

## IDENTITY, PLACE, AND LOCALE IN GALVESTON

SUSAN W. HARDWICK

After my first visit to the island city of Galveston, Texas, I knew what I wanted to do. I would examine identity and place through the lenses of ethnicity, race, and culture. Untangling relationships among these variables, along with the questions that arose concerning my new research site, made for an intricate project. The relatively clear-cut data I had so meticulously gathered from census records and other government documents, I discovered, were far more complex and nuanced once I was on the ground and engaged in “up close and personal” fieldwork with local residents.

My decision to work in a place like Galveston grew out of my post-tenure, post-full prof decision to take a new faculty position midcontinent. I’d spent years writing my dissertation, developing grant proposals, presenting papers at meetings, and publishing articles and books about my work with Russian immigrants on the West Coast. All of my prior research had been “traditional” cultural/historical geography. But after many years I relocated from California to central Texas, four hours away from what is popularly referred to as the “Third Coast.” Field-based research in Texas was, I quickly learned, a world apart from my former life.

The Texan Gulf Coast was both fascinating and foreign. Nowhere did a sense of Otherness in my new life feel as immediate and real as on Galveston Island. I had conducted interviews with more than two hundred Russian immigrants on the West Coast, and with some of their relatives still residing in the Russian Federation (Hardwick 1993), but no prior experience could have fully prepared me for the adjustments I made to understand the story of the “peopling” of this distant and distinct Texan island city.

Visiting Galveston was a sudden reminder that my move to Texas had made me a stranger in a strange new land. This initial trip to the southeast Texas coast felt nothing less than frightening. The confusing Otherness was heightened by the sticky heat and clinging humidity of an August afternoon. Indeed, the intense heat rising up from city streets and the surprising warmth of Gulf Coast waters permeated everything I experienced that first day. The weather was oppressive, and a strange taste and feel was about the air. All created a blur of uncomfortable confusion that lingers to this day.

As a newcomer to Galveston, I was caught at an intersection of place and culture. I was an insider and an outsider, a Yankee and a new Texan, an academic and a tourist. Would I be able to do meaningful fieldwork in this insider/outside position? What methods would best provide answers to the research questions I had posed so easily in my air-conditioned office four hours away? How could I find the most

---

\* DR. HARDWICK is an associate professor of geography at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.