I want to acknowledge that the first inhabitants of Lower Manhattan (Manhattan) were the Lenapehoking, the Lenape people. We must pay respect to Lenape peoples, past, present and future and their continuing presence and struggles in the homeland. No conversation about gentrification and displacement can be had without first acknowledging that we stand on occupied Leni-Lenape land in New York City.

The concept for Imagining De-gentrified Futures comes from my own experience in anti-displacement organizing and recognizing its limitations—it can often feel reactive, defensive and sometimes lacking in long-term vision. As an artist, activist and educator I wanted to create a space for dialogue that dares to imagine socially-just futures for our cities. To that end, I have asked artists, cultural workers, activists, organizers, scholars and urban planners to engage with a broader audience on the crisis of displacement.

My role as the creator of this project was that of a facilitator and the process was one of discovery. I hoped that artists would live up to my expectations and create work that would express the collective imagination. They can help us understand the complexity of issues and help envisage a hopeful future while remaining grounded in reality. As the late cultural theorist Stuart Hall reminds us,

"...and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation, and we cannot wield 'how life really is out there' as a kind of text against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular cultural strategy or text can be measured."

The creative class is frequently perceived as the vanguard of "artwashing": the often early stages of gentrification in which an influx of artists, galleries, and cultural institutions end up displacing residents from their homes. In many cases, this is intentionally orchestrated by real estate developers under the guise of "neighborhood revitalization" through discounts in rent for cultural spaces and other incentives, but there are instances when grassroots creative communities contribute to artwashing by nature of being visible. There are artists engaging in "creative placekeeping" and rejecting "creative placemaking" projects that are promoted by city governments, real estate developers and art institutions. In contrast, "creative placekeeping" has been described as the active care and maintenance of a place and its social fabric, often by the people who live and work there. It is not just about preserving buildings, but keeping alive the cultural memories associated with a locale, while to envision what a de-gentrified city looks like—particularly one that is rooted in anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist values, and recognizes housing as a universal human right. Is it possible to disrupt dominant narratives put forth by real estate developers, extractive industries and the 1%, which depict gentrification as "inevitable" and a "natural" part of urban evolution? How might we trace a new trajectory that allows our neighborhoods to flourish without being priced out of our own communities?

Working class communities, immigrant communities and communities of color across U.S. cities have been greatly impacted by hyper-gentrification over the last fifteen years—the product of culture capitalism which has extended national legacies of oppression. Now more than ever, our creative communities must continue to manifest work that captures the hearts and minds: that agitates, educates, and provokes people to action. Of course creative expressions alone will not save us from gentrification, but they can inspire our collective imagination. They can help us understand the complexity of issues and help envisage a hopeful future while remaining grounded in reality. As the late cultural theorist Stuart Hall reminds us,

"...it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we can come to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation, and we cannot wield ‘how life really is out there’ as a kind of text against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular cultural strategy or text can be measured."

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Black Quantum Futurism’s (BQF) installations weave quantum physics, Afrofuturism, and Black/Afrodiaporic cultural traditions of consciousness, time, and space. On display are community-created collages, videos and other ephemera that were part of Community Futurisms: Time & Memory in North Philly 002 - Black Space Agency, a 2018 event inspired by the legacy of the Fair Housing Act, Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements, and the space race in North Philadelphia during the 1960s. Participants were able to apply their imaginations through a series of creative visioning workshops with tenant organizers and youth, and engaging with BQF’s art and media installation. BQF’s installation All Time is Local explores time’s intimate relationship to space and locality through text, clocks, objects, and video footage. BQF recovers and amplifies the historical memory of autonomous Black communal space-times in North Philly. Viewers are invited to meditate on the complex, contested temporal and spatial legacies of historical, liberatory Black futurist projects that have been based there. These two works combine BQF’s art and ethnographic research, illuminating the impact of gentrification, gentrification, and displacement in Philadelphia through the modes of oral histories and alternative temporalities.

Supporting the ability of local people to maintain their way of life as they choose. This exhibition highlights and celebrates many artists and cultural workers who use this strategy, while others examine complex histories and interests that are at play behind gentrification and land occupation. Forging a way forward is not only about identifying solutions but recognizing these trends within a larger trajectory of exploitation. Gentrification inspiration from anti-gentrification resistance across the U.S., decolonization movements, and Afrofuturism. Imagining De-gentrified Futures explores ways in which socially-just futures can exist for city communities.

Sandra de la Loza’s To Oblivion: The Speculator’s Eden, a 2018 event inspired by the Chinatown Tenants Union and collaboration with the Committee Against Asian American Profiteers. It incorporates the voices of my parents, neighbors, and other Latinx and Chinese residents who are exercising their creativity in the midst of devastation and displacement. It challenges us to face the painful past and present in order to inform the future. It is critical to its process that the local residents have the platforms and agency to tell their own stories of displacement, and celebrate their own resilience and resistance. These projects highlight tenants’ stories and bolster support for the Chinatown Working Group Plan, a community-created zoning plan aimed at protecting Chinatown from gentrification.

And for myself (Betty Yu), a socially-engaged artist and curator of this exhibition, I present De-gentrification in Progress, a mixed media work that uses 360° video, augmented reality, and photography to reimagine a new society where housing is free for all and real estate profiteers are outlawed. It incorporates the voices of my parents, neighbors, and other Latinx and Chinese residents of Brooklyn’s hyper-gentrifying neighborhood of Sunset Park, where I grew up. Finally, the show is rounded out by Through photography and writing, Imani Jacqueline Brown’s work: The Beginning and The End and The Beginning Again explores displacement, loss, and taking future of the Mississippi River. By the time it flowed from its origins in Minnesota and reached New Orleans (the artist’s hometown), the river has become brutalized, toxified, and engaged by extractive corporations like Exxon and Texaco. Brown’s marked-up photographs identify the land formation and deformation in Louisiana caused by today’s land colonizers. Written text reveals that the land once known as the Birdfoot Delta of the Mississippi River was born of slave plantations. The oil industry destroyed the upriver plantations and deltaic land bringing about Birdfoot’s demise. Brown’s work connects the seemingly-disparate histories of colonization, devastating results of disaster capitalism post Katrina, and land displacement.

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Robin Holder’s drawings Falling Figures and Home explore the theme of home and its many implications, including identity, family, race, migration and upheaval. Using the house as a primary motif, both works illustrate the disintegration of the American Dream and its expectant vision of prosperity. While the concept of home is universal, social and economic disparities create devastating polarization; where one person may feel a sense of security in relation to their home, another may feel a profound sense of loss and dispossession. Falling Figures depicts the dystopian emotional and material reality many people feel while Home portrays an ideal image of acceptance, unity and equality. The series is about celebrating the legitimacy of all identity narratives.

Chinatown Art Brigades’ Here To Stay (large-scale street projections of anti-gentrification messages) and Imagining A Future Chinatown (large-scale street projections, audio, and blueprints from community organizers, cultural workers, urban planners, and scholars that offers a future fulfillment of neighborhood development. The selection of works serves as a resource combining research and vision. I hope this exhibition creates a generative space for dialogue, engagement, and reflection. The exhibition contributors challenge us to envision a liberating future, while recognizing that it is always inexorably tied to the past. As social activist Grace Lee Boggs once said, “A great social change is based on the people exercising their creativity in the midst of devastation and is one of the great historical contributions of humankind.”

Betty Yu
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2. Afrofuturism is a powerful cultural aesthetic in that it combines science fiction, history, and fantasy while exploring the African-American experience, the black diaspora and self-determination. It challenges us to face the painful past and present in order to inform the future.
3. Chinatown Art Brigade was founded in 2015 by myself, Tomie Arai, and ManSee Kong.