Ma'o Organic Farms: E hānai lāhui (Feeding the Nation)

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Abstract

Ma‘o Organic Farms is an organic farming co-op in Waianae, Hawai‘i. Its goals are myriad - to help in the greater establishment of food sovereignty in the state of Hawai‘i, and to cultivate young leaders in the Hawaiian community. Started in 2001, Ma‘o Organic Farms provides services for youth in the form of internships, employment and leadership training. There is a real need to archive the work being done by the youth in the political sphere of the organization (food sovereignty looms large in the greater Hawaiian nationalist movement), as well as provide support in the form of cultural resources. Libraries can step in, with the greater acknowledgement of the institutions that shape services to youth (particularly Native Hawaiian youth), and have a huge impact on the effectiveness and outcomes of the goals of organizations.

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I. Introduction

The history of Hawaiian people and the history of Hawai‘i’s land is intrinsically tied. One cannot discuss Native rights and issues without first exploring how the Hawaiian people interacted with the land, and how the impact of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism have all but severed the ties that the Hawaiian people had with the land, or ‘āina. The etymology of ‘āina is fascinating - the word itself means “land”, but to break it down further, “‘ai” means “to eat”. The ‘āina (land) is how the Hawaiian people not only understand their world and history, but also expect to sustain themselves. To separate the people from the land is not only fundamentally culturally destructive, but also serves to take away identity, political power and historical narratives.

It is this separation from the ‘āina that Ma‘o Organic Farms (located in Wai‘anae, O‘ahu) seeks to demolish. Its goals (apart from creating leaders amongst youth), is to attempt to establish greater food sovereignty in the state of Hawai‘i. That in itself is in overtly political statement, a step in the decolonization process. Besides being a working organic farm that provides produce to supermarkets and restaurants across the state, it also has a youth leadership and internship program where youth (mainly Native Hawaiian youth), not only learn about the agricultural industry, but gain valuable work experience and cultural knowledge. Youth are exposed to the idea of food sovereignty through the actual farming process, and by doing so, become involved in a greater political struggle that has taken place across the islands since the 19th century.

II. The Founding of Ma‘o Farms

The organization was started in 2001 by Gary Maunakea-Forth, a former farmer from New Zealand who attended the University of Hawai‘i and graduated with degrees in environmental science and political science. This intersection of disciplines was incredibly

important in the founding of Ma‘o Farms; in his interview with PBS Hawai‘i, Maunakea-Forth states, “… this was back in the early 90s; this was when people started to talk about sustainability and about the carrying capacity of Hawaii and whether very popular things like tourism, were really having a …an adverse impact on Hawaii” (PBS 2009). It was this interest in the “carrying capacity of Hawai‘i” and the influence of his wife (Kukui Maunakea-Forth) that led him to explore the political situation surrounding food production in Hawai‘i.

Kukui Maunakea-Forth, Gary’s wife and a co-founder of Ma‘o Farms, grew up in the area where Ma‘o Farms is now located. The story of the place is largely shaped by its agricultural history - as Hawaiian Business Journal writes, “…before Western contact, Waianae was a self-sufficient region that produced enough food for its people while sustainably managing its resources. Lualualei, the largest of Oahu’s Leeward coastal valleys, was one of the area’s six ahupuaa, land divisions from mauka to makai [mountains to the sea]” (Hawai‘i Business 2010). The area in which the farm is located is widely acknowledged to be productive, yet contemporary stigma of the place has shaped its narrative and identity. Nānākuli, the specific locale of the farm, has a particularly negative stigma. Josh Lurie writes, “The community has the largest native population, many of which have been marginalized to the arid part of the island over the years. Ma’o is committed to empowering young adults, 40% of which drop out from high school. Only 6% of community go to college” (Lurie 2011). Hawaii Business Journal puts it thusly: “When the rest of Oahu thinks of Waianae, sometimes all they consider is the poverty and homeless encampments along the beach” (Hawaii Business 2010). It is this narrative of poverty and hopelessness that Ma‘o Farms not only seeks to dismantle, but it is a narrative that is the antithesis of Kukui’s experience while growing up in Nānākuli. In her interview with PBS, she discusses the joyful upbringing she had on Hawaiian homestead land, and speaks highly of her connection with the land (‘āina). Kukui says, “ I think it starts with the ‘āina. I think that’s what sort of the forces that brought us together was that idea of appreciation. And Iknow Gary

hasn't sort of mentioned it yet, but he comes from a rural town where farming and growing food is a wonderful occupation. And I sort of had that similar experience of being very close to the food, and close to the land. As the family started to be less close knit, the same thing happened to communities, and especially in our schools" (PBS 3). Kukui acknowledges the intrinsic connection to the land as a part of the foundation of Ma'o Farms. She goes further to discuss the disconnect from the land and how, in severing that connection, creates a further disconnect from other cultural practices (language, family structure, knowledge transmission, etc.) This idea of a disconnect of culture as extremely destructive is not an unfamilar idea - that same idea is echoed in Fay Yokomizo Akindes' article "Sudden Rush: Na Mele Paleoleo (Hawaiian Rap) as Libertory Discourse". In it, Akindes writes "Silencing the Native Hawaiian language was one of the loudest violations of human rights by U.S. American colonizers in Hawai'i…the American colonizers understood the centrality and power of language for a people" (Akindes 82). Akindes' assertions are supported by Kukui, as she explains, "…a Hawaiian homestead community, and no Hawaiian language. And that was very hurtful. Having had that in my own family, and with my own grandma. And if she had been alive at the time, she would have been the first to be there, going, This is not pono, this is not … right. And so when the opportunity came to sort of question what had happened in the Hawaiian experience, we sort of came out and started to say, Hey, you know, we have to do something as community people" (PBS 3). Kukui's encounters with the "colonized mind" (as Akindes puts it) was one of the formative experiences behind Ma'o Farms.

Both Gary Maunakea-Forth and Kukui Maunakea-Forth (hereafter referred to by their first names, as to avoid confusion) realized that the greatest way to address these needs in the Hawaiian community (and specifically the Nānākuli/Wai'anae community) was to specifically address the needs of the youth of the community. Their goals became twofold: establish greater

food sovereignty in the community, and to do so in a way that perpetuates the Native Hawaiian culture. Gary explains how the merging of the two goals came to be:

> I think the first place it came down to was the fact that we weren't growing our own food. We definitely worried about the kids in our community,but I think because we saw all this land that was being wrongly used—Lualualei Naval Base, seven and a half thousand acres are still used by the military, and the base is really closed. And so we just kept asking ourselves, Why, why aren't we feeding ourselves? And then we dug a little bit deeper, and one of our friends who's a soil scientist, and it turns out that the soil in Lualualei Valley is one of the most unique and nutrient rich soils in the world. And we didn't know that, and kids in our community weren't taught that. They'd been taught that, you know, Makaha is a great beach, and we have beautiful oceans, and we should be proud of our water, and we should be proud of our culture and heritage. But the connection to the land had been severed. And still to this day, there's kids that come up to the farm who have never been up into the valleys (PBS 4).

They realized that the children of the community were being heavily underserved. The cultural needs of the youth were not being met, and that the youth seemed to be members of a "multigenerational system of poverty" (as Gary put it). So they met with leaders of the community and founded Ma'o Organic Farms. "Ma'o" is an acronym of "Mala 'Ai 'Opio", which translates to "youth garden". Their project started small - they realized that many youth in the community do not have the opportunity to take advanced placement classes to prepare them for college or the workforce, and so they began an internship program. In the formation of this first "class", Kukui explains, " I wanted it to be this great education program, and I wanted this element of culture and this element of vocational skills being taught, and this element of community work being done" (PBS 5). When speaking of the type of youth that the Maunakea-Forths wanted to serve with Ma'o's program, Gary explains, "… if you look deep at the statistics, you'll find that Waianae has twice the teen pregnancy rate, twice the substance abuse rate. All of these indicators are terrible, twice as bad as anywhere else. And so most of the kids that come have issues at home or in their own lives that they've got to deal with. On top of that, we're told in this society that if you go and get a college education, you can get ahead in life, you can get your American dream" (PBS 6). Here we see the recognition of a huge idea in youth

services - the notion that each individual is responsible for oneself and capable of achieving anything (neoliberalism). The Maunakea-Forths seek to dismantle this idea by acknowledging that the youth in this community are often disenfranchised to a point where achievement according to State standards is sub-par, as well as by empowering youth to enact social change themselves. While Soo Ah Kwon, in her book *Uncivil Youth*, writes that "I found problematic the uncritical promotion of these young people as social change leaders…youth of color activism is embedded in strategies to prevent potentially "at-risk" subjects from engaging in potentially risky behaviors…by allowing youth to participate in community programs" (Kwon 4), I argue that Maʻo Farms services not only is empowering to youth (particularly Native Hawaiian youth), it is a way for Native Hawaiian youth to counteract State influence by participating in what is essentially a political act.

III. Maʻo Farms, Food Sovereignty & The Politics of Agriculture in Hawaiʻi

In almost every article or interview that involves Maʻo Farms, the words "food sovereignty" are uttered. The Maunakea-Forths spoke of it as they were interviewed by PBS, and an article written in 2011 by Josh Lurie explores this in detail. While speaking with Maʻo Farms' director of social enterprise (Kamuela Enos), Enos puts it bluntly: "To grow food in Hawaii is a political act…to grow food in this community is even more of a political act" (Lurie 2011). The history of agriculture in Hawaiʻi is complicated, and incredibly influential on many political movements (particularly the Hawaiian sovereignty movement). The lack of food sovereignty that Hawaiʻi experiences is staggering, as well as culturally problematic. As Noelani Goodyear-Kaʻōpua writes (in her work *The Seeds We Planted)*, "Structures of settler colonialism have inflicted a fundamental violence on the relationship between Kānaka [people] and ʻāina; they have eroded our ability to feed ourselves from the land…from an Indigenous ʻŌiwi cultural perspective, being unable to feed yourself and your ʻohana [family] is not only dishonorable but…humiliating" (Goodyear-Kaʻōpua 134).

Indeed, it is this ability to feed oneself that Native Hawaiians thought of as the marker that identified you as having transitioned from youth to adult. In her seminal work *Nānā I Ke Kumu,* Hawaiian scholar Mary Kawena Pukuʻi explores Native Hawaiian belief systems, daily life, and interpersonal relationships in pre-contact Hawaiʻi. In it, she writes, “The first smooth batch of poi was part of Hawaiʻi’s belief that a child must make a perfect thing before going on to the next project” (Pukuʻi 52). Poi was a staple for the Hawaiian people, and so making a perfect batch that could feed their ʻohana was a signal that they were ready for more “adult” tasks, and ready to transition into the world of adults. Feeding oneself and one’s family from food produced outside of more mainstream farms is a political act, and one that many Hawaiian scholars argue is essential to the restoration of Indigenous power. Leʻa Malie Kanehe, in her work “Kūʻē Mana Māhele”, explains that “The food sovereignty movement, like other movements for self-determination, restores Kanaka [Hawaiian people] to our appropriate role as servants to the ʻāina and restores ea [sovereignty] to the ʻāina” (Kanehe 350). Kamuela Enos, also interviewed in this work, talks about the role that “biocolonialism” (the use of Hawaiian agricultural lands as planting ground for experimental crops and cash crops) has played in the embedding and perpetuation of colonial power in Hawaiʻi. To resist this practice - that is, to grow food produced by oneʻs own hands, is to exert individual political power over one’s existence. It is a political practice (thinly) disguised as agricultural practice.

Welcoming youth into the political realm via food production is one such way that Maʻo Farms is providing progressive and proactive youth services. As many scholars have noted, there is a stigma of apathy when it comes to youth and politics. However, this participation in the growing of food is a signal that Native Hawaiian youth are not apathetic when it comes to politics, particularly the idea of food sovereignty (and perhaps sovereignty in general).

In Jessica Taft’s article “The Political Lives of Girls”, she offers an image of girls a depoliticized or “othered” - however, she seeks to resist that image by offering ways in which

girls can reclaim political power and be welcomed in political spaces. Taft writes, "…women have often been tasked with the role of maintaining and representing tradition in new cultural contexts" (Taft 260). While this maintenance of cultural traditions holds true in the context of Maʻo Farms, it is also expected of the young men in the program. Furthermore, Taft argues that political spaces are not made safe for girls, and girls are made to feel uncomfortable in these spaces. By offering the opportunity for young men and women to work at Maʻo Farms, all genders are given the opportunity to participate equally in this specific political space. Cheryse Sana, a graduate of the internship program and current farm manager at Maʻo Farms. Speaking to Hawaii Business Magazine, she says, "I learned that it wasn't only about farming, but it was a mix of organic farming and the Hawaiian culture" (Hawaii Business 2010). Sana represented Hawaiʻi at the World Slow Food Conference in 2010, another example of youth participating in political acts that have a wider impact.

IV. Execution of Maʻo Farms' Goals

At present, Maʻo Farms seeks to attain their goals of youth empowerment and food sovereignty by providing internships and "leadership" opportunities for youth ages 16 - 24. The interns, high school students and recent high school graduates, work on the farm and receive a stipend that goes towards college credits from the nearby community college. The interns who are attending college all participate in the food production and agricultural studies program at school, and must maintain a certain GPA in order to continue with the program at Maʻo Farms. Speaking of this program's impact, Gary Maunakea-Forth explains that the farm managers they now employ are former participants of their program and explains, "They can do more than just work on a farm. They can run a whole operation, from the sales and marketing side all the way to the fundamentals of land prep and clearing" (Hawaii Business 2010).

The program itself is largely adult-led, but with opportunity for youth to become involved in leadership roles. Many former interns become employees of the farm, and the farm has a

“Leadership” program that allows interns to welcome and aid incoming youth during a summer program. The summer program allows youth to be introduced to Maʻo Farms before they graduate from high school, and gives opportunity for those youth who are already entrenched in the internship to guide the program. The leadership, in this sense, does seem to be give and take. While initially the youth program is adult led, as they progress in the program they are given time to demonstrate leadership. It seems that this system is effective - many employees of the farm are also former participants of the youth internship program.

The fact that the program provides services to students (as well as living spaces) means that there is ample opportunity for a library or information professional to become involved with Maʻo Farms. Examining the program and its desired goals illustrates many areas in which libraries can step in and aid in the manifestation of these goals - from archiving, to information literacy sessions, to supporting the Hawaiian cultural instruction, it is clear that a partnership with a library would be extremely beneficial to the program.

V. Libraries: How Information Literacy & Farming Can Co-Exist

Because the goals of Maʻo Farms aren’t just agricultural, libraries have a huge opportunity to participate in the furthering of Maʻo’s mission. On their website, Maʻo Farms states, “Our commitment to gather, engage and empower youth, families and community in place is of utmost importance to our success, so- we will ensure that our work reflects and manifest our values and guiding principles to mālama kuleana [take care of our responsibilities]- our responsibility to care for our beloved ʻāina and our beloved people” (Maʻo Farms 2016). Their commitment to not only to agricultural success, but community building and youth engagement as well, aligns with goals of progressive librarianship as well. The path to self-determination for Native Hawaiians at Maʻo Farms begins with food sovereignty, but does not have to end there. Self-determination and information literacy can go hand in hand.

Ma‘o Farms has an investment in the perpetuation of the Hawaiian culture. Kukui & Gary Maunakea-Forth express that over and over again, and the impact strategy of Ma‘o Farms outlines “Hawaiian culture” as one of the “five critical areas of need” that they seek to address (Ma‘o Farms 2016). Libraries could provide a huge support in this area - by creating programming not only at the farm itself, but at Leeward Community College (where all the interns attend). The community college libraries could have cultural practitioners (not just farmers) speak at the farm and the school about Hawaiian agricultural practice, Hawaiian belief systems and how it connects to the natural world, or how changes in the agricultural landscape influenced Hawai‘i’s history. By providing these varied perspectives, libraries could aid youth in making connections to Hawaiian cultural practice, and apply what they have learned in a modern context to a reclamation of traditional culture.

A vital area that libraries could aid and partner in is the utilization and perpetuation of Hawaiian language, both on the farm and in every day life for the youth at Ma‘o Farms. A collection of Hawaiian language materials, as well as an organization of a Hawaiian language instruction program would be an excellent way for a librarian to demonstrate the abilities of a library to advocate not only for literacy, but for cultural literacy.

Arguably, “cultural literacy” is largely the main goal of Ma‘o Farms, but at this point in time, many markers of cultural revitalization are not actively being addressed. There is no mention of the use of Hawaiian language in the mission (although Hawaiian phrases and vocabulary are peppered throughout). The student interns are expected to be in the Agriculture track at the community college, yet there is no mention of participating in a Hawaiian studies or language program. This cultural need must be formally addressed. As stated earlier, severing the connection from the ‘āina was one way that the colonizer sought to demoralize the Hawaiian people. The other huge way was the dismantling of the Hawaiian language as the every day tool of communication. No‘eau Warner, a scholar of Hawaiian language, writes in the book *A Nation*

Rising: "One by one, the markers of Hawaiian identity as a people have been stripped away, starting with the land, sovereignty, language, literacies (knowledge), histories and connection to our ancestry" (Warner, as quoted in Oliviera 78). Warner outlines multiple cultural shortcomings that can be immediately addressed by libraries. Ma'o Farms is already addressing the severance to the land - now libraries can step in and address the rest.

The fact that the youth also reside on the farm makes library programming at Ma'o Farms logistically much easier. A collection of Hawaiian language materials in a shared learning space would ensure that access to the materials is easy. Instruction time in Hawaiian language could also be done on-site, and facilitated by a librarian. The librarian who has created an effective Hawaiian language materials collection would have some knowledge of the curriculum used by the language instructor, and would support that instruction as much as possible with the materials. Hawaiian language materials could include Hawaiian newspaper databases (access provided through the devices the librarian provides, as outlined below), books of Hawaiian history and Hawaiian language learning resources.

Another area of collection development would be the selection of materials that deal with "place-based" information. Context about various place on the island, along with historical narratives of the place could easily inform future work at Ma'o Farms. Having these types of resources (indexes to traditional place names, reference books about places on the island, etc.) could be helpful to students who are interested in learning about agricultural histories of other sites, indigenous resource management methods and historical narratives of place.

Other cultural needs that could be met by the librarian are access to histories and a connection to ancestry. Both of these could be addressed by information literacy sessions conducted onsite, in which the librarian explores (with the youth) how to find genealogical resources online, and how to conduct Hawaiian historical research. Access to Hawaiian genealogical resources can often be mystifying for many patrons, regardless of age - there are

luckily databases available (free of charge) that provide some information. The problem with these resources is that people largely do not know they exist; therefore, sessions devoted entirely to these resources would be incredibly helpful. As we know from the Agosto article, youth often have a very negative idea of libraries. Many would prefer to get information from their friends or family. This is nothing new - in Pukuʻi's exploration of pre-contact Hawaiian childhood, she makes it clear that the Hawaiian youth is incredibly reliant on peer to peer learning (Pukuʻi 60). By taking the "library" as a physical space out of the equation, the information is being presented to them in a space in which they feel comfortable. The librarian is then able to make a better impression and engage the students in a deeper way. The hope here is that students will then take this knowledge back into their own communities, and instruct others. It introduces a new resource, and rekindles a connection with histories and ancestry.

Access to these databases may be provided through a technology plan that the librarian creates and facilitates. Maʻo farms, as stated earlier, relies on grants for funding their farm and outreach operations. The opportunities available for grants providing services to Hawaiian youth are fairly plentiful in the state - organizations such as Office of Hawaiian Affairs, Kamehameha Schools and Hawaiʻi Community Foundation all have grants available that are concerned with issues of diversity, literacy and the perpetuation of Hawaiian culture. A grant could be written with the goal of attaining devices with internet access. If the institution is able to provide convenient and consistent internet access with devices the librarian provides through the farm, it will make instruction easier and open up opportunities for the students to have self-directed study and research.

At present, there is not much information about the impact that Maʻo Farms has made on individual youth. The farm's website does have a section titled "Our Impact", but it has no content (but contains the message "coming soon!"). While the webpage is very well organized and does have a lot of information, this is another role that a librarian could fill. Archiving and

taking oral history of the workings of Maʻo Farms would not only help the organization see the impact that they have indeed had on the youth they seek to serve, it would aid the public in recognizing the importance of the farms' goals. Archiving individuals' experiences at the farms could create a fascinating narrative of political activism, cultural reclamation and individual empowerment. Having this resource would aid Maʻo Farms in assessing their services and aid in grant writing, which Maʻo Farms currently relies on. Giving a voice to the youth in the program would also be in line with Maʻo Farms' more political goals - for too long Hawaiian voices have been neglected, and often narratives of Hawaiian people are not written by Hawaiian people. Hawaiian youth must often rely on narratives created by non-Native writers in order to learn about their histories.

The librarian (or information professional) who undertakes such a partnership must be aware of the institutions that shape services to Hawaiian youth. It is widely acknowledged that libraries exist as a colonial construct (particularly in the case of Hawaiian culture, as it is an oral tradition), but thoughtful library practice existing outside the boundaries of a "library" can only be beneficial to the participants. With special attention to the goals of "cultural literacy", a really effective library program at Maʻo Farms would do more than just increase literacy and aid student achievement. It would be a political act in and of itself - by aiding Native Hawaiian students in the reconnection to language, history and ancestry, it is a key step in the process of decolonization that Maʻo Farms lays the foundation for in their work with the ʻāina.

VI. Conclusion

While Maʻo Farms does provide services that seek to empower youth and revitalize culture, there are a few attitudes that Maʻo Farms participates in that must be explored critically. In their mission they state, " [We recognize that] our land and youth as our most important assets and to catalyze educational and entrepreneurial opportunities around these

assets…" (Ma'o Farms 2016). The language here is a bit problematic, and reflective of Kwon's misgivings when exploring youth of color activism. The identifying of youth as "assets" is evocative of Kwon's exploration of the idea that the State desires youth to be "productive" in order for the betterment of the State. While Ma'o Farms asserts that their work is being done outside the State's influence, they are still actively participating in the State system. They do sell their produce at farmer's markets and to restaurants, so the farm is not entirely free of the influence of capitalism.

While this attitude is problematic, it can be addressed and changed. The librarian who partners with the farm could dismantle this attitude of "youth as assets" by educating the organization about influences on services for youth. Ideally, the librarian could become an equal partner in the organization, and contribute to the planning process. By contributing to the planning process, the organization (with the librarian's help), could re-examine that attitude and adjust it to fit the goals of the farm. The farm seeks to revitalize Hawaiian culture through a greater connection to the land. A library could build on this very strong foundation of cultural reclamation, and take it even further.

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