

BOOK REVIEW

***Trespassers?: Asian Americans  
and the Battle for Suburbia***

Willow S. Lung-Amam. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.  
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THE UNITED STATES—land of immigrants, historically considered a multicultural melting pot—has recently become the setting of an outbreak of xenophobia. All manner of peoples standing outside of the mainstream encounter “exclusionary geographies” that can be mapped, interpreted, and critiqued, with sensitivity shown to both structuring forces from without and felt forces from within. These people may be excluded because of who they are, how they look, what they do and think, and are therefore deemed “out of place”—or even “trespassers”—in a range of mainstream spaces (Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts, and Whatmore 2009).

*Trespassers?: Asian Americans and the Battle for Suburbia* is organized around landscapes that tell a story about Asian Americans’ struggles to make their homes in Silicon Valley. The author, Willow S. Lung-Amam, demonstrates that built landscapes and spatial uses that do not conform to White hegemonic views of suburbia often become points of negotiation for the terms of Asian American suburban inclusion. In this process, policy and planning prescription commonly reinforce dominant spatial norms and standards of suburban design and development. Spaces occupied primarily by Asian Americans frequently fall outside these norms, creating a sense that they are suburban trespassers. Governed by policies and processes that have long favored White Americans, suburbia’s built environment continues to racialize Asian American space and produce subtle trends of social and spatial marginality, even among those considered to be model minorities (Lung-Amam, 11–12).

Lung-Amam holds a Ph.D. in Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning from University of California, Berkeley, with a background in

urban studies and planning, comparative studies in race and ethnicity, and community development. Her scholarship focuses on the link between social inequality and the built environment, and is primarily concerned with how the conditions in disadvantaged communities are shaped by urban politics, policy, planning and design practice, and the changing geographies of social and economic inequality. In conducting research for this book, Lung-Amam observed the everyday life in the spaces at the center of debates about Asian American exclusion—ethnic shopping malls, high-school classes, and the streets of neighborhoods most affected by large home development. She tracked Census figures, demographics, and spatial data; studied the archives of the city council, the school board, the planning department, and local libraries; and became an avid reader of local and regional news (15) to show that suburbia is an increasingly important place for immigrants and minorities to register their claims for equality and inclusion. *Trespassers?* also draws on the work of several notable geographers, such as Wei Li (“ethnoburbs”), Richard Schein (race and American urban landscapes), Donald Mitchell (cultural theory and landscapes of struggle and oppression), and David Ley (migration, multiculturalism, and the governance of diversity), and seminal works by Henri Lefebvre (“right to the city” and the production of social space), Michel Foucault (space, place, and geography in relation to historical and social thought), and David Harvey (social and environmental justice and geographies of difference).

*Trespassers?* starts with an introduction detailing the author’s main premise and the contents of the book, followed by five chapters, a hopeful afterword, and an appendix. Chapter one, “The New Gold Mountain,” focuses on the sweeping changes that occurred in Fremont economically, spatially, and socially after World War II, and underscores how this suburb’s rapid growth and development were prefaced on the valley’s booming innovation economy and Asian Americans’ own suburban dreams. Chapter two, “A Quality Education for Whom?,” considers how migrants’ educational priorities and practices have reshaped Silicon Valley neighborhoods and schools. A case study of the Mission San Jose neighborhood in Fremont showcases “White flight” driven by tensions between Asian American and White students and parents over educational values, school culture, and academic competition. Chapter three, “Mainstreaming the Asian Mall,” shows how public and political debates have framed Asian American-oriented shopping malls in the Silicon Valley as “problem spaces,” with planners and city officials using their power to promote particular visions of multiculturalism that are more aligned with their projected image of a middle-class suburb. Chapter four, titled “That ‘Monster House’ Is My Home,” examines controversies over

the building of large homes, or what some derisively call “McMansions” or “monster homes,” in established neighborhoods and demonstrates that the planning processes, development standards, and design guidelines adopted to deal with these conflicts largely reflect the interests of established White residents while marginalizing those expressed by Asian Americans. The final chapter, “Charting New Suburban Storylines,” examines the issues presented in the first four chapters and their effects on social and spatial change in Silicon Valley for suburban development, design, and community building, and provides a case study that challenges communities to examine the ways in which they are making space for minorities, immigrants, and other suburban newcomers (17–18). Lung-Amam urges readers, especially those who reside in suburban areas, to “shift their spatial norms from those that celebrate conformity, consensus, and stability to those that respect difference, contestation, and change” (18). If the U.S. is to continue to be a multicultural melting pot, these principles must be central to efforts to reconstruct and redesign suburbia.

Lung-Amam’s style is a mix of formal and informal qualitative research, intended for an academic audience yet suitable for those outside the academy as well. The language used and structure of the book are appropriate for and accessible by a broad audience drawn to the field of human geography, specifically those interested in race and ethnicity, urban studies, and Asian American experiences. *Trespassers?* is written in the first and third person; first person when sharing the specifics of how the author conducted the study, and third person when revealing the details of interviews and results of field research. The author’s thesis—that the structural forces at play in Silicon Valley suburbia, such as governmental, policy, and planning processes, have produced racialized landscapes for Asian American residents whose preferences do not conform to established suburban norms—is easy to follow; she maintains continuity throughout the entirety of the book; and the information presented is phenomenally well researched. Her results are illustrated in a narrative format that uses quotes from interviews and data gathered from secondary sources, participant observation, and a cultural landscape analysis; visual information is delivered in photographs and illustrations; and spatial information is displayed in maps. Lung-Amam delves deeply into the political, social, and cultural issues of the area regarding its pastoral history and suburbanization, push-and-pull factors for immigration and settlement (e.g., high-tech industry jobs), the importance of and competition for high-quality K–12 education, the development of ethnic shopping centers, and the construction of “monster homes” in Fremont.

This book is impressively comprehensive. Lung-Amam goes into great detail about immigrants from mainland China, as well as those from Taiwan and Hong Kong, and mentions of Southeast Asians. Only briefly, however, does she touch on experiences of Indian immigrants. The term “Indian American” is listed in the index as appearing only on pages 40–41, and, although reference is made to their presence once or twice in the book, “Sikh” and “Punjabi” do not appear in the index at all. I would have enjoyed more elaboration on Indian Americans, considering their large presence within the region, and they should not be forgotten when describing exclusionary geographies in Silicon Valley and the Asian American experience.

Lung-Amam’s interdisciplinary approach and research methods provide a unique perspective on Silicon Valley suburbia that wasn’t previously available in literature and adds to our understanding of Asian American experiences. This volume enhances scholarship on place-making, sense of place, (sub)urbanism and ethnoburbs, and landscapes of difference. Her research exposes the structural and social exclusionary forces at play in suburbia in relation to race, ethnicity, and immigration. This information may be utilized by planners and policymakers nationwide to promote the production of more ethnically and racially inclusive communities. Additionally, this study helps to uncover the role that spatial relationships and processes play in the construction and reproduction of exclusionary geographies in the western U.S. If you are an educator in a human geography-related discipline and you are searching for additional reading material for a particular course (e.g., urban studies, race and ethnicity studies, and Asian American studies), this book is right up your alley. I also recommend this book for students of human geography who are researching Asian American experiences.

Lung-Amam’s afterword includes a short reflection on race and social relations in Fremont and around the nation following the election of Donald J. Trump. These pages round out the book nicely—a book that highlights the spatial and social exclusion of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants in a region considered to be multicultural and multiethnic. Silicon Valley residents, along with many other U.S. citizens, “stood up to declare themselves welcome to immigrants and other marginalized groups” (186) in the wake of rising intolerance, xenophobia, and extreme nationalism. As Lung-Amam puts it, “breaking down the barriers that keep residents of different backgrounds out of privileged spaces, be they neighborhoods or countries, and establishing the social and spatial infrastructure that allows diverse values, practices, and aspirations to thrive takes the sustained efforts of those beyond the halls of Congress and the White House... The ways that communities

make space for difference is a test of strength and resilience of the nation’s democratic ideals and of the American dream” (186).

## Reference

Gregory, D., R. Johnston, G. Pratt, G., M. J. Watts, and S. Whatmore (Eds). 2009. *The Dictionary of Human Geography, 5th Edition*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

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