

Growing Community, Cultivating Space: The San Diego-Tijuana Urban Agriculture Movement

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Introduction

What does it mean to feel as if you belong somewhere? What social values are involved when people try to create a community or a sense of belonging in a certain space around certain activities? And how do people cohere into groups around something like, for instance, growing food? These fundamental questions have driven and inspired my work on urban agriculture in San Diego and Tijuana.

In my research, I explore these topics of space, community, and value and the relationships between them within the urban agriculture movement. My project inquires into the relationship between the urban agriculture movement, race and class, political economy, and the formation of place-based community since the 1970s in the United States and Mexico, particularly in San Diego and Tijuana. I make this inquiry to provide a holistic perspective on urban agriculture efforts, which is not only a leisurely activity for the affluent, but can also serve more politically radical and racially resilient endeavors with visions of autonomy and self-dependence. My project will focus on the question of how community practices of urban agriculture operate as a political reaction to economic inequality. More specifically, it will explore how resistance politics thereby affect the social and collective values of food producers in urban neighborhoods and their interaction and engagement with urban agriculture.

I pursue this work so as to develop the concept of “rooted communities”—where residents are knowledgeable, secure, and engaged in the issues and institutions that impact the quality of life in their community. This is especially important among groups that are often the most marginalized and silenced in our societies.



Raised beds with vegetables at Olivewood Gardens & Learning Center, National City



A small urban garden in Colonia Divina, Tijuana

Project Goals

In order to work toward to creation of rooted communities, my overall research objective is to understand the role politics, race and ethnicity, class, and place have in affecting the social and collective values of the communities of food producers involved in the urban agriculture movement in the San Diego-Tijuana metropolitan area. Concomitantly, I aim to also demonstrate the dialectic ways in which food producers' values shape the urban agriculture movement itself. The specific questions I will pursue in my investigation are:

- What do urban farmers, gardeners, and communities mean when they refer to sustainability, food (in)security, and creating “healthy places”?
- In what ways do race, ethnicity, political involvement, and class shape engagement with urban agriculture and food security experiences?
- What values and meaning do urban farmers and gardeners attribute to their agricultural sites, practices, and pursuits?

The theoretical aim underlying this project is to understand how place-based community practices of urban agriculture operate as a political reaction to neoliberal inequality, as well as how such politics structure the social and collective subjectivities of urban farmers and gardeners.

Project Framing

The San Diego-Tijuana metropolitan area presents a unique case in which to tackle my research questions for several reasons. As the fourth largest bi-national merging of cities with a population of over 5.3 million, and it being home to the busiest land-border crossing in the world with over 50 million crossing each year and around 300,000 per day, San Diego-Tijuana is a place where the border is both extremely permeable but also highly rigid. And although on one hand they can be treated as one bioregional entity, they also have very different agricultural engagements.

San Diego County is home to the greatest number of small farms in all of the United States (defined as less than 10 acres). San Diego leads the nation in avocado, ornamental tree, and shrub exports due to its various advantageous microclimates resulting from its topography and position on the coast. In contrast to San Diego, Tijuana does not have such an agricultural emphasis nowadays. Tijuana is emblematic instead of Mexico's current main economic sector: services in the form of manufacturing at *maquiladoras*. This cross-border arena is a significant one for anthropological study as it can further reveal the ways in which neoliberal capitalism has transformed economies, landscapes, and values.

Methodology

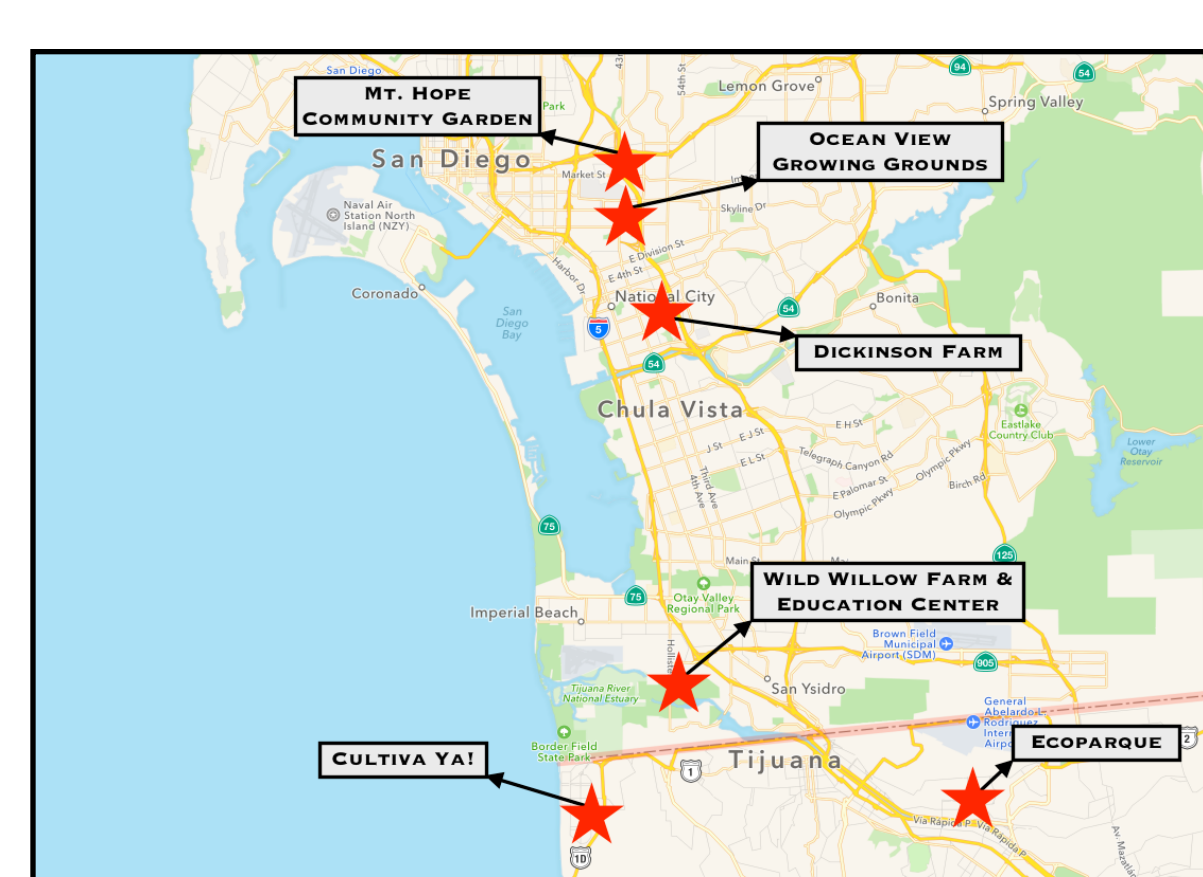
The 14-month period over which this project will occur will be divided into three phases:

- Phase 1: Participant observation, interviews, and initial surveys
- Phase 2: Archival research of primary and secondary sources
- Phase 3: Geospatial data analysis

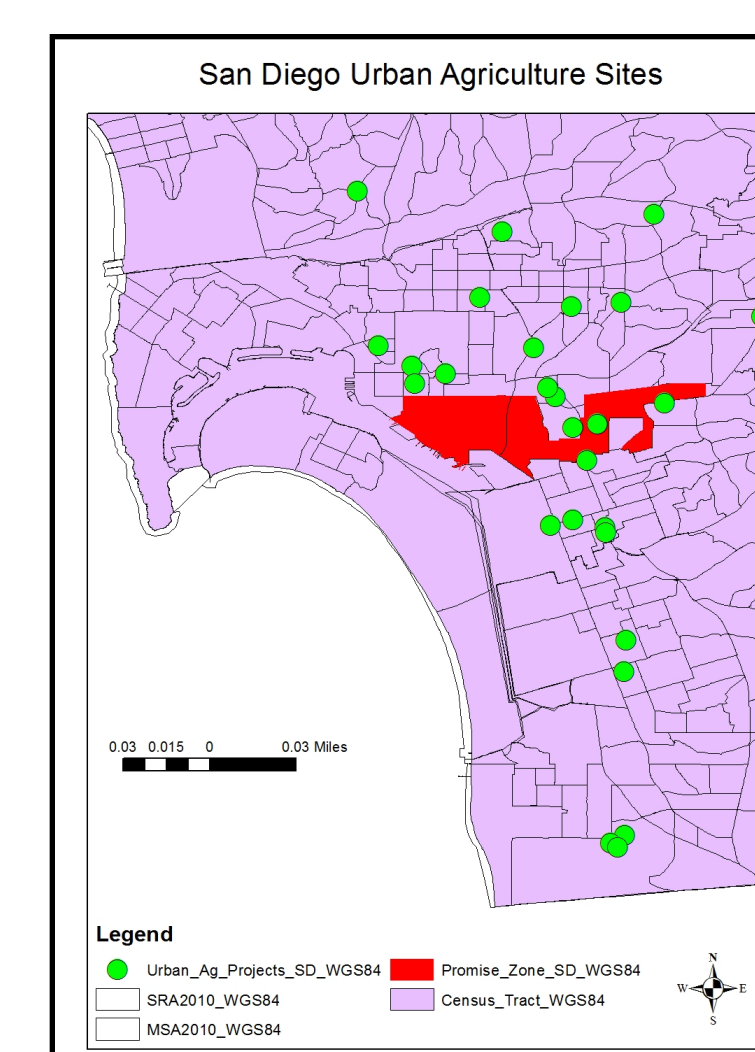
Ethnographic methods will help me to understand the lived experiences of those participating in the urban agriculture movement, including their values and relationship to space. I will participate in and observe work days at the urban agriculture sites during the entirety of the research protocol.

I will also conduct archival research of primary and secondary sources since the 1970s. For this part of the research, I will explore land grants, government policies, and newspapers surrounding issues of farmland, urban agriculture policy, and zoning based on racial and ethnic demographics at public libraries and governmental archives.

Geospatial data analysis using ArcGIS will allow me to overlay quantitative data with qualitative data collected through my research design. This will help visualize cultural and social values held by urban farmers and gardeners as mapped onto the physical environments of urban ag sites, their surrounding neighborhoods, and the larger San Diego-Tijuana region.



Six urban agriculture sites to be investigated in San Diego-Tijuana region



GIS map showing San Diego urban agriculture sites (green circles) and Federal Promise Zone (red)

Data Analysis

The research methods described were intentionally selected to enable analysis on multiple levels, including at the levels of the person and of the society, as well as analysis of historical changes and processes. They were also selected for their ability to represent and reflect the complexity and nuance in social configurations and values surrounding the urban agriculture movement. In order to analyze the collected data, I will use NVivo 11 (a qualitative data analysis software) to create codes to apply to transcripts, documents, audio recordings, photographs, and videos from fieldwork. I will also use ArcGIS to analyze spatial data. In-depth data analysis and the written dissertation will be initiated upon return from the field in October 2019.



Urban gardening class by Victory Gardens San Diego.



Rows of squash at the now-closed Suzie's Farm, Tijuana River Estuary

Broader Impacts

Although this research will build off of and expand current anthropological literature on food production, political economy, etc., it will also be part of creating strong linkages between the university and outlying communities. The university, as a site for the production of knowledge, has historically been separated and held above the public. I want to work against that kind of model, and instead have my work contribute to the creation of systems where residents can disseminate knowledge gained at urban agriculture sites to their own neighborhoods, thereby spreading critical knowledge throughout communities. In so doing, I hope to improve food and science literacy at a neighborhood scale in ways that engender proactive civic engagement and social learning for increased health and well being. This can be applied not only to the San Diego-Tijuana area, but also to other urban settings across the United States and beyond. Such engagement is especially necessary in disadvantaged neighborhoods, whose residents are often the most marginalized and silenced in our societies.

Literature

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