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Practicing the Future

Exercises in immanent speculation

Los Angeles is a city made from an assemblage of speculative practices. Spain colonized the region, surmising it was unsettled territory to be conquered—ignoring, of course, the Tongva who had lived here for thousands of years. Later on, as part of the United States, the region went through a stuttering period of growth as boosters proclaimed the magic of Southern California throughout the Midwest and elsewhere, fueling land speculation wherein gullible investors would repeatedly and blindly bid up land prices only to discover more often than not upon a first visit that the real estate was essentially worthless. And, of course, it became ground zero for all the imagination of Hollywood, projecting moving images of fantasy plotlines onto screens around the world. Across from La Placita, the mythical origin point of Los Angeles, is Union Station. The last of the grand train stations built in the United States, it was approved in 1926 and completed thirteen years later during the throes of the Great Depression and a world war. What was then Chinatown was demolished in the process, whitewashing the site of the largest mass lynching in US history¹ with gleaming art deco construction. It is the terminus of a city upon which it seemed almost anyone could project their own minor utopia. Sure enough, in 1938, a bigger, better Chinatown was built about a mile away under the guidance of community leader Peter Soo Hoo and with the help of Hollywood set designers in designing its core, Central Plaza. As Edward Soja has noted, subverting the boosterist claim, “It all comes together in Los Angeles.”

To speculate might mean to assume rather than to know based on facts (as in Spain’s assumption of the *tabula rasa* of California, and later again with Manifest Destiny), or it might mean to envision historical or fictional realities (as in the imaginative work of Hollywood). There are, of course, endless varieties of financial speculation, such as land speculation or the mining speculation in the goldfields of Northern California and the oilfields around Los Angeles. We might read into Chinatown’s

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destruction an element of racial speculation: that the sullied, foreign, Chinese landscape was envisioned by city boosters as bleached clean, transformed into a gleaming beacon of Anglo LA. But we might also see the inverse of that in a work of speculative fiction: Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, where, again, it all comes together in Los Angeles—"it" being a stunning kaleidoscope of new ethnic formations.

Decades of Anglo hegemony in LA literature gave us Chandler's hard-boiled noir and Didion's upper-middle-class neuroses. Yamashita gave us Bobby: "Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown. That's it." The book spans seven days, with seven narratives moving between Mexico and Los Angeles, just like its eponymous orange, which a character named Arcangel brings across the border (and, along with it, the Tropic of Cancer). It straddles magic realism and speculative fiction, suspending our disbelief about any number of perfectly plausible alternative realities for Los Angeles: palm trees as flags for the poor instead of street ornamentation for Beverly Hills, a traffic jam on the Cahuenga Pass as a meticulously conducted symphony, NAFTA as a *luchador* being defeated by *el gran mojado* . . .

In the university, speculative work most often involves theoretical development, from physics to philosophy. But there are some today who eschew conventionally understood "academic speculation" for something closer to what Yamashita practices. This form of speculation has something to do with race insofar as it aims to decolonize, and little to do with jumping through the hoops of theory. What we might call *immanent speculation*, this is the practicing of an inherently unknowable future in order to create the conditions for that future to unfold. In contrast to theory-laden speculative philosophy, or to the incrementalism of design in the built environment, or even to the extreme opposite of ungrounded utopianism, immanent speculation rigorously pulls out latent alternative realities embedded in a place through the method of making. It does so with the consequence that these other worlds—whether or not they are fully realized—expand our notion of what could be. It aims to decolonize the future from the forward march of time, from the imperfect conditions of the present, freeing it to become something just beyond what we imagine to be possible. It is called immanent because it is not pulled from thin air, but rather from the sites and places in which we live. It is

undisciplined yet rigorous, intellectual yet artistic. In fact, an imperfect immanent speculation recently found its way into where we began: Union Station and Chinatown.

In October of 2013, the experimental opera company The Industry staged a performance based on Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*. Performed in collaboration with the LA Dance Project, the characters were embedded in Los Angeles's Union Station. Some 100,000 people commute through the station every day, and they continued to do so as the opera was performed. The characters moved fluidly through the building, exploring imaginary spaces and playing out a war of words between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo. Viewers were given wireless headsets that played the full opera with live orchestra, but were given no instructions on how to view the piece. You could sit down and experience it motionless, you could attempt to catch every exciting moment by recklessly following where you assumed the action was, you could take your headset off to mute the orchestra and listen to the ambient noise, you could share your headset with a curious passer-through, and sometimes you could find yourself in the way of the performers. Donning a headset transported you to a different world that was overlaid on top of this one, in real time.

The opera was lauded by critics. Christopher Cerrone was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for composing the opera, while director Yuval Sharon's spatially sophisticated interpretation won great acclaim. The performers miraculously transformed from anonymous commuters to fully costumed period characters. Dancers deftly maneuvered between audience members and passers-by like some feat of spatial jazz. Using postmodern techniques of fragmentation and nonlinear space-time, the opera traversed the present world, the age of Marco Polo's exploration, and the many worlds he described. The technological novelty of listening to the fragmented bits of opera on wireless headsets, synthetically mixed into a whole, was equally impressive, blending the excitement of a full, live orchestra and the contemporary remix-mash-up sensibility of a DJ set.

Most striking of all was the opera's site-specific deployment of Union Station. Each of the other elements played out in particular relation to the space, history, and essence of the site. Tropes of the traveler, of the explorer, of the grand hall versus everyday spaces were played out in the train terminal. This demonstrated immanent speculation because it was at once speculative—it imagined and performed an



A performance of *Hopscotch*.

otherworldly fantasy—as it was embedded in the messy reality of urban space. At one point, a homeless person noticed the captive audience and began singing her own tune before a nervous stagehand awkwardly ushered her away to receive her own headset. And, of course, the inversion of who is watching and who is being watched cannot go unstated: as much as we privileged theatergoers invaded this space and tried to watch as much of the frenetic and fractured performance as we could, so too were we being gawked at by passers-by. We were a funny-looking mob of confused people with wireless headsets on, providing our own free show. There was none of the unidirectional comfort of a darkened theater. In this strange, ambivalent way, the audience’s discomfort with being implicated by the performance’s dynamics—of power, of privilege, of post-modern obtuseness—became absorbed into the opera, suggesting an alternative, immanent reality that had the potential to come into being.

In 2015, *The Industry* took on an even more heady and complex project. Titled *Hopscotch*, the opera was broken into

thirty-six scenes that were repeatedly performed at a variety of sites across Los Angeles. Members of the audience could as easily be called participants: they viewed the opera by choosing one of three routes, and starting with a small group of actors, facilitators, and other participants, they would drive to eight of the sites before congregating with the entire cast and audience at a “central hub” for the finale. One of the participants would be responsible for capturing the experience on video, live broadcasting to one of thirty-six screens at the central hub where anyone could drop in and watch the live video for free. To complicate things considerably, the opera was written by multiple playwrights and composers, a few scenes consisted of lines shouted between cars or long quotes from French Marxist theorist Guy Debord, and multiple actors played single roles to manage the logistics of multiple locations—all in the service of a relatively straightforward love story. Loosely based on Julio Cortázar’s 1963 novel—which shares the title and nonlinear structure—*Hopscotch* follows a woman named Lucha who

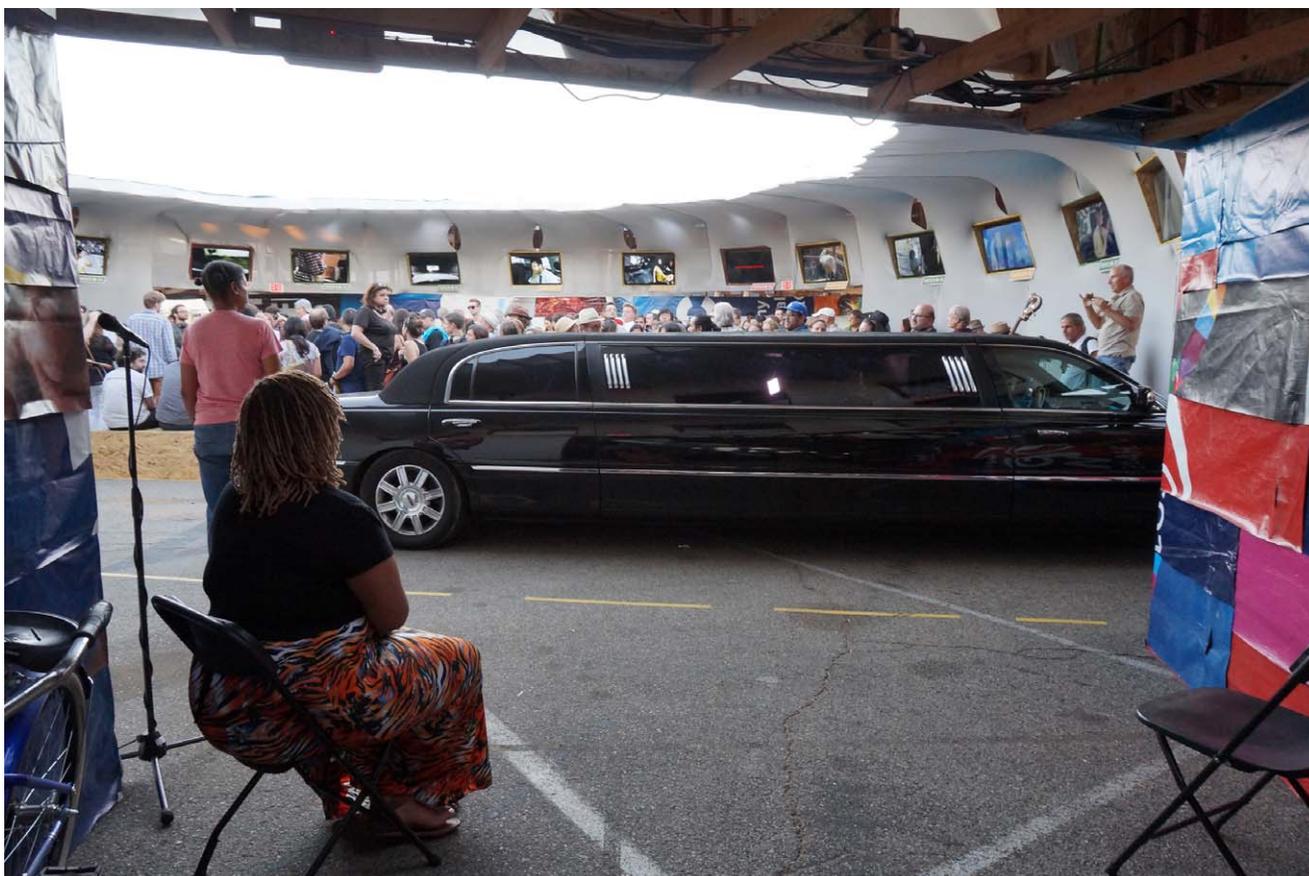
moves through a star-crossed romance only to discover her true love for her longtime coworker instead. As one could imagine, if *Invisible Cities* was on the verge of crashing down under the weight of its postmodern tendencies, *Hopscotch* casually blew past any nod to such concerns.

Hopscotch also blew past its predecessor in the cost of a ticket. While there is easy justification for the expense, given the opera's incredibly intensive resource needs and limited number of seats, with prices in the hundreds of dollars it nevertheless catered only to an elite audience. This was partially remedied by the free viewing experience at the central hub, but the discrepancy between the segregated experiences was striking. In one, you were a participant in an immersive experience, while in the other, you had to wait in line to view a set of screens that could have almost as easily been broadcast online. The central hub was deftly designed by two SCI-Arc (Southern California Institute of Architecture) faculty and located on its campus but was almost certainly underfunded for its wider purposes. The design effectively deployed shape and interior sheathing to create the conditions necessary for both the broadcasting of the various scenes and the culminating act in which numerous cars pulled through the structure. Ticket-holders emerged from the vehicles like awards show attendees walking a red carpet, while many non-ticket-holders were unable to enter because of capacity issues. Their only view was of the exterior of the hub, which was literally wrapped in trash—no doubt the only affordable material after value engineering went its course. A group of musicologists in Los Angeles went so far as to boycott the performance—though tickets still sold out almost as soon as they went on sale. My own viewing experience was possible only by hacking the machine: by analyzing hashtags on social media, I was able to discern where the most popular non-mobile scenes were performed, and I staged my own complimentary private viewing tour. With stops at Angel's Point in Elysian Park and the Bradbury Building downtown, my tour culminated in a scene that unfolded in Chinatown. That Peter Soo Hoo's Central Plaza, designed like a movie set, now was the stage for an opera seemed fitting.

The scene involves Lucha, the heroine, receiving some kind of message from a soothsayer, amidst flutists, a pair of characters who bore an uncanny relation to the twins from Kubrick's *The Shining*, and handfuls of raining rose petals. While the narrative wasn't immediately clear, I could certainly

sense a bit of the supernatural in it all. A limousine bearing a handful of ticket-holders would roll up to the plaza and the scene would begin, moving throughout the plaza and reaching its apex as Lucha sings them back into the vehicle, which whisked them to their next site. As in *Invisible Cities*, one of the most powerful elements of the opera was its site specificity, transforming the mundane space of the everyday into one that held speculative possibility. There was no set constructed apart from the preexisting set of the plaza, so characters aptly used benches, lamp posts, and steps to their blocking's advantage. Bystanders who expected to do little more than buy lunch were presented with this otherworldly performance, generating curiosity and discussion between these happenstance strangers who bore witness to the opera. While this was, for the most part, the standard reaction to these pop-up opera segments, there were instances in which the fourth wall was more violently broken. One segment, which was to be performed in Hollenbeck Park in Boyle Heights, a historic immigrant community in Los Angeles currently under severe threat of gentrification and displacement, was regularly overtaken by shouting protestors demanding that these operatic outsiders leave their neighborhood.

Yet here there was another curious phenomenon that made *Hopscotch*, for all its issues, the beginnings of a work of immanent speculation. The logistical complexity of the opera made the kind of control found in a theater impossible, and this had the effect of opening up a discursive space within the performance. In between location changes, repeated scene resets, and the space between sites and participant vehicles, conversations between performers, participants, crew, and bystanders unfolded about the opera, the experience of performers and participants, and about Los Angeles itself. This also had the effect of making the plotline—something which oscillated between simple love story and overwrought reflection on postmodernity with the main characters in search of abstract centers—strikingly touching. It made an impact precisely because its simple narrative stood in such stark contrast to the numerous other complexities reflecting and reproducing the tropes of Los Angeles—that it demonstrated underneath all of the postmodern geography was an earnest and hopeful desire for connection. And beyond the narrative, the opera itself *performed* this relationship through the creation of a network of producers, actors, participants (intentional and unintentional),



Viewers at *Hopscotch's* central hub.

and places. It drew from this network, looking past and forward, simultaneously creating and suggesting potential for creation, expanding the margins of the possible.

Returning to the university, there are two additional examples worth noting, which demonstrate the budding of immanent speculation within the university. During the summer of 2014, two teams of urban researchers in the UCLA Urban Humanities Initiative produced short videos about Chinatown that delved into ethnography, fiction, space, time, narrative, and the future. The first, titled “en-Counter Chinatown,” is composed of a relatively disjointed set of rapidly cut shots of Chinatown, much in the spirit of the early city symphony films of the 1920s. Yet here the subject matter is not frenetically moving transportation systems and flashing urban lights—instead, there are decidedly slow subjects: smoke wafting up from sticks of incense, the gentle sway of red lanterns, old men sitting in a public park, slow pans of a mostly horizontal landscape, a feeding fish. The most intense movement comes from a rapidly spinning

seat, part of a twenty-five-cent children’s ride in front of a shop, which instructs, “Enjoy The Ride !!!” We return to this shot several times, suggesting that the ride is, in fact, the video and we its riders. There are subtitles in the film though we hear no dialogue. “How are you connected to Chinatown?” “Those terms don’t apply to us.” A repeated exchange between typical ethnographic interview questions and apparently nonsensical answers devolves to the point where even the questions start to lose stability: “Who is Chinatown?” Indeed, the only audible sounds come from the ambient noises indicative of some kind of commercial space, punctuated with the regular chiming of a singing bowl. Toward the end of the video, a traditional song is played or, perhaps, performed—we aren’t sure because the soundtrack is utterly asynchronous with the image.

Here, much like in *The Industry's* operas, we are presented with an everyday space made unfamiliar. And with our estrangement comes the ability to see things previously unseen, to imagine another world very much overlapped

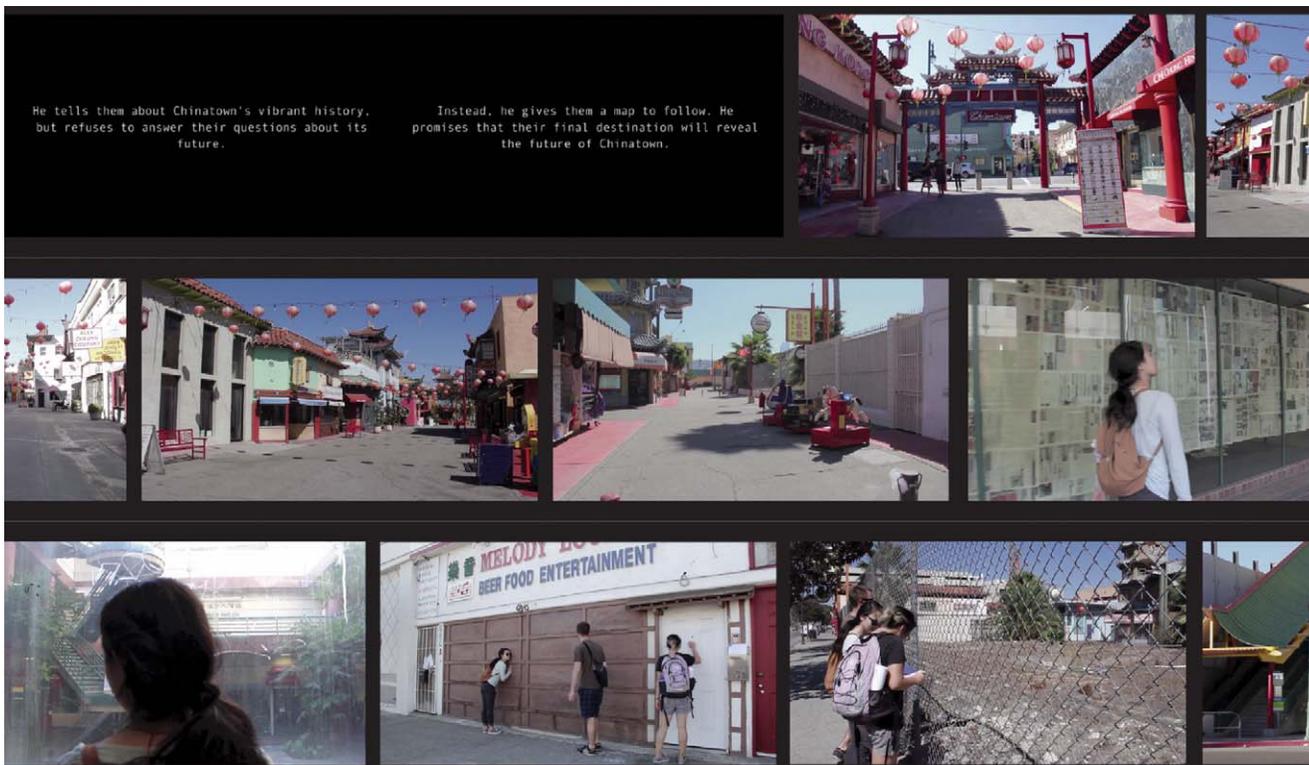


Scenes from *Encounter Chinatown*. Courtesy of J. Lee, W. Ren, C. Robertson, A. Shrodes, and E. Yen.

upon the one we knew. A question like “Who is Chinatown?” which on first blush sounds ridiculous now begins to make some sort of odd sense. Aren’t these the questions that any critically minded scholar first asks of a situation? For whom is this neighborhood meant? And who else is excluded? There is, again, a touch of the supernatural. Between shots of incense and prayers, the video’s rhythm is maintained only through a Buddhist monk’s tolling of the bells. It asks us to slow down, to read between the lines. Is there another Chinatown present, one that we looked past before? This immanent speculation is easy to brush past because it lacks the didactic quality of a futurist’s homily or the spectacle of an opera on wheels, but given time it is perhaps even more effective, more seductive, because we are the ones who are compelled to complete the task of speculation. We are given time and space with which we can attempt to make sense of the swirling assemblage of images before us.

Another video, titled “Welcome to Chinatown,” is perhaps the previous film’s opposite. When the team attempts to explore what the future might hold for the neighborhood, they are met by community members who only have the

capacity to look to the past. They turn the film on themselves, setting out to explore the neighborhood. What they capture is a place ensnared in decrepitude, bereft of life apart from cars passing through, and an octogenarian or two. Deploying the motifs of horror films, the filmmakers find one abandoned shop and empty lot after another in this ghost town, only to flee the neighborhood, running to the safety of a departing train. This narrative was less successful insofar as it presented a singular and straightforward reading of Chinatown as haunted and abandoned. It lacked the interpretability and openness found in the previous film, or even in the operas. Nevertheless, the decision to present Chinatown in this way was certainly an act of speculation: Chinatown, for anyone who has visited, is a largely bustling neighborhood, despite its declining Asian population. You are just as likely to see a hip art opening at one of its many galleries, or foodies photographing their lunch for social media, as the imported tchotchke shops of old. And it was grounded in trends immanent to the site: the Chinese population that remains is one that is in many ways stuck in the past, aging in run-down facilities with little drive for change. The collection of stunningly framed



Scenes from *Welcome to Chinatown*. Courtesy of C. Huang, L. Phan, G. Pugh, and S. Yoshida.

shots of abandoned malls, walkways, and plazas was more than an intentional decision: it was one that most certainly was difficult to fulfill. While this immanent speculation might be a weaker form, it still presents a visually striking narrative that pushes past the static boundaries of description and analysis to which most scholarly work timidly abides. This video may have a reserved view of the future, but it presents it with surety, again forcing us to reconcile this vision with the assumptions we have collectively thought as fact.²

It seems appropriate for immanent speculation, this act long practiced by a subset of artists and storytellers, to find its way into the academy in California’s public university. The city of Los Angeles and, indeed, the state at large were shaped by a network of actors who were practicing the future, so that it would become their reality. Judged on the empirical and positivist terms common to education, immanent speculation might be seen as a trifling waste of time. Yet it is these speculative trifles, appearing ungrounded while actually utterly immanent to the spaces and places from which they rise, which have the capability to construct not only what we imagine to be our future but, moreover,

what we might even conceive of as possible in the future. It is this speculative practice that Percy Bysshe Shelley saw in poetry when he proclaimed, “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” In a day when cynicism and fear appear to shape public discourse in a way not seen in decades, it seems ever more important to have intellectuals at all levels of society—in the university and out—practicing the future. **B**

Notes

- ¹ The Chinatown massacre of 1871 is widely believed to be the largest mass lynching in American history, where a mob of around five hundred white men chased down and killed around twenty Chinese immigrants. While the purported cause was vigilante justice after a local rancher was killed by a Chinese gang, the massacre coincided with increasing anti-Chinese sentiment throughout California, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act passed eleven years after this event. A trial was held for some of the killers, but no punishment was ever served out.
- ² These videos are available at <https://youtu.be/aREUa4lhxTs> and https://youtu.be/G5wghwQ_xU, respectively.