

Patricia Klindienst. *The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic America*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006). xxviii, 304 pp. \$26.95 cloth.

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Perhaps one of the most fascinating parts of this book is its prologue, where Klindienst discusses her own family's rejection of its ethnic Italian heritage. Frightened by the anti-Italian sentiment surrounding the execution of Nicolo Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in the mid-1920s, Klindienst's family changed their name to something less Italian-sounding (she doesn't say what) and raised their children as assimilated Americans. Only many years later, at a family reunion, did Klindienst learn of her own ethnic origins. Fascinated, she began researching not only her own family's history but also that of Italian Americans in general. In the process she discovered the letters that Sacco and Vanzetti had written while in prison, awaiting their execution. Vanzetti's letters, in particular, touched Klindienst. Vanzetti wrote lyrically of his father's garden in Italy: how he missed it and how thinking of it brought him some measure of peace. These letters, according to Klindienst, and the sentiments expressed in them, led to her interest in researching the gardens of other ethnic Americans and set her off on a series of interviews with gardeners from a variety of ethnic backgrounds in the United States to see what gardening

means to them.

Klindienst tells us that she told her stories about Vanzetti's garden and her family's assimilation to all of the ethnic gardeners that she visited. She tells us that these stories provided her subjects with an explanation of why she was interested in their gardens and their stories. And she leads us to believe that the gardens and stories we are about to read will provide us with valuable insights into the relationships between ethnicity and gardening, between cultural identity and the land. Regrettably, however, each interview quickly develops into a set of political pronouncements on the evils of industrial farming or the importance of living organically on the land. In the end we learn more about Klindienst's personal philosophy of how we should all relate to the land than about ethnicity, gardening, or the relationships between ethnicity and gardening.

The first chapter, for example, opens with a portrait of Clayton Brascoupe, a Mohawk Indian living in Tesuque Pueblo. Infusing local practices with his own Iroquois gardening knowledge Brascoupe also draws from Japanese no-till concepts and Australian permaculture ideas to recreate traditional corn-growing in the area. A member of the Traditional Native American Farming Association, he participates in workshops and seed exchanges. The emphasis here is on adaptability and sustainability. The chapter then moves on to present the Fresquez family, a Flemish-Hispanic mix whose ancestors have been in New Mexico from the seventeenth century onward. The Fresquezes—father David, mother Loretta, and daughter Jennifer—grow vegetables for sale in the Santa Fe market. "We don't grow traditional food" (p. 24) they tell us, but they still prepare traditional dishes. As Klindienst explains, "Sprouted blue corn pudding, ritually pure food, is something Loretta can claim, and pass on. It is untainted by shame" (p. 25). We are left on our own to guess at what kind of shame Klindienst is referring to here.

Chapter two introduces us to two different Gullah gardeners on the island of St. Helena, South Carolina: Ralph Middleton has reintroduced indigo to the island and Otis Daise keeps a ten-acre market garden from which he sells produce at a local farmer's market. Klindienst uses this chapter to explore the role of African slaves in indigo growing during colonial times as well as to explore some African American history. She does a good job of presenting

this background material. Regrettably, however, in trying to give “color” to her characters, she succumbs to the temptation of presenting their speech in dialect. “I raise five kids on this land” (p. 47) and “I wish you come last week” (p. 50) are just two examples of this offensive practice. Her explanation—that Gullah is a rich oral tradition and that her speakers’ Standard English reflects Gullah grammar—do not reassure me. Other chapters have individuals whose first languages are not English yet those individuals are represented as speaking flawless Standard English. Why the discrepancy? Why reinforce some stereotypes and not others? Klindienst does not address this issue. The chapter ends with a rant against commercial growers who are taking over (and poisoning) the land and leaving less and less room for traditional growers.

Chapter three introduces us to Gerard Bentryn, a Polish American gardener in Bainbridge Washington, Akio Suyematsu, the Japanese American (Nisei) berry farmer from whom Bentryn leases his land, and Betsey Wittick, the young woman (ethnicity not indicated) who has bought two and a half acres of land from Suyematsu. These three individuals, along with Bentryn’s wife Jo Ann, have established a complex symbiotic relationship in which Suyematsu grows berries, Bentryn and his wife maintain an organic winery and market garden, and Wittick gardens with draft horses and helps out at the winery. It’s a fascinating interplay of personalities and we do learn a little bit about the plight of Japanese Americans who were forced to give up their land during World War II, but again, the primary theme of the chapter ends up being the struggle of all of these folks to maintain organic farms in the face of an onslaught of increased taxation and commercial interests. By the end of the chapter it is clear that Bentryn will have to turn his winery into a museum and sell most of his land in order to make ends meet.

The rest of the chapters are similar in tone. Khmer survivors of the Pol Pot regime find peace in community gardens in Amherst, Massachusetts. Italian gardeners living in California and in New England remember their childhood lives in Italy while they maintain gardens in the United States. A wealthy Punjabi woman, forbidden from digging in the dirt in India, flaunts tradition in California and creates a lush garden in her backyard, combining local plants with plants from India. Young Puerto Ricans in

South Holyoke, Massachusetts, learn respect for the land and for themselves as they learn to plant and grow their own food in community gardens. The final chapter is reserved for a Yankee farmer in Stonington, Connecticut, who has discovered a way to grow flint corn and to return the seeds to Native American groups who would like to have them. He too, like so many others in the book, is faced with losing his house and land to government taxation. Instead of talking about the importance of seed corn to the maintenance or recapturing of ethnic traditions and identity however, Klindienst prefers to focus on this farmer's contribution to "restorative justice" (p. 240). It is "Garden Democracy" that she is interested in, and not ethnic identity, as she reminds us yet again of Vanzetti's garden "which kept alive in him the memory of a place where he belonged as a citizen of a world that transcended any mere nation" (p. 242). It is not clear how this global identity relates to the ethnic identity that Klindienst has promised to tell us about. My copy of the book, a prepublication uncorrected page proof, had "Ethnic Americans" at the end of the subtitle. The shift to "Ethnic America" in the published version (see Amazon.com) reflects Klindienst's overwhelming focus on commonality, rather than on the more specific aspects of ethnicity in the different individuals portrayed. Although it had some fascinating sections, overall this book was a disappointment.