

A Virtual America: Americans and 'American' Spaces in New Shanghai¹

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Abstract: *Expatriate spaces on the outskirts of New Shanghai constitute a new transnational social space inhabited by many different nationalities. Yet these areas are often understood as 'American' spaces, filled with virtualities of everyday Americana, and with franchises to cater to the transnational elites such as KFC, Diner's, Papa John's Pizza, etc. What meanings does the old 'New World' retain in the context of this hyper-modernizing Chinese megacity, with ambitions to become a world center? And how do Americans negotiate and appropriate these spaces? This article is based on three stints of fieldwork among Americans in Shanghai in 2007 and 2009, with a particular focus on white, female, corporate transfer expatriates living on Forest Manor, Rancho Santa Fe and the Racquet Club. Pitting these spaces against some of the most important theorizations of the virtual bearing on them, I propose that in order to analyze the human face of global mobility we need to move beyond postmodern notions of the simulacrum where people are stripped of agency. Through the voices of those who reside on 'Disneyland' I stress the sense of lived virtuality on the compounds, inclusive not only of the rhythms of the everyday in these virtual spaces, but also of the possible getaway from them.*

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Americans do not lack places to go and new things to find. [...] Far larger experiences are open to our restlessness—the fascinating unknown is everywhere. How will the Americans act and react to a new set of circumstances for which new rules must be made? We know from our past some of the things we will do. We will make many mistakes; we always have. We are in the perplexing period of change. We seem to be running in all directions at once—but we are running. And I believe that our history—our experience in America, has endowed us for the change that is coming. We have never sat still for long; we have never been content with a place, a building—or with ourselves.

John Steinbeck, *America and Americans*

Introduction: In the New ‘New World’

During the last decade of the twentieth century, the U.S. became the ‘single super power’ and its cultural influence and global significance seemed stronger than ever. During that same decade, however, the world has simultaneously witnessed the birth of a new gravitational center in the East, today’s ‘New China.’ This geopolitical shift in the world order toward the East is obviously related to the power of the Chinese economy, but also to an arguable burgeoning ‘China model,’ that is, Chinese soft power, to challenge the United States. The shift can also be discerned in China’s urban development. The People’s Republic of China shows the world its new face in, amongst other places, the metropolis of Shanghai: the second largest city in China and one of the world’s most densely populated cities, pushing 21 million inhabitants. Shanghai enjoys an increasing importance in the global imagination, a city that for many seems to represent the rise of China and for some even the decline of the Western world. New Shanghai, which is currently hosting the World Expo of 2010, is a *future city* in which modernization and urban re-structuring take place at unprecedented speed. For 16 years, between 1992 and 2007, the city had a double-digit growth and its gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 12 percent annually, increasing to 13.3 % in 2007 and hitting a 16-year low at 9.7 in 2008. Many of the ‘Fortune Global 500’ companies, the largest companies in the world, have offices in the city. As China’s commercial hub and main industrial city, it is presently, in accordance with the current Master Plan (covering 1999-2020), striving to become

a financial and economic trade and shipping center and perhaps even a world center.²

An important part of the regeneration of contemporary Shanghai has been foreign direct investment and the simultaneous return of Westerners to the city ever since the 1990s. It is estimated that 200,000 expatriates live in the city, of which many are Americans (i.e. U.S. citizens). Shanghai is the place where a growing number of them want to be for career purposes. Shanghai is considered to be a space of opportunity—in effect, this seems to be Steinbeck’s “place to go,” the “new thing” to find. The case of American expats in Shanghai stirs a general curiosity about how they, as representatives of the nation that used to constitute the future, if not Modernity itself, view the rise of China, how their identities are affected and how they renegotiate ‘Americanness’ in the context of a place that aspires to world centrality and futurity. How is their way of life in the city? This article is based on three stints of fieldwork in Shanghai, 2007 and 2009, and 33 interviews (two group interviews) with 35 Americans in the city and 5 follow-up interviews with expats who returned to the U.S. or stayed on in Shanghai.³ It builds on my previous work on New Shanghai⁴ in which I’m attempting to answer the “call for more micro-level, phenomenological studies of the everyday of ‘global mobility’” (Smith and Favell 2006). This article thus focuses on “the transnational capitalist class” (Sklair 2001), to which these Americans belong.⁵ Following on from the work by for example Ulf Hannerz,

2 The city is home to the world’s fastest train, a 77 kilometer elevated highway, advanced ICTs integral to the urban fabric and some of the world’s tallest skyscrapers, mostly along the skyline of *Pudong*—the icon of New Shanghai—on the eastern side of the Huangpu river. The city has huge ambitions to digitalize and become the communication hub of the Asia Pacific region.

3 The forms and foci of my fieldwork, the research problem, questions and issue-areas of concern here have emanated from experiences gained and impressions gathered on 14 trips, during more than 12 years of traveling to Shanghai and from having lived there for some time in 1999, 2005 and 2006.

4 Since 2005, I have been conducting a number of different ethnographic, visual and textual analyses of Shanghai with an empirical focus on the experiences, spaces, scripts and mediatized performances of visiting Westerners (see Lagerkvist 2007, 2009, 2010b, forthcoming). Theoretically I’ve approached Shanghai from a socio-phenomenological vantage point in two complementing ways. First I’ve devoted attention to the conjuncture of timespace as a key analytic in my work on the transformation of Shanghai. Second, and in relation to this, following on from the work of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, I’ve stressed the role of agency and bodily performativity as well as affect in the constitution and appropriation of urban space.

5 Research on expatriation is extensive and spans many disciplines. This article does not make claims to cover all aspects of the American expatriate experience in Shanghai. Nor will it satisfyingly reflect the vast ongoing work on the expatriate experience in the global context. Previous research on American corporate

I hold that transnational elites are key in setting in motion the production of world city space (1996). The agency and spatial movements of highly educated and highly skilled elites, with ‘hypermobile’ international careers and cosmopolitan cultural uniqueness, play a huge part of the production of New Shanghai. Jonathan Beaverstock argues that “elites are not only important flows into and through the city, but their cosmopolitan practices and discourses are deeply embedded in specific transnational spaces, which are at the intersecting points of particular corporate, capital, technological, information and cultural lines of flow, and connections” (2001). This points me to the spaces where some of the Americans—white, female, corporate transfer expatriates—dwell in the city.⁶

In this article we will move into the homes and living spaces of some of these Americans currently residing in Shanghai: the expatriate compounds in the western suburbs of the city. This will be an unexpected move into an imaginary ‘American’ space abroad, since these built environments—constructed by the Chinese—are filled with everyday Americana, to cater mainly to transnational elites.⁷ These areas are inhabited by Americans, but also by many European expats, and by a few *nouveau riche* Chinese. Even if these spaces are certainly international, rather than exclusively American, and even if Americans work in the same multinational companies as well as live together with Dutch, Swedes, French and Germans for example, and share the same schools for their children—they are commonly described by several of my informants as ‘American’—or at least virtually so. This triggers a curiosity to learn more about what meanings the *old* ‘new world’ may retain in this context. How do Americans appropriate this space? One

expatriates—in particular the CEOs—has focused on the ideologies of those Americans who actually witness and contribute to these transformations hands on (Davison, Hunter and Yates, 2002). For research on American expats in other countries, see Wennersten (2008), and for research on expats in general in Shanghai, see Farrer (2008, 2010).

- 6 Americans also reside in other types of areas, for example in gated communities constituted by high-rises closer to or in the city center. In these areas foreigners typically live together with Chinese tenants, and other nationalities. Some live in less expensive five-storey Chinese quarters from the 1950s. A few live exclusively in restored colonial villas. In addition, Shanghai has also more than one American-style space, and there are ‘American’ spaces in the city center that are not in a ‘pastoral’ setting: for those with a long-term memory of foreign Shanghai ‘America’ in Shanghai was long associated with the Portman Shanghai Center on Nanjing Road, which opened in 1990. Many thanks to James Farrer for this important disclaimer.
- 7 It should be noted that Shanghai has not only American style suburbs, but entire towns modeled on German, British and Swedish models for example. The American style suburb is thus not hegemonic, yet, I will argue, constitutes a significant feature of these transnational social spaces in New Shanghai. Some expat communities are more symbolically ‘American’ than others.

way of finding out is to go straight into the living spaces of the expat compounds, to observe their visual appearance and theorize their traits, and to talk to those who live there. This analysis necessitates aligning the transnational approach in American Studies—hollowing out America as cultural formation, tracing links and connections, looking for how American culture “intersects with, modulates, and is in turn modulated by cultural practices in other parts of the world” (Giles 2002: 19)—with the emergent discourse on media space and communication geography, where the task is to interrogate how media and communication shape our sense of space and place in terms of for example our experience of spaces subject to a high degree of mediation (Couldry and McCarthy eds. 2004; Lagerkvist 2008). Since “Americas multiply in memories and fancies” as Felipe Fernandez-Armesto writes in the *The Americas* (2003: 8), the basic premise here is that ‘America,’ everyday ‘Americana,’ or ‘the American city,’ are elastic terms which extend beyond what we ordinarily understand as the USA, into other geographical areas, into media spaces, symbolic spaces, and material imaginaries—that is into *virtual spaces* (cf. Campbell 2005; Lagerkvist 2008). ‘America’ here reemerges as a post-territorial category, detached from the USA. Taking my cue from these debates, I am inclined to theorize the expat compounds by focalizing their *virtual* qualities, pitting them against some of the theoretical writings on the virtual that bear on them. What are the meanings of these replications of mythical ‘American’ home territories/architectural structures on Chinese soil?

The spaces I will discuss share some features of what Edward Soja described in the early 1990s in Orange County, California:

[...] Orange County is a park-themed paradise, the American Dream repetitively renewed and infinitely available, as much like the movies as reel life can get. It is a *resplendent bazaar of repackaged times and spaces* that allows all that is contemporary (including histories and geographies) to be encountered and consumed with an almost endemic simultaneity. (Soja, 1992: 94-95, italics added)

This repackaging of different times and spaces within such themed urban formations, as well as in (globalizing) cities more broadly, craves, however, an analysis of the so-called ‘postmodern aesthetic’ beyond mere categorization (Lagerkvist 2007; Yaeger 2007). Shanghai at large, I argue, is a strange space of multiple rhythms of modernity (Lagerkvist 2009), a city where history and futurity curiously feed off each other (See Lagerkvist, 2010a and b). In a feverish movement toward the future, post- or perhaps

rather retromodern Shanghai (Lagerkvist 2010a), barefacedly duplicates themes and visual codes from different eras, merges diverse mediations and material cultures, providing stylistic assemblages in architecture, design and media. This mish-mashing makes the whole city of Shanghai into a heterotopian if not virtual cityscape where incommensurabilities merge, and where temporal and spatial discrepancies are juxtaposed (cf. Zhang 2000). Such discrepancies are also evident in the architectural landscape, which displays the typical characteristics of transnational social spaces in which different kinds of spaces are stacked within the same geographic space (Pries 1999). In Shanghai, migrant enclaves and older colonial and Chinese structures coexist with the new spaces of globalism, such as spaces of consumerism, nostalgia, tourism, finance and the expatriate compounds. I will pursue Americans who live in these enclaves, and these arguably 'American' spaces in New Shanghai, by pressing forward the analytical focus on timespace. I will delve into the formal as well as emotional aspects of the living spaces of the corporate migrants. Before we enter into these, I will describe the American expatriate community in Shanghai.

Moving to Shanghai—leaving 'the land of plenty'?

The American story is a story of immigration. American space is the mythical land of Eden—as such a land of plenty, of consumerist democracy, offering an everyday materially and psychologically alleviated from hardship. This is to where people are moving, not from where they are supposed to be leaving (Wennersten 2008). But as John R. Wennersten points out, people have always left America (a fact both neglected in scholarly work and eclipsed by national myth making). In relation to the population at large, those Americans who leave America are quite few. Right now around 6.6 million Americans have moved abroad for work. It should however be noted that today American citizens are leaving America in greater numbers than before, mainly due to broader transnational trends. American capital expatriates its managers, and families move along. Others do it in order to find better-paid jobs—to escape the Mac-jobs; others still look for life style realization, leave because of taxes, or have left for political reasons, because, as one American in Shanghai told me in the autumn of 2007, he was uncomfortable with "America's current world profile" (Interview 5). Who are the Americans in Shanghai? Robert 56, the headmaster of a Western school, describes the different groups within the group:

AL: OK, would you say that there are two categories of people?

Robert: At least, at least, at least ...

AL: Yes ...?

Robert: Within that spectrum there may also be, there might be a person who wanna explore: 'I wanna go to China, I wanna know what life is, about the people, I wanna learn some of the language and learn about the cultural history.' Then there is the adventure, 'I wanna be in a new place, and I may tell my friends back home that I am having this great experience and I can say I did it' which is a good thing too. You know just the excitement and stimulation of life. And then people who are here either ... somewhat happily because yes we have a good package and a good life and many of them find it hard to go back to real life in their home countries from all over the world because 'I don't have a driver anymore, I don't have a big house my kids schooling is not paid for, fancy private school,' and those who are here maybe somewhat grudgingly: 'OK my spouse needs to do this for his career so I tagged along and I really hate it and I wish I were back home and I miss it all the time.' So those are just some people on the spectrum. (Interview 1)

As any cultural group, the American expatriates in Shanghai are diverse and cannot be neatly categorized. A majority belongs to the corporate sector, and is shipped there by the company for which the husband (and in rare cases the wife) of the family works: they are trailing spouses, moms and homemakers. Or they are younger people, often singles or what is sometimes called the 'latte Americans' of the 'new economy' who go there seeking adventure (cf. Farrer 2010). They can also be found in teaching (elementary English and other subjects). There are also American university students in the city, and there is a small group of artists and actors, and other people working in the creative industries. In consequence, the Americans in Shanghai make an economically diverse and stratified group, and not everyone is leading an affluent expat life. They are stratified by income and the size of the villas, and Americans who are not on a 'package' include both high-earning entrepreneurs and low-earning 'half-pats.'

Many Americans in Shanghai are ethnically Chinese, both Chinese-American and Taiwanese-American. The American expats within the corporate sector are typically white. This group can be differentiated by the number of times they've been contracted abroad. For some, this is the first time; for others it's just one overseas assignment out of many over several decades. Some of the Americans in Shanghai are there out of free will, but a significant proportion of them were appointed there. These expatriates could also be distinguished in terms of their attitude toward foreign cultures (in this case China), that is, levels of interest in Chinese culture and society

and their cultural tolerance. This relates to the amount of experience they have with globality: their level of 'cosmopolitanism' as it were. It should also be noted that some are closely identified with the USA; others define themselves more as world citizens or 'cosmopolitans,' reluctantly describing themselves as Americans at all.

This article focuses on those expats belonging to the corporate sector, who actually dwell in Shanghai and experience the city. In this sector, I learn from the informants, many of the men working in business see their families for about 24 hours per month and travel massively in Asia and globally. This means that the CEOs that spend their lives in airliner cabins and board meetings across China and Asia (and the globe) are not my main focus. This article singles out the people who live and spend time in the areas of interest—mainly American women—but there are many others who have opinions about these areas and whose voices will be heard too. The trailing spouses constitute the kernel of this paper, but in the larger context of this project, I focus on other groups: I've interviewed two CEOs who are or have been based in Shanghai and I've talked to a number of trailing spouses/moms, one school girl, several teachers, one university student, one school director and a small group of artists, two architects, one photographer and film producer, three actors, one playwright and one theater director.

Would it be possible to describe the typical American expat living on compounds and doing the global life? This is a question I've asked all of the informants. John, a 42-year-old teacher hailing from New York, describes his opinions of the typical American expat in ways that also highlight that critical aspect of the expatriate everyday—life in the bubble:

John: The typical American expat is here, but living in a bubble. I think most of them are (...) xenophobic, I think most of them don't actually really know China, I think most of them have an over-inflated sense of their own openness, I think most of them are only here to rape and pillage the Chinese. I think that the majority of people, the majority of especially my fellow countrymen Americans, here, where I do feel that yes, there are some that are here for interest in other cultures, I don't believe that's primary because if they were really interested in China they would not be living in Shanghai. I think they are either currently engaged in business practices of the old idea of selling one Coca-Cola to every single Chinese person, you know that old idea, and if they're not involved in that they are doing something to prepare for that future idea, taking Chinese classes, learning about China etc, etc., ... yeah actually we're doing our best to spread American consumerism, so that way the Chinese can buy more Coca-Colas, more Nikes and more McDonalds.

AL: Does this go for both the men and the women?

John: Unfortunately, it looks like it's laid out, it's that most men here are the rapers and pillagers out actively and the women are home protecting the family trying to keep as much of an American bubble as possible, you know birthday parties and Halloweens and Christmases and everything and keeping their family safe into hamburgers and French fries and away from the mean and nasty Chinese people. (Interview 5)

John stresses that he is not the typical expat himself: a radical intellectual from New York who lived in Nepal and speaks Chinese and who lives in a Chinese neighborhood. His critique makes me want to see these spaces—these ‘bubbles’—with my own eyes and hear out those people who inhabit the compounds. As already stated, for some of these Americans in Shanghai (especially for newcomers) this is a new space of transcendence. But what kind of imaginaries about the U.S. are the Americans faced with in this space? In the next two sections I will tackle the senses in which these Americans have (for different reasons) left the land of plenty, only to find it anew in Shanghai.

Back to America: Virtualities of everyday Americana

I'm going by taxi along the highways to the west, towards the gated communities outside the city center of the districts of Gubei, Changning, Qing Pu, Hongqiao and Minhang. I'm invited to *Forest Manor*—a luxurious community where the rent is between 6,000 and 12,000 US-dollars per month. Other exclusive forms of living that I will come to visit during the day include the *Racquet Club* and neighboring *Rancho Santa Fe* which has “a tasteful Southern US-flair” according to its website. My first impression when setting foot in these spaces is that in here you undoubtedly encounter a *virtual America*—both visually and architecturally—that may be interpreted as offering an extract of the United States on the outskirts of Shanghai, an extract of its most exclusive and resort-like forms, or of its myths. These enclaves for foreigners (such bubbles are certainly not unique to the Americans) share a curiosity of being little pieces of America. They are patterned spaces replete with visualities and virtualities of everyday Americana and seem to make up, as Mark, a 23-year-old film and journalism student from Atlanta says, “an extended America” on Chinese territory (Interview 26).

In some respects, these spaces seem to echo aspects of the long imperial



Figure 1: Villa on Forest Manor. Photograph by the author, 2007.

history of extraterritorial settlements. Historically, imperialists built low-density areas, requiring extensive land consumption for officer housing, parading grounds and recreation areas as well as grid-like streets and security zones. European imperial powers were very detailed in their planning of overseas settlements, stressing above all, the need for order. The newly acquired landscape appeared to them as “chaotic and disordered indigenous settlements, filled with possible dangers around every bend” (Gillem, 2007: 6). Imperial socio-spatial planning policies were stratified along gender and race lines. Promoting order and control meant demolishing whole neighborhoods, relocating brothels, and fighting vectors, ultimately in order to maintain separation between the indigenous people and the colonizers—something that John’s unwavering observation about the bubble echoes above. Shanghai has a history of Western presence, but to what extent is the comparison valid? In the colonial era (1840s-1945), Westerners resided in different jurisdictions, that is, in independent concessions under their control. The international settlement, for example, was built by foreigners

who erected European-style architecture in the city center.⁸ Now, as in the past, many Westerners are separated from the locals although the full comparison falters, since today foreigners have not chosen social segregation deliberately. These are not comparable geographies of foreign power and privilege: foreigners in China today have no political power and limited economic control. They have no independent authority over this territory since the land is owned by the Chinese government. The housing is typically owned by large Chinese or Hong Kong real-estate developers. In their isolation and marginality these areas show the power of the Chinese state to continue to contain and marginalize the foreign presence, so that these isolated and distant enclaves represent an attempt by the Chinese government to settle the expatriates as far on the periphery of the city as possible.

Although the relationship between this type of temporary settlement and earlier patterns of colonialism is tenuous, and although many Americans in Shanghai live outside of these areas and are striving to learn about China, to learn Chinese (many even marry a Chinese person and thereby become integrated, see Farrer 2008), parts of the (American) expat community in Shanghai remain aloof from Chinese society in ways that reflect the past. The compounds were constructed by the Chinese, but the principles behind them share the separatist as well as gendered character of colonial times: the gated communities are spaces inhabited and lived by women and children mainly. These American home spaces of the compounds are—viewed here through the lens of the American cultural tradition of pastoral—the settlements where the women and children are left behind, and the men are at the ‘frontiers’ of business and action (cf. Buell, 1989). The home seems here to be posited as so often in American culture in tension with the city and even the world at large (with its chaos, wilderness and cultural differences).

The companies pay for the expatriate families: the packages include the houses, full-time help (an *Ayi*), a private school for the children and a car and driver. Some of the informants feel very awkward about having someone help them out in the home, and the women are generally very uncomfortable with depending on a driver. My overall impression is that they wish to convey how much they respect the Chinese employees, and how much

8 This feature also points to the history of virtuality in Shanghai, which goes beyond any specific American connection, namely the sense in which Shanghai's streets were at the height of the colonial era, as William Shafer quotes, “transplanted from Europe” and thus “paved with shadows” (Mu, quoted in Shafer 2007).



Figure 2: Silver Buick on Le Chateau. Photograph by the author, November 2007.

they appreciate the work they do. For the American women, this part of the package seems to be the most ‘un-American’ aspect of their whole life in China, and very few reconcile with the idea of having an *Ayi*, although they easily get used to having the help itself, as it is convenient and handy. Some express that it will be difficult to return to the U.S., especially for children, who have become used to this lifestyle of recreation and privilege. One American woman visiting her daughter who lived in Shanghai said to me ecstatically that her daughter’s living space was “just like a resort!” (Participant observation, Shanghai American Women’s Club city walk: “A walk down memory lane with Yvette,” October 2007). In these spaces or just nearby, you find restaurants such as Diners and Kentucky Fried Chicken. While you find these franchises all over the city, and not just here, and while they are frequented mainly by the Chinese, they add to this sense of ‘Americanness’ in conjunction with pastime areas that include tennis courts, services, swimming pools, club houses, massage parlors, and spas. To me this leisure zone also invokes aspects of the Hill stations in India that

were monuments of British colonial presence (Kennedy, 1996). Hill Stations served as refuges where the colonizers could rest and play, offering therapeutic and regular relief from the physical and emotional toll of the foreign culture. The Hill stations also replicated aspects of British culture and society so that the transitory expatriate population could connect to 'home.'

Expatriate spaces in Shanghai also resemble more recent 'outposts of empire'—that is the military bases across the globe where American servicemen and servicewomen are stationed—depicted by Mark L. Gillem in *America Town: Building the Outposts of Empire* (2007). The America Towns of the twentieth century, he argues, are markings of imperial space: they make up a network of Empire, in which the U.S. lays claims to land across the globe within the Pax Americana of our time. Constituted by on-base and off-base structures, these outposts are, as Gillem argues, typical American small town structures, filled with schools, parks, fire stations, homes and offices, shopping malls and fast food restaurants. Designers of these areas recreate and follow a blueprint for American space, and "[w]herever they go, America's soldiers are bound to arrive at the same familiar vision of 'home'" (ibid: 73). They are "homeward bound—bound to the same sprawling sub-divisions, franchised restaurants, and vacuous shopping malls" (ibid: 74). This holds for the transnational American elites within the corporate sector too: wherever they go, a *virtual America* potentially brings them 'home.'

The concept of virtuality has been relentlessly exercised in a number of works during the past thirty years or so (see for example Baudrillard 1983; Crang et al 1999; Massumi 2002; Shields 2003, 2004; etc.). The concept addresses the image overload and mediatization of modern society and culture, and recently the digitalization of different sectors and phenomena of our contemporary culture. Beyond the digital and in relation to the American experience, Paul Giles defines virtualization in two complementing ways. Firstly it is conceived in terms of an estrangement of American myths, and secondly as something implicitly American. He explains this second aspect through the examples of "fictions of abundance" that "can be seen as interwoven ideologically with doctrines of philosophical idealism, because both capitalism and transcendentalism function by conscripting empirical objects into cycles of exchange, by 'virtualizing' natural phenomena into their shadow or replica" (2002: 12). Furthermore he holds that "...virtual elements are implicit in America's mythic construction of itself."

The quandary here is that these virtual Americas were in fact constructed and imagined by Chinese architects. What do we make of these virtualizations when they occur in a 'post-American situation,' meaning a multicentric global world (Zakaria 2008)? Do we need to rethink the virtual beyond the American experience? Can we in the future develop the virtual to account for the post-American condition, a oneworldedness defined by many centers and multidirectional flows of globalization—a globality in which *virtual America* is as much a contested as a frivolously copied and vital part of the global imagination? At this point I don't have conclusive answers, but will suggest that the virtuality of these 'American' spaces and their emplacement within this larger Asian city of hypermodernization, calls for a meticulous transnational move.

Furthermore, the idealistic traits of these mythscapes are important, but we need a more materialistic grounding fused with a media cultural understanding of the virtual for it to be useful in this context. The virtual is both abstraction and concretion at the same time (Massumi 2002). Like the simulacrum it entails very real and material dimensions although it affords an expansion of the geographical imagination (Soja 1996). More to the point: the virtual is where the material and immaterial interface. I thus trace virtual geographies both to media spaces and to architectural forms, but additionally, to their mutual dependency (cf. Holmes 2001, Shields 2004: 2). Within this definition the premise is that mediation shapes our global imaginaries and our sense of authenticity when the creation of artificial, visually themed and homogenous 'world spaces' reorganize the experience of space in social life (Holmes 2001: 14-15). In this view, there is convergence between the production of new kinds of world spaces and different media and communication technologies of globalization, and a flattening out of differences between mediated and physical spaces.

The particular visual aesthetics and layout of these fabricated spaces are described in a short paragraph of the villa compound *Forest Manor* in *Business Week* magazine in 2005:

When Giselle Wilson and her husband Darryl, a vice-president at General Electric Co. (GE), moved to Shanghai in August, she never expected this: a house with 15-meter-high cathedral ceilings, six bathrooms, two Jacuzzis, maid's quarters, and patrols to keep the 600-sq. meter, furnished villa safe. "I thought we would be in a 20-story high-rise with no grass," she says. "But we moved into a Norman Rockwell lifestyle."

Welcome to Forest Manor, a gated community on the outskirts of Shanghai. The American, Korean, and British international schools are minutes away. Forest Manor is a veri-

table architectural theme park, with Antebellum, Neoclassical, Norman, and American Southwest styles on display. "It makes me think of Disneyland," says Shirley Yeung, a Guangzhou-born, ex-JP Morgan Chase & Co. (JPM) banker who runs her own investment advisory. She bought her 400-square-meter mock-Tudor mansion, with a creek and 40-foot trees, two years ago for about \$770,000. Today it's worth twice that.

Businessweek Magazine 2005

Marketing this place in terms of 'a theme park' and with overt connotations to 'Disneyland' is quite in order, resembling those ads of the 'exopolis' of Orange County in California analyzed by Edward Soja. This urban form existed through two waves, Soja argues. First the type of hyperreality that Umberto Eco observed on Disneyland where there is no reality simulated but "within its magic enclosure it is phantasy that is being absolutely reproduced." The second wave of hyperreality carried it, however:

out of the localized enclosures and tightly bound rationalities of the old theme parks and into the geographies and biographies of everyday life, into the very fabric and fabrication of exopolis. Today the simulations of Disneyland seem almost folkloric, crusty incubula of a passing era. [...] The exopolis demands more serious attention because it is fast becoming the nexus of contemporary life ... (1992: 100-101).

Soja's reading of the simulations of Disneyland as endemic to everyday life, seems like an inevitable point of departure for interpreting the virtualities of everyday Americana in New Shanghai. By contrast however these are spaces *outside* of the ordinary life of the Chinese community. On the compounds I encounter strange juxtapositions of incompatible expressions of Americana. These spaces bring about associations to for example the Disney phantasmagoria, the luxury spaces of televised romance or spaces we presume to be inhabited only by Hollywood stars in conjunction with the 'workers everyday' of the Norman Rockwell-lifestyle, and fuse these with the seemingly incompatible culture and aesthetics of Papa John's Pizza—all at once. The virtual here refers to the quality of "a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce and connect" (Masumi 2002: 30).

In addition, Edward Soja's claim that "in Orange County America the original simulacra are being simulated again, to ever higher powers and lengthening chains, all over the map of its territory. And the map that appears is a strange one ..." (1996: 101) seems to carry weight in relation to these 'American' spaces in New China. Resembling Disneyworld the compounds express a curious layering of visual and material representation.



Figure 3: Club House at Forest Manor. Photograph by the author, November 2007.

Simulating Disneyworld, they are a reflection of how Disneyworld itself materializes and simulates Disney's animated fantasies about (for example) imaginary European castles and edifices. In effect, the compounds curiously materialize contested Baudrillardian notions about the third-order simulacrum where there are only simulations of simulations (Baudrillard, 1983). Disneyland, in Baudrillard's thinking, functions to conceal the fact that 'the real' has escaped us altogether. But here a real virtuality, a real 'American life' on Disneyworld—in New China—is offered to transnational elites.

Life on Disneyland—the intellectual impasse

John R. Wennersten describes transnational Americans, and especially the young ones, as a group who are fed up with the surrogate experiences and synthetic settings of America and who go abroad looking for something real, "not some Disneyland, or Frontiertown or Las Vegas casino village" (2008: 21). Moving to Shanghai in this pursuit may however prove very disillusioning. John who has no illusions describes the compounds as a "sick replication of America" (interview 5). His view, shared by a substantial number of observers within the expat community, is that there is an

“artificial” quality to the bubble (and there is an extended comfort zone that exists in the U.S. as well). Edwin is a theater director from Concord who left the U.S. for Shanghai to start a new life and set up a Shakespeare theater. To his disappointment he found too many American things in China, as well as the people he had tried to escape from:

Edwin: And as I said I go to the end of the street and turn left and I'm in Laowai land, you know, and I see a lot of the people I'm happy to place 8,000 miles between, you know, ... these are the people I wanted to get away from, all the white people playing football or soccer or whatever they wanna call it. (Interview 6)

There are expatriates who feel that Shanghai is becoming too westernized. They feel that these compounds are indeed strange and unreal, subscribing to Soja's position, which implies that people live, as it were, in-authentically in there. It is important to acknowledge the critique leveled by some of the Americans inhabiting these spaces, and by those with some knowledge and experience of these compound territories who choose to live in other residential areas and in Chinese neighborhoods. Anne is a trailing spouse who deliberately chose to live in a different area than these compounds because it would be deeply dissatisfying to live in “the same kind of structures” that she “would see at home” (Group interview 8). Some of my highly educated or intellectual informants express a tremendous sense of estrangement and ambivalence before the virtuality of these areas or before this imagined America. Maurice, a 38-year-old artist, photographer and film producer from Long Island who lives exclusively in the French Concession, remembers going to a New Year's party in one of those spaces with “a generic name.” He was stunned at the enthusiasm among the Chinese hosts about this weird artificial luxury space (Interview 27). Rita, from Silicon Valley, who lives on *Le Chateau* (the most expensive of all of the compounds with a rent of 12-15,000 USD/month, and with a more ‘European’ look), similarly recounts her feelings when she moved there:

AL: How do you feel here in this community? Do you feel at home?

Rita: Ah, it's been, you know, this is my fifth year so it's changed. When I first arrived here I thought it was a really bizarre, artificial, strange environment. I had never lived outside the U.S., I had spent my whole life in California. My husband had lived outside the U.S. and had grown up in a diplomatic family, so it was not so strange for him. But for me to be in this fabulous house and have household help and a driver, made me feel very awkward because I have sort of an egalitarian point of view and all of the work ... politically that's how I am—populist—and the work I have done as a lawyer has all been

as a public defender or working with the poor and legal aid so to all of a sudden be with all of these like ex-sorority girls who were following their CEO-husbands around and entertaining all the time was just a totally different culture, kind of very strange to me. (Interview 7)

With time she gradually resigned from this position. Rita says that there's nothing wrong with spending time on nails and pearls, tennis and spa, the American Women's Club and shopping: it's just not enough for her. At times she has felt really depressed in Shanghai and learning Chinese became part of trying to burst the bubble and find a fulfillment beyond its confines. Rita is not alone in this, and many trailing spouses take Chinese classes, and do charity work in order to make their stay in China more meaningful.

Based on experiences in the U.S., Soja urges us to move beyond a polarization of the virtual versus the everyday: "Everyday life seems increasingly to have moved well beyond the simpler worlds of the artificial theme parks that you visit when you want to. The new theme parks now visit you, wherever you may be: the disappearance of the real is no longer revealingly concealed" (1992: 121). Soja however also retains an opposition between what is real and unreal, authentic and inauthentic, and in this urban form ("politically-numbed societies of hypersimulation") everyday life is spin-doctored to the point that "consciousness itself comes in pre-packaged forms" (ibid). This position also resonates with the critique leveled by John, Rita, Edwin and Maurice. They seem almost as perplexed as I was on my visits in expat space. *Forest Manor*, the *Racquet Club*, *Rancho Santa Fe* are environments that strike me as sleeping, vacant, still or perhaps 'waiting.' A person strolls by, a lonely car passes me, a security guard and a gardener on their posts. Silence—the kids are in school, the wives and Ayis indoors or on shopping raids in malls some distance away. My impression—conscious of the risk of over-interpreting the semiotics of this space—is that even for those who really like living in a gated community, this emotional geography is replete with melancholic undercurrents. In sum, expats express that these areas are both 'wonderful' and 'depressing'; like the uncanny *ur*-scene of 1950s America which continually reappears in popular cultural representations in films such as *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), *Far from Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002), *Revolutionary Road* (Sam Mendes, 2008).

But will my estrangement and critique prevent me from understanding the full function of these little pieces of the United States of America (as some

regard them) on transitional Shanghai soil, as well on the global circuits of multinational corporations? Is this an intellectualist position: a stalemate for further coming to terms with the meanings of this space? What if instead we would do away with this reasoning and describe the compounds as realities in themselves: as *real virtualities*. In his article "Real Virtuality" Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto discusses the effects of globalization on our imaginaries, and makes such a case for the concept of virtuality:

Consequently, in the new global space, the dichotomy of the real and the imaginary plays a far less important role than that of the plausible and the implausible or the actual and the virtual. The concept of virtuality, then, refers to a new spatio-temporal continuum which continues to radically alter our sense of reality. (1996: 111-112)

Rob Shields elaborates on this further:

The virtual troubles any simple negation, because it introduces multiplicity into the otherwise fixed category of the real. As such the tangible, actually real phenomena cease to be the sole, hegemonic examples of 'reality.' ... The solution is not to debate the reality of the virtual, but to develop a more sophisticated theory of the real and the ways in which the virtual and the concrete are different really existing forms, how they are related to each other and to non-existing *abstractions* and *probabilities*. (2004: 21)

Shields suggests that we should focus our attention on how people actually conceive of the virtual in their lives. Following Shields and moving beyond Soja's reading, I will suggest that we need to pay attention to the everyday and embodied rhythms of these virtual spaces. Life on 'Disneyland' must also be assessed through the manner in which virtual spaces of the gated community are lived, sensed and appropriated. The virtual needs here to be grounded in the living and moving body (cf. Masumi 2002: 30f; Shields 2004), and we need to move beyond representations of everyday spatiality as false or simply simulacra and into the Lefebvrian representational spaces of a *lived virtuality* (cf. Chaplin & Holding 2002). How do Americans feel about these spaces? In what way do they become meaningful interiors for people? And what kind of life do they afford?

Time capsules: melancholic safety bubbles in a space of hyperflux

Mobile elites sometimes face an anchoring of their 'fluid' life in spaces that for many of them connote a virtual America. Why is this spatial form produced and to what ends? Robert describes this peculiar existence in the

hands of multinational corporations, which are shipping people in and out of places, as a life choice and a lifestyle that is easily appropriated:

Robert: I don't think people back at home in all of our countries realize the extent of globalization. You can't until you get out there and see how many people are overseas, how many people have just (clicking his fingers) fluidly kind of blended right into it and they are doing it, they are doing the global life. You know, it's interesting. (Interview 1)

A fair amount of expats I've interviewed find it easy to move to Shanghai and I hold that these environments serve the purpose of creating as little friction as possible for the families. These virtualities of the everyday seem to emplace the mobile families, as they are emotionally able to connect to 'home.' In the virtual spaces of the compounds everything is recognizable and homogenous. These areas connote something antiseptic and mediated but also exchangeable. Following David Holmes (2001) we may argue that the virtuality of the expatriate compounds retains architectural-electronic-audiovisual qualities that contribute to the standardization, homogenization and routinization of contemporary world spaces. Holmes outlines other spaces where this occurs:

The screen (television or computer), the airport, the arcade, the shopping mall, freeway, tourist precinct, theme park resort and the modern city itself—they are all expressions and outcomes of cultural globalization. Insofar as they represent an abstract culture of homogeneity which encircles the globe, they form a mutually reinforcing, interlocking system of world-spaces which displaces the geographies of space 'as a "fact" of nature' [...] which preceded them. (2001: 3)

The premise is that mediation shapes our global imaginaries and our sense of authenticity when the creation of artificial, visually themed and homogenous 'world spaces' reorganize the experience of space in social life (2002: 14-15). This reorganization means in this case that life on the compound, the secluded, gated community, could be lived *anywhere* in the world. This seems to be a virtual *somewhere*, which is simultaneously a *nowhere*—a spatiality reminding us of theme parks, airports and hotels—and where you could basically be here in Shanghai, but just as likely in Manila, Kuala Lumpur or the U.S. for that matter. Like the non-places described by Augé, onto which you dock, these are spaces for landing on the global circuits (Augé 1995). They interestingly amount to the 'oxymoron' of (American) globalist/capitalist space itself, as the substratum of expansionism, the stillness of the flow, the home bases of the 'nomads.' As Karl Marx and Fried-



Figure 4: Diners in Gubei, Shanghai. Photograph by the author, April 2009.

rich Engels put it in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* from 1848: “The need for a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, it must settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere” (quoted in Gillem, 2007: 21).

So these are docks, essential for the global economy, but docks that also fulfill needs of identification and homeliness. Robert tells me about these areas, with their nearby Papa John’s Pizza, Diners, Starbucks Coffee and Kentucky Fried Chicken, and claims that they are there “to cater to the homesickness of the Americans” (Interview 1). Lisa, a 41-year-old homemaker and mom from Michigan, whose husband works in the automobile business on a two-year contract, lives on *Forest Manor*. She describes how she felt moving into a partially furnished villa. She liked *Forest Manor* because it had a home feel and coming to Shanghai had been much easier

than she expected. This was almost, but not quite, like her home space in America:

AL: Would you describe this compound as ... resembling anything you've seen back home or completely new to you?

Lisa: The houses at home are probably more brick, like that home (pointing). But I would say, you know, like size-wise and maybe even a little bit of the shapes and that would be something you might see at home. So it was comfortable coming in here. (Interview 11)

For Lisa this was virtually America, and it sufficiently fulfilled her needs of comfort (having a yard was very important) and security. This major American concern in recent years is also vocalized by Patricia 37, mother of three, from Oregon, who really likes it in Shanghai. She stresses the sense of safety she has in the city:

AL: What is it like to be an American expat in Shanghai?

Patricia: Privileged, very privileged to do it. I, eehm, I'm actually feeling ... I was talking to a friend yesterday and she's looking at ... she's also American and may be moving back to the United States soon and she is very nervous about it. So we were talking about these kinds of things. And ... to me one of the elements we talked about is safety, that we feel very safe over here, and in fact the only time I've ever felt threatened here it was another expat, it was an expat American man. That was the only time I've ever felt threatened here. And whereas in the U.S. you have to, if you're a woman you know going anywhere at night you have to be much more careful, and you know, aware of a potential attacker. It feels much more safe here.

...

AL: I'm thinking about the security issue. Why do think it's so safe here?

Patricia: Eehm, I think one thing, the compounds are very nice. I really like that the schools all have fences and security guards. I mean in the U.S. the schools are all open, and there have been cases of pedophiles going in and snapping children. And stuff like that. That I have my driver with me. (Interview 4)

For trailing spouses in Shanghai, this is the space they are bound by and faced with and in which they have to bring up their children, create an everyday routine and form new relationships to new people. Here is a familiar and yet strange world of leaving and picking up at schools, of preparing for the Halloween party, shopping, going off to play bridge and to the book

or sowing club or the American Women's club luncheons and city walks.⁹ This is also where they can devote their lives to tennis or the gym, but there is a flipside to this leisurely 'paradise.' Many families do this as a lifestyle and they may be relocated elsewhere with short notice. Rita says that the "corporate gypsies" feel mobile and free to travel, but a lot of them have become totally fatalistic about it. Who knows how long I'll be here? Who knows when we get the call that we're moving to Kazakhstan? (Interview 7). Virtual life cannot, in addition, be described wholly in terms of hyper-mobility. David Holmes stresses the connection between virtual environments and a mobile life: "Globally standardized constructed environments, like the shopping mall, freeway, airport, casino, hotel resort or theme park, increasingly adopt the hallmarks of virtual space ... Such spaces tend to be architectures of entertainment and consumption, which each in some way facilitate mobility—mobility of the gaze or of the embodied traveler" (Holmes 2001: 22). Adding the expatriate compound to this list will modify this conceptualization with a more nuanced understanding of the limits of mobility. There is in our mobile and global era also a sense of dwelling in mobility and in some cases mobility could even imprison its subjects (Urry 2007: Chapter 1; Cresswell 2010). This means that on-the-move elites are also bound by localities: the husbands are locked into airliner cabins and business meeting rooms; the women are confined by the compound and the limited mobility they are subject to depending on a driver to move around. The corporations they work for are in total control of their so-called mobile life.

But apart from the fact that expats live a contingent life dependent upon the corporations who may ship them back or elsewhere when they need to (something that happened on a large scale after the financial crisis of the fall of 2008 for example), many expats say that things change so quickly in Shanghai. The city is in massive transition: the immense flux and extreme speed and proportion of change seem unknown to mankind (cf. Gamble 2003). Foreigners and expats often talk about these changes and mention their problems with cognitively grasping or mapping what is going on around them. I'm asking Rita if she gets the feeling that the compounds are here forever or if the buildings were constructed for a short lifespan only.

9 These virtual spaces further point to Lefebvrian insights about the curious rhythms of the everyday (1992/2004), where newness—the polyvalent and multilayered fabric of New Shanghai—actually seems to emerge through various forms of repetition.

Are they solid or temporary? While this house is really well constructed she's not sure it's a permanent structure:

Rita: You know I don't know. I don't think, I think everything in Shanghai is kind of up for change. We've seen a lot of change around here just in the period of time we've been here. I could see them flattening this place and putting up a high-rise if they decided that's what they needed with more and more people. (Interview 7)

I interpret the 'expat exopolis' as spaces, just like the Hill stations, where the transitory capitalist class is fixed and secured in a larger context of hyperflux. But in order to fully grasp the meanings of these mediatized spaces, I'm compelled to complement the spatial analysis with a temporal dimension. Repeating the American beat in this city actually involves a 'freezing' of America. Mythical America—visualities and virtualities of diverse styles such as Antebellum, Norman, American South West, etc.—here represents a frozen timeframe that possesses a finite (and perhaps finished?) Americanness that is far from the nation's foundational myths about transcendence. These compound spaces can be described as time capsules that consist of the fixity of residual, traditional, and invented visual materialities of Americana—a virtual and temporally fixed America—that seems to represent not the future, dynamism, newness and modernity but the West as, in effect, a space of the past. As such they are safety bubbles. What can be more safe than the bygone as expressed in the solidity of a controllable compound space? Virtual America, as experienced within the themed time capsules in the larger context of a New 'New World,' is an obsolete and obscure spatial form that is indeed in the past—or perhaps rather in the timelessness of the nightmarish cinematic 'dream' of an American 1950s suburbia, repackaged for the global age. Americans residing on these compounds, however, seem safely but self-reflexively anchored there in a frictionless place of privilege. Some pick and choose from the offerings of this transnational space, and thereby renegotiate as well as reaffirm both this space and what Americanness means within it. Rachel, a playwright from L.A. who taught English in a nearby town for nine months, describes the typical Americans by stressing their negotiations of Americanness in expat space:

Rachel: ... then there's the corporate sector I mean I've met some business people, who are very insulated in their ivory towers in their compounds in Pudong, and that's a whole other life, and they're living like a luxurious life that they wouldn't get in the U.S. They're getting kind of spoiled with Ayis and drivers. You know so, they kind of love it, and but it is, I think that they're not as invested in the typical narrative of the

American life, but they can still get pieces of the American life there, I mean they're not living completely Chinese lives, some are, but some still are getting massages, like mad tanning, eating McDonalds, clubbing until 7 am, they still get like anything in Shanghai, like the maximal effect of this lifestyle. But I know that a lot of them are not staying, it's just a period. (Interview 37)

Robert discusses how people negotiate and try to shape the bubble. He says that “[e]verybody’s dread is that my kid is gonna live his whole life in the expat compound and in the Silver Buick van which everybody drives with a driver and not experience China. So, it’s a big issue to people” (Interview 1). Many don’t complain, yet some dream about leaving or expanding beyond the comfort zone. Joanne, mother of three from South Carolina, for instance, lives on the *Racquet Club*:

AL: Is that a good place to be?

Joanne: I think it is. I think you can relax there, and have ... It’s certainly not like the American suburbs. You’ll hear people say that, and I don’t think ..., either those people have never been at the *Racquet Club* or they’ve never been to an American suburb. But you do get nice green space, and the kids can play and you can meet more other people like yourselves, on one side, on the other side it is far out and you do lack the actual city experience ... (Interview 3)

These spaces offer a fairly good, secure and easy life but, as Joanne says, this is nothing like America. But it is not real China either, since in there she gets “less of a real China experience” and Joanne feels she wants to get out:

Joanne: The expats that I know live very separately from the locals. Especially in the beginning of their times here, they live in compounds and I feel in our life here we’re very isolated and we would like to over the next year or so try to make ourselves less isolated and work towards being more a part of the normal society than always being in a compound environment, but you can have fairly good life here. (Interview 3)

Many Americans in Shanghai hence find the compounds too limited. The seclusion of these spaces makes them feel even more alienated. So this longing for leaving the bubble, moving into the normal society, regaining some individual freedom lost in the rear seat of the Buick, is a common if not dominant aspect of the life in the bubble. There is sometimes a deep dissatisfaction with—or a distanced irony in relation to—the fabrications as well as isolations of expatriate space.

Into/out of the expat bubble

A new geopolitical situation and new forms of elite migration within the global economy combine to urge more Americans to seek new places to go in East Asia. In fierce contrast with the search for something new, some of them paradoxically end up in insulated areas that tend to bring them 'home' symbolically—a paradox of the globalization process itself. Americans in Shanghai who live in these gated communities find themselves in a virtual space of an—perhaps unintentionally—imagined American fixity and finitude, representing in one sense the actual opposites of American ideology in its celebration of mobility. This is a strange space where they are doubly dislocated not only as “strangers in a strange land” (as Joanne describes herself, Interview 3) but as Americans in relation to what the U.S. symbolizes within the spatial imaginary of this foreign context. I have demonstrated the tenuous hold on the expats exerted by a virtual America. The compounds seem to encapsulate and freeze what is ‘American’ into an American past; yet this freezing should not be viewed in terms of absolute fixity, as a space of the simulacrum where the implosion into the image makes the world into a dead and unmoving variation on a theme park, a post-tourist world of entire and absolute simulation. It would be a bit too easy to straightforwardly harness the observations I’ve made on the compounds and from talking to the expats onto the whole discourse on postmodern urban forms, variations on theme parks and monocultures of globalization. My observations provoke a discussion of the lived rhythms and temporalities of these gated communities (Lefebvre, 1992/2004) as well as the negotiations of space occurring in there. In avowing that life on the compound is a form of lived virtuality, I have suggested that in order to advance our understanding of “the human face of global mobility” (Smith & Favell eds., 2006) the virtual needs to be “embodied,” in other words rooted in lived experience. In fact, moving into the expat bubble is in important respects to move out of it and beyond those theorizations.

Hence, as demonstrated above, negotiating these spaces sometimes actually means (dreaming about) leaving them. Beyond Soja’s ideas about the eroded agency of the inhabitants of the exopolis, for many Americans the meanings of these virtual spaces also encompass the break out, and there is an urge to not just sit there complacently. The expat experience changes and transforms these individuals, and a majority of them have a desire to get more of a real China experience. May we thus conclude that in virtual America the confines and contradictions of lived virtuality actually

expose themselves? Perhaps like Truman Burbank, drenched in too much simulation, fettered by the counterfeit of his whole life, and perhaps like Steinbeck's restless American, always in movement "never content with a building, a place—or with ourselves," these American women in New Shanghai's compound areas are set on overturning the inertia of real virtuality. For them the inner shortcomings of a virtual America may, I will suggest in closing, open up the fissures through which their alternatives may be envisioned.

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