## HOUSTON'S NAMES NEW

Text and Photos by John Pluecker

The ride begins at the house my father's parents built on Lawson Street in the East End. I bike over from my own house and take a little video of it: the green grass, the beige tones of brick, the overgrown ornamental pear tree in the front. I ride past the little apartment complex where I lived in 2001 when I first moved back to this neighborhood, and then by the little houses being manicured and flipped all around the neighborhood. Riding past the Magic Palace party complex at the corner of Dumble and Leeland, I notice new graffiti behind the Thai restaurant: "La Raza Unida" and "F\*ck gentrification" and "La Raza para siempre." I continue down Leeland and cross the railroad tracks near Cullen, conscious that this is the dividing line the East Downtown Management District uses to define their jurisdiction. Behind a house on Leeland, a huge quantity of jeans, pants, and shorts in child and adult sizes are pinned on a clothesline, zigzagging across the backyard. On the other side of the street, gleaming white, four-story townhomes beckon. I bike

on to cross the light rail track barreling down Scott Street.

By the Oak Farms Milk facility, a huge new HISD building is being raised on a site where formerly there was an array of narrow streets and humble shotgun homes. One of those houses was owned by the family of artist and friend Lisa E. Harris, who has made film, opera, and performance about the loss of her ancestral home and about that very neighborhood, which she and other residents call "the Lost Ward." A little chunk of the Third Ward that was lost first when it was cut off from the rest of the neighborhood by the building of the Gulf Freeway, and now it is being lost again to redevelopment. What is razed and what is raised?

Around the corner, there is a Perry Homes gated development called "Midtown Village," built in the mid 2000s. The anachronistic use of the term Midtown is due to the fact that the development predates the invention of the EaDo term; the developers knew they wanted a marketable name, but none existed so they used



Midtown, despite the geographical distance. In 2009, the East Downtown Management District held a competition to select a new name for this part of town (the losing options were Warehouse District and Saint E—after St. Emanuel Street); EaDo won.

I bike by the Tian Hau temple nearby on Delano Street with its cantilevered archway entrance, one of many reminders that this used to be a Chinatown, before business owners relocated to Bellaire Boulevard and Alief. The streets around it are lined by townhomes up and down every side. The only people outside are walking dogs, jogging, or exercisewalking, a range of colors in lycra and skin. On the streets, old trolley tracks crisscross the pavement in all directions—remnants of other ways of moving through the city. I read on a sign in front of a gated set of pasty white stucco townhomes: Modern EaDo. As I come closer to the newlychristened Emancipation Avenue, I pass a sign for the Assumption Cameroon Catholic Association at St. Nicholas Catholic Church.

A group of people are assembled on the front steps of the church and are happy to chat, a lively mix of Cameroonians, Nigerians and African-American members. As one Cameroonian member tells me, their community was re-assigned to this church by the Archdiocese about 15 years previous in order to infuse the parish with new energy (and increased tithing). A Texas Historical Marker by the front door tells the story of this oldest Black Catholic church in Houston, which—coincidentally and unbeknownst to me—was designed by my German Texan great-uncle, Leo M. J. Dielmann, who designed hundreds of churches around Texas in the early twentieth century. I've sped down Polk Street thousands of times just one block over from the church, but I was unaware of this little sanctuary or my own familial ties to it.

It's getting dark by this time, and, tired, I bike home as quickly as I can pedal.

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Since the mid-twentieth century, highways have dominated thinking in Houston, not bike rides or trolleys. The highways sliced through the historic wards in the center of the city, devastating historical neighborhoods. The highways ignored and attempted to obliterate older forms of movement, other ways of organizing and seeing, though they were not entirely successful.

What I'd call highway thinking has run along wellestablished corridors, falling into old arguments and engrained positions. Houstonians swerve, cut, and accelerate forward as fast as possible into the future, dreaming that it will be more comfortable or more safe. The mind is formed and shaped by its surroundings, by the ways the body transports the mind. The city becomes the structure of our minds, allowing certain pathways and disallowing (or at least discouraging) others. But not everyone stays on the highways.

Artist Lisa E. Harris told me the story of her grandfather who would always take the backroads, the cut-throughs, the smallest thoroughfares connecting one historic neighborhood to another. She recalled being picked up from one family home and taken somewhere, and her grandfather would never take the highways. Her grandfather called these routes "The Old Indian Trail."

What other kinds of thinking become possible in Houston, when one exits the highway and leaves behind the Google Map fastest route from one place to another? What about navigating through the backstreets of neighborhoods? What other kinds of seeing and perceiving become possible? Highways here are both real and metaphorical, standing in for a larger structure of thinking, a lack of attention. What if thinking happened along backroads, narrow alleys, and farm roads with deep ditches tucked into the middle of the city? What if thinking happened not just in relation to the names of the exits on the highway or the erroneous neighborhood designations on smartphone apps, but rather through all of the other ways that



people have called and named these spaces?

This way to a memory. This way to remember something buried or entangled with weeds and vine. Old Galveston Road. Old Spanish Trail. Old Indian Trail. The wards.

On Youtube, I watch a talk by Jim Parsons from Preservation Houston about the history of Houston's wards, from their creation in 1839 as political districts until the present day. By 1915, the ward system was officially abolished. And yet, despite that fact, as Parsons says, "110 years after the Wards should have disappeared, they haven't." These nineteenth century political districts became social and cultural formations largely defined by race and national origin. As African-Americans moved into Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, those of European descent moved out. As Mexican-Americans moved into First, Second, and Sixth Wards in the first decades of the twentieth century, those Germans, Italians and other Europeans—my ancestors who had newly acquired their twentieth century urban whiteness—largely left

Those historic wards were subsequently sliced by freeways, diced by redlining and disinvestment. One history of Houston could be written by analyzing the gradual shrinkage of the size of historic wards. For the last thirty years or more, these same neighborhoods have faced steady encroachment and displacement of historic residents. With a slew of hungry real estate developers and agents, the wards would appear to shrink year after year, while other names and designations grow and grow. Midtown creeps north and east, west and south. Eado creeps across the bayou into the Fifth Ward to the north, deep into the Second Ward on the east.

In 2016, I wrote an article about a development project designed by Francois de Menil in Acres Homes that aims to build \$350-400K homes for artists. In that article I wrote a paragraph that was widely shared online:

"One note for anyone looking to move into a neighborhood in Houston that is not historically their own: no need to rename the neighborhood. Nationwide, this phenomenon has become a tired cliché. If historical residents call the neighborhood East End, let's not call it EaDo. If historical residents call the neighborhood

Third Ward, let's not call it Midtown. If a neighborhood is called Acres Homes, let's not invent another name like NoLo. It's offensive and wrong. Naming is important, is political, is a way of self-identifying. When a developer re-names a neighborhood, it enacts a kind of violence, an erasure, of that community and its history."

Years later, the battle for control and power in a space is still a battle for the power to name. Names have an architecture a sound structure. The shape of a name gives it a body, born out of years of history and struggle. These structures of sound and memory are often unknown to new arrivals, or given short shrift. Thus new arrivals often end up calling a place by a new name, one they can identify with more smoothly.

Perhaps it's helpful to differentiate naming and calling. For this purpose of this essay, I'd argue naming is institutional, hierarchical, and assigned from above. While calling tends to be more ephemeral, personal, and specific. Though it is entirely dependent on who is doing the calling and who has the power to name. And often the two intertwine and weave together.

If socially powerful people and power can result in that calling becoming a name. For and Everton Streets is being East End. Yet this development Residents of the Second Ward Second Ward. In this case, with the actual institutional name of the space. As a historical resident of the Second Ward told me, "EaDo is not a neighborhood, it's a creation of marketing." While this is true, this new name for a space is promoted and repeated in real estate and re-christening spaces as it goes.

Another example of this calling becoming naming is found in Lisa E. Harris's film about the

Third Ward; in it, two young people looking for a home with a real estate agent refer to their disinterest in homes "in the Third Ward part of Midtown." The name Midtown here is so powerful as to overstep its bounds, growing larger and larger while literally devouring other historical names. Over the long term, these incursions into new territories erode historical names, as the privileged decide to call a space by a new term that often later becomes recognized as the new name. A friend at the Midtown Management District tells me they recently received a phone call from a new resident complaining about Midtown street names appearing on signs in both English and Vietnamese; "This isn't Little Saigon anymore," he insisted, "all of them have left already," he insisted. The Little Saigon name was won after years of work and years of calling; that legacy is rapidly being undone. There are myriad examples, and they are often ugly.

On the flipside, many places with official names are called by other names by people without societal position and privilege. These names remain under the radar, non-dominant. Like calling Second Ward "El Segundo" or "the Deuce." Or, for example, the neighborhood named Magnolia Park is often called "the Avenues," says María Siménez in an online recording. In 2017, an artwork by Jamal Cyrus, Nathaniel Donnett and Chanelle Frazier near Project Row Houses along Holman Street included directional signage with an arrow pointed toward "The Bottoms," which is what many residents of the Northern Third Ward call the area. "The Tré" instead of Third Ward. "The Nickel" instead of Fifth Ward. These informal callings—these soundings—never reach the level of an institutional naming, because the people doing the calling do not have the economic backing and social power of those managing and promoting names like EaDo or Midtown.

Over time though, through persistent organizing and power-building by the less powerful, historical elites can lose the power to confer names. Witness the renaming last year of Houston Independent School District institutions named after Confederate heroes like Stonewal Jackson. Or the renaming of Dowling Street—which had been named after a Confederate hero in 1892 as a way of insulting the empowered Reconstruction—Era Black community in Third Ward. In the last few years, many community members in the Third Ward decided that this name needed to change and this insult needed to be undone; they

successfully petitioned for the city to rename the street Emancipation Avenue. In Magnolia Park, 67th Street was re-christened César Chávez Blvd in 2000, after a long fight spearheaded by Bennie Martinez, a member of LULAC and the Tejano Heritage Society. Naming reflects power gained and power lost.

## On the east side of Downtown,

the streets still tell stories about the Lost Ward, Third Ward, Old Chinatown, the East End, the oldest Black Catholic Church in Houston, and more. So many stories told by the streets, the buildings, and all the long-term and generational residents of the neighborhood.

Although there is change afoot in Houston, it is hardly new. Historically, change is deeply hardwired into the logic of this city, ever since its founding as a colony on Karankawa and Mexican land. This is a moment of reckoning though, as names are reevaluated nationally in an attempt to rid places and institutions of white supremacist affiliations. At the same time, urban neighborhoods are embroiled in a steady re-taking of their territories by waves of wealthier and more privileged residents; these new residents and the organizations and institutions wooing and backing them impose new names onto the landscape. It is ironic that in Houston, as white supremacist names are being reconsidered and removed, the historical boundaries of the wards and their very names are being whittled away by hip-sounding monikers that ignore the history of the place. Who is made to feel disposable when that happens? What are the stories suppressed in that process? Maybe Lisa Harris's grandfather was right to never take the highways.