

# what kind of place is a home?

by Marisol Cortez

I ask this because my own history, over generations, gives physical shape to the trajectory of upward mobility for Chicana/os in this city.

The movement of my father's family around the city—from the Westside in my grandparents' time to the central city in my parents' time and my own early childhood to points North and beyond during adolescence—suggests the geography of class and race that has taken me far away from where I began, where my father began, where his parents before him began (with my Minnesota farmgirl mother, another story, altogether). First, out of the city limits, then to other Texas cities for college, then out of the state altogether as I traveled first to California for graduate school and then to Kansas for teaching work. In between bouts of leaving I've felt compelled to return, as if trying to remember something lost. Something to which, if I could only remember what it was, I could finally return for good. Some memory of home.

I start to become aware that I've lost something by what I don't feel in those other far-flung places, the transient spaces of acquisition in which I find myself. For a long time I don't even recognize that what I am feeling is an absence or loneliness, a nowhere-ness. I think it is normal, that it must be part of me, a dysfunctional part. Anxiety, depression. I don't realize until later that there is actually something missing. There is actually a difference between a place you go to get something, to light temporarily for a degree or a job, and a place you call home, call community. There is a difference between living on a surface and living within, underneath, embedded. As I begin to contemplate declining the promise of a secure position in Kansas—the certainty of a comfortable life for struggle alongside those I love—I think that I would give up the world for this difference. I think nothing matters more.

It has only been recently, after years of intermittent participation in and ongoing reflection on the development politics that link the fight for the Pink Building to earlier struggles around energy, water, streets—only recently that I have been struck by the realization that the reason we moved north to begin with, out of the city, was because our house got torn down. When I was a child we lived on East Mulberry Street, right where it intersects with Highway 281, in a big old wooden house with peeling white paint. Trinity encroached and we got bought out. It could have been far worse. We could have displaced, as so many poor and working class families are, without fair compensation from developers or the city. Instead, Trinity's offer was a boon to my parents, who took the money and built their own house out in the country: Bulverde, the middle of nowhere back then. But I remember



my father's sadness. For him it was a tragedy to lose a house in this way, to be forced to move. I remember him taking me for a drive into town one Sunday to take pictures of the demolition debris, the gaping holes where houses once stood, like the sockets of teeth punched out in a fight. Right before we moved he had

taken pictures of the inside of the house as we slowly began to dismantle it. For a long time I've kept a photograph of the dining room, its contents partially packed, taped to whatever wall is nearest my writing desk as I move, again and again and again. There are no people in the photograph, only furniture and boxes, and white-bright light shining in through a curtained window. I've never really understood why I would tape that to my wall, but now I feel like I do.

**Kansas recruits me** in part because they know I work on urban environmental stuff, and they want me to participate in a project tentatively called *New Cities*. Someone has given someone else money, with the promise of more. A green development company has put up \$20K so that the University of Kansas will act as a kind of think tank, producing models for planned residential communities that will address the impending crisis as millions of Boomer-age adults begin to retire at roughly the same time. A housing crisis prompted by shifting demographics.

Freshly transplanted from San Antonio, fresh from grassroots EJ (environmental justice) work, it is so weird for me to be in the room where a development project is spawned, the predetermined set of options later to be presented in earnest to those who will live in these spaces. And what about the people who will never live there, the kinds of elders who won't be retiring because they are poor, for whom plans are not being made? My department, American Studies, has been invited to participate as the social conscience of the think tank; we are supposed to ask those kinds of questions, about power and privilege and who will and won't benefit. We are supposed to look out for the communities we variously represent—the brown and the black and the native and the female, the queer and the trans and the poor. We are like emissaries from these communities, these histories of exclusion from process, from people gathered in a room or at a table, emissaries to the academy. I am the emissary of my Westsider grandparents, of a grandfather who once dropped out of Lanier to follow the cotton crop up to Arkansas. In a different way I am the emissary of my Minnesota grandparents, Irish and German tenant farmers who never owned the land they worked all their lives. Now we are here; we are supposed to have arrived.

Except it's not enough anymore. It never was enough for those not present, and now it is not enough for me. Because now I know this is not really process, real participation—being able to pick between designs already drafted somewhere else, between decisions already made. I know what gente would say, if something was pitched to them like this. A deal already made elsewhere, at a campus in the Midwest where I have landed, tossed by a tanking academic job market. I know these things now because I've glimpsed other possibilities. I have seen how process looks when it is respectful and horizontal, with community at the heart from the first step to the last. I have seen what it looks like when the basis for figuring out how best to inhabit a place is stories rather than the authority of technical expertise, the local knowledge of elders rather than the master knowledge of city staff and professional planners.

So what gente would say, I say too: Who says we want new cities, anyway? Who does that newness benefit, who gets left behind? Who gets to say what newness is? Maybe newness is something already here that you just don't see. Maybe the new city is within us. Maybe we already know what we need, it's just

## Leaving/Returning

In the night my daughter calls for me. In the bed across the room. I'm right there but she needs me closer, she needs me in the same bed sleeping, and when I do she claws at my chest and desperately tries to nurse through the blankets, through my shirt, nearly four. She cries when I try to detach. During the day she needs to know where I am, she looks for me, always calling out even when I'm right there, in the next room. She senses my absence: it is because I don't know where I am or in what strange place I have found myself. It is because we have been here and then there and then here again ever since I left—left what, where, when? Back and forth, north and south, chasing after work, chasing love, then chasing home and dreams of home remembered suddenly, clawing at blankets. I have been here and there, my body present but my heart and thoughts somewhere else: some other state, some other room, some other bed as I wake in the night to a memory or dream of that somewhere. And she feels it, and she calls for me, wondering: where?

*by Marisol Cortez*



that no one's listening. Maybe we're already doing it and you don't even know. Because if you did, you wouldn't be here; you would be there, asking how you could help. Instead of inviting us in at the very end to pat you on the back for doing what you were going to do from the very beginning.

I know there are other possibilities. I know I can say that, sitting at the table—I know we have been brought there to say it. But it is a formality only, a ritual saying. The entire process itself could not go forward if it were anything other than that. American Studies has to say what no one else will, but that doesn't mean it hasn't already been decided. Money has been spilled, master plans are in the works. I know this already; I can see it.

And it's then that I start thinking more about nowhereness, about the home I am missing. Other kinds of gatherings, other ways to work and to live. I think about food, meeting food. Strong black coffee and tacos with nopales and conchas in greasy paper sacks, so fresh they are almost crispy around the edges. Plates of melon. Lemonade with ice. I think about hugs and kisses on the cheek. I think about home, and houses.

**Today I had** one of those coincidental crossings that reminded me of home: less the physical place than the sense of living under the skin, of knowing and being known. It was the kind of crossing that feels fertile, the product of things coming together in a way that gives rise to a feeling of creative possibility. I was at home on a Sunday afternoon in Lawrence, Kansas when I received a call from a number I did not recognize, although I knew from the 210 area code that the call (or at least the caller) had some connection to San Anto. Against my inclination for an unfamiliar number, I picked up and heard the voice of one of my favorite people to encounter via exactly these kinds of weird, fortuitous coincidences. When I run into Brenda Davis at the library or on the other end of my phone, I feel I must be back home. I feel I have returned somehow, to something. Our chance encounters make me feel I am on the right path, moving in the right direction. In this case, toward the writing I have been struggling to begin in this reintroduction of *La Voz de Zocalo*, a column that considers the politics of public space brought so vividly to the fore once again in the recent case of the Casa Maldonado, which itself continues a longer history of struggle in San Anto around access to a variety of public goods: water, air, streets, sidewalks, green space, culture, political process.

Brenda was surprised I still had a San Antonio area code, given that I've been up in Kansas for a year now. I reminded her that you can do that with a cellphone, move locations but not your number, and we laughed together. Then she told me her reason for calling. She remembered that I had been involved with another grassroots organization whose location was on the Eastside, and she was wondering if they would be interested in getting involved in a struggle around public space and historic preservation on that side of town.

She got involved, she said, after participating in the monthly circles at the Casa de Cuentos, listening to the stories of vecinas and vecinos who remembered a different Westside. Their stories of now absent woodframe houses and storefront tienditas made her

remember her own childhood on the Eastside; they reminded her that her own mother's house had been demolished by the city.

Since then she had begun organizing informally in her own Eastside neighborhood, talking with people door to door about what they remembered, how things had changed and why. There was talk of starting up an Eastside group analogous to the Westside Historic Preservation group organizing to save Casa Maldonado. Different side of town, same struggle, same shared history of purposeful disinvestment and neglect followed by an urban renewal policies predicated on the erasure of cultural history and the appropriation of public space—open space, green space, residential quality of life—for commercial use and private investment.

At stake in this case, she informed me, was the fate of the city-owned land surrounding the recently renovated Hays St. Bridge.

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Like the Guadalupe Street bridge to the Westside, the Hays Street Bridge is the connective tissue suturing the Eastside to downtown, and many community residents hoped that the city would use the open space beneath it for a park. Instead, discussions are underway as to whether the city should sell the space as "surplus land" to a developer interested in building a brewery, part of ongoing efforts to revitalize the Sunset Station area as a spillover tourist destination from downtown. No matter the side of town, the arguments are always the same, and on their face self-evident and indisputable: economic development. Jobs creation. Removal of "blighted" structures and spaces.

The difficulty community has had convincing city officials of the value of historic and cultural preservation, especially for the working class African American and Chicana/o neighborhoods of the East, West, and South sides, lies in the seeming transparency and givenness of these arguments. Who doesn't want jobs, when

unemployment rates in communities of color are staggering? Who could deny that Casa Maldonado is falling apart? Who doesn't prefer new to old? The task of explaining why the most self-evident claims are problematic is difficult precisely because it requires us to look beneath the surface appearance of things. It requires a consciousness of history, the beyond-our-lifetime forces that have shaped land use to serve some economic interests and not others—not just here in San Anto but in most major metropolitan areas around the United States. Seeing that the Pink Building is old and dilapidated is easy. Understanding why, and thus the importance of preservation or open space is harder. It takes time and patience and the right public forum, the right way of reaching people.

On the phone Brenda directed me to another person heading up efforts to present these more difficult arguments to Mayor Castro and City Council, Gary Houston, who mentioned a number of parallels between the brewery situation and the Pink Building struggle. Of particular interest is the issue of a fair and participatory public process over these questions, made acute by the ways in which the Avenida Guadalupe Association and the Dignowity Hill Neighborhood Association both represent “community” interests to the city, yet at the same time push forward the model of economic development that has long characterized growth in San Antonio. Only in the context of this kind of conflict between public face and private interests can we make sense of the kind of doublespeak we witnessed during AGA's flawed charette process, described by Susana Segura in last month's issue of *La Voz*. Here a “preservation” option initially presented as “compromise” with and “due diligence” to community in fact turned out to entail demolition of the actually existing structure, in order to build something new that simulates what is no longer there.

**So many stories** of having to leave: much of San Antonio is in some vital way the diaspora of the Westside (and Eastside). How can we know what home is when we have been displaced so long ago that we cannot remember?

Much of the impetus for returning to *La Voz del Zocalo*, then, is personal: wanting to think about all the reasons and ways we both leave and return, and decide to stay. If I listen to the logic of the academic career path, returning means I stay in Kansas but migrate back to keep writing about these things, back and forth like a bird, north to south to north along the flyways of winter and summer breaks. An image of return, a simulation. But maybe returning means actually going back to actual places. Emplacing my actual body where I write, in actual struggle alongside and within community. Because it is where I am from. Because it is home. Because I believe in coming back to put what you've gained in leaving to use.

When the parade ordinance prompted the first appearance of *La Voz del Zocalo* in 2008, the image selected to represent the column was floral or solar in design, with many radiating strands (air, water, bodies, stories, cultura, streets) converging on a central point labeled “space.” The space of the city, the spaces and places where we live: home. This image and motif have continued to guide our revival of the series in 2011. Every few months or so, we hope to feature a number of articles linked by their common

concern with the politics of urban space, the politics of home. In this issue are contributions that further explore many of the issues and themes already touched on in these introductory testimonios. We hope to regularly feature updates on fights to save different community buildings; on access to streets; on struggles to organize the Riverwalk; on environmental justice issues; on community rights to its own cultural history.

Given that many of us participating in this project are contingent academics—thinkers and writers on the margins of a higher ed in crisis—*Zocalo* is also an experiment, an attempt to create the kinds of alternate intellectual spaces and institutions that Luz Guerra calls for in the July/Aug issue of *La Voz* from this year. If for many of us academia is no longer a place where we can



Marisol Cortez (left) at the San Antonio International Woman's Day March & Rally Press Conference in 2010.

make a living wage—or where we have to choose, unsustainably, between a living wage and the communities we care about—what sorts of alternative educational spaces can we create? For if we are serious about challenging the forces of privatization that threaten to limit access to public goods, the university cannot be exempt from this challenge. At the same time that our research and writing recovers a new city already existing within the old and within us, we must critique the corporatization of the university and ask how we can create new spaces for thinking, writing, and sharing ideas.

More to come. Or, to appropriate a common commercial phrase to public ends: Watch this space. □