

# City & Society

## Book Review

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**Trespassers? Asian Americans and the Battle for Suburbia.** Willow S. Lung-Amam, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017, 264 pp.

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During a 2017 talk in New York City, famed urban geographer David Harvey declared, “New York? The whole damn place has been turned into a suburb. . . . The feel of the city is losing its urbanity and being made okay for suburbanites to enjoy Times Square” (Lindsay 2010). But what is so wrong with the suburbs? In her book, *Trespassers? Asian Americans and the Battle for Suburbia* (2017), environmental planner and ethnic studies scholar Willow S. Lung-Amam counters and complicates this cliché. “Urban scholars have long had a fraught relationship with suburbia” (187), she writes. But the latter has much to teach those who study the former. “Hyperlocal, seemingly sleepy suburbs are some of the most interesting places in which the global politics of immigration, diversity, and difference, spatial or otherwise, are playing out,” she writes. “They are places where globalization and its many flows—of people, finance, technology, media, and ideas—hit home” (177). Specifically, Lung-Amam researches Fremont,

California—a Silicon Valley “ethnoburb” at the cutting edge of technology and suburban change—to challenge the commonplace dichotomy between “sanitized” suburbs and “urbane” centers.

In *Trespassers*, Lung-Amam combines scholarship on urban studies and planning, suburban landscape and architectural studies, and Asian American Studies. Methodologically, she employs ethnographic methods like in-depth interviews, participant observation, site analysis, and secondary data content analysis. Between 2008 and 2012 Lung-Amam conducted seventy-four in-depth interviews with diverse interlocutors: politicians, planners, developers, business owners, community leaders, and Fremont residents. In so doing, the author makes the convincing claim that contrary to the dominant American narrative of suburbia as irredeemably homogeneous (i.e., racially white and wealthy), “diversity has long defined the culture, landscape, and inhabitants of suburbia” (4). To illustrate this point, she focuses on economically affluent Asian Americans in California’s famed Silicon Valley suburbs. As a social-justice-minded scholar, Lung-Amam admits that she initially was reluctant to study such an ostensibly privileged group of highly educated, high-income professionals—a

## Book Review

perception Harvey's comment apparently would affirm. Yet Lung-Amam contests the notion that Asian Americans (as "model minorities") have been immune to suburbia's historical exclusion of communities of color (especially African American). Likewise, she interrogates the idea that high-tech centers like Silicon Valley are "postracial meritocracies" (7). Instead, Fremont's growing Asian American community had to adapt to "a landscape that was simply not built with them in mind" (15).

At a lean 250 pages, *Trespassers* is divided into two parts with five chapters, including an introduction, afterword, and appendix on research methodologies. Centering on the book's introduction and Chapter One, Part One maps out broader historical, political, and social forces that pushed multiple waves of Asian American migration to the suburbs of Silicon Valley. Lung-Amam uncovers the historical and political work required to "sanitize" suburban inequality, first through the explicit exclusion of low-income residents, namely people of color. Historically, however, Asian Americans have been fundamental to this exclusion—literally. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 initially barred and later restricted Asian immigration to the U.S. until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. An oft-neglected footnote of US history, the former was the first and only federal legislation to explicitly halt the immigration of a specific ethnic group. Not surprisingly, despite having established roots in Silicon Valley as

early as the mid-1850s (first as gold miners), the Chinese in California were greeted with hostility. Lung-Amam highlights this earlier history to dispute a stereotype (one even prominent activist scholars like Harvey cannot resist) between a seemingly progressive cosmopolitan urban core (racialized as non-white) and a conservative suburban periphery (racialized as white). That spaces built by and for Asian Americans in Fremont—what Lung-Amam deems "landscapes of difference"—continually became marked as strange, unattractive, and foreign demonstrates how subtle forms of (anti-Asian) racism become invisible against a traditional black and white binary (7).

In Part Two, Lung-Amam elaborates on these claims through three related case studies. In Chapter Two, Lung-Amam describes white parents' claims of "reverse racism" that were sparked by the "undesirable" influx of overly "successful" Asian American students in a quintessentially suburban American high school. Similar fears of a "Yellow Peril" threat color Lung-Amam's Chapter Three analysis of criticism—by Fremont's non-Asian American community—of Asian American-oriented shopping centers. These criticisms concerned both the form (i.e., concerns over "poor design" [116]) and function (accusations of "self-segregation" [115]) of these shopping centers, which are a central site of Asian American suburban sociality. In Chapter Four, Lung-Amam chronicles what might be the most unequivocal example of Asian Americans confronting suburbia's efforts to sanitize the former's

## City & Society

unwanted difference: a four-year city council battle between a coalition of mostly established white Fremont residents against “monster homes” built and occupied primarily by Chinese immigrant families (138).

According to Lung-Amam, these place-making politics are dramatic. Yet they are not occurring in stereotypical “citadels of cosmopolitanism,” a.k.a. the US’s central cities. Instead, these landscapes of difference are happening outside traditional urban centers with “little reference point for the pace and character of change they are now experiencing” (176). As such, claims to and battles over what Harvey describes as the “right to the city” (or “the right to change and reinvent the city according to one’s hearts’ desire” [178]) are increasingly suburban. Calls to respecting difference and diversity, therefore, demand an aesthetic sensibility and appreciation of spaces and places that might appear “undesirable,” “illogical,” or even “tacky.”

Ultimately, *Trespassers* is an important contribution to scholars interested in how histories of suburban spatial distinction and social hierarchies operate into the present, as well as new forms of political and civic engagement by minority communities. Refreshingly, non-specialists, community activists, and policy makers also will find Lung-Amam’s prose accessible and informative.

[Suburbia; Fremont, California; Asian Americans; Race]

## References

Lindsay, Greg. 2010. “David Harvey’s Urban Manifesto: Down with Suburbia; Down With Bloomberg’s New York.” *Fast Company*, July 22, 2010. <https://www.fastcompany.com/1673037/david-harveys-urban-manifesto-down-suburbia-down-bloombergs-new-york/>.