An Idiosyncratic Tour of Houston
Pokey Anderson

For at least several thousand people in Houston, I was the first open lesbian they ever encountered. In the 1970s, I spoke in front of more than fifty classes and organizations around town. During the 1980s, I hosted a weekly lesbian radio show. In the 1990s, I operated a lesbian/feminist/gay bookshop that doubled as a community center.

Today as I walk around Montrose, my home for over a quarter of a century, I trade dog stories with my neighbors, commiserate about the weather, and lament the bulldozing of bungalows to make room for yet another hermetically sealed townhome. But I also see landmarks of a larger journey toward visibility and justice. I invite you to tag along on an idiosyncratic tour, viewing Houston´s recent past through my eyes.

Rice Hotel, 909 Texas at Travis. Our tour starts here on February 9Ü11, 1973. I was in my early twenties, having just moved to Houston after college. Like countless lesbians at the time, I believed I was "the only one" on the planet. Then I went downtown to the inaugural National Women´s Political Caucus convention, the first national women´s convention in 101 years. I got to see the "stars" of the women´s movement up close: Sissy Farenthold, Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm, Betty Friedan. I also found several workshops devoted to sexual orientation and discovered that a fledgling gay community center, Houston´s first, was up and running.

Montrose Gaze Community Center, 504 Fairview at Whitney. For a long time, I sat in my car outside, too scared to go in. When I finally made it inside, I found pool tables, posters on the walls, and . . . mostly gay men. Sigh. A friend and I used to pretend there were really seventy-five lesbians around, instead of the usual one or two or three. I´d say, "Where are all the women?" Marion´s answer was always, "Oh, the seventy-five just left."

Roaring Sixties, 2305 S. Shepherd. "Sign in," I was told the first time I went into this lesbian bar. "No, not your real name. Are you crazy? Use a fake name!" Gay/lesbian bars used to post lookouts. If the police showed up, the lookouts would flash a warning light inside, and the same-sex couples dancing together would separate, switching to a partner of the opposite sex.

The Women´s Center, 3602 Milam. Though Houston´s first women´s center had—you guessed it—just two or three lesbians, a new generation of politically active lesbians was right around the corner. In 1974 Harla Kaplan started a NOW task force on sexuality and lesbianism. Where the previous generation´s watchword was "Keep a low profile and maybe they´ll leave us alone," ours was more on the lines of "Everybody should have rights—us, too!" It took a later generation to chant, "We´re here, we´re queer, get used to it!"

Just Marion & Lynn´s, 817 Fairview. When I bellied up to the bar here and ordered a ginger ale, the bartender screwed up her face and said, "Do you know what kind of place this is?" I knew. Not long after that, in April 1975, I arranged for lesbian author Judy Grahn to read her wonderful poetry here. As the beer bottles clanged and the cash register banged, I wished for a better space, but almost no one would rent to an openly lesbian group in those days. This bar was also the scene of one of my most unfriendly experiences in Houston. I was outside the bar saying goodnight to a woman, standing next to her car as we talked and did a little kissing. "Look at ´em! Stuck together like dogs!" A man was yelling from his porch across the street. Startled, we realized he was talking about us. "I´m going to go in and get my rifle and shoot ´em apart!" he said. We didn´t wait to see if he was a good shot.

1531 Maryland. On this cobblestone street in June 1975, three gay men, a lesbian, and a terrier started the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus. I had heard that a San Francisco group was using block voting to try to elect gay-friendly candidates. Since virtually the entire gay/lesbian populace was in the closet then, the privacy offered by the voting booth was ideal. Keith McGee, Bill Buie, Hugh Crell, and I (and my dog) set the Caucus in motion, and soon after Jerry Miller and I appeared on television. Coming out publicly at that time was a little like taking a leap off a cliff without knowing how far down it was, but nothing bad happened. Well, there was that woman at work, the one from Midland with one of those made-up faces that looked as if it would shatter if she smiled. She refused to get on the elevator with me.

A ball field somewhere in Houston. In March 1977 during a softball game, I mentioned that I had been chosen to go to the first White House meeting on lesbian and gay rights. I couldn´t afford the airfare, so I had decided not to go. Within moments someone had grabbed a baseball cap; before I could stop her, she went around to everyone on the field,

shaking them down for a dollar or two. Several other friends chipped in what seemed like princely sums at the time—$25 and $50—and I was on my way to Washington. Central Library, 500 McKinney. Anita Bryant was a paid spokesperson for orange juice; with comments like "Homosexuals are human garbage,"[1] she also became a lightning rod for controversy. When the Texas Bar Association invited Bryant to speak at their convention, it sparked Houston's first gay march. On June 16, 1977, 3,000 gay men, lesbians, and supporters marched by candlelight from 401 McGowen past the Hyatt Regency to the library plaza.

Albert Thomas Convention Center, Smith at Capitol. On November 18-21, 1977, 2,000 delegates from all over the United States gathered for the International Women's Year (IWY) conference. I was a Texas IWY delegate and a board member of the National Gay Task Force, which had worked in coalitions for a year to get progressive delegates elected at the state level, out-organizing and outmaneuvering the right wing. On the last day of the national plenary sessions, it came time for lesbian issues to be considered. Jean O'Leary, Charlotte Bunch, and Ellie Smeal were among those who spoke. Then Betty Friedan, legendary mother of modern feminism and equally legendary opponent of lesbian rights, stepped up to the mike. "I am known to be violently opposed to the lesbian issue in the women's movement, and in fact I have been," Friedan said that night. "As someone who has grown up in Peoria, Illinois, and who has loved men—perhaps too well—I have had trouble with this issue. I now see that there is nothing in the ERA that will give any protection to homosexuals. We must help women who are lesbians win their own civil rights." I was dumbfounded. She'd reversed herself! When the vote was taken, an overwhelming majority rose to confirm the lesbian rights resolution. As our 1,000 helium-filled balloons proclaiming "We Are Everywhere" floated to the ceiling, pandemonium broke out. We cried, we jumped on the chairs, we danced in the aisles.

KPFT Radio, 419 Lovett. A number of Houstonians flipping their radio dials on Friday mornings got a big surprise during the 1980s. Cherry Wolf and I, co-hosts of "The Breakthrough Show," reeled them in with great music by women, whether it was reggae, New Age, folk, classical, world music, jazz, or rock. Mixing in interviews, commentary, and an offbeat sense of humor, all from a lesbian-feminist point of view, we won listener support that ranked near the top of KPFT's 100+ programs. Perhaps the program should have been declared a threat to public safety: more than one listener reported driving their cars off the road, helplessly laughing or crying, during one of our shows.

City Hall, 900 Bagby. In June 1984, Houston City Council passed an ordinance preventing discrimination in city employment on the basis of sexual orientation. Showing up for the Council deliberations were gay people, church people, and Klansmen. Crowded into the Council chambers, I stood within a few feet of some Klansmen and can still remember one young man's face, marred by acne and a vacant meanness; he wore fear like a cologne. While City Council voted, the Klansmen chanted, "Death to homosexuals." Although their language was more muted, the downtown establishment and Houston Chamber of

Commerce, led by former mayor Louie Welch, joined the Klan in opposing the equality ordinance, which went down to resounding defeat in a January 1985 referendum. By now fear and ignorance about AIDS was growing: the state health commissioner was calling for quarantine of AIDS patients, and police patrolling the Montrose area began wearing latex gloves. In the next election, Steven Hotze organized the Straight Slate, a group of political unknowns hoping to unseat City Council members who had supported the ordinance.

Outside Kaphan´s Restaurant, 7900 Main at Kirby. Louie Welch, trailing in a bid to defeat incumbent mayor Kathy Whitmire, made one of Houston´s most famous political gaffes on October 24, 1985. When he thought a microphone was off, he said on live television that the solution to AIDS would be to "shoot the queers." By the next morning, we were wearing T-shirts that said "LOUIE, DON´T SHOOT!" Welch and the Straight Slate were unsuccessful.

Inklings Bookshop, 1846 Richmond Avenue. In 1988, Annise Parker and I decided to open Inklings Bookshop. Our clientele would be lesbians, gay men, and feminists. And bisexuals. And transgendered people. And progressives and . . . like the movement, the clientele grew broader over time. It included two young lesbians who came in facing their first serious problems as a couple. They had no money for therapists, so I recommended a book. They diligently followed its advice. Recently, musing that their relationship might not have survived without Inklings, they celebrated their fourteenth anniversary together. On another day, a blonde, middle-aged woman came in wearing embroidered denim with matching accessories. She leaned over the counter and said, "I need to speak with you privately." Leery of inviting her into my office, I finally told her we could step outside the front door. Once there, she started to sob. "I think I´m bisexual," she confided to me and the cars driving by on Richmond. I gently got her back inside and listened to her story. Now Vickie Shaw is a professional comedian in national demand for her funny stories about being a soccer mom and a lesbian.

Montrose at Drew, near Texas Art Supply. Paul Broussard was a polite, clean-cut young man, a teller where I banked. He and a friend were walking to their car on July 4, 1991, when a group of young men from The Woodlands asked them where a gay bar was. Paul told them. The group attacked Paul and his friend with nail-studded two-by-fours and a knife. Paul died; his friend was seriously wounded. When the police refused to characterize it as a hate crime, Queer Nation organized a march.

Montrose at Westheimer. Nine days later, more than 2,000 demonstrators wound through the streets of Montrose. We were angry. That night the legendary ability of our community to laugh at ourselves and others was not present. At the end of the march, we took over the intersection, blocking traffic. For one hour, this spot was ground zero of our collective memory of insults, threats, assaults, rapes, and murders, compounded by an often oblivious judiciary. The mounted police wisely retreated and watched from a block away, almost surely avoiding a riot. We demanded that hate crimes be recognized and prosecuted. That night, the community spoke as one: It is not open season on gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, or transgendered people in Houston. No more.

Wortham Theater, 500 Texas. On January 2, 1998, Annise Parker was sworn in as the first openly gay or lesbian elected official in the city of Houston. Her partner, Kathy, sat with the other spouses on stage. Annise represents almost 1.8 million constituents as a Houston City Council member. In her quiet, competent way, she has made immense strides for good city governance and for positive visibility for our community.

Here the tour ends. It would be nice to think that as we turn the calendar on a new millennium, we could leave behind hatred. But the horrific murders of James Byrd in Texas and Matthew Shepard in Wyoming say otherwise, and too many of our public officials still use fear and bigotry as springboards for personal gain.

As a lesbian who came out in the 1970s, I considered my initial task to be breaking out of invisibility and isolation. Since Stonewall in 1969, the magnitude of change has been remarkable, and Houston, blessed with its rich brew of people willing to tackle anything, has been in the forefront of southern cities. But it would be easy for Houstonians to be lulled into complacency, entangled in a web of busy-ness, encased in our careening vehicles, or mesmerized by our TV and computer screens. It would be easy to let politicians or the media dictate to us who we will engage with as human beings and who we will shut out. Gay people may be "in" some time and another group will be "out." But each time we make the effort to really know other people, face to face, in all their complexity and all their contradictions, we will be richly rewarded, as individuals and as a community.

1 Newsweek (June 6, 1977).