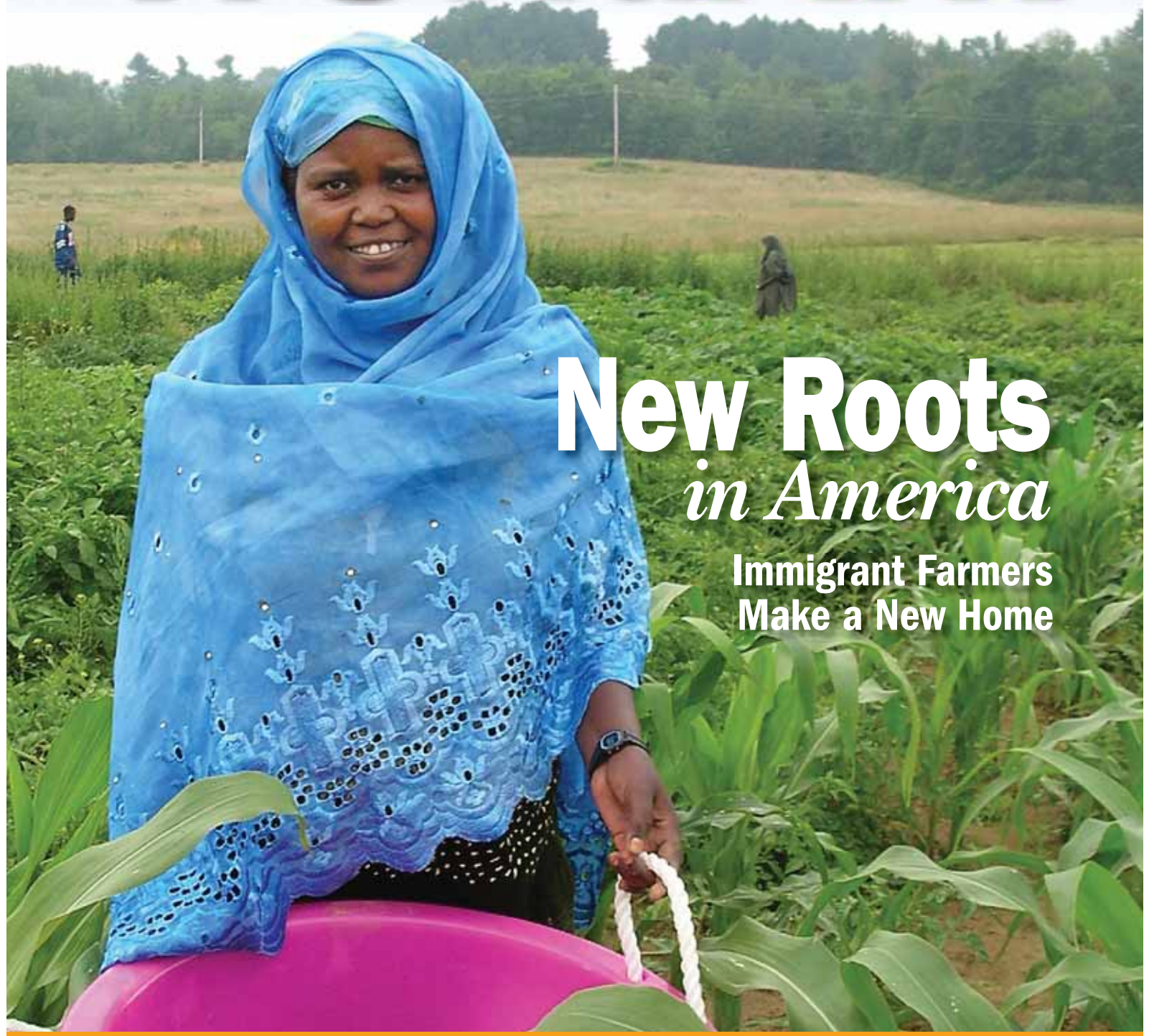


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## New Roots *in America*

Immigrant Farmers  
Make a New Home

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2007



Preserving  
Canada's Prairie Farms

Caste Away—  
Nepalese Women Unite

# The Earth Knows My Name:

## Food, Culture, and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans

Reviewed by Jaman Matthews | HEIFER STAFF WRITER

“Immigrant” is one of those words that periodically rises to the surface of a society’s consciousness and becomes a political touchstone. No longer do we envision Ellis Island; the word now conjures up night-vision border crossings and has about it a whiff of fear. The new metaphors are dark and deformed: immigration is a plague. Walls are built. Borders are closed.

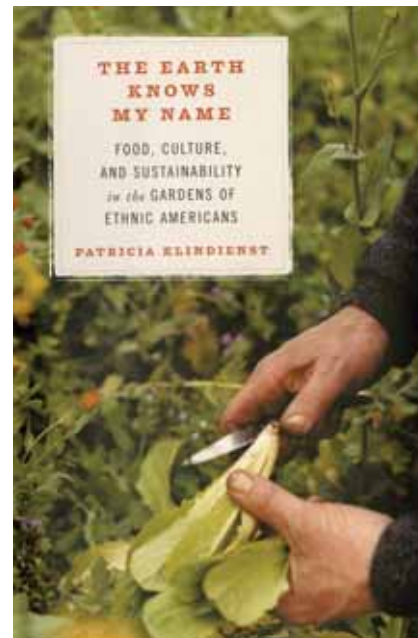
In *The Earth Knows My Name*, author Patricia Klindienst steers the conversation about immigrants and immigration in a more humane direction, reminding us that, whether we are first generation Asian-Americans or eighth generation descendents of Spanish settlers, almost all American families emigrated to this land. And land lies at the heart of this book: homeland and adoptive land, farmland and forgotten land. Klindienst, a master gardener and creative writing teacher in Yale’s summer courses, presents the stories of fifteen American gardeners, ranging from recent Punjabi immigrants to an eleventh-generation descendent of the earliest European settlers.

Klindienst, her own family having emigrated from Italy, settled on the topic after discovering a family photograph that hinted at an even older story of American immigrants and gardening, a story that ended in the wrongful execution of two men in 1927. Initially she spoke with only Italian-American gardeners. Even when her scope widened to include

gardeners of many ethnic backgrounds, her intentions and methods remained the same. “I would ask questions and listen; they would answer both my questions and my unspoken need to hear anything that might help me imagine my family’s origins.” *The Earth Knows My Name* is a successful and compelling fusion of oral history and personal narrative.

Gardening proves to be an appropriate and fertile vein through which to approach the immigrant experience, with its appropriate metaphors of uprooted plants and transplanting, new soil and a certain hope in the bounty of the future. One chapter titled “Place” recounts the story of Gerard Bentryn, a Polish immigrant vintner, and the reclusive Akio Suyematsu, a Nisei (a second generation Japanese-American) berry grower. The two have found a way to share their land on Bainbridge Island, Wash. Bentryn is the most vocal of the two, also likening the immigrant experience to that of a plant. “You tear a plant from the soil,” he says, “and the first thing it does is try to put down roots. It’s a matter of survival.” But it is in the reserved and sparse language of Suyematsu recalling the internment camps during World War II and how Japanese-American farmers often lost their land that the perseverance of the immigrant finds its fullest.

The other chapters, with titles like “Refuge” and “Community” and “Justice,” take up the theme of the



Patricia Klindienst  
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garden as an image of renewal and hope for a pluralistic society. But the chapters all succeed in going beyond mere metaphors to tell of the very real experiences of ethnic gardeners. These stories offer lessons for every reader: a new life is built upon the old, and what is left behind is never completely left behind.

Gardens are more than mere ornamentation; they are sources of familiar fruits and vegetables. Food serves not only as a source of nutrition for these ethnic gardeners, but also fulfills some deeper craving. “Food is a form of deep memory,” says Klindienst. “Through food they are linked to their native landscape, to its soil, its water and its trees.” And it is here, in the gardener’s recognition of the connectedness of the social and natural world, that *The Earth Knows My Name* offers its greatest lesson.