Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Sanctum Sanctorum

Robin Grearson · Wednesday, July 29th, 2015

I went to a poetry reading at the bookstore in my town over the weekend. A white woman read a poem about a black UC Berkeley professor. The poem was about a lot of things, but the story of the black professor arranged and informed the poem. I met the poet, Sarah Sarai, in Brooklyn two years ago. When I learned that she was reading at my local bookstore, I went to say hello.

In another poem, Sarah read:

“Friend, I know it’s not easy. That’s the point.”

I wrote down the words, because they gave me a chill.

A teacher told me once that we know when a thing is true, because it feels like remembering. I’ve learned to pay attention to the moments that give me these chills. This word is not adequate, the feeling is not one of cold. I visualize instead that I am recognizing something and my neurons are lunging toward that thing, as if trying to hold hands. It feels like the universe discovering a piece of itself.

1. We sat in a circle.

I was invited to be on a panel discussion about how hard it is to live in New York right now. I don’t live in New York right now and it was named “Part of the Solution,” so I was nervous. I didn’t want to represent myself as an expert on how to survive in New York City.

The event was held July 22 in Chinatown—although many of those who attended are part of Bushwick’s community, in Brooklyn. Ventiko, a New Yorker for about 9 years now and also a photographer, organized a monthlong residency at Gallery Sensei, on Grand Street. This residency invited local and international artists to work and exhibit and perform as part of Ventiko’s ongoing salon, Animamus Art Salon.

2. When the circle was full and there were no more chairs, some people just stood.

When it was my turn to talk, I talked too much. When someone is looking for the just-right-size of some little bolt or washer to make a thing work, and you have a bag of spare parts and you just

want to *help* so much that you spill everything you have out on the table? I think I was that person. I have just had so many other people's ideas on my mind lately. For instance…

1. Sesshu Foster, How Is the Artist or Writer to Function (Survive and Produce) in the Community, Outside of Institutions
2. John Metta, I, Racist.
3. Vanessa Martir, Gentrified Brooklyn Is Not My Brooklyn.
4. Ben Sutton, In Bushwick, Street Art Comes with a Copious Side of Advertising Billboards.
5. Jillian Steinhauer, In the Bronx, a Pop-up Art Show Is a Lightning Rod for Fear of Gentrification.
6. Tom Agnotti, Five Things You Can Do About Gentrification in New York City.

3. It wasn't a panel, like with a stage. We were participants more than panelists. Nicole Brydson was the moderator, she introduced us: Eric Ho, Alex Mitow, Nyssa Frank, Anthony Rosado, me. We participants/panelists didn't even sit together; Anthony sat on the floor. I don't know if Ventiko planned seating in advance; a circle just made sense.

Conversations around gentrification tend to appear adversarial. People having these conversations are indignant, or angry and growing angrier. From afar, it looks like people of color without a lot of money are angry with white, affluent people who are moving into their neighborhoods.

I don't care for the term *gentrification*, because it is so clunky to use as an active verb. No one is ever really responsible. The *neighborhood* is just "gentrifying," as if by itself? Consider that "to be gentrified" feels like you are cleaning up a mess in your life that someone or something else is creating. Who is the someone? If the new neighbors are "the gentrifiers," then to gentrify is to buy into a new version of someone else's old neighborhood. But who is creating this vision? The process generates tension by design. Most of the people in the process, are not part of that design.

4. Nicole started the discussion with a prompt that what is personal is political. We related to this by talking about access, community; mainly in Bushwick.

I want to mention that I just started reading *New York for Sale*, by Tom Agnotti. On page 2, Tom provides the definition of displacement found in "Displacement: How to Fight It." *Displacement* is "what happens when forces outside the household make living there impossible, or hazardous, or unaffordable." And a process by which people "are engineered out of their traditional neighborhoods…."

As we introduced ourselves each of us said things like, "I'm angry," "I'm frustrated." Anthony talked about how anger that exists in his heart has to be released and not held, so he can continue to speak to people with love. In other words, when we become full, as we do when we hold anger, we have to also empty ourselves—lest we be poisoned. The anger still comes, of course. He uses his fist to point to his heart as this place where anger might live, if he is not careful.

5. Nicole asked us to consider white fragility. Are we who are white so convinced that we are not the problem, individually, that we are not receptive when others point out—well, actually, you kind of are?

Before this talk, gentrification and #BlackLivesMatter looked like different conversations to me. But if you are insisting on the right to a stable community, you are asking for housing rights, and social justice. Agnotti notes in his book that in many countries, security of tenure is an essential

component of the basic right to housing. The US as a country does not explicitly support this security, and in fact, “federal housing policy has contributed in many ways to insecurity among households, particularly low-income people and communities of color.”

Anthony said, about talking to white people: *I’m here to give you my love. I’m not here to make you comfortable.*

A couple months ago I read *The Edge Becomes the Center: An Oral History of Gentrification in the 21st Century*, by DW Gibson. I recognized for the first time while reading someone else’s story that I’d been profiled. A few years earlier, a prospective landlord in Bushwick told me to meet him at a corner, instead of at an address. I suspected he intended to pressure me into signing on-the-spot for an apartment that might have bedbugs, or a notorious landlord—whatever I might learn by searching the building’s address. Instead, he was standing where I couldn’t see him, until he saw me.

I knew he was trying to preserve some advantage over me, but it never occurred to me that he was profiling me for my race. Never.

All of us have scraps of experience like this we are contributing to the circle. I feel everyone here is like me in this way—ready to share collections of small parts; we are in the room wanting to do the work of building something.

6. I said, if you are a white person in an all-white building, maybe you can ask yourself if you are helping the problem and maybe you could tell your landlord that an all-white building is, by the way, not a very desirable way to live in New York City.

The night after this conversation, Ta-Nehisi Coates spoke with Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* about his new book, *Between the World and Me*. Jon said to him, “What is so difficult to read about is that the subjugation of the people is the design of how the country prospered—not, as you said, the error.” Ta-Nehisi Coates seems, like us, unhappy with the state of things.

It is essential for a white person to feel empathy for the violence done to black and brown bodies, but the pain of bearing witness is not enough to change the world. Public demonstrations and confrontation through all avenues—videos, essays, social media, art—only keep a subject on the table. It takes personal work and a private compassion for the self, to be willing to know that the structural conditions creating this violence are still held tightly in our own fists. Fish have no basis to understand water, but we have consciousness, we can choose to understand.

#BlackLivesMatter is testimony to a commitment that we can build something better.

7. We said much more. We said artists can hack gentrification as individuals using creativity and by supporting activist groups, or both, and more. Neighbors should talk to neighbors. We can disrupt real estate one landlord at a time. We can protest policies that reward owners for not-renting. We can support the Small Business Jobs Survival Act, we can protest developers’ game-playing with affordable-housing promises at the Rheingold Brewery site in Bushwick. It is pointless for poor people to be angry with slightly less poor people, we said. They laugh at our fighting all the way to the bank.

Gentrification and displacement are violence by capitalism. It is not the same fight as #BlackLivesMatter, but it is not entirely different.

One person was very excited to describe the ways he could, for instance, leverage marketing knowledge and use graphics to create tools to build awareness of everything we were talking about. You could see in his eyes that he was rummaging around inside himself to find words to match his inspiration and pull them out. We listened as he found them.

We want to be part of solutions. We talked about little tricks and medium-size strategies; we want our institutions to change. There are right ways and wrong ways. Nyssa Frank reminded us that we are fighting for the world that our children will inherit.

Eric Ho helped us think about trying to engage those rare visionary landlords and do all the work we can with them, even if they are only 0.1%. It doesn't make sense that the renters, writing the checks, have little power to cultivate better landlords. But despite the high cost of retail space, Alex Mitow said, entrepreneurs can create pop-up spaces, share storefronts. There is a way, even now, they were saying.

An architect came but she left early and bummed out absolutely everyone because we all wanted to talk to her afterward. Architects want to build long-term solutions, she said. Remember, most of us are focused on how to impact society through physical environments—but the architects often lack power over design. "So I decided to go into real estate development, because I wanted to know the system, to fuck the system," she said.

8. More people had come in and they sat on the floor, within the circle. As the event closed, a young woman, Stefa, spoke up. "It feels like everyone here is passionate about this; it's our responsibility to have these conversations with people who aren't passionate about it, as uncomfortable as that can make us…."

As Stefa spoke, I felt that chill. The word, *chill,* is incorrect; the feeling is not at all cold. I visualize instead that I am remembering something and my neurons are lunging toward that thing, as if to hold hands. It feels like the universe recognizing a piece of itself.

President Obama was on *The Daily Show* last week, too. The day before our event at Gallery Sensei, Obama told Jon Stewart that "the country is full of good and decent people. And there is a sense of common purpose at the neighborhood level and in the school and in the workplace. And that dissipates the further up it goes because of all the money and all the filters and the polarizing that takes place in terms of how our politics are shaped. But the only way to prevent that is by people getting involved. And it doesn't take that much."

He is right, of course. It is important that we know the names of our elected officials, but it is probably just as important that we make sure our elected officials know us, learn our names, hear from us often.

When choosing a name for the residency, Ventiko told me she imagined it as a place to bring creative people together to make things: a space as sacred for artists as a religious sanctuary is sacred to its followers.

She chose the name *Sanctum Sanctorum*: holiest of holy places.

The next day, I woke up feeling more hopeful. The circle renewed our spirits. I hope we will

continue to turn to each other for replenishment, in person. This is also what Sarah's poem was about. The collective despair of our society is felt alone, and this private sadness keeps us from knowing the strength we have together. If this is by design, then we need a new design.

9. Despite the money.

Obama had also said, "If people are engaged, eventually the political system responds. Despite the money, despite the lobbyists, it still responds." I believe he was suggesting that we need to keep faith with each other. Every way forward requires this.

What does that look like? To me, it looks like this:

When the discussion ended, all of us became aware of how hot the un-air-conditioned space had become. But throughout the two-hour event, it occurred to me later, I don't remember even one person checking their phone.

"Friend, I know it's not easy. That's the point."

Read Sarah Sarai's poem, "Popular Mechanics," and others in Posit, here.

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