Suburban Life and Racial Construction

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In the American imaginary, suburbs have long been theorized as homogenous places—disparagingly described in Lewis Mumford's celebrated urban history (1961:509) as "a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group". On the latter point, Jane Jacobs (1961) noted that the tolerance for racial difference in suburban life was low, reaffirming a common image of suburbia as uniformly white space. This paper examines and compares two ethnographic works that address this perception in two very different contexts: Wendy Cheng's *The Changs Next Door to the Díazes*, a 2013 book on a racially-diverse Los Angeles suburb, and Rachel Heiman's *Driving After Class*, a 2015 book on a well-to-do New Jersey community that originated in mid-century white flight. Ultimately, both ethnographies portray suburbs as changing environments where racial citizenships and hegemonies are both maintained and challenged in everyday life.

Heiman's *Driving After Class* (2015) is set at the tail-end of the 1990s in the anonymized New Jersey town of "Danboro", which is described as a community where "residents are not just suburban American, but ethnic white, post-urban suburban American" (p. 34)—a town built by and for upwardly-mobile baby boomers who fled a darkening Brooklyn and a declining New York City behind for the suburbs in the 1960s and 70s. Indeed, Danboro is situated in the book as "post-Brooklyn" (p. 37), with the New York borough representing everything which Danboro was not and which its residents had chosen to leave behind: chaos, diversity, and the cosmopolitan big city. Over the course of two years, Heiman follows several striving families with school-age children in their daily lives. Although they are all comfortably middle class, they are insecure about their status and put up a facade of material wealth (p. 59) to engage in "class passing (with all its racial implications)" (p. 69). Heiman captures a key moment in which the

community's self-identity is challenged and its anxieties reach a boiling point through the lens of a contentious local debate about redistricting, when the construction of a new school and the consequential reorganization of catchment areas meant that Danboro kids risked being sent to the stigmatized, more diverse high school in the poorer nearby town of Milldale.

In examining the redistricting battle, it is clear that Danboro residents construct themselves within their whiteness in opposition to a racialized other. They are acutely aware of a growing ethnic presence in the area, with Stu (a local father) lamenting the growing number of non-white faces on the bus (p. 48) and Rachel (a mother for whom Heiman works during her fieldwork) engaging in disparaging commentary of immigrant labor (p. 106). Danboro's residents also traffic liberally in stereotypes, falsely claiming the presence of metal detectors at Milldale High School due to the presence of Black and Hispanic "tough guys" (p. 177), both tropes of so-called inner-city schools, to vilify the redistricting plan at public hearings. However, they are also conscious of the racial connotations of their words and speak only in coded terms, framing their apprehension as rooted not in racism but in community spirit (p. 172) or in concerns over a "bad area" and a lack of people "that I could relate to" (p. 131). Overall, Heiman concludes that racial fears in the community are widespread and founded on "residual white-flight sensibilities" (p. 49) and class insecurity in an increasingly polarized global neoliberal political economy (p. 223).

Whereas Danboro can be said to be the archetypical American suburb, Cheng's study (2013) conversely deals with a unique neologism: the ethnoburb. Set in the West San Gabriel Valley, an inner suburb of Los Angeles, the book explores how Mexican and Asian American immigrants developed a new common identity within "worlds of their own" (p. 13). The community has its roots in in the 1970s, when the first Mexican and Asian American families

negotiated entry into the hitherto-white area despite concerted racial steering by realtors and existing residents to keep them out (p. 37), overcoming a type of informal segregation described by Massey and Denton (1998) by presenting themselves as model minorities, emphasizing their respectable professions over their race, or, for many Mexicans, downplaying their racialized identity and passing as white (p. 38). Nonetheless, as their ranks grew, white neighbours increasingly felt uncomfortable with the challenge to the existing racial order and left en masse (p. 45). As such, the towns in the Valley represent an extension of the phenomenon of white flight to a suburban context, resulting in some of the country's first majority-minority suburbs (p. 42).

A different kind of suburban racial identity exists in the Valley, where normative associations between homeownership and whiteness have become peripheral due to the overwhelming non-white presence (p. 13). Like with Danboro's post-Brooklyn identity, where the community's racial attitudes remain shaped by a shared experience and continued apprehension of invasion and succession in Brooklyn, white flight proves foundational to the Valley's sense of self by creating a shared history of racialization among its residents and "a world view that challenged and opposed whiteness as property" (p. 60). However, unlike Danboro, this results not in a common identity based on segregation through an exclusion of the racialized other but in a post-racial acceptance of diversity, where "everyone had an equal claim to the neighborhood" (p. 50).

In both studies, race remains an omnipresent component of their communities' identities, but the way in which it manifests diverges based on shared senses of history, experience and privilege. For Heiman (2015), whiteness is a potent symbol of status to Danboro's affluent white residents and the defence of the town's racial order becomes intertwined with the protection of

its residents' social standing. Race is thus clearly constructed as a by-product of class, where the ability to move to the suburbs, away from the darkening inner city, is seen by the upwardly mobile white middle class as the fulfillment of their American Dream (p. 37). Thus, whiteness, as much as having a nice house (p. 63) or a fancy car (p. 64), became a jealously guarded status symbol and means of differentiation with the have-nots. This differs significantly from Cheng's study (2013), as to the West San Gabriel Valley's lower middle-class racialized subjects, race—or more specifically, racism—is a shared community trauma and the basis of a collective solidarity to challenge normative racial hegemonies. Though class sensitivity remains present, it plays a smaller role in the Valley, where there is "relative class parity" (p. 4) and a limited acceptance of class differences among members of the community (p. 49). Whereas Heiman's well-to-do subjects in Danboro seemingly cannot conceive of racialized others as anything but of a lower-class (p. 25), class diversity even within ethnic groups, e.g. Chinese Americans (p. 10), makes it a much less useful tool of differentiation in the West San Gabriel Valley. As such, while both ethnographies clearly deal with race, they propose different mechanisms by which it has achieved its importance to the respective community's identity: economic status versus experiences of racialization.

Though broadly similar in subject and in identifying race as a central concept to suburban identity, differences between the two works begin to emerge in in their methodology.

The researchers find themselves in different positionalities vis-à-vis their subjects. Wendy Cheng is a Taiwanese American scholar with deep-rooted family ties in the West San Gabriel Valley and personal familiarity with the community (2013:vii). This allowed her to engage in snowball sampling using her immediate family as a launching point (p. 20), which in turn enabled her to explore community links and common identities through natural relationships

across ethnic lines. Although Rachel Heiman (2015) has no prior links to Danboro, the facts that she grew up in a similar New Jersey suburban community and that she shared race, class, education level and cultural capital with her subjects (p. 109) made it easy for her to find acceptance within the community, to the point where she secured a position within a local family as an "ethnographic babysitter" (p. 104) without so much as an interview because the mother, Rachel, had a "really good feeling" (p. 111) based on Heiman's social status. By presenting herself as a professional middle-class white woman, Heiman was accepted in the community and gained intimate access to the world of Danboro through the social connections of the family that employed her. Thus, despite their different positions, both women were well-situated to achieve social proximity to their subjects and to immerse themselves in their worlds (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:2).

Another meaningful distinction is subject selection. Heiman (2015) is acutely aware of the high social status of her subjects and notes a widespread perception in the area that Danboro has "an extreme sense of privilege and entitlement" (p. 172) and commands immense political influence in local affairs, such as in their influence over the school redistricting process (p. 189). As such, she coins the term "rugged entitlement" to describe the town's residents—as neoliberal subjects who engage in performative reaffirmations of their class and merit in order to temporarily alleviate shared anxieties about their social status in an era where upward social mobility is shrinking and where the government programs that enabled the stratospheric post-war growth of the middle class face retrenchment (p. 4). Conversely, Cheng (2013) looks at the opposite strata of society, on "people who are beneath the public radar" and without an organized voice (p. 10). While Heiman's subjects are those who have the means to escape transforming neighbourhoods and the power to stop encroachment on their way of life, Cheng instead focuses

on those left behind in the wake of white flight—the racialized lower middle-class—and how they adapt to their situation.

The two works both interact extensively with the existing literature and extend on previous ethnographies. *Driving After Class* is presented as a sequel of sorts to studies of working-class white resistance to school integration and non-white encroachment in 1970s New York (p. 36). A central theme throughout Heiman's piece (2013) is how her subjects internalize Gramsci's concept of "common sense"—i.e. how the way that individuals think is unconsciously shaped by the neoliberal zeitgeist and its emphasis on personal responsibility and competition (p. 16). In fact, the book even concludes by imploring the reader to challenge the dominant common sense of our era (p. 231).

Because of this theoretical underpinning, Heiman takes a strongly structural view of her subjects, asking the reader not to judge them for "their small part in the entrenchment of neoliberalism" and declaring that her ultimate goal was to "understand the limits of what people (…) were becoming in a pivotal historical moment" (p. 32). While this does make a forceful case for the centrality of class insecurity to white suburban life, it also downplays the agency of her subjects and may fail to capture indigenous meanings by imposing preconceptions about their intentions (Emerson et al. 1995:12). For instance, when Wendi (one of her subjects' teenage daughters) professes her desire to always own a sport utility vehicle, this is presented as an instance of class insecurity—with the SUV's safety features compared to the middle class' search for stability in their status and their internationalization of neoliberal values (p. 161). This is, needless to say, a rather fanciful analogy. Although class may be present without being explicitly identified by a member (Emerson et al. 1995:138), Heiman's case for a class-based analysis of Wendi's taste in cars seems reductionist and does not appear to be supported by a

plain reading of the brief interview. Indeed, instances in the book where subjects are allowed to speak for themselves, rather than paraphrased by Heiman or quoted in a handful of words, are few and far between.

The reductionist approach that frames Danboro residents as neoliberal agents might also fall into the trap of out-group heterogeneity bias (Small 2018:6) by avoiding analysis of the dissenting voices within the town that appear throughout the book. At the school board's public hearings, a man is recorded as declaring that "I'm not always proud to be from Danboro!" (Heiman 2015:190)—disagreeing with many of his fellow residents' fears about redistricting. Meanwhile, Stu (one of Heiman's subjects whose views on race are depicted as an example of white anxiety) admits that his children call him Archie Bunker, a reference to the famously bigoted patriarch from the sitcom *All in the Family* (p. 40). One might thus ask whether Stu and his like-minded cohorts are truly representative of the town as a whole, or whether they might form a vocal, civically active minority. However, as views within the town that challenge the racialization of the common other are not presented in the book, the answer remains unknown.

On the other hand, *The Changs Next Door to the Díazes* (Cheng 2013) is presented as a continuation of a nascent field of study about how many so-called ethnic enclaves could actually be seen as multiethnic spaces (p. 10). Like *Driving After Class*, the book makes reference to the Gramscian concept of common sense, describing the logic of a "regional racial formation" in its terms. However, unlike Heiman's (2015) common sense, which is externally imposed by greater national and global forces such as neoliberalism (p. 16), Cheng's (2013) common sense is created at the regional level of the Valley community, and, far from being an immutable societal force, is understood to be "provisional, daily, and constantly shifting"—though still influenced by certain unchangeable facts of wider society (p. 11). This view, which highlights the

importance of the individual and challenges a static view of the community's identity, can be seen as a clear contrast to Heiman's more structural understanding of how race and class are constructed in the American suburb. While Danboro's residents are said to still live in a post-Brooklyn world where the decades-old experience of white flight remains salient and at the forefront of their minds, the people of the West San Gabriel Valley have instead moved on from their traumatic history and continue to evolve, with the emergence of new streetwear brands celebrating the area's identity (p. 2) and cross-ethnic friendships amongst the youth (p. 54) indicating that, beyond simply home to a diversity of ethnic cultures, the Valley was increasingly also a place with an indigenous hybrid culture.

Cheng's work appears to better capture indigenous meanings, providing fairly lengthy excerpts from her formal interviews to provide context and backing to her claims and displaying views from many subjects of all ages and ethnicities, many of whom support the thesis of the development of a socially egalitarian common identity, but some of whom also challenge it to a degree. For instance, she features the experiences of Japanese American residents who describe a new wave of Chinese immigration in animalistic terms (p. 60), showing a degree of latent ethnic conflict, while still noting that they ultimately felt at ease in the community (p. 61). Likewise, Cheng readily admits that a shared experience of racialization and an acceptance of diversity do not necessarily translate to an end to racism, noting that the trope of the studious Asian student had been internalized within the regional common sense and thus offered a form of racial privilege for Asian Americans over their Chicano counterparts in the education system (p. 74). While most members of the community appear to have embraced their collective solidarity, these challenges present a fairly compelling case that, as Cheng theorizes, the local community is

bound by both a regional common sense of diversity and some persistent elements of the national common sense of racial hegemony.

One final methodological issue to note is that the experiences of white flight from the Valley are described solely from the perspective of the newly arrived Asian and Mexican American residents. Although, just as in studies of gentrification such as Freeman (2006), it is admittedly difficult to get the perspectives of those who have left a neighbourhood, their lack of direct representation does raise questions about the accuracy of their stated motivations. The only white perspective comes from a single contemporary newspaper interview, in which an older resident attacks the Asian presence as an invasion and decries their failure to act American (p. 45). This is presented as evidence that many locals had nativist sentiments, but how widespread these beliefs were among the original white populace may be unknowable. Indeed, many of the interviewees even propose an alternative cultural explanation, declaring that Asian and Mexican Americans rarely sold their homes while "Anglos" did so liberally—potentially explaining the longevity of the former's presence in the Valley (p. 43).

Heiman and Cheng are certainly not the first to challenge our normative perceptions of the American suburb. As early as 1961, Gans critiqued the image of the suburbs as dull, uniform ways of life and wrote that their residents "do not develop new life styles or ambitions for themselves and their children" (1961:409). However, that opposite view is likewise challenged by these two works. The people of Danboro clearly do adopt new, distinctly suburban lifestyles where class anxieties caused by the rise of a neoliberal common sense are soothed by performative displays of material wealth, while the Valley's residents have created a syncretic culture as a function of their "geography of differentiated space" in a racialized suburban neighbourhood (Cheng 2013:49).

Ultimately, despite some methodological concerns, what both ethnographies present is a nuanced understanding of racial construction that simultaneously challenges and reaffirms the orthodox homogenous image of suburbia in the American imaginary. In *Driving After Class*, although Danboro is presented as fairly homogenous, there is a clear sense that this fact is not set in stone. Indeed, the aggressive and increasingly desperate resistance that its residents mount against the redistricting project betrays an ever-present fear that the growing diversity of the surrounding areas—as demonstrated by residents' apprehension concerning schools, buses and immigrant labor—may soon engulf the town. Meanwhile, *The Changs Next Door to the Díazes* challenges the idea that a suburb must be ethnically homogenous, while simultaneously affirming that there are limits to tolerance in suburban space, as exemplified by the flight of its white residents and the continued presence of some latent racial conflict beneath the surface. Together, they enable us to understand how racial inclusion and exclusion are constructed, challenged and maintained in suburban space.

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