

All over the world, people are chasing houses. Aurelia Guo and Amy Ching-Yan Lam discuss how property and the pursuit of it shapes all of our lives.

Amy Ching-Yan Lam's *Property Journal* (2024) is a diary of a year in which Lam recorded every time that real estate, property and housing came up in conversation. People's names are replaced with those of household objects – Blender, Slippers – which has the affect of making the whole action of the book cramped and domestic, similar to the affective experience of negotiating precarious housing. Aurelia Guo's *World of Interiors* (2022) is a book of essays and poems about housing, hoarding, migration, and the experience of being perceived by other people. For TANK, Lam and Guo discussed the personal and political dimensions of housing, and how property shapes our lives and dreams – which take place within and outside the permanent state of urgency, scarcity, disenfranchisement and desire called the “global housing crisis”.

Amy Ching-Yan Lam The first essay in your book is called “London (Poverty)”, in which you talk about *The World of Interiors*, the glossy magazine about interiors and furniture.† Condé Nast imagined it as a – wait, sorry, was the guy's name actually Condé Nast?

Aurelia Guo The media empire's originator was literally called Condé Nast. *World of Interiors* was begun as an independent publication by Min Hogg [in 1981], then [the company] Condé Nast bought it. Hogg remained the editor, but Condé Nast became the publisher.

AC-YL You write that Nast saw how success lay in conspiring not only to attract readers from a particular class but to “rigorously exclude all others”. I was wondering about this idea of exclusion – the magazine is designed to exclude you, but at the same time anyone can read it, and in some ways, it's also meant to attract the people that it excludes. I was wondering about that in relation to property itself – this feeling of constantly being excluded from what we need, while the very fact of scarcity makes us want it more. Someone told me that there's a feeling of longing throughout *Property Journal*. I love walking around in the evening, looking through people's windows and imagining their lives.

AG Last year, I was commissioned to write a text on public libraries in Glasgow, and I wound up writing about the origins of philanthropy in the sense that we know it today – support of the arts and culture through institutions, libraries or museums – as a product of 19th-century industrial capitalism and the struggle between capital and labour, between the new urban rich and the new urban poor. Writing that text made me reconsider the transition I mention in *World of Interiors*, from periodicals connected to guilds



† “Preferring genteel aesthetics over commercial and professional ones, Hogg favoured a decorating style that was ‘cluttered, ancestral, simple, eccentric’: *The World of Interiors* coined the term ‘shabby chic!’”
— *World of Interiors*, Aurelia Guo

Conversations
on community:
where we live

Anxiety about the economic migrant takes us back to the particular and often unfortunate place that the Chinese migrant has had in the settlement and urbanisation of colonies like Australia and Canada

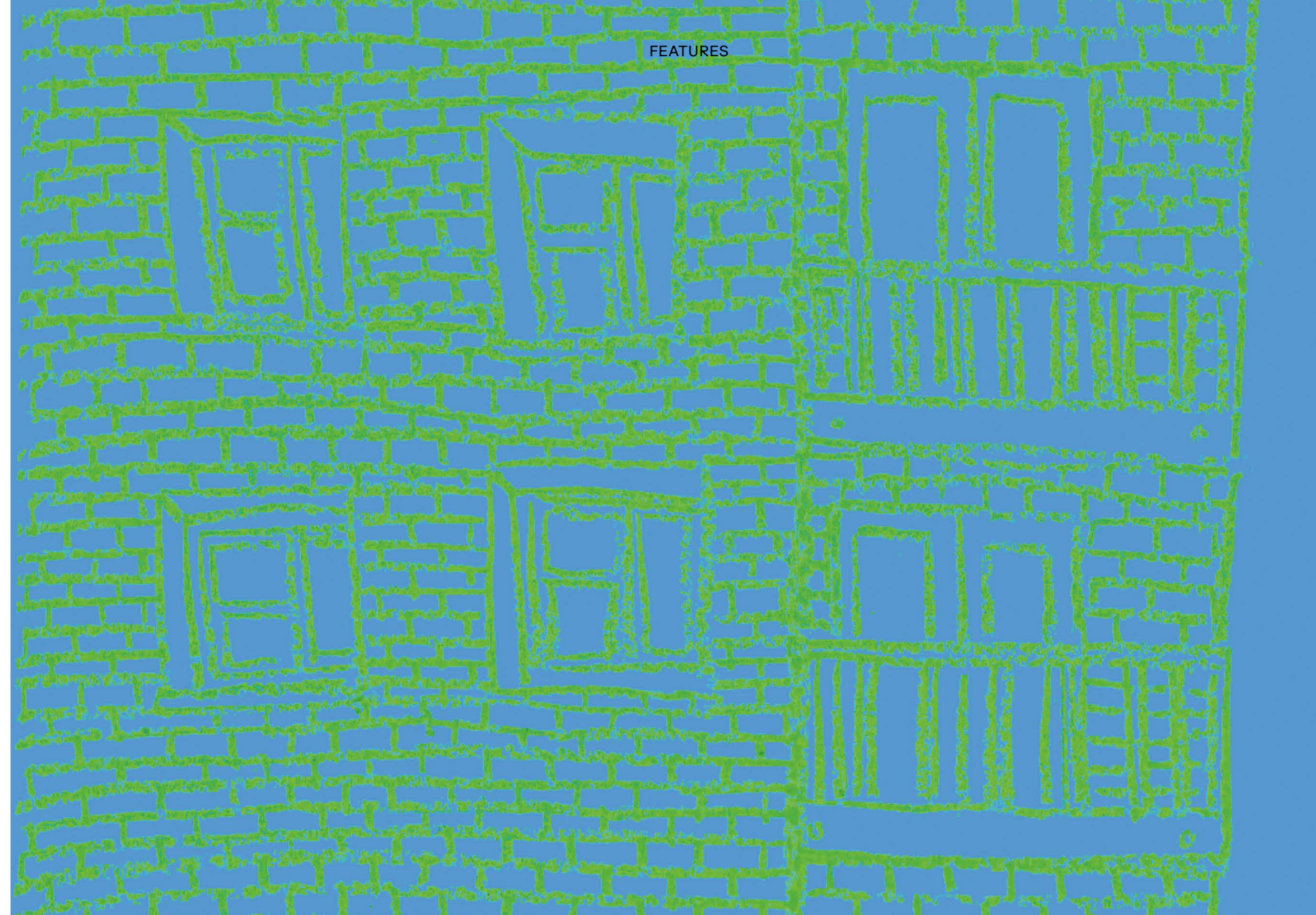


‡ **“Philanthropy in the modern sense of funding for arts, education and cultural institutions emerged in the period between 1885 and 1915 through the ideology and actions of philanthropists such as [Andrew] Carnegie, who explicitly framed philanthropy as an alternative to the redistribution of wealth in a period of class consciousness and struggle that had recently encompassed the 1848 publication of Marx and Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto*, the 1871 Paris Commune experiment with socialist government, and the 1886 founding of the American Federation of Labor.”**
— “The Gospel of Wealth”, Aurelia Guo (2023)

or professions – directed at, for example, the Association of Metal Workers – to what Nast called class publications, for people who want to dress in a certain way, decorate their house in a certain way, entertain their peers in a certain way.[‡] The 19th-century emergence of global capitalism made goods available on the market that had never been available before. Today, commodities have cheapened, so that even someone who’s not wealthy can afford an iPhone or a lipstick or a handbag, but property has not. Not everyone can afford somewhere central, attractive and desirable to live – so property remains an object of envy and spectacle. It’s interesting to hear a description of *Property Journal* as full of longing, as I also think of it as full of anxiety. I was struck by the scene where you visit your sister’s newly renovated home for the first time. Your description of the pale oak hardwood floors and the soft wool carpet is suffused with anxiety and tension and the feeling that all of this could be taken away.

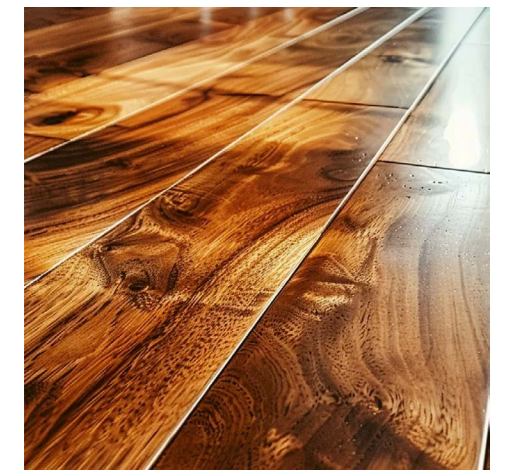
AC-YL Absolutely. In the midst of celebrating all these very nicely appointed details, I also remember thinking, “Oh my God, how will this oak floor stay clean?” There’s a joke in the journal about how to survive academia: if anyone brings up their home renovation once, never talk to them again. But I knew how taxing and stressful it was for my sister and her partner, how hard they had worked to afford it and the financial pressure they felt, and the oak floors embodied all of those pressures and strains. Maybe this is completely ridiculous, but I’m relieved even now when I go over to their house and the floors still look really good. I guess that’s the nature of having something expensive. My partner said that the book is also a journal of class contact within families, a map of difference between my financial position, and my sister’s and my parents’. I found that helpful to think about. It’s not uniform. That can strain relationships. The sense of anxiety in the book is also about the future, because so many things about money are unstable.

AG The way you use dollar amounts in the book is really effective. It drives home how much the property market is an exercise in financial property speculation while at the same time capturing the prosaic and everyday nature of property relations. When I was writing my book, I was thinking about how the British context is so different from the Australian context where I grew up and I imagine the Canadian context you grew up in. Class is something that people are painfully conscious of in Britain and the hiding and disavowing of it is such



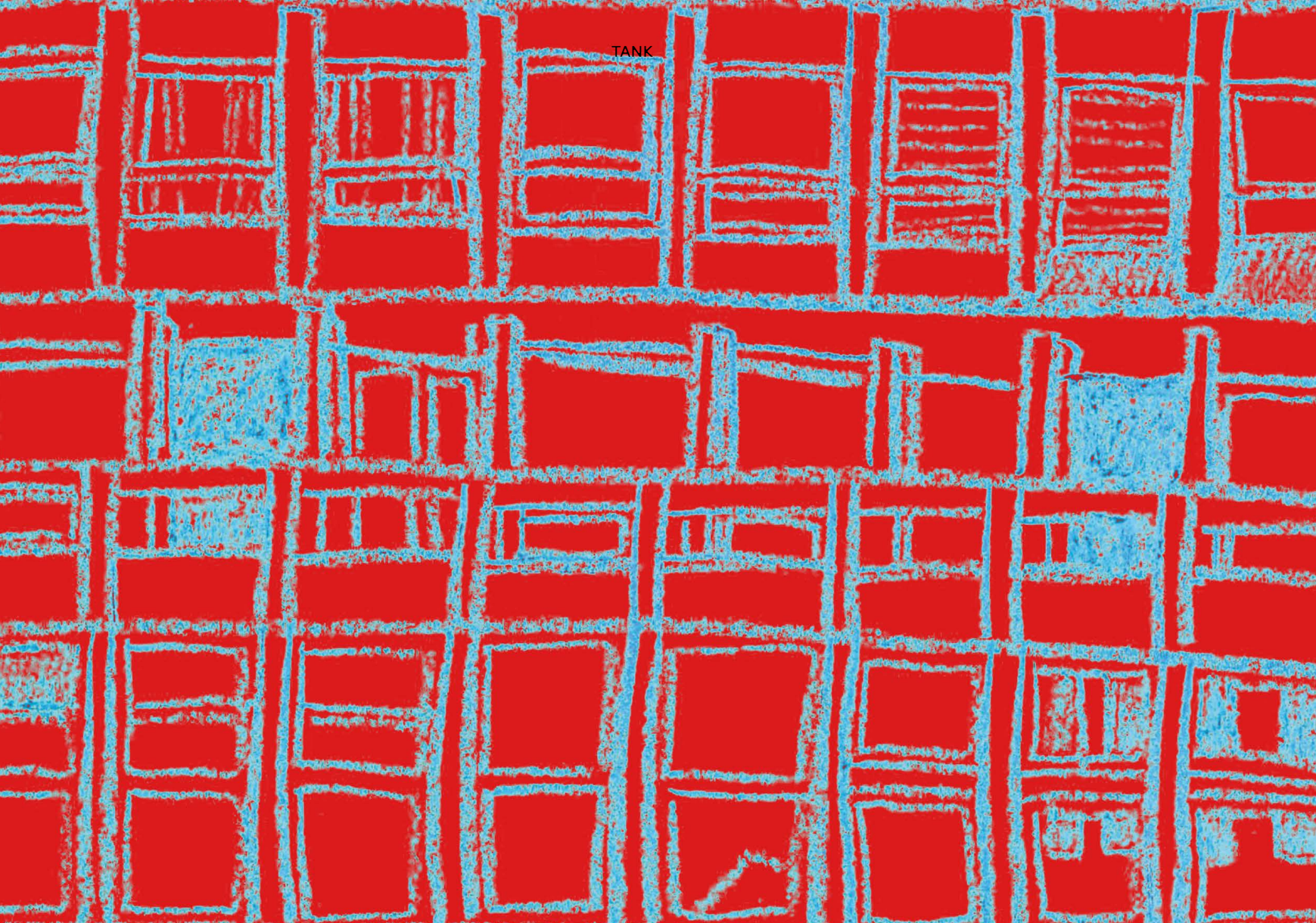
a big part of life. We both come from settler colonies, New World places that are premised on the dubious ideas of discovery, and on new societies supposedly different from the British class system. I’m not sure how different Australia or Canada are from Britain in terms of their class systems. But there are things in London that are just so galling and do feel uniquely British. There isn’t really an equivalent of Oxbridge elsewhere or a similar discourse around accent. Those things were completely foreign to me when I moved to London, when I realised that they are massively important to British people.

AC-YL A British person once told me they thought Canada was frozen in a specific idea of what it thinks Britishness is. There is a strong current of Anglophilia in Canada, of aspiring to be the progenitors, the settlers. But she said that Canadians copy what they think Britain is and then make it even more stuffy and inert. I think that’s so funny, because as a Canadian, I do feel the culture is uptight. And the book is very much about Canada as a settler colony, a place that’s founded on genocide and extraction of profit from land. The project of settler colonialism isn’t about bringing so-called enlightened values to the New World, but about taking the land and speculating on its value. This is what created the housing situation in Canada, where rent and house prices are so high. It’s not Hong Kong, where I was born, which is a small island – Canada



“Sunday 18 December. The house reminds me of going to a really fancy downtown food court with Blender a few years ago, while she was on a lunch break, and getting these super dense, deep-green, velvety smoothies together. It was so delicious and so unaffordable, and in that moment I felt a strange urge to protect her from the super luxurious smoothie!”

— *Property Journal*, Amy Ching-Yan Lam



What we've been writing and talking about is how we inherit what there is – we're not born into utopia, and we don't make our lives there

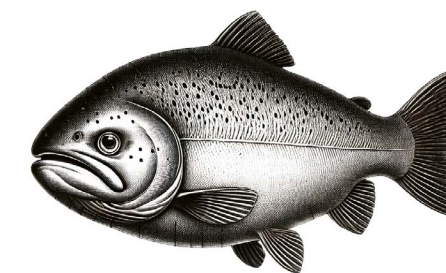
their baby. They decide to move to Nova Scotia, where they could afford land and a house. When they finally buy a house, other people are living in it, so they have them evicted. As you write, “the evicted become evictors.” When asked by an interviewer, “What do you think about people in Nova Scotia being worried about people coming in from other parts of the country, buying up their houses and land?”, the couple said, “I hope they can think of all of us as Canadians in it together.” Elsewhere you write about how someone you know worked on a book about the Community Land Trusts that were started in the 1970s, 1980s and even 1990s, and now have large land holdings because of how cheap land was at that time. A major challenge for people involved in these land trusts is that they began as activists and tenant organisers, and now they find themselves property developers and property managers.

AC-YL I think capitalism promotes this idea that every circumstance can be changed for the better. As you write in your opening essay about Anna Nicole Smith, people talk about poverty as if it's a place from which you can escape, but poverty is a legacy. This idea of legacy and inheritance is present in both of our books. I do believe in transformative potential but we live in societal structures with legacies that can feel impossible to change.

AG I wrote *World of Interiors* to try and work out something about national and racial identity in relation to social and geographical mobility. That was part of my interest in people like Anna Nicole Smith, who was white but a figure of transgressive social mobility. I was also trying to think about the tangled ways in which the state draws a distinction between political refugees and economic migrants – not that the state is really in the business of creating safe and legal channels for the political refugees that it supposedly cares about. Now that there's even less of a notional idea of adhering to international law, even that seems to be fading away. In any case, this anxiety about the economic migrant takes us back to the particular and often unfortunate place that the Chinese migrant has had in the settlement and urbanisation of colonies like Australia and Canada, and the economies that have emerged there. I wrote the book partly as a way of dealing with what I felt I experienced as people's classed and racialised projections of who I am – their often shifting and contradictory fantasies about what kind of class or family origin I have. How would you describe the role of race in your book?

has a small population and vast land mass, but for some reason, the housing market is completely bonkers. It doesn't make sense, and I think that's why it feels so disturbing. Something I was thinking about in reading *World of Interiors* and reflecting on this topic was this feeling of loneliness. In Canada and Australia, and here in the US, where I am now, there's so much loneliness in the way these societies are structured. People aspire to live alone in a family-sized home. Was loneliness something you were thinking about as you were writing? In your book there are essays, but there are also poems created through collage that bring in language from other sources. Does this collage technique have something to do with loneliness?

AG When I was rereading *World of Interiors*, I thought about the loneliness that can happen inside homes. I watched a lot of television as a child and read a lot of books from the library. I lived in quite a fictive world. This has extended into my adult life and art practice through the use of collage, perhaps as a way of incorporating other voices. When I was writing the book, I was thinking about transformation and how an individual's life can transform again and again, in acts of creation and “de-creation”, of homes and families and lives. Relationships between people can transform through their relationships to power. You write about a radio interview of a couple who were evicted from their house on Vancouver Island with



“Friday 20 May. At the sushi burrito place at Yonge and Dundas, Rice Cooker and I saw a sushi burrito being made with an enormous amount of salmon, like two whole fistfuls. We were saying to each other, How is that even going to fit into the burrito?! when a white woman in front of us with the same thought, wearing a cardigan and flowered pants, asked the man who'd ordered it, Wow, so much salmon, what did you order? The man, also white, wearing a Prada jacket with pointy shoes and a briefcase, replied authoritatively, Get extra protein and make it extra spicy. The woman asked him where in the city he lived. He told her he lived in Midtown and then, without any other preamble, they started discussing what property they owned and what they might buy next! ... It was if she'd spotted him, another wealthy white person eating near Yonge and Dundas Square, getting his money's worth, and they just went straight into the heart of the matter.”

— *Property Journal*

AC-YL It's a good question. In the years leading up to keeping the journal I was involved with organising around gentrification and displacement in [Toronto's] Chinatown. My experience of being involved in the Toronto Chinatown Community Land Trust taught me about the history of Chinatowns in North America as neighbourhoods created by exclusionary laws on immigration. Chinatowns formed around the reality that only men could immigrate, and they had to be workers, and they couldn't bring their families. Now there's the shared identity of being Chinese as an ethnic and racial category, but there's also the same kinds of difference that you get within any group, where there are people with different political beliefs. The dominant group in Toronto's Chinatown is the Business Improvement Area Association, which gets money from the city to operate. It's very conservative, very pro-police, anti-unhoused people, and pro-development. It's very contradictory in relation to the history of Chinatowns. And now there's a rise in the scapegoating of immigrants and racialised people in Canada, blaming them for the housing crisis, and especially of international students. Before Justin Trudeau stepped down, he put policies in place to deny international students work permits. People are fighting back, but there may be a mass deportation of international students from Canada in the coming years.

"Wednesday 20 July. Learning about land assemblies in Chinatown from the land trust research, which is when people or companies buy up adjoining properties with the hope of selling them off together for big future developments. One of the biggest current land assemblies is owned by a huge real estate investment company. Their mealy-mouthed slogan: *Delivering sustainable value through creative real estate investment solutions.*"

— *Property Journal*

Maerl
Sarah Bernstein

After her presentation, my colleague, making reference to my two years at art school prior to the degree in environmental science, asked if I would build a human-scale model of a maerl bed for educational purposes. She imagined at one end a living landscape, that deep pinky-red, replete with sea creatures, a colour and life which, dwindling in the middle, would end in a ghostly, white emptiness. Six feet by eight feet, she said, very clearly, turning me around so that she could use my back to scrawl something on a piece of paper. On the paper she handed to me was a sketch of the maerl bed with rough dimensions and the words *the barren sea*.

I undertook this endeavour without much comment, using papier-mâché and chicken wire, education was, after all, one of our charitable objectives, and as to the question of whether the children, who were between the ages of six and eight, might be frightened by the exhibition, which was accessed through a curtain into a dark room, with only the maerl bed illuminated, accompanied by a soundscape emulating the undersea noises of the fish farm, the generators running day and night, the incinerators, the feed-delivery systems, the motor boats, the constant repairs, as to this question, my colleague would not have her efforts derailed by the mollycoddling instincts of the bureaucratic class, she would not be deterred. I left the organisation before she executed the final stages of these plans, so I never did find out how it went.

FLASH FICTION

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Before this, they'd been used by universities as an enormous source of tuition income. So there's this scapegoating of racialised people, but it's also perpetuated by conservative forces within these same racialised communities. Some of the main property developments in Chinatown are geared towards students. They're completely unaffordable, terrible buildings.

AG Things are similar in Sydney and Melbourne. The business models in higher education have relied on massive extraction from international students who, at the same time, are deprived of work, housing and welfare rights. This becomes fodder for a nativist, populist kind of right, and it's also a challenge for the left. You would hope that trade unions or student unions could organise around these unmet needs. Now, additionally, there's an unease that surrounds Chinese people for geopolitical reasons and the spectre of a possible trade war with China.

AC-YL And all the Chinese spy weather balloons.

AG Exactly. I wrote the book following the wave of consciousness during the Covid-19 pandemic but I feel quite pessimistic about how things have gone since. World events, like the LA fires, don't always, or only, indicate something positive as far as our ability to cohere around shared experiences and unmet needs, whether they're material, social or emotional.

AC-YL There's a line from one of your poems in the book about the "limitless human capacity for tedium and abuse". It's one of the last lines of the book, in fact. While it's so true in this extremely negative way, it also speaks to human endurance. This idea of survival comes up a lot in your writing. Do you remember where that line came from?

AG It's so difficult to look at the world sometimes. I guess what we've been writing and talking about is how we inherit what there is – we're not born into utopia, and we don't make our lives there. The line comes from a piece on workplace novels by Kaitlin Phillips. I think of it as connected to the line before, which references a "theatre of profound loneliness that has constituted their lives for centuries" written by Marguerite Duras, the author and filmmaker, whose films sometimes push the limits of boredom. I appreciate how *Property Journal* documents that many human efforts are futile, at least in the sense they don't work out as hoped at the time. We should never forget that boredom is a big part of the human experience, and a big part of what we share; acknowledging it makes it a lot easier to bear one another. There is something affirmative about remembering that we're vulnerable, that we have these needs we can't escape, that we have physical and emotional limits. It all becomes a moving document of the idea that nonetheless, we'll live with one another, that that's all there is.®