

Editor's Introduction

When the Allen brothers bought the land that would become Houston in 1836, they saw its obvious political and economic potential, connected by land to the rest of the Republic and by the Gulf to other economies. In attempting to sell the land, though, they perhaps stretched the truth, proclaiming in an advertisement that the area was "handsome and beautifully elevated, salubrious and well watered."

From its founding, Houston has been a city with its identity in flux: land and port, “well watered” and swampy. Today, we see arguments over the identity of our city in the juxtaposition of rodeos and world-class museums, sprawling suburbs and bustling city-centers, and neighborhoods of vast wealth and abject poverty. The identity struggle isn’t just theoretical or ideological, though--it’s marked onto the maps, streets, and



neighborhoods. We see it when we drive from Montrose to the University of Houston, when we travel west down Bellaire until the street signs appear in both Mandarin and English, and when we go beyond the outer loop to the cookie cutter homes and manicured lawns of middle-American suburbia.

Robert Beauregard wrote that a city "is not a speaking subject. Rather, it is the object of our discourse." But Houston is more than a silent subject--it is an example of a city that can, to quote Linda Flower, provide us with a "source of meanings,

motivations, and identities.” Our connections to specific neighborhoods in Houston has an enormous impact on our identities and our perspectives on everything from politics to football teams to light-rail construction. Houston teaches us that *place* is a loaded term, serving to describe both a location and the ideological and discursive principles written onto that location and the people who live there.

Place is an important term in both literary studies, where the location of author and narrative have undeniable influences on a text, and in composition studies, where we create entire courses devoted to the study of a place and the people and language practices in that place. It is because of our interest in the term and our connection to Houston that we chose

to focus our second issue of *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature* on the topic of *place*, from the metaphorical to the discursive to the material. In this issue, writers consider the way that physical *place* and metaphorical *space* impact literary texts, language practices, and classroom relationships. Those essays that begin with a treatment of *place* as a literal, material term are found under the heading "Place," while those that place more focus on the metaphorical or ideological issues are found under "Space."

On behalf of the *Plaza* editorial board, I want to thank Najyah Hafezz, who provided our cover art; Tasneem Mandviwala, who contributed photographs from Cairo and Mumbai; and especially UH faculty member Dr. Nathan Shepley, who has given us guidance and encouragement in this issue.

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