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 tracks 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 exercise-walking, 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 newly-christened 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.

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 well-established 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, 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?

Third Ward, let’s not call it Midtown. If a neighborhood is named after a house or after it has an architecture, a sound structure. A shape of a name given its architecture, a sound. The name of a city, a name given a city, born out of years of history and struggle. These structures of sound and memory are often unique to new arrivals, or a given short shift. Thus, new arrivals often end up calling a place by a new name, one they can identify with more smoothly. So, 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 personal, specific, and particular. Though it is entirely true, this new name needed to change and this was won after years of such a neighborhood, it enacts a kind of 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 the 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 calling; that legacy is rapidly being undone. There are myriad examples, and they are often ugly.

On the flipside, many places with new 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 Bottoms,” which is what a real estate agent refer to their neighborhood named Magnolia Park. “The Deuce.” Or, for example, the neighborhood named Magnolia Park is often called “the Avenues,” says Maria Jiménez in an online recording. In 2017, an artwork by Yamal Ceylan, Nahaniel Bynum, and Chanele Frazier near Project Row Houses along Holman Street included directional signage with an arrow pointed toward “The Nickel” or “The Deuce.” Or, for example, the neighborhood named Magnolia Park is often called “the Avenues,” says Maria Jiménez in an online recording. These informal callings—these names remain under the radar, non-dominant. At the same time, urban neighborhoods are being wooed and backed 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 nicknames 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.

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 other names. 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 Mexican land. This way to a memory. This way to a memory. This way to a memory.

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