
By JANE CREIGHTON + CARL LINDAHL

PLACEMAKING FROM THE BOTTOM UP

An Introduction to Writing & C/Siting Houston

Jane: From my office on the tenth floor of the old Merchant and Manufacturer's building, now the University of Houston–Downtown, I can look directly down at the ducks and turtles in Buffalo Bayou, then over at the Allen's Landing wharf on the south side of the White Oak / Buffalo Bayou confluence. Here is where this town first made its entrance, as two enterprising Anglos from New York took advantage of Santa Anna's burning of Harrisburg just to the east to set up a rival town. I can also take in the dilapidated beauty of the old International Coffee Building just up from the wharf, then gaze out through the gridded forest of downtown buildings, swinging from east to south to west, with the knowledge that everything I know about this city and its geography is fluid, a work in progress. Look one way, and there's a hungry Cabeza de Vaca, shipwrecked and thrashing through the brush nearly 500 years ago, working his way up among the Karankawas. Look another, and there I am 28 years ago, driving into the city for the first time from a Texas Commission on the Arts teaching gig in Edna down Highway 59, a New York transplant subdued by the heat and the strip-mall flatness, wondering how this city could possibly get into my bones. Those first visits brought me deep friendships, my first red beans and rice, the Continental Zydeco Ballroom, and extraordinary dishes at an Afghan restaurant, all for starters.

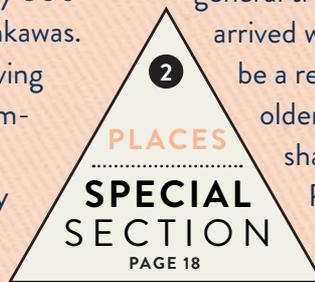
Since then, it has been a delicious, slow build. A return to Houston for good brought contact with intricate communities: writers and artists, schoolchildren who wrote about their families and neighborhoods—Eastwood, the near north side, west Houston—and labor organizers who introduced me to the rich difficulties of organizing state workers in offices, prisons, and the Richmond State School. It also brought friendships that have taught me how a

chaotically organized city—evolving as it has from the opportunism surrounding the sometimes bloody culture wars that marked it from its very beginnings in the 1830s—can also hold the deep and resonant voices of people who persist against great odds. Those who have been here for generations, alongside those who have found political and economic refuge in the city, recreate themselves even as they create meaningful senses of place. Communities in flux, they borrow, reshape, mix it up, and sustain themselves, making music and food, making place. They're spread out across that grid all the way to the horizon.

Carl: When I moved to Houston in 1980, everything about the city was broadly advertised as either brand new or about to happen. This image was accurate enough to pass for general truth. Sixty percent of the city's population had arrived within the past 12 years. The Astrodome, soon to be a relic, was still the Eighth Wonder of the World, and older landmarks were being dismantled daily in the shadows of Philip Johnson's postmodern towers.

People were remaking themselves and the shapes of the city to fit the contours of their dreams.

The first Houstonian who talked to me was a gas station attendant. Glancing at my Illinois license plates and the U-Haul trailer hitched to my car, he offered in welcome, "You'll do just fine here. I'm working three jobs and I'll be doing something bigger next month." I was the first tenant in my apartment; the whole complex had been slapped together just before I arrived, and the lot was filled with cars bearing license plates from Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan, as well as several bumper stickers that pleaded in unison, "Will the last one leaving Detroit please turn out the lights?" In the course of my first year, walking to and from my car, I watched nine tracts of flat grassland transform into apartment complexes that looked just like



mine. I kept asking myself, “Here are the immigrants, but where is the city?” I had spent more of my life in Chicago, my father’s birthplace, than anywhere else, and there was nothing on my new horizon that even vaguely evoked my sense of a city. In this mass of shifting forms and faces, I could find no anchor in time. The scene seemed choreographed by Austin Dobson, who wrote (I paraphrase), “You say time passes? No, we pass. Time stays.” I kept searching for that one focal place where I could see time stay.

My neighbors were all mutual strangers to Houston, but in time I began randomly meeting locals who shared their anchors with me. I picked up a hitchhiker who told me to check out the Continental Zydeco Ballroom. “Best music in the world, been going since my folks took me there as a baby.” I took him up on it. Next Friday night I drove to Frenchtown in the Fifth Ward and parked beside a rickety wooden structure, part ranch house, part barn, shaking with the sounds of accordion, frottoir, bass guitars, and stomping feet that seemed to drive the rhythms of speech—English mixed with Creole French—of the overflow crowd in the parking lot. The Continental’s world was peopled mostly by friends who had walked there from nearby homes in a neighborhood created in the 1920s by migrants from rural Louisiana and Texas. They had turned this corner of Houston into a suburb of the countryside. Frenchtown was, and is, in constant



Doris McClendon ran the Continental Zydeco Ballroom for many years.

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Ward, is a Houstonian by birth. The others, like us, are migrants who have discovered in the city special sites of refuge and exploration. They came here from places as distant as Iran and Vietnam or along shorter roads from Alabama, Louisiana, and rural Texas, driven by necessity or drawn by the arbitrary geography of employment. None of them sought Houston as a place in itself, but each of them helped fashion something here that is richer, more complex, and far more human than the flat and polished public face of the city would have led any of us to dream we would find.

transformation, but it also possessed and honored its roots in time. In the 30 years since I followed that hitchhiker’s advice, many other rooted strangers have introduced me to their essential places, places that became theirs through birthright or adoption.

The Houston that has grown to be so important to us is the sum of those places, illumined by the insiders who live there, where time stays.

Writing & C/Siting Houston is a project aiming to give voice to that persistence in time. Each of the writers whose words follow focuses on a corner of the city where neighbors have fashioned meaning through their interactions with place over time. Only Gwendolyn Zepeda, raised in the Sixth

This special section is dedicated to the memory of Susan Ahern (1949-2011), whose vision made our work possible. Writing & C/Siting Houston is a collaboration of the University of Houston-Downtown Cultural Enrichment Center, the Houston Arts Alliance Folklife & Traditional Arts Program, and The Houston Folklife Archive of the University of Houston. www.uhd.edu/cec.