TreePeople: Bringing Sociology, Climate Research, and Community Voices into the Same Room

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ABSTRACT
This is an exploration into being the first and only Cal State LA sociology student intern at TreePeople, a seasoned non-profit environmental justice organization. TreePeople's Policy and Research department teams host multi-component environmental initiatives which use participatory community engagement and outreach to dynamically record new urban climate change research and maximize resilience outcomes in underserved neighborhoods. Los Angeles is one of the most historically notorious urban landscapes for resource and land discrimination, racial and class segregationist policies, and extractive/polluting enterprises. My internship sought to bridge the gap between researchers and community members while encouraging a new approach to climate studies that brings all stakeholders into conversation equally. My team and I are employing micro to macro motivations, technological details, and sociological theoretical frameworks during the pre-outreach and beginning sampling stages of our initiative launch. LA provides a potent location for implementing more sociologically rooted environmental research, especially in the face of imminent climate crises, that disproportionally affect marginalized communities. *LA's Urban Soil Future* combines quantitative measurements of soil health and biodiversity in LA and documented qualitative feedback and collaborative ideation about nature-based solutions, giving community voices an empirical and social platform. It is my fervent wish that organizations like TreePeople become progressively interested in compassionately and respectively widening the breadth of stakeholder collaboration and collectivism in all their current and future scientific research. I believe there is no better arena than climate justice to foster in a plurality in connection and wisdom, because we all share the threat of an inhospitable future, if we cannot work together.

INTRODUCTION AND POSITIONALITY

When I first walked onto TreePeople's operations hub in Beverly Hills, *Coldwater Canyon Park,* I wasn't sure what to look for or what to expect. This fifty-year-old LA based organization began with one impassioned high school student planting trees to challenge air pollution, but it's obvious from the park's long attended beauty and ample resources that the achievements of this organization are at least due in part to a relatively elevated degree of privilege. Beyond the unassuming but cleverly curved parking area, there's a small cluster of energy efficient office buildings, the foundation's nursery, a conference center, a yurt village (where employees and guests alike come for refuge and/or work), a small outdoor amphitheater (that doubles as a venue and field trip teaching post) and a host of shady mulch laden hiking paths lined with magnificent vistas and old growth trees. At first, I felt uncomfortable on TreePeople's campus, as it's surrounded by some of the most obscene wealth in the nation. But as I ventured further, I realized that the legacy of this place represents a rare mainstay in publicly accessible green space. Its iron-clad trust agreements cannot be touched by the private speculation or urban development that plague many of the communities where TreePeople's work takes place. This means that the organization has a unique opportunity to try new approaches to community engagement without jeopardizing its local social capital and municipal partnerships in the grander environmental non-profit sector of Southern California.

TreePeople's community organizing strategies and mission statement reflects its central ambition to empower community members to think of themselves as active land stewards rather than passive city dwellers:

> TreePeople is Southern California's largest environmental movement whose mission is to inspire, engage and support people to take personal responsibility for the urban environment, making it safe, healthy, fun and sustainable and to share our process as a model for the world.

To date, the organization remains a major contributor to research and direct action(s), for everything from expanding canopy cover,

school greening and food justice, to local forestry protection efforts. It's the only non-profit organization of its size and influence in the Los Angeles region that uses its privilege to confront *all* of these issues simultaneously and has established itself as an important consultant for city and county urban greening. Accelerating climate threats have further pushed TreePeople to think more creatively about how to elevate community involvement in vulnerable neighborhoods—including pursuing relationships with local universities—while staying cognizant of the historical tensions between the academy, race, and low-income urban residents.

The desire to commit myself to a common cause around ecological and community healing is what first brought me to TreePeople. But as a white woman, it would be dishonest of me not to acknowledge race and class influence and bias in my own life. As TreePeople continues to diversify its largely upper- and middle-class staff of white and Latinx professionals, one of the crucial challenges it faces in attempting to reimagine how it values marginalized community input centers around the willingness to admit that it too will make racially biased assumptive mistakes along the way.

Low-income folks have suffered under a ruling neoliberal framework that pursues private market investments in socially vulnerable areas and enjoys tax exemptions and other wealth consolidating incentives at their expense. The nationwide wealth gap and growing wage disparity provide enough evidence of this reality, but it's the largely white-benefiting spatial control and occupation of marginalized communities that shows the harms of neoliberal ideologies in urban landscapes. I am more aware than ever of the impact whiteness can have on the dynamics in a room, and that it is something that often catalyzes unintended damage in the non-profit industrial complex. Many years of higher learning and direct action helped me to accumulate the language and intersectional framing critical for meaningful civil activism. Climate justice work is a useful place to start building intercultural empathy and recognize shared humanity and wisdom, as no amount of privilege buys full protection from climate change. The white anti-racist group, White People for Black Lives (WP4BL) often asks its members to think about their personal stake in

toppling systems of oppression, and I revisit this notion often throughout my day. I believe it is the duty of white people in *all* industries to grapple with their unearned privilege and to embrace the interconnectedness that White Supremacist cultures purposefully deny, to maintain social power. TreePeople is primed to center this in its practices and research.

METHODS

TreePeople's work is boldly turning toward a research paradigm that establishes open communication and collaboration with communities (Davidoff 1965) and moves away from myopic practices that lead to remitting prescriptions based on limited, biased and/or exclusionary data. This strategy (TreePeople 2021) brings the contributions of scientists, scholars, and policymakers into equal partnership with community leaders and advocates to strengthen the innovation and robustness of climate change solutions in their unique areas and translate community response in a culturally and linguistically relevant way. By prioritizing a holistic consideration of situational circumstances involving race, class, gender, area history, and other factors, it also contributes to resistance efforts against the historical onslaught of gentrification and redevelopment projects that has tormented South and East Los Angeles in particular. The basis for this kind of approach, often referred to in the field as "community science" (Moulite 2017), will help bolster, "the stories of marginalized communities through an intersectional lens, by adjusting for the multiple spaces people occupy."

This path presents an exciting and empowering opportunity to meet folks where they are and build resilience together as equal stakeholders in climate action. It's a notion that also aspires to champion "resilience hubs" (Resilient Cities Catalyst 2023) in under resourced neighborhoods, by providing training and support, and welcoming alternative ways of thinking and knowing about land management and protection that reside outside of dominate systems. As a social science student, I feel *very* passionately about maximizing the collective wisdom of scientific research, activism, and collectivism, because it reseats autonomy as the core goal, rather than development (Escobar 2020), and builds a platform for residents to become local

management ambassadors. Indeed, the reason that strengthening collaboration in this work is so critically important is that it's simply consensus and not conjecture that will move against the climate crisis. At its core, the story of "extractivism" (Besteman 2020) is the story of Earth's witness to the Anthropocene. Many humans have and continue to commit profit motivated atrocities against the land in the name of socially constructed benefits, and we see it filter down to every species on the planet (Klein 2014). To put it bluntly, climate change is the ultimate "find out" phase for humanity and potentially all existing life.

For decades, Los Angeles has shown itself to practice "Dracula urbanism," (Kirk 2023) and the consequences logically stoke distrust and a sense of powerlessness from low-income folks and BIPOC, who've felt more of the brunt. According to Kirk (2023), the ongoing effects of speculative capitalism and the privatization of resources belies good faith "development" and "renewal schemes" in LA, masking a more insidious agenda to gentrify and exclude already disadvantaged communities from land occupation and ownership wherever profit is perceived. Thus, our collective work must be profoundly dedicated to "uplifting local perspectives & voices," because "people won't trust a program that doesn't prioritize their needs, knowledge, and critical input" (Fabian 2022).

PROJECT DETAILS

Headed by our principal soil scientist, Dustin Herrmann, I have been thrilled to be assisting in phase 3 of a county wide climate resilience initiative called *Los Angeles' Urban Soil Future,* in accordance with the "LA Urban Soil Collaborative" and funded by Accelerating Resilience Los Angeles (ARLA), under the supervision of the policy & research department at TreePeople. This project targets residential soil health and biodiversity in LA, so that residents can be connected with the resources they need and want, with the intention to effectively boost resistance to forthcoming climate change challenges in their neighborhoods. The ultimate goal of this initiative is to capture the diversity of the soil in LA, to help support its health, and to inform new policy on building and infrastructure that considers hydrology conservation goals.

In phases 1 & 2 of the project, TreePeople's scientific staff and community organizing team released a report in 2021, *Healthy Soils for Healthy Communities*, which recounts the thorough needs assessment they conducted on local soil knowledge in unprotected neighborhoods. Over 1300 locals from four stratified groups were surveyed online about their land management experiences and familiarity with best management practices (BMPs) for soil health. These surveys along with the subsequent discourse at TreePeople's annual Los Angeles Urban Soil Symposium & Workshop in 2020 guides the community engagement and action strategy design for phase 3, when I began my internship.

Our team is utilizing the unprecedented aerial detail of the LA Regional Imagery Acquisition Consortium (LARIAC) urban geospatial data set to quantify soil type in socially vulnerable parcels of land, identify bright spots we hope to physically sample and evaluate, and help contextualize soil status assessments more precisely. Armed with this data, we are more able to discuss the details of the project with residents in a way that resonates with what they must navigate on their properties, such as limited parcel vegetation and shade, heavy impervious ground cover infrastructure, and highway corridor air quality.

Indeed, some of the trouble with past research and theory in climate justice (Foran 2017) begins with a misunderstanding of the foundational and ongoing implications that colonial imperialism and capitalistic thought have in the climate crisis. The field acknowledges some of the current impacts of oppressive systems in environmental justice, but a general disconnect still remains between many scientists' and scholars' planning and the ethical limitations that our institutional systems uphold. "Market worship" perspectives (Klein 2014) still pervade our society in ways that directly shape the questions we ask, our motivations and methods for research, and our policies. However, I am hopeful that climate change and its impending effects are meaningfully changing the way things are done, ushering in more holistic strategies (Escobar 2020) that may inspire greater shifts in the ways people "sentipensar" (or "think-feel") about the urban land in which they inhabit and how it forms their lives. Going forward, we must remember that solidarity is not rendered through an

isolated action or protest, but through committed practice in "building meaningful relationships, making spaces for others, (un)learning, and listening" (Sholock 2012:709).

So called North America built itself on the deliberate destruction and demoralization of Indigenous groups throughout the continent (Dhillon 2016), and American society has a duty to divest from wealthy speculators and to tear down the "Terra nulls," (or "nobody's land"), justification for the seizure and exploitation of lands, if we are to mitigate climate change. We should look to Indigenous communities for wisdom and knowledge of the natural world and include them and other communities of color in developing insightful effective protections against future environmental threats (Klein 2014), as they may represent the best shot we have for avoiding total climate crisis. I agree that this is especially true in urban settings today, where demographic flux often indicates imminent redevelopment projects that further disenfranchise low-income residents from the land (Hassberg 2020).

LA's Urban Soil Future operates in two very distinctive dimensions. On a basic level, it seeks to bridge a historically large gap between low-income and BIPOC communities and researchers so that development and execution will include local voices and goals in an equitable way throughout. Yet, on its most meta level, it is intrinsically intertwined with regional and global land & food sovereignty, as well as housing and other civil rights discriminations. Arguably, TreePeople's most ambitious and expansive research project to date, a venture like this has the potential to inform other TreePeople projects, such as ongoing education focused school greening and community garden programs. It could be used as a steppingstone to bigger investments in humanity and ecological wellness in general, because soil is our most foundational living organism and supports us all.

THEORIES

Another recent report released by TreePeople's sustainability scientist collaborators, *Cooler & Healthier: Increasing Tree Stewardship & Reducing Heat Health Risk Using Community Based Urban Forestry* (Guzman et al. 2023)

spotlights resident engagement in tree planting and continued management programs in LA. Study participants principally expressed their biggest barrier to participating in a planting program was a perceived lack in continued maintenance support after initial help with planting their trees. Likewise, Buchler (2021) explored the frequency that residents who practiced mindful landscaping and gardening tested their soil health found that people felt the absence of a centralized testing facility in LA and the resulting costs of sending their soil samples elsewhere to be processed was a major barrier to consistent testing. Refunds, rebates, and other convoluted governmental incentive options were not what most persuaded folks to want to take part in either activity. Instead, earned trust and reliable, affordable, continued knowledge & materials support gave people more positive imagined outcomes, and they were far more likely to engage long term (Eisenman, Guzman, and Wohldmann 2023). Past research such as this, in conjunction with Tree People's own focused and varied pre-outreach conversations with residents, has helped our team synthesize and operationalize theory into thoughtful engagement, through mailer copy, brochure literature, and producing an informative webinar.

Some of the most crucial work I have done for this initiative involves designing community engagement materials along with participant interview guides that accurately convey solidarity and a deeply shared social commitment to land reclamation and climate resilience transformation goals. This includes figuring out how to tell the story of microbe species living in soil in a way that connects people to it and inspires them to want to contribute more time and effort to protect it. If we can't bring people into the work with us, then any and all actionable parts of this initiative could be lost. To establish this critical link, my supervisor and I utilized several sociological theories to help us in approach, language, and accountability. The foremost theories we've used so far as reference guides for material design are: community based participatory research or CBPR (Detroit URC Board 2011), community based social marketing or CBSM (McKenzie-Mohr n.d.), theory of change or TOC (Center for Theory of Change 2023), the protective action decision model or

PADM (Lindell 2012), and the health belief model or HBM (Washburn 2020).

My other important role has been designing and authoring recognition and compensation materials for the study's participants, offering them an appropriate menu of beneficial options in exchange for allowing us to enter their property, collect and catalogue soil samples, and interview them about their personal land management interactions and perspectives on larger environmental issues. In my view, the likelihood that a resident takes part in this study may very well rest on how well executed recognition and compensation materials are, and I believe environmental justice non-profits in general should allocate more resources to developing sincere recognition platforms for study participants, both on site, on social media and at community event(s). In order to establish solid resilience hubs in LA that will also expand and share TreePeople's larger mission, *all* of our participants must be officially thanked and acknowledged for their contribution and encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings on the experience with the wider community, so that they feel appropriately valued as an essential part of climate resilience solutions. I have also assisted TreePeople and its partners to formulate a plan for keeping the project transparent and the research accountable to communities, so that all findings can be disseminated in a timely and inclusive way, something I see as a crucial component of sincere community science efforts. As we continue outreach to engage target residents about the study, we cannot forget that we are also meaningfully inviting them to participate and contribute to the process of sampling, management program design, and implementation in their communities, so our methods must stay clear and inclusive.

The sociological theories we're utilizing can be applied to studies such as the tree stewardship one mentioned previously, even with the added constraint of it being written based on needs assessment data alone. For example, a CBPR focused environmental program would address past distrust in governments and non-profits by consulting community leaders and other residents on blueprinting short-and-long-term components of the plan(s), as pertains to the community's particular constraints and concerns. CBPR rightly includes

feedback from the community from the beginning, often even prior to official research, and implements their input throughout the entire process of an initiative, so that blind spots can be identified ahead of any rollouts. *LA's Urban Soil Future* was not designed to include community input at the start, but there are already plans to amend that oversight in future TreePeople projects. The CBSM framework compliments the CBPR approach, because participants are far more likely to organize/nominate their neighbors to participate in environmental desired behaviors when there is an understanding that all locals are treated as equal partners in planning solutions.

Additionally, the theory of change (Center for Theory of Change 2023) offers researchers a platform for preparing against community disengagement by critically diving into, "the 'missing middle' between what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to achieving desired long-term goals. Behavioral hypotheses are strengthened using this model, by creating an "outcomes framework" which endeavors to determine what nuanced context may most successfully activate participation *before* community engagement begins. Essentially, TOC aims to make social research more robust and efficient by working backwards from the goal to the plan. TOC also invites researcher and participant evaluation throughout, creating a more flexible planning environment (Center for Theory of Change 2023). We believe this model has been very helpful with our outreach campaign, fortunately bolstered by TreePeople's established relationships with an array of seasoned local consults and staff, which have offered us advice while building our outcomes framework and engagement materials.

The final two specified theoretical models we are employing get to the heart of individual perceptions in an emotional and existential way. PADM analyzes the social and environmental cues that most influence decision-making about perceived threats to health and safety (Lindell 2012). As stated in the tree stewardship report (Eisenman, et al. 2023), "Heat exposure is a public health hazard that burdens disadvantaged communities in urban areas disproportionately and threatens the livability and sustainability of cities." Because climate change is

very much manifested through increasing heat, both regionally and globally, appealing to an urgent need for temperature mitigation is a great way to call folks in to actionable behaviors in land stewardship. Healthy soil can majorly reduce erosion, trap carbon and water vapor, and support shade providing plants like trees; By this logic, green infrastructure begins to make sense. I'm excited about the potential for protective action decision making models to show people that green infrastructural solutions are not just desirable but essential, and they are cheaper and more gratifying than most tech-based resiliency options.

To aid my individual work further, I'm borrowing the well-known Japanese concept of "Ikigai," a concept meaning "a reason for being," because it helped me to visualize what internal elements compose our human need to serve, something that has often alluded my conscious mind. Ikigai can communicate the intertwined needs, desires, and abilities that can bond us to land stewardship. This concept (Figure 1) is typically represented as a

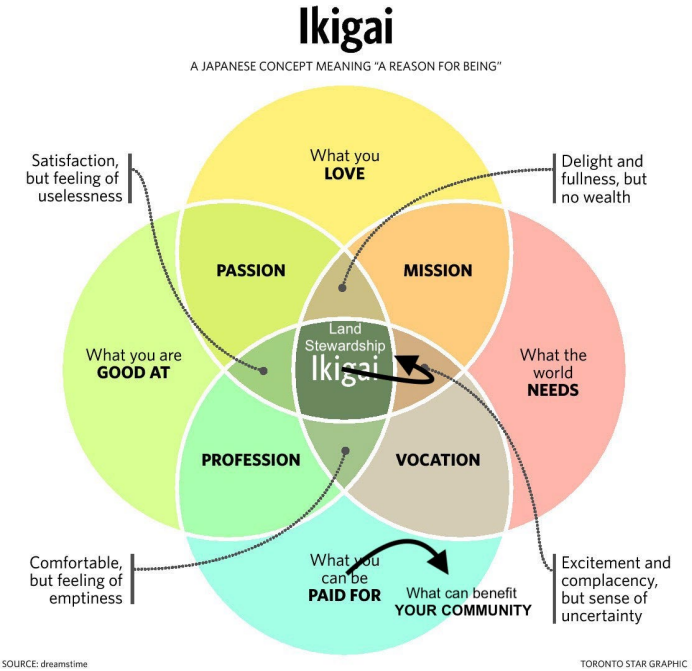

Figure 1 Ikigai: A Japanese Concept Meaning "A Reason for Being".

Venn diagram with four main parts: what you love, what you are good at, what the world needs, and what you can be paid for. This concept is culturally tied to the Japanese belief that a life's work never ends. Retirement is not even a word in the Japanese language, instead, they acknowledge that all individuals have a purpose and an avenue for contributing to the world. It's common practice in Japan (Pasricha 2016) to carry reminder "ikiagi card(s)" to jot down daily or weekly affirmations and aspirations throughout one's life. Keeping the first three components, I augmented the last to "what can benefit your community," to connect individual behavior(s) to community vs. profession. With that, a reason for being transforms into a reason to be a good land steward. I think this idea is best located in the PADM realm, because it may be a good way to challenge people with reasonably few resources from discounting themselves altogether as land managers/protectors and help residents to mitigate feelings of overwhelm and burden when it comes to climate action.

Finally, HBM explicitly acknowledges (Washburn 2020) that individual health in the short and long term is impacted by behavioral choices. This model was originally developed for use in the medical field, but I believe it provides a perfect opportunity to convey the necessity of initiatives like ours to the public, especially in historically disadvantaged communities. Some elements of the self-efficacy theory are incorporated into HBM, to help empower people who may have negative perceptions of their own impact on their health. I believe these theories, taken together, will advance *LA's Urban Soil Future's* final success tremendously. I am excited by the connections with community members that have already been mindfully built and am eager to bear witness to what is possible when an epistemological "pluriverse" (Escobar 2020) is further embraced.

EFFICACY

For years TreePeople has also been working toward increased diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as an overtly anti-racist approach to their work. However, it continues to be an ongoing challenge. Our entire team must stay acutely aware of our personal biases and assumptions throughout this project, and continually ask locals to point out inevitable misinterpretations or

deficiencies, to honor self-determination and avoid unhelpful deficit thinking. This can be especially difficult for white academics and practitioners who have not had enough meaningful contact with underprivileged residents in LA, something TreePeople has been working to correct for years. This city's socio-political history is riddled with discriminatory dynamics based on race, class, and gender, and attitudinal context often differs from neighborhood to neighborhood, sometimes even from street to street. I appreciate the work TreePeople does to invoke this notion in its work, through implementing community led needs assessments, participatory workshops, and educational discourse throughout the process of many projects, such as the "Learn@Home" webinar series which translates complex scientific research to the public and "T.R.E.E. Talks" lectures that facilitate and encourage community members to discuss their actionable role(s) in climate related issues.

Moving forward, it is also essential to continue cultivating successful collaboration between nonprofits, researchers and communities to persuade municipalities to make genuine investments in community-based climate action(s) and continue support for scaling them up. Importantly, TreePeople's collective has been accepted as a consultant for the City and County of Los Angeles Urban Forest Management Plans (UFMP), LA City Biodiversity Guidelines, and LA City Bureau of Engineering's Biodiversity Checklist. Building climate resilience undoubtedly requires a reexamination of urban ecosystems on every scale. It is in the best interest of *all* stakeholders that this initiative collects useful data and supports local efforts to mitigate extreme weather effects. Our grant initiative is therefore funded by Accelerating Resilience LA (ARLA), and in conjunction with the LA Urban Soil Collaborative, is partnered with a multitude of municipal and community based groups, including the US Natural Resource Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) and US Forestry Service (USFS), the city and county of LA Chief offices of Sustainability and Public Health, the Safe Clean Water Program (SCWP), LA Compost, and several South LA community leaders, including organizers from the Watts community garden. The coalition power of these groups demonstrates how the positionality and mission of organizations like TreePeople can facilitate critical

connections and conversations between government agencies and grassroots community action.

CONCLUSION

Green infrastructure (GI) solutions *desperately* need a wealth of grassroots support to affirm their validity to power holders and offer them as a better and more flexible response to future climate effects over expensive tech-based options that are inexorably tethered to fossil fuels. The urgency and price of inaction is much harder to illustrate to individuals and governmental bodies, without a solid demonstration of this approach's strength and viability. If a community understands how to protect and increase the health of their soil after participating in this initiative, there will be better opportunities to build even more power, rooted in local empowerment toward better health outcomes. We hope to leverage strong results to inspire other cities, counties, and state systems to adopt urban soil solutions across the US, and hopefully the globe. It is, after all, undeniable that Earth's hospitality to life is what's really at stake (Escobar 2020).

Invoking the "just growth" advocacy planning model may also be a useful tool, as it asserts that equity concerns are often left underserved in the vast non-profit industrial complex, and that "lifting them up sharply and crisply can require the sharp elbows of community organizing" (Benner & Pastor 2015). This idea echoes arguments that advocacy and collaboration cannot exist separately from one another, and that in fact, a "principled conflict" is the vital shared platform from which people from different spaces can come together to solve problems. TreePeople's lens (2021) anticipates that building legitimate climate resilience necessitates a strengthened feedback loop among residents, government, and other neighborhood institutions that can provide community members the tools to shape their neighborhoods both during crises and on an everyday basis. Indeed, every actor in planning and action has a genuine interest in a "shared regional destiny" (Benner & Pastor 2015) and can become an ambassador for change, with appropriate support.

Amid the grim acceleration of climate-based threats, both locally and globally, my experience working with TreePeople

shows me that hope is the collective muscle that can carry us all to a better world. As humanity embarks on this journey, I can't imagine a better ground up starting point than improving soil health and resilience; urban soil health is the linchpin to natural solutions. In some ways, we as researchers are only there to listen and facilitate the implementation of nature-based plans for socially vulnerable areas of LA. But we also crucially endeavor to advocate for bridging the gap between community leadership and future projects and policies that will make sure informed local choices and needs are reflected (TreePeople 2021). With TreePeople's continued support, residents in under resourced neighborhoods and beyond can collaborate and cultivate a stronger cultural bond to environmental action(s) that appreciates the benefits of tree and soil preservation over the limited offset gains available in a marginalized community.

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April D. Laird (She/Her) will complete a BA in Sociology, in Spring 2024. Her research and action interests include climate justice, labor rights, anti-racism, abolition, and sustainable urban planning, and her professional ambitions in advocacy coalesce around these topics. Her experience collaborating with CSF as an editor and team leader has been a true delight, enjoying participating in the peer review process and the exciting heterogeneity of student sociological work at CalStateLA. Currently, April assists part time as a community messaging and engagement intern and student employee alongside the policy and research team at TreePeople.org, for county scale climate resilience initiatives.