
Reviewed by

Teresa Mares
University of Vermont

Reviewing Paradise Transplanted: Migration and the Making of California Gardens as the state heads into another summer of severe drought drives home the poignancy of the subject matter. In her most recent book, accomplished sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo examines the significance of migration—of gardening practices, of seeds and of trees, and of gardeners themselves—in the shaping and maintenance of Southern California’s landscapes. Drawing upon original analyses of historical archives, print materials, and first-hand data collected through interviews and participant observation, the author weaves together a compelling portrait of how gardens in this region function as sites of resistance and autonomy, but also of exploitation and exclusion. She argues, “[i]t is my conviction that we cannot understand these gardens without acknowledging that nearly all the plants, the people, and the water in Southern California have come from elsewhere” (2014: 2). In her tracing of the connections between this region and the global movement of species (both human and nonhuman), Hondagneu-Sotelo illuminates how the urban and suburban environments that we naturalize and normalize are in fact the result of dynamic processes of displacement, accommodation, and integration.

One of the greatest strengths of this work is the diversity of spaces examined, ranging from community gardeners in underserved neighborhoods to suburban yards tended by Latino jardineros toting gas-powered blowers, to the gardens at the Huntington, once the estate of railroad and real estate magnate Henry Huntington. In narrating the histories and multiple meanings of these spaces, Hondagneu-Sotelo states, “...I have come to see gardens as a form of storytelling, as individual and community efforts to shape outdoor surroundings and plant nature in ways that we find desirable and congenial. As we shape the landscape, we are crafting ourselves and projecting our ideas of how nature and culture should look” (2014:4). This dialectical relationship between humans and their environments serves as the thread linking these spaces together, a relationship the author underscores in the conclusion where she makes the case for the reconciling “gardening practices with practices of social, economic, and cultural sustainability” (2014: 217). As in countless other optimistic accounts of the power of gardening in bringing about social change, Hondagneu-Sotelo firmly believes in the continued necessity of productive urban green spaces in providing for multiple and integrated human needs: food, sociality, transcendence, and cultural exchange.
What grounds Hondagneu-Sotelo’s optimism about the future of gardening is her erudite description of the violent and exclusionary historical realities that have shaped the place-making possibilities of migrants into the region. Southern California, as a “flawed paradise,” has drawn successive waves of migrants from other parts of the United States and other nations seeking wealth and economic opportunity amidst the region’s sunny and mild climate. As the author emphasizes, the construction of verdant landscapes has come at a significant cost, both human and natural. Beginning with the enslavement of indigenous communities, multiple generations of communities of color have been exploited to create gardens where “conspicuous leisure” could be performed by those with racial and economic privilege. Now teetering on the brink of extreme water shortage, the long-term viability of these gardens and those who cultivate them is at risk unless serious conservation measures are taken and the cultural ideal of the perfect manicured lawn is relinquished.

*Paradise Transplanted* is a deeply personal scholarly project for Hondagneu-Sotelo, who describes looking out at her own Southern California garden while engaged in the writing process and staying “longer than she needed to” in the community gardens she studied in order to fulfill her own needs for human and natural connection. At the “Franklin” and “Dolores Huerta” gardens, participant observation, in the form of gardening work and experiencing these shared spaces, served not only as a significant means of data collection but also a place where the author could be restored and reconnect with the biotic world. These deeper and layered effects and affects of qualitative research methodologies are often felt but rarely described in great detail by social scientists, and this is a methodological strength of *Paradise Transplanted*. Hondagneu-Sotelo’s voice and presence is continuously felt in her work, and this presence is matched by the voices of her research participants, particularly the *jardineros* and community gardeners who reside within the social and economic margins of Southern California. The full color photos that are included in the middle of the book also serve to humanize and bring depth to bring these voices and offer visual evidence for the landscapes under the author’s keen analytical eye.

In concluding her book, Hondagneu-Sotelo outlines some of the potential models for using gardening to catalyze forms of social change that rest upon a multidimensional understanding of sustainability. Here, we are reminded that her focus on Southern California is not a case study, but rather a wide-reaching commentary on the (often perilous) relationships between humans and their environment. In discussing the future of gardening, she forecasts some of the critiques that her work may receive: “The more radically attuned reader may dismiss some of the models I propose as liberal boutique Band-Aid solutions, but I would wager that even a Band-Aid can stop bleeding” (2014:193). As both a radically attuned reader, and as someone who has become convinced about the transformative potential of gardening, this was an important reminder that incremental changes can and should move forward while always keeping in mind the structural inequalities and forms of violence that have beleaguered the places where we live and grow. *Paradise Transplanted* provides an absorbing narrative about how gardens are spaces where the past and the future merge, and where the local and the global meet to form new practices and possibilities.