

# Formation of a Latino Grassroots Movement

## The Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles Challenges City Hall

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*ABSTRACT: When the city of Los Angeles banned gas-powered leaf blowers in 1996, the law sparked one of the most dynamic grassroots campaigns by Latino immigrants in recent history. Latino immigrant gardeners, working with a small group of Chicana/o activists, organized the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles (ALAGLA), which pressured city leaders to reverse the ban. ALAGLA pursued its objectives by engaging in the political process, taking direct action, advocating technological adaptations, and reframing the gardeners and their tools in a positive light. Turning public opinion in their favor, they persuaded city leaders to void the draconian elements of the ordinance, which included a misdemeanor charge, a \$1,000 fine, and jail time for gardeners using the blowers. ALAGLA's movement can be compared in some ways to earlier immigrant-organizing efforts by organized labor, notably the United Farm Workers and the Service Employees International Union's Justice for Janitors campaign, but it is also distinguished from them by ALAGLA's nonbureaucratic grassroots structure. The association's campaign for social and economic justice shows the potential for collective action among marginalized immigrant workers and petty entrepreneurs in the informal economy.*

On January 9, 1998, after a historic organizing campaign, a group of Latino gardeners successfully forced the city of Los Angeles to take the teeth out of an ordinance banning gas-powered leaf blowers. Starting out with few financial resources and little or no political support from local unions, business groups, civic leaders, or elected officials, the Latino gardeners nonetheless pressured city leaders to drastically amend the ordinance, which would have criminalized contract gardeners in the city's household service sector. The original ban included draconian penalties for gardeners using gas-powered leaf blowers within 500 feet of a residential area: a misdemeanor charge,

a \$1,000 fine, and up to six months in jail (Boyarsky 1997; Cameron 2000; Martin 1996). To defy this harshly punitive ordinance, the Latino immigrant gardeners partnered with a small group of Chicana/o activists to form a dynamic grassroots organization, the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles (ALAGLA).

Given the unregulated nature of the informal economy, informal petty entrepreneurs and domestic workers are some of the most difficult sectors to organize. To achieve their goal of overturning or reforming the ban, the Latino gardeners embraced creative organizing and media tactics, including barefoot marches, press conferences, truck caravans to Sacramento, political theater, and a week-long hunger strike that garnered mass press coverage. Through these multifaceted and energetic organizing efforts, ALAGLA became an effective vehicle for capacity building and collective action. It successfully reached out to numerous Latino immigrant workers in the city, gave voice to their concerns, and influenced policy at local and state levels. Consequently, ALAGLA successfully challenged the second-largest city in the country.

By examining how this group of informal workers organized so effectively, we can learn how similar groups without significant financial resources or political clout can challenge local governments when faced with unjust laws. Circumstances vary, of course, and perhaps not all of ALAGLA's organizational and political tactics will be effective in other parts of the country. However, given the obstacles that low-wage immigrants and working-class communities face when they go up against well-financed corporations and local governments, the case of ALAGLA represents a historic victory for *los de abajo*—those on the bottom.

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This essay is organized in three sections. First, we map the socio-organizational and historical context for contract gardeners in Los Angeles onto the salient issues, focusing on the context and relationships that gave birth to ALAGLA. Second, we describe the tactics ALAGLA used to delay implementation of the ordinance, reduce its consequences for contract gardeners, and improve the social status of Latino gardeners more broadly. Lastly, we discuss some positive individual outcomes for gardeners who participated in ALAGLA and suggest implications for scholars and community organizers who study and engage in social movements.

### **Gardening in Socio-Organizational and Demographic Context**

Like Latina domestic workers and Latino day laborers, Latino immigrant gardeners are an integral part of the household service economy in many US cities (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001; Maher 2003; Valenzuela 1999, 2001, 2003). Toiling in the informal economy, most Latino gardeners in Los Angeles and elsewhere are independent contractors who perform landscape-related services, like yard maintenance, for cash payments (Huerta 2007, 2011; Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009). These individuals or small-scale enterprises are distinct from government landscape employees (such as park and recreation workers) and state-licensed landscape contractors. While the latter may recruit workers from the immigrant labor pool, these licensed landscaping companies are part of the formal economy, with standard managerial and administrative practices and higher profit margins (Huerta 2006). Within small contract gardening enterprises, as in most small businesses in the formal economy, there exists a clear hierarchy between the owner, or *patrón*, who controls the enterprise and the workers, or *trabajadores* (Huerta 2007, 2011). Contract gardeners rely on their business skills and social networks to establish a regular clientele. Their work reputation is important, but the highly competitive environment limits their remuneration.

Contract gardeners resemble other small-scale entrepreneurs found in public markets or street vending sites throughout the country (Cross and Morales 2007; Morales 2009a). They operate in a fiercely competitive environment in Los Angeles, given the unregulated nature of this service sector, the low entry costs, and the large immigration population in the city (Huerta 2007, 2011; Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009). Nevertheless, small-scale gardening operations provide viable economic ventures for

Latino immigrants, including those with legal documentation and those without. Latino immigrants and other immigrant groups have used contract gardening, street vending, and similar segments of the cash economy for more than a century to establish an economic foothold in this country (Morales 2000). In some cases these low-status occupations have provided a basis for significant upward mobility (Serachek 1980).

The first contract gardeners in Southern California were Japanese immigrants, or *issei*, who arrived in the early 1900s (Hirahara 2000; Tsuchida 1984). The *issei* originally worked as in-home domestic workers, occasionally performing yard work for their mostly white employers (Tsuchida 1984). Contract gardening represented an ideal niche for the *issei* during this period. Like agricultural labor, contract gardening offered a smooth path of entry into the US economy for immigrants with rural backgrounds. Compared to domestic work and other manual labor available to low-wage immigrants, contract gardening represented a more profitable and independent means of earning a living (Tsukashima 2000, 2001). Also, since the California Alien Land Law of 1913 and related laws excluded Japanese immigrants and other noncitizens from owning agricultural land, many *issei* pursued contract gardening as a viable occupation in urban settings like Los Angeles (Hirahara 2000; Jiobu 1998; Tengan 2006; Tsukashima 2000). Their reputation for a strong work ethic and excellent work, together with the steady demand for lawn care services from affluent residents, allowed these immigrants to carve out a niche for themselves and their descendents (Hirahara 2000).

As they pioneered the contract gardening service sector in Los Angeles and throughout the state, the *issei* paved the way for other immigrant groups, notably Latino immigrants, to earn an honest living in this informal sector. Contract gardening offered many advantages to recent immigrants from rural areas, including low entry costs and a lack of formal prerequisites found in the formal economy, such as a high school diploma, English fluency, and citizenship status. Following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the dramatic influx of Latino immigrants, particularly from rural Mexico, created a large labor pool for the remaining Japanese American gardeners to hire from. Apart from contract gardening, many Latino immigrants worked for Japanese American employers in their lawn mower repair shops and landscape nurseries. By the end of the twentieth century, gardeners of Japanese origin were an aging and declining population, and Latino immigrants had emerged as the dominant ethnic group in contract gardening in Los Angeles and beyond (Huerta 2007, 2011;

Pisani and Yoskowitz 2005, 2006; Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009; Tsukashima 2007).

As petty entrepreneurs, Latino immigrants have used their social networks and co-ethnic economic experience to develop small gardening enterprises in Los Angeles and throughout the country.<sup>1</sup> Owning a small business requires hard work, discipline, and business savvy to accumulate sufficient capital to purchase equipment and hire employees. Social and negotiating skills are also needed to establish and maintain a clientele and manage employees. Contract gardening, like street vending and other small businesses, allows immigrants to make the transition from employee to employer. This offers an important, albeit limited, opportunity for upward mobility for those whose language limitations and lack of formal qualifications may hinder their mobility in the formal economy. This objective reality, referred to as “blocked mobility” by some scholars, explains why many immigrants, such as Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, and Cubans, tend to initiate their own small-scale enterprises (Kim, Hurh, and Fernandez 1989; Waldinger, Ward, and Aldrich 1985; Yoon 1995; Zhou 2004).

Monthly rates for gardening services vary with the size of the yard, frequency of visits, time required per visit, and other factors. During the mid-1980s, contract gardeners typically charged homeowners from \$75 to \$100 per month (Huerta 2006, 2007). By the late 1990s, however, with the intense competition among contract gardeners and the influx of immigrants entering the sector, monthly rates had dropped as low as \$50 (Boxall 1998; *Los Angeles Business Journal* 1999). Presently, earnings remain low for workers, although they are mostly stable: a typical wage for a worker ranges from \$50 to \$75 per day, including meals. A crew member with a driver’s license earns a small premium, since drivers are in high demand (many states do not grant licenses to undocumented workers). In 2013, however, California passed a law that granted special driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants.

To maintain a cost-effective and profitable operation, the *patrón* equips his crew with landscaping power tools, such as leaf blowers, lawn mowers, and hedge trimmers. While these gas-powered tools are far more efficient than the brooms and rakes of the past, they are also noisy and polluting and have generated many complaints from a segment of the public. A campaign by affluent homeowners and environmentalists eventually led the city of Los Angeles to ban leaf blowers in late 1996 (Boyarsky 1997; Huerta 2006, 2007). In their campaign to oppose the ban, gardeners acknowledged the problems related to these power tools, but they argued that contract

gardeners should not be held responsible for equipment that they neither designed nor built. The problem and the solution, the Latino gardeners argued, lie with the manufacturers of these gas-powered tools (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006).

Contract gardeners in Los Angeles are overwhelmingly Latino males—mostly Mexican—of low socioeconomic status (Huerta 2007, 2011, 2013; Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009). They typically work long hours for minimal pay. In addition, they lack human capital, financial capital, and political influence that would allow them to have a voice in public policy in Los Angeles and beyond. How, then, did these marginal immigrants, dispersed throughout the city and disrespected by a portion of the public, manage to join forces and grapple with affluent residents and powerful policy makers? How did their efforts give rise to an effective grassroots social movement, and how does this movement compare to other economic justice movements involving immigrants? Finally, what lessons can we, as scholars, policy makers, organizers, and members of the public at large, learn from this experience?

## **Germinating ALAGLA**

During the mid-1980s, several elected officials in Los Angeles, working with affluent Westside residents, launched a campaign to pass a leaf blower ban in the city. On December 13, 1985, then city council members Marvin Braude and Robert C. Farrell introduced a motion for the city to support statewide legislation prohibiting the sale of leaf blowers “that produce a maximum noise level exceeding 65 decibels” at a distance of fifty feet.<sup>2</sup> Although the council voted 15–0 to support the measure, this statewide effort failed thanks to lobbying efforts by business interests (e.g., leaf blower manufacturers) and Japanese American gardeners (Huerta 2006; Tsukashima 2001). The Southern California Gardeners Federation, a federation of Japanese American gardener organizations founded in 1955, played a key role in the defeat of this statewide initiative and similar efforts at the local level in this era (Hirahara 2000; Tsukashima 2001). However, as Japanese Americans moved out of the gardening sector during the mid-1990s, the burden of preventing a ban on leaf blowers in Los Angeles fell on the shoulders of another ethnic group: Latino immigrants, mostly of Mexican origin.

For over a decade, council member Braude and his affluent supporters fought to ban leaf blowers in residential areas while allowing city employees and commercial facilities to utilize them. They finally prevailed on May

14, 1996, when the council took a preliminary vote to ban leaf blowers within 500 feet of residential areas (Huerta 2006; Tsukashima 2001).<sup>3</sup> Essentially, the majority of council members, by a 9–4 vote, presented Braude with a going-away gift shortly before his retirement from public office. A self-proclaimed environmentalist, Braude focused only on the negative environmental impacts of leaf blowers—noise and pollution. He appeared to care little about the economic well-being of the Latino immigrant workers who operate them for mostly meager wages in poor and unregulated working conditions (de la Cruz 1997c; Huerta 2007, 2011; *Los Angeles Business Journal* 1999; Medina 1998; Rommelmann 2004). He ignored, as well, the positive outcomes of this informal service sector, which helps beautify the city for all residents and produces a healthy, green environment of plants, trees, and lawns. In taking this stance, the Westside council member mainly catered to his well-heeled constituents (Boyarsky 1997; Cameron 2000; del Olmo 1997; Huerta 2006). Ironically, these same constituents reaped the benefit of the cheap labor and services produced by Latino immigrant workers—not only gardeners, but also other domestic workers like Latina housecleaners (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001), whose labor relieves affluent residents from traditional domestic duties so they could pursue financial opportunities and leisure activities.

Jaime Aleman was a Mexican immigrant gardener and owner of a contract gardening enterprise in Los Angeles. In the summer of 1996, upon learning about the city council's efforts to ban leaf blowers, he decided to fight this ordinance. Fearful of the negative impacts on his business, Aleman, originally from Zacatecas, Mexico, decided to take civic action for the first time in his life (Aleman 2006). He could not understand why the council would take away this important work tool, especially when contract gardeners work long hours to make the city a greener and cleaner place to live and work for all residents. Getting involved in local politics and civic action represented something new for Aleman and other Latino immigrant gardeners who mobilized against the leaf blower ban. Like many other Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles and throughout the country, Jaime had followed his family from rural Mexico to the United States to pursue better economic opportunities. Once settled in Los Angeles, he worked in the garment industry and later in a warehouse. Eventually he found his way to contract gardening by marrying his childhood sweetheart, Leticia Sánchez. Her father, Antonio Sánchez, had started working as a gardener in the late 1970s. As a veteran owner of a contract gardening enterprise, he hired Aleman as an assistant gardener and eventually helped him start

his own gardening business. By way of his gardening livelihood, Aleman unexpectedly began a new life as a community activist in this country.

Without significant knowledge of local politics, political connections, or direct experience in community organizing, Aleman turned for help to his wife and her network of Chicana/o activist friends from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where she had been a student activist. Her social circle included veteran university and community activists like Adrian Alvarez, Elsa Bolado, Antonia Montes, Pedro Pérez, Karina Prado, and others.<sup>4</sup> Aleman quickly educated the Chicana/o activists, most of whom he already knew personally, about the proposed ban and its negative ramifications for his livelihood and that of his fellow gardeners. They agreed to help Aleman based on their mutual friendship and their common interest in defending Mexican immigrants and working-class communities against social and economic injustices in this country. Among the activists, Adrian Alvarez took on the public leadership role for this embryonic movement. After immigrating to the United States from Sinaloa, Mexico, as a teenager, Alvarez eventually enrolled at UCLA and gravitated toward student activism, becoming a campus leader.

The strong ties between Aleman and Alvarez had developed over the many years since Aleman's wife had introduced them. More generally, though, the relationship between the Latino immigrant gardeners and the university-educated Chicana/o organizers was initially weak or nonexistent. Alvarez and his fellow activists faced enormous challenges in helping organize a disenfranchised group of Latino immigrants. Many of the gardeners were undocumented and unwilling to discuss their activities with strangers. Overworked, with low human capital, they were often unable to see beyond their immediate circumstances and had little time for community activism. In the next part of this essay, we examine how the Latino gardeners and Chicana/o activists gradually bridged these gaps and built an effective social movement.

## **Growing ALAGLA**

With council members set to take a final vote on the leaf blower ban in December 1996, Aleman and the Chicana/o activists faced a daunting task. They needed to quickly lay the groundwork to overturn an ordinance ten years in the making. Having been organizing for many years, both on campus and in the community, the activists understood the importance of establishing relationships with the gardeners and having them participate

at all levels of this grassroots organizing campaign. Wasting little time, Aleman and the activists coordinated door-to-door outreach efforts and numerous late-night meetings with small groups of Latino gardeners throughout the greater Los Angeles area to educate them about the ban, build trust between activists and gardeners, and mobilize resistance.

In their effort to recruit more gardeners, Aleman and the activists strategically moved from one apartment complex to another throughout the city. These complexes tended to house concentrations of people from the same hometown (Huerta 2011). For instance, in September 1996 Aleman and the activists met with a group of about twenty gardeners from Aleman's hometown of Valparaiso, Zacatecas, in an apartment complex near downtown (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006). By tapping into their migrant ties, Aleman and the activists successfully planted the seeds (to use a gardening metaphor) of a social movement that would organize and galvanize Latino immigrant gardeners on a citywide level for the first time in US history.

As the word spread in the Latino community, the activists established new connections with gardeners throughout the greater Los Angeles area, including West Los Angeles, Central Los Angeles, and the San Fernando Valley. Unlike janitors and farmworkers, who work in fixed sites such as office buildings and agricultural fields (Ferriss and Sandoval 1997; Waldinger et al. 1996), contract gardeners are mobile workers and petty entrepreneurs, making them more difficult to locate and organize. But the Chicana/o activists continued to make progress, reaching out to over 100 gardeners throughout the city and holding meetings in parks, schools, and other public spaces. By December 1996 Aleman and the activists had recruited enough gardeners to formalize their organizing efforts through an ad hoc group: the Los Angeles Gardeners Association (LAGA).

On December 3, 1996, the city council voted 9 to 3 in favor of the leaf blower ban (Huerta 2006). During the winter of 1997, the activists organized a large meeting at the Griffith Park Visitor's Center Auditorium, in Los Angeles, where over 200 gardeners discussed the implications of this new law and their options for action (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006). In this meeting the gardeners debated an official name for their organization, finally deciding to replace the ad hoc name, Los Angeles Gardeners Association, with the official and current name, the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles. ALAGLA leaders and members—consisting mainly of Latino gardeners from rural Mexico and a small group of Chicana/o activists—eventually applied for nonprofit status for their new group, which was

formally approved by the state in November 1997. Gradually, the Latino gardeners and activists began to coalesce from a fragmented, ad hoc group to a cohesive organization focused on defending the interests of all Latino immigrant gardeners in the greater Los Angeles area. By early 1998 the group's membership had grown to over 1,000 (Huerta 2006).

Instead of assuming all leadership positions and creating an organization with a strict hierarchy, like a traditional labor union, the Chicana/o activists encouraged the gardeners to take on key leadership roles and to build a democratic organization from the ground up, in which all members would have input into the composition and direction of the association (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006; Huerta 2006). Many organized labor groups advocate on behalf of Latino immigrant workers in this country, but these groups tend to have a corporate structure, in which those on the bottom (staff and members) have little or no say about the organization's vision or the direction of its organizing campaigns. ALAGLA was and continues to be different. For instance, Aleman, himself an immigrant, was instrumental in creating this new organization and social movement, and he played a key role in speaking on its behalf to elected officials and the media, especially Spanish-speaking outlets like *La Opinión* and Univision 34 Los Angeles (Huerta 2006). Later in this article, we briefly discuss the comparison between ALAGLA and organized labor.

## Organizational Structure

During the important meeting at Griffith Park during the winter of 1997, where the attendees selected ALAGLA as the official name of the organization, members elected a formal governing body. This was made up of a president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary, along with six regional coordinators—two each from West Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley, and Central Los Angeles. The leadership group, consisting mainly of Latino gardeners and a few activists, spearheaded all organizational decisions and organized regional meetings to inform and gather feedback from each region (Alvarez 2006; Huerta 2006). While the members elected Alvarez, a nongardener, as president, gardeners filled the vast majority of positions, including vice president (Aleman) and the regional coordinators.

From the start, the activists made clear that ALAGLA belonged to the gardeners (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006). Given their university training and extensive organizing backgrounds, the activists could have easily usurped all organizational power and dictated the terms of agreements to

the gardeners, who mostly lacked formal education and political activism experience. However, instead of taking a top-down approach, the activists mostly forged an equal partnership with the gardeners. Essentially, ALAGLA established an efficient organizational model with both experienced and novice organizers: members had the ability to provide input and feedback, while the leadership had the latitude and authority to act, if needed, without too much delay. While the activists provided their organizing expertise on how to build and sustain an effective organization and social movement, especially when challenging powerful foes like city leaders and residents of affluent neighborhoods, the gardeners had equal say in, and veto power over, all organizational decisions (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006).

That said, while ALAGLA's elected officials and regional coordinators played an important role in expanding the group's outreach efforts, Alvarez eventually emerged as the group's charismatic leader. This role was not new for him; he had first established himself as a student leader while an undergraduate at UCLA during the mid-1980s (Cameron 2000; Huerta 2006). Experienced leadership represents an essential component of any successful social movement.<sup>5</sup> While Aleman and the gardeners had the discipline and desire to succeed, Alvarez and the activists possessed the organizational skills and plan of action to lead a successful campaign.

As ALAGLA branched out through the greater Los Angeles area, the regional coordinators established fixed venues for membership meetings. By accessing their professional and personal networks, the activists and gardeners worked together to secure regular meeting sites (Cameron 2000). In West Los Angeles, meeting sites included La Talpa Mexican restaurant, El Rebozo Mexican restaurant, Richland Avenue Elementary School, St. Sebastian School, and a local church; in the San Fernando Valley, Hermandad Mexicana (Panorama City), Don Juan's Restaurant (Van Nuys), Pollo Chiapaneco (Pacoima), and the Ritchie Valens Recreation Center (Pacoima); and in other parts of Los Angeles, Griffith Park Visitor's Center Auditorium, Hermandad Mexicana (Los Angeles office), and the office of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA). Securing these regional sites where members could meet became an important recruitment tactic for ALAGLA. For example, new and potential recruits tended to join the meetings when they were held conveniently near their homes or gardening routes. Aleman recalls that the gardeners typically arrived at these meetings in their dirty work clothes, with trucks full of equipment parked outside (Aleman 2006). Providing safe and secure

parking for the valuable equipment represented a logistical problem that the coordinators had to solve to meet the needs of the membership. The coordinators drafted flyers in Spanish announcing the regular meetings for all members. The gardeners also utilized a phone tree system to call and remind members of key meetings that were convened to take immediate action against the leaf blower ordinance (Huerta 2006).

## **Resistance to the Ordinance**

The Latino gardeners' resistance to the ordinance started sporadically, yet gradually became organized after the birth of ALAGLA.<sup>6</sup> The association's outreach efforts increased the membership base. Furthermore, opposition to the leaf blower ban helped establish ALAGLA as a legitimate voice in Los Angeles's wider immigrant community. Alvarez and the other activists played a key role in ALAGLA's strategy to delay and, eventually, reform the ordinance. The activists, in conjunction with the Latino gardeners, successfully used four tactics: 1) engaging in the political process, 2) taking direct action, 3) advocating technological adaptations, and 4) reframing the issues in a positive light. Moreover, outreach to the media was an important part of all four.

### **ENGAGING IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS**

ALAGLA originally lobbied local elected officials and their field staff.<sup>7</sup> As a new organization representing an informal and immigrant workforce, ALAGLA initially had little success communicating with city council members. After months of persistence, however, ALAGLA leaders were able to hold several meetings with council members and their staff. During these meetings, ALAGLA leaders questioned the council members and held them accountable for their position in favor of the leaf blower ban. To the gardeners' dismay and puzzlement, those in favor included Latino council members Mike Hernandez and Richard Alarcon. In addition, two African American council members also favored the ban: Mark Ridley-Thomas and Nate Holden. During these meetings, the elected officials dismissed ALAGLA's grassroots lobbying efforts and said they considered the leaf blower issue closed for debate. ALAGLA's leadership responded by continuing their lobbying efforts at city hall amid a major campaign to gain public support (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006). By publically shaming the council members for their vote to ban leaf blowers and, potentially,

send Latino immigrant gardeners to jail, ALAGLA successfully turned to the court of public opinion and eventually managed to sway some of the elected officials to support their cause. Those who changed their minds included Hernandez and Alarcon; the former, in particular, became a strong advocate of ALAGLA and its members.

Throughout their organizing efforts against the leaf blower ban, from December 3, 1996, through 1998, the Latino gardeners organized barefoot marches, staged massive protests, held candlelight vigils, wrote opinion newspaper articles, purchased ads in *La Opinión*, conducted grassroots lobbying at the local and statewide levels, held press conferences, organized grassroots fundraising events, and planned annual celebrations for Latino gardeners.<sup>8</sup> They also filed two lawsuits against the ban.<sup>9</sup> As ALAGLA gained media attention at local, statewide, national, and international levels, especially in Spanish-speaking media outlets, more Latino gardeners and their sympathizers joined this growing social movement. According to Alvarez (2006), one gardener attended one of the protests and, soon thereafter, joined ALAGLA because he felt ashamed of his lack of involvement in a campaign that would eventually benefit his self-interests. The Spanish-speaking media in particular became a key recruitment tool for ALAGLA, allowing it to expand its membership base and influence among Latino immigrants and sympathizers.

### TAKING DIRECT ACTION

Once the city council's December 1996 vote had put the final touches on the leaf blower ordinance, ALAGLA invested enormous effort in delaying its implementation, originally set for July 1, 1997. ALAGLA members became familiar figures at city hall, where they frequently protested the ordinance that, while not yet enforced, presented a clear threat to their livelihood. Attempting to buy time in which to overturn the ordinance, ALAGLA demanded a moratorium to allow the city to study the law's economic impact on gardeners. When city leaders rebuffed them, ALAGLA leaders decided to take action on the first day the ordinance would be enforced. On July 1, 1997, an estimated 500 gardeners assembled on the front steps of city hall for a nine-hour sit-in and candlelight vigil, a measure intended to pressure lawmakers into implementing a one-year moratorium on the ban's enforcement.

During this key protest, the gardeners created a media-friendly image by dressing in their new uniforms: green ALAGLA baseball caps and T-shirts



Figure 1. ALAGLA baseball cap with logo, 2013. Photograph by Alvaro Huerta.

bearing the group's new logo (fig. 1). The uniforms provided them with a sense of unity and pride (McGreevy and Wahlgren 1997; O'Donoghue 1997; Stewart and Wilgoren 1997). To the surprise of the gardeners, however, the mostly white and affluent Westside residents who supported the ban accused the gardeners of being puppets of the leaf blower manufacturers, citing the uniforms as evidence (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006). They argued that the manufacturers must have paid for the gardeners' uniforms, falsely assuming that the gardeners could not muster the financial resources to buy uniforms themselves. These verbal attacks by some privileged white residents against a mostly Latino immigrant workforce perpetuated an atmosphere of division and racism in the city that continues to the present.

ALAGLA leaders effectively used the mainstream media to get their message out to the public. Quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, Alvarez, as ALAGLA president, clearly articulated the inherent flaws in the arguments of opponents—both affluent residents and elected officials—who supported the ban:

“If you want clean lawns, LA—if LA wants beautiful gardens—you have to accept minimal disturbance,” said Adrian Alvarez of the Assn. of Latin

American Gardeners, standing in front of a sea of colleagues wearing bright green T-shirts. “Many people have the nerve to say gardeners are lazy,” Alvarez said. “I dare any city council member, for one day, to perform the job of a gardener and see if they have time left for happy hour.” (Stewart and Wilgoren 1997)

ALAGLA’s mass demonstration of July 1, 1997, included a demand for recall campaigns against Latino city leaders who had supported the ban (Alvarez 2006; McGreevy and Wahlgren 1997). Alvarez first introduced the idea of a recall campaign against the Latino council members for not defending the interests of the Latino immigrant gardeners (O’Donoghue 1997). Pressured and publicly shamed by the gardeners, council member Mike Hernandez soon agreed to support ALAGLA’s demand for a one-year moratorium on the ban’s enforcement (de la Cruz 1997b). Ironically, after initially voting for and supporting the ban, Hernandez and his staff (including then chief of staff and later council member Ed Reyes) became ALAGLA’s main advocates in city hall. Hernandez in particular spoke passionately and eloquently on behalf of all Latino immigrant gardeners while addressing his colleagues and the media.

ALAGLA leaders also demanded to meet with then Los Angeles mayor Richard Riordan. The strong working relationship established with Hernandez and his staff provided ALAGLA leaders with the opportunity to first meet with Riordan on July 2, 1997 (Tsukashima 2001). Although Riordan agreed to consider a compromise with ALAGLA over the ban, no concrete plan resulted from this meeting (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006). When the gardeners asked for something in writing, Riordan stated that they could take his word for it.<sup>10</sup> Unable to secure a written agreement from Riordan, ALAGLA continued to fiercely oppose the ordinance.

ALAGLA also found important allies in the mainstream media, where influential reporters exposed the injustices against working gardeners due to the leaf blower ban. In particular, *Los Angeles Times* columnist Bill Boyarsky (1997) and assistant to the editor Frank del Olmo (1997) wrote scathing articles against the ban. Del Olmo, who had worked for his uncle’s gardening business in the 1960s, questioned the wisdom of having law enforcement focus on leaf blowers in a city plagued by murder and other serious crimes:

Nobody’s likely to be thrown in jail for misdemeanor leaf blowing anytime soon, of course. The Los Angeles Police Department has made it very clear that dangerous criminals still have priority over noisy gardeners.

Indeed, the police department was not prepared to enforce the ban. As reported by *Los Angeles Times* reporters Hugo Martin and Jodi Wilgoren (1997), “LAPD officials told the council panel that they have no plan in place to enforce the citywide ban, and that there are currently only four patrol officers assigned to the noise unit, which would be responsible for the leaf-blower law.”

On July 16, 1997, council members finally yielded to ALAGLA’s demands by passing a six-month moratorium on the ordinance (de la Cruz 1997a; Martin 1997; Tsukashima 2001). It was a huge victory for the gardeners, the fruit of their astute organizing efforts, intense lobbying outreach, and savvy media campaign. By successfully reframing the issue (Lakoff 2004)—casting themselves as honest, hardworking individuals, and the leaf blower as an essential tool of their trade—the Latino gardeners prevailed in the media and in the court of public opinion. ALAGLA leaders hoped that the moratorium represented the first step toward a full repeal of the ban. However, after a few months, they realized that they did not have the votes at the city council to win a full repeal. Thus, in a last attempt to challenge the ban, they contemplated and planned for a drastic and life-threatening form of direct action: a hunger strike. To draw more negative attention to the ordinance and force city leaders to deal with the bad publicity associated it, several ALAGLA leaders and members decided to risk their lives for their right to use a vital tool of their trade.

ALAGLA’s many protests and related events for almost two years had generated significant media coverage and galvanized gardeners and their supporters, yet the organization had failed to overturn the ban (fig. 2). Seeing no other option, and mindful of the tradition of César Chávez and Mahatma Gandhi, ALAGLA leaders launched their most dramatic political action against the ban (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006). On January 3, 1998, Alvarez and ten other ALALGA leaders and members began a fluids-only hunger strike on the city hall’s south lawn (Huffington 1998; Merl 1998; Purdum 1998; Rofe 1998). It was the first time any of the Latino gardeners had fasted for a social cause. Roberto Cabrera, one of the strikers and a co-founder of ALAGLA, argued that this dramatic, life-threatening action was essential to highlight their exclusion from the local political process. “This is the only way to get them to listen to us,” Cabrera said in an interview with *Los Angeles Times* reporter Matea Gold (1998). “We have to show them [city leaders] the poor have hearts. We need the tools for our jobs.”

The hunger strike lasted six days, until January 9. It generated a tremendous amount of negative publicity, both domestically and



Figure 2. Scene from ALAGLA protest, 1997. Photograph by Adrian Alvarez.

internationally, for the city of Los Angeles. By framing the issue as a David-versus-Goliath narrative, ALAGLA leaders pressured city leaders to end the strike by holding negotiations and reaching a political compromise on the ban (Gold and Newton 1998). Instead of repealing the ban outright, however, city leaders agreed to remove its more draconian aspects, including the misdemeanor charge, \$1,000 fine, and provision for up to six months in jail. Instead of these harsh penalties, violators would be subject to a \$271 citation fee. Braude's replacement, Cindy Miscikowski, saw the ban take effect the following month, in February 1998. Determined to remove the ban altogether, ALAGLA leaders continued protesting and seeking new ways to circumvent the ordinance.

### SEEKING TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS

As part of their organizing campaign, ALAGLA leaders advocated for technological adaptations that might remove or mitigate some of the objections to leaf blowers. In lieu of the proposed ban, ALAGLA urged city leaders to provide financial incentives for leaf blower manufacturers to produce environmentally friendly machines. In appealing to council members, the organizers' rationale was simple, yet persuasive: "If they [American innovators] can send the Pathfinder to Mars," ALAGLA leaders argued, "they can produce a [quieter, environmentally friendly] leaf blower that does the job" (Huerta 2006).

Using this logic, during meetings with council members and staff, ALAGLA leaders sought technical solutions to the political problem facing gardeners at the local, state, and national levels. ALAGLA leaders also sought to develop relationships with equipment manufacturers to encourage them to reduce the noise and pollution created by their products. These tactical alliances had symbolic and real implications, demonstrating a market demand for environmentally friendly equipment on the part of an organized group of users. Moreover, the ban had also affected the financial bottom line of manufacturers, which were no longer able to sell gasoline-powered leaf blowers in the second-largest city in the nation.

ALAGLA leaders also challenged the leaf blower ban by finding a key loophole in the ordinance: the fact that it applied only to “gasoline-powered” blowers. By converting their machines to operate with an alternative fuel source, methanol, the gardeners found a way to legally circumvent the ban (Aleman 2006; Orlov 1998a). In an interview with *Los Angeles Daily News* reporter Rick Orlov (1998a), Glenn Barr, then chief of staff of council member Miscikowski, acknowledged the existence of the “methanol loophole”:

“The city law applies only to gasoline-powered blowers,” spokesman Glenn Barr said. “What we don’t know is if we can pass anything involving alternative fuels. We might be pre-empted because of state or federal laws.” However, Barr added that he didn’t believe the alternative fuels would remain in vogue because they could damage the equipment and possibly have environmental consequences.

Not long after the ban became law, two ALAGLA members cited for purposely using methanol-powered leaf blowers prevailed in court, successfully claiming that they had not violated the ban on gas-powered blowers (Associated Press 1998; Hiestand 1998b; Tsukashima 2001; Yi 1998). In a major legal victory for ALAGLA, West Los Angeles Municipal Court judge Elizabeth Allen White ruled in favor of the defendants, Ismael Muñoz Rodríguez and Pascual Máximo Pegueros.

Following the judge’s ruling, Miscikowski continued to defend the ban and pledged to return to the city council to close the methanol loophole (Hiestand 1998a). In reaction to Miscikowski’s pledge, the *Los Angeles Daily News* published an editorial, “Gone with the Wind,” on August 16, 1998, urging the city council to rescind the ban and negotiate a compromise with the gardeners:

You would think that after 10 years of debate, hundreds of hours of lawyering and strategizing, the city council of this great metropolis could outsmart the gardeners. But NOOOOO. The gardeners beat city hall's ban on gas-powered leaf blowers in court. All it took was to claim that the leaf blowers had been converted to methanol. For the moment, the ban is near dead and ought to be buried. . . . Now, Miscikowski wants to close the methanol loophole. We say forget about it. Give it up. Rescind the law. Sit down and work together for a sensible solution that encourages development of quieter, cost-efficient alternatives. And don't waste a lot more time on it—there are far more important problems to be dealt with. (*Los Angeles Daily News* 1998)

Despite the organizing efforts of ALAGLA leaders and members, the real and symbolic victories, and the alliances created with elected officials, manufacturers, and legal professionals, ALAGLA could not fully overturn the leaf blower ban. Still, the association's achievements were historic: they created a significant organizing campaign at the grassroots level, in a hard-to-organize sector of the immigrant informal economy, with creative direct actions and promotion of technological changes. Just as important, ALAGLA leaders successfully portrayed a positive image of this historically stereotyped immigrant workforce, demanding that they be viewed as human beings who should be treated with respect and dignity.

### REFRAMING THE DEBATE

ALAGLA leaders effectively reframed the debate to turn public opinion in the gardeners' favor.<sup>11</sup> They organized to combat the image of Latino immigrant gardeners as a public nuisance, depicting them as honest, hardworking individuals who produce greener and more beautiful neighborhoods through their labor (fig. 3). In doing so, ALAGLA leaders increased the level of dignity and self-respect for this disenfranchised workforce in the city and beyond.

On March 19, 1999, the Los Angeles City Council passed a resolution declaring March 21—the first day of spring—as the “Day of the Gardener/Día del Jardinero” to honor

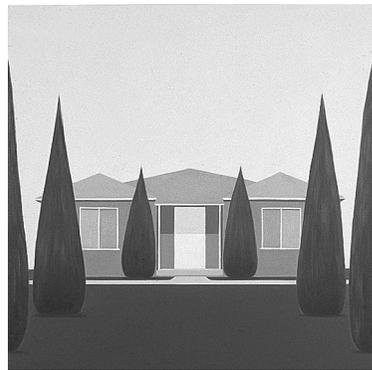


Figure 3. Salomon Huerta, *Untitled (Green House)*, 2001. Oil on canvas, 34 × 33 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

the gardeners' contributions to the city (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006). The Latino immigrant gardeners worked closely with council member Hernandez to draft and introduce the resolution, which stated in part:

Whereas, gardeners toil daily from dawn to dusk and struggle to take their rightful place as a contributing constituency among the citizenry of this great city as they continue to exemplify the notion of struggling to achieve the American dream.<sup>12</sup>

Based on the city council resolution, gardeners from across the city organized their first annual Día del Jardinero event on March 21, 1999 (Ha 1999; Inigo 1999). The day's events celebrated the gardeners' organizational accomplishments and their contributions to the city by maintaining green, clean, and aesthetically pleasing neighborhoods. Besides making important political inroads, ALAGLA helped bolster the Latino gardeners' status in the local immigrant communities and the public in general by demonstrating the power of unity, organization, and action in response to an unjust law.

## **A Brief Comparative Analysis**

ALAGLA's approach to organizing and mobilizing Latino immigrants follows in the tradition of other immigrant-based social movements in Los Angeles and beyond (Cameron 2000). Two such movements have been particularly effective: the United Farm Workers (UFW), which began organizing in California's agricultural fields during the early 1960s (Ferriss and Sandoval 1997), and the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Justice for Janitors campaign, starting in Los Angeles during the late 1980s (Banks 1991; Lerner 1991; Nazario 1993; Waldinger et al. 1996). Both organizations were able to garner mass media attention as a result of their creative organizing tactics, which included political chants, speeches by charismatic leaders, political theater, religious ceremonies, and wearing of uniforms (Banks 1991; Ferriss and Sandoval 1997; Lerner 1991; Nazario 1993; Waldinger et al. 1996). These also met with brutal police reprisals. These organizing experiences have been well documented in numerous academic journals, books, newspaper articles, photographic exhibitions, and documentaries; the Justice for Janitors campaign even inspired a Hollywood movie, *Bread and Roses* (2000).

While ALAGLA's efforts to organize immigrant workers bear some similarities to these earlier campaigns, there are key differences between the organizing efforts carried out by the Latino gardeners and by organized

labor. Both the UFW and the SEIU are labor organizations with hired staff (executives, managers, researchers, lawyers, organizers, clerks), dues-paying members located at fixed sites, and a broad constituency of sympathizers (Banks 1991; Ferriss and Sandoval 1997; Waldinger et al. 1996). ALAGLA's structure as a grassroots group, in contrast, does not include all these institutionalized roles. Its immigrant-centered organizing efforts were carried out by a group of educated, organizationally and politically savvy volunteers (the Chicana/o activists) and the Latino immigrant gardeners to whom they related through their migrant networks and common interests (Huerta 2006). By briefly comparing the SEIU's Justice for Janitors (J4J) campaign with ALAGLA's organizing efforts, we can draw clear lessons as to how different groups organize themselves to achieve their objectives.

On June 15, 1990, Local 399 of SEIU organized a mass protest of janitors in the Century City district of Los Angeles against an international company, International Service Systems (ISS), to demand union contracts in the company's office buildings. Over 300 protestors participated. Although the protest was peaceful, the Los Angeles Police Department brutally attacked the demonstrators, resulting in many injuries, arrests, and a miscarriage suffered by a pregnant woman (Banks 1991; Waldinger et al. 1996). Broadcast by mainstream media outlets and photojournalists, this event created a public outcry against abusive police force and energized the J4J movement, which became a significant social and economic justice movement extending far beyond Local 399. Influential political forces at the local and national levels eventually forced ISS to sign union contracts, creating momentum for the J4J movement, which went on to seek negotiations with other cleaning contractors and owners of commercial buildings (Banks 1991). According to Roger Waldinger and his co-authors (1996), janitorial unionism in Los Angeles had been in decline since the end of World War II, but this changed with the success of the J4J campaign. The campaign represented a turning point for labor relations in the city that was especially significant given the growth of Latina/o immigrant populations in the metropolitan area in recent decades.

Though ALAGLA's leaf blower campaign and SEIU's J4J campaign used similar organizing tactics, they differed in other ways. In contrast to ALAGLA's grassroots organizational structure, SEIU has a hierarchical, bureaucratic structure that emphasizes training and top-down management of the staff who organize and execute their campaigns. In short, the successful J4J campaign was carried out by paid personnel, consisting of managers, organizers, researchers, and support staff.<sup>13</sup> ALAGLA, as a

volunteer-only organization, relied on a more horizontal structure with fewer typical bureaucratic roles and a consensual decision-making structure that balanced various interests in reaching major organizational decisions. For future research, further comparison of the two cases would produce new insights about the relative merits of these and other dynamic campaigns for social and economic justice.

## Conclusion: Lessons for Scholars and Organizers

It's the working man, under the leadership of Adrian Alvarez, the Spartacus of leaf blowers, that has resorted to this age-old weapon of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. in the fight against oppressors.

—Arianna Huffington (1998),  
commenting on the gardeners' hunger strike

The founding of ALAGLA enhanced the capabilities of Latino immigrant gardeners in two ways: (a) organizationally, through political participation; and (b) individually, through civic action.<sup>14</sup> In this conclusion we will revisit the former and offer lessons for scholars, but first we wish to highlight an example of the latter to indicate the important capabilities, including leadership skills, that developed in those who participated in ALAGLA's historic activities.

As immigrants from rural Mexico, the gardeners who participated in these organized actions became more civic-minded and educated about political and organizational processes. By conducting grassroots lobbying activities that urged city leaders and staff to repeal a draconian law, they gained firsthand knowledge of local legislative processes. One ALAGLA member, Salvador Muñoz, a gardener with over twenty years of experience, commented,

It has had a very positive impact on my personal life because I have always believed in their struggle, because it is also my struggle, in being united and fighting for that. If they [city leaders] prohibit leaf blowers, they could just as easily ban other things of ours. I found out that being united gives us power and leverage. For me, this has had a large impact on my life and that is why I am still with them. Because I still believe in what we are fighting for. (Muñoz 2006)

By engaging in civic action and participating in the political process for the first time in their lives, the majority of ALAGLA members, like Muñoz and Aleman, developed new civic skills. In a letter soliciting legal

assistance from Public Counsel, a pro bono law firm, Dr. Juan Gómez-Quiñones, a professor of history at UCLA, highlighted ALAGLA's civic and social contributions:

The Association of Latin American Gardeners is helpful civically and socially in several ways. Foremost it serves by providing for a public persona and voice for fellow residents whose services and equities are far less recognized than their obvious presence warrants. This civic strengthening enriches all of us. The association strengthens the dignity and cohesion of families by their internal encouragements as well as their family premised public activities. In the medium- and long-range efforts to improve the lives of gardeners, this translates into higher health and education thresholds for all family members of association participants. Clearly the gardener's association strengthens civic participation in many ways. Members learn civic participation through organizing, planning and leading their organization in behalf of their own meritorious interests. Here civic participation is strengthened by public efforts and advocations through which both speakers and listeners are sensitized.<sup>15</sup>

ALAGLA's efforts fostered new interpersonal and organizational skills in numerous Latino immigrant gardeners, as well as new political sensitivities within—and toward—this group. ALAGLA leaders and members not only testified before legislative bodies but also learned how to develop organizational agendas, facilitate meetings, plan events, conduct educational outreach efforts, lobby elected officials, circulate press releases, and speak to the media in both English and Spanish (Aleman 2006; Alvarez 2006). Activist scholars seeking to enhance the participation of Latina/os and other underrepresented groups would do well to study ALAGLA's fine example of developing organic, grassroots leadership. The Latino immigrant gardeners' organizing campaign represents part of a long and rich tradition of Latinos resisting discriminatory and punitive government measures directed at immigrants and racial minorities. In the process, the Chicana/o activists became an integral part of the gardeners' cause for social and economic justice, but they did not dominate it. ALAGLA's organizing campaign did not rest in the hands of one charismatic leader, or even with a small group of community activists, but depended on the collective will and action of a group of people—both experienced and novice organizers—willing to defend the rights of honest, hardworking immigrants and their families.

During the late 1990s, ALAGLA became an important organization in the political landscape of Los Angeles. Like the 1996 massive mobilization of Latino immigrants against harsh federal legislative proposals

(Archibold 2006; Watanabe and Becerra 2006), the Latino gardeners' dynamic campaign sent a clear message to city leaders and the public: working-class Latina/o immigrants do not represent a burden to society, but are key contributors to this country. It was no coincidence that then mayoral candidate Antonio Villaraigosa sought the help and endorsement of ALAGLA during his successful election campaign in 2005. Many Latina/o gardeners and their families volunteered in Villaraigosa's campaign, helping elect the city's first mayor of Mexican origin in 133 years. In terms of popular culture, ALAGLA also influenced local artists like the photographer-filmmaker Rubén Ortiz-Torres and painter Robert Russell, who created art based on this historic grassroots movement (fig. 4).<sup>16</sup>



Figure 4. Graphic art by Robert Russell, 2002. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

ALAGLA is one of many immigrant organizations that have shown resolve, creativity, and intelligence in seeking to empower their members and surrounding immigrant communities. Essentially, it stands out as one of the most successful grassroots campaigns in Los Angeles and beyond. Forming the first organized group of Latino immigrant gardeners in US history, then forcing powerful city leaders to dramatically alter an existing law, this grassroots group won a major victory for this “invisible” immigrant workforce. Community organizers, elected officials, and the public have much to learn from ALAGLA's experience.<sup>17</sup> To improve the working conditions of the immigrant workforce, whether in gardening or in other immigrant work niches, scholars, community activists, and policy makers should work with immigrant groups to address the many work-related problems that immigrants experience in the informal economy, including lack of health care coverage and workers' compensation; long work hours and low wages; poor and hazardous work conditions; lack of governmental worksite protections; high risk of being robbed and assaulted; clients who refuse to pay; and harassment by law enforcement. Finally, concerned parties should partner with organizations such as ALAGLA to foster local economic development and community participation for the betterment of Latina/o immigrants and other disenfranchised communities in this country.

## Notes

1. By “co-ethnic,” we refer to individuals from the same ethnic group.
2. Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, File #85-1050-S44.
3. In addition to Los Angeles, more than forty cities in California had banned or restricted the use of leaf-blowers by 1996 (Cameron 2000).
4. The lead author, Alvaro Huerta, also played a pivotal role in this campaign prior to pursuing graduate studies.
5. See Morales and Jimenez (2003) for a critique of social movement leadership, with some attention to housing in Los Angeles.
6. See Scott (1985) for a detailed discussion of the “weapons of the weak.”
7. See McAdam (1982) for a discussion of the political process model.
8. For example, Adrian Alvarez (1998) published an op-ed in *La Opinión*, arguing for the economic and social rights of gardeners in their fight against the city’s leaf blower ban.
9. One lawsuit challenged the legality of the ordinance, while the other seized on a loophole the gardeners found in the ban, which only applied to gas-powered leaf blowers. By converting their machines to operate with methanol—a cleaner fuel source—the gardeners successfully challenged the ban in court (Cameron 2000; Yi 1998).
10. An ALAGLA organizer specifically asked Mayor Riordan for a written guarantee that he would help the gardeners with a viable solution to the ban. Stating that his word was “as good as gold,” Riordan rejected the request.
11. On frame analysis, also see Lakoff (2004), Snow and Benford (1988), and Snow et al. (1986).
12. Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office.
13. In addition to accessing journal articles, the lead author observed many J4J activities and interviewed past and former staff members of SEIU in Los Angeles.
14. See Morales (2009b) for a detailed study on action and participation among immigrant farm workers.
15. In his letter to Public Counsel of September 26, 1998, Dr. Gómez-Quíñones supported ALAGLA’s request for pro bono support from this public interest law firm.
16. In 2002, Ortiz-Torres’s ALAGLA-inspired art show opened at the University of Southern California’s Fisher Gallery. For the exhibit, titled *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the artist customized lowrider gardener power tools, including a lawn mower operated with hydraulics (similar to a lowrider car) and a leaf blower. See David Pagel’s (2002) review in the *Los Angeles Times* and a short YouTube video produced by the artist ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugCR2g\\_MxaA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugCR2g_MxaA)).
17. One organization that learned from and applied ALAGLA’s organizing tactics is Communities for a Better Environment, an environmental justice organization in Huntington Park, a southern suburb of Los Angeles. Its community organizers successfully defeated the building of a 550-megawatt power plant in neighboring South Gate (Huerta 2001, 2005).

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