

# What Happened In the Place In Which I Lived?

Tomi Hilsee



June 2020, Military Police staging for protest repression after the killing of George Floyd at the intersection of Kneeland and I-93 [cropped frame], Facebook video of Laconia Strothers.



1971 Boston Garment Center 35 Kneeland, Boston Public Library.

To the Inspector of Wires:  
 Perform the electrical work described below.  
 64-  
 1 St 72 5th floor

permit: Yes  No  (Check Appropriate Box)  
 Piano School Utility Authorization No. \_\_\_\_\_

Volts Overhead  Undgrnd  No. of Meters \_\_\_\_\_  
 Volts Overhead  Undgrnd  No. of Meters \_\_\_\_\_

Wiring for 6 Class Rooms 5th floor

Hot Tubs	No. of Transformers	Total KVA
Pool Above-grnd. <input type="checkbox"/> In-grnd. <input type="checkbox"/>	Generators	KVA
Burners	No. of Emergency Lighting Battery Units	
Gas Burners	FIRE ALARMS	No. of Zones
Cond. Total tons	No. of Detection and Initiating Devices	
Hot Taps Total Tons Total KW	No. of Sounding Devices	
Boiler Heating KW	No. of Self Contained Detection/Sounding Devices	
Business	Municipal	

1993 Application to Perform Electrical Work, 72 Kneeland, 5th floor, wiring for 6 classrooms for IP Piano School, Inspectional Services Department Public Archives.



View from my apartment at 72 Kneeland, Boston, 2015.

## What Happened In the Place In Which I Lived?

It is the imposing  
of all those antecedent precessions, the precessions

of me, the generation of those facts  
which are my words, it is coming

from all that I no longer am,  
yet am, the slow westward motion of

more than I am

There is no strict personal order  
for my inheritance.

Self-quarantine has got me thinking again on the places in which I've lived— the personal history of those places and the personal history which leads me to those places, but also the history of those places themselves and the history which leads a person like me to have lived in those places. Not that I am not obsessed with thinking about those things already, but there is something about remaining in the same room for three weeks, watching the sun go from one side of the house to the other only to begin again a few hours later that connects me more fully to being present with these histories and thinking through remembering. What I'm sharing here is a story of a research project I conducted mostly during 2016 and 2017 into the history of an apartment in which I was living at the time— and the forces that brought that apartment to be there in the way that it was, and for a person like me to be there; conducted mostly from a personal curiosity of wanting to know.

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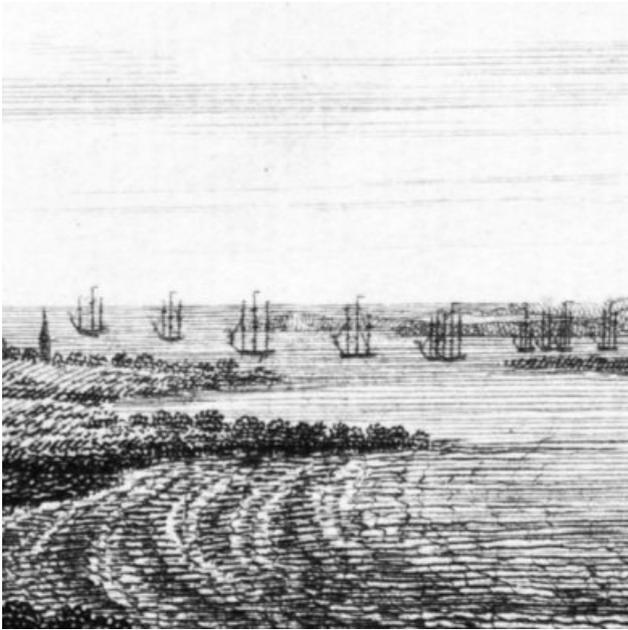
I was 22 when I moved into this apartment, in 2013. It was a small fifth floor two-bedroom apartment in the core of the very small and dense Chinatown in the downtown of Boston. And it's not easy to find an apartment in Boston's Chinatown— to find any housing (at any reasonable rent) in any area remotely close to the downtown is unheard of. Paying rent, especially in booming 'wealthy' cities like Boston, becomes just impossible. It would take 91 hours of work every week at minimum wage to afford an average one room apartment. Additionally the downtown has gone through a building boom of luxury condominiums and hotels adjacent to the assortment of financial office towers, exacerbating the rent disparities and pushing out the last remnants of the garment district and the so-called 'Combat Zone' of dive bars and strip clubs. 18 of these massive towers were constructed between 2000 to 2017, with another 17 under construction or planned to start construction within the next 5 years at the time that I had paused my research. They stood looming over the residential townhouses of Chinatown, which was then facing potentially its most existential gentrification crisis. Chinatown had been assailed since its conception, from street widenings, policing, industrial relocations, hospital expansions, urban renewal, highway construction and so on, but this could potentially eradicate the entire neighborhood, except for the restaurants. The other residential neighborhoods of the downtown area had been long pushed to the periphery, some well over a century ago— all except for Chinatown. And I was enamored by this, as it seemed a miracle that Chinatown was still there, and that some thing that an external-observing white person would call 'life' was going on there— in a city which was so seemingly intent on destroying anything that looked like 'life'. Of course it's not merely a perception to say that 'life' occurred there in Chinatown, there is a community— a complex field of communities in fact— which persist there; coming from a long history of having to do so. "A very close community, partly by choice and partly by discrimination," as Tunney Lee would describe in talking of his experience growing up there in the 1930s and 40s within "just a few hundred families at the most".

But not that many white Americans know of these histories, (or the history of what (in)forms those histories)— of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the mass lynchings and ethnic cleansing in the west, the false work (indentured) contracts, the enforced bachelor societies, restrictions on types of work and sometimes even places to live (via de jure or de facto policy), blocks on citizenship, the racist policing/targeting of 'opium-dens', deportations, 'paper-sons' and so on. Nor do they know about the family associations, the district and region associations, the garment workers unions, the networks of support (like the buses that would go each day transporting people between the various chinatown hubs in the center and the suburbs taking people to the Chinese supermarkets, the Chinese restaurants in which they worked, the churches and so on), as well as the varying waves of migration during the 1800s from Toishan, the 1970/80s from Fujian and the 2000s more broadly but especially from Shanghai— and the different origin regions, languages, politics, and business interests that accompany such a large thing. I wasn't completely unaware of all of that, but I also didn't know so much either. But more vitally my reason for living there was not those reasons. It's not my community— in the sense that I don't share those conditions. If I got priced out I could easily make my way living in another neighborhood.

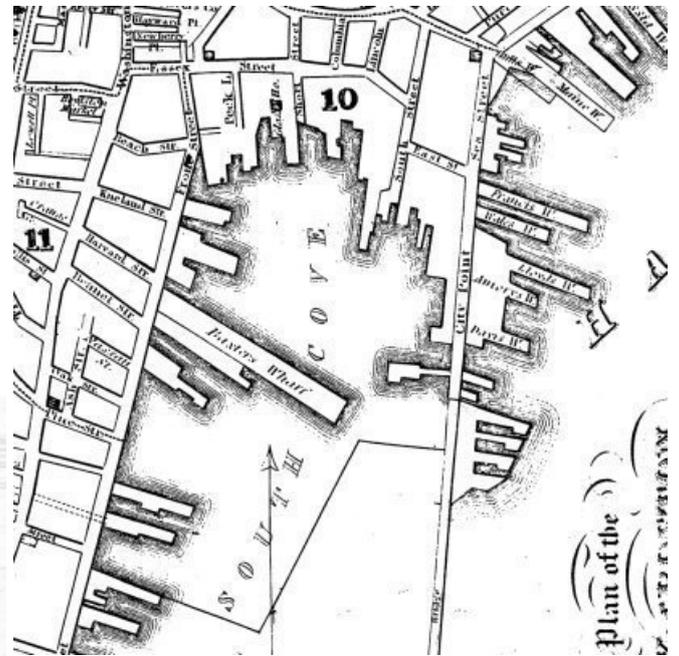
My relationship to that space is completely different of course. But not absolutely different, which is maybe controversial to say. But finding that relationship is to me what interests me, and what I actually find quite urgent. Politically urgent. For being an American, as Charles Olson would say, "is a complex of occasions." For me, finding a home and decolonization are too inseparably woven to speak of one without speaking of the other. And I really mean it in both ways. The obvious way is that I can't justly find a home for myself without approaching decolonization, but I also mean that to speak about decolonization means that I need to try to justly find a home for myself.

But the complexity of American is also not merely an interior occasion— such as sorting through the complexity of a complex personal history relating to a complex larger history (of geography, and the racialized production of that geography), but something about the complete impossibility for there to be an essence of that occasion of being American, or living on so-called American ground. Any attempt at that is usually some white supremacist nationalist project. But I also don't think it's the negation of that by resorting to tropes of 'White America' and 'Non-White America', to the binary of 'settler' and 'indigenous', enslaved, immigrant, migrant. Yet I'm not proposing that everyone is in it together— there are obviously immense coercive and exploitative asymmetricalities in that field of relations, which are just simply different. And I don't want to suggest that American is something that any of us can ever actually be. Although, we know Olson was writing from his position as a White American Male, which has a specific historical relationship to the place in which is lived upon. And which brings with it a different, but not entirely (because one might be involved in the same history, but from a completely different approach, opposed even), sort of things to disentangle with, and complexities to engage. Complexities, personally broad complexities, that the person sorting through them probably won't ever completely understand, nor do I think they should. I think danger arrives when that person thinks they understand, when in fact they don't. Or rather don't even fully appreciate the vastness of the horizon of things that they don't know beyond the things that they think they do know. Maybe that sounds too religious... I don't mean it in this way (or perhaps I do, in the way that humility towards a thing called 'god' is maybe not the worst..) But I really feel that it's not merely a spectrum or a series but really a field of things, which can't be avoided, and can only be engaged. It has to be engaged.

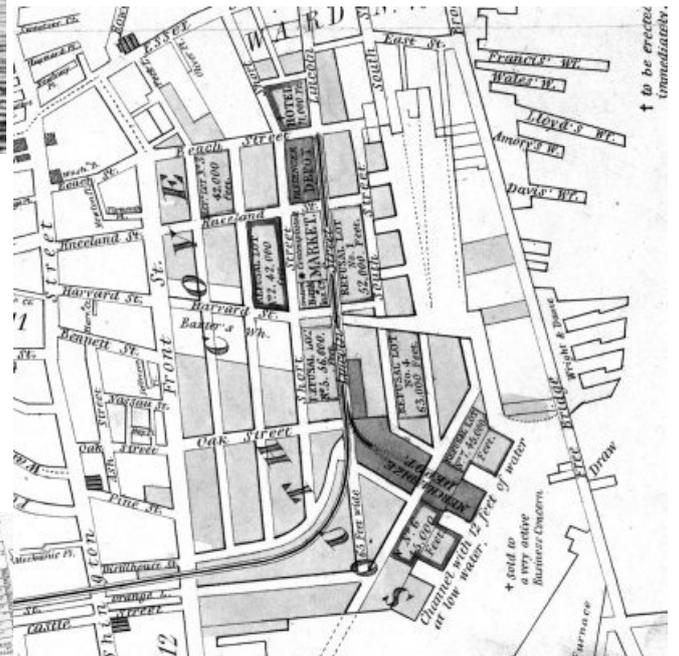
~ To deviate with a story... , I once asked a friend, once I had started my semester in Beirut, who I had known from an American university we attended together and who had spent the previous year in Beirut, if they had made any contacts in the Palestinian camps in the city— as they were a leading spokesperson for the liberation of Palestine on campus. And they responded that they wouldn't go to the camps and suggested I not either, as this would amount to poverty porn and a reproduction of colonial relations. Beyond the question of why you would go to Lebanon in the first place if this is your mentality, I just completely disagree. But I hear this a lot. And I think if you think your interaction with someone of a different history or set of privileges as your own will reproduce racism or a colonial relation, then I think you have a problem with how you relate to people, not the fact that you encounter them.



1775 View of Boston and Harbor from Roxbury, Des Barres, Boston Public Library.



1832 Charles Stimpson Map of Boston, Boston Public Library.



1835 Proposal for South Cove Territory, South Cove Development Corporation, Boston Public Library.



1842 Parcel Plan South Cove Development Corporation, Boston Public Library.



1908 Construction of seawall with sewer conduit, Back Bay, typical crane construction.



1867 Excavating Fort Hill, clearing of slum to make way for expansion of warehouse district and eventual expansion of financial district, Courtesy Nancy Seasholes.



1907 Boston Herald, Racist depiction of a deportation raid targeted on the day of a large funeral for a high-up member of Hip Sing, 300 arrested, 40 deported, Boston Public Library microfilm archives.

TITLED "SOUTH COVE TERRITORY"

d.g.m.) THE

## SOUTH COVE TERRITORY,

COMPRISING EVERY PART WHICH IS COLOURED ON THIS MAP.

It contains 2,440,000 feet.  
It is larger than the Common.  
It is at the geographical centre of Boston.

*The Plan is to have a Rail Road Track reach every door, in every street of this Territory, to the edge of the Ocean on one side, and to the heart of the Country on the other.*

SOUTH COVE TERRITORY

*This map shows the condition of the Back Bay when we were buying mud from it to fill the water to be a better and more convenient harbor.*

1835 Proposal for South Cove Territory, Title Block, South Cove Development Corporation, Boston Public Library.

The world is composed of encounters, which are never equal, and that's why it is so urgent to work on them. Every encounter we have with anyone is not equal, in so many uncountable ways. So of course we are always at work in working on our encounters and relationships through inequality. But that's not to say all inequality is equally unequal or dissimilar— different encounters ask different gradients and forms of attention to more intense differences. At least that's how I feel, and history to me— in writing it, knowing or unknowing it, living it, producing it through action, etc— is an amalgamation of encounters. And I feel that is the core of the thing, of political work, to work on and engage relationships and history (in the broadest active sense).

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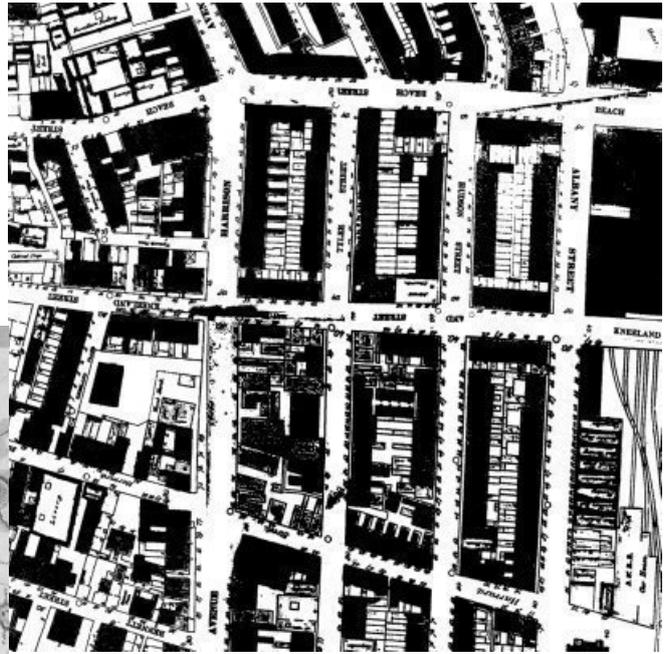
After returning from Beirut at the end of 2014 back to that fifth floor Chinatown apartment in the old loft building, with the fire escape out the window as my balcony, my white guilt was leading me into wanting to know what I was standing on. Well actually that's a reduction, it's not merely guilt, it's also curiosity, and wanting to engage. But it's also guilt. But when I tell this story I want to avoid the pitfall which so often happens with the White American Male who falls in love with their own tragic story of being the anti-hero. So I'll try not to do that. (e.g. the list of 'Great American Novels' is in half a collection of men who introspectively fell in love with their violence all the much more. But maybe that's an immature and hasty analysis, and perhaps I'm projecting since I'm tired of critics claiming the Sopranos is the greatest TV series of all time.)

So I started researching the building's history, intensely. For two years, non-stop— in the sense that I was constantly pre-occupied thinking about it. Not only the history of the building, the history of my room, but the forces around that building and room which brought that place to where it is, and brought me to be there within that room. And as an architecture student of course I was going to draw it, and map it. Well, I'm over simplifying the story a bit. I didn't start with the research. I started from activism and joining the Chinatown Residents Association (which is different than the officially city hall recognized association which is mostly comprised of interests from the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, the family associations, the Asian Community Development Corporation and the business association).

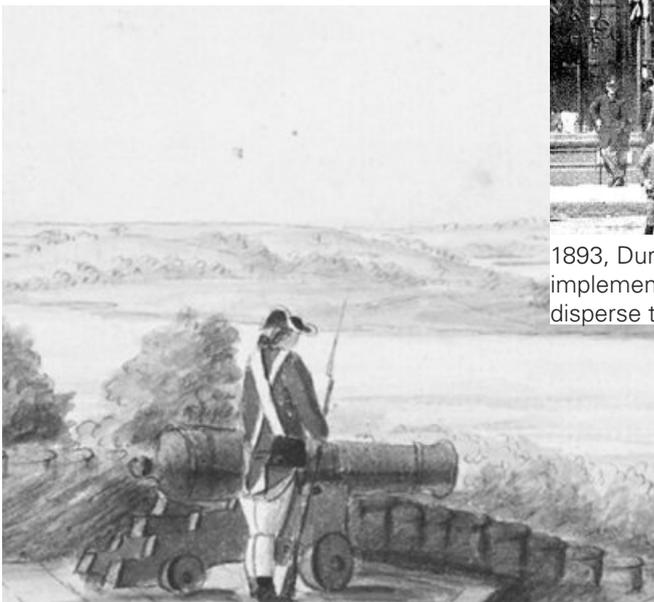
Chinatown was gentrifying, and so that was my point of departure. I started becoming involved with the communist leaning Chinese Progressive Association, the Chinatown Land Trust and eventually the Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE). I was helping organize petitions, letters and testifying against AirBnB and for affordable housing, publicity workshops, surveys, election canvassing, bringing groceries to people who couldn't get out and so on. But it was at CHSNE where I met Tunney Lee who was working on a long term project on the geographical history of Chinatown. Tunney had grown up in Chinatown and was professor emeritus at MIT, and I had known him from a couple of talks he gave at my school (Massachusetts College of Art). He was an unbelievably warm person to me as soon as we met— I don't know exactly how old he is, but I think it's around 90. He was completely intrigued that there was some white guy living in this old garment building, which to his knowledge didn't have any apartments— only gingseng herb stores, massage parlors and Chinese owned small businesses like Walter Kwans accountancy office (who was a former student of his). I told him I really liked his project and I wanted to help. It seemed to suit more of what I could do, also because it felt like the things I needed to do, for myself. His response was immediately enthusiastic— the type of person who loves to teach, and talk, and think and share things. And there was no reason for him to respond to me at all— I was really still just a random person, without much experience, no longer a student, offering to help on the side without being paid (which is hardly sustainable). And he doesn't need someone like that— he knew everything that was happening in Chinatown, and was the pre-eminent expert on its history— one of the most known and respected persons in the neighborhood. I don't know, I think he just enjoys it.



1777 Pelham Map of Boston, Boston Public Library, South Cove bottom right of center



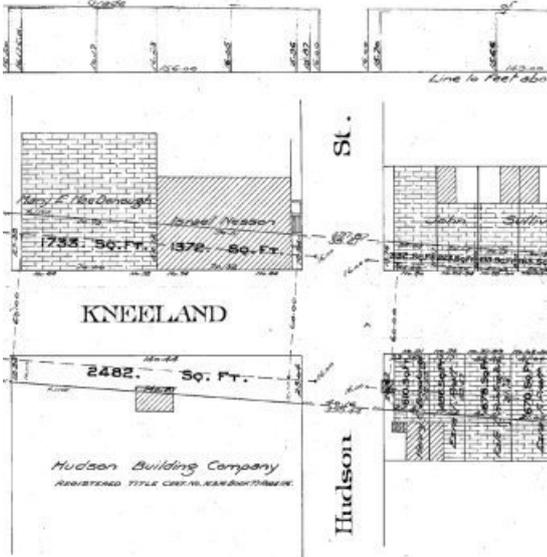
1930 Bromley Atlas, Kneeland in center, rail tracks still visible.



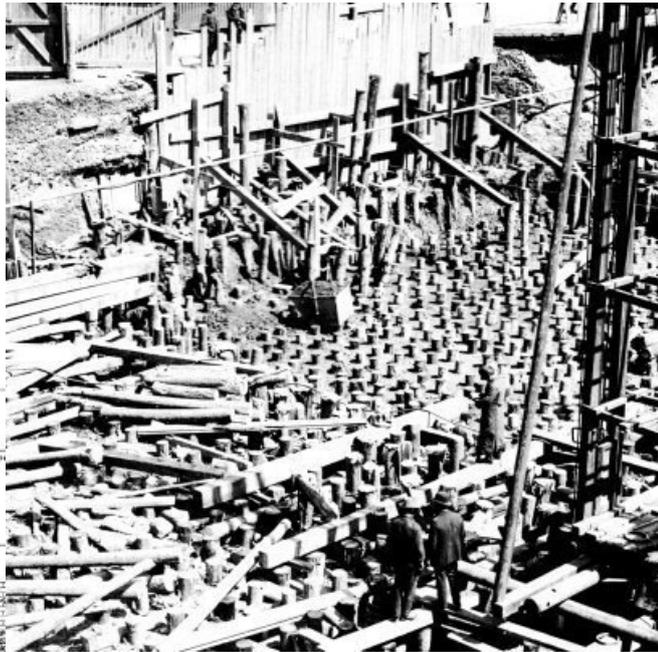
1775 View of Country Around Boston Taken from Beacon Hill by Lt. Williams of British Royal Watch, Boston Public Library.



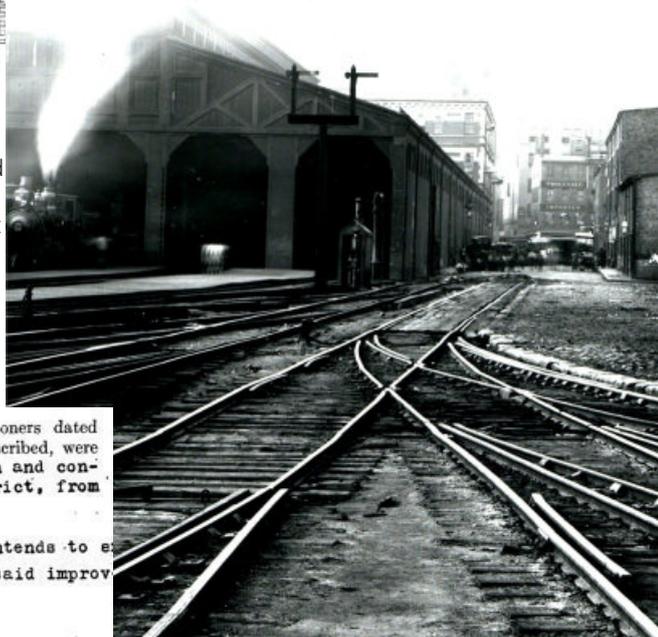
1893, During widening of Harrison Avenue for the nominal implementation of a trolley line, but with an intention to disperse the then core of Chinatown, Boston City Archives



1924 Street Layout Plans for Widening of Kneeland Street, diagonal line showing new edge of street cutting across existing buildings, Street Laying Out Department, Boston Public Works.



1900 exposed pilings for Lincoln Wharf, Boston Public Library.



1898 Boston Albany Train Depot on Kneeland and Lincoln streets, Boston City Archives.

WHEREAS, by an order of the Board of Street Commissioners dated **October 26, 1925**, certain parcels of land, therein described, were taken by the City of Boston, for the **widening, relocation and construction of Kneeland street, Boston Proper district, from Washington street to Atlantic avenue,** it is therefore

**Ordered;** That due notice be given ~~xxx~~ that the city intends to ~~ex~~ upon said lands for the purpose of constructing said improv and that notice be given to

~~and~~ all ~~other~~ persons interested as owners, ~~residents, tenants, occupants or~~ ~~holders~~, in said lands, that they cut off, pull down or remove all buildings, erections, and obstructions of every sort, ~~except~~ standing on or projecting over said lands so taken, and vacate said lands **within sixty days** ~~xxx~~ from the date hereof.

And in default thereof the city will proceed to sell at public auction all buildings, erections and obstructions standing on, or projecting over, said lands, so taken.

Passed:

**Joseph F. Sullivan** Secretary.

1925 Order of Board of Street Commissioners for widening of Kneeland Street, City of Boston, Boston City Archives.

I would meet up with him for hours on end in the bakeries, me sharing my research and he guiding me towards more things to look into and connect between— sharing stories and getting to know each other. It was his idea for me to do a long history of a small room— my own room— through the history of the building, and the area. I had lacked an ability to do proper research, and link it with architectural methods, during my undergrad so I was more keen to have been given assignments that would simply aid Tunney in the project he was already doing so that I could learn from him directly. But he was kindly redirecting this towards me having my own project, to which he would serve as a mentor for, and could possibly be included alongside his work— which was really an unbelievable gift. I'm still not finished the project. Like any young student would do I opened up too many lines of interest to ever be able to connect them all. And maybe that's interesting, and maybe necessary to approach such a project of disentangling. But it's also necessary to keep working towards the process of sorting through those strings and finding some bits which you can say some things about— so I'm working on it. And I like that I'm still perpetuating working on it. And I still exchange emails with Tunney. I'll go six months without saying anything and then will send him a scan of a 1930 business directory asking him to verify if a certain restaurant was in fact at a certain address because there is a discrepancy with the photographs, and he will respond with data within a day or two having done his own checking and reconfirmation. And if he doesn't hear from me for too long he will reach out and ask how I'm doing, sending a photo of the scene outside his window. All because we just enjoy it, this prolonged correspondence which might not be going anywhere definitive, or producing an end (product)— although we still maintain that as a goal.

Chinatown has been facing many different forms of constriction for decades— since its conception, from before its conception, perpetually. It's impossible to point to any moment or extended period of stability of what Chinatown is or was. But not only that but Chinatown as a community is completely distinct from the geographical area which contains Chinatown. A geographical history of Chinatown is less about the soil and more about interior spaces, families and networks. The focus of my research was less upon this story, and more on the geographical changes to the soil, and the forces that built that soil, and built on top of that soil, and how that became or emerges from the entanglement with all of the things moving across and through and into that building (as a verb and a noun).

The historic constriction is not only from luxury condos, but also from the expansion of the Tufts University Medical Campus and related urban renewals schemes in the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and still on-going, and the construction in the late 50s of the Central Artery highway which sliced away entire streets, and the road expansions and street widenings, particularly of Kneeland Street in 1927 and Harrison Avenue in 1893 which was the then center of Chinatown, the widening of which was ostensibly to improve traffic flow but the real reason was to disperse Chinese and to make policing easier. But also the perpetual shifting of school locations, the growth of the garment industry in the 1910s to 1960s (which at first didn't hire Chinese workers), and the shifting location of businesses and laundromats which were one of the first few modes of work men in the 'bachelor society' of early Chinatowns could do, because the exclusion act limited immigration to merchants, or rather persons

who owned a business, so many Chinese men became shared partners, on paper, in these businesses in order to immigrate and the shifting regulations on businesses and public housing and welfare benefits, and the shifting policing practices and immigration laws, and the shifting movement of other immigrant groups, and the alteration of transit lines, and so on. All of these aspects and more are constantly shifting the landscape of what constitutes Chinatown and where Chinatown is. And in some unlikely ways one could interpret Chinatown as being close to the largest its been in its history, depending on which parameters you use to define 'size'.

But in other ways the complexity of the area of the South Cove, which is today called Chinatown, reveals some of these broader complexities, by both being more specific and also wider. My apartment was in an old garment building, built in 1915, on the north side of Kneeland Street, at the corner with Tyler Street. Kneeland served at different points as a dividing line between neighborhoods, as a middle line of a district, and as an arterial road cutting through a neighborhood, but in general is a more commercial and industrial road. Tyler street on the other hand has a more stable history as a residential street, with townhouses adapted for retail businesses and restaurants, and serves since the 1920s as a core street in the commercial heart of Chinatown.

The South Cove gets its name from the fact that it was an actual cove when the Europeans encountered Shawmut peninsula, upon which colonial Boston was settled in 1630. Large swaths of Boston sit on land-fill projects, thousands of tree trunks cut to pilings holding up buildings on top of gravel and silt excavated from the western and southern suburbs of Newton and Roxbury, held behind sea-walls of puddingstone. Before 1830 Kneeland Street was water and marsh. The plans to fill in the cove— to demolish the wharfs— went in hand with a project to connect a rail line from the south (New York) into the central business district. The curve of the rail line dictated the limits of the fill. The location of the depot dictated the intersection of Kneeland and Lincoln streets. The rest of the fill was given a grid to be populated with middle class housing for white (English) Americans. From roughly 1840 to 1860 townhouses similar to those on Tyler street populated Kneeland, until a protestant church was built at the location of my apartment in roughly 1870. A period which corresponded with the re-entrance of white philanthropic charities into urban slums, often operating out of churches. As the 'middle class' housing had quickly turned into an area of devalued real estate due to the proximity to the expansion of rail lines and depots, as well as the sinking of soil which was not given in parts enough of a gravel base in addition to being filled with mud, 'cellar dirt' and ashes from fireplaces. The bulk of the filling began in 1833 by the South Cove Corporation, after having dug a 600 foot canal to gravel hill in Roxbury to excavate the 18 acres of marsh. 75 persons, mostly Irish, worked the transporting via scows to wheelbarrows and horse carts, resulting with a fill 13 feet deep. From the 1850s the area was predominantly Irish and Germans, from the 1880s eastern European Jews and Italians, from the 1900s Armenians, Syrians and Lebanese and by 1890 Chinese communities in the northern part along Harrison. It wasn't until the 1940s and 50s when the almost entirely Christian (mostly Maronites from Mount Lebanon) Syrians and Lebanese south of Kneeland began to move farther south, and eventually into the white

middle class, that Chinatown expanded to the south side of Kneeland.

The filling of the South Cove was actually an extremely incremental process as well, due to varying holdings and financing bodies, bankruptcies and changing plans of potential development. There were partial fillings in 1795, 1807, 1814, 1832, 1835, 1838, 1842, 1846, 1852, 1901, 1940 and 1991.

Concurrent with the shifting immigrant communities was the shifting location and scale of production industries and warehouses— particularly of garment and leather production— which built increasingly larger loft buildings scattered among the townhouses, ultimately in place of the church which became the loft building I lived in. A building which was literally cut in half in 1927 on account of the municipal decree to widen Kneeland Street, which meant that owners on the north side had to "cut off, pull down or remove all buildings standing on said lands", which resulted in some demolitions, and in the case of my building, having the facade taken off, the beams cut back to the new street line, and a new facade constructed. The building abutting mine was demolished and on the narrow lot too small to realize much value, and on account of the depression and the slow movement of capital, it sat vacant until 1935 when an Atlantic Gas station was built to service the now busy arterial road which connected the wealthy rich Back Bay neighborhood to the Old Colony Parkway (now Morrissey Boulevard) towards Cape Cod. Garment industries continued, with a different company operating on each floor, sometimes multiple on one floor, until it gradually shifted to other businesses, particularly Chinese and Vietnamese. My landlord bought the building when the garment industry was collapsing (mostly due to consolidation, which was always on going, and offshoring) in 1987, and he quickly moved to renovate with partition walls and dropped ceilings. An assortment of businesses followed: a herb store, a piano school, an accountants office, sex work, massage parlors, gambling in the basement, an engineers office, a Hong-Kong-style market stall that unfolds from a doorway. The gas station kept its 1930s form but got converted into a clay pot cafe. In 2010 my landlord renovated the the fifth and sixth floors, which had previously hosted the piano school (which moved to the third floor) into apartments. When I moved in in 2013 almost all of the other residents were Chinese students from Mainland China studying at Emerson and Suffolk, and by 2017 almost all of the other apartments were either permanent AirBnB's or well paid young medical professionals from Tufts Medical Center. Not only was Tufts Medical expanded over the course of a few decades through urban renewal but it was also occupying the other former garment buildings, especially the large and more modern ones built in the 1930s on the south side of Kneeland, constructed not around the limitation of natural light via windows, but of electrical lighting. It was in part the potential to construct these larger garment buildings which lead to the widening of Kneeland. These were becoming medical labs since the 1990s, and now funding the gentrification through the informal housing of their employees into the rest of Chinatown (if you can say the older garment buildings belong to Chinatown...)

All of which I would say are not separate stories to be compartmentalized, but strings within the same story. And reveal a constant flux of what a place 'is', and what occurs

within a place— what forms and deforms a place, perpetually. And are intertwined with the larger movements of capital, labor, technologies, bodies, materials, mud, stone, cotton, oil, property lines, logistics of transport, sewer lines and traffic lights, colonial trade, regulation, planning, projection and so on. And these dynamics don't occur as a linear string of points in a sequence, but are happening simultaneously and contradictingly.

The garment district shifted to the area of the South Cove in the wake of the Great Fire in the downtown warehouse district in 1872. Simultaneously alongside regulations against tenement sweat shops in the North End, a reduction in the cost of sewing machines, wider streets in which goods and emergency carts can move easily, proximity to railroad depots, cheap real estate, supportive politicians, consolidation of industry ownership and capital, vertical production, and the emergence of steel frame structures. Which results in the increase of real estate value which simultaneously sets the motion for the destruction of housing for manufacturing and the flight of the middle class to be replaced by immigrant low-end housing on sinking soil cradled by rail lines. Followed with the introduction of electricity which allowed garment buildings to be larger and deeper, the introduction of automobiles and highways, widened streets giving space and value for demolition of housing for industry— the remnant half lots filled with auto-body shops, parking lots and fast food.

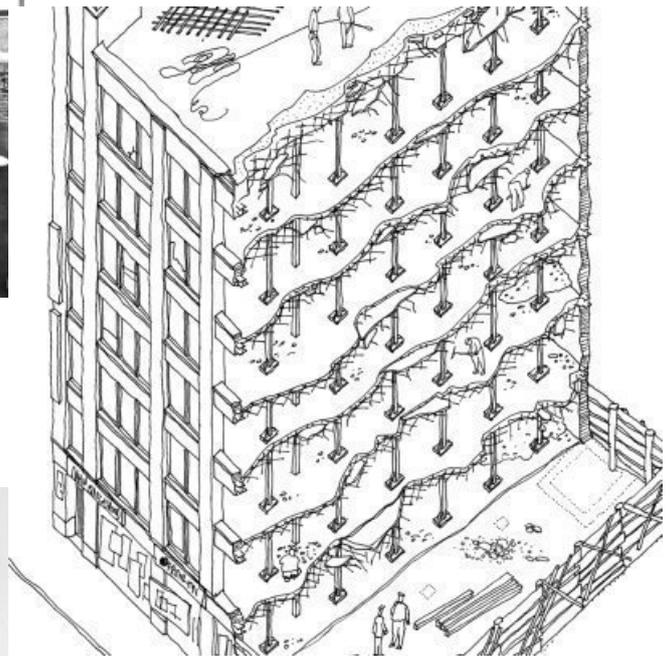
All resting upon a landfill project that emerged from the concession that the economic windfall of real estate exceeded that of wharf activity. A group of speculators, all wealthy merchants, whose names still grace many of the public institutions in Boston (Harrison Gray Otis, Jonathan Mason, William Tudor, and Gardiner Greene, son-in-law of Singleton Copley) in 1803 bought up land on Dorchester Neck (what is today South Boston), petitioning that the neck, which was a peninsula opposite the South Cove and central Boston, be annexed to Boston on the condition that a connecting bridge be built. The proposed bridge however would cut off sea access to the wharfs in the South Cove, favoring only ten families and a small group of speculators. Due to the involvement of the speculators upon influential positions within the town council the bridge proposal was passed, not without a contemporary critique in the Chronicle that "a few chattering lawyers in combination with men who are able to monopolize every dollar in the banks, will henceforth generate project after project... and under a pretended act of generosity will eventually bear down every opposition to their plans." The scandalous nature of the motion brought the state legislature to broker a compromise which saw the construction of a bridge which did not cut off access to the sea, but instead the South Bay (along what is now Berkeley Street). In 1805 already was there another petition to build a more direct connection via bridge which had difficulty being implemented so the collaborated with the proprietors of the India Wharf project in the North End to 'extend' Sea Street (now Atlantic Avenue) as if it was a wharf, when in actuality it would form the basis of their intended bridge. The structure was a cobb wharf of which the "top four feet were solid earth and stone." On the third day of construction a group of 70 men on behalf of the South Cove wharf owners armed with crow bars and axes "assembled and cut the said fourth hundred feet of 'wharf' to pieces and set the timber adrift." Eventually the city authorized the Boston Free Bridge Corporation to construction



1926 houses on Kneeland Street between Hudson and Albany in process of demolition from street widening of Kneeland, compromised facades supported in place, New England Historical Society.



1926 houses on Kneeland Street between Hudson and Albany in process of demolition from street widening of Kneeland, New England Historical Society.



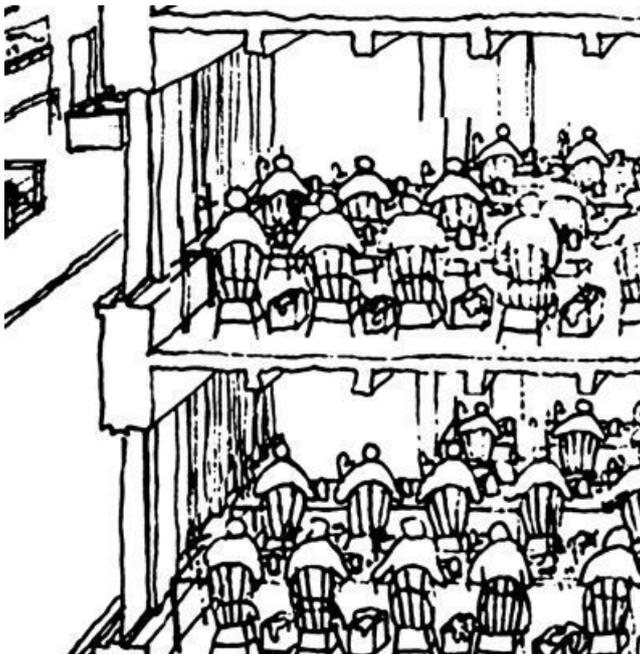
1927 drawing of 72 Kneeland being cut in half, Tomi Hilsee, 2018.



1927 72 Kneeland on left immediately before being cut in half, abutting building to be demolished and become gas station, New England Historical Society.



1930 two Chinese boys at Stanleys Auto Repair stand at corner of Kneeland and Tyler streets, in remnant lot left from street widening, Courtesy Tunney Lee.



1930 drawing of garment workers sewing by window in 72 Kneeland, Boston, Tomi Hilsee, 2017.



1935 drawing of Atlantic Refinery gas station next to 72 Kneeland in empty lot remaining from street widening demolitions, Tomi Hilsee, 2019.

## Selected Central Artery Route Slices Chinatown, Garment Area

### State, City Decision Announcement Soon

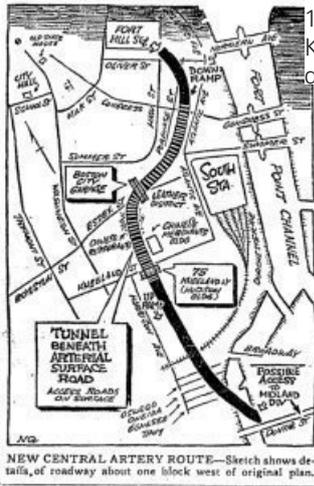
*Expressway's Approved Path Spares Leather District, Dooms New Garage*

By WILLIAM J. LEWIS

A new route selected for the Boston Central Artery will cut a deep swath through the heart of Chinatown and the garment district, but the city's highly valued leather area is to be left intact, it was learned by the Globe last night.

Both city and state officials have agreed to the newly chosen route which will mean destruction of property assessed at nearly \$10,000,000 and actually valued far in excess of that figure.

Official announcement of the route, which runs on a line about a block west of the original path proposed by the State Public Works Department, will be made at the State House later this week. While city officials are dismayed by the high cost of land takings involved in pushing the artery through the dense downtown area, they have been convinced that the Chinatown route will be the least costly in the long run.



a bridge in 1828 as it was "in the city's best interest". As the South Cove was cut off from both the South Bay and the sea there was more financial incentive to develop it than keep it open for shipping. So in 1833 a group of lawyers, merchants and businessmen formed the South Cove Corporation for the sole purpose of filling in the area between the bridges in order to provide land for railroad terminals from Worcester, Providence and New York. The same corporation demarcated the streets and plots of the rest of the land fill which became the neighborhood which is now Chinatown. And so a few white male merchants dictate the form of the city, its construction, its purpose, and its governing.

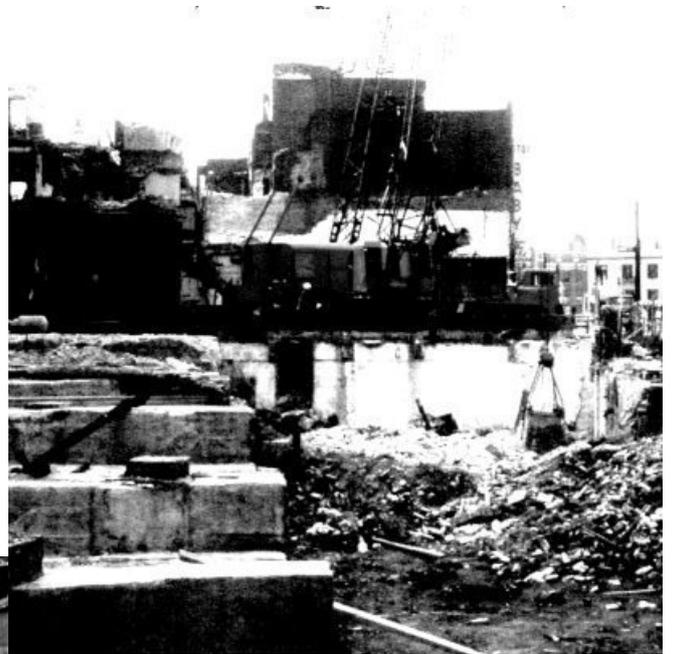
And these merchants are engaged heavily in opium trading and the Atlantic slave trade. The most infamous is Thomas Perkins whose opium profits funded much of the hospital infrastructure in Boston, but funded much of the municipal works, rail infrastructure and investments into early industrial iron works and mining. Not only Perkins but also the Forbes and Delanos (related to the Roosevelts). Funding more generally which also led into the eventual expansion of first textile mills in Lowell and Lawrence which required the damming of the Merrimack river, flooding the countryside and notoriously coercing the labor of women and children into the rigid routines of exploitative wage slavery. The cotton being spun into fabrics coming from the labor of enslaved Africans on plantations in the south, and the fabrics sent to sweatshops in New York and Boston to be made into garments. Britain controlled 90% of the opium trade in the 1800s, 10% of which was handled by Americans. Mostly Boston merchants, who had raised their initial capital through the Atlantic slave trade in the 1700s, which they translated to opium trading in the 1800s. They sailed from Boston to Turkey where they bought opium, to China where they sold it, primarily in Guangzhou, and taking tea, porcelain and silk back to the US. This is of course in the backdrop of the military coercion of Britain towards China to force legalization and the trade of opium on favorable conditions to European and American traders and the expansion of the coolie-slave-trade of 'debt slavery'. Which targeted many Chinese men from Guangdong to labor in Hawaii and then California irrigating the San Joaquin Valley, and working on western railroads and Wyoming coal mines before eventually moving to eastern cities to escape ethnic cleansing. And it was the breakup of opium dens of Chinatown which became the largest public crusade for brutal police raids into Chinatown to disperse and deport Chinese persons.

Of course it's all fucked when you get down to it. And of course Boston and the South Cove is all not merely on stolen land but a fort and capitol which served as a base of departure or support for the massacre of Pequots in 1637 and Wampanoags and Narragansetts in 1675-78.

. . .

Very early on in my meetings with Tunney he asked me about my heritage and my family history, which I wasn't so prepared to answer at the time, even though I could have shared something. (And I could write another essay upon.) I just hadn't thought of it being so directly relevant to a research project in which a researcher or historian is supposed to remain a neutral objective observer from outside the situation. But of course that's problematic. The only thing we can ever be is within the world, because we already are. So the only thing left to do is to engage complexity as a participant in it. And I think it is complex. Maybe to say things are fucked up is not complex, but to say what we should do with it and how to place ourselves within it, I think is complex. And I think to engage this would also mean to not give up on it, but instead to expand it, re-placing ourselves within it, always starting over from where we left off. And I think when we do this we are not just reading history but are producing, designing, inventing, whatever— which can also be problematic. To find something in history I think is a process of creation. When we draw lines (because that is exactly what we are doing), we create those lines, in the unique way in which you or I have drawn that line. I think to occupy such a realm is stressful, and urgent, and also just the way things are. And so I think it's hard to say what happened, even if there are facts, and even if we know what happened. Anyone who has been in any kind of long term relationship (of a broad non-romantic sense also), knows the impossibility of remaining the same, or stability in the sense of maintaining the idea that you know where you are. To impose an idea of remaining the same upon a partner, a child, a collective, an environment, a building, a thought, a history, a home, is potentially abusive. So I'm opposed to that. And I want to remain in instability. Constantly working on our relations, through history, which are never stable, and which demand our commitment to being attentive and present and engaged. An act which is design, (searching for a home, even if it rejects a home), which we are constantly doing, to some degree or another.

Maybe I say all this about engaging and it sounds optimistic, but in fact I'm not so much optimistic, I'm quite pessimistic. Especially about white people. And white people's ability to engage or relate to history at all. I think this becomes more and more abundantly clear when, especially when, a Black or Native trans person, woman, or man is killed by the police or any other agent of white supremacy, and Black or Native people take over the street demanding reparations. White people have no idea how to reconcile with the brutality, let alone even approach their relation to the existence of racial hierarchies of violence. Which is at least related to a lack of being able to really understand why they are forming a coalition and how they are to be involved in that coalition. Not only do we not understand racism, but we don't understand what racism means for us, or what fighting against it, as an issue which is also personal for us, would look like. Because we also have no model for that. I just don't think it has ever happened. I don't think there has ever been a broad coalition of white people fighting against racism. I don't even know if there is even a model of genuine white rebellion against anything in recent memory. Certainly not in a way which isn't reconstituting whiteness in another form, or coming from a place of guilt and moral obligation, or performative solidarity. I think white people have developed an incapacity to relate to history, not just their own history, but history in general. Like an



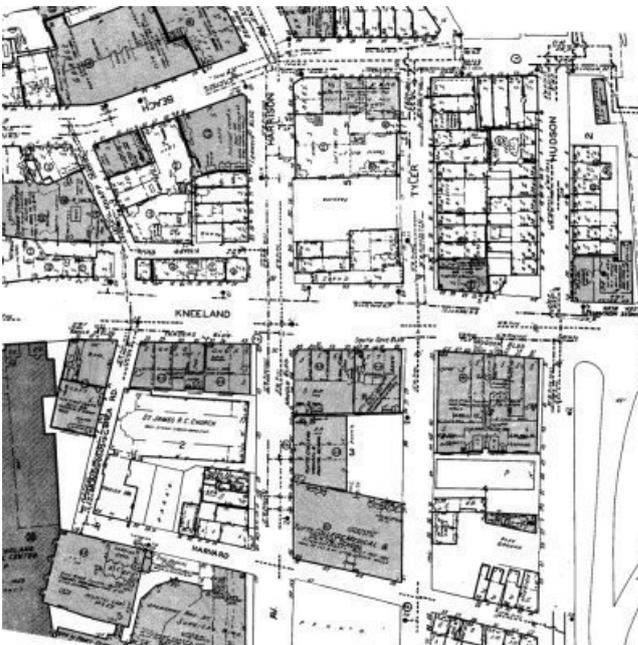
1968 View of a demolition site at Bennet and Washington Streets south of Kneeland during urban renewal for expansion of Tufts Medical Center, Tufts University Archive.



1956 Construction of Central Artery highway tunnel cutting through Chinatown, steel beam structure being laid, Boston Public Library.



1956 Tyler Street looking away from Kneeland.



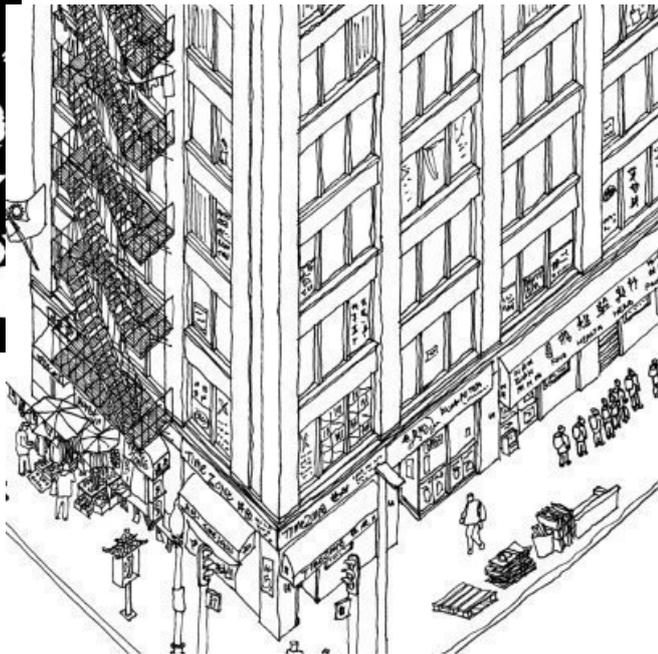
1960 Sanborn Atlas, Kneeland in center, depletion from urban renewal visible, Central Artery highway on right, Tufts medical south of Kneeland.



ca 1890 Original town houses on Tyler street before modifications, Boston City Archives copy.



1980s Chinese Progressive Association Protest Against the Combat Zone, CHSNE.



Contemporary drawing of 72 Kneeland, Boston, Tomi Hilsee, 2018.



1909 Syrian immigrants smoking narghile on south Hudson street, Boston Public Library.

abusive man, they willfully wipe away the awareness that things have actually occurred at all, and that they have some relation to that. The proof is that white museums contain no history.

So at least for me, I struggle to destabilize and reposition a thinking and relating to the idea I have about home, maybe towards a "possible embrace of homelessness" or maybe also, or in addition to, what Fred Moten said. "Civilization, or more precisely civil society, with all its transformative hostility, was mobilized in the service of extinction, of disappearance. The shit is genocidal. Fuck a home in this world, if you think you have one."

- Poem in the beginning from Maximus to Gloucester by Charles Olson (who referred to himself not as a writer or a poet but an 'archaeologist of morning')

In loving memory of Tunney Lee, who passed away on July 2nd 2020. My growth as, and my belief that I can be, an architectural historian will be forever indebted to Tunney. A debt which can't, and shouldn't, be repaid.

Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival, Film, 2016.

How the Irish Became White, Noel Ignatiev, 1995.

The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, 2013.

Citizen: An American Lyric, Claudia Rankine, 2014.

Home, Toni Morrison, 2012.

Edouard Glissant: One World in Relation, Film, 2009.

Daughters of the Dust, Julie Dash, Film, 1991.

"My Old Home", Lu Xun, 1921.

Beyond a Boundary, C.L.R. James, 1963.

Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism, Craig Womack, 1999.

Gaining Ground: A History of Landmaking in Boston, Nancy S. Seasholes, 2003.

Chinese Immigrants and Chinese Americans in the City of Boston: Architectural and Historical Context, CHSNE, 2016.

The Industrial Revolution and the Emergence of Boston's Central Business District, David Ward, 1966.

The Ladies' Garment Industry in Boston, Albert Tappe, 1952.

"How Profits From Opium Shaped 19th-Century Boston", Martha Bebinger, wbur, 2017.

Chinatown Atlas, [chinatownatlas.org](http://chinatownatlas.org)

Chinese Historical Society of New England, [chsne.org](http://chsne.org)

- video summaries of Chinatown Atlas on CHSNE Facebook page, narrated by Tunney Lee

My Life in China, Kenneth Eng, Film, 2014.

Chinese Progressive Association, [cpaboston.org](http://cpaboston.org)

The Chinese Experience in America, Shih-shan Henry Tsai, 1986.

Strangers from a Different Shore, Ronald Takaki, 1989.

"Building an American Muslim Community", Confessions of an Ordinary Muslim, Mary Lahaj, 2015. [marylahaj.wordpress.com](http://marylahaj.wordpress.com)

"Lost Syrian Neighborhood in Boston", AJ+, 2017.

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Chinese Laundries in Massachusetts Oral History Project, interview with Tunney Lee by Shauna Lo, Asian American Studies and Chinese Historical Society of New England, 2009.

Search Terms:

Dawes Severalty Act 1887  
Rock Springs Massacre  
Acadians  
Chinese Exclusion Act  
Paper Sons  
Boston West End

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1964 Kneeland street looking east, 72 Kneeland center left.



1990s view of downtown Boston and Central Artery highway I-93, Chinatown to left of highway.



2017 Luxury towers on Washington street shadowing Chinatown, taken from south side of Kneeland facing north west, Tomi Hilsee.