

## Assembling Houston: Writing and Teaching the Neoliberal City

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In the season five premiere of the popular NBC sit-com *Parks and Recreation*, Leslie Knope (played by Amy Poehler) goes to Washington. During her visit to the nation's capital, she recognizes just how out of place, as a newly elected city council member in Pawnee, Indiana, she truly is—her position as a fish out of water is treated as not only revelatory but discomforting to Ms. Knope throughout the episode. Instead of helping Ms. Knope rise to the occasion, as the episode's namesake's lead *Mr. Smith goes to Washington* does, Leslie continually is shown to be almost insignificant in both the greater world of politics (she is asked by a Washington staffer if she's from Pawnee, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, or Texas, thus revealing just how commonplace Pawnee is across the U.S.) and her boyfriend's new life as a senatorial campaign consultant (she sees herself as a novelty—a tourist thought she was Beverly DeAngelo—in comparison to the young, tall, beltway women whom Ben Wyatt, played by Adam Scott, works with every day). Ms. Knope's trip to Washington sheds light on the fact that as a local government representative, she is not nearly as powerful or important to government as she had believed.

I begin this article with this brief discussion of a current television program to demonstrate difficulties that come with focusing on the local. Leslie Knope can in fact *do* important work as a councilwoman in Pawnee, Indiana, as last season's election plot line revealed. Yet, by focusing her political identity and aspirations purely on the local, she could not fully comprehend Pawnee's place (or lack of place as the

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episode intimates) in national or global politics. The tension established between the local and national in this episode is central to scholarship on the local or regional. Jenny Rice argues in the 2012 *RSQ special issue on Regional Rhetorics* that the very tension between the regional, national, and even the transnational is central to any study of place. She uses the Deleuzian metaphor of the *fold* as a way “to bring together multiple sites that are not proximate” (207). Connecting across time and space allows for sites that are not always considered linked by cause, effect, or history to be seen in similar context, thus extending how we see regions (or nations, for that matter) as singular constructs of particular histories and ideologies.

Rice’s analytic is savvy in that it provides a bullwork against the type of dichotomies seen in the *Parks and Recreation* episode above. However, there are some clear connections in the example above that do not need to be made through *folding* necessarily. For example, Leslie’s city council campaign was challenged by the son of the town’s main employer—Bobby Newport (played by Paul Rudd). While he was wildly unqualified for the position, he almost won when his father threatened to offshore the Sweetums candy factory if his son was not elected to the city council. The inclusion of global trade, offshoring, and its connection to the livelihood of the people of Pawnee shows that it is not necessary to fold Pawnee with another global site, but instead follow the links between neoliberal capital and local government to see that the local is not merely connected to the national but to the global as well.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the personal connection Leslie has to national politics, through her relationship with Ben Wyatt, needs no folding either. Instead, she is personally connected to the trials of national elections, funding, and lawmaking by maintaining her intimate ties to a now Washington insider. The personal here cannot be underestimated. As many feminists have written, the personal *is* political, and I would argue it is also a frame of reference that should be taken seriously as a means to connect individuals to place and then extrapolate the larger connections between places. Jeff Rice, in his book *Digital Detroit*, argues that personal connections, both prior to and during the experience with a place should be collected with other information much like in a database. And it is through the organization of the information in said database that a rhetor can begin inventing



and arranging an understanding of a place (31–36). Rice’s interest is in how places are always already constructed as sites of digital media (he uses the example of GoogleMaps and MapQuest), and that through engaging with locations as networked information, we can provide a better understanding of both place and digital writing. And part of the database, Rice advocates, is personal experience, memory, and pleasures attached to the place itself (30). As writing teachers, then, we must venture to provide students (and scholars) the latitude to engage with their own understandings and relationships to place to understand local histories, politics, and engagement fully.

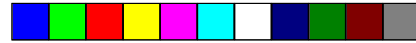
By extension, I argue that both the personal and a locale’s connection to neoliberal economics are key to understanding place. Much as Leslie Knope is both connected to Washington and Pawnee through her personal affinities, she is also connected to neoliberalism through the threat of offshoring Pawnee’s factory jobs. The *Parks and Recreation* example above demonstrates how both the personal and the neoliberal are key to understanding place—even one, like Pawnee, that is constructed as seemingly insignificant. Because of the importance of both the personal and the neoliberal, I developed a writing course that asked students to focus on their knowledge and experience of Houston, Texas. For a group of students who were primarily native to the area, the course allowed them to form a sense of connection to community and place that they previously did not have with Houston or even their own neighborhoods. But more importantly, the course allowed the students, through a legitimization of their personal inquiries and connections to Houston, to engage the local and the global in ways that teaching a traditional course on globalization or community literacy could not.

The course draws on what I have named in my *Branded Bodies, Rhetoric, and the Neoliberal Nation-State* “rhetorical assemblage.” According to Manuel DeLanda, we assemble meaning by placing words, phrases, and, in the case of this study, narratives of location contiguously. They then become “territorialized” and “coded” or “decoded,” or, as Rebecca Dingo would say, “networked,” throughout their exchange.<sup>2</sup> An assemblage is never complete, nor is it stable. It is always changing due to its context. When using rhetorical assemblage as a pedagogical method, it requires students to form linkages (to draw from Rebecca

Dingo's 2008 *College English* essay) between seemingly disparate or traditionally isolated texts. In other words, throughout the course students were required to assemble their own personal observations, questions, and theories about Houston with creative, historical, and current media focusing on different aspects of Houston. And it was through those assemblages that students were able to resist the binaries I previously mentioned.

In order to avoid the pitfalls faced by Leslie Knope, I require students to see their own relationships to Houston within a larger social context—many of the students come from radically different locations across town. By contextualizing their personal reactions and relations to the city of Houston within historical and economic contexts, they are able to begin to see how locations are created and reinforced through the exchange of local and global power relationships. As discussed in the introduction to this cluster, the local and global are not specific sites to be read with or against one another. Instead, they are sites of economic and political exchange wherein the flows of global power are often masked in the name of ideology. Therefore, I work to show students how memory, affinity, and even city planning are “situated language practices within far-reaching political and economic systems” (Stone-Mediatore 129). In other words, transnational feminisms not only look at particular temporal issues like histories and time-based influences of economy and ideology borne of a particular region or localize history, they also look at how these issues are spatially related in the context of global and local relations, as well as state-to-state transactions. The ideas of distance/proximity, migration, flows and exchanges are at the heart of transnational feminist scholarship, and these ideas deal directly with the concepts of space, place, and location. Furthermore, transnational feminist scholarship is committed to the “bottom up” analysis of power structures.<sup>3</sup> And, therefore, it often begins with the personal experiences of individuals. But the analysis does not stop at an uncritical expression of individual stories. Transnational feminist scholars focus on how those individual experiences are constructed within specific histories and geographies of power.

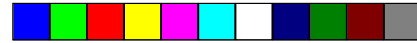
For example, the feminist geographer Cindi Katz asserts that civic topographies can be seen not merely as a set of geographical data or



survey driven numbers; instead, it is a set of material relations that are infused with power, connections, and agency—all of which create a complex terrain of scaling forces (international, national, local, and personal) with which researchers must acquaint themselves to get a full view of any site of study. Thus, when students and researchers focus their research questions on specific local topographies, taking into account the uneven development of spaces due to the unequal distribution of money, power, and resources present locally, national, and across the globe, they can begin to reveal the complex and multifaceted histories that tell the story of particular locations (Katz).

Furthermore, by following the example Katz gives of a site in the Sudan wherein she reveals the many considerations and layers that influence, connect, and network said site to both local and global systems of power, students and researchers can begin to disrupt the notion that the local and the narratives created therein are isolated and merely influenced by those who live and “know” about a particular space. In other words, exploring the local as a site of interlocking power relations allows students to disrupt the very myopic practices that local, experiential research can sometimes produce. And what becomes critical is helping the students assemble their own narratives with those of others. And it is through that very assemblage that students begin to understand how their personal investments and inquiries are networked with larger systems of political, historical, and economic power.

The remainder of this essay begins to critically examine the local topography of Houston. I sketch out three scenes of Houston life—a fiction of Houston, an event, and a place. I will then discuss what assembling these scenes means for the writing of this paper as well as the teaching of writing and rhetoric in an era of neoliberal education. I will then go on to discuss an upper-division writing course based on located research focusing on Houston. Each of these sites works as an assemblage of sorts; a locus of meaning that when placed in the context with the others can generate more meaning than when alone. It is my contention that assemblage theory is key to teaching writing and transnational feminist rhetorical practice at this historical moment.

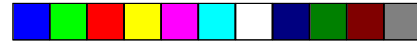


### Houston: An Exemplary Neoliberal City

A large part of the course is guiding students through the process of assemblage. As stated earlier, the ability to read seemingly disparate texts together allows for a more complex rendering of a particular location. Douglas Reichert Powell, in his book *Critical Regionalism* argues that to fully understand a region, scholars must understand that a region is more than a location or a nostalgic memory. Instead, it is a constant negotiation between memory, history, geography, as well as individual and collective understandings of that place. In other words, it is a constantly changing, yet mutually constituted site (26).

I argue that the assemblage, much like Powell's critical regionalism, can expose the varied histories, ideologies, and materialities that comprise a place. But unlike Powell, whose focus presupposes a democratic, communal vision of located experience and even action, the assemblage pieces together narratives that may not be constructed in light of a common or even democratic good. In other words, the assemblage is an analytic well-placed to understand location or exchange set in neoliberalism. That is the key shift present between Powell's work and mine. I read Powell as being invested in a vision of liberal governmentality—where governments and people are invested in producing or agitating for a common good, story, or ideology. I, however, see the commitment to liberal governmentality as waning, and instead we have entered a moment of neoliberal governmentality where personal responsibility and protection of the free market reign.<sup>4</sup>

As such, the assemblage allows for narratives of conflicting and competing contexts to come together and create a clearer picture of a location. In this next section, I will assemble three scenes of Houston. Each give a particular narrative of Houston at different historical moments, and each comes from different kinds of texts. It is through the assembling of these narratives, that I can show how those who tell stories about Houston do not always have the interests of "the greater good" in mind, nor do they strive for democratic deliberation between parties. In other words, the assemblage of these scenes demonstrate Houston's investment in individual interest and neoliberalism.

*Scene One*

In *Open House*, Mark Doty writes about driving down Westheimer Boulevard in Houston. He recalls being stuck in traffic as people enter and exit strip mall parking lots—each equipped with its own nail salon open for business even as the other spaces in the mall remain empty. He paints an image of Houston with big skies, no zoning, confusing planning (due to the lack of zoning laws and the sprawl), and cultural hybridity. If everything is built for the culture of the car (and Harris county does insure fifteen percent of all the vehicles in the U.S., as Doty is quick to remind his readers), then the city itself can sprawl like a suburb—not really a city at all—and begin to take on a new kind of American urban identity—as “polyglot, open ended, divergent, entirely unstuffy, and appealingly uncertain of itself.”<sup>5</sup>

Doty’s read is quite lovely, and on a good day Houston does seem to be a place where contradictions and complicated histories and politics jostle each other in seeming polite company, if not harmony. However, I would not go so far as to say that Houston’s culture is solely fueled by desire and chance. Rather, in some respects, it is driven by economics and unrestrained city ordinances. Doty does gloss the “no zoning” policy in Houston that allows “Adult bookstores to exist next to corporate Modern Condos,” and he does point out that Houston is “a driver’s city,” thus the abundance of traffic and registered vehicles mentioned above. But for Doty, this is part of the new postmodern city where people have the means, space, and imagination to propagate their own futures—free from the binds of limited space, resources, and city planning (or laws, ordinances, and stigmas) that are present in other more traditional (or modernist) cities.

Doty misses the economic and political commitment to neoliberal capital that underlies the choices made in (and for) Houston. For example, part of the reason there is no zoning in Houston is because the city privileges private property and therefore will not even intervene so much as to tell businesses or private citizens what can be built where. The private citizen and his/her home are central to both the ideologies and economic policies that structure Texas life.<sup>6</sup> And it is because of these policies that Texas becomes an exemplary site to discuss how aspects of privatization—a feature central of the economic and political practices of



neoliberalism—tell stories about who the American public “others” and who is exempted from this othering in order to define the national public as discrete communities—Homeowners, Texans, Americans.

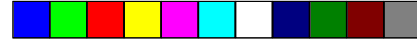
So Doty is correct; on any given street in Houston, you can see luxury homes next to businesses, one-hundred-year-old ill-maintained apartment buildings, churches, and strip clubs. There are narrow restrictions—particular neighborhoods manage themselves with deed restrictions and/or home owner’s associations, enough civic pressure and/or money, or laws regarding how close you can place a strip club or adult video store to a school. But aside from these minor interventions, Houston is a free-for-all. Assuming you have the money to purchase the property, it is yours to do with as you please.

Doty’s piece celebrates the erosion of the modernist city, and he celebrates the freedom he associates with the postmodern city. I, however, do not see Houston as a bastion of freedom. Instead, I read the changes Doty articulates as a new phase of capitalism—one that thrives more on privatization, business, and capital than state and municipal regulations. Primacy of private property is central to neoliberalism, and Wendy Brown discusses how the move away from liberal democracy to neoliberal logics focuses on the privatization of property and ethics. She states:

In making the individual fully responsible for her- or himself, neoliberalism equates moral responsibility with rational action; it erases the discrepancy between economic and moral behavior by configuring morality entirely as a matter of rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences. (6)

According to Brown, neoliberalism removes the buffer between economics and morals and creates a world wherein moral decisions are made through a cost-benefit analysis of what will affect the self. There are no longer objective moral standards to be met or dealt with, and state and local laws follow the same guidelines that put the onus on individuals to police their own behavior. Morality, within neoliberalism, is another commodity that has been privatized. And it is the yoking of the ideology of personal responsibility to the economic realities of privatization that makes neoliberalism within Texas so powerful.





The rhetoric of personal responsibility and the pursuit of economic self-interest demonstrate the clear logic of neoliberalism (Dingo 15), a logic that holds the seemingly contradictory ideas of “family values” and “economic individualism” together through the larger framework of the public/private, self/other divide. In 2007, Joe Horn was arrested because he shot and killed two men burglarizing his neighbors’ home. He was ultimately acquitted under the Castle Doctrine laws, which state that it is self-defense to shoot intruders on *your* property if they show intent to commit a crime. The controversy surrounding Horn’s case was not that he shot and killed two men, but that those men were not on *his* property. A grand jury, however, finally acquitted him because it was shown that the suspects did have weapons and items from his neighbors’ home in hand (Rogers and Lezon). Also, his neighbors were not home, and Horn was protected under Good Samaritan laws. So in Houston, property wins over life—there needn’t be any demonstration of self-defense needed, just a threat to your property. The postmodern charm of the “no zoning” described by Doty in the beginning of this section is all part of a much more insidious logic of privatization that can have deadly consequences.

### *Scene Two*

On 12 September 2008, Hurricane Ike blew through Houston, Texas and the outlying areas. There was not quite as much rainfall as predicted because the hurricane lost momentum upon hitting land. It became a high category two in ferocity instead of the predicted category four it had been while circling in the gulf. However, even at a high category two, Ike managed to down trees, rip through roofs, flood neighborhoods, and leave the entire Houston metropolitan area literally powerless.

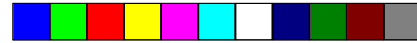
And it is the reality of and discussions surrounding the month long power-outage that I now want to focus on. In order to do so, there are a few facts about civic life in Houston that must be made clear. The first is that like the rest of the state of Texas, the city of Houston is a strong pro-business municipality. From the aforementioned lack of citywide zoning to the absence of personal, business, and state income tax, Houston is invested in business and private property rather than social services or municipal investment.



Seeing that as the political context of Houston and Texas at large, it is not surprising that Houston was an exemplar of Texas' Energy Deregulation that had begun statewide in 2002. There were some critiques of the rising costs of power associated with the deregulation of power services, especially in Houston—some specific critiques noted that power costs had risen up to 56% over the seven years deregulation had been in effect (Fowler and Elliot). But by the time Ike hit in early September, Houstonians had made their choices and had signed up with particular power companies that they thought would bring the best price—and none of these firms were directly connected to Centerpoint Energy, the company who delivered the power to the delivery companies, who then delivered “their” power to the homes of the 2,099,451 residents in Houston.<sup>7</sup>

This move is not rare, and it is merely an example of neoliberal economics wherein prices, ethics, and customer service are guaranteed through competition. Two of the main beliefs in the neoliberal economic model are: the market will regulate itself and competition will insure fair if not low pricing. In the case of post-Ike Houston, the good quickly became the ugly when it took over one month to restore power to the whole city. During that time, there was seemingly no rhyme or reason as to who got their power restored when. Houston was not a repetition of Katrina: the wealthy neighborhoods were just as likely to be out of power for the duration as those neighborhoods known as the “poor” or lower class ones. The ethnic demographics of the neighborhoods had little to do with it. Instead, most citizens of Houston saw the power-outage as an inconvenience, but one that was fair—just like the market.

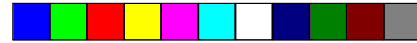
The local news coverage of the outage, however, did not focus on the parallels between market logic and city's loss of power. Instead, the power problems were discussed, charted, and reported as resulting from the unique nature of Houston's topography and the lack of knowledge and/or ability to understand and overcome the very Houston-ness of Houston. For example, a story that circulated between all three of the local news stations followed out-of-state electrical service workers who had been called in to help restore power to Houston.<sup>8</sup> The reporter would follow them down manholes into sewer walkways, up electrical poles as they



opened breaker boxes, and around fallen trees as they attempted to clear pathways for trucks and other service vehicles. The conversations between the workers and the news reporters always produced the same three memes: 1) Houston's heat is like nothing they had ever experienced; 2) Houston is full of large bugs which fly at you while you are working; and 3) Houston does not have a clear map of its grid, like other cities, so it is difficult to systematically restore power. Each of these narratives provided a chuckle to the news anchors, and allowed for some levity about how non-Houstonians just don't get Houston.

One could argue that these faux-human interest stories served as a way for uncomfortable and frustrated Houstonians to begin to bond over the trials and tribulations of their collective fate. However, I see this rhetoric as a function of the neoliberal economics (and the deregulation) responsible for the lengthy return of Houston's power. The use of out-of-state workers as the main conduits of information on the progress of the restoration allows for those gems above to serve as the reasons why power hasn't been returned in a more timely fashion. It is not that the system is flawed, although you could argue that the lack of a map of the grid of Houston does nod to that conclusion. But rather it is the fact that there are outsiders who cannot handle what Houston has to offer (the heat, bugs, quirky electrical grid). The use of the outsider is a trend in both media and legislation to shift focus from the failures of power and place the failures of a system on a group of people who do not belong. I argue in *Branding Bodies* that nationally in anti-immigration and anti-LGBT discourses the "other" (the immigrant or GLBT body who can be enfolded into the nation) and the "other-other" (the bodies that are too different and must be expelled) are central to neoliberal rhetoric, but I also argue that here, in a much more benign way, you can see it focused on those workers who came from Montana, Arizona, and California to help restore power in Houston.<sup>9</sup> They just could not do it fast enough because they aren't part of this unique community.

Of course, this was no Katrina—Houston's power problems did not outwardly affect only the poorest or ethnically populated neighborhoods. Instead, the blind eye of neoliberalism created havoc all over the city.<sup>10</sup> Now, the "equality" of the power outage presented by the media and many Houston liberals is by no means entirely true. Houston is an incredibly

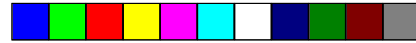


segregated city, but it is defacto segregated. Schools are almost exclusively African-American, or Caucasian, or Southeast Asian not because they are segregated, but because Houston does not want to pay for bussing, and, therefore, schools' districting is done through economic concerns, not census data ("Student Eligibility"). However, many believe that this adherence to economics in all of its decisions is a way for Houston to remain racially neutral in its politics. Even liberals to whom I presented my reading of the post-Ike power outage always felt a little proud when confronted with the fact that post-Ike was not post-Katrina. The issues in Houston did not affect only lower-class African American neighborhoods. They affected everyone in Houston equally, or seemingly rationally.

### *Scene Three*

1717 Bissonnet, or Maryland Manor, is an unassuming 1960s apartment complex on a high-traffic street in the middle of Houston's Museum District. Its exterior fits in with the eclectic look of the high-priced neighborhood townhomes and single family dwellings, and even though it provides reasonably priced apartment-living for students or others who wish to live in this neighborhood, Maryland Manor's grounds keep up the appearances of a well maintained complex suited to one of Houston's most exclusive zip codes. From the outside, no one would expect that 1717 Bissonnet had become one of the most controversial addresses in Houston.

It began in the summer of 2007 when a development group bought 1717 Bissonnet and submitted proposed plans to level Maryland Manor and erect in its place the Ashby high-rise, "a 23 story, 183 unit high-rise building" that would include both living and business units. The Boulevard Oaks Civic Association and Southampton Civic Club joined together, as well as otherinterested citizens in the surrounding area, and insisted the city stop development of the high-rise on the grounds that it would (1) dwarf the current neighborhood buildings, and (2) exponentially increase traffic in the neighborhood and near a neighborhood school. The city agreed to halt the development until a proper traffic study could be undertaken. No comment was made about the size of the building.

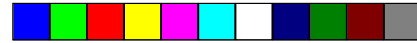


According to the civic associations against it, Ashby High-rise, or “The Tower of Traffic” as many around Houston know it, is a unique and detrimental addition to the neighborhood’s character and development. However, because of Houston’s overt lack of zoning and limited deed restrictions (1717 Bissonnet is an unrestricted piece of property and was originally a mixed use property that historically had a gas station, grocery store, and apartment complex housed on the land), there is little legal action the neighborhood can take. The civic associations are quite clear that they are not trying to get the mayor, city council or any other civic entity to institute zoning. But they do want them to consider the “children,” the “traffic” and the “character” of the neighborhood they have built.<sup>11</sup>

These arguments, as moving as they seem, are no match against a development plan that contains little or no plan other than one of non-restricted growth. However, the city and the mayor are not unsympathetic to the value of wealthy voters who actually have the influence (and the means) to put forward a campaign against development in their neighborhood. So the city did listen, and they did limit what could be built at 1717 Bissonnet. After turning down 11 applications, the city of Houston finally approved the twelfth set of plans Buckhead Development Partners submitted. The plans were quite different than the original concept; they removed all business suites, and eliminated 40 apartment units leaving the building totaling 17 floors of residential space. However, ground has still not broken on the project. Buckhead is now suing the city of Houston for \$40 million in damages, claiming that they were not dealt with in good faith and that the city’s judgment represents loss of revenue. As of today, Maryland Manor is still leasing inexpensive apartments to Rice graduate students in one of Houston’s most exclusive neighborhoods.

### **Assembling Houston**

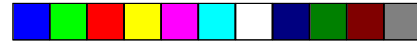
Part of how assemblage works is that it joins together texts which are seemingly distant from one another, yet through a contiguous reading it becomes clear that there are certain ideologies and material realities that



join them together. Furthermore, this particular assemblage was borne of my own interest in understanding Houston's commitment to "No Zoning." Houston is the only major metropolitan area to subscribe to a city plan (or lack of city plan) that regulates building through Home Owners Associations and Deed Restrictions, but offers no city-wide intervention about where and how businesses, single-family homes, or high rises are built.

Having grown up in California (which is one of the most zoned states in the nation) and having arrived in Houston via New York State (which also employs zoning, city ordinances, and civic control of space), I found the idea that Houston does not zone both fascinating and abhorrent. I found that the more I began to focus on the question of "No Zoning," the more other people had stories to tell about it as well. Some stories were positive, some were ambivalent, but most were in line with the story Houston tells about itself—that the lack of zoning adds to the "opportunities" you find in the city. Both ideologically and personally, then, this assemblage revealed both the personal and neoliberal stakes of "No Zoning!" in Houston.

These particular moments of experience—or what I am calling "scenes" within a location—are stories of a place, Houston. And it is my contention that when you assemble these stories, they begin to reveal something about that place that might not have been there before: a new story, a counter-narrative, or a story beneath the story. As discussed earlier, Manuel DeLanda's theory of assemblage joins together the discursive, material, and organic through interactions and the reconceptualization of how we understand our most basic biological and social interactions. Furthermore, I would argue that it allows us to reconceptualize our own individual relationships and understanding of a place by putting them in conjunction with other conceptions of that same place. For him, it is not enough to say that we assemble meaning by placing words, phrases, and sentences together (or in my case scenes from the city of Houston). We must also attend to how these words, phrases, and sentences are territorialized and coded or decoded throughout their exchange. And each exchange can be scaled from the minute (discursive assemblages at the sentence level, or organic at the atomic level) to the global (assemblages of territorial nation-states or biological viruses that

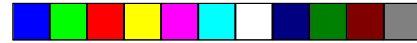


grow and adapt to other organisms and cells in their wake). And from there, we must reflect on how each scale of exchange relates to our own individual scales of understanding.

Even within these few scenes of Houston, the assemblage appears discursively in multiple scales. It is first used at an organizational level as a rhetorical structure for Doty as he assembles a collection of buildings, histories, and memories to define Houston as a postmodern city. Next, the assemblage is used in the local news as a rhetorical figure to create an “outsider” whose many non-Houstonian traits serve as a means to unify the city during the stressful period of post-hurricane Ike. And finally, the assemblage becomes a rhetorical meme in the Ashby high-rise debate through the creation of “the tower of traffic” campaign, and that meme serves as a way to obfuscate the true stakes behind the arguments limiting the building at 1717 Bissonnet. The scaling from neighborhood phrase, to piece of writing, to citywide argument all represent how flexible the assemblage is within rhetorical theory. Yet, these scenes also reveal that not only does discursive assemblage mark them, but they are markers of material assemblage as well.

No zoning and deregulation are both easily translated into Deleuzian assemblage theory because after all, per Deleuze, assemblages are just wholes characterized by relations of exteriority. And when a city is deregulated or marked by unrestrained growth, the only way to find meaning is by how the external buildings relate to one another once they are put in place. You cannot look to city plans, corporate schemes, or national ideology. Instead, you are forced to assemble some kind of reading of Houston from the exteriority—how the buildings, the power grid, the people fit together and move around one another. In other words, Houston is a prime city to be read through assemblage theory.

Therefore, by structuring my paper in this way, through discussion of these scenes, in a way I am already assembling the narrative of Houston I want you to see—one of neoliberal capital, privatized morality, wealthy investors, and capital run amok. And what is key about the assemblage, as I have stated throughout this essay, is that it allows those personal investments to guide our readings of a place, but not uncritically. The personal is respected, but it is also open for critique, revision, and



exchange, just as all the other texts assembled together. Therefore, there are many other stories of Houston that challenge my assembled narrative, ones about religion, counter culture, immigration, and poverty. How we code our stories, our classrooms, and then decode them with our students becomes key in these local investigations.

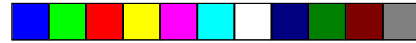
### **Writing Houston: Writing with One's Community**

In *Dangerous Writing*, Tony Scott discusses how large public universities are changing. He sites demographics, economic conditions, and No Child Left Behind as root causes of the shift in our student body. He claims that more and more large institutions educate working, commuter students who do not follow the “typical college experience,” we as professors often assume our students have. He argues that our students “fit classes and homework” into their already “overbooked lives” filled with “material realities and economic responsibilities” that we do not take into account when creating course assignments. Scott sees this shift as permanent and pervasive, and he believes that it will encompass all of higher education, with the exception of a few elite institutions, within the next several decades.

Scott's description of student life—filled with family, work, and material obligations—mirrors the lives of students at the University of Houston. And for that reason, I attempted to create a writing course that not only engaged them critically but personally. I developed a course based on their relationship with the city of Houston because most students have a day-to-day engagement with the city, regardless of whether that engagement is positive or negative. According to Scott, it is working from topics that the students know that the best writing can happen. Therefore, I began to work up a course that not only drew on that premise, but one that also drew on the many premises of the deep connections between the local and systemic power put forth by transnational feminists.

One of the reasons Houston engages the current UH student population is because of its logics of individualism and privatization. As discussed in my previous assemblage, Houston's commitment to



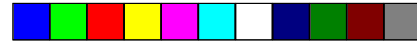


private property and individual interest organizes daily life in Houston. Yet, almost all of the ideology and material consequences of this commitment to privatization is not made explicit. In other words, students experience the daily realities of neoliberalism without ever having to analyze the underlying assumptions behind them. But by teaching the students to look critically at their own “first world autobiography,” to use a term from Caren Kaplan, students can begin to see their place in the networks of neoliberal economics and larger systems of power.

After all, as Kenneth Saltman carefully articulates, students who come through the public school system are subject to and products of the melding of capitalist interests masquerading (not so subtly) in the guise of education. These students find themselves within systems of unequal power where they have little or no say in the regulations from which they must act. In fact, many of these students have been taught to work as neoliberal actors through the messages they get from the media, corporate sponsorship of sports teams or afterschool activities, and even their educational experiences. Saltman argues that these students are hardly given the tools to analyze their own conditions; rather, they are taught “such compartmentalized versions of knowledge and learning” that they “fail to see how they relate to the broader social realities and knowledge-making both in schools and society in general” (16).

And it is these students’ commitment(s) that prepares them to begin looking at a site, such as Houston, that is so steeped in the logics of neoliberalism. Even though on the surface, students may not understand the links between their local experience and the transnational, they do understand that Houston is a “city of opportunity” that prioritizes money and commerce—sometimes to the detriment of their own needs, as in the case of the privatization of public education. However, these students’ position as neoliberal subjects does not only make them able to read Houston as a pro-business city. It allows them to begin to understand the implications of Houston’s commitment to business across its social and political culture, as well.

Therefore, I ask students to engage with their own autobiographies and their local conditions, not in order to form myopic practices or analyses that simply interrogate their histories within a vacuum. Instead,



I ask them to employ a feminist engagement with “the politics of the local” wherein the students situate their experience within larger networks of power, exchange, and conditions. They may begin focusing on a meaningful place to them in Houston, but by the end of the first unit of class, where they read several different pieces about Houston’s history, they are able to begin to see their affinity for particular places, or now the places themselves are created in response and/or connection to powerful economic relationships and histories that are often rendered invisible. In other words, much like transnational feminist work by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, and others, I ask students to look at experience as part of a collection of power relations and circumstances that are not often made clear by large institutions that govern our world. Therefore, the local, and students’ places within the local, become a fruitful site of inquiry within which to resist the type of neoliberal and capitalist public education Saltman discusses above.

Part of the challenge of doing responsible place-based research in a fifteen-week semester is not only getting the students to invest in the course, but also finding a way to ensure that they continue their engagement with their chosen site of investigation after the research is complete and the projects have been turned in.<sup>12</sup> To keep the students involved past the end of the course, it is traditionally thought that there must be ways to monitor the students, give them credit hours or monetary compensation, and structure their involvement. I found, however, that if the students began with a space that they had intimate knowledge of and a personal connection (for example, their own neighborhood), researched that space and found their own place within in it, then their commitment to their own location and interaction within their community was enough to create a relationship that lasted beyond the course. This commitment became one that was personal, and did not need to be mediated by the university or by me. In fact, the research in the class allowed students to become a part of their community on their own terms. It became a negotiation for students of their place within a larger community, one to which students began to feel a responsibility and a commitment that they did not feel prior to the research and engagement that they did during the course.



As demonstrated above, part of the work of the assemblage is to allow students to see their own experiences and personal investments as texts to be placed in conjunction with the fictions, histories, and statistics we read. By asking students to engage with images of Houston already circulating and then adding their own images to those archives, the students were able to assemble a clear set of texts from which to write and construct their own arguments about Houston. The first part of the course, then, asked them to read essays, travel books, news stories, and view videos about Houston in order to provide a context or a series of narratives about the city. During this segment of the course, students were asked not only to form their own opinions about the texts we were reading and viewing as a class, but also to collect and assemble their own narratives or collections of texts that spoke back to these texts.

This assignment proved quite fruitful for the students because it enabled them to disrupt the view of texts as solo entities or finished documents. Furthermore, it gave them space to dispute the neoliberal tendencies of the narratives of Houston, which tended to focus on post-modern narratives of individual achievement, business prowess, or private gain. Instead, students began forming research questions based on their own personal experiences. Seeing those experiences in a broader frame led them to question overlooked contradictions in Houston's celebratory self-sufficiency narratives.

For example, one student began to question why in a city with so much diversity, most neighborhood schools were predominantly attended by only one or two races. She was particularly interested in a high school very close to the University of Houston campus that was 90% African American and 10% Latino with no Caucasians or students of other ethnicities. For her first paper, she assembled her observations and research from the Houston Independent School District (HISD) website where it heralded itself as one of the most diverse school districts in the United States. But her observation of Yates High School contradicted that claim, and it was not addressed in any way. Her assemblage of these texts led to a class discussion about de facto segregation and how the economic choices of the district that prevented bussing, along with the ideology that supported neighborhood schools, created a district wide "problem"



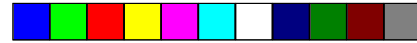
wherein neighborhood schools were often attended by the limited diversity of the neighborhood in which they resided.

Her assembled counter-narrative about Houston and her research sparked an interest in the local neighborhood, the Third Ward, and led to a more sustained final research project. But by starting with resistance to established narratives and beginning to assemble different stories, the students were able to discover a different Houston, one in which they were part of a community of inquirers who were not satisfied with the status quo. They began to challenge the narratives about Houston because when compared with what they were seeing first hand those narratives did not seem to make sense anymore. If Houston was indeed so diverse, why weren't the schools?

I believe that by creating inquiries based on experience, and then contextualizing those experiences within assemblages of text and context (that is, laws, cultural practices, art, neighborhood lore), students began to see research as a viable means of understanding their world. Each of these collections of texts allowed for a unique perspective on Houston, and by placing these seemingly disparate texts in conversation, the students were able to show how multiple genres and linkages were at work in Houston.

### **Connecting to the Past: Personally Experiencing Houston**

As I have stated throughout this essay, the key to the work in the course was allowing students to begin engaging their own personal histories and/or stories about Houston. Once they established their own connections, they were able to assemble those with other stories, histories, and statistics. Through the contextualization of their own experience, most students came away with a newfound understanding, and often an appreciation of their own place within Houston. Take the work of Megan Mitchell.<sup>13</sup> Mitchell was a resident of Houston's Third Ward—a historically Black neighborhood right outside of the University of Houston. She moved into the Third Ward four years prior, but had visited there her whole life. Her grandmother, aunt, and many cousins had lived in the Third Ward for most of her life, and she remembered spending a great deal



of her childhood in the shotgun houses that used to line the streets of this neighborhood. Even though she had strong familial ties to the neighborhood, Mitchell never felt a particular affinity for the Third Ward or the community of people who lived there. According to her, she never felt particularly “at home” in any neighborhood in which she lived, and the Third Ward was no exception. She writes:

Before I began my inquiry surrounding the neighborhood, I was under the impression that the 3<sup>rd</sup> ward had always looked like this, with dilapidated houses and buildings, drug infested streets, trashed lots and filthy gutters. [...] This inquiry led me to discover a new 3<sup>rd</sup> ward, (what some like to call the “Tre”) and this paper is more of a chronicle of my journey to finding my place in the neighborhood that I call home. (Mitchell 1)

Through interviewing the people in her neighborhood, Mitchell began to see the Third Ward differently. She even renames it “the Tre” in her introduction. Instead of her paper merely discussing the role of arts intervention and community building in the neighborhood, her research led her to a much more fruitful discovery—“my place in the neighborhood I call home.”

By interviewing the long time residents of her community Mitchell began to collect counter-narratives about the Third Ward from “folks” who had lived there for many years. These were not only seen by Mitchell as valuable knowledge, but they functioned as key stories which allowed her to begin to assemble her own history, understanding, and context of what for her is now “the neighborhood I call home.” Once again it is the personal experiences of those who live in the neighborhood that connects with Mitchell. However, the questions she asked did not merely allow for her interviewees to describe their lives uncritically. Instead, their personal accounts are steeped in an understanding of gentrification and urban redevelopment, which are both borne of neoliberal economics.<sup>14</sup> When asked to discuss how she would use her interview data, Mitchell writes:

I plan on using my interview with Ms. Lee in my paper because she adds emphasis on the state of the area as a whole. I can use what she has to say to add to the idea of whether urban redevelopment is really helping the community or just a front. (Annotated Bib 1-2)



For Mitchell, Ms. Lee's position as an insider of the community is important because it helps her frame a part of her argument against urban redevelopment. Furthermore, Ms. Lee's interview was full of both the "good and the bad" about the Third Ward itself. She not only criticized the development companies who were trying to come in and "build up the Ward," but she also criticized the youth in the Ward who were "selling drugs" and "into crime." In Ms. Lee's eyes, the Third Ward did have a noble history, but she also saw its current issues. This impressed Mitchell, and she was able to begin to balance the narratives about the dangers of the ward against the view of someone who was inside the history and current conditions.

Furthermore, by assembling different sources, Mitchell was able to begin to understand the uneven power positions certain community members had within "the Tre." She began to negotiate those stories not by merely looking for similarities, but instead, she was able to weight certain opinions as "more relevant" to her because of their respected places within the community. Another community member who Mitchell interviewed and recorded was Mr. Eugene. Again, Mitchell found his interview valuable for many of the same reasons, and it was his place in the community, solidified by his interaction with passers-by as Mitchell conducted her interview, that made this interview quite special to Mitchell. From those interactions, Mitchell was able to understand his importance as a community member and thus value his interview accordingly. She states:

I plan on using my interview with Mr. Eugene, what the neighborhood likes to call him. I learned that Mr. Eugene had a better understanding of the community and a love for the community than Ms. Lee did. Mr. Eugene is an older retired man who lives in the community by himself. As I was doing the interview almost every person that walked down the street stopped and greeted Mr. Eugene. Mr. Eugene's perspective of the neighborhood is different than most because he was a part of the neighborhood during its high times and its lows. Mr. Eugene gave me great insight into how the community functioned in the fifties and sixties as the place to be for blacks. (Annotated bib 2)

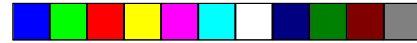


Mr. Eugene gave Mitchell a “longer view” of the Ward than Ms. Lee, and that was helpful to Mitchell. She was able to use these two interviews primarily as a way to negotiate narratives about the Third Ward against the popular narratives in the press and around University of Houston. Mr. Eugene’s and Ms. Lee’s interviews allowed Mitchell to assemble a narrative of the Third Ward that represented its rich history and its importance to the African American community in Houston. She was also able to begin to sort through how economics, politics, and ideology work to change the topography of a neighborhood. Through spending time in her own community, Mitchell began to notice the signs and signals of value within her neighborhood. She also learned the histories of that neighborhood, thus getting a certain sense of pride about her place within the community and the culture. Through assemblage, Mitchell was able to connect her personal experience, as well as the experiences of others, with the neoliberal realities of “the Tre.” And through that exploration, she was better able to feel “at home” in her world.

**Inquiring into National Discourse:  
Assembling the Local as Counter-Narrative**

Michell’s work demonstrates a personal, localized discussion that uncovered connections to neoliberalism, but ultimately served to extend her own personal engagement with a particular location. The assemblage, however, can work to challenge dominant discourses even more explicitly. Student Jamie Martinez used the assemblage to challenge a commonly held assumption that undocumented immigrants come to this country and live in apartments and homes in vast numbers. In his experience, this was not the case.<sup>15</sup>

Martinez has lived in Jacinto City, Texas—a suburb on the southeast side of Houston—for most of his life. Although he was aware of the community center, the schools, and the make up of the neighborhood, he was unaware of the statistics and histories that circulated throughout his community. He decided to challenge what he saw as a national “misunderstanding of the conditions under which immigrants live”; he decided to do a project that assembled visual archiving (photographs of the



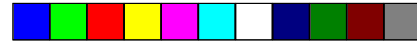
neighborhood), statistical research (the census), anecdotal evidence (walking tours and informal conversations), and historical research (educational archives). He felt by assembling a narrative of Jacinto City in many different media that he could demonstrate how his personal experience was in direct contradiction to the national narrative.

His final piece revealed a story of Jacinto City, Texas that challenged current stories of immigration patterns in the United States. Instead of homes that contained several families of immigrants crammed together in one small living space, Jacinto City offers small single family homes in which immigrants can settle as single families until they are ready to move into larger homes in more centralized areas of Houston. Between the photographs, the census, and his casual observations and interviews, Martinez's project demonstrated a counter-narrative to the dominant vision of immigrant multi-family, multi-year squatting, in the form of fixed and comfortable "immigrant communities." See below:

His project used digital media to combine photographic evidence of single family homes, for rent signs, maps, streets, as well as the presence of few cars per home (instead of the presumed multiple cars correlated with multiple residents), with census and real estate data for the area. This multi-media, multi-genre text demonstrates that the median vacancy rate in Jacinto City is 0.8 % (one of the lowest in Houston), and the rental vacancy rate is 4.9%. The average household size is 2.345 and the average family size is 3.88. Martinez was able to make educated claims about residents in the rentals by comparing this information to the population breakdown of 75.4% Hispanic to 22.7% White, in addition to drawing on his own experience living in Jacinto City.

Martinez's ability to use multi-genre and digital media enabled him to tell a story of his neighborhood that he could then compare to the national stories told about immigrants. He used his own experience and "located knowledge" as a basis from which to explore his world. From there, he began to assemble data digitally. It was his experiences collecting photos of "for rent" signs that helped him develop further questions about what kind of conditions Hispanic immigrants were really living under in Jacinto City. From those photos, he began researching census and real estate data. And by putting all the pieces together, he found a very different story that matched his own experience. Again, like





Mitchell, Martinez assembled a new story, but this time about national immigration.

**Assembling the Personal:  
The Local Challenges to Neoliberalism**

Each example of assemblage in this essay demonstrates how engaging the personal and the neoliberal can provide a critical look at the local. And even though I have argued that Houston is a particularly relevant site for this type of research because of its investment in neoliberal ideology, I by no means believe that Houston is the only place where these kinds of critical assemblages can take place. In her work on rhetorical ecologies, Jenny Rice shows how the local rhetoric in Austin—a much smaller and more liberal Texas town—circulates differently than previous discussions of the rhetorical situation have claimed. She states: “Rhetorical ecologies are co-coordinating processes, moving across the same social field and within shared structures of feeling” (20). Rice draws on Raymond Williams’s notion of “structures of feeling,” a term Williams defines as “concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systemic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable), over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences. An alternative definition would be structures of *experience*” (132).

This seemingly contradictory move to make experience both shared and individual mirrors even the most basic spatial condition of neoliberalism—the mall, the freeway, and the promenade are all public private spaces. Therefore the rhetorical moves within Williams’ structures of feeling are quite in line with the economic and political beliefs of those who espouse neoliberalism. Neoliberalism can name anything as a value or meaning, as long as it fits with current beliefs. However, both Mitchell and Martinez’s work demonstrates that through research and assemblage seemingly personal (or private) stories can resonate or challenge larger (either communal or national), established narratives. Whether they were able find their own place within their community (in

Mitchell's case) or to find how their experience within their community fit into larger national narratives (in Martinez's case), each student's engagement with larger systems of power was quite evident. And that is one critical point of transnational feminist (or rhetorical) pedagogy, as defined in the introduction to this cluster. It is not enough to understand one's own experience; one must be able to situate, locate, and analyze those experiences within larger contexts of power. And then understand how those experiences and systems of power interact and circulate forming new and different narratives across time and space.

Writing in or about a community can be a dangerous prospect for students who are not exposed to issues of power, economic, and ideological relations. However if we work to give our students the opportunities and the support they need to see themselves in relation to said communities, they can learn far more than we typically expect. Furthermore, by asking our students to begin in a place that allows them to expose and disrupt the neoliberal values and economic exchange with which they have become accustomed, they can begin to see the just how ingrained neoliberal rhetoric, economics, and systems of power truly are.

*University of Houston  
Houston, Texas*

### Notes

1. Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, as well as many other scholars who study neoliberal economics, clearly document how the implementation of NAFTA and CAFTA during the Clinton administration, and the development of FTZ (free trade zones) across the globe have impacted the skilled labor sector of the U.S. No longer are factories and mass production centered within western countries because they can manufacture for less cost and under less regulation than within the U.S. or other seemingly "democratic" societies.

2. In *Networking Arguments*, Dingo discusses how rhetoric is formed through neoliberal linkages that cross both global and economic borders. She examines policy and NGO public exchanges to demonstrate how neoliberal culture has created conditions for changes in rhetorical practice.

3. Mohanty and Alexander discuss "bottom up" genealogy at length in their collection *Feminist Genealogies*. Drawing on the work of postcolonial and



Marxist scholars, like Edward Said, Mohanty and Alexander argue that those who are oppressed often have the clearest understanding of power relationships. Therefore, as scholars, we need to understand the experiences of marginalized people because they will allow us to more accurately theorize systemic relationships steeped in uneven power.

4. In *Branded Bodies*, I argue that we are in a neoliberal moment when the promise of the liberal nation-state, one in which the government purports to care for its citizens through social welfare programs financed by state funds, is eroding. Currently, state policies are defined by neoliberal governmentality that privileges privatization of government industry and individual personal responsibility.

5. My critique of Doty's reading of Houston as a postmodern city is reminiscent of Jameson's critique of postmodernism's corrective to modernism in *Postmodernism*. In that text he critiques the way critics have looked at Andy Warhol as "free" from the constraints of modernism when his work truly reveals how embedded in capitalism postmodernism really is. I would argue that Doty's view of Houston occludes that same deep connection to capital that the postmodern has.

6. Texas is a strong pro-business state as the lack of personal, business, and state income tax reveals. Texas is invested in business and private property rather than social services or municipal investment. The results of these material conditions is an ideology that privileges the individual over the communal. It is each individual's right and responsibility to take care of themselves, their property, and their own livelihood. And they need to do this without governmental intervention.

7. 2010 census data.

8. Each of the major network affiliates in Houston—KPRC-TV (NBC), KHOU (CBS), KTRK (ABC), and KRIV (Fox)—all ran similar stories in which they focused on the treacherous conditions and calamitous events that befell the out of town Centerpoint workers. Each station followed the same line of reasoning, and even the *Houston Chronicle* (Houston's only print newspaper) did not inquire about the connection between the power outages, Houston's commitment to no zoning, or the deregulation that took place the previous year.

9. The terms "other" and "other-other" were first theorized by Sara Ahmed in *Strange Encounters*. In *Branding Bodies*, I used the theories associated with those terms to establish how certain immigrants and GLBT bodies are forwarded as brands to reify the U.S. nation-state in times of economic vulnerability.

10. An excellent discussion of the political and material causes and ramifications of hurricane Katrina can be found in *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* edited by Johnson. The assembled texts within this collection analyze not only the history of Louisiana, but also the strategic response by the governments—both local and

national—to demonstrate the underlying ideologies of late capitalism, historic (and arguably current) racism, and American exceptionalism that ebbed to the surface.

11. According to Brown, Dean, Duggan and other scholars who study the changes in both the nation and subjectivity that are the result of neoliberalism, a key feature in the ideology and discourse is the privileging of private property and private interest. The arguments surrounding the Ashby High rise does not stem from the desire to change conditions across Houston. Instead, it is about a particular community asserting their perceived rights as property owners who have a vested interest in keeping their neighborhood free of a multi-use dwelling. However, to rally neighboring areas and the city to their cause, they call upon the rhetoric of “community” and “safety” to gain political support.

12. Mathieu makes this concern quite clear in her book *Tactics of Hope*. Her answer is to move service learning or community literacy courses out of the traditional semester long writing classes and into writing centers that do not follow semester schedules. But barring that possibility, she sees many difficulties in continuous engagement with the community outside of the university.

13. Name changed to protect student anonymity.

14. Gentrification and urban redevelopment are key to bringing the “young upper middle class” to the city. According to Dunay, Speck, and Lydon in *The Smart Growth Manual*, cities across the country are now working to establish more walking, family-friendly urban neighborhoods. While their book suggests these areas can be done throughout the city through attention to scale (regional, city, neighborhood), city planners and urban developers too often purchase low-income properties (or whole neighborhoods) to create these “new” urban spaces.

15. Name changed to protect student anonymity.

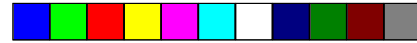
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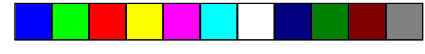
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