

THE LOOP



COMMON FIELD CONVENING. HOUSTON, TX + ONLINE. MMXX

LETTERS FROM THE CO-EDITORS

We wish to recognize the indigenous land and peoples that Houston is built upon:

Akokisa, Sana, Atakapa, Karankawa, and to any others we, the editors, are unaware of.

Originally, this publication was meant to provide more viewpoints and ideas of Houston since the Common Field Convening 2020 was to be held mainly in the Midtown area. As such, the contributors and their works give insights to H-Town that Convening participants would not have had a chance to see or the time to get to know. You'll see works exploring many facets of Space City, some even about neighborhoods within neighborhoods.

The contributors included are artists, writers, organizers, performers, Houston-born, transplants, emerging, and established; the pieces range from experimental poems to formal essays, personal to observant. To best represent Houston, the contributors are diverse, comprising different marginalized gender identities, ethnicities, races, and backgrounds.

However, this publication in no way comes close to capturing all the voices and identities in Houston. For this reason, we implore that publications such as these are supported and continued in centering marginalized voices to build upon conversations and discussions that make this city, this nation, this world a more just reality.

Reyes Ramirez



Reyes and I are both proud Houstonians born and raised in Bayou City. We commissioned pieces for this publication to showcase the pulsing electricity of creativity, history, culture, community, and innovation coursing throughout Houston neighborhoods, which subconsciously or consciously inspire and inform our art community everyday. This publication is a labor of love. A tribute to our city. Reyes, the contributors, and I all have deep connections to Houston. My connections extend beyond the bounds of this publication:

1. My cousin, Magnificent (also known as Magno), was a rapper for SwishaHouse, located in Northside, and recorded a mixtape with legendary Houston rapper, Mike Jones. Paul Wall even shouted out Magnificent in the famous Houston anthem, "Still Tippin'": "Mike Jones, he runnin' the game and Magnificent 'bout his cash..."

2. My grandfather helped build I-45 in the mid 1960s while living in East Texas; in 1969, he moved my family to Houston.

These are two of the many anecdotes and personal histories we, the editors and contributors, have with Houston. We hope you feel these roots and essence of Houston while reading this publication. Even though you may not be here physically, we hope you experience the trill energy of H-Town.

Megan Sparks



THE LOOP:

This publication was commissioned by Common Field for the 2020 Common Field Houston Convening. The Loop was organized by Houston partners Reyes Ramirez and Megan Sparks (The Resistance Healing Clinic).

Support for Common Field and the Convening, including projects like this one, come from our supporters.

Generous lead support for the Common Field 2020 Houston Convening has been provided by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Additional significant support has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. This project is also funded in part by the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance and Stardust Fund.

COMMON
FIELD



The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts



haa

FUNDED IN PART BY THE
CITY OF HOUSTON
THROUGH HOUSTON ARTS ALLIANCE



STARDUST
Arts

THE LOOP refers to Interstate 610, a 38-mile-long loop that marks the border between the City of Houston and Greater Houston. An important distinction for Houstonians, the neighborhoods inside and outside the loop are referred to as the Inner Loop and Outer Loop, respectively. This publication's title, *The Loop*, refers to the complex identities of Houston's various neighborhoods. Houston is touted as the "most diverse city in America;" instead of simply telling this fact, *The Loop* shows our diverse and multicultural artist community through our contributors' voices.

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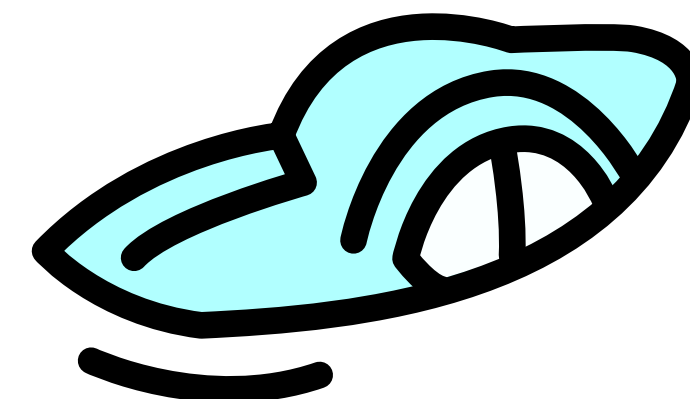
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Cover by Sebastian Gomez de la Torre



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ÁNGEL LARTIGUE

Researcher and artist born and raised in the Northside of Houston, Texas, Ángel's work explores the relationship between the body and land through the use of organic matter as raw material. This concentration has led them to experimenting with processes of decomposition into artworks, incorporating fungi, insects, and even odors captured during fieldwork.

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REYES RAMIREZ | CO-EDITOR

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MEGAN SPARKS | CO-EDITOR

Megan Sparks is an interdisciplinary social practice artist, poet, and art writer. She is the founder of The Resistance Healing Clinic (RHC), a series of public programs examining self and community care survival tactics through the lens of anti-capitalism, history, and critical theory. Her art writing has been featured on *Arts and Culture Texas* and *Not That But This*. She has also been a participant in performances held at Aurora Picture Show, Project Row Houses, and Art League Houston.

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NICK VAUGHAN & JAKE MARGOLIN

Nick Vaughan & Jake Margolin are Houston-based interdisciplinary artists whose work connects LGBTQ histories from each state to contemporary local queer communities. Since moving to Houston in 2014, they have collaborated extensively with members of the city's queer community and have made several series of work focused on Houston's historically queer enclave, The Montrose.

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STALINA VILLARREAL

Stalina Emmanuelle Villarreal lives as a rhyming-slogan creative activist. She is a Generation 1.5 poet (mexicanx and Xicanx), a translator, a sonic-improv collaborator, and an instructor of English.

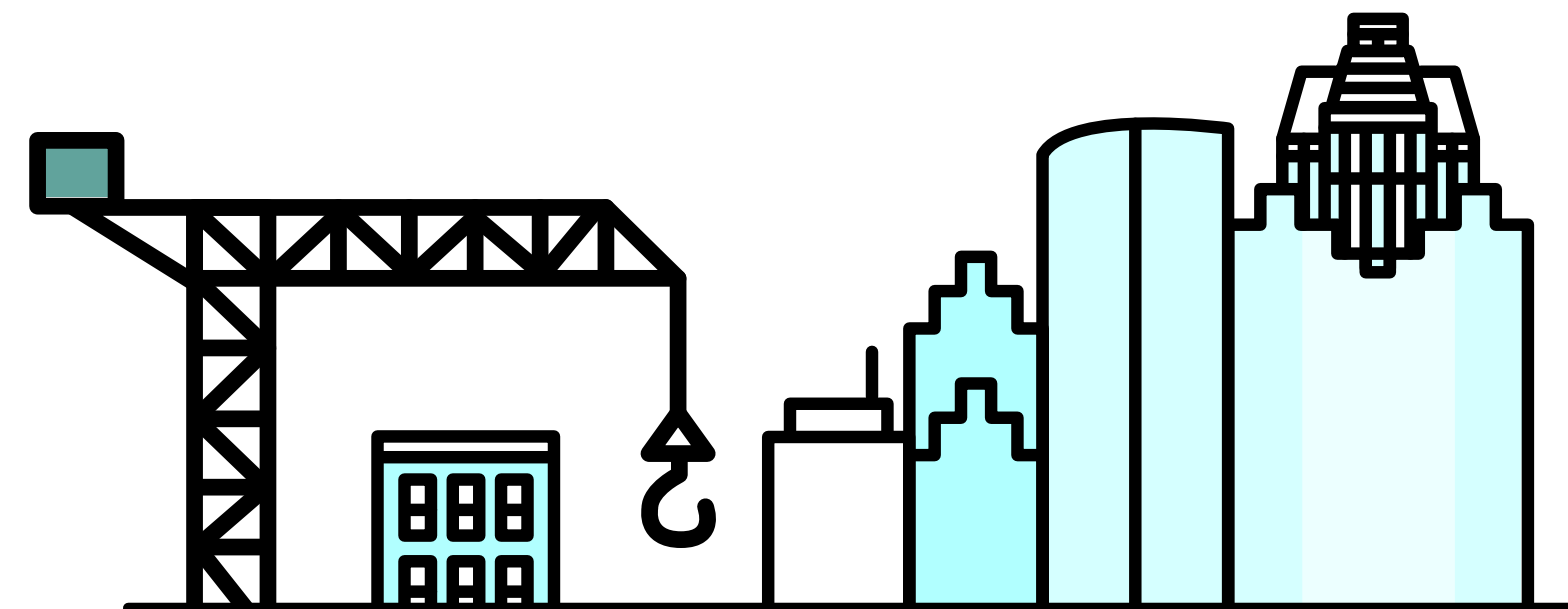
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SEBASTIAN GOMEZ DE LA TORRE | LAYOUT DESIGN

Sebastian is an illustrator and designer living in Montrose. He has done this and that among other things.

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INSIDE. OUTSIDE.

Dear Houston,

You break my fucking heart.
My heart aches for how much I love you
For how much I miss the old you
For how much you are changing
For how I have no idea what your future entails.

I'm so sorry I took so long to love you...

(I was blind)

I love you're an unassuming urban sprawl beauty
You're ugly beautiful
You aren't gorgeous and sparkling
You are gritty grimey
Hard to look at

But, that's what makes you breathtaking
You're not trying to prove anything
You don't dress up in fancy clothes
Wash the dirt away
Put on makeup

You let yourself be someone
You let the people see the beauty in you
Without begging

You are strong
You are tough
You are strange
You are soft
You are full of contradictions

Houston,
you are a mishmash, rule breaking, unconventional city,
I wouldn't have it any other way.

Houston is 665 square miles. Houston is bigger than Rhode Island, Delaware, Connecticut, New Jersey, New Hampshire, and Vermont. You can drive over an hour and still be inside Houston city limits. This creates a dichotomy.

Inside. Outside.

If you are inside the 610 loop, a literal ring of a freeway, you are a part of the art world: The Menil; Museum of Fine Arts Houston; Contemporary Art Museum Houston; Houston's world class restaurant and bar scene. After NYC, Houston has the most theater seats of any city in the country. Downtown Houston holds the opera, ballet and the symphony. Every arts non-profit participating as a partner in the 2020 Common Field Convening is nestled inside the loop. H-Town is a small town inside the loop, which I've called home for seven years: The East End and Rice Military. Five hundred thousand Houstonians in a giant sea of 2.3 million. We've created our own ecosystem.

If you live outside 610, you live inside or beyond Beltway 8, another ring. This is Greater Houston. This is where most Houstonians grow up. In the suburbs and random neighborhoods meshed between and alongside a sea of strip malls. Houston has no zoning laws. Anything you want to build can go anywhere. A single street can have a school, dog park, sex shop, a warehouse, bar and a corner store. It makes no sense. But it works. An art space is the one unacceptable thing to build.

I grew up in various neighborhoods outside the loop: Alief; Greenspoint; and The Woodlands, one of the richest suburbs in America. I hated Houston until I started to visit inside the loop, realizing H-Town was rich with hidden gems. I did not know I could be an artist, art writer or art administrator until I came inside. Houston is the most diverse city in America, but the majority of POC do not have easy access to the art scene. Blame the urban sprawl. Blame the lack of public transportation. Blame the segregation of neighborhoods. I did not step foot inside an art museum until I was 19. This is not an uncommon experience. Houston is brimming with culture, but only a select few get to experience the richness. And yet as a city, we keep sprawling and growing with no plan of unity.

Currently, Houston is vying to become a glossy "desirable" city. I drive down familiar streets and, like Solange sang, "cranes [are] in the sky" building luxury apartments. Every artist feels the seismic shift. The gentrification boogeyman destroying the Houston we know. These changes create another boogeyman as well: environmental consequences. The Bayou City is a swamp covered by concrete. Every new construction is a reminder of the impending doom of a second Harvey but more catastrophic. Artists clammer to live (stay) inside the loop despite the rising rents, gentrification, developers using the arts as reputation laundering, etc., etc. Where will we all go? What does the future hold for the art community if we are priced out or under water?

Houston is a wild west city. This translates into our artists' determination. Artists here are not waiting for institutional approval and will convert an old warehouse or use their apartments to create an art space to call their own within a blink of an eye. FLATS. Civic TV. El Rincon Social. Box 13. The list is endless. The Houston grit and no-fucks-given spirit, which convinced oil tycoons to build a city on a swamp in 1837, still pulses through the veins of our art community. The future of Houston is unknown, but our artists are Houston strong, innovative, daring, and community-oriented. Clutch City always finds a way to move forward, rebuild, and reinvent itself; our artists do this daily. We are more than prepared for the future of our city and art community. We are Houston.

ALIEF is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Houston and home to immigrants from China, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Japan, Laos, Indonesia, and more. Many street signs in Alief are written in English, Chinese and several other Asian languages.

6 DAGGERS

6 DAGGERS (FEATURING PERFORMANCE BY FARRAH FANG) | 'CLUB INTERVENTION' AT THE DIVE BAR IN DOWNTOWN HOUSTON, TX. IXTLI PYRAMID STRUCTURE MADE OUT OF CHICKEN WIRE & FORMALDEHYDE COW EYES, A QUEEN BEE & SIX 3-D FABRICATED DAGGERS



I. A caged pyramid with four face panels composed of cow eyeballs and images of trans victims of violence is pulled through the venue. Inside, a trans woman dances while wearing a necklace capsule containing a live queen bee. Eventually, a crowd begins to destroy the cage cocoon with daggers, piercing through the eyes and images, releasing their souls and the vulnerable trans woman into the space. Just like when a new queen bee gets introduced to a colony, if not accepted, her own community kills her. The trans woman devours the live queen bee that she holds in her capsule necklace. She is dragged out of the venue.



II. A live (dying) honeybee queen is transported into the nightclub within a capsule necklace worn by trans performer Farrah Fang. Imitating the process when a new queen bee is introduced to a colony, the worker bees surround her upon entry, touching and smelling her. This scene is recreated during the performance. The nightclub crowd inspects the caged trans woman, eventually forcing her out of the cage by tearing the panels. Once released, the trans performer consumes the queen bee.



III. The souls of trans bodies are trapped within the gory images produced by the media, depicting trans bodies as solely "victims of violence." These photographs were taken from online sources, printed and used to construct a face panel of the caged pyramid made out of chicken wire. During the performance, a group of spectators begin to destroy, rip and stab the photo panel with daggers - releasing and freeing the souls upon piercing their faces. Formaldehyde cow eyes cover the face panels of the moving pyramid, constructing an architecture made out of flesh. Originally, the eyes were for scientific dissection purposes. Instead, they are used in a parallel ritual manner of being pierced by daggers.

Images by Brenda Edith Franco. Special thanks to Farrah Fang, Leopoldo Germán Beltrán Rolón, Juan Aaron Castillo, Moe Penders, Slant Rhyme, Stnbak Lou, Vidal & Nathan Kennard

Built as the foundation for Houston by the Allen brothers and formerly the capital of the Republic of Texas, the land for **DOWNTOWN** Houston was cleared and drained by a team of Mexican prisoners and Black slaves.

UNTITLED: WE FIRST MET RAY HILL ...

This is a piece about The Montrose, made by a couple of transplants to Houston who knew nothing about the city's queer history when they moved here six years ago. It was made in 2020 with typewriter, compass, and colored pencil, based on an interview conducted in 2014. If you'd like, print it out and hold it in your hand and turn it upside down and get real close to it so you can read it.

Artists: Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin

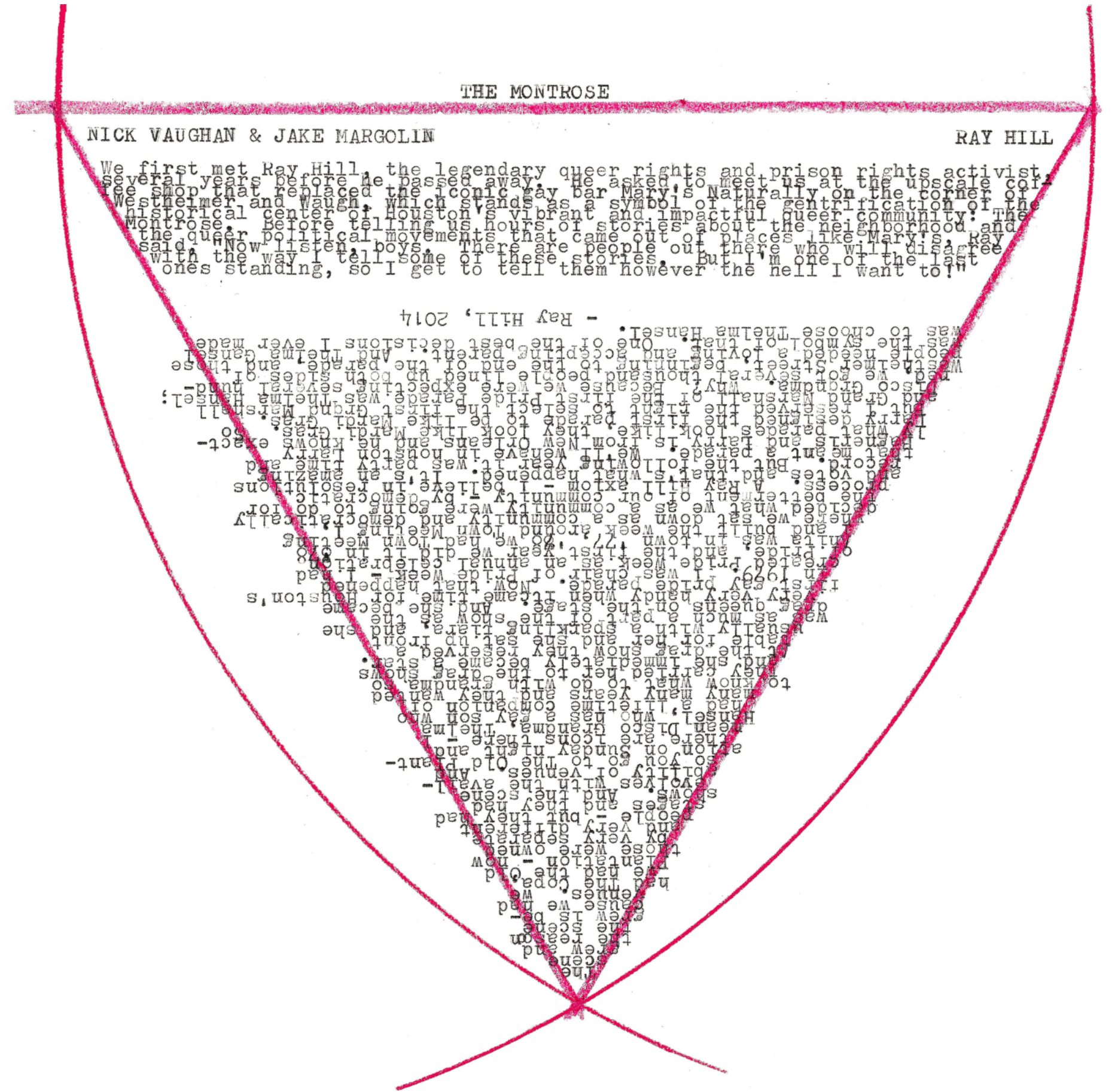
Title: UNTITLED: "We first met Ray Hill, the legendary queer rights and prison rights activist, several years before he passed away. He asked to meet us at the upscale coffee shop that replaced the iconic gay bar Mary's Naturally on the corner of Westheimer and Waugh, which stands as a symbol of the gentrification of the historical center of Houston's vibrant and impactful queer community: The Montrose. Before telling us hours of stories about the neighborhood and the queer political movements that came out of spaces like Mary's, Ray said, "Now listen, boys. There are people out there who will disagree with the way I tell some of these stories. But I'm one of the last ones standing, so I get to tell them however the hell I want to!"

Year: 2020

Medium: Typewriter ink and colored pencil on paper

"The scene grew and the reason the scene grew is because we had venues. We had The Copa, we had The Old Plantation – now those were owned by very separate and very different people – but they had stages and they had shows. And the scene evolves with the availability of venues. And so you go to The Old Plantation on Sunday night and there are icons there – I mean Disco Grandma, Thelma Hansel, who has a gay son who had a lifetime companion of many many years and they wanted to know what to do with grandma so they carried her to the drag shows and she immediately became a star. At the drag show they reserved a table for her and she sat up front usually with a sparkling tiara, and she was as much a part of the show as the drag queens on the stage. And that became very very handy when it came time for Houston's first gay pride parade. Now that happened in 1979. I was chair of Pride Week – I had created Pride Week as an annual celebration of Pride, and the first year we did it in '78 - Anita was in town '77, '78 we had Town Meeting I and built the week around Town Meeting I, where we sat down as a community and democratically decided what we as a community were going to do for the betterment of our community – by a democratic process. A Ray Hill axiom – I believe in resolutions and votes and that's what happened. It's an amazing record. But the following year it was party time and that meant a parade. Well we have in Houston Larry Bagneris and Larry is from New Orleans and he knows exactly what parades look like, they look like Mardi Gras. So Larry designed the first parade to be like Mardi Gras. But I reserved the right to select the first Grand Marshall and the Grand Marshall of the first Pride Parade was Thelma Hansel; Disco Grandma. Why? Because we were expecting several hundred, we got several thousand people lined up on both sides of Westheimer Street, beginning to the end of the parade, and those people needed a loving and accepting parent. And Thelma Hansel was the symbol of that. One of the best decisions I ever made was to choose Thelma Hansel.

- Ray Hill, 2014"



MONTROSE, fondly referred to as the "Gayborhood," was once the epicenter of the LGBTQ+ communities in Houston. During the AIDS epidemic, The Montrose Clinic founded in 1978—now known as Legacy Community Health—was the only health facility treating HIV/AIDS patients in Houston.

THE BENEFITS OF BEING OFF-BROADWAY

Houston is not visible on the world stage in terms of art. Despite our status as one of the largest cities in the United States and the truly massive amount of wealth that resides in Houston, our art market and therefore our international art clout, is disproportionately small. We do not host an art fair on the scale of the Armory or Art Basel. We don't have a Gagosian, Pace, or Zwirner. It is rare that any of the shows in Houston get a write-up in a national publication, and our local publications are few and far between. We yearn for the recognition and money that comes with being a major player in the art world. We know the value of our artists and institutions and want everyone else to know it as well.

Despite this longing, we benefit immensely from our own anonymity. Houston has an intimacy that should be celebrated, but by its very nature cannot be recognized nationally. The DIY atmosphere of the arts in Houston goes hand in hand with the experimentation, trust, and intimacy we deeply value.

The lack of international and national attention contributes to the kind of artist shown in Houston. Our irksome provinciality, however limiting it may be to our reputation, allows us the freedom to focus on local artists. Houston institutions know that press attention is unlikely, regardless of the artist. Station Museum presented *Solutions*, a solo exhibition of Los Angeles based performance artist Cassils in 2019. They are an artist who has garnered major press attention at other museums in the country and internationally for their daring and important performance work that focuses on minoritized populations, especially LGBTQIA+ people. *Solutions* gathered together the documentation and ephemera of their importance performances from the last decade, including a 200-gallon tank of crowd-sourced urine, a two-ton bronze sculpture they had pushed through the streets of Omaha, and a new performance collaboration with Rafa Esparza, Keijaun Thomas, and Fanaa that premiered at the opening of the exhibition. They were shocked by how little attention publications paid to their first big solo show. The Houston art scene cannot rely on or expect press attention, which has granted us the blessing and curse of invisibility. When you are able to dance like no one is watching, you can boogie unfettered. You can liberate a jig choreographed for and by you. No one will clap, but you loved it and it still gets on your resume. The experimentation and locality that permeates our art scene has and will continue to develop our unique identity and allow us to collectively tell a story of an incredible city with incredible talent. We aren't the Houston art scene if we focus primarily on artists and stories that the global art world has vetted and not the ones Houstonians need to see.

When people walk into the museum where I work and ask for suggestions of other art spaces to visit, I am proud that the recommendations I am able to offer are spots where you are likely to encounter work by Houston artists and that are designed to cater to Houstonians. We may be desperate to see our name in print, but our institutions are free and generally responsive to the feedback of their communities. Project Row Houses, DiverseWorks, Aurora Picture Show, Art League Houston, Lawndale, Station Museum of Contemporary Art, and MECA are just some of the arts organizations in Houston that have dedicated themselves in varying ways to local artists.

Apart from individually helping artists and developing the arts community in Houston, our organizations, with a few notable exceptions, are deeply collaborative. Administrators, curators, and artists working for local art spaces and in the scene know each other. If we don't know someone, we know of them. This type of intimacy builds bonds of trust as well as working networks. One of the most successful art shows of 2019 was *There is Enough for Everyone*, curated by Houston artists Michael Stevenson and J. Bilhan. It was a group show of 25 artists in a DIY space in Knockout Factory, a boxing gym important to the 2nd Ward community located on Navigation Boulevard. It was not sponsored by a larger arts organization. *There is Enough for Everyone* was well attended and lauded by critics, artists, and the general public. The power of Stevenson and Bilhan's vision for a show that would highlight the realities of scarcity in Black and Brown communities plus the incredible talent they pulled together were the only ingredients necessary for a landmark exhibition. The strength of Houston's art scene is evident in the success of that event because it was driven by the curator and artists' reputations as coworkers and creators, not by institutional sanction.

Without question, Houston's art scene has work to do. We, like every arts community, have serious reflection to do on who we are excluding and how our institutions impact urban issues like the criminalization of homelessness and gentrification. I feel strongly, though, that our intimacy is what sets us apart. Houstonians in the art world are brought together by their work but also by our strong interpersonal ties. The allure of international recognition and institutional reputation do not color our work in the way that they do in cities with a higher profile. Our foundations are set in a highly localized and personal understanding that we uplift and are uplifted by our community.

The Camp Logan Mutiny occurred in **RISE MILITARY** in 1917 and was an uprising of 156 soldiers from the Third Battalion of the all-Black Twenty-fourth United States Infantry Regiment. Members of the Houston Police Department harassed members of the local Black community during Jim Crow-era Houston, causing the riot which took place over a single night and resulting in the deaths of 11 civilians, five policemen, and four soldiers.

TWO POEMS

AUTHOR'S NOTE: From my perspective as a Latinx artist, Box 13 is largely a gentrifying space, but it has had its gems of Houston Latinx artists whom I consider to be my homies. One of the artists had an exhibit there, and that's Stephanie Saint Sanchez (www.lachicanalaundrypictures.com), who for many years lived by Gulfgate until Harvey displaced her. The second will focus on Violette Bule (www.violettebule.com), who currently has a studio at Box 13. The following are ekphrastic poems for each of these artists.

FLOODED MEMORIA

Stephanie Saint Sanchez's
Tip Drop: Time Machine—Before the After
 a vintage
 1974 zenith
 television rayada
 la pantalla with image
 de la casa, also known
 as Penwood Studios starred
 "A MILLION YEARS AGO AND
 YESTERDAY" written on
 the screen, as time has lapsed

since Hurricane Harvey, a soundscape
 patchwork of songs, sounds, and words
 from a ghost channel in the barrio:

"time to change
 you've got to rearrange
 what you gonna do?
 I can't breathe!
 I can't breathe!
 Whoa, whoa!
 Our house,
 family
 know
 a time,
 take a chance
 and face the wind
 Harvey
 same people . . . come back"

displaced but present in what has passed
 in the past, leading to a ruptured future.

"HISPANO" SOAP

Esto no es oro sculpture,
 soap steps lead to a wall,

ivory to ochre shades,
 stacked body size but
 stand as architecture,

with potential to be handheld,
 but in an art space untouchable,
 each soap branded "HISPANO."

Violette Bule critica al
 neoliberalismo y capitalismo,
 lack of gold, but a product

of consumerism, españolparlante
 in a country where *Hispanic*,
 coined by the Nixon administration.

El derecho a self-determination,
 inmigrantes and citizens co-live
 pero el privilegio divide a

the Latinx population, y el jabón
 de la exposición no limpia.

Located within Second Ward, **MAGNOLIA PARK**, built in 1890, was named after the nearly 4,000 magnolia trees planted there; the neighborhood later became known as "Little Mexico" due to the high concentration of Mexican/Mexican American Houstonians.

BEING STUCK IN HOUSTON'S TRAFFIC ON I-45 S AT 6 PM EVERY TUESDAY IS MY AMERICA

"Free the children, let them go! Free the children, let them go!" chanted demonstrators outside of a children's detention facility [...] in downtown Houston."

-ABC13 Eyewitness News, July 12, 2019

We float in this river of concrete, boiling engines, living meat, and blood. It is either too hot or too cold. Asses & backs stiffen. Everyone wants to be elsewhere. The world continues despite our desires. We sit & attempt to escape our deadlined bodies. The radio may play hip hop, cumbia, classic rock, a conversation about a war, a prayer, cursing, someone asking why love hurts and someone explaining it is because the distance between wanting someone and them wanting you likewise in return is so vast, so great that this gulf of yearning, this tectonic plate of desire, reminds you not everything in your short life will be fulfilled & starting anew will take more life, then scratching static interrupted by someone speaking in some other language, silence. Look outside the car window. The freeway wall forms a frame bottom to an infinite painting. The sky's a bed of lavender rusted by decaying sunshine. Clouds are loose feathers to an immense bird. There's mountainscapes of ashen bodies made by buildings. Look equally at other drivers. They face forward. Every car's a nation

in this continent of waiting. Take, for example, the greying sedan to the front. The bumper hosts a Salvadoran flag sticker. In the rear windshield, a child plays with die-casted toy cars on the back rest. What a film this child composes: one sleek car races another, a fire truck crashes into a monster truck, a convertible weaves between the headrests & seatbelt straps, their mouth hums to mimic engine zooms & purse to perform explosions. Maybe their radio sings songs of joyful sadness. Maybe their radio speaks in Spanish about politics. Maybe there's static. Maybe silence. No matter. The child has created their universe of joy. Within a nation of waiting. Within a continent of waiting. Within a nation of violence. Within a continent of theft. Within this very world. If only this universe would be liberated. We must kill this epoch, no? Look up at the sky. See the motionless sea above. The painting continues. The radio remains soundless. This stream of consciousness tributaries. We break away from this one mind. We all achieve the next phase of our destinies. We all enter another sleep. No one remembers this dream when they awake.



1958. Photo Credit: RGD0006-2600, Houston Public Library, HMRC



Present Day. Photo credit: 45intol: Dhanix at the English language Wikipedia / CC BY-SA (Creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

INTERSTATE 45 (I-45) was officially established in 1971 and is 284.913 miles long (going north & south), connecting Galveston, Houston, & Dallas; however, it's the shortest of the primary interstates and the only primary interstate to be entirely inside of one state.

CHITLINS



"THE SCENE THAT SPREAD BEFORE HIM HAD IN IT QUALITIES OF BOTH HEAVEN AND HELL."

I tell them where I stay. "Oooh Gunzpoint," they say. And I think that even though I been living here near a decade, I still don't feel comfortable calling it nothing other than Greenspoint. And them, that don't even know the right exits from the right freeways, throw that word around like they was native. And I never tell them, but I think it every time.

*

"FOR AN INSTANT HE FELT THE HOPELESSNESS OF THIS MAD RACE HE WAS MAKING TO NOWHERE."

In art appreciation classes, we always end up talking about offal, about chitlins. We talk about chitlins because, in these classes, the subject at hand is always the transformative, and unexpected, and difficult, and useful presence of pleasure. Almost none of the kids fuck with pig intestines, most of the grown folk don't neither. Mad depressing.

*

"IN FRANTIC HASTE HE HURRIED FROM BUILDING TO BUILDING, PEERING INTO THE SILENT ROOMS, PAUSING NOW AND THEN TO SHOUT HOARSELY."

I am sitting with a group of photographers showing them some of my Greenspoint area pictures. The group is smart, and kind, and generous, and so I feel comfortable speaking nakedly of my affection for the spaces in the photographs. But the more I talk, the wider the field opens up between us. The pictures, they tell me, do not look like affection. Or is it the spaces themselves that look hard to love? How do you visualize the difference between an erotic strike and one that bursts forth from anger? Without that final moan, that hot spurt of jazz, does it all look like violence? Like contempt? I sink into the couch, and into doubt. What are these pictures? What is this place?

*

"THE FACT PENETRATED SUDDENLY. HE RAISED HIMSELF AND GAZED WONDERINGLY AT THE DROPLETS OF WATER THAT SPARKLED ON THE SMOOTH STONE. AS HE WATCHED, ANOTHER ONE SQUEEZED UP FROM THE APPARENTLY SOLID SURFACE AND SHIMMERED IN THE LIGHT OF THE SINKING SUN."

We drift through the neighborhood most nights; my daughter is mad colicky and these evening constitutionals are essential bedtime practice. We're here, the place where my wife grew up, where my in-laws live, because we are fucking broke. This was no plan, it was consequence. We walk the dédale for weeks before we pass by some parties. Slurred words, loud cackles, mud-thick sounds, and an even thicker cartoon cloud of tobacco smoke and booze fumes. This is the real deal, this is -



the right mix, this that dead-on feel. It's like I'm a kid again twisting through the labyrinthine residential looking for the right house with the bass booming. This feels like being young in Haiti in a way that's hard to find in Houston.

A few more weeks and the Christmas decorations go up. And here's a Black Santa, and another one, and another one, and another one. All the Santas are Black or Brown around here; they never look like Tim Allen. And I figure, why should we ever leave this place, with its wide spaces, and its overwhelming greens, and its Black Santas, and its far away accents, and every day on the calendar says June 27th. Why leave?

*

"HE BRACED HIMSELF. HE COULDN'T LEAVE, AS THERE WAS NOWHERE TO GO. IF NECESSARY, HE WOULD FIGHT TO THE DEATH TO REMAIN IN THE VILLAGE."

In class, they explain to me that they don't eat chitlins cause they don't have to: these were the scraps from the master's table, made palatable through arduous labor and seasoning magics, it is the inheritance and memory of chattel slavery, something that needs to be left behind. But they wrong, though.

The truth is that the practice extends beyond the history of slavery. Eating the "bad parts" of the animal is a global practice, that is thousands of years older than the first Portuguese to call himself White. It is exactly that shame, that disdain, that blindness, that is the legacy of Colonialism: that narrowing of aesthetic possibilities, the eradication of ways of being.

If people so readily reject the flavors of offal, I worry about the future of eating ass even.

*

"THE VILLAGE WAS DOING WHAT IT COULD. THE REST WAS UP TO HIM."

This world will end, and relatively soon. In many ways, Greenspoint, abandoned by the economy, ignored by the halls of culture, often looks and feels post-apocalyptic. But check it, people are out here finding their lives, people are out here making joy, people are out here maintaining communities.

If this is a vision of what comes after the end of the world, it also means that this might be what it looks like to survive the Apocalypse. It's a hopeful vision. It's a beautiful thing.

*** ALL QUOTES FROM A.E. VAN VOGT'S THE ENCHANTED VILLAGE**

PHOTO CREDIT: Sebastien Boncy

Despite being one of Houston's major business districts and having close proximity to George Bush Intercontinental Airport, one of the largest airports in the US, **GREENSPPOINT** is commonly referred to as "Gunzpoint" due to high crime rates over the years.

SECOND WARD

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Like many other Brown/Black neighborhoods across the country, my barrio Second Ward is becoming gentrified. As reported by the Kinder Institute of Urban Research at Rice University, Second Ward has a 79.74% susceptibility index of gentrification in the next few years. The first wave of gentrification began about a decade ago, with the art murals under the Navigation Blvd. bridge. Art came like La Pinta, La Niña y La Santa Maria and splattered buckets of paint on the columns under the I-45 Freeway by Cullen Blvd., Telephone Rd., and Wayside Dr. to “brighten” the neighborhood and foreshadowed the capitalized interest in our hood. This was followed up with by the ambitious downtown light rail that carved through historic Harrisburg Blvd. down to Magnolia Park. The cookie-cutter houses that look like expensive match boxes sprung up on bulldozed shotgun houses, incinerating the fires for real estate grabs. My piece below shows a slice of what it was like growing up in the East End, historically an immigrant working-class neighborhood, and at this rate, an irreplicable memory.

Migs always put too much chile in her elote. The lemon juice proportion was just right but se pasaba with the chile. The red spicy swirl chased the sour citrus rings like the artificial clouds from the oil refineries down Manchester and Harrisburg. The spicy/sour quarrel came to a stop with grated cheese and mayo creaminess that made you feel so seen. An elote was a hot comfort in even hotter summer days. A raspa usually balances out the meal. Shaved ice in that Houston heat made even the styrofoam cup sweat. I always go for the nachos supreme. This time the new girl in the refresheria forgot to add the chili on that good melted cheese, the carnival kind with la gofita.

Migs stares down at my little bowl and dryly says, “More like a supreme disappointment.” I was too shy to correct the new girl since I knew she was barely learning the ropes. In all my years of coming to this Refresqueria Tampico on Harrisburg, I had approximate familiarity with all the doñas behind the thick window counter, who sweat unbothered under the hand painted menu signs. Even though Migs wanted to tell the girl something, I didn’t think the confrontation was worth the 75 cents difference from a regular nacho.

“It’s about the principle,” Migs states, “you paid for it.”

“Yeah... I know... I’m also not getting heartburn skipping the chili,” I replied, digging into my cheesy shyness.

The raspa melted steadily like a frozen hourglass. Timing is everything. We have balanced our breaks from the hot corn kernels to steady bites of cold crema, the sweet condensed milk on the raspa. Qué se revuelva todo. We started coming to this location after the original spot on Milby and Canal closed down.

The mechanic shop that bought the spot painted over the beautiful mural of fruit on the facade of the former refresheria. The image of hands with sharply manicured red nails holding papayas, guineos, strawberries was now covered up by a sad gray paint job which added to the depressed looking library across the

street. The same library that has been permanently “closed for renovations” for years. It’s a real damn empty parking lot for a “construction site.” Either the city has forgotten to close it down, doesn’t want to deal with the paperwork/optics, or it has nowhere to put all those books.

Migs and I would spend hours in that library. We begged our poor, old tired Pops, fresh off another overtime shift from his warehouse job, to take us to the library. He would rub the sleep out of his eyes, change out of his sweated uniform and drive down Leeland past the fire station, turning on Lockwood. Always on that corner into Canal, Dad would wake up and point at the church building, which was a movie theater in a past life, and say, “Tu mamá y yo vimos ‘El Noa Noa’ con Juan Gabriel ahí,” with a tinge of nostalgia for their first date in this new country.

I would get lost in those library books for hours. The plastic book covers crinkled under the loud, antiquated air conditioning system. Pages and pages passed through my thick, pink plastic-rimmed glasses. The library was a sanctuary where I could take autonomy over my education and away from the sterile classroom of state-mandated test-taking and the social anxiety of growing pains. I practiced new, foreign English words at my own pace, placed them awkwardly on my tiny tongue and scorched the vocabulary into my bilingual baby brain. A few minutes before closing time, we would wake up Dad to walk to the refresheria across the street. The same refresheria where Mom’s immense pregnancy craving for papaya was satiated after one bite. To this day, my brother still refuses papaya slices from my Mom.

Sunset settled into a tropical orange hue over the East End. Migs’ interrupts the Metro Light Rail train whistle to ask, “Are you done?” and points to the cut up cardboard box turned tray. I snap out of the memory like an ejected VHS tape and instinctively start cleaning up. I place my used styrofoam cups in the cardboard box tray. “Here you go,” I replied, throwing in my chili-less empty bowl.



PHOTO CREDIT: Yeiry Guevara

SECOND WARD has been home to many diasporas, including immigrants from Germany, Ireland, France, Mexico, El Salvador, Italy, Cuba, and Algeria, amongst others, and has nicknames such as East End and Segundo Barrio. Never call it Eado.

WHAT DO THEY TAKE? WHAT DO THEY LEAVE BEHIND?



PHOTO CREDIT: Moe Penders & Brenda Edith Franco

AUTHOR'S NOTE: In my experiences as a trans woman from the Northside, I've seen reflections of myself and my neighborhood through the men that I've encountered. Exploring certain locations as a young adult in Houston has crafted my identity and, ultimately, the way I behave as a creative. From walking the streets to working the streets, I draw inspiration from my experiences. For me, the men, the clients, and the muses I met in Northside represent my version of my neighborhood which always inherently funnels into my artwork. There are connections to my neighborhood in the content I produce that will always draw back to what I felt was an artistic awakening for me, which occurred during this experience that I wrote about in my personal essay. The photos I included with the essay represent this connection. I view it as a full circle experience that highlights the evolution of my identity and artistry.

In 2012, I worked at this grocery store called Fiesta, the one on Airline. It was down the street from me, but on foot it was a good half-hour trip. Walking to work in Houston weather had a particular sting to it; I'd start off out the door already angry I had to walk, onto Crosstimbers with napkin slices stuffed in my pockets for the oncoming sweat. Ego and eyes wounded from the sun, I contemplated the meaning of my humble existence and pouted all the way to work. Already dripping bullets a single block into my journey, I pulled out a paper towel and wiped waterfalls of sweat off my forehead. "What did I do to deserve this?" When I finally reached Fiesta, I stole away to the restroom for more napkins and cold water. I'd contemplate quitting and never coming back as I rinsed my face. I looked into the graffiti ridden mirrors for the umpteenth time and didn't recognize the person I saw. "Why do you drag yourself through a war zone everyday?" I whispered. One of the many voices in my head quickly responded: "Capitalism."

I lost my virginity while working at Fiesta. This was the first time I experienced my neighborhood as an "adult." One day, I was in a mood counting the minutes in my head until I could escape this godforsaken register and an odd man came to my lane. He was a short, swole Mexicano who told me to call him Tío of all things. I remember him looking me up and down and instead of being repulsed, I came alive on the inside. "Hola muñeca," he grinned. I kept it dry, "Hi, how are you?" I responded in English because my Spanish didn't extend past "Como estas" and "Bien y tu." He kept strong eye contact & asked me about bars in the gayborhood; he wanted me to know that unlike other customers, he knew who I was. "¿Habras español?" he asked. I laughed and shook my head. "Por que? You should know it." I looked into his curious eyes and said, "Maybe you can teach me." He told me I was beautiful. No man, no human in fact, had ever told me that before. In that moment behind the dusty counter, I knew he wanted me. In that new feeling, a chain reaction began. We exchanged our contact info, and he left with his cases of Sunday beer. Before I could gather my thoughts, the next customer was pushing their produce onto my scanner, asking me if I spoke Spanish. "Por que? You should know it." I dissociated while I bagged their nopales and imagined what being with Tío would be like, hearing the word "beautiful" play over and over in his voice in my head. "These were my moments," I said to myself. Then, someone said "Hola," and it broke my trance. I looked up into the customer's eyes, a part of me still daydreaming. I could see it in them too. We both wanted to claim contentment.

Tío took me to the Moonlight Inn. It was down the street from Fiesta, near Tidwell. I grew up passing by it all the time but never went in. "Do not dream. Make it reality." To this day, I still pass by it and think of him.

Our time in the Moonlight Inn cost \$20. It had carpeted walls with floral prints that matched the floors and a mirror on the ceiling that covered most of the bed. I wasn't hesitant or scared. When we laid down and started kissing, I felt I was finally in my element. His cock was the size of my thumb, and I thought to myself, *Is this a joke?* I looked at it and then at him, right into his tipsy eyes. *It gets bigger right?* He told me to lie on my back and lifted my legs to sit on his shoulders. He looked hungry and grinned at me, this time with a more ravenous smile. He began to enter me, but my knee jerked in pain and kicked him. "Cálmate, muñeca. You can take it." He stretched down to kiss me and started again. As he rose up, my eyes focused on our reflection on the ceiling. I stared at us, at my submission and Tío's dominance. I couldn't look away.

He thought I was pretending to be in pain because of how small his dick was, but he didn't know this was a first for me. I kept staring at the mirror. It dulled the pain getting lost in this trance. I watched him ravage me as he fed from me, took from me. He shifted his weight onto me, biting into my neck. I wrapped my arms and legs around him and never broke focus from the mirror. My face seemed to be fighting pleasure and shame. I didn't know how I got to this point, how I became someone who did things like this. How did I find myself contemplating suicide while scanning diapers and cerveza all day at work to a motel rendezvous with a man I just met? I didn't even travel that far from Fiesta, but I didn't feel like I was in the Northside anymore.

I couldn't stand to look at myself any longer and made Tío lie down. I climbed on top of him and looked down, taking a moment to savor this scene. I was the submissive vessel for his ego trip into my body, but I felt like the one in control when I peered over him. When I started to ride him, the beautiful muñeca he picked up from the tienda turned into someone more powerful. It wasn't long before I took his seed from him. I saw in his eyes his guilt as he moaned and cried his climax. I could tell he was silently saying, "This moment stays between us," as he came inside me. But that's exactly what I wanted: something to think about as I walked through summer heat to a job I hated. In his dilated pupils, I could see the person he saw. I was his secret paradise in the hood from the expectations his life demanded of him, his punching bag for his sexual repression, his Northside girl. I knew what I was, what we had just done, what I really could get from men.

Right after I climbed off of him, I remembered feeling as if I needed to romanticize the sex to make it feel less disgraceful. The Moonlight Inn showers wouldn't spit warm water, but I wanted to wash him off of me. No one warned me of the emptiness that replaced desire once it was met. *What did he leave behind?* I thought as I scrubbed myself with hotel soap. I could still feel him on me. I could still feel him in me. Something else felt gone, taken.

A few other men tried to get to me while I worked at Fiesta but many never got the chance to meet. The longer I worked there, the more tortured I felt. I was eventually demoted and reprimanded frequently by a new manager for not wearing "slip resistant shoes." I rolled my eyes, "You're kidding me right?" He wanted to send me home for the second time in a row, and I wasn't in the mood to pretend like it wasn't a blessing in disguise. "It takes me 30 minutes to get here. I don't have a car. If I go home, I'm not coming back." He nodded his head, and I gave him my nametag. I left Fiesta for the last time and walked home. It was September. It was a cloudy afternoon, and I wasn't drenched in sweat. There was enough wind to keep me dry, but the subtle brutality of summer still lingered in the air. I thought to myself, *I should be upset but I'm not.* Before I could contemplate how I'd never have to make that trek across the Northside ever again, a random woman pulled over near me. She rolled down the window to her Honda and stuck out her arm. She said I looked like I needed whatever she was going to hand me and drove away. It was a small pamphlet with a picture of Jesus Christo on the front with text saying "Find salvation today!" I cackled and threw it to the ground. I couldn't stop laughing. "Fuck that lady! Fuck Fiesta!" It was the first time in a while that I had a pleasant walk in these streets, in this heat. When I made it home, I turned on my window a/c unit, took off my work uniform and sat naked on my bed. I stared at the ceiling and laughed some more.

NORTHSIDE is the origin of famous Houston rappers, labels, and groups—such as Swishahouse, Mike Jones, Slim Thug, and Paul Wall, amongst others—and hosted an infamous rivalry with the Southside rap scene featuring DJ Screw, UGK, Lil Keke, etc.

ANOTHER LETTER FROM THE CO-EDITORS

The Loop, originally created for the Common Field 2020 Convening in Houston, TX, is a time capsule where Houston had not yet experienced a pandemic, a chemical plant explosion, a winter storm, and more. These disasters, man-made and natural, are imprinted in our collective psyche as Houstonians, but our artistic community and organizing efforts persevere.

Over the last two years, The Loop was solely available on the Common Field website, until now. You are holding it in your hands as we intended.

Let this publication serve as a testament to Houston's diverse communities who use their voices to build a more hopeful future despite the challenges of living in turbulent times.

If you have enjoyed the work presented in this issue, stay tuned for more at:

📷 @theloop_htx

H-Town Til We Drown,

Megan & Reyes



LIFE UPDATES FROM THE CONTRIBUTORS

SOPHIE ASAKURA

I've curated and helped mount several exhibitions, managed two public art projects: a city-wide public art initiative and a major sculptural commission. I got into and completed my first year of an art history masters program at the University of Houston.

SEBASTIEN BONCY

Despite my commitment to unprofessionalism, I continue to find opportunities to exhibit and publish with good people like Flats in Houston, Visible Records in Charlottesville, Michel Obultra in Philadelphia, Fotodok in Utrecht, and the Galveston Art Center. I've also managed to pull off a peanut-butter and chili sauce that's on the level with Cuchara.

FARRAH FANG

I've performed poetry for Sin Muros Latinx Theater Festival (2021). My artwork was included in the "EVERYTHING / EVERYONE" exhibition by Alief Art House (2021).

YEIRY GUEVARA

Yeiry has presented at various platforms with her writing, including Los Angeles Public Library, international poetry festival, and local venues in Houston. Most recently, Yeiry is finally taking a break. She has ended her 3 year tenure as a grantmaker in order to prioritize her health, write, and explore new opportunities.

ÁNGEL LARTIGUE

Lartigue was a participant at the international conference Taboo – Transgression – Transcendence in Art & Science 2020 part of the University of Applied Arts Vienna Austria where she presented her first essay, "Science At The Club: Putrefaction As An Artistic Medium". Lartigue has given lectures and exhibited at Station Museum of Contemporary Art (HTX), the University of Texas at Austin, The Latinx Project NYU, The Holocaust Museum Houston, USC Roski School of Art and Design, The Charla Fund part of the US Latinx Art Forum 2021 and awarded through The Andy Warhol Foundation for The Visual Arts for both 2021 and 2022.

REYES RAMIREZ

My first collection of stories, The Book of Wanderers, was released and featured on NPR's Books We Love, as well as a book of poetry coming soon. I've received grants, residencies, and fellowships, notably the Dobie Paisano Fellowship. Most importantly, I'm engaged to the love of my life!

MEGAN SPARKS

I created the Houston BIPOC Artist Accountability Coalition (HBAAC) in 2020 alongside Sebastien Bony and Julie DeVries. HBAAC was a data project that collected data regarding representation and racial justice from local arts organizations in order to foster permanent structural change in the Houston art community.

NICK VAUGHAN & JAKE MARGOLIN

Our first solo museum exhibition in Texas is currently running at the Blaffer Art Museum, our livre d'artiste "Norma Trist" was acquired by the Getty Research Institute (Los Angeles) among other public institutions, and we have begun research and development on a new body of work in Utah, Idaho and Illinois.

STALINA VILLARREAL

I received my PhD, obtained a tenure-track job, and have a book contract for my manuscript Watcha, forthcoming from Deep Vellum Publishing. I translated Postcards in Braille by Sergio Pérez Torres, published by Nueva York Poetry Press. I am the recipient of the Inprint Donald Barthelme Prize in Poetry.

SEBASTIAN GOMEZ DE LA TORRE

I have been sliving(slaying/living) and walking through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I also self-published my first Children's Book "Pancho & The Inca Poncho" thanks to a grant from the Houston Arts Alliance.