

## **Chinaman in Brooklyn**

*Dedicated to all of those who walk down the streets and experience emotional, physical and sexual violence every day.*

Over the past few years I have been living in Bedford Stuyvesant and Crown Heights in Brooklyn, New York. These are two neighborhoods that I have truly grown to love and struggle in.

As someone who has organized in communities around gentrification, I have always examined my own space and role in it. I am a thirty-something Korean living and surviving in a predominantly black neighborhood, with folks from a rich diversity of African descent. These neighborhoods get gentrified and re-gentrified, both by people of color and white people, by people of African descent and those not, by young families and new professionals. When I walk down the street in Brooklyn, I feel a sense of understanding that this community has undergone many generations of transformation to come to its current moment.

I have made many friends along the way--some who were born and raised here, and others who are newly relocated. This is my community that I have found and that has been found for me. Amongst queer, trans and intersex people of color, in particular, I have talked with individuals around the country and world who have been ostracized from their families, alienated, or perhaps simply cannot keep as close to them as they would like. This is when one's community is even more critical and community truly becomes family and home.

It makes sense that the composition of those who have brought violence against me are from the neighborhood, hence predominantly black. Some believe I am a bit overly optimistic and hopeful of building with a community I am obviously not a part of originally. Friends and family have encouraged me to move to different neighborhoods, different cities, even. My entire life I have moved around the country and around the world and at this moment, I feel that my home is here in Brooklyn.

I would not say that violence here is anymore extraordinary than other places I have lived. Violence comes in so many forms, but is often only documented when it is physical. I have been punched, slapped, mugged, hit with a pipe/rocks/bricks, verbally harassed, stabbed, grabbed, fondled, touched and sexually violated. Even so, I can honestly say that I do not feel more oppressed here than I do anywhere else. Cuts on my body heal quicker by far than injury to my passion.

The reasons for this violence seem to range from questions of my sexual identity, gender identity, from being Asian, to general ambiguity. I am told very clearly what they see me as: "Hey, Chinaman," "faggot," "batty boy," "chinky," "dyke," so many things. Though I do not identify as any of these, sometimes how one is perceived is an entirely intrinsic part of one's being, that it must also be embraced critically.

I actually have tried to have conversations, sometimes successfully, usually not, perhaps at not even in the most strategic of moments, with those who initially come to me with

violence. The times I have had successful conversations, people have listened, with curiosity, confusion, genuine thirst, and I have been able to defuse what could have been a violent interaction. It is at these rare opportunities I have been able to communicate with the very people that have expressed their violence through me. We typically have discussions that I have had hundreds of times; people want to know who I am, what I am, and what I'm doing here. These passing conversations serve a multitude of purposes: they may save my life, I am able to build personally with individuals, and take down some inhibitions that exist historically between Asian and black communities.

The most I have done legally, in response to the violent incidents is have conversations with other community organizers and organizations, make one report to the police to report a stolen wallet, and make sure I have people with me when I walk home late at night. I haven't made reports to the police for this violence primarily because I do not want the police going after my community. In addition to this reason, from past experience I have found that I am often the one interrogated when I come into contact with the authorities. Who am I, what am I, and what was I doing there? Even though these are the same questions my neighbors ask me, when I am asked by the authorities it does not seem to yield potential for building in the same way.

There was a time, after a particularly tough rash of getting roughed up, that I was afraid to walk alone. After a couple of weeks of refocusing, I talked myself through this fear and exercised my confidence to understand that I needed to be who I am and still be able to survive. So I overcame that fear and took a long stroll down the street, and I fell in love with this city again.

There is something that happens to many of us, that I call "one in ten days," where 9 days out of 10, I can handle the violence without a problem, without me thinking it is affecting me. But on that tenth day, I know it has been building because that is the day, regardless of how big or small the violence, I am deeply wounded and saddened.

If one could capture the expression on my face in slow motion when a fist is coming at me in these situations, it might portray what I feel accurately. My face reflects the utter sadness I feel, with tears in my eyes, my body probably stands with awareness of the world being fucked up and certain events having to happen, but asks why at the same time.

As long as I have been talking to thousands and thousands of people around the country about internalized oppression, anti-oppression and oppression in general, I still feel the hurt when I see it as strongly as I did the first time I remember being called a chink as a small kid. I am physically fit, have extensive martial arts defense experience and am quick on my feet. But I am not at war with my people and unless it is life threatening, I do not strike back.

I feel a sadness that people I am trying to build with are feeling so much pain that it manifests in violence. Sadness that what people don't know creates fear, which creates violence. Sadness that our internalized oppression is so deep, that we have been carrying a fear of the unfamiliar with us from the days of colonization. Destroying that which we are unfamiliar with is the historical basis for the founding of the U.S.

For many years there have been community programs, neighborhood block association initiatives and community organizing efforts to curb violence within our communities. When we hurt we hurt each other. I think of this violence, as many of us do, in the larger context of how everyday survival to us often leads to acting out our anger. It seems the most basic and elementary of reactions, acting out on others when we are angry, but it is so fundamentally a part of our conditioning.

Of course violence increases when gentrification happens. Families that have been struggling to hold onto their abodes for years are pushed out in days. Of course there is tension between Asian business owners and the mostly black folks who make up this community. This hostility and violence is what we are taught to have internally and externally. We are taught to destroy our bodies, to be unhealthy. This leads to addictive, abusive, hurtful behavior to those in our own families and communities. We know all of this. And this is where we need to stop killing ourselves.

My entire life's work is based on the knowledge that we, as oppressed beings are working towards something much larger than us. This is simply the way that I personally have been venturing through these challenges. I am, with many beside me, working to radically change the world and how things work. I truly believe in revolution and work to have that vision everyday. I struggle with keeping sight of this vision and larger picture, with keeping myself afloat, and with building with a community that needs one another to survive. This is the street I walk down everyday, these are the people that may feel the need to fight me today, but that will fight beside me another day soon.

**YK Hong is a queer genderqueer Korean. YK founded and is the lead trainer for Freedom Trainers, a collective dedicated to working on anti-oppression through training with a foundation in community organizing. YK is also involved in sexual liberation work through the industry and outside of it. Please visit [www.relativist.org](http://www.relativist.org) for more information.**