

DOING PUBLIC HUMANITIES

Edited by Susan Smulyan

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WHAT READERS MATTER?

Challenging the Disappearance of the Branch Library in Boston's Chinese Neighborhood

Diane O'Donoghue

Introduction

Sometimes doing public humanities can also be an act of undoing. In this essay, a prevailing notion of what did and did not constitute a “public” will be undone, disentangled in two different ways, one through a critical reading of institutional records and another through acts of advocacy. Archives play a decisive role here, as they suggest how such documents can function as important tools in the service of either creating a civic amnesia or in galvanizing community agency. In the space that encompasses both, and floats in between, public humanities can—and should—stake an important claim, both in its theorizing and with its projects of engagement. In this essay, the latter—this chapter’s “case study”—involves an urban exhibition that took place in downtown Boston that I organized in my role as Senior Fellow for the Humanities at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University. The installation made visible aspects of one neighborhood’s cultural history, and was created to counter decades of being what Judith Butler calls a “shadowed” public.¹ The site of exclusion was particular—the absence for over sixty years of a local branch of the Boston Public Library (BPL) in the city’s Chinese neighborhood—but the issues that surrounded this occurrence encompassed much broader concerns: racism, treatment of “immigrants,” economic inequities, and institutional misrepresentation.

In all these aspects, we can posit that one of the pernicious effects was to produce an “unpublic,” a phantasm of non-existence and forgettability within civic privilege. The ways in which such an attempted erasure was enacted will be located here in the records of the Trustees’ meetings at the BPL in the mid-1930s, where appalling “justifications” were given for the closing of a dynamic, much-used branch in a neighborhood that had received library services since 1896. Determined in a very private yet

binding decision, the ramifications of this action would be felt profoundly in the affected community. Many years later it would be through the activation of a strikingly different, far vaster archive—the documents and images spanning one hundred years that were housed in Boston’s Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE)—that a public-facing humanities project would challenge this exclusion: the six-decade absence that was initiated in those long-inaccessible minutes was met by a plenitude of evidence attesting to a century of a flourishing print and reading culture in the neighborhood. This was brought into the bright, urban daylight of the Chinese neighborhood in the form of an exhibition titled “These Words: A Century of Printing, Writing, and Reading in Boston’s Chinese Community.” On the windows of two buildings, digitized archival material documented how this part of the city, in contradiction to the trustees’ racist assessment of its lack of worthiness, never forgot nor relinquished its claim for a local library and for public enfranchisement.

The installation, on view in the summer and fall of 2016, generated considerable interest and support from the neighborhood, the mayor’s office, and the BPL itself, and in February 2018 a “Chinatown branch” returned, in the building housing CHSNE, that also had been one of the sites of the exhibition. Its success resulted, in no small measure, from creating an experience that required only passing on the sidewalk; viewing was often as a chance encounter, yet one with high quality images, bilingual labels and text panels, and an accompanying, free brochure that served as the show’s “catalog.” Thus a specific “humanities” activity—seeing an exhibition—was deployed in the service of place-making and advocacy. The capacity to move and thus engage viewers through the visual reception of images and text opened a potential for change that was very particular, and proved to be extremely effective.

Prior to introducing the details of “These Words,” we will scrutinize the language and ramifications of the decision made by the BPL to close what was then called the “Tyler Street Branch,” a library that served a part of Boston that was home to largest number of residents who, within a generation, had immigrated to the United States.² But, as we will trace here, what had been a source of pride in fulfilling BPL’s municipal mission of outreach and inclusion had very strict geocultural and racial limits. By the 1930s, as the majority of the neighborhood’s residents were arriving from countries that were non-European and frequently cast as racially inferior, notably China and Syria, the BPL reframed its view of the community as one that had, in essence, lost its right to its claim to a library. The BPL based its actions on what was stated to be a study of its residents’ “character.” Our inquiry—“what readers matter?”—begins here.

Public Humanities and the Critique of the “Public”

The literature that discusses the roles, efficacy, and future of the humanities is considerable, but our focus will be on the word that precedes it throughout this book. The etymology of the term “public” can be located in the two Latin

meanings of *publicus*: one that translates as “relating to the people,” usually spoken in a political sense and gesturing to a state structure, and another meaning that was more encompassing, referencing people more generally, and as a descriptor of the “ordinary, common.” In this usage, the word could be juxtaposed to the “private,” thus distinguishing between sites of seemingly equal access: public spaces and private spaces, either domestic or social. This latter sphere would be thus extra-ordinary, implying a certain exclusivity.

We are accustomed to this distinction, but we must also recognize that the public has another declension, not relating to extra-ordinary but rather to what we could term “sub-ordinary.” That is, a discursive space of the “unpublic,” a state of being subordinate to those individuals and their spaces that are considered as the baseline of common reckoning as . . . people. This has been a strategy all too familiar in racist and fascist ideologies, but it also can occur within political environments where individuals seemingly possess civil rights and their prerogatives. In these cases, specific indicators of civic recognition can be denied or, as we will see here, rescinded.

The basis for this in our study ostensibly was the result of a population decline—a claim that there really weren't “people” in that neighborhood anymore—although it was actually about population *change*: there certainly were people still there, but they are not accorded recognition as the entitled recipients of a municipal service. And thus persons existed in metropolitan Boston whom the BPL deemed not to constitute a meaningful public. The story told about them here is a very specific one, but offers glimpses into what could be an important site of work within public humanities much more broadly, as it suggests how the contours of visibility are highly mutable. While the question of temporality is rarely posed, our field needs to be asking: “Are they (a community, a specific economic or cultural group, etc.) ‘public’ now or not?” Simply put: When is a group considered to be part of the public? There are many ways to pursue this inquiry, among them examining whether certain groups of individuals share civic privileges that are accorded to other citizens, and when and how do some people get pushed “out of the public.” In the case presented here we can chart this process quite closely, and our narrative begins in the decades leading up to the moment when the recognition of a neighborhood's need for a library and its patrons' demands for its services were shuttered by those presumably charged with safeguarding them.

The “main” Boston Public Library, an impressive neo-classical building (now with later additions), forms one of the borders surrounding the city's historic Copley Square. Designed by Charles McKim and opened in 1895, it was an expansion of early libraries in the city, with the first appearing in 1854.³ Boston would be the home to the first large urban public library in the United States, inaugurating the practice of lending books and the establishment of branches. When its funding was approved, the Copley Square library was hailed as “a palace for the people,”⁴ but the library administration recognized that there also needed

to be locations that were more accessible to Boston's neighborhoods. By the time the new library opened, patrons could go to ten branches throughout the city or request books at 12 “delivery stations,” usually storefront locations closer to home. By 1920, fully 90% of the borrowing came through the branches,⁵ with the edifice in Copley Square increasingly focused on research and special collections, and serving the nearby affluent neighborhoods like Beacon Hill and the Back Bay that included the impressive homes of some of Boston's oldest families.

Since the majority of the branches were in neighborhoods with newly-arrived residents—the delivery station in the North End neighborhood served borrowers of 20 “nationalities” in the early twentieth century—there was a recognition of the generational differences in the users:

It is comparatively easy to attract the children of foreign-born parents, and to lead them by progressive stages into the world of English literature, particularly since the elementary schools are also opening the way; but many of the adults never master the new language very well. If the Public Library is to serve all classes, these people must not be overlooked.⁶

This desire for inclusion led to the expansion of holdings—the vast majority in the earliest years focused on children's books—in a number of languages and the addition of new branches.

A small book “depot” on Harrison Avenue, serving a neighborhood to the east and south of the Boston Common (in an area that today forms the southern edges of Boston's Chinese community) opened in 1896.

Two decades later, an existing municipal building on Tyler Street, close by, had its bottom floors converted into a full-fledged branch.⁷ A rare insight into the early history of the “Tyler Street Branch” came from its exceptional librarian, Fanny Goldstein (1895–1961), who filed detailed annual reports during her tenure in the early 1920s. From them we are able to trace her creation of a library that fostered cultural cohesion, while retaining a recognition of the identities and experiences of library patrons who enthusiastically embraced this aspect of public entitlement. Goldstein's own story paralleled many others, as she had come to Boston at age five, in 1900, as part of a Jewish family fleeing persecution in what is now the western Ukraine.⁸ Living in city's North End, she aspired to attend college but left school after the eighth grade, upon the death of her father; as the eldest of five, she needed to support her family. By then, she was already known to the staff at her neighborhood branch as an avid library user and was offered a position as a junior trainee. This allowed her to rise through the ranks, providing her access to vocational instruction and ultimately to college courses. Her commitment to the role of the branch libraries within “immigrant” neighborhoods was unequivocal, and her appointment as librarian at Tyler Street—at the age of twenty-one—was evidence of the BPL's recognition of her accomplishments and ideas.



FIGURE 7.1 Book depot at 202 Harrison Avenue, Boston, ca. 1910. Photograph courtesy of the Chinese Historical Society of New England.

In her first annual report, submitted in 1921, Goldstein asserted, with no small pride, that this was “a section of the city that is always foreign,” noting that “we may truly say that our constituency is the most varied one in the entire city for nationalities.” She then goes on to enumerate them:

...Syrian, Greek, Jewish, Italian, Polish, French, Chinese and Spanish. The district is particularly rich in social, political and educational activities. All who come are keenly appreciative of the “open door” and warm welcome and the hospitality we aim to give daily.⁹

For Fanny Goldstein, the fact that the Tyler Street area was a neighborhood that was “always foreign” spoke to its capacity to receive newly-arrived residents, an attribute that she felt intensified the need for the branch and its vital role within the educational and social life of the area. Goldstein’s programming included activities and “story hours” for children.

Also mentioned in Goldstein’s first report were “literacy and citizenship” workshops for adults, and a striking program of holiday celebrations, including those of virtually every ethnic and cultural group. Goldstein herself remained a life-long speaker of Yiddish and founded “Jewish Book Week” to celebrate various classic and contemporary authors, believing that the ability to openly hold



FIGURE 7.2 Children’s story hour at the Tyler Street Branch Library, Boston, ca. 1925. Photograph courtesy of the Chinese Historical Society of New England.

multiple expressions of identity was a prerogative of participation within the American democratic process.¹⁰

But by 1930, as immigration became restricted and second-generation residents began to settle in other neighborhoods or into surrounding towns, areas like the North End and Tyler Street became home to residents belonging to fewer cultural and national groups. In a move that reflected the transition away from striking diversity to more distinctly defined and particularized neighborhoods, the Boston Public Library transferred Fanny Goldstein to the West End Branch, then serving the major Jewish neighborhood in the city, where she would remain through the rest of her long career. The number of “nationalities” served by Tyler Street had decreased by the end of the 1920s, with those cited in Goldstein’s reports as coming from Europe primarily now relocating to other areas. Chinese and Syrian residents remained, however, and became the majority populations and the primary users of the branch library.

In the aftermath of the Great Depression, the BPL experienced financial reversals and it was ostensibly for this reason that a survey of all neighborhood branch libraries was undertaken in the mid-1930s. In the end, the BPL closed only two of thirty-six branches, in both cases putatively due to a decreasing population that resulted in dwindling library use.¹¹ The motivation for the choice of these particular branches—Tyler Street and Roxbury Crossing—was, however, highly suspect: the populations of these neighborhoods, at that time as now, were predominately persons of color. Roxbury, one of Boston’s oldest neighborhoods,

had a large population of Jewish and African-American residents in the early twentieth century, and had been home to a robust library for several decades. As the Jewish residents moved to the West End, the neighborhood remained vibrant, its library actively used, but the community was no longer home to a large population of those of European birth or descent. A similar situation occurred at Tyler Street, whose journey into oblivion we will chart here, and could be read alongside a similar strategy to “unpublic” occurring concurrently at the Roxbury Crossing branch.

A Private Document of Public Erasure, and a Library Disappears

As part of its survey of the BPL branches conducted by members of the library staff in 1936, a “confidential” assessment of Tyler Street was presented to the five-person Board of Trustees. In reading their review, it is almost unimaginable that this was the place described, only fifteen years before, in Goldstein’s glowing yearly reports. Nothing seemed robust there any more, even to the health of its residents, who were said to have “the highest tuberculosis rates in the city,” the result of living in extreme poverty within a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly “industrialized.”¹² While the most prominent “nationalities” were identified as Syrian and Chinese, their neighborhood was depicted as being on the edge of extinction: the rising commercial interests would, the report predicted, “wipe out entirely the residential area in the immediate vicinity of the Tyler Street library.”¹³ The syntax of erasure could not be emphasized more, with the disappearance of these residents imminent, if not by disease then by the removal of seemingly all traces of residential space. This dire scenario prefaced what followed: a “character” assessment of the residents as non-library users. If their physical and environmental conditions were not bad enough to warrant the closing of a library, this explanation formed the ultimate source of justification: these residents were simply not fit to be counted as a BPL constituency.

Evidence for this exclusion was found in unlikely places, such as the doubt cast on habits of coffee and tea consumption. Although the city had innumerable bars and taverns in neighborhoods with long-established branch libraries, the beverages consumed around Tyler Street seemed to cause far deeper suspicion. The very first concern voiced in this section of the study involved a neighborhood practice that seemed far from a characterological deficit. The study noted that “many foreign heads of families—whether employed or not—spend considerable time drinking.”¹⁴ “Syrian coffee shops abound here,” the study stated as a kind of accusation, as did Chinese tearooms, the latter founded as early as the 1880s within steps of Tyler Street. Such libations carried connotations of suspicious “foreign” activities, and these social environments were posited as antithetical to any activity that might involve using a library. Were such criteria applied to areas serving alcohol? If that were the case, one wonders which neighborhoods—ironically, other than this one—would have enjoyed any hope of a nearby branch at

all. The authors of the report actually note the absence of alcoholic drinking establishments here, but not as a positive feature. Rather, a preference for the seemingly more unsavory cafes and tearooms was somehow related, in a connection that was never explained, to a preponderance of “drunkards” who were said to reside in rooming houses on the neighborhood’s periphery.

Although the report does not deny the statistics revealing that a high number of young people graduated from high school in this neighborhood—not a claim that could be made city-wide at that time—these graduates were depicted as “attach[ing] slight importance to the benefits derived from cultural subjects or from reading.”¹⁵ Then, in a statement that posits a logic completely counter to that of only a decade earlier, the study noted: “The library has a difficult task to attract these adults who have not grown up in close association with books.” Recall that reaching adults as potential readers had been a stated mission of the branches; here the older constituency doesn’t seem to have grown up in a way to be close enough to books, a circumstance that is then detailed. “The allure of the pool rooms and social halls are great” for young men here, and, although adequately educated, they are characterized as having little interest in what a library could offer. This disturbing report further placed the blame for a current generation of non-readers upon “wives and mothers in nearby factories who can devote little time to home-making and self-improvement.” The women were neither aspiring to “self-improvement” for themselves nor were they setting that expectation for their children. And if the residents actually were interested in borrowing books, there was now only a “limited book budget” that “does not allow for their interests (or languages) to be served.” And even when certain neighborhood residents had predilections and tastes that were more commensurate with library standards, that still wasn’t quite the correct “fit.” For the “one hundred educated Jewish workers” in the garment factories in the neighborhood, “our limited collection” was “inadequate to their needs, which were scholarly and discriminating.” So, even if the neighborhood didn’t disappear, which it was predicted to soon do, its residents were simply not reading what was deemed appropriate for the continuation of a branch library.

This circuitous argument creates the illusion of some sort of ontological frame, always already in place, that would determine what constituted an appropriate public for BPL services in a particular place. Such a strategy reverses the earlier determinations, when branches were supposed to serve whatever were the specifics needs of patrons at any given time. Tyler Street residents were either too unsophisticated or too discerning, as though there was some imaginary nodal point where the citizenry matched, or didn’t match, this standard. The annual report for 1936 disclosed that the number of books circulated from Tyler Street was among the lowest in the city; but of course only books that existed could be borrowed, and the neighborhood was among the smaller districts and, by then, the least funded.¹⁶ In the following year, 1937, the number of books in circulation actually rose by 2000, suggesting that although the number of books did not

increase (if anything, the budget was cut more) there was more borrowing,¹⁷ perhaps due to population growth (although the Trustees' report suggested the reverse). The Tyler Street closing was documented in the annual report for 1938 with the explanation that "decreasing populations had set in in preceding years resulted in a decreasing use of the branch." The final verdict on Tyler Street: "in the interest of economy it is no longer advisable to continue its existence."¹⁸

But Tyler Street was a robust branch throughout the period of its purportedly fatal decline; all that may have changed was that its users were becoming more demographically specific. In 1933 the librarian there reported that "more foreign books, especially in Chinese and Arabic were needed."¹⁹ But this does not mean that books in these languages had not already been part of the holdings: there were Chinese books, as well as a "collection of articles" (meaning a collection of small Chinese objects and paintings) by 1922, during the tenure of Fanny Goldstein, who was probably also responsible for introducing "Armenian and Syrian books" into the collection. But in 1934, rather ominous in retrospect, other than noting the librarian's name, no reference to the Tyler Street branch appeared in the annual report at all. Reappearing in the report the next year, circulation at the branch had again increased, and continued to do so. In 1937, there were just over 51,000 books that circulated²⁰ and although the statistic for the next year would appear strikingly reduced—25,397—a small footnote provides a single line of explanation: "branch library closed on July 1, 1938."²¹

Although it was known well in advance by the small elite of trustees and the senior administrators, the decision to close was never officially announced, either to the neighborhood or to the staff at the branch. In a poignant letter from the librarian, Dorothy Nourse, to Milton Lord, then director of the BPL, dated 29 April 1938,²² she wrote that "I knew nothing of such rumors and the library was very busy." She had heard that the library would "very shortly close from the janitors and policemen" and that this was being done "to save the city expense." She concluded, "I thought you might be interested in these rumors though I hope there is no truth in them." But her branch's fate had been long sealed by then.

Yet the documents included with the archive of the branch report reveal that despite the official wish for Tyler Street to quietly disappear, that didn't happen. Once Dorothy Nourse learned the truth, she made repeated attempts to intercede, offering numerous vignettes of patrons who were shocked and saddened by the news: "the tall Syrian gentleman who comes to the library each night," "the Chinese mother with her plump baby girl," and "the businessman who saw the library as an antidote to clubs and halls in the area."²³ In the summer months, children would stay entire days in the library while their parents worked. Now they would be expected to walk to Copley Square, but Nourse contended that "the children in these families would never be allowed to walk that far." In a letter to Boston's mayor, Maurice J. Tobin, the director of the Syrian Child Welfare Society, Jennette Draney, wrote that the closing "would be disastrous, not only for cultural but also civic endeavors."²⁴

The assessment of Tyler Street's "worth" as a location for a public library was determined by the perpetuation of racist fabrications that made invisible the persons who actually lived there. Claims of disease, crime, and nefarious activities are all too frequently ways in which communities and neighborhoods, especially those of color, have been represented in dominant discourses. The Tyler Street branch closed after its patrons were constructed as "sub-ordinary" in a place of "no longer being in public."

But the residents kept fighting.

Demonstrations occurred in Copley Square and on the steps of the State House, both including numerous children, and these actions garnered attention in the local press. But for the administration of the BPL, their decision was final and its ramifications clear: access to a neighborhood library was a privilege that could be bestowed and taken away.

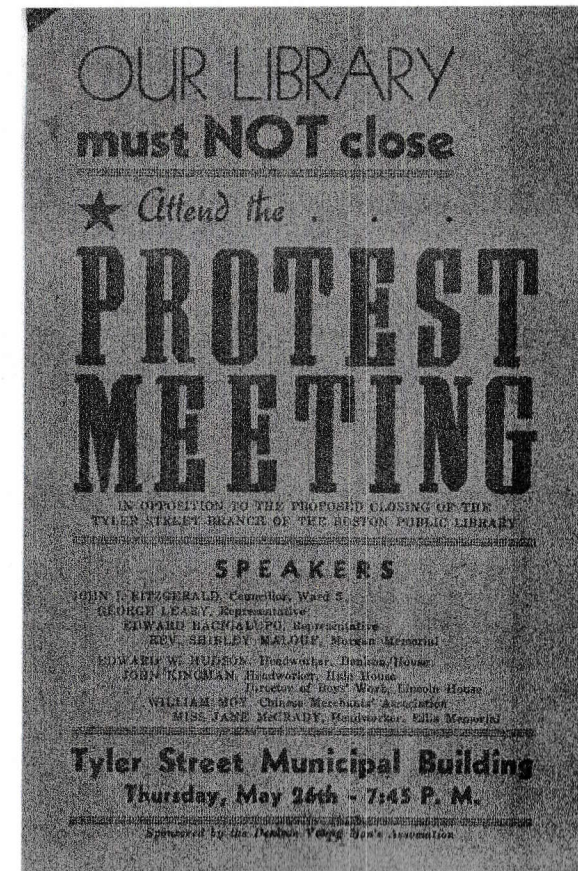


FIGURE 7.3 Poster protesting the closure of the Tyler Street Branch Library, Boston, 1938. Photograph courtesy of the Chinese Historical Society of New England.

One voice of dissent within the city government was preserved in an "order" recorded in the proceeding of the Boston City Council soon after the library's closing by Joseph Russo, who represented the North and West End neighborhoods. The order was passed but no action was taken. Russo said:

I can't see for the life of me why the Trustees of the Public Library don't see fit to reopen this branch, to give the people of that district the same rights that all the people of any section of Boston are entitled to and that they are now receiving. We have in that section all races, colors, and creeds, and I hate to use the word, Mr. President, but this is "discrimination."²⁵

Councilman Russo's plea fell on deaf ears, and the process of pushing this neighborhood into the shadows sent a chilling message, with the expectation that, once rescinded, these civic rights would be somehow forgotten.

This appeared to be the case for the BPL and in the local city government, but the neighborhood never forgot. The area included many men and women who served in the military during World War Two, and many of those returning veterans, some of whom had used the library branch as children, now demanded its return. In response to their advocacy, a portion of one floor in the Tyler Street building, then being used primarily as storage for the city's school books, became a small library, but only for a short time, opening in 1951 and closing again, for good this time, in 1956.²⁶ The second shuttering invoked some of the same rationale found in the earlier decision. In this case, urban expansion, including the extension of the Massachusetts Turnpike, was predicted to cut the neighborhood in half, and the library board opined that the community would, again, disappear. The BPL would not reopen the branch even after it was apparent that the construction route would bypass the neighborhood.

Still the Tyler Street branch lived in community memory; a number of residents recalled vividly the brief period of its final appearance, in the 1950s, and that story was kept alive in the neighborhood's oral and public history. Over the years, community activism persisted, attested to by an archive of numerous petitions, surveys, meetings, and demonstrations; many of these were initiated by members of the neighborhood's student organizations. There was even a considerable history of "bookmark advocacy," strips of sturdy paper made by the neighborhood teens for younger readers, embellished with drawings and text that imagined a future library for them.²⁷ In the recent past, at a moment of transition in leadership for both the city of Boston and the BPL, a space opened that allowed for another form of advocacy. An exhibition, with its capacity to bring back to visibility—quite literally—aspects of Chinatown's history and resistance, was a public humanities project whose time had come.

What Readers Matter? Challenging the Disappearance of the Branch Library in Boston's Chinese Neighborhood

For several months in the summer and autumn of 2016, residents, passersby, and tourists had the chance—usually by chance—to encounter an installation that opened onto several busy streets, providing images of a hundred years of the cultural history of Boston's Chinese community. "These Words" was the exhibition project itself, and along with a series of related events, brought together two institutions as first-time partners: Tisch College, as it expanded its focus on civic engagement to include work in the public humanities, and the Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE), with funding provided by the Tisch College Community Research Center and Mass Humanities. CHSNE, now in its twenty-fifth year, has become an important community archive, with holdings relating to the Chinese experience both in Boston and considerably beyond, and an active participant in preserving and representing the local neighborhood's history.²⁸ We reached out to our CHSNE colleagues, Susan Chinsen and Jessica Wong Camhi, and proposed a joint project focusing on the issue of the long-disappeared library. They were very supportive of this undertaking, as CHSNE's holdings included photographs of the earliest book depot and the Tyler Street branch, as well as records of more recent advocacy activities. What was clearly evident in this material was that this neighborhood had a distinctive cultural history that spanned a century, and one in which the long-disappeared library branch had played an important part.

A popular tourist attraction and dining destination, the neighborhood's distinctive features are apparent in its narrow streets, businesses that have prospered there for decades, and its capacity to absorb numerous new Chinese-speaking residents to the city, from not only the contemporary People's Republic, but also from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Vietnam. The part of Boston that once housed an important Syrian community is today largely home to those of East Asian birth or ancestry, as most of those earlier neighbors have relocated to the nearby South End or to areas outside the city. But there is also a new population here, those seeking to live in what is an increasingly gentrified area of downtown Boston. Their luxury residences, many in new soaring structures, literally cast long shadows over Chinatown. Thus, the need for a branch library that could serve both this changing population and also provide access to Chinese-language materials and programming was becoming even more acutely felt.

Although the 1936 branch report cited the "industrialization" of the area (primarily referring to a small garment industry that had developed there), the neighborhood was a place bustling in the production of something else: a significant and distinctive culture of printing and writing, and, despite the BPL claims to the contrary, an obvious focus on reading. At the very time when this area's demise was being predicted, a new enterprise began that would flourish for over half a century. The Shanghai Printing Company, located on Oxford

Street (one of the city's oldest byways housing Chinese residents), became the leading publisher of Chinese and bilingual materials in New England. Its output was remarkably varied, from the laundry tickets ubiquitous within those traditional Chinese-owned businesses, to restaurant menus, legal documents, and social announcements, created alongside publications relating to the Asian book collections at Harvard University. The business was founded by You-min (Henry) Wong, who had come to the United States from Taishan, a small area in southern China that was home to many of the neighborhood's first Chinese immigrants.²⁹ This region boasted an unusually high level of literacy for men and women in the early twentieth century, due to its exceptional amount of transnational migration and subsequent economic support that returned to the region, enabling schooling to be widely available there.³⁰ Wong's business featured a printing press that used thousands of characters, each with its own small block, which he kept in order through a dictionary-like arrangement on special shelving units.

A few doors away from Wong's business and home on Oxford Street was an expanse of wall, belonging to a local restaurant, that served for seven decades as a community bulletin board. Here the neighborhood shared a wide variety of information, the kind that later one would find in the neighborhood's newspaper: international news, local stories, legal and employment notices, organizational and personal announcements, job listings, and political advertisements. Originating at the turn of the century and continuing until the 1970s, this wall served a vital function as both a gathering space and a source of information presented in a wide array of formats, including handwritten sheets, some in beautiful calligraphic script, printed Chinese posters, and English-language banners, the latter often promoting local or national political candidates. The posted material was all ephemeral and none of it survives today, although an invaluable record of this important neighborhood site is preserved in a photographic collection in the CHSNE holdings.

The exhibition of 2016 created a persuasive and moving visual response to the question of this community's cultural specificity. Four themes constituted "These Words": the decades of a library presence here; the diversity of activities at Shanghai Printing; the Oxford Street community bulletin board; and more recent activism, including a storefront library in 2010 and the tradition of children's book days organized by local youth groups. Rather than display the originals of all of these objects and images in cases at CHSNE, or post them exclusively online for individual viewership, we decided to bring the evidence out into the public square, by digitizing these archival documents and photographs and displaying them as large outward-facing panels on windows in the neighborhood.

The physical material selected for the installation was an unusual choice: fabricated sheets with tiny perforations (hence the common name "perfs") onto which the digitized imagery was printed. These adhesive coverings were primarily fashioned for commercial use, and one frequently encounters them on store

windows and as "wrappings" on the exterior of buses. Along with their capacity to maintain high resolution imagery and color at a considerable scale, the greatest advantage of the "perfs" was the distinct difference between looking at the surface from outside, where the imagery appears like a banner or poster, and from within a space, where the perforated surface creates virtually no obstruction to the view looking out. As our exhibition would be within buildings where people would be working, it was essential not to cut off all natural light in the course of covering the windows. We designed 30 panels, one set to be installed on the building that housed CHSNE on the northern periphery of Chinatown and very close to the Boston Common, and the other on a Tufts University building, part of its health sciences complex that bordered the neighborhood to the south. Each location would display a different set of images relating to the exhibition's four themes, along with a general text panel describing the project and labels accompanying each "object."

The viewer encountered a variety of representations of the community's history, ranging from glimpses into the early book depot on Harrison Street, steps from the installation site on the same street, alongside examples of the work of Shanghai Printing, such as laundry tickets, small and ephemeral, now displayed as monumental, and thus appropriate to the importance of these places to the history of the Boston Chinese community. Colorful restaurant menus documented the cultural and economic changes in one of the neighborhood's oldest and most important industries, with a panel beside it featuring the austere cover of a catalog of books in Harvard's Yenching Library. They all shared space with the images of the Oxford Street wall, a virtual sea of Chinese (and in some cases English) words, and the more contemporary images of student advocacy, the "storefront" library that existed for some months in 2010, and events for children around a small book cart donated to the community in the months before the exhibition opened.

Everything was bilingual, including an eight-page catalog that was available in dispensers attached to the windows in both locations. There were several ways to experience this installation, from the glance of the quickly passing pedestrian or driver, to a sustained engagement, brochure in hand, as in a gallery or museum. The many hundreds of catalogs that were distributed suggests that people did spend time attending to the installation, an occurrence that was corroborated by those within the buildings, who came to develop quite a proprietary relationship to the panels that literally surrounded them. Faculty from several universities brought their students, and local community activities and walking tours of the neighborhood incorporated visits to the exhibition sites. When it came time to de-install—"perfs" have a relatively short life, as the colors begin to fade—the response from those who lived and worked in the neighborhood was one of sadness and loss; many had imagined this to be a permanent installation.

The exhibition did have a legacy, the one that all of those involved had hoped might come of it. Eighteen months after the exhibition was taken down,

hundreds of people gathered in the atrium of the China Trade Center, the nineteenth-century building that housed CHSNE, to attend the opening of the newly named "Chinatown Branch." Today it is a lively and much-used space, and plans are underway to eventually move into a larger facility, where there will be space to also display some of the archival documents that are part of the neighborhood's history of the story of the return of the library.

Those involved in this project like to say that the stars aligned, with the exhibition occurring as the leadership of both the city and the BPL were becoming increasingly interested in reopening a neighborhood library in the Chinese community. In the installation, this issue was experienced as a specific visual and affective encounter, one that allowed a form of advocacy that complemented but also differed from what had come before it. What happened in creating "These Words" was an undoing of what had occurred in the distant past and then been perpetuated, with all its implications and exclusions, into the contemporary municipal moment. The community's right to be part of the public in "public library" was posited as undeniable, pushed back into open view, emerging from shadows even longer than those created by the encroaching high-rises. The exhibition format literally created such a return: of the children at Fanny Goldstein's story hour, of the many kinds of texts that had been printed, written, and read on Oxford Street, of the several generations of neighborhood youths who had passed-on the desire for what should have always been a part of the lives of these neighborhood residents, of all ages and through all these decades. Joseph Russo's assertion of "discrimination," made over eight decades ago, identified what motivated the negation of a civic right, the denial of an entitlement to what was "common and ordinary." In undertaking this public humanities project, we aspired to advocate for the recognition of what should be, for all, common. In doing so we found that in the stories told here, the extraordinary was everywhere.

Notes

- 1 Judith Butler, "Ordinary, Incredulous," in *The Humanities and Public Life*, ed. Peter Brooks with Hilary Jewett (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 16.
- 2 City of Boston, Archives, *Annual Reports and Publications* (Boston, MA: City of Boston, 1923): PB016/ 2900.001.
- 3 Walter Muir Whitehill, *Boston Public Library: A Centennial History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 1.
- 4 "The City will have a building of rare beauty—a 'palace for the people'—built at a cost no more extravagant than that of many other public buildings," City of Boston, Government Committee on the Library Department, April 13, 1891 (doc. 54–1891). Quoted in Whitehill, *Boston Public Library*, 152.
- 5 This statistic was contained in the Library's "Examining Committee report for 1921," cited in Whitehill, *Boston Public Library*, 212.
- 6 This passage was written in 1905 and is contained in the papers of the Library's then director, Horace G. Wadlin. In citing this, Whitehill (*Boston Public Library*, 188) writes that "Wadlin noted the increasing responsibility placed upon the BPL by the tides of immigrants."
- 7 Boston Public Library, "Notes on the Tyler Street Branch District: General Description," in its community survey-branch narrative reports, 1936, 2:461, 472, 481, p. 1, BPL Archives.
- 8 Margaret Kanof Norden, "Fanny Goldstein," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (1962): 68–73; Aditi Mehta, "Overdue, Returned, and Missing: The Changing Stories of Boston's Chinatown Branch Library" (master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010), 42–4.
- 9 Boston Public Library, *Seventieth Annual Report of the Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston: 1921–1922* (Boston, MA: Published by the Trustees, 1922): 64–5 (hereafter cited as *Annual Report*).
- 10 Fanny Goldstein, "Jewish Book Week," *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 26, no. 5 (1932): 347.
- 11 The existence of the "branch reports" was barely mentioned in any official publication of the BPL. The survey was cited as being completed in the annual report for 1937, and that its findings "were filed" (28). These documents, and some related correspondence, are in the "Community survey-branch narrative reports," (1937–2:481), BPL Archives. All material cited from the survey comes from this source, with pagination noted when it occurs.
- 12 "Community survey-branch reports: Notes on the Tyler Street Branch: General Description," 1937, 1.
- 13 *Ibid*, 2.
- 14 "Notes on the Tyler Street Branch: Population – Character Of," 1937, 2–3. All quotations in this paragraph are from this portion of the report.
- 15 *Ibid*, 3.
- 16 Boston Public Library, *Annual Report: 1936* (Boston, 1937), 37.
- 17 Boston Public Library, *Annual Report: 1937* (Boston, 1941), 54.
- 18 Boston Public Library, *Annual Report: 1938* (Boston, 1941), 49.
- 19 Boston Public Library, *Annual Report: 1933* (Boston, 1936), 15.
- 20 Boston Public Library, *Annual Report: 1937*, 54.
- 21 Boston Public Library, *Annual Report: 1938*, 51.
- 22 Letter from Dorothy F. Nourse to Milton E. Lord, dated 29 April 1938, unnumbered document in "Community survey-branch narrative reports," (included with 1937–2:481), BPL Archives.
- 23 Letter from Dorothy F. Nourse, to Milton E. Lord, with subject "Human Interest Stories," dated 24 May 1938, unnumbered document (1937–2:481), BPL Archives.
- 24 Jeannette Draney to Mayor Maurice J. Tobin, dated 22 May 1938, unnumbered document (1937–2:481), BPL Archives.
- 25 "Order for the Re-opening of the Tyler Street Library," by Councilman Joseph Russo, City of Boston records, 36:821, 23 September 1944, BPL Archives.
- 26 Boston Public Library, *Annual report: 1956*, 42.
- 27 For discussions of neighborhood library advocacy see Stephanie Fan, "The Boston Chinatown Library: 1896–1938 and 1951–1956," *Chinese Historical Society of New England Chronicle* (2006): 14–6, and Mehta, "Overdue, Returned, and Missing," 44–77.
- 28 The most comprehensive archive of the "These Words" project, and source for material in this portion of the essay, can be found on the website of Chinese Historical Society of New England: <https://www.chsne.org/these-words/>.
- 29 Henry Wong, interview transcript dated August 1982, Chinese Progressive Association records, Archives and Special Collections, M163/56–3, University Libraries, Northeastern University.
- 30 Madeline Y. Hsu, "'Qiaokan' and Transnational Communities of Taishan County, Guangdong," *China Review* 4, no. 1 (2004): 122–44.