-synthesized.

Hybridization in place-making, or the hybrid identity of places, thus produces a resiliency in the very tensions it supports. To use a botanical analogy (not completely unbecoming in Cuetzalan because of its agricultural history), hybridization ensures the survival of marginal cultures in places — just as the hybridization of flowers, coffee, cereals, and other products expands their genetic composition to ensure survival in the face of changes in climate and habitat.<sup>71</sup> And it is with this in mind that I have alluded to an organic relationship between the lived spaces of the *tianguis* and the architectural adornments on the Iglesia de los Jarritos, as these have been produced out of the contentious socio-political history of Nahua-mestizo interaction.

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49. Amador-Greathouse, “Tourism and Policy in Preserving Minority Languages and Culture,” p.56.
50. Coronado, “The Intercultural Invention of Authenticity 2004,” p.132.
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53. Ibid., p.77.
54. R. Cordero y Bernal, <https://www.e-consulta.com/opinion/2014-02-22/cuetzalanpueblo-magico-o-pueblo-tragico>.
55. De Orellana, “The Municipality: Cuetzalan,” p.98; Greathouse-Amador, “Tourism and Policy in Preserving Minority Languages and Culture”; and interview by author with Emma de Los Angeles Gutierrez-Manzano, *cronista* of Cuetzalan, January 13, 2019.
56. F. Hernandez, “Spaces of Hybridization: The House of the Architect,” in Lejeune, ed., *Cruelty and Utopia*, p.111.
57. Interview with Emma Gutierrez-Manzano, January 13, 2019.
58. It was subsequently renovated in the early twentieth century as the Iglesia San Francisco de Asís.
59. G.M. Barrios Bonilla, *Homenaje a G. Marcos Barrios Bonilla* (Cuetzalan del Progreso: H. Ayuntamiento Constitucional, 2002–2005).
60. Ibid.
61. Thompson, “Agrarian Conflict in the Municipality of Cuetzalan,” p.249.
62. Barrios Bonilla, *Homenaje a G. Marcos Barrios Bonilla*.
63. Ibid.
64. See, for example, R. Cleary, “Texas Gothic, French Accent: The Architecture of the Roman Catholic Church in Antebellum Texas,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol.66 No.1 (2007), p.60.
65. During my interview with her of January 13, 2019, Emma Gutierrez-Manzano told me that a notebook documenting the construction of the church had been lost.
66. Ibid., p.539.
67. Piotrowski, “Heresy, Hybrid Buildings, and a Geography of Architectural Traditions,” p.8.
68. J. Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), p.243.
69. Haly, “Upon this Rock,” p.528.
70. Ibid., p.529.
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