

The Culture in Agriculture:  
Community Gardens as a Space for  
Community Empowerment and Cultural  
Cohesion for Immigrant and Ethnic  
Communities

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## Executive Summary

This paper explores the deeper significance of immigrant and ethnic community gardens beyond the cultivation of food and the general benefits associated with urban community gardens. I assert that community gardens offer accessibility to more profound spiritual and cultural motivations for growing food in a communal setting. I begin the paper introducing the impetus for this project and an explanation of my methods. From there I lay out the history of community gardens in the United States from before World War I to present day. I discuss the meanings and motivations behind each phase of community garden development and how they have evolved over time. Next, I investigate the general and more heavily researched benefits associated with urban gardens in terms of economic development, urban blight, and food security. From there I assert how those benefits act as catalysts for community empowerment.

The next section gives an overview of the current food system in America and how that relates to an expanding distance between producer and consumer. From there I define and discuss the political and cultural ecologies encapsulated within immigrant and ethnic community gardens. Moreover, I give a brief description of the importance of ethnic and regional foodways and how they relate to the assimilation of immigrant groups in the United States and how community gardens are a medium through which these groups can resist certain aspects of assimilation by retaining ties to their cultural practices related to food and community building within garden spaces.

Following this section is my original research on four local Los Angeles community gardens, Southeast Asian Community Alliance Garden in Lincoln Heights, Milagro Allegro in Highland Park, Proyecto Jardin in Boyle Heights, and Stanford

Avalon in Watts. Each section contains a description of the gardens and their significance for the community from information obtained through interviews with administrative leaders in the garden. I compare and contrast the varying models of the gardens and from there I draw out similarities that can be applied to other gardens in the Los Angeles area. In the last section I present recommendations for expanding the community garden movement and for more fully understanding the cultural significance behind immigrant and ethnic gardens.

## Glossary of Terms

**Agroecology/Agroecosystems:** Those that rely minimally on the use of purchased inputs, activities within these ecosystems are beneficial to the immediate and surrounding environment, are adapted or adapting to the local conditions, maximize yield while sustaining productive capacity, rely on and conserve genetic diversity, and conserve indigenous knowledge and culture.<sup>1</sup>

**Cultural Ecology:** Expands on the concept of political ecology with a focus on highlighting traditional and cultural knowledge.

**Food Security:** Access to fresh, healthy, affordable, safe, and stable food.

**Food Sovereignty:** A concept that combines the idea of local food security with the idea that food sources are consistent with cultural identities and involve community networks that promote self-reliance and mutual aid.<sup>2</sup>

**Foodways:** The cultural, economic, and social patterns related to the production and consumption of food.

**Permaculture:** Method of agriculture sustainable and self-sufficient., working with rather than against the natural environment utilizing organic inputs and polyculture.

**Political Ecology:** A framework and methodology for interrogating socio-environmental tensions and conflicts that revolves around access to resources and threats to livelihoods.<sup>3</sup>

**Vernacular Foodscapes:** A food landscape that nourishes bodies and minds in a more holistic approach to health and wellbeing that encourages a sense of place.

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<sup>1</sup> Elena L'Annunziata de Monge, "Following the Plant: The Political Ecology of a Hmong Community Garden." Thesis. Humboldt State University, 2010. 85

<sup>2</sup> Devon Peña. "Farmers Feeding Families: Agroecology in South Central Los Angeles." National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies. Washington State University, Pullman, Washington. 4 Mar. 2006. Address. 1

<sup>3</sup> L'Annunziata de Monge, 13

## Introduction

The impetus for this project came from my semester abroad in Thailand in the spring semester of my junior year at Occidental College. The program I was on, Globalization and Development, explored five topic areas that covered land-use issues, social and environmental justice, and human rights. Of the five topic areas that we studied, I was most inspired by our study of the rising organic farming movement in Thailand. Although considered a developing country, the food system of Thailand demonstrates many similarities with that of the United States, perhaps largely in part due to the Green Revolution of the 1950/60s as well as expanding free trade agreements both past and present. In addition, the convenience stores that have invaded urban areas of the United States, have also invaded Thailand and have affected the food culture of the country as products from Nestle to Coca-cola line the shelves, discernable not from the language of the label, but the ubiquitously recognizable logos. The United States has heavily influenced the production of food on a global level, and continues to influence immigrant agrarian practices in other countries directly, as well as the practices that migrate with these immigrant groups into the United States.

Despite similarities between our food systems, Thailand is distinct in its cultivation, production, and distribution of food as well as in the cultural meanings and traditions surrounding the production and consumption of food. For the majority of communities, especially in rural regions and smaller urban cities, food is procured from local outdoor markets made up of stalls selling fresh produce and meats, live seafood, and prepared food, somewhat similar to American farmers' markets, with the exception of freshly slaughtered meats and seafood. But unlike many of the farmers' markets in the

United States, these markets are held daily and are utilized by all socio-economic levels, not just more affluent patrons, which is a general stigma linked to American farmers' markets. In Thailand, it is rather the supermarkets that cater to wealthier customers.

The livelihoods of many people, especially in the Northeast region, where I studied (known as Isaan which maintains a cultural mix of Lao and central Thai traditions) rely on and center around the rice harvest. Much like bread, or perhaps meat in the days of high protein/low-carbohydrate trends in the United States, rice is a staple food and a meal is not considered complete without it. That was a lesson I learned quickly upon receiving confused looks from vendors when I occasionally asked for a dish *mai sai khao*, without rice. There is also a regional distinction between rice; the Isaan region traditionally eats a variety called *khao nieo*, or sticky rice, while the rest of Thailand eats a non-sticky variety of white rice, known as *khao suay*, which translates into pretty rice. There is somewhat of a social stigma connected to each set of rice; the former is eaten by hand among the poorer, rural people, while the latter "pretty" rice is eaten in the urban settings with utensils and has historically been considered by the upper-class as more civilized.

As previously mentioned, the Isaan region retains a mixture of Lao and central Thai traditions, while simultaneously remaining a distinct culture. Influenced by the agriculture unit within my abroad program, several students and myself developed a final project revolving around the meaning of food culture in Thailand and what the shift back to organic farming meant or could mean specifically for the community we studied, and more broadly for Isaan and the whole of Thailand. The organic market that my group worked with in collaboration with the Alternative Agriculture Network of Isaan, aimed to

expand not only their weekly organic market, but to expand upon and educate other farmers as well as consumers about the benefits of organic farming. In addition, the farmers saw organic farming as an opportunity to establish a focus on local and native produce that have cultural significance and uses in the culinary traditions of the region.

As a result of this project, I was inspired to explore the food culture of the United States and within that, how community gardens could play a role in the revitalization of the various cultures that make up the United States. Because of their connection to Southeast Asia, I was struck by the gardens of the Hmong people who had been forced to migrate to the US after the Vietnam War. Later in this paper, I briefly describe their gardening practices and how they relate to the Hmong culture and therefore allow for a maintenance of their heritage. From there I wanted to explore the potential to expand the community garden movement through a cultural ecology lens by working to understand the deeper meaning and significance of gardens for other immigrant cultures in the United States.

### **Methods**

My methodology for this project has evolved greatly since the beginning of my research. At the start of this project, I had set out goals to work with three local Los Angeles community gardens, doing participatory and observational research, interacting with the gardeners themselves as well as the managers or leaders of the gardens. I quickly came to realize the enormity of that endeavor, and the time that it would take to first get in contact with those gardens, make connections with them, and most importantly gain the trust of the garden members themselves. From my research and the timeline I had for this project, I began to understand there was no way that I could build solid relationships

with one let alone three gardens in the relatively short time I had to do my original research. From my research of other previous research on immigrant community gardens, some researchers had dedicated at least two years to a single garden they had studied and had spent a significant time building a relationship with the garden members and gaining their trust. This preliminary research on other garden studies, however, helped me to frame my project and to understand more fully the political and cultural ecologies of community gardens, specifically immigrant and ethnically-tied gardens.

I started my research working within the framework of community gardens as a form of empowerment, with a literature review of the general benefits and barriers of urban gardens. I incorporated the history of community gardens in the United States, which is outlined at the beginning of this paper in order to set the stage for the evolution of gardens and specifically their status today in Los Angeles. From there, I began my search for community gardens in Los Angeles by contacting the Los Angeles Community Garden Council and speaking with Yvonne Savio who runs the University of California Cooperative Extension Common Ground Program which trains master gardeners.\* In my interview with Savio as well through contacts through Rosa Romero, Zoe Phillips, Martha Matsuoka, and Bob Gottlieb of the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute, I was referred to several urban gardens in Los Angeles.

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\* “Since 1978, UC Cooperative Extension's Common Ground Garden Program has made gardening possible for many Los Angeles County residents, particularly low-income and traditionally underrepresented families. The program goals are to improve nutrition; increase access to fresh, low-cost produce; offer gardening education; build bridges between neighbors and communities; help create employment opportunities; and encourage a cleaner, greener Los Angeles. Families learn how to garden, grow their own food and prepare it in a healthful manner. In addition, the program trains community volunteers and Master Gardeners, who in turn, volunteer their time to community and school gardens.” (UC Cooperative Extension Common Ground Program Website: <http://celosangeles.ucdavis.edu>)

My research methods for contacting interviewees consisted of snowball sampling in that I found my resources from referrals by the aforementioned resources through Occidental College and the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute. I had various difficulties in contacting gardens and other connected individuals and had to expand my search due to the lack of response from gardens I had initially chosen to research. I was lucky to have the aforementioned resources that led me to the gardens that are profiled in this paper. I contacted the gardens and set up interviews, some of which were conducted via phone and the rest in person. The interviews were recorded upon consent by the interviewee and afterwards transcribed and incorporated into the original research and findings of this paper.

In contacting interviewees and, subsequently, holding those interviews, I learned the limits of my research. For example, I was only in contact with individuals involved in the administration and facilitation of the gardens, but was not able to speak with gardeners themselves, therefore getting an important but more limited perspective on the gardens. I realized through my research and individual observations that making ties with gardeners would take a much longer period of time and involvement than I could commit, and I had no way of knowing how long it would take to gain the trust and understanding of a single garden group. Thus my research progressed into a deeper understanding of political and cultural ecologies of previously studied community gardens and how that relates or has the potential to relate to existing community gardens and to future gardens specifically in Los Angeles. In my research of the four gardens profiled in this study, I discovered the deeper cultural, spiritual, and personal benefits that gardens create, aside from the general benefits commonly connected to community gardens.

Although the outcome of this project turned out differently than what I had initially envisioned, the research I have done has been essential for me in creating a framework around the study of immigrant and ethnic gardens. This paper is in no way an end to my study and understanding of community gardens, but is a medium through which I, or others interested in this topic, can move forward in the study of immigrant community gardens.

## Understanding Community Gardens and Food Culture

### Introduction

In the last century, community gardens have played a significant role in urban America. From before the First World War up to present day, community gardens have been a symbol of self-sufficiency and community initiative. The underlying impetus for each phase of urban garden development, however, has shifted throughout its history, beginning as philanthropic, government initiated gardens, and expanding over time into grassroots, community projects that address problems of urban disintegration and environmental injustice. The current urban community garden movement has a strong focus on community building by working to address health disparities, environmental injustices, urban blight, food insecurity, and lack of a political voice. While all these areas maintain great significance in the development and continued importance of urban community gardens, this paper attempts to intertwine these facets with the cultural importance of immigrant and ethnic gardens specifically, in order to convey the additional, less studied community benefits that sprout from these efforts. But in order to understand the cultural significance of immigrant and ethnic gardens, I present first the more general benefits that come from urban community gardens in the context of their history in the United States and in Los Angeles.

Urban cities across the country have been working on expanding the movement in order to address these issues. Los Angeles, although lagging behind cities like Seattle and its growing P-Patch gardening movement, is very much part of this burgeoning movement. Although there are several important barriers for community gardens to address and overcome in this city, many communities within Los Angeles have or can

benefit from the implementation of urban gardens in terms the more researched and understood benefits such as community revitalization and development, community identity, and political standing. But as will be the focus of this paper, with the diversity of Los Angeles, community gardens have the potential to connect immigrant and ethnic groups creating a medium through which these groups can reclaim a community identity as well as retain a space for the expression of traditional and cultural values and beliefs that surpass strictly economic or social development benefits, therefore reconnecting these communities with the deeper significance behind cultivating the land and a way of life.

### **History of Urban Community Gardens in the United States**

Throughout their history, urban gardens in the United States have been called many names: war gardens, relief gardens, victory gardens, school gardens, rehabilitative gardens, community development gardens, and neighborhood gardens. Although the main tangible product of these various gardens is the food produced, the intrinsic impetus and social outcomes vary greatly. The first urban gardens in the U.S. were created to respond to severe unemployment during the economic depression of 1893-1897. These Relief Gardens, as they were called, were inspired by the self-help gardens seen in Europe that utilized the green space as additional support related to welfare needs.<sup>4</sup> In Detroit, for example, “owners of vacant land on the outskirts of town were called upon by the mayor...to donate the underutilized land to the unemployed for the purpose of supplementing their families’ food supply and income” in an effort to create greater food

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<sup>4</sup> Deborah Tull. “Urban gardening as a tool for community empowerment: a comparative study of urban gardening programs for youth in Los Angeles and San Francisco” (Amherst, Mass: 1995), 11.

security as well as “a measure of independence and self-respect” for the unemployed.<sup>5</sup> These gardens utilized vacant lots to create their green space, but were provisional sites, lasting only as long as there was an economic crisis. As Erin Williamson asserts in her thesis on urban community gardens, the gardens of this period were “shaped by economic hardship,” and they were thus seen and slightly stigmatized, as “mainly for the urban poor and land tenure for this purpose was seen as temporary until commercial real estate investment renewed once the hardship was over.”<sup>6</sup> The connotation of gardens as temporary structures for immediate relief has continued as a theme throughout most if not all of the history of gardens, and today remains a significant barrier in their long-term maintenance.

During World War I, urban gardens proliferated in the form of war gardens, a national effort to confront rationing and high prices resulting from the war by supplementing household food consumption so that the food from country-wide farms could be sent overseas.<sup>7</sup> Citizens were called to be “soldiers of soil” and to “plant for freedom and hoe for liberty.”<sup>8</sup> Land that was not being put to use was deemed “slacker land” and those who did not join the effort were seen as unpatriotic and “equated with the enemy for contributing to the starvation of allies in Europe and American soldiers.”<sup>9</sup> The government highly promoted war gardens making instruction manuals widely available to civic groups, individuals, and city agencies that were encouraged to start their own local

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<sup>5</sup> Erin Williamson. “A Deeper Ecology: Community Gardens in the Urban Environment”. Thesis. University of Delaware.

<sup>6</sup> Williamson, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Lawson. *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America*. (University of California Press: Los Angeles, 2005) 124.

<sup>8</sup> Tull, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Lawson, 139.

community garden campaigns. Such organizations such as the Garden Club of America and various national women's clubs were encouraged to use their skills to contribute to the urban garden movement.<sup>10</sup> As opposed to the garden movements that would follow in later decades, the war garden campaign was one targeting all socio-economic levels and social groups. The purpose of these war gardens, aside from food production, was philanthropic, looking towards a common national goal rather than building a sense of community. As the war ended, war gardens were renamed victory gardens in order to continue aid for Europe in the aftermath, but the effort faded as the crisis lessened and "federal agencies and voluntary leadership shifted to other activities."<sup>11</sup>

Like the depression of the previous century, the Great Depression saw a revitalized effort in community gardens. These relief gardens, also referred to as welfare gardens or subsistence gardens, were funded by the welfare department and organizations such as the Family Welfare Society and the Employment Relief Commission and became an extension of the welfare system, thus institutionalizing the movement into the political system.<sup>12</sup> The gardens were an attempt to offset household expenses during times of high unemployment with the goal of "constructively occupying the unemployed and increasing their access to healthy food while sustaining their self-respect."<sup>13</sup> Unlike the war gardens of WWI, impetus came from sources other than national advocacy groups, and although the gardens were government funded, individuals and groups in affected communities became more able to self-initiate gardens with the confidence in their

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>12</sup> Tull, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Lawson, 145.

knowledge and skills gained through earlier war gardens.<sup>14</sup> By 1937, relief gardens began to disappear, as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) that had funded relief garden projects could no longer sustain them as the Depression drew to an end.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as the Depression ended, gardens were “no longer a symbol for those destroyed by the system but they were once again intended for those who would not support themselves”<sup>16</sup> and thus the connotation of community gardens became negatively linked to the poor rather than maintained as a space for continued solidarity in food production and community cohesiveness.

The garden movement of the Second World War was a quasi-grassroots movement in that the federal government was at first wary to begin another community gardening scheme, but “public desire to assist in war preparedness coupled with justifications that victory gardening was not just about food but also for health, recreation, and morale succeeded in convincing federal officials to support urban garden programs.”<sup>17</sup> This period of gardens saw an attempt to change the image of the connotations previously associated with them in past national gardening efforts. Early on in the war, a campaign was launched that sought to make gardens accessible to everyone, not only for the poor or those already knowledgeable in gardening. The campaign aimed to shed light on the benefits gardens offered across the board as an expression of “self-reliance, patriotism, civic responsibility, and wholesome recreation.”<sup>18</sup> In 1944, the peak year of WWII, “20 million victory gardens produced 44% of the fresh vegetables in the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 160.

<sup>16</sup> Sam Bass Warner, Jr. *To Dwell is to Garden: A History of Boston's Community Gardens*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987) 17.

<sup>17</sup> Lawson, 170.

<sup>18</sup> Williamson, 13.

United States;”<sup>19</sup> a hugely significant amount taking into account that a quarter of those gardens were in urban settings. But as it did with the end of the First World War, even with an evolved image of the community garden, the effort of WWII dwindled as the country resettled from the end of the war.

The community garden movement began to shift substantially between 1968-1976 when “ordinary city dwellers stopped waiting for public institutions to provide land for them and began, instead, to demand services and land from their municipalities.” The motivation came from the rise of environmental awareness and economic concerns that came about due to high rates of unemployment and inflation. The purpose of community gardens transitioned from one of “political philanthropy to one of self-help” as community groups began to more fully utilize the space as a medium through which to respond to the needs and interests of the gardeners themselves.<sup>20</sup> In 1978, garden organizers met nationally for the first time and created the American Community Garden Association (ACGA). Using the model of the burgeoning self-help inspired gardens, the ACGA began in order to bring awareness and support to community gardens which they believed “improves the quality of life for people by providing a catalyst for neighborhood and community development, stimulating social interactions, encouraging self-reliance, beautifying neighborhoods, producing nutritious food, reducing family budgets, conserving resources, and creating opportunities for recreation, exercise, therapy, and education.”<sup>21</sup> This view on gardens has become a major motivator for the creation and sustaining of gardens.

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<sup>19</sup> Tull, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 20.

### Urban Community Gardens and Community Empowerment

The 1960s shift to self-help gardens paved the way for public awareness and support and consequently, cities and communities began to form coalitions around garden advocacy. This self-help approach to community building through gardens was part of a “broader urban ecology movement which [sought] to address both environmental devastation and social injustice in the city” and was sparked by the growing Civil Rights movement. As of 1995, 40% of all existing gardens had begun in 1975.<sup>22</sup> The vitality of these community gardens can be seen in the various physical and social benefits they produce. From greater food access to increased social capital, the proliferation of community gardens has created a social space where ecology, community, and social change intersect.

According to the 1995 study “Urban Gardening as a Tool for Community Empowerment,” these spaces have become increasingly necessary at a time when many top-down approaches to reform have failed to meet the needs of neglected inner-city communities...there is an increasing need for grassroots programs which help inner-city neighborhoods gain access to the power, resources, and leadership needed to improve their communities and to rebuild the economic and social fabric of the city.<sup>23</sup>

The most obvious benefit of a community garden is the physical production of fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Gardens are especially influential in low-income and urban minority communities that suffer from increasingly high rates of hunger and diet-related diseases. In a study of Seattle’s growing community garden movement, the authors of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 5.

*Greening Cities, Growing Communities*, discuss the expansion of community food security through garden spaces, which they define as “a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximize[s] community self-reliance and social justice.”<sup>24</sup> Consequently, community gardens are a medium through which these impacted communities can reclaim their right to accessible and affordable healthy foods. Not only are these families given the opportunity for greater food security through better access to affordable healthy food, they are also given a chance to expand their food sovereignty, defined as “a concept that combines the rich notion of local food security with the idea that food sources are consistent with cultural identities and involve community networks that promote self-reliance and mutual aid.”<sup>25</sup> The significance of food sovereignty will be discussed in more detail throughout the rest of this paper, as it revolves more fully around the cultural significance of community gardens.

For blighted communities who lack appropriate access to healthy foods, gardens create improved food security through access to fresh fruits and vegetables that are overwhelmingly too expensive for low-income families to afford in traditional grocery stores, many of which have moved out of the inner city and consequently have created food deserts.\* In addition, participation in urban gardens lower a families’ dependence on

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<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey Hou, Julie M. Johnson, and Laura J. Lawson. *Greening Cities, Growing Communities: Learning from Seattle’s Urban Community Gardens*. (Landscape Architecture Foundation: 2009) 22.

<sup>25</sup> Devon Peña. “Farmers Feeding Families: Agroecology in South Central Los Angeles” National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies. Washington State University, Pullman, Washington. 4 Mar. 2006. Keynote Address.

\* A food desert is defined as an area with little or no access to fresh, healthy, and affordable foods needed to maintain a healthy diet but often inundated with a heavy concentration of fast food and convenience stores

social services (which many times don't offer the most nutritious products for needy families) and allow for greater self-sufficiency. As a result, families benefit from better nutrition from these foods over the poor quality, calorie dense, and nutrient deficient foods they are forced to endure in the fast food chains and convenience stores that line the streets of the inner city. Moreover, the labor of the garden provides increased physical activity for families who don't have access to safe outdoor spaces for recreation.

Urban gardens can be seen as an economic development strategy and used as a “sustainable tool for reducing hunger and poverty by providing the poor with the capacity to feed themselves and generate income” an extremely important factor in constructing community identity and cohesion as well as individual economic and political empowerment.<sup>26</sup> In communities suffering from disinvestment or blight, it can be hard to feel pride and ownership over one's neighborhood, especially with threats of violence and vandalism. But in their capacity to beautify an area, gardens have the ability to inspire community investment in open public space. Urban neighborhoods have the chance to physically enhance their communities by converting vacant lots into beautiful green spaces that also offer tangible rewards in the form of fresh food, increased exercise, and community networking. But this is not a new nor simple outcome of community gardens. Since around 1890, garden city plots were seen as a neighborhood beautification tool linked in part to the City Beautiful Movement. The movement aimed to transform underutilized or blighted public spaces into more pleasant, beautiful, and safe green spaces where residents would feel safe.<sup>27</sup> But although gardens can and have been linked with neighborhood beautification, there has also been contention between gardeners, the

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<sup>26</sup> Tull, 65.

<sup>27</sup> Williamson, 9.

community, and the city of what a garden should look like. This has been an issue for many gardens that don't fit the aesthetic standard for the surrounding community that speaks to the debate over use versus aesthetics, a contention seen in many Hmong gardens as well as at Proyecto Jardín in Los Angeles which is profiled in greater detail in a later section.

In addition to the physical beautification of a space, community gardens create a great number of environmental benefits that positively affect the surrounding community and the natural environment as a whole. For example, in working and cultivating the soil, the garden space, that may have previously been contaminated depending on its previous use, can be rejuvenated and the soil improved. The green space of the garden enhances air quality by providing natural filters for polluted air. Moreover, gardens act as a way to help mitigate the heat island effect that is associated with dense urban areas.

Community gardens can “heighten people’s awareness for the beauty of living things in their neighborhoods”<sup>28</sup> and in addition create a safe space for social interaction. According to Deborah Tull’s study on urban gardens, “the most important aspect of gardening empowerment is the increase in community awareness and a sense of politicization that comes with being aware of how you can effect change in your community.”<sup>29</sup> By being active in one’s own community, individuals as well as whole communities can reduce feelings of powerlessness and defeat and in its place foster self-worth, ownership, and pride. Moreover, gardens offer a communal space for organizing and establishing political clout. Urban gardens can be a venue for community

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<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, Laura. “Growing a Movement: Community Gardens in Los Angeles County.” Senior Comprehensive. Occidental College, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Tull, 54.

organization and an arena for discussion about how to address other pressing issues a community is facing. One example of this can be seen in Los Angeles' Food from the Hood program where a youth gardening program eventually became an economic enterprise that helped send participants to college. The program began as a way to educate youth about gardening and nutrition while involving them in the process of growing their own food. As the program continued to develop, the youth of the program began selling their produce at farmers' markets and eventually created their own salad dressing. With the money made from their produce and dressing, they were able to start a college fund that eventually provided enough money to send some of its high school graduates to college.

Over the past few decades, gardens have sprouted up as a reaction to the lack of public spaces in inner-city neighborhoods and the separation of the poor from access to resources. From a social justice standpoint, "for people who are economically disadvantaged and spatially isolated, the garden is an important tool for mobilizing people and helping them access power."<sup>30</sup> Community gardens create a safe social space for cooperation, collective decision-making, and an overall land reclamation strategy within a community that have implications for the economy, food access, and health. Gardens can help to break social and racial boundaries by allowing for a communal exchange of ideas, recipes, and cultures. Gardens are an extremely positive asset to urban cities by constructing open spaces for social interaction and diversity that offer a safe and beautiful outdoor arena as an option to over-crowded apartments or homes. Especially in

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<sup>30</sup> Tull, 83.

communities that lack a political voice, gardens foster social capital and a sense of community identity and pride.

### **America's Food System and Immigrant Agrarian Roots**

In order to understand the various roles of community gardens in the United States, and subsequently how immigrant gardens are unique, there needs to be some context regarding the larger food system. The term *food system* is defined as “the chain of activities connecting food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management, as well as the associated regulatory institutions and activities.”<sup>31</sup> The United States food system is a highly complicated organism that strives for efficiency in terms of high production and low costs. In her paper exploring the deeper ecology, Erin Williamson states the major loss of connection that consumers have with their food. The fact that we are solely *consumers*, speaks to our disconnect to the actual physical production of our food. She asserts that “personal connections between the farmer, consumer, trucker, producers, even store owner and workers seem to be minimal to non-existent [and] little connection is felt between the average citizen and the earth which is the ultimate source for the food that is eaten.”<sup>32</sup>

Food travels significantly farther to get to our plates than it did in the 1960s; on average a piece of food had to travel about 265 miles in 1960, while today it travels approximately 1,500 miles. Moreover, Williamson concludes that within our food system and the practices and values that stem from it, consumers “try to live outside our means; instead of working with the land and climate we try to transform it and by doing so create

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<sup>31</sup> Kameshwari Pothukuchi and Jerome L. Kaufman. “The Food System: A Stranger to the Planning Field.” *APA Journal*. (Spring 2000 v66 n2) 113.

<sup>32</sup> Williamson, 19.

even more problems.”<sup>33</sup> But there is an expanding local food movement that is working to create awareness and accountability in order to develop a more sustainable food system. One aspect of the growing movement is the rise of community gardens as specifically important in the local food movement.

One main point to draw from the history and previously studied benefits of community gardens in the United States is the fact that although they have been prevalent and dynamic throughout their history, they have typically been set up as a reaction to a social or political event as a means through which to ease food inaccessibility or social and economic crises. Although the US has its own agrarian history, throughout much of the country especially in the ever-growing urban areas, gardening has not remained an important cultural tradition as it has been in many other countries around the world. The US food system itself lacks links to a specific North American food culture, especially with the expanded concentration on commodity crops, many of which are not endemic to the region where they are grown, and moreover are increasingly being genetically modified. These crops, namely wheat, corn, and soy, that have encroached onto most of the cropland in the United States, help to define the food culture that stems from these products, which has increasingly become associated with overly processed convenience and fast foods.

Throughout their history in the United States, community gardens have “come in waves responding to societal factors such as economic hardship or expanding environmental awareness.”<sup>34</sup> This in part, is one major difference between the gardening culture of Americans and the culture of immigrant groups that settle here. For the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Williamson, 18.

majority of Americans, gardening is not an intrinsic daily practice, as our food culture does not revolve around generational, cultural, and spiritual practices within garden spaces but rather revolves around the convenience of the grocery store or fast food outlet. For certain immigrant groups such as the Hmong refugees of South East Asia and Mexican and South American immigrants from certain regions, gardening and cultivation have been practiced in daily life as a lived expression of their homeland's agrarian roots, which themselves have deeper symbolic and practical meanings.

For the Hmong people who mass migrated to the United States after the Vietnam War, gardening is a way to reconnect to their cultural roots after being constantly uprooted. In the mid-1970s after the Vietnam War, the Hmong people were once again uprooted and many were brought as refugees to the United States where they settled in large concentrations in places such as the Twin Cities in Minnesota and Merced County, California. The Hmong are a hilltribe people many of which had settled in Laos, their geographic origins not fully known, that have historically practiced subsistence swidden agriculture. The Hmong people have been forced to migrate throughout Asia, and have long been persecuted for not assimilating fully into the culture of the country in which they inhabited. In China, for example, the Hmong chose to remain isolated from the greater Chinese society, living in the highlands. When forced to leave China, many of the Hmong migrated to Southeast Asia. The studies that I researched focused on the group of Hmong that had migrated to Laos, although there are similarities across all of the migratory Hmong groups.

The lifestyle of the Hmong people was heavily influenced by the geography of where they lived. Because they lived in the highlands, the Hmong could live relatively

isolated in small self-sufficient village tribes that, due to their agricultural practices, were mobile. For the Hmong tribes in Laos, “life revolved around the crops” and the “geographic location of villages was based on where the most productive farm land was located.”<sup>35</sup> Although swidden agriculture, \* more commonly known as slash and burn\*, has been argued against as being environmentally destructive, for the small scale and mobile Hmong groups, this form of agriculture is asserted to be more ecologically sustainable than other associations with the practice. Although labor and time intensive, no plowing, irrigation, terracing, or fertilizing is required, and inorganic inputs were typically not used by the Hmong, a practice still utilized by Hmong gardeners in the United States. The Hmong practiced permaculture methods of intercropping and crop rotation that allowed for a vast variety of crops throughout the seasons.

At the time of the resettlement period in the United States, the Hmong people were involuntary immigrants hoping, if they had to move, to be left alone once resettled. The United States settled the Hmong in places with sufficient job opportunities, strong ESL classes, and social services, and thus, there were strong concentrations of Hmong in several places, allowing them to maintain a somewhat strong cultural identity within those distinct geographic locations. But upon coming to the United States and adapting to the culture, the Hmong faced drastic changes in their culture, livelihoods, social

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<sup>35</sup> Laura Kerr. “Resisting Agricultural Assimilation: The Political Ecology of Hmong Growers in the Twin Cities Metropolitan” Honors Project, Macalester College. 30 April 2007. 25

\* Swidden is an old English term that means a cleared and burned field. It is considered to have a more positive connotation than ‘slash and burn’. Some argue that this agricultural practice is environmentally destructive because it is said to increase soil erosion. While this may be true in instances of over use of this technique, new research argues that if practiced sustainably with sufficient fallow periods after the burn, small scale slash and burn agriculture, like that practiced by the Hmong, is not as environmentally deleterious.

organization, religious patterns and politics. They have, however, “fiercely held onto their cultural heritage while also adapting to life in the United States” and one manifestation of this is through their continued agricultural practices, though more limited, in community gardens. “In order to supplement their inadequate food supply and connect to their past, many people tended to small plots of land in order to grow food. This stemmed from the desire to recreate any semblance of their lives in Laos.”<sup>36</sup>

In comparison, for various Mexican groups, the garden is an extension of the home, namely an extension of the kitchen, and in being given a space to grow food in the United States, people of Mexican heritage are given the opportunity to “cultivate heirloom crops and weave visions and memories of their cultural identity and heritage into the landscape”<sup>37</sup> as was the case for the South Central Farmers. Devon Peña’s address on “Agroecology in South Central Los Angeles” illustrates the relationship between culture and land describing “youth who know hundreds of wild and cultivated plants, their nutritional and medicinal properties, and what it takes to grow them naturally”<sup>38</sup> and asserting the idea of these farmers “making home” by creating a viable space for food cultivation that is directly linked to the culture of their homeland.

In her study of Mexican house-lot gardens, Maria Elisa Christie explores the relationship between culture and food cultivation and finds that “at the intersection of everyday life and fiestas, food-preparation spaces, or kitchen spaces in the house-lot garden are fertile areas in which to explore the cultural reproduction of nature-society relations” and, consequently, “represent people’s symbolic connection with the land in

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<sup>36</sup> Kerr, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Peña, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 1.

increasingly urban contexts.”<sup>39</sup> For the semi-urban community that Christie studied in central Mexico, as an extension of the household, the house-lot garden “is a privileged site of cultural reproduction and plays a central role in family and community life”<sup>40</sup> and the food prepared in these spaces is an active portrayal of the religious, spiritual, and familial traditions of the heritage of this community.

An example of this cultural reproduction could be seen in the South Central Farm, before it was dismantled. Peña asserts

For thirteen years, the community—including native peoples of Mixtec, Tojolobal, Triqui, Tzeltal, Yaqui, and Zapotec decent—has relied on a rare piece of urban open space to grow food while becoming self-reliant and building a sense of community. . . In a collective fashion, the farmers now democratically manage a landscape that is filled not just with native row crops, fruit-bearing trees and vines, and medicinal herbs but is a vibrant space filled with social life and buzzing with the moral density that comes with sustained conviviality.<sup>41</sup>

For the South Central farmers, the garden acted as an extension of the home when there was no space available near their actual urban homes. As a result, the South Central farm was a

communal expression of a community’s political power as asserted through the demand for space to support local families by encouraging conviviality, the intermingling of mixed generations and ethnicities, and thus the reproduction of original as well as hybrid identity formations and cultural practices through conscious place-making.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Maria Elisa Christie. . "Kitchenspace, Fiestas, and Cultural Reproduction in Meixcan House-Lot Gardens." *Geographical Review* 94.3 (2004): 368.

<sup>40</sup> Christie, 370.

<sup>41</sup> Peña, 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

From this, Peña asserts that many urban gardens created by immigrant communities are attempts to replicate the familiar kitchen garden they utilized in their homeland that Christie explores in her study. Peña finds that gardens are important sources of fresh produce that supplement a family's food security but are also "iconic spiritual and political symbols of a process involving nothing less than the re-territorialization of place as a home by transnational communities."<sup>43</sup> For agrarian immigrant cultures, gardens are spaces that create community identity and allow for place-shaping by allowing them to grow culturally significant foods and developing a space similar to home.

### **Ethnic Foodways and US Food Culture**

According to Brown and Mussel in their book *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States*, "food and eating create a feeling of group *belongingness*"<sup>44</sup> and the traditions that surround certain meals play a role in community identity and cohesion. The United States lacks a distinct binding food culture. While certain foods are linked to national traditions, such as turkey at Thanksgiving, food in the United States has less significance in terms of culture and tradition than in other countries and ethnic groups. One could argue, however, that the United States does have a unique food culture of fast and convenient foods as Eric Schlosser identifies in his book *Fast Food Nation*. Harvey Levenstien asserts that food in the United States "presents a fine abundance of material carelessly, and poorly treated. The management of food is nowhere in the world, perhaps more slovenly and wasteful," and, moreover, that "abundance seemed to breed a

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussel. *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States*. (University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville: 1984) 48.

vague indifference to food, manifested in a tendency to eat and run, rather than dine and savor.”<sup>45</sup>

For other cultures and regions, food plays an important role in maintaining a cultural identity. Brown and Mussel assert that “foodways bind individuals together, define the limits of the group’s outreach and identity, distinguish in-group from out-group, serve as a medium of inter-group communication, celebrate cultural cohesion, and provide a context for performance of group rituals.”<sup>46</sup> Conversely, food culture can act as a form of assimilation into a culture. If a group is denied access to culturally appropriate foods or a way in which to grow their own, that group is forced to assimilate into the food culture of where they are. Because food is linked to more than just nourishment, by denying these culturally appropriate foods, the immigrant group is also denied the chance to express the traditions, beliefs, and rituals that rely on distinct foods; food is a symbol of ethnic identity, and inaccessibility to these foods, is a denial of the identity connected to them. Immigrant and ethnic community gardens, therefore have the capacity to play a significant role in the progression of ethnic foodways, allowing for a group to retain their cultural traditions and a cohesive identity. In addition, they create a place where different cultures can interact and share, developing a greater understanding and respect for various foodways and traditions and resisting total assimilation into the food culture of the United States.

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<sup>45</sup> Harvey Levenstein. *Revolution at the Table: the Transformation of the American Diet*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 8.

<sup>46</sup> Linda Keller Brown., and Kay Mussell. *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: the Performance of Group Identity*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1984) 42.

**Political and Cultural Ecology within the Context of  
Community Gardens**

For Williamson and other political ecologists, gardens, and in a larger framework farms are not to be understood solely as spaces of production within the current food system or only as serving social service purposes. *Political ecology* is a term used to describe “a framework and a methodology for interrogating socio-environmental tensions and conflicts that revolved around access to resources and threats to livelihoods.”<sup>47</sup> In addition, *cultural ecology* expands on this idea also highlighting traditional cultural knowledge. Within the former context, for urban community gardens, the “ecology of the garden does not stand outside of the socio-political, material, and discursive worlds in which it is situated”<sup>48</sup> but is rather very much a part of the interactions within and outside the garden. Gardens allow for a person or a group to reconnect with nature, and moreover, connect to it in a way that is not separate from the city, but rather within and part of the city. For some political ecologists, nature and city are not dichotomous but are part of each other; nature exists as part of the city, although more controlled by human interaction. A garden is one way in which nature can be more fully realized and appreciated within the confines of the cityscape.

Many people see the city as a separate entity from nature or the natural environment. For political ecologists such as L’Annunziata de Monge, the urban built environment is not a space where “nature ceases to be, rather there is an inseparable connection between the urban and the natural...cultivation within city limits explodes the boundaries of the city-nature dichotomy, challenging the meaning of the urban landscape

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<sup>47</sup> L’Annunziata de Monge, Elena. “Following the Plant: The Political Ecology of a Hmong Community Garden.” Thesis paper. Humboldt State University. 2010, 13.

<sup>48</sup> L’Annunziata de Monge, 16.

as devoid of nature and nature having to be untouched by human interaction.”<sup>49</sup>

Community gardens have an overwhelming capacity to increase the biodiversity of city life, and by extension of immigrant gardens, the diversity of cultures and traditions within and surrounding these garden spaces. As L’annunziata de Monge asserts immigrant gardens, “can therefore be analyzed as a structurally and systematically marginalized community’s demand to define and reshape city space for themselves in a manner of value to them, outside both the capitalist mode of production and the homogenizing notion of what a community garden should look like.”<sup>50</sup> They stand as a way to reclaiming urban space, mixing nature and the built environment, moreover shifting the vision of capital-intensive use of space to cultural, community-based uses.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 12.

## **Garden Profiles: Growing Food and Retaining**

### **Cultural Identities**

#### **Los Angeles Gardening Scene/History**

Although Los Angeles' gardening scene is continuing to grow, it continues to lag behind many other cities with expanding community gardening movements such as those proliferating in Seattle through the P-Patch program or the New York Green Guerilla program. The oldest community gardens still in existence in Los Angeles are about 30 years old. There are about 70 community gardens in the Los Angeles area and very few, if any, are distinct immigrant gardens, but many have high concentrations of one or more ethnic groups within the garden, which many times represents the demographic of the surrounding community. The following sections are profiles of four community gardens in Los Angeles that have distinct ethnicities. In this section I explore the similarities and differences between the gardens and how they relate to the research I have done on community gardens, and more over how they can act as models for the expansion of the movement in Los Angeles.

#### **Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA) Garden: Lincoln Heights**

The Southeast Asian Community Alliance is a community organization that was started in 2002 in Los Angeles with the mission of empowering Southeast Asian youth and their communities to organize and fight for "a more just and equitable society through intergenerational, multiethnic dialogue, leadership development, and community

organizing.”<sup>51</sup> SEACA strives to fulfill their mission through leadership development, community organizing, advocacy, and community building and through these methods hopes to create “spaces for new forms of leadership to emerge and [support] the development of members of our community to create new and culturally relevant solutions to deep-rooted social, economic, and racial justice issues impacting the Southeast Asian community.”<sup>52</sup> One of the ways through which SEACA has furthered its community building and leadership development, is through its creation of a community garden in Lincoln Heights, a predominantly Southeast Asian and Latino community about three miles northeast of the center of downtown Los Angeles.

The SEACA community garden is still young, having started in 2009 with permission by Bishop Bruno of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. This was necessary as the garden is located across from the Church of the Epiphany and is on the land owned by the church, an important aspect of the garden as it is at less of a threat of being developed, as many gardens on public property face. The garden utilizes raised bed plots that are used as a community, not by individuals. The initial focus of the garden was to create a space for high school youth in the community to be involved in their community and learn about gardening and healthy eating. One major goal that the youth group is working toward is to reach out to older community members to engage them with the youth and share their cultural knowledge. The SEACA garden does not believe in having a Master Gardener that is trained by the Common Ground Program. Instead

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<sup>51</sup> *Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA)*. Web. 30 Mar. 2011.  
<<http://www.seaca-la.org/>>

<sup>52</sup> *Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA)*. Web. 30 Mar. 2011.  
<<http://www.seaca-la.org/>>

they hope to access the native and culturally appropriate knowledge of the community. This is an important facet of what the garden symbolizes; it is not just a space for cultivation of produce deemed appropriate from a master gardener outside the community but rather a space for development and understanding of the cultures of the people that make up the garden. It is not just a space for the cultivation of food, but is moreover, a space in which to invite and practice familiar methods of older community members and to share the knowledge inter-generationally.

The garden is one medium through which the youth of this community are organizing and reaching out to one another as well as older generations and across ethnic lines to share, empower, and practice their cultural heritage. The members of the garden hope that it will help “engage Latin and Asian community members, create a green space for multiple generations to support one another, and provide access to fresh healthy produce.”<sup>53</sup> Although the garden is still in its beginning phases, it is quickly moving forward. When I first visited the garden in January, the plots were bare and the garden members were just getting ready for a new planting season. The day I came to observe the garden, the youth were preparing for an outreach activity in which they were canvassing the surrounding community including local Asian markets and providing information about the garden and the upcoming events, hoping to recruit multigenerational participants who would be able to share their knowledge with the current youth group. Since then, the members have planted a new harvest, and have restarted free cooking and gardening classes to the community with an added emphasis

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<sup>53</sup> *Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA)*. Web. 30 Mar. 2011.  
<<http://www.seaca-la.org/>>

on various aspects of food justices, environmental justice, and farm workers' rights for the theme of this season's workshops. The garden has the potential to expand awareness of the social and environmental issues that SEACA advocates for, providing a voice for the residents. Furthermore, it is striving to build a community identity through the garden space.

**Milagro Allegro: Highland Park**

*“We’ve been hugely successful in linking people up. It think that’s one of the things to me that’s most incredible about this project. It’s been a great way for people to be connected”*—Nicole Gatto, Milagro Allegro

In February 2009, the Milagro Allegro community garden broke ground and the vision of two gardening-minded neighbors came true, fulfilling the prophesy of the meaning behind its name. These two individuals, Nicole Gatto and Oscar Duardo are now part of the board of directors for the garden and have watched it grow in the past three years. What started as musings of shared interest and possibility, has become a reality in the form of a garden which has proliferated into a space for food production and moreover a place for the community to be connected.

The name of the garden itself is a symbol of the diversity and the mission of the garden. *Milagro Allegro* intertwines the past and present heritage of the community, acknowledging the diversity of the neighborhood as well as the diversity of the garden's founders. *Milagro*, which, roughly translated from Spanish means miracle, was chosen when co-founder, Oscar Duardo suggested it, jokingly musing that it would take a miracle to make their dream a reality. *Allegro* is an Italian word signifying happiness and positivity, and also links back to Nicole's Italian roots. In creating the garden space,

Nicole and Oscar hoped to have a positive influence. “We wanted to be something that was peaceful and beautiful, that brought good things to the area, so we put those two words together”<sup>54</sup> and since then, the garden has expanded into a space for community connection, food production, education, art, and culture.

Milagro Allegro is the first community garden on Department of Transportation property. The land is leased under a Memorandum of Understanding with a 5-year lease. After the first five years, there are 2-year renewable terms. But the threat of future removal of the garden is still present, as it has been even before the implementation of the garden. Nicole had to testify in front of the board of transportation commissioners who oversee the Department of Transportation to gain access to the land. During the meeting, one member asked what her exit plan was for the garden, and when she retorted her plans for the garden to remain indefinitely, the commissioner who had previous experience with community gardens expressed his understanding that “community gardens serve more as a transition for a low-income community to pick itself off its feet, but then at a certain point there’s not a need for them anymore”<sup>55</sup> reflecting back to perspectives of gardens from earlier generations as economic development strategies for communities in need somewhat aligning with the UC cooperative extension model for economic and community development. Although it sat vacant for many years before the involvement of Gatto and Duardo, there had long been contention about how to best utilize the lot, and thus the process of gaining access to the land was arduous and there still remains the threat of removal for development.

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<sup>54</sup> Nicole Gatto. "Milagro Allegro." Personal interview. 5 Feb. 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Nicole Gatto. "Milagro Allegro." Personal interview. 5 Feb. 2011.

While understanding the commissioner's perspective, Nicole sees the community garden movement and, subsequently, the Milagro Allegro garden as having the potential for much more than just economic benefit.

I absolutely agree that there's value for community gardens for low-income communities, but I also think that there's value for community gardens in all communities, because I think they are so powerful in what they can do and not just on an economic level. It's actually almost limiting to put it like that. I just see that there's so many aspects that are beneficial to any community that to prioritize low-income gardens in low-income communities sells the project short for what it can do across the board.<sup>56</sup>

By labeling a community garden as wealthy or low-income, it suggests a lack of heterogeneity and diversity, so for Nicole, Milagro Allegro creates a space for diversity, both in what is grown and in the community members that garden there. In terms of demographics of the gardeners, the garden is a diverse one, somewhat reflecting the diversity of Highland Park. Though not in equal percentages, the garden has a lot of different ethnic, racial, educational, and generational groups represented. The surrounding neighborhood is predominantly Latino and the garden is about 50% Latino.

Nicole and her fellow gardeners continue to reach out to the community. Every month there is at least one by donation workshop that revolves around anything from growing fruit trees to fixing bicycles, inviting people from inside and outside the community to get involved. There are 16 individual plots on either side of a communal space three of which are set-aside for educational purposes. The garden hosted a 12-week educational program for fourth and fifth graders called LA Sprouts designed to

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<sup>56</sup> Nicole Gatto. "Milagro Allegro." Personal interview. 5 Feb. 2011.

reduce childhood obesity and encourage healthy eating habits. A University of Southern California graduate student worked with the program to monitor the effectiveness of the program and, subsequently, work to develop similar programs in the area. This was the first quantitative research done on educational community gardens for children and there were significant correlations with activity and education in the garden and reductions in obesity and diabetes, even within a few months.

At the Milagro Allegro garden, members get plots based on a lottery system. The plots are available on two-year terms after which there is a new lottery for the present gardeners and new members to join for a spot. Although still a new garden, the organizational leaders decided the two-year term was a way to ensure that the plots were utilized to their full potential, rather than sitting unused. As Nicole explained, “people have the best intentions in the beginning, and tend to lose interest or don’t have enough time” which is the reason for the two-year period. “We just try to make it as rich as possible of an experience for the gardeners and the community.” There is a core group who serve as the board of directors for the garden. Because the garden is still new, they are continuing to work out amongst themselves and amongst the garden members how to delegate garden responsibilities in a democratic way.

The garden monetarily runs on two grants from the Annenberg Foundation, and extra funds come from various fundraising events and go into replacing tools and investing in new projects. Milagro Allegro now has a compost pile and a worm compost bin in the corner of the garden and a communal shed for tool storage. Gardeners log their harvests on a communal scale in one of the communal sheds at the garden in order to keep track of the amount of produce grown at the garden. The fence surrounding the

garden was funded by grant money, but created brief contention with the Department of Transportation.

In concluding our interview, Nicole expressed, “granted we are small and there’s no way that we can serve everyone in Highland Park but I think that the value is both direct and indirect; even if you’re not gardening here if you’re walking by, seeing it just might give you an idea, open your eyes to something.” The garden is still new and growing yet has already shown its capacity to bring diverse people together into a communal space to grow and share food and culture.

### **Proyecto Jardín: Boyle Heights**

Proyecto Jardín, located in Boyle Heights about four miles from downtown Los Angeles, has been a part of the community for over 10 years. Set up just behind White Memorial Hospital, the garden came into being from the vision of founder Dr. Robert Krochmal who wanted to create a space for healthful eating, exercise, herbal medicine, and community, and since its beginning, the garden has continued to expand upon these four different areas. Over the years, the garden has blossomed into a communal space in which culture, spirituality, tradition, and cultivation intersect, creating much more than just food.

Proyecto Jardín is a space based on the structure of a commons, without individual plots. It is a space that goes beyond food cultivation; the members of the garden work under the tenants of sustainability, cultural traditions and knowledge, community, and connection to the land. The layout and practice of a commons space has at times been challenging in terms of when and how things get done, how responsibilities are assigned and how the members are held accountable. The garden organizers are

working on a method to install a structure of core coordinators that can commit to a certain amount of time and energy to the garden or certain managerial responsibilities to the garden in order for it to grow and for members to be able to utilize the space more efficiently. At the moment, weeds have intruded the pathways and some of the beds, and as Irene Peña, the one of the garden's administrators, walked me through the garden, she pointed out parts of the garden that needed extra care once individuals committed to a space.

The communal cultivation of the garden has at times been a barrier to the growth and collaboration within the garden. "People have their own reasons for being in the garden; for exercise, therapy, food, just being outdoors," Irene explained to me. Although it is a communal space, some individuals at times treat it as an extension of their own personal routine, and forget that the space is for the whole community to use for different purposes. For a time, there was contention between regular gardeners and community members who came to the exercise classes but were not involved in the garden. As the garden continues to grow, the garden leaders hope to connect the two groups and recognize the different uses for and meanings of the gardeners for each individual, while also serving the community as a whole.

The garden has an application process through which members are picked and in that application, potential members are asked what three plants they want to see grown in the garden. Because it is a communal space, garden members meet at the beginning of the season to decide on what they want to grow from a list created from the suggested plants in the application process. From there, the group votes on what would be most successful in the garden based on the season and the use of the plant. At the moment, huge bushels

of chard dot the garden and rows of fava beans take up a portion of the north quadrant. The south quadrant is set aside as an herb and medicinal garden. In the medicinal garden, there are four raised beds that represent the four directions: East, West, North, and South. Planting in the four directions is a permaculture practice that is linked to different Mexican and Central and South American cultural groups. The way in which the herbs and plants are planted could be based on a variety of different aspects depending on what region a group is from. For example, a certain color is planted in a specific quadrant that reflects the direction of the sun and what that represents (i.e. the sunrise symbolizes new life and yellow flowering plants may then be planted in the East).

The Proyecto Jardín garden uses a mix of different philosophies in the directions the herbs are planted, not favoring one method over another, respecting the diversity of the garden members. Various culturally relevant plants are harvested in the garden, representative of the native homes of garden members, most of which hail from Mexico and South and Central America. The Napol cactuses are just one example of these plants. Although not prime for eating, the cactuses are host to an insect parasite from which red cochineal dye is made, a cultural marker for the Aztec and Maya. An adobe structure lies in the back of the garden and is utilized as a seed saving storage unit. The structure was made using traditional methods with mud and straw and the outside is brightly painted with images reflecting the members' heritage.

The adobe is only one instance of the artwork that has been incorporated into the organic growth of the garden. The eclectic and beautiful artwork that fills the garden amidst the overflowing communal beds adds its own story to the garden and is a symbol of community connection and cultural expression. The well-known East Los Angeles

artist, Michael Amescua, designed the front gates. The mosaic artwork serves a dual purpose of beautification and function. The main-entry mosaic remains a symbol of community as the now grown children who helped to create it, reminisce on their work, as they continue to remain involved in the garden.

The garden has several spaces that serve community purposes beyond growing food. One of these spaces is the main covered meeting area that has been a space for fitness classes for garden members as well as community members outside the gardening group. In the past there have been Brazilian Capoeira classes and aerobic classes bringing together the intention of health and exercise in the holistic vision of the garden. In addition there is an open air kitchen space that is used for cooking classes and art demonstrations. Although presently the kitchen space is rather modest, the leaders are looking to revamping the space to accommodate a greater range of cooking opportunities.

The land is privately owned by the White Memorial Hospital. The garden had previously been its own 501(c) 3 with a non-profit status, but has since become a part of Community Partners. The reason behind the switch was to have access to larger capacity building grants for more advanced or distinct projects. With the help of the Community Partners as a fiscal agent, the garden members hope to push forward with projects such as expanding their Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) box that is currently linked with the South Central Farmers. In the future, the garden members are looking to create a market, selling produce and products made from the harvests of the garden in order to establish a more self-sufficient economy within the garden and, in addition, share the culture of those involved in the garden.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Irene Peña. "Proyecto Jardin." Personal interview. 4 Mar. 2011.

**Stanford/Avalon Community Garden: Watts**

*I like to focus on the 'culture' in agriculture—Miguel Luna, Urban Semillas*

The Stanford Avalon community garden is located in the Watts area of Los Angeles about twelve miles from downtown, Los Angeles. The garden is about four years old and was expanded under the guidance of Mayor Villaraigosa as compensation after the contentious dismantling of the 12 year old, 14-acre South Central Farm located at 41<sup>st</sup> and Alameda about seven miles from the Stanford Avalon Farm. During the battle to maintain the South Central Farm, due to internal divisions the farmer group broke apart. After the dismantling of the South Central Farm, one group moved to Bakersfield to continue farming under the South Central Farm title, running a CSA box and working to regain their past land that continues to sit vacant. The other group, some of whom had left the farm shortly before it was removed, stayed in the vicinity of the area and moved onto the land provided by the city where the Stanford Avalon Farm currently resides. The Los Angeles Community Garden Council (LACGC) acts as landlord for the property and was responsible for entering into an agreement with the city via the Department of Water and Power because the farm is located under the power lines. Although there was contention between the two groups of farmers, according to Miguel Luna who works with the Stanford Avalon Farm “it seemed appropriate to provide people who wanted to farm with some land to farm on. The land was made available and those that were interested went ahead and applied.”<sup>58</sup>

Miguel Luna’s role in the garden was to build capacity amongst the farmers and to help with the process of informal electoral leadership. He came to the farm after the

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Miguel Luna. Stanford Avalon Farm/Urban Semillas. 29 March 2011.

group had already been there about eight months and an organic structure had formed based on who wanted to take on leadership positions. In his experience with the farm, Luna's understanding of what it takes to create a cohesive leadership structure continues to grow:

Sometimes it's very difficult to dedicate yourself to being at the farm the time that its necessary to make things function well. So I think it was a matter of self-identification of people who could spend the time. In a farm, everybody has different roles; some just want to be there to farm, some just want to help others, some want to take on a leadership role and kind of oversee things if they have the time and capability and the skills to do so. We all come with different skills. With Luna's help, the farmers were looking to create a solid foundation as the farm continued to grow so that there was a level of transparency of who were in leadership positions and so decisions could be made democratically with the involvement of all the members. In conjunction with the farmers, Luna hoped to facilitate a balance of what he describes as "structure and void: providing some level of structure and then stepping back a little and letting things function as they function." He believes, "you have to have a fine balance or else things will totally fall apart or they'll become so rigid that nobody wants to be a part of it. It was that dance for about two and a half years."

At the moment there are about 190 individual plots and 20 community plots with 40 more individual plots in the making. There is an application process for attaining a plot, and there remains a rule of one plot per household. The farm is divided into three sections with a master gardener in each section. The title master gardener does not refer to the Cooperative Extension program, but rather, is a role filled by a self-identified member of the garden who has the time and capacity to fulfill the role of master gardener, which entails being present in the garden, taking fellow gardeners' complaints to the

meetings, and having the trust of the surrounding gardeners in order to be a reliable leader in that space. The master gardener title is not based on the depth of knowledge and individual has, but rather, as Luna asserts, all of the farmers have the same knowledge. The garden holds monthly, facilitated meetings to discuss various issues surrounding the garden. Beyond the structure meetings, the garden is perpetually a space for camaraderie, community, and celebration. Things are always going on within the garden, whether it be a potluck in a member's plot who is connected to a house, a celebratory gathering, or simply helping one member plant or harvest.

Although there are individual plots, there is a very communal, sometimes village-like feel to the garden, especially because of extended family members who each have their own plots. "Everyone here is a good neighbor," Luna explains. "If you see that someone left the water on, you turn it off. Sometimes it's very village-like. There could be an activity that brings everyone together. Everyone works their own land, but if someone needs help they get help." Moreover, the farm allows a space where multiple generations interact with one another, the younger learning from the experiences and the knowledge of the older generation. The garden members are predominantly Latino (with a small group of African American members) and much of the plants grown reflect the Latino culture.

Working with the farmers has been a continuing learning experience for Luna. His organization, Urban Semillas, which works with the farm, did a series of workshops on water conservation, one of the organization's main areas of focus. One workshop consisted on gray water systems, and at the encouragement and support of the farmers, Luna excitedly set up a workshop, but learned a lesson himself.

One of those things you have to learn is what sort of knowledge is already there. When we did this gray water workshop, we were very excited that we got the funding to do them. And then I started looking around at the plots and a lot of people had gray water sinks already in their plots; what we wanted to teach was already in motion. It's that appreciation for a culture even when you think you got it all down, you're always surprised by what's out there.

An example of utilizing existing knowledge is the role of the master gardener at the farm. Similar to the master gardener role in the SEACA garden, the Stanford Avalon farm does not believe in using master gardeners from the Master Gardener Cooperative Extension program, but rather uses the gardening knowledge already within the community, in order to perpetuate the local and cultural knowledge of the garden community.

One way in which the farm perpetuates and shares this farming knowledge is through the inter-generational exchange within the community. Luna acknowledges, "For me, I always emphasize the culture in agriculture. There's so much in it, and I think that in culture being this set of knowledge that gets passed on to future generations, it kind of gets fragmented with the hustle and bustle." To inspire and perpetuate this ideology, with the permission of the farmers, Luna set up an educational plot to work with the children of the farmers. With the help of the gardeners, the Seeds for the Future program began. It was a four-month program for children between the ages of seven and eleven that taught the children how to grow and harvest the produce in the plot and created a space for the kids to better understand the value of gardening and moreover instilled a greater sense of respect for the work of their families in the garden and the importance behind food cultivation, both economic and cultural. Luna explains that in participating in the program, "we did see some bridging of some of the kids really taking an appreciation of

why their parents are there and why its important to have that skill as well as the identification of different plants.”<sup>59</sup>

The Stanford Avalon garden, along with the other three gardens is a rich green space that has deep cultural roots. The profiles of these gardens do not go as deeply into the culture of the members and the space as I had previously set out to find, but rather, present a basis for further research focused directly on the cultural ecologies of each space individually.

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<sup>59</sup> Miguel Luna. "Stanford Avalon." Personal interview. 29 Mar. 2011.

## **Research Findings**

There are several parallels that can be drawn from the four gardens profiled in this paper. The areas I focus on in this section include:

- Educational elements
- Re-defining master gardener
- Community identity and cultural interaction.

## **Educational Elements**

Each of the gardens profiled in this paper include an educational element within the garden. For the SEACA garden, the space is a constant learning experience for the youth who cultivate the garden. The garden works as a place for experimentation and active hands-on learning for the students utilizing the garden. The members are moving to incorporate more community members in hopes of expanding the garden knowledge inter-generationally, since many of the youth are new to gardening. The SEACA garden takes learning outside of the classroom, engaging high school students and encouraging them to connect to their community, their cultural identity, and where their food comes from. Through SEACA's organization, the garden is a place for alternative education revolving around community organizing, active experimentation, food cultivation, community building, and expanding the knowledge and understanding of food systems, healthy living, and cultural identity.

The other three gardens, Milagro Allegro, Stanford Avalon, and Proyecto Jardín, have all incorporated a separate but intertwined space for education in the garden. Both Milagro Allegro and Stanford Avalon have plots specifically set aside for educational purposes for elementary school-age children. The models are different, but hold a similar

purpose. For the Milagro garden, the resident master gardener holds a plot that was designed as a learning garden for the LA Sprouts program for fourth graders, as mentioned previously in this paper. Stanford Avalon maintains a plot for children of the community members as a space to engage the children while their parents are working in the garden as well as to facilitate the understanding of the importance of gardening for their community and families. Miguel Luna, who started the educational plot, the space works to instill in the children why gardening is important and how they can help their families in their own gardens. For Proyecto Jardín, the youth are incorporated within the member structure. The garden does hold classes and demonstrations and is currently creating an area for some of the local grade school children to grow and learn.

For each of these gardens, there is a focus on perpetuating the knowledge within the community through educational programs and workshops for the youth of the garden. These programs inspire and instill respect for growing food for oneself and one's family. Not only are the children taught gardening skills, but they are also taught how they relate to food systems, healthy living, environmental and social justice, and their cultural identity.

### **Redefining Master Gardener**

With the exception of Milagro Allegro, the gardens I have studied do not rely on the assistance and knowledge of master gardeners from the UC Cooperative Extension Program. Instead, these gardens look to individuals who have the knowledge base as well as the time and energy to commit to an instructional and facilitating leadership role in the garden. These gardens focus on the knowledge and practices of those within the community rather than looking towards outside instruction on what should grow in the

garden or how it should be grown. For the SEACA garden, the youth are working to recruit community members with gardening knowledge as master gardeners, expanding the inter-generational relationships within the garden maintaining a cultural knowledge relating to the heritage of the gardeners. As Miguel Luna stated in his interview, everyone has the same knowledge at the Stanford Avalon farm, and there isn't a need for an outside master gardener to oversee the gardeners. The role of master gardener does not just necessitate knowledge, but more importantly, requires a mutual trust between the person in that role and the gardeners themselves.

### **Community Identity and Cultural Interaction**

Supporting the research question for this paper, each of these gardens has displayed a goal to work towards strengthening community identity and cultural ties between the gardeners and the surrounding communities. The gardens have acted as not only as places for food cultivation, but as places for connecting people, educating youth, and practicing cultural traditions and celebrations. They have created a medium through which greater self-sufficiency can be achieved and through which the sharing of knowledge and tradition can occur. More in depth study can be done for each of these gardens in order to more fully grasp the unique traditions and beliefs practiced and built upon within the garden by the members. This aspect of my findings still necessitates more research in terms of these four gardens, specifically.

## **Recommendations and Conclusions**

Although there are numerous social, political, and economic benefits to community gardens, there are also various barriers that keep the movement from expanding to its full potential. Based on my research and findings, I have laid out a number of barriers that affect the gardens profiled in this paper as well as the community garden movement as a whole. From these barriers, I present recommendations or areas for further study.

### **Status of the Land**

One of the main barriers to creating and maintaining gardens is the issue of available land. In the early relief and war gardens, and even with the more recent gardens, communities have utilized unused urban space for the sites of the gardens. Although the earlier gardens were meant to act as temporary solutions, the gardens of today are working to be more permanent structures within their communities. But the use of vacant lots has become an increasing problem for the urban garden movement; once prices rise or a more profitable development plan comes to fruition, the vacant lots become a potential space for redevelopment such as the example of the South Central Farm. Subsequently, the importance of the gardens and the communities who work within them are put on the back burner in favor of a better project in the eyes of the city or the private developer. Moreover, gardens “take a backseat to other anti-poverty and community development efforts” which makes their implementation especially difficult coupled with the fact that in Los Angeles in particular “community garden initiatives are on the fringe of the parks and green space movement. No grants designed specifically for or cater

directly to community gardens, thus gardens are forced to compete with other types of parks and recreation for the same funding.”<sup>60</sup>

This problem is further hindered by the various organizations and developers that own the land of interest to gardens and by the terms and conditions they apply to the land. For example, each of the four gardens in this study is owned by a different group: the Department of Water and Power, the Department of Transportation, White Memorial Hospital, and the Church of the Epiphany. Two are privately owned and two are public property owned by the city and the length of lease for each vary, and can be a barrier for future maintenance of the gardens.

The lack of documentation of community gardens in Los Angeles keeps community gardens from being accounted for as part of the general planning process or the city budget. Based on the research I have done, I recommend that there be a streamlined process through which community gardens can be implemented and maintained on a long-term basis. Local governments can incorporate land use legislation that provide comprehensive plan policies and zoning codes in order to facilitate the creation and preservation of community gardens. Similar to zoning for parks and recreation, I suggest that there be a zoning legislation specifically for implementing community gardens in the city’s comprehensive plan. Moreover, I recommend that the city provide some financial support specifically for community gardens. I assert that there should be better protections for the preservation of community gardens so that there is less threat of their removal for more economically profitable developments.

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<sup>60</sup> Benjamin, 43.

In a conversation with Irene Peña of Proyecto Jardin, we discussed the temporary status of most community gardens, and when I suggested stronger policies for long-term gardens, she highlighted the point that although it is important for a community that their gardens are preserved, there is also much benefit from temporary gardens in unutilized vacant lands. In terms of food production and food access, the more garden space the better, and if gardening groups can take advantage of vacant lots, even if temporarily, they can enhance their access to fresh food. The need for community gardens on a temporary basis is valid in terms of utilizing vacant spaces for a purpose especially during times when land is economically feasible for a garden over another development plan. In response, I recommend that in addition to zoning codes that address that allow for community gardens as well as comprehensive city plans that include places for gardens, that there is also a section that allows for gardens to make use of vacant lots, at least for a temporary period for expanded food production. Overall, I agree with Devon Peña's idea for "grassroots new urbanism"<sup>61</sup> to be developed into the future plans for Los Angeles which encourages human and natural capital over economic capital. But I acknowledge this concept will take more than policy implementations to come to fruition; it also requires a ideological shift in society about the benefits and reasons for gardens and subsequently a respect and understanding for the deeper ecologies intertwined within them.

### **Role in Local Food Networks**

According to the study *Greening Cities, Growing Communities*, community gardens have the ability to play a role in rising local food networks and should be

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<sup>61</sup> Peña, 11.

considered “an important planning concern because not only is food access a basic human need but food systems can also be included as an essential part of the local economy, public health, and natural environment.”<sup>62</sup> In response, I recommend that community gardens be incorporated into local food networks, where applicable. If gardens have the capacity, structure, and will to expand, with the help of the local government and local non-profits, they could be a space that serves the community beyond those who work within the garden. Gardens have the potential to be small-scale, self-sufficient economies, as some of the gardens I have profiled are working towards. Gardens can expand into the local food network in the form of CSA boxes or farmers’ markets. Moreover, community gardens and urban farms can be incorporated, at least in small-scale, into farm to institution programs, distributing produce to local schools linking producer to consumer and creating relationships between the two. I recommend that community gardens be integrated into the regional food hub movement, as they have shown to have increased access to healthy food at a local level. Especially in communities with a predominant ethnicity, incorporating culturally appropriate food grown from local gardens into schools can be an important part of retaining a cultural identity within the school system.

### Conclusion

This project explores the various uses and benefits of community gardens throughout their history in the United States. From their beginnings, they have served many purposes, most of which revolved around combating a crisis or economic hardship throughout the nation. In later years, the garden movement became more engrained in

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<sup>62</sup> Hou, Johnson, Lawson, 22.

social and environmental movement broadening green space in urban settings and increasing access to fresh, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods.

The United States has an agrarian background in some regions of the country, but in the increasingly urban areas as well as rural areas, there is a significant lack of community or individual gardens as supplemental food for the family. This stands in contrast to many other countries that have a strong agrarian history that has been maintained as part of daily routine for families and communities. The United States is a country built of immigrants, yet there is a significant amount of expectation to assimilate into the elusive culture of the United States. For immigrants that come from countries with agrarian roots, it is difficult to retain a cultural community especially when a portion of the cultural practices revolves around food cultivation and the symbolism and significance behind it. Foodways are extremely important in retaining a cultural identity, and community gardens are one medium through which they can be more tightly held. Through my research of immigrant and ethnic community gardens, I became increasingly interested on the deeper political and cultural ecology of garden spaces for these groups. My initial purpose was to find out why gardens are significant to immigrant and ethnic groups aside from the typical benefits of general community gardens. With this project, I have begun to scratch the surface of finding out the answer to this, but hope to continue my study of the cultural significance of community gardens. The benefits of gardens are far beyond economic, extending more deeply into the political and cultural dimensions associated with the groups involved. Immigrant and ethnic community gardens create a space for cultural identities to grow alongside the harvests of the garden and allow these ethnic groups a space for reclaiming their culture away from their homeland. In addition,

these groups are given the opportunity to share their culture with the communities that surround them so as to develop an awareness of, respect for, and interest in different and unique foodways, especially in the diverse setting of the United States.

My research became more philosophically centered rather than policy centered as I attempted to focus on the interactions between the gardeners and the cultural significance of the garden space that cannot be interpreted quantifiably. To expand my research, I would attempt to build a relationship with one farm, working with the gardeners and gaining their trusts in order to obtain future insights into the importance of gardening for that specific cultural group. Community gardens come in many varying forms, but I hope to further my understanding of the cultural significance of community gardens of agrarian-connected groups that goes beyond the growing of the food, and delves deeper into the spiritual and cultural roots of working with the land, and this paper has been an introduction into understanding this more profoundly.

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