THE CAPITAL OF ELSEWHERE: PLACES, FICTIONS, HOUSTONS

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the manner in which fictional works illuminate the complex identity of place by investigating authors associated with a single American city, Houston, Texas, focusing chapter length studies on four: Donald Barthelme, Rick Bass, Farnoosh Moshiri, and Tony Diaz. Its methodological framework is the "geocritical" approach, wherein, as stated by Bertrand Westphal, "[t]he study of the viewpoint of an author or of a series of authors . . . will be superseded in favor of examining a multiplicity of heterogeneous points of view, which all converge in a given place, the primum mobile of the analysis."

This multifocal approach reveals Houston as a place of unusual juxtapositions formed by freeway culture, fluidity of categories due to a lack of zoning regulations, a "timelessness" resulting from constant bulldozing of the past, and a powerful concern for market forces owing to a laissez-faire attitude towards business and regulation, brought together in what architect Peter Rowe labels the city's "ever-present and unvarnished capacity for destabilization and shape-shifting." Variations of the place-experience of Houston based on the four authors' heterogeneous viewpoints are examined, and potential drawbacks of the geocritical model in identifying the nature of place through the lens of literature are explored.

To Kazumi and Dylan

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

THE CAPITAL OF ELSEWHERE

> Yet Houston was no monolith; it was, as one of its writers would say, a whiskey and trombone town, openly in conflict with itself, and its very disorder had encouraged a rough and open democracy.
>
> Willie Morris – *North Toward Home*

This study examines the manner in which fictional works illuminate the complex identity of place. It investigates authors associated with a single American city, Houston, Texas, focusing chapter length studies on four of these: Donald Barthelme, Rick Bass, Farnoosh Moshiri, and Tony Diaz. As a methodological framework the dissertation utilizes what Bertrand Westphal and others have come to call the "geocritical" approach, wherein "[t]he study of the viewpoint of an author or of a series of authors . . . will be superseded in favor of examining a multiplicity of heterogeneous points of view, which all converge in a given place, the primum mobile of the analysis" (Westphal *Geocriticism* 122). Since the spatial turn in humanistic studies inaugurated by theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Michel Foucault and others, "place" has come to be seen not as a static and unchanging dimension, but a fluid product created by a process of social relations. It is a product, however, that produces. As ecocritic Barry Lopez puts it: "The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual is affected by land as it is by genes" (in Buell 83). Literary studies tend to focus on those interior landscapes, emphasizing the artistic

representations authors produce. In this study such products, and the narrative strategies they perform, will serve as a means for better understanding the "character and subtlety" of the exterior spatial milieu from which they arise.

The current impulse to investigate spatial issues in the humanities is most often traced to experiential developments of the post-World War II era when dominating influences arose such as acceleration of travel and the resulting interconnectedness of locales once considered distant; globalization in its various forms, including financial; new ways of considering the spatial due to digital communication, social media, and paradigms such as cyberspace; and many other alterations to experience that express what Marxist geographer David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990) termed "time-space compression" (284). For scholars, geocritic Eric Prieto notes, this compression results in a realization that while "every era is, in its own way, a transitional era," current developments may be characterized by "an uncommonly rapid pace of cultural and technological evolution":

> Demographic upheaval, migratory circulation, economic liberalization, technological innovation, environmental change, and all the other motors of geo-cultural flux have disrupted many of the practices that have traditionally given us a sense of belonging to a place or community, and they have done so in a spectacularly short period of time. These transformative processes have necessarily generated new modes of spatial organization. (*Literature Geography* 8)

Harvey, in 1996's *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, indicates how spatial metaphors have entered the current era's modes of communication. "We talk about the place of art in social life the place of men in society, our place in the cosmos, and we internalize such notions psychologically in terms of knowing our place or feeling we have a place in the

affections or esteem of others," all of which leads him to conclude that at this point "[p]lace has to be one of the most multilayered and multipurpose keywords in our language" (208). Considering in overview these alterations of spatial experience in the modern and postmodern world, it is not surprising that political geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja concludes that "the spatial dimension of our lives has never been of greater practical and political relevance than it is today" (1), or that Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) states that "our daily life, our psychic experiences, our cultural languages, are dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time" (16). In literary studies, we find the use of spatial metaphors—fragmentation, juxtaposition, margins, peripheries, borders, narrative distance, etc.—is prevalent as well.

As part of this "spatial turn," exactly what is meant by such concepts as "place," and "space" (not to mention "region," "zone," territory," "border," and other labels) has come under greater scrutiny, especially as a means to avoid such definitions as lend themselves to what geographer Doreen Massey calls, in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), "exclusivist claims": "nationalist, regionalist, and localist. . . . attempts to fix the meaning of particular spaces, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities and to claim them for one's own" (4). Evolving theories of place fly in the face such enclosed and fixed definitions. Perhaps most famously, Martin Heidegger's notion of place as the locality where humans take up the practice of "being in the world" has been subject to critique. Especially powerful is the impression Heidegger delivers of a timeless quality that attaches to his meditative example near the end of the influential article, "Building Dwelling Thinking" (1951):

> Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. . . . It gave it the wide

> overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and that, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. . . . it made room in its chamber for the hallowed pieces of childbed and the "tree of the dead"—for that is what they call a coffin there: the *Totenbaum*—and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. (362)

Although possessed of a kind of calm surety—especially for those among us who live in the world of "time-space compression"—such characterizations of place that connect with timelessness, a wholeness of being, and established authenticity of experience have drawn critiques from those who see them, firstly, as inaccurate, and, secondly, as dangerous. This version of place would appear to be the one contemporary writers find distasteful when they bristle at labels of limitation such as "regional novelist." Roberto Dainotto in *Place and Literature* (2000) has something like this Black Forest farmhouse in mind—a place that determines "the character of [the] journey through time" of its inhabitants—when he speaks against giving over too much attention to the spatial turn in literary studies. "What we have lost," says Dainotto, "to begin with, is a *historical* perspective. Place, as much as we see its theorists claiming to the contrary, is fundamentally a negation of history" (2). He is critical as well of a field which seems unable to define its terms, noting W.J. Keuth's question "What is a region? This is the fundamental question, and an obvious place to begin is with dictionary definition. . . . The relevant definitions are disappointingly vague at the edges" (7) [1] It is certainly the case that, in addition to confusions over "place," "space" or "region," many of the terms utilized in spatial studies are also burdened by what David Harvey calls a "surfeit of meanings";

> To begin with, there are all sorts of words such as milieu, locality, location, locale, neighborhood, region, territory, and the like, which refer to the generic qualities of place. There are other terms such as city, village, town, megalopolis, and state which designate particular kinds of places and still others, such as home, hearth, "turf," community, and nation, which have such strong connotations of place that it would be hard to talk about one without the other. "Place" (like space and time) also has an extraordinary range of metaphorical meanings. (*Justice, Nature* 4)

Such a range of meanings, however, are not necessarily inappropriate for the far more fluid, heterogeneous, even fragmented spatial entity place has become since the "spatial turn." Hints of this view of place—and certainly the necessity for taking temporality into account when discussing it—were evident before this turn, as when geographer Carl Saur appears to answer in advance Dainotto's fears concerning place's lack of historical perspective in his March, 1941, remarks to the Association of American Geographers:

> The geographer cannot study houses and towns, fields and factories as to their where and why without asking himself about their origins. He cannot treat the localization of activities without knowing the functioning of the culture, the process of living together of the group, and he cannot do this except by historical reconstruction. (8)

The work of French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, especially *The Production of Space* (1991), is marked by many as foundational to changes in perceptions of space and place in the humanities. For Lefebvre, space is not a "form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it. Space is social morphology:

it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure" (94). Harvey Molotch's 1993 review of the first English translation of *The Production of Space* perhaps most clearly delineates the Copernican revolution Lefebvre introduces when he concentrates on "production." "Space is not simply inherited from nature, or passed on by the dead hand of the past"—a phrase evoking Heidegger's farmhouse—"or autonomously determined by 'laws' of spatial geometry as per conventional location theory. Space is produced and reproduced through human intentions, even unanticipated consequences also develop, and even as space constrains and influences those producing it" (22).

The evolved experiential complications native to an age of "space-time compression" can be expected to produce a complex, unanticipated, even contradictory, spatial product. One version, the heterotopia, appears in Michel Foucault's 1967 lecture, "Of Other Spaces." "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space," says Foucault, sounding like a figure charged with tracing a line in the sand. "We are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long line developing through time that that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (22).

Edward Soja, working especially from the ideas of Lefebvre, feels that this new conceptualization of space

> detonates the scope of spatial knowledge and reinforces the radical openness of what I am trying to convey as Thirdspace: the space where all places are, capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear; but also a secret and conjectured object, filled with illusions and allusions, a space that is common to

> all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood, an "unimaginable universe," or as Lefebvre would put it, "the most general of products." (56)

For Ana Manzanas and Jesús Benito Sanchez in *Cities, Borders and Spaces in Intercultural American Literature and Film* (2011), Foucault's heterotopia, Soja's Third Space—as well as other concepts such as the invisible and migrational city Michel de Certeau introduces in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*, especially "when compared to contemporary migrants and the homeless," Marc *Augé*'s concept of the "non-place," and even those "workings of the border in contemporary literature and culture" that most interest Manzanas and Sanchez as scholars—*all* are interpretable as various ways to fill the need for "alternative spatial poetics" after the spatial shift from notions of place as static, timeless or closed (6). Indeed, while each of the above may well be employed in the description of actual spatial situations—real places—Soja also emphasizes something worth considering when it comes to spatial poetics, calling the "central point" of more "relational" concepts such as the heterotopologies of Foucault and trialectics of Lefebvre "not just 'other spaces' to be added on to the geographical imagination, they are also 'other than' the established ways of *thinking spatially*" (163; emphasis added).

Highly influential in conceptualizing the "relational" when it comes to place has been the work of Doreen Massey. For Massey, no place is an island (including, presumably, an island) but exists instead—and especially in the digital era—in constant social interaction with the larger world, including transmissions and receptions leading to global connections. As such, for Massey, any particular place's specific character might then be considered representative of the unique intersection of these combined outside influences, not from its supposed boundaries or

container-like qualities. In *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), she notes how considering places in a relational way

> implies that they are not so much bounded areas as open and porous networks or social relations. It implies that their 'identities' are constructed through the specificity of their interaction with other places rather than by counterposition to them. It reinforces the idea, moreover, that those identities will be multiple (since the various social groups in a place will be differently located in relation to the overall complexity of social relations and since their reading of those relations and what they make of them will also be distinct). And this in turn implies that what is to be the dominant image of any place will be a matter of contestation and will change over time. (121)

Helpful to me as a model of this spatial viewpoint has been the earliest pictorial sign for "city" represented in the Egyptian writing system: a cross enclosed in a circle. Anna Manzanas, in her introduction to *Border Transits: Literature and Culture across the Line* (2007), demonstrates the profound ways in which many of postmodern mankind's competing concerns *vis-à-vis* place are represented already in this ancient symbol. "[T]he city is the site of two contradictory urges," Manzanas points out. "[T]the conjunction, the intersection and the mixing of directions implied in the cross, and the countering wall, the protection against indifference and the outside" (10). Indeed, many cities are located at intersections—or, as Massey puts it, "In one sense or another most places have been meeting places" (*Space, Place* 171)—often forming at the crossing of trade routes or where major geographical features come together, such as the Tigris and the Euphrates. This is represented in the symbol by the cross which is easy to imagine extending outside of the circle, routes establishing place identity, as Massey says, "through the

specificity of their interaction with other places" (121). The circle reminds that, in addition to being located at points of transfer and interchange, cities were often also, literally, walled—enclosed in structures that made architecturally explicit divisions such as insider/outsider; citizen/stranger; friend/enemy. The circle can be seen to represent the source of Dainotto's complaint that "region is a bounded space"—such enclosures making inevitable that "insiders" use boundaries to "separate and shelter from the historical outside," thus explaining why, for example, "symbols of purification, demarcation, and punishment of transgression abound in what is called the 'regionalist novel'" (15). It is the graphical combination of the two aspects, however, that serves to make the Egyptian "city" ideogram such a helpful touchstone for place. Firstly, much like the barrier in Frost's "Mending Wall," encircling edifices are capable of "making good neighbors" in more ways than one. As de Certeau puts it, "created by contacts, the points of differentiation between two bodies are also their common points. Conjunction and disjunction are inseparable in them" (127). Manzanas, interested in border matters, adopts de Certeau's conception as a different way of experiencing boundaries, and adds that "the wall or border is not the impenetrable ring of protection that creates a metaphysics of the pure, but the site of a constant crossing, of conjunction, and disjunction" (22). Considering the circle a place both of separation and communication, the strict insider/outsider dichotomy can be avoided. Importantly, however, the circle and the cross are truly useful as the two elements combine two oft-expressed aspects of the place-experience. Although we may accept a contingent definition of place, unique in its expression of *genius loci* owing to its specific intersection of disparate influences, Massey does not neglect the pull of the older paradigm: "How," she asks, "in the face of all this movement and intermixing, can we retain any sense of a local place and its particularity?" (146) Or, as Nicholas Entriken puts it in *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a*

Geography of Modernity (1991), "We know that places differ and that these differences are not imaginary, but rather are actual features of the world. We also suggest that these differences matter, and we self-consciously employ this knowledge in our everyday lives" (13).[2] As I have worked through a geocritical study of Houston, I have attempted to retain both the complex, interconnected and "in flux" notion of "place," and the sense of *genius loci*—a somewhat unidentifiable spirit that does—grounded in the intersection between place and identity—make it possible for someone to self-label as a Hoosier, a Nigerian, or a Houstonian. The spatial, graphic representation of "the city" from ancient Egypt has been of some service in helping me do this. When thinking through a recurring theme in these works—the "outsider," or "outsiderness"—the circle part of the circle and the cross has been an especially helpful reminder. The fact that, cartographically, the symbol resembles the manner in which Houston's 610 loop is intercepted both horizontally by I-10 and I-45's north-south corridor can be here noted, but not emphasized. [3]

I have noted that this study will undertake a geocritical approach. This methodology, as it is developing in Europe and the United States, arises at least in part to address increasingly complex versions of "place" that, as noted above, can no longer be considered static, isolated, or void of process and history, and, in fact, such a definition of place is taken as an axiomatic starting point for this approach. As Bertrand Westphal puts it "space should be seen in its temporal dimension, and the inverse. There is also the fact that any definition relating to the relationship between place and space is inscribed in the trangressiveness that is the guarantor of a fluid and non-permanent vision of territories" ("A Geocritical Approach" 4). Westphal, at the University of Limoges, is seen as a central figure whose influential *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* was translated into English in 2011, although the term "geocriticism" itself had

more than one place of origin, and many who call themselves "geocritics" practice very different approaches.

In addition to accepting "place" as complex, existing in time and interrelational, a second belief of most who call themselves geocritics, would be that because "place" is viewed as process—or as George Lipsitz puts it "not only as specific geographic and physical sites, but also as circuits and networks of communication, physical movement, and commodity circulation" (25)—works of literature, and what Westphal calls "artistic referents" of place (121), are considered powerful, appropriate and even preferred resources for spatial study. Geocriticism, then, takes a specifically literary approach to the complexities of place, although, in its various iterations, exactly what constitutes "literature" has varied. Studies using literature to illuminate concepts of place are not new, such as novelist and critic Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973) which examines the positive and negative associations of particular geographical categories—rural and urban—via analyses of works of literature alternated with recorded events of social history. This has been an activity not only for novelists and critics, for that matter, as geographers have also added literary texts to the resources used in their analyses of place: examples including Charles Aiken's study of the "on the ground" Mississippi basis for Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County (1977), and B.P. Birch's 1981 review of Thomas Hardy and lessor known British novelists' presentations of the socio-ecological nature and topography of Wessex. D.W. Meinig's lecture to the Institute of British Geographers in 1983, "Geography as an Art," argued for "a view of literature as a valuable storehouse of vivid depictions of landscapes and life," as well as, importantly, for "the value of literature in sharpening our sensitivities to the human experience with place" (316). In fact, literary representations, especially in the category of "narrative," have been a staple in the developing theoretical

approaches to space and place. Michel de Certeau in 1984, although not exactly programmatic regarding how stories can best be used in the study of spatial issues, does manage to capture the spirit of the importance of narratives, specifically in determining what he considers the tactical *uses* of space:

> Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice. For this reason, spatial practices concern everyday tactics, are part of them. From the alphabet of spatial indication ("It's to the right." "Take a left"), the beginning of a story the rest of which is written by footsteps, to the daily "new" ("Guess who I met at the baker?"), television news reports (Teheran: Khomeini is becoming increasingly isolated . . ."), legends (Cinderellas living in hovels), and stories that are told (memories and fiction of foreign lands or more or less distant times in the past). These narrated adventures, simultaneously producing geographies of actions and drifting into the commonplaces of an order, do not merely constitute a "supplement" to pedestrian enunciations and rhetorics. They are not satisfied with displacing the latter and transposing them into the field of language. In reality, they organize walks. They make the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it. (116)

For Entriken, as narratives portray time synoptically and from a point of view, they form a connective tissue along the spectrum of place experience, especially when utilized as "a means of mediating the particular-universal and the subjective-objective axes" (6) of place experience—special concerns of his. He admits a "more modest . . . goal" in turning to narratives of place: " a better understanding of the narrative-like qualities that give structure to our attempts to capture the particular connections between people and place" (14).

Geocritic Eric Prieto believes geocriticism takes literature even more seriously than the previously mentioned approaches. "Because literary texts operate, for the most part, within the hypothetical, metaphorical register of fiction and poetry, they may contribute to our understanding of the problems posed by emergent places." For Prieto "great works of literature have a performative dimension that may rival in importance the kinds of authority attributed to philosophical or scientific discourse" (*Literature, Geography* 9). And Westphal gives particular agency and even attributes didactic improvement to the use of literature in the examination of place *because* of its artifice. "Artistic representation provides a lesson to the world. Of all the instances that capture the 'real,' it is without a doubt the most honest, because it alone does not indiscriminately posit its own objectivity, its own reality, or even its own quest for the truth" (*Geocriticism* 130-31). Both of these scholars raise issues for my particular study: what works would constitute "great works of literature" for geocritial purposes, or, for that matter, which could meet the criteria for "artistic representation" and qualify as "artistic referents" as opposed to other kinds? I have attempted to continuously foreground this question when choosing the authors for the present work.

For Westphal, as outlined in *Geocriticism*, the central propositions for more accurately dealing with the complexity of place through the vehicle of literary works are four, thus delivering up what can be considered an actual methodology for the study of literary works and their relation to place. First, he emphasizes that the examination of place should be *stratigraphic*, underscoring the extent to which a given place is composed of an accumulation of past moments, thus avoiding falling into the fallacy of *presentism* without historical context—the issue, basically, that Dainotto critiques in his view of "the region" as "an otherness . . . *from*, and against history" (emphasis in original 9). For geocritic Eric Prieto, literary representations,

again, make excellent resources for this kind of stratigraphic study, providing as they do "precious evidence of the various ways in which places have been perceived at different moments in their history, making it possible to get a sense of the transversal path cut by the place through history" ("Geocriticism Meets"). That such works also are experienced "in time" and that narrative arcs cover temporal periods seems to me another advantage for analyzing the stratigraphic nature of place. Secondly for Westphal, examination should also be *polysensorial,* eschewing the sole use of visual analogies in the study of place, as "the experience of an environment comes from all the senses" (132). "In all the major genres," advises John Gardner in *The Art of Fiction* (1985), "vivid detail is the life blood of fiction" (26). That fiction and other literary works most commonly concern experience rather than data, often performing their work via significant sensory detail, again underscores their worth as a source for evidence of place under the geocentric model. Because of this requirement for stratigraphic and polysensoral analysis—along with the power of narrative mentioned by several theorists when it comes to the study of place, for this study I have determined to utilize only works of fiction.[4]

Even more central than these to the geocentric approach, however, are two other tenets. One Westphal labels calls *geocentrism*. This might seem overly obvious, and refers to the way that geocriticism is, as Paul Smethurst puts it, a "place-based criticism" (176). In other words, though using as primary sources literary works, geocriticism paradoxically privileges the primary object of study to be places rather than texts. This is most easily comprehended by considering investigations that tend in the opposite direction, as in presentations featuring, for example, Joyce's Dublin, Dickens' London, or Faulkner's Mississippi. For Westphal, "[o]ne might call this an ego-centered analysis, since discourse on space is made to serve the discourse on the writer, who becomes the ultimate object of critical attention" (111). In addition, with some

exceptions, it is notable that theorists interested in "place" often mention as few of them as possible, concerning themselves rather with places as "types," such as "The City," "Rural Villages," or "Border Regions." Emily Johansen notes how "[d]iscussions of place remain remarkably abstract as well as, more importantly, overly generalized" (158). The geocentric principle flips this tendency, moving a single particular place to the center of examination. As Eric Prieto puts it: "[q]uestions of textual mechanics, aesthetic value, and the author's world view are considered . . . but considered in light of their referential relationship with the *real-world place*, how they shape our understanding of that place" ("Geocriticism Meets" emphasis added). Understanding precisely what it means to have a "referential relationship" to a specific, "real-world place"—and how such a relationship expresses itself textually both directly and indirectly—is one of the great challenges of the geocritical approach. Some approaches to geocriticism seem more aligned with *particularity* of place rather than insisting upon its "reality," the choice of topics turning mainly on the number of artistic representations that exist of that place. For Westphal "it becomes permissible to identity a referent in an intertextual chain that will be consolidated over time and across many different books (or paintings, or films, etc.). (117-18). Thus, for example, it's perfectly possible to "undertake a geocriticism of Atlantis" (118). The present study, however, assumes both that Houston, Texas, is a "real world place," and that a modest intertextual chain makes it a proper topic for geocritical analysis.

For Westphal's fourth methodological approach —and again taking into account a complex model of place versus one tending to "type" or generalization—geocritics, take up as many textual representations of the single particular place as feasible to conduct the study, a process Westphal labels *multifocalization*. "In order to escape from the perspectival limitations of a single author or interpretive community," says Prieto, "the geocritic will consult as many

texts, and as many different *kinds* of texts, as possible, emphasizing especially the juxtaposition or confrontation of texts written from different perspectives" ("Geocriticism Meets"). While this attempt to transcend Western dualities via multiple perspectives is not unique to geocriticism, it does separate the methodology from place-oriented approaches such as ecocritism, which commonly maintains, for example, a stark categorical division between the rural and urban when considering natural habitats. Although as we'll see, this particular part of the methodology appears to be most often honored in the breach, Westphal calls multifocalization "the defining characteristic of the geocritical approach" (*Geocriticism* 199).

One other aspect of geocriticism has especially been noted by geocritic and Westphal translator Robert Talley, and echoes the way J. Nicholas Entrikin writes of the concept of place as "drawing attention to the relation between particularizing and universalizing discourses and between subjective and objective perspectives" (6)—perspectives he attempts to navigate by locating an analytical point of "betweeness" when considering place. As would go hand in hand with its reliance on artistic representation, geocriticism does not shy away from the subjective end of this perspectival spectrum. "I emphasize the human, subjective dimension of place" says Tally, "which gives rise to expressions like 'a sense of place' and has an inherently experiential dimension that has often gone missing from geographical analyses, especially since the advent of the post-World War II 'quantitative revolution' in geography" (15). Or, Westphal again: "The imagination is not a factor of alienation. . . . Narrativity, albeit fictional, brings a greater knowledge of the essence of space, just as any other representation, discursive or not" (168). It is mainly via the multifocal approach that Westphal feels "we come closer to the essential identity of the referenced space" (114).[5] Therefore, while this dissertation will serve as a kind of test case for the methodology of geocriticism, it is also presented as a study of the "sense of

place," "spirit," or *genius loci* of a particular city as represented by fictional works that take that location as influence, setting or subject, as well as a showcase for that place's fictional production, artistic representations from Houston at present occupying only the margins of literary study. While this can be seen as an artifact of the publishing industry's attraction to other American cities such as New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago, it may also be seen as a result of the particular qualities of a young city occupying a heterogeneous zone and located within a diverse cultural crossroads: a metropolis characterized both by the suburban sprawl enabled by automobile ownership, and the economically powerful centralizing global connections provided by petroleum and other industries. In other words, the fluidity and category defying nature of Houston's identity is *part* of its "sense of place," and this is reflected in the literary works taken up by this study.

It is difficult to find a clear example of an examination where geocentric, multifocal, polysensorial, and stratigraphic perspectives have been simultaneously applied to a particular place, or a body of literature associated with that place. In 2011, fast on the heels of the English translation of Westphal's *Geocriticism,* came the publication of a companion anthology of essays, *Geocritical Explorations*, edited by Robert Tally. As he notes: "Many of the essays . . . challenge Westphal's views, and many offer positions quite different from his" (3), which would appear to be true. Of the eleven essays, many eschew the "multifocal" aspect of geocriticism entirely, dealing either with a single issue as encountered across a number of places—Michael Walonen's examination of race in Marseilles, Morocco, and Spain, for example (75-90)—or a number of places in one spatial category—Rebecca Weaver Hightower's analysis of 19th Century Australian, South African, Canadian and American frontier literature (123-138)—or a single author's take on a place as in "Furrowing the Soil with His Pen: Derek Walcott's

Topography of the English Countryside" from Joanna Johnson (161-176). The latter—works with titles featuring author names in the possessive form followed by place names—would seem to be the most common scholarly approach when literary texts and specific, particular "places" are brought into contact. Palgrave Macmillan's book series "Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies" at time of writing contains ten titles with similar, book length approaches to those found in *Geocritical Explorations*. All of these works are valuable additions to the study of place and literature, but few take up simultaneously the four approaches proposed by Westphal for dealing with a new, more complex vision of "place," and, indeed, their approaches underscore the difficulty of carrying out his four part regime to the letter, especially concerning multifocalization. The recently released *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* (2016) compiles a variety of "place-based" theoretical approaches, and includes geocriticism, giving a nod to its Gallic roots by placing it under the "Eco- and Geo- Approaches in French and Francophone Literary Studies" section (385). That chapter, in fact, includes helpful ecocritical, ecopoetic, and geopoetical sample analyses of Michel Tournier's *Friday, or the Other Island* (1967) for the interested student of place, but leaves out geocriticism, noting that such an example

> is not possible because geocriticism looks at multiple cultural representations of a single place (multifocalization) and not at one single literary text. It would have been necessary to find other cultural or textual representations of the geographical space represented in the novel . . . to develop a geocritical analysis. (399)

Collections of literary works that attempt to gather a variety of multifocal sources connected to a particular "real place"—what might be called "regional anthologies"—do undertake geocriticism's goal of "the confrontation of several optics that correct, nourish and mutually

enrich each other" (Westphal *Geocriticism* 113). In Texas, the Texas Christian University Press "Literary Cities" series is an example, including *Literary Houston* (2010), a sampling of biography, memoir, journalism, creative non-fiction, poetry and fiction edited by David Theis, although such a collection, like most, does not concern itself with a critical framework.

When laying the groundwork for such a framework that considers the literary production of Houston, it is instructive to look beyond the metropolitan area to Texas as a whole, where there seems to have been an assumption since the 1980's of a state that has, in Tom Pilkington's words, "generated its own literary tradition, separate from the national and regional traditions of which it is a part" (8). Pilkington admits "North Dakotans do not claim for themselves a North Dakota literature, nor do Kansans normally think in terms of a Kansas "literary tradition'," and "[f]urthermore, people from other states may think the idea of a Texas Institute of Letters rather pretentious" (25), yet this pretension does seem powerful enough to have engendered several overviews of "Texas Literature," such as Pilkington's own *State of Mind: Texas Literature and Culture* (1998), and James Ward Lee's *Adventures with a Texas Humanist* (2004). These works tend to take a literally "traditional" approach, identifying recurring cultural motifs over time in much the manner used to characterize the literature of the American south before the mid-twentieth century. Although assumed to exist, the quality or merit of "Texas Letters" has been a topic of discussion dating at least to novelist Larry McMurtry's 1981 article in the *Texas Observer*, "Ever a Bridegroom: Reflections on the Failure of Texas Literature," wherein he characterizes the state's literary production as a "limited, shallow, self-repetitious literature which has so far failed completely to do justice to the complexities of life in the state" (21). While authors such as Katherine Anne Porter, Cormac McCarthy, Sandra Cisneros and McMurtry himself have garnered some critical attention, the question arises as to whether or not

and in what capacity these are "Texas writers" as opposed to American writers who merely have some association with the state. Pilkington concludes that "it seems clear that extant criticism of Texas writing is still relatively slight" (32-33). This appears to be a common viewpoint, and is arguably true, but does indicate a blind spot towards the sophisticated theoretical attention scholars such as Ramón Saldívar (1990's *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*) or José Limón (1998's *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States and the Erotics of Culture*) have given Texas-Latino/a authors like Cisneros, Tomás Rivera, and Américo Paredes.

When the state of the question is narrowed to Houston, these issues of blind spots, theoretical frameworks and their sophistication (or lack thereof), and authorial attention, all apply. At 10,062 square miles, Greater Houston is nearly the size of Maryland; a global city with 90 foreign consulates and 22 foreign-owned banks (Parker, 119). Its diversity goes beyond business connections: more than a million Houston residents are foreign born, nearly one in four, and almost half of these are recent arrivals, the city having gained more immigrant residents in the twenty-first century than any U.S. city save New York. Rather than forming ethnic enclaves, these newcomers are often dispersed across a county-wide suburban area, decreasing levels of segregation (Rhor). This nearly explosive heterogeneity is countered by Houston's location in Texas, a state that, in the words of Pilkington, "is held together by a powerful chauvinistic mythology that generates fierce loyalty from almost all who think of themselves as Texans" (26). Add to this paradoxical and fluid interaction of power dynamics and social hierarchy the findings of a 2014 study by the Center for Houston's Future which highlights a thriving, and growing, center of cultural production—with one non-profit arts organization for every two square miles of the city (26), plus a ranking second only to Los Angeles for artists' wages (38)—and it is possible to see in Houston a culturally productive area of juxtaposed, contradictory and

interacting influences calling to mind such spatial models as Michel Foucault's "heterotopia," Edward Soja's "Third Space," and, indeed, Gloria Anzaldúa's "*Coatlicue* state." A study of the fictional products of Houston is both appropriate to a critical analysis of the interactions of place and literature, and timely as an investigation of a particular, developing cultural region whose artistic production might someday be as central as its present day importance as an energy and aeronautics hub.

Of the writers taken up by this dissertation, only Donald Barthelme can be considered the subject of extended analysis, there being presently eight critical monographs, a critical anthology, and multiple articles and book chapters that deal with his work. Rick Bass is the subject of one critical anthology and his fiction and non-fiction is often a topic for conference panels centering on ecocritical issues. Seldom are either author's connections to Houston emphasized, however. While a handful of articles deal with the work of Farnoosh Moshiri—at times in connection with other Iranian American writers—Tony Diaz can be studied for the most part only through media reports concerning his community activism. My chapters on the latter two authors depend for background on the media and personal interviews. As for the place at the center of the present study, it is of interest that only two general histories of Houston are presently in publication, both ending their narratives in the mid-twentieth century: David McComb's *Houston, A History* (1981), and Marguerite Johnston's aptly titled *Houston: The Unknown City 1836-1946* (1991). At present, the 2010 publication of the aforementioned *Literary Houston* provides the most promising occasion to date for further study of this place and its literature. The mere presence of editor David Theis's anthology makes possible such fruitful questions as: What is a "Houston writer?" Is there such a thing as "Houston Literature?" What does it mean for the concept of "place" to assume that there is? Although a nationally

recognized creative writing program has attracted serious students of poetry, non-fiction, and fiction writing to the city for twenty years—including two in this study—Theis laments (ironically for an anthologist) that there seems to be relatively little writing *about* Houston, as if there were a problem with "seeing Houston as a real city, and not simply an economic one where you go to make your first million before moving on to less humid and topographically deprived pastures" (xiii). It is also the case that many highly acclaimed native Houstonian writers have fixed their gaze well outside the city limits when choosing settings for their works. Donald Barthelme's stories arguably exist in a universe of his own creation, or, if tethered to a recognizable place, are often set in New York City. Rick Bass is a similar case: raised in the Houston suburbs, yet associated with another place entirely, the Yaak Valley of Montana. Is it possible to speak of a "Houston literature" that is not, itself, set in Houston? For that matter, given the heterogeneous and fluid "sense of place" arguably common to the city, does a lack of connection in and of itself have a relation to the artistic representations produced by Houston authors? These trends and questions will be taken up by this study as topics of inquiry, addressing gaps in the "relatively slight" (Pilkington 33) attention given to Houston's literature, adding an analytic dimension to examination of this "place," and doing so multifocally, via a selection of the fictional works produced by the four writers of this study who—I will argue—are each "Houstonians."

Another argument can certainly be made that, *as* a test case for geocritical study, Houston has some attractive qualities. For one it has not been the source of a literary production so large as to make it what Westphal labels an "artistically mythic" place—such as London, New York, or Rome—sites containing bodies of work so great that "full-scale geocritical analysis . . . would be madness" (Westphal 127). It can also be argued that the four authors are positioned variously

vis-à-vis the spatial referent—some representing *endogenous* or native viewpoints, while others belong to the *allogeneous* class of authors who, though arriving from distant places, have made the city an integral part of their life and work. Hence the choice of these four authors makes at least an initial stab at meeting Westphal's "main principle of geocritical analysis," which "resides in the confrontation of several outlooks which correct each other" (187). In addition, with Barthelme's first story collection, from 1963, serving as the first point of study, followed by Rick Bass's Houston stories from the 1980's, Farnoosh Moshiri's 2005 novel (set in Houston in the 1990s) *Against Gravity*, and Tony Diaz's 1998 novel *The Aztec Love God* along with an examination of his very recent "Librotraficante" movement active between 2012 and 2017, another stab is made towards utilizing literary works *stratigraphically*—or, as Prieto puts it, serving for "evidence of the various ways in which places have been perceived at different moments in their history" ("Geocriticism Meets"). There are a variety of ethnic backgrounds represented as well: two Anglo-Americans, a Latino, and an Iranian-American immigrant (although, as we'll see, Moshiri prefers to think of herself as an "exile"). The breadth and variety of this group can and should be augmented in future studies, but as an initial "multifocal core" I feel the four make for a substantial attempt at multifocalization.

Eric Prieto's statement that, in a geocritical approach, "[q]uestions of textual mechanics, aesthetic value, and the author's world view are considered . . . in light of their referential relationship with the real-world place" ("Geocriticism Meets"), presents the main task in an analysis of a multifocal group of texts featuring a geocentered place. Robert Tally defines geocriticism as "a critical framework that focuses on the spatial representations within the texts [that] would also explore the overlapping territories of actual, physical geography and an author's or characters's cognitive mapping in the literary text" ("Geocriticism and Classic

American Literature"). What this means in an actual analytical sense has been the question I've undertaken upon placing these texts "in light of their referential relationship" with Houston Texas. In doing so, I have settled upon two main approaches. One fairly straightforward method of noting a place/text referential relationship or "overlapping territory" of textual and physical geography involves the description of setting. This would seem to be what D.W. Meinig has in mind when he lauds "the value of literature in sharpening our sensitivities to the human experience with place" (316). While there is indeed such value, and it is made note of in the chapters that follow, setting in and of itself is of limited use for my purposes. Laurence Buell notes a common way to consider what I have come to call these "direct" relations between place and text:

> Here and elsewhere in fiction, writers typically regulate the evocation of setting according to a few simple rules: prefatoriness (each new location briefly described), dramatic intensification ("It was all wild and lonesome"), and symbolic doubling ("the silence in which the house was wrapped was another fold of the mystery which involved him"). Perhaps this formula explains the durability of the term "setting": that is, mere backdrop. (254)

The presence of "mere backdrop" descriptions of place does not justify inclusion of a text in this study, a consideration that sheds some light not only on which writers *have* been included, but which others—perhaps unexpectedly—*have not*. For example, for *Texas Monthly* journalist, Mimi Swartz, "[t]he hands-down best novelist on Houston is Larry McMurtry; the best of his books set here—*Moving On, All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers, Terms of Endearment,* and *The Evening Star*—evoke the place with affection and authority" (56). Rice History professor Douglas Brinkley calls the first three Swartz mentions an "underappreciated

Houston trilogy," and, in a recent *New York Times* article, adds the novelist's *Some Can Whistle* (1989), the sequel to *All My Friends*, as a work he considers "Houston's literary high-water mark." For Brinkley: "By using recognizable landmarks like high-spouting Mecom Fountain and ostentatious River Oaks, by drawing upon the social conditions of the metro area, by bringing slapstick to Houston's six historic wards, McMurtry has bestowed lasting honor on the flood-prone city. In the Republic of Letters he has made Houston matter" (22). Perhaps he has helped Houston's status in this Republic, but the attributes Brinkley mentions—save, perhaps, "social conditions of the metro area"—all read as the superficial, "direct" effect of place-experience, that is: setting. University of Houston literary critic Terrell Dixon, attempting to nail down the appeal of the popular author's version of Houston, notes that:

> McMurtry's presentation of the physical aspects of Houston comes from a steady and fairly unobtrusive accumulation of detail, rather than through any attempted overview or extended description. Some of the detail is, in fact, a simple naming of streets. . . . At most, this naming provides a flat kind of telephone book or street map representation of reality which he supplements with extensive references to climate. (95)

McMurtry, who was born and raised 380 miles from Houston in the Archer City area, lived in the city a relatively short time when a graduate student at Rice University, unlike the two "outsider" novelists encountered in this study, Moshiri and Diaz, who came from a distance, but made the city their permanent home. McMurtry could be assigned, then, to what Westphal calls the *exogenous* author category. Works composed from this viewpoint are often created to inform neophytes about the "elsewhere quality" of a place via facts, data, information, and the occasional map. This Westphal labels "the vision of the traveler; it exudes exoticism" (128).

This approach, common to the travel narrative, is less favored for geocritical study in his view as being "privileged by those who adopt the egocentered perspective of the author" (129). The experience of place in such works, in other words, takes a backseat to the perspective and choices of the author, and might rely on stereotypical descriptions—as if a guide-book were at the elbow of the composing writer (or, as per Dixon, a telephone book and street map).

At any rate, authors whose works lean heavily toward this direct, setting-like description of place are less favored for this study than those who evince a different, deeper relation between place and text. This relation first occurred to me upon encountering a 2009 *New York Review of Books* portrait of Donald Barthelme and his enduring influence by fiction writer Lorrie Moore. Therein she notes that "though his early reading of Mallarmé is usually given the credit" for Barthelme's unique style, his early life spent in a "sprawling city without zoning ordinances and resplendent with surreal juxtapositions (billboards next to churches next to barbecue shacks), must have been a deep and abiding influence" ("How He Wrote His Songs"). Indeed, as we shall see, that style included a great deal of the "resplendent . . . surreal juxtaposition" Moore mentions as characteristic of Barthelme's home town, and would represent an aesthetic reaction to the city, deeper in my mind than a "storehouse of vivid descriptions" as it concerns the structure of the narrative itself. It recalls the category of place influence Lefebvre mentions in *The Production of Space* when he relates how rows of cypresses were planted in thirteenth century Tuscany, separating newly developed social classes from each other's view.

> Symbol of property, immortality, and perpetuity, the cypress thus inscribed itself upon the countryside, imbuing it with depth and meaning. The trees, the criss-crossing of these alleys, sectioned and organized the land. Their arrangement was evocative of the laws of perspective. . . . Town and country—and the relationship

> between them—had given birth to a space which it would fall to the painters, and first among them in Italy to the Siena school, to identify, formulate and develop. (78)

These aesthetic laws of perspective could be carried out for any visual subject—not just cypresses, in other words, and certainly not only in Tuscany—just as any "relationship" Barthelme absorbed from the city of his youth (into his thirties), no longer required those juxtapositions be used in the service of description of the literal place, Houston. Indeed, we shall see, they arguably are *not* used in that way. This kind of relationship between place and text I have come to call "received," borrowed after the not-exactly-similar concept of the "virtual gaze" expressed by Anne Friedberg in *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (1993), mainly in the sense of it being mediated: "not a direct perception," she says of the virtual gaze, "but a *received* perception mediated through representation" (2). In the case of what I am calling the "received" place/text relations I've uncovered in the four authors, and how they parallel the place-experience of Houston, they are most generally mediated through an author's aesthetic choices, expressed either in narrative structure, characterization, or an emphasized aspect of the presented story. To me the concept also bears a great deal of resemblance to what Jeffrey Nealon labels as "overcoding" in *Post-Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time-Capitalism* (2012): a parallelism between economic effects and cultural effects and how these find their way into literary expression. An example for Nealon would be the way "contemporary literature is open ended, process oriented, not dedicated to the limitations of univocal meaning" mainly because it swims in a world of "global capitalism [that] is open ended, process oriented, not dedicated to the limitations of univocal meaning" (22). Nealon himself borrows this concept from the "transcoding" of Frederic Jameson in *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009), where "[t]he

structure of production can . . . be translated or transcoded into the language of class struggle, and vice versa" (46-47). When Lucien Goldmann in *The Hidden God* (1956) discovers connections between Racine's tragedies, the philosophy of Pascal, Jansenism and the French social group the *noblesse de la robe*, he registers a similar parallelism of societal characteristics to characteristics found in literary texts that he labels "homology" (18-19). That critics—especially Marxist critics—should identify the relation between the material and literary worlds, for me, means such overcodes, transcodes, and homologies may similarly be encountered to usefully complicate our reading of the materiality of place. I have proceeded with the approach that those works that evince a preponderance of "received" influence from Houston, as opposed the more descriptive "direct" sort, are better candidates for what Westphal has labeled (but only poorly defined) "artistic referents" (121), a term I read as opposed to other kinds of referents (telephone books, guide-books, street maps, etc.).

My first search for the "received" kinds of relations is attempted in this study with Donald Barthelme, both because among the four his writing occurs first chronologically (part of the aforementioned attempt at a *stratigraphic* reading of Houston), and as an appropriate foundational exercise given that many of the stories examined, in Thomas M. Leitch's terms, offer "no sense of place or community" (85) at all. The study will argue that Barthelme's fiction serves as useful *tabula rasa* for uncovering relationships that can be applied to other authors as well, and the chapter on his first collection, *Come Back Dr. Caligari* (1964) will serve as a cornerstone for the study as a whole.

The reading of the works of these four authors, paralleled with considerations of the place that is Houston, Texas, led inevitably to various theoretical perspectives that called attention to themselves as appropriate to those relations. Because Houston is a densely populated, globally

connected, urbanized metropolis, observations concerning the effects of the urban experience on human society going back to Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin also proved helpful and necessary in examining the works of Barthelme, including perceptions of the *flâneur*, a figure relevant to the Houston experience both in its early bipedal and later mobilized and cinematic forms. It turned out that the works of the four major authors here considered are varied enough that different spatial relationships proved useful in the examination of each, at times presenting writers who "Houstonize" their vision of the world, at other times demonstrating examples of authors who "globalize" their vision of Houston. Border theory came into play in my reading of the Houston stories of Rick Bass, as with the analysis of Tony Diaz. Farnoosh Moshiri called forth a closer examination of the role of the exile, as well as Derrida's concept of "Cities of Refuge." One way of summarizing what occurred in my readings is to say that each author emphasizes a distinct "imagined Houston," which accounts for the pluralization of this study's subtitle: *Places, Fictions, Houstons*. The four taken together bring to bear not only different focalizations of artistic references, but also multiple theories of place, of literature, of urban experience and spatiality.

Something should be said about the first part of the title, *The Capital of Elsewhere*. In fact, Houston was made the capital of the pre-statehood Republic of Texas on April 19, 1837, after which—in an altercation between second Republic President Sam Houston and third President Mirabeau Lamar—it was *moved elsewhere* (Austin) in 1839. Texas humorist John Nova Lomax argued in *Texas Monthly* in 2013 that the state capital should by all rights be moved back, as it represents nearly all the "elsewheres" in the state:

> Texas is now an urban state, and Houston, the mestizo megalopolis where the Dirty South meets Aztlán, is every Texas city. It has an Austin inside it, in the

> Heights and parts of Montrose. It has barrios to rival those of El Paso and San Antonio, in the East End and on the Northside. Louisiana lagniappe is scattered about in all the Cajun, Creole, and post-Katrina New Orleans eateries and in the zydeco that is a living, vital part of black Houston culture. There's a Dallas in and around the Galleria and Highland Village, and once a year, the whole city pretends to be Fort Worth at rodeo time. In fact, with trail rides clogging all our roads on Go Texan Day, we might even out-Cowtown Cowtown itself.

This in itself shouldn't be enough to entitle the city to the status of "capital," and, in fact, given the unpropitious landscape and climate of the original founding site of the city, a fact that caused architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable to entitle her 1975 *New York Times* overview of Houston, "Deep in the Heart of Nowhere," *The Capital of Nowhere* had to be considered a title contender. Yet this seemed the wrong note entirely for the works under consideration. Partly because Massey's notion of place identity as "constructed through the specificity of [its] interaction with other places rather than by counterposition to them" (121) seemed especially appropriate to Houston with its multicultural population, and cadre of oil professionals with both Houston and global connections; partly because Massey's idea of place also seems a nod to the city's freeway system, connecting Houston to so many elsewheres; partly because two of the authors in this study were native to Houston, then moved elsewhere, while two others are now settled residents of the city, having arrived *from* other places; the present title began to form. As should be hinted by this paragraph, the concept of "elsewhere" is also of importance to "the outsider," a recurring theme among the four authors' works that I will attempt to bring into relation in the study's conclusion.

Aside from all of the above, perhaps the title was influenced by that sentiment I myself have often experienced, captured by David Theis in his introductory chapter to the *Literary Houston* anthology—that sense of a strange, ethereal "elsewhere" that travels along with the inner consciousness of some Houstonians: "For years it's been the joke—and the truth—here," says Theis, "that, when you're having a particularly fine experience; when you feel really comfortable in a restaurant or at an event, you feel compelled to say, 'This is so great. I feel like I'm not in Houston'" (xvi). He admits, as a city's literary anthologist no doubt should, that "Houston is growing into itself," and "[y]ou hear this refrain much less often these days. . . . On the rare occasion when people still trot out the cliché, I want to say, *Open your eyes. This is what Houston is like*" (xvi).

This study is one person's geocritical response to Theis's request. With its ethnic diversity, juxtapositions resulting from no-zoning policies and freeway sprawl, intersecting cultural and geographical borders, nearness to the national border of Mexico and inclusion in "Greater Mexico," experience with frontiers and boundaries both geological via its far reaching petroleum exploration connections, and universal owing to the presence of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Houston turns out to be a "Space City" in more ways than one.

Endnotes - Chapter I

[1] While Dainotto's book is entitled *Literature and Place,* it is arguable that his real beef is not with most evaluations of "place," but rather with ideas of "region" and "regionalism."

[2] For Marc *Augé*, one characteristic of places is "They want to be—people want them to be—places of identity, of relations and of history" (52).

[3] One test of the helpfulness of the circle and the cross is the very sensible question: "what *isn't* a place under this definition?" I, in fact, can imagine what I will here consider "locales" that would be missing one of these contradictory urges, perhaps an intersection of two farm-to-market roads in West Texas for example, that would fail to qualify not because the four corners of that crossing are bare, but because it lacks the kind of social interaction that would cause anyone to identify with that intersection. It would lack, in other words, a circle.

[4] An exception could be considered the "Librotraficante" persona adopted by Tony Diaz and analyzed in Chapter V, although I would argue that does qualify as having a "performative dimension" as Prieto says of all great works of literature (*Literature, Geography* 9), and, by extension, may be considered a form of "street theater."

[5] Lest readers fall into interpreting this passage as arguing for the "timeless" or "unchanging" quality of a term like "essential," Westphal follows this passage with the caveat: "At the same time, we confirm that any cultural identity is only the result of incessant efforts of creation and re-creation" (*Geocriticism* 114).

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CHAPTER II

"I WANT TO GO SOMEWHERE WHERE EVERYTHING IS DIFFERENT."

DONALD BARTHELME, HOUSTONIAN

"Let us suppose that someone is writing a story," begins Donald Barthelme in his essay "Not-Knowing" (1986). "From the world of conventional signs he takes an azalea bush" (11). Readers follow as this "someone" spins a narrative of love, wit, and even commerce in and around the bush, a tale intertwined with Barthelme's own speculations on the uncertainties of inspiration, and, for that matter, the necessity *for* uncertainty in inspiration. The initial bush is, we are to believe, a randomly chosen "conventional sign"—a story-starter of the MacGuffin variety, plucked arbitrarily from all possible shrub-like signifiers in an impromptu game of "Let's Suppose." It exists, arguably, for the purpose merely of initiating a narrative example inside of a prose work about narrative initiation. A gardenia could have served as well as a flowering plant beneath which to place the equally random items the essay soon collects, such as "a handsome thief and a chastity belt," or "Jacqueline and Jemima" who also appear, both having "just failed the Graduate Record Examination" (11).

Barthelme, however—in this, one of only two essays he published concerning the writing process—makes the case a few pages later that language comes always with worldly burdens. "The prior history of words," says the author," is one of the aspects of language the world uses to smuggle itself into the work. If words can be contaminated by the world, they can also carry with them into the work trace elements of world which can be used in a positive sense." (22).

Though on the one hand a flowering plant with its own set of meanings in the language of blooms, the azalea is also "contaminated" by 90 years' exposure to annual garden expositions

featuring nearly unexcelled pomp and public relations bluster in a particular American city, one in which Donald Barthelme spent almost three of the first decades of his life. Occurring each early March, and currently sponsored by the tony River Oaks Garden Club, the "Azalea Trail" has been labeled by journalist Kathy Huber as "Houston's favorite rite of spring" ("Azalea Trail is a Rite"). Participants purchase packages which allow them to travel this "trail," which is not a cross-country walking path, but a turn through some of the city's most impressive gardens and residences. I would argue that Barthelme, in describing the creative impulse of this "someone," has not *randomly* plucked from the universe of conventional signs at all, but chosen rather from a more limited offering, "contaminated by the world" of his own experiences, and—it might be said—of his own, home place.

Though his final literary stature remains undetermined, Donald Barthelme is at present the most influential Houston author taken up by this study. His work is notoriously difficult to categorize, Thomas M. Leitch claiming that "the most striking feature of Donald Barthelme's fiction is the number of things it gets along without," a list of negations that includes, among other aspects, "no sense of place or community" (85). In addition, on the occasions Barthelme *is* associated with a "place," it is not usually Houston, but rather the city and culture Michael Thomas Hudgens goes so far as to label his "context": "upscale New York City, the art circuit," as well as his "home" in the pages of "the *New Yorker*, where he made his reputation and had a relatively loyal readership" (vi). Biographical information underscores, however—as his friend the poet Edward Hirsch puts it—"how deeply the Barthelme family was rooted in Texas in general and in Houston in particular" (340). Donald Barthelme, the son of well known Houston modernist architect Donald Barthelme Sr., was raised in Houston from the age of two until leaving for the aforementioned New York at thirty, a period interrupted only by a two-years'

service in the Army.[1] It was in Houston that he attended St. Ann's Catholic School, a rigorous, disciplined, educational setting operating under the auspices of the Basilian order, an experience that apparently gave him his first distaste for authoritarian dogmatism as later reflected in his stories. Going on to become an award winning student writer at Houston's Lamar High School as well as a student—although never a graduate—at the University of Houston, Barthelme worked as a journalist at the daily newspaper, the *Houston Post*, and served as artistic director for the Houston Contemporary Arts Museum from 1961 to 1963, writing, during that period, the earliest of the short stories for which he would become a much discussed American literary figure. Returning to the city in 1980 after seventeen years in New York, Barthelme took over the direction of the creative writing program at the University of Houston, influencing directly and indirectly other writers included in this study.

For Walter Benjamin, "[t]he masses had become so much a part of Baudelaire that it is rare to find a description of them in his works" (167). As with Baudelaire and the masses, so with Barthelme and Houston, as—in spite of the above mentioned years of influence and place-experience—the literal city appears seldom in his writing, serving as a named setting in only one of his most popularly anthologized stories, "Lightning," first appearing in *The New Yorker* in 1982. Yet Houston's effect on his work, and especially on the distinctive aesthetic choices that appear in his stories, has been mentioned more than once. American fiction writer Lorrie Moore laid out the connection as succinctly as anyone, noting that, "though his early reading of Mallarmé is usually given the credit" for his unique style, Barthelme's early life spent in a "sprawling city without zoning ordinances and resplendent with surreal juxtapositions (billboards next to churches next to barbecue shacks), must have been a deep and abiding influence" ("How He Wrote His Songs"). For Nicole Sierra, who explores in a 2012 article in *Pacific Coast*

Philology "the usefulness of architecture as an interart analogy" for Barthelme's work (75), the spatial, narrative, organizational sense that resulted from absorbing the ideas and concerns of his architect father "was coupled, and perhaps reinforced by, the unusual landscape of Houston, Texas—the only major city in the United States without zoning ordinances" (77).

The present chapter, examining the usefulness of analogies of a particular "place," Houston, Texas, in regards to the works of Donald Barthelme, will attempt to expand upon these observations using spatial, sociological, and historical aspects considered unique to the city. It will take up, as geocritic Eric Prieto, puts it: "[q]uestions of textual mechanics, aesthetic value, and the author's world view . . . considered in light of their referential relationship with the real-world place" ("Geocriticism Meets"). In addition, the world view of Donald Barthelme can affect our own "place-experience" of the Bayou City itself, his stories adding to this study's multi-focal examination of Houston via the works of our four authors. In Barthelme we encounter an artist with works that resist ready interpretation so profoundly that resisting interpretation seems part of their obvious purpose. His output is, in addition, as large as it is confounding. Coming to grips with the Barthelme *oeuvre* is like getting one's arms around the Balloon that stretches from Fourteenth Street to Central Park in the story named after it (in *Sixty Stories* 53). Out of the large, varied and difficult-to-classify body of work produced by this author, this chapter will concentrate on specific stories from his first collection—those produced closest in time to his long, early contact with Houston—*Come Back Dr. Caligari* (1964). It will conclude by examining a little known, atypical Barthelme story, one which does include the city as an obvious, foregrounded, setting: "Return" (1987). Written specifically on the occasion of the author's re-appearance in Texas after his extended absence in New York, a hint of the

instructiveness of "Return" for our purposes might be found in its first sentence: "I went on the Azalea Trail, and shot one, right through the heart" (35).

Barthelme's first book, the story collection *Come Back Dr. Caligari*, appeared in print on April 1, 1964. An advance preview of the work included a letter from Little Brown Associate Editor (and Barthelme friend) Herman Gollob, who promised readers "one of the most exciting, uniquely gifted new writers of the past decade." According to Gollob, for those taking up the collection "Mr. Barthelme's bizarre vision of life may terrify you, confound you, infuriate you, or just plain amuse you, but we guarantee that it will not leave you indifferent" (in Dougherty 242). Whether or not indifference ultimately overtakes his vision is yet to be seen, but *Come Back Dr. Caligari* remains a foundational text for studying his work, and for examining the influence of his home town on his aesthetic.

Several of the *Caligari* stories have demonstrated staying power throughout the author's decades-long career, and project a high profile even today in the Barthelme canon. The first anthologized collection of his short works, *60 Stories* (1981), included five of the book's fourteen offerings, including "Me and Miss Mandible" and "A Shower of Gold," both of which have attracted substantial scholarly comment. The posthumous *Flying to America* (2007) re-issued eight more, including "the Viennese Opera Ball," "Florence Green is 81"—a work that will take up a great deal of our concern here—and "Hiding Man." Thus, listing what critics, editors and anthologists appear to consider Barthelme's most important short fiction, his first collection is well represented. Scholars have also noted how what might be called the *seeds* of his aesthetic—his strategies of narrative discourse—are on full display from this first volume forward. Charles Thomas Samuels finds "in the first story of his first collection both his main artistic strategy and the crucial question it raises" (39). For Samuels that question is keyed to the

narrator's musing in "Florence Green is 81": "I am free associating, brilliantly, brilliantly, to put you into the problem. Or for fear of boring you: which?" (4).[2] For Jerome Klinkowitz, what he calls the "technical experiments" of *Come Back Dr. Caligari* are "brought into practice" in later, perhaps more famous stories such as "The Balloon" as well as in more extended works such as the 1975 novel, *The Dead Father* (*An Exhibition* 42-3).

Though containing precursors of most narrative strategies he'll employ in later works, reasons also arise for considering *Caligari* when reading Donald Barthelme more specifically through the lens of a particular place. Tracy Dougherty's biography, *Hiding Man* (2009), reveals how "[m]ore than half the stories" in the first collection "were written or first drafted in Houston," most of these at the home he shared in the city's Montrose district with second wife Helen Barthelme (243). These included many that were, by the author's own reckoning, the earliest "successful" stories he had ever written (Barthelme, Helen 148). Deeper structural elements resonate, however. Houston in the 1960s could be seen as a young city occupying a heterogeneous zone located within a diverse cultural crossroads: a metropolis characterized both by the suburban sprawl enabled by automobile ownership, and the economically powerful centralizing global connections provided by the petroleum industry. In other words, the fluidity and category-defying hybridity of Houston is *part of* its "sense of place." Even *Come Back, Dr. Caligari's* over-arching structure might be seen as analogous to this category-defying hybridity. Klinkowitz takes up the issue of story sequencing in the collection, noting first that both the order and organization are a "radical departure" from the order of first publication—effacing the chronological arc of the stories' appearances in print. For Klinkowitz, positioning what he calls the "disorganized selections" (stories that defy chronology, character and other conventions usually associated with fictional narrative such as "Florence Green" and "The Viennese Opera

Ball") in both the beginning and middle of the book challenges reader expectations. "The fact is," he concludes, "this apparent diversity of method is central to the author's purpose in breaking up the modernist lock on expression and interpretation" (21). Another way of looking at it would be to say that the collection is as diverse, inconsistent and even paradoxical as the city in which most of it was written. But it is within several of the individual stories that a deeper analogy with the place-experience of Houston becomes more obvious.

As mentioned, though not the first of his stories written or placed before the public by Donald Barthelme, readers are presented with the work "Florence Green Is 81" as the initial story in the first book he published. Besides the fact that it was composed in the Bayou City, other empirical evidence links "Florence Green" to the place that interests this study, such as Helen Barthelme's claim that "several prominent Houston women believed the character of Florence was based on each of them" (94). The more symbolically inclined might point to the name "Florence Green" itself: an echo of the qualities encountered in a city bound—and often threatened—by the *flow* of water, not only via hurricanes, but tropical storms, and other instances of flooding and ponding. In fact, that there is a looming "deluge" hidden within the works of each writer taken up by this dissertation will serve as one of the study's overarching conclusions. Architect Bruce Webb finds "[w]ater—*flowing*, drenching, rising, as well as invisibly suspended in the sultry air most of the year" directly linked to the *genius loci* of the city (3 emphasis added). As for Florence's surname, located, as it is, in a tropical region, many have described the *greenness* of the city as well, Helen Barthelme being one: "As a metropolis of the south more than the southwest, Houston is a city of trees. Even now . . . one can look out from an airliner and see that trees remain a dominant part of the landscape" (67). With no more to go on than Florence Green's name, we might infer that the story's grande dame who oversees a

dinner party at her "huge horizontal old multibathroom home" *represents* Houston, dealing as she does with her invited guests much in the way professor of Sociology, Urban and Environmental Policy at Occidental College, Jan Lin, characterizes the city itself as host to "an eclectic cast of characters (including heroic pioneers, cowboys, wildcatters, oilmen, and spacemen) . . . historically fused in a unifying patina of forward-looking rugged individuals" (629).

All of the above, however, represent the sort of unmediated, even superficial influences of place on text that may be associated either with extra-textual information—such as Helen Barthelme's biographical note concerning the "several prominent Houston women"—or explicit reference: the kind of referential relationship I have chosen to label as "direct." However, Barthelme's stories—especially as they evince, in Leitch's terms, "no sense of place or community"—offer an enticing test case for whether or not deeper structures of place appear in referential relationship to an author's productions, aesthetic values, and world view. These I have styled "received" effects: deeply mediated and even *hidden* aspects, tucked or folded away in an artistic referent's aesthetic choices and forms of presentation, aspects that are perhaps framed or identified only when that text is examined through the lens of place. An instructive starting point to seek these deeper forms is the first paragraph of "Florence Green is 81." As a portion of a fractal image recreates the larger pattern of the whole, the paragraph encapsulates many of the narrative approaches Barthelme will take for the story overall, as well as in his overall career as a writer of fiction.

> Dinner with Florence Green. The old babe is on a kick tonight: *I want to go to some other country*, she announces. Everyone wonders what this can mean. But Florence says nothing more: no explanation, no elaboration, after a satisfied

> look around the table bang! she is asleep again. The girl at Florence's right is new here and does not understand. I give her an ingratiating look (a look that says, "There is nothing to worry about, I will explain everything later in the privacy of my quarters Kathleen"). Lentils vegetate in the depths of the fourth principal river of the world, the Ob, in Siberia, 3200 miles. We are talking about Quemoy and Matsu. "It's a matter of leading from strength. What is the strongest possible move on our part? To deny them the islands even though the islands are worthless in themselves." Baskerville, a sophomore at the Famous Writers School in Westport, Connecticut, which he attends with the object of becoming a famous writer, is making his excited notes. The new girl's boobies are like my secretary's knees, very prominent and irritating. Florence began the evening by saying, grandly, "The upstairs bathroom leaks you know." What does Herman Kahn think about Quemoy and Matsu? I can't remember, I can't remember . . . (3 emphases in original)

Here is an aesthetic of sudden non sequitur: a description of the title character, then one of her guests, suddenly interrupted by snippets that could have come from geography textbooks. In film terms—which are often helpful in examining Barthelme—the narrative has moved from a pan shot of the dinner table across the figures of Florence and the girl, Kathleen, to a "jump cut"—switching attention abruptly to an unrelated lesson concerning lentils and the River Ob. Close readers interested in place will find the mention of geographical locations a commonly recurring element in the story. Another "jump" from Siberia back to dinner is occasioned by table conversation concerning the global crisis regarding defense testing in the Taiwan Straits—the Quemoy and Matsu incident. Before uncovering the source of this particular topic—we do

not always learn in "Florence Green" who around the dinner table says what—there is a new encounter with someone named "Baskerville," a writer who is, in fact, by all indications as we read deeper into the story, the narrator himself. Or: is it possible that we are reading his "excited notes"—included but not separated from the third person narrator's account? Such inconsistencies in point of view cloud the reader's judgment here and elsewhere in *Caligari*—often with spatial consequences, as well as consequences for identity and its fluidity in the Barthelme world. Another film term—flashback—applies with a dip into the past ("Florence began the evening by saying, grandly. . . .") and a report on the house's poor plumbing. Indeed, for William Gass, much of Barthelme's method in *all* of his work consists of "putting end to end and next to next" (100), and that method is on full display from this initial paragraph in this first book's initial story. Without belaboring the point, the paragraph ends after a space of only two hundred words having delivered the impression of an aesthetic production Barthelme takes as a touchstone throughout his career: collage. Images, narrative techniques, places and ideas, are all seen in juxtaposition, unconnected by any discernable narrative thread.

In his 1971-72 interview with Jerome Klinkowitz, the author expanded upon his oft-repeated statement that "the principle of collage is one of the central principles of art in this century."[3] "The point of a collage," says Barthelme, "is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality" ("Interview" 204). "Florence Green Is 81" proceeds for thirteen pages placing "unlike things" alongside each other. This occurs in so many instances it is difficult to imagine the author expecting readers to recognize everything on the page: the effect is not necessarily dependent, that is, on knowing the location of the river Ob, the identity of Herman Kahn nor his thoughts concerning Quemoy and Matsu, the simple fact of the juxtapositions being the point. This is a strategy brought to the fore in *Come Back Dr. Caligari,*

especially in this first story and the seventh, "The Viennese Opera Ball," a story in which surgical procedures reside alongside anthropological reports, the biographies of young models, an actual Opera Ball in Vienna, and details concerning letterpress printing (85-86).[4] In "Florence Green" the dinner table talk is interspersed with psychotherapy, information on U.S. cities and their populations, a voyage in years past by Florence on the *Graf Zeppelin,* and summaries of Baskerville's unfinished novel, this litany only scratching the surface. Geography is invoked again when in response to Florence's desire to *go to some other country* the suggestions from dinner guests as to just which nation might suffice create a list of global space-shrinking abutments, with distant (and vastly different) places brought together in a classic collage manner: "What about Casablanca? Santa Cruz? Funcha. Malaga? Valletta? Iraklion? Samos? Haifa? Kotor Bay? Dubrovnik?" (14). The narrator himself might well be considered a juxtaposition whose aspects, viewed together, create a new, collage-type identity from a combination of elements. When Kathleen inquires as to his job, Baskerville identifies himself as "an American weightlifter and poet (that is to say: *a man stronger and more eloquent than other men*)" (8 emphasis in original).

This kind of "putting end to end and next to next" parallels a strategy noted by Brian McHale in *Postmodern Fiction* (1987), who finds the technique often in postmodern writing: in his terminology, the putting together of "segments" for the construction of "zones." For McHale, "spaces which real-world atlases or encyclopedias show as noncontiguous and unrelated, when juxtaposed in written texts constitute a zone" (45). In fact, McHale uses the collage-like "The Viennese Opera Ball" from *Caligari* as an example of what he calls juxtapositions of discourses along a *horizontal* axis. "That is, segments from different discourse are spliced end-to-end . . .

and the ontological tension between incommensurable discourse-worlds develops, so to speak, *across the seams* between adjacent segments" (170 emphasis in original).[5]

Although Barthelme is often associated with the postmodernist influence McHale taxonomizes in his book, such juxtapositions have of course been associated with the experience of urban life ever since urban life became a topic of study. Although not the first to mention them, in his influential 1903 lecture, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Georg Simmel lays out the basic proposition connecting fragmentation with the urban experience:

> The psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the *intensification of nervous stimulation* which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli. Man is a differentiating creature. His mind is stimulated by the difference between a momentary impression and the one which preceded it. (409-10 emphasis in original)

An attraction to this sort of collecting of momentary impressions begins to sound very much like the viewpoint of the urban *flâneur*, the figure Walter Benjamin described in 1938 in "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" as engaged in "botanizing on the asphalt" (19). For Anke Gleber, these *flâneurs*, as described by Benjamin, are like many modern artists who "pick up the historical materials of their own time, use them in a new context, and thereby recycle some of the discarded but fundamental material aspects of modern life" (51). Anne Friedberg characterizes Benjamin's texts themselves in a way that's similarly analogous to Barthelme's practice of composition: "to collect fragments, to construct dialectical images (*dialektische Bilder*) as a montage of opposites" (50). When she depicts Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as "a succinct instantiation of the fragmentary nature of modernity—its hodgepodge

accumulation, its uncanny juxtapositions" (50), she could be describing the narrative method of "Florence Green is 81."

Barthelme understood a Simmel-like connection between his work, its "disorientation," and the influence of metropolitan life. "The disorientation in my stories is not mine," the author told Stephen Banker in a 1978 interview that's worth quoting at length:

> It is what is to be perceived around us. This is hardly an original observation. It's been made over and over again. I think what I'm doing is rendering rather than creating the disorientation. I think if you went down to the street and stood on the corner of 3rd avenue and 65th and did a 360 degree pan a la Godard's camera, and what registered on the brain, the information that came in, would be pretty unsettling. I mean it's not . . . people in cities are not the same people as people years and years ago where the vista was a few trees and a field, and perhaps a mule. They're different kinds of people because their brains are saturated with a hell of a lot of information, a lot of it indigestible, and much of it threatening, in a way that the neither the field, the trees nor the mule are. I think we're different people, especially city people.

We will find McHale's terminology of "horizontal" juxtaposition useful for our purposes, and it may well be fruitful to examine Barthelme's "information" output via the frame of the *flâneur*,[6] but whether or not the Houston author fits comfortably into the categories of either "modern" or "postmodern"—perhaps "botanizing in the dining room" moving him towards the latter—is of less interest here than the role these fragmentary and juxtaposed images take on in an examination of *place*. The question for this study concerns whether, for "Florence Green" and other Barthelme works, it aids us to pay attention to these horizontal, juxtaposed segments

when seeking the presence of the Bayou City in this author's work. That is: given that "Florence Green," "The Viennese Opera Ball" and other stories operate via juxtaposition of a kind often associated with collage in its various forms, and the urban experience as a general type, is that a reason to associate this particular putting together of disparate discourses and word imagery with the place-experience that is Houston, Texas?

It is true that Houston in particular has been associated with jarring visual and commercial juxtapositions, as seen in Lorrie Moore's example of "billboards next to churches next to barbecue shacks." The city has been described, in fact, using the very term Barthelme identifies as a central principle of art. Architect Bruce Webb relies upon Marcel Duchamp's definition of collage to define Houston as a whole: "the chance meeting on a non-suitable plane of two mutually distant realities." For Webb, "[t]he non-suitable plane in this case was a jungle of swampy woods in a steamy-hot region of clay-bottom land that shares the 30th parallel with the Sahara Desert" (3). In addition, McHale's "zone" terminology touches on vocabulary almost universally associated with Houston, generally in a negative sense, that being "zoning"—or, more accurately *anti-zoning*—mentioned in the quotes above both by Moore and Sierra and, in fact, mentioned in most efforts to describe the city.

A link between clashing juxtaposition and the lack of zoning regulation is easy enough to imagine, but architects Bruce Webb and William Stern point out that Houston's policies may result in an urban scene "not so different, in outward appearance, from other Sun Belt cities" (15) especially given how, aside from zoning, other kinds of land-use regulation are found in all municipalities. In Houston, even without zoning ordinances, the policies of neighborhood associations, business and governmental agencies all project other means for setting boundaries and protecting interests (Webb & Stern 14). Houston's zoning *mentality* might prove more

fruitful when examining a different aspect of Barthelme's work, but when it comes to the concept of collage, another factor worthy of note—and not completely unrelated—is the city's urban sprawl, and especially the freeway system that has arisen to serve its far-flung neighborhoods.

In their study of free enterprise in Houston, Mexican social scientists Jose L. Lozano and Barry Espinosa-Oropeza echo an observation made commonly by other urban planners concerning the unique position of the city when it comes to sprawl. For them, Houston is "[u]nlike other cities in North America who saw their horizontal growth constrained because of the existence of a belt of self-governing suburbs" (12). In addition, "[u]nlike other cities which had consolidated their urban form before the era of motorized transport, at a time of carts and pedestrians, Houston had the advantage of having the free land available for planning streets and massive freeways" (12). Given governmental tools that have favored the power of municipal annexation, and the few physical obstacles to freeway growth, the automobile has had a disproportionate effect on the map of Houston compared to other metropolitan areas. Because of the general lack of barriers to concrete roadways, as well as a lack of historically pre-existing transport means such as streetcars, mechanical engineer Erik Slotboom finds Houston even more of a sprawl metropolis than even the oft-considered "freeway capital of the world," Los Angeles, California (6). Although the influence of the private car is obvious in Houston in the twenty-first century, freeways projected a strong presence even when Barthelme first lived in the city before his departure for the East in 1962. The timeline in James Buchanan's entertaining *Houston: A Chronological & Documentary History* (1975) notes that by 1962, the city had almost the same population as Baltimore, but 64 percent more cars (55). By 1964, Harris County (within which Houston is located) had registered 587,000 vehicles, with 95 percent of Houston residents

depending on automobiles for transportation (57). It stands to reason that this growth occurred in the 1950s and 1960s given the national shift in transportation to personally owned gas-powered vehicles during that time. In 1940, the central business district of Houston was the workplace for 70 percent of doctors, 30 percent of architects and 76 percent of engineers. By 1963, these figures were 14 percent for doctors, 10 percent for architects, and 24 percent for engineers (Buchanan 56). For Lozano and Espinosa-Oropeza, upon the advent of the automobile, the city "quickly formed a 'car cult' among its inhabitants,"—a further catalyst to the outwardly spreading population (12). In another feature unique to the region, the petroleum products powering these cultish icons were an important element of the local economy, i.e., the oil industry, part of the Houston work-life and, hence, part of Houstonians' identities. Webb takes this one step further, describing Houstonians' "devotion to the private automobile" as "a passion that is an expression of the city's culture of freedom and identity" (4).

Native Houstonian Benjamin Moser, writing in the *American Scholar* in 2004, imagines an historian visitor to the city who might seek a book to explain "Houston's commerce, its population, its politics, its art." Instead, this visitor's hosts "might suggest a drive through the city"—although that probably wouldn't help:

> At the end of the day, the visitor would be bewildered. The area containing the usual sights—the museums, the big buildings, the theaters, the elegant neighborhoods—covers many square miles. The constant lurching about in the car would leave him with scattered impressions and he would have trouble finding any real threads to connect them. (66)

Moser describes an experience that parallels readers' encounter with Barthelme. The historian is unable to stitch "meaning" together from his tour of the metropolis in much the same way

Klinkowitz finds the reader of "Florence Green" "is deconditioned, or is at least in no position to do much more than surrender to the story's apparently random form" (*Donald Barthelme* 31). For Klinkowitz, "there is no synthesis"—that is, no interconnected thread—"at all—just the replication of such useless information as a way of keeping all knowledge in the story completely disjunctive" (33).

If Frederic Jameson is correct that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally" (4), the manner in which the car culture economy of Houston affects its "aesthetic production" is worth consideration. Built environments from the time of the development of Houston until the present are often concerned with the mobility of cars rather than the mobility of people, and the narrative of orientation and connection to the environment has altered. The link between a disjunctive account of a dinner party and Houston's affair with the automobile is illuminated by Ann Sussman and Justin B. Hollander in *Cognitive Architecture: Designing for How We Respond to the Built Environment* (2015). These architects see storytelling as both a key cause *and* effect of our surroundings, and that environments constructed to "fit the needs of a bipedal forward-looking mammal" turn out to be different from those built to fit the needs of Fords, Chevys and BMWs (104). Because the "horizontal scans of humans are faster than the vertical . . . they must cover the longer horizontal distance in the same time-frame to present us a coherent image of the world" (97).

Geographer Paul C. Adams takes up this faster, more horizontal worldview—and its relation to literary imagery—in the 2001 article "Peripatetic Imagery and Peripatetic Sense of Place." For Adams, the sensory muscle signals of human movement called proprioception—neurological feedback associated with walking and human body locomotion in general—become recalled as part of "the places one has loved" (188). For Adams—after John Elder—the imagery

taken in especially by pedestrians creates a kind of "emblem of wholeness that derives not from the visual, but from the "multisensory experience, an intertwining of person and place," as in Wordsworth's "An Evening Walk." For Adams, this poem is a "still life, a bucolic collage of loosely related impressions."

> Although described in a sequence, bridge, cliff and peasants all exist at once in a particular place at a particular time and are placed in sequence only by the observer, a parallel to the act of walking, which is a way of carving a transect through a place. The peripatetic frame therefore invites contemplation of a place (and a social reality) where permanence and simultaneity are more evident than change and sequence. (194)

This is far different from the jarring, far less bucolic, non-sequitur-like juxtaposition collage found in Barthelme's work, and hearkens back again to Benjamin's *flâneur*. For Mike Featherstone, that figure does move beyond bridge, cliff and peasants, and "[points] to the centrality of locomotion in social life: the stroller is constantly invaded by new streams of experience and develops new perceptions as he moves through the urban landscape and crowds" (910). However:

> If the new transport systems (the train, tram, bus and car) which came to dominate the urban landscape meant new corridors were driven through existing urban landscape . . . did the speed and danger of the new forms of traffic lead to the eclipse of the *flâneur*? Can cruising in a car, or being stuck in a traffic-jam in Los Angeles or São Paulo, in any sense be regarded as a form of *flânerie*? (911)

The sequence as experienced in Barthelme does not seem placed in order by a strolling observer, and—if consisting of a form of *flânerie*—represents a new one, experienced at

locomotive and, most especially, automotive cruising speeds. The sequence is not determined by narrator, the character, Baskerville, or even the reader, but appears as a set of unlike things placed alongside each other—a paratactic syntax hardly recognizable as "sequence" at all, its meaning open. Adams, indeed, takes up this possibility, with those sensations available not to the stroller, but to those in the more isolated "motorized metal box" (189) of freeway transport. For Adams, car culture reduces experience from "multisensory intake to *the scanning gaze*," resulting in the "loosing of ties between person and place that have preoccupied more than one generation of human geographers" (188 emphasis added). He adds that those who have grown up in "automobile-dependent cities like Houston and Los Angeles" (292) have now lost those place ties, their environments reduced to "a visual tableau, an abstract play of angles and light," the causes traceable to many of the same causal relations scholars speak of for the postmodern world in general: urbanism, increasing spatial flows of commodities, people, information and capital, and spatial interdependence—"the stretching out of human interactions and projects across space" (189-90). [7]

Architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable begins her 1975 *New York Times* overview of Houston, "Deep in the Heart of Nowhere," with statements that resonate with Adams description: "This is a car's-eye view of Houston—But is there any other?" (219). Still, perhaps none have captured the conceptual and social effects that arrive along with the city's horizontally scanning freeway gaze as has critic, essayist and novelist Philip Lopate whose commissioned 1982 essay, "The Mysterious City of Houston," amends the famous words Gertrude Stein levelled at Oakland—"When I got there, there was no *there* there"—with observations appropriate to a different metropolis. "When I got there," says Lopate, "there was a mysterious there, maybe somewhere just beyond reach, all that flat, exploding, vaguely urban galaxy outside

(but never bigger than) one's car window" (13). Lopate captures Houston's car experience while simultaneously hinting at the vast concept of "elsewhere" that looms over the city in so many ways, "just beyond reach."

Conversations in "Florence Green is 81" do not take place at sixty miles per hour, but they are disconnected, and interrupted often as they progress in collage-like form. Baskerville, a *flâneur* on wheels, will *not* "explain everything later" to Kathleen in his quarters, but will be disconnected himself, heading away from the multibathroom structure alone in his car at dinner's conclusion. It may well seem that Barthelme, in this early collection, had pioneered a narrative form for the freeway travelling consciousness of those who live much of their lives in motorized metal boxes. Readers take in the experience of Florence Green in a horizontal joining of segments, much like passengers take in billboards and commercial interests along the Gulf-Freeway between downtown Houston and the South Loop. [8]

However, can those interested in literature and place be certain that this means anything in particular for this *particular* place? In other words, many cities in 1962, when "Florence Green" was composed, had freeway systems, just as many had the means by which the movement of cars had taken priority over the muscle memory experience of people afoot. The urban reality of the era in which Barthelme composed the stories of *Caligari* had, in many metropolitan areas, no doubt, worked to "reduce one's environment to a visual tableau, an abstract play of angles and light" (Adams 189) rather than a more sensorial, "closer" experience of place. Houston, however, possesses another regional freeway feature that *is* distinct, the development of which dates to Barthelme's time writing *Come Back Dr. Caligari* and before.

Erik Slotboom's *Houston Freeways: A Historical and Visual Journey* (2003) is an homage to the monumental system of concrete loops and radii that most Houstonians find

anything but a suitable topic for homage. "None of us alive today will know history's judgment of the freeway legacy," says engineer Slotboom, but that this legacy will be profound he does not appear to doubt, nor its powerful effect on Houston, a metropolis he takes to be "in fact the world's most freeway-focused city" (vii). For Slotboom, the final qualifying aspect when it comes to Houston earning this title does appear to be unique, and involves

> a certain design feature that elevates the freeway to a higher level of importance in the functioning of the city than nearly all other cities. It's a feature that exists extensively only in Texas, and its prevalence in Houston is unequalled by any other city.
>
> The freeway design feature is, of course, the freeway frontage road. Because of the frontage road, Houston's freeways are more than just transportation corridors. They form the city's principal commercial strips and business centers. Whether you are going to work, going shopping, going out to eat, staying at a hotel, seeking medical care, or buying a car in Houston, there's a good chance your destination will have a freeway address. (93) [9]

Lopate may be incorrect in his judgment that "the freeway offers the best vantage point" to experience Houston (in Theis 233), that vantage point perhaps indeed being found in what are officially the freeway frontage roads of Houston, though called there (as they appear to be nowhere else in the world) "feeder roads." This feature of the Houston freeway landscape was made possible both by the general low density of Texas cities compared to other regions, as well as a high-tolerance for commercialism (Slotboom 98). "Feeder roads" in Houston date to the very earliest plans for car transport in the region, such as the first of the city's freeways, the Gulf Freeway, formulated in 1946 (Slotboom 145). Swedish engineer, architect and educator, Lars

Lerup, in his provocative 2011 work concerning the city, *One Million Acres & No Zoning*, claims that these "two parallel frontage roads which feed the endless commerce distributed in repeating clusters of franchise outlets," now form what is in truth their own "linear city," one that surrounds the major trunk lines of the larger metropolis (151). Anne Friedberg, after Johann Friedrich Geist, harkens back to Benjamin's arcades as "the organizing force of retail trade. . . . The arcade eased traffic, protected the consumer from weather, and was accessible only to pedestrians" (68). These have morphed (perhaps into malls), and, according to Marc Augé, the urban experience has also changed as '[m]ain roads no longer pass through towns, but lists of their notable features—and, indeed, a whole commentary—appear on big signboards nearby. In a sense the traveler is absolved of the need to stop or even look" (97). Perhaps most main roads are this way, but Houston's showcases of retail trade—the "feeder roads"—though less accessible to pedestrians, provide daily content to the rapid scan of those in sealed, protected, air conditioned spaces who take in Lopate's "flat, exploding . . . urban galaxy" framed by the window of a car. *These* arcades—roofless, separated by multi-lane freeways, and navigated via lanes of vehicular traffic—offer a variety of juxtaposed commercial interests to the quickly scanning gaze that is tremendously varied.

This, interestingly enough, appears to be exactly what Florence Green decides she wants most of all: quick, tremendous and varying variety. Her guests' offerings of geographical locales—both national and metropolitan—to meet Florence's first pronouncement, "*I want to go to some other country*," do nothing to satiate her oft-repeated goal—but few Barthelme critics have commented on how this goal *changes* by the end of the story. "*I want to go somewhere where everything is different*" (15), she decides—all mention of "country" gone. A reader might well ask: different from what? In Houston (the actual setting of the story is impossible to

determine) she would reside already in such a place, especially along the commercially hybridized, cramped, collage of businesses and services offered up along the city's long feeder roads. These "anti-parkways," [10] and the variety of commercial interests juxtaposed along them, evince horizontal axes along which, in a manner of speaking, everything *is* different. One is reminded of what Anne Friedberg calls Siegfried Kracauer's "ringing question" concerning the Parisian arcades: "What would be the meaning of a passage in a society which is itself no more than a passage?" (in Friedberg 76). Baskerville decides that the assembled diners, in asking her *specific* places she might want to travel, are missing some point important to Florence's true motivation, which is simply to find "difference," that "intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli" Georg Simmel identified as part of the urban experience in 1903 (409). "They are asking I think the wrong questions," Baskerville decides. "[T]he question is not where but why?" He, in fact, finds in her statement: "A simple, perfect idea. The old babe demands nothing less than total otherness" (15). That "otherness" is readily available, the place where "everything is different" being obvious given the spatial experience of mid-century Houston, especially scanned horizontally along its commercially lined motorways—all of the *different* goods, services, and commercial interests found in the business rich feeder road collage as Duchamp's "chance meeting of mutually distant realities" fly past in the visual stream of the "linear city."

Relations discovered in a work like "Florence Green is 81" as viewed through the lens of the particular place, Houston, Texas, are probably the most valuable products when undertaking the geocritical exercise. It is impossible to draw a line of cause and effect between the Bayou City and "Florence Green is 81" owing only to that place's collage-like nature, the juxtapositions along the city feeders, or the "scanned" perceptions taken up by those who, turbocharging their

flânerie, experience this urban scene automotively. On the other hand, there is value in the exercise if the city's "overcodes" highlight aspects seldom otherwise noted. In this case, we could take up the fact that the ending of "Florence Green" is dealt with only infrequently in scholarship, much less frequently than its fragmented—as Klinkowitz would say, "difficult"—construction, as if a linear plot-line progression from beginning to end is beside the point of this particular work, one which does seem to bring our faith in linearity and, for that matter, endings, into question. [11] Barbara Roe takes up the story's ending by interpreting the aging hostess's goal to "*go somewhere where everything is different*" as *unimaginable* to Baskerville. "Unable to imagine such a journey," says Roe, "he ends his tale driving in circles of despair" (42). Yet he doesn't seem so much unable to imagine this goal as totally accepting of it. It is, as we recall, for him, "A simple, perfect idea" (15). There is, in the final scene, a leave-taking, rain, even Verdi's *Requiem*. But such dark imagery doesn't necessarily attach itself in a simple fashion to "despair" when dealing with this author. "Iraklion? Samos? Haifa? Kotor Bay? She will be in none of those places," says Baskerville at the finale of "Florence Green is 81," "but in another place, a place where *everything is different*." And then he does what everyone does in the Bayou City when they depart for "another place": "I begin to drive my tiny car in idiot circles in the street," thus tracing out the "loop" of the system which spreads throughout the city, out into its "non-suitable plane," although the operative part of the phrase is, perhaps, "I begin to drive" (16).

The third story sequentially in the collection, "Hiding Man," operates less on disparate segments joined horizontally as in "Florence Green," but rather from a confounding of the boundaries of *all* "segments," or, as the narrator himself puts it: "In these times everything is very difficult, the lines of demarcation are not clear" (29). Readers meet in this story the "Hiding Man" himself, I.A.L. Burligame: at first introduced by a voice in the third person which

shifts later, however, to first person narrator, presenting readers either with a character who refers to himself grandly in the third person, or with another example of effacing the "lines of demarcation," in this case, those separating narrator from character. For Wayne Stengel, "Hiding Man" is among a whole category of stories by this author which "refuse to honor their protagonists' identities as easily translatable signs which elicit predictable responses in the minds of readers. Barthelme rejects a formula for identity in both life and art" (60). Indeed, "Hiding Man" rejects even formulaic constructions of genre and grammar. As with "Florence Green is 81," the first paragraph is instructive.

> Enter expecting to find the place empty (I.A.L. Burligame walks through any open door). But it is not, there is a man sitting halfway down the right side, heavy, Negro, well dressed, dark glasses. Decide after moment's thought that if he is hostile, will flee through door marked EXIT (no bulb behind EXIT sign, no certainty that it leads anywhere). The film is in progress, title *Attack of the Puppet People.* Previously observed films at same theater, *Cool and the Crazy, She Gods of Shark Reef, Night of the Blood Beast*, *Diary of a High School Bride.* All superior examples of genre, tending toward suggested offscreen rapes, obscene tortures: man with huge pliers advancing on disheveled beauty, cut to girl's face, to pliers, to man's face, to girl, scream, blackout. (17)

Lines of demarcation between "superior examples of genre" are blurred here by the telegraphic nature of the text, together with stage direction-like commands ("Enter expecting," and "cut to girl's face"), all appropriate more to screenplays than fictional prose. Arguably the two written forms morph into one another throughout the story. Another "boundary dispute" appears at the grammatical level—in this case "sentence boundaries" challenged by comma

splices and sentence fragments. These are found throughout *Caligari* and most of Barthelme's written production, his wars with editors over punctuation as recounted in Tracy Daugherty's 2009 biography of the author (also titled *Hiding Man*) proving them conscious decisions. [12] They are another place where the "lines of demarcation" are blurred, in this case at the sentence level. In addition, we could say that the author, like many of his characters, is a quintessential outsider, here pursuing his escape to a space where he may operate free of narrative convention and even grammatical norms.

The theater setting of "Hiding Man," seems at first a more claustrophobic area than "Florence Green," in spite of the latter taking place in a single dining room. Daugherty, in fact, sees it as a transitional work before the author's move to New York: "composed entirely in Texas, [it] offers a claustrophobic setting, a character in flight from everyone around him. An expression of Don's isolation in Houston?" (243). The enclosed, windowless theater, and even more so the controlled "grid" of theater seats, works against the sprawl and freeway scanning experience expected when examining a Barthelme story through a Houston lens after our experience with "Florence Green." On the other hand, we may recall Michel Foucault's argument that "the theater" exemplifies the alternative spatial poetics of his "heterotopia" as it "brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; thus it is that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space" (25).

At any rate, I.A.L. Burligame does not seem to be suffering from claustrophobia, and will prove to have a great deal of agency, and even the capacity for violent, action-packed decisiveness that makes *Caligari*'s move to the cinematic world in this story appropriate. Graeme Gilloch—who casts aside notions of Benjamin's *flâneur* as limited to the pedestrian

population of Baudelaire's era—sees "[t]he shifting vantage-point of the film camera" important to the continued evolution of the concept, and as "[t]he representation of the city demands a discontinuous, fragmented literary form and style," movies represent a perfect medium for the metropolitan experience (18). Benjamin himself speaks of some of the paradoxical freedom inherent in sitting and watching a film in the 1939 version of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility."

> Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. (265)

To consider in another way the joining of the scanning gaze with the cinematic, Ann Friedberg sees how "*flânerie* can be historically situated as an urban phenomenon linked to, in gradual but direct ways, the new aesthetic of reception found in 'moviegoing'" (3), with cinema spectatorship, in fact, serving as "a radical metaphor for the windshield" (viii). [13]

McHale's (and Houston's) "zone" terminology becomes helpful again in identifying metropolitan elements in the composition of "Hiding Man," though not in this case the "horizontal," juxtaposed segments often commented upon in Barthelme's prose, but rather via a multi-layering effect. An instructive example appears in the movie titles mentioned above in the first paragraph. We have noted above how appropriate film terminology is for describing Barthelme's technique, even in "Florence Green is 81." He was, in addition, a film-reviewer for the *Houston Post* in the mid 1950s. Barthelme may or may not have seen the titles listed, but all refer to actual produced works, albeit of the "B" genre. Interestingly, in the case of the film most-discussed in "Hiding Man," *Attack of the Puppet People*, the story's description does not

match the narrative arc of the actual release at all. With Barthelme's story riffing on the *Puppet People* title, and the notion of *Attack*, Burligame describes hard pressed U.S. Army grunts with cinematic war-buddy film names like "Honest John," "Hound Dog," and "Wowser," embattled with literal "puppet people." "Young lieutenant defends Army nurse (uniform in rags, tasty thigh, lovely breast) from obvious sexual intent of splinter men" (26). But the 1958 production from MGM studios—in spite of its lurid title—involves neither wooden "splinter men" puppets nor war-like attack. Starring actors such as Hollywood heartthrob John Agar—identified on the IMDb database as a staple of John Wayne westerns, and married for a time to Shirley Temple—and character actor John Hoyt who'd been featured in *Blackboard Jungle* and *Spartacus*, the actual *Puppet People* is very close to making at least the "B+" grade, a sci-fi offering in the "incredible shrinking" genre, a movie possibly familiar to readers of *Caligari* in 1964. If so, they would experience the zone aesthetic McHale labels "a *vertical* collage. In this case, two or more discourse-worlds coexist within the same segment"—a kind of "internal dialogism" (170). In other words, for collage's "vertical" mode, complexities arise from simultaneously competing discourses occupying what might be considered a single space, rather than along the scanned sequence of different segments side by side in a "horizontal" narrative, or, for that matter, along the "linear city" encountered with Houston's "feeder roads." McHale finds such a vertical dialogue emblematic of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, where "each segment belongs to two or more discourses at the same time; the result is a layering of discourses, a *lamination*" (170).

This kind of superimposition repeats throughout the story. Upon entering the movie theater while *Attack of the Puppet People* flickers overhead, Burlingame meets a black man in dark glasses who moves slowly towards him across empty seats while conducting what Stengel calls an "uneasy conversation" (15). The man's initial attempt to market himself as a kind of

Burligame doppelganger—"I know you're hiding, you know you're hiding, I will make a confession, I too am hiding" (29)—doesn't work out: he is not *another* Burligame, but someone entirely different, just as the "Hiding Man" version of *Puppet People* is nearly the opposite of the Hollywood version. The man in dark glasses, in fact, does not so much have an identity as various identity *versions*. This is not the "unlike things stuck together" method of collage employed in "Florence Green," but a laminated series of unlike things stacked higher and higher in the same discourse space.

Again, although the story's action takes place in an enclosed theater, with its multiple, fixed rows of theater seats, it's possible to see in this intruder's movements towards Burligame a form of advancement across this grid—an encroachment that brings to mind the identity struggle that takes place when the multi-perspectival, inflated ego reflector featured in "The Balloon" fills the streets of Manhattan. "The balloon, for the twenty-two days of its existence, offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to *the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet*" (*Sixty Stories* 57 emphasis added). More importantly, the man, as he floats ever nearer to Burligame, cycles through his "layered," multiple identities, signaled almost immediately in his conversation: "What do you know about me? Nothing, absolutely nothing," he points out. "I could be anybody" (28). He offers his name at first as "Bane"—a word that could serve as a label for distress, annoyance, or affliction as well as a surname. Stacking up the possibilities, Burligame runs through a list of six potential explanations for the "Role of Bane" ("role" being another film term), including "Agent of the conspiracy," "Talent scout for Police Informers School," and "Market research for makers of *Attack of the Puppet People*" (28)—each adding to the "vertical" method of creating, in a single Bane, a complex stack of possibilities: a discourse space reminiscent of McHale's Zone,

Foucault's heterotopia, or that spot in the cellar in Borges' "The Aleph." Multiple interpretations and labels abound for this character. "Bane," he ultimately admits, is not even his real name, that turning out to be the rather improbable "Adrian Hipkiss" (30). For the rest of the story he is "Bane-Hipkiss"—not the usual sort of hyphenated surname indicating a joining of families, but an indication of two surnames existing in a single person. In a piling on of further possibilities, Bane-Hipkiss, before breaking down in sobs, admits to a life that has been "one mask after another, Watford, Watkins, Watley, Watlow, Watson, Watt, now identity is gone, blown away, who am I, who knows?" (30). These "masks" occur in alphabetical order and include the "what" sound as a recurring drum beat: *What* is Bane-Hipkiss? [14] Although sequentially in order via the alphabet, they are not juxtaposed segments but—as masks—worn one on top of another. Bane-Hipkiss represents *too many* identities to settle on one.

"Hiding Man" can be seen as taking up almost as many simultaneous thematic possibilities as Bane-Hipkiss has roles: movies as a replacement for religious ritual, a jab at the authority of the Catholic Church, and certainly questions of race—the "Negro" Bane-Hipkiss ultimately "*strips away his skin.* Clever Bane-Hipkiss, now he has me, I sit gape-mouthed . . . he is white!" (35 emphasis in original, ellipsis added). Bane-Hipkiss is not only white, but an ultimate authority symbol, as, once the Russian doll-like identities are revealed and carted way, at bottom he turns out to be a Catholic priest. Burligame acts, in this case moving perhaps more directly against authority than any other character in *Caligari.* "I grasp him by the throat, plunge needle into neck, his eyes bulge, his face collapses, he subsides quivering into a lump among the seats, in a moment he will begin barking like a dog" (37). As it turns out, it's possible to see the story's multi-layering of identity and anti-authoritarian tendencies in general paralleled by the

fluidity of identity found in Houston, as well as a less obvious aspect of the city's attitude towards identity, power and authority.

Any study that mentions "feeder roads" as a possible source of "overcoding" for an author's "horizontal" literary juxtapositions, probably cannot avoid at least the mention of another aspect of Houston freeway engineering when speaking of the "vertical": the stack. Stack interchanges, locations where freeways converge at one geographical point but permit free travel by allowing vehicles to pass over and under each other via multilevel road construction, are, as Eric Slotboom puts it "signature structures of Houston's freeway system" (103). Not as unique as "feeders"—Los Angeles, Slotboom admits, "built the original stack in 1953 and still reigns supreme with its sleek cast-in-lace concrete structures"—it's still the case that the two cities between them are "in a class of their own when it comes to the size and number of multi-level stack interchanges" (104). There is something more in the line of a "received" influence that might have a greater than superficial resemblance to Barthelme's "vertical" fictional aesthetic, however. Just as Bane-Hipkiss runs through his litany of masks, more than one writer has noted the difficulty of pinning a single label on Houston, as Jan Lin discovered when researching the slogans by which Houston has, at one time or another, self-identified: "magnolia city, freeway city, mobile city, high-tech city, space city, speculator city, strip city, oiltown, cowboy city, and 'shining buckle of the Sunbelt'" (632). In the sixties, former Houston Chamber of Commerce CEO Marvin Hurley discovered that in addition to the arrival of NASA and the moniker of "Space City, U.S.A." Houston had taken on such names as "Energy Capital, "Air Conditioning Capital," "Center of New Knowledge," "Headquarters City," "Corporate City," and "World Class City." For Hurley, "phrase-makers sought the title with the truest ring" (in Moser 67). Moser critiques with a vengeance this tendency for "phrase-making," ultimately presenting

Houston as a shining example of how, for this particular region of the Gulf Coast, language can no longer be trusted at all (also a recurring Barthelme theme).

> The names of suburbs—Kings Forest, Whispering Pines, Mandolin, Windsong, Vienna Woods, Woods of Wimbledon, Pecan Grove Plantation, Sha-De-Ree—are meant not to describe but to lure. Clear Lake City is not a city (it is part of the city of Houston); the "clear lake" itself is neither clear nor a lake but a muddy inlet off Galveston Bay. Actual meaning is so beside the point that one recoils from trying to assign one. (66-67)

Here the signs in front of suburban developments become a literal embodiment of the thirty-five-year-old narrator's revelation in the *Caligari* story "Me and Miss Mandible" when a mistake over meaning sends him back to elementary school. There he learns "that signs are signs"—as in *only signs,* carrying a meaning that is assigned to them arbitrarily—"and that some of them are lies. This is the great discovery of my time here" (109). For Moser, such subdivision names "have as little to do with describing a meaningful human landscape as masturbation does with sexual intercourse," and he goes on to describe the dizzying "Bane-Hipkiss" like manner in which prominent Houston buildings alter names every time their corporate sponsorship changes hands. "For all this spinning, no lasting image has been created of the city" (67).

Indeed, as place can be useful for uncovering aesthetic choices in literary works, so subtler aspects of place might be uncovered by framing them with a challenging text like "Hiding Man. Although the "direct" line traced by observers such as Lorrie Moore and Nicole Sierra between Barthelme's style and the issue of zoning prove superficial, Houston's anti-zoning *tendency* ends up being an effective a means for highlighting the more "vertical," multiple-identity-occupying aspect of a work like "Hiding Man"—and vice versa. Zoning codes

have been rejected three times in the city's history: in 1948, 1962 and 1993 (Glassman 184). While it may be that the bizarre juxtapositions sometimes found in the place-experience of Houstonians might be more readily framed by car culture and frontage road policies than zoning, examination of anti-zoning *sentiment*—the *rhetoric* of anti-zoning campaigns when the topic arises for referendum—reveals intriguing undercurrents having to do with place and identity.

University of Houston historian Barry Kaplan, surveying anti-zoning rhetoric in the city for the 1946 and 1962 campaigns, feels the controversy surrounding the topic "offer[s] the historian a useful tool in comprehending the values, ethos, and fears of Houstonians" during those periods (133). Anti-zoning propaganda in 1948 contended that under proposed ordnances "no home in Houston . . . will again be a castle of refuge" (152) and that, for example, under zoning, doctors could not have homes that also served as their offices (155). Some scholars link this mistrust over zoning to intangible elements of the Texas character forged in the distant past, such as those codified in the anti-centralized government bias of the 1875 state constitution (Qian 34) or—further still in the past—aspects of "pioneer spirit" evidenced in the struggle over commercial interests that resulted in the region's rebellious departure from Mexico in 1836 (Lozano and Espinosa-Oropeza 2-4). During the 1962 referendum, one Houston newspaper columnist blamed the ordnance's defeat on this very spirt, and observed that Houstonians were "inclined to think of owning a piece of city property as being identical to owning a barn or a mine, to be exploited in whatever way will bring the greatest profit to the owner" (Kaplan 167).

Inherent in such statements is the idea that governmental interference will make impossible that desire for what McHale labels the *vertical* collage, that "internal dialogism" where "two or more discourse-worlds coexist within the same segment" (170)—in this case, within the same segment of land. A home is a home but for Houstonians it is also a castle—and

with some luck, a mine, a barn, or a professional medical office as well. Though true that this kind of separation of commercial property from residential was also seen as excessively limiting economically, conceptually, to support zoning was also to oppose personal property's inherent possibility for more than one identity. It is, in other words, possible to see anti-zoning as a basic unwillingness on the part of Houston citizenry to force property into being only one thing, or reducing it to a single potential.

That Donald Barthelme applied some of this "pioneer spirit" to his own artistic product is an intriguing possibility, but his unusual approach offers at the very least opportunities to see the qualities of a particular place spotlighted in the aesthetic qualities of a writer's work, as well as the manner in which particular works can then go on to inform our experience of a place.

Certainly Barthelme's fictional technique is not limited to collage of either the vertical or horizontal variety. His literary production is also marked by verbal play, parody of—one could say *flaunting of*—narrative convention, and manipulation of the arrow of time. "Will You Tell Me?" is an example of the latter from the *Caligari* collection, a story Barthelme found trouble publishing initially. Tracy Daugherty reports it was "too formally extreme for *The New Yorker*," which had begun regularly presenting the author's work before the public by 1963, although it did find a home in John Ashbery's more experimental *Art and Literature* journal the following year (242). As might be inferred from the (frustrated?) plea for "telling" in the title, the story ignores most conventions of narrative, delivers little in the way of sensory description and features a large, multi-generational cast of vague characters nearly indistinct one from another save for occasional violent outbursts. "Will You Tell Me?" is a skein of inexact interconnections told in an intermingled, non-chronological fashion rather than via a clear narrative arc. Wayne B. Stengel takes up the story in *The Shape of Art in the Short Stories of Donald Barthelme*

(1985), admitting that "[n]o summary of this unique story can describe the tale's skill in distilling the sensation of aimless drifting that overcomes these people and their relationships" (124). They are inhabitants of Georg Simmel's urban space where "the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves" have created the psychic phenomenon "unconditionally reserved to the metropolis"—that is, the *blasé* attitude. Their lives take place, likewise, in Anne Friedberg's postmodern time-space, where "the simultaneity of [the] temporal triad—'the new, the already past and the ever same'—will remain a key component" (51). In fact, some of the recorded occasions are impossible to place in sequence, and cues clearly demarking the march of "time passing" do not exist in "Will You Tell Me?" Some scenes appear to challenge the notion that time *does* pass. A character named Irene askes another, Hubert—in an exchange taking place in yet another theater and with a tone we can characterize most readily as, to borrow again from Simmel, *blasé*—about his gift to her of a child. Hubert, it seems, had handed over to his lover a baby named Paul, though not from the usual place, but "[f]rom the bank" (41). The question elicits a response, although not from either of the two characters present in the scene, or engaged in the dialogue:

> Irene, Hubert said, I love you. I've always hesitated to mention it though because I was inhibited by the fact that you are married to my close friend, Charles. Now I feel close to you here in this newsreel theater, for almost the first time. I feel intimate. I feel like there might be some love in you for me, too. Then, Irene said, your giving me Paul for a Christmas present was symbolic?
>
> Inge smiled
>
> Rosemarie smiled.
>
> Ann smiled. (49)

Upon Irene's question regarding the nature of her gift—inquiry regarding "symbolism" common to conventional story analysis—three *other* female characters smile. The problem is Inge, Rosemarie and Ann are *not* present in the "newsreel theater" during this conversation, and—from what the reader can tell—might well be smiling from three separate points along the chronological timeline of the story; that is, smiling at a distance of both time and space. The where and when of the story is shuffled and scrambled such that Stengel concludes "all events occur contemporaneously and . . . any event, no matter how trivial or mundane, assumes the importance of any other" (125). This is not the steady relation Adams finds in Wordsworth where "all exist at once in a particular place at a particular time and are placed in sequence only by the observer" (194). Time, place *and* sequence are all obliterated as necessary elements of a story like "Will You Tell Me." It is in a way consonant with Frederic Jameson's description for the postmodern response to the world in general: "a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality, whose 'schizophrenic' structure . . . will determine new types of syntax or syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts" (*Postmodernism* 6). Putting the question of Barthelme's "postmodernity" aside once again in order to concentrate on "place," we find that, as with the collage form, fluid identity, and azalea bushes, time and history as used in this story may have been "contaminated by the world" of the city where Barthelme spent the first thirty years of his life.

"[T]he history of Houston," Philip Lopate notes in his 1989 essay collection, *Against Joie de Vivre*, "is not that easy to come by. This is not a city that wears its past on its sleeve. . . . it is an amnesiac city, one that keeps forgetting its intriguing antecedents in a headlong rush to embrace the shock of the new" (in Theis 232). For Lopate, time is not only assaulted in Houston

in its overarching, historical sense, where the remnants of the past are "for the most part demolished and replaced by a colder set of freestanding corporate towers alternating with surface parking lots," but such activity affects time-passing at the micro level as well, in a way not unconnected to the destruction. "One is no longer invited to dally, meander, window-shop" he notes (in Theis 232)—another judgment threatening the continuity of the *flâneur* in its classic, strolling sense. Benjamin Moser bemoans the lack of books dealing with the history of the city, claiming that "[s]omeone seeking to write the history of Houston finds himself quickly thwarted: a history, like a novel, needs some thread of narrative, some conclusion or completion" (66). Those few historians who have turned their attention to Houston do little to dispel this idea, even when they are non-objective Town-Hall boosters like Chamber of Commerce executive Marvin Hurley. His 407 page love-letter to the Bayou City, penned close to the years in which Barthelme first lived and worked there, *Decisive Years for Houston* (1966)[15] states in a celebratory passage:

> While other cities were waiting for the 'federal bulldozer' to level certain condemned areas, Houston was clearing block after block to make way for modern buildings and other upgraded land uses. . . . Rehabilitation as well as tearing down and rebuilding are a way of life in Houston. (202)

This "rehabilitation" would appear to be the same process Lopate has less effusively labeled as "self-cannibalization" ("From *Against Joie de Vivre*" 234).

In much the same way, "Will You Tell Me?" is filled not only with scrambled and simultaneous temporal events, but acts of destruction that play a featured role, including the fact that Paul, the child brought as a gift "from the bank," grows up to make bombs meant to be thrown at fathers, this an Oedipal impulse thematically recurring in Barthelme, perhaps most

obviously in *The Dead Father*, yet also a violent attack on generational history writ large, similar to "clearing block after block to make way for modern buildings." One intriguing bit of destruction in the story seems even more appropriate, as it is linked to a motive. We learn that "Hilda cut down a black pear tree in the back yard," a fact about which the story asks "Why?"

> The reason I cut down the black pear tree Howard, which I've never told anyone, was that it was just as old as I was at that time, sixteen, and it was beautiful, and *I* was beautiful I think, and we both were *there* the tree and me, and I couldn't stand it, Hilda said. (44 emphases in original)

Here the past makes way for the present and future, also emphasized by the ultimate disposition: "The new black pear tree reached sturdily for the sky on the grave, the very place, of the old black pear tree" (50)—the "tearing down and rebuilding" common to the Houston experience figured in the text in this organic fashion.

One "why" is never answered. Many characters in "Will You Tell Me?", including those in story's margins, query what, exactly, it means to bring a baby "from the bank"—a question on the lips of Inge, Rosemarie, Charles, and Paul himself—the baby who grows to manhood over the course of the narrative. While the title of the piece could represent a plea for narrative sense, for a "telling" that can bring order to the story's events, the main aspect never revealed or *told* by "Will You Tell Me?" concerns those particulars and the entire meaning of Paul's origins. Paul's history is effaced by the story, much in the way the physical record of Houston has been erased periodically by developers' earth movers and wrecking balls.

Seeking out a "deep pattern" of place experience in an *oeuvre* as large as Barthelme's is challenging, but examination of some of the early stories closely connected to his time in that place makes an intriguing beginning. Other possibilities in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* present

themselves. The corrosive power of late capitalism and the experiences of individuals nearly powerless in the face of "the market" is arguably touched upon often in Barthelme's work, present overtly in many characters, including those found in his first collection. Sociologist Joe R. Feagin, in his book *Free Enterprise City: Houston in Political-Economic Perspective* (1988), collected demographic and economic data to argue that Houston, by the 1970's, had "achieved the status of a widely cited model of the positive consequences of a free enterprise, laissez-faire approach to urban development," (1). This pro-money, anti-regulation attitude, however, contains elements that smack nearly of social Darwinism. Former city mayor Louie Welch's 1980 statements were typical of Houston's business climate in that era: "The free market place has functioned in Houston like no other place in America. It has a method of purging itself of slums. No city is without poor people, but the opportunity not to be poor is greater than in most cities" (in Vojnovic "Governance in Houston" 590). It's arguable that an artist living in Houston in the mid twentieth century would have absorbed this climate, and developed an aversive reaction to it. When Barry Kaplan describes Houston as "a businessman's dream," complete with "a limited government structure and a climate congenial to capitalism," all adding up to an attitude that allows entrepreneurs to "maximize short-range profits" (135), he describes precisely the situation that has brought on the unusual demise of the aforementioned protagonist, Joseph, in "Me and Miss Mandible." The eighth story in the collection, it is the first Barthelme wrote that he considered successful by his own lights, both drafted and completed during his Houston years.[16] Joseph's enforced return to elementary school is punishment for mistaking the purpose of his employer, the Great Northern Insurance Company: "I misread a clue. . . . I conceived that it was my duty to obtain satisfaction for the injured" (102). Taking this duty *literally*, he makes his "tragic mistake on the Mrs. Anton Bichek claim," encouraging Mrs. Bichek—caught in some

calamity that is un-named, but definitely covered by Great Northern—to have enough self love to "prize her injury. . . highly" (102 ellipses in original). This brings about his return and "re-education," routed back through the system to apparently insure he doesn't make such mistakes in the future.

Joseph ends up breaking away from the confining return to grade school imposed upon him by engaging in a non-grade school sexual transgression—sex being one of the few ways something that might be called "nature" intrudes upon the Barthelme canon. In this flagrant flouting of authority, he is caught with his teacher, Miss Mandible, in the cloakroom during recess. Similarly, the sculptor, Peterson, in the final *Caligari* story, "A Shower of Gold" transgresses those forces that seek to exploit him when he refuses to take direction from the producers of the game show *Who Am I?* where he has made an appearance as a way to fend off poverty. Contradicting the producers' wishes, he instead speaks directly to the television audience, making him the character in the collection who, according to William Stott, "most consciously and completely resists public violation of his self" (80). Just as the artist Donald Barthelme critiques his art form even as he practices it, Peterson rails publicly against the medium that presents him to the public, again with some suggestion of carnal line-crossing. "Don't be reconciled. Turn off your television sets, cash in your life insurance, indulge in mindless optimism. Visit girls at dusk" (183).[17] Paradoxically, Barthelme's work celebrates both the fluidity of individual identity, and the power of concentrated individual action. Not for the last time we'll see that the characters of Houston writers often find themselves adrift, unsure of themselves and their own identities, yet determined to exercise the freedom that a fluid identity provides. In addition, they often gravitate to conditions or situations that might appear negative or problematic, only to render them into expressions of power. Such individualistic,

anti-authoritarian sentiments recall yet another aspect common to Houston's business climate, urban policies and overall attitude already touched upon: a general mistrust of authority, especially governmental authority. Kaplan found resistance to the propensity for an authoritative, outside government to "dictate and guide private land use" a major theme in the anti-zoning campaigns (133), the greatest complaint in 1946 being that zoning amounted to "just another invasion of an individual's property rights" (157). Geographer Igor Vojnovic argues that Houston reflects the larger attitude of the state of Texas in this regard as

> the early Texas environment and the lifestyles led by Texans had in large part facilitated local commitment to the laissez-faire philosophy. Laissez-faire became entrenched in Texas, where Thomas Paine's maxim that 'government, even in the best state, is a necessary evil' remains embedded in mainstream local culture. ("*Laissez-Faire* Governance" 20)

Jochen Achilles sees the very title of Barthelme's first collection as a reference to this battle between individuals and the extra-individual powers which loom over them in the nod to the 1920 film *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, as well as Siegfried Kracauer's seminal study of German movies, *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), arguing Barthelme was likely familiar with both works. For Achilles, after Kracauer, "On the one hand, Caligari may be seen as a 'premonition of Hitler'; on the other hand, the film suggests that the total absence of any authorities and ordering forces may entail anarchy and chaos. . . . In a wider sense, this alternative stands in the center of Barthelme's writing too" (106). Indeed, the alternative could be said to stand in the center of Houston's struggles between unrestrained commerce and uncontrolled sprawl and urban blight. Not unrelated to the above antiauthoritarian regional policies and laissez faire attitudes, the cultural references in Barthelme's *Caligari* stories and

those which followed display a great comfort with and inclusion of commercial and mass consumer elements: what John Domini calls his "free-wheeling use of contemporary culture in all its kitschy largesse" (95). For while economic elements of Houston consonant with the city's "no zone" culture of the mid-twentieth century resulted in periods of economic strength for the region, it also resulted in the label "the billboard capital of the world" before concerned citizens enacted a ban of large roadside advertisement in 1980 (Leigh).

There are further investigations to be made concerning Barthelme and the unusual city where he spent his formative years, and perhaps more to be examined regarding Barthelme as a *flâneur*, or—better to say—new model *flâneur*. "As shocks increase and intensify," Sven Birkerts says in relation to urbanization, "the possibilities for genuine perception and a genuine relation of the self to the world diminish. The *flâneur* was only meaningful so long as he could sustain or represent the genuine perception or response. Baudelaire's was the last stand; the *Fleurs du Mal* are to be read as an elegy" (174). *Come Back Dr. Caligari* is no elegy: nor a capitulation to the intensifying shocks, with characters like Joseph in Barthelme's "first successful story" un-resigned to his re-education even in the atmosphere of un-stoppable, laissez-faire economics. No last stand, *Caligari* is a playful attempt to compose a tune for graveyard whistling as the juxtapositions clash amidst unregulated, high-speed sprawl—all while holding out the possibility that the confusion might be turned to one's advantage. To write conclusively about this author and this place, however, is difficult without at least some mention of one particular, unusual story.

"Return" in some ways, is no fictional work at all—more a rumination tied to a particular occasion. For our purposes, its greatest value, perhaps, lies in illuminating what the author *does not do* in the rest of his large body of work when it comes to questions of place, community,

power, space and time. “Return” is an outlier, and has not appeared in any of the major anthologized collections of Barthelme’s stories. It was commissioned by the Literary Arts Panel of the annual Houston International Festival in 1984, and appears alongside other commissioned prose and poetry works by authors like Max Apple, Phillip Lopate, Vassar Miller and Lorenzo Thomas in the *Liquid City: Houston Writers on Houston* anthology (1987). Editor Rita Saylors explains in her Preface that the festival “began commissioning poetry and prose by established writers living in Houston, to describe the culture, to capture the spirit of the place.” The intent was not to be laudatory, but rather “to encourage honest interpretations and fresh images of city life” (1). Written three years after his return to the Bayou City to take up teaching at the University of Houston—hence the title—it is difficult to argue that Barthelme’s piece fulfills any of Saylor’s aims beyond honesty. Paradoxically, it can be argued to have failed in presenting anything but the surface of Houston, mainly by expending its energy on specific references to the city—often in the form of lists of sites, and institutions—and largely eschewing or even parodying the deep structural influences—what I’ve called “received influences”—this chapter has explored in the form of choices such as, vertical, horizontal, or time scrambling aesthetics. We recall that in “Not-Knowing,” Barthelme plucks from “the world of conventional signs” the random azalea, without any mention of that particular plant’s connection to any place. In “Return” the bush, and the annual trail for which it is named, becomes the explicit, and explicitly absurd, inciting incident for all that follows, and in an enlarged, highly exaggerated form, brings the tale to its close.

“I went on the Azalea Trail, and shot one, right through the heart” (35), the narrator begins, and it is guilt over this crime that lands him in a deep and recurring melancholy. “I had been long away from Texas, living in the wicked, sinful cities of the East—perhaps I no longer

understood Texas ways" (35)—thus firmly aligning the story with Barthelme's own autobiography, but incorporating such fantastic elements that calling it autobiography will not do. The engine of the story becomes "Barthelme's" attempts to "understand" once again this place he came from, and the solution ends up being, once again, an azalea—only this time one of particularly outsized construction.

"Return" could justifiably be treated as a minor piece, and, in fact one created purposefully for a limited audience. Many of the allusions would make sense *only* to a Houston audience, and—for that matter—only a Houston audience circa 1984. As "Barthelme" makes an effort to "get connected" and overcome his shortcomings vis à vis the place experience of Houston ("Had I misunderstood the Azalea Trail?" he asks) he seeks out connections, literally. He begins, in fact, with utility companies, and not un-named, generic ones but "Southwestern Bell, and Entex, and The Light Company . . . long lines binding me once again into the community." He subscribes to the two (at that time) Houston newspapers, not by name but "the American one and the Canadian one" (35), again assuming an audience familiar with the fact that *The Houston Post* had been sold by the Hobby family in 1983 to the *Toronto Sun* (Kleiner). When the narrator purchases a barbecue pit to continue his project of reconnection—because what Houstonian doesn't have a barbecue pit?—it is an "Old Smokey" brand, this being the well known (at least regionally) name of a family owned Houston grilling and smoking products firm, founded—according to their website—in 1923, with a factory that has "remained in the same location near downtown Houston since opening our doors" ("The History of Old Smokey"). When he sets out to sail Buffalo Bayou on a sheet of plywood—perhaps in a 20th century re-enactment of the arrival of the Allen Brothers on that body of water in 1836[18] —his craft is powered by "eight mighty Weed-Eaters," lawn trimming implements that made a fortune for

Houston entrepreneur, dance studio owner and inventor George C. Ballas Sr. when he came up with and successfully marketed them in the 1970's (Evans).

"Return,' in other words, with its very specific local and regional "connections" flies in the face of Thomas M. Leitch's claim that Barthelme's fiction features "no sense of place or community" (85). Although some of the items mentioned above might be considered bizarre juxtapositions, they would still have to be taken as the complete opposite of Jerome Klinkowitz's reading of the method in "Florence Green" as "replication of such useless information as a way of keeping all knowledge in the story completely disjunctive" (*Donald Barthelme* 33). "Return" goes out of its way to present *insider information* that depends upon familiarity with *local knowledge* to achieve its "nod and a wink" effect. If Leitch's claim is taken seriously, however, the piece *could* be considered something of value for those interested in the deep structure of place, something more than a one-off, rushed item created for the pleasure of the director of a local festival (apparently, for a fee). In other words, the author's intentions with this unusual story are difficult to divine, but that it exists allows for a possible reading of "Return" as a parodic, against-the-grain framework for examining the modes Barthelme *usually* employs regarding the "sense of place."

"Return," for example, handles time in a way directly contrary to the manner it's dealt with in a story like "Will You Tell Me?" In the story, historical Houston events and figures are tied to particular, locally understood eras. In other words, the Houston in "Return" *does* have a past and a chronological story, and is, in fact, a city of famous historical personages: the reader just has to be reminded of them; perhaps reminded more than once. Visiting the offices where he used to work at the *Houston Post*, for example, the author describes having been put to work as a young man at a

> scarred wooden desk, and they told me that it had been O. Henry's desk when O. Henry worked for the paper, as he had at one time. And I readily believed it. I could see the place where O. Henry had savagely stabbed the desk with his pen in pursuit of a slimy adjective just out of reach, and a kind of bashed-in-looking place where O. Henry had beaten his poor genius head on the desk in frustration over not being about to capture that noun leaping like a fawn just out of reach. (38-39)

It's almost possible to view the author banging his own poor genius at the thought of an occasional piece that would "capture the spirit" of the nearly indefinable liquid city, and deciding, at the last, to playfully work against type.

"Return" contains litanies and lists like many Barthelme works, but these are not a collection of unlike things juxtaposed in the "horizontal" joining of non-sequiturs. In fact, during the more leisurely—compared to freeway speeds—Weed Eater-powered cruise down Buffalo Bayou, we see images like "an egret and then another egret" (35). More involved lists are still, arguably, of *like* things. When the narrator takes "additional measures" to cure his melancholy by seeing to his spiritual needs, he joins "the First Baptist Church of Aldine, the First Baptist Church of Alvin, the First Baptist Church of Friendswood, the First Baptist Church of Golden Acres. . . ." etc. (35) Then, when it appears the "vertical" identity of something might be called into question, a single discourse space occupied by more than one possibility, the identity ends up firm and singular after all. The narrator, spying a "wise old owl" in a tree on his bayou voyage, slows his craft to speak to it, only to find it is Philip Johnson, renowned architect, often cited with giving contemporary Houston its skyline (and, in that era, noted for his large, round eyeglass frames), "out hunting for new clients, by the light of the moon" (35). Later, seeking to

"grasp that core experience of culture which is the Opera" a caped and masked figure is seen "lurking in the shadows." This isn't a Bane-Hipkiss-like remover of mask after mask, however, but *Philip Johnson again* (40). "Return" begins to look more and more like a playful inversion of the unconventional techniques found in Barthelme's earlier works, those elements traceable to a deep structure homologous with the city of his youth.

Ultimately, the narrator asks Philip Johnson for the very opposite of the randomly chosen bush that begins the "Not Knowing" essay, a monumental azalea, created not out of uncertainty, but via respected principles of commerce and architectural practice.

> And the great architect whipped from his sleeve his magic Eberhard Faber 2B pencil and waved it in the air, and sketched a most beautiful stainless steel azalea nine hundred feet high. My melancholy fell away from me, and I was content. And some day, God and the Gerald D. Hines Interest willing, you'll see this nine-hundred-foot high stainless steel azalea, taking its place with the city's other great and tall monuments in the garden of the creative imagination. (40). [19]

The narrator's melancholy, brought on by his "ill-considered act of azaleacide that I would not have committed had I not lingered too long in the wicked, sinful cities of the East," a place where his values had been "screwed up," is cured by the monumental replacement. His request is for a design that delivers "some kind of an azalea that I can plant somewhere on the surface of this wondrous city" (40). Jochen Achilles warns with good reason that "[t]he structure of Barthelme's writing discourages any attempt to extrapolate political, moral or aesthetic judgments from it. . . . He does not want his readers to accept his works submissively as sources of wisdom" (113). But "Return" does not seem to be structured like most of his writing, and it's nearly impossible to read the "wondrous city," or the "garden of the creative imagination" as

anything but an ironic judgment on both Houston as a city and as a font of creativity—something festival curator Saylors probably did not intend with her commission. It is the capitalistic, uncreative "surface" that's revealed in "Return," rather than the "deep structure" developed from the—as Lorrie Moore put it—"deep and abiding influence" of the city where Barthelme spent three formative decades. *That* Houston *is* a garden of the creative imagination for the author, a place where advantage many be taken of fluid, un-governed possibilities, though the city itself might not find mention in most of his freewheeling stories, as it does so superficially in "Return."

For Wayne Stengel, Barthelme focuses on signs and language "to reshape his reader's conceptions of those formalized lies known as literary conventions and to offer literary techniques and devices that are more mimetic approximations of reality" (39). Although the place is seldom mentioned in his work, it was the reality of Houston, Texas, that influenced the shape of his "formalized lies" and the structure of his unconventional stories. However, geographer Paul C. Adams reminds of the complexity of any place—and the perceived human experience of any place—when, echoing the title of Barthelme's essay on inspiration, he points out that "[p]lace-experience is not binary, a simple matter of knowing or not knowing; knowledge arises from actions, and place-experiences thus present innumerable shades of differentiation depending on what one is doing in a place" (186). Barthelme followed his path as a writer, but were place-experience simple, there would be no reason to take up the geocritical methodology of *multifocalization*, utilizing as many textual representations of a place as possible to, as Eric Prieto says, "escape from the perspectival limitations of a single author or interpretive community" ("Geocriticism Meets"). This we shall see as we examine work from a different

generation which evinces a different aesthetic, and takes up for the most part without irony the material reality of Houston, Texas.

Endnotes – Chapter II

[1] For the most comprehensive biographical portrait of Barthelme, see Tracy Daugherty's *Hiding Man*, the Houston years covered thoroughly in Parts I and II, the first twenty-two chapters. Helen Moore Barthelme's *Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound* (2001), cited extensively by Daugherty, is an indispensable resource covering the events of those years from the viewpoint of the author's second wife.

[2] This chapter will cite stories from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* to pages from that collection's first edition. Citation of other stories will be to the anthologies *60 Stories,* or *40 Stories*.

[3] In a symposium at Washington and Lee University in 1975 with William Gass, Grace Paley, and Walker Percy, Barthelme said, "I have said this too many times to make it interesting even to myself, but the principle of collage is one of the central principles of art in this century and it seems also to me to be one of the central principles of literature. *Finnegan's Wake* and *Ulysses* are obviously the chief cases in point, Joyce is the great collagist, literary collagist, of the century." (*Not Knowing* 76)

[4] This kind of "collage" is nearly ubiquitous in the work of Barthelme, other notable, later examples being "A Picture History of the War" (1968), "The Rise of Capitalism" (1972), and the oft-anthologized "The Indian Uprising" (1968).

[5] Sharp-eyed readers may have caught in the first paragraph of "Florence Green" that the dinner party takes place at the title character's "huge *horizontal* old multibathroom home on Indiana Boulevard" (14 emphasis added).

[6] Phillip Lopate described Barthelme to biographer Tracy Daugherty as "a sort of flaneur in his writing," which made him, in Lopate's estimation, a good match for *The New Yorker* magazine, a publication "that allowed for pastiche and parody: (Daughtery 249). I find few other references

to Barthelme linked with the concept of the *flâneur*. When Sven Birkerts calls "[f]inding and relating," the "sum and substance of the flâneur's obscure art," he likewise could be describing Barthelme's career-long practice of *his* obscure art (171).

[7] In a classic phrase defining the centrality of cars in urban areas like Houston, Adams describes how "[a]ds for vehicles continue to suggest that one is not a complete person, and *has no place*, if one is not the owner of a particularly impressive vehicle" (200 emphasis added).

[8] It is not the case that characters do not walk in Barthelme stories (which did occur to me). The eponymous figure in *The Dead Father*, for example, is tugged across the landscape for a novel-length duration by a group of marchers. Still, walking does seem deemphasized in his work, and descriptions made by walkers do not resemble Adams' "contemplation of a place (and a social reality) where permanence and simultaneity are more evident than change and sequence" (194). Abrupt peripeteia are the norm, rather than the peripatetic. In "The Falling Dog" the narrator is on foot, moving along a street, when a dog jumps on him from the window of a building. But in fact there is no "moving along," the story's first line beginning with the action already a *fait accompli*: "Yes, a dog jumped on me out of a high window. I think it was the third floor, or the fourth floor. Or the third. Well, it knocked me down. I had my chin on the concrete" (*60 Stories* 169)—and on the concrete the narrator largely stays to ponder further collage elements that accompany the incident with the dog. An exception (that proves the rule?) is from the series "Here in the Village," untitled and anonymously written for *The New Yorker's* "Notes and Comment" section. The most peripatetic of these is the first which purports to be a weekly record of the author's travels through that New York neighborhood on foot, the first line being the sentence fragment: "Walking around the Village:" (28).

[9] In another bid to best a more commonly thought of city when it comes to "freeway focus," Slotboom points out that "In Los Angeles, the freeway capital of the world, frontage roads are practically nonexistent" (95).

[10] For Slotboom, "The idea of commercial development and commercial clutter along freeways is accepted in Texas, especially in Houston. Other states adhere to the ideal of parkway or greenbelt freeways and would never tolerate the commercialism associated with frontage road freeways" (96).

[11] In "The Dolt," from the collection Barthelme published after *Caligari*, 1968's *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*, we find the character of Edgar, who, as with Baskerville, is trying to be a writer—in this case by attempting to pass the National Writers Examination he has failed twice already. When he struggles to think of an insult, but can't, the narrator commiserates. "I myself have these problems. Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin" (in *60 Stories* 96).

[12] "In 1984, Don would tell George Plimpton that he had waged a 'twenty year' war with . . . William Shawn, who always 'stippled' Don's stories with commas, interfering with the 'freer style of punctuation' Don preferred" (Daugherty 233).

[13] It is worth noting that not all is not freedom and *flânerie* for Friedberg in the cinema age.

> But a paradox here must be emphasized: as the "mobility" of the gaze became more "virtual"—as techniques were developed to paint (and then to photograph) realistic images, as mobility was implied by changes in lighting (and then cinematography)—the observer became more immobile, passive, ready to receive the constructions of a virtual reality placed in front of his or her unmoving body. (28)

We will find that it will be difficult to see I.A.L. Burligame as "passive" in this particular story, however.

[14] To add yet another layer, "Watt" could be an allusion to Samuel Beckett's 1953 novel by that name, its eponymous protagonist moving between roles in a Bane-Hipkiss manner, although without the vigor or volubility of Barthelme's character. For B.S. Johnson, *Watt* "has a narrative progression rather than a plot. Watt is on a journey to take up a post as a servant to Mr. Knott; he arrives, displaces his predecessor, serves his term, and is in turn displaced; the book ends with Watt again on a journey" (23). Helen Barthelme notes the profound influence of Beckett on her husband's work: "From the day he discovered *Godot*, Don believed he could write the fiction he imagined; it would be from an ironical perspective of the world and he could use his wit and intellect in a way that would satisfy himself" (46).

[15] A book whose dedication reads: "To all the unselfish men and women who have given so generously of their time, talents and means in building Houston as one of America's great cities."

[16] See the preface to *Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound* which Helen Barthelme begins with an account of the day in the fall of 1960 when the author "completed what would become his first published story in the new literary style he was developing." Her reaction: "I was astonished—I had heard nothing like it before. . . ." (xiii)

[17] Daugherty's research indicates "Shower of Gold" was drafted in Houston, but changed substantially after Barthelme's move to New York (238).

[18] Few have captured, or deflated, the Allen brothers' achievement at the site now called "Allen's Landing" so succinctly as *New York Times* architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable in her article "Deep in the Heart of Nowhere." "From that time that the Allen brothers came here from New

York in 1836 and bought the featureless land at the junction of two bayous (they could not get the site they really wanted), this city has been an act of real estate, rather than an act of God or man" (220).

[19] It is of more than passing interest that "Return," and the far more famous "Not-Knowing" were composed almost contemporaneously. As stated, "Return" was commissioned in 1984. "Not Knowing" has a more tortuous history, with versions of it appearing in lectures from 1982-83, then finding publication in various forms in 1985-86. See the publication notes in *Not Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme* edited by Kim Herzinger (322). Azaleas were much on the mind of the author in the early to mid eighties at any rate.

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CHAPTER III

"TO LOOK AT THE SNOW LIKE A CHILD, OR A TEXAN."

RICK BASS, HOUSTONIAN

> Who loves a garden loves a greenhouse too.
> Unconscious of a less propitious clime,
> Where blooms exotic beauty, warm and snug,
> While the winds whistle and the snows descend.
>
> William Cowper, *The Task* (563)

"One morning last week," Rick Bass reports in *Winter: Notes from Montana* (1991)—an account of survival through his first cold season in a newly adopted home—"as I was writing in the greenhouse, a coyote came trotting out of the woods, sat by the edge of the trees in a patch of sun, and watched the road" (35). Traditionally a personified trickster figure of category transgression and border crossing, the coyote appears to inspire in the writer an impulse to himself erase the human/animal distinction, as he recognizes in the creature a parallel to his own activities in preparation for the coming snows. "They catch mice the way I gather wood. We're all close, we're all tied together" (36).

That the space Bass sets aside for his writing is a greenhouse is appropriate, as he was at the time of writing himself a recent transplant, having spent his childhood in a place far different from Montana's pristine, snow-peaked, mountain-rimmed Yaak Valley, the place with which he is mainly associated. He grew up, rather, in the flat, chemical refinery filled, tropical suburbs of Houston, Texas. As an environment created for those border transgressing species "out of place"

in their present climate, the greenhouse can be seen as nurturing the literary output of a blooming young author from a land much more—to borrow from William Cowper's observations of greenhouses in the epigraph—"warm and snug" than his present surroundings. For Bass, it is in fact this status as a new arrival that makes his observations of the Montana winter worth recording in the first place. For this author it is a season which can only be truly seen by those who "remember to look at the snow like a child, or a Texan" (133).

Born in 1958 in Forth Worth, Rick Bass spent his childhood in the suburbs of Houston, Texas, interspersed with formative wilderness excursions to his family's Texas Hill Country deer lease. As a child, and a Texan, his observational skills were first honed not in a tree-lined valley like the Yaak, but—in Bass's words—the "suburban, homogenous, petrochemical mall-land" of Houston (*Why I Came West* 18). This landscape of Houston influences the aesthetic and narrative strategies Bass uses to shape his stories, and leaves its mark on his body of work, including those works that focus on far different places. Reading Bass's *oeuvre* via the lens of Houston—especially those stories that are set in the Bayou City—both informs the work and, reflexively, presents a particular perspective towards what Barry Lopez has called the "character and subtlety" (in Buell 83) of the city he inhabited in his formative years. Unlike Donald Barthelme, Bass's approaches the material reality of the city, records un-ironically and "directly" the effects of such influences as car culture and a boomtown economy, and presents characters recognizable as more than emblematic types, making him a valuable addition to any "multivalent" look at the often paradoxical relationship between a place and its literature.

Long recognized as an author concerned with the landscape and environment, framing Bass's texts within larger, less place-specific spatial concepts is not new. As someone who by his own admission fled the urban world in search of a different life closer to nature, it is possible

to see in much of Bass's writing a modern day attempt to inhabit that moving zone Frederic Jackson Turner described as the "meeting point between savagery and civilization,"—the frontier (3). Bass often recounts in his fiction and essays his great love of the Rockies, and his conversion from suburban dweller to inhabitant of the American West, narratives informed by a mythology celebrating a place where, as Donald Worster puts it, "independent men might live in the bosom of nature" (14). That such narratives *are* mythological has been taken up by many recent studies demonstrating how poorly Turner's spatial "meeting point" aligns with the actuality of experience in "The West," [1] but scholars have also identified another—less teleological—spatial concept in Bass's work, one befitting the coyote figure above: the border. Literary critic O. Alan Weltzein proposes Bass's present day home in Montana itself to be "a regional, climatic, botanical, zoological, and personal border country. . . . As a multivalent border country, it provides a source of energizing tensions that fuel his career" (4). Scant attention has been accorded, however, to the influence on the author of that first border country that likewise fuels his literary production, and did so long before he set up his writing desk in his Montana greenhouse.

Bass's home state of Texas can itself be considered a multivalent meeting zone of several "imagined cultural zones," each with mythological characteristics: "The West," "The South," and what José Limón and others label "Greater Mexico"—the influence of Latino culture that extends beyond national boundaries (Limón 3). Bass explicitly uses the terminology of borders meeting at a geographical crossroads to describe the Texas Hill Country in his novella, *The Sky, The Stars, The Wilderness* (1997). Here, Real County, Texas, is presented as a region where "all the borders come together"—the mountainous Texas Oak-Juniper Hill Country meeting up with both the Gulf Coastal Plain and the southern reaches of the Great Plains (122). As another

intersection of borders inside this intersection of borders, the city of Houston has also been noted as a peculiar spatial crossroads within the region of "Central Texas," an area historian Neil Foley calls the "shatter belt" (2). For Foley—evoking something like Doreen Massey's sense of place as a unique intersection of combined outside influences—this belt is a complex blend of "multiple and heterogeneous borders where different languages, experiences, histories, and voices intermingled" (7), as well as a crossroads of cultural zones—"east Texas, west Texas and south Texas"—that makes the region the "cultural core" of the state (15). Yet, thinking spatially, this core is also, paradoxically, a periphery, Houston being set geographically not at the metropole but on the rims of all of the aforementioned Western, Southern and Latin cultural mythologies, as well as at the outermost edges of what has come to be thought of as the Global South.

As an inhabitant of this hybrid crossroad, Bass's childhood in the 1960's through the 1980's would have been spent experiencing a metropolis undergoing expansion during years of transformation from *The Unknown City*—Marguerite Johnston's subtitle for her history of Houston before 1946—to *The Space City*. His place-experience of Houston begins approximately where Barthelme's is interrupted by that author's sojourn to "the wicked, sinful cities of the East" ("Return" 40). National attention, resources and population growth were all augmented during this era by the presence of the Johnson Space Center, an enterprise transgressing newly conceptualized borders between the atmosphere and outer space, while simultaneously the city grew in importance as a center for oil exploration and refining: the border separating the earth's surface from its hidden petroleum reserves punctured to a greater and greater extent by corporate enterprises that housed their headquarters in Houston.

In addition to the frontiers, borders and peripheries scholars find in his fiction, the

juxtapositions, atemporalities and broader issues of identity encountered in Barthelme's work also see expression in Bass's stories, and reveal themselves in ways that are again both direct and received. These relationships appear in particularly high relief among examples of the relatively small body of fiction that Bass sets in Houston: the short stories "Mexico," "Juggernaut," "Redfish," "Pagans" and "Swamp Boy." In addition, as we shall see, placing the authors side by side reveals just how intent Barthelme's characters are in utilizing the fluidity of their circumstances to effect escape, while Bass's desire escape from the fluid chaos into a more ordered life. Finally, in a kind of cultural "give" exported to a different state, exposure to the urban (and suburban) space of the Gulf Coast also frames Bass's better-known works focusing on Montana, as evidenced in his first non-fiction production from that region: *Winter: Notes from Montana*. Bass is, like Barthelme, a writer who has "Houstonized the world"—or at least the Big Sky Country. It is not the "American West"—in either material or mythological form—that most haunts works like *Winter*, but rather the refinery-dotted coastal plains of Houston, Texas.

There has not been a great deal of critical interest in the Houston stories of Rick Bass. For one, they make up a small portion of this prolific author's *oeuvre*, five stories among an output that includes (as of 2017) six story collections (the latest, 2016's *For A Little While*, comprised of both new and selected works), four novels, three novellas, sixteen non-fiction books of memoir or investigation of ecological themes, and numerous articles in popular magazines, literary journals, and online websites. He has also edited anthologies and collaborated with the author James David Duncan on the novella *The Heart of the Monster* (2010). In what is still the largest collection of critical work on Bass, 2001's *The Art and Activism of Rick Bass*, only one of these five abovementioned Houston stories, "Juggernaut,"

appears by name. Admitting that one of stories, "Pagans" appeared in print only after publication of the critical anthology, we are left to assume that the other three—"Mexico," "Redfish," and "Swamp Boy" are present in that work mainly within anthology contributor Jim Dwyer's complaint concerning "some of the Houston stories" which contain characters that "aren't remotely real" and, for this reason, "aren't compelling" (48). However, if one utilizes Houston as a framework for reading Bass's output, a place with an identity so problematic that the editors of the Houston architectural magazine, *Cite*, entitled their 2003 article anthology *Ethereal City*, these characters' remoteness from reality seems appropriate.

Were the five stories mentioned combined in a collection, it would be an odd one, with four—"Mexico," "Juggernaut," "Redfish" and "Pagans"—combinable into what I would label as kind of "novella" as two characters arguably recur in each. The fifth, "Swamp Boy" touches upon many of the themes of the other four, but utilizes a quirky narrative point of view that calls into question the veracity of all it relates, though in a manner different from the point of view shifts noted in Barthelme, and to a different effect. All five stories are recounted in a non-linear manner Bass employs for much of his writing, both fiction and non-fiction. This is not so much in a "horizontal," discontinuous juxtaposition of segments, nor a vertical "stacking" of meanings, but rather an approach that does a good job of appearing un-plotted or unplanned, related on the page much in the way meandering, rambling anecdotes are told around campfires. If Walter Benjamin's figure of the urban *flâneur* is useful in framing the works of Barthelme, perhaps better employed for Bass would be his observation in "The Storyteller" that, in the modern situation, "the communicability of experience is decreasing" (86). Notably, in addition, although Bass in his non-fiction roundly critiques the "petrochemical horrors" of the aforementioned "suburban, homogenous, petrochemical mall-land of Houston"—and bearing in mind that, by his

own account, in going West and becoming involved in ecological activism, he sought to flee "the clotted tangle of skyline billboards, [and] the 99 percent soil saturation by concrete" that is the Bayou City (*Why I Came West* 18)—these five stories align Houston's urban and suburban motifs with freedom and opportunity as much as they do with "horrors." Nevertheless, David Theis's anthology, *Literary Houston* (which includes the rarely anthologized "Juggernaut"), sounds a common note among critics concerning Bass's emigration from Texas: "Despite the fact (or perhaps because of the fact) that he grew up in Houston's suburbs, Rick Bass is a deeply committed environmentalist and wilderness advocate" (416). Thus the Houston stories appear as outliers in a body of work that stresses the rural over the urban, and wilderness over domesticated suburban geography. As we shall see, the settled places of Houston are also shown in these stories as presenting their own ecological and natural facets. In *Why I Came West* (2008) Bass recalls

> [t]he strange prehistoric architecture of crawdads, latticed light falling through the longleaf pines, [and] skinks rattling in dry oak leaves, locusts shrilling in summer. My childhood memories of Houston, from the very beginning, might as well be as those from a great and deep wilderness. (18)

In this vein, in a 2010 *Texas Monthly* article, "Wild at Heart," Bass waxes poetic about his mother's instructive and influential "embrace of suburban nature—rare and wonderful" (72). Under her tutelage, he comes to identify "the different gray and fox squirrels that patrolled the yards of our Houston suburbs," while he revels in her policy of "supporting my boyhood predilection for keeping as pets whatever bayou creatures I could capture" (70)—an observation readily conjuring a likely provenance for the story "Swamp Boy"—a work that presents Houston as a challenger to Jenny Price's vote for the urban metropolis of Los Angeles as "the ideal place

to tackle the problem of *how* to write about nature" ("Thirteen Ways"). I will first take up, however, that story out of the five which appeared last in chronology of publication. It is in "Pagans" that we find perhaps the clearest example of Bass's paradoxical conception of Houston as place, with the story serving well as a fairly transparent case study in how the city can work as a "direct" source of place-overcoding for a native, *endogenous* writer.

Jim Dwyer (of the above mentioned "Houston stories 'aren't compelling'" school of thought) argues that the "weird, wild, and wonderful images and events" in the stories of Rick Bass situate his works in a category resembling the magical realism of Latin American authors such as Gabriel García Márquez—only stamped with Bass's own distinctive concerns and obsessions (50). Márquez, however, often claimed to have based the narrative voice of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* on the matter-of-fact way his grandmother told stories, combined with a general sense he found common in Latin America that incredible things happened every day. "[T]he truth is that there's not a single line in all my work that does not have a basis in reality," claimed the novelist. "The problem is that Caribbean reality resembles the wildest imagination" (186). As goes Márquez's Caribbean, so it is with Rick Bass's Houston. In "Pagans," the first story in the collection *The Lives of Rocks* (2006), three high school aged Houstonians travel to the nearby Sabine river, only to discover that this body of water "would ignite spontaneously" into flame. Alternatively, "they found that they could light it themselves by tossing matches of flaming oily rags out onto its oil and chemical slicks" (9). For Dwyer, such light is one of the ways that Bass creates "the unbelievable thing" that characterizes his magical realism, an effect achieved by highlighting "nature's inherent glow" as well as other forms of "luminescence," (64).[2] The fact is, however, rivers in the Houston area do catch fire. Owing to petrochemical runoff and pipeline leaks, a much-publicized case being the San Jacinto river in 1994, the

luminescence of Bass's story is based on a fairly common Houston occurrence.[3] Comparing some of commonly considered aspects specific to Houston with their representation in "Pagans"—where many of the city's realities appear either directly or perhaps only once removed via fictional representation—serves as a useful way to grasp Bass's own conception of that place: one he presents as unusual, outsized and as full of opportunity as it is of poisonous, inflammatory, polluting toxins.

"Pagans" concerns, as do many short works in Bass's *oeuvre,* a triangle; this one between Houston high-school students Richard and Kirby, and the object of their shared, if awkward, attentions, Annie. The two boys, exploring by driving randomly up and down the Texas coastline at night, come upon a "rusting old crane half sunk near the estuary . . . salt-bound, a derelict from gravel quarry days" (2). By manual manipulation of the gears they find they can leverage anything into the air with the crane's massive hooked cable: their first experiment being Kirby's car. By attaching to the vehicle's front bumper, and raising it vertically into the air, they give each other rides in "the rocket car," "one of them lifting it with the crane while the other [grips] the steering wheel and [holds] on for dear life, aiming straight for the moon and praying that the cable would hold" (3). I take this to be an example of the kind of "real" to "fictional" linkage geocritics often mention. Bertrand Westphal's studies, for example, have centered around the "reality" of the Mediterranean—the scare quotes for that word often appearing in his writing, as he emphasizes the fictionality of all representations of place. As Westphal translator Robert Tally puts it, "all places are like Yoknapatawpha, combining the real and the imaginary." For Tally, "geocriticism allows us to understand 'real' places by understanding their fundamental fictionality. And vice-versa of course. We understand 'fictional' spaces by grasping their own levels of reality as they become part of our world" ("Timely Emergence" x).

Bass's stories explicitly possess that feature of "reality" Thomas Leitch finds lacking in Barthelme: a "sense of place or community" (85), and, in the case of "Pagans," this enters the fiction in "direct" ways—the represented evidence of the place's presence analogous to the information that, for example, "several prominent Houston women believed the character of Florence [in "Florence Green Is 81"] was based on each of them" (Helen Barthelme 94). For example, with their car and their crane, Kirby and Richard figuratively reenact something their home city is famous for, creating their own program paralleling that found at the nearby Johnson Spacecraft Center. Although not immediately obvious, readers soon see that as the boys eye the easily-parted rusted cable during their ascent, their project is filled with just as much threat of death and destruction as that faced by Apollo astronauts ("aiming straight for the moon")—figures mentioned explicitly a few pages later: "the riders, the journeyers, would imagine that they were astronauts, voyaging through the stars, cast out into some distant future" (5). Thus, in this story, the regional importance of car-identity intersects and is amplified by Houston's *Space City* identity. That Bass is making several nods towards Houston through this re-enactment becomes more plausible when, in order to augment their "space" adventures, Richard and Kirby buy an Army surplus diving bell, fix the gasket of its hatch, and "give each other crane rides into the poison river." The boys submerge themselves, "the globe tumbling with the current . . . and the passenger within not knowing whether or not the cable was still attached, bumping and tumbling, spotlight probing the black depths thinly" (5-6). Here is another Houston-oriented representation. Exposed early to the oil industry, Bass's first choice of career was not writer but geologist—or, as he puts it, "earth diver" (*Why* 4). The motif of petroleum explorer as "diver" recurs several times in Bass's works, as in the geologist character Wallis's fear of losing "his ability to dive into the boulder fields—to track the old paths of mountains as they moved across

the landscape of the past" in the novel *Where the Sea Used to Be* (23). Houston in the mid twentieth century had taken upon itself the business not only of exploring outer space, but inner space as well, serving as a global hub for energy exploration and, an important addition, oil refining. In fact, Richard and Kirby's crane is within easy viewing distance of the "smokestack flares of the refineries" along the Sabine River. When the bathysphere is lifted from the water, the boys experience "emergence, back up out of total darkness and into the night. The gas flares still flickering around them" (6)—another, "real world" example of the luminescence that Dwyer reads metaphorically. Like the scientists and geologists of the metropolis where they've come of age, the boys in their crane are able to explore upward into the vastness of space, and dive below into the poisonous residue of oil and petrochemicals as well.

Soon they are attaching "the Great Claw of Hunger," as they call the crane, to "anything substantial they can find: pulling from the sandbank half-submerged railroad ties, the old bumpers of junked cars, twisted steel scrap, [and] rusting slag-heaped refrigerators" (4). Although only examples of industrial waste, these soon form the foundation of a "sculpture" they arbitrarily deposit in the river as the collected items are lifted over the water and dropped. "Within a few nights they had created an island in the slow current's middle, an island of steel and chrome" (4). Soon, riverboat captains, ferrying the oil and chemicals in and out of refineries, "would have to contend with the new obstacle of the junk slag island, not previously charted on their maps. They might or might not marvel at the origin or genesis of the structure" (5). On the one hand, the three seem to be creating something like Leo Marx's "middle landscape" between civilization and wilderness, turning away both from "the violent uncertainties of nature" and "the repressions entailed by a complex civilization" (22)—the abandoned crane truly representative of the title of his *Machine in the Garden*. The island would

also have to be considered, after Lefebvre, a *Production of Space,* the trio utilizing a machine to create a "an actualized 'second nature,' far removed from nature proper yet concrete at its own level . . . emancipated from artifice while at the same time retaining no suggestion of the 'natural'" (376). But for our purposes, this previously uncharted man-made construction also represents an overcode, in this case the "origin or genesis" of the City of Houston which has been labeled an arbitrary construction by many observing the history of the area. Founded in 1837 by brothers and real estate developers Augustus and John Allen on the West Bank of Buffalo Bayou—the inspiration for the plywood and Weed-Eater parody in Barthelme's "Return"—the omphalos of the city supposedly rested at the "head of navigation" of that waterway—a place where transference of goods would be required from steamboat to overland carriage such as ox-wagon. (Again we find the presence of the ancient Egyptian symbol, in this case emphasizing the cross.) As such, the location would form what Charles H. Colley labels a "commercial break," important "as a foundation for later manufacturing and political development" (in McComb 12). Unfortunately, the navigability of the waterway was at best a public relations exaggeration, at worst a lie, as readers of early accounts of "Allen's Landing" will attest. Early setter Percy Lubbock discovered that the last six miles of Buffalo bayou required three days of travel to push through the various snags and obstructions (in McComb 14). It was this reason that architectural writer Ada Louise Huxtable labeled the city "an act of real estate, rather than an act of God or man" (220). For Huxtable, "what strikes the visitor accustomed to cities shaped by rivers, mountains and distinguishing topography, by local identity and historical and cultural conditioning, is that this is instant city, and it is nowhere city" (219). The island Richard and Kirby construct is, like Houston, "without the normal rationales of geography and evolutionary social growth," (Huxtable 219). Like the Allen Brothers stepping

onto the banks of Buffalo Bayou at an arbitrarily available location, Richard and Kirby have *willed* their structure into being because an abandoned crane happens to be situated there, not because it is a planned construction placed at an important crossroad or confluence.

This arbitrary construction is also, like Houston, inhabited by them nonetheless, as well as by their friend Annie, who comes to form part of their community:

> They piled lawn chairs atop the edifice. And even though the water was poisoned, the sound of it, as they lay there in the sun with their sleeves rolled up and their shoes and socks off, eyes closed, was the same as would be the sound of waves in the Bahamas, or a clear cold stream high in the mountains. Just because the water was ugly did not mean it had to sound ugly. (7)

Both for "Pagans" and Houston itself, there are implications here for what humanistic geographer Edward Relph calls "placelessness." In a "place" that seems to exist without rationale there is the danger for what Relph calls "an uncritically accepted stereotype, an intellectual or aesthetic fashion that can be adopted without real involvement" (82). This appears to be the attitude David Theis disparages of when noting the way Houstonians "when [they are] having a particularly fine experience; when [they] feel really comfortable in a restaurant or at an event . . . feel compelled to say, 'this is so great, I feel like I'm not in Houston'" (xvi). Yet the "elsewheres" of the Bahamas and the clear mountain streams, though places "not in Houston," are mentioned in a celebratory fashion by the three protagonists of "Pagans," the comparison allowing them to construct a metaphorical space that echoes another of Theis's observations about the city as an "economic" zone, only inhabited temporarily before "moving on" (xiii). "They had found a lazy place," the story says of their man-made structure in the Sabine river. "[A] sweet place, to hang out, in the eddy between childhood and whatever came next" (9). It is

as if the blankness and basic purposelessness of their constructed island better allows them to project meaning upon it, and do so in a way that counters the toxic, petrochemical drawbacks of their surroundings. "The river was dying," they observe, "but it was still alive" (13).

They are, in fact, at home with every aspect of this strange, polluted landscape. "I want to give the river a blessing" Annie says, and leads the boys to the island with water and steel wool where they "polished the chrome appurtenances and rinsed the mountain anew" (10). What inspires this action is the before-mentioned ignition of the river into flames. "The snaky, wandering river fires, in various bright petrochemical colors, seemed more like a celebration than a harbinger of death" (9). By the time of the 2006 publication of "Pagans," Bass had already left Houston and made a mark as a nationally recognized fiction writer and commentator upon matters of nature and ecology. Yet for every instance in the story that might be read as an indictment against man's defilement of the natural world along the Texas Gulf Coast, there is also sounded this note, with the industrialized landscape as its own kind of opportunity: a "celebration."

In "Pagans" neither boy ends up with the Annie, as "in a less common variation on that ancient story, she chose neither of them but went on to meet and choose a third, and lived happily ever after" (1), but much of the story appears to concern the place of the river and the abandoned crane over the human interrelationships. It's true that the story expresses nostalgia for lost nature, and notes the damage done to the biological world in the Houston region by economic and industrial forces. Part of Annie's ritualistic cleansing of their island includes recitation of Jeremiah 2:7: "And I brought you into the plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land and made mine heritage an abomination" (10). Yet the work also overtly expresses nostalgic sadness over the loss of just

such abandoned construction sites as the one that attracted the boys—the loss of opportunities for adventure. "There were still a million, or maybe a hundred thousand, or at least ten thousand such places left in the world back then," the narrator mentions. Indeed this sequence emphasizes explicitly Bass's thematic concern both with *place* and the desire for fluid transgression of borders or *boundaries*. "Soft seams of possibility, places where no boundaries had been claimed. . . . Places of richness and health, even in the midst of heart-rotting, gut-eating poisons" (14). Time-wise, "back then" is an important concept for the story, as the third person narrator of "Pagans" admits to be speaking from an era thirty years following the events of story (1), Richard, Kirby and Annie's island of scrap resonant of the "rampart of bones" encountered in the penultimate sentence of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado"—"For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them" (279). While the love interests are not fulfilled, and end with parting, all three characters look back upon those events as a "treasure-trove," or "reservoir,"—one that "remains with them, a power and a strength, so many years later" (25). While making feints towards being both a love story and a cautionary ecological fable, in the end "Pagans" is a story of the kind of hope and opportunity available even in the land of "abomination"—available if not now, at least in some nostalgic golden era of the past. And, as with the island of discarded waste, part of that hope includes the construction of a home, and the joining of a community. [4]

"Pagans" represents a return to the subject of Houston for an author who had made his career writing about elsewhere, but these exciting, unclaimed, transgressable *seams* or *boundaries* of opportunity are likewise expressed in three stories which appeared in print closer to the time Bass actually spent in Houston, in his first story collection, *The Watch* (1989). Rather than the presentation of emotional distance encountered in "Pagans"—delivered up by a third

person narrator separated from the action by the space of thirty years—the earlier "Mexico," "Juggernaut," and "Redfish" are told in the first person, arguably, though not definitely, by "Richard."[5] No Annie appears, but there is a Tricia, Kirby's wife in two of the stories.

"We have all these distances set out before us," says the narrator of "Mexico," the first story in the collection, "and we can do what we want with them, our lives. We are all in perfect and proper control. We can make happen what we want to happen, in our lives, and there is all the time in the world" (28). By all rights he is incorrect about just how much control he and his friends exert, though he does seem to be correct about "these distances" that are juggled in the stories, and about the relative *non*-importance of time. The three Houston stories in *The Watch* emphasize juxtaposition, distance and peripherality, and, as Barthelme does especially in "Will You Tell Me?" push temporality as a concern to the far margins of the narratives. In fact, many of these deeper, what I call "received," aesthetic choices that are influenced by the place-experience of Houston, and that we've seen Barthelme employ, are used also in the work of Rick Bass, although in his case against a much more realistic backdrop and in the service not of freedom so much as "belonging."

For example, while I've begun this discussion by taking up "Pagans"—a story that has to be considered "out-of-sequence" both for the case of Richard and Kirby's narrative arc and Bass's own publication history, "Mexico," "Juggernaut" and "Redfish" appear in *The Watch* out of chronological sequence in another way: internally. That is, evidence within the stories indicates that the collection's first offering, "Mexico," is set circa 1986, during a time of high oil prices that are just about to go bust and take the Houston economy with them, although it hasn't affected the narrator or the now oil-rich Kirby, both of them long decamped from high school. "Work," says the narrator dismissively, upon observing people at a restaurant who have actual

jobs. "Kirby and I laugh at them" (21). Separated by three stories set in both Montana and Mississippi, the second Houston story in the collection, "Juggernaut" takes place ten years *earlier* than "Mexico" as a kind of prequel—a time when Kirby and the narrator are in high school, apparently before Tricia enters the scene. In fact, readers learn that the story takes place during Gordie Howe's tenure with the Houston hockey team, the Aeros, when he was "making a comeback at the age of 48." Uncovering Mr. Howe's birth year and applying some simple math tell us "Juggernaut" takes place circa 1976. The last, "Redfish," the tenth in the collection, seems to be *after* 1986, as the narrator and Kirby—so flush with inherited oil money in "Mexico"—have now have resorted to gainful employment: Kirby at a bank, the narrator at a moving company. Bass in so ordering these stories in his collection offers a scrambled or weakened sense of chronological time, although all point backwards nostalgically towards an earlier, better Houston that is rapidly disappearing. In "Juggernaut," this golden era has just been missed, the story taking place "in the last year before Houston got big and unlivable" (106). By the time of "Mexico," the metropolis's report card is already grim:

> That sweet suck of lime: the beer, so cold. Some way you have got to get by in Houston these days. Hell will come here first, when it opens. Everyone here's already dead. The heat killed them or something. People don't even fall in love here anymore: it's just the pelvic thrust, and occasionally children as the result. There's no love, and that's the surest sign of death. (13)

We shall see that the narrator doth protest too much, however, as engine of these stories is, in fact, the search for love. Importantly, however, before taking up the way "outsiderness" (and its cure) affect the characters, notice should be taken of how in Bass's early stories collected in *The Watch* the march of temporal or chronological cause and effect by many measures appears

to have "stopped." This is occurring in a far different manner from that employed by Barthelme in a story such as "Will You Tell Me?," where, for example, uncovering the year in which the story takes place—so easy for "Juggernaut," above—would be impossible. One way of considering what Bass has done comes from novelist and creative writing instructor Chris Bachelder, who presents the craft/plot concept of time as a dramatic device, present in most conventional short fiction in the form of a timekeeping device:

> . . . and this clock starts ticking early in the story. Like the clock at a football or basketball game, the story's clock counts down toward zero. The clock implies the end of the story, the point beyond which the story will not go, and thus it creates the time-space within which the meaningful events of the story will occur . . . . The ticking clock is inextricably connected to the story's conflict, tension, form, pacing, movement, and momentum. (35)

Geocritic Robert Tally similarly notes that, conventionally, for critics such as Frank Kermode, for example, "the soul of narrative" can be located in "the form-giving fiction that organizes time: the tick-tock of a clock is the simple model of a plot. . . . we who live in the middest can craft a narrative with a distinct beginning and end to make sense of our own condition" ("Geocriticism and Classic American" 5-6). To borrow once again a quote from Michel Foucault concerning the "heterotopia" in 1967's "Of Other Spaces":

> We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. . . . when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (22)

Foucault could be describing the epoch and moment of the Houston stories found in *The Watch*. The skein created especially in these three stories is coiled and knotted by a simultaneous combination of narrative approaches. One we have seen in Barthelme is non sequitur: actions and imagery connected without recourse to linear development or cause and effect, of which the first paragraph of "Mexico" serves as a ready example. "Kirby's faithful. He's loyal: Kirby has fidelity. He has one wife, Tricia. The bass's name is Shack. The fish is not in an aquarium. It's in the swimming pool that Kirby built, out in his and Tricia's front yard" (13). To account for this sort of juxtaposition as received and expressed through the aesthetic medium of the story, it's possible to point, as with Barthelme, towards aspects of the Greater Houston area: rapid automotive impression made by the scanning gaze across the vast interconnected differences of the feeder roads, or the anti-zoning mentality that renders categories of land-use spatially mixed and juxtaposed (a swimming pool in a *front yard*). The "imagined Houston" encountered in these particular stories demonstrates a deeper resonance, however, with a different aspect of the region in their nonlinear narratives: the effect of intersecting multivalent borders. In order to discover why Kirby's loyalty is at issue (mentioned three times), or why having only one wife would be notable, or what this has to do with a bass (authorial intrusion?), and why any game fish *might* be in an aquarium in the first place, let alone a swimming pool, readers are placed in an initial position much like Tricia as she attempts to reconstruct exactly what it was that happened at Kirby's bachelor party before their marriage; she will "get a snatch of it here, pick up a tidbit the year after that; sometimes there'll be a dinner party and great long stretches of the narrative will come out, after eleven-thirty, told charmingly, happily, among friends" (27). The reader similarly follows the meandering thread of only loosely connected vignettes in these stories, most of these emerging in an informal, rambling

manner ("among friends"), and, for that matter, among friends who are—with their cold beers, already "dead" from the heat, and no longer capable of love—arguably blanketed in Simmel's blasé attitude towards their urban existences.[6] It's an effect reminiscent of Wayne B. Stengel's take on "Will You Tell Me?" where a "sensation of aimless drifting . . . overcomes these people and their relationships" (124), but here consummated in a more conventional approach than Barthelme's—in fact, partly through employment of a grammatical turn.

For example, in the case of "Mexico" and "Juggernaut," the narrator's seemingly directionless rambles are almost always couched in the imperfect tense, "Richard" set on describing *habitual action* rather than specific scenes. "When it rains, when the floodwaters lap around the edges of the pool," we are told in "Mexico" concerning the fish, Shack, and his personal swimming space,

> Kirby turns on the underwater floodlights situated around the perimeter at various depths, as in a regular swimming pool, and the three of us, and any of the neighborhood kids who can be trusted, circle around and around, barefooted and in our shorts, slapping at the top of the water with bamboo poles, keeping Shack at bay. (15)

James Woods notes that while the French language has an imperfect past tense that can convey both discrete occurrences and recurrent ones, "English is clumsier. . . . as soon as we do that in English we have given the game away, and are admitting the existence of different temporalities" (33). The stories are thus presented as very few *particular* scenes, but many general summaries of actions presented as typical—many different temporalities displayed at once. Although quoted dialogue and detailed description ("barefooted and in our shorts, slapping at the top of the water with bamboo poles") help carry the effect of evocative prose

through what novelist Madison Smartt Bell calls "half scenes" (90), any sequential or chronological "timeline" is marginalized for the more spatial representation of juxtaposed, nonlinearly connected images and occurrences. As the narrator notes in "Mexico," these are stories that appear to have "all the time in the world," and that are furthermore not directed towards any particular problem to be solved or obvious conclusion to be pointed towards. For example, as it turns out, the death of Kirby's pet bass, Shack, will bring a profound change to the three friends, but there is little indication in the story that this is going to be an important point of conflict until it happens. For the most part "Mexico" proceeds with vignettes of drinking, trips to Mexico, flashbacks to a problematic roommate named Gus and bachelor party visits to Houston's topless dancing establishments, many related in the imperfect tense and few necessarily related to the demise of Shack.

As mentioned, Tricia's attempt to reconstruct the narratives told to her with "a snatch of it here . . . a tidbit the year after that" (27) calls to mind not what is received via the scanning gaze of the *flâneur*, but what is heard by the audience of a storyteller who has lost the thread of the story. The storyteller is, indeed, a figure urban observer Walter Benjamin saw as diminished in the modern world. For him this was not so much a lamentable circumstance as a natural development, "a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech" (87). Bass's fellow Texan, Larry McMurtry, examining Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" in his book of essays, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* (2001) is more alarmed, finding in Benjamin's musings "an examination, and a profound one, of the growing obsolescence of what might be called practical memory and the consequent diminution of the power of oral narrative in our twentieth–century lives" (13).[7] However, as with the rapid non-sequiturs of Barthelme, we must ask: is it possible

to locate anything particularly Houstonian—as opposed to generally twentieth-century—in "Richard's" meandering tales?

A possibility concerning nonlinear aspects associated with narrative that concerns itself with the "border" regions that interest Bass—and that we find intersecting and comingling in the Bayou City—has been remarked upon by several scholars. Historians Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett note the difficulties inherent in writing meaningfully about such regions that by their nature resist oversimplified "centrist" explanations and the teleological linearity like that found in conventional American frontier history before the challenging of Turner's paradigm of Westward expansion (351). In characterizing border narratives, they find "instability—a lack of linear progression, unanticipated twists, [and] a profound sense of uncertainty about how stories will play out" (360). Beyond the mere fact of its occurrence, however, exactly why this nonlinear narrative approach should be privileged by "border writers" has been taken up by Bertrand Westphal in *Geocriticism*. For Westphal, as mistrust grows of temporal notions like "progress"—of which Turner's ever-westward march of civilization towards a unified America would serve yet again as an example,

> history can go forward, turn in circles, or cross and recross its own paths. This is a secularization of progress, freed from the single trajectory that the progressivists celebrated with such euphoria not so long ago. Synchrony seems to take precedence over diachrony. Events are crammed into the present. (14)

For geocritic Eric Prieto, this freeing up of temporal progress in favor of the spatial occurs when "spaces once thought to be self-contained and autonomous, defined in stable, self-evident ways" are understood rather to be "in constant flux, loosely delineated by borders that are shifting, permeable, and always open to question" ("Geocriticism Meets Ecocriticism")—as

in the multivalent borderland of Rick Bass's Houston youth. In fact, the city portrayed in this group of stories is a hybrid juxtaposition of places, concepts, characters and characteristics, perhaps representatively personified by Eddie Odom in "Juggernaut," a hybrid figure who is both the boys' geometry teacher and—as they discover to their surprise—a moonlighting semi-professional hockey player named "Larry Loop." He is, in addition, the only character in Bass's *oeuvre* who speaks directly to urban planning in the Bayou City:

> Houston, he told us, was the only town in the country that was zoned and ordinanced properly, so that a man could do what he wanted, as he wanted. He paused for about five minutes after he said this, and looked at us, one by one, going down the rows in alphabetical order, to make sure we had understood him. (106-7)

As Mr. Odom, he is a geometry teacher who doesn't teach, spending class periods unraveling fantastic stories that often themselves dwell on the theme of category transgression and hybridity. "All female lions have a claw hidden in their tail," he explains to his class, apropos of nothing geometrical. "My guess is it's left over, from a time we don't know about, when lions used to swing from the trees, like monkeys." This "responsible adult" encourages his charges "to go down to the zoo and somehow manage to slip a hand in through the bars of the lion cage, behind them, and find out" (108). As hockey player Larry Loop, he appears to know little about the game. He would "*run* on his skates rather than actually using them, and could travel just as fast that way" (emphasis in original 115). He wears a "savage, painted goalie's mask," though he is not a goalie. In spite of the fact that Larry "drew his stick back incorrectly and almost always shot improperly, off-balance" he always scores a great deal (116). As Mr.

Odom, he claims to be from Walla Walla Washington; as the hopelessly inept yet totally effective Larry Loop, the narrator declares, "You could tell he was not from the north" (115).

In addition to relating occurrences in a time-scrambled imperfect tense, the narrator of all of the Houston stories found in *The Watch* contains in his approach another concept associated with the spatial over than the temporal, and one that it is very difficult to locate at all in Barthelme's body of work. He is what writers like Janet Burroway would label a "peripheral narrator": someone "on the edge of the action, but nevertheless our eyes and ears in the story and therefore the person with whom we identify and with whom we must be moved or changed" (56). In the case of this group of stories, he might even be labeled "narrator as third-wheel." In "Mexico," his friend, "King Kirby" has "found the right woman,", and, as the narrator bemoans, "I don't know what she sees in him, what the purpose is, but she sees it" (27). Kirby and Tricia possess exactly the relationship the narrator feels he may never have. "Maybe I'm a sensualist, and no good at moving forward," he says. "[M]aybe I'll never be able to go anywhere on my own or *do* anything—that's what a friend of Tricia's said, one horrible occasion when a double date was accidentally created" (29). On the other hand, this is a perspective he also takes up by choice, because "there's time. You can learn from everybody else's mistakes; isn't that the best way? You can stay off the field, on the sidelines, and spare yourself the crunch of gristle, crack of bone" (30). While Barthelme, especially in early works like "Florence Green is 81" and "Hiding Man" manipulates point of view to emphasize the fluidity of identity, Bass with his peripheral narrator emphasizes how characters are distanced from what matters in their lives. This kind of presence in the margins, sidelines or periphery is not a spatial concept solely for narrators, however.

As a paradigm common to cultural geography and postcolonial studies the "center and periphery," or "metropole and periphery," is often invoked to describe spatially the way colonizing centers in Europe imagined their culture and influence spreading across the world in a process of diffusion. It is not completely without precedent to use such models borrowed from postcolonial theory to examine regions of the United States, as Edward Watts has attempted to re-frame the Midwest as a species of *colony* (170-71). As mentioned, thinking in terms of cultural authority and the power of mythological identity, we might consider Texas to be at the periphery of more than one metropole, with the state positioned not only at the *intersections* of the American West, American South, and Greater Mexico, but at the marginal *peripheries* of each of those centers as well. Using a post-colonial lens, it becomes possible to view the vaunted (and often annoying) "Texas pride" as comparable to what Edward Said calls the "[d]efensive, reactive, and even paranoid nationalism" of former colonies (xxvi). There is, in other words, a tendency for those on the periphery to, in a reactionary manner, desire a more central role, what Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o styles "Moving the Center," which became the name of his 2008 essay collection. When Rachel Hooper, curator at the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston states that "Houston is often perceived as a city that exists on the margins of culture, but it is a sleeping giant positioned at the very center of today's energy concerns," she is expressing that desire for a region at the margins to be taken more seriously (99).

This is also the desire expressed by the narrator of "Redfish"—the final story in *The Watch*—when, upon leaving his drunken friend, Kirby, in the surf at Galveston, he hikes up the beach, stops at a pay phone, and dials Kirby's home number. "Tricia," [he] said, disguising [his] voice, mumbling. 'This is Kirby. I love you.'" (190). A more directly symbolic gesture of a

peripheral narrator pushing his way into the center of a relationship—to come in from the margins—is hard to imagine, yet Bass manages just that in the last Houston story I will take up, "Swamp Boy" from the 1995 collection *In the Loyal Mountains*. The only example in the group of Houston stories that does not in one way or another feature Kirby and his friend, "Swamp Boy" is narrated by a mysterious figure which is itself a hybrid take-off on the collective "we" voiced in a story like William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," only one that purposely places itself at the very edge of its collective community—a community itself peripherally set "there in the sixties at the edge of that throbbing, expanding city, Houston" (26). The story begins:

> There was a kid we used to beat up in elementary school. We called him Swamp Boy. I say we, though I never threw any punches myself. And I never kicked him either, or broke his glasses, but stood around and watched, so it amounted to the same thing. A brown-haired fat boy who wore bright striped shirts. He had no friends.
>
> I was lucky enough to have friends. I was unexceptional. I did not stand out. (22)

All of Bass's Houston stories cut across the grain of what Jenny Price calls the "historically powerful definition of nature as only the wild things, which we destroy and banish when we build cities."[8] For Bass, "the urban" and "the natural" are not mutually exclusive, but wildness is definitely placed at risk by the press of human activity. "Swamp Boy" is a more self-conscious, even didactic, ecological allegory concerning that risk when compared with the Houston stories in *The Watch*. The character, Swamp Boy, stands out—is *peripheralized*—from his community because he loves nature, and spends most of his time away from people. He explores the wildlife of Houston's grass prairies and bayous, collects specimens, studies them,

and learns their Latin names. He raises these creatures in his aquarium, a kind of ecological activist in his own right, all of which places him in even greater conflict with his peers. The narrator reveals nostalgically that these events took place in a past that has been bulldozed away, "buried by so many tons of houses and roads and other sheer masses of concrete that what happened there when I was a child might as well have occurred four or five centuries ago" (25). There is no celebration of the adventures made possible by abandoned cranes and industrial waste as in the later "Pagans." Swamp Boy is chased and tormented by the less ecologically concerned children, while the narrator "avoid[s] getting too close . . . for then the other boys would treat me as they treated him"—a clear self-identifying pronouncement of the narrator's role that mirrors that of Swamp Boy: sticking to the sidelines. As in "Pagans," we learn of these events from a distant future, one in which the narrator has abandoned those lakes, swamps, and amphibious denizens Swamp Boy loves so much for life in corporate America, seen as its own kind of biological existence:

> Sometimes I feel as if I've become so entombed that I have *become* the giant building in which I work—that it is my shell, my exoskeleton, like the seashell in which a fiddler crab lives, hauling the stiff burden of it around for the rest of his days. The chitin of things not said, things not done. . . . (27-28 emphasis in original)

Ultimately, in a frenzied scene, the narrator does join in as children of the neighborhood chase Swamp Boy to the edge of a bayou where, to escape, he has to "dive into the milky brown water." The narrator imagines him cowering and crying on the other side of the bank. Bass and ecological awareness are much discussed, but what's important to his Houston connection is the unusual narrative shift that occurs at this point. Just as "Richard" attempted by imitating Kirby

on the phone in "Redfish," telling Kirby's wife "I love you," the narrator moves from the sidelines of the story to its center.

> If this were not all a lie, a re-creation or manipulation of the facts, and if I were the boy who had chased the other boy through the cane, rather than the boy who had leapt into the muddy bayou, then what I would have done, what I should have done, was something heroic. . . . I would have said something noble, like, "He got away. Let him go." (34)

Here the teller completes the leap that the narrator of "Redfish" can only jokingly approximate and reveals that he had been all along *not* a peripheral watcher—not someone "unexceptional" who "did not stand out"—but the main, outlandish protagonist in the action the entire time, only hiding behind the "lie" of the peripheral, fictionalized narration. The story could arguably be seen as teetering on the edge of Bass's own decision to leave his suburban life and lucrative job as a geologist for a role in environmental activism. "I was that boy," the narrator says at the end of the story, "and I was the other one too. I was at the edge of fear, the edge of hesitancy, and had not yet—not then—turned back from it" (34).

It is unclear if this is to be read "literally" (a meta-fictional move in which the artifice of the story is revealed: the narrator *was* the beleaguered Swamp Boy all along), or more metaphorically as a narrator glancing back from that "giant building" where he works, though possessed now with an empathetic understanding of what Swamp Boy had been up against—or a bit of both. What is clear, aesthetically, is that the voice has shifted from the periphery towards the central character—the title character—of this story, a character readers had previously learned about only via narrative voyeurism. "I was that boy." The center of consciousness of the story parallels the desires of the city where Bass spent his childhood, executing a shift away

from existence at the margins towards the center of narrative concern. It is a consciousness that wants to come home.

In 1987, Bass overcame any hesitancies *he* might have had about changing homes and moved to the Yaak Valley of Montana, with one early result being *Winter: Notes from Montana* (1991). Proceeding as a series of dated journal entries, *Winter*—purportedly a memoir recording the native Texan's first months living near the Canadian Border—nevertheless, like the fictional Houston stories, resists both chronological order and linear plot, and reflects the hybrid influences and open-endedness of the multivalent border region Bass carried with him when he "went West." Joseph Meeker, discussing pastoral values, points out how classically "[t]he sensitive aristocrat who turns toward Arcadia and away from Rome often discovers that Rome is really within him. Although he can leave behind the fearsome environment of civilization and its cities, yet the psyche of civilization remains to guide his responses to nature" (91). Similarly, Mike Featherstone calls the *flâneur* "not just the stroller in the city, something to be studied. *Flânerie* is a method for reading texts, for reading the traces of the city. It is also a method writing, of producing and constructing texts" (910). Bass is no motorized *flâneur* like Barthelme, nor has he quite retired to a middle ground between wilderness and civilization to live out his ideals in his greenhouse, but he has learned his own ways of producing and constructing texts from the multivalent border region of his youth, and carried this aesthetic with him, a way in which he will "read the traces" of the snowy mountains.

Winter avoids mentioning any motivations for making this move from Texas, and begins without explanation, *en medias res*, with Bass already settling into the Yaak Valley, about to face his first winter there with his future wife, Elizabeth Hughes. Though the book inhabits a completely new landscape, there remain strong links—similar to the direct, surface influences of

car culture, space travel and the petroleum industry explicit in a story like "Pagans"—between Houston's connection with energy production and Bass's representations of the more pristine wilderness of the Yaak. One of the book's most persistent—in fact, nearly obsessive—themes involves procuring, extracting and processing energy: fuel for warmth through the approaching cold season, with Bass enacting the exchange of "labor for heat" involved in cutting and gathering firewood (114). The "deep diving" in "Pagans" and other works is replaced here with "heavy logging." As early as the entry labeled "September 15," Bass worries, "Can't get enough wood!" (11). On October 6: "I went to cut wood today. . . . I cut and cut, until I was dripping sweat" (63), yet four days later, and in spite of it being such a "brutal, dirty job," he complains: "I need a lot more wood" (69). The process, however, gets into his blood. "I'm thinking about how I love getting wood. I moan about it. . . . and yet I really, really enjoy that feeling" (69-70). Bass's fuel gathering is not merely a process of extraction, but—as with the refineries that line the Houston Ship Channel or the Sabine River in "Pagans"—processing is required:

> splitting and splitting and splitting again, taking a fine fireplace-size creaking yellow heart-log of wood, a barrel-size piece . . . knocking it down with the maul into toothpicks, which will be gone in a flash. . . . But they'll cook the beans, those little sticks. (47)

A major part of the narrative action of the book can be summarized by two words recorded at the beginning of the season: "Git [*sic*] wood" (16). In *Winter*, Bass unites the energy needs and resulting problems encountered in Montana with the energy requirements and dilemmas of his original hometown in a symbolic fantasy projection: "Perhaps this spring I'll drive to Houston pulling a sixty-foot larch tree behind me" (114). Thus, in "the wilderness," he cannot escape the confluence of extraction, refining and consumption that have brought

environmental stress to urban Texas. If he wants to stay warm, Bass can only shift the cycle onto another resource.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Bass reports that his "journal entries" are produced in a greenhouse: the space reserved for his writing in the large Montana home where he and Elizabeth work as caretakers. Indeed, a greenhouse, as an environment created for border and region transgressing species that are "out of place" in their present climate, works as a fitting emblematic space for nurturing the art of this "transplanted" author from Houston. The craft and purpose of writing is, in fact, a frequently mentioned topic in *Winter,* and it is the book's narrative strategies more than fantasies of towing giant larch trees to the Gulf Coast that reveal it most as a product of Donald Barthelme's home town. Bass's imagined Houston is a confluence of borders, separations that are, nonetheless, permeable. Speaking of his youth in the Texas Hill Country, Bass recalls in *Winter* how he had been taught "never to leave a gap open" in barbed wire fences when crossing between ranches, lest cattle escape. "In writing I've been taught the same thing," he admits. "Always close your gates—unless, of course, you *want* something to get out, escape into the next chapter, perhaps, or even into the night, never to be seen or heard from again" (143 emphasis in original). It is exactly this kind of "*want*" that a reader finds in this memoir—writing that has left its gates open and allowed the characters and recorded events to spill between the dated "journal entries," much as the characters and obsessions are seen to spill between the stories Bass has set in Houston.

Like "Richard's" rambling tales—accounts from an urban storyteller who has lost the narrative thread and experiences, as Larry McMurtry would put it, the modern "diminution of the power of oral narrative" (13), even the more rural events of *Winter* proceed in a fragmented, non-linear fashion. Incidents and encounters are described that claim importance, yet were un-

mentioned when they first occurred. For example, on October 3 Bass records how "[t]he first truly cold day was two days ago," (49). Yet flipping back in the "journal" to "October 1," or even "September 30," readers will find no mention of this long awaited "first,"—an event that should be notable, especially for an author who has moved from the tropics to a region where the winter season, according to Bass's new neighbors, reaches a "wonderful" windchill temperature of eighty below zero (17). The book pretends to the role of journal or collection of "notes" just as "Richard's" first person accounts in *The Watch* stories pretend to the role of casual stories "among friends"—consonant with the urban, drifting, blasé setting in which the characters operate. [9]

In Thomas Bailey's opinion "this perplexing book" (96)—in spite of the progressing calendar dates—"subordinates exact chronology or dominant plot," and "moves with the suppleness, indirectness, and subconscious thematic coherence of a long poem" (93), much like the rambling vignettes of the Houston stories in *The Watch*. "I don't know how to write about this country in an orderly fashion" (12) Bass acknowledges in *Winter*, although it is almost impossible not to suspect method to the "disorder": the "gates" of the memoir have been left open because this is the kind of narrative that best serves the attitude the observer has carried with him from his home town. "I think I am beginning to see a pattern," says Bass. "—that there is no pattern" (72): a judgment that might also be made concerning the collage-like fiction of Donald Barthelme, and unsurprising given an author who grew up, as Mr. Odem/Larry Loop puts it in "Juggernaut," in "the only town in the country that was zoned and ordinanced properly, so that a man could do what he wanted, as he wanted" (106-07).

Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett's characterization of border narratives as featuring "uncertainty about how stories will play out" (360) also resonates with *Winter*, as, in a manner of

speaking, the plot of Bass's *Notes from Montana* does not "play out" at all. "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there," Henry David Thoreau explains in *Walden*, bringing to a close an account of a full year's experiment in authentic, un-mediated existence (217).[10] *Winter*—refusing to close the cycle of the year by spanning only six months, and refusing Thoreau's teleological conclusion by stating in its final sentence "I won't be leaving this valley" (162)—remains unfinished. It's likely that the prolific author's still ongoing production of novels, stories, articles and non-fiction works will continue to be built upon this open-ended framework, one that is thrown into high relief in the five stories he sets in Houston, and one that is arguably transplanted West from that earlier geography—an aesthetic personal border country mentally mapped first in the suburbs of the Texas Gulf Coast.

Endnotes – Chapter III

[1] For weaknesses of the "Turner Thesis" as a controlling narrative for American History see works such as Patricia Nelson Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987), 20-23.

[2] Such luminescence connected with the observation of nature is also a thematic concern of Bass's suburban Houston adventures with his mother in the "Wild at Heart" article: "A glow would heat up and incandesce in my mind when I saw these things and when I engaged with that outside world. . . . In my vision of the boy-in-nature I was, I see the light of his mind glowing even in the darkness of nightfall, lit like a burning lantern" (72).

[3] For one example see: "Texas River on Fire as Flooding Snaps Pipeline." *Los Angeles Times*. N.p., 21 Oct. 1994. Web. 4 Apr. 2014. Dwyer is no doubt correct about various forms of "luminescence" in Bass's work, but I have yet to see a critic address his use of the powerful imagery specific to fire and flame. "[S]naky wandering river fires, in various bright petrochemical colors" (9) and the "flares of the refineries" (6) appear in "Pagans" along with one character's "exposed fires and energies"(9), but flames take center stage in much of Bass's fiction; such as "Fires" in *In The Loyal Mountains* (1995); and "The Fireman," and "The Hermit's Story" in *The Hermit's Story* (2002). Seasonal forest burns occupy a large section of the novel *Where the Sea Used to Be* (1998) which features the youthful actions of the geologist character, Mathew, who as a boy would frighten swans by "stripping naked in the summer and covering himself with a film of gasoline, then lighting himself on fire and leaping out of the bushes and into the river" (41). There is plenty of work yet to do for critics who investigate Rick Bass and fire.

[4] The nostalgic notion that change has brought havoc and destruction down upon a once better Houston is touched upon several times in these stories, explicitly, for example, in "Juggernaut":

> This was back in those first days when Houston was clean and just growing, not yet beginning to die or get old. Houston was young then, too. You cannot imagine how smooth life was for you, if you were in high school, that one spring, when oil was $42 a barrel, and everyone's father was employed by the petroleum industry, and a hero for finding oil when the Arabs wouldn't sell us any. Anything was possible. (121)

[5] The name "Richard" does not occur in the three stories, although Kirby is named. Internal evidence links these characters however, such as, in "Pagans": "because Kirby had a car, an old Mercury with an engine like a locomotive's he and Richard would sometimes spend their skip days traveling down the coast" (2) compared with, in "Juggernaut": "Kirby had a sandy blue Mercury, one of the Detroit old iron horses from the sixties that would throw you back into its back seat if you accelerated hard" (110). That we might infer "Richard" to be the alter-ego of author "Rick" Bass is a seductive idea.

[6] This is far more the case in the stories of *The Watch*, written closer to Bass's youth growing up in Houston. Characters in "Pagans," and "Swamp Boy" evince more conventional, less submerged passions and motivations.

[7] Graeme Gilloch's estimation of Benjamin's writing style itself sounds much like the Houston stories in *The Watch*. "His cityscapes do not form a neat, linear, sequential series. . . . his writings are 'rhapsodic' and repetitive, rather than systematic and cumulative. . . . The cityscapes involve a circling, a continual return to the same loci, the same figures, the same objects, but each time from a different direction, from a shifted vantage-point" (20).

[8] Price's call to "rewrite entirely the stories we tell about nature" in her essay for *The Believer* website, "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A," is arguably answered by Bass in much of his

work. In “Pagans” several passages intermingle industry, waste, and lyrical evocations of wildness: “[T]he giant rusting gear teeth gave such a clacking roar that the night birds roosting down in the graystick spars of dead and dying trees on the other shore took flight, egrets and kingbirds and herons, the latter rising to fly long and slow and gangly across the moon” (2).

[9] For *Winter,* this constructed “fiction” of journal notes also allows the memoir to project what Walt Whitman calls the “on the spot” experience: one the poet claimed for his own highly crafted *Memoranda* of supposed “jottings” made during his Civil War experience (3). Much of *Winter* is also written in present tense, even though admitting to be a reflection of past events recalled while sitting and writing in the greenhouse.

[10] Thoreau notes that his stay at Walden Pond lasted “two years and two months” (5), but his book is structured around a single passing of the four seasons. For an overview of *Walden’s* structure see Robert Sattelmeyer’s “The Remaking of *Walden*,” which argues the work also encompasses nearly a decade of Thoreau’s “spiritual and intellectual growth” (493). For an interesting look at how Bass manages time in another memoir see *The Deer Pasture* (1985) where the seasons are brought nearly to a halt. The book records visits to a central Texas deer lease over the course of several years, but always in November. “Hunting the third week in November as we do, year in and year out, you can notice things that would not be noticed on a less-controlled and more random series of visits, such as February one year and September the next” (12).

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CHAPTER IV

"WE'RE ALL REFUGEES IN A WAY."

FARNOOSH MOSHIRI, HOUSTONIAN

Bertrand Westphal, in *Geocriticism* (2012), calls not only for a variety of texts, but for a variety of viewpoints as well when considering place through the lens of artistic literary production, what he labels the "three basic variations" of "the observer with respect to the space of reference" (128). In choosing authors for this study, including more than one of these variations has been an aim. For example, when native Houstonian Rick Bass pens "Pagans," featuring the "Great Claw of Hunger" that Richard and Kirby use to rise into the air, plumb the riverine depths, and construct from worthless slag an arbitrary steel and chrome island structure, this paralleling of Houston's space program, oil and petrochemical industry, and even original municipal formation on the banks of Buffalo Bayou—Ada Louise Huxtable's "instant city . . . nowhere city" (219)—could be presented as a prime example of the *endogenous* point of view, Bass having been raised in suburban Houston for most of his youth. For Westhphal, these endogenous, or "native" authors, provide "an autochthonic vision of space. Normally resistant to any exotic view, it limits itself to a familiar space" (128). The overall tone of such a point of view when it comes to place is of acceptance and familiarity, no matter how fantastic the circumstances of a youthful love triangle combined with adventures on an abandoned crane. The case for native Houstonian Donald Barthelme is, as indicated in his chapter, more difficult to apply directly to the city, but his outlier story, "Return," is an interesting case of this kind of point of reference, the text giving a reading of Houston almost indecipherable *save* to an "insider" or native. The bizarre image of an intrepid explorer setting out on Buffalo Bayou on a

plywood sheet powered by "eight mighty Weed-Eaters" has little effect unless leavened by familiarity with local history, drainage and the fact that these propulsive devices are created by the reader's fellow citizen, a local figure. One of the notable characteristics of "Return," for its native audience, is that it appears almost as familiar as it does fantastic.

Works from what might be considered the opposite viewpoint, according to Westphal, are written by "outsiders," often to inform neophytes about the "elsewhere quality" of a place via facts, data, information, and the occasional map. These he labels the *exogenous* viewpoint—"the vision of the traveler; it exudes exoticism" (128). This approach, common to the travel narrative, is less favored for geocritical study in his view as being "privileged by those who adopt the egocentered perspective of the author" (129). The experience of place in such works, in other words, takes a backseat to the perspective and choices of the author, and might rely on stereotypical descriptions—as if a guide-book were at the elbow of the composing writer. Although difficult to consider as a complete outsider, I have argued in Chapter I that Texan and reader of Walter Benjamin, Larry McMurtry—born and raised 380 miles from Houston in the Archer City area—should be placed in this category. And when a novel set in Houston mentions "Allen Parkway," "Memorial Park," "The YMCA [that] was built to look Old Spanish," the "Southwest Freeway and the Gulf Freeway," "Galveston," "Lake Conroe," "the red neon emblem of the Baroid Mud Company," and even "a white neon grand piano [revolving] slowly above the speeding crowds"—as does New York native Laura Furman's 1986 work *The Shadow Line* (4), *all in a single paragraph*—we are examining a text that has taken up the *exogenous* viewpoint.

Westphal's third mentioned relationship to place is different: a viewpoint characteristic of outsiders who have arrived from elsewhere yet made a particular place their own—the work of

allogeneous authors. Utilizing an approach that avoids by definition an egocentric narrative, the allogeneous writer brings a kind of double vision, combining angles of observation *not* native to a place, yet filtering these through a source permanently entrenched enough to eschew the exoticism often recorded by itinerant travelers. It could be said that the allogeneous viewpoint considers a place *as* an elsewhere, but—paradoxically—a familiar one. For Westphal, the works of such authors are "characteristic of those who have settled into a place, becoming familiar with it, but still remaining foreigners in the eyes of the indigenous population" (128).

Such a viewpoint calls to mind the expatriate author, along with the immigrant, exile and refugee. It recalls as well Salman Rushdie's claim that it may well be the sense of *being* "elsewhere" that allows someone like an immigrant "to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal" (12). Edward Said likewise claims a privileged viewpoint for these outsiders, those who because of their circumstances "cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience" (147).[1] Homi Bhaba's concept of the "unhomely" touches upon this dislocation and empowerment, beginning with the displaced person's encounter with "elsewhere" which

> captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations. To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the "unhomely" be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily, as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James's Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state

> of "incredulous terror." And it is at this point that the world first shrinks for Isabel and then expands enormously. (13)

As J.P. Riquelme interprets Bhaba's concept, it is a mistake to cast the "unhomely" condition "as a predicament or problem that could be solved rather than as a situation both defining us and enabling a particular kind of freedom" (546).

We see that aspects of Houston's car culture, zoning rhetoric, and propensity for effacing the effects of time are handled in far different ways even by the two native Houston authors taken up so far, Donald Barthelme and Rick Bass—evidence that Charles C. Adams is correct: "place-experiences . . . present innumerable shades of differentiation depending on what one is doing in a place" (186). Thus we might expect even more varied and differing aspects of place to be emphasized by the allogeneous, "unhomed" author. For Houston, Texas, it is difficult to find a more fitting example of this point of view than that expressed in Farnoosh Moshiri's *Against Gravity* (2005), a novel that, owing both to its characters and narrative structure, yields an opportunity to examine yet another angle on this particular place, framed by a third artistic referent.

Moshiri was born in Tehran in 1951 into a family of intellectuals, writers, and scholars, and is the niece of prominent Persian poet Fereydun Moshiri.[2] Receiving a BA in dramatic literature from the College of Dramatic Arts in Tehran in 1974, she then traveled to the United States, obtaining an MA in drama from the University of Iowa in 1979, at about the same time as the fall of the Iranian monarchy and its replacement by an Islamic Republic under the leadership of the Ayatollah Khomeini. This overturning was at first considered an encouraging new dawn for Iran's artistic, intellectual and scholarly community. Moshiri returned to Tehran, becoming during this period by some reckonings Iran's first published female playwright (Wright, Laura

69-70). Securing work as a college professor, she was forced to reevaluate her position in society in 1983 when the regime began to impose its religious policies on university classrooms. As she reported to the *Houston Chronicle* in 2012, she had a play in rehearsal in Tehran but was herself at home "when they arrested my director and the actors. It was so alarming that I went underground" (Galehouse). "My bad luck," she told Laura Wright in an interview for the *Minnesota Review*, "was that I was writing at the threshold! When I was getting to be known, it was the time that a 'bomb' fell in the country and I had to leave. . . . If nothing had happened and I had stayed in Iran, probably I would be the first woman playwright in a world of men" (70).[3] At the advice of her father, she left the country, as she reports: "on foot with my two-year old son sleeping on my back. I was thirty-two when I lost my home, my readers, my language, and a career that had just begun to shape my life as a professional writer" ("Picketing" 3).

Moshiri writes in her personal blog of her travels first to Afghanistan, then India, where "in a tiny room with several people (and two five-year-old boys), I would seek shelter in a closet to read and write. Those moments of immersion in the carefully crafted world that the writer had created, brought peace and harmony to my chaotic life" ("Why One More Blog?"). She continued to consider a return to Iran, awaiting a time when the situation might grow more stable, but, sponsored by a sister in Houston, she ultimately moved to the United States permanently in 1987. As she stated to an audience of students in Victoria, Texas, in 2008, if her sister had lived in a different city, Houston would never have become her home (*Farnoosh Moshiri- UHV/ABR Reading Series*), though she admits appreciation upon encountering "the geographic location I'd been thrown into by forces beyond my will. Houston was not the desert of the Western movies with a few cacti and plenty of dust, but one of the greenest places I'd ever seen, only comparable to lush tropical India" ("Exile and Live Oaks" 24).

Moshiri endured her exile first through a variety of menial jobs, finally entering graduate school at the University of Houston in hopes of continuing her playwriting career. Sydney Berger in the drama department, however, suggested an English degree, the university's drama program at that time concentrating more on acting and stagecraft than creative works. She enrolled in PhD coursework up to the point of studying for her comprehensive exams, but admits "I found myself stuck between two languages." When novelist Rosellen Brown saw the short story, "The Wall"—the first Moshiri had written in English—she along with poet Robert Phillips and novelist Daniel Stern convinced her to concentrate on creative fiction and study towards an MFA, shortening the graduate school process, and also giving her a degree more suited to what they saw as her strong points. "'Go and write,' they told me. 'We've all just got master's degrees.' So rather than take comps I worked on my creative thesis." Moshiri was still a student at the University of Houston when her first novel, *At the Wall of the Almighty* (2000), appeared in print. For the most part Moshiri has lived, taught and written in the Bayou City ever since, save for a two-year stint at Syracuse University. In New York, she found the weather depressing, and the region demographically monocultural, so abandoned an attractive tenure track opportunity and returned to Houston.

Moshiri is, as of 2017, the author of five books. *The Crazy Dervish and the Pomegranate Tree* (2004) is a story collection, the works produced largely during her graduate student days at the University of Houston.[4] Her other books are novels. In addition to *At the Wall of the Almighty,* both *The Bathhouse* (2001) and *The Drum Tower* (2014) are set in Iran following the 1979 revolution. *Against Gravity* (2005) is, in many ways, an outlier in her *oeuvre*.

The novel's action occurs mainly in and around Houston's Montrose and Rice-Village neighborhoods. It is told from the point of view of three main characters, only one of whom is

Iranian, so when considered in the context of her other works, *Against Gravity* is set, literally, "elsewhere." In the time frame of the book's surface action—from May of 1990 to late December, 1991—the histories, tribulations and backstories of these three figures are presented in three novella-sized sections, each told in the first person. These narratives are interspersed with shorter, italicized vignettes concentrating on more marginal but still thematically important figures, and told in a more reportorial third person. The first "novella" is in the voice of Madison Kirby, a young man—angry, educated, and unemployed—who lives in a cheap Houston apartment where he is dying slowly of AIDS. The demise of his professor father at the University of Texas in Austin—discovered in a compromising car-wreck with a young co-ed—has caused Madison to abandon his graduate studies in philosophy (a dissertation on Wittgenstein), and take up a life of self-indulgent world travel and drug experimentation, all of which has left him by the time of the novel with the retro-virus, and little money or ambition. Madison is an obvious sufferer of what Georg Simmel called the "psychic phenomenon . . . so unconditionally reserved to the metropolis. . . . A life in boundless pursuit of pleasure makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all." His intellect, for Simmel, would not be aiding him when it comes to this phenomenon: "stupid people who are not intellectually alive in the first place usually are not exactly blasé" (413-14). Upon returning to the United States, Madison opts not to return to his mother in Austin, but rather to settle in Houston. "I knew that I had hit rock bottom," he explains (16), equating the city with the lowest extremity of both his mental and physical life. Arguably the darkest character in a fairly dark novel—both in his view of humanity and his take on the setting's chaotic freeway-based sprawl and tropical weather—the person Madison latches on to in order to lessen the existential pain of his final years is his neighbor, Roya, a struggling

immigrant he attempts to entice into his life by offering her what's left of his trust fund. "She was here to save me," he believes, "to stay with me during the last years of my life and console me" (30).

Roya, narrator of the second novella-length section of the book, is a political refugee from Iran, imprisoned and tortured at a young age for the "crime" of being the sister of a revolutionary, as well as being "a little girl who had read some books to find out what the revolution was" (100). Thus, much as Westphal deals with the complexities of place by calling for examination of multiple texts in which that place is represented, *Against Gravity* presents its "Imagined Houston" via three very different narrative viewpoints. Internal evidence indicates Roya is the same character readers encounter as the un-named narrator of *The Bathhouse*, Moshiri's account of a young woman's mistreatment imprisoned by the Revolutionary Iranian regime. The Roya in *Against Gravity*, however, presents a more mature voice: now a woman who has survived not only prison and mistreatment, but the birth of a child, the death of a husband—"killed in the first week of the war" with Iraq (101)—and foreign exile in two countries, all before arriving in Houston. As happens in a novel where the main characters know each other, but are often missing important pieces of information *about* each other, Roya has little idea Madison considers her his salvation. Attempting to survive in a city of strangers far from her native land, she despairs over finding a place she can call a home, yet—unlike Madison—perseveres out of the responsibility she feels towards her young daughter, Tala. An intellectual, Roya was forced to abandon her graduate work for reason different from Madison's: she lost her credentials when she lost her native land. Far too challenged by responsibility to adopt the blasé attitude, still, as a character she shares much of Madison's melancholy. In re-telling Tala of their travels together, Roya points out: "I didn't mention my dark thoughts—

despair, dread of the unknown future, and the constant presence of death, real or imagined, in my dreams and wakefulness. Madness at times" (108).

Moshiri considers Roya the most autobiographical character in any of her published works. The author recounts her own difficulties making a space for herself upon first arriving in Houston, and the continually "locked doors" that formed obstacles for her. In an article for the Houston architectural journal, *Cite*, she recounts a lunch break at a piecework job she held painting T-shirts—one of the backbreaking labors that Roya also takes up in the novel—when she "went downstairs to the sidewalk and sat on a bench under the umbrella of an oak tree and immediately drifted back to those locked doors, pounding and pounding. But they were sealed and bolted. . . . How could I survive here?" (24).

Roya is helped to survive by *Against Gravity*'s third major character, Ric Cardinal, a social worker originally from Cincinnati who helps Roya through the resources of his non-profit agency. The lives of these three main characters intertwine, Ric serving also as a counselor to Madison Kirby. Abandoned by his father, Ric has, like Roya, faced torture, in his case at the hands of the Argentine government after an ill-advised trip to South America to help a left-wing comrade. Ric struggles as well with the troubles of his schizophrenic teenage son. While largely a character study of personalities under stress—some of which is global in cause—*Against Gravity* is also structured as a love triangle: Ric and Roya begin a relationship that, unknown to them, infuriates Madison, driving the novel's vengeance-fueled plotline. What *resolves* this plot is that the characters are operating in Houston—a fluid, largely unregulated and fairly well populated multicultural zone—where being an outsider is not necessarily a drawback if the character has the inner strength to seek opportunities. The question is, in Riquelme's framing: may one see their "outsiderness" not as a problem to solve, but as a "particular kind of freedom"

that comes with its own advantages? In *Against Gravity* Moshiri indicates that some can do exactly that, but others, sadly, cannot.

Little scholarship has focused on *Against Gravity*, an exception being an article by Robert Bennett dealing with four Iranian-American novelists, "Defending the 'Republic of the Imagination': Imagining Diasporic Iranian American Identities beyond the Jurisdiction of the Nation-State" (2008). A recent book length study, *Women Write Iran: Nostalgia and Human Rights from the Diaspora* by Nima Naghibi (2016) does not take up Moshiri, treating rather the phenomenon of memoirs by Iranian-American women, many of which have become popular and appear to be preferred by American publishers over Iranian-American novels. (Roya, in *Against Gravity,* is herself writing a memoir.) Though not dealing with fiction, Naghibi's perspective is useful in underscoring the draw of their home country for these writers. "Diasporic Iranian writers are in fact keenly aware of the object of their nostalgic longing: their homeland, Iran" (9). Indeed, reviewer Sheefteh Khalili finds that in *Against Gravity* "Moshiri draws from her rich understanding and knowledge of Iranian culture and politics from the time of the Islamic Revolution, and makes it accessible to a wide audience" (187). While there is much truth to this, especially in her other novels, *Against Gravity* concentrates less on nostalgia for the "culture and politics" of Iran than on the attempt to build a new home. In fact, the characters work at overcoming challenges in the Bayou City rather than recovering an idealized past. This is, in other words, a Houston book, with Roya's escape from Iran, travels through Afghanistan and India, and arrival in America taking up only 36 of its 308 pages.

Oddly, although there has been limited attention paid to the novel, it's notable that there has been even less given to its setting. Bennett's article does not mention Houston by name. [5] Writers and reviewers do appear to see the book's American aspect as important to its overall

thematic concerns, yet topo-blindness specific to the Bayou City demonstrates another case of Emily Johansen's observation that despite the "spatial turn" in the humanities, "[d]iscussions of place remain remarkably abstract as well as, more importantly, overly generalized" (158). Yet, as with the first two authors in this work, viewing *Against Gravity* through the overcoding influence of a specific place, Houston, Texas, reveals intriguing, and not immediately obvious, patterns.

Houston has influenced the work of Farnoosh Moshiri in many direct ways. This influence extends, surprisingly, to the novels in which the city does not appear.[6] *At the Wall of the Almighty* uses the magical realism genre to deliver a searing account of confinement and brutal torture in the prison, "El-Deen"—Moshiri's mythologized version of the infamous Evin prison in Tehran—yet she insists this work was inspired by "long morning walks on North Boulevard" in Houston as she observed the overhead oak trees and "interwoven branches that had created a roof above the street"—models for "the maze of corridors, the torture chambers, the wall of execution" ("Exile and Live Oaks" 25). Although *At the Wall of the Almighty* and *The Bathhouse* both concern terrifying conditions of imprisonment, Moshiri is quick to admit that she herself was never imprisoned in Iran, having escaped to avoid just such a circumstance, fearing especially what revolutionaries might have had in mind for her young son. She did, however, work for nine years in a prison environment as a writing instructor at Houston's Juvenile Detention Center. "I *put* myself in that atmosphere," she says, "to *have* that experience. It wasn't that I was looking for material for a novel, but I had lost friends to prison in Iran. Some were still in those prisons while I worked at JDC. And some had been executed in those prisons. You could say I went to work at the Detention Center out of survivor guilt." At the JDC she was struck especially by the staff—the guards—their behavior, physique, and methods of harassing

juvenile inmates. Many of these observations went into characterizations of the brutal prison guards in both *At the Wall of the Almighty* and *The Bathhouse.* Ric's character borrows from the novelist's autobiography much as Roya's does, the social worker serving part-time as a counselor of underage offenders at that same Houston detention center (246). [7]

Bennett, who seeks a post-national lens through which to read Iranian-American novels, evokes Benedict Anderson as he examines the four novelists in his article. In his seminal work, *Imagined Communities*, Anderson conceives of a nation as an "imagined community" (6), one forged less in some shared mythological history of blood and soil than in the cultural crucible of national languages and literatures, those features that make it "possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate to themselves and others, in profoundly new ways" (36). Anderson's community model, however, works for entities other than nations. The question for our purposes is: what *kind* of community do readers of *Against Gravity* imagine from this *Rashomon*-like, multi-valenced construction from three different, oft-contradictory viewpoints?

Firstly, while the passage of time and accumulation of history is important for the back stories of each character, *Against Gravity* definitely emphasizes the "erased temporality" noted in previous chapters as peculiar to a city that dynamites much of its past. Like the presence of car culture, the oil business and aerospace concerns in Rick Bass's "Pagans," this is showcased in some very direct ways. The hypersensitive Madison, especially, suffers actual physical torment attempting to deal with the unsettling, constant destruction of the old, and its replacement with the new. On an emotional level, it is why he has difficulty coming to terms the stakes of his own demise. "And in what way would my death make any difference for anyone?" he asks. "Who cared if today I was here and tomorrow not?" (49), echoing the manner in which,

indeed, much of his immediate landscape is here today, gone tomorrow. Madison bemoans how "[t]he city didn't have respect for old age; it bulldozed and demolished history. It destroyed the past to build a short-living now that would never become a future." This observation, a reflection on his own entrapment by a fatal disease in what can only be called "a short-living now," leads him to label Houston "the image of doom" (11). In some ways, Madison has "become" Houston, or has at least taken up that tendency of the city for what Philip Lopate labels "self-cannibalism" ("From *Against Joie de Vivre*" 152).

On one occasion, he hikes furiously through his neighborhood, searching out his favorite greasy spoon coffee shop, but simply can't find it. "Now I walked and walked, beginning to wonder if Dot had also been a figment of my imagination." Entering a nearby bead shop, he's told, "They demolished it a few months ago. They're building an arcade here. They're going to dump my store too. I'm moving to a new location" (18). "All I can say is that he was not made for this world," his physician, Dr. Haas, explains to Roya after Madison leaves the apartment complex and goes to live without shelter on the Houston streets.[8] "He suffered every minute of his life. It wasn't just his illness. . . . Do you see how they're digging up the street? Or sawing a tree somewhere else? The smoke in the air, the chaos in the city? Madison had magnifying glasses, he saw everything, felt everything" (183).

Roya similarly internalizes the city's mercurial existence. After an exhausting day of work, reflecting back on her time in the much older cultures she inhabited not only in Iran, but also Kabul and New Delhi, she asks "was this garage apartment in the heart of Houston, Texas, my home?"—as if incredulous of that possibility (142). Houston represents a temporary non-home at this point in her life, its spirit of place characterized mainly by a *lack of a spirit of place* when compared to the rest of her world. This lack becomes part of the process of forging her

new identity. “Wasn’t I finally acquiring an identity by forgetting who I’d been?” she asks (69)—a question that a city bent on effacing its own history might ask as well.

As with this tendency noted in other writers that reflects in various ways what Philip Lopate labeled Houston’s “self-cannibalization” (in Theis 234) , many of the hybrid and heterotopic characteristics noted in this study’s first two authors also appear in Moshiri’s novel. From its very first pages, *Against Gravity* features a bizarre juxtaposition of commerce, entertainment and architecture familiar to those who consider the city a category mixer of the first order, and—with its Fay Wray overtones—also thematically parallels the female figure who appears at first caught up in the maw of the large, powerful hand of the patriarchy (as Roya’s story in *Against Gravity* is sequenced between those of Madison and Ric). In paragraph two of the novel, the voice of Madison Kirby reports “the gorilla on top of the Transco Tower, standing tall and fat, with his arms wide open, his chest protruded, as if laughing at the city.” He stops to watch Roya stare “at the animal’s helium-filled belly, shimmering with gold and red, the sign of one oil company or another. The gorilla lifted one foot lightly, then another, tap dancing in the hot breeze” (2). This inflatable advertisement is itself a marketing ploy perched atop one of the more visible monuments to Houston’s corporate-driven market economy,[9] emblematic of the overshadowing presence of commerce in the city, a theme that will be taken up several times in *Against Gravity*, and expressed directly by Marina Haas, the German-born physician treating Madison’s illness, who states baldly: “Capital’s rule is absolute” (11). Yet the addition of the inflated, “tap dancing” gorilla adds a fantastic element of entertainment, Hollywood excess, and even silliness mixed with the power of money.

In a more classically heterotopic vision, Madison sees, early in the novel, from the hospital room where he receives his AIDS diagnosis, the illness and pain of his own experience

reflected on the mixed features of the unregulated, sprawling, unhealthy landscape below him, a municipality that places refineries, homes and hotels cheek by jowl:

> I sat there and worried and looked out the window—waves of haze. On the horizon two refineries, not far from each other, swam in a white fog. Tall, dark columns, derricks and cat crackers, pierced the white clouds, but these were not real clouds, they were vapor coughed out of tall pipes. On the right side I saw the compact geometrical towers of downtown, silver and blue, taller and shorter, flat as unopened books, reflecting the crooked image of each other and mirroring the crooked haze. I saw the red roofs of affluent houses on the left, and closer, the hospitals' and hotels' roofs. On top of the Marriott a swimming pool glowed like a piece of turquoise fallen from the sky. A woman, the size of a doll, bathed in the sun. (11-12)

Here Moshiri, with smokestacks that "pierce," and the vapor "coughed" from them, utilizes the landscape to reflect the health of her HIV positive narrator, as well as his judgment concerning what goes on in those edifices where the drudging, unexamined lives of office workers are spent in "unopened books," the buildings' "crooked images" of one another forming a kind of enclosed mirror show. ("Crooked" is one of the dour character's favorite terms.) "Memories came to me," Madison says, "but not in long, graceful chapters, not in well-arranged sentences, edited in my mind to refinement as was often the case. They came in a fragmented, nervous way, in the shape of broken images, meaningless and chaotic" (23). Donald Barthelme's narrator in the story "See the Moon?" famously claims that "[f]ragments are the only form I trust" (*Sixty Stories* 98)—a sentiment often attributed, understandably if only superficially, to that author's own aesthetic. Madison's are not the "horizontal" or sequential

collected observations of a latter-day roving *flâneur,* however. For him, the fragmentation is not a trustworthy reflection of postmodern clutter, but a representation of his life's brokenness.

Roya's "novella" also presents a patchwork-quilt, mixed and hybrid, heterotopic Houston, where it is necessary to drive "only a few streets from the land of the haves to the land of the have-nots" (157). If Barthelme and Bass are able to "Houstonize" the world—or at least winter in Montana—it's tempting to consider that a novel set in the Bayou City and written by an Iranian-American offers an opportunity to highlight the legitimate, far flung global connections of that city: to "globalize" Houston. Yet Roya turns this idea completely around, marking instead how the international flavor of the juxtaposed spaces—global, yes, in origins—have rather been stereotyped, generalized and cheapened upon arrival in Texas. She notices:

> the cars, towers, and glass walls, imitation waterfalls, and replicas of other parts of the world, here and there imitations of Italy, France, India. A Mexican market without the aroma of tortillas, a Middle Eastern bazaar without the smell of wool, horse sweat, and saffron—all fake, all façade, all smiling America, noisy and fast, lacking silence, a magic globe containing the world, but illusory, deceiving. (144)

At this point Roya has still not accepted Houston as its own authentic place, and so observes the identities of the city's global connections as faded, by dint of their close placement beside one another, or by the scrubbed and sanitized versions available for display. Benjamin's observation that "[a] scent may drown years in the odor it recalls" (184) means that, for Roya, memory itself has been scoured from the Houston experience, along with the smell of "wool, horse sweat, and saffron." [10]

Ric, like Roya, and in spite of the fact he is a citizen of the United States, marvels as well at the juxtapositions of Houston, and wonders how he has ended up "in a city as strange as planet

Mars" (210). As with the other two main characters, he makes non-guidebook observations concerning the city's hybridity. He notes, for example, that the Juvenile Detention Facility where he works part-time is "right at the edge of River Oaks, one of the fanciest neighborhoods in Houston, famous for its glamourous mansions and quiet, shady streets. JDF has a red tower that, if you stand—let's say, on the roof of one of these rich people's houses—you'll see its top" (246).

In fact—and harkening back to Madison's description of the refineries and the "closed books" and "crooked images" from his hospital window—many descriptions of the city in *Against Gravity* are viewed from elevated positions ("let's say, on the roof")— as if taking on the point of view of the helium filled gorilla encountered atop Transco Tower on page 2, or presenting a map rather than a record of a speedily passing landscape made by a recording device. Like Madison, Ric also sees and describes refineries and office buildings, and also from a bird's-eye-view—not from a hospital room but from "a bridge over the rushing river of traffic in Houston. . . . If you sit on this bridge after midnight, when the traffic is slow, on the horizon to the south you'll see the refineries coughing white vapor, and to the north the postcard view of the skyscrapers against a gray night" (210). These sweeping, panoptic visions stand in contrast to the impression described by Brian McHale in his work, *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), and exemplified in many of Barthelme's stories as juxtapositions of discourses along a *horizontal* axis where "segments from different discourse are spliced end-to-end . . . and the ontological tension between incommensurable discourse-worlds develops, so to speak, *across the seams* between adjacent segments" (170 emphasis in original). That there would be a spatial dissimilarity to Barthelme's collage-related approach reflects several aspects of the lives of the characters in Moshiri's book, *Against Gravity* demonstrating how the car culture and hyper-

flânerie of our two earlier authors is experienced differently by the allogeneous writer. What happens for those without access to this quality of profound place-experience and place-identity?

The fact is, both Madison and Roya live in a condition that makes them as rare in Houston as bubonic plaque victims, and nearly as incapacitated: they do not own cars. "I don't drive," is one of the first things Madison says to Roya when he takes her out to eat. "Never?" she asks, already seeming to understand how rare this is for her peculiar new city (29). Although an "arcade" has replaced the Dot coffee shop Madison seeks in his tour of the streets, this can't be understood in Benjamin's sense: it's a space with coin-operated games, not a covered amalgam of various opportunities awaiting window shopping. That Moshiri's characters lack personal automotive transport goes a long way towards explaining why the spatial juxtapositions in the book are cartographic rather than aligned in horizontal segments of the kind Paul C. Adams identifies as the "scanning gaze," a viewpoint most available from the "motorized metal box" utilized by freeway travelers (188-189). On foot, or using public transport, Madison and Roya arrange the city in terms of direction, and distance that must be overcome. They cannot—at least, not easily—experience Lars Lerup's "linear city" that lines the feeder roads (151).

This relates to another of the factors marking *Against Gravity* as an outlier compared with Moshiri's other books, all of which are set in Iran. Each of those novels features an obvious, overpowering thematic and symbolic presence that, for the author, is nearly a signature: *walls*. Brick and mortar barriers loom over the characters in her other works, including prison walls that grow higher daily, walls against which executions are performed, and even, in *The Drum Tower*, an oft-referenced garden wall that keeps characters from escaping their homes and the burdens imposed on them both by family and agents of the Revolution. *Against Gravity* contains virtually no such overpowering barriers, yet manages to confine its characters in a different way

by the simple act of dropping pedestrian figures into a world not made for them. They are exiled from the freeways as well as their places of origin, and in this manner profoundly "walled off" from society. Ana M. Manzanas and Jesús Benito Sanchez in *Cities, Borders and Spaces in Intercultural American Literature and Film* (2011) put this in a way that delivers up implications for this study's graphic "circle and cross" definition of "place." "If cities have long discarded the walls that encircled them, they have also fashioned new forms of protecting lines. These new flat walls are the multiple highway lanes surrounding and enveloping the city. They make movement easy and fast; at the same time, they prevent access to certain areas (54) [11] As another way of looking at this, while David Frisby might highlight his model of the *flâneur* as someone freed because marginalized "within his class (marginal to the bourgeoisie and, downwardly mobile)" (33), downward mobility doesn't add to freedom in a place where all mobility depends on four wheels, titles and licenses. Wandering the city, Madison describes his usual means of transport:

> So I walked back under the burning sun and maneuvered around the piles of cement and mounds of brick on the edge of the street. Like most of the streets of Houston, there was no sidewalk, and I had to walk in a narrow pathway crowded with gigantic pipes. Cars rushed and dust rose and I covered my mouth to not inhale quicklime. . . . So by the time I threw myself inside the rotating glass door of the hospital and fell on the first leather couch to catch my breath, my mood had been ruined for the day. (9)

Against Gravity, by its choice of protagonists, foregrounds a Houston built for one kind of mobility, and emphasizes the daunting shades of differentiation that occur for people unable to partake of it. As cars "rush" past him, Madison encounters "narrow pathways" with obstacles of

brick, cement and "gigantic pipes." It is a space in which it is difficult to do exactly that which defines the pedestrian existence—walk. With "no sidewalk" the question of exactly where a pedestrian is supposed to travel hangs in the air. Roya, unaware at first of the power of the car in Houston society, has to be instructed of this fact by a social worker. The character, Maya, trying to help Roya break out of her struggling existence, sets her up with a job as an ESL instructor, finds a creative writing workshop for her alienated daughter, Tala, but—most importantly—presents what she calls a "revolutionary" solution for breaking through the final "wall" keeping Roya from finding a home in the city. [12] "I had to buy a secondhand car, no matter what. In Houston, [Maya] said, one couldn't get from here to the next block without a car." This life changing feat is accomplished by obtaining a small loan from her sponsoring cousin, a Houston attorney (166). Indeed, the politics of mobility have nearly "walled off" her possibility of a relationship with Ric Cardinal, Roya having to use a "week's grocery money to pay the cab" that takes her to the airport for a final goodbye before a trip he takes to El Salvador (164).

Ric, unlike the other two, does have wheels, and is in fact able to demonstrate power over Madison because of this, whisking the AIDS sufferer to the coastal town of Kemah for seafood in an early encounter (34). Ric's driving, however, is set aside for more pedestrian pursuits in moments of high anxiety, as upon learning that his mentor in the left-leaning organization that brought him to Houston—the man who recruited him as a "soldier of the revolution" (260)—was in reality an FBI plant. "I took a week off from work and walked the length of various streets in the rain and wind, thinking about Johnny and recalling various incidents" (259). This cataclysm, one which he feels "was the death of my past life, my youth, my political ideas—my identity so to speak," separates him from his identity as a Houstonian as well, as he insists "*I couldn't drive,* so I left the car in the parking lot and began to walk the length of Richmond—a street that

connects downtown to the end of Houston, where wild grass grows. I began to walk in a straight line along the endless identical shopping centers toward eternity. I panted and walked" (258 emphasis added). It is difficult to imagine a less *flaneur*-like attitude towards bipedalism than that evinced by these characters, as even Ric sees the city not as passing horizontal juxtapositions, but as a dreary sameness—"endless identical shopping centers toward eternity."

If the lack of economic power for characters in Moshiri's novel works against the privileged mobility discernable in the works of other Houston writers, and demonstrates to readers a different angle on the "place experience" of a "car-crazed" locale, *Against Gravity* also spends energy on another aspect of the city that works against the appeal of "the stroll." Maya's statement of the impossibility of transportation without a car—that "one couldn't get from here to the next block"—is the other side of the car-cult identity expressed by such Houston commentators as Philip Lopate and Benjamin Moser. In addition to the metropolitan infrastructure built around the freeway network, there is that "burning sun" mentioned by Madison, the city's tropical latitude acting as another dampener on pedestrianism. *Against Gravity*, with its outsider perspective, emphasizes this aspect of the region, one that the native-raised such as Bass does find worthy of mention, even exaggeration—"Everyone here's already dead," says "Richard" in "Mexico." "The heat killed them or something" (13)—but not worthy of elaboration. Historians Martin Melosi and Joseph Pratt, setting the context for their environmental study of Houston in *Energy Metropolis: An Environmental History of Houston and the Gulf Coast* (2007), call Houston's climate "one of its most identifiable features,"—a feature that has not always served it well.

> An ill-fated publicity campaign once used the phrase "Houston is Hot!" to promote the city. Indeed, Houston's climate is subtropical and humid, with

> prevailing winds bringing heat from the deserts of Mexico and moisture from the Gulf. The sun shines for much of the year, with an annual growing season of almost 300 days. The average low temperature is 72 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and 40 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter; the average high is 93 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and 61 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter. Humidity in June is typically about 63 percent. (13)

Against Gravity's "canary in the coal mine," Madison Kirby, has the most to say on this topic. "I walked like a madman in the heat of June when even the homeless sought shelter and poor dark maids held umbrellas over their heads" (66). He notices the "millions of cicadas" that "sang in the nearby bayou," but only after dusk. "Waters were awake in this city all night and only the daytime heat put them to rest" (49). Roya, too, mentions the heat. She has experience with plenty of non-temperate zones, but finds that in Houston—in another Doppelganger-like parallel of Madison—when she takes stock of her life, her exposure to heat is inexorably intermixed with her approach to madness:

> At times I felt that it was impossible and I couldn't go on. Long hours of the stupefying shirt-painting job, filling in the printed blanks. . . . hours of waiting on tables at night; taking buses—numerous slow and smelly buses—in unbearable heat; coming home late at night drenched in sweat to Tala's demands and complaints, fever and tears; and hopelessly trying to write every night, a futile effort to re-create *a past that had been hell, but now seemed better*. I was going mad again, the way I had gone mad before. But no, this time was worse. Much worse. (142 emphasis added)

That Houston and its "unbearable heat" are worse than Roya's previous life is a sobering observation for readers who have by this point experienced her refugee status in both Afghanistan and India, and especially alarming for readers of *The Bathhouse*, filled as it is with experiences Roya herself merely refers to in *Against Gravity*. "I tried to remind myself of those endless nights when I was seventeen and I sat behind the bars of a cell in that old decaying prison" (142). Her past of actual imprisonment and torture that "had been hell" now appears "better" than her days spent adjusting to Houston's society and feverish climate. Even Ric finds the "warm and moist" atmosphere of Argentina—a place where he is interrogated and tortured—an improvement over the Bayou City, the air "not heavy like in Houston" (213).

Against Gravity does see transformation and community building as a possibility in ways that are less individualistic (egotistical?) than in Barthelme's works, and more hopeful than in Bass's. However, the novel also goes to a great deal of trouble to set obstacles in the way of this joining and self-actualization. In so doing, Moshiri emphasizes Houston's challenges. An inescapable aspect of the place-experience we find in the novel would be that, unlike the Houston imagined in Rick Bass's story, "Pagans"—as full of adventure and opportunity as it is of industrial waste and toxins—the city in *Against Gravity* is a grim, melancholy landscape of endless barriers. When Madison complains after his navigation of the tropically oppressive, sidewalk-less streets of Houston, that his "mood had been ruined for the day" (9) he expresses a drastic understatement. Partly this portrayal of a dark, nearly hopeless Houston is explainable in his case by his incurable health difficulties. "I live in chaos," he explains to Dr. Haas. "My things are in boxes. I'm living the life of a man between two journeys. Why unpack?" (82). But his tone also matches the overall sense of alienation found throughout the book. After his observation concerning the cicadas, Madison sits at a bus stop for hours, joylessly reciting over

and over the D.H. Lawrence poem, "The Ship of Death," not a mood-elevating exercise. A breeze comes—a rare Houston phenomenon, but on this occasion Madison interprets the air only as a vehicle to sweep "a sour odor onto my face," from which the "smell of rot and decay" emanates. "This was poisonous vapor—gas and sulfur. A minute ago, I almost admired the night, the white sky, the silent waters of the many bayous, the cicadas' fuss, and now this deadly odor brought me back home" (49). "Home" here is treated just as ironically as when Roya asks "was this garage apartment in the heart of Houston, Texas, my home?" (142). Soon, a group of African-American youth come past, one of whom, in a gesture, "turned his long arm into a machine gun, rattled with his mouth, and pierced me with hundreds of hot bullets. The bastard executed me" (49)—not quite the shooting at dawn against a wall encountered in works such as *At the Wall of the Almighty*, but grim nonetheless. The arrival of neighbor Bobby Palomo evinces from Madison the statement, "This city is infested with worms . . . . Worms, worms, multiplying worms" (50). [13] Typical of the either/or thinking of this character, who seeks to blame others for every problem he experiences, his version of the city comes across in a similarly binary fashion: in tone Madison's Houston is nearly always a place of last resort. Encountering an alley with a "roof of intertwining oaks, all shade and peace and tranquility" in a neighborhood of "[h]ouses old, decent, and modest," he decides that this, indeed, is where he would like to live—but it is a statement that comes with many "ifs." "If I didn't have to die," he says, "and if I had to live in Houston" (14). All of the characters of *Against Gravity* are in Houston not because they want to be, but, for one reason or another, they feel they *have* to be. Their experience of living there is anything but edifying. Yet, this "unhomely" condition is also what leads Ric and Roya to join forces together. As Riquelme puts it, "displacement seems to be

the necessary, though not the sufficient, condition for bringing something new into being" (542-43). It does turn out to be insufficient for Madison.

Before that can occur, *Against Gravity* places Houston at the nexus of all of the pains the characters have received in their various "elsewheres," in a manner that, for Roya especially, feels like a crucible of hopelessness. Following the attempted suicide of the young waiter, Bobby Palomo, she feels the pain she experiences in Houston with a weight her other challenges hadn't delivered.

> I hadn't cried in prison when I was violated, held back my tears when the jailers handed me my brother's bloody shirt, had no tears when my husband's corpse returned from the front. . . . But now I was weeping. It was as if those incidents were not real, but this one was. Prison and war were not the scenes of my real life—I'd stepped on a stage to act and I was to perform the role of a brave and strong woman and I'd done my best. But my real self in real life was a vulnerable girl-woman who had never grown up. (161)

It is as if, after finally surviving the trauma of prison torture and refugee life to enter quotidian, urban space in Houston, Texas, Roya finds this world itself a bridge too far. We are, at any rate, in *Against Gravity*, far from the "shining buckle of the Sunbelt" slogans common to Houston's booster-prone public relations machinery.

Moshiri has always maintained that there is a difference between the experience of immigrant writers in general—who might indeed be strangers in a strange land—and her own situation: *a refugee in exile*, a state of displacement that is both unasked for and that excludes the possibility of return to one's native home. For Moshiri:

> [t]he exiled writer lives in her self-made house, this house of words, in constant fear of failure, in moral torment. She has good reasons to fear failure, for only a few exiled writers possess the resilience necessary to oppose the corroding effects of uprooting and isolation. Not all of the exiled writers are able to build a new house out of their own words. ("Picketing" 3)

It is not the similarly exiled Roya, however, but Ric who makes the novel's key statement on this theme. A character whose career as a social worker has brought him into contact with Houston's "internationals," he has worked at "listening to the refugees' tales," and followed the narratives of "families lost, executed, houses bombed, burned, prison torture. [He'd] heard stories about swimming across rivers, crossing minefields and mountains" (283-84). Though familiarized by these second hand accounts, he still, ironically, transfers and broadens the diasporic experience to cover all Americans—and arguably Houstonians in particular—in a passage that is the occasion for scholars like Bennett to claim *Against Gravity* produces a "deeper and darker" effect than Moshiri's other works set in Iran, presenting "exile as more or less a general human condition" (101). In fact, this idea of "the refugee" and "the exile" dovetails with most of the place relations mentioned in this chapter thus far: historical, meteorological, and even transportational. To Roya, Ric says:

> I just want you to know—how can I put it? . . . It's not just you, we all have problems. *We're all refugees in a way*. Many of us, many Americans, live worse than refugees. This notion is wrong—this notion that we all prosper and we've all found that so-called American Dream. You see what I mean?"
>
> I didn't quite see what he meant, but I wanted to hear his voice. (152 emphasis added)

Roya—someone no longer residing in her native land and, in fact, no longer permitted to do so—might very well *not* see what he means. While it's difficult to settle the ways in which the issue of exile might hang over the book, the question for this study can be stated fairly simply: what are the implications for *place*—this place of Houston, Texas, in particular—when it is characterized as a community where "[w]e're all refugees in a way?"

Defining exactly what Ric even means by the word "refugee" is problematic. William H. Gass tells us that "Life is itself exile, and its inevitability does not lessen our grief or alter the fact. It is a blow from which only death will recover us" (212)—a metaphorical sense of the term "exile," at least, that might well sound familiar to a figure like Madison Kirby. Specific to the word "refugee," Hannah Arendt simplifies matters profoundly in a 1943 essay, "We Refugees," stating that at that moment of global history, "'refugees' are those of us who have been so unfortunate as to arrive in a new country without means and have to be helped by Refugee Committees" (110). Oddly enough, just that kind of help has been obtained by *all* of the main characters in *Against Gravity*, both Madison and Roya having been aided directly by a non-profit organization founded by Ric who, after falling into a deep depression following divorce, joined with his therapist to found "The People's Aid Center," to help "the most needy of the city—the homeless, the refugees, the runaway and drug-addicted teenagers" (227-28). This is also the act by which Ric gains a sense of direction after a life of romantic failure and traumatic violence resulting from his work as a political activist. "I put my whole life there—seven days a week," he says. "We were loyal and dedicated, like dogs." (228). Ric has perhaps been "helped" even more than the others, the agency having given him a life purpose.

It could be posited that Ric, and the novel, by stating "We are all refugees, in a way," are hyperbolically touching upon a mere fact of life—expressing a direct influence of the place-

experience of Houston. The city's status as a target for those who arrive in the United States from other parts of the world has expanded rapidly in the last quarter century. To take the era in which *Against Gravity* is set as a starting point, the nonprofit American Immigration Council notes that between 1990 and 2000, the share of the population in Texas made up of "foreign-born" rose from 9.0% to 13.9% ("Fact Sheet: New Americans" 1). Rice University's Stephen Klineberg, administrator of the "Houston Area Survey" conducted by the Kinder Institute of Urban Studies, narrows this development in the 1990's to the Houston area, and concludes that much of the growth spurt for the population of Harris County during that time was "due to immigration from abroad, as well as to the birth of new babies, often the children of earlier immigrants and of U.S. born Latinos" (1). By the twenty-first century—during which time *Against Gravity* reached publication—this trend had become part of the city's civic sloganeering, the Kinder Institute noting in 2017 how statistical evidence of such population influx had often been used to sell Houston as "increasingly known for its diversity. City officials tout Houston's demographics—44 percent Hispanic, 26 percent white, 23 percent black, 6 percent Asian—and its large international community as signs of a booming, diverse, cosmopolitan metropolis" (in Binkovitz). Cosmopolitanism and diversity do not necessarily speak specifically to the exile or refugee experience, but by 2015, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that 30 out of every 1000 refugees settled worldwide by the United Nations came to Houston, which is "more than any other American city. . . . If Houston were a country, it would rank fourth in the world for refugee resettlements" (Kragie). The February 2016 edition of *Houstonia* magazine examines "How Houston Became the Country's Most Welcoming City for Refugees," noting that 4,818 refugees, from 40 countries, resettled in Harris County in 2014 (Shilcut). *Against Gravity*, among its other attributes, can be read as dramatizing the beginnings of this trend.

Helpful as a way of framing representations of Houston as a "refugee" center, and the ethical and social justice concerns that come along with such a label, is Jacques Derrida's concept of "cities of refuge"—produced spaces of safety, first presented in his address to the International Parliament of Writers in Strasbourg in 1996. Both theorized-about and institutionalized in various forms since that time, the city of refuge would exist to counter what Sean K. Kelly labels "the growing numbers of political entities who were willing to employ physical force against writers as a mode of censoring alternative sources of information" (421). Though concerned originally as zones for dissident writers and artists, Derrida deduces the concept from Kant's definition of cosmopolitanism—a philosophical formulation which accepts wholly "the conditions of universal hospitality" towards a much larger potential group. In Derrida's reading of Kant: "All human creatures, all finite beings endowed with reason, have received, in equal proportion, 'common possession of the surface of the earth.' No one can in principle, therefore, legitimately appropriate for himself the aforementioned surface . . . and withhold access to another man" (20). For Derrida, "Hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic amongst others" (16). That this role of insuring the common possession of the earth should be entertained at the governmental level of "the city" rather than by, say, nations or states, is expanded upon by Kelly, the refuge spirit requiring

> on the part of the city, a real declaration of independence from an imaginary power structure—that of national governmental sovereignty—that has proven no longer able to protect all of its citizens from the threats of information-age censorship; it requires that the cities decidedly commit to becoming the 'elsewhere' of the geo-political landscape. (424)

As Emily Johansen puts it, "Large cities, because of their very size, are able to offer hospitality

to the displaced if it is denied by the state since they often have the ability to provide services that are nearly impossible for smaller municipalities to offer" (13).

It might be considered that the Houston we find in *Against Gravity*, in spite of its grim day-to-day aspects—represents just such an area of hospitality and opportunity, the novel dramatizing variously displaced persons as taking advantage of the same place-experience *Houston Chronicle* journalist Alexander Kragie means when he declares that "Houston welcomes more refugees than any other American city because its nonprofit sector has the capacity to assist them"—the novel's "People's Aid Society" being an example precisely from that sector. And while Houston has never self-labeled as one of Derrida's "cities of refuge"—a zone of hospitality that has freed itself from larger power structures which might serve to place refugees at risk—in 2017, at the time of writing, the city does find itself wrestling over an analogous concept, mirroring Derrida's but specific to illegal immigration, the so called "Sanctuary City" issue. During the 2017 Texas legislative session, a bill calling for punitive measures to be employed against any Texas cities that didn't join the Trump Administration's crackdown on illegal immigration found resistance from state municipalities. As a practical matter, the new law means changing the policies of police forces of several large metropolitan areas in Texas which, by common practice, do not bother to verify the citizenship of those in their custody save for individuals charged with violent crime. Senate Bill 4 makes mandatory the detainment of all in custody until their immigration status is determined (Wright, Lawrence 49-50). On June 21, 2017, the Houston City Council voted to join a lawsuit against Texas regarding the constitutionality of the bill. "We are not a sanctuary city," claimed Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner, but added, "Houstonians are expecting us to stand up and protect their interests" (Elliott)—much the tenor of a city interested in the common possession of space by its

inhabitants when threatened from the "outside."

But if Bennett is correct, and *Against Gravity* is an expression of "exile as more or less a general human condition," Ric's statement cannot be read only as a reflection of "mere fact" concerning the number of local service agencies for the foreign-born, or even, beyond this, the more hopeful possibility that *Against Gravity* imagines a city that is difficult yet, nonetheless, a refuge, where characters such as Roya can—with effort—build and rebuild their lives and create new homes. It indicates, rather, the kind of refuge that is metaphorically applicable to all.

One way of thinking about this would take into account how both Texas and Houston have proven attractive destinations for what Alexa Ura and Jolie McCullough of the *Texas Tribune* web news site label "migrants of the domestic variety." These "Newstonians," [14] according to Lloyd Potter at the Office of the State Demographer, arrived in Texas by an average of 345 persons per day between 2005 and 2013—5.9 million people in total, 4.8 million of them from one of the other 49 states, with the largest number settling in Harris County (in Ura and McCullough). [15] These "domestic migrants" provide another shading on the "common speech" sense of a term like "refugee," both reflecting and indicating the cause of a deeper aspect of Houston's *genius loci*, the oft-expressed sense of movement and transience to life in the city, something analogous (though not identical) to the way that, in Said's terms, refugees, as the term is more generally understood, undergo the "sorrow of estrangement" (137). Peter Rowe, in his Forward to the aptly named anthology of articles concerning Houston architecture, *Ephemeral City* (2003), captures some of this sense:

> Indeed, it is this ever-present and unvarnished capacity for destabilization and shape-shifting that makes Houston unique. Rather than place being fundamental to individual and shared identity, it would seem that registrations of space-time

> dynamics and the prospect of change and of getting ahead in the world are more determining for Houstonians, imbuing their city with a restlessness, temporary familiarity, espousal of individuality, and lack of concern for preservation, as well as much else among the paraphernalia of traditional city-building. (vii)

Rowe's Baroque way of saying "transience" is the exact aspect novelist David Theis encountered when compiling his valuable *Literary Houston* anthology (2010). Categorized by genre, he found that the volume's section of autobiographical essays required inclusion of a number of authors "for whom apparently Houston was just a way station" (2). For Theis: "None of them stuck around, because Houston is not the place where you enjoy your rewards; it's where you earn them" (xv). Here he echoes the sentiments of that earlier chronicler of the Bayou City, Philip Lopate. Complaining that Houston seems a city that is not quite "together," Lopate, in 1984, theorized how "[p]erhaps that much of Houston's population is not only new but transient has a bearing here. Many people use Houston as a stepping-stone to make money quickly and get out of this ugly town" (11).

We are reminded of Sigfried Kracauer's question: "What would be the meaning of a passage in a society which is itself no more than a passage?" (in Friedberg 76). *Against Gravity* subtly delivers this "way station" aspect of the city without labeling it—at least aside from Ric's "refugee" remark. Roya and her daughter Tala are from Iran; Madison from Austin; Ric from Cincinnati—these three "refugees" in the city (or at least "Newstonians") taking up the preponderance of the book's action, plot, and characterization. However, this is the state even of the book's more marginal characters, and almost all of the named ones. As mentioned, Dr. Haas is a German emigrant. Jenny, the artist with whom Ric has a four-year relationship in Houston, is from Kansas (231). Young waiter and Tala's first love, the suicidal Bobby Palomo, qualifies

as a fairly typical "domestic migrant." "I was born and raised in Chicago, you know?" he tells Ric. "But my dad moved us to Houston when I was in fifth grade." Bobby goes on to describe a more profound transience as, growing up, he is shuttled between the homes of his separated parents (286). Maya, the African American community organizer, seems to be integrated into the city, telling Roya about "her poetry, her dance, her activism, her women's organization" (166), but of the named characters there is solid proof of only one native Houstonian: Maya's colleague and Ric's therapist, Steven Baldwin, who allows Ric and Jenny to live in "his dead parents' house . . . in a very old neighborhood of Houston, once populated with white people and now with poor Mexican immigrants who worked at the Ship Channel" (229). [16] Reading *Against Gravity* is to enter into a space populated mainly by characters who are poster children of the "unhomely," not *being* so much as *pausing* in the midst of transient lives, much like the fluid spatial existence of refugees of whatever stripe. As we have seen, however, such a space confines but, as Isabel Archer comes to understand, also expands.

Of course, for both its foreign or domestic-born migrants, that Houston ably serves the role of "refuge" or "sanctuary" in which to work through their transient re-adjustments to spatial change as they seek their homes, is by no means certain. In fact, Sean Kelly, though supportive of a municipal role in a planned entity such as Derrida's "city of refuge," also sees its illusory aspects and limitations.

> The cities of refuge. This phrase immediately rings utopian. A city of refuge, a place where even the unforgivable is forgiven, sounds too attractive in this world where crimes against humanity crowd in upon one, and even one's own home cannot safeguard against incrimination. (Kelly 421)

Moshiri's novel is not utopian. It is arguably her status as the allogeneous, exiled outsider that would make such a simplistic and idealistic viewpoint on the city impossible, no matter the amount of work accomplished there by non-profits and other organizations. The author, through her own biographical experiences and artistic statements, can be considered as writing not from the vantage of a home-like refuge, but from what Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996) calls "Diaspora space:" that 'zone' created by those who—as mentioned by Said and Rushdie—start from the position of outsiders in their observations, and never lose the ability to critically distance themselves from their new land, as well as hold it in juxtaposed contrast to where they've been and what they've seen. For Brah, this particular viewpoint creates a zone which is "an intersection of borders where all subjects and identities become juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed, or disavowed" (208).

Indeed, an "intersection of borders" sounds similar to the Houston imagined in Rick Bass's stories of the city, but in Moshiri's work this space hasn't resulted in a meandering, non-linear story line, but rather a series of dramatized, clashing interactions. For her, it is the "contestation" and "disavowal" of Diaspora Space that are emphasized, especially when involving the economics of *laissez-faire* business practice in contemporary Houston, noted already as an influence on the works of Donald Barthelme. Madison's emphasis on the "non-humanity" of Roya when set against his own egotistical desires is a notable, extreme example. As he has managed to keep a nest-egg inheritance after the death of his father, Madison sees no reason why Roya wouldn't accept money in exchange for taking care of him in his dying days. "She wasn't an angel; she wasn't sent by God; she was a human being *and I could buy her*, the way thousands of women were bought and sold every day" (46 emphasis added). It's because she's a "human being" that she becomes affordable at a price in the mind of this American,

reducing his "Persian" at best to the status of whore, at worst slave. Madison expresses to Ric that God is indifferent to the sufferings of people such as Roya, and the social worker accuses him in turn of having a god "like a corporate executive or something." The hypersensitive AIDS sufferer's reply is characteristic of his grim outlook: "Exactly. With immense power and gigantic hands" (36).

Houston's economic engine and the power of commerce over decency is also set in troubling "intersection" in the book, alongside those very programs that seem most positively motivated. In Houston, Roya finds little to counter Marina's claim that "Capital's rule is absolute" (11)—much the same state of metropolitan affairs Barthelme rails against in "Me and Miss Mandible." She comes to understand that she could easily quit her laborious day jobs by acquiescing to the conditions of supply and demand in her waitressing job: "if only I allowed the old men to molest me every night" (148). For Roya, "[e]ven when you're receiving the kindness of your best friends you should never forget that one day you'll have to pay this back" (175). As Ric's non-profit organization maneuvers her into a public speaking engagement, showcasing her travails as a refugee for the purpose of fund raising—and placing her scholarship money in the balance for performing the favor—Roya can't help but rail against how she "was forced to write the same cursed tale again and present it to rich old ladies to be able to go to school." As for that improbable "home" that she can't quite accept, yet finds comes with such a heavy price, she wonders "How could I buy the upstairs apartment? Metaphorically, I mean. How could I buy my peace?" (176). "Almost everything in America is a deal," Roya concludes (175), leaving a splinter of space in that word "almost" that will turn out to be big enough to support her relationship with Ric.

In and of itself, the city is never presented as a solution to any of the characters' problems: only as a space filled with opportunities to press their advantages. And though Robert Bennett finds a mistrust of nationhood in the works of the four Iranian-American novelists he examines, he's unable to settle on a smaller governmental body, a "city of refuge" as a source of sanctuary either, but borrows instead from a successful memoirist for a different sort of justice community.

> Contemporary Iranian American writers have begun arguing that we should fight to establish and defend what Azar Nafisi describes as the more expansive "Republic of the Imagination" a "country worth building, a state with a future, a place where we can truly know freedom" beyond the fundamentalist ideological jurisdiction of the nation-state. (152)

For Bennet, it is writers especially who support the insight expressed by Kwame Anthony Appiah, that it is "largely through 'language and literature' that individuals and nations 'articulat[e]' their deepest concerns" (in Bennett 106). He quotes Arundhati Roy in a similar sentiment: "It is the writers, the poets, the artists, the singers, the filmmakers who can make the connections, who can find ways of bringing it into the realm of common understanding" (in Bennett 106). For Bennett, Moshiri's novel, like those of other Iranian-Americans, makes explicit reference to just this enlarged, artistic "Republic."

> For example, Moshiri's character Roya responds to her traumatic experience of political exile by heightening, not diminishing, her interest in literature. As Roya explains, "Reading had become my only pleasure, one thing I looked forward to after the tedious and dry job of translating the news (always of wars and other calamities)." (153)

It's true that there are a number of writers and other artists in *Against Gravity*. Madison is a failed scholar, stopped part-way through his philosophy dissertation by the death of his father. Roya, along with her graduate work in literature, labors on a memoir throughout the novel. Roya first imagines Ric *as* a novelist, seeing him in a café where she works part-time, scribbling in his notebook, seeming to her "a Hemingway-type writer . . . who spent his days writing, drinking at a bar, fishing on a lake, hunting on the weekends, and so on" (147). Jenny, Ric's former love interest, is a painter. Indeed, part of the "mere reality" of Houston's paradoxical and fluid interaction of power dynamics and social hierarchy does include an energetic arts scene—easy enough to claim by the municipal boosters, but actually borne out by the findings of a 2014 study by the regional think tank, Center for Houston's Future. Their yearly "Community Indicator Report" attempts to "capture longitudinal trends and challenges that affect the Houston region," and in 2014 concentrated specifically on "Arts and Cultural Heritage." The results highlight a thriving, and growing, center of cultural production—with one non-profit arts organization for every two square miles of city, plus a ranking second only to Los Angeles for artists' wages (*Arts and Cultural Heritage* 26, 38)

But the quote Bennett uses is from Roya's time in India, and—as befits the clear-eyed navigator of Diaspora Space—Moshiri's novel also explores the outer borders of Nafisi's new "Republic," that is: the darker side of "Arts and Cultural Heritage," especially as encountered in a municipality Joe R. Feagin and others flatly label the "Free Enterprise City" (1). In Houston, Roya's cousin objects strongly to her literary efforts, suggesting "another option: accounting—a CPA degree." She complains about how her relatives "completely ignored my specialty, my degrees in literature, and my wish to continue my education. They acted as if I had no identity and had to obtain one" (154). Roya's aims with her memoir, clashing with those of the society

she has joined, are distinctly non-communal and highly personal—far from Arundhati Roy's goals of making "connections" and creating "common understanding." "I didn't want fame," she insists: "all I wanted was a book so that I would remain in this world, so that I wouldn't die after my death" (119). Ric makes a somewhat ambiguous statement about her memoir at the end of the novel. Though encouraging, he also seems to be telling her to alter it. "Use your imagination," Ric tells Roya. "Who is interested in what really happened?" (297). That Roya's memoir has become *Against Gravity*, or something like it, is a possibility Penguin's "Readers Guide" to the book itself raises, [17] but the larger point is that Moshiri's works offer no easy pathway for the power of literature to do its work in the world.

In addition, that it is artists who will form the community of the future Nafisi speaks of is problematized in *Against Gravity* most especially by the presence of the painter, Jenny. She is, according to Ric, "petite, childish, weird, demanding, and domineering" (229). "Now that I think back on it," he muses, "in the four years that I lived with Jenny, I never once talked about my past life. She was so fragile that she would break if she heard my morbid stories" (230). Despite her fragility and domination, Ric remains with Jenny until, returning home early one afternoon, he finds "Jenny and a guy . . . making love on a white canvas next to the washing machine." Employing this sort of betrayal (of time? Of attention?) that artists often utilize to justify their creative impulses, Jenny and the "guy" are making not only love, but art: "Her body was blue and she was twisting and wriggling like a fish out of water . . . With each move or turn Jenny made, a blue impression marked the canvas. She was doing her ultimate experiment" (237). [18]

Biography again parallels theme here. Moshiri explained to Laura Wright that she was "not part of any community of writers," finding her preferred counterparts in Houston rather to

be "open-minded Americans, feminists, political Americans who know the essence of what is going on behind all of this" (73). She has expressed her own difficulties in finding time to write ("My load never gets lighter") and falling out of favor with the economics of publishing as "what they really want is autobiography, nonfiction; the market wants a memoir. There are several memoirs of Iranian people from different groups. . . . But they don't want fiction, especially if the fiction is kind of literary and kind of dark" (Wright, Laura 69).

Two aspects are worth underscoring, however. The first is that Ric and Roya's move from "outside" to "inside" works out positively for both. The second is that that neither Jenny's paintings nor Roya's memoir get the last word in the novel when it comes to creativity. In a final italicized vignette, we follow the travails of Tala, now fourteen, sporting a tattoo of a revolver on her belly, and attending a "special school" called "Dawn," an institution for troubled children where "Dr. Middleton and her staff and the children's parents—who pay a good sum of money for the tuition—hope that this small, friendly environment will help. It helps sometimes and it doesn't help many times" (302). Under therapy, Tala works her way back through her childhood refugee experiences and the traumas of adapting to Houston, most especially the death of her beloved Bobby Palomo. Her only solace is writing. When a young graduate student brought to the school to teach creative writing sees Tala's stories, she can't help but be impressed. "This tall, heavy-set teenager with purple hair and many rings on her body is a natural writer," she discovers, asking herself: "Could I ever make up such stories?" (308).

Against Gravity with its viewpoint from the outside *and* the inside, and its recognition of "contention" in matters of social justice, is emblematic of the ways in which concepts such as the "city of refuge" or "republic of the imagination" exist in time as ongoing processes rather than clear cut panaceas. Emily Johansen points out that Derrida and his "metropolitan focus" as seen

in the idea of "cities of refuge" is representative of "a cosmopolitical *project* rather than a philosophical *limit* to cosmopolitanism," a project she sees mirrored in many others such as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and "No One is Illegal" campaigns. For her, "these projects are never complete, never fully cosmopolitan" (13).

Moshiri's novel dramatizes this ongoing project in its multivalent collection of voices. Reviewer John Freeman, writing in the *Houston Chronicle*, finds the communication from different viewpoints problematic, the narrative full of obvious "overly colloquial phras[es]" with a plot "close to melodrama." While containing elements of a murder story and high stakes international adventure, *Against Gravity* is also ultimately a love story, with Ric and Roya finding each other, overcoming a series of obstacles, and pooling their resources to work together to help raise a troubled child in the nation's fourth largest city. Moshiri, too, has come to terms with Houston. In her essay for *Cite* she records how she returned to the building where she labored at the back breaking work of painting t-shirts, a job she also gave to her fictional Iranian heroine.

> I crossed the street and approached the umbrella-shaped oak under which I had swallowed painful bites of sandwiches. I caressed the rough skin of the tree, as if she were the representative of all—the one bending over my former garage apartment, and the many along North Boulevard. . . . Now gripping the waist of the tree in one hand—as if she were a lover—and listening to the carefree laughter of the youth, I suddenly and unexpectedly felt at home. This was home, and I did not belong anywhere else. (25)

Endnotes - Chapter IV

[1] It's worth keeping in mind when considering the allogeneous author in general, and Farnoosh Moshiri in particular, that while Said does speak of the outsider's privileged viewpoint, the 1984 article "Reflections on Exile" from which his quote is taken, concerns itself more centrally with keeping those in the humanities focused on the sobering human costs inherent in gaining this viewpoint. Said begins his essay:

> Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (137)

[2] Biographical information on Moshiri in this chapter is synthesized from a number of sources, most especially her interview in *Minnesota Review* by Laura Wright, "Fiction in Exile: An Interview with Farnoosh Moshiri"; the Penguin publishing house's *"*Reader's Guide to *Against Gravity*" found at the end of that novel; and her own website, www.farnooshmoshiri.net. Very helpful for her years of adjustment in Houston is her short essay "Exile and Live Oaks: Stories Whispered from the Trees" in the Houston architectural magazine, *Cite*. At a presentation delivered at the University of Houston, Victoria, campus and reprinted in *American Book Review,* "Picketing the Zeitgeist: Writing in Exile," she also speaks of her experiences as they relate directly to Houston. A question and answer period after reading this essay to students was videotaped, and is available via streaming from her website and on YouTube under the title

Farnoosh Moshiri- UHV/ABR Reading Series. Any un-cited quotations or opinions from Moshiri that appear in this chapter stem from a personal interview with the author, 18 July, 2017.

[3] A highly autobiographical work, a character in *Against Gravity* uses the same terminology to describe the Iranian revolution. "'It's insane!' Uncle Salim raised his voice. 'The god-damned mullahs threw a bomb in the middle of our country and scattered us around the earth'" (156).

[4] *The Crazy Dervish and the Pomegranate Tree* includes her first story written in English, "The Wall," that caught the eye of Rosellen Brown, as well as "The Brick Layer," a fictionalized account of bringing her emaciated father from Iran to the United States that was, with collaborator lyricist Gregory Spears, turned into a libretto and performed by the Houston Grand Opera as part of their *Song of Houston: East + West* series in 2012 (Houston Grand Opera).

[5] An interesting 61 page Master's thesis presented at Leiden University by Judith Jongenelen, *Persian Diasporic Novels: An Analysis of Farnoosh Moshiri's Against Gravity*, analyzes time, narrative structure, and setting in the book, but Houston is mentioned for the most part only as the author's current place of residence. In fact, the section in the thesis labeled "Setting in *Against Gravity*" deals only with Afghanistan and India—two locales important for the character, Roya, but taking up only a fraction of the novel's narrative arc.

[6] Although referred to by writers and reviewers as an Iranian-American writer (she is, as she told one group, "a person of the hyphen" (*Farnoosh Moshiri- UHV/ABR Reading Series*)), Moshiri revealed to me in our interview that she also self-identifies as a "Houston writer."

[7] Moshiri credits the city and its demographics as well for delivering a profound influence on her language, and ultimately her style. "In Houston, there was not a community into which I could dissolve. In Los Angeles—sometimes called 'Tehran West'—it's possible to communicate totally in Farsi, to never learn English. People write and even publish in Farsi out there. Here

my isolation ended up being a good thing. It brought me into the English language." As she explained to Laura Wright, "I always tell my students that the first thing that I admire about this country is American literature. I'm more in the line that came down from Hemingway—that kind of clean, minimalistic prose. I admire it. It's like a clean spring of water" (74).

[8] Madison's doctor meets and befriends Roya when they both take the same ballet class. Set in a city with a 1990 census population of about 2 million souls, *Against Gravity* manages a formidable number of coincidental encounters.

[9] Presently (2017), in another example of what Benjamin Moser calls the identity defying "spinning" of labels across the Houston landscape (67), "Transco Tower" is known as "The Williams Tower."

[10] In my interview with the author, Moshiri spoke of her amazement that the flower departments in grocery chains like Kroger's or H.E.B. did not actually smell of flowers. "Haven't you ever noticed?" she asked. I hadn't, but it's true. Although Roya does see this stage she walks upon as "a magic globe containing the world, but illusory, deceiving" (144), it is still the case that *Against Gravity* takes some effort to emphasize the city's international connections, no matter how illusory, and is a book that is, in Robert Bennett's words, "unmistakably global in scope" (102). Each of the major characters is able to claim an overseas link. Madison recalls the "small solitary room on top of a roof in an old widow's house in New Delhi" from his days of travel and debauchery. Hallucinating with fever at night, his mind plucks from memory the subtle sensory experiences of India, all of the "nonexistent scents—sandalwood and curry, dust and manure and hot sweat" (23). An intense scene of torture in Argentina is featured in Ric's "novella" (217-233).

[11] *Against Gravity*, operating in a realistic fictional genre, dramatizes what Karen Fei Yamashita expresses in a work belonging more to the realms of magical realism and postmodern experiment, the novel *Tropic of Orange* (1997). Yamashita's book features spatially inventive "foldings" (a character transports the Tropic of Cancer from Mazátlan to Los Angeles) and conflict centered on a massive, multi-day-long Harbor Freeway traffic standstill. Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak finds in that novel a clear expression of the "impacts of the politics of mobility through its opposite, a standstill." For Mermann-Jozwiak, "In a city/nation where mobility is the norm and where cars are more valued than spouses, any arrest is cataclysmic." Class distinctions that might be less visible from the surface experience of a rapidly moving freeway system—and less visible still in the booster-ish rhetoric of business communications touting a city's energy and opportunity as occurs in places like Houston and Los Angeles, reveal their high profile in *Tropic of Orange* because of this cataclysm. The city's economically disadvantaged come into stark relief when "[i]n a complete role reversal, they take over the freeway" (11). There is no massive freeway gridlock in *Against Gravity*: rather, being barred from freeway travel catches up the economically challenged characters in the gridlock of their daily lives, causing the "arrest" of their progress in society.

[12] This is an especially resonant way of labeling the automotive solution when delivered to someone who'd been imprisoned merely for being a sister of a "revolutionary."

[13] Almost any random page of Madison's "novella" will turn up a dire comment. When it comes to his landlord, his summary characterization is that "[t]he stingy old man owned an air-conditioning repair business across the street but let the poor tenants boil in the hothouses of mousehole garage apartments,"—apartments that are rented by people who are, at any rate, "[a]ll a bunch of losers like myself" (90). If Madison seeks anything, it is to *block out* the experience

of his surroundings. "I had wished many times that I could also narrow my window, to blind myself, to conceal the world that stretched forever from all sides. I'd wished to be able to stare ahead, straight in front of me, through a slight crack of a window that showed order and peace" (88). Madison's problem isn't merely with the climate, the apartment, insulting gangs, or rushing traffic, but seeps into the institutions that surround him. At a doctor's appointment, he berates those watching TV in the waiting room. "Don't you realize they're feeding you shit? They feed you shit from morning to night" (59).

[14] A neologism found in many sources but often traced to fifth generation Houstonian, architect, and architectural preservation advocate James Glassman. His book, *The Houstorian Dictionary: An Insider's Index to Houston* (2015), defines the word as "A new Houstonian. Houston is known for its constant supply of them" (125).

[15] Jeff Balke writing in the *Houston Press* in 2017 notes that "the number of native Texans has shrunk." For Balke: "In recent years, we have seen a rise in people from western states like California. I'm sure Austin natives probably feel about Californians the way Houstonians did about folks from the Midwest in the '80s, when it seemed like half the license plates on the road were from Michigan."

[16] There are, as far as this reader can determine, only four mentions of Houston's Mexican-American population in *Against Gravity*. Moshiri appears to have fallen under the contextualizing force of a place-aspect which will be examined more closely in Chapter 5 concerning the work of Tony Diaz.

[17] *Against Gravity* includes an interview with Moshiri and two pages of numbered, open-ended "Questions for Discussion." Number 9 asks, "Do you think that Roya's memoir has become Moshiri's novel?" (11).

[18] That Moshiri would trust everyone on Roy's list of artistic creatives is further problematized by the novel, perhaps especially her assertion that it is "the filmmakers who can make the connections, who can find ways of bringing it into the realm of common understanding" (in Bennett 106). Roya's daughter has become distanced from reality viewing the fare offered by American television. Roya describes Tala's TV watching as "compulsive" (45). She talks to the characters, which only tends to make her "sulky and demanding" (141). Roya complains:

> She was absorbed in a new world that she had discovered in the mesmerizing images of the American TV. She escaped from the reality of our miserable garage apartment into this colorful magic box. Her numerous friends in Kabul and New Delhi had all become illusory images in the glaring box and she held long conversations with them in a hushed tone. (138-39)

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CHAPTER V

"HOW DO I MAKE MY COIN? I COINED A PHRASE: *SOMOS LIBROTRAFICANTES."*

TONY DIAZ, HOUSTONIAN

> We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed in the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.
>
> Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (6).

In his 1998 work, *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States, and the Erotics of Culture,* José Limón made note of a remarkable missing element in the Texas stories of Katherine Anne Porter. "I continue to be perplexed as to why Porter—who was so concerned about social injustice, who was raised in south-central Texas, and who came to know Mexico first by way of Mexicans in Texas—never wrote Mexican Americans or Mexican immigrants into her fiction about that place" (68). "Relative to both American racism and perhaps Porter's own unconscious sensibilities," he continued, "the immigrant Mexican *cannot be figured openly in a valorized manner* in the context of south Texas" (70 emphasis added). This was a form of marginalization and exclusion that had been long noted—and not just for Texas, of course. Ramon Saldívar, in his seminal analysis of Latino literature, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (1990), concludes:

> Despite its long-standing cultural presence, Mexican American heritage has either been excluded from or relegated to the margins of American political, social, and

> literary history. Paraphrasing Frantz Fanon, we might say that the dominant Anglo-American culture did not simply alter the material conditions of the Southwest after 1848. In rewriting history, it distorted and disfigured its future [Fanon 1982, 169]. This work of devaluing history continues and takes on dialectical significance today. (23)

Saldívar is correct in predicting that this devaluation—not a passing condition noted only by 1990's Latino literary criticism—continues in a significant way. Texas novelist Dagoberto Gilb considers in *The Texas Observer* in 2017 that

> there is nothing surprising or new about most of the country being unaware of the culture and community of MexAmerica. On the other hand, it is such a strange form of ignorance . . . that one might want to call it utterly fascinating in that unique quality. . . . Over the years (and by years I mean at least 50) historians and scholars are inclined to attribute that unawareness to an "invisibility" of the community. (3)

This study could further highlight many examples this aspect of Latino identity in the United State, in Texas, and, as we'll see, in Houston as well, but the point is that in the context of this region, there is what amounts to an identifiable "clearing of the scene" of Chicano and Latino presence, this occurring at the same time that presence has increased demographically. The next author in this study, Tony Diaz, makes his literary mark upon this very stage, one on which he must strive harder to be "acknowledged" and "openly valorized." Making his home as he has in Houston, his response reveals aspects of the Bayou City place-experience that might be overlooked or omitted by the casual reader, and—in fact—demonstrates that the metropolis is not only, as we've seen with Rick Bass, a place *on* the margins, but a place *containing* margins,

perhaps more so than similarly-sized cities. Diaz, in both his writings, and as presented by a particular public persona he has taken on as part of his social activism—the "Librotraficante"—highlights the way that, as Edward Soja puts it, "space can be made to hide consequences," yet also spotlights the *advantages* that accrue to those knowledgeable and willing to exploit and inhabit those spaces of marginalization, invisibility, and erasure. Houston, for Diaz, can be a considered a place so loosely organized that there is plenty of room "in-between," "in the margins" and—importantly—"behind the scenes" to allow for success, power, and agency of a kind that make up another aspect of the city's complex nature.

As stated, the role of the "Librotraficante" is one of social reform, and in taking it up, this study risks moving outside the "artistic referent" preferred by critics such as Bertrand Westphal for the geocritical examination of place; however, Westphal notes that, for him, geocriticism is easily able to explore "other paths that themselves lead beyond the purely literary." These include "examining several forms of mimetic art in a single study of spatial representation" (122). The example he uses is cinema, but, as we'll see, Diaz as social activist has taken up a role that might be considered theatrical, possessing elements of street theater, or even—appropriate for Houston—"freeway theater," involving as it does caravans of cars and interstate travel. Just as Limón's *American Encounters* is useful in contextualizing the place of Mexican Americans in Texas literature, his 1993 article, "The Return of the Mexican Ballad: Américo Paredes and His Anthropological Text as Persuasive Political Performance" aids in contextualizing the career of Tony Diaz as a kind of performance, and one prefigured in his writings. "Paredes's life and his book [*"With His Pistol in his Hand"* (1958)], in their narrative organization and poetics, recall the aesthetic politics of their scholarly subject, the Mexican ballad of border conflict" (Limón "The Return"14). Similarly, Diaz's life, career and role as the

"Librotraficante" recall the subject matter encountered in his first and, at present, only novel, *The Aztec Love God* (1998), and do so in ways reflecting the place-experience of Houston, the city in which he composed that work. We will find this to be the case for the author especially in regards to his use of the powerful metaphor of Houston as a site of intersecting borders, the presence of multiple, vertical, unzoned identities in the city that are reflected in his many personae, and—importantly—in the qualities of the hyper-capitalistic, laissez-faire attitude towards money and success that is encountered in the metropolis, much as it is in his work.

In spite of observations such as those made by Limón, Saldívar and Gilb concerning Mexican American "invisibility," Jesus Jesse Esparza's 2011 *Houston History* article, "*La Colonia Mexicana*: A History of Mexican Americans in Houston," argues that the ethnic group is not only a vital ingredient in the city's multicultural mix, but is important as well to its creation mythology. Esparza points out that Mexican soldiers taken prisoner by Sam Houston at the battle of San Jacinto were pressed into immediate service to clean the swampland that would one day be home to the settlement that would bear his name. While some of the workers returned south of the border, others remained, planting the seed of Houston's Mexican and Mexican American population on that unpromising, disease-ridden wetland (2). In other words, although there did not exist, as in San Antonio, a historical tradition of Hispanic occupation in the area, such an occupation was nonetheless present from the moment Houston rose, *sui generis,* from the landscape in 1837. Esparza points out how Spanish language newspapers appeared soon after the city's founding, and, by the turn of the next century, a growing Latino middle class produced mutual aid societies, including by the 1930s an active chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). Houston's first World War II casualty was Hispanic: Joe Padilla, a sailor killed in the South Pacific (5). Chicano activists rose to high profile in the city in the

1960's, and elections saw successes of figures such as Leonel Castillo as city controller, and Armando Rodriguez as city judge. In 1974, a political party emerged solely for improving the rights of Mexican Americans: *La Raza Unida* (6). By the twenty-first century, Houston had become, for Esparza, "the most popular destination for Latino immigration in Texas" (7). Historian Arnoldo De León in *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (2001), traces similar developments, pointing out that by the end of the twentieth century, "Houston had acquired what seemed the apt sobriquet of the 'Hispanic Mecca of Texas'" (223). We have already seen when examining the multicultural milieu of Farnoosh Moshiri's, *Against Gravity,* that the 2017 survey of the Kinder Institute presents Houston as an increasingly Latino city, with Hispanics presently making up 44 percent of the population (in Binkovitz).

In regards to Moshiri's novel, however, we could also point out that are no Hispanic characters of note in *Against Gravity*, and only four superficial mentions of the presence of Houston's Mexican-American population in the work at all. Two of those, a "Mexican grocery store" (209) and a "Mexican market" (144) might be considered nods more to architecture than demographics. Likewise, Hispanics appear rarely in Donald Barthelme's impressively large *oeuvre*, with the group mentioned only occasionally, and mainly, also, in reference to food or restaurants. An exception is the short story "Cortés and Montezuma" from the 1979 collection *Great Days*, wherein an anachronistic conquest of Mexico is portrayed as the scheme of the abominably greedy Spaniard to convince the impressionable, spiritually-minded priest-king that their continuing friendship is in the interests of both. Jochen Achilles groups that story with others in the Barthelme canon that demonstrate "reason to confront with distrust what is presented . . . as authoritative and/or authorial truths" (116)—a lesson that applies, certainly, to the relationship between Anglo and Latino Texans as much as it does between texts and readers.

Still, as a single example, and one that playfully introduces the world of 1531 Tenochtitlan to limousines and detectives, "Cortés and Montezuma" can be taken as the exception that demonstrates the paucity of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the Barthelme *corpus*. Limón observes how Texan Katherine Anne Porter's multiple sojourns in Mexico—travels that resulted in extensive writing about the country's culture and people—did not result in the physical presence of such culture and people in her Texas stories. Something similar might be said for Houstonian Rick Bass. His historical novel, *The Diezmo* (2005), concerns the Mier expedition, an ill-fated attempt to establish the Texas border beyond present-day Santa Fe, New Mexico, that resulted in the capture, forced march, deprivation and imprisonment in Mexico of 243 Anglo-Texans by the Mexican Army in 1842. *The Diezmo* is an even-handed presentation that takes into account the complicity of the Anglo-Texans in their own demise, and the fairness of their treatment at the hands of many Mexican authorities. Yet, again, in the works Bass sets in Houston, Texas Latinos either do not appear or do so only peripherally—a circumstance true even, ironically, for the short story "Mexico," examined in Chapter III of this study. There, the oil-rich young triumvirate of the narrator, Trish and Kirby travel to Mexico often, and even explore the nation, driving "deep into the poor country, broken and cracked and roads turning to dust, children without clothes, a cantina only every thirty miles." The narrator notes, "It was different when we got back into Texas" (31)—one of these differences being that there are no longer Mexicans or Mexican Americans in the story. The single exception in "Mexico" concerns the narrator's plan to make their trips more interesting by working summers in a Houston nursery in order to learn Spanish, his aim being to "learn the words: working with Mexican laborers, aliens" (30). Bass's Houston characters are not condescending towards the Latino population, but do bring to mind Gilb's accusation of invisibility as he presents it in his *Texas Observer*

article: “a visual degeneration in the center of the dominant culture’s eyes. No faces, only hands serving enchilada plates and then busing away what’s left of the spicy yum yum. Beds are made after a fun vacation day, floors swept and waxed . . . lawns mowed and edged. . . .” (2).

With such an attitude from these Houston authors, it is little wonder that despite Arnoldo De León’s acknowledged recognition of the vitality of the city’s Hispanic community by the end of the twentieth century in *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, he is nonetheless forced to ask “why did Houston in general not recognize Mexicanos to the same degree before?” (159). Why the lack of valorization? Why the invisibility? And, importantly, what is the best approach to remedy this situation if you seek to effect a presence in your own city?

Tony Diaz moved to the above described milieu from his childhood home of Chicago, Illinois, in 1992.[1] Born in 1968, he is the ninth child of migrant workers who, though believers in the power of education, were unable to attain any for themselves, his father, Antonio, having never set foot in a classroom of any kind. The first in his family to attend college, Diaz studied Communication at DePaul University, began graduate studies at Kansas State, then moved to Texas to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree in fiction writing in the University of Houston’s Creative Writing Program—the institution also attended by Farnoosh Moshiri and, upon Diaz’s arrival, still heavily influenced by the directorship of the late Donald Barthelme who had passed away three years prior. “I’m pleased to have earned the MFA, but it’s interesting to see the way it also incorporates limitations on imagination and culture,” says Diaz. “This isn’t unique to UH. My time there was a time of living both underground and above ground.” This idea, that there is a “system,” and that it must be understood, utilized, *and* transgressed—inhabiting space underground *and* above ground in order to avoid inevitable systemic limitations—recurs often in his writings and public statements.

Despite drawbacks of the university program, Diaz felt an immediate affinity for his new home, especially because of what he considered the loose regulation and "general lack of organization of Houston," this appearing most obvious to him in comparison with his native Chicago.

> I think what was eye-opening to me is that it seemed that it was a wider range of opportunities in Houston, especially for me at the time. And also in my humble estimation, I think that for my access to education there were more opportunities for myself and Latinos in Houston. . . . I think I have been able to accomplish a lot differently than I would have accomplished in Chicago only because it is more open. There is more room for trying on projects. (Goode)

An experience emblematic of his first days in the city occurred when Diaz asked a neighbor: "*¿Quién* es *el jefe de la cuadra?*" In Chicago, "block captains" and neighborhood associations were common, but in Houston his question was answered with "*¿El Que*?" Echoing the city's rhetorical attitude towards property use noted in previous chapters, Diaz came to understand he was in a new environment. "Houston is no zoning, no laws, un-regulated. That's the great thing here: nobody runs shit. It made me believe I could do what I wanted." In the summer before beginning graduate school, Diaz joined his first comedy club, developed a stand-up act, studied Taekwondo, and—in spite of having no journalistic experience—worked for a small newspaper covering City Hall meetings for the bedroom community of Sugarland, Texas. "It's a little uncomfortable to admit, but I did things I didn't have the *balls* to do in Chicago. Here it seemed I could do anything." Diaz's opinions resemble the explicit recognition of the city's unregulated nature found in Bass's "Juggernaut," when Larry Loop calls Houston "the

only town in the country that was zoned and ordinanced properly, so that a man could do what he wanted, as he wanted" (106).

Though no refugee from Chicago, Diaz's origins in that city, and his frequent characterizations of Houston in comparison to it, classify him, like Moshiri, as one of Bertrand Westphal's outsiders who have arrived from elsewhere yet made a particular place their own—an *allogeneous* author. As mentioned, for Westphal, the works of such writers are "characteristic of those who have settled into a place, [become] familiar with it, but still [remain] foreigners in the eyes of the indigenous population" (128). Diaz's years at the University of Houston culminated in a creative dissertation, a collection of short stories, two of which he expanded into a novel, *The Aztec Love* God, that received the Nilon Award for Excellence in Minority Fiction in 1998 and publication under the Fiction Collective 2 imprint. Diaz has also edited collections of essays on Latino issues, appears frequently in the opinion columns of Houston area newspapers, and as of 2017 can be seen weekly on the televised discussion program "What's Your Point?" broadcast by Houston Fox News affiliate KRIV. He is host of a monthly Latino Literary Showcase sponsored by his organization, *Nuestra Palabra,* and a weekly KPFT Pacifica radio program by the same name. Diaz has had a varied career as a community activist since moving to Houston, but when it comes to the way that his work illuminates the city as *place* this chapter will concentrate on the conceptual persona—or perhaps it is better to say *performance*—that Diaz has created while waging a battle for inclusion of Mexican-American studies in secondary education: the "Librotraficante." The chapter will also take up ways in which his novel, *The Aztec Love God,* demonstrates the "received" influence of the city in which it was written, and foregrounds the approach that will be taken by Diaz in his performance as the "Librotraficante."

Belinda Acosta in *Poets and Writers* recounts the 2011 passage in the Arizona state legislature of House Bill 2281, the edict that by most accounts can be said to have brought the "Librotraficante" into existence. HB-2281 prohibits the teaching of books in state public and charter schools to the extent that such works serve to "promote the overthrow of the U.S. government, promote resentment toward a race or class of people, are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group, or advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals" (16).[2] Whatever the exact policy, patriotic or personal intent of this legislation, the effect of the bill—the ending of Mexican-American Studies in Arizona public schools—was seen immediately by Latino activists, including Diaz, as a targeted cultural attack.

Although it might at first seem odd that a legislative action in Arizona had an effect on this Houston activist and his organization, in fact Diaz took as a key ingredient of this circumstance the geographical fortuity that a trip from Texas to Arizona requires several border crossings—albeit of the state rather than national variety. The concept of "the border," and the various complexities of identity that come along with that concept, would become an important element in his response. Within weeks, his organization, *Nuestra Palabra*, had formulated a plan. *Nuestra* is itself worthy of further study concerning its reflection of the city in which it was born, having grown since its founding in 1998 in the unheated side room of the Chapultepec Restaurant in Houston's Montrose district into a regional literary coalition featuring writing workshops, book stores, and school programs.[3] This organization represented the first chapter in Diaz's plan to begin a "*Movimiento Literario Latino en Houston*," an undertaking he began even though "[h]is friends advised him that there weren't enough writers, or for that matter listeners" to support any such project in the city (Dewan). This "invisible" audience, however, soon began showing up monthly for showcases at the the 270 seat *Talento Bilingüe de Houston*

theater, and filled the stadium-sized Brown Convention Center for two Hispanic Book Fairs. "It was a perfect hybrid blend that would only have happened in the hybrid city," Diaz claims.

> *Nuestra* was first of all a reading series, something I learned about from being in the Creative Writing Program—usually a pretty elite enterprise. But I mixed it with poetry slams and open mic nights from my time putting acts together for Houston comedy clubs. Then there's the Latino tradition of the *Tertulia*—salons of art and culture where people just get together to talk books and ideas. Finally, the *declamando*—a *barrio* practice where people just get emotional and theatrical and recite other people's poems from memory, sometimes in the streets. *Nuestra Palabra* incorporated *all* of these influences.

At present, Diaz counts twenty-one writers who have begun by giving readings at *Nuestra* showcases, then, helped in the application process by the author and his staff, gone on to obtain MFAs in various writing genres. "They couldn't all get in the UH program," says Diaz archly, "so some had to go places like Stanford and Columbia."

Diaz and other activists seized upon the fact that, since House Bill 2281 halted Mexican American studies in places like the Tucson Unified school district, this meant books associated with those classes would also no longer be found on campuses, a fact they found translatable into a de facto "book banning" by the State of Arizona. Diaz called for the formation of a multi-vehicle caravan that would then ship "contraband books" to replace these "banned" ones, all carried out in clandestine "border crossings" as the group traveled from Houston to Tucson. The convoy was to be led by brand new persona, "played" by Tony Diaz in the starring role, who first appeared in this guise in an online video. "Chin tilted upward," as Acosta describes his appearance in the streaming YouTube clip that soon went viral, "he exudes a streetwise, mildly

defiant posture as he showcases the goods in his vehicle. The implication is that he's hawking something illegal—and he is, in a sense" (16). It is that parody of "something illegal" that gave the "Librotraficante" figure its tone and character, although I'd argue that the attitude exuded was not "streetwise," but "border-wise."

In the video, wearing aviator glasses and a brown leather jacket, Diaz stands near the open cargo area of an SUV filled with books. As he mentions "new words in the lexicon," these appear superimposed in front of his image:

> My name's Tony. You might have heard that Arizona had the audacity to ban Latino studies. Well I'm here to introduce a few new words into the lexicon of Arizona, courtesy of the Protestors Handbook, written right here in Houston, Texas.
>
> First phrase: "Libro-Traficante." Me and my fellow Librotraficantes will be smuggling contraband books back into Arizona this Spring Break, March 2012. If you want to get involved, visit the website, Librotraficante.com.
>
> Second phrase: "Wet-Book." These are books that we smuggle illegally across the border to be used in underground classes where we will conduct Latino Literary Studies. It's a lethal dose of Dagoberto Gilb coming at you Arizona. [Holds up Gilb's story collection, *Woodcuts of Women*.]
>
> Third phrase: "Dime-Book." These are paperbacks that used to be worth only ten dollars, but are now invaluable thanks to your fascist laws, Arizona.
>
> *House on Mango Street* [holds up the book]. Twenty-first anniversary edition by Sandra Cisneros. I hear she's leaving San Antonio. Maybe we can convince her to come live . . . in Arizona. Contraband people!

> Arizona, we're throwing the book at you. "V" for victory, *vatos* [a rooster crows in the background.] (*Wet Books: Smuggling Banned Literature Back into Arizona.*)

The caravan received endorsements from Gilb and Cisneros, as well as figures such as Rudolfo Anaya and Lorna Dee Cervantes (Acosta 16). Diaz's insistence that the movement came from "right here in Houston, Texas" may seem a throwaway, but the caravan *Nuestra Palabra* sent onto the roads in 2012 ended up traveling not in a straight line, but swerving across a great deal of the Southwestern United States, including stops with readings and demonstrations in San Antonio and El Paso, Texas, then Mesilla and Albuquerque, New Mexico, before arriving finally in Tucson. Its Houston origins might not have been obvious if not made note of, and the emphasis underscores longstanding attempts to make up for the self-identification Blaffer Gallery curator Rachel Hooper describes as the "city that exists on the margins of culture" (99), a place that seeks to move from those margins to the center of the action. In this new persona, Diaz insists at the introduction of the video that the Bayou City is the epicenter of the resistance movement, fighting to protect Mexican American Studies across a broad geographical area, much as Bass's "third wheel" characters—the narrative voice in "Swamp Boy," or Richard in "Redfish"—attempt to move from the margins of their stories to central narrative slots. Tony Diaz's fluid Houston is similar to Bass's: *located at the margins*, but capable of moving and taking a more central role in a national agenda.

Other parallels begin to appear between the "Librotraficante" and some of the more traditional fictional works of authors examined thus far by this study. Notable, for example, s the "traficante" part of the new persona, from the verb *traficar*, signifying in its less common form "to travel; roam; rove," and so hinting at the frenzy of Houston's ubiquitous freeway

system. More often, however, the verb means "to traffic; trade," and so with a *traficante*, a "trafficker or trader," we find the combination in a single word of both Diaz's concerns for books and reading—*libros*—with motion and travel, as well as hints concerning the laissez faire capitalism that is a signature of Houston's business climate ("traficar" 473).

Linguistic roots aside, an obvious and important aspect of the word, "Librotraficante," is its identity as a parodic version of a "narcotraficante," an outlaw figure associated with criminal activity and drug abuse, though nonetheless ambiguously understood in Texas border lore as having some positive aspects. Diaz, in other words, in this figure, operates much as he had since graduate school, both "underground and above ground." Narcotraficantes are the subject—as with Paredes' Gregorio Cortez in *"With His Pistol In His Hand"*—of popular border ballads or *corridos* describing their sometimes paradoxically "heroic" activities. Indeed, José David Saldívar's description of *corridos* in 1997's *Border Matters, Remapping American Cultural Studies* calls to mind a more musical version of Diaz's video presentation in almost every feature:

> *Corridos* appear to be built of three structural elements: a hero or protagonist, with whom the Chicano or Mexican audience is presumed to identify in some way; a world in which the hero acts and is acted on by antagonistic, often Anglocentric forces, which is presumably a reflection of the audience's conception of the world; and an oral narrative in which the interaction of the protagonist and the world is described. Specifically, the hero, as Paredes tells us, "is always a Mexican whose rights or self-respect are trampled upon by North American authority." (61)

—or, in this case, Arizonan authority. The Anglocentric House Bill 2281 threatens the audience's culture, and the Librotraficante hero/protagonist will interact with this antagonistic force by undertaking a journey—a narrative of a "smuggling operation"—staged theatrically on the highways and freeways of the southwest, featuring readings and demonstrations along the way.

Historian Alan Taylor notes "that scholars find borderlands everywhere—leaving us with no space, at least in North America, that's not a borderland" (in Hämäläinen 348-49), but by centering his movement "right here" in Houston, the "Librotraficante" folds what may be thought of as the "*real*" governmental separation between the United States and Mexico northward into the city, translating and transporting it 350 miles from its present location. Via parody, invoking a colorful and "dangerous" border figure, Diaz alters the discourse of the city through the actions of his caravan and the video promoting it. The "Librotraficante" as a character calls to mind Arcangel in Karen Fei Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange* (1997), "his body fastened to an entire continent" who, in magical realist fashion, brings the Tropic of Cancer—dividing line between global north and south—with him to Los Angeles: "a line finer than the thread of a spiderweb" (12). Such a mixture of the geographical and the metaphorical "dividing line" is far more easily visualized forty years after the publication of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera,* a work Ángel Mateos-Aparicio sees as the occasion of a "postmodern transition from a geographical and political description of borders to a cultural and ideological conception," one he finds "essential in the establishment of the new vision of border space" (244). The Texas/Mexico border is, in Anzaldua's formulation, an actual, historical "open wound," between the two countries, yet, as Édgar Cota-Torres points out, after the influence of *Borderlands/La Frontera* it must also be considered "not one space but many, a heterotopia at

the limit of two nations" (53). Hence, that one heterotopia along the Rio Grande might find a home symbolically inside of another along Buffalo Bayou does not seem so odd. It is true, however, when the figure in Diaz's promotional video wearing brown leather jacket and aviator shades signals Houston as, now, a border zone—it must be considered one unlike the actual, present day U.S.-Mexico zone; one that harkens back to a different, nostalgic border region, a mix of the real and the ideal.

In effecting this, the "Librotraficante" presents the border conceit not through fantastic thought experiments or magical alteration of space, but by linguistically delivering up "a few new words into the lexicon," each of which satirically and in parodic fashion conflate book smuggling with the far more serious business of drug smuggling, an act which raises again the message concerning the power of words and labels. Parody invites comparison, and comparisons of the "Librotraficante" with the *narcotraficante* yield useful complications for reading Diaz's project through the lens of place. Perhaps the most thorough study of the actual border criminal as *folk figure* (as opposed to law-enforcement challenge) has been undertaken by Mark Cameron Edberg in *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos & the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (2004). Although the drug trade might be imagined as a venue for well-dressed gangsters of *Scarface*'s Al Pacino/Tony Montana variety, Edberg points out that, in Texas, *narcotraficantes* are decidedly rural "regional signifiers," even delivering up for the most part "positive rural signification" (91), perhaps unsurprising when one considers that "the whole process of growing and distributing drugs is also intertwined with a rural consciousness, a tie to the land and a sense of autonomy vis-à-vis the central government. Thus it is also an affirmation of local identity and rural identity" (50). Though lacking the true "chero" style which would include a "cowboy-type" hat, "plate metal buckles . . . boots of lizard or alligator" (Edberg 70),

Diaz's brown jacket with Western lapels—as opposed to a more "urban," black leather variety—and aviator glasses reminiscent of figures such as *"El rey del cielo,"* Amado Carillo Fuentes, head of the Juarez cartel until his mysterious death, and known for his fleet of airplanes (Edberg 62)[4], underscore the rural, border impression. That Diaz's video sign-off is succeeded almost immediately by the crowing of a rooster likewise serves to bring "the country" "right here" to the City of Houston.[5] The crowing cock and this border figure subtly interject nature in a place that, at times, has to be reminded of nature's existence—much like the reminder Rick Bass enacts in a story like "Swamp Boy." Considering that Houstonians in post-World War II years decided to build "the Air-Conditioning Capital of the World" (Gray), a metropolis whose reigning nature story could be that, as Jenny Price says of Los Angeles, "[t]here is no nature here," the "Librotraficante" concept offers a hero who insists on an alternative, "border country" discourse for the city, although it turns out to be one of a nostalgic character, one "in-between" border ideas and border realities.

This is because, for many Texans—and Houstonians—any border discourse contains at least two complex and competing social elements: one a reminiscing vision of an exciting cultural zone, the other factoring in the very real changes brought to the region by recent and high profile narco-violence of the kind the "Librotraficante" parodies. Houston poet Sarah Cortez characterizes the earlier version of the U.S.-Mexico Border as a "constant dialogue between people" resulting in the "creation of a borderland easily navigable by those creative and intrepid enough to live in this in-between" (ix). Novelist and El Paso native Sergio Troncoso calls it "a world between two worlds," a place where "you could live in between worlds, and have the hope of creating something new. A third way to be, not along the border, but *on the border*" (272). In 2013 these authors co-edited the essay collection *Our Lost Border: Essays on*

Life Amid the Narco-Violence, the contents of which underscores how powerfully Anzaldúa's "open wound" has festered in recent years. Troncoso describes current Ciudad Juárez—across the border from El Paso—as "descended into the bloody chaos of today. Instead of a border of bridges, it has become a border of walls," and notes how the "breathing living entity" of the former zone has been lost (258). Diaz, then, inevitably draws upon these nostalgic and current aspects in his "Librotraficante" character, and it's worth wondering if that would have been possible in any other U.S. city. Houston is close enough to the Rio Grande to foster remembrance the former version of the border, yet far enough away to feel some distance from the present situation. It might be most accurate to say that Houston is and is not a border city for the "Librotraficante," but a new awareness of the "world between two worlds" is nonetheless built into the figure and the place in which he announces his project, "right here in Houston, Texas."

Of course, it also both is and is not Tony Diaz who appears in this promotional video: he has constructed a persona, and done so with quite a bit of craft when considered against the model it parodies. Diaz's explorations of the city's "margins" allows for this kind of manipulation, even of an otherwise criminal figure. For Edberg, for example, maintaining the kind of reputation necessary to be an actual narcotraficante "is a richly coded task." "[T]he way to hold a gun during a shooting," he explains, "was horizontally, with arm extended out to the side as opposed to in front. This was a stylized way of demonstrating power and insouciance vis-à-vis the victim" (116-17). When Diaz introduces his "Second phrase," he turns his side to the camera and extends his arm to point at the audience in a similar manner. More coded, however, is that second parodic word itself: "'Wet-Book.' These are books that we smuggle illegally across the border." With this take-off on the pejorative "wetback," a term that signals

an undocumented immigrant who has crossed the Rio Grande without papers, Diaz turns the tables on the insult, and begins to express the power of manipulating a message from behind the screen of a mask. This study has not finished with the "Librotraficante," but this characteristic, the use of personae and the fluidity of Diaz's expressions of identity—the idea of *playing a role* as an effective method for controlling one's message—is best introduced and foregrounded for this particular author by his novel, *The Aztec Love God*.

At first glance, it is not surprising that *The Aztec Love God*, with its multiple voices, short fragmented chapters and multiple digressions, is the product of a student in a writing program put in place by Donald Barthelme. Certainly, Diaz counts as important influences many Latino/a writers such as Paredes, Gilb, Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, the Austin poet *Raúl Salinas and* Texan Tomás Rivera. His novel could be seen as borrowing from these influences stylistically, as in the interconnected vignettes, often featuring viewpoints distinct from that of the protagonist, in Rivera's, *. . . y no se lo tragó la tierra/ . . . and the Earth did not Devour Him* (1971). However, that Houston, which historian Neil Foley describes as a hybrid crossroads or intersection of borders that he labels the "shatter belt" (2), dovetails geographically with such stylistic features and writing strategies likewise serves to highlight those choices when viewed through the lens of place. Diaz could also be said simply to have soaked up the "fragmented" style of storytelling featured by Barthelme. The novel's narrative is punctuated by discursive, "detour" chapters that have only limited connection to the thread of the plot. These include notebook—or, to put it more accurately, "joke workbook"—entries, essays on race and ethnicity in America, opinions on Latino issues, instructions for creating fake IDs (identity and its creative falsification being arguably the major theme of the book), and, in general, pieces voiced far differently than the book's first-person protagonist, Catholic prep-school student Tiofilio ("Tio")

Duarte. It is thus easily possible to trace the book's stylistic foundations to the "sprawling city without zoning ordinances and resplendent with surreal juxtapositions" where it was written; those features that Lorrie Moore argues as determinant to the work of the UH Creative Writing Program's most famous director ("How He Wrote His Songs").

The Aztec Love God is, in broad outline, a coming of age novel. Unlike Rivera's young, unnamed migrant worker protagonist in . . . *y no se lo trago la tierra,* who Ramón Saldívar describes as "born into a world of absence and loss, seeking to discover his identity, to inscribe his name on the text of history" (77), Tio Duarte speaks from privilege, his narrative reporting back on his high school years from the "now" of the book—a time in which he's grown to adulthood, become rich, and inscribed his name solidly on the realm of popular culture, albeit—importantly—in a supporting rather than title role. The main narrative line concentrates on Tio's seventeenth year, studying under the Basilian Brothers, from whom, we recall, Donald Barthelme also received his secondary schooling. (Diaz admits in a personal interview that his own Chicago prep school was affiliated with the De La Salle Brothers.)

Tio's story takes readers through his role as a "high school avoidance expert,"[6] as well describing his efforts as a fledgling stand-up comic, the narrative following his navigation of the very disparate worlds encountered in this trio of nightclub, school and family contexts. Much of the novel's drama stems from Tio's temptation to achieve comedic success by succumbing onstage to ethnic stereotyping, as well as the young entertainer's attempts to clarify the source of a mysterious inheritance that has meant that his father no longer has to work. The clash of Latino culture, history, and tradition with the demands of both a dominant Anglo society and a clamoring nightclub audience is paralleled by Tio's romantic dilemma: should he partner with Catholic girl-next-door, Rosie, or the aptly named Farah—blond stripper and paramour of a

successful Anglo comic and manager? Such a milieu—not cotton fields or mean barrio streets—is where the cultural dialectic operates in *The Aztec Love God*.

The novel is set, ostensibly, in Chicago, although its place referents are for the most part so generic they are not necessarily traceable to that city at all: it is possible to nearly complete the text before encountering such "direct" Chicago landmarks as "Sears Tower" (70), "Lincoln Park" or "Maxwell Street" (93). Although I would not argue vociferously for "direct" influences from the city in which the novel was composed there are a few enticing possibilities. A Lone Star State connection is hinted at in a character who is an Asian comic with the stage name "Hon Cho" (i.e., "Honcho"), dubbed by his manager "The Eastern Cowboy" (16). More explicitly, Tio—who, as we shall see, has a slippery identity in general—is introduced by his manager in a club as "a headliner from Houston," all in an effort to make him appear both more successful and mysterious than he is (81). But it is biographical data that speaks more to questions of setting in composing the novel, as Diaz admits the book to be: "*Quasi* set in Chicago. Everything that takes place in the high school comes from my Chicago experiences, but the rest—the comedy clubs, the strip clubs—is right out of my first summer in Houston, and my first attempts at a standup act." Just as Farnoosh Moshiri's "long morning walks on North Boulevard" beneath the "interwoven branches that had created a roof above the street" influenced her setting of prison hallways and torture chambers in faraway, fictionalized Tehran ("Exile and Live Oaks" 25), Diaz's summer of stand-up comedy and clubbing in Houston become the seamier landscape of distant Chicago in *The Aztec Love God.* Rather than belaboring such tenuous place connections, however, it probably makes most sense to say that Diaz's anti-realist novel takes place in a hybrid, heterotopic zone of its own construction—or as the author puts it, "Neither city was enough for the novel"—rather than any identifiable metropolis. The Houston influences to seek

in the book that are of the "received" variety rather than the "direct" are more interesting. Examining an excerpt from the work's first page begins to highlight these possibilities.

> I am a behind the scenes man. Invisible by choice, not unwillingly wiped off your central nervous system. No. Invisible to seep deeper into your receiving system, your super-central nervous system where the frequencies you experience but try to ignore make you nervous. There is where I plant the crops I pick.
>
> But before I worked my way up to obscurity, I struggled insanely to attract the spotlight, to let it be known where I stood in the darkness, to show my spot in the universe. (11)

Fairly recognizable even in that short excerpt is the book's nod to the North American canon outside of the influence of both Houston and Latino/a authors, most obviously *Invisible Man* (1952). Another American canonical author alluded to in the book's first pages is Nathaniel Hawthorne: "I was then a young, good Brown Man" (11), Tio admits. But the "behind the scenes man" can also be seen as an inhabitant of that space Limón, Saldívar and Gilb posit for Latinos in North American culture: the zone of invisibility taken on by those who work but are unseen, rendered by the "dominant culture" incapable of validation, and mythologized by the official record into the margins of history. Indeed, Donald Barthelme, Rick Bass and Farnoosh Moshiri, have all experienced a Latino reality in their home "place" that has for some nervous reason (arguably subconscious) failed to make it onto their pages. As *The Aztec Love God* traces out Tio's attempt ("struggling insanely") to gain superficial fame before finding true power in the "behind the scenes" position, the paradox is that the character, in moving *towards* the margins, creates in them a seat of power. "I worked my way *up* to obscurity," Tio reveals, and

that this kind of inversion can be a move of empowerment and even cultural celebration is part of the logic of the novel.

Ellison's novel makes a similar movement towards empowerment. After all, "It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen," his narrator admits early on (3). It is, likewise, the idea bell hooks puts forth in her essay "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," when she claims to be "located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance" (23). hooks, in fact, poses it as an invitation: "Marginality is the space of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators" (22). But if Ellison's character undergoes a sequential series of encounters in a search for identity, they are most often the kind hooks doesn't favor: where identity is thrust upon him. Roles in academia, industry, and even social activism are opportunities others seek to mold the Invisible Man into their templates, impose behavior, ignore or deny his own emotional and psychological sense of self. What is intriguing about the manner in which Tio answers hooks' invitation when he enters the "behind the scenes" space is the mechanism he uses: one that puts us in mind of a "received" element of the Houston place-experience that has appeared in other works, especially Barthelme's. *The Aztec Love God* is not a horizontal joining of unlike things as in a collage, but more a vertical stacking as we've seen in Barthelme's story "Hiding Man," Tio proceeding "not unwillingly" to adopt a series of different personae. This—the fluidity of identity, all contained in one entity—can be considered the main thematic engine driving the novel, and evidence of the book's strong ties to the fluid identity of the Bayou City.

In fact, in the novel's high school setting, the narrator is not known as "Tiofilio Duarte" at all, but has forged the name "Antonio Marquez" on his self-written admission papers. As he

explains the choice, it is "'Antonio'—ethnic and sophisticated, 'Tony' when I'm being casual. And 'Marquez' as in Spanish for 'marquis,' French for 'royalty,' and it sounds like 'sign' in English." (18). It is, indeed, in the more generalized sense of "sign" that Tio moves most commonly through the story, more a stand in or symbolic referent than an individual. His fluidity is established partly by straightforward acts of language and labeling in this book that constantly showcases the power of words. He is variously either "Tio" or "Junior" at home; "Rosendo" as a kind of joke when he's seen as being under the thumb of Rosie—a name identifying him as an unsophisticated, "just up from across the border" yokel, (102); "Arterio Gonzaga" when attempting to convince a Basilian brother he is mentally unfit (63); "Lorenzo Casanova" on his oft-employed forged ID (106), and "Ramon Cervantes" as he's trying to pass as the "headliner from Houston" (81). He is also, as near as can be determined, "Sam Kent"—an Anglo persona working to establish a special month set aside for white people, in one of the novel's discontinuous digression chapters (53), each of which could itself be seen as an alteration of personae. This donning of masks is Tio's purposeful method for inhabiting the margins of invisibility, and investing these with power. On the rare occasions the labeling is taken from his hands, Tio still retains control, as when he is appropriated by his Anglo comedy club manager, "Jester," as an ethnic act, and learns suddenly when he's introduced onstage that his name is now "Juan Valdez, Jr." Quickly, he changes *this* name *again* as his act begins—this time to "José."

> You don't recognize me, but my dad was the first Hispanic on American TV. You know-—Juan Valdez, the dude who picked the coffee beans. Not many people know he was Ward Cleaver's love child. My life's been a Mexican version of "Leave it to Beaver." "Leave it to Burro," it should be called, starring me, José Valdez, as The Burro. (78)

The chapter entitled "Fake ID's: A Manual for Young Men" serves as the thematic glue for the narrative, as the true test in *Love God* of identity comes from changing it. The chapter opines that "for some reason only twenty-one-year olds are supposed to pass in and out" of certain places (85), a fact that seems as mystifying and arbitrary to the novel as the presence of a border along the Rio Grande that allows some to pass while others are barred. The answer, in either case, is simple-—new papers, and in this "Manual," the fake ID process is understood to be practical yet profound: "Think of the new you," the chapter advises. "[Y]our fantasy career, the new place you were born, your real parents, get a feel for your new name. . . . You can baptize yourself with any name you want. Write letters to yourself using your new name. Save'm so you'll remember who you are. Get to know yourself a little better" (88-89).

We have seen already, for example, how—Tio-like—Diaz's adopted city itself resists a single mono-labeling, witnessed in sociology professor Jan Lin's listing of the variety of self-identity slogans adopted by the metropolis, with "magnolia city, freeway city, mobile city, high-tech city, space city, speculator city, strip city, oiltown, cowboy city, and 'shining buckle of the Sunbelt'" serving as only a sampling (632). It is therefore possible to see Houston as a model for highlighting identity, power and authority through language. Tio is "Tiofilio," "Antonio," "Junior," "Rosendo," "Arterio," "Lorenzo," "Ramon," "Juan," "José" and "Sam." While on the one hand, this aligns with observations from literary critics such as Juan Alonzo that "hybridization of identity is nothing new for Chicano/as since *mestizaje* goes to the core of their existence" (2)[7], students of the place-experience of Houston and its literature nonetheless are put in mind of Barthelme's aforementioned "Hiding Man," and of Burligame's nemesis, "Bane"—a name encompassing only one in a series of roles such as "Agent of the conspiracy," "Talent scout for Police Informers School," and "Market research for makers of *Attack of the Puppet*

People" (28), as well as "Adrian Hipkiss," "Bane-Hipkiss," "Watford, Watkins, Watley, Watlow, Watson, Watt" (30). In *Love God* we have entered Brian McHale's "vertical collage," that "internal dialogism" where "two or more discourse-worlds coexist within the same segment" (170)—the segment in this case being the character Tiofilio Duarte. This is an author grown comfortable with such a "role-exchange" model for identity by soaking in the rhetorical atmosphere of a place dead set against policies that force property into single categories rather than multiple potentials, an atmosphere Diaz states as being especially obvious when compared with the city where he came of age. "Everything is zoned and in lockdown in Chicago," says Diaz. "You can't have a hair salon in your own house. Now I get my hair cut in somebody's house." Because he is an "outsider," able to see Houston via the perspective of another, very different city, he is more easily able to identify the seams and margins in his current home.

The Aztec Love God does not take a superficial approach to this kind of fluid identity and persona morphing, and demonstrates in several instances the downside of such high stakes, vertical stacking. Tio realizes that in some instances "creating an all new personality was not only cowardly, but could also be a sign of psychosis, what with me creating a new name, a new person for a specific task, not just letting the person develop" (130). It is as academic alter-ego "Antonio Marquez" that Tio most profoundly tastes the lonely void of non-valorization Limón and Gilb identify in the minds of Anglo-Texans. Midway through the novel, it appears that the school authorities figure out "Antonio" has problems with his "papers" in the chapter entitled "The Death of Antonio Marquez." "In homeroom the next morning," Tio says with alarm, "Mr. Bavilsic skipped from 'Manning' to 'Nazarine' during roll without pausing to confirm my existence" (56). When he raises his hand to report this he goes unnoticed for the entire class period. A "brown El Camino" is parked in his assigned spot, a teacher omits giving him

demerits when he walks in late, and no one returns his greetings in the hallways. "In and of themselves no one 'incident' was a big deal," he admits. "But all these incidents piled together seemed very strange" (56). Ultimately, a Basilian brother takes pity and arranges for him to finish his degree, but in an iconic moment that underscores the isolation of his marginalization, Tio pushes into a gymnasium full of freshmen participating in intramurals.

> "I'm here today!" I shouted at their noise. "Look at me," I shouted and waved my arms, "I'm here. I am Antonio Marquez. Look at me. I'm here." And there weren't any cheers. Some of them looked at me, but in the din of feet shuffling, their mumbling, only a small immediate circle of kids playing ball in front of me could hear, would look at me long enough to maybe miss a shot.
>
> "I am Antonio Marquez. I am here today." And no one cheered. There wasn't a stampede of soldiers running to stand up with me. "Marquez, Marquez," I yelled. And even the tug at my arm was much lighter than I hoped it would be. Much lighter than I'd imagined. A weak pull, really, is all it took. (61)

Although "pulled" from obscurity in this instance, Tio doesn't cease in his efforts to craft the invisible margins into "behind the scenes" places of power, although recognizing that even an "unregulated" space that makes doing so possible doesn't mean that it's easy or that success is assured. The scene can be read as recognition of the high stakes risks, fears and alienation of the undocumented, but, in fact, Latinos in Houston do not have to be undocumented to be marginalized. In these deep, received means, the novel reflects the way in which the city where it was written is still a place that—like Mr. Bavilsic, taking roll—has difficulty "pausing to confirm the existence" of its now largest demographic

The Aztec Love God, though slender, deals in a humorous manner with a number of other thematic strains. In some ways the cultural clash—what Ramon Saldívar labels the "stance of resistance" (17)—between Mexican American culture and that of the dominant Anglo society is elided, moved onto the show business stage, not only to the performances in comedy clubs but to entertainment media in general. If we can present that a category-defying city might produce a category-defying aesthetic for an author like Donald Barthelme, it is unsurprising to see the same in Diaz, as when rather than identifying his fellow henchmen in a school organization that sells exam papers to a ready audience, Tio records their dialogue with the "on screen" warning that "they appear in silhouette with their voices disguised" (23)—another parallel of Barthelme's "Hiding Man" and its use of screenplay syntax and jargon. Tio's absorption of American media is itself described as a transgression across a somber, liminal, border zone—a dangerous experience of "betweeness": "There in the dark, alone, the TV projecting on my wall, I slip between sleep and waking, not sure when one ends and the other begins, mixing in my head the frequencies of the dreams and the subconscious of the TV. Killing time between performances" (44). His big debut night as a client of Jester's is likewise couched in terms of popular TV culture: "It should not have been a big deal. But it was. It wasn't 'The Tonight Show,' but it was tonight. It wasn't 'Late Night.' But it was late, for a school night" (45-46).

Ransacking his father's house for money, he encounters a document written—in capital letters—by his grandmother, detailing the way that land in California had been taken from the Duarte family by unscrupulous film studio executives, one of whom—unnamed—turned out to be his grandfather. Tio—a character unable to remain in a single category—is both a victim of Anglo injustice, and the descendent of a powerful filmmaking Anglo who may well have passed down the role-playing skills he evinces throughout the text. His grandmother, in her letter,

opines that "MY FATHER DID NOT UNDERSTAND BECAUSE OUR FAMILY HAD NEVER LEFT MEXICO BECAUSE MEXICO HAD LEFT OUR FAMILY IT WAS UP TO MEXICO TO COME BACK TO US HE SAID BECAUSE WE HAD NEVER LEFT THE LAND" (140). Returning home to find that his father in a panic, thinking the letter has been stolen, Tio reassures him in an overdetermined closing statement that refers to the letter, the family history, and even the traditions, struggles of, and injustices against Chicanos in North America, simultaneously. "No, Dad. We have not been robbed" (156).

In some ways this echoes conclusions drawn by other Latino authors with whom Diaz claims both influence and kinship. At the end of José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* (1959), considered by many the first Mexican American novel to take up the conflict of a group caught between two cultures, Richard, son of parents born in Mexico, joins the Navy, turning his back both on his revolutionary father, the Catholic Church, and the enticements of white society. The implication is that rather than mediate between two cultures, he will strike out on his individual path, a portrait of the artist as a young man similar in attitude to Tio Duarte: one who asks "*But what about me?* (Villarreal 187). Or, as Ramon Saldívar puts it, "Richard will freely accept the derogatory term *pocho* and transform it into a sign of his ambiguous status as a child of two cultures—Mexican and American—yet claimed by neither" (61). Tomás Rivera's . . . *y no se lo trago la tierra* ends on a similar note of individuality and hope when the un-named protagonist overhears neighbors saying "He must be losing his mind. He's losing track of the years."

> Smiling, he walked down the chuckhole-ridden street leading to his house. He immediately felt happy because, as he thought over what the woman had said, he realized that in reality he hadn't lost anything. He had made a discovery. To discover and rediscover and piece things together. This to this, that to that, all

> with all. That was it. That was everything. He was thrilled. When he got home he went straight to the tree that was in the yard. He climbed it. He saw a palm tree on the horizon. He imagined someone perched on top, gazing across at him. He even raised one arm and waved it back and forth so that the other could see that he knew he was there. (*Complete Works* 220)

"This to this, that to that," Rivera's protagonist, Villarreal's Richard and Diaz's Tio will set off to construct creative lives (and, in Tio's case, even appear under the spotlights at "The Tonight Show"). The difference is that Tio is aimed towards making his way "behind the scenes," and doing so by refusing to settle into a single identity, scattershotting the world, rather, with a fluid combination of personae. If he were to climb a tree at the end of *Love God*, he would no doubt see a dozen boys hanging from the distant palm. Tio's words to his father, "We have not been robbed," resemble Rivera's "he hadn't lost anything." Diaz himself takes a political approach to his novel's final words: "It's aimed at that idiot Octavio Paz with his ideas about the 'rape of culture' or that old view that Mexican-Americans are neither Mexican enough or American enough. In fact, we are ourselves."

It's also possible that Diaz, and Tio Duarte, have adopted a view similar to Houston's reckoning of the past and tradition as concepts fit mainly for the wrecking ball. What matters is now, and the future. We recall Philip Lopate's estimation that "[t]his is not a city that wears its past on its sleeve. . . . it is an amnesiac city, one that keeps forgetting its intriguing antecedents in a headlong rush to embrace the shock of the new" (in Theis 232). To be "robbed" even of his grandmother's story and his own past means little to the "behind the scenes man." But most importantly, just as Limón argues that Américo Paredes' life has paralleled that of the hero of a border *corrido*, Diaz's life recalls the aesthetic structure of *The Aztec Love God* in the way he has

employed the tool of the persona in his career and community activism. He appeared for several years as coterminous with "The Aztec Love God" himself—the on-stage comedic role portrayed by Tiofilio Duarte—even dressing the part per this 1998 description: "a dark suit and tie or his trademark collarless button-down shirt. Stray spikes of gel-stiffened, longish black hair fall artfully across the smooth moon of his face. . . . Like a sultry Latin film starlet, he sports a mole above the right corner of his mouth" (Dewan). Diaz also appeared for several years on the weekly radio version of *Nuestra Palabra* as "Tony the Machine,"—a gruff-voiced character with an exaggerated Chicago accent, described as a "200 Pound Mexican with an MFA and a Black Belt in Taekwondo." Like "Bane-Hopkiss" in Barthelme's story, or Tio Duarte in his own novel, or simply like the young Chicagoan who realized, upon moving to Houston in 1993, he'd found a place where "it seemed I could do anything," Tony Diaz, public intellectual, evinces the influence of the possibility of multiple, vertical identities that we have associated with the city's *genius loci*. By 2012, he was prepared to step into another incarnation—this one *very* concerned with the past, history, and cultural heritage—and brought to life by a change in Arizona Law.

To be clear, the Librotraficante caravan did nothing illegal by transporting books across state lines, even after Arizona House Bill 2281, nor were any books literally "banned" from the state, although the Tucson school district officials did classify seven titles as "not approved for instruction." [8] These did not include either book featured in the video, *House on Mango Street* or Dagoberto Gilb's *Woodcuts of Women*, the latter of which appears on camera wrapped in cellophane, apparently to protect it in its river crossing. That the video warns how Arizona will be receiving a "lethal dose" of Gilb's book, touches upon the metaphorical comparison between "books" and "drugs." That these books are *dangerous* is part of the glamorous appeal to Diaz's audience, and parallels a sentiment Edberg finds in the warning lyrics of narcotraficantes to drug

users in *corridos,* such as: "If you can't bullfight, then stay out of the ring" (56). But it is the aforementioned "wet-book" designation that more profoundly involves the border milieu of drug smuggling by actual narcotraficantes, with the enterprise. Edberg finds the narcotraficante persona "a packed, polysemic symbol" even in his commonly encountered form as an actual border criminal (112). These lawbreakers—like the unzoned properties of Houston that can be both homes and hair salons—are capable of containing multiple meanings. Money generated by the drug trade, Edberg points out, sometimes finds its way into community infrastructure in places where the traffickers are considered "'big men,' providing wealth and jobs to the community" (Edberg 75). Beyond this and the questionable moral aspects of the trade, when it comes to the simple economics of drugs, Edberg finds an inversion at the border, where the movement of contraband reverses what some scholars see as

> the loss of value that occurs when people migrating across the border from Mexico to the United States become categorized as "illegal aliens," as people without rights, under the stratifying discourse of immigration, which operates at the point of the border. However, when *commodities* are smuggled across the border, they *gain* value because of their legally imposed scarcity, and the smuggling also boosts the value and prestige of those who make it happen, the traffickers. Thus the act of smuggling could be viewed as a kind of commodified, symbolic retribution for the loss in value that is associated with *people* who are migrants or peasants. (106 emphases in original)

For Diaz, that the "retribution" against the Arizona legislature is taking place because of the "legally imposed scarcity" caused by eliminating programs is especially appropriate. Note also the language of "commodity" and "gained value" in the next term he introduces to his video

audience (pointing with his hand even more horizontally sideways): "Dime-book." These "paperbacks that used to be worth only ten dollars, but are now invaluable thanks to your fascist laws" follow exactly the logic of drugs crossing the border that gain in street value because of their illegality, as well as the logic of *laissez faire* economics common to the Bayou City: the species of capitalism that inspired former mayor Louie Welch to claim that "[t]he free market place has functioned in Houston like no other place in America" (in Vojnovic 590). While we have seen especially Barthelme and Moshiri critique this aspect of the place-experience that is Houston, Texas, Diaz might be said to have absorbed it and converted it *linguistically*—as "new words in the lexicon" rather than new products (or drugs) on the streets—transforming this "contraband" into gained value for Latinos across the southwest. Diaz also recognizes that in places outside of Houston, this turn of linguistic value might not have worked. "Because of the baggage of the actual narcotraficantes," he notes, "a librotraficante would not have been accepted as a label, let's say, south of the border." Only in Houston could he have utilized the business climate to, in a parodic fashion, combat the devaluation and "invisibility" of Latinos in Texas (and, by extension, Arizona) by referencing drug smugglers, underscoring again how Diaz's Houston is both inside and outside of the "border zone."

This conflation of the contraband with the commercial and the linguistic is further evidenced in the work Diaz read during Sandra Cisneros' writing project, the Macondo Workshop, in 2015. It repeats the smuggling/reading, drugs/books conceit, but highlights the language element with a twist on "coining a phrase."

> When Arizona banned Mexican American Studies, we became kingpins of mind altering prose smuggling wetbooks across the Arizona border.
>
> And I coined a phrase: *somos Librotraficantes*.

How do I make my coin? I coined a phrase: *somos Librotraficantes*.

For Diaz, Cisneros' workshop, named for the setting of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* is an institutionalized opportunity not quite institutionalized enough to restrict freedom. After an application process, writers are invited who fulfil Macondo's mission, which for Cisneros is to support those "who view their work and talents as part of a larger task of community-building and non-violent social change" (in Call). Carmen Rivera in *Border Crossings and Beyond: The Life and Works of Sandra Cisneros* (2009) devotes several pages to the ongoing project, describing it as a meeting of writers "from different parts of the United States [who] gather for one week of creative productivity, cultural exchange, and social commitment" (90). Although begun in San Antonio, Cisneros found that she needed to move the yearly gathering to various cities. "I realized the community that I want and need, it's not in any city," she says. "I have to create it. And so I have with Macondo. When people come together for a week each summer to discuss their writing, to take it seriously, that's my homeland" (in Carmen Rivera 91). Since 2012 it has been a border transgressing institution as well, held that year in Oaxaca City, Mexico (Call).

For Tony Diaz, fond of creating phrases and neologisms in addition to "librotraficante," [9] Cisneros' Macondo Workshop is a perfect example of what he calls a "cultural hub":

> Compare it in San Antonio with the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. Guadalupe has great programs, workshops, festivals, but also a full time staff and brick and mortar facilities that cover two blocks on South Brazos. That's why it's a *center.* Like the situation in Chicago, things there are locked down compared with the Macondo Workshop, which is moving, fluid, a *hub*.

Though employing his own terminology, Diaz's distinction recalls that of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) concerning the "simple opposition between the smooth and the striated" when it comes to space (530). Although not so simple to apply in practice, Brian Massumi, in his translator's forward to Deleuze and Guattari's work, describes the concept succinctly:

> State space is "striated," or gridded. Movement in it is confined as by gravity to a horizontal plane, and limited by the order of that plane to preset paths between fixed and identifiable points. Nomad space is "smooth," or open-ended. One can rise up at any point and move to any other. Its mode of distribution is the *nomos*: arraying oneself in an open space (hold the street), as opposed to the *logos* of entrenching oneself in a closed space (hold the fort). (xiii)

In Diaz's world, a "center" like Guadalupe Cultural Arts is "locked down," restricted by its brick and mortar edifices ("hold the fort"), similar to Chicago with its organized unions and block captains, whereas a "hub," like the Macondo Workshop, is moveable, resembling Houston with its freeways, feeder roads and anti-zoning attitude (hold the street)—moveable like a travelling caravan of border transgressing book smugglers. Though not making a value judgment, for Diaz the distinction between the two models is clear—and a hub paradoxically easier to defend than a center. "House Bill 2281 proves that. I think of *Nuestra Palabra* and the Librotraficante movement as hubs," says Diaz, "that legislatures can't take away. In fact, I think of Houston as a hub, too."

In January of 2013, the Librotraficante movement was given the Robert B. Down Intellectual Freedom Award at the Midwinter Meeting in Seattle of the American Library Association (Morehart 14). House Bill 2281 has been the subject of several lawsuits, but as

these were being adjudicated, the Librotraficantes uncovered a threat closer to home. In 2013, apparently taking the Arizona law as an inspiration, conservative Texas State Senator Dan Patrick (presently the state's Lieutenant Governor) submitted, only days before its filing deadline in Austin, Senate Bill 1128. Although somewhat innocuously requiring Texas college students to take general surveys of U.S. and Texas history in order to graduate, as reported by Roque Planas at the *Huffington Post*, the effect of the proposal would have been to shift undergraduate history courses away from thematic topics of race, gender and class, and back towards "more traditional scholarly interests, like intellectual and military history." The Librotraficante movement showed up in the state capital to protest. "This is a warning to all far right legislators in any State of the Union," said Diaz. "[I]f you attack our History, our Culture, or our books we will defy you. And we will win" (Planas). As the highly unpopular measure died in committee without reaching a vote, the Librotraficantes claimed victory. "The Librotraficantes stopped policy in Texas," as Diaz puts it.

The 2012 caravan of book smugglers to Arizona was repeated again in 2017 as suits began to come to conclusion. Diaz was present in Tucson when U.S. circuit court judge A. Wallace Tashima prepared a verdict. "I told one of my colleagues that I was nervous, that I couldn't believe it had taken five years of hard work to confront this law. He reminded me that *Brown vs. Board of Education* took fourteen years."

Judge Tashima found for students and parents who alleged their 14th amendment rights had been violated when the Tucson Unified School District eliminated its Mexican American studies program. In August 2017 he ruled that "plaintiffs have proven their First Amendment claim because both enactment and enforcement were motivated by racial animus," and ordered both sides submit remedy briefs (Strauss). The Librotraficante, from "right here in Houston,

Texas," had indeed "thrown the book" at Arizona, although the decision occurred the same day that President Donald Trump, at a rally in Phoenix, hinted he would pardon the Maricopa County, Arizona, sheriff, Joe Arpaio, for ignoring court orders against detaining people "because he merely suspected them of being undocumented immigrants" (Strauss).

Endnotes - Chapter V

[1] Biographical information on Tony Diaz has been collected from several sources, most of which contain similar information, each of which is cited when quoted. Especially helpful from the era of *The Aztec Love God*'s publication is the 1998 *Houston Press* profile by Shaila Dewan, "Meet the Aztec Love God." Recent updates include *Houston Style's* 2017 article by Jo-Carolyn Goode, "Tony Diaz: Father of the Librotraficante Movement," and his own statements on his many web sites and social media sites, the most central being <tony.diaz.net>. Un-cited quotes from Diaz throughout the chapter stem from December 8, and December 26, 2017 interviews with the author. This chapter draws extensively on Tony Diaz's comments from those interviews.

[2] Valerie Strauss traces the bill's origins to a 2006 protest at Tucson High School that Tom Horne, Arizona superintendent of public instruction, found "rude." ("Arizona's ban on Mexican American Studies").

[3] The history of *Nuestra Palabra* is recounted many times in websites and social media sites associated with the organization. One of the more comprehensive overviews is by Diaz and appeared on the Huffington Post's website in May of 2014 in the article "*Nuestra Palabra*: Latino Writers Having Their Say."

[4] Edberg describes Fuentes as "near mythical" on the border—travelling at will and, perhaps, faking his own death, now living a life of ease away from the dangers of drug trafficking (84).

[5] According to Diaz, the crowing is not an added effect. "When I finished the take, my neighbor's rooster let one out, like on cue."

[6] Journalist Shaila Dewan's label for the character.

[7] Gloria Anzaldúa speaks to this hybridity when she points out the difficulties for Latino/as to differentiate between "*lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto" (82)*—the legitimately inherited,

as opposed to that which is taken up or acquired by choice, then taking into account as well that which is imposed from the outside, as by a dominant culture.

[8] The titles are somewhat obscure textbooks but inclusion of *Message to Aztlan* (2001), collected essays, poems and plays by activist Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, was seen by critics as an alarming choice. See Acosta, "Librotraficante Takes Back the Book" (16).

[9] He is fond of calling himself a "cultural accelerator," considers his brand of "multifaceted cultural unity" to be "Quantum Demographics," and—another nod to economics—describes many of his artistic endeavors as the creation of "cultural capitol."

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CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION:

SPACE CITY

> I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways . . . but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past.
>
> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (10).

In Act One of Michael Frayn's Tony winning stage play, *Copenhagen* (1998), in a long, apparently posthumous conversation between Danish physicist Niels Bohr and his erstwhile German disciple Werner Heisenberg, the two recall a trip they'd taken before the war. (Heisenberg, we come to understand—if we are otherwise unfamiliar with the history of atomic weapons development—had been part of the Nazi bomb project; Bohr had spent time at Los Alamos.) "We went to Elsinore," says Heisenberg. "I often think about what you said there. . . . the whole appearance of Elsinore, you said, was changed by our knowing that Hamlet had lived there. Every dark corner there reminds us of the darkness inside the human soul" (30-31). The darkness of the soul is an appropriate theme for this conversation, though the factual basis for it ever taking place is slim. Still, Frayn's point is interesting for our purposes. The experience of the visitor to Elsinore is shaped in a particular way because—simply put—someone wrote about it. The text using the place for a setting has, in this case, existed for over 400 years, accrued a great deal of thematic weight and meaning (much of it attached to tragedy and darkness) gaining

global recognition besides, but Frayn's dramatization reminds us that while places have effects upon writers and texts, the relationship is reciprocal. This is in accord with Bertrand Westphal's views. "I will never get tired of repeating," says the theorist in 2011's *Geocriticism*, "that fiction does not reproduce the real, but actualizes new virtualities that had remained unformulated, and that then go on to *interact* with the real according to the hypertextual logic of interfaces. . . fiction detects possibilities buried in the folds of the real. . . ." (171 emphasis in original). Eric Prieto puts this more succinctly when he states that central to the conception of geocriticism "is the conviction that literature not only *represents* the world around us, but participates actively in the production of that world" ("Geocriticism Meets"). His approach, then, "is not about representation as a passive or imitative depiction of such places, judged in terms of accuracy and conformity to the original, but about representation as a creative, performative act, part of the process that brings places into being *as* places" (*Literature, Geography* 11). Save extreme examples such as the setting for the Prince of Denmark's family problems and ultimate demise,[1] it's difficult to find examples of this relationship, although something akin to it has occurred during the course of this study and my examination of the four authors: Donald Barthelme, Rick Bass, Farnoosh Moshiri, and Tony Diaz. It is difficult, even reading over the manuscript now, to know for certain when I was seeing the place, Houston, Texas, through the words of these authors' works, and when I was reading the works through the lens of the place. An example of the latter that comes to mind is my discovery of multiple "third-wheel" characters in the fiction of Rick Bass, occurring not only in his Houston stories, but throughout his body of work. This is an aspect I do not believe I would have noticed had I not been considering how Houstonians often express consternation at being "not the center of things," as well as the city's physical distance from the "cultural centers" of the "American South," "Southwest," and "Greater

Mexico." Unlike some featured in this study, there is a respectable body of criticism on Mr. Bass's fiction and non-fiction, yet I can find no mention of this trend in his writing. "Place" has, thus, opened a window on Rick Bass's *oeuvre* that I doubt I would have otherwise found. For an example of the former—text influencing experience of place—I can only say that as a native Houstonian, I have never paid the least attention to "feeder roads." I would claim that this is true even to the point, shockingly, that it never occurred to me that other large urban areas don't have them. It was only in considering the collage-like juxtapositions of Donald Barthelme, and seeking "real world" parallels in the city that might might serve as a homology for such a technique—just as the rows of cypress trees in Tuscany served as an "overcode" for perspective drawing—that led me to a realization of their presence, never mind, as Eric Slotboom argues, their "prevalence in Houston" that is "unequalled by any other city" (93). Whether this is caused by a reciprocal relationship of the kind Westphal and Prieto claim or if it should more accurately be considered a tool for usefully complicating readers' understanding of both texts and places, I'm unsure. Westphal does claim "[o]ne of the major tasks of geocriticism is to make the observer consider what he looks at or reproduces in all its complexity. In other words, the space must cease to appear obvious" (*Geocriticism* 139). During the course of this study, Houston, Texas has, for this writer, done just that.

I am also now able to take a less than obvious approach to other works about Houston. Interestingly, the summer of 2016—when I was deep into my investigations—featured a spike in the publication of such texts. Three novels appeared that were set in the city: enough to make *Texas Monthly* reporter Mimi Swartz consider there was "room for hope" that "the vibrancy and diversity of life" in the Bayou city was drawing attention, "especially given the richness of the potential subject matter." These were Melissa Ginsburg's *Sunset City* (2016), Georgina Puig's *A*

Wife of Noble Character (2016), and *The After Party* (2016) by Anton DiSclafani. All lean towards "direct" notation of Houston sights, streets, and historical landmarks, with *Sunset City* featuring especially spots in the Montrose area (The House of Pies, The Alabama Ice House), *A Wife of Noble Character* tending more towards filling in readers on recent history (background of the Azalea Trail) or the biographies of local celebrities ("She remembered that an oil heiress by the unfortunate name of Ima Hogg had donated this land to the city" (28)), while *The After Party* is a heavily researched novel set in mid-twentieth century Houston featuring the golden era of oil money, the wealth of River Oaks, and especially the conspicuous consumption of Glenn McCarthy at his Shamrock Hotel—inspiration for the Jett Rink character in Edna Ferber's *Giant* (1952).

All three works contain place influences that have been seen already in this study. Perhaps one of the most obvious is that *virtually none of the books feature major Chicano/a characters of any kind. Sunset City* has an un-named Latino police officer, some lawn workers, and a few kids making noise in a laundromat where the protagonist is waiting—none given names. *A Wife of Noble Character* relegates all Hispanics to the serving role, some treated like acquired property. ("'I adore her,' Sissy said. 'You know, she was working at the gas station in town, at that dirty front desk behind the glass, by all the lotto tickets and crap, and I just said, 'You are way too adorable to be working here'"(72).) *The After Party* is something of an exception, with the presence of Ciela, "the product of her father's affair with a beautiful Mexican girl he'd met while working in the oil refineries down in Tampico" (16). Able due to her father's new wealth to hold her own in the novel's upper crust River Oaks setting, Ciela has money, status, and agency, and even fewer obstacles to success than the relatively privileged Tio Duarte in *The Aztec Love God*. Certainly she is not "born into a world of absence and loss, seeking to

discover [her] identity, to inscribe [her] name on the text of history" as Ramón Saldívar describes the protagonist of Tomás Rivera's. . . *y no se lo trago la tierra,* (77). She seeks cocktails at the Cork Club, a lucrative marriage, and to inscribe her name on the membership roster of the Junior League. While I would like to think that the absence of such a large demographic in these novels would have been noticeable to me even before reading José Limón's *American Encounters* and following Tio's adventures "behind the scenes," after this study the persistence of such near-erasure in works published in 2016 is startling.

Arriving at a point where the character of a city, or a summer's trio of popular novels, "cease to appear obvious" is a worthy goal, but not the final one of the geocritical method, nor is the multifocalic gathering of a variety of texts connected with a certain place an end in itself. "By taking a geocritical perspective," says Westphal, "we opt for a plural point of view, which is located at the crossroads of distinct representations. In this way, we contribute to the process of determining a common space, born from and touching upon different points of view. Also we come closer to the essential identity of the referenced space" (*Geocriticism* 114). If we accept the belief that there are essential characteristics of specific places—something strongly akin to the *genius loci* or "spirit of place" that is nearly universally felt yet likewise universally difficult to pin down, Westphal considers that this method can begin to hone in on it by examining the "intersecting points of view" (129). While various possibilities exist for determining where the place, Houston, Texas, "meets at the crossroads" of the works of Barthelme, Bass, Moshiri and Diaz, I would like here to concentrate mainly on one, then present other possible questions to explore in the future. I'll conclude by touching upon a real-world consequence of a Houston characteristic that has appeared in every text examined. For the main "intersection of diverse views" under discussion, what has come home to me most strongly is that the characters in these

works share a relationship with place that strongly shapes identity, and, as it turns out, it is a particular aspect of identity-formation which most often comes into play.

This aspect is obvious even in the three novels from the Summer of 2016, each picking up on this homology or overcode of Houston. The heroine of *A Wife of Noble Character,* Vivienne Cally, is thirty, from an important Houston family, but, owing to the death and bankruptcy of her parents, finds herself without means of support, especially for the high class crowd she runs with. Vivienne is, as Mimi Schwartz puts it, "trying, almost against her will, to find a husband among the rich she grew up with." If this plot sounds familiar, think *The House of Mirth* moved to modern-day Houston.[2] Compare this "Bayou City Lily Bart" to Charlotte Ford, a twenty-something barista with no traceable ambition or goals, the narrator of *Sunset City*, who enters the foreign universe of Houston's underground drug, prostitution and porn worlds, seeking answers to the murder of her best friend; and, finally, Jean Fortier, the compelling central personality of *The After Party* who, Florence Green-like, opines "I want to go where the ideas are. . . . New York, Chicago, somewhere big, somewhere else, and not for the clothes, for the world" (42). The resonant role throughout is the same: the outsider—although it is perhaps better to think in terms of "dis-placed" characters of various kinds dealing with aspects of "outsiderness." In these works, like those of Barthelme, Bass, Moshiri, and Diaz, characters struggle with the circle part of the circle and the cross, this study's graphically expressed definition of place. They wish either to *escape*--breach the permeable wall and achieve self-actualization—or, contrary-wise, *enter* the enclosure to gain a sense of belonging, or even to reach through the barrier, manipulate the "inside" from the "outside." Outsiderness" is a common theme in fiction of all kinds from all places, but Houston offers both compelling opportunities and compelling limitations when it comes to wrestling with this condition, and its

presence in each text offers up "intersecting points of view" on a single area that reveals different takes on the place associated with each work; that is to say, looking at "outsiderness" offers one opportunity to locate the different "Houstons" offered by these works, allowing for a plural overview of the city's *genius loci*.

For Westphal, borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a *territory* is a place that would like to be homogeneous, and as such could be transgressed. A "deterritorialized" space, however, is heterogeneous, in flux, in motion, lacking explicit and stable limits: a condition under which transgression is difficult to truly remark, as the fluidity of the situation nearly always offers some kind of release or escape (*Geocriticism* 52). This is exactly the space created in Barthelme's stories. Read via the lens of Houston, characters encounter a place of such fluidity that it delivers freedom, choices, power and possibility of individual action. That action often, at least in *Welcome Back Dr. Caligari*, turns out to be the act of escape. Barthelme's Houston is the city of the escape artist.

Joachim Achilles labels the alternative that "stands in the center of Barthelme's writing" to be between ordering, authoritarian force and arbitrary, unruled chaos, an observation that reminds us how escape requires not merely a means to effect a getaway, but also something to escape from. The place presented in the writings of Barthelme, certainly compared with the other three authors, offers up the most intense servings of authoritarianism and liberation, a mixture which seems a prerequisite for the author's form of escape. ("How can you be alienated," asks Peterson in "Shower of Gold," "without first having been connected?" (183).) The intensity of market forces in "Me and Miss Mandible" that imprison the adult Joseph back in Middle School for the mere act of losing the Great Northern Insurance Company more money than it preferred is countered by his ability to transgress the system—in that particular story via a

carnal line crossing with his teacher. Florence Green, desirous of escaping the depressing surroundings of her "huge horizontal old multibathroom home on Indiana Boulevard" (14), her longing to be "*somewhere where everything is different*" (15), can be accommodated just by a trip to a nearby, ubiquitous "feeder road": one of the arcade-like "linear cities" composed of *completely different* commercial enterprises, set cheek by jowl along the freeway. Baskerville, in the same story, gets away from the birthday party in classic Houston fashion: climbing into his car to drive "in idiot circles" (16)—tracing out the "loop" of the system which spreads throughout the city. If Joseph flees the authority of the education system and Baskerville the oppression of a dreary dinner party, I.A.L. Burligame short-circuits the multi-persona pursuit of the authority of the Catholic Church with a freely applied hypodermic to the neck of Bane-Hipkiss (37), and Peterson takes control of the message by commandeering the cameras of the manipulative media set on determining his identity in a program that's called "Who Am I?"—a question it doesn't allow contestants to answer. "Don't be reconciled," Peterson says to the masses. "Turn off your television sets . . . cash in your life insurance, indulge in mindless optimism" (183).

The notion of escape brings to mind both the biographical fact that *Caligari* is written during a period of transition—Barthelme's escape, if you will, from Houston to New York City where he would remain until returning to head the University of Houston Creative Writing Department in 1980—as well well as Wayne Stengel's judgment of the author's goal to "reshape his reader's conceptions of those formalized lies known as literary conventions and to offer literary techniques and devices that are more mimetic approximations of reality" (39). These are works that escape not only the authoritarian rules (lies) of conventions, but even—as we've seen—those of grammar.

I would posit that many of the "received" aspects of place in Houston such as the juxtapositions formed by freeway culture, fluidity of categories due to zoning, a "timelessness" resulting from constant bulldozing of the past, and concern over the will of the indomitable market—taken together, the general sense best captured by architect Peter Rowe, in his Forward to *Ephemeral City* (2003), of an "ever-present and unvarnished capacity for destabilization and shape-shifting that makes Houston unique" (vii)—are all found in some form in the Barthelme canon, and are also all common to the other three authors. Each takes a different approach to the instability, however, and encounters different opportunities and limitations within this unique space. There is, of course, overlap of viewpoint, as well. The self-actualizing Eddie Odom in Bass's "Juggernaut," a hybrid figure who is both a geometry teacher and semi-professional hockey player named "Larry Loop," could be considered an escape artist in the Barthelme mold: a figure who adopts new roles and refuses to be bound by convention, partaking of that freedom found in "the only town in the country that was zoned and ordinanced properly, so that a man could do what he wanted, as he wanted" (106). The trio of young people in "Pagans" who are able to turn industrial waste and environmental toxins to their own advantage similarly make use of the region's freedoms, at least those recorded as present in the past when "[s]oft seams of possibility," still existed, "places where no boundaries had been claimed. . . . Places of richness and health, even in the midst of heart-rotting, gut-eating poisons" (14). But Bass's work is also marked by another relation to the circle—isolation from "insidership" and the desire to cure that by passing over the membrane and evincing re-entry. Even in "Pagans," Richard (Rick?) ends up a "third wheel" or peripheral character in the relationship with the object of the two boys' affections, Annie. (In the end, both are estranged from her.) In spite of its opportunities, Bass's Houston is a City at the margins, never quite taken seriously or placed at the center: a space for

wallflowers. (Which leaves such statements as Odem's concerning the "only town in the country" where things are done right sounding like vaunted pride used to counteract low self-esteem, a common theoretical explanation of the more diffusely regional "Texas Pride.") The narrator of "Redfish" moves to *take the place* he desires, the role inside the home of his friend, by pretending to be that friend on the phone. ("Tricia," [he] said, disguising [his] voice, mumbling. 'This is Kirby. I love you.'" (190).) Here he slips into a persona, not as a way of breaking into his own true identity as might be argued for Larry Loop, but as a disguise for "breaking in" to someone else's identity. Bass's characters are, hence, "overcoded" with the cultural and geographical peripherality of Houston in relation to the "centers" of culture, industry, and commerce such as New York or Los Angeles. Bass, who "goes West" in a kind of re-creation (before it's too late) of the frontier adventure, paradoxically has works filled with characters who seek stable homes and identities, desirous of coming in from the margins, and—at times—even assuming the established roles of others. Such inhabitants of the "margin" are found often throughout his *oeuvre*, and the concept is mediated in the narrative strategy of "Swamp Boy" when a narrator speaking *of* the title character in some mysterious way *becomes* that character by the story's conclusion. If Barthelme is a "pioneer" whose characters escape convention for the world of self-actualization, Bass's characters react to the "destabilization and shape-shifting" of Houston with the desire to become "settlers." They find Houston at the margins a difficult place to belong.

Yet, Farnoosh Moshiri demonstrates how the same "unhomely" aspects of the city do make for the possibility of joining if one accepts that, in Houston, we are "*all* refugees, in a way." The city, largely unregulated, providing opportunities for fluidity, can definitely be seen as displacing or alienating large groups of people, in addition to those who enter the city with the

expressed desire to treat it only as a "way-station"—a place to make a mark and move on. We are reminded of Sigfried Kracauer's question: "What would be the meaning of a passage in a society which is itself no more than a passage?" (in Friedberg 76). *Against Gravity,* however, calls to mind J.P. Riquelme's consideration of Homi Bhabha's take on location and home: "[t]he misrecognition of our homeless situation casts it as a predicament or problem that can be solved rather than as a situation both defining us and enabling a particular kind of freedom" (546). The novel serves to turn Peterson's question in "Shower of Gold" on its head: "How can you be connected without first having been alienated?" In *Against Gravity,* the Iranian exile, Roya, successfully partners with what Alexa Ura and Jolie McCullough of the *Texas Tribune* would label one of the "migrants of the domestic variety" so common to Houston, Ric Cardinal. Moshiri's Houston is—paradoxically enough—the City of Community, another example of Charles C. Adams' admonition that "place-experiences . . . present innumerable shades of differentiation depending on what one is doing in a place" (186). Just as the authoritarian, laissez-faire economy of Houston becomes an impetus for "escape" in Donald Barthelme, the oft expressed failure, for Roya, of finding in Houston qualities that she could experience as *being in the world* ("was this garage apartment in the heart of Houston, Texas, my home?" (172)) becomes the very occasion for homebuilding. This "unhomely" community is dramatized in each of the three main characters. Roya and her daughter Tala are from Iran; Madison from Austin; Ric from Cincinnati—these three "refugees" in the city (or at least "Newstonians") taking up the preponderance of the book's action, plot, and characterization. Madison can be considered a transient in not only the city but the world. Because of the AIDS virus, he travels as a passenger on the poem he incessantly recites, D.H. Lawrence's "Ship of Death." Roya, the exile from political oppression in Iran, burdened with the responsibilities of parenthood, and

even Ric, who wonders how he has ended up "in a city as strange as planet Mars" (210), are equally travelers meeting at a "way-station," a status for Houston further emphasized by the foregrounded presence of organizations such as the "People's Aid Society" and the book's over-arching feature of having so few native Houstonian characters, even in marginal roles. Yet Ric and Roya find one another, begin a life, and at the novel's conclusion there are hopeful signs for the artistic production of Roya's daughter, Tala. *Against Gravity* subtly delivers this "way station" aspect of the city without labeling it—aside from Ric's "refugee" remark which is inclusive of *all*. Just as "Juggernaut" overlaps with Barthelme's model of "outsiderness," the Madison character seems Moshiri's comment upon those who wish to remain outsiders, or those who wish to place themselves at the center of things, but only for egotistical reasons, and by force. Madison refuses the help of the community by abandoning his medical advisor, Dr. Haas, and sets out, not to join with, but *own* a helpmate: "She was here to save me," he believes about Roya, "to stay with me during the last years of my life and console me" (30)—and, worse, "she was a human being and I could buy her, the way thousands of women were bought and sold every day" (46). In Madison, Moshiri points out that the individualistic path of the escape artist can be grim rather than liberating, even in a town with enough fluidity to make successful getaway a possibility.

Houston is a place where the circle may be escaped, longed for, pierced and, in the case of Tony Diaz, even *reached through*—the heart of the city manipulated from behind the curtain by the "behind the scenes" man. *The Aztec Love God*, in the spirit of Riquelme and Bhabha, understands the marginalized position of Latinos in society not as a problem to be solved, but rather a "particular kind of freedom." With this author we inhabit not a city in the margins, as with Bass, but rather a City *of* the Margins. Tio Duarte utilizes personae not so much as

disguises, but as a tools for manipulating space to his advantage, and, taking a page from bell hooks, exercising the use of the margins as a "space of resistance" (22). The role of the "the outsider" is just as malleable as any other in the book's milieu of aliases, forged papers and fake IDs, where "destabilization and shape-shifting" can be applied to the self as well as to one's surroundings, or at least to the presentation of that self. The freedom awarded to the outsider in Houston is likewise embodied in this study's single "non-literary" character, the "Librotraficante," where unsavory aspects most commonly associated with crime, violence, addiction and death are turned instead towards cultural preservation and literacy. Houston—part of yet also distant from the national line at the Rio Grande river that Diaz invokes in the creation of this persona—has enough border peripherality to make the parody acceptable, yet enough border centrality that the parody is still understood. By Diaz's own estimation, a Librotraficante couldn't have come into being anyplace but Houston.

A comparison of "outsiderness" in the four works, where the concept coincides and where it conflicts between the authors, is one example of how the multifocalic method can inform place. It leaves us with an impression of a variable and permissive location, capable of supporting those who seek escape from restriction, those who pine for a home amid chaos, those who join in community to turn a drawback into an opportunity, and even polysemic, behind the scenes manipulators who use what might in other contexts be unsavory characteristics in a space that, rather, lends flavor and excitement to their enterprise. Whether or not "the outsider" as expressed by authors associated with other places—other cities—faces an easier or more difficult time could certainly be a fruitful area of further study. Also, because of the nature of the geocritical idea, when it comes to capturing the complexity of a specific place, other authors, more Houston texts, could no doubt be added to this study. A difficulty of navigating the

methodology of multifocalism has been to include as many and as many varied writers as possible, without falling into a trap of then assuming "here we have the Latino view of Houston," or "this is what women think about the Bayou City." By concentrating on the individual viewpoints I hope to have avoided such a snare, but cannot be totally sure I've succeeded. In addition, the authors are mostly male. The effect of gender on representations of the city has not been emphasized in this study, and there is a great deal of room to do so. Including, for example, of the work of African American mystery writer and television producer Attica Locke might lend balance to views of Houston both multifocally and stratigraphically. Her novel *Black Water Rising* (2009) could be a textual candidate: a critically acclaimed legal thriller set in Houston in the 1980's. Locke, now living in Los Angeles, is a native Houstonian, which calls to mind that in this study I have concentrated on persons whom I could argue *were* Houstonians—whether they so self-identified or not, and, in fact, whether or not the city even appeared in direct fashion in their works. I did so in an attempt to establish a logical relation between the texts and the place under examination. This is not the only possible approach. Edna Ferber's portrait of Glenn McCarthy in *Giant* and even works like *The After Party* by Anton DiSclafani, a non-native whose version of the oil rich metropolis comes from family relations and a great deal of research, remind that there are versions of the city created by those who have, perhaps, little direct familiarity with it. If those setting up the underpinnings of geocriticism see value in studying representations of Atlantis, then representations of Houston "from afar" seem fair game, and of interest to those who wonder how aspects of the city can themselves "escape" and form impressions.

Finally this study in its present form was completed around the Fall of 2017, as nature intruded on the city of Houston, Texas, in a way that is not completely uncommon, yet for the

"Air Conditioning Capital of the World" was a reminder that the great outdoors does exist, and perhaps a sound reason for those interested in place and literature to heed the point made by Eric Prieto that, because geocriticism, especially as it has come to literary critics through Bertrand Westphal, depends for its foundational study of place so much on texts, it should be remembered that

> there is one surprising thing that Westphal has left out of his account: the role of direct experience in shaping our understanding of the spaces and places we inhabit. At no time does Westphal consider the role that direct observation and field work might contribute to the geocritical enterprise, even if only as one point of reference among others. ("Geocriticism Meets")

For Prieto—and the title of his 2011 online article for *épistémocritique*, "Geocriticism Meets Ecocriticism: Bertrand Westphal and Environmental Thinking," foregrounds this idea—this lack of direct experience or "field work" is a drawback, and the reason that "the ecologically oriented epistemology promoted by ecocriticism, which emphasizes the place of man within nature, may be able to offer an important complement to Westphal's theory." Few living in the Houston area on Memorial day of 2015, Tax Day of 2016, or during Hurricane Harvey's stalled sojourn over the city in late August of 2017 have had to search far to ponder the place of man within nature. Even global warming skeptics among Houston's regional leadership have begun to ponder the effects of climate change, or, as Harris County Judge Ed Emmet puts it: "Three 500-year floods in three years means either we're free and clear for the next 1,500 years, or something has seriously changed" (Kimmelman). In fact, the Judge severely underestimates, as Houston's regional flood control district meteorologist Jeff Lindner has labeled floods from Hurricane Harvey the

results of a 40,000-year rainfall (Zaveri). With damage to more than 136,000 homes and trouble still looming at time of writing on the city's west side where two large reservoirs risk failure, discussions of the world's weather patterns were joined to another factor in the view of writers like Christopher Flavelle and David Wethe in *Bloomberg Politics:* "Harvey's floods exposed the clash between two visions: Business leaders say the sprawling, economically vibrant metropolis shouldn't change its hands-off approach to planning. Environmentalists and disaster experts warn that Houston is courting a repeat catastrophe." "The next storm could be still more destructive," Flavelle and Wethe add, "[b]ut protection means rules, and rules go against Houston's ethos."

While this is a literary study and not a venue to examine either climatological change or the funding that would be necessary to head off future catastrophic events in the Houston region, a geocritical examination of this place is still an opportunity to remind readers of the value of literature when it comes to approaching the complexity of place. When Joseph misreads the intentions of the Great Northern Insurance Company and is punished by having his life derailed as he is sent back to middle school, or when Madison dehumanizes Roya's life in comparison with his own desires (and decides "she was a human being and I could buy her"), or Larry Loop appreciates the way in which the "Houston ethos" is arranged "so that a man could do what he wanted, as he wanted," or when El Librotraficante accepts the logic of how the scarcity of a banned item, even a book, can be understood by his audience to create an increase in value in the same manner as an illegal commodity—in other words, when the works of Barthelme, Bass, Moshiri and Diaz meet at the crossroads, a message they share is that behind their fictions lurks the deluge.

Endnotes - Chapter VI

[1] An interesting thought experiment is to imagine, just as the play affected the place, had the two physicists later gone together to see a production of *Hamlet*, would the memory of Elsinore in some way have affected their experience of Shakespeare's play? Would they see a play different from the one they'd have witnessed had they not taken their walking tour?

[2] Not to worry: the conclusion of *A Wife of Noble Character* changes "death by chloryl hydrate overdose" to "married to promising young architect."

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