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## Remembering the Bottom: The Street and Feets Exhibit - Panel 3

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## REMEMBERING THE BOTTOM: THE STREET AND FEETS EXHIBIT – PANEL III

ENKESHI EL-AMIN<sup>1</sup>

*“Almost seventy years after a neighborhood is destroyed, how is it remembered? ... What I learned in trying to answer this question is that with public memory being a site of contestation, it depends on who you ask ...”*

Thank you to the law school for inviting me to be a part of this panel. Fran, we've only met just a few months ago, but it's been a great time getting to know you and connecting. I'm really honored to be here.

Today I'm going to talk about “Street and Feets: A Living Exhibit of The Bottom.” This was an exhibit I organized last year, and it was at this event that I met Fran for the first time. I knew of Fran before; I knew her work but our first encounter was on that hot August afternoon as I was trying to get about 100 people on a 50-seater trolley. It was a brief encounter, but it ignited something special, and so today I want to share a bit about the exhibit, which I understand pleased Fran very dearly.

Before I get into the exhibit however, I would like to appreciate some of the previous speakers. I really liked Jennifer Gordon's fire analogy. A couple of weeks ago I attended a conference, where sociologist Brian Foster, gave a talk titled, “Dancing on the Fire.” That resonated with me because as Jennifer said, the house is indeed burning, but Brian challenges us to find ways to dance on the fire. We have to keep living and keep fighting even as the fire is raging. When I think of my work, when I think of this exhibit, I think about dancing on the fire. Furthermore, JJ talked about fighting and building and weaving, and I feel like whatever career this is that I have carved out, I spent a lot of years trying to fight or learning how to fight, including with some people in this room. But then I got to a point where I felt like it was time to build. And so, the work that I do at The Bottom is building work. It's building in the community; it's building with the community. Streets and Feets was and continues to be an effort to build.

So, let's jump into the presentation.

Almost seventy years after a neighborhood is destroyed, how is it remembered? This question framed my research on The Bottom, a Black neighborhood that was located in the East Tennessee city of Knoxville. The Bottom was formed at emancipation and destroyed by

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1. Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Sociology, West Virginia University

urban renewal in the 1950s. What I learned in trying to answer this question is that with public memory being a site of contestation, it depends on who you ask. In pursuit of an answer, I looked in three different places.

First, I looked to the archives, primarily the Knox County Archives at the East Tennessee History center. There I found that in the official records The Bottom was almost forgotten. The only mention of the neighborhood I found was in a 1999 publication called *Knox-stalgia*.<sup>2</sup> This publication is identified as an incomplete pseudo-encyclopedia of communities, towns, and villages in Knoxville and Knox County, Tennessee, from the earliest times to 1950. It lists, “The Bottoms” as “the name by which the section at the base of Reservoir Hill was known.”<sup>3</sup> Reservoir Hill, also known as Fahnestock Hill, was an old name for an elevated point east of downtown where Green Elementary school currently stands. Apart from this mention, The Bottom was almost invisible in documented records. What I was able to locate was maps, city directories, and urban renewal documents that gave me bits and pieces of insight. There were boxes upon boxes of unorganized/uncatalogued materials and records related to urban renewal. It is almost ironic how much information you can find related to the destruction of a place, but for the place itself and its people, not to be a part of it. The neighborhood and its inhabitants are treated in these files as complete non-factors. Nevertheless, where I could, I read between the lines.

The other place I looked to find The Bottom was digital newspaper archives. Here I found more information about urban renewal, but these were first-hand reporting of the developments of the project. Where the neighborhood is mentioned, and it’s never by its name, just the name of the project, the “Riverfront Willow Street Project” or the “First Creek Slum Clearance Project,” and words like “slum” and “blight” are superimposed on the neighborhood. Headlines included “KHA Plans Clearance of First Creek Slums,” or “City Planners Get KHA Proposal on Flood Control” or “Bids Asked for First Creek Job.” Many focused on the Knoxville Housing Authority (KHA) and in addition to being procedural, they were very top-down. There was little to no consideration of the people’s response to the development.

The third place I looked to find a depiction of the neighborhood was to former residents of The Bottom. These people, now in their

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2. R. R. ALLEN, *KNOX-STALGIA: A PRELIMINARY ENCYCLOPEDIA OF COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS, HOTELS, ENTERTAINMENT VENUES, HISTORICAL BUILDINGS, ORGANIZATIONS, SITES AND SOME HISTORICAL EVENTS IN KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES TO 1950* (2011).

3. *Id.*

seventies and eighties, seemed to have the remedy to the forgetfulness of the other sources. I was quite surprised that their collective account of The Bottom was not reminiscent of the poverty and hardship that was a reality for many in the neighborhood, or even the disaster that was urban renewal. Rather, they recalled the names. They recalled the boundaries. They recalled their relationships with the people and places. They mapped their neighborhood by the “streets and the feets” they knew.

In this presentation I will share with you how in collaboration with former residents of The Bottom we shape the public memory of a lost Black neighborhood through a living exhibit of that neighborhood. First, I’ll give you a brief overview of The Bottom, then I’ll explain how we used community sociology to gather stories of The Bottom, and finally I’ll share how we collectively remembered The Bottom through the exhibit.

### *The Bottom*

The Bottom was the unofficial name of a Black neighborhood. It was initially referred to as “The Bottoms” but somewhere along the line the ‘s’ was dropped. The neighborhood stood immediately east of uptown, just near the part of town currently referred to as the Old City. Though not called “The Bottoms” until the early 1900s, the area was likely occupied by Black Knoxvilleians from emancipation until its destruction by urban renewal in the 1950s. Its boundaries are somewhat fluid but forming the parameters of the neighborhood were First Creek, tobacco and other warehouses, and a slaughterhouse. The creek, though a marker of the neighborhood, was occasionally a source of stress as it would flood and turn nearby streets into raging rivers. Up the hill from The Bottom, along Vine and Central Streets was the Black commercial district. The Bottom, though, was a residential area spreading across about twenty or so streets. During the 1940s and 1950s, key features of the neighborhood included the beloved Shady Corner Grocery Store. Located at the corner of Florida and Campbell Streets, the small store was owned by the Hicks Family and named for the hugely tall and broad-branched tree in the yard that provided shade for the entire square. Several churches stood proudly in the neighborhood, Tabernacle and Mount Calvary Baptist Church were among them. Many did not survive after being displaced but as two of Knoxville’s oldest Black churches, these are still in operation today. Another major landmark in the neighborhood was what was described as the heart and soul of The Bottom, Heiskell Elementary School, the first public school newly built for Black children in Knoxville.

### *Community Sociology*

I was introduced to The Bottom while doing field research for my dissertation. As a result of my deep involvement in the local community, I was able to establish lasting relationships with community members, including elders who grew up in The Bottom. From these elders and others, I acquired great knowledge about the urban renewal process. One person in particular, Mr. M, a former resident of The Bottom, now in his eighties, played a key role in my research and my understanding of Knoxville. He told me many stories, but most were of The Bottom, his beloved neighborhood. His recollection of the neighborhood is what ignited my interest in The Bottom, not only beyond my dissertation but also beyond urban renewal. As I listened to him, I wanted to know more about this place and its people.

Over time, my interest grew into a collaborative project including other former residents of The Bottom, community members, and faculty and graduate students at University of Tennessee Knoxville. We met regularly and held sessions where everyone would gather in a circle to share and brainstorm and play equal parts in the research process. We went to the archives together, debriefed together, ate pizza and laughed together. There were even moments of tears, like when me and Mrs. Margaret and I recognized that she was the little girl in one of the pictures we found in the urban renewal box in the archive.

This was a project done *in* community not *about* community, and it felt like nothing I had done in the academy before. I'm not sure I can capture the essence of it in this presentation, but I want to acknowledge that so much of what we did was led by Mr. M. He drew us maps of the neighborhood so that we could identify it on official maps, he took us on tours of the neighborhood so that we could visualize the neighborhood and how urban renewal drastically changed the landscape. He made contacts with other former residents so we could expand the story. One of the most memorable experiences of this process was the group reunions/work sessions we planned with residents of The Bottom where they gathered with each other and shared story after story. When I listen back to the recordings, they are filled with outbursts of laughter and several conversations happening at the same time. It's mostly hard to decipher anything, but the chaos is so special. Almost seven decades later, together we all remembered The Bottom and we helped the rest of Knoxville to do so as well.

### *The Tour*

In August of 2020, we learned that the space where The Bottom once stood several decades ago is undergoing another round of transformation as the city prepares to subsidize private development of a baseball stadium and a \$142 million mixed-use project. A living exhibit of The Bottom, in the form of a neighborhood tour, seemed an appropriate way to challenge the notion that the land was unclaimed and for the taking. It felt like a loud way to remember and claim the space as Black space and to also connect African American history to Knoxville's history.

In many ways this tour was intended to not only activate a remembered past but to also engage the present and imagine the future. By elevating public memories of The Bottom, current and future generations might be moved to action to challenge uneven development. The tour took place in August of 2022 and involved a trolley ride and walk of The Bottom. We demarcated the boundaries of the neighborhood and anchored abstract narratives in places. There were about 100 to 150 people in attendance. This was so much more than I could have imagined. And what was intended to last for two hours lasted for about four. Moving through the neighborhood we made stops at predetermined points where we held a brief memorial and allowed The Bottom residents to share stories.

### *Signs*

Along the tour there were signs. There were two types of signs, street signs named for the streets in The Bottom, and story signs that told stories about life in the neighborhood. Each street sign included a narrative of The Bottom as it was remembered by former residents. They highlighted things like where and how the streets ran, people who lived on those streets, and interesting or notable memories about the streets or the people. The following is an excerpt from the Willow Street sign:

Heading west on Willow towards downtown, Andrew's hot dog stand was on the left near Patton Street. Andrew sold hot dogs and hot tamales. He was reputed for having the best hot dogs in the nation, which sometimes provoked debate in later years from those patrons who swore by the hot dogs sold by Lindsey's on East Vine Avenue. Nevertheless, Andrew's hot tamales were a cinch. Uncontested!

The signs' vernacular history was paired with documented history as the signs also include a list of residents found in the Knoxville City Directory for the year 1954. We chose 1954 because according to newspaper records, the first demolition began in 1955. So, we believed 1954 to be the last year the neighborhood was completely intact. Street signs also included pictures that represented that street. Pictures were found in Knox County Archive/Beck Cultural Exchange archive or the Knoxville History Project website.

### *Memorial*

It was important to us that this event to not only recognize The Bottom, the neighborhood, but also the people of The Bottom. The emphasis on urban renewal and the destroyed physical structures had in many ways tried to erase the people of The Bottom. But the stories of former residents told us that these were people who were worthy of public remembrance because they were the ones who made The Bottom a dynamic community. The physical space might have been a conduit of the community, but the essence of The Bottom was in its people, who were friends, neighbors, and kin, and who had strong bonds with their place. So much so that seventy years later, their community was alive in their relationships.

At each sign of the tour, there was a designated reader who read the narratives on the sign but also read all of the names of the Black families who lived on those streets and their addresses according to city directories. This took a lot more time than we anticipated but it was important to do so as these names had been disregarded by city officials for decades and were likely to be forgotten. For Willow Street some of the names listed include:

- Mrs. Bessie McCoy (210 Willow Ave, SE)
- Mrs. S.V. Hodge (216 Willow Ave, SE)
- Alex Irwin (218 Willow Ave, SE)
- Miss Geneva Howell (220 Willow Ave, SE)
- Miss Margaret Long (222 Willow Ave, SE)

### *Storytelling*

Walking the grounds of their old neighborhood with each other and seeing the pictures and reading the names evoked memories for former residents of The Bottom. It was such a joy and celebration. People came out that we had not met before in some of the previous reunion/work sessions, and they were just as eager to share, even if it was just to point out their street or where their house was located. They gave life to the place with their stories of swimming in the creek



or catching a ride on the train, playing in the school yard, busting out the neighbor's windows, having baths on the back porch, and so much more. Others enjoyed listening to them or asking them questions. Additionally, former residents were able to clarify or correct some of the narratives we had previously constructed. It was a lovely celebration. One of the most notable things about this sharing was that a teacher from Heiskell Elementary, the school that was in The Bottom was there. At 96 years old, she was the last living teacher, and she was pleased to share fondly about her students, many of whom were in attendance.

As I come to a close, I'd like to comment on why this work was so important to me. In the contemporary period, when people think about The Bottom, at least before we did this project, their point of reference for the neighborhood was urban renewal. It matters to me that the dynamic community that was The Bottom is not just defined and remembered by urban renewal. Urban renewal did happen, and it is important to contend with the ways uneven development impacts Black communities and the ways our sense of community and sense of place continues to be undermined by processes like urban renewal, like this baseball stadium that's being built, like gentrification, like so many other things that we can go on and on about. It's important to think about those things and to grapple with them.

But it's also important to remember and to center the community and to examine how even without the physical infrastructure of the neighborhood, the community was and has been alive and a part of the ongoing collective identity of its inhabitants.

If we think about reparations for Black folks in places like Knoxville, where urban renewal destroyed so much social, economic, and physical infrastructure, it's important for us to go back to our communities. In communities like The Bottom, where people might not have had much else, there were deep relationships between the people and their place, and those relationships and the community they forged through them matter.

Our relationships are important as we think about how we dance on the fire today. The house burns and the neighborhood burns, and the city burns and the next city over is also burning. So as these struggles continue, the building work also has to continue and there is much to gain from understanding Black communal relationships and how Black people forged community in the face of so much struggle.

