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QUEER MAHI 'AI CULTIVATE PU'UHŌNUA'S IN A HETERONORMATIVE LANDSCAPE¹

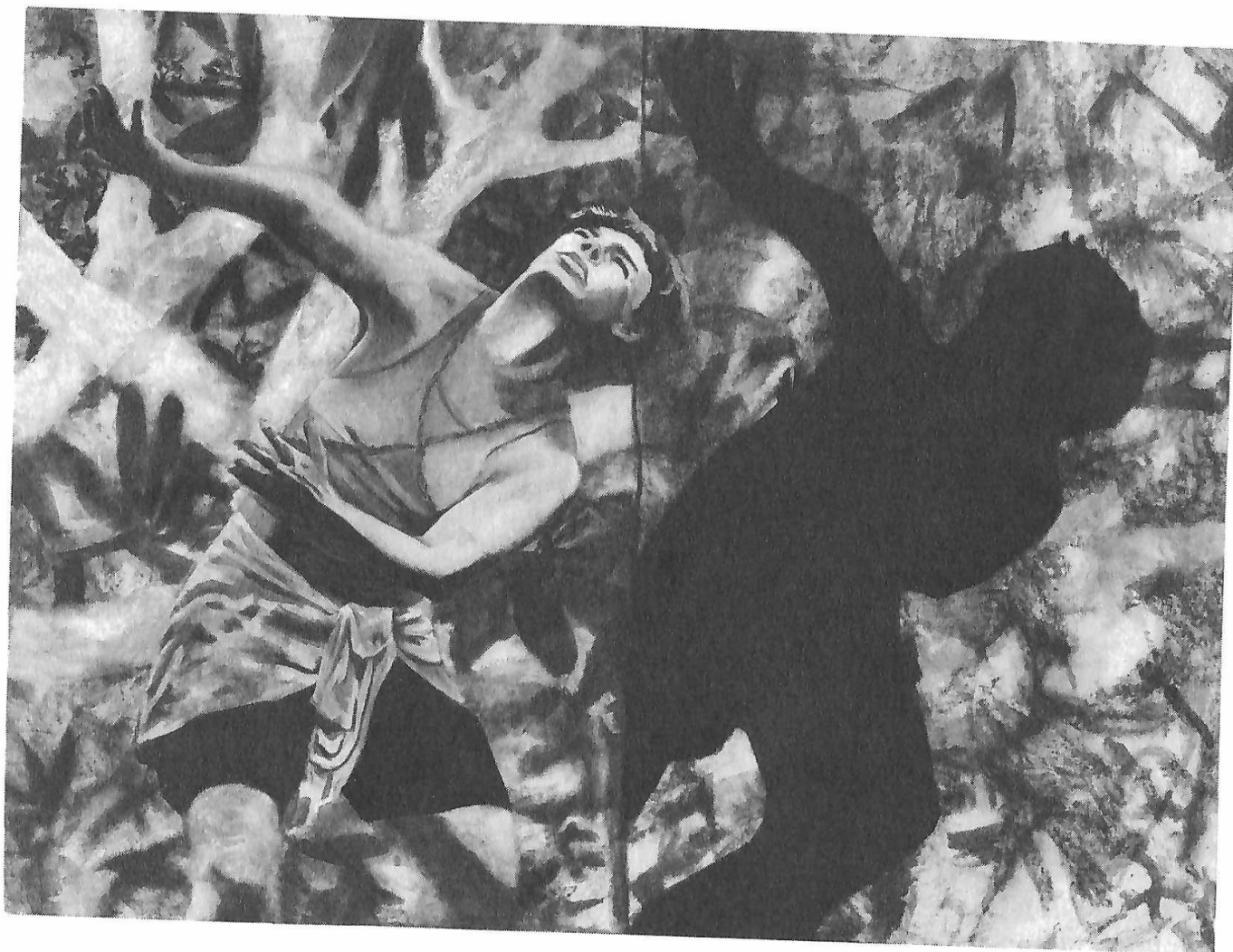
Queer mahi 'ai (farmers) growing their identity in an assertively heteronormative world have few outlets for expression. Birth families are not often accepting of a queer identity. School and professional settings can be even worse. Where is there to turn? 'Āina (land; farm).

'Āina is often defined as an entity that nourishes Kānaka 'Ōiwi (Indigenous Hawaiians) physically through its bounty. Indeed, queer mahi 'ai produce thousands of pounds of food for the community every year. However, 'āina nourishes the spirit too. In the 'āina, queer mahi 'ai can find a reflection of themselves, a diversity-embracing entity rid of conformity which is also recovering from the scars of colonization and dispossession. Therefore, when mahi 'ai tend to 'āina, there is reciprocal restoration occurring. While farming 'āina, mahi 'ai can connect to akua (gods) and kūpuna (elders). They can receive guidance from revered figures from past generations, who expressed a wide range of intimacies rooted in 'āina, of which the term queer can capture a small part of.² Therefore, queer mahi 'ai of today continue to lead and perpetuate Kānaka 'Ōiwi (referred to as kānaka hereafter), intimacies rooted in 'āina.

For queer mahi 'ai, the family they choose includes 'āina and the 'āina's kin, both the

more-than-human world of cultivated crops and animals along with the other farmers and community members who shape and share 'āina. In hāloa, they find an accepting brother that will ensure their health.³ They feel a warmth and embrace from the lepo (mud) of the lo 'i (taro patch) around their legs, and, in the deepest of lo 'i, waists as well. The many kānaka that come to volunteer and work in these spaces are kin that embrace and welcome a multitude of identities. On farms mahi 'ai and kānaka learn various forms of intimacy—such as touch or embrace—and relationship building—such as brotherhood, sisterhood, and friendship. The formation of these intimacies ties them to that space through time, creating a responsibility to continue to mālama (care for) each other.

Mahi 'ai can embody masculine and feminine traits while farming. The full range of traits can blend on 'āina and break through the binary. When it comes to farming, a whole slew of never-ending tasks must be completed: weeding, soil prepping, planting, harvesting, and, in the context of several forms of kānaka agriculture, moving large pōhaku (stones). A heavy pōhaku that needs to be moved does not necessarily care about your sexual or gender identity. The pōhaku, along with the lepo, wai



Nanea Lum *Loli i ka 'ūmalu*

This artwork started with a land-based process—documenting the shadow of a tree which I observed over the course of a year. The shadow cast by a *Plumeria* tree was a place I brought my canvas in the daytime to capture its gesture. By bringing myself to this tree, the form and magnetism of the shadow created a deep connection to time and formlessness. During these long months of

documentation of this tree, I began a collective project with Kanaka artist Kalikopuanoheaokalani Aiu. As a transgender performance artist, Kaliko's body is the concept of change that I observed in the dynamic variation of shape and space inside of shadows. This work focuses on the body as an ideological site of 'āina; a place where interconnected parts compose expressions seen and felt all at once.

(water), *mea kanu* (crops), and other more-than-human kin are just happy to be in relation. Moreover, human kin are more concerned with your willingness to contribute and complete a task than your identity. In this way, 'āina becomes a neutral space where binary roles are put aside.

The growth cycles of *mea kanu* mimic the life stages and experiences of queer *mahi 'ai*. The connection between the two can commemorate a momentous or joyous moment; help heal grief, loss, or pain; or create guidance and calm during new circumstances. For example, a mother can plant the 'iwe (placenta) of

their newborn child under an 'ulu (breadfruit) tree. They will then tend to the 'ulu tree and child so they may grow big and strong together. Planting can also coincide with the loss of or inability to have a child.

Cultivating a long-lasting crop can nurture you through life by providing food, shade, and comfort into your elderly years. Transgender k̄anaka undertaking gender affirmation can take comfort in seeing a landscape under transition due to their cultivation practices, with mea kanu displaying all forms of their stages from a planted cutting to flowering to bearing fruit.

The 'āina shaped and tended by queer mahi 'ai are pu 'uhōnua (refuge) for other queer folks traversing a heteronormative world. This queer pu'uhōnua is like how a loko i 'a (fishpond; Hawaiian aquaculture) takes in pua (young fish) and raises them in a nurturing, nutrient-rich environment where they thrive and become momona (fat). Queer kids and adults are drawn to and seek out 'āina spaces cultivated by queer mahi 'ai. The mahi 'ai sets the terms of their 'āina. This is simply more than the physical space, but the warmth and friendliness of it as well, which allows all queer folks to truly express themselves, grow in their identity, learn farming and cultural practices, and be ready to take on the outside world.

As we make adjustments to our current food system in the era of COVID-19 and social justice reckonings, we must emphasize a more equitable and inclusive system that recognizes the incredible role queer mahi 'ai play in feeding the community while raising a new generation of queer leaders. Queer mahi 'ai are leaders on 'āina and should be included on state and federal level agricultural boards and committees. From these positions, they can craft policies and rules to help fellow

queer mahi 'ai based on their own experiences. For example, more grant programs should support Indigenous crop cultivation since this would support the queer mahi 'ai that primarily reside in this space, while also feeding Indigenous community members and promoting the tremendous social benefits outlined in this piece. Moreover, all queer people should feel accepted in farming spaces, no matter the identity of the farmer. This will require non-queer mahi 'ai to rethink and reset the terms of their farm, how they assign roles, and the ways in which they name, refer, and relate to people, crops, and land. ○

1. This written text was inspired by wonderful topical conversations with Brooke Leilani Hutchins, Liesel Santimer, Amber Arthur, and Kaile Luga, along with my personal reflections as a queer k̄anaka in the 'āina space.
2. Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio, *Remembering Our Intimacies: Mo 'olelo, Aloha 'Āina, and Ea* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).
3. Hāloa, short for Hāloanakalaukapalili, was the stillborn child of Ho'ohōkūkalanani and Wākea (Sky Father), who was planted into the earth and grew into the first kalo (taro). Ho'ohōkūkalanani and Wākea had another child after Hāloa. That child was the first k̄anaka. Therefore, genealogically, kalo is considered an older brother to all Kanaka Maoli.