



NORMA

International Journal for Masculinity Studies

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: 1890-2138 (Print) 1890-2146 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rnor20>

Place, nature and masculinity in immigrant integration: Latino immigrant men in inner-city parks and community gardens

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo

To cite this article: Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2017) Place, nature and masculinity in immigrant integration: Latino immigrant men in inner-city parks and community gardens, NORMA, 12:2, 112-126, DOI: [10.1080/18902138.2017.1341450](https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2017.1341450)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2017.1341450>



Published online: 22 Jun 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 101



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Place, nature and masculinity in immigrant integration: Latino immigrant men in inner-city parks and community gardens

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo 

Department of Sociology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

With this paper, I offer three contributions to the subfields of gender and migration scholarship, and to the sociology of immigration. Firstly, the paper argues for the importance of place and gender in immigrant integration, and seeks to nudge the sociology of immigration away from the dominant paradigms of assimilation and transnationalism, towards one that acknowledges how quotidian practices and the materiality and meanings of place constitute active assertions for the right to make a home in the city. Secondly, this paper builds on several decades of gender and migration scholarship, and seeks to bring immigrant men back into the frame, not as androcentric agents, but as actors with gendered, intersectional social locations imbued with both masculine privilege and social marginality. Thirdly, the sociology of immigration has mostly ignored the materiality of the local environment in processes of settlement and immigrant integration, and this paper adds a focus on how plant nature and landscape shape immigrant integration and public home-making practices in inner-city contexts. The empirical work informing this paper includes one and half years of team ethnography and interview data collected in public parks in South Los Angeles and a large community garden in Watts.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 February 2017
Accepted 9 June 2017

KEYWORDS

Masculinity; green spaces; parks; community gardens; immigrant men

Introduction

How do Latino immigrant men create a sense of place, belonging and civic culture through their homosocial gatherings in parks and community gardens, and what is the role of these activities in processes of immigrant integration? Latino immigrant men are simultaneously empowered by masculine privilege and marginalized by racial subordination, poor and working-class status, and regimes of immigrant illegality that affect even men who are US citizens or legal permanent residents. While exerting masculine privilege in family and home, and reaping gendered wage benefits in the workplace compared to their female peers, they nevertheless experience marginality. Male homosocial leisure in the community gardens and public parks of the inner-city constitute a set of practices that is responsive to this tension of privilege and marginality, allowing racialized, poor and working-class immigrant men to restore and revitalize themselves, and enabling

them to make claims of home-making and belonging on public space in the city (Harvey, 1988; Lefebvre, 1974/1991).

Immigrant men have had a relatively light presence in the immigration and gender literature, and their relative erasure endures despite pleas to understand gender dynamics as encompassing a multiplicity of femininities and masculinities (e.g. Kofman, 2014; Montes, 2013). As Choi and Peng note (2016), most studies on immigrant men take an androcentric lens, or focus on the men in the contexts of work, family or behavior deemed to be deviant (e.g. alcoholism, violence and drugs).

We can observe the latter in urban sociology and ethnography in the US, where volumes of research focus on poor African-American men engaged in crime, drug addiction and gang violence (e.g. Goffman, 2014; Venkatesh, 2008), and now, similarly, on Latino men (e.g. Contreras, 2012). Some of the newer scholarship promotes a gendered analysis of how Latino boys and men are policed and channeled into prisons and detention centers (Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013; Rios, 2011), and the ways in which masculinities are vital to both constituting and undoing Latino gang identity (Flores, 2014). At the same time, we have witnessed a vibrant scholarly inquiry into migrant men's gay and queer social life (Cantu, Naples, & Vidal Ortiz, 2009; Carrillo, 2004; Manalansan, 2003).

Scholarship on migrant men and masculinities still clusters around themes of family, work or activities deemed transgressive or deviant. As Choi and Peng note (2016, p. 13), 'Ordinary, heterosexual migrant men's voices and subjective experience are largely absent from the gender and migration literature.' Looking at what poor and working-class Latino immigrant men do in urban green spaces offers a fresh research angle, moving the gender and migration discussion away from criminality, family and work, and toward an analysis of gendered immigrant life in public places.

Shifting the focus to immigrant men who gather in public parks and community gardens refocuses our attention on leisure, and the practice of place-making in public places. Why shift the focus in this direction now? This is an historical moment when net Mexican migration to the US is reported to be at zero (PEW Research Center, 2015), and regimes of illegality, deportation and detention (Golash-Boza, 2015; Menjivar & Kanstroom, 2013), as well as violence in Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador, have diminished circular migration and transnational social circuits. In areas such as Watts and South Los Angeles, which was the established African-American area of Los Angeles for much of the twentieth century, first and second generation Latinos are no longer a numerical minority but a numerical majority. The historical moment is thus timely for developing new perspectives on gendered processes of immigrant integration, and inhabiting public places is a key dimension of immigrant integration.

Literature review

The gender and migration scholarship is rich but with some significant exceptions in geography (e.g. Silvey, 2006; Willis & Yeoh, 2002), it has mostly not dealt with place. One repeated finding from scholars studying the gendered consequences of international labor migration is the relative improvement in immigrant women's lives and the relative loss of status and autonomy in immigrant men's lives, leading to narrative preferences among many immigrant women to remain in the host society, while immigrant men often say they wish to return to their place of origin (Goldring, 2003; Grasmuck &

Pessar, 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Menjivar, 1999). In other words, gendered migration outcomes lead to distinct place preferences. In these discussions, however, 'place' remains abstract and amorphous. It is the national society of origin or destination that is idealized and desired, not a particular place.

A small chorus of immigration researchers in sociology and anthropology have called for renewed attention to place. In anthropology, Brettel (2005) and Schiller and Caglar (2009) emphasize that inquiries must include space, locality and culture. Much of the immigrant incorporation scholarship in sociology, especially in the United States, has focused on assimilation outcomes and economic indicators, but now some sociologists too are suggesting more attention to culture and place. For example, Jaworsky, Levitt, Cadge, Hejtmanek, and Curran (2012, p. 80) make a case for understanding immigrant integration through the local lens of 'cultural armature' that influence how warmly or coldly new immigrants are received in particular city contexts. In a similar vein, researchers Pastor, Ortiz, and de Graauw (2015) emphasize the powerful role that city offices can play in local immigrant integration efforts, arguing that these place-based efforts are especially critical when federal immigration policies stay hostile to newcomers. Some cities offer more services and opportunities than others, creating welcoming sites of reception for new immigrants. These are critical contributions yet neither Jaworsky et al. (2012) nor Pastor et al. (2015) examine the implications of the ways local contexts of reception of public places might be gendered, nor do they consider how green space may create opportunities for belonging.

A key conceptual contribution is offered in Schmalzbauer's (2014) study of Mexican undocumented immigrants who have settled in rural Montana, working on ranches and for the affluent lifestyle migrants drawn there by outdoor leisure. Among the 80+ Mexican immigrants interviewed, respondents expressed deep connection and love for the Montana landscape because it reminds them of their rural home in Mexico. Part of this is nostalgia, but it is also an appreciation for the vast expanse of plains, the cherished big sky, for feeling at home in what Schmalzbauer calls a rural 'geographic habitus.' Taking inspiration from Bourdieu, she writes that 'one's geographic habitus is greatly influenced by the context of one's childhood and coming of age ... when migrants move to a place that geographically approximates home, their geographic habitus is reinforced' (2014, p. 76).

Schmalzbauer shows how geographic habitus is gendered, with many Mexican immigrant women finding satisfaction in domesticity and motherhood, even under conditions of extreme rural social isolation and hardship, while the men described feeling freedom while working outdoors, with livestock and on ranches. As one man reported (2014, p. 77), 'I am a person of the campo. Here I feel free. I feel like I am in Mexico. For me, my work in the campo is liberty.' Similar reports emerge among Mexican immigrant residential maintenance gardeners in Los Angeles, where men raised on the ranchos of central western Mexico expressed preference for their suburban gardening jobs over employment in restaurants and factories where they felt 'locked up' (Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009). These studies highlight how immigrant men from rural backgrounds remain drawn to places with plant nature and working outdoors, however, both studies remain narrowly focused once again on immigrant men and labor.

Research on immigrant leisure in green spaces in Europe takes varied approaches, but conceptual cohesion concentrates on the creation of 'identities-in-context' (Kloek, Buijs,

Boersema, & Schouten, 2013), and how social activities in nature creates a sense of belonging (De Martini Ugolotti, 2015; Peters, 2010). A study of Turkish immigrant men found that sharing the sport of pigeon flying in Berlin allows them to connect with animal nature and among themselves, articulating ethnic resilience with their pre-migrant lives (Jerolmack, 2007).

While the assimilation and transnationalism paradigms dominate studies of immigrant integration in the United States, home-making and belonging is now emerging as an alternative paradigm with immigration studies in Canada (Lauster & Zhao, 2017), Italy (Boccagni, 2016; Cancellieri, 2015) and inquiries into globalization and gender in the US and Western Europe (Duyvendak, 2011). Immigrant home-making can be seen as a process of re-territorialization, an antidote to the transnationalism paradigm's overemphasis on flows, circulation and movement (Cancellieri, 2015). As Kusenbach and Paulsen (2013, p. 15) underscore, home and belonging evoke strong emotional connections of *feeling at home*, linking places and people (see also Duyvendak, 2011). In the book *Migration and the search for home*, sociologist Paolo Boccagni (2016, p. 2) asserts that in the migration-home nexus, 'home can be reframed as a meaningful relationship with place.'

The home-making paradigm moves us beyond the limitations of assimilation-oriented research (e.g. Alba & Nee, 2009; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Vallejo, 2012), and transnational paradigms (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994; Levitt, 2001; Smith, 2006), prompting us to consider how immigrants practice place-making and invest meaning and effort into the project of making claims to a new home. Assimilation researchers gauge indicators of how immigrants become like members of the host society, while transnationalists emphasize cross-border social circuits, but both ignore place. Focusing on everyday life in parks and gardens underscores both the materiality and sociability of immigrant place-making.

This paper also emphasizes the materiality of immigrant social life, with a focus on how plant nature and landscape shape immigrant integration in inner-city contexts. Scholars from urban planning, anthropology, geography, sociology and landscape architecture have shown the varied ways in which plant nature situates immigrant home life and place-based identity (Chang, 2006; Kloek et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2004; Peters, 2016), yet attention to gender has generally been absent in this literature. I examine how this plays out for working-class Latino immigrant men living in densely packed urban environments, and suggest how this contributes to settlement and immigrant integration. The majority of Mexican and Central American immigrants in Los Angeles have origins in rural ranchos and towns, and in Mexico, national identity is deeply intertwined with historical struggles over the right to land, *la tierra*. In this political context, connection with soil and plants is a salient practice. Interaction with the material dimension of plant nature becomes a vehicle not only for transforming the urban landscape, but also for supporting a web of daily social relations that support sustenance, life, leisure and claims to the city. And the way this occurs is gendered, with Latino immigrant men in inner-city contexts enjoying greater access to public green spaces than their female peers, enabling them to participate in a masculine home-making project.

In the US, public green spaces are seen as healthy spaces. Urban community gardens are today widely praised, recognized for providing food security in low-income 'food deserts' or 'food apartheid' neighborhoods. Since Olmstead's design of Central Park in New York City

in the late nineteenth century, public parks in the US have been hailed for providing opportunities for exercise and physical recreation, cross-class sites of leisure, and today, for diminishing risks of obesity, heart disease and other maladies. Yet Los Angeles remains the most 'park poor' big city in the United States. South LA once hosted what is believed to be the largest urban community garden in the US, the South Central Farm, 14 acres cultivated by 300+ Mexican and Central American families, which was bulldozed in 2006. In the aftermath, organizers and cultivators appealed to the city and established the 9 acre Stanford Avalon Community Garden (SACG) in Watts, which includes 209 plots (each rented for a monthly fee of \$20), a site of this study. This prompts us to ask: Are green spaces actually 'white' in Los Angeles? Urban planners, geographers and sociologists find evidence of racial and social exclusions in the public parks of Los Angeles (Byrne, 2012; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; Trouille, 2013). Regimes of inequality lead to scarcity of green spaces in Los Angeles, particularly in African-American and Latino neighborhoods.

Non-profit organizations advocate for the physical benefits that urban community gardens and parks provide in poor urban neighborhoods, but here I focus on the agency, and subjectivities of the men who inhabit these green spaces. How do Latino immigrant men create a sense of place for themselves in the public gardens and parks of inner-city Los Angeles, what does this do for them, and how might these activities and experiences advance immigrant integration?

Research methods

I began the research process by scouting parks and community garden sites in South Los Angeles in fall 2014. By spring 2015, a diverse group of undergraduate students, graduate students and postdoctoral scholars assisted me in visiting two parks and two gardens at different times of day, recording typed field notes into a template, separating observations and analysis. The ethnography team of spring 2015 included three Latino undergraduate students raised in these neighborhoods; two post-doctoral fellows in sociology from, respectively, the Ukraine and Mexico; and one Latina and one African-American graduate student, and myself. At this point, I was discerning who was at the green spaces at different times of day, what they were doing, and the texture of interactions between Latinos and African-Americans. During the summer of 2015, two male students (Antar Tichavakunda and Adrian Trinidad) and myself began approaching people at these sites to conduct interviews. In November 2015, Jose Miguel Ruiz joined us. We conducted 57 audio-recorded interviews with people at 2 urban community gardens in Watts, and at 2 public parks, offering \$30 gift cards to participants. We interviewed African-American and Latino immigrant men, and a few women and civic leaders; all of these were transcribed verbatim, and coded.

This article draws on ethnographic observations and 27 interviews with Latino immigrant men, all but three conducted in Spanish. Women rarely congregate at these green spaces alone, or for their own leisure and recreational needs. Rather, women bring their kids to play or do sports, or to watch their partners play sports, and at the gardens, they are more likely to cultivate with male partners than alone or with other women. While Latina immigrant women concentrate at other community gardens in LA (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2014), at the community gardens in Watts, women constitute less than 20% of the cultivators. For women, coming to parks and gardens serves as an extension of their

domestic duties, allowing them to provide social reproductive labor in public spaces where children, youth and men may enjoy leisure. Fear keeps women away too. Watts and South Los Angeles are vibrant family neighborhoods, but many local residents avoid the parks because of fear of violence and gangs. In the early phase of research, I learned that I could not safely send young female students out alone to the public park; they received too much sexual harassment. As an older woman, I was not subjected to this, but there were times, particularly at one of the parks, controlled by the Crips and with open prostitution and drugs, where I too felt unsafe. Gender divisions of social spaces are common in many societies and cultures (McDowell, 1983), and South Los Angeles neighborhoods are still perceived as dangerous places for women and girls. This social fact prompted me to focus research on men. Below, I discuss Latino immigrant men and their search for leisure, restoration and transcendence in green spaces of the city, which includes enjoyment in male camaraderie, sports, shared food, intoxication and music as well as preparing soil and cultivating food.

Findings

Five themes emerged in the analysis. At the parks and gardens, the men find: (1) solace and sanctuary in urban nature; (2) experiences of themselves as responsible family men; (3) male sovereignty and sociability; (4) belonging and feeling ‘at home’; and (5) an emergent civic culture.

Solace and sanctuary in nature

Latino immigrant men who gather in the parks and community gardens of South Los Angeles find solace in nature. These are men who are hyper-employed, working many hours in manual labor and at the urban community gardens, they include also older retired Latino immigrant men, some of whom are now physically disabled and sickly. Hard work has defined their lives. Some have suffered alcoholism, illness, and family separations and dissolutions.

At the green spaces they may play sports, cultivate the soil and spend time in conversation, in dyads and small groups. But they frequently, particularly at the gardens, spend a good deal of alone time. They say this heals them. They repeatedly said of their experiences at the parks and gardens, ‘*Aquí me relajo ... This is where I relax,*’ or ‘*Es una terapia ... It’s a therapy.*’

At the Fred Roberts Park in historic South Central Avenue neighborhood, Latino immigrant men of diverse ages seek peace and relaxation. Twenty-nine-year-old Cesar, a DREAMer (provisionally authorized)¹ college student who was born in Mexico but grew up in the vicinity, said he never came to the park as a child because ‘it was a dump.’ As a young adolescent, fear of assaults from gang members kept him away from the park. Now that conditions had improved, he, like others, ‘come here just to relax and drift away from the stress.’ Sometimes he brings a book. At the same park, we also interviewed Tiburcio, a 48-year-old street vendor from Puebla, Mexico who sells food at the park. He is illiterate, undocumented and separated from his family. On days when not selling popsicles and *chicharrones* at the park, he sells flowers near the freeway onramps. For him, the park invites daydreaming and dreaminess, even when

he is selling popsicles. ‘*Hay veces ...* There are times when I come here and I laugh when I see the children playing. I forget my problems that I’ve had all day,’ he said. He continued, generously sharing his fantasies. ‘*A veces me digo ...* Sometimes I say to myself, how nice you would look right here with your wife, maybe eating an ice-cream while the children play,’ he said. But he quickly added that this scenario was unlikely, as ‘*dos glorias no se puede tener ...* one cannot have two glories,’ by which he meant having work and family in the same place. For Tiburcio, the park is a site that allows him to imagine the impossible and to recharge his energy to continue forward as an immigrant worker in the United States. At Martin Luther King Park, Lorenzo said, ‘I don’t know what it is, but it’s like when I’m in here, I just forget about my stresses. It just goes away.’

At the community gardens in Watts, the men spend many hours alone, amending and tilling the soil, sowing seeds, pulling weeds and watering by hose. The individual garden plots are substantial, 1500 square feet each and cultivating takes consistent dedication. Some of them are there daily, while others come several days a week. Tomas, a middle-aged father of three daughters, could only find time away from his busy work and family schedule to come tend his plot about twice a week. Growing and eating his own vegetables helped him lose 50 pounds, bringing physical health, but he had this to say about his emotional experiences:

Yo creo que la coneccion con la tierra ... I think the connection with the soil is really important ... Nature, the trees and plants gives us oxygen and allow our minds to think with clarity. So I might be stressed out and about to make decisions, but once you go to the plants, you clear your mind, your thoughts and your feelings.

He continued, explaining, ‘That’s why I think so much violence exists in some people. Why? Because they don’t have a natural *desahogo* (outlet). I’m happy here. I like what I’m doing. That’s why I’m here.’

One can observe a Zen-like spirituality practiced at the community gardens. Over the course of a year, I had interviewed and conversed several times with Jose, a married father of eight and a construction worker in his 40s, who tends a diversely planted vegetable plot. He has been working in LA factories and construction since migrating from Mexico at age 14, and now his construction jobs often necessitate a fatiguing two hour freeway drive each way daily, to and from home. When I had interviewed him, he told me the garden was a place to grow vegetables and herbs for his family, but also a place where he feels ‘*en casa*’ or ‘at home,’ a place where he relaxes in solitude and can express his ‘*amor por la tierra ...* love of the land.’

One Sunday afternoon when I approached, I saw him sitting alone in silence. I was not sure if I should interrupt. Here is what I later wrote in my field notes:

I strolled to the very end, and then I saw J.R., sitting alone below his shade structure, constructed of plastic tarp draped over plastic tube pipes. From a distance, he seemed to be in quiet prayer, with his eyes downcast. I wasn’t sure I should interrupt him, but I called out ‘*Buenas tardes,*’ and he responded, ‘*Hola, pase no mas.*’ (‘Good afternoon’ and ‘Hi, come on in.’) ... He was spending his Sunday afternoon in zen-like solitude, intently de-thorning beautiful fresh paddles of *nopales* that he had just harvested. I wish I had had a video camera to capture this, because there was a skill and simplicity to this repetitive, careful work, and a very calming vibe. We both sat on chairs under his shade structure, and our conversation rambled to topics like the weather and if we will have a big wet winter, our families, and work. He had many questions to ask me too – if I had children, if they liked agriculture as

much as I did, how it is that I can speak Spanish, where I work, and so on. It was so peaceful ... We talked about many themes (I did not take notes) but here is one memorable one: His father, who had worked many years in LA, died suddenly last November, and J.R. and his daughters drove back to Guanajuato for the funeral ... We talked about his dad – how hard he had worked in California. In Spanish J.R. said, *The body breaks down faster on this side of the border*. (Field notes, SACG, Watts, 13 September 2015, around noon)

Cultivating alone in silence, close-up with plant nature, and de-spining nopales as gifts for relatives, these can be seen as both spiritual practices and practices of self-care that occur in relative solitude for these men. Hard work and hardship has defined their lives as Latino immigrant workers in California. With plant nature in the parks and gardens, time slows down, and these men create places for solace, sanctuary and self-care.

Responsible family men

While white middle class men may see traditional, hegemonic breadwinner responsibilities as a yoke from which to flee (Ehrenreich, 1983), for poor and working-class Chicano and Mexican immigrant men, fulfilling these traditional responsibilities can be an illusive and hard-won achievement (Flores, 2014). At public parks and community gardens, Latino immigrant men can express themselves as responsible family men. Going to the park with children, or raising vegetables for family consumption and income generation, allows these men to make visible contributions to their families. This is a tenuous claim for poor and marginalized men of color who struggle to fulfill ideals of good breadwinners.

The parks are places for taking kids to soccer, baseball, the playground or to enjoy family picnics. Family leisure is expensive in cities, and the parks provide free sites for play, sports and leisure. Lorenzo, interviewed while sitting with his wife and his five-year-old daughter on a red blanket, watching a soccer game and enjoying music from the adjacent African-American drum circle, said it was important to bring children to explore and experience ‘adventure’ at the park. He recognized the dangers of parks in South Los Angeles, but he said ‘since the police have taken over’ he now felt sufficiently safe to relax and bring his child.

Still, many Latino men’s work schedules and other priorities leave precious time available for these activities. As one young man related about this father,

My dad is a huge soccer fan and he’s really into sports, but ‘cause he came from Mexico at a young age, all he did was work ... he actually told me I’m sorry, that once he got here, the main thing was working ... He had to work and stuff, so he couldn’t really go and play at the park. He couldn’t really practice soccer and basketball (with us).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that fear of violence continues to keep parents from bringing their children to these parks. As one young man, recalling his childhood and adolescence said,

My brothers brought me out here ... but it wasn’t a park where our parents would tell us, ‘Hey, let’s go to the park, we’ll have a BBQ there.’ They just wanted to stay away from it as much as possible because of the gang activity.

At the Stanford Avalon Community Garden (SACG) in Watts, older Latino immigrant men fulfill family duties by providing fresh fruits, herbs and vegetables for home

consumption, by earning income through the sale of produce, and by connecting to ancestral practices they were taught by their fathers and grandfathers. Children, however, are noticeably absent from the community gardens in Watts. These remain adult male spaces – children and grandchildren are included, but not often.

Yet the Latino community gardeners in Watts felt themselves to be fulfilling family responsibilities by providing fresh fruits, herbs and vegetables. They grow a plethora of fresh foods, including tomatoes, strawberries, watermelons and chiles in the summer, cabbages, greens and root vegetables in the winter, as well as culinary and medicinal herbs. Some of them have planted tropical fruit trees and nopal cactus at the edge of their plots, providing iconic foods that are enjoyed and appreciated by their family members.

Income-generation occurs here too. A number of the men sell the produce they grow, although this practice is technically illegal. On weekends, Latino residents from near and far walk through the gardens, inquiring about purchasing herbs, tomatoes and greens. Some of the cultivators sell small clusters of produce for \$2 or \$5 a bunch, while others harvest crops which they transport to *marketas* in East LA, the San Fernando Valley or elsewhere. The men say that they are not self-supporting themselves with this income. Proceeds help cover their substantial monetary costs, which include monthly \$20 plot rental fee, plus fertilizer, soil amendment, tools and sometimes renting a rototiller. The money supplements earned income or social security. For example, 77-year-old Ricardo is still working in a college cafeteria, where he has worked over 25 years, but on the side, he cultivate crops, selling part of his harvest. At the South Central Farm, he said he learned that here in the city one could grow homeland vegetables and herbs such as *papalo*, *pepicha* and *chipilin*. Papalo, a pre-Columbian wild-growing culinary herb also known as ‘butterfly leaf’ in Nahuatl language grew wild in the hills back where he grew up in Mexico, but here in Los Angeles he discovered he could grow it and sell it in expanding ethnic markets. ‘Papalo, I knew what that was, but not as a business. Here, I figured out it can be a business, and many people use it.’

Finally, cultivating at the community gardens connects these immigrant men to their ancestral pasts on rural ranchos of Mexico and Central American. As 64-year-old Jorge said, ‘*Si, como se cultiva* ... Yes, how to cultivate, how to harvest, yes they (parents and grandparents) taught us so that we could do the same.’ The rural geographic habitus that Schmalzbauer (2014) discovered in Montana is experienced by Latino immigrant men even in the inner-city, as connection with *la tierra* and plants simultaneously anchors them to the earth and to their families of the present and the past.

Male sovereignty and sociability

Parks and gardens are public places where Latino immigrant men can hang out, experiencing male homosocial recreation, sociability and a sense of male sovereignty.

Just as African-Americans seeking leisure in public parks may encounter surveillance and control (Austin, 1998), Latino immigrant men may find the right to public outdoor spaces in the city to be scarce and sometimes contested. As Trouille’s (2013) ethnographic research on men who gather to play soccer in the public parks of affluent Los Angeles Westside neighborhoods has shown, Latino men are not welcomed in many public places, and boundaries may be enforced even when liberal dispositions lead affluent white residents to express and mobilize their opposition in subtle ways. Other times,

boundaries and exclusions are enforced with violence. In 2016, the news media (Hamilton, 2016) reported that five Latino men playing soccer at an LA County public park were assaulted with knives by white men screaming ‘Heil Hitler’ and other racial threats.

Different activities organize Latino men’s camaraderie at the parks and gardens. At the gardens in Watts, once their cultivation work is over, the men enjoy chatting, cooking and sometimes eating and drinking together. Many of them have built small shade structures, or *casitas*, at the back of their plots, and some have innovated benches or chairs out of overturned plastic containers and the sort. They joke around, sometimes playing cards or dominoes. For the older retired men, this is particularly important. One man, now retired for nearly a decade, explained, ‘*Platicamos asi nomas ... We sit and just talk, we just talk about our own matters.*’ There are more or less consistent clusters of friends, and some of them create a very homey-like environment for themselves at the gardens.

At the public parks, it is primarily soccer, but also after work ‘hanging out’ that brings Latino men together. The latter usually includes informal ‘happy hour’ for working men. At Fred Roberts Park, when the work day is over, Latino men driving pickup trucks from their jobs gather in the parking lot to see their friends while enjoying a few beers. Marijuana smoke wafts around the parking lot and picnic benches. Ranchera music blares from radios and boom boxes. Liquor stores, identified as neighborhood blight and local nuisances, are located across the street from all the public parks I have observed in South LA. The gardens and parks become sites of male conviviality, relaxation and camaraderie, with inebriation and music contributing to the festive atmosphere.

Belonging and feeling ‘at home’

At both the community gardens and the public parks, Latino immigrant men say they feel at home. Part of feeling at home at the urban community gardens is feeling as though they have earned sweat equity rights to the land. At SACG, many of the men came from the bulldozed South Central Farm. They recounted how when they first came to see the terrain in Watts, they found abandoned lots in disarray. As one man explained,

Nosotros nos toco limpiar ... We had to clean it up. Each one of us had to clean up his place. We cleaned all of this. And well, we dug, we took out all the weeds, we pulled out all the high grasses and we dug the soil to sow. Each person cleaned his plot.

The men remain proud of the improvements they have made to the soil and the locale, and it gives them a righteous sense of belonging to this place, and this city.

When asked, do you feel you belong here, as though you are at home, they replied unanimously, yes. One retiree described his daily routine this way: ‘*Me siento muy a gusto ... I feel really good here. I relax a lot here. I get up, I bathe, I change, I go and maybe get something at the market and then I come here.*’ Another older Latino man concurred:

Me siento muy a gusto ... I feel really comfortable. I feel really happy with all the vegetation that there is right now. I feel really proud to be here sitting down and looking at my things here. When it’s time to cut, I feel good. Yes, I’m happy to be here.

In fact, he added ‘*Si, me siento bien ... Yes I feel good, as if I lived here.*’ Ricardo, at age 77 and still employed in a college cafeteria, declared, ‘*Esto es mi vida ... This is my life. I feel more at home here than my real home.*’ And Arturo, a 70-year-old retiree, suggested

that the community garden kept him alive. ‘*La verdad* ... Truthfully, if it wasn’t for this, I’d go back to Mexico.’ When he visits Mexico, he misses his plants and friends at the garden.

These are gendered, outdoor homes away from home, and a series of home-like, domestic practices anchor social life here. As we have seen, the gardens are sites for conviviality, and for some of the men, this involves shared cooking, drinking and eating. This leaves them with feelings of well-being, and belonging. The older, retired men described a domestic shared culture of care, arriving early in the morning to work, and then sharing cooking and meals.

Pero la mayoría ... The majority of times one comes here, maybe at eight in the morning, to work. Nine, ten. And at ten, one starts looking for food. They make soups, a stew, or they bring a chicken and everyone gets together to eat.

He described this as a fraternal family. ‘*Ahi se ve uno* ... There one is seen like family. For example, right now Don Victor is sick, and everyone is asking about him.’

At the public parks, the rootedness, routine and pull of particular place was not as strong, but even so the Latino immigrant men we interviewed also said they felt they belonged, as though it was a home away from home. Rogelio stated as much, but could not quite articulate why he felt this:

I don’t know. Just growing up here, it’s just the park that I knew growing since I was little. Hanging out here all the time, seeing what goes on here kind of made me and shaped me who I am today. And I realize that more recently, more now than ever especially now that I come back. If it wasn’t for coming here, I wouldn’t be this certain way or I wouldn’t have done the things I have done, certain things so like I feel like, this park is like, yeah I would say it’s like another home I guess. I have a really strong connection with this park.

Emergent civic culture

While nascent and sometimes barely detectable, we can observe an emergent civic culture of governance at the urban community gardens. At the gardens, the men feel a sense of ownership and ongoing privatized relationship to a particular plot of land. They rent their plots, but they also participate in governance, attending monthly meetings, mobilizing against water rate increases and partaking in elections of representatives. Recall that the SACG began with political demands on the city to replace the bulldozed South Central Farm.²

A few of the Latino immigrant men have found in the gardens a platform to develop their skills as grassroots leaders. Don Pablo, who honed many of his leadership skills at South Central Farm, was one of the most sought out and respected leaders. Of his informal political work at the gardens, he said ‘*Siento que es parte de mi vida* ... I feel it’s part of my life ... Not so much because of what I have done, but because people started coming to me with their problems.’ Another leader, an illiterate Guatemalan Mayan who had also developed his community organizing skills at the South Central Farm and later in neighborhood councils, now also took satisfaction in his elected position at the garden and his abilities: ‘*Siento muy privilegiado* ... I feel very privileged to lead a meeting and I feel very happy to serve as the voice of my Latino community.’

Some of the community garden members are highly critical of governance structures and have voiced allegations of theft, and political promises not kept. When asked about

relations with the leaders, Jose said ‘*No, no hablo con ellos ...* No, I don’t speak with them, never. I never get into with them, I just pay them and we see each other around.’ For him this was a way to avoid problems, and he dismissed the leaders as motivated by graft. ‘*Es una politica ...* It’s a politics they do just so they can get money out those little plots.’ Another elderly man thought the political discussions were amateurish squabbles, dismissively concluding that ‘*parece una escuela ...* it seems like a kindergarten.’

At the public parks, there is unrealized potential for civic engagement. Some of the men recognize conditions have improved, but they remain far removed from identifying local leaders and governance structures. As one young man said, ‘I mean it’s a great park and now it’s way better than ever ... Whoever decided to do this to the park, good for them. They did a lot for the community.’ At the community gardens, the men have created an emergent civic culture of self-governance. It is nascent, fragile, contested and appears to be stronger at the gardens than at the public parks.

Discussion and conclusion

Looking in unlikely places, at the inner-city parks and community gardens of Los Angeles, reveals the importance of place and gender in immigrant integration. Neither assimilationists nor transnationalist researchers acknowledge place as a site anchoring immigrant relationships and meaning making. While there is burgeoning gender scholarship on migrant men and work, including new studies of migrant men in paid domestic work (Gallo & Scrinzi, 2016; Kilkey, Perrons, Plomien, Hondagneu-Sotelo, & Ramirez, 2013; Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009), immigrant men in their sites of gendered leisure remain relatively ignored. Shining the focus on Latino immigrant men in public green spaces allows us to see critical meanings and relationships that unfold in particular sites, contextualized by both masculine privilege and social marginality.

At the parks and gardens, Latino immigrant men restore and revitalize themselves. As they gather to relax, play, converse and cultivate, they are making what I would call ‘quiet claims’ on public space in the city. Lefebvre used the term ‘representational space’ to refer to places that have been collectively and organically created by daily use. To be sure, the physical infrastructure of parks and gardens were established through political and civic projects, and social circumstances now allow Latino immigrant men to conduct their quotidian activities more or less as they wish, generally separate from women, children and their African-American neighbors. This ethnographic study thus challenges cosmopolitan canopies or melting pot views, as well as our familiar gendered binaries of the public and domestic, showing that Latino immigrant men are creating home-like places in the public parks and gardens. It is also possible to see softening masculinities at the parks and gardens.

Public parks and community gardens are not the only sites away from family and work where Latino immigrant men seek solace, companionship and belonging, but these are among the very few non-commodified places where they may gather. The parks and gardens also highlight the important role of plant nature in open air settings. Urban nature at the inner-city gardens and parks provides a ‘geographic habitus’ (Schmalzbauer, 2014) that allows Latino immigrant men from rural areas of Mexico and Central America to feel comfortable and ‘at home’ in these green spaces. These are not, however, utopian sites, as violence, inequalities and partial exclusions of women occur. The routine visits and familiar quotidian activities that unfold in the parks and gardens allows us to see

immigrant integration as a process of place-attachment whereby the men simultaneously cultivate food plants and an appreciation of outdoor nature, but also they are cultivating meanings, relationships and 'at home' feelings. It is thus possible to see that a key dimension of immigrant integration are gendered processes of inhabiting places, and developing feelings of belonging and social relationships in particular material environments.

Notes

1. The California DREAM Act of 2011 granted undocumented students in-residence college tuition and benefits, and the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) signed by the President in 2012 allowed 2 million undocumented youth and young adults to provisionally work and study in the US.
2. To gain an appreciation of how combative this prolonged political battle became, see the documentary film *The Garden*, <http://www.thegardenmovie.com>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This research was supported by an ASSHR grant from the USC Provost's Office.

ORCID

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8085-2566>

Notes on contributor

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Southern California. Her research has focused on gender and migration, informal sector work, religion and the immigrant rights movement, and the relationship between migration and gardens. Her publications include four sole-authored books, the most recent of which is *Paradise transplanted: Migration and the making of California gardens* (University of California Press 2014). Current research focuses on Latina/o immigrant home-making in historically Black neighborhoods, and examining how place attachments and plant nature shape this process.

References

- Alba, R., & Nee, V. (2009). *Remaking the American mainstream: Assimilation and contemporary immigration*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Austin, R. (1998). Not just for the fun of it!': Governmental restraints on black leisure, social inequality, and the privatization of public space. *Southern California Law Review*, 71, 667–714.
- Basch, L., Schiller, N. G., & Blanc, C. S. (1994). *Nations unbound: Transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments, and deterritorialized nation states*. London: Routledge.
- Boccagni, P. (2016). *Migration and the search for home: Mapping domestic space in migrants' everyday lives*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Brettel, C. (2005). The spatial, social and political incorporation of Asian Indian immigrants in Dallas, Texas. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems*, 34(2/3), 247–280.

- Byrne, J. (2012). When green is white: The cultural politics of race, nature and social exclusion in a Los Angeles urban national park. *Geoforum*, 43(3), 595–611.
- Cancellieri, A. (2015). Towards a progressive home-making: The ambivalence of migrants' experiences in a multicultural condominium. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 32(1), 49–61.
- Cantu, L., Naples, N., & Vidal Ortiz, S. (2009). *The sexuality of migration: Border crossings and Mexican immigrant men*. New York: New York University Press.
- Carrillo, H. (2004). Sexual migration, cross-cultural sexual encounters, and sexual health. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, 1(3), 58–70.
- Chang, S. (2006). *The global Silicon Valley home: Lives and landscapes within Taiwanese American trans-pacific culture*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Choi, S., & Peng, Y. (2016). *Masculine compromise: Migration, family and gender in China*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Contreras, R. (2012). *The stickup kids: Race, drugs, violence and the American dream*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- De Martini Ugolotti, N. (2015). Climbing walls, making bridges: Children of immigrants? Identity negotiations through capoeira and parkour in Turin. *Leisure Studies*, 34(1), 19–33.
- Duyvendak, J. W. (2011). *The politics of home: Belonging and nostalgia in Europe and the United States*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ehrenreich, B. (1983). *The hearts of men: American dreams and the flight from commitment*. New York, NY: Anchor Press.
- Flores, E. (2014). *God's gangs: Barrio ministry, masculinity and gang recovery*. New York: New York University Press.
- Gallo, E., & Scrinzi, F. (2016). *Migration and masculinities and reproductive labour: Men of the home*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Goffman, A. (2014). *On the run: Fugitive life in an American City*. New York: Picador USA.
- Golash-Boza, T. (2015). *Deported: Immigrant policing, disposable labor and global capitalism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Golash-Boza, T., & Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2013). Latino immigrant men and the deportation crisis: A gendered racial removal program. *Latino Studies*, 11(3), 271–292.
- Goldring, L. (2003). Gender, status, and the state in transnational spaces: The gendering of political participation and Mexican hometown associations. In P. Hondagneu-Sotelo (Ed.), *Gender and U.S. immigration: Contemporary trends* (pp. 341–358). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Grasmuck, S., & Pessar, P. (1991). *Between two islands: Dominican international migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hamilton, M. (2016). 3 charged with hate crimes in attack at park. *Los Angeles Times*, p. B2.
- Harvey, D. (1988). *Social justice and the city*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (1994). *Gendered transitions: Mexican experiences of immigration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2014). *Paradise transplanted: Migration and the making of California gardens*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Jaworsky, B., Levitt, P., Cadge, W., Hejtmanket, J., & Curran, S. (2012). New perspectives on immigrant contexts of reception. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 2(1), 78–88.
- Jerolmack, C. (2007). Animal practices, ethnicity, and community: The Turkish pigeon handlers of Berlin. *American Sociological Review*, 72(6), 874–894.
- Kilkey, M., Perrons, D., Plomien, A., Hondagneu-Sotelo, P., & Ramirez, H. (2013). *Gender, migration and domestic work: Masculinities, male labour and fathering in the UK and USA*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kloek, M. E., Buijs, A. E., Boersem, J. J., & Schouten, G. C. (2013). Crossing borders: Review of concepts and approaches in research on greenspace, immigration and society in northwest European countries. *Landscape Research*, 38(1), 117–140.
- Kofman, E. (2014). Reviewing theories of gender and migration: Perspectives from Europe and North America. In G. Battistella (Ed.), *Global migration issues 4* (pp. 119–137). New York: Springer.

- Kusenbach, M., & Paulsen, K. E. (2013). Home: An introduction. In M. Kusenbach & K. E. Paulsen (Eds.), *Home: International perspectives on culture, identity and belonging* (pp. 1–22). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Lauster, N., & Zhao, J. (2017). Labor migration and the missing work of home-making: Three forms of settling for Chinese-Canadian migrants. *Social Problems*, doi:10.1093/socpro/spw035
- Lefebvre, H. (1974/1991). *The production of space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Levitt, P. (2001). *The transnational villagers*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Loukaitou-Sideris, A. (1995). Urban form and social context: Cultural differentiation in the uses of urban parks. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 14(2), 89–102.
- Manalansan, M. R. (2003). *Global divas: Filipino gay men in the diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McDowell, L. (1983). Towards an understanding of the gender division of urban space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 1, 59–72.
- Menjívar, C. (1999). The intersection of work and gender: Central American immigrant women and employment in California. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 42(3), 601–627.
- Menjívar, C., & Kanstroom, D. (2013). *Constructing illegality: Critiques, experiences and responses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mitchell, K. (2004). *Crossing the neoliberal line: Pacific Rim migration and the metropolis*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Montes, V. (2013). The role of emotions in the construction of masculinity: Guatemalan migrant men, transnational migration, and family relations. *Gender & Society*, 27(4), 469–490.
- Pastor, M., Ortiz, R., & de Graauw, E. (2015, December 15). *Opening minds, opening doors, opening communities: Cities leading for immigrant integration* (Report for Americas Society/Council of the Americas, Welcoming America and the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration at USC).
- Peters, K. (2010). Being together in urban parks: Connecting public space, leisure, and diversity. *Leisure Studies*, 32(5), 418–433.
- Peters, K. (2016). The role of natural environments in developing a sense of belonging: A comparative study of immigrants in the U.S., Poland, the Netherlands and Germany. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 17(1), 63–70.
- PEW Research Center. (2015, November 19). *More Mexicans leaving than coming to the United States*. Washington, DC: Hispanic Trends.
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. (2006). *Immigrant America: A portrait*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ramirez, H., & Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2009). Mexican immigrant gardeners: Entrepreneurs or exploited workers? *Social Problems*, 56(1), 70–88.
- Rios, V. (2011). *Punished: Policing the lives of black and Latino boys*. New York: New York University Press.
- Schiller, N. G., & Caglar, A. (2009). Towards a comparative theory of locality in migration studies: Migrant incorporation and city scale. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(2), 177–202.
- Schmalzbauer, L. (2014). *The last best place? Gender, family and migration in the new west*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Silvey, R. (2006). Geographies of gender and migration: Spatializing social difference. *International Migration Review*, 40(1), 64–81.
- Smith, R. C. (2006). *Mexican New York: Transnational worlds of new immigrants*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Trouille, D. (2013). Neighborhood outsiders, field insiders: Latino immigrant men and the control of public space. *Qualitative Sociology*, 36(1), 1–22.
- Vallejo, J. A. (2012). *Barrios to burbs: The making of the Mexican American middle class*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Venkatesh, S. A. (2008). *Gang leader for a day: A rogue sociologist takes to the streets*. New York: Penguin.
- Willis, K., & Yeoh, B. (2002). Gendering transnational communities: A comparison of Singaporean and British migrants in China. *Geoforum*, 33(4), 553–565.