

Mexican Immigrant Gardeners: Entrepreneurs or Exploited Workers?

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Suburban maintenance gardening is one service sector that has grown in the United States, and in many parts of the country it has become a gendered occupational niche for Mexican immigrant men. What is the social organization of this occupation and to what extent are Mexican immigrant gardeners following in the footsteps of Japanese gardeners, achieving socioeconomic mobility through gardening? Based on interviews conducted with 47 Mexican immigrant maintenance gardeners in Los Angeles, this article examines the occupational structure of this informal sector job, the social context in which it has developed, the mix of informal and formal economic transactions involved, and the strategic challenges that gardeners negotiate. The data show that there is occupational differentiation and mobility within the gardening occupation, and that mobility in the job remains dependent on combining both ethnic entrepreneurship and subjugated service work. Gendered social and human capital, together with financial and legal capital are necessary for occupational mobility. Jardinaria, or suburban maintenance gardening, is analogous to the longstanding labor incorporation of female immigrant domestic workers into affluent households, but it is also indicative of a new trend: the proliferation of hybrid forms of entrepreneurship and service work and the incorporation of masculine "dirty work" service jobs into affluent households. Keywords: informal sector, Mexican migration, landscape gardening, ethnic entrepreneurship, gender and work.

Concentrated numbers of Latino immigrant workers are now working in unregulated, informal economy jobs in U.S. suburbs and cities (Gordon 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Lopez-Garza 2001; Valenzuela 2003; Zlolniski 2006). These include income generating activities that are not illegal, but which occur outside of state regulations, and it is now generally recognized that these are constitutive elements of advanced capitalism, not premodern vestiges of the past (Castells and Portes 1989). Los Angeles is perhaps the mecca of Latino immigrant informal economy, with vibrant sectors of day laborers, street vendors, garment assembly workers, nannies, domestic workers, and gardeners. Many observers note that Latino immigrants wind up being exploited in the informal economy because they have low levels of literacy, English fluency, and job skills (Castells and Portes 1989; Joassart-Marcelli and Flaming 2002). However, all informal sector jobs are not alike, and many include degrees of informality and formality. More importantly, some of these jobs afford disadvantaged workers opportunities not otherwise available to them in the formal economy. To disentangle some of these job characteristics, in this article we step inside the social and economic world of Mexican immigrant maintenance gardeners in Los Angeles.

Throughout the twentieth century and into the present era, Latino, and particularly Mexican immigrant gardeners, have transformed the landscape of Los Angeles, enabling the lush, leafy, suburban visual character of the city and surrounding areas. From Pasadena to

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding from the University of Southern California Provost's Initiative on Immigrant Integration and the University of Southern California College Diversity Placement program. They also thank sociology department colleagues Amon Emeka, Leland Saito, and Mike Messner for feedback on an earlier draft. Direct correspondence to: Hernan Ramirez and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Department of Sociology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-2539. E-mail: hernanra@usc.edu or sotelo@usc.edu.

Social Problems, Vol. 56, Issue 1, pp. 70–88, ISSN 0037-7791, electronic ISSN 1533-8533. © 2009 by Society for the Study of Social Problems, Inc. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website at www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/sp.2009.56.1.70.

Beverly Hills, and from the Hollywood Hills to Santa Monica and the modest-sized yards of Culver City, small crews of brown-skinned, Spanish-speaking men drive around in pick-up trucks packed with lawn mowers and other landscaping equipment. They circulate and descend on residential neighborhoods—and not just the toniest ones—six days a week (and some even work on Sundays). Usually working in teams of two or three, they restore clean, orderly greenscapes by quickly mowing lawns, blowing leaves, and trimming bushes. They typically do several gardens in one neighborhood before moving along, allowing them to maintain routes that may include working in 10 to 15 different yards in one day. They also perform “extras,” such as pruning trees and planting annuals, for extra pay.

What is the occupational status of these *jardineros*? On the one hand, Mexican immigrant gardeners appear to be highly exploited cheap labor, toiling and sweating under the scorching sun in residential corners of Los Angeles. Newspaper articles refer to them as “leaf blowers” and “brown dirt cowboys,” and lump them in phrases like “maids and gardeners,” suggesting servant-like, racially oppressed, unskilled, subordinated labor (Rommelmann 2004). If gendered dirty work involves men working with dirt and grime and women with bodies, this is classic masculinized and racialized dirty work (Wolkowitz 2006). Gardeners cultivate plants growing out of soil, and dust and dirt literally swirl around them when they use the blowers. Visually, Mexican immigrant gardeners certainly look like workers: they are dressed in boots, caps, and work clothes, and lug heavy mowers and blowers in and out of their trucks to do hard, manual labor.

On the other hand, many of them operate as independent contractors, and in this regard, today’s Mexican immigrant gardeners may be following in the footsteps of Japanese American gardeners, acting as small entrepreneurs (Huerta 2007; Pisani and Yoskowitz 2006). Route-owner gardeners own their own trucks and tools, they bill their clients for services rendered, they strategize how to minimize risk, they enjoy a degree of autonomy in when and how they do their work, and most of them employ one or sometimes a few employees. During the twentieth century, Japanese American men established residential maintenance gardening as a skilled occupational and entrepreneurial niche, one that allowed them to capitalize on their background working in agriculture and to negotiate racial discrimination and exclusion (Tsuchida 1984; Tsukashima 1991). Gardening jobs afforded them and their families routes to upward socioeconomic mobility, and were pathways to their children’s professions (Tsuchida 1984; Tsukashima 1991). Are Mexican immigrant men following in their footsteps?

Based on interviews conducted with 47 Mexican immigrant gardeners, this article examines the occupational structure of this informal sector job in order to assess contemporary possibilities for socioeconomic mobility. We ask, are these men exploited workers, toiling in a low-wage, dead-end, dirty, dangerous informal sector job, or are they acting more autonomously as small business owners who employ co-ethnics, strategizing risk and opportunity, and thereby enabling socioeconomic mobility? What organizes the pathways into this job, and how do gardeners move up the ladder? As we address these questions, we gauge the range of informality in the job and the gendered aspect of job demand and organization, and we show how the local labor market conditions in Los Angeles have changed during the last 20 years through labor immigration, economic restructuring, and social and cultural shifts in the consumption of services.

New Gendered Immigrant Economies of Household Service

Globalization and economic restructuring have accelerated the diversification of labor migration, and the decline of manufacturing in developed nations. In nearly all post-industrial nations around the world, one can find bifurcated, segmented labor markets with immigrant workers of various nationalities earning a living by providing services to well-to-do “others,” members of the host society. These jobs, which include cleaning, caring, tending, selling,

fixing, serving, and servicing, prevail in the large global cities such as Los Angeles, London, New York, and Berlin (Sassen 1991). Dublin, Dubai, and other cities are also showing similar patterns. In these sites, the concentration of income inequalities and immigrant workers has cultivated the creation and expansion of specialized boutique services (Sassen 1991). This pattern also prevails in affluent U.S. suburban locales from Long Island to Los Angeles, where immigrant workers toil in car washes, hotels, hospitals, and restaurants, and in private homes doing repair, restoration, cleaning, and caring. These are arduous, physically hard jobs, constituting what one observer has called “suburban sweatshops” (Gordon 2005).

Suburban maintenance gardening is one sector that is indicative of seismic shifts in service consumption in the United States. With economic restructuring, income inequality, time-squeezed dual-career families, and a larger proportion of the population working long hours in the professions and business services, new services have appeared and others have expanded to be consumed by the middle class. The domestic labor performed by foreign-born women has been studied in the United States, Asia, and Europe (Hondagneu-Sotelo [2001] 2007; Lan 2006; Lutz 2008) but scholarship on the work of immigrant men in and around private households remains scarce. An important exception is the analysis of “the migrant handyman phenomenon” in the United Kingdom, a response to the male time-squeeze in affluent households (Kilkey and Perrons 2008).

Paid domestic work is a gendered immigrant occupational niche, and in the United States, gardening has emerged as the masculinized counterpart. Four similarities are evident. First, *jardinieria* is activity coded as men’s work. It takes place outdoors among dirt and plants. It requires hard physical labor, machinery that is heavy to carry, gas-powered and loud, and sharp, potentially dangerous tools, all of which help constitute the masculine domain. Meanwhile, *domesticas* work indoors, doing feminized dirty work in the domestic sphere (cleaning toilets, changing diapers, sweeping, mopping, etc.), socially reproducing human beings and interior domesticity (Hondagneu-Sotelo [2001] 2007; Lan 2006).

Secondly, *jardinieria* is performed by men and is organized through men’s social networks. Domesticas are women, and they find jobs through female networks, but they usually work alone. Gardeners—to state the obvious—are not only men who find jobs through male kin and friends from their village, but they also work among men, forming their own male work culture (Ramirez 2007). Both jobs are sharply segregated by ethnicity and gender. In Los Angeles, 97 percent of noncitizens working in landscaping are men, and 94 percent working in private households are women (Klowden et al. 2005:285).

Thirdly, just as domesticas provide substitute paid labor for the work women once did for free, so too *jardineros* provide commodified labor that substitutes for the work of husbands and sons. As recently as the 1950s and 1960s, cultural representations of post-war tract homes featured in magazines or television privileged iconic images of proud homeowner men or their teenage sons mowing pristine green lawns. Green lawns still prevail, but it is rare to see middle class homeowners in Los Angeles mowing these. Mexican men are doing the work.

Finally, the proliferation of Latino immigrant workers seems to have activated an expanding demand for gendered household work. Residential maintenance gardening is not new, but in the early twentieth century, it was a service reserved for the rich. Today, those employing gardeners include a wider range of social classes. It is notoriously difficult to measure informal sector growth, as census data tends to undercount both informal economic activity and the employment of unauthorized immigrant workers. Nevertheless, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) data show that in 1980 there were 8,000 Mexican foreign-born men working as gardeners in the Los Angeles-Long Beach metropolitan area. By 1990, this had more than doubled to 19,886, and by 2000, there were 31,000 foreign-born Mexican gardeners counted. The numbers nearly quadrupled in twenty years (Ruggles et al. 2004). It is likely that many remain uncounted.

This is not only a regional phenomenon. Our travels and conversations with colleagues reveal that Mexican immigrant men are working in residential maintenance gardening in

locales as diverse as Princeton, Atlanta, and Chapel Hill. This reflects the diversification of new destinations of Mexican immigration, which has gone from regional concentration in the Southwest and Chicago, to a nationally dispersed geography during the 1990s (Zuñiga and Hernandez-Leon 2005). This period also witnessed an economic boom in residential maintenance gardening and home construction, sectors increasingly staffed by Mexican immigrant labor. Many Americans now pay for gardening services. One nationwide market research study estimates that American consumer spending on lawn care and landscape services increased from \$25 billion in 2001 to \$45 billion in 2006 (National Gardening Association 2007). As one industry insider observed, this increase reflects not only homeowners' taste and appreciation for beautifully landscaped yards, but also that many "may not have the time or inclination to do this work for themselves" (National Gardening Association 2007). Aesthetic and cultural shifts support this transformation, notably the emergence of private homes and gardens as asylum and escape from the pressures of the public work sphere. These images and cultural ideals are routinely displayed in magazines such as *Sunset* or *Better Homes and Gardens*. Cultural pundits refer to these processes as "cocooning." We maintain that the expansion of landscaping services is bound up not only with appreciation for beauty, privacy, and status in residential gardens, but also with changes in patterns of Mexican labor migration and ethnic occupational niche employment.

From a Japanese to a Mexican Occupational Niche

Residential maintenance gardening was pioneered in California in the early twentieth century by Japanese immigrant gardeners who found themselves racially excluded from owning property, which precluded them from continuing with independent agriculture and truck farming.¹ Spurred by racial discrimination, as well as finding residential gardening contiguous with culturally rooted skills and knowledge garnered from both peasant farming in Japan and agricultural work in California, Japanese American men discovered that with a modest investment, gardening could provide a viable income (Tsuchida 1984; Tsukashima 1991). Additionally, the job did not require high levels of education nor more than rudimentary English language skills, and social networks among family members facilitated entry into the job (Tsukashima 1995/1996). By the 1930s, maintenance gardening was institutionalized as a Japanese American man's job all along the West Coast (Japanese American National Museum 2007). Even after the second generation Nisei obtained higher education, many of them stayed in gardening because of racial discrimination. Coming out of the World War II internment camps, many Nisei found themselves cast as perpetual foreigners and outsiders, and they were either shut out of or shunned more visible, public jobs in favor of gardening, which provided reliable, steady earnings and a degree of protection from scrutiny (Japanese American National Museum 2007). Moreover, Japanese American gardeners were able to leverage images associated with Japanese horticultural aesthetics and artistic talent (Japanese American National Museum 2007).

Evidence suggests that Japanese American gardeners in Los Angeles employed Mexican helpers as far back as the 1930s (Tsuchida 1984), but it wasn't until the late 1960s that the Mexican immigrant population began growing in urban and suburban locales throughout the Southwest. The Bracero Program, which issued nearly 5 million temporary work contracts to Mexican workers for agricultural labor between 1942 and 1964, sowed the seeds for the rapid expansion in the Mexican immigrant population in the 1970s and 1980s. As former Braceros

1. The 1913 and 1920 Alien Land Laws in California held that persons ineligible to become U.S. citizens were prohibited from owning land. They were directed at the Japanese and motivated by white agriculturalists' racism and fear of economic competition (Gaines and Cho 2004).

legalized their status through employer certification or family reunification provisions of the 1965 Immigration Act, many of them brought their families to the United States and moved out of the fields and into cities and suburbs. Social network migration prevailed, and the demand for Mexican immigrant labor diversified out of agriculture and into manufacturing, services, and construction. Our interview data suggest that it is in this post-1965 era, beginning in the 1970s and consolidating in the 1980s, that gardening shifted from being a Japanese American occupational niche to a Mexican one in Los Angeles. And, with the passage of the 1986 Immigration Control and Reform Act (IRCA), more Mexican men were able to become independent, self-employed gardeners.

Yet, there are some striking differences between the work of Mexican immigrant gardeners of today and the Japanese gardeners of the pre-1980s. First, while there is a range of technologies in use, the tools of the trade have shifted from manual implements to machines. While Japanese gardeners in the 1970s began using blowers, hand-held clippers were the iconic symbols of their work. Today, *jardineros* rely primarily on loud, gas-powered machinery—blowers, mowers, and hedge trimmers.² Gas-powered technology means that *jardineros* can work quickly and handle an increasing volume of clients. With increased use of blowers, *jardineros* typically spend only 30 to 60 minutes on each job (they spend more time only when it is a large, high-service, high-paying estate). Business acumen is necessary to manage the higher volume of jobs, and this adds stress, but it also increases the possibilities for higher earnings.

Like the Japanese American gardeners before them, Mexican immigrant *jardineros* complain of competition and under-bidding from new arrivals. When Japanese Americans were a numerical minority, and gardening was a smaller sector, it represented Japanese Americans' most recognizable occupational niche. In contrast, Mexican-origin people now constitute approximately half of the population of Los Angeles and about one-third of California. Mexican immigrant men—those with legal status and those without it—provide an institutionalized source of labor in many industries and occupations, in construction, hotels, restaurants, and as painters, parking valets, and *carwashers*. *Jardineria* is simply one of the many diverse service occupations in which they work, serving as part of a new caste-like labor force in a post-industrial plantation-like economy. What is different today is that moving up the ranks requires legal status, and many Mexican immigrant men remain *sin papeles* (without legal status papers).

Finally, unlike Japanese American gardeners who formed collective associations and rotating credit associations (Tsukashima 1991, 1998), Mexican immigrant *jardineros* today prefer to help one another on a one-to-one basis, through family and village ties and *compadrazgo* (godparenthood). Although an organization called the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles (ALAGLA) formed in the wake of the leaf blower crackdown in the mid-1990s, only five of our interviewees reported participating in this association. Kin, village, and *compadrazgo* ties among men bind the *jardineros* together and inform the social organization of the job.

Informal Worker-Entrepreneurs?

Given their history of migration, direct labor recruitment, and economic incorporation in the United States, and their low levels of education and occupational skills, most Mexican immigrants in the United States work as manual laborers not as credentialed professionals. Other immigrant groups, particularly Koreans, Cubans, Chinese, and in an earlier era, Jewish im-

2. Gas-powered blowers were introduced in the 1970s, and became a standard part of the *jardinero's* toolkit by the 1980s. The California drought of the late 1970s and competition among gardeners led to the widespread adoption of blowers (Hirahara 2000:64).

migrants, have been over-represented among entrepreneurial immigrants (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Because we argue that Mexican immigrant gardeners are worker-entrepreneurs, it is instructive to build on insights from the literature on ethnic enclave entrepreneurship more broadly.

The concept of immigrant ethnic enclaves as spatial sites where immigrant co-ethnics constitute a singular commercial sphere of business owners, employees, and customers was introduced by Ivan Light (1972), and developed by Light and Edna Bonacich (1988), Zulema Valdez (2008), Min Zhou (1992), and others. Chinatown and Cuban Miami are classic ethnic enclaves. An ethnic enclave economy provides immigrants with refuge from otherwise hostile labor markets, endowing a spatially concentrated ethnic community with social capital and social networks, enabling the development of thriving ethnic businesses (Valdez 2008). Immigrants without valuable employment credentials, job skills, education, and English language fluency, and who face racial discrimination in the formal, nonethnic economy, may seek work in the ethnic enclave and discover that it serves as an “employment buffer” (Light and Gold 2000) or that it prevents “downward assimilation” (Valdez 2008). In the most optimistic rendering, the ethnic enclave leads to expanding opportunities and upward mobility (Lee 2002; Light 1972). Unpaid family labor, social capital, and ethnic solidarity bolster business.

Recent scholarship has acknowledged the expansion of Mexican immigrant and Mexican American owned businesses serving Latino communities, such as produce markets (Alvarez 1990) and *carnicerias* (meat markets) (Oberle 2006). Survey data shows that most Mexican business owners have lower levels of education than their white or Korean peers, and that most Mexican business owners started their businesses with low levels of financial capital, many with less than \$25,000 dollars (Valdez 2008). The majority of Mexican-owned businesses in the United States are thus small enterprises.

Sectoral specialization is a key feature of immigrant business. Chinese restaurants, laundries, and now banks, as well as Korean-owned groceries and beauty product shops or Vietnamese nail parlors exemplify this (Kang 2003; Lee 2002). As David Kaplan and Wei Li (2006) summarize, this specialization stems from “the skills that ethnics bring with them, the opportunities available in a particular context, the legacy of longstanding activity in a sector, and the structural barriers set by hosting societies . . .” (p. 3). For Mexican immigrant men, the gardening business has become a sector of gendered specialization.

What explains this development? As we will show, Mexican immigrant men possess skills, experience, and the predisposition required for residential maintenance gardening, and through informal apprenticeships they learn from one another how to operate these businesses.

By definition, the workplaces are spatially dispersed. Gardeners go to work in other people’s neighborhoods and yards. In Los Angeles, many of them travel daily from the more heavily Latino eastside to the more affluent white majority neighborhoods. Like paid domestic workers and nannies, the gardening industry is integrated into the mainstream suburban society and economy, allowing Latino immigrant workers passage into neighborhoods where they might not otherwise be welcome. Here, the “landscapes of the ethnic economy,” a term that geographers introduced to refer to Chinatowns or ethnic commercial neighborhoods (Kaplan and Li 2006), are simultaneously visible and invisible throughout white suburbia. While black men in Los Angeles’ white, affluent neighborhoods may be racially profiled, Mexican men in trucks with tools are common sights. They are institutionally incorporated as laborers in many home service occupations (construction, installation, painting, pool service, etc).

Description of Research and Sample

This study is based on 47 interviews conducted with Mexican immigrant gardeners in the Los Angeles metropolitan area during the summer of 2007. We designed a semi-structured interview guide that asked primarily open-ended questions about occupational experiences

(e.g., job entry, duties, wages, income, and expenses, relations with clients and co-workers, and dangers encountered on the job, etc.). Research participants were also asked questions on themes not addressed here.

All of the interviews were conducted by the first author, in Spanish, and typically lasted between one-and-a-half to two hours; all were audio-recorded. Institutional review board (IRB) protocols were followed, with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Each research participant filled out a brief "face sheet," which collected data on factors such as age, marital status, income, place of origin, legal status, and number of years living in the United States. This allowed us to sketch demographic profiles, but the primary data is based on the in-depth interviews.

After the interviews were transcribed verbatim, we read through each transcript and coded the data into themes for analysis. We translated into English only those portions of the interviews reported in this article. The extended case method (Burawoy 1998) guided our analysis of the data in light of existing theories of ethnic entrepreneurship, gender, and the informal sector. Grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1994) provided directives for coding, organizing, and analyzing the data.

Snowball sampling is commonly used for gathering research participants in instances where economic informality and diverse immigrant legal statuses prevail (Hondagneu-Sotelo [2001] 2007; Menjivar 2000; Zolniski 2006). We found the initial research participants through several different snowballs, beginning with family members, personal acquaintances, and university colleagues with ties to Mexican hometown associations. We then built a purposive sample from these initial contacts. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked to name someone who worked in *jardineria* who might be interested in participating. When telephoned with a request for an interview, a few men declined to participate, citing their busy work schedules. We also distributed an IRB-approved research subject recruitment form at a local lawnmower repair shop. This strategy yielded no interviewees, reinforcing our view of the power of social capital and trust among gardeners who are friends and family.

Because Mexican immigrant gardeners work long hours and six days a week, the interviews took place during evenings and a few on Sunday afternoons. During the summer months, with extended daylight hours, many of the *jardineros* did not return home until 6 or 7 pm. At the time of the interviews, they were tired and some were still dressed in their work clothes. All interviews took place in the *jardineros'* homes, which included modest bungalows in Inglewood and South Los Angeles, hot, cramped apartments in central Los Angeles, and sprawling suburban, ranch-style homes in the San Fernando Valley. Study participants were not paid, but received a small gift (a box of See's Candies) as a token of appreciation.

We consciously restricted our sample to Mexicans because they now prevail in this occupation, and the majority of the study participants (40 out of 47) hail from the state of Zacatecas. We may have oversampled Zacatecanos, or it may be that their social networks allowed them to get a toehold into gardening in Los Angeles. Numerically, there are more people from Jalisco and Michoacan in Los Angeles, but Zacatecanos in the United States disproportionately reside in Los Angeles. In fact, more of them reside in Los Angeles than in any other city.³ Most of the men were married (40 out of 47) with children, and most of them were legal permanent residents or naturalized U.S. citizens (36 out of 47), although many of them had once been undocumented immigrant workers. The sample included men who worked for other gardeners as paid employees (9), self-employed "route-owner" gardeners (36), and a few licensed contractors (5).⁴

3. For figures on the percentages of people from different Mexican states registered with the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles for the *matriculas consulares* identifications, see Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior, <http://www.ime.gob.mx/estados.htm>. On Zacatecanos in Los Angeles, see Quiñones 2002.

4. Four of the contractors maintained routes on the side, so they are counted as both route owners and contractors.

Like most Mexican immigrant workers in the United States, most of these men had primary school education or less; only 13 of the 47 interviewees had gone further than ninth grade. Through the interviews and the face sheet, we attempted to gather data on annual income, weekly earnings, and monthly earnings, but the income data are clouded by several factors: the reluctance of a few interviewees to reveal income; the credibility issues surrounding self-reported income; and by variable earnings and complicated calculus of costs and fees of self-employed workers. Still, it is clear there is a vast range of pay. Paid employees make \$20,000 to 25,000 a year, while many route owners cite incomes of \$60,000 to \$100,000. The highest earning respondent, a landscaper with an eighth-grade education, claimed a gross annual income of \$800,000 and his posh residence did not contradict this self-report.

Findings

Occupational stratification and an informal organizational system mediate residential gardening jobs. In part, this reflects specialization and division of labor, with some gardeners entrusted with particular tasks that other gardeners do not do (driving the truck, tree pruning). Most gardeners, however, do a variety of tasks, including driving, mowing, blowing leaves, pruning, clipping, planting annuals, fertilizing, and so on.

The primary differentiation among gardeners is determined not by the tasks they do or the hours that they spend working at one particular residence, but according to occupational social relations. Here, the job breaks down into three categories. These include *ayudantes* (helpers), or waged employees who work for an independent gardener. This is the point of entry into the job. Next are the independent, self-employed route owners, who maintain a route of residential customers for whom they provide regular gardening services. Some of these independent gardeners work alone, but most employ, or have in the past employed, at least one or two *ayudantes*. Finally, some Mexican gardeners become licensed landscape contractors. Degrees of informality and formality characterize each of these positions, with the *ayudantes* usually paid in cash and tilting almost exclusively into the informal economy, landscape contractors veering toward more formal, contractual economic transactions, and the route-owner gardeners somewhere in between.

The Ayudante Apprenticeship

There is a linear progression of mobility in the job, and while not everyone becomes a financially solvent route owner and fewer still become landscape contractors, all newcomers begin by working as *ayudantes* or employees. These are not advertised job positions. Rather, gendered social networks provide an "in." The men typically start off working for male family members or for acquaintances from their ranchos or towns of origin. A few are hired from day laborer hiring sites, but generally, social networks and social capital assure the independent route owners of a trusted, loyal work force (Huerta 2007; Pisani and Yoskowitz 2005, 2006).

Social network hiring and social capital are institutionalized mechanisms of immigrant occupational niches and ethnic enclave employment (Light 1972; Waldinger and Lichter 2003) and social networks may in fact help regulate informal sector occupations (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). It is not just solidarity among co-ethnics, however, but a familial and localized sense of trust and obligation that allows newly arrived Mexican men to work as gardening helpers for their family members and close acquaintances. At the point of occupational entry, informality and social capital rule.

Wages are generally paid in cash. During the summer of 2007, when this data was collected, the daily wages averaged between \$75 and \$80, with drivers earning slightly more (\$100 to \$110). Most of them earned between \$450 to 480 for a six-day workweek. Whenever possible, the *ayudantes* earned additional pay (typically \$100 a day) by working weekend

“extras.” Tree trimmers, a job that involves more danger and skill, might earn \$200 a day. Informality prevails, and part of their wages may even be paid in kind, as room and board to men who are newly arrived from Mexico.

When discussing their earlier experiences as *ayudantes*, some of the men recounted narratives of gratitude while some expressed resentment, but they all agreed that working as a gardener’s helper served as an apprenticeship and an important entry into residential maintenance gardening. As one man recalled: “I started working (in 1974) as a gardener’s helper with some relatives, but really, it was practically out of appreciation for food and everything, and I worked that way for four months. And that’s what allowed me to learn (about gardening).” Newcomers to the job may work as helpers for several months or years before they break out on their own.

Migrant social networks among family and friends constitute powerful channels pulling the men into gardening. Thirty-seven out of the 47 gardeners reported finding their first job with family members or friends. One interviewee said that he had initially shown an interest in construction work, but this proved impossible to break into because his brothers and uncles all worked in gardening jobs. “So, well, okay, gardening it is,” he conceded. Another gardener explained the magnet of family networks this way: “All of my *paisanos* (countrymen) that are here, those from the rancho, my friends, the brothers of my friends, my ancestors, all of them came here to work in this (gardening).” Recognizing the powerful tug of these ties, but the arbitrary job sector to which they connect, he explained: “If they had all worked in restaurants, I would assure you that today we’d all be working in restaurants.”

Mexican immigrant gardeners have low levels of formal education, few job skills, and backgrounds rooted in rural, peasant agriculture in central western Mexico. The majority of our interviewees grew up in ranchos, or rural villages, and as adolescents many of them cultivated and harvested corn, beans, and other crops in small plots of land, working alongside their fathers. All of the gardeners interviewed, except one, had previous experience working in small-scale agriculture in Mexico (the one exception was an engineer who was pulled into gardening, he said, because “my relatives were gardeners”). Some had also worked in the agribusiness fields in California. In this regard, they have a similar human capital profile to earlier generations of Japanese gardeners who brought farming experience with them from Japan, which Nobuya Tsuchida (1984) suggests facilitated entry into the occupation but also made a hard job “relatively easy for them” (p. 440). The Mexican gardeners echoed this assessment. Residential maintenance gardening is hard physical work, but the gardeners were unanimous that it was easier and *menos matado* (less backbreaking, but literally, less killing), than either peasant cultivation on Mexican ranchos or field work in California agriculture. When asked about what they liked best about their job, they said it was the ability to work outdoors, in *aire libre* (open air), as they had been accustomed to doing in Mexico. They saw working outdoors, and among plants, as preferable to the limited opportunities and stifling work sites available to them in factories, sweatshops, or restaurant kitchens.

Economists and sociologists maintain that a background without formal schooling in rural, preindustrial agricultural societies is a hindrance to economic incorporation in the city. For gardening jobs, we propose that a background rooted in ranchos and peasant agriculture serves as a form of positive human capital, as it provides the gardeners with experience that allows them to withstand and perhaps even enjoy a job that others might reject. This constructs a particularly gendered, masculine human capital. Mexican immigrant gardeners’ background of working in the fields, in small crews composed of brothers, sons, and fathers, endows them with gendered human capital well-suited for the way that residential commercial gardening is organized in the United States.

Mexican gardeners express an affinity for working outdoors and among plants, but residential maintenance gardening involves a different set of skills than plowing fields or harvesting crops. As gardeners in suburban California, they must learn to tend to ornamental shrubs and flowers, mow, edge, and apply fertilizers to lawns, and to prune according to homeowners’

specifications. Working as an ayudante or employee for an established gardener provides newcomers with an active apprenticeship. They learn the job by doing it alongside their brothers and uncles. On the job, they are exposed to the daily rigors and seasonal rhythms of tree pruning, planting annuals, or applying rye grass seed to lawns. A few of the men said that a customer had provided instruction on how to prune a rose bush or deadhead a plant, but the majority of them learn by doing, and over time, job skills increase.

Becoming an Independent Gardener

The potential for higher earnings increases for independent gardeners who maintain a “route” of regular customers. The independent gardeners act as worker/entrepreneurs. They continue to do the manual work of gardening maintenance, but they also own their own trucks, machinery, and tools, and importantly, they negotiate the price and collect fees for services from the customers. In essence, they own a route of paying jobs. Most ayudantes eventually try to venture out on their own as route owners, and they need four things to do so: human capital, social capital, legal capital (legal status and attendant papers), and a modest amount of financial capital.

Mexican immigrant men become independent gardeners by building on the gendered human and social capital they have already accumulated, and by cobbling together help from family members and friends who give or lend them equipment, and who sometimes give them *casas*, or customers. The route of regular customers is the primary business commodity that these gardeners own (Huerta 2007), and the gifting and sharing of routes poses an interesting sociological dilemma. The gardeners talk about the size of their business not in relation to how many ayudantes or employees they have working, nor how much they own in tools and machinery, but rather by reference to the amount they gross from their route of paying customers each month. “*Traigo una ruta de \$7,000*” or “I’ve got a route worth \$7,000 (a month)” is the common lingo they use to discuss their businesses. Why would they give away part of their business? Some well-established gardeners want to downsize their routes, or they want to get rid of their lowest paying clients, but they also do it to help newcomer relatives. An uncle or father may give his nephew or son a portion of a route as a wedding gift. One gardener offered this analysis of the social network chains that initially absorb men as ayudantes or employees, and then spawn new, independent gardeners by giving them portions of routes:

For example, my nephew arrived and I got him in working with me. One day soon he’ll want to become independent, and I’ll help him. I’ll say, “Here are a few houses,” and then it will be one more who is separating (to become an independent route owner) and then his brother will come, and he’ll put him to work. And that’s how it grows (Adrian, 47).

Even with assistance from friends and family, the men need financial capital to become independent route owners. According to our interviewees, breaking into independent gardening in 2007 required a financial investment of about \$5,000. Gardeners need a truck, tools, and equipment, and a list of paying customers. Gardeners agree that becoming an independent route owner is harder than it used to be because there are too many gardeners, and because equipment is now more expensive. Careful calculations of investment are in order. As one gardener said:

If you’re going to start from the bottom, you need a truck. You need your equipment, and all of that. Just your *maquina* (mower), how much is that going to cost you? Brand new, it’ll cost more than a \$1,000. That’s just to cut, and then maybe another \$500 for the blower. And then the edger, let’s say another \$400 and some. And you have to buy your truck, your rakes, all of it—hoes, rakes, hoses, oil, and gasoline everyday. You have to spend a lot (Salvador, 38).

Before inflation, it was cheaper. In the 1980s, one gardener recalled spending \$1,100 on a used Datsun pickup, and going to the swap meet to buy used equipment. “Back then, 20 years

ago, it wasn't that expensive," he said. "You could buy a lawnmower for \$160, a weeder for \$60, a blower for \$40" (Antonio, 49). Although no one spoke about buying stolen machinery or equipment, just about every gardener told a story of having had a blower or power mower stolen from his truck. This suggests a lively underground market at swap meets for low-priced gardening equipment, a market that lowers the entrance fee for becoming a route owner. With a strong route, a successful route owner can gross \$5,000 monthly, so the initial costs can be quickly recouped.

Routes are also bought and sold, usually for two to three times what they generate in monthly earnings, and this too is another informal practice. Typically the transaction occurs between friends and acquaintances, but at least one L.A. lawnmower repair shop features a corkboard with notices of routes for sale. These are delicate negotiations. While social capital and trust prevail, the buyer still risks purchasing a route where the customers may be reluctant to accept a new gardener, or he may risk getting jobs with few opportunities for earning "extras," where the clients are difficult because they are habitually late payers or too picky, or where the homes are distantly located. Buyers entering into transactions also risk dishonest route sellers who may reappear after several months to get their clients back, a practice that Tsuchida (1984) referred to as "route snatching" when it occurred among the Japanese gardeners. This practice still continues. One interviewee even reported that a route buyer had murdered an unscrupulous route seller "who was knocking on doors, trying to get his clients again." We have no corroboration of this event, but this kind of information flows among the social networks, informing the negotiations and decisions of *jardineros*, encouraging them to keep these transactions limited to well-known, trusted friends and family.

Finally, becoming a route owner requires legal capital. We use this term to refer to legal work authorization, and the range of particular job permits and credentials dependent on it. Lack of legal work authorization exacerbates immigrant worker exploitation and deters job mobility and depresses wages (Gordon 2005; Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark 2002; Rivera-Batiz 1999). Here, we emphasize that mobility in gardening is enabled by legal status. Legal status is technically required for route owners because they own and drive trucks, and since 1993, applicants for driver's licenses in California must present Social Security numbers. All of the *ayudantes* we interviewed were undocumented, and most of the route owners (32 of 36) were legal permanent residents or naturalized U.S. citizens. Legal status is practically a necessity for route owners.

Still, a few interviewees had ventured into independent gardening in spite of undocumented status, and like many of the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, they lived and worked in fear. They fear not only deportation, but also having their trucks impounded and losing their investments. "I don't have a driver's license so I must drive very carefully," said one man who had his truck registered under his wife's name. Besides driver's licenses, gardeners are also required to have work permits to do gardening in particular municipalities. These are generally not enforced, and gardeners seek permits if they have many houses in one city, and forego the permit fees if they only have one or two houses in the city limits. Undocumented gardeners also fear inspectors who may issue tickets for using loud, gas-powered blowers. Gas-powered blowers are banned in 20 California cities, many of which are in Southern California, but this is haphazardly enforced and blowers are widely used.

Legal capital also enables business growth. One gardener claimed that undocumented status held him back from expanding his business. He regretted being unable to compete for large landscaping jobs that required insurance. "I feel pressured right now," he said. "Maybe if I had my *seguro* (Social Security number) I would venture to open more doors . . . get bigger jobs, get bigger trucks. With my *seguro*, I could get credit, invest in machinery. I know that with my *seguro* I could place ads in the yellow pages." Without legal status, those opportunities were closed to him.

The fees for residential maintenance gardening vary considerably, and reflect local labor markets, the size of the property, the extent of work involved, and the number of weekly

visits. The lowest rates in Los Angeles, found in neighborhoods with modest-sized yards, are \$40 to \$80 a month, but the typical monthly fee is \$150 to \$200. At the high end are larger estates that yield monthly fees between \$600 and upward of \$1000 for garden maintenance.

Managing the Route: Shades of Grey

Once they own a route, Mexican immigrant gardeners rely on different strategies for managing it so they can thrive in an increasingly competitive environment. They innovate these business strategies along a continuum of economic informality and formality. It is instructive to consider the particular contours of this grey zone.

First, it is important to note the many practices of formality in which the gardeners engage. Most of the independent route owners are legal permanent residents or naturalized U.S. citizens. This means that they can, and usually do, abide by the rules that regulate the roads. They generally hold valid California driver's licenses, pay state registration fees for their pickup trucks, buy auto insurance, and carefully abide by traffic laws. They also pay income tax as well as the annual municipal permits in cities where they have a concentrated number of customers.⁵ Moreover, they act as formal business agents by submitting monthly bills in writing to their customers. The customers pay by check, not cash. The gardeners cash these checks at banks, and they pay income tax, although they may underreport their earnings.

Still, informality characterizes other dimensions of their jobs, particularly those involving their paid helpers and paying customers. Most hire informally, through family and migrant networks, and they pay these *ayudantes* in cash. Some even try to maintain good relations with their workers by providing lunch for them, a paternalistic practice of informality. While the gardeners bill their customers in writing, mailing the bill or leaving it in the mailbox, they do the jobs based on verbal agreements. There is typically no signed contract between the gardener and client. When the gardeners encounter clients who are months late in paying their bills, they do not penalize these late bill payers or go to small claims court, but they informally handle it by patiently waiting for payment. It is not uncommon for a gardener to keep working at a home where he has not been paid for three months. Similarly, when they are terminated due to a house sale or disagreement, or when they decide to stop carrying a particular customer because they are giving that yard away to a newly independent gardener, a verbal conversation handles the transaction. Independent route owners thus navigate their businesses by abiding by some rules and practices of the formal economy, but they also rely on informal occupational practices.

Managing Competition

The biggest complaint, repeated by every independent route owner interviewed, is that customer fees have remained stagnant while competition and underbidding from new independent route-owner gardeners has become fierce. "*Estamos entre la espada y la pared* . . . We're caught in between a rock and a hard place," is how one gardener summarized the situation of being caught between rising costs and stagnant fees. Also, more gardeners willing to work for less are crowding the field. Independent route owners who had been in business for many years said that the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which offered amnesty/legalization to many formerly undocumented Mexican immigrants in 1986, had acted as a catalyst for helpers to venture out on their own as route owners. Amnesty/legalization freed the *ayudantes* from the yoke of working for someone else, and it emboldened those who remained as helpers to be more demanding about their working conditions and pay. Labor costs,

5. These annual municipal permits are based on the gross income generated within each city. The fees typically range from \$100 to \$250, and gardeners who work across different municipalities in the Los Angeles metropolitan area must pay multiple permit fees.

and the cost for equipment and maintenance had steadily increased, and during the summer of 2007, gasoline soared to over \$3 a gallon. All of this created competitive pressures.

The clients don't go with the first estimate they get, but they get two, three, maybe four estimates from different *jardineros*. They tend to go with the lowest bidder. If you charge \$300 (a month) for a place, there will be people who will charge \$250 (Salvador, 38).

Things have gotten tougher for *jardineros*. Clients today look for the lowest price, and they almost always go for the lowest bid. This has been the change I've noticed over the last 15 years. Lots of new *jardineros* have entered the field . . . They charge lower prices, and as result, the work is going downhill for all *jardineros* (Raul, 46).

I think *jardineria* is still a good line of work. It's good to be your own boss. But I don't like it when younger *jardineros* undercut each other . . . clients take advantage of the situation and pay the lowest possible price (Fernando, 62).

Veteran gardeners who have been working for the last 30 years in Los Angeles said the market was now flooded with competitors. "For every *jardinero* who retires, there must be two new guys who enter *jardineria*," said Alberto (63). "In the 1980s, there were half as many as today." While their periodization varied, many of these veteran gardeners portrayed the 1970s and 80s as the "golden age" of gardening in Los Angeles.

These perceptions of competitive pressures mesh with growth in Mexican immigrant labor markets in Los Angeles. The number of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles quadrupled between 1980 and 2000, and as Light (2006) argues, by the 1990s there was rapid growth in all kinds of immigrant self-employment. According to Light (2006), "around 1980, demand-driven migration spilled over into network-driven migration, that, as it propagated itself, undermined the economic well-being of low-wage Latino immigrants already in the region" (p. 80). Consequently, Latino immigrant wages in Los Angeles declined between 1980 and 1990 (Ellis 2001), and Mexican immigrant wages were found to be lowest in workplaces saturated with co-ethnics (Catanzarite and Aguilera 2002). While the demand for gardening services increased during this period as well, the new jobs were not necessarily better paying ones, but ones that responded to the new terrain of underbidding. The fee floor seemed to be moving down.

Managing the route of customers is the top business skill required of successful gardeners, and Mexican immigrant gardeners innovate various approaches to doing this in the increasingly competitive environment. Route size varies, but most keep a route of about 40 to 60 clients. One route-managing business strategy is to simply increase the route size, to obtain and keep as many clients and jobs as possible, regardless of what they pay. One interviewee maintained a route between 200 and 250 customers, but he owned four trucks, each manned by different crews. This gardener's strategy was to build the business and route size to the maximum, and his customers included ones that he'd had since he first began in the business. "I'm not going to leave them just because they pay little," he reasoned. Rather, he said his business philosophy was: "*No te fijas en lo que te da uno, sino fjate en lo que juntas de todos* . . . Don't pay attention to what you make from one, but rather to what you make from all of them." This jumbo-sized route yielded him gross monthly earnings of \$18,000 to \$20,000, but after labor costs, machine maintenance and gas, he said he reported \$120,000 to the IRS.

Maximizing route size, however, was not a favored business strategy with most gardeners because it involves managing more customers and a larger work force, and both may entail problems. The route owners generally reported that they had good employees, and they said they were thankful for their many good clients, but they also complained that clients have gotten cheaper, and the *ayudantes* have become less reliable. Here, their thinking follows that of many business people—they want to keep their labor costs down and they want to increase the price of their service. Instead, the opposite seems to be happening and they expressed complaints such as the following:

If you used to have an *ayudante*, you would put him to work, and he'd work. There wasn't a problem. But after that (1986 amnesty/legalization), they got finicky. They'd say, "Oh, I'm not going to start work at such and such time," or "I don't want to work late" (Ramon, 54).

Nowadays, *ayudantes* don't want to be paid too little, but clients don't want to pay well either . . . I've always tried to carry worker's compensation insurance, in case something happens, but it has become an added burden (Horacio, 50).

The clients are sometimes too demanding. They ask for too much. They pay too little. And sometimes the workers—there are days they know how to do the work, and there are days that they don't (Juan, 48).

I don't like it when clients are impatient . . . and they call you to come out for some silly reason, and then they don't want to pay (extra) (Teodoro, 53).

In this context of stagnant fees and higher labor costs, most gardeners do not want to build jumbo-sized routes. Once they reach what they consider an optimal route size, they pass jobs onto friends or relatives who are starting out in the business. They also try to minimize risk and costs by guardedly, and cautiously, taking on new customers. These route owners are selective about whom they will accept and keep as their paying customers. Some gardeners deliberately "downsize," doing away with *ayudantes* altogether in order to save on labor costs, or labor management headaches.

It would seem economically rational that Mexican immigrant gardeners would prefer a route made up of the very highest paying customers. One gardener reported that he had a customer who paid \$3,500 monthly, and 24 out of the 36 route owners interviewed reported having at least one customer who paid \$600 or more a month for gardening services. But some gardeners remained wary of taking on a big job, because it makes a large percentage of their total earnings dependent on only one customer. If that customer disappears, then a big portion of their total monthly earnings disappears as well. As entrepreneurs, gardeners make constant calculations of risk.

Gardeners complained of stagnant fees, but by asking the clients for a raise, they risk being fired and losing the job. In this aspect, they are in the same position as domestic workers who may work at the same house without a raise for many years. As workers, they feel the inflationary pressures. As one gardener explained: "You get home and each month you've got bills to pay . . . but they (customers) don't ask you if your (gardening service) fees are going up. They don't ask that." He had concluded, as had other route owners, that "then you have to resort to other tactics . . . not to depend solely on maintenance gardening." Long standing customers, he said, "*ya no dejan* . . . no longer leave a profit."

The proven strategy cited by all the route owners involved taking on extras. They keep their route of steady residential garden maintenance jobs, even if fee levels remain flat, in hopes that the clients will approach them for the more lucrative extra jobs. These extras involve special tasks, such as the seasonal pruning of big trees, laying sod, cleaning brush on hillsides, putting in sprinklers or walkways, or planting annual flower beds or bulbs. Many gardeners said this is where they earned real money.

What generates a profit is (extra) planting . . . I've had the same fees for a long time. But like I tell you, what helps me out are the extra jobs I do for them. They never, never haggle (over prices for extras) (Juan, 48).

With the route you make enough to get by, you make enough to pay the rent and to cover your basic expenses. And the extras, you know, are the ones that generate profit . . . (the route) is where you make enough to sustain yourself, but the extras are the ones that leave you enough money for savings (Miguel, 53).

The good thing about having the route is that it provides a base (of work), and it's always stable . . . You make a bit more money when there are extras. The route itself doesn't make you as much money as the extras (Mario, 42).

Extras can yield the route owners anywhere from \$2,000 to \$4,000 month. Good ones might pay \$500 to \$1,000 a day. "It's better business," and "you make more money and you work less," were common refrains about the extras. One gardener said he even targeted the earnings from extras to his savings account. "I notice that when I get checks from (the route), I don't deposit anything into my savings account. When I *do* make deposits to my savings is whenever I do extra jobs."

Keeping the maintenance route allows the gardeners access to the more lucrative extras, and it allows them to balance the reliability and predictability of steady earnings with the opportunities of the extras. In lieu of asking for raises or charging higher fees, they count on the extras. When they charge for extras, gardeners position themselves as independent contractors, such as professional painters, roofers, or appliance vendors. They name a price, and most clients go for it. Also, the fees may involve selection, purchase, delivery, and installation of plants or materials. The gardener charges the clients more than he paid for it, so he profits from both labor and the mark up on material. This is how they navigate the turbulence of saturated labor markets.

Still, many route owners expressed verbal defeat from competition. They hadn't quit maintenance gardening, but some believed that "it's no longer a good business. We're just surviving because of the extras, tree trimming, and all that. But from gardening? No." The defeatist attitude was not expressed by all the gardeners, but was succinctly stated by one man whose frustration had replaced *raza* immigrant optimism and *ganas* (the will to triumph). "*Ya no se puede* . . . It can no longer be done," he concluded.

Formalizing the Informal: Landscape Contractors

A few route-owner gardeners make the transition away from maintenance and tilt their occupation towards exclusively doing extras. They become landscape contractors, but this requires overcoming many hurdles and largely stepping out of informality into practices of formality. It also requires enhanced, occupation-specific legal capital. Landscape contractors are required to work with a state-issued specialty contractor's license, and this necessitates successfully passing a comprehensive written exam administered by the California Contractors State License Board (CSLB). The Board's landscaping examination is rigorous, covering every facet of the occupation, from landscape design and job estimation to contracts and business practices, irrigation system installation, landscaping maintenance, and job site safety. It also requires more financial capital. In 2007, it cost \$400 in fees to obtain a landscaping contractor's license. To qualify for a license, applicants must also undergo a criminal background check, submit their social security number, and possess more than \$2,500 in operating capital. Contractors must file a \$10,000 bond and present proof of worker's compensation insurance coverage as a condition of licensure.

When they bid on jobs, and accept work, landscapers issue formal written contracts. Unlike informal route owners, who must be wary of advertising their unlicensed services with cards or flyers, the landscape contractors are able to take out ads through conventional means (yellow pages, flyers, etc.).⁶ The landscape contractors do big one-time jobs, installing new lawns, irrigation systems, hardscape walkways, or covered patios, and planting mature trees and entire yards. Often they continue overseeing a gardening route in addition to their work as landscapers. Keeping a maintenance route on the side allows their landscaping firms to flourish with referrals. Customers are not willing to pay much for their regular garden maintenance, but when it comes to improving their yards they often invest thousands of dollars. One man described obtaining contracts worth between \$70,000 and \$80,000:

I've been working on my own for about 30 years. And about 12 or 14 years ago, I got a ticket for putting in sprinklers without a license. So I got my (landscape) contractor's license. Yes, I had to get it.

6. The AT&T Yellow Pages for Greater Los Angeles, September 2007, list many more "landscape contractors" than "lawn maintenance and installation" businesses, including businesses with such names as Mares Jardinaria-Landscaping, Jesus Sanchez Landscaping Service, Dominguez Landscape, and Romero's Landscape.

I figured it was cheaper to get it than to pay fines . . . So, it's been 30 years, and I've got six kids, and all of them, I think, have had a good education. And you can see that our neighborhood is nice (Teodoro, 53).

Over the course of the years, the income generated by his landscaping business allowed him to purchase a home in a mostly white, upper middle class section of Los Angeles and put his children through college. Two of his children were in law school, and another one worked at a Spanish-language television network. His story, like those of countless other route owners and landscapers, is a testament to the ways in which jardineria involves entrepreneurship and can facilitate intergenerational socioeconomic mobility.

Conclusion

We concur with earlier analyses that gardening provides Mexican immigrant men with social mobility opportunities (Huerta 2007; Pisani and Yoskowitz 2006). While working in residential gardening offers no direct pathway to jobs in the formal sector, there is occupational differentiation and mobility within the occupation, and this mobility track leads towards economic formality and higher earnings. All of the self-employed route owners started off as waged employees, as *ayudantes*, but as they become self-employed route owners, they in turn become employers, employing one or more paid workers. A few become licensed landscape contractors. Mexican immigrant gardeners may look alike to the casual observer, but residential maintenance gardening is not a monolithic occupation. Each one of these suboccupations has its own logic, its own rewards and risks, and its own blending of informality and formality. Mobility in the occupation is regulated by social, human, legal, and financial capital.

This internal occupational mobility is nothing short of stunning. Within several years, a newcomer rookie can gather his apprenticeship knowledge, a driver's license, and truck and modest savings, and use these to become an independent route-owner gardener. Acting as both worker and entrepreneur, he will need to strategically manage the route and to negotiate rising costs and stagnant fees, but if he does well, he might increase his earnings anywhere from between three to ten times greater than what the paid employees earn. In South Texas, Michael Pisani and David Yoskowitz (2006) found that Mexican immigrant gardeners earn 1.7 times the minimum wage, but in affluent Los Angeles, where home values are among the highest in the nation, and where capital circulates out of many dynamic sectors (e.g., global trade, business, entertainment media), the possibilities are far greater. Affluent homeowners create backyard sanctuaries and status yards, and they seek to protect their residential investments by paying for home improvements and maintenance. Gardeners are poised to benefit from this situation. By strategically managing their routes, and by working long hours and six and seven day workweeks, some Mexican immigrant gardeners earn six figure incomes. Few occupations in the contemporary, post-industrial service economy offer Mexican men with less than primary school education and limited English fluency this opportunity.

In the context of Los Angeles, where low-skilled immigrant workers from Mexico and Central America face dead-end jobs in downgraded manufacturing, construction, and services, the economic integration of Mexican immigrant gardeners looks far more promising than other job sectors. Future research, however, will need to evaluate the extent to which the sons and daughters of Mexican immigrant gardeners are benefiting from the gardening business. A segment of them appear to be following the children of Japanese gardeners into the more lucrative professions.

The route to upward mobility, however, is paved with steep costs. Route-owner gardeners act as both workers and entrepreneurs, and both roles require extreme self-exploitation. As workers, the route owners put in long hours, working 12-hour work days in the summer

months, and usually working six days a week. Repetitive stress injuries, the occasional accident with a gasoline-powered hedge trimmer or sharp blade, physical exhaustion, and no vacation are routine parts of the job. As small entrepreneurs, the route owners experience the constant stress of calculating costs and fees, planning and scheduling their extra jobs, and managing the routes and clients so as to minimize risk. Even when they rest at night or on Sunday afternoons, they must plan upcoming logistics.

This study of residential gardening is not intended as an uncritical celebration of informality. Rather, our analysis confirms that the occupation, like many informal sector jobs, comes in shades of grey, and offers otherwise disadvantaged immigrant workers the possibility to use their ingenuity and hard work to innovate opportunity. While the route owners operate in the realm of formal economic transactions more than their employees, it is important to underscore that the activity where they cite their highest earnings and profits, the “extra” jobs of planting or installation, are entrenched in informality.

Jardineria combines elements of ethnic enclave entrepreneurship and service work. Co-ethnic route owners and workers predominate, but the customers, of course, are not co-ethnics, as in the traditional ethnic enclave, but rather affluent “others.” The majority of the customers are white, but in a multicultural city such as Los Angeles, they also include other racial-ethnic groups, including immigrants of more affluent groups, such as the Chinese and Iranians. Like nannies and domestic workers, gardeners provide services to homeowners, but they remain outside of the home, experience little face-to-face contact or emotional intimacy with the homeowner/clients, and their work focuses not on human social reproduction, but on property maintenance and upkeep. It is perhaps this last aspect, taking care of property, which has exchange value and is appreciated for investment potential—unlike the cleaning and caring work of human social reproduction, which is always poorly remunerated—that allows the gardeners to have a gender advantage over their female peers who do paid domestic work. The male advantage in labor market outcomes persists.

Gardeners still walk a tightrope, acting simultaneously as empowered entrepreneurs and as subjugated service workers. It’s not only the waged employees, but also the route owners who experience the corporeal punishment of hard, physical work and the social subordination of service work. Most of them are out there driving the trucks and sweating and working alongside their paid ayudantes. They may put up with habitually late paying clients, stagnant fees, or dangerous tasks. When doing the extras, they are positioned as empowered entrepreneurs, selling products and services at prices they command.

Fordist manufacturing regimes are over, and while labor migrants are fueling downgraded manufacturing, agribusiness, and service operations of formal organizations, we see a new pattern emerging. The late twentieth, and early twenty-first century, are characterized by affluent households increasingly employing immigrant service workers. While there is a vast literature on migrant domestic workers in Asia, the United States, Canada, and Europe, the economic sociology of immigration has not yet grappled with this more general development, the incorporation of immigrant men’s labor into the households of post-industrial societies (an exception is Kilkey and Perrons 2008). Social capital, network hiring, and informal apprenticeships still prevail, but what requires further recognition and exploration is this new recombinant, hybrid form of business and service whereby some immigrant men get the contracts and work alongside their paid male co-ethnic employees to get the household jobs done. Ethnic entrepreneur products and services are moving out of Chinatown and into affluent households. Gardening is a prime example, but elsewhere we may see the development of new forms of immigrant economic incorporation that similarly combine elements of business and service and of masculinized dirty work (snow removal, home remodeling, appliance installation and repair, and post-hurricane reconstruction come to mind). In residential maintenance gardening, entrepreneurship and subjugation coexist under conditions of informality. Mobility is the potential payoff, but to be in business, Mexican immigrant gardeners must work hard to serve.

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