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Review: Willow S. Lung-Amam, *Trespassers? Asian American and the Battle for Suburbia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017)

Silicon Valley, the world knows, has been a centre of technological and entrepreneurial innovation for several decades. But as Willow S. Lung-Amam's book demonstrates, the region has also been at the cutting edge of suburban change in the US. Between 1980 and 2010, the area's population surged, in large part due to a huge influx of migrants from mainland China, Taiwan and India. Several of Silicon Valley's municipalities are now majority Asian, which together comprise a patchwork of ethnically diverse suburbia. But if scholarship to date has been interested principally in Asian Americans' contributions to the economy of the world's leading high-tech region, Lung-Amam's book shows Asian Americans to be community builders and place makers, and investigates how they have reshaped the Silicon Valley suburbs in which they have made their home. Despite its considerable affluence and diversity, however, the region is far from being a colour-blind meritocracy of creative class professionals. As its title indicates, *Trespassers?* focuses on how the place-making strategies of Asian Americans have continually been understood by established white, middle-class residents and authorities to be abnormal and out of place. Indeed, despite being a 'minority of means', Lung-Amam insists that Asian Americans' inclusion in suburban life has never been on equal terms with white Americans. Yet, the author is ultimately optimistic that these environments, which were originally designed as spaces of exclusion, can be continually refashioned and may yet inspire attitudes and policies that respect and enable diverse uses and understandings of suburban space.

Lung-Amam's study focuses on the Asian-majority city of Fremont, the most populous suburb in the whole of the San Francisco Bay Area. The book devotes individual chapters to three quite different kinds of space – public, quasi-public, and private – that have each become cultural battlegrounds. Lung-Amam's case studies are principally informed by multiple in-depth interviews conducted with local politicians, officials, developers, business owners, community leaders and residents from different ethnic backgrounds. *Trespassers?* gives voice to and places into dialogue a great many of its informants, who speak of territories that are both keenly contested and undergoing rapid change.

Schools comprise the first arena of conflict discussed by Lung-Amam. Reflecting similar tensions that have flared recently in other parts of the US, many established white families in Fremont – along with some native-born Asian Americans – have objected to what they perceive to be the way local schools have become dominated by Asian immigrant values. Concerns that schools have become overly competitive and therefore stressful places for children, and also too narrowly focused on maths and science subjects, have prompted a recent wave of white flight, despite rising property prices in areas with the highest-performing schools. As more and more white parents depart to secure a ‘normal’ and ‘well-rounded’ education for their children, the schools they leave behind further confirm in their eyes the apparent failure of Asian Americans, and in particular Asian immigrants, to adopt the social and spatial norms of their middle-class white peers.

The Asian-themed shopping mall is next disputed territory considered by Lung-Amam, who provides a compelling account of the ways these transnational commercial spaces serve as vibrant social hubs for Asian American suburbanites from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds. In Fremont as elsewhere in the US these malls are eclipsing the importance of traditional Asian urban enclaves, which are felt by increasing numbers of Asian Americans to be inaccessible and old-fashioned. Yet the malls have been portrayed by many white residents and city officials as irregular, undesirable spaces that do not fit into the existing character of retail in the city. Various policies and processes have been developed by local authorities whose specific aim is to reshape and regulate Asian malls. Ironically, at the same time city officials have sought to promote Fremont’s ethnic diversity as a way of attracting outside investment by encouraging Asian malls to open in Fremont’s downtown area. These double standards, Lung-Amam justifiably concludes, evidence a modern-day form of redlining or racial steering.

The final space examined by Lung-Amam involves a dispute that has been replayed in urban and many suburban residential communities across the US in recent years: the teardown phenomenon, which involves the substantial remodelling of older homes or their complete demolition by their new owners to make way for much larger dwellings. These ‘monster homes’ are frequently judged by neighbours to be inappropriate in terms of both size and style. In parts of Fremont the conflict has taken on a racial dimension. Lung-Amam’s chapter details the ways Asian

Americans' preferences for large rebuilds have come under fire from established residents, who accuse the new arrivals of, among other things, nouveau-riche ostentation and a lack of neighbourliness. But Lung-Amam insists that we see beyond the 'bigness and bling'. Aesthetic judgements, after all, so often have political bases and consequences. Lung-Amam shows that white opponents to the new homes would frequently refer to the architectural and social 'stability' and 'integrity' of their neighbourhood, unmindful that such terms have long been used as euphemisms for residential segregation. Meanwhile, the specific requirements of Asian Americans that help explain their preferences for large new-builds – to accommodate extended families, for instance – often go unheard. Indeed, Lung-Amam charts how Asian immigrants have been disadvantaged by linguistic and cultural barriers that have limited their participation in decision-making processes, and by the tendency of planners and policy makers to presume that 'good design' is grounded in spatially homogenous and relatively static and stable neighbourhoods.

In a coda Lung-Amam outlines some principles she sees as undergirding a more just and inclusive suburbia. She proposes, quite reasonably, that only the meaningful involvement of diverse parties in the development of planning policy and procedures will help guarantee a 'right to the suburb'. More intriguing, though, is her assertion of the potential value of environmental 'messiness'. She declares: 'We need flexible, open and "loose" spaces that are complex, contain layers of meaning, express multiple points of view, and offer users different kinds of experiences.' It is, however, hard to square such a positive vision of suburban space with the account of Fremont provided by Lung-Amam, who shows again and again that conflicts over schools, shopping malls and (especially) houses are seen as insoluble, and understood by both sides to be a zero-sum game. Neither, indeed, does *Trespassers?* begin to illustrate how suburban landscapes might, like rings on a tree, 'accumulate layers that speak of the many people who lived on or passed over them'. Most suburbias are inevitably accumulations of different histories of settlement; what matters first and foremost is who gets to tell those histories and how they are told. Indeed, very likely, the organic motifs that Lung-Amam resorts to here would serve defenders of a suburb's established order far better than those seeking to justify a radical remodelling or teardown of their property. Equally, Lung-Amam's breezily optimistic assertion about change being 'an inescapable urban

condition' can take on a more minatory cast in other contexts, most obviously in relation to gentrification. But while these perfunctory final suggestions fail to convince, overall *Trespassers?* offers a rich and illuminating study of the contemporary politics of contested suburban space in the US.