The Other in the City of Destiny

Rich Furman

Why permit an army of leprous, prosperity-sucking, progress-blasting Asiatics befoul our thoroughfares, degrade the city, repel immigration, drive out our people, break up our homes, take employment from our countrymen, corrupt the morals of our youth, establish opium joints, buy or steal the babe of poverty or slave, and taint with their brothels the lives of our young men?...If no other method of keeping them at a distance from our people can be found, let the citizens furnish them with lots on the waterfront, three fathoms below low tide.

—The Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest, quoting an unnamed journalist discussing the problem of the Chinese in Tacoma, August, 1885.

Through the blurred lens of the fifty-cent point-of-view telescope, the trees across Commencement Bay resembled a Renoir landscape more than an actual panorama—burnt orange and yellow waves of muted trees crash into swirling reds and many shades of green. It is late fall, and I have driven twenty minutes up SR-509 to Saltwater State Park as I do every couple weeks. This spectacular stretch of beach lies just beyond where Commencement Bay fades into the open waters of the Puget Sound. I walk along the back half of the beach covered in driftwood, past McSorley Creek where salmon spawn until November. I examine a large fallen leaf maple lying on the sand, its roots twisting like spiders toward the chilly, cloud-heavy sky. It's covered with dark-green seaweed and shiny black mollusks, the wood smooth from many seasons of sun and

tide. Two seagulls in the distance race between the water and another piece of driftwood, chasing each other back and forth over the green-blue bay horizon. As I watch them, I take in a deep breath of salt, plankton and cedar. Looking northwest, the Olympic Mountains recede under layers of swampy, dark nimbostratus clouds and higher up, white swirling cirrus give way to the late afternoon sun.

Looking south, just behind the hills of Browns Point, is Tacoma, Washington. *The City of Destiny*—given this name upon being selected as the terminus for Northern Pacific's transcontinental rail line—is a city of 215,000 halfway between Seattle and the state capital Olympia, Washington. The bluffs hide the downtown urban core and the Foss Waterway, a finger of the bay which divides nature and the Port of Tacoma. Huge red cranes and dull-grey tankers line the banks of the Foss, and further down are the pulp mills and factories, only a few of which are still operational. In 1981, the Thea Foss Waterway was declared a federal Superfund site. Fish were found with strange lesions and tumors in their livers. After three decades of cleanup efforts, it is a national model for environmental healing, a reconciliation with nature, if you will. Condominiums and trendy restaurants dot the west side of the waterway, facing Mount Rainier. Fishermen pull red and stone crabs from the waterway for their dinners. Schools of minnows glisten as they move through the waterway up toward the greater Commencement Bay. Students from the University of Washington Tacoma descend the modernist steps—past the hundreds of glass sculptures that line the Chihuly Glass bridge—to have lunch with friends by the almost pastoral urban waterway.

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Only a few miles away is the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC). The NWDC is not any different from most prisons. Its gray, unassuming exterior hides and silences the terrified people within. With manicured lawns and flags flying above what looks like a benign government structure, the prison was built on the edge of toxic lands east of downtown Tacoma. Few Tacomans know where it is, what it is, or what it represents.

The NWDC opened its doors in the spring of 2004. It was

designed to hold a maximum of 500 immigrant detainees, but for much of its history, the NWDC has held over 1,500 people. The Department of Homeland Security pays a for-profit corporation for up to 1,500 beds, creating a structural incentive to arrest and detain undocumented immigrants and detain them for as long as possible.

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At the junction between where Commencement Way joins the Foss is the Tacoma Chinese Reconciliation Park. I first visited it in 2011 when it had been open only for a couple of months. The park is only a few minute drive from my North Tacoma home. I head north on Alder, take a right and drive down hilly North 30th Street, through Old Tacoma, not far from where the Chinese lived in the 1880s. The view is spectacular—as it is on any cloud-free day. The northern Cascade Mountain range fades into Mount Rainier, a 14,000 foot, perpetually snow-covered volcano that appears almost perfectly symmetrical from a distance, hovering just south and east of the city. When my mom first visited us here, and caught a glimpse of Rainier on the drive back from the airport, she gasped when she saw it: "That's not real, is it?"

The park was still under construction when I discovered it, but the walkway and most of the sculptures, along with the placards telling the story of the Chinese in Tacoma, were all in place. I walked the gravel and stone path with dark red stone boundaries. A large stucco and wood welcoming sign with an overhanging roof of ornately carved, Chinese slate tile read: *Your Journey to Reconciliation Begins Here*. I walked closer, and read the text on the first museum quality placard:

> *Toward healing our community from this act, the park's peaceful Chinese landscape is meant to promote a deep sense of peace, healing and reconciliation.*

The next placard's large caption read: *Toward Gold Mountain*. Gold Mountain, or *Gam Saan*, the near-mythical America, the fantasy and myth of which glossed the lips of famine-sickened Chinese laborers in their home country. The United Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads were desperate for low-wage laborers to build the First Transcontinental Railroad, 1,900 miles of continuous track

from Council Bluffs, Iowa to the Pacific in the 1860s. Hyperbole about the opportunities in the expanding young nation, not only on the railroads, but in mines and tunnel-blasting crews, were used in propaganda fliers by unscrupulous recruiters and smugglers who packed Chinese so tightly into ship for the two month voyage that many of them suffocated to death or died from starvation.

The next placard on my walk explored the complex story of the Chinese in America during the following two decades, a story characterized by hardship and resilience, but also hate and intolerance. In 1882, recession and xenophobia culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited the immigration of laborers from China. On the next placard read: *Expulsion of the Chinese from Tacoma on November 3, 1885*.

I walked toward the *ting*, the fire-red, Chinese pagoda-like structure at the back of the park. A hundred yards behind it were train tracks, and above that, a 1940s concrete overpass. Next to the northbound rails on a detached strip of track is parked a maroon BNSF boxcar with a stenciled white skeleton almost like a Day of The Dead figure, though a bit more modernist and playful than haunting. As I approach the *ting*, I see workmen repairing it. I watched them for a few minutes as I struggled to make sense of the narratives that I read on the placards, the stories of the Chinese and the citizens of Tacoma, the place I have called home for five years, the place I intend to call my final home. They worked carefully, filling holes in the wood, and adding a layer of paint to the impressive thirty by forty foot wood structure supported by eight granite columns, each weighing 3,000 pounds.

In the front of the pavilion stand two stone lions, each carved from a single piece of granite. Within each of their mouths, behind a row of menacing teeth, lie a large white and black, spotted granite ball, small enough to be able to roll around the lions' mouths, but too large to be removed. The guardian lions were carved by an artisan from Tacoma's Chinese sister city in Fuzhou, China—which commissioned and funded both the *ting* and the massive stone cats.

Guardian lion statues—one female and one male made from bronze, granite or stone—have been used to ward off evil and protect temples, imperial tombs, government buildings, and the homes of the wealthy in China since the Han dynasty, dating back

to 200 BC. The male statue, nearly always with his mouth wide open, is responsible for protecting the structure itself. Around the neck of this one, a stone necklace and carved coins with painted Chinese letters—the only color on either of the two statues. The lioness has her mouth closed with her paw resting gently on her cub, as is tradition—the small cub looking like an angry lapdog or gremlin hybrid. The youngling is tasked with guarding the contents and lives within the structures they guard. Similar statues also guard the entrances of nearly every Chinatown around the world where a Chinese diaspora can be found.

One of the workmen notices me watching. He calls down.

"Chinese wood does not seem to do well around here," he says.

It is not only Chinese wood that has suffered in the damp Pacific Northwest air, but also Chinese bodies as well.

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Anti-Chinese crusaders throughout the West had become increasingly frenzied and emboldened: whites in the Sierra Nevada Mountains beat and killed Chinese gold-panners working rivers already bereft of gold. In Rock Spring, Wyoming, a mob of armed, mostly Irish coal miners marched into Chinatown and burned it to the ground. Fifty Chinese who fled into the hills froze and died. Throughout the West, Chinese were driven from their homes. Chinatowns were looted and destroyed. Yet nothing matched the scope and scale of what happened in Tacoma, one of the largest and most prosperous towns in the Pacific Northwest, the city that beat out Seattle and Portland to become the thriving terminus of the transcontinental railroad.

Vitriol and rage filled the Alpha Opera House in Tacoma on February 21st, 1885. Nearly 1,000 people, or half of the voting citizens (white men) of the town of 6,000 gathered to discuss what was to be done with the Chinese. At a smaller, more secret meeting on October 3rd , the mayor formed a committee to oversee the previous meetings, as something had to be done about the Chinese menace in Tacoma.

Those at that clandestine meeting had decided that the 800 Chinese citizens of Tacoma—many of whom had been living

and working and even praying in Christian churches, side by side with white residents for nearly a decade—would have to abandon the city by 1:30 in the afternoon of November 3rd. An anointed "Committee of Fifteen" was charged with informing the Chinese residents of their fate.

Over the next few weeks, all but 150 Chinese residents fled Tacoma to Port Townsend and Seattle—other towns also in the Washington Territories—as well as Canada, San Francisco and even Portland, where anti-Chinese mobs had recently threatened the lives of their Chinese communities. Those who remained had hoped to hold on—that goodness and justice would prevail, that their shops and stores, businesses and homes, all that they owned in the world, would be protected, would be saved. They petitioned officials in the Chinese Consulate in San Francisco, who pleaded with the Governor of the Washington Territories, along with federal officials, to protect the rights and safety of the Chinese residents of Tacoma, who lived legally and peacefully in the city.

The hoped-for response never arrived.

Even though they had yet to open, at 9:30 in the morning on November 3rd a coordinated cacophony of steam whistles from the paper mills and foundries and shops cut through a wet, haunting stillness—for a moment, the city appeared deserted. However, within minutes of the haunting shrill, saloons that never closed were suddenly latched shut. Businesses that normally would have been open already remained closed. As planned, nearly five hundred white men armed with clubs and guns gathered near the Chinese quarter and began to march through the streets. Pounding on the doors and shouting racist demands, they ordered Chinese to leave by 1:30 that afternoon.

Those that defied and asserted their rights were dragged from their homes, their windows were smashed, and their doors destroyed. Many of the Chinatown's homes were vandalized and looted. Over the next several hours, all but a few of the 150 Chinese men, women, and children were rounded up and forced to march in the cold and driving rain that began in the early afternoon. Crying and desperate, they marched for hours on muddy, unpaved streets and roads, carrying all that remained of what they had owned, the little that was not taken by the white men—family photos and keepsakes, legal documents, jewelry and religious relics that the

looters had missed, and woks and wooden spoons. They marched south until they arrived, seven painful miles later, at a small, semi-rural train station normally used for animals and freight. Once Chinatown had been emptied, their homes were torched and burned to the ground, beginning the erasure of the existence of the Chinese of Tacoma.

They arrived at the disconsolate, rural station, terrified, exhausted, and now homeless. Those that could not fit inside the small train station sheltered in a nearby storage shed throughout the night as they waited for the morning trains. Some could afford the $6 ticket to Portland; those who could not fund their own banishment piled into a passing freight train hours later. Those who could not fit into the freight car or feared for their lives, began the 140-mile trek to Portland. Many were seen walking the desolate tracks for days.

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The first I remembered ever hearing about Tacoma was about twenty-five years ago from Sheldon, a friend of a friend. Over a couple of pints of English bitter at McGillin's Old Ale House, a pub from the 1860s tucked into Drury Alley in downtown Philadelphia, he told me about property his family owned on nearby Vashon Island. The homestead—in the family for three generations—rested on the bluff high above the bay, just northwest of Tacoma.

Sheldon and his father stood close together on a small hill a few blocks from their home. They liked to throw a baseball around together at the small grass park just at the base of the hill, and afterwards would walk up the hill and look out together, trying to find evidence of the city. Sheldon recalled an early fall day, just toward the end of baseball season. They gazed through the ever-lingering haze that made Tacoma one of the most polluted cities during the middle decades of the twentieth century. He recalled:

"I remember looking out toward the brown-orange glow. I must have been seven or eight at the time, my Dad standing by me, both of us looking across the water. I asked him why we never stopped in Tacoma, which we had to drive through frequently on the way to visit family in Federal Way, about ten miles north. Dad took a breath—my measured and slightly religious father who never

cursed and rarely had anything unpleasant to say—and said flatly, 'cause it's a shithole son. An absolute shithole.'"

And it is true that for more than half a century Tacoma was far less than a desirable city. Of course, I could selectively aggregate its best points and paint another picture, but by the time the eighties rolled around, Tacoma suffered from just about every problem that afflicted urban American.

Photographs of the town show a blighted, urban mess. The now renovated warehouses and factories that house the University of Washington Tacoma were dilapidated shells filled with garbage. Students learn where once sickly forests grew inside the buildings, right up from the filth, and addicts and the homeless lived in something like a post-apocalyptic nightmare. Methamphetamine dealing and use was rampant, and addicted near-zombies and sex workers roamed the downtown at all hours of the day and night. The police had pretty much given up on downtown, focusing their energy on other areas of the city.

And if these problems were not enough, consider the "Tacoma Aroma," the near constant stench that has been described as "thrice cooked eggs" or "sulfur-ass death." The aroma—a combination of sulfur emanating from the Simpson Tacoma Kraft pulp mill, toxic sediment raising from the beds of the Commencement Bay, an oil refinery, and a rendering plant—was frequently given as a reason why investors and developers ignored the city, while residents of tough, working class Tacoma merely viewed it as an unfortunate part of existence.

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In 1916, Historian Herbert Hunt, in *Tacoma: Its History and Its Builders,* both chronicles and reflects the xenophobic tenor of the late 1880s and the antipathy of many of the white citizens of Tacoma toward the Chinese, a sentiment that was growing nationally:

> *In Tacoma, idle men who wanted work reviled and hated the yellow competitor who had employment when he wanted it, because he labored for a less wage and was more servile. Yet, even among the whites who wanted work, there was developing an inclination to regard as menial anything that a Chinaman could*

> *do. Honest labor, in short, was losing its dignity. White women disliked to take employment as maids, because it put them in a class with the Chinese. A servant class, or menial class, was being developed, and this was the real serious aspect of the Chinese problem, and it could be cured only by ousting the Chinese. The cure came with a drastic remedy.*

The abuses against the Chinese Tacomans can only be conceptualized as relics of history if they are framed as isolated narratives that do not represent historical trends. However, the extreme racism, nativism, and willingness to dehumanize others is hardly a relic of a bygone century.

In two edited books colleagues and I published with Oxford University and Columbia University Presses on the criminalization of immigration, we explore the lived experiences of those to whom we refer as the “Immigrant Other”. The chapters of *Detaining the Immigrant Other: Global and Transnational Issues* and *The Immigrant Other: Lived Experiences in a Transnational World* interrogate how undocumented immigrants are marginalized, or “othered,” in over twenty countries around the world. Too frequently, history and even current discussions are written from the vantage point of those in power. We sought to honor and reposition the experiences of immigrants who we believe to be heroes. We insisted that the scholar who wrote in individual chapters engage in the difficult task of demonstrating the agency of the immigrants who make the painful decision to cross borders, yet to position this agency within the complex sociocultural contexts of colonialism, neoimpressionism, neoliberalism and corporate capitalism—forces that severely restrict their range of options. The power and constraints placed upon them by their forces make them all the more heroic.

The histories of the Chinese in America rarely present their own lived experience of marginalization. Very few first-person accounts of those who were driven out of Tacoma were recorded. Instead, white journalists and historians reflected the prevailing nativist attitudes of the day. The Chinese were viewed as subhuman creatures who were destroying the economic and moral fabric of the newly patchworked northwest territories instead of as highly productive community members subjected to abuse, hate crimes, and human rights violations. Newspaper articles that described

how the Chinese were marched through the foul rain—away from homes they would never again see, from lives they worked for years to create—were almost always from the vantage point of those that expelled them.

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On May 13, 2018, Marco Antonio Muñoz died by suicide in his jail cell in Starr County Jail in Rio Grande City, Texas. However, he did not hang himself from the ceiling, as is the more typically used method of disconsolate prisoners and detainees—this was a special padded cell that would not allow for such an approach. Marco was so tortured from being violently separated from his family, and so afraid to return to Honduras where families' lives were in danger, he tied his shirt around his neck, fastened it to a drainage pipe on the floor, and thrashed around until he suffocated to death.

His senseless death mirrors the savagery and cruelty of the Trump administration's policies on undocumented immigrants. Starting in October of 2017, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the Deferred Act For Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program would be rescinded. DACA has allowed nearly 800,000 young adults who arrived in the country without administrative authorization to obtain temporary (renewable every two years) legal status. DACAs were allowed to work legally, obtain drivers licenses and were required to pay income tax, provided they kept free of most legal infractions. However, what DACA most significantly did was end the terror that many families felt each day, wondering if their family members would be banished to a country that many of them do not even remember.

Imagine, if you can, the stress and psychological strain of this kind of uncertainty. Imagine what it would be like to have to start anew in a country that is not emotionally your own—you may not even speak the language—because of the status of your paperwork.

In June of this year, in an action that violates several international laws and human rights treaties, Sessions announced that the United States would no longer process refugee applications for those who are victims of "private crimes"—in other words,

those who have fled their countries due to violence. This same week, Sessions announced a new "zero tolerance" of those who try to cross the border without authorization, threatening to criminally charge vulnerable immigrants and many refugees. President Trump subsequently threatened to take the judiciary out of the process, and allow immigration officials to turn potential refugees away at the border.

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The Northwest Detention Center occupies part of the industrial area of Tacoma's tide flats, situated between railroad tracks and a local propane distributor. It was built on the soil of a former toxic waste dump and Environmental Protection Agency Superfund cleanup site. This land, according to the preliminary environmental impact statement by the Environmental Protection Agency, was believed to be so toxic that the agency worried about future liability and litigation. The inexpensive, available land was close to the urban core of the city yet, in an area where few residents would ever need to go—perfect attributes for a detention center—and was so polluted that the federal government could easily be found culpable if inmates developed cancers and other health concerns.

The Northwest Detention Center is currently owned by The Geo Group, a for-profit, publicly traded corporation that operates 95 correctional and detention facilities globally, totaling 72,000 beds and employing 18,000 staff. Annual reports show that corrections and detention account for approximately two-thirds of Geo's $1.5 billion dollars of revenue. Criminalizing immigration is big business. When the detention center is full and the company meets other contractual requirements, Geo grosses approximately $119,000 per day at the Northwest Detention Center.

The NWDC detains people from over 80 countries and the average length of stay is about 35 days. Less than ten percent of the detainees are level three offenders, or those who have committed any kind of violent crime. Most were found incidentally, for traffic stops or other minor offenses, and are now incarcerated.

For profit-detention of any time is ethically dubious at best, yet for-profit immigrant detention may be the most profound

human rights violation perpetrated within and by the United States. The practice of othering undocumented immigrants—ascribing blame for problems that they had no hand in creating, dehumanizing them as a means of denying them constitutionally guaranteed rights, criminalizing their very existence, detaining their bodies and deporting them regardless of the potential consequences to their safety—has normalized the violation of the core values of our country.

It has been over one hundred and twenty-five years since the Chinese were uprooted from their homes and forced to leave Tacoma, but for other vulnerable immigrants today, life is equally as tenuous. The poorest of the poor, powerless over the forces of globalization—which serves as a global economic sponge, drying up jobs in one area and flooding another with bodies hoping to survive—are often forced to roam, city to city, province to province, and country to country, in order to survive. Few truly wish to leave their ancestral homelands unless they are desperate, subjected to violence, or lose their capacity to make a living. The loss of home is one of the greatest wounds a human being can possess—the grief of the migrant and refugee are emotional scars that most attempt to avoid. The poor separate from families they love, cross thousands of dangerous miles across contested lands, are often beaten and abused along the way, and ultimately cross borders in order to survive.

As the crow flies, just over two miles of once toxic Tacoma air separates the Northwest Detention Center and the Chinese Reconciliation Park. It is true that over a century separates the events that etch significance onto these two spaces. Yet, these differences are largely superficial. Those who contend that historical oppressions do not relate to present expressions serve as a justification for a nativist, xenophobic, racist sentiments that have existed in the United States since its inception.

I include myself when I assert that the city of Tacoma and its residents, by allowing the Northwest Detention Center to exist within our city limits, are complicit in the same acts of xenophobia, racism, and oppression that our park hopes to reconcile. However, there does exist significant activism and resistance to the Northwest Detention Center and the general criminalization of immigration; dozens of advocates and protesters are now camped

in front the NWDC, protesting the separation of children from their families at the border.

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It was the type of late spring day that makes the dark, rainy winters worth it—clear skies and in the high sixties. Late at night on May 2, 2016, vandals bashed in the mouths of the granite lions that guard the pavilion-centerpiece of the Chinese Reconciliation Park. They stole the granite balls that rested within the mouths of the lions—balls that were not inserted by the artist but as with the entire statue, carved from the single block of granite. Every time I go to the park now, I reflect on the sad irony of the lions—with their bashed in nubs of crooked teeth, their heads tilted as if confused, and I wonder why they guard the front of such a city, why their faces were desecrated and abused, why they are completed to stand in silence, part of a reconciliation that largely remains unstated.

It is, after all, far easier to engage in a symbolic reconciliation of a distant past than to take responsibility for our present, one in which similar atrocities occur to a new immigrant other only two miles from that very space of attempted reconciliation. The very mission of the park's Foundation—to promote peace, harmony and understanding in Tacoma's multicultural community—recognizes that reconciling the past extends to the present.

Many of us were the first "others" on this land. Native tribes had lived and fished for centuries in the verdant hills and valleys that make up Tacoma and the surrounding communities. At first, the Puyallup were not concerned with the few white settlers who arrived in 1854 on their ancestral lands. Indeed, theirs was a sharing nature—known to themselves as the *spuyaləpabš*, meaning "generous and welcoming behavior to all people (friends and strangers) who enter our lands." White traders and settlers slowly took over lands that were sacred to the various native peoples who lived in the shadows of Mt. Tahoma, later renamed Mt. Rainier. They soon became "the other" on their own lands, forced to leave through lies and violence. It was the first, but not the last time nonwhites would be driven off these lands.

The question is, do we deserve reconciliation? Do we deserve the park? Perhaps we should send the lions somewhere safe, for healing, until the time when we deserve them.

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Rich Furman is the author or editor of nearly 20 books, including a collection of flash nonfiction/prose poems, *Compañero* (Main Street Rag, 2007) and poetry *Trotting Race of Time* (University Professors Press, 2020). Other books include *Detaining the Immigrant Other: Global and Transnational Issues* (Oxford University Press, 2016), *Social Work Practice with Men at Risk* (Columbia University Press, 2010), and *Practical Tips for Publishing Scholarly Articles* (Oxford University Press, 2012). His work has been published in Another Chicago Magazine, Hippocampus, Bluestem, Chiron Review, Sweet, Hawai'i Review, Pearl, Coe Review, The Evergreen Review, Black Bear Review, Red Rock Review, Sierra Nevada Review, New Hampshire Review, Penn Review, and many others. A qualitative researcher whose work is situated on the boundary between the expressive arts and the social sciences, he is one of the pioneers of poetic inquiry. He received his MFA in creative nonfiction from Queens University Charlotte's MFA-Latin America program. He is, or has been in former incarnations, a punk, dishwasher, laminator, photographer, dad, social worker, therapist/coach, busboy, chemical-spill cleaner, telemarketer, Time/Life bookseller, dance club bouncer and dog petter. Petting dogs is what he does, and enjoys, best.