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Today & Yesterday

Chinatown Anti-Displacement Zen Garden

by Amy Lam

Most of the time, real estate developers act as brazenly as they want and still manage to remain mostly invisible. The iconic sunshine-yellow Bright Pearl building at the corner of Spadina and St. Andrews had sat empty for a while before it was sold to a new owner and underwent the renovation that left it a hideous grey-panelling-clad box with faux graffiti and a solitary Chinese guardian lion, stripped of its companion. The grey cladding whitewash reno had already happened a couple years earlier to another building on the strip, 310 Spadina, and artists had been kicked out of their studios in favour of tech company office space, but for those not directly involved, that displacement blended into the overall wash of Toronto's affordability crisis. The Oriental Harvest grocery store closed and now is an expensive sneaker/streetwear shop. This kind of dispossession is not easy to adjust to, but it's pervasive like the weather.

The Bright Pearl building, though—the before/after photos of this building, the obvious contrast between the sunny yellow tiles and the oppressively neutral grey—stuck in people's heads. (In some ways, the displacement happening in Chinatowns all over North America is similar to the Bright Pearl—it is but one clear symbol of the untenable pressures on poor, racialized people.) So, when a group of us wrote an open letter arguing against the supposed art exhibition (or commercial art fair) named “The Invitational”—which had announced that it was proud to make this historic space “open to the public” in the “dynamic” neighbourhood of Chinatown—the letter gained a lot of traction. The letter described the exhibition as a “thinly disguised real estate ad.” Having lived in Kensington Market/Chinatown area for nearly a decade, I had heard rumours that developers wanted to buy up the whole block, from Dundas St. northwards to St. Andrews St. Of course, a scheme like this would be enabled by art-washing; the pop-up art exhibition is the same as the faux graffiti façade, a move that draws eyeballs while simultaneously deflecting attention. These strategies have been used by powerful interests for a long time; at worst, they've shaped our culture and our conceptions of what art is capable of. These interests want us think that art is useless and politically ineffective, in the same way that they've inculcated into popular culture the overall feeling of futility against the forces of capitalism. In their eyes, art only serves the purpose of driving up the value of the room it's in.

What I know, though, is that art is not about value but energy. This past weekend a group of us, based out of TeaBase—a community arts space in the Chinatown Centre—started the *Chinatown Anti-Displacement Zen Garden* in the courtyard of that mall. The action of getting a bunch of people together to turn soil and plant some seedlings was about nurturing the type of energy that says: we see you, and we will fight you. The amount of joy that we found in digging a tiny hole for one tomato plant—I think a few of us were screaming with excitement—is proof to me of what power is and the urgency of using it.

Amy Lam is an artist, writer, and editor. She works with Jon McCurley as the artist duo Life of a Craphead.

More Chinese or Queer?

by Alvis Choi

Since moving here in 2011, my longest relationship in Canada has been with Chinatown. It was where I found work (despite the low wage) when I had nowhere to go. It was where I discovered a sense of home. It feels complicated to talk about Chinatown because I risk being politically incorrect. But if I'm being honest, I would say that I excuse any homophobia that I experience in Chinatown. When I meet homophobic Chinese people, I forgive them the minute their mindless thoughts turn into hurtful speech. I go easy on them, just as I would with my biological family.

In 2013, I did a self-directed mini residency titled *Coming Out For Dummies - Chinese Family Edition* at Whippersnapper Gallery, where I sought advice from Chinese elders for coming out to my parents as gay/homosexual. I wrote an ad in Chinese and posted it on the window of the storefront space, inviting folks to share any thoughts they had on the topic with me. For the first couple of hours, I was too scared to unlock the door. I eventually mustered enough courage to solicit conversations from passers-by who paused to read the ad. While I received occasional curses and rejections, I got to meet a few elders who ended up coming inside and chatting with me for hours.

One of them was Bernard. Not an uncommon way of relating in Chinese culture, we spoke about many things except the proposed topic. It would have been too direct, especially for such a “touchy” subject. (*For me or for him? Not sure.*) I don't remember if he had given me any advice during our first conversation, but he kept returning throughout the next three days of the residency. On the last day, he came by while I was in mid-conversation with another visitor. He left me three printed photos and exited quietly. Two of them were from Gay Pride in the 1980s. The remaining one was a photo of a beautiful orange sunset taken by Bernard at Tommy Thompson Park. I turned it over after Bernard left. On the back, he wrote: “The world is full of beauty when your heart is filled with love.”

Sometimes it only takes one interaction for a relationship to grow in our hearts. Whether it was Bernard, Mr. D, or Mrs. Mak, the love that they shared with me in just a brief moment, with or without homophobic remarks, has healed some of my own broken familial connections over time. They ignited a desire within me: if I meet enough elders who love different parts of this child that is me, together my whole self will be fully loved.

I continue this ongoing quest for acceptance in Chinatown, both for the queer and the Chinese parts of my identity, from this family composed of strangers with some shared resilience, grief, and knowledge. And with an open heart that is not fixated on the binary of right or wrong, I now feel that I can go home and no longer be afraid. I can unlock all the doors, as I realize I can never be disowned.

Alvis Choi aka Alvis Parsley is a Toronto-based artist whose latest endeavour involves food, love, and rest.

Sometimes suicides are not suicides after all

by Sajdeep Soomal

William Wong did not join in the celebrations. His mind was elsewhere, busy grieving the untimely death of his younger brother. While the others celebrated the fourth anniversary of the Nationalist Party of China, the aging man leaned against the back wall of the Preston Springs Hotel, pulling out another Du Maurier cigarette. A few months ago, he had found his 56-year-old brother Harry Wong half-naked, hanging from an ash tree. The officer's questions still lingered in his head: “You never took him to down to London? Couldn't you see he was not right up there?”

William had hoped that moving away from the Prairies would do it. Away from all those railroad Chinatowns that sprung up and disappeared within a week. Away from all those working men. But things only seemed to have gotten worse in the eight years that they spent running a small laundry in Preston, Ontario. He blamed it on the public baths. They attracted the wrong type of men. The type of men that eerily reminded William of his younger brother.

Putting out his cigarette, the old Chinese man started off towards the cemetery. As he walked along the wooded path, William thought back to the small cots that they shared in the man camps. He remembered when Harry would stumble into bed, drunk in the middle of the night. Sometimes laughing. Sometimes crying. William never bothered asking where his brother went into the night, he knew what some men did in those cramped, transient spaces.

William arrived flustered at the shaded grave site, his mind racing. He thought about all the brutal nights, the nights when his brother would come back battered and bruised. For the first time, he questioned whether his brother had committed suicide. He imagined a faceless white man crudely sodomizing Harry and leaving him for dead. Pressing his shaking hand on the roughly carved gravestone, William muttered to himself, “I guess it wouldn't be the first time that they killed a Chinaman.”

The old man knew it was murder. After all, that is what the men would do in the man camps, so why not here in the man towns. *Rape and pillage. Kill and hide.* He thought about all the men who worked on the Canadian Pacific Railway in the Prairies and all the Cree girls that they raped and threw into the river. He remembered the lies that followed the washed-up bodies. They turned the girls into legendary Indian princesses who would—one after another—plunge to their deaths because their beloveds had apparently been killed in battle. He remembered when those lies became truths and when each dumping spot—one after another—was re-named Lover's Leap. “What better way to cover up a genocide than with big little lies?” William thought to himself.

Walking back on his swollen feet, the old Chinese man kept thinking about what had happened in those man camps. He thought about the young girls and his soft brother, and about all the worlds between them. Stopping to look over the small town, he slowly started muttering a new chant: “Sometimes suicides are not suicides after all.”

Sajdeep Soomal is a writer, researcher, and curator who lives along the Grand River.

To Our Friends in Toronto: 3 Lessons from Organizing in Vancouver's Chinatown

by Vincent Tao

1: CULTURE IS A TRAP

Popular debate over gentrification in any Chinatown often hinges upon slippery notions of culture, its “revitalization” or “disappearance.” Avoid this conversation altogether. After facing backlash to an initial, vulgar attempt at gentrifying Chinatown, real estate moguls in Vancouver have learned to rebrand as preservationists of the neighbourhood's supposed historic essence.

Vancouver's billionaire real estate heiress Carol Lee has embarked on a vanity venture to “save Chinatown” by redeveloping it into a multi-block gift shop. Her vision of Chinatown's future is part Oriental theme park and part live burial of the neighbourhood's working class. Culture perverted from its material history is resold at a price wholly unaffordable to the very residents it claims to spring from.

Debating the future of Chinatown's culture with these profiteers is a waste of time. Name gentrification for what it is: capital's scorched-earth strategy of slum clearance, cutting the poor from their means of survival to drive them off valuable land.

2: ARTISTS AND LANDLORDS, ARTISTS-AS-LANDLORDS

Artists and their institutions hold a contradictory role in Chinatown struggles, at once instigators of anti-gentrification actions in their neighbourhoods and apparent agents of that very same process. This mire can be cleared by a sober analysis of differential power and ownership in the arts.

In Vancouver, 221A and BC Artscape swooped on Chinatown's once-depressed property market to make bank on subleasing studios. Supported by grants and land-use policies designed to gentrify the neighbourhood, these institutions extract additional revenues from the very artists they claim to serve. Rent-profits and cultural capital skimmed from their tenants' work are subsequently used to expand their empires across the city.

These nonprofits have consolidated their fiefdoms by reinforcing division between Chinatown's tenants. The precarity-bound strata of artists depend on them not only for studio spaces, but also for scarce funding selectively distributed through exhibition fees. The culpability of gentrification is laid upon the arts as a whole, while its rewards are funnelled into the pockets of the few. A fighting coalition between artists and Chinatown's working class must begin from an understanding of these arts institutions as rent-collectors like any other.

3: THERE IS NO CHINATOWN COMMUNITY

While Chinatowns were—and continue to be—shaped by exclusionary policy and urban planning, it has proven a strategic mistake to flatten the narrative as one of a coherent “Chinese community” against a racist city. Since their making in the 20th century, Chinatowns have always had their bosses and workers, their landlords and tenants. There is no community here; only classes.

A contemporary Chinatown proverb: “Gentrification is complicated.” It isn't. To win the fight for Chinatown's working class, we must sharpen a ruthless clarity to discern our enemies from our friends. This means building solidarity among the neighbourhood's working tenants, organizing across difference without the facile logic of culture, forging alliances with artists without the ruses of their institutions. What emerges is not a community, but a movement.

Vincent Tao is a labour union organizer, housing activist, and educator of social movement history and practice.

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