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SAMPLE "MY ACADEMIC CONVERSATION" ASSIGNMENT

IDS 494: Interdisciplinary Inquiry
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Dr. Padoongpatt

Asian Americans and a "Right to the Suburb"

Large numbers of Asian Americans moved into suburbs across the United States after World War II, bringing distinctive everyday lifeways, identities, and worldviews that remade American suburbia. By 2010, Asian Americans were the "most suburban" of all ethnic and racial groups, as 62% of Asians called the suburbs home, followed by Latinos (59%) and African Americans (51%).[1] In the process, they made claims on suburban space and tried to assert themselves as full-fledged participants in suburban culture and life historically defined by racial exclusivity and white middle-class norms. However, their presence, ethnic expressions, and ways of life often sparked tensions with other suburbanites that led to heated battles over what suburban neighborhoods should look and feel like. *How and where did Asian Americans try to establish a place for themselves in America's suburbs? And what kinds of conflicts emerged from these attempts?*

Urban studies scholar Willow Lung-Amam offers one of the more recent studies of these complex "battles for suburbia" in her book *Trespassers?* (2017). Lung-Amam analyzes the way Asian American suburbanites in Silicon Valley, California established a sense of belonging and created places centered on their needs, desires, and values. She focuses especially on how Asian shopping malls and plazas provided ethnic-specific and mainstream goods and served as a community hub for Asian Americans. She argues however, that they also generated a great deal of controversy. In different

neighborhoods, local officials and residents deemed the plazas as nonnormative, undesirable, and foreign, rendering them out of place in the retail landscape of middle-class suburbia.[2] As such, many longtime residents sought to maintain white suburban norms in the face of demographic changes via race-neutral mechanisms of exclusion. Religious centers also allowed Asian Americans to practice, redefine, and put on full display their respective religious traditions in a suburban setting. In *Creating a Buddhist Community* (2015), anthropologist Jiemin Bao documents the way a Thai Buddhist temple in Fremont, California served as a place of worship for Thais and White Americans as well as a vibrant community center that hosted festivals and events. Her ethnographic fieldwork at Wat Thai Buddhanusorn revealed that while many supported the temple, it also frustrated local residents and led to fierce, lengthy battles. Bao asserts that it stemmed from racism and xenophobia. Local residents harassed monks and the laity and tried to petition the city to stop temple construction, citing traffic, illegal parking, and violation of single-family use. But Bao found that Thais were not welcomed because they were "misrecognized as poor immigrants or 'boat people,' although they were predominantly urban, affluent, well-educated professionals."[3] Moreover, Bao found that temple officials were also convinced that racial prejudices were "being hidden behind some legitimate claims" as the same residents also expressed fears that "Thai cooking smells would be offensive," "a Buddhist 'cult' would be their midst," and that Thais would "ruin the neighborhood."[4]

Asian American suburbanites also tried to assert a right to the suburb through the architectural design of their homes. Historians Becky Nicolaides and James Zarsadiaz argue that a majority of Asian American homeowners participate in "design assimilation": conceding to hegemonic white American landscape aesthetics and muting Asian design elements, both willingly and through coercion.[5] Design assimilation was especially at play in middle-class and wealthy neighborhoods where, despite rapid demographic changes, Anglo architectural customs persisted. For example, they show that after 1980, Chinese residents in San Marino, California, in spite of their growing numbers, embraced established Euro-American tastes and design principles—Tudor, Spanish Colonial Revival, Mediterranean/Italian Renaissance—because they upheld property values as well as provided an elevated class position and status over other Chinese immigrants in nearby ethnic enclaves. However, Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz argue that these decisions are not always made by choice. Local officials and residents passed measures regulating design, landscaping, and structure to crack down on potential Asian "foreign" aesthetic encroachment into "their" neighborhoods. White San Marino residents, with support from Chinese community leaders, spearheaded a "discreet, preemptive campaign" to shut down any possibility of having Asian immigrants transform the neighborhood's physical appearance.[6]

While they focus on different kinds of sites (shopping plazas, temples, single-family home), Lung-Amam, Bao, and Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz agree that Asian Americans had to fight to create their own spaces and places in the suburbs. In other words, they were born out of disputes. Yet, the scholars seem to disagree when it comes to the nature of the disputes. Lung-Amam and Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz suggest that suburban residents and policymakers used race-neutral and color-blind language to prevent Asian ethnic expression. Bao, on the other hand, asserts that anti-Asian racism and xenophobia drove opposition to the presence of Asian Americans.

My research on Thai food festivals at the Wat Thai temple in suburban Los Angeles aligns more with the insights of Lung-Amam and Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz. I build on these studies by turning attention to a relatively understudied site of suburban placemaking for Asian Americans: ethnic food festivals. More importantly, I will use ethnic food festivals to show how these kinds of tensions and battles over suburban spaces were fueled by more than just anti-Asian racism. In the case of Wat Thai, I want to argue that nearby residents opposed the temple's food festivals not because of personal bigotry toward Thais but because they wanted to reclaim a 1950s suburban ideal rooted in white middle-class values and the sanctity of private property—or a "white spatial imaginary."

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[1] Nicolaides, Becky M. "Introduction: Asian American Suburban History." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 34, no. 2 (2015); William H. Frey, "Melting Pot Cities and Suburbs: Racial and Ethnic Change in Metro America in the 2000s," Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings, State of Metropolitan

America, May 4, 2011: 7, 9, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0504_census_ethnicity_frey.pdf

[2] Willow S. Lung-Amam, *Trespassers?: Asian Americans and the Battle for Suburbia* (Oakland: University of California, 2017), 115–122.

[3] Jiemin Bao, *Creating a Buddhist Community: A Thai Temple in Silicon Valley* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 61

[4] Bao, "From Wandering to Wat: Creating a Thai Temple and Inventing New Space in the United States," *Amerasia Journal* 34, no. 3 (2006): 6

[5] Becky Nicolaides and James Zarsadiaz, "Design Assimilation in Suburbia: Asian Americans, Built Landscapes, and Suburban Advantage in Los Angeles' San Gabriel Valley since 1970," *Journal of Urban History* 43, no. 2 (2017): 332-71

[6] Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz, "Design Assimilation in Suburbia," 344-345

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