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II

"Illegality" and Spaces of Sanctuary

Belonging and Homeland Making in Urban Community Gardens

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Jose Miguel Ruiz

Urban community gardens in poor areas of U.S. cities and in Latino urban neighborhoods have proliferated in recent years. These gardens address many community needs. They provide healthy foods in Latino neighborhoods where fresh produce may not be available in stores; host numerous social and cultural events, sometimes leading to community activism and resistance; and serve as sites of leisure where poor adults and children may interact with nature in dense urban neighborhoods that are typically devoid of parks and playgrounds (Mares and Peña 2010; Peña 2006; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004; Schmelzkopf 1995). One benefit that has not been previously identified is this – these gardens serve as palliative sanctuaries for lives steeped in marginality and illegality. In this chapter we draw on ethnographic and interview research from urban community gardens in Los Angeles to show how these urban gardens provide sites where people alleviate the hardships and suffering of illegality. We shift the focus to the spatial and the palliative realms, and we frame this discussion by drawing from scholarly debates on illegality and Latino cultural citizenship.

Illegality is lived, experienced, and gains meaning in particular physical spaces. The spaces under consideration here are urban community gardens in the Pico Union, Westlake, and Koreatown neighborhoods of Los Angeles (also popularly known as MacArthur Park). These are among the most crowded immigrant neighborhoods in Los Angeles. The majority of people living here are young, foreign born, and predominantly Mexican and Central American, and the population density is among the highest not only in the city but also in the country. These are also among the poorest neighborhoods in Los Angeles, where the

majority of households live below the poverty line.¹ Most people here live in crowded, substandard apartments with code violations. At the gardens, Mexicans and Guatemalans, and a few Salvadorans, the majority of them "without papers," build community ties, friendship, and homeland recreations, as they gather to grow vegetables, fruits, and medicinal herbs, including corn, *chayote*, *pápalo*, *chipilín*, *epazote*, and even tropical bananas, papaya, and mangos. We argue that these urban community gardens serve as palliative sanctuaries, as both *consuelos* and sites for the recreation of homeland and as new spaces of belonging. To be sure, we are not arguing that urban community gardens are the only spaces where these processes of homeland making and belonging occur (e.g., we might think of churches, homes, or other associations). Here we highlight the need to consider the spatial dimension of illegality, and the importance of connection with plant nature, especially productive medicinal and food plants familiar from Mesoamerica, and we show how processes of alternative forms of belonging, homeland making, and incipient mobilization unfold in these sanctuary spaces where nature and culture meet.

THE URGENCY AND CONTOURS OF ILLEGALITY TODAY

The old idea that there are simple dichotomous categories of "citizens and aliens" or "legal and illegal" immigrants is now widely recognized as a fiction, as modern societies of immigrant and refugee destination are complex nation-state bureaucracies that produce a panoply of official state-sanctioned legal-status categories. Moreover, these categories shift over time. For this reason, historians, legal scholars, and social scientists emphasize that illegality is a social, historical, and political construction (Calavita 1998; Coutin 2000; De Genova 2002; Hing 2003; Kanstroom 2007; Ngai 2004). Binary categories of legal and illegal no longer accurately describe, if they ever did, contemporary realities that include many "in-between" categories. There is no bright line separating illegal from legal (Goldring, Berinstein, and Bernhard 2009, citing Bosniak 2000), and scholars have suggested terms such as "liminal legality" (Menjívar 2006) and "permanent temporariness" (Bailey et al. 2002) to refer to Salvadorans with temporary protective status (TPS), and "legal non-existence" (Coutin 2000) and "precarious legal status" (Goldring et al. 2009) to include a plurality of in-between forms of illegality and irregularity.

¹ See <http://projects.latimes.com/mapping-la/neighborhoods/neighborhood/westlake/> (accessed December 5, 2012).

Today illegality presents us with a new sense of urgency and relevance.² It has now been more than twenty-five years since the United States enacted a broad amnesty-legalization program for undocumented immigrants to regularize their status. The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), signed into effect by then President Reagan in November 1986 was at heart an exclusionary act, but it included provisions that allowed approximately 3.1 million undocumented immigrants to become legal permanent residents, and many of those people went on to become U.S. citizens in the 1990s. Amnesty-legalization provisions were included in IRCA as a measure to gain support for the legislation, as it had been met with opposition from those who claimed that it would create a permanent underclass of long-term, settled undocumented immigrants and lead to intensified racial discrimination at the workplace. Yet since 1986, no comprehensive immigration reform has offered new pathways to legal residency and citizenship. The legislation that governs routes to legal permanent residency and citizenship is the same ossified system that has been on the books for nearly half a century, well before the current age of globalization and global migration.

The Immigration Act of 1965 still governs who may qualify for legal permanent residency, but many changes have shifted unprecedented resources to deportation and new forms of restrictionism. This includes a series of federal administrative decisions; border enforcement policies and the escalation of interior enforcement (such as workplace raids); the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act legislation, which introduced new expansionary definitions of “criminal aliens” and diminished the rights of legal permanent residents; and the post-9/11 reorganization of the Immigration and Naturalization Services into the Department of Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Immigrant illegality, as we have seen, is legally produced (Calavita 1998; De Genova 2002), and the production of illegality in everyday life is more intensified now than it was a few decades ago because of legal,

² We wish to offer a note on the term *illegality*. In the context of deeply xenophobic times, many immigrant rights and human rights advocates have objected to the term *illegal*. “No person is illegal” has become a popular slogan, and in 2010 some organizers started a Facebook campaign to “Drop the I-word,” exhorting participants to “tell 5 friends to join you in dropping the I-Word.” We concur that “no person is illegal,” but we join with others in drawing analytic attention to the increased significance of illegality in contemporary social life. In this chapter, the terms *undocumented* and *illegal* will be used interchangeably, with recognition that these are socially and politically constructed concepts and categories.

administrative, and juridical changes. For example, surveillance is now expanded beyond the Border Patrol to police and sheriffs’ offices; social welfare agencies; private employers who must check legal documents and fill I-9 forms; and Department of Motor Vehicles offices administering driver’s licenses (Coutin 2000; Golash-Boza 2011). Immigrant detention centers have proliferated during the Obama presidency, many of them built and operated by private contractors (Golash-Boza 2011). Punitive immigration policies now punish undocumented immigrants as well as legal permanent residents and their U.S.-citizen family and community members. For example, when the undocumented parents of U.S.-citizen children are deported, this generally results in a de facto deportation for the U.S.-citizen children. Undocumented immigrant workers who once freely circulated between their homes in Mexico or Central America and the United States can no longer do so as the U.S.-Mexico border has become increasingly militarized and dangerous to cross, so they are essentially trapped in the United States for decades. In the United States, deportation has historically been used for social control purposes, but in recent decades this has intensified into a new form of *Deportation Nation*, as Daniel Kanstroom’s (2007) book title suggests.

What are the social consequences of this increasingly punitive, carceral, and restrictionist immigration regime? We suggest that there are at least three. First, people are living with illegality for longer periods of time, as much as twenty or twenty-five years. The average length of residency of living with illegality in the United States has increased. Based on U.S. Census data from 2010, Passel and Cohn (2011) finds that nearly two-thirds of the 10.2 million undocumented adult immigrants in the United States have lived in the United States for at least ten years, and nearly half are the parents of minor children. Thirty-five percent have lived in the United States for more than fifteen years. Living “without papers” was not uncommon in the mid- and late-twentieth centuries, but during those times, people circulated back to their countries of origin or they eventually regularized their legal status. Today, a complicated web of legal restrictions prevents millions of people from qualifying for legal permanent residency. Among those who do, the waiting period for getting a visa for legal status, especially for those from high backlog countries such as Mexico and the Philippines, can span twenty to twenty-five years. Second, living with illegality in the context of enhanced border and interior enforcement involves living with uncertainty, fear, anxiety, terror, and prolonged separation from family and community members. We concur with Susan Coutin (2000), Tanya Golash-Boza (2011), and

Cecilia Menjivar (2011) and others that this experience is qualitatively different than it was say, thirty years ago, when a less restrictionist climate prevailed, when immigrant enforcement was enacted at the border, not the interior. Third, as many commentators have noted, many people living with illegality or liminal legality are now trapped and isolated in the United States, prevented from returning to their homelands to visit family and community members (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2001).

Our second point of departure for a study of illegality draws attention to intersectionalities, a perspective developed by feminist sociologists of color in the 1980s. The basic idea here is that gender oppression or privilege is always interrelated to class, race, and other forms of inequality. This is the basic insight of the intersectionalities framework, and it is relevant here. Illegality is relational with other dynamics of inequality, including race, gender, class, and nation, so that multiple marginalities are always associated with illegality (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1997). As we now know, even legal permanent residents may be deported and constructed as “illegal” (Golash-Boza, Chapter 9). Multiple marginalities may include gender subordination, unemployment, or subemployment or informal sector work; living in substandard housing and high crime neighborhoods; and experiences of racism and racial discrimination. “Illegality,” or being without full legal authorization, cannot be considered separate and apart from other axes of inequality.

Finally, our third point is that the spatial cannot be considered in the abstract, but only in relation to time and historical specificity. Many of the new concepts of illegality focus on the temporal dimension of uncertainty. This chapter is inspired by insights from cultural geography and builds on the work of Adrian Bailey and colleagues (2002) who acknowledge that illegality is accompanied by spatial “acts of strategic visibility”; Clara Irazabal and Macarena Gomez-Barris (2008) who look at tourist and commercial enactments of Latino cultural citizenship; and Marie Price and Courtney Whitworth (2004) who, building on Edward Soja (1996), examine soccer fields in Washington, D.C., as a transnational third space that incorporates the remembered homeland. We add an emphasis on the spatial. As Teresa Mares and Devon Peña (2010: 241) underscore in their study of community gardens as contested urban spaces, “space is continuously re-invented as place over time through the formation of place-based resistance.” Illegality cannot be reduced to binaries of permanent and temporary, or between country of origin and country of destination. Thus we urge the examination of interstitial sites. Urban community gardens are interstitial places, locales that offer respite

from the hardships of living with illegality, and they contain as well the seeds for resistance and social transformation.

LATINO CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP

Cultural practice can serve as a form of belonging. In *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space and Rights* (1998) William V. Flores, Rina Benmayor, Renato Rosaldo, and other scholars suggest that beyond the realm of citizenship, legal status, and deportation regimes, Latinos in the United States are constructing their own vision of society through cultural expression. In this view, Latino cultural resiliency, shared practice, and language are ways that Latino immigrants can claim rights and dignity. “Claiming space,” Flores (1998: 263) contends, is a vital aspect of this process, allowing groups to define themselves, claim rights, and create “a distinct Latino sensibility, a social and political discourse, and a Latino aesthetic.” Flores (1998) also reminds us that “[c]ommunity formation and claiming physical space in this country take place in the context of a capitalist society . . . ,” with resulting tensions.

In a study of Plaza Mexico, a commercial mall constructed, owned, and operated by Korean investors in South Los Angeles, recreations of Mexico using replicas of national architecture and symbols, such as plazas and the Angel of Independence statue, produce spatial practices that Irazabal and Gomez-Barris (2008) call diasporic bounded tourism. They suggest that this commercial homeland recreation is tied to new regimes of illegality. The commercial market created by restrictionist border policies now prevents most Mexican immigrants from returning to the communities of origin. Irazabal and Gomez-Barris (2008: 193) describe this public market as “forcefully bounded-in-place for individuals with a desire for ethnic consumption and leisure, great nostalgia for an idealized homeland they cannot easily return to, and some time and money to spare.”

The most famous urban community garden, thanks in part to the Oscar-winning documentary *The Garden*, is the South Central Farm of Los Angeles.³ Until 2006 when it was bulldozed, more than three hundred families, mainly Mexican and Central American immigrants, including indigenous people of Mixtec, Tojolobal, Triqui, Yaqui, and Zapotec descent, cultivated a fourteen-acre property in the impoverished

³ The documentary, *The Garden*, by Scott Hamilton Kennedy, is available for purchase or rent on Netflix. See <http://www.thegardenmovie.com/> (accessed May 18, 2013).

neighborhood of what we now call South Los Angeles, near Watts and Compton (Peña 2006). This large urban garden began in the 1990s, in that post-Rodney King moment when community activists and new coalitions were seeking to rebuild and fortify poor communities of color in Los Angeles. With funding from public and private parties, the organizers started with a 7.5-acre vacant lot controlled by the city, and deliberately used the word *farm* to connect agricultural production and to erase any connotation of suburban, ornamental gardening.⁴ The South Central Farm grew to include more than three hundred substantial-sized parcels, each averaging 1,500 square feet, big enough for families to build small shelters or *casitas* where they could gather for socializing and eating.⁵ Until it was bulldozed, the South Central Farm was reportedly the largest urban community garden ever documented in the United States. When geographer Devon Peña conducted a study of plant biodiversity there, he counted more than one hundred species of trees, shrubs, vines, cacti, and herbs, and proclaimed the replication of a veritable “Vavilov Center.” Vavilov Centers are world sites where the original domestication of wild plants occurred, and there are only eight in the world. Mesoamerica is one of them, having introduced corn, beans, squash, tomatoes, chiles, chocolate, and peanuts, foods now commonly ingested in our global diet. In this regard, Peña suggests that the South Central Farmers served not only as food producers but as “stewards of a significant cultural and natural resource.”⁶

The South Central Farmers were involved in not only sustaining their families and communities with food, but they were also involved in the project of community narration through place making, what Peña calls “autotopography.”⁷ In one of the poorest, neglected neighborhoods of Los Angeles, the South Central Farmers transformed abandoned urban wastelands to look like their homeland, often with *nopales* (cactus) and small *casitas* erected on the plots. This transformation was particularly salient for Latino immigrants denied formal legal status and U.S. citizenship. This process of community self-definition is also what is unfolding at the pocket-sized community gardens in the Westlake area of Los

⁴ Initial funding for the South Central Farm came from the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, the city of Los Angeles, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and thirty private restaurants; site preparation was provided by the Los Angeles Conservation Corps and the city of Los Angeles (Lawson 2005: 271).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Peña 2006: 2.

⁷ Ibid.

Angeles, where the gardens have come to serve as community sanctuaries during the current crisis of detentions and deportations.

The South Central Farm was violently razed in 2006. Why was it bulldozed? We contend that this happened because the cultivators and the land lacked legal permanent residency and full rights. This was essentially the struggle between the legitimacy of private property held by a multimillionaire (who has continued to leave this large property vacant) versus the illegitimacy of poor people’s collective claims to the productive use of land. Not even celebrity support from Daryl Hannah and Joan Baez could stop the bulldozers. The original farm was lost, but today, South Central Farmers are thriving, thanks in part to strong organizational leadership and community autonomy, and to their integration into local capitalist markets. Some of the farmers continue to cultivate vegetables in South Los Angeles at the Stanford Avalon Community Garden, a nine-acre space under power lines in Watts, where individual families cultivate nearly two hundred large plots (40’ × 60’) for personal consumption and sale to local restaurants and taco trucks. Restaurant owners and catering trucks arrive early in the morning to purchase fresh produce, and food writer Jonathan Gold has even profiled the garden in the upscale food magazine, *Saveur*.⁸ Some of the original South Central Farmers have taken this to another scale, and now lease agricultural land near Bakersfield in the Central Valley, allowing them to sell fresh organic produce at trendy farmers markets and at Whole Foods stores in Southern California. As a cooperative, they have also branched out, developing Community Supported Agriculture and selling kale chips and beet chips.⁹

In this chapter we show the ways in which concrete, physical space in urban community gardens is reshaped by illegality. Undocumented immigrants are not simply incorporated or inserted into a particular geographical space, but they transform it. In the urban gardens, they convert formerly dead urban spaces into oases of freedom, belonging, and homeland connection, and this occurs largely outside of the market, in a noncommodified way. In this context, public community gardens emerge as small sanctuary spaces in an otherwise hostile territory.

Latino immigrants caught in webs of illegalities and liminal legalities are able to create spaces of belonging in urban community gardens. In

⁸ The community gardeners pay \$15 a month here, and sell their produce in a vibrant on-site market to taco truck and restaurant owners. Personal communication with Al Renner, of the L.A. Community Garden Council, on-site at Stanford Avalon Community Garden on October 31, 2010.

⁹ See <http://www.southcentralfarmers.com/> (accessed October 16, 2012).

these gardens they create spontaneous community gatherings and *convivios* to combat solitude and social isolation; address *añoramientos* and longings for people, places, and collective practices by connecting with homeland plants, practices, and rituals; and ameliorate political marginality and gender powerlessness by participating in empowerment classes, social events, and meetings. Urban community gardens are neither repressive spaces of subordination, nor are they necessarily spaces of resistance or contestation to state-imposed illegality. Rather they are sanctuary spaces where creative practices and engagement with plant nature make the hardships of marginality and illegality bearable, and perhaps reveal pathways to social justice.

The empirical data for this chapter come from one year of ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews conducted at two urban gardens in the Pico Union and in between the Westlake and Koreatown neighborhoods. For more than one year, we conducted participant observation at different times of the day, during different days of the week, and with various gardeners as well as community members who are regulars but who do not tend plots. We attended community meetings, collective garden cleanups, informal garden meals, the women's empowerment classes and celebrations for birthdays, and festivities such as Día de los Muertos and Las Posadas. We also spent many hours sitting on benches chatting with whoever was there, or helping in the individual garden plots, and afterward we typed copious field notes. During the winter of 2010 and spring of 2011, we conducted twenty-five in-depth interviews with core members at both gardens, and in this chapter, we focus on one of the gardens. The interviews were audiotaped and fully transcribed, and covered a range of semistructured questions on the respondent's relationship with the garden and with other garden community members. We obtained Institutional Review Board authorization for all of the research. In the following text, we show how activities in the urban community gardens address three aspects of illegality and marginality: social isolation and stress; longings for people, places, tastes, and collective practices of the homeland; and social and political powerlessness.

FROM SOCIAL ISOLATION TO SOCIAL CONNECTION

During most weekday mornings, the Franklin Community Garden is quiet and receives only a few random visitors, but by late afternoon, the Franklin garden and the surrounding neighborhood come to life. Mothers are picking up children from the local elementary schools and pushing

strollers; women and men are walking home from the bus stops on the busy corridors of Vermont and Wilshire Avenues, lugging groceries; and the *paleteros* (popsicle vendors) are out in full force with their pushcarts, ringing bells to promote sales of savory mango-chile and watermelon popsicles. At these moments, the streets pulsate with human energy and the garden is transformed into a plaza, a public square that you might see in a Latin America town. A built-in bench placed near the garden gate serves as a major lookout point, offering whoever is sitting there a bird's-eye view of the street activity. On any given weekday between 4 and 7 PM, *comadres* gather to chat on that bench or on the benches below the casita, while children run around the garden chasing birds or chickens, and a few teens might cluster a few yards away, drinking soda and eating chips, or a young couple might be kissing.

On late afternoons and weekends, the garden becomes a place of social connection that is particularly important to women, especially women living with illegality. Men have other public spaces. In the late afternoons men gather on street corners, perhaps enjoying some beer after work while sitting on the front steps of an apartment or huddled around a car engine. Women do not enjoy access to these public spaces. Their interior apartment dwellings are crowded and small, so visiting is not common (in fact even after years of friendship, we learned that women here rarely visit one another's apartments). Instead, women gather at the garden, seeking relief from solitude and social isolation in their small, cramped apartments, just as immigrant women with legal status might do, but it is more acute for these undocumented immigrant women, as they know they cannot travel to their home countries for visits. Tilling the soil, tending plants, enjoying the aesthetics of the garden with others, and chatting with other women brings them solace. For Bertila, a young mother from Michoacán who was raising two ten- and eleven-year-old boys while her husband was in jail, the garden became a space of relief and social connection. As she explained, "*Yo no salía, yo no conocía a nadie. Yo era muy aislada en mi casa. No salía con mis dos niñitos pequeñitos. Este, no los sacaba al parque, porque no conocían a nadie.*" (I didn't go out, I didn't know anyone. I was very isolated in my house. I didn't go out with my two little boys. I didn't take them to the park, because they didn't know anyone.) In fact, there was no nearby public park. The closest parks were Lafayette and MacArthur Parks, and these were not only blocks away, but were widely perceived as dangerous and full of drug addicts. Chickens had roamed freely at the Franklin garden; the chickens were still there when we began our fieldwork, but community complaints

led the land trust organization that oversees the garden to get rid of them. When Bertila's sons had expressed interest in seeing the chickens, she entered the iron gates and met Monica and discovered a new social world of friendship, community, and understanding in a garden environment that reminded her of home.

Some of the women are active gardeners, but others are not. For several months Bertila joined two other women in cultivating a small plot, but later, the gardening work proved too onerous and the annual fee (\$30) too expensive. She stopped tending the plot, but like other women, she remained a stalwart garden community member, a regular visitor and collaborator in shared meals, conversations, and activities. Victoria, a Guatemalan woman who lived with her four children and common-law partner in a small apartment, also found the garden to be a respite from isolation. She explained her connection this way:

Me empecé a incluir en los grupos, en las reuniones. Y ya este, empecé a como hacer una familia. Y ya se nos hizo aquí. Aunque esté lloviendo, aquí nos mira. Tenemos frío, ponemos la parrilla. Y, y ya nos sentamos en grupito. Pero siempre desde ese momento en que yo, en que yo conocí a Monica fue tanto, fue tanto la, la, lo, o sea, la, yo pienso que el estar aislada, que yo misma me dije que ya no quería estar ... aquí es una unidad que tenemos.

I began to join the groups, at the meetings. And then, I began to make a family. And that's what formed here. Even if it's raining, this is where we see each other. When we're cold, we light the grill. And then we sit in a little group. But ever since that moment when I met Monica it was so much, so much that, that is, I think having been so isolated that I myself I no longer wanted to be (that way) ... here we have unity.

The garden provided Victoria and her children with a new physical space and a new "family." When she began coming to the garden, her children were young and she didn't work. As she explained, "*Me gustó porque aquí nos quedábamos casi todo el día con mis hijos, porque como ya ve que los apartamentos son muy chiquitos, hace mucho calor, y los niños necesitan correr.*" (I liked it because we could stay here almost all day with the kids, because as you can see, the apartments are really small, it's really hot, and children need to run around.) When her youngest daughter started school, Victoria became one of the most actively employed women at the Franklin garden, developing an active house-cleaning route. Five days a week, she took the bus around the city, cleaning different houses on different days. But in late afternoons, and on Saturdays, she returned to the garden, taking along the youngest children. Unlike Bertila, Victoria became one of the most dedicated and celebrated gardeners at Franklin,

tilling and fortifying the soil alone or with her children, sharing bountiful harvests of herbs, squash, lettuce, sunflower seeds, spinach, cabbage, tomatoes, corn, and medicinal herbs with her friends and neighbors.

While there are only eighteen official plots rented out to eighteen individuals or families, the garden community includes approximately forty or fifty people, and only some of them cultivate vegetables and herbs. Most of them are women, and like Bertila and Veronica, most of them have been living with illegality for many years. Among them, the domestic workers are among the most affluent, and other women piece together income from the sale of tamales, or doing child care for other women in the neighborhood. Economic life is precarious. Gustava, a Guatemalan woman who lived with her Mexican common-law husband and young son, had come to Los Angeles ten years prior, leaving behind four children back home in Guatemala, the youngest of whom was then only four years old. The community garden, she said, had allowed her to overcome the anxiety and depression of this situation:

Cuando vengo aquí yo, se me va todo. Sí le digo que cuando me pegó, como nervios, yo para acá buscaba, el jardín buscaba. El jardín buscaba. Y así rápido se me quitó gracias a dios. Era como un, era como, como se llama ese, depresión que me estaba pegando. Bien feo eso. Pero no, tardé como dos meses y ya, no tenía nada ... y rápido salí de eso, pero eso me afectó, de muchos problemas allá. Como mire que dejé mis hijos allá. La tristeza.

When I come here, all my cares fade away. Yes, I'll tell you that when it hit me, this nervousness, I would always seek this out, I looked for the garden. I looked for the garden. And then it quickly ended, thank god. It was like, something like, what is it called, depression that hit me. It was really ugly. But no, it lasted about two months, and then I didn't have it ... and I quickly got out of that, but yes, it affected me, as I have so many problems back there. As you see, I left my children back there. The sadness.

So what is it about the garden? For the Franklin garden members, the majority of whom are women living with illegality, the garden community offers a sense of belonging, social connection, and emotional support. They form new friendships with women who hail from different regions and different countries, but who face similar challenges, living as they do with illegality, long-term family separations, underemployment, and poverty. The garden also serves as an important social imaginary, a life line of social connections that women carry with them even when they are not physically at the garden. Ceci, a Salvadoran single parent of two, who was navigating the uncertainty of generating money to pay for the renewal of her TPS and the dilemma of finding appropriate, affordable

therapy for her young daughter who had suffered a violent sexual assault while at her babysitter's house, put it this way:

Aunque yo no este aquí estoy pensando en las personas que vienen acá al jardín. Y son imágenes de que me vienen como fotografías o video, recuerdos pues. De cualquier conversación que tenemos y hay conversaciones que, que uno se esta recordando en la casa y uno a veces se ríe, a veces se preocupa, a veces también nos preocupamos por los demás.... El hecho de que uno este en la casa no se puede uno desligar. Se puede desligar físicamente pero no emocionalmente.

Even when I'm not here I'm thinking about the people who come here to the garden. And these images come to me like photographs or videos, like memories. From whatever conversation we have, and there are conversations that you might recollect when you are home, and once in a while you laugh, sometimes you worry, and sometimes we worry about someone else.... Just the fact that you are in your home doesn't mean you can separate. You can let go physically but not emotionally.

RECREATING THE HOMELAND: SIENTO QUE FUERA UN
PEDACITO DE MI PAÍS

(I feel like it's a little piece of my country)

Añoramientos, deep longings for people, places, and collective practices are part of the experience of illegality. Immigrants with legal status can generally travel back home to visit family members, activating transnational social circuits (Levitt 2001; Smith 2006). For undocumented immigrants living in the era of the militarized and violent U.S.-Mexico border, the United States becomes a new carceral-like environment, with an iron wall separating them from everything and everyone they previously knew. A kind of permanent homesickness roots in them.

Some of the women at the garden are transnational mothers, with their children in Guatemala or Mexico. Others are raising their children in Los Angeles, but they have constant worries about them too, particularly with their older adolescent and young adult children who encounter problems with school failure, substance abuse, unemployment and underemployment, criminal arrests, and detentions and deportations. Although they have experienced significant ruptures, they remain very devoted to their family members in their countries of origin. As we got to know these women, we realized that they also palpably experienced stress not only as mothers, but also as transnational daughters.

One day, while clumsily trying to show affinity, Pierrette said, "Sorry, but I won't be at the next garden *limpieza* [clean up] because I need to

go visit my mother this weekend in the Bay Area." In her ethnographic conceit, she had thought she was showing similarity, acting like a good attentive, dutiful Latina daughter. As the women stared at their feet in silence, she quickly realized that her statement had siphoned their spirits, underlining her own privilege. The sociologist can hop on a plane and go visit her elderly mother without any penalty of wondering if she will be able to return freely. These women cannot do that. That day, after a pause, the women shared with one another that they worry about what they will do when their elderly mothers become ill. Will they even be able to return for a funeral?

Coming to the garden does not magically reconnect them with family members "back home," but it becomes a space where homeland is recreated and lived. Yearnings and anxieties imposed by the current system of detentions, deportations, and family separations, and by the hardship of being poor in this dense, urban neighborhood, were momentarily alleviated in the garden. The garden space was comfortingly familiar. Many of the garden members were first drawn to the garden when they saw physical markers that reminded them of their towns and villages in Mexico or Central America. Drawn by the sound of hens clucking, or the sight of *hoja santa* or sugar cane peaking over the chain link fence, they entered the garden and found a community of people who were growing the herbs and vegetables that they too had grown up with – *pápalo*, *chipilín*, *nopales*, *chayotes*, *epazote*, *ruda*, varieties of chile, and the Mesoamerican staples of maize, beans, and squash. In the middle of arid Los Angeles, they have even coaxed tropical papaya, mango, and banana trees to bear cherished fruit.

Plants and animals from "back home" become place markers of homeland oases. The chickens and rooster prompted particularly visceral memories and evocative emotional connections. "Just seeing the chickens was so nice, because you would look at them and think you were back where you grew up," said one woman. Another woman from Chiapas who had spent her first six years living in a trailer park in Atlanta said she felt happier in Los Angeles because she heard the garden rooster crowing. When her son, the main breadwinner in her home, was arrested and incarcerated at an immigration detention center, she took a fall and suffered severe migraine headaches and paralyzing back spasms, but she hobbled to the garden to hear and see the chickens, insisting that this relieved her physical ailments. Others at the garden doubted that listening to the hens clucking could alleviate physical pain, but she insisted that it did. Elena, an undocumented single mother of four children, came to

the garden four or five times a week. "Everything here reminds me of my country," she said. "Like that corn, that reminds me, and also the nopales. My grandfather had a lot of those, even though we didn't eat them. Even these benches remind me of home." And Gustava, a transnational mother said:

Y me gusta mucho el ambiente. Vengo, me siento como que estuviera allá en mi país. En este pedacito. Porque veo, veo la tierra allá en la casita. Veo las flores, la entrada. Veo la basura, los palos. Digo, ay parece que estuviera ahí sentada allá, en un corredor de allá. Porque así es bien verde allá con nosotros. Y eso es lo que a mí me atrae aquí, a este lugar.

I really like this environment. I come here, and I feel like I'm back there in my country [Guatemala], here in this little patch. Because I see the dirt [floor] in that little casita. I see the flowers at the entrance. I see the trash, the sticks. And I think, it seems like I could just be sitting back there in a pathway. Because that's how it is, really green back there. And that's what attracts me here, to this place.

Homeland visuals became sights for sore, homesick eyes. In the middle of densely urban Los Angeles, where asphalt and apartment buildings prevail, one small physical space is transformed with plants, animals, benches, a tool shed/chicken coop, and a shade structure so that the Franklin garden looks like places in Mexico or Guatemala. Just as important, homeland social relations are also recreated and reenacted in the garden through meal preparations, spontaneous feasts and *convivios* (get-togethers), the celebration of festivities such as Día de los Muertos, and small gatherings for children's birthday parties and first communions. On Friday evenings, the women might gather for *atole* and pan dulce, or they might just share store-bought chips with salsa and perhaps some pureed black beans that someone has prepared at home. On weekends, elaborate feasts occur.

A great deal of cooking happens outdoors in the garden. On Saturdays, especially after a community garden cleanup sessions, the women prepare meals that include vats of *masa* expertly shaped into handmade *tortillas*, *pupusas*, and *quesadillas*. Typically, a short discussion will take place, with Monica providing directives. One woman will run home for her *comal*, and another will go to her apartment for cooking oil or rice, while others gather pápalo, cilantro, tomatoes, and chile from the garden. Those that can afford to spend a little money will go to the corner store to buy some cream, mushrooms, or a bit of meat. Sometimes there are contributions brought from the local L.A. Regional Food Bank distribution, which occurs on Saturday mornings at the Unitarian church just around the block. There is no sink and no kitchen counter space, but tomatoes

are rinsed off with bottled water in plastic bags, while onions, chiles, and vegetables are expertly minced and then sautéed over small propane grills (a few knives and pans are stored in the tool shed). These are spontaneous makeshift meals cooked under challenging conditions. One day, Jose Miguel complimented the women for their resiliency in cooking under these "*casita*" conditions. A Salvadoran woman responded, "*Yo así cocinaba en mi pueblo. No teníamos luz ni gas.*" (That's how I cooked in my town. We didn't have electricity or gas.) So here was yet another homeland comparison, cooking without basic infrastructure. The meals were always delectable and eaten with *mucho gusto*. On a warm Saturday afternoon in January 2011 the Santa Ana winds were blowing and we enjoyed delicious quesadillas made with handmade tortillas and store-bought mushrooms and zucchini squash.

Growing homeland foods and eating homeland meals are significant ways of connecting with Latino homelands and traditions (Mares 2012; Peña 2006). Meals here at Franklin garden, however, were not a pure authentic replication of homeland foods. Community members hail from different countries and regions, so they share their traditions and a kind of intraethnic *Latinidad* unfolds on the table. This is not about preserving homeland culture in some rarefied way, but it's a living culture, and garden members are open to change, even with food. The mushroom quesadillas, for example, ignited a lively discussion. While people from Mexico and Guatemala had eaten *hongos* (mushrooms) in their countries of origin, a woman from El Salvador shared that she had first tried mushrooms here in Los Angeles, on a Domino's pizza. Another person from Oaxaca mentioned the tradition of hallucinogenic mushrooms in Zapotec culture, eliciting a few raised eyebrows. Similar discussions center on medicinal herbs, with women from different regions of Mesoamerica sharing a variety of medicinal remedies. These are intraethnic exchanges, allowing people to share and relive different homeland memories, as they simultaneously adopt new foods and herbal remedies.

Finally, and most obviously perhaps, homeland identity is expressed through cultivation of particular plants. The gardeners who cultivate plots of vegetables and herbs take great pride in growing foods that taste just as good as those back home. And for many of these gardeners, this becomes a way of connecting the past of their ancestors, to their present reality, and to that of future generations. Armando, one of only a handful of men who regularly participated in the Franklin garden community, hailed from Puebla, Mexico. He was a relatively new gardener at Franklin and he said the garden was particularly important because it

allowed him to teach his seven-year-old son, Oscar, about how to prepare the soil, plant seeds, tend plants, and harvest food. Armando's grandfather had cultivated sugar cane in Puebla, and here was a homeland tradition he could pass on to his seven-year-old son in Los Angeles. This was the legacy that his father and grandfather left him: "*Mi padre no me pudo haber dado una herencia de dinero, pero sí me heredó una fortuna muy grande, y esta es la de sembrar.*" (My father couldn't leave me an inheritance of money, but he did allow me to inherit a great fortune, that of cultivating.) Now, Armando was happy to pass this legacy on to his young son. "It's really nice to see my son learning how to harvest fruit, vegetables, a tomato or radish ... so that he can see what the earth can give us." Growing and eating these foods became an experience not unlike religion, a practice that connected the *tierra* (soil) of the homeland past with the present lived geography in Los Angeles.

Lo sembraste con tus manos, sí. Y como allá en nuestro país igual, lo que cortabas directo del campo era mucho más sabroso. Entonces, cuando yo cosecho algo de aquí, del, del, del jardín, me da la sensación que estoy allá en mi pueblo y que estoy cosechando algo de allá de mi pueblo [ríe] y que me sabe igual de sabroso que allá.

You cultivated it with your own hands, yes. And back in our countries, it's the same – what you cut directly in the countryside was much tastier. So, when you harvest something from here, from the garden, it gives me the sensation that I'm back there in my *pueblo*, and that I'm harvesting something there in my town [laughs], and it tastes equally as delicious as it does back there.

SOCIAL CRITIQUE, EMPOWERMENT, AND INCIPIENT MOBILIZATION

At the Franklin garden, community members are also developing social and political consciousness, and are launching collective projects for social change. Social critique unfolds in informal discussions and in formal meetings. One of the key formal meetings is a women's empowerment class, funded by the land trust organization and staffed by Paty, a social worker from Guatemala with a very warm and welcoming manner. For more than two years, women – and a few men – have gathered on Saturday mornings at the *casita* to participate in discussions, lessons, and group exercises that feature self-esteem and communication skills. The sessions draw heavily from Western psychology and the human potential movement, and promote what used to be called "the power of positive thinking" and is sometimes now referred to as "the science of positive

emotions." But the discussions always went beyond individual emotions and decisions to include social and community issues that are relevant to illegality and marginality. For example, the first meeting we attended in August 2010 focused on managing money, and Paty wrote basic advice on a white board:

Evitar deudas. (Avoid debt.)

Ser persistente y disciplinada. (Be persistent and disciplined.)

Soñar en grande, y poner metas. (Dream big, and set goals.)

These dictums did not remain abstractions, and Paty actively drew out everyone to talk about concrete aspects of managing money. Women shared the daily problems of poverty, brainstormed solutions, and shared their dreams and aspirations, such as graduating kids from college, learning to drive, or starting a business. When a woman spoke off topic to complain about a husband who was so jealous that he did not want her to come to the garden or so much "look at a flower" without his permission, Paty responded with compassion and support, telling the woman that she had every right to attend these meetings. These were not lessons in institutional politics, but in personal politics, and the attendees were grateful for these classes. Later, when we interviewed some of the women who had been in the class they expressed deep appreciation and said they had learned new communication styles, skills, and self-confidence in these classes. "I learned that yes," said one woman, "Yes, we must defend ourselves whenever we are accused of something that we didn't do." Another woman affirmed that the class had helped her become a public speaker at an event attended by the local city council representative. Commenting on her personal growth, she said:

Esa fue la primera vez que participé así como hablando, y pues, ya le digo que he cambiado mucho de mi forma de pensar. Soy mas positiva que negativa. Aquí me dieron esa iniciativa de que tu lo puedes, tu puedes, tu puedes hacer esto. Tu puedes hacer el otro.

That was the first time I had participated as a speaker, and well, I can tell you that I've really changed my way of thinking. I'm more positive than negative. Here [at the empowerment classes] they gave me the initiative [to think] you can do it, you can, you can do this. You can do that.

The empowerment class also became a launching point for social critique and more political discussions. After one leadership class, Pierrette wrote the following in her field notes:

C led us in a game with yarn, a game designed to highlight our individual strengths and our interconnectedness. We stood in a circle and took turns

throwing a ball of red yarn. With the ball of yarn in hand, each person had to say one thing they admired about themselves, and then throw the yarn to someone else, making an intricate web across the patio, underneath which the kids ran and played. The women frequently said they liked these traits about themselves: friendly, hardworking, good mother... The game subsided and Victoria brought up the topic of social conflict. She said they just opened the new Ambassador school (actually called The Robert F. Kennedy School, built on the site of the old Ambassador Hotel, where Bobby Kennedy was assassinated in the 1960s). Rich people, she said, motioning with her hands to the Westside, are used to being the only ones who produce lawyers and doctors, and now this school is going to allow our kids to get ahead. Some rich people don't like this, she said. They say, "Why should \$50 million dollars be spent on this school here?" Then she went on to give a very sophisticated rendition of the ideas presented by scholars David Hayes-Bautista, and later Dowell Myers, saying, "What they don't realize is that later these kids are then going to contribute to society and contribute to the social security retirement funds. Their advancement is good for everyone." Paty affirmed her comment, and used the phrase "*clase trabajadora*."

What unfolded on that day was a fairly typical discussion in the empowerment class, ranging from self-esteem-building exercises, to a critical discussion that connected the local neighborhood to broader politics of class, immigration, and public debate about who is worthy of receiving social investment (note: the cost of the Robert F. Kennedy School is actually more than \$500 million). At the same meeting, the group discussed the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, the environmental consequences of the Gulf oil spill, and the new xenophobic laws in Arizona.

The empowerment class and the informal discussions that occurred afterward, as we ate food in the *casita*, often prompted discussions that connected private problems with public issues of illegality. These also included shared experiences and consciousness raising about racism, police brutality in the neighborhood, unjust immigration laws, and class inequalities. One day, Jose Miguel shared his story of coming to the United States as a baby from Mexico, and not discovering his illegal status until he was in high school and ready to apply to college, when he was finally able to regularize his immigration status. This prompted the women to speak openly about their own bouts with illegality and emotional depression. One woman shared that sometimes she is able to forget about it and forge ahead, but she admitted that on other days, when she stops to think about all the limitations that come with being undocumented, she didn't feel like getting out of bed. "*Sin papeles, te*

sientes como que no eres nadie," she said (Without papers, you feel like you are nothing).

At the empowerment classes, or sometimes just working together in their garden plots, the garden members also shared useful information with one another. What is a charter school? Where are the good ones? Which are the ones to avoid? How can you best help your kids in school? These were regular topics of conversation, and in the middle of weeding, watering, and making compost, the women were actively building their stores of social capital. One day after the empowerment class, about a dozen women were informally chatting, but two or three dominated the conversation. One woman held the floor, and said no one should be content just to be a classroom volunteer but rather parents like themselves need to get involved in school governance. This was essentially a didactic and politicizing conversation, more like an informal speech or political lesson. Didactic, socially useful information was freely shared in these informal garden settings.

The women's empowerment class also helped generate social capital that fueled a number of other programs and activities. As they gathered to chat and talk about what was happening in their lives, the women decided they wanted a shared savings account, outlets for safe and affordable exercise, and new income-earning opportunities. With help from volunteers from the Unitarian church around the corner, who served as official liaisons, the women opened a small collective savings account at a bank, and they started a regular schedule of aerobics and zumba classes, also held at the church. Conversations and gatherings in the garden led them to launch collective and individual efforts to earn income by making and selling tamales and handmade soaps that featured fragrant herbs from the garden. The profits were disappointing, and the sales efforts sometimes prompted new tensions, but the women were together trying to find new sources of income.

Incipient political mobilization also occurred at the garden. The lack of affordable housing is one of the most pressing social issues in Los Angeles, and this is especially critical for undocumented immigrants living in Westlake and Koreatown neighborhoods, where gentrification looms with new high-rent apartment complexes. In 2011, Mercy Housing Corporation began construction on what was officially called "low-income housing" in the neighborhood. When the garden members learned that only families earning a minimum of \$40,000 a year would qualify, local housing activists (some of them also living with

illegality) began holding meetings in the Franklin garden. These meetings brought together activists with ties to community mobilization in other parts of the city and transnational ties with a social movement organization in Mexico. It is impossible to predict the outcome of these efforts, but a new political mobilization has taken root at the Franklin garden.

CONCLUSION

Urban community gardens are routinely celebrated for producing organic vegetables and fruits in poor urban neighbourhoods, but these sites also produce numerous social benefits, and in this chapter we have drawn attention to how these gardens alleviate the social costs and suffering caused by illegality. The social costs of illegality include isolation and stress; a precarious economic existence; a longing for people, places, and practices of the homeland; and an exacerbated sense of social and political powerlessness. While we have shown how the social practices and relations that unfold in the garden address these issues, we contend that urban community gardens such as Franklin are neither panaceas for illegality, nor “natural” or intrinsic sites of resistance. That is why we contend that urban community gardens, and similar social arenas, may be better conceptualized as palliative sanctuaries. Palliative is an adjective generally associated with physical illness, referring to treatments that relieve pain without treating the underlying cause of illness. The focus of palliative care is on the prevention of pain and suffering, but sometimes remedies to illness may emerge with palliative treatment. Similarly, we believe that urban community gardens hold the potential to become seed beds for social change. This social change might occur at different levels, individual, community, and broader transnational mobilizations as well.

That said, however, we remain adamant that palliative sanctuaries are no substitute for comprehensive legal immigration reform. Illegality is socially constructed through legislation, and it can only be dismantled through legislation. Social practices at the garden may provide feelings of belonging and community well-being, homeland familiarity, and political empowerment, but only access to legal authorization can address basic civil and employment rights. And even then, as we have seen in numerous cases, legal permanent residency and U.S. citizenship does not always ensure these.

At the beginning of this chapter, we noted that it has now been more than twenty-five years since the 1986 IRCA amnesty-legalization program. What are the consequences of living with long-term illegality? That is a question that remains beyond the scope of our research, but we remain convinced that this is a critical social issue that deserves attention of scholars and public advocates. Significant scholarly attention has focused not only on the unauthorized immigrants, but also on their U.S. citizen family members, especially their children, as some of the authors in this volume have done (Abrego, Chapter 6; Dreby, Chapter 8). But parents and spouses of the detained are also affected, and a sharp gendered dimension has emerged. The deportation crisis of the last decade and a half has been extraordinarily selective with respect to race, class, and gender, targeting primarily Latino working-class men (Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013). Our ethnographic research at the gardens in Los Angeles during this crisis sensitized us to the effects on the wives and mothers of detained and deported men. For many Latina immigrant women in this community, the detention and deportation of their sons, husbands, and fathers of their children created new economic hardships and emotional stress. How does this affect women’s opportunities for basic well-being and social mobility? Their mental and physical health? Our time spent with the *mujeres* and families at the gardens has underscored the urgency of these issues, but rather than leading us to conclude with a pathologizing framework emphasizing the despair of desperate immigrant women, we wish to emphasize the resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness generated in these urban garden communities, and particularly the women’s social ties. The urban community gardens serve as spaces of autonomy and community resilience. When one person is detained or deported, family and community members also experience a carceral-like environment. We know from history that even in prisons, gardens provide hope and a sense of freedom and autonomy. Here we are inspired by the words of one of the most famous political and moral leaders, Nelson Mandela, who tended a small kitchen garden in prison. In his memoir he wrote:

A garden was one of the few things in prison that one could control. To plant a seed, watch it grow, to tend it and then harvest it, offered a simple but enduring satisfaction. The sense of being the custodian of this small patch of earth offered a taste of freedom. (Mandela 1994: 489–90)

Urban community gardens such as Franklin serve as sanctuary spots for practices and social relations that make illegality and marginality

bearable, and offer moments of freedom and collective sharing. There are ripple effects too, as the community-building practices that unfold at the garden also lead to general community enhancement and neighborhood improvement. In Los Angeles, small abandoned lots have been transformed into inviting green oases that serve as sites of belonging, community narration, homeland recreation, and mobilization. While the urban environment is reinvented in ways that are reminiscent of home, precarious legal and economic status remains. As our final quote from one of the women at the garden suggests, people are frustrated that they cannot challenge the terms that this system of illegality imposes on them. They cannot go home, but they seek consoling sanctuary by creatively building a new homeland and communal life in the garden.

Pero he podido sobrevivir a ello, y gracias a dios encontré el jardín. Y el jardín me ha, como que ha regresado de nuevo a lo que era mi pueblo. Yo se, no puedo traer mi pueblo acá. No puedo ir a mi pueblo. Pero si puedo ... traer recuerdos, y ponerlos en práctica.

But I've been able to survive because of it, and thank god I found the garden. And the garden has allowed me to return to what was my *pueblo*. I know I can't bring my *pueblo* here. I can't go back to my *pueblo*. But yes I can ... bring memories, and put them into practice.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Gardens have been ignored in sociology and in other social science disciplines, yet the connection between people and plants is an ancient one, essential to all human societies. Gardens serve as sources of sustenance, beauty, enchantment, and sanctuary, but they also can be deployed as instruments of power, status, exploitation, and subjugation. Our experiences at the urban community gardens in Los Angeles convince us of the powerful, life-affirming potential of gardens and we believe that urban sociology, Latina/o studies, and immigration studies would be wise to turn attention to gardens and plant nature. This is not an altogether new topic. Sociology's earliest puzzles involved understanding the transition from rural, preindustrial, feudal agricultural life to urban, industrial capitalism, and these transitions remain themes that are still relevant in the twenty-first century. For many Latino immigrants in the United States, strong connections with homeland *tierra* remain and find expression in gardening and farming. Even in the face of repressive immigration policies and systems of surveillance, detention, and deportation, and in some of the most urban and crowded metropolitan regions, Latino immigrant

communities have pioneered new spaces of belonging in gardens and urban farms. From the Puerto Rican *casitas* on the Lower East Side, to the South Central Farm in Los Angeles, these efforts have been captured in film and literature.

In recent years, a good deal of scholarly attention in sociology and political science has focused on nation-state belonging, citizenship, and formal organizations. Looking at gardens, and people's interactions with plant nature and plots of land, may offer an alternative view of belonging, one that emphasizes a smaller spatial scale of belonging and claims expressed through the collective creation of alternative homelands. We suggest that scaling down to smaller community garden sites where people interact with each other and *la tierra* reveals social worlds of creativity and resourcefulness, and highlights efforts that seek to resolve and moderate problems of ruptured transnational families and communities; crises of illegality and deportations; and urban marginality. Like the sedimentation found in soil, there are many layers of life in the urban community gardens.

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