


RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Playing *Hopscotch* on Dangerous Ground: Site-Based, Transit-Oriented Opera in Los Angeles

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### Abstract

*Hopscotch: An Opera for 24 Cars* was a celebrated site-based and technetronic musical performance that sought to bring opera into various communities in Los Angeles, many of which were economically disadvantaged. In the process, this opera set off a firestorm of protests that ultimately resulted in confrontations with community members, protests that would test the very premise of the dissemination of opera and performance outside spaces of privilege and in communities of colour. Informed by the concept of transit-oriented performance, this article analyses some ways in which neoliberalism is distorting opera's modern-day resonances.

**Keywords:** Transit-oriented performance; Opera; Gentrification; Social pornography; Social protest; Site-based performance

The phone call came to me just as the opera *Hopscotch: An Opera for 24 Cars* (*Hopscotch*, 24 October to 21 November 2015) had gone into previews. Yuval Sharon, the opera's director, explained that a small group of interlopers at Hollenbeck Park in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, had interfered with *Hopscotch*'s previews and complained about its portrayal of people of colour. Sharon explained that everywhere else that *Hopscotch* was being performed, people met the cast and creative team with enthusiasm, encouragement and support. He asked me to join the production team and help him communicate with these interlopers. As a site-based performance scholar and practitioner,<sup>1</sup> I was thrilled to become a part of what I thought an 'unprecedented, beautiful and historic event'.<sup>2</sup> How could I not be? This was an audacious, unconventional, ambitious and perhaps extraordinary artistic experiment, and if anyone thought differently, I would help change their mind. In my view, Sharon was bringing art to the masses and developing best practices for performing opera outside traditional theatre venues and among communities of colour in a respectful and collaborative way. I proudly added my voice to this opera. *Mea culpa*.

One of the first things I did after agreeing to come on board was to see the production in its entirety; if I was to help the opera, I needed to see not only what the community was taking issue with, but other moments along the show's routes where the production could

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<sup>1</sup> Understanding that Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks' term 'site-specific' performance has served as a benchmark for what works outside theatres, herein, I follow site-based scholars Penelope Cole and Rand Harmon by embracing 'site-based' as a way to account for 'the multitudes of ways in which a "site" is employed in the creation and experience of the performance'. For more, see *Theatre History Studies* 38 (2019).

<sup>2</sup> From the author's email exchange with Sharon on 14 January 2016.

be vulnerable to similar accusations of ‘occupying a historically oppressed neighborhood’.<sup>3</sup> I set out to speak to individuals at the park, one of whom was a food vendor named Maria. She was in her late 50s and sold fresh *tamales* and drinks out of a shopping cart for a living. When I asked if she knew what the group of people with instruments in the park were doing, she said, ‘It looks like a tour. Those people have been here for six weeks, but I do not understand what they are doing. They buy nothing from me.’<sup>4</sup> Maria was one of the many people from some of the most disadvantaged ethnic neighbourhoods of Los Angeles cast as *mise en scène*, i.e., *free* and mobile backdrops, for a paid cast of more than a hundred actors, dancers and musicians.

*Hopscotch* was a site-based technetronic opera that employed an episodic model of geographical and narrative fragmentation to tell its story. It aimed to bring visibility to both opera and Los Angeles’s rich cultural heritage, but it did so in a manner that caught it in what feminist scholar Peggy Phelan calls ‘a trap’ that ‘summons surveillance’, ‘provokes voyeurism’ and whets the colonialist ‘appetite for possession’.<sup>5</sup> The concept behind this production and the process used to implement it ostensibly objectified, belittled and enraged Boyle Heights residents and stakeholders, partly due to its overlooking the possibility that site-based performance requires a more robust sensitivity and respect to the community in which it occurs. By not properly reaching out to all members of the key groups directly and from the start, *Hopscotch* claimed the realm of creativity as a property of the cultural elite, and became vulnerable to the accusations hurled against it. The result was a set of confrontations that tested the very premise of the dissemination of opera and performance outside spaces of privilege. This article examines the mobilisation of opera as a tool of the neoliberal capitalist agenda to privatise public space. Through examining the way in which this opera behaved specifically in one of their performance locations in Boyle Heights, I will illustrate a way in which even arts non-profits can behave like large corporately minded concerns, and harness the power of classical music not to elevate but to displace.<sup>6</sup>

This production provides a valuable opportunity to examine the implications and complications of staging site-based work inside communal spaces without first considerably communicating with those whom the performance most directly affects. *Hopscotch* also illuminated the way in which neoliberal forces position the wealthy as creators of aesthetic value, and the autochthonous economically disenfranchised as background extras who obscure the cultural, economic and social realities. In what follows, there is an examination of questions about what responsibility, if any, site-based artists have to engage community members and stakeholders in ways that will construct a mutually beneficial relationship. What gains (or losses) result when one achieves what Miwon Kwon calls ‘a more meaningful and relevant connectedness with an audience’ in a site-based context?<sup>7</sup> Finally, what are the best practices for contemporary site-based artists to employ when performing for an audience in a way that acknowledges a community’s sense of ownership over a place?

While tackling these questions and issues, I hope to give the subtleties involved in implementing transit-oriented performance techniques the attention they richly deserve,

<sup>3</sup> STPLA, Tumblr post, 4 October 2015 (accessed March 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Quotation translated from Spanish by the author; the conversation with this woman (she asked me not to use her name) was held in Hollenbeck Park, 10 October 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Abingdon, 1993), 3–4.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Oreskes, ‘Stores Using Music Not to Soothe But to Deter’, *Los Angeles Times* (15 September 2019). In just one recent example, Pachelbel’s Canon in D has been employed by the Dallas-based 7-Eleven franchise as part of a programme where they blast classical music outside their stores day and night ‘to steer homeless people away’. This is a programme that – their corporate headquarters was quick to point out – has ‘received very positive feedback’.

<sup>7</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 89.

given their part in creating a situation that exotified economically disenfranchised people who lived in a historically immigrant municipality, populated primarily by Mexican Americans, Latina/os and Chicana/os.<sup>8</sup> It was this opera's execution, then, that created art reifying a virulent version of *social pornography*, which performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett theorises as an exploitation of private and public disparities in class and culture.<sup>9</sup> In practice, social pornography is a public, pronounced, voluntary and compensated community participation in an artistic performance where an audience can gaze upon an artwork featuring community members as participants.<sup>10</sup> Herein, I extend the concept of social pornography to account for cases, such as the one in *Hopscotch*, where community participation is involuntary and uncompensated, to highlight both the passive role as commodities that subaltern subjects are called to inhabit in neoliberal domains in general and in *Hopscotch's* scopophilic, colonial and sonic enactments in particular.

Neoliberalism's infrastructure, as outlined by geographer David Harvey, is useful to this analysis for the way in which it articulates this ideology's power to orchestrate human thought, practice and action in favour of privatisation, finance and market processes at the expense of safeguarding the public's welfare, thereby leading to a situation where, as Harvey observes, 'The freedom of the masses would be restricted in favor of the freedoms of the few.'<sup>11</sup> This way of reading our current historical moment enables this article's interrogation. *Hopscotch's* conduct established a need to consider issues such as California's increasing wealth gap and how the creative economy interacts with people of colour and their spaces according to their wealth-generating capacity. The portion of *Hopscotch* that took place in Hollenbeck Park in Boyle Heights sparked an uprising because community members and stakeholders saw its all-white production team as agents of and for gentrification. The concern in this case seems justified, since communities of colour in general and Chicana/o communities in particular have seen the most drastic increase in homelessness in the past few years.<sup>12</sup>

Crucial to this enquiry is musicologist Marianna Ritchey's incisive work, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era*, in which she underscores the relationship between neoliberalism and gentrification, framing *Hopscotch* as 'opera and/as gentrification'.<sup>13</sup> I follow Ritchey by problematising the idea that a place's, product's or person's ability to generate profit in the competitive free market is a suitable index of social value. As Ritchey points out, classical music 'regularly deploys some of the central keywords and values of neoliberalism, using them to exemplify how [it] can be regenerated by exposure to market forces'.<sup>14</sup> Then there is Patricia A. Ybarra, who points out neoliberalism's ability to behave as not only an economic but a "political philosophy", which

<sup>8</sup> There is as yet no word, term or phrase that completely and perfectly articulates the mass of community people discussed in this essay. All the nomenclatures available to identify them as a monolith bring with them deficiencies. To solve this and for clarity, the word Chicana/o will be privileged as a way to discuss, however loosely, these community members.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley, 1998), 54.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Lind, 'Actualisation of Space: The Case of Oda Projesi', in *From Studio to Situations: Contemporary Art and the Question of Context*, ed. Claire Doherty (London, 2004), 109–21, at 114. Lind describes this concept as art that exhibits and makes 'exotic marginalized groups' out of community members. The author gives an example of this when she speaks of the *Bataille Monument* (exhibition at Documenta 11, Kassel, 2002), a project that paid participants to work on an installation but ultimately cast them as executors and not co-creators.

<sup>11</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, 2005), 70.

<sup>12</sup> Gale Holland and Doug Smith, 'L.A. County Homelessness Jumps a "Staggering" 23% as Need Far Outpaces Housing, New Count Shows', *Los Angeles Times* (31 May 2017), [www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-homeless-count-20170530-story.html#](http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-homeless-count-20170530-story.html#) (accessed July 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Marianna Ritchey, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* (Chicago, 2019), 90.

<sup>14</sup> Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 4.

promises to be the best way to reach prosperity and democracy'.<sup>15</sup> This case study reveals such a promise to be bankrupt and undemocratic.

Site-based performance in the United States of America is an under-investigated field of study, and transit-oriented performances such as *Hopscotch* are even more so;<sup>16</sup> however, American site-based performance has also begun to show up as a 'catalyst for revitalization' that elected officials and developers gradually deploy.<sup>17</sup> Michael McKinnie points out that in cities around the world, 'site-specific performance', as he calls it, 'has become tied up with the political-economic management of the city' and accordingly, not all site-based performances are singularly and necessarily valuable (or detrimental) to a community purely because they take place at sites within its borders.<sup>18</sup> Artist Thomas Hirschhorn puts the unpredictable nature of site-based work in the following way: 'Work in public space is never a total success and never a total failure.'<sup>19</sup> However, as contemporary performance scholar Bertie Ferdman points out, the field's failure to discuss problematic issues around space, access and privilege remains a most pressing issue in site-based work.<sup>20</sup> Thus, knowing when a site-based, transit-oriented performance becomes valuable or detrimental is important, and learning how a site-based, transit-oriented performance specifically *means* is critical.

*Hopscotch* was performed along three separate routes through which audiences travelled to unknown destinations inside various limousines.<sup>21</sup> It was the limousines in Boyle Heights, a Los Angeles neighbourhood at the forefront of Los Angeles's anti-gentrification movement, that represented the overall failure of the production team to understand, and proactively engage, the residents and stakeholders whom the performance would most directly affect. It is this deployment of a vehicle as both a centralising motif and a primary means of delivering a narrative that makes *Hopscotch* a *transit-oriented performance*.<sup>22</sup>

The Industry, an opera company founded in 2011 by Sharon, produced *Hopscotch* as a large-scale collaboration between composers, dancers, musicians and actors.<sup>23</sup> It commissioned six librettists and six Los Angeles-based composers to write original music to create and texture the production's soundscape. The musical compositions were to be modular to enable them to accommodate unexpected delays. In keeping with the connotations of The Industry's nomenclature, the show was written much in the same way as a television series: that is, *Hopscotch's* writers gathered in a room and brainstormed the main story's arc.

<sup>15</sup> Patricia A. Ybarra, *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism* (Evanston, IL, 2017), x.

<sup>16</sup> The majority of scholarship concentrates on site-specific work manifestations in dance and art, leaving musical and theatrical site-specific performances largely unexplored; to date there is no monograph available on American site-specific theatre and only a dozen or so Canadian and European edited collections.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (New York, 2009), 37.

<sup>18</sup> Michael McKinnie, 'Rethinking Site-Specificity: Monopoly, Urban Space, and the Cultural Economics of Site-Specific Performance', in *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Performance Interventions*, ed. Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (London, 2012), 21–33.

<sup>19</sup> Claire Doherty, ed., *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situations* (London, 2004), 138. See Thomas Hirschhorn's case study on the *Bataille Monument*.

<sup>20</sup> Bertie Ferdman, *Off Sites: Contemporary Performance Beyond Site-Specific* (Carbondale, IL, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Only one location along the Los Angeles River used a vehicle other than a limousine (a jeep) because of the rocky and uneven terrain.

<sup>22</sup> Here defined as any performance that employs a vehicle, actual or virtual, as a unifying and centralising theme, idea or location to organise, house or transport a performance or narrative.

<sup>23</sup> The Industry has produced three large-scale site-specific opera performances in Los Angeles going back to 2012. Its inaugural show, *Crescent City*, was a large-scale, interdisciplinary opera by Anne LeBaron and Douglas Kearney. In 2013, The Industry staged *Invisible Cities*, an operatic adaptation of Italo Calvino's novel, composed by Christopher Cerrone, and in 2015 The Industry presented *Hopscotch*.

The production organised its 24 episodes or ‘chapters’ into a triadic format comprising a Green, Red and Yellow route. Each route contained eight distinct chapters with a dedicated assistant stage manager, who usually sat in the front passenger seat with that episode’s promptbook. An audience of only four people would board a limousine at the designated starting point for their coloured route and travel as a private party in either a clockwise or an anticlockwise direction. The performance order of the chapters was non-chronological, and each route lasted approximately 90 minutes and ended where it began. The performance locations for the opera varied from the inside of apartment buildings to the newly refurbished Los Angeles River Trail and to other notable Los Angeles locations such as Mariachi Plaza and Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights; the opera staging also included architectural landmarks such as the Million Dollar Theatre, which is a two thousand-seat venue in the heart of downtown Los Angeles, and the much-filmed Bradbury Building, a historical landmark also located in the downtown area. At one location, the audience followed a guide through a luxury apartment complex and up to a rooftop pool lounge via a warren of hallways and a cargo elevator.

The day’s final performance on each route ended in a grand finale scene at the central hub, where the paying audience members, along with selected performers, exited the limousines onto a reserved space where a waiting crowd of non-paying audience members provided this privileged group with readymade witnesses to their limousine debarkation. Audience members could experience *Hopscotch* in one of two ways: free at the central hub, which was described as ‘a large pop-up outdoor structure’, in the parking lot of the Southern California Institute of Architecture in downtown Los Angeles, or by purchasing a ticket to experience *Hopscotch* for \$125 during a regular performance and \$150 for the finale. Tickets were for specific routes, and a limousine would transport the audience along one of three routes, each consisting of different episodes of the overall narrative; the routes included audiences seeing performers suspended from rafters, standing atop buildings or sitting inside their limousine. Though the show dedicated part of their eight rehearsed performances to spaces outside the vehicle on each of its three routes, the audience enjoyed most of the show from the interior of the limousine by peeping out into the street through the limousine’s dark-tinted windows.

*Hopscotch* enjoyed effusive if not oleaginous publicity in the lead-up to its opening and during its run, with coverage from major newspapers and magazines across the country.<sup>24, 25</sup> According to *The New Yorker* magazine, *Hopscotch* moved people according to an ‘ingenious scheme’,<sup>26</sup> whereas *The New York Times* called it ‘a trippy exploration of time and memory’.<sup>27</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* heralded *Hopscotch* as ‘a transformative moment for an art form’.<sup>28</sup> Despite this uncritical critical acclaim, *Hopscotch* vitiated its art by failing to

<sup>24</sup> *Hopscotch* official press release, 19 May 2015.

<sup>25</sup> In an email dated 24 November 2015, the director stated that a reporter saw the protest discussed in this article. The reporter did not pursue the story. *The Guardian* also enquired about the events described in this article; on 6 April 2016, I sent a response on behalf of The Industry where I parroted the following: ‘*Hopscotch* looked to engage in positive dialogue with Serve the People-Los Angeles and it was dismissed by STPLA, as were all the good faith adjustments made to insure a peaceful coexistence with all other activity at the park. Everywhere else *Hopscotch* was performed (including elsewhere in Boyle Heights), the cast and creative team were met with enthusiasm, encouragement, and support from individuals, businesses, and organizations. Given the size and scope of *Hopscotch*, it is important to note that this isolated event was the exception and not the rule of an otherwise excellent community engagement.’

<sup>26</sup> Alex Ross, ‘Opera on Location: A High-Tech Work of Wagnerian Scale is Being Staged Across Los Angeles’, *New Yorker* (8 November 2015), [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/16/opera-on-location](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/16/opera-on-location).

<sup>27</sup> William Robin, ‘“Hopscotch” Takes Opera into the Streets’, *New York Times* (31 October 2015), [www.nytimes.com/2015/10/31/arts/music/hopscotch-takes-opera-into-the-streets.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/31/arts/music/hopscotch-takes-opera-into-the-streets.html?_r=0).

<sup>28</sup> Mark Swed, ‘Musical Ride-Along: Moving Around L.A., “Hopscotch” Sometimes Can Transport’, *Los Angeles Times* (2 November 2015).

be sensitive to the political history and the socio-economic realities of all people. As Soyini Madison articulates the responsibilities involved with site-based work, 'Entering a public sphere enlivens scrutiny, enlarges responsibility, and cracks open into plain sight hidden wrongs.'<sup>29</sup> These wrongs have consequences that can shift a place's safe inhabitability.

### Chalking the lines

In the 1890s, when wealthy landowners William H. Workman and Elizabeth Hollenbeck donated to the city of Los Angeles the 25 acres of land that Hollenbeck Park now occupies, they did so under the condition that the city commit to allocating \$10,000 over a two-year period for making improvements to the park. This commitment of public funds seems to have been a key to making Hollenbeck Park a highly frequented pleasure ground. In 1905, Workman and Hollenbeck subdivided their substantial property surrounding the park into the Workman Park and the Hollenbeck Heights Tracts, which they then advertised as 'situated just east of and overlooking beautiful Hollenbeck Park'.<sup>30</sup> This business-savvy manipulation of public resources masquerading as philanthropy is articulated by Ferdman as follows: 'Neoliberal economies have also greatly shifted views of private and public space, in particular as spaces considered public increasingly reflect private-public partnership in the interest of capital.'<sup>31</sup> This privileging of monied might may be one of the examples that local activists invoked to support their reading of *Hopscotch's* claims of aesthetic and altruistic motivation. The Industry's significant support from prominent Los Angeles real estate developers was also problematic for many community members.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, The Industry's goals, as expressed by Mary Ann O'Connor, who is The Industry's founding board chair, include a distinction between a 'micro-audience' and a 'general one', representing the concept of an audience as a bifurcated entity and implying a foundational distinction between a privileged few and the average many.<sup>33</sup> This distinction plays out in *Hopscotch's* limousine and non-limousine riding audiences.

When asked about Boyle Heights's current battle with gentrification, Harry Gamboa Jr, who grew up in the neighbourhood and is a founder of Asco, a famously confrontational and scatological art collective,<sup>34</sup> said, 'Some communities don't have a background of resistance ... but Boyle Heights does, and it has an intellectual base that goes back to the Chicano Movement.'<sup>35</sup> This background of resistance has today been re-manifested in a decidedly more aggressive and still scatological way, evidenced most literally when an arts non-profit was deemed a gentrifying space and had faeces flung at its building.<sup>36</sup> Today, Boyle Heights is seen by many as a real estate goldmine; thus, Gamboa's invocation

<sup>29</sup> D. Soyini Madison, *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance* (Cambridge, 2010), 18.

<sup>30</sup> 'Hollenbeck Park Heights Tract [Advertisement]', *Los Angeles Herald* 32/155 (5 March 1905), [cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=LAH19050305&e=-----en-20-1-txt-txIN-----1](http://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=LAH19050305&e=-----en-20-1-txt-txIN-----1) (accessed 27 May 2022). This edition of the Herald has an advert for the Hollenbeck Park Heights Tract, subdivided by Elizabeth Hollenbeck, featuring two views of the park to lure prospective buyers.

<sup>31</sup> Ferdman, *Off Sites*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Developers gave both financial support and facilitated *Hopscotch's* access to some of the historical buildings and spaces.

<sup>33</sup> 'New Year, New Chairman of the Board', *The Industry* (7 January 2016), [theindustryla.org/new-year-new-chairman-of-the-board/](http://theindustryla.org/new-year-new-chairman-of-the-board/).

<sup>34</sup> One of Asco's most famous works is titled *Asshole Mural*; it features Asco members occupying the space around the cloaca of the Santa Monica sewage drainpipe.

<sup>35</sup> Carolina Miranda, 'Watchful: Boyle Heights Has So Many New Galleries. Has Gentrification Begun?', *Los Angeles Times* (16 October 2016).

<sup>36</sup> Miranda, 'Has Gentrification Begun?'



represents a call for present-day activists who seek to defend their community to draw upon both Boyle Heights's past confrontational strategies and its rich history of resistance to exploitation. This call has been heard; as Marianna Ritchey has pointed out, 'Today, Boyle Heights is home to many revolutionary activist groups ... [who are] joining together to resist the increasingly powerful gentrifying processes that they feel are transforming their community in harmful ways and without their input or consent.'<sup>37</sup>

A particularly aggressive group that called the opera a gentrifying endeavour was Serve the People, Los Angeles (STPLA), a New Communist Party affiliated group dedicated to serving the people of Los Angeles in general and the disadvantaged residents of Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles and Echo Park, who are subjugated by 'capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and national oppression', in particular.<sup>38</sup> This group has made a name for itself by regularly distributing food and clothes to the needy residents of Boyle Heights and by confronting groups that it sees as gentrifying forces. STPLA's core members are predominantly Chicana/o, with a majority of them having family who live or work in Boyle Heights.<sup>39</sup>

In December 2015, STPLA confronted a group of University of California, Los Angeles urban planning students on a walking tour of Boyle Heights, escorted them out of the neighbourhood, asked them not to come back, and later blogged that Boyle Heights is 'under attack in the form of gentrification and therefore must be defended'.<sup>40</sup> It was STPLA's contention that the community was being exploited and was involuntarily (and without remuneration) serving as *mise en scène* for *Hopscotch* and that this compelled them to both resist and engage in counterattacks. This 'group of exclusively white people strolling around the park'<sup>41</sup> had to be stopped, and they were the group to do it. Members of *Hopscotch* disputed that STPLA and its members were stakeholders in Boyle Heights, opting to characterise them as opportunistic interlopers and obstructionists instead. STPLA's only response to this claim was to dismiss the accusation as a typical ploy of gentrifiers, saying, 'They always want to make people with problems seem like they are a problem.'<sup>42</sup>

The first clash between *Hopscotch* and STPLA occurred during rehearsals on Sunday 4 October 2015, after one of the STPLA members spotted a person they described as being dressed like a pseudo-vaudevillian in front of a *paletero* (popsicle vendor) cart, playing it like a drum. This representation was offensive to STPLA because they interpreted the casting of a white male in this role as mocking the real-life Chicana/o *paleteros* who make their living in the park. Indeed, all the performers and production team members dedicated to this location at the time of the clash were white, a fact that soon changed when staff were shuffled around and Sharon called on me. It was after this clash that a confrontation ensued during which a white *Hopscotch* assistant stage manager produced a city permit, waved it around as proof that the production had a right to use the park, and stated, 'We have a permit to be here. See this paper? It gives us the right!' To this declaration of right, a Chicano member of the group responded, 'We don't need no permit to fuck you up!'<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 103.

<sup>38</sup> Members of STPLA spoke under the condition that all quotes from its individual members be attributed to the whole of the organisation, in keeping with their communal code of conduct.

<sup>39</sup> STPLA.

<sup>40</sup> Brittny Mejia, 'Gentrification Pushes Up Against Boyle Heights—and Vice Versa', *Los Angeles Times* (3 March 2016), [www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-las-palomas-gentrification-20160303-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-las-palomas-gentrification-20160303-story.html) (accessed 3 March 2016).

<sup>41</sup> STPLA, Tumblr post, 4 October 2015 (accessed March 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Conversation with STPLA members at Hollenbeck Park, 8 November 2015.

<sup>43</sup> After this altercation, the production team of *Hopscotch* decided to bring in the present author as a translator (English/Spanish) for their promotional material, hire a community member as a security guard, and offer a lottery for free tickets to people from the zip codes in the area.

As this interaction demonstrates, both sides of this issue justified and fortified their perspectives and rights to inhabit the same space. One group invoked the unfettered privilege to defend a *de facto* ownership of the territory, and the other group invoked an official document from the city. In the stage manager's case, the permit was his archival document recording *Hopscotch's* sanctioned presence, which was purchased months before the event. For the Chicano youth, his and his friend's possession of the park rests on a repertoire of the temporal, historical and corporeal occupation of the park. Caught in the same space, they approach it from opposite sides: one privileges an archive and the other a repertoire.<sup>44</sup> It was after this confrontation that STPLA cast themselves as the spokespeople for the inhabitants of Hollenbeck Park and the wider Boyle Heights community.

Feeling empowered, STPLA then interrupted *Hopscotch's* performance by heckling the performers and agitating the nearby ducks into quacking to drown out the music and text of the show. STPLA's contention was that 'the oppressed nationalities of Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles do not want empty art that says nothing of the Chicano/Mexican/New Afrikan struggle and history'.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, *Hopscotch's* cast inadvertently escalated the situation by reportedly yelling, 'We're not gentrifiers! We're putting on an art show! We're entertaining the community!' There is of course a colonial logic at play in this rejoinder, as it highlights an ethnocentricity whereby 'community' is redefined not as the people who continuously live, work and play in Hollenbeck Park but as *Hopscotch's* paying audience. This clash escalated to a more pronounced conflict, leading STPLA to write the following part of a blog post about *Hopscotch*:

Boyle Heights is not a safe space for their circus, that the masses of Boyle Heights won't tolerate gentrification, that they are, in fact, in danger, that they will get physically hurt. Not by us. But by the people ... And for the sake of their safety, they should immediately leave.<sup>46</sup>

STPLA would then overlay their repertoire of live verbal threats with threatening images and an archived and more direct message to *Hopscotch*: 'Death to gentrification! ... It won't stop unless you stop it!'<sup>47</sup> Here, STPLA considers threats of violence as an appropriate means by which to arrest *Hopscotch's* performances in this community. This aggressive rhetoric is quickly becoming a hallmark of the activism in the Los Angeles anti-gentrification movement, and the Los Angeles Police Department has investigated some anti-gentrification activity under the classification of 'hate crimes'.<sup>48</sup> Thus, STPLA's summarising of *Hopscotch* as nothing more than door jams for 'white artists and hipsters and gentrifiers and city council sellouts and city agencies who don't give a fuck about building proletarian power and preserving community' emerges from the idea that gentrification is threatening enough to merit being stopped by *any means necessary*.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC, 2003). I draw from Diana Taylor's work on *The Archive and the Repertoire* primarily for the way it reasserts the power of an embodied and ephemeral repertoire as a means of storing and transmitting historical, political and cultural knowledge through gestures, dance and song. Taylor's work is also useful in framing points of contact between diametrically opposed groups thrust into settings of discovery and conquest.

<sup>45</sup> STPLA, Tumblr post, 4 October 2015 (accessed March 2016).

<sup>46</sup> STPLA, Tumblr post, 4 October 2015 (accessed March 2016).

<sup>47</sup> STPLA, Tumblr post, 4 October 2015 (accessed March 2016).

<sup>48</sup> Brittny Mejia, 'Boyle Heights Vandalism Seen as Possible Hate Crime: Graffiti on Art Galleries Could Be Reaction to Gentrification Fears', *Los Angeles Times* (4 November 2016).

<sup>49</sup> STPLA, Tumblr post, 4 October 2015 (accessed March 2016).



### Casting the first stone

A foundational problem with *Hopscotch* was its staging, which made it difficult for the show staff and the audience members in their limousines to connect with community members outside the insulated and exclusionary moving environment of luxury cars. This staging also prevented producers from fully recognising that even the poor and disenfranchised can lay claims to a site and that, as Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik have stated, ‘engagement with place has its political consequences’.<sup>50</sup> Though the disenfranchised may not control the historical archive, their repertoire of daily activities composes the cultural definition and ownership of an urban site.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, as the performers of *Hopscotch* learned, when the resident’s ethnic identity enmeshes itself with a location, the community forges a powerful affiliation with a site that outsiders, who attempt to resignify its meaning, must register. As Elin Diamond aptly articulates, no artist ‘can shake off the referential frame imposed by text, mode of production, and spectator’s narrativity’.<sup>52</sup> When a site-based production chooses, as *Hopscotch* did with my help, to appropriate cultural space, stories and symbols, it should do so judiciously or risk serious visceral resistance.

According to its commemorative programme, *Hopscotch* ‘help[ed] Los Angeles get to know itself better, to rejoice in the diversity and character that distinguish this city’.<sup>53</sup> *Hopscotch* facilitated interracial encounters, but the encounters did not foster much visible rejoicing by any Boyle Heights community members. What *Hopscotch* did in effect was to expose fissures in the show’s core concept, namely, that an opera could step into the streets of one of the most dynamic and ethnically rich cities in the world without a planned engagement with the disenfranchised members of the communities in all the locations where the opera took place. Omitting a thoughtful consideration of diversity, aesthetic representation and strategic interaction with Los Angeles’s massive ethnic diversity ultimately proved to be problematic. The events caused by this omission also brought into question *Hopscotch*’s goal of dissolving the isolation, that is, of driving into ‘an ecstatic vision of community in Los Angeles’.<sup>54</sup> According to a group of Boyle Heights stakeholders, it takes more than an assemblage of ‘all-white performers ... all-white staff and ... all-white audience members’ to bring art to Boyle Heights.<sup>55</sup>

‘First Kiss’ was the episode of the opera that took place at Hollenbeck Park. At the top of the show, two soon-to-be lovers began their first date. Lucha (‘battle’ or ‘struggle’ in Spanish), played by Sarah Beaty, and Jameson, played by Victor Mazzone, awaited the audience.<sup>56</sup> Two other key players, Stephanie Williams, a parasol-twirling roller-skater, and Linnea Sablosky on the *cajón*, awaited just outside the audience’s view. This chapter’s full cast wore late 1950s outfits inspired by *The Pajama Game*, a Hollywood musical for which a large musical number (‘Once a Year Day’) was shot on location at Hollenbeck Park.

After the four-member audience exited their limousine, their guide encouraged them to stroll behind accordionist Isaac Schankler as he and his legato melody snaked their way

<sup>50</sup> Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik, eds., *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces* (Gainesville, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

<sup>52</sup> Elin Diamond, *Unmasking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London, 2006), vii.

<sup>53</sup> The Industry, *Hopscotch: A Mobile Opera Commemorative Show Booklet* (Los Angeles, 2015), 7.

<sup>54</sup> The Industry, *Hopscotch: A Mobile Opera Commemorative Show Booklet*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> STPLA, blog post, 25 November 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Beaty specialises in contemporary music; she premiered *Invisible Cities* with The Industry and is a founding member of the contemporary chamber ensemble Blue Streak. Victor Mazzone is a native Kentuckian who landed in Los Angeles via a degree in voice studies and theatre from Northwestern University. The supporting cast for this episode also included Logan Hone as a saxophone player, Stefan Kac on tuba, Isaac Schankler on accordion and T.J. Troy as another percussionist.

towards the front of a band shell, picking up Jameson and Lucha on the way.<sup>57</sup> This part of the show took the audience towards the park's prominent lake and then to a patch of grass approximately 20 feet away from the front of the band shell. In the park, the amphitheatre stage sits approximately four feet off the ground with a band shell as a backdrop. At this stage and in front of the lovers, Williams and Sablosky had a choreographed musical interaction that involved Williams gracefully gliding on her roller skates as Sablosky tapped a barely audible rhythm on her *cajón*. Lucha and Jameson watched this duet as part of their date while they continued to engage in their recitative.

The scene staged the first date between Jameson and Lucha as they greeted each other with all the trepidation and seduction of many a first date, with no inkling of the abandonment that was to come or, in keeping with *Hopscotch's* simultaneous format, the abandonment that had always and already happened. In the staging of this moment, *Hopscotch* provided a scene that Phelan would classify as both 'alluring and violent' for the ways in which 'it touches the paradoxical nature of psychic desire' and promises 'reciprocity and equality' but fails and ends by producing 'violence, aggressivity [and] dissent'.<sup>58</sup> The Anglo Jameson's seduction of the Mexican Lucha recalls a ubiquitously known cultural archive for the Chicana/o community of Boyle Heights and beyond, the story of La Malinche, in which an indigenous slave girl is seduced, impregnated and abandoned by Hernán Cortéz.<sup>59</sup> This is a central motif of colonial seduction and abandonment, played out in *Hopscotch* as a romantic date in the multicultural city of Los Angeles in the new millennium and before a Chicana/o community who are in effect the cultural progenies of La Malinche. *Hopscotch's* reiteration of this seduction and abandonment then took on bottomless resonances, as it reified a lasting legacy of exploitation.

As Lucha and Jameson continued their path, leaving Williams and Sablosky behind, the audience shadowed them as they strolled towards the lake, now holding hands. At this point, Marc Lowenstein's musical composition was played the loudest, and a small band was formed with the addition of Logan Hone's saxophone and Stefan Kac's tuba to Isaac Schankler's accordion in the romantic texturing of a conversation and song inside the covering of a boathouse. Erin Young wrote the text that was spoken along the stroll, and the text did not help to ameliorate the communities' concerns about The Industry 'bringing opera to the masses, *whether they want it or not*' (emphasis mine).<sup>60</sup> At one moment, Lucha praised the beauty of the Park's avian residents, only to have Jameson respond loudly, 'Yeah, but it's horrible how those children throw rocks at them.'<sup>61</sup> Independently of whether or not this specific line referenced reality, it constituted yet another articulation of a colonialist mindset that privileges the European over the native. The natives in this case (i.e., the community residents) did not understand how to manage the natural resources, including and perhaps especially the real estate, around them as well as the colonisers did (i.e., *Hopscotch's* audience, cast and crew). After a performance inside the boathouse, Lucha and Jameson began a walk back towards the street, stopping for what was the scene's climax, complete with a musical crescendo that added T.J. Troy's percussion, who, until this point, had been observing the scene as an anachronistically dressed ice-cream cart attendee. Troy used his ice-cream cart as a drum set, and his rhythm led our lovers to their first kiss.

<sup>57</sup> The show's format had only one audience group aboard the limousines to begin the show. The other group of four simply followed the performers from the waiting area.

<sup>58</sup> Phelan, *The Politics of Performance*, 3–4.

<sup>59</sup> Cortéz would later marry La Malinche off to one of his subordinates.

<sup>60</sup> STPLA, Tumblr post, 4 October 2015 (accessed March 2016).

<sup>61</sup> 'First Kiss' scene text, written by Erin Young.

## Jumping the line

On typical weekends, there are at least half a dozen vendors spread across Hollenbeck Park, selling everything from shaved ice to *churros* to *tamales*. The vendors cater to the constant stream of people enjoying the park, mostly by strolling along the lake's pedestrian bridge and using the park's features as backdrops for various *in situ* photography sessions. The final day of performances for *Hopscotch* occurred on 22 November 2015. This day found me driving towards the central hub to await the grand culmination of *Hopscotch's* run. Hollenbeck Park was already filling up with its usual traffic: vendors preparing for a regular Sunday in the park, families lounging near the lake and a group of Roosevelt High School marching band members rehearsing on a hill off in the northern section of the park. These Roosevelt High School students would reify their school's motto of 'Don't flinch, don't foul, hit the line hard' by playing the most significant role in the day's protest.

All looked normal but for a Chicana female, described by a park employee as a local community member, who arrived at approximately 10 a.m. equipped with noise makers and a handmade sign proclaiming the day's performance and the production as unnecessary, unwanted and unwelcomed. The sign read 'Your "ART" is displacing people of Color #AntiGentrification'. As the performance began, the woman with the sign approached the scene to disrupt it by heckling and blowing on a whistle. At this point, an altercation developed that saw a violent reaction against the woman's body and its performance of resistance. According to a park employee, audience members (perhaps thinking the woman a cast member) engaged her in earnest conversation, and others using threatening language informed her she had no right to disturb the performance. During one such exchange, a white male audience member stepped out of a limousine in his role as a passive observer and advanced towards the Chicana female protestor to silence her through physically menacing behaviour and expletives. The exchange was serious enough to warrant an intervention from both *Hopscotch's* security guards and the park's on-site representative.

In this scenario, the white male audience member embraced his role as what John Berger calls a 'spectator-owner' as he actively protected the integrity of his purchased opera experience, mounting an aggressive and abusive public defence against the Chicana female, who injected herself too much into the action of the performance.<sup>62</sup> Through her action, she simultaneously worked for, with and against *Hopscotch* to play a functioning role in recasting her own and, by extension, her community's identity. She challenged the white male by transforming his investment into a struggle to maintain his positionality as the unquestioned dominant observer. The Chicana female thus placed the white male audience member in a paradoxical situation. He needed her in the present to adorn his shows' background with her exotic figure, but he also needed her to be silent. She disruptively proffered her voice, though the only part of her that was of value to the opera was her body.

Had the Chicana female disappeared from the scene completely, however, so would have a key element of the performance that Sharon had envisioned and that the white male audience member had purchased. In this way, the logic of the attack on this Chicana female is comprehensible as an assertion of ownership, she and her community are little more than show extras, and so Sharon's vision and the white male's actions were simply putting this woman in her place. There was no room in *Hopscotch's* score or aesthetic concept for her monody – thus, she had to be silenced. After this altercation,

<sup>62</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 1972).

the woman, who protested the show, posted a mass invitation to Facebook for people to come to Hollenbeck and protest against gentrifiers.

*Hopscotch's* production manager, Ash Nichols, was the first member of *Hopscotch's* production team to arrive at the scene to help manage the situation, which was relatively benign in the initial moments but escalated quickly after his arrival. It fell to Nichols to activate safety precautions, including calling in another limousine in case of a potential cast and crew evacuation. After the first break taken by the cast, the woman approached the band shell where approximately fifteen members of the Roosevelt High School marching band were now rehearsing, and she briefed them on the issue. This quickly mobilised the youths, and the band geared up their instruments, now determined to do their part to defend Boyle Heights against the encroaching forces of gentrification.<sup>63</sup> During the time that the students were preparing themselves, *Hopscotch's* leadership held a hurried vote among the cast and crew and decided to continue with the show. At this time I was still at the central hub awaiting the show's grand finale; I did not get a call on this day asking for me to help or to inform me of the situation. However, months later, I would be called on to defend The Industry, which I did, even though Sharon felt the tone of my response to be too 'apologetic' and thought the focus needed to be on the fact that 'whether right or wrong, an aggressive attitude against peaceful citizens that have consistently attempted dialogue is not a tactic we condone'.<sup>64</sup> I took his notes and changed my tone.

As the students approached the performance area and played from their musical repertoire to disrupt the performance of *Hopscotch*, the musicians picked up the students' melody and increased their instruments' volume to subsume that of the marching band, thereby integrating the students' protest into what had now become not a performance of an opera but an assertion of dominance. After an initial period of disorientation, the students decided that this engagement cast them as *mise en scène* for the show, just as their neighbourhood had been. The students refused to embrace *Hopscotch's* casting of them as extras and chose to play themselves instead; they took the lead in an aggressive musical performance. The marching band began to play in a mode of counter-identification by taking the same notes the *Hopscotch* players were using and distorting them in what José Esteban Muñoz might call 'a strategy of resistance'.<sup>65</sup> *Hopscotch's* musical director Marc Lowenstein framed the sonic clash between the student band and the cast as a reconciliatory gesture on the part of the *Hopscotch* performers, telling *The Guardian*: 'I asked our own musicians to play along with the high school players, to engage them.'<sup>66</sup> Lowenstein's attempt to engage the marching band students read to them as a trivialising of their grievances and protest, which in effect caused an escalation that manifested as a cacophonous battle.<sup>67</sup> When the two sonic repertoires collided, *Hopscotch* betrayed its specified desire to archive the community by using its repertoire to drown out the community's autochthonous music.

STPLA arrived just as the marching band students were leading the confrontation with their instruments at full volume. During a break in the action of *Hopscotch*, a cast member made a sign reading, 'I am a Boyle Heights resident. We are not rude.'<sup>68</sup> The sign was held

<sup>63</sup> The instruments consisted primarily of the brass section of a band and included tubas, trombones, trumpets and saxophones.

<sup>64</sup> Email exchange with the author, Friday 8 April 2016.

<sup>65</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota, 1999), 4.

<sup>66</sup> Rory Carroll, "'Hope Everyone Pukes on Your Artisanal Treats': Fighting Gentrification, LA-Style', *The Guardian*, 19 April 2016, [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/19/los-angeles-la-gentrification-resistance-boyle-heights](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/19/los-angeles-la-gentrification-resistance-boyle-heights) (accessed 24 June 2016).

<sup>67</sup> Phone conversation with park security on 10 December 2015.

<sup>68</sup> This claim of residency by this cast member is disputed by STPLA.

aloft and waved, and he then approached the group of youths and brandished the sign in one of the youth's faces, at which point the youth slapped the sign out of his hands and stomped on it. In the ensuing moments, one protester struck a female *Hopscotch* stage manager on the arm. Despite this, *Hopscotch* continued its performances with the adjustment that audience members would no longer exit the limousine. Instead, the performers would only gather at the limousine's windows and play. However, when the opera members attempted to implement this plan, the students could not be ignored; they participated in *Hopscotch*, but they did so by playing an unscripted score of their own. Ironically, in this way these students contributed the only voluntary, authentic and passionate example of true community engagement that *Hopscotch* ever earned.

When the *Hopscotch* cast went to the limousine's window for the next performance, approximately twenty activists and student band members loudly and menacingly surrounded the *Hopscotch* cast, first corralling them and then trapping them inside a small space between the limousine and a crescent of bodies, brass and sound. It was not until this moment that a retreat began, and the audience and performers hurried to get into a backup limousine as the community of protesters cheered, jeered and waved their middle fingers, and the marching band played a mocking tune and then a victorious march. As the last performer entered the limousine, the group of community activists expectorated at the limousine and pelted it with dirt and pebbles. Vera Caro, one of the community organisers present at the site that day, posted a video of the incident and summed up the day's events as follows:

Let this serve as a reminder that Boyle Heights does not want gentrifiers in the community, and that residents aren't going to sit idly as gentrifiers try to Columbus their neighborhood. Such a brilliant intervention, and one of the white males [sic] gentrifiers had the audacity to tell protesters that they were 'trying to bring art to Boyle Heights!' Hahahaha. Some people have no sense of history.<sup>69</sup>

Here, Caro's version of history and the events is clear. She both transformed 'Columbus' into a verb and invoked the performed, embodied, lived and familiar repertoire by dismissing the idea that Boyle Heights invites, wants or needs imported art. According to Lowenstein, the ultimate loss was for the students, for as he put it after the confrontation, 'We could have helped those kids, given them classes on how to play music, but now they can forget about it; they don't know how to act.'<sup>70</sup>

### Losing balance

*Hopscotch*'s inattentiveness to the inhabitants of the space they worked to arrogate manifested in the claims of *Hopscotch* actants that community members were not active partners and collaborators but rather clusters of benign logistical obstacles or, in some cases, pests to be eradicated. An illustration of the consequences of this inattentiveness lies in the way in which reporters represented the community. *New Yorker* staff writer Alex Ross described a *quinceañera* during a scene from *Hopscotch* in Hollenbeck Park as 'a young woman who had just been married, in a flamboyant purple dress'.<sup>71</sup> As a Catholic coming of age ritual, a *quinceañera* is actually a popular religious and social event in the Chicana/o communities in the United States, not unlike a Jewish *bat mitzvah*. Ross's misidentification could be an innocent example of how our experiences carry with them the limitations of

<sup>69</sup> STPLA, Tumblr post, 16 November 2015 (accessed 17 November 2015).

<sup>70</sup> Phone conversation with park security on 10 December 2015.

<sup>71</sup> Alex Ross, 'Opera on Location'.

the categorical systems of which are aware, as in the story of Marco Polo who, upon seeing a rhinoceros for the first time, mistook it for a unicorn.

Conversely, this misidentification of a sacred ritual for young Chicana girls could be a sign of a much more detrimental semiosis, one that is unwilling or unable to account for any phenomena outside its privileged colonial and Anglo-normative structure. Although Ross was not directly involved with the production of *Hopscotch*, his article was an important part of its overall signification as interpreted by STPLA and other Boyle Heights readers. Many other individuals involved with *Hopscotch* suffered just as much, perhaps even more explicitly, from the same cultural myopia as Ross did. This myopia was evident, for instance, in one usher shooing away an older Chicano man who came too close to one of *Hopscotch*'s limousines during a performance,<sup>72</sup> and in an interaction that occurred between Ashley Allen, one of the many non-Chicana woman who played Lucha, and Sharon.<sup>73</sup> In an *ad lib* moment while riding in a car through an ethnic enclave, Allen said, 'My dress is way better [than] that', as she spotted a *quinceañera* dress displayed outside a store, which caused Sharon to laugh excitedly.<sup>74</sup> What Sharon and Allen accomplished by this speech act and laughter was the legitimisation and reinforcement of *Hopscotch*'s position of power over the communities it exploited as *mise en scène*. Allen was in this instant articulating a moment that Taylor describes as moving from the 'here to an exotic there, transferring the not-ours to the ours, and translating the other's systems of communication into one [Allen] claim[s] to understand'.<sup>75</sup> That Sharon found Allen's comment funny is not surprising, since the opera he constructed also enjoys subaltern subjects and their cultural productions most and best when they can be laughed at from the back seat of a moving limousine.

Furthermore, Sharon's risible attitude towards *Hopscotch*'s backdrop turned out to be profitable; after the opera's success he won the MacArthur Grant, became the first American director at the venerable Bayreuth Festival in Germany, and had one of his other operas nominated for a Grammy,<sup>76</sup> all accolades that were not disconnected from *Hopscotch*. Far from having a personal animadversion towards Sharon, I want to highlight the fact that though I never rode in that car, I amplified the laughter, since as neoliberalism poignantly teaches, 'each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions'.<sup>77</sup>

The previous examples, however, are tame when compared with a *New Yorker* story in which Jonah Levy (a trumpet player in the show) equated himself to a 'musical sniper' who waited on a building rooftop until he received the 'go' signal. Just what or whom Levy was shooting from his perch was not made explicitly clear, although Ross ventured to double down on this unfortunate metaphor by calling Levy 'an assassin of the ordinary' at the close of his article.<sup>78</sup> Just what exactly 'ordinary' means in this case is not clear, but this metaphor is exemplary of how, as Ritchey puts it, 'art can indeed be a weapon' and that part of practicing thoughtful citizenship under neoliberalism entails acknowledging this fact, as well as clearly identifying what such a weapon ought (and ought not) to be aimed toward'.<sup>79</sup> Here, Ross's allegiance to *Hopscotch* led him to privileging opera as a

<sup>72</sup> Interview with audience member, October 2015.

<sup>73</sup> Because all three of the main characters were played by different actors, subjectivity is purposefully and blatantly underdefined in the piece.

<sup>74</sup> 'L.A.'s Crazy Opera Inside a Fleet of Moving Limos', *LA Weekly* (20 October 2015), <https://www.laweekly.com/l-a-s-crazy-opera-inside-a-fleet-of-moving-limos/> (accessed 5 May 2023).

<sup>75</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 54.

<sup>76</sup> Jessica Gelt, 'Long Beach Opera Reaches for a Star', *Los Angeles Times* (21 November 2019).

<sup>77</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 65.

<sup>78</sup> Alex Ross, 'Opera on Location'.

<sup>79</sup> Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 113.



civilising force and positioning it as a grand occurrence in the battle between civilisation and barbarism.

Ross also evoked the historical violence used by colonising forces to subjugate people deemed uncultured and uncivilised. STPLA would frame it in just this way when they wrote that *Hopscotch*'s 'inaccessible, white high-art is a cultural attack on the history and contemporary culture of Boyle Heights'.<sup>80</sup> The polemic tone of this quotation aside, it is not accurate to position Mexicans and Chicana/os as being hostile to opera, since Mexican participation in opera is not only historic, as Manuel de Zumaya suggests, but also current, as scholar Tania Arazi Coombs's work establishes.<sup>81</sup> Arazi Coombs argues that operas celebrating Latinidad, or the Latin/o-American experience, as a subgenre that have emerged out of opera companies' desire to 'reinvigorate the art form and combat declining numbers of audience members'. Her research also valuably points out that Latin/o-American characters and themes related to their unique American experience have been a part of American operas and operettas 'since at least the turn of the twentieth century'.<sup>82</sup>

It is the framing, however unfairly, of opera as an art form rooted in the communities of elitist nobility that allows one to see and understand why and how *Hopscotch* could not have had much more than a cosmetic impact on bringing opera to those who would otherwise never have experienced it. This was not its goal in the first place but rather part of the narrative it deployed to obscure the actual goal, of providing its clientele with the most exclusive and customised experience possible at the expense of many of the city's most vulnerable residents. The best it could do for the community people in this context was to make fragments of the opera available to the city overall via monitors at the central hub, while preserving the intimate experience inside the limousine primarily for its more well-off audience members and people like myself who took the most exclusive seats that *Hopscotch* offered. However, this discrepancy of reserving the live repertoire for its boutique-audience while offering the general audience an artificial digital archive may be part of the reason why the show provoked STPLA to demand that the opera leave immediately. They articulated their reasoning as follows:

[W]e spoke to the local park vendors, the families and other regular park visitors. There was a consensus of negative feedback about *Hopscotch*'s unwanted presence at the park. The vendors complained that they couldn't understand what the singers were singing about. The vendors, much like the rest of the regulars at the park, are exclusively Spanish-only speakers. The vendors are predominately Mexican immigrant women. Several of the women complained about recent rent increases, about not being able to afford to pay rent and how *Hopscotch* Los Angeles and their supporters do not purchase anything from them.<sup>83</sup>

The water and snacks given to the cast and crew at this location were not purchased from the vendors at the park (despite my recommendation). The producers did, after the onset of the conflict with the community, provide a few tickets via an online lottery for Boyle Heights residents, invite key stakeholders to see the show, and agree to purchase advertising space in a local community newspaper. When I suggested more substantial investments in the community, they encouraged me to focus on strategies that would not cost any money, which I did.

<sup>80</sup> STPLA, Tumblr post, 4 October 2015 (accessed March 2016).

<sup>81</sup> A Mexican citizen who was also the first indigenous opera composer in all the Americas.

<sup>82</sup> Tania Arazi Coombs, 'Redefining America Through Opera: Representations of Latin/o Americans and a New Tradition', University of Illinois (2020), <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/116343>.

<sup>83</sup> STPLA, blog post, 25 November 2015.

Both the expensed and gratuitous gestures of engagement proved to be too little and come too late, and the community felt justified in criticising *Hopscotch* because ‘none of those funds (from this million dollar opera) are going to the community’.<sup>84</sup> How the author of this quotation knew the cost of the opera is unclear, but the 2015 total revenue for The Industry was in fact \$1,120,131.<sup>85</sup> Again, tickets were \$125–\$150, well beyond the reach of the people who make a living at the park and who served as *Hopscotch*’s backdrop. This fact exacerbated the perception that *Hopscotch* was scarcely more than a tool through which the *haut monde* could revel in the scopophilic consumption of an unfamiliar but potentially lucrative real estate topography from the safety of a limousine with dark-tinted windows.

Sociologist Andrew Ross articulates this dynamic as ‘a rubric to convert large sectors of social housing into luxury residences for prized beneficiaries of the creative economy’.<sup>86</sup> In another independent but relevant example of this desire to monetise dormant value, a Los Angeles-based realtor invited clients to tour Boyle Heights for ‘bargain properties’; however, after a flood of threats, she cancelled her tour as she feared violence.<sup>87</sup> In the context of the real estate market’s increased interest in Boyle Heights, *Hopscotch*’s audience in their limousines resembled people who were prospecting for investment properties or surveying a new investment terrain, not people enjoying art. Thus, *Hopscotch* was an event designed to enable an affluent audience to gaze upon such neighbourhoods and, more importantly, to see mostly without being seen. Thus, what was at the core of this opera’s artistic concept was an uneven encounter that required that the audience scrutinise the ‘images of others, so that the spectator can secure a coherent belief in self-authority, assurance, presence’.<sup>88</sup> It was not enough for these spectators to rule the known; unfamiliar hinterlands had to also be made known, in more ways than one.

## Falling down

Through the audience’s participation in the opera’s format, they engaged in the classic dynamic of pornographic consumption, with the consumer protected by darkness and the consumed visible and fully exposed for most of the performance. This dynamic of anonymous gazing enabled the audience to penetrate the community’s space without losing their place of privilege, which *Hopscotch* rendered mobile through the use of the limousines. The audience members were thus empowered to evaluate, value and judge. Therefore, *Hopscotch* became a metaphorical victory march into communities that could disrupt but never join the penetrating audience’s tour, as only the audience could afford the cost of gazing out at the community. This exclusivity was apparently evident to *Hopscotch*’s creators since their title omitted the one element without which the show would not have been what it was: as Christopher Hawthorne put it in a *Los Angeles Times* article, ‘the opera as Sharon envisioned it simply would not have been possible without limos’.<sup>89</sup> This choice to deploy *sign vehicles* that exuded exclusivity and privilege and to then design routes that drove these vehicles into and through gentrifying neighbourhoods was not an accident or even a mistake: it was *Hopscotch*’s true *raison d’être*.

Thus, the limousines are seen as a fleet of Trojan horses filled with delegations ready to devour the little spaces that the Hollenbeck community had all to its own; neoliberalism

<sup>84</sup> Posted on Facebook page of Undeportable Productions on 22 November 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Figure from the 2015 990 form for The Industry Productions Inc.

<sup>86</sup> Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, 32.

<sup>87</sup> Carroll, ‘Fighting Gentrification, LA-Style’.

<sup>88</sup> Phelan, *The Politics of Performance*, 5; following Roy Schafer, ‘Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue’, *Critical Inquiry* 7/1 (1980), 29–53.

<sup>89</sup> Christopher Hawthorne, ‘A Window into L.A.’s Complex Allure’, *Los Angeles Times* (21 November 2015).

tolerates no refugia. The audience then became heralds of the evils of gentrification and, by extension, of an urban colonialism that reduces community residents to found objects and then, when the time comes, removes them in the name of neoliberalism masquerading as progress. Consequently, the built-in exclusivity, both actual and perceived, that *Hopscotch* embodied asserted itself in an unfortunate steady and undeniable *pentimento*. As Ritchey stated, ‘*Hopscotch* aestheticized and glorified the processes of gentrification that are currently displacing many working-class and minority communities from the very areas the opera was meant to celebrate.’<sup>90</sup> This situation leaves one hoping that future artists will realise the importance of moving within communities in sensitive, productive and beneficial ways for the individuals most affected by their art. As scholar Erin Mee sagely points out, ‘site-based performance loses a lot of its strength when it uses the site simply as a backdrop or a set piece, rather than ... in fact responding to what is actually there – which includes the resident community’.<sup>91</sup> Just how much artists will heed this advice and how much the sensitivity manifested in the future will foray into public spaces depends on the strength of the outreach made before the artists strike the first key of any composition.

Maria, the woman in her late 50s who sells food out of a shopping cart, no longer works in Hollenbeck Park. After the incidents discussed during the run of *Hopscotch*, a ‘no vending’ sign appeared at the park. Thus Maria had to take her cart elsewhere, rolling her makeshift food cart away to both make room for neoliberal art to ride in on luxurious vehicles and to find another park that site-based, technetronic, transit-oriented opera has yet to enrich. *Mea maxima culpa*.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 111.

<sup>91</sup> Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez, Penelope Cole, Rand Harmon and Erin B. Mee, ‘Ethics and Site-Based Theatre: A Curated Discussion’, *Theatre History Studies* 38 (2019), 166–95.

<sup>92</sup> Phone conversation with park security, 10 December 2015.

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