

# 1 Gardens of Migration

When a fire destroyed the chaparral on a hillside in LA's Griffith Park in 1971, Amir Dialameh, an Iranian immigrant who worked as a wine shop clerk, got the idea to build a garden there. He began by terracing two acres with pick and shovel and his own bodily strength, clearing burnt-up tree stumps and planting jacaranda trees for shade, as well as magnolias, pines, pepper trees, roses, geraniums, bougainvillea, ferns, and succulents. For nearly three decades, this lifelong bachelor hiked up the hill to tend the garden, working about four hours daily, scarcely taking a vacation. He paid for all of these plants on his own and installed steps and benches that he painted with colorful designs. Once word got out about the public garden, some people offered money to cover the plant costs, but he refused cash donations, reciting his rhyme "In the land of the free, plant a tree." To show his love for America, he laid out rocks to read *USA*, and when he worked in this hillside oasis he flew an American flag. This garden was his act of creation on the earth, and it became his home and his connection to humanity and the universe at large. "I created this place," he said. "It is like my family."<sup>1</sup>

Gardens are deceptive. They are seemingly place bound, enclosed, and immobile patches of earth with plants, yet they are products of movement

and migration. In elementary school we learn that seeds scattered by wind and sea and carried across the ocean from one continent to another allow plants to sprout in new places and that bees, water, and photosynthesis allow plants to thrive. But why do gardens look the way they do? And what do gardens reveal about the people who make and inhabit them? These answers are to be found in the movement and migration of people, plants, and ideas about garden design.

In *Paradise Transplanted*, I examine Southern California gardens through a migration lens. It is my conviction that we cannot understand these gardens without acknowledging that nearly all the plants, the people and the water in Southern California have come from elsewhere. Lush tropical foliage from equatorial regions, lawns, and towering trees now dominate the landscape in this arid semidesert, and today these appear to be “naturalized,” but photographs from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show this region as it once was: wide-ranging plains filled with scrubby chaparral and with few trees to relieve the flatness. Native landscape has been replaced by the built landscape you now see when your flight departs from LAX—a vast horizontal sprawl of buildings and a maze of streets and freeways with palm trees, shrubs, and patches of green grass growing in the crevices, some thriving in vacant lots and in between asphalt cracks, and some in gardens meticulously designed and maintained, but all of it sandwiched between sea and sun-drenched hills and desert.

The gardens of Southern California are defining elements of the region. They have been produced by the sedimentation of distinctive eras of conquest and migration, exerting an influence on who we are, how we live, and what we become. In poor urban neighborhoods and wealthy residential enclaves, gardens surround the homes and apartments where migrants, immigrants, and the fifth-generation descendants of earlier newcomers now live. These gardens can be read like tattoos or graffiti, as ways that our social and cultural expression has left marks on the landscape. In turn, these gardens shape who we are as individuals and as a society.

Gardens are diverse and laden with multiple meanings. Most basically, a garden is a plot of earth used for growing, enjoying, and displaying trees, flowers, and vegetables. Gardens can be distinguished from parks (used

primarily for recreation) and agricultural farms (used primarily for food production), although there is clearly some overlap. Landscape architects Mark Francis and Randolph T. Hester define the garden as an idealization, a place, and an action, emphasizing that “by making gardens, using or admiring them, and dreaming of them, we create our own idealized order of nature and culture.”<sup>2</sup>

In this book I underscore the sociological implications of migration and gardens, unearthing social, cultural, and economic consequences of Southern California gardens. I share what I have learned in my study of paid immigrant gardeners in suburban residential gardens; urban community gardens in some of the poorest, most densely populated neighborhoods of Los Angeles; and the most elite botanical garden in the West. To tell this story of labor, community, and status in the gardens of Southern California, I rely on over one hundred interviews, ethnographic observations, and historical analysis. I begin by framing the study with three claims, which I sketch below.

#### GARDENS AS MIGRATION PROJECTS

For more than two centuries, people have trekked to Southern California to fulfill dreams for a better life, and the quest for the good life here has generally included palms, orange trees, and lawn. The idea that the good life is situated in a garden is an old idea, echoing the biblical Garden of Eden and the Islamic paradise, and today, from trendy wall gardens to healthy school gardens, garden imagery continues to define our notions of ideal surroundings. As people have remade themselves in Southern California, they have transformed the gardenscape, and this interaction between migrants and the environment has produced gardens. This is a historical process encompassing the successive conquests and migrations, as I detail in chapter 2. It began with the Spanish missionaries’ enslavement of Native Americans and the Anglo-American appropriation of Mexican land and continued with the widespread employment of first Japanese and now Mexican immigrant gardeners toiling in residential gardens. In the process, native landscapes have become gardens of migration.

Gardens are always produced by the interaction between plant nature and culture, and because of its conscious cultivation, every form of garden embodies both pleasure and power, but a constant defining feature of Southern California is the significance of migration. Migration culture and aspirations have shaped the gardens here since the eighteenth century. In turn, the gardens have influenced the society that has formed here.

Today, immigrants from around the globe come to Southern California, joining prior immigrants and domestic migrants who came from other parts of the country. Even when migrants have occupied subordinate social positions and have found themselves excluded from legal citizenship, subjected to racism, and relegated to bad low-wage jobs, they have actively cultivated plants and gardens. In this regard, gardens can serve as minizones of autonomy, as sites and practices of transcendence and restoration. Gardens offer compensation for lost worlds, bringing moments of pleasure, tranquility, and beauty, and they articulate future possibilities.

These acts of migrant creation are projects of self-expression and social creativity. Building on the work of others, I have come to see gardens as a form of storytelling, as individual and community efforts to shape outdoor surroundings and plant nature in ways that we find desirable and congenial.<sup>3</sup> As we shape the landscape, we are crafting ourselves and projecting our ideas of how nature and culture should look. As landscape designer and historian Wade Graham reminds us, however, “The drama of self-creation isn’t straightforward”; rather, it is “full of deviations, diversions, dodges, and impersonations.”<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes we seek to transform ourselves and the garden provides a vehicle for that aspiration. Sometimes we seek a sense of freedom, or of control when our lives feel out of our own control, and the garden provides that too. From the level of individuals up to nations, gardens tell a story about the people who create them, their aspirations, yearnings, and anxieties.

We used to think of immigrants and migrants being inserted into new physical spaces and just learning to “fit in,” becoming like the majority that already lived there. We called this theory *assimilation*, and sociologists, with our penchant for quirky jargon, derived many variants—straight-line assimilation, segmented assimilation, bumpy-line assimila-

tion, and racialized assimilation, among others. Most of this focused on social institutions and groups, such as workplaces, schools, and civic spheres.

These perspectives implied that immigrants are like passive plants, when in fact they are among the most agentic, willful people on the planet.<sup>5</sup> They are the ones who picked up and left, who either were driven out or elected to go elsewhere and enact the drama of starting anew. The garden metaphor of the “the uprooted” and “the transplanted” might be productively reversed, as the writer Patricia Klindienst has suggested. “What would become visible,” she asks, if we “focused on the immigrant as a *gardener*—a person who shapes the world rather than simply being shaped by it?”<sup>6</sup>

This view sees gardens as an expression of immigrant agency and creation, with immigrants using homeland seeds and plants to anchor themselves in a new place, bringing together culture and nature to materially remake a strange new environment into a familiar home. In this view, the cultivation of particular flowers, herbs, vegetables, and fruits forges critical connections to cultural memory and homeland. Bulbs and seeds, sometimes illegally smuggled across borders by friends and relatives and sometimes purchased at a local store, are planted in backyard gardens, on balconies, on windowsills, in the hidden spaces of apartment building lots, and in community gardens, providing a narrative of home continuity and familiarity that is particularly meaningful for immigrants from rural, preindustrial societies.<sup>7</sup>

But it would be a mistake to see this as a matter of simple ethnic continuity and reproduction. Immigrants also adopt new practices. And sometimes their garden replicas of their homeland are enthusiastically adopted by others, inverting the story of assimilation. That is what we are now seeing with the current global food fashion, as upscale restaurants and publications enthusiastically tout the joys of growing and eating *chipilin* and *papalo*, culinary herbs from southern Mexico and Central America that still remain unknown to many people in central and northern Mexico. “The Global Garden,” a weekly feature by Jeff Spurrier that ran for two years in the *Los Angeles Times*, provided a multicultural tour of LA gardens and educated readers about the new edible plants that recent immigrants have brought to Southern California, including *papalo*, the

pungent culinary herb popular in Puebla and Oaxaca, which has now also been featured in the upscale food magazine *Saveur*.<sup>8</sup> *Papalo* has now even migrated into that iconic zenith of French-California cuisine, Alice Waters's Chez Panisse restaurant kitchen garden in Berkeley, showing the power of humble immigrant culture to reshape the mainstream. To be globally omnivorous is today a sign of cosmopolitan status, and immigration and immigrant cities are vehicles for this process. Immigrant cultivation feeds and revitalizes the mainstream.

Elements of gardens have always been borrowed, copied, and deliberately inspired by other gardens, but now garden conventions and styles circulate transnationally with relative ease. These exchanges are concentrated in global, cosmopolitan metropolises that bring together people from many corners of the earth. Sometimes migrants from very urban, industrial societies who are accustomed to living in apartments without tending plants pick up new gardening ideas and practices when they come to the United States. In *The Global Silicon Valley Home*, landscape architect Shenglin Chang shows how Taiwanese engineers and their families who migrated to the Silicon Valley embraced single-detached family homes with green lawns and foliage planted around the perimeter, an aesthetic form and home preference long associated with British, Australian, and American conventions. This kind of domestic garden has now been transplanted to Taiwan, as trans-Pacific migrant commuters bring back a preference for Mission Revival-style homes with red tile roofs and carefully tended lawns that they first experienced in California. They report taking pleasure in displaying the "home's face" with a front-yard garden, although some, like many Americans, dislike the tedium of lawn care. These lawns and gardens constitute new transnational and material forms of what Peggy Levitt has referred to as "social remittances," cultural and social practices that migrants take back to their place of origin.<sup>9</sup>

Similar processes are under way in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, where Southern California-style detached homes and gardens signal conspicuous consumption and "status on both sides of the Pacific."<sup>10</sup> In Hong Kong, a gated housing development called Palm Springs offers home buyers "the look, feel and beauty of southern California" with "palm-lined streets and picturesque scenery." These housing developments promise the California dream in Asia, and, as Laura Ruggeri compellingly suggests,

they have been deliberately “imagineered” on the Southern California model, facilitated by circuits of transnational capital.<sup>11</sup>

Not all immigrants and transnational subjects adopt new gardening practices and forms. Elsewhere on the West Coast, affluent immigrants from Hong Kong have been criticized for refusing to adopt neo-English styles of lawn and naturalistic plantings.<sup>12</sup> But the point is that the material life of homes and gardens now circulates in transnational flows and that contemporary migration facilitates this process.

In my approach to understanding the role of migration in creating gardens and transforming the landscape, I underscore the influence of social inequalities. Labor migrants and refugees fleeing war, violence, and economic devastation, for example, face different scenarios in their engagements with gardens and gardening practices than do transnational entrepreneurs and engineers. While some of the privileged circulate as citizens with access to multiple passports, multiple homes, and a vast array of credentials and financial resources, others operate in a state of restricted legal and economic possibilities. It’s an age of international migration that is characterized by what Steven Vertovec has dubbed “super-diversity,” drawing people of different origins, legal statuses, and social classes together in metropolitan regions.<sup>13</sup> This too shapes gardens.

Many of the eleven million undocumented immigrants who live and work “without papers” in the United States do not own private property with expansive gardens. Yet agriculture and gardening have long served as job sectors for disenfranchised immigrant workers, especially in the western United States. Many of these same immigrant workers have operated with what Cecilia Menjivar has called “liminal legality,” a gray zone of temporary visas, permits, or waiting for the possibility of regularizing status.<sup>14</sup> In various places around the world, agriculture and gardening jobs have employed migrants with experience working in rural, preindustrial peasant and farming societies. And that is the story throughout the West Coast region, including Southern California, where gardening became an important sector of the immigrant labor market and a route of economic incorporation, especially for Mexican and Asian immigrant men from rural backgrounds. Today, Latino immigrant men are disproportionately employed in residential maintenance gardening, but it was Japanese immigrant and Japanese American men who invented the job as we know

it today. While Basque, Vietnamese, Central American, and Korean immigrant men from rural backgrounds also work in California gardening, the job is today mostly performed by men of Mexican origin.

It is also important to take account of traces, sedimentation, and vestiges of past migrations. The sedimentation of prior migrations and the vestiges of garden ideas and plants and practices that were once popular remain on the land. These now appear side by side with new plantings and practices that reflect contemporary migration. As Yen Le Espiritu has underscored, immigrant communities express yearnings for homeland not only through the physical reshaping of their surroundings but also through the imagination, so that ideas, memories, images, and practices that are disconnected from the physical space where one lives help to define home. As she reminds us, "Home is both an *imagined* and an *actual* geography."<sup>15</sup>

Sometimes immigrants rely on deliberately modified perceptions that allow them to see the new landscape, and their place in it, in ways that remake their original home. They are trying to maintain dignity and restore their place in the world. For example, in a study of early twentieth-century Japanese and Punjab farmworkers who were exploited in the California fields and denied citizenship, Karen Leonard found that they reinterpreted the Sacramento Valley as similar to their homeland and saw themselves as "rulers on the land . . . subverting the imposition of the racial and ethnic stereotypes that portrayed them as powerless laborers in California agriculture."<sup>16</sup> This too is a kind of place making and exhibits agency and imagination of the type that allows immigrants to endure challenging conditions.

Gardens, through actions and the imagination, enable migrants to create new homes, attachments, and means of livelihood that link the past with the present. Through gardening, immigrants may transcend and resist their marginalization.

#### PLEASURE AND POWER

Most garden writers describe gardens as sites of beauty and enchantment, enclosed havens of tranquillity fenced off from the harshness of the world. As Robert Pogue Harrison has eloquently reflected, gardens, like intoxica-



tion, art, storytelling, and religion, make human life bearable. They re-enchanted the present, slow down time, provide the satisfaction of cultivation, care, and creative expression, and fill yearnings for pleasure, sustenance, and restoration.<sup>17</sup>

I too am convinced that gardens are life-affirming, transcendent sites, with practices that sustain us and connect us, but I think it is also important to understand how gardens are bound up with the larger society, with power, inequalities, dislocations, sickness, and even violence. People have depended on plant life to provide sources of food, magic, medicine, and comfort for eons, and now there is empirical evidence that gardens have the capacity to heal. Today some landscape designers, responding to this idea that there is a basic human desire to be around plants—sometimes called chlorophilia or biophilia—dedicate their practice to designing therapeutic healing gardens for hospitals, nursing homes, and the infirm. Research suggests that looking at a garden, or even just looking at photographs of trees and plants, reduces stress and quickens postsurgical recovery.<sup>18</sup> Scientists are now discovering that smelling herbal and floral fragrance releases endorphins that reduce pain and diminish stress. Even sticking our hands in soil releases serotonin. The pleasure that we take in gardens is emotionally and physically restorative.

What might gardens do for existential woes? For financial and emotional stress and the pains of injustice? For the feeling of being overwhelmed by bureaucracy and anonymous, fast-paced life in concrete cities? For feelings of displacement, the loss of family ties, and social exclusion in a foreign land? The life-affirming and restorative qualities of gardens become even more critical during periods of crisis, as Kenneth I. Helphand has shown. When war, death, and destruction loom, when entire communities have been forcibly removed from their homes and unjustly imprisoned in subhuman conditions, people have often sought relief by planting, tending, and contemplating in gardens. Relying on meticulous research, Helphand shows how soldiers deployed in World War I trench warfare, Jews locked up during the Warsaw ghetto's early period (1940–41), and Japanese Americans detained in World War II internment camps all cultivated gardens in brutal, almost unimaginable conditions, sometimes even in bomb craters, surrounded by death, destruction, and dehumanization. These gardens were not passive retreats

or escapes but sites of resistance and defiance for people facing inhumane conditions. Garden making allowed these groups “a way to control something in the midst of chaos. They represented home and hope.”<sup>19</sup> These gardens offered both sustenance and transcendence, providing food and connecting people to meaningful activity, to their pasts, and to a more optimistic future. Yen Le Espiritu has uncovered similar garden and shrine-building activities among the Vietnamese who were held in military refugee processing camps in Guam and the Philippines during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>20</sup>

Not all immigrants and refugees suffer war and forced imprisonment, but as people move across regions and nations they experience hardship, uncertainty, risk, and dislocation. Gardens, especially private residential gardens and urban community gardens, enable immigrants to create new homes and forge new sources of attachment. To be a gardener is to be optimistic and future oriented, investing effort that will make the next season, the next year, and the next decade bear fruit and fragrance.

While gardens are sites of pleasure, sustenance, healing, and restoration, they can also project power and strengthen social processes of inequality and labor exploitation. Big grand gardens not only display power and domination over nature and others but are built on relations of inequality. We might look at them with awe and admiration, but we should also recognize that they embody rigid boundaries of exclusion. In fact, the construction of some gardens might require the destruction of other people’s homes and livelihoods. This too is the story of Southern California gardens, which are cultivated on land that was violently taken from Native Americans.

Typically, garden grandeur conceals garden labor. Louis XIV’s Versailles and Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello are revered for the grand ambitions of their creators, but making these gardens required other men to move mountains. In this vein, sociologist Chandra Mukerji argues that the building of Versailles can be seen as a material practice of territorial state power: it created a garden landscape that showcased military engineering techniques in garden terracing, used basic principles of the water system of Paris to develop garden irrigation, and demonstrated the reach of French trading networks in the importation of exotic plants.<sup>21</sup> While Monticello is said to embody the democratic, agrarian impulses of Thomas

Jefferson and is sometimes posited as the aesthetic antithesis of the garden formality at Versailles, it was built and maintained with coerced labor, beginning as a plantation. Slaves tilled the soil for one of the most famous proponents of American democracy, as Jefferson owned over six hundred slaves in his lifetime, many of whom planted and tended his cash crops and his vast ornamental plant collections.

This pattern continues in the present. Status and distinction accrue to the owners and designers of grand gardens, but the actual gardeners who plant, tend, and maintain the gardens remain invisible. "Garden history," as Martin Hoyles remarks, "has usually been a study of ownership, design and style . . . yet the labour in making gardens is crucial."<sup>22</sup> The invisibility of garden labor is reproduced in garden books and magazines and is thrown into relief in Southern California, where thousands of perfectly manicured gardens are maintained by Latino immigrant gardeners. At the University of Southern California campus where I work, the garden grounds are always beautifully maintained, but every year just before graduation the flower beds are festively, miraculously plumped out overnight, with hundreds of flats of blooming annuals in crimson and gold, the Trojan colors, inserted into elaborately designed flower beds. The Latino men who do this work remain invisible because, like the gardeners at Disneyland, they are dispatched and called to duty in the wee hours before dawn, before students, professors, and visitors arrive. The gardeners are erased from the garden landscape, yet they are critical to its production.

As Douglas Mitchell suggested in *Lie of the Land*, the beauty of the California landscape obscures the human costs of labor camps and exploited migrant farmworkers who produce that agricultural landscape, and so it is with gardening labor in metropolitan Southern California.<sup>23</sup> When the Latino immigrant gardeners are visible and audible with the tools of their trade, the gas-powered mowers and blowers, they are subjected to vitriolic criticism. As Laura Pulido has emphasized, landscapes and spatial processes of suburbanization and decentralization in Southern California have been shaped by racial privilege.<sup>24</sup> The latest manifestation of this pattern features white home owners blaming Mexican gardeners for the noise they make doing the work that home owners command them to do. Privileged home gardens depend on the labor of racialized others, and today this involves a triangle of labor and cash that flows between

home owners, the gardeners who own the trucks and tools, and their employee gardeners.

Gardens display power by projecting status and conspicuous consumption. Writing over one hundred years ago in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen outlined his theory of how standards of taste hinge on the consumption of nonproductive goods. From lavish expenditures on landscape installations, to the quotidian adoption of lawn and the proliferation of nonshade and non-fruit-bearing trees in residential gardens, and including today's pricey industry of native plants and modern landscape architectural design, public and private gardens are vehicles for conveying leisure, status, and power.

Devotion to gardening as a leisure practice is also a way of displaying cultural refinement and morality. "Conspicuous abstention from labour," Veblen wrote, "becomes the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement."<sup>25</sup> Participation in gardening clubs and garden tours, or simply gardening for pleasure and relaxation, cultivating rose bushes or heirloom tomatoes, falls in this category. Gardening and appreciation of gardens are forms of conspicuous leisure evident in private residential gardens and at botanical gardens, though less at urban community gardens. Municipal regulations that outlaw vegetable gardens on parkways or in front yards and mandate green lawns there instead codify these conventions of conspicuous leisure.

Garden making involves tension between social processes of inequality (e.g., domination, colonization, labor exploitation, and the commodification of plant nature) and the desire for and experience of enchantment. In this way, gardens are about both pleasure and power. They are sites of exclusion, dominance, and status but also restorative places that invite reflection, connection, transcendence, and sustenance, and in Southern California immigrants engage in both sides of the garden story. This is the true story of gardens here.

#### GARDENS SHAPE OUR LIVES

My focus on migration and gardens in this book is also driven by the belief that gardens are constitutive elements of society. They are not passive,

innocent, or superfluous environments. Rather, garden sites and gardening practices help shape the social world of Southern California. Here I am inspired by the historians William Deverell and Greg Hise, whose approach to “metropolitan nature,” considers “how people transform nature in particular sites and . . . how what is created in particular locales is generative for local and broader culture,” and by urban scholars Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear, who maintain that “social life structures territory. . . and territory shapes social life.”<sup>26</sup> This idea can be traced to Carl Sauer, the key figure in the Berkeley School of Cultural Geography, who prompted a shift from seeing landscape as just a passive recipient of human transformation. Later, geographer J. B. Jackson built on this by advancing the idea that the landscape actively influences social and economic processes, shaping the way we live and what we become.<sup>27</sup>

Sociologists have also called attention to the influence of landscape. As Sharon Zukin demonstrates in *Landscapes of Power*, the physical landscape in metropolitan regions is shaped by distinctive eras of social and economic regimes, reconciling market and place in a range of postindustrial situations. Migration is a central part of the story in Southern California and Los Angeles, which she reminds us, was “created by making desert and hills habitable for immigrant labor, both skilled and unskilled.”<sup>28</sup> It required conquest and then constant reinvention, and Zukin underscores how colonized labor and the production of fantasy were key elements of this manufactured landscape.

The myth of a romantic Spanish past, as William Deverell shows in *Whitewashed Adobe*, rewrote the history of Spanish and Anglo conquest and colonization in an attempt to erase the Mexican influence in California.<sup>29</sup> Later, the fantasy of Southern California as the nation’s racialized “white spot” and a matching agricultural and suburban garden paradise was used by boosters and developers to sell alluring visions of the place to new generations of migrants.<sup>30</sup> As historian Lawrence Culver argues, an antiurban ethos and focus on recreation and leisure prevailed in Southern California, supporting the development of single-family, detached homes and private backyard gardens scattered in the valleys and canyons, rather than investment in public parks such as Golden Gate Park in San Francisco or Central Park in New York City. “Instead of bringing nature into the city,” he observes, “they brought the city out into

nature, dispersing housing and allotting private yards rather than public parks.”<sup>31</sup>

Much of the plant nature used to make these gardens came from other continents. Historians show that a cross-pollination across continents began with the “Columbian exchange,” when Columbus’s voyage of 1492 sparked an exchange of plants, animals, and diseases across the Atlantic Ocean, and this process expanded with the trans-Pacific exchange of plants and seeds.<sup>32</sup> These continental exchanges provided a broad array of plants and trees for the creation of fantasy gardens and landscapes. As the historian Jared Farmer underscores, California now boasts more trees than at any time since the Pleistocene era (when mammoths roamed the earth, 2.6 million to 11,700 years ago) because of the very deliberate remaking of the landscape by American settlers and migrants.<sup>33</sup> From the Spanish missions to orange empires, the early movie industry, and later the proliferation of California dream homes and gardens and the creation of the ultimate dreamscape, Disneyland, fantasy gardens constructed from imported plants and seeds have prevailed in Southern California.

Generations of migrants have shaped Southern California gardens, and in turn the gardens have exerted an influence on the society that formed here. For example, Mexican immigrant gardeners are today instrumental in keeping Southern California residential yards looking as perfect as they do, and in turn the regime of garden and lawn care work affects Mexican immigrant gardeners, their economic incorporation, and the life chances and opportunities for them and their families. To be sure, the outcomes are diverse. Gardening is a stratified occupation, in which some gardeners remain mired in minimum-wage jobs, while the “route owner” gardeners who own the trucks and tools earn better incomes by combining entrepreneurship and manual labor.<sup>34</sup> As the research of sociologist Hernan Ramirez shows, the children of the latter are achieving educational and professional success, in part due to their fathers’ ability to earn better than just living wages in the occupation.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, the presence of a vast army of Mexican immigrant gardeners allows many Southern Californians to escape the drudgery of outdoor domestic chores while still enjoying meticulously manicured lawns and gardens unspotted by fallen leaves or debris. The immigrant gardeners’ work allows well-to-do fathers and husbands to meet the new standards

of involved fatherhood and companionate marriage while still protecting home equity and property value. Of course not all home owner households include men living in heteronormative family forms, but the outcome of the immigrant gardener system is the same: the outsourcing of garden labor prompts new higher standards of lawn care, with repercussions for protecting wealth, leisure, and social relationships. Middle-class people who have recently moved here from the Midwest often express surprise at the tidiness of Southern California lawns. There is scarcely a leaf on the ground, and it is the widespread normalization of Mexican immigrant gardening service that allows for that unnatural tidiness.

#### WHY HAS SOCIOLOGY IGNORED GARDENS?

Walk into any remaining brick-and-mortar bookstore, and you are likely to see shelves bulging with books about gardens. Hundreds of gardening books are published every year, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, suggesting just how important gardens are to people. I have read many of them, and I find the popular books fall into three types. First, there are the “how to” guides, offering detailed directives on preparing soil, when to prune, and so on. Another segment consists of the heavy coffee table books with glossy photographs of garden perfection, usually portraying gardens of historical importance or big estates (these tend to be pricey). Then there are garden memoirs, which divulge confessional, personalized accounts of gardening joys and challenges.

The libraries, I discovered, are bulging with scholarly books on gardens written by philosophers, landscape architects, literature scholars, urban planners, environmentalists, art historians, and cultural geographers. A good deal of the scholarly literature is confined to discussions of what we might call “the grand gardens,” which is the term I loosely use to refer to Italian renaissance gardens, Islamic gardens, and the gardens of kings, emperors, and industrialists. “The great innovators” of landscape design (e.g., Gertrude Jekyll, Frederick Law Olmsted, André Le Nôtre) also fill many serious books. Yet the mundane practice of keeping a small kitchen garden or an ornamental residential garden, and what that means to participants and the society at large, with a few excellent exceptions in

England, Australia, and the United States, has received little scholarly attention and sociological analysis.<sup>36</sup> A growing literature critically analyzes the causes and consequences of the American lawn obsession.<sup>37</sup> More recent publications also focus on urban community gardens and the revival of urban farms, which were reinvigorated with the onset of the global financial crisis of 2008.<sup>38</sup>

For the most part, sociologists have ignored gardens. I believe this is because sociology grew as a distinctively urban discipline, one dedicated to studying groups and institutions in cities and attuned to the significance of social problems and social inequalities. Gardens are identified with nature—although they are intersections of culture and nature—so they are perceived to be divorced from society and urban processes. In addition, they have been overlooked as irrelevant, frivolous, and possibly feminine, another cause for disregard. As the geographer Matthew Gandy has noted, “The idea of a radical separation between nature and cities is a powerful current running through Western environmental thought.”<sup>39</sup> Nature is thought to be somewhere “out there,” in rural areas far away from cities and society.<sup>40</sup> In fact, elements of nature surround us constantly, and gardens provide places where we may have the closest daily contact with plant nature. In this regard, the writer Michael Pollan suggests that a garden “may be as useful to us today as the idea of wilderness has been in the past.”<sup>41</sup>

Another reason that sociology has ignored gardens as sites of inquiry is that the discipline is not generally concerned with the quest for pleasure unless it involves deviance and transgression. This is particularly true of the sociology of migration, which has focused on assimilation, development policies, labor exploitation, economic incorporation, and social mobility. Sociology assumes the negative: that sites of pleasure cannot reveal relations of power and inequality. Rural sociology and environmental sociology are subfields revolving around plant nature, but studies here have not pursued investigations of gardens and society.

Yet the connection between people, plants, and places is an ancient one, and I find inspiration in the declaration by the prolific British naturalist writer Richard Mabey that the meanings we assign to gardens and “our vernacular relationships with nature should be taken every bit as seriously” as other arenas of social life.<sup>42</sup> In this book, I rely on ideas from geography, history, sociology, and landscape architecture to animate my



study, and I am also inspired by historian Douglas Sackman's claim that "the making of a garden is a cultural and historical project." Garden landscapes, he reminds us, are "infused with market forces and bound up in a web of economic, political, and ecological exchanges" spanning the globe.<sup>43</sup> Looking at these connections, and at who makes and maintains the gardens, how they are used, and what they mean to people in Southern California, can reveal the tensions and dynamics of our contemporary society. Sociology's earliest inquiries involved understanding the transition from rural, preindustrial, feudal societies to urban industrial capitalism, and the challenges of these transitions are still relevant today as we consider global migration and diverse global metropolitan areas such as Southern California. Studying gardens can give us a fresh way of visiting classic themes of sociological interest.

*Paradise Transplanted* emphasizes that gardens are diverse and in flux and that they always embody pleasure and power. For this reason, I deliberately chose to study very different types of gardens that would allow me to reveal the untold stories of gardens and migration. Two of the garden sites I examine in this book illustrate just how populist, on the one hand, and how elitist, on the other hand, Southern California gardens can be. In inner-city neighborhoods of Los Angeles where people live below the poverty line, I studied how urban community gardens offer opportunities for poor, often undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants to create restorative ties and feelings of home. At the top end of the class spectrum, I analyzed a museum-like garden, the new Chinese Suzhou-style scholar's garden at the Huntington, which displays a form of pre-modern elite refinement and depends on financial contributions of wealthy Taiwanese and Chinese donors. The residential gardens of Southern California provide the third contemporary case. While backyard gardens are generally seen as places of leisure and relaxation, these gardens require constant labor, and I shift the study focus here to the immigrant garden labor system.

Through my analysis of diverse types of gardens, I aim to show how immigrants, migration, and the transnational circulation of ideas and practices have shaped gardens in Southern California and how in turn the gardens exert an influence on contemporary society at large, sometimes with echoes beyond this region.

## THE PLACE AND THE STUDY

Southern California is today a sprawling metropolis that includes a diverse population of twenty-two million people living in a nearly contiguously built area that extends from the US-Mexico border to Santa Barbara, bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the west and the desert to the east. Over 60 percent of Californians live here, with the majority (about twelve million people) packed into the Los Angeles region.<sup>44</sup> It's a multiethnic, multiracial place, with immigrant communities from around the globe. Students in the Los Angeles Unified School District speak more than ninety languages at home. Forty-eight percent of LA's population claim Latin American origins. Today Mexican immigrants are by far the largest immigrant group in Los Angeles, California, and the nation, but immigrants from China, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Central America, Iran, Russia, and many other places have also made their home here in Southern California.

An unmistakable suburban style prevails here, and decades ago the writer Dorothy Parker supposedly called Los Angeles "72 suburbs in search of a city." Today, Los Angeles County alone consists of eighty-eight municipalities, and now many of these suburbs have become or are becoming what the geographer Wei Li has called immigrant "ethnoburbs."<sup>45</sup> Suburban white flight characterized Los Angeles in the mid-twentieth century, but new immigrants have been setting down new roots in the Southern California suburbs and towns for many years now, and increasingly this is a nationwide pattern, with many new immigrants forgoing the inner city to settle in the suburbs.<sup>46</sup> Property is costly here, with the residential enclaves along the coast including some of the most expensive properties in the world, while more affordable detached homes with garden yards are to be found further inland. Prices fluctuate, but the median value of an owner-occupied home in Los Angeles County is nearly half a million dollars.<sup>47</sup>

"Anything grows here," you hear people say, and it's mostly true. The region has been molded and sold as a garden paradise on earth, and plants and people from around the globe mingle here in a mild climate that is often called "Mediterranean" but that contains diverse microclimates and geologic formations offering year-round growing possibilities. As the

British architectural critic Reyner Banham observed in his classic book, “Some of the world’s most spectacular gardens are in Los Angeles, where the southern palm will literally grow next to northern conifers, and it was the promise of an ecological miracle that was the area’s first really saleable product—the ‘land of perpetual spring.’”<sup>48</sup>

The idea that Southern California is an Edenic “island on the land” is still celebrated, but critics such as Mike Davis have countered that it is in fact an “evil paradise” on the brink of ecological disaster, with apocalyptic earthquakes, droughts and floods, and explosive social and racial rebellions responding to deep chasms of inequalities, unfettered capitalism, and environmentally destructive development.<sup>49</sup> The way a lot of gardening is done here—with chemical pesticides and herbicides, scarce imported water, and exploited immigrant labor—is no doubt contributing to a flawed paradise, but the Edenic trope remains dominant. In fact, it is the way most people experience gardens. Close up, at the micro level, encounters with gardens and plants usually bring pleasure and feelings of calmness.

This is a vast region to cover, and I attempt to understand contemporary intersections of migration and Southern California gardens using three empirical case studies, each focusing on a different theme: labor, community, and status. I chose this focus for the sake of practicality and to show the range of sociological processes in garden making (by contrast, I could have focused solely on gardening labor in all three sites). Because I seek to reveal the social meanings people assign to gardens, their engagements with plants, and the social relations and processes supporting them, the methods I use are in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations.

I conducted the empirical field research sequentially, starting in 2007 when a grant allowed me to hire the research assistance of Hernan Ramirez, then a PhD student and now an assistant professor of sociology. Together we designed an interview guide that asked Mexican immigrant maintenance gardeners primarily open-ended questions about occupational experiences, such as job entry, duties, income, wages and expenses, relations with residential clients and coworkers, and dangers encountered on the job. Hernan, the son of a Mexican gardener and himself experienced in working on his father’s jobs, contacted potential interviewees, starting with a small circle and snowballing out to others, ultimately interviewing forty-seven men. Hernan’s familiarity with the social milieu of *jardinería* opened

doors to trust, and he conducted the interviews with sensitivity, thoroughness, and rigor, always probing at just the right moments. We read through these transcripts and coded the data into themes for analysis, a fairly standard procedure that I followed for the other case studies too. Several years later, I conducted fifteen audio-recorded interviews with home owners and landscape designers, asking them about their own garden practices and maintenance, including questions about their relations with the Mexican immigrant gardeners who work for them.

The next stage of research centered on the social dynamics that brought about the Liu Fang Yuan, the first phase of a Chinese Suzhou-style scholar's garden built with \$26 million in donations, much of it from Chinese and Taiwanese philanthropists, and introduced in 2008 at the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens in San Marino. I was interested in the process of how this distinctively non-European garden was introduced into the Huntington, the aspirations and intentions for it, and the ways in which both Chinese American and non-Chinese visitors experienced and perceived the garden, and I designed an ambitious research plan to interview the professional staff, donors, docents (guides in the garden), and first-time visitors to the garden. I conducted rich, informative interviews with some of the highest-ranking professional staff at the Huntington, but I was unable to interview donors and visitors in the garden. This is an old, familiar problem of gaining access to elites and to powerful institutions, and I detail some of these difficulties in "studying up" elsewhere.<sup>50</sup> Analysis of text, therefore, became important. Ultimately I depended on my analysis of Huntington brochures, the promotional DVDs intended to cull new donations, and news reports about the garden, supplemented by six audiotaped interviews with key figures involved in the fund-raising, planning, and building of the new Chinese garden and three interviews with Chinese American local residents. My observations at the garden and the related lecture series round out the analysis. Since I do not read Chinese, I relied on the assistance of Xiaoxin Zeng, a graduate student in sociology, who translated Mandarin materials that appeared in local Chinese newspapers.

To understand immigrant life in urban community gardens, I immersed myself in social life at the "Franklin" and "Dolores Huerta" community gardens—those are pseudonyms—located in the densely populated Latino

immigrant neighborhoods of Pico Union and MacArthur Park/Westlake, just west of downtown Los Angeles. Here I was assisted by Jose Miguel Ruiz, who had grown up in Pico Union and had recently returned after college. We began in the summer of 2010 by going to the gardens at different times of day, on different days of the week, and after we met some people there we fell into a rhythm of participating in the monthly Saturday morning *limpiezas*, the collective cleanups that are required of the plot holders, where we pruned, raked, swept, pulled weeds, chopped plant debris for compost, and carted sacks of soil and compost. It wasn't all hard work, for we regularly feasted on sumptuous meals with homemade salsas, tacos, *pupusas*, and quesadillas cooked in the gardens on small propane stoves or charcoal fires. We both graduated from the "Women's Empowerment" class that was taught on Saturday mornings at the Franklin garden by a Guatemalan social worker, and we attended the monthly garden community meetings, run by a paid organizer of Green Spaces (a pseudonym for the nonprofit organization that administers one of the gardens), where I was often asked to take minutes and read the meeting rules in Spanish and English. There were more meetings too, but we also spent many hours at these gardens sitting on benches, in conversation and joking. Binders full of typed field notes from these encounters, audio-recorded interviews with twenty-five of the community garden plot holders (Jose Miguel conducted five of these), and five additional interviews that I conducted with community leaders provide the data.

I have never paid interview respondents in cash (as some social science researchers do), but to show my appreciation at the community gardens I gave people plants and bags of groceries containing nutritious novelty items such as nuts, dark chocolates, stalks of brussels sprouts, and a festive plant. Several years ago I wrote a book about Latina domestic workers in Los Angeles that has now been translated into Spanish and been published in Mexico, and when I gave copies of this book to community garden members others asked for copies of their own. Women, and some of the men, were moved by this book. For me, this was not only a gift but a way of showing I had a commitment to telling their stories and a gentle reminder that I would be writing about them too.

At the community gardens, I was both physically and emotionally situated as a participant, gossiping, joking, eating, and sharing conversation.

While I identify as Latina and speak Spanish, my comfortable professional class life insulates me from the daily hardships insiders in this community face. Yet I too was grappling with some of the same family issues, and over time I felt myself drawn to social life at these urban community gardens. As researchers, we are taught to leave the field once we have reached data saturation, but I stayed longer than I needed to, mostly for my own needs. An ongoing methodological concern in participant observation ethnography is the extent to which the researcher's presence transforms the social scene. It is impossible for me to really know how my presence changed social interactions, but I do feel as though I was transformed by my experiences with these urban community gardeners. Observations and a half-dozen research interviews with change makers and other innovators inform the discussion of visions of the future that I present in the final chapter.

This book is also based on my extensive reading and analysis of secondary historical works and my review of primary archival documents at the Huntington Library. Although I am a sociologist, I firmly believe that we cannot understand contemporary society without taking historical context into account, and for a project such as this one, where I aim to show how what came before shapes the present and future, history is crucial. In chapter 2 I construct a 240-year historical chronology of migration and garden making in Southern California. The chapter's focus is on residential gardens, the dominant form that unfolded in this region, where developers and cities invested meagerly in public parks, but there is some overlap with citrus agriculture, which provided much of the wealth and many of the labor camps from which many regional residential gardens emerged. In addition, I used secondary sources to research the history of labor in US residential gardens (included in chapter 3), the history of urban community gardens both in the region and nationally (included in chapter 4), and the development of modern botanical gardens in Europe and the United States (included in chapter 5).

#### OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Each chapter in this book examines Southern California gardens of migration and the impact of gardens on the way we live. Chapter 2 reviews the

diverse migrations that have made Southern California, from the Spanish colonial conquest to the present, emphasizing how the sedimentation of past migrations shapes how gardens look and how gardening is done here today. Since the eighteenth century, garden making in Southern California has included violence, exclusion, and exploitation in the quest for a new and improved Eden. Multiple migrations are now sedimented on the land, visible in the trees and gardens that remain.

Chapter 3 focuses on the work it takes to keep up the private garden paradises of middle-class and upper-class home gardens. Southern California's gorgeous residential gardens require constant labor, and in this chapter I focus on home owners and the Mexican immigrant gardeners they employ. Everyone is guided by different dreams and aspirations in these gardens, and exchanges of labor and money shape the private residential gardens. Suburban gardens are places of leisure and beauty, but for the Latino immigrant gardeners they serve as the twenty-first-century factory floor, offering the hope of a better life and the mundane site of hard work. Residential maintenance gardening is a racialized and gendered occupational niche, the masculine parallel to paid domestic work.

Gardens are natural sites to congregate and converse and relax with others. In the urban community gardens of Los Angeles, some of the poorest, most marginalized newcomer immigrants gather to grow homeland vegetables and share community ties and build new places of belonging. Chapter 4 focuses on life in these urban gardens, where undocumented immigrants who are excluded from other spaces of Los Angeles collectively transform discarded urban patches of ground into oases of freedom, belonging, and homeland connection. On previously abandoned lots, they are producing bountiful vegetables and herb patches, vibrant community connection, and places of great beauty. As they tend to their gardens, they are tending to themselves, practicing care of self, family, community, and the land.

Modern botanic gardens developed in Europe to show off the spoils of empire, conquest, and colonization and to harness the power of scientific knowledge, and in the American West wealthy industrialists sought to convey their own personal grandeur by collecting diverse plants and displaying majestic beauty that echoed the Roman Empire and European aristocratic life. These were fundamentally gardens of status and distinction.



*Figure 1.* In Southern California postcards such as this one, culture was portrayed as a benign and innocent presence surrounded by plant nature. This item is reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Chapter 5 considers these historical legacies and examines the process through which the Huntington Botanical Garden built a representation of a Chinese Suzhou-style scholar's garden. This is a type of garden that first emerged in fifteenth-century China, when scholar-officials designed elite residential garden compounds for scholarly reflection. I suggest that the process surrounding the replication of this type of garden at the Huntington reflects the increasing power, status, and wealth of a segment of the Chinese American and Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants in Southern California, the rise of China as a global power, and the acknowledgment by a dominant cultural institution that it can no longer continue to ignore and exclude significant members of the region or the possible philanthropic contributions they bring.

Chapter 6 considers new interventions and possibilities for Southern California gardens of the future. In this book I offer a place-based study of gardens, but it is my hope that the discussion will also resonate with what is unfolding elsewhere. Certainly other metropolitan regions are also



grappling with the challenges of meeting environmental sustainability while respecting diverse cultural sustainability and promoting social justice.

I have spent time trying to decipher and understand the social world of gardens and migration in Southern California because I believe gardens offer a portal to understanding our social and existential conditions and because global migration is fundamental to this region and to the era in which we live. Gardens here in Southern California are more than simply enclosures of roots and foliage. Gardens are conscious acts of transplanting, created and sustained by continual migration. They are vehicles for our engagement with the natural landscape and also expressions of the forces of exclusion and domination. At their best, gardens are aspirations for transcendence, beauty, and alternative social worlds.