EXPLORING EDUCATION

AT A HAWAIIAN-FOCUSED CHARTER SCHOOL,

A FOOD SOVEREIGNTY MOVEMENT, AND

THE AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY

A Visual Vignette by Mascha Gugganig, 2019
During a brief visit to Kaua‘i in 2010, I passed by a straight row of cornfields that stood in contrast to the majestic Waimea Canyon. Hawai‘i, I learned, had become a central place for researching & developing genetically engineered and hybrid seeds.

I wondered: how did this new form of land use relate to Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) ways of caring for the land, to mālama ʻāina? Who advocated for this agriculture, based on what kind of knowledge? Who opposed it, and why?
At Hawaiian-focused charter schools, education is intrinsic to ‘āina (land), aloha (love, affection) and ‘ohana (family). Education can be translated as aʻo, where teaching and learning are inherent to each other.

At Kanuikapono charter school, while teaching high school students visual and research methods (2012/13), I not only relearned education. Implementing it is no easy task, as these schools develop Indigenous education models on the go.

The high school students learned how to plant trees, but also to straddle the values of ‘āina, aloha and ‘ohana with algebra or language skills. This was an emergent form of education, or learnscapes that often went beyond school walls and were not easily standardized.
I started to wonder what it means to be ‘educated’ on the land, particularly in light of a growing awareness of the agricultural biotechnology industry through County Bill 2491. The bill mandated disclosure of used pesticides, 500 feet buffer zones around fields applied with restricted-use pesticides, and a temporary moratorium on genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

I would say our time of being makapo, of being blind is over and my plea to you is to educate yourself, so that you can make informed decisions based on the health and well-being of your ‘ohana.


Among GMO opponents, ‘education‘ meant a **democratic right and responsibility**, as well as a **sovereign right and responsibility** for Kānaka Maoli (and others) to malama ‘āina.
For proponents of agricultural biotechnology, education had yet another meaning. Educating the public meant diminishing skepticism by providing scientific information:

In our experience, the biotech community, from scientists to farmers, can do more to educate consumers and ease scepticism. [...] Like any technology—whether synthetic fertilizers in farming or penicillin in medicine—it can take time for the general public to catch up with science.

Oregon farmer, brochure of Hawai‘i Crop Improvement Association et al.

‘Education’ here meant a corrective effort of public misconceptions of biotechnology where society is guided by scientific facts.
Upon my first discovery of the possibility of harmful effects of GMO on the ‘āina, my heart hurt and my nā‘au told me that this was not right.

Bill 2491 testimony; K. H. Cabebe, County of Kauai 2013.

The nā‘au is the gut; affection; the heart, the mind; temper and feelings. This way of knowing does not stand opposite to reasoning with the mind, but is compatible. References to testimonies were therefore often (wrongly) dismissed as ‘emotional’ and ‘irrational.’

‘Having an education,’ calling on others to ‘get educated’ or ‘educating the public,’ does not always mean the same thing. It demands being sensitive to these different ways of knowing.