
How do we decide who does and does not belong in a city? What qualifies an individual or social group as a legitimate inhabitant in urban and suburban spaces? What is the membership criteria? Who decides it? And where and when are the contours of membership delineated? Underlying these questions are fundamental assumptions around the right to the city. As Lefebvre (2002: 374) posed it, the right to the city is a “transformed and renewed right to urban life” that refers not only to the right to basic urban services (like housing and education) but also to a right to appropriate the spaces of the city and to participate in the decision-making processes that organise urban space.

For migrants, claiming a right to the city is an especially fraught process. Substantive attempts to enjoy full rights as urban citizens necessarily involve processes of diasporic “home-building” (Hage 1997) that generate feelings of security, familiarity, community, and a sense of possibility. Crucial to this is a sense of control over space or having a “space where the deployment of our bodily dispositions can be maximised” (Hage 1997: 102), which also fosters a sense of continuity after the disruption of migratory processes. Contemporary conditions of hypermobility and the associated transformation and transfiguration of cities through the arrival of new and “unfamiliar” residents, make these questions critically relevant.

In Willow Lung-Amam’s engaging book, she frames these questions in relation to suburban space in Silicon Valley, California. Silicon Valley is a kind of quintessential hub for the kinds of transactions that typify the global knowledge economy and its networks. This choice of ethnographic location sets up a fascinating tension of images: assumptions about the staid mundanity of suburbia with its social conventions and immobility contrast sharply with the
picture Lung-Amam paints of Asian American immigrants transforming the local politics and material landscape of Fremont, a low-density and highly diverse suburb in Silicon Valley. As the author rightly points out, the idea of a predictable and homogenised suburbia is a common if increasingly irrelevant trope in America. Like other parts of the city long characterised by migration flows, the suburbs have never been homogeneous spaces in practice. Reflections on her own unorthodox upbringing nicely illustrate and personalise this point: even in the most parochial of spaces (in Lung-Amam’s case, rural Appalachia), there are people embodying forms of difference that rub up against the status quo.

At the heart of *Trespassers?* are the contested politics of place-making in cities of diversity. Focusing on the place-making practices of highly-skilled and -educated Asian American migrants employed in the Silicon Valley tech industries, she discusses how newcomers navigate community and government attempts to homogenise or “mute” the “landscapes of difference” that they create. Countering claims that high-tech centres are “postracial meritocracies”, Lung-Amam clearly demonstrates the degree to which even wealthy, productive newcomers and their associated ethno-material practices are “out of place”. Her analysis of these groups’ attempts to “make home” focuses on two key questions: What spatial norms pattern everyday residential landscapes? And, how do these norms work to identify and validate some residents as “locals” while casting others as “trespassers”? The division of these issues into three case studies—schools, shopping centres, and the redevelopment of private homes—grounds the analysis in three clear spheres that are central to the aspirations of this group of migrants.

The first chapter examines the historical context of Asian American migration, linking it to processes of suburbanisation in the US. Like the politics of urban development in so many other settler colonial states, at the heart of suburbanisation lies the desire of the white middle classes to protect their property values and maintain racial and class segregation, veiled through
claims about a normative “way of life”. Lung-Amam traces how issues of exclusionary zoning, racially restrictive covenants, and red-lining gradually gave way, in response to civil rights movements, to more inclusive planning regulations. She explores how Fremont rapidly became one of the largest Asian American majority cities in Silicon Valley, noting the emergence of suburbs as global gateways after the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act and the expedition of this process after the 1990 Act. The latter legislative shift saw increased migration of skilled labour coinciding with improved political economic conditions in China and India, and an influx of a significant numbers of highly trained information technology professionals into Silicon Valley and its suburbs. Lung-Amam’s discussion of the evolution of “cosmopolitan suburbia” in this chapter does well to capture the complexity of immigration in the context of waxing and waning political economic conditions, and to describe the demographic layering that shapes the lived spaces of suburbia.

In electing to focus on “Asian Americans”, Lung-Amam is addressing an incredibly diverse range of ethno-cultural and national groupings—people from mainland China, India, South Korea, the Philippines, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Malaysia, as well as those from the Indian and Chinese diaspora in other parts of the world (p.43-44). One issue with relying on this label is that the vast designation does not make intuitive sense outside of the US. Presumably based on a contemporary political labelling in the US, it nonetheless tends to conflate what are otherwise highly divergent groups. As with any social labeling, identifying a particular group (or several groups) under one label runs the risk of homogenising or misrepresenting peoples’ experiences, identities, or modes of belonging. Lung-Amam’s focus on “Asian Americans”—mainly Chinese, Taiwanese, and Indian migrants—living in Fremont is understandable to the extent that, as she argues, this group shares comparable experiences of mobility, education, transnational connectedness, and socio-economic status. Indeed, she calls them a “class of global cosmopolitans” (p.45). At points Lung-Amam does acknowledge their internal diversity, but
more critical reflection on the political project of categorisation as well as the challenges of subsuming this range of migratory experiences and cultural reference points under one label would have strengthened the discussion.

Lung-Amam is able to neatly illustrate the politics of place-making by taking three actual cases of community conflict and municipal policy responses, in the areas of education, shopping malls, and residential homes. The depth of her research through archival work, qualitative interviews, and observation is obvious in these examples, and makes for fascinating reading. She intersperses her analysis with comments from local residents, personal observations, and media coverage to show the depth of emotion and controversy involved in these otherwise highly mundane spheres of life.

She begins her analysis with the issue of schooling (Chapter 2), drawing on the case study of one particular school (Mission San Jose High School) that has a majority Asian American population and is one of the highest ranking schools in the state. The ethno-cultural transformation of the student body over the course of 20 years is significant, and Lung-Amam discusses this change in relation to the re-orientation of school curricula to reflect the scholastic priorities of Asian American students and their families and issues of “white flight”. Throughout the discussion, the centrality of education to the aspirations of this migrant group are foregrounded, to the extent that most make property decisions based on school zoning. As the preeminent form of cultural capital for these groups of migrants, the intergenerational pressure associated with achievement in education is immense. Lung-Amam grounds these discussions in the example of an attempt to re-zone the catchment area for the high school. She examines the resulting furore that pitted Asian American parents against established white (and other) residents and the School Board. Her discussion explores how this highly charged conflict generated not only a series of claims about what forms of knowledge should be privileged (e.g. science and maths over the arts), but also what constitutes a “proper” education (holistic
education or an education that guarantees financial success), which ultimately highlights differing concepts of the ideal citizen-subject.

Also interesting in this discussion was the importance of considering how school zoning regulations are overlaid onto the usual forms of symbolic boundary-making in suburban space. School zoning throws up a whole raft of interesting questions about the inscription of class-based aspiration upon the lived landscape. Moreover, Lung-Amam shows how local schools become another node in the transnational networks of these “global cosmopolitans”.

The analysis then moves to Asian-themed shopping malls (Chapter 3). Here, the shopping mall is analysed as a kind of micro public space. The fine-grained description of this “pseudo-public sphere”—both in terms of its everyday relations and its materiality—makes it easier for the reader to imagine, when compared to the more regulated space and sporadic politics of the school or the more individualised spaces of private homes. These are clearly spaces of comfort—home-like environments that can also foster a sense of community, cross-cultural exchange, and transnational connectedness.

Despite the central place they hold in the lives of the Asian American community, Lung-Amam points to the increasing regulation of these spaces by the city council. She notes the contradiction in local council treatment of Asian-themed malls: they are valued because they are material symbols of the council’s multicultural credentials, yet they are problematic because they are always “Other” and run the risk of becoming too visible in the otherwise orderly and familiar suburban landscape. Lung-Amam traces the complex politics that underlie the redrafting of council regulations concerning proposals for Asian-themed malls, including attempts to regulate different modes of retail space ownership. She argues that underlying these politics is a concern with order—articulated through covenants, codes, and restrictions that aim to standardise the physical appearance of the malls. Her insightful analysis highlights the exaggerated response of local government, and their underlying desire to attract retail, that is symbolic of the white upper
middle class, to the point that “the city’s argument amounts to a claim of retail or commercial redlining”—that is, discriminating on the basis of racial or ethnic composition.

Again, Lung-Amam shows the power of spatial regulation as a means of social regulation. This is especially interesting in the case of commercial retail space as it can be the most visible and emblematic material form anchoring a suburban landscape. The management and appropriation of ethnic precincts (e.g. “Chinatowns”) has received a lot of scholarly attention, particularly in relation to processes of displacement of minority populations (as Lung-Amam notes in relation to other areas in Silicon Valley). Yet, the management of everyday, non-remarkable commercial spaces as a form of local ethnic politics has not garnered as much attention. But it is crucially important to the lived realities of ethnic neighbourhoods. For example, Suzanne Hall (2011), studying the micro-social and -economic lives of multi-ethnic high streets in London, shows that local government policies that support small, independent, ethnic retailers are critical for the survival, resilience, and vitality of multicultural high streets, not to mention their role as sources of ethno-cultural exchange and support. While the urban morphology and demography is vastly different across these examples, the attempts to govern difference through municipal regulations of ethnic retail (controlling shop size, upkeep and appearance, sub-leasing etc.) are similar (see also Valverde 2012), as is the importance of recognising the role of home-like local retail spaces for social inclusion, especially for newcomers.

Throughout the analysis, Lung-Amam’s discussion beautifully illustrates how ostensibly neutral technocratic language ingrains spatial and social norms of the dominant (white) classes. Like other studies that show how inextricable planning processes are from social and racial hierarchies of entitlement (see, for example, Bugg and Gurran 2011; Mitchell 1993; Trudeau 2006), she demonstrates how terms such as “compatibility”, “continuity”, “local character”, and “appropriate use” become heavily loaded with a politics of legitimacy. This was best illustrated
in the chapter on “monster homes” (Chapter 4), where the author shows the power of local residents’ organisations in dictating to local municipal government the terms of their support: that “good design” was grounded in spatially homogeneous and relatively static and stable neighbourhoods” (p.167). She documents neighbourhoods where residents’ groups succeeded in changing residential design controls to scale back the size of proposed renovations, justified through arguments about the need to maintain the existing form of the neighbourhood (as heritage value), notions of privacy and community, and a valuation of outdoor space. Meanwhile, Asian American residents seeking to enlarge their homes articulated their dissent through a language of individual property rights, and more culturally-specific arguments about the need for homes that accommodate intergenerational families. In this sense, Lung-Amam shows that community and family for the newcomers was more transnationally extensive, and not so exclusively local. The overlap and interplay of ideas about privacy and property rights on both sides of the argument shows how such ideas get strategically mobilised in specific contexts.

The revised design standards marginalised groups not only symbolically but also financially. This suggests that participation in local politics is highly contingent upon access to forms of social, economic, and cultural capital that enable particular groups to dominate the debate in the micro public spaces of community hearings, for example. Established residents were able to mobilise to address the city council in a way that the new(er)comers could not, which highlights the bias implicit in access to local democratic processes and decision making.

The research methods are included in an appendix following the afterword, and they might have been better placed in the introduction (even as a footnote), as the reader is rather hastily launched into life in Fremont and commentaries from local residents, without the sense of being properly introduced to them. However, the empathy Lung-Amam shows for the participants she speaks with is clear, which reflects the length of her fieldwork (undertaken over four years) and the rapport she has built up over time. Despite her identification with her
subjects’ struggles, she acknowledges moments of ambivalence with regard to their highly privileged place in the networks of global transnational elites. Indeed, at times, the reader feels somewhat ambivalent about the participants. While clearly disadvantaged through established institutional frames in many respects, they are hardly lacking options for mobility or avenues to circumvent the barriers they sometimes face in US society. Given their positionality in US ethnic hierarchies, it would have also been interesting for Lung-Amam to reflect more on the interaction between these groups and other racial minorities in the area, and more generally on how they might reinforce these hierarchies through their lifestyles and patterns of consumption (although she does acknowledge the effect Asian Americans’ dominance in the schooling system has on ethnic minority students).

Having said this, Lung-Amam is highly articulate when sketching the conditional status of their privileged position. She shows how a “model minorities” label does not allow much room for manoeuvre in the realm of local and state politics. Indeed, it seems to present its own set of barriers to integration, in the sense that the mainstream expectation is for the unconditional conformity of these “exemplary minorities”. Moreover, as she notes, for many “their class status is still precarious” (p.66). This point speaks not only to the volatility of the high-tech labour market after the global financial crisis, but also to the wider conditions of omnipresent precarity associated with the global neoliberal economic project. Granted, it is a long way from the bare life precarity of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, or the entrenched disadvantage of other lower class groups. Nonetheless, this class precarity is exacerbated by, and inextricably intertwined with, a generalised, everyday experience of discomfort, dissonance, or lack of ontological security (Noble 2005) that is part and parcel of home-building for migrants. In this sense, considering this group of migrants’ affective experience of “out of placeness”–despite their material resources–encourages a more nuanced understanding migrants’ projects of aspiration and home-making. Moreover, it reinforces the extent to which established (white)
residents enjoy a taken-for-granted status—an unquestioned form of substantive urban citizenship—that has often invisible but multifarious dimensions of privilege built-in.

I found the relatively minimal engagement with literature beyond the US frustrating at times, given the rich work on planning and diversity in other regions. For example (and while acknowledging the critical stance on multiculturalism in the North American context), the body of work in UK, Europe, and Australia dealing with everyday multiculturalism and the politics of accommodation in cities of migration would have provided a sense of the study’s relevance beyond the US context. Yet, Lung-Amam’s work has significant comparative value for the analysis of other locations where conditions of hypermobility, innovation economy wealth, and suburban landscapes converge—i.e. the “techno-ethnoburbs” of Li and Park’s (2006) formulation. As an Australia-based scholar researching Sydney’s multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, I found myself reflecting on the parallels with several Sydney suburbs. While the spatialities of knowledge and tech industry workers are somewhat differently configured, there are clear residential clusters; indeed, some northern parts of Sydney have been labelled “Australia’s Silicon Valley” (Searle and Pritchard 2005). Moreover, issues of “monster homes” and the competition for schooling are highly relevant. The ubiquity of over-sized houses in middle- to outer-ring suburbs is not just an issue of class aesthetics, but also a real problem in cities where a lack of affordable housing and underused homes compound existing spatial pressures. Interestingly, in Australia, the phenomenon of “McMansions” is not limited to upper middle class migrants; it has been framed as a manifestation of values of the conspicuous consumption associated with an emerging aspirational, white working class of “cashed-up bogans” on the periphery of the city (Allon 2006; Pini et al. 2012).

More broadly, Trespassers? raised questions about the politics of aspiration in a global neoliberal economy, and its “spatial fixes” in the everyday spaces of the suburban neighbourhood. It shows how patterns of social inequity in suburban spaces continue to echo
racial divisions that have long patterned these places. Such struggles, as Lung-Amam argues, are not fought on the streets, but rather “are waged more quietly in the city council meetings, with planning commissions, in development reviews hearings, in school board meetings, at parent-teacher conferences, and over the white picket fences of their well-manicured lawns” (p.52). Clearly, municipal structures of governance continue to inscribe dominant class values, with a structural bias towards home-owners and those with the cultural, economic, and human capital required to mobilise these resources. Local government is a notoriously fickle domain where, as Valverde (2012) argues, issues of consultation, participation, and representativeness, issues of city-wide coordination around zoning, and, not least, financial pressures, can have systematically negative effects on ethno-cultural inclusion.

In her conclusion, Lung-Amam argues that examples of “suburban counter-publics” demand a different way of doing things. For example, she argues that “respect for difference also requires an aesthetic sensibility attuned to difference” (p.180). In the context of middle class suburbia, advocating for such a sensibility does bring up problematic concepts of celebratory multiculturalism (that is, an appropriation of difference that caters to white middle class consumption preferences), which Lung-Amam identifies with regard to the council’s appropriation of diversity in the case of Asian-themed malls (“diversity for sale”). Yet, like other scholars in this field (e.g. Noble 2005; Wise 2009), she recognises that such a class-based aesthetic can also be re-appropriated to foster informal, situated forms of mixity and “vernacular cosmpolitanism”. Moreover, she suggests a reconfiguration of the built environment to include more “flexible, open, and ‘loose’ spaces that are complex, contain layers of meaning, express multiple points of view, and offer users different kinds of experiences” (p.180). Yet it left me pondering how municipal processes of governance could be made more inclusive in practice. Examples of what this might look like in terms of urban planning and regulation (e.g.
participatory local governance or movements towards integrating diversity-based urban design principles) would have been worthwhile to signpost.

Despite the deeply entrenched social inequities inscribed in suburban space, there is a sense of optimism in Lung-Amam’s assertion that “suburbia is fertile ground for new beginnings that can rewrite its own narrative of social exclusion…suburbia is now a global meeting ground that may allow new ways of thinking about building inclusive and equitable communities” (p.181). The book is a detailed and eloquent story of how the place-making practices of resourced newcomers confront and challenge normative structures of belonging embedded in everyday space. Throughout, co-habitation and aspiration are awkwardly juxtaposed upon the lived spaces of affluent neighbourhoods, and highlight the need for better accommodation of “landscapes of difference” in sites of arrival.
References


*Rebecca Williamson*
*Department of Sociology*
*Australia National University*
*rebecca.williamson@anu.edu.au*

*December 2017*