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Cultivating Culture: Youth Food Movement in the Taos Pueblo Native American Community

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Cultivating Culture: Youth Food Movement in the Taos Pueblo Native American Community

Abstract

A large number of studies have emerged in recent years regarding the social effects of local food systems. They have been shown to bolster local economies, increase general health, and even decrease crime rates. This study analyzes the effect of local food systems in the Taos Pueblo community, and how and why they create positive farming ideologies. A proposed covert effect may correlate to developments of positive ideologies towards native heritage, which would imply that local food systems can help to preserve indigenous language and culture. To study these trends I moved to Taos, New Mexico with my research partner, where we immersed ourselves in a Tiwa Pueblo youth food movement. Throughout three months of intensive fieldwork, we gathered interview data and engaged with participant observation in the community in order to elicit localized perceptions of native culture and local food cultivation. We interviewed sixteen community members and accumulated over twenty hours of interview data. Combining the interview data with my participant observation experiences, I found mutually reciprocal relationships between positive community ethics of food cultivation and positive ethics of native identity and heritage, while also gaining insight into the primary manners in which the Pueblo youth create their traditional farming ideologies, and why. This study is arranged here in a narrative literary style meant to appeal to a broad audience, without losing its academic rigor. Ideally, the findings will shed light on yet another social effect of local food systems, which could be capitalized upon when dealing with future development issues. This study could also encourage more quantitative data gathering at Taos Pueblo.

Keywords

Culture, farming, indigenous, youth, anthropology

Cultivating Culture: Youth Food Movement in the Taos Pueblo Native American Community

Jordan C. Thomas

“All right, let me get up on my soapbox.”

Elliot said this with a half grin. The unsmiling half of his mouth seemed to imply a kernel of strained truth. He had taken a seat at the table across from my partner. I sat across from Elliot’s wife, Jamie. For my partner and me, this was our first couples date. This was also the most important interview that we had been able to arrange with our Native American friends.

The room was dim, lit partially by candles. A small window was black and slick from the cold night rain washing over the adobe house. A Chihuahua named Snowball tiptoed between our feet. Snowball never ran away. There were rez dogs out there, and bigger things in the mountains.

We filled our bowls with wild mushroom pasta. Elliot and Jamie had picked the mushrooms in the forest. They hoped to sell some at next week’s market. Silverware tinkled to the sound of our voices and the beats of an alternative rock Pandora station that played from the kitchen.

During a lull in conversation, I cleared my throat and asked Elliot to tell us about his work in agriculture here on the Pueblo. The flow of our date hardened and froze into an interview. I respect Elliot, so I had been nervous and perhaps even felt a spark of self-loathing when I bridged the gap between researcher and friend. He is calm and measured. His expression changes, but his dark eyes maintain a stasis of control. Elliot grudgingly stood on his soapbox. We all took a sip of our margaritas. Jamie, my partner and I listened.

“I think it’s got to go way back to when my dad had a garden out on some land we had right next to the Pueblo. It was just like five blocks from the village.” Elliot was not looking at us. His eyes had grown distant, drawn to fields surrounding the adobe Native American buildings nestled against mountains just north of Taos, New Mexico. Though we were currently sitting in Elliot’s home, his mind was drawn to the past. “We’d go out there because he’d be irrigating, and we’d be eating and barbecuing and playing in the water. At the end, we had all this badass food.”

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Elliot pushed his shovel into the black earth of David's field and was rewarded by the scrape of metal on stone. He flicked the stone deftly towards the driveway, stepped forward, and shoveled again. A flow of clear mountain water followed him, advancing almost sentiently into the opening furrow. I attempted to follow suit, sticking my own shovel into the earth. David cried out in alarm and hopped toward me with his arms waving, careful to step only on the ridges of the moistening furrows.

"That's a corn sprout, dude!" He knelt and cradled the plant in his palms, inspecting the bruises I had inflicted upon it. He carefully placed its roots back into the ground, patting the soil gently. David looked at me and chuckled, a disarming, bubbly sound that softened his normally ponderous demeanor.

We stood on Native American land at the base of alpine foothills in the southern Rockies. Móxwóluna Mountain towered over the surrounding landscape, contrasting the desert with thundering waterfalls, thick pine forests, and groves of aspen. To the west, the desert was a measureless expanse of sagebrush cut by the Rio Grande coiling deep in its gorge. Lonely mountains and flat mesas stood witness to millennia in this space.

I had been invited to an irrigation party; an invite that David may have been regretting in the moment I butchered his baby corn. David lived just up the road from Elliot, and together they made quite the pair. David was tall and lithe, with a narrow spectacled face that harbored a brain sharp in both music and mathematics. Like Elliot he had a long ponytail that complimented Asiatic features. Elliot was short, muscular, and a natural leader.

This was David's first time irrigating his field. For hours, he had crawled under the sun and moon along a trough that cut through the rolling foothills toward the mountains. He moved stones, uprooted sagebrush, and carefully leveled thickets of prickly cholla and yucca. The trough had fallen into disrepair from disuse throughout the past five hundred years.

By 10:30 the prior evening David had connected this trough, his family's irrigation ditch, to the larger irrigation channel. The trough had come alive in the moonlight as the serpentine water slithered toward his freshly planted field. In the following day's light I stood next to him as he moved the final rock that could be used to control the flow of water onto his land. The water behind the rock redirected and began pouring over the lip of a terrace, flowing down a slightly smaller channel that ran parallel to his field. In the field, furrows intersected with the channel of water. Pressed into the bottom of each furrow were kernels of corn. We moved small rocks and clumps of dirt, plugged prairie dog holes, and were able to redirect the water yet again, smoothing the course so that soon each of the hundreds of furrows began to glisten wetly under the desert sun as the corn awakened.

David, Elliot and I were the lone field guides for the new trickle of water, but close to a dozen others were gathered for the celebration outside David's adobe house. Laughter and conversation wafted down the slight hill along with the smell of barbecued chorizo and the promise of tamales. David's brother was visiting from Albuquerque with his wife, and they were

locked in combat around a patio foosball table against David's girlfriend and her younger brother. My partner and Jamie chatted with several other couples in attendance.

The revival of David's farm was a continuing party, and each person had played a part. The week prior, the women had organized a girls' night weeding party. They had mixed mojitos with fresh mint from their kitchen gardens, and had picked David's field clean of bindweed in what had proven to be a great social affair. Now, the combination of sweat, friends, family, and food filled the late afternoon with a communal glow as everyone viewed the fruition of their work.

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Rain continued to wash over Elliot's home. In the dark, the rain seemed almost normal. In the light, the rain had personality. Storms could be seen marching across the mesa like gods. Wild. Graceful. Benevolent.

I was listening to Elliot. I wanted to record him. I felt like a horrible anthropologist. Why hadn't I asked to record the interview before we started? I knew why. To do so would have been a social transgression. Conversations were supposed to flow seamlessly - like life. They shouldn't be secularized or fragmented. Elliot and Jamie knew we wanted to learn about their farming, but to record them would have made us something other than friends. If we weren't friends, why the hell were we at their table?

Elliot was speaking. We listened. He was telling us why he produces food.

"That's what my ancestors did for thousands of years. We have this land, and it would be a waste if I didn't utilize my ancestor's gift of a green thumb to grow food and help other people grow it."

He did not leave space for questions.

"My work in agriculture is attributed to my hardwired DNA, dude."

--

I saw two Pueblo men sword fighting with shovels. The image was conjured in my mind's eye by Ben, a spiritual leader in the Taos Pueblo, as he told the story amidst the group's roaring laughter.

"He ran over with his shovel and was like '*ching, ching, ching*'."

"Like a lightsaber!"

"Yes, like a lightsaber!"

Ben was a short man, with gray hair, a strong build, and a dark face lined with the wrinkles of a lifetime of joking under the sun. Ben spoke in heavily accented English, puppeteering our laughter as he wildly relived a neighborhood irrigation feud from his childhood.

The irrigation water runs through channels called *acequias*, which are regulated by the Pueblo community. *Acequias* are like man-made earthen arteries that catch mountain runoff, splitting into veins that cross through each family's land before splitting further into capillaries that fill the many furrows of each individual field.

The land is slightly terraced, so families high on the slopes have first access to the water. If the rules are not followed, families at lower elevations will receive only a trickle.

Ben punctuated the end of his story with an exclamation and pantomimed a punch. When he was a child, someone from a lower area discovered someone above using water outside of their allotted time. They clashed with shovels, but bloodshed was spared when a passerby sprinted into the quarrel and punched one of the combatants unconscious.

Elliot lives downhill from David. He joked that they might have to fight, sparking another bout of laughter. Beneath the joking lay a depth of mutual understanding that exists among an agricultural people in a desert climate. Water provides life. The tradition of irrigation spans centuries in Taos, and millennia in the Southwest.

Most archeological theories contend that lack of water is what drove northern Puebloan people to abandon their settlements in present day Colorado and to settle along the Rio Grande. Their ancestors, the Anasazi, settled the Southwest some ten thousand years before Christ, and began growing corn more than four thousand years ago. They eventually built cities in the vertical faces of table-like plateaus, farming the tops of the plateaus and catching the runoff water in great bins for storage.¹

These methods sufficed until a fifty year drought starved their crops and decimated their cities close to AD 1250.² A stream of refugees poured south in search of more hospitable climate and sources of water. They settled along the Rio Grande.

Taos is the northernmost Pueblo. It is believed to have been originally settled one thousand years ago and rebuilt into the modern adobe city seen today by seven hundred years ago, when refugees of drought and social upheaval brought their architectural knowledge from other settlements³. Taos Pueblo has been continuously occupied since it was built⁴. The subterranean ceremonial chambers are the same kivas in which their ancestors passed on song, dance, and sacred knowledge. Water flows over seeds which are the descendants of crops once held in the hands of their ancestors.

When I asked David how old his irrigation ditch was, he laughed.

“Like, older than this country old.”

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I did it. I pulled out my recorder, placed it on the table, and asked Elliot if he would mind if I record him because I want to remember his words.

Elliot’s face does not change much with his emotions, but I could feel a tense energy form underneath his tight skin. He looked at the recorder with narrow eyes. Alternative rock music added to the silence.

¹ Mark A. Stiger, “Mesa Verde Subsistence Patterns from Basketmaker to Pueblo III,” *Kiva* 44, no. 2–3 (1979): 134–136, doi: 10.1080/00231940.1979.11757913.

² Edward P. Dozier, *The Pueblo Indians of North America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), 4–7.

³ Ruth M. Van Dyke, “Chaco Reloaded: Discursive Social Memory on the Post-Chacoan Landscape,” *Journal of Social Archaeology* 9, no. 2 (2009): 221, doi:10.1177/1469605309104137.

⁴ Luis Mountain Zamora and Mary Kay Judy, “Taos Pueblo Preservation Program,” *APT Bulletin* 46, no. 4 (2015): 38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43659962>.

“Yeah, you have to write a paper or something,” he said. He got up from the table and went into the kitchen to mix another margarita. When he returned he did not mention the recorder, but the wooden table almost creaked under its weight.

My own margarita glass was nearly empty, and a bitter, sweet smoke swirled near the ceiling. It took a conscious effort to keep my mind from spreading across the ceiling with the smoke. He continued.

“What inspired me was having land. Not my land, but my family’s land, and if I steward it, it becomes my land. So in a way, on reservations we’re lucky.”

I had not been expecting to hear that. “What about oppression?” I thought. “You’re lucky for your reservation?”

“All tribal communities have gone through atrocities, and I highly believe that all tribal people deserve to live on their land. You lose your culture and your tradition... everything, when you are moved off of your land.”

Elliot was speaking steadily. The Pueblo do not consider their land to be a reservation because they exist as the only Native American group to have not been forced off of their land by the U.S. government. This has helped them keep their culture intact. When moved off of the land on which they created their livelihoods, most Native people were at the mercy of new economies and ways of understanding the world. In this imposed society, the plants were not relatives, and the forests were not filled with divine spirits. The land was to be dominated and the forests were worth the price of their logs. As a marginalized people separated from the land, Native people were at a severe disadvantage in this new society.

“This society shows one way of success: school, career, and accumulation... That’s a very intimidating mold to break when indigenous. Prosperity is that light at the end of the tunnel, but it’s packed.”

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In Taos, the threats to Puebloan cultural survival can be understood in three phases: the Spanish rule, United States’ policy, and the arrival of the capitalist market economy. The combination of these forces created ideologies of language and practice, or societal and native views of the Indigenous people’s lifestyle, which must be overcome for the culture to survive.⁵

The threat began with the arrival of the Spanish, who first enslaved the population, oppressing the shamans and forcing the Pueblo to build churches over the kivas⁶. The Spanish had little knowledge of the local ecology and their farms failed, so they resorted to exorbitant corn taxes on the Native people⁷. The Puebloan stores of food quickly ran dry and the Pueblo people, decimated by disease, whips, and missionaries, starved⁸.

⁵ Paul V. Kroskrity, “Language Renewal as Sites of Language Ideological Struggle: The Need for ‘Ideological Clarification’,” in *Indigenous Language Revitalization: Encouragement, Guidance & Lessons Learned*, ed. Jon Reyhner and Louise Lockard (Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University, 2009), 71–73, <https://www.researchgate.net>.

⁶ John Upton Terrell, *Pueblos, Gods, and Spaniards* (New York: Dial, 1973), 150–152.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

Spain lost the Pueblo's land to Mexico, who in turn lost the land to the United States in 1846.⁹ Early U.S. Native American policy can be concisely understood by an 1881 congressional consideration to mint medals sporting a dead buffalo on one side, with a dead Indian on the other.¹⁰ A decade prior to the congressional consideration, buffalo had outnumbered people in the United States.¹¹ By 1881, they were nearly extinct due to a U.S. military effort to destroy native livelihoods and exterminate Native Americans, forcing the surviving people to assimilate.¹²

Attempts to assimilate the Pueblo were carried out largely through religious imposition. The Religious Crimes Code was passed by Congress in 1883, formally forbidding Native people from practicing any religion other than Christianity. This was an unconstitutional law because it violated the Bill of Rights provision separating church from state.¹³ Native cultural life was banned on the premise of the Indian Bureau that the dances were "half animal, sadistic, and obscene."¹⁴ Native language was also banned and pejorated as children were sent to Christian boarding schools to become "civilized". The Code of Religious Offenses continued through the 1920s until forced evangelism was banned under the FDR administration in 1934. As late as 1978, however, one in three Native American children were being raised outside of Native American communities; typically among Christian or Mormon families.¹⁵ Realizing that this was another form of forced assimilation, the Supreme Court finally banned these child removal practices, with a dubious degree of effectiveness.¹⁶ Few cultures have closer ties to the spiritual world than the Pueblo, so it is not surprising that in the Pueblo language the words *Christian* and *Christianity* were synonymous with *disaster* and *death*.

When cash and capitalism came to Taos, the people became poor. Taos, in fact, became one of the poorest counties in the nation, with 29.7% of people in Taos living below the poverty line.¹⁷ Capitalism did not enter Taos until after World War II, and was not a true presence there until the opening of a ski resort in 1956.¹⁸ This is largely due to its rugged isolation, nestled between mountains and desert hundreds of miles from Albuquerque and Denver, and also due to the rich hunting and specialized farming that allowed for this community to thrive self-

⁹ Dozier, *Pueblo Indians*, 16.

¹⁰ Wade Davis, *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2009), 169.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 169–170

¹³ Terrell, *Pueblos, Gods, and Spaniards*, xxi.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ B.J. Jones, "The Indian Child Welfare Act: The Need for a Separate Law," *Compleat Lawyer* 12, no. 4 (1995): 18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23778993>.

¹⁶ Ann E. MacEachron et al., "The Effectiveness of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978," *Social Service Review* 70, no. 3 (1996): 451, doi: 10.1086/604199.

¹⁷ Statistic taken from successful federal grant applications in the archives of the Taos County Economic Development Corporation.

¹⁸ John J. Bodine, "The Taos Blue Lake Ceremony," *American Indian Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1988): 91–92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1184317>.

sufficiently.¹⁹ Before, the economy had been based upon gift exchange, in which most community members were subsistence farmers who exchanged their own goods and services for what they lacked, fulfilling needs while strengthening relationships that ensured they would receive support in times of need.²⁰

In Taos dentists still occasionally accept bags of corn, and there are still feast days where Hispanics bring sheep and the Native people bring pumpkins and produce. This form of economy, common in many Indigenous people's cultures, has been called an "economy of affection."²¹ This economy "denotes a network of support and interaction among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affinities," consisting of "invisible organizations which tend to be readily forgotten in the development debate."²² Around the world, the same invisible relationships and social organizations that are built into the fabric of gift economies have been shown to continue to be vital for populations that are struggling to exist in contexts of underdevelopment.²³

Most of the economy of affection in Taos has been supplanted by market capitalism. When the ski valley opened, property values skyrocketed and development spiked. Prices rose and wages fell. Tourism brought restaurants and hotels, which needed the low-wage labor of local Hispanics and Pueblo people.

The Pueblo, like most communities, began to engage with mentalities of capitalism even as the economy of affection was commodified. Prestige became tied to possessions, and possessions are accumulated by gaining money. Some Native people became "professional Indians," a term used within the community to describe Native people who made livings dressing traditionally and allowing visitors to paint portraits of them.²⁴ Others danced for tourists at hotels like the Katchina Lodge, a commodification of both word and ritual. Many more left the Pueblo, moving to cities for jobs. In urban settings, surrounded by concrete and asphalt, urban Native people sometimes found difficulty learning their native tongues, and the dances and stories that reflect the land and crops could lack both relevance and familiarity.²⁵ Thus, ancient cultural knowledge can begin to fade.

"For a good 30 years, young people were told that farming is for dumb people," Terri, an old Native woman, told me. "It destroyed the pride for a lot of people."

¹⁹ Enrique Salmón, *Eating the Landscape: American Indian Stories of Food, Identity, and Resilience* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 52.

²⁰ Antoinette M. G. A. WinklerPrins and Perpetuo S. de Souza, "Surviving the City: Urban Home Gardens and the Economy of Affection in the Brazilian Amazon," *Journal of Latin American Geography* 4, no. 1 (2005): 110, doi: 10.1353/lag.2005.0033.

²¹ Goran Hyden, *No Shortcuts to Progress: African Development Management in Perspective* (London: Heineman, 1983), 14.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ WinklerPrins and de Souza, "Surviving the City," 110.

²⁴ Sylvia Rodriguez, "Impact of the Ski Industry on the Rio Hondo Watershed," *Annals of Tourism Research* 14, no. 1 (1987): 90, doi:10.1016/0160-7383(87)90049-1.

²⁵ Salmón, *Eating the Landscape*, 33.

“Our generation didn’t value or instill in your generation the importance or prestige of growing,” continued her friend. “It was like speaking your language. For a long time you weren’t supposed to speak your language or you would be discriminated against.”

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“They grew food, lived on subsistence, and created their own wealth. That kind of lifestyle has a stigma now. A bad stigma against farmers. Poor people. Fuckin’ rednecks.”

Elliot paused. Took a slow sip.

“That’s fuckin’ stupid. The ability to create a lifestyle off a note or currency is fucking lame. What happened to being a man and shaping the space around you?”

He spoke steadily.

“Modern society is filled with so many selfish pursuits that people forget about simple community, like knowing your neighbors. Imagine what you could do with 40 hours every week. I guarantee you’ll create an income without having a career path.”

He paused.

“I would be a fool if I was somewhere else. I’m here to develop the land and take care of it, to make an income from agriculture.”

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“A lot of people went towards money and jobs and abandoned their fields,” Tina said in the city heat of Albuquerque. Trucks rumbled and screeched down the freeway, and the summer sun shimmered from asphalt. My partner and I were visiting Tina, David’s sister-in-law, at the Pueblo heritage museum that she curates.

She continued, “But there is a lot of support for Pueblo farmers now. A lot of young people are growing their own food. It’s awesome.”

I asked her why. Tina had something to show us, so we had stepped from the museum’s shelves of pottery and swaths of school children into the hot noise of the city.

“We’re more aware,” she replied in a lilting voice. Her face was broad and dark, and seemed to absorb the warm light. “We’re all on the same page. It’s hard to explain. Here we are.”

The sidewalk had taken us past a medicine wheel and onto a path flanked by gardens. “This is our classroom.” The freeway screeching seemed to be muted by the growth. Beans, squash, and corn grew together in beds of varying shapes and levels. I saw three kinds of corn: blue for cooking, red for saving, and white for praying.

“They want to have it as a teaching garden,” she continued, speaking of her Pueblo co-workers. “We wanted to have something the kids could do to learn about gardening. It’s such a huge thing in our culture. It’s why we stayed in the same spot.”

The beds were unlike anything that would be seen with industrial agriculture. They appeared cluttered, but possessed a self-regulating ecological logic. A compost pile acted as natural fertilizer, while nitrogen-fixing plants maintained rich soil, and cilantro, chives, and other herbs attracted ladybugs and carnivorous insects to control garden pests. Different desert methods were used to maximize water usage. One bed was arranged in little squares like a

waffle, channeling rivulets evenly throughout. Another bed was covered in a mulch of sandy-gravel, an ancient Zuni technique employed to retain water against evaporation. Perhaps the greatest climactic adaptation, however, were the seeds.

“All of those are Pueblo heirloom seeds,” Tina gestured. “That’s what’s out there now.” We returned inside and Tina promised that she would see us soon. After graduating college she had moved to Albuquerque with her husband, Mark, but they visited Taos often for dances and feast days. She seemed sad as we said goodbye.

“We want to go back soon,” she said. “It’s so hard to leave. I have land. Mark has land too, right across from David. We want to be totally off the grid. David has chickens, so we could trade. And David’s house is pure solar energy. We’re going to build a house and put in solar panels. We really just want to have a farm.”

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We listened.

“If there is something for young people, especially if it’s making money off of stuff growing in your backyard, why not? You gotta be realistic with people, where they’re from and how they live. You have to teach young people that there are all kinds of ways to live, make income, be successful...”

Elliot said something that surprised me, “Each of these kids, I show them what a ticket to college looks like. It’s fucking stupid if they don’t. Why, you scared? There is a whole world out there!”

The statement contained echoes from Tina’s conversation. Kids *should* leave. They will come home if they are committed to the people, and the community will be better for it.

He continued, “You have your home, your land, your family, and your people to come back to. Go out there and learn about life. They’ll be talking about harvests, where the markets are, how to do it, how to make it happen. These are the avenues the kids are learning.”

“Land. Money. Water. Seeds.”

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Heirloom seeds and consumption of personally grown produce are highly valued in Taos, but recent years have seen the emergence of a market mentality in the youth towards the growing of their food. Local agriculture is attracting a dual utility: subsistence and market. Youth are being both taught and socialized into entrepreneurial attitudes towards the food that they grow.

This young Pueblo market mentality may, to some, appear as a paradox. How can a culture adopt the market economy without destroying itself? Isn’t this what causes culture death in the first place?

This mentality is best understood as an adaptation to the market economy. Total self-sufficiency through subsistence farming has become virtually impossible in Western society, so in Taos children are being taught how to market their crops to supplement their subsistence fields, not to replace them. This mentality should be understood as a strategy that will give the growers the financial autonomy to grow on their fields and to dedicate themselves to the

practices and relationships revolving around the process. Anthropologist Wade Davis explains this differentiation:

“All societies are constantly evolving. Indeed a culture survives when it has enough confidence in its past and enough say in its future to maintain its spirit and essence through all the changes it will inevitably undergo.”²⁶

Developing an income base from traditional farming allows Pueblo growers to use knowledge of their ancestral land to develop a form of financial autonomy, creating a say in their own future. The ideology of maintaining traditional agriculture would not be salient unless it was economically feasible. Through agricultural entrepreneurship, the youth are striving for a financial freedom that will allow them to make decisions about their future, unpressured from ulterior monetary forces.

Pueblo growers often now have separate fields for personal use and market use. The personal fields are sown with inherited heirloom seeds, while the market fields are sown with hybrid seeds. They take care not to mix their own seeds with outside seeds. Terminator seeds, for example, are an outside brand which are altered so that they cannot produce fertile offspring. They cannot be selected or passed on, and must therefore be bought annually. Farmers are sued when these strands mix with their crops, and are forced to adopt the commodified seeds. This may be logical from a business perspective focused on the bottom-line, but this is disastrous in a culture whose identity is closely connected to the seeds they grow, select, and share.

During the irrigation party at David’s house I took a break, leaned on my shovel, and asked Elliot about the seeds we were planting. I wanted to know if the seeds were Pueblo heirloom seeds. Elliot gave an emphatic “no”. This was hybrid corn, not GMO stuff, but not Puebloan either. David planned to put this corn on the market, and couldn’t risk spreading the seeds and getting them stolen.

I asked if they had experienced problems with people spreading the heirloom seeds. No, Elliot replied. If someone sold Pueblo seeds, they would probably have their houses burned, their cars burned, and their animals shot. That’s what happens when you do thoughtless, senseless, harmful acts on the Pueblo.

Later in the evening, I spoke with Tina’s husband, Mark, about the seeds. Tina and Mark had driven three hours from Albuquerque to join the irrigation party. His land was across the road, and he hopes to begin farming the land when he moves back with Tina.

“What we produce is a sustainable product, genetically strong, acclimated, and fit for this land,” he explained. “And we have a market mentality.”

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Vibration. On the table.

Elliot trailed off. Swept his phone to his lap. He looked towards the door.

²⁶ Davis, *The Wayfinders*, 16.

Bang. The door opened. We froze. Brandon filled the frame. Elliot's cousin. The light touched Brandon's eyes. Wildly dilated. His hair was black, wet, matted on his face. His face unnaturally pale. Twenty dollars in his hand. Trembling. His jaw square and stubbled, contorting as he stared at my partner and me. Attempted to form words.

"I'm sorry," Brandon said.

Elliot held his gaze for a long time. Eyes flat. Face impassive.

"I told you not to come," he said evenly. The door remained open. The cold, black night was intruding.

"I told you not to come," Elliot repeated more harshly. His chair clattered as he stood, cursing. He went into a back room. Brandon followed. Music played softly. Brandon left with a small bag clutched in his hand. Elliot sat down again. He stared at his hands, folded on the table. His jaw clenched. We said nothing.

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Earlier.

"I grew up in a place where all these things were happening because agriculture wasn't happening. When I was younger, I didn't have any positive influence," Elliot had told us. "The big motivation for me is to work with the youth and give them influence... To inspire them."

The community of Taos Pueblo is strong in its cultural resilience, but it is also fractured. Drugs and alcohol take their toll. While rich in heritage, the Taos Pueblo remains materially impoverished from centuries of colonial settler practices, and there are many harmful routes that pull youth who don't find positive direction. Indeed, positive direction is often not readily available to be given in Taos.

David grew up without a father. The adobe house where we gathered for food after the irrigation party was built by David's father over the span of a decade, before he was arrested in the early 1990s for selling marijuana. His father spent the next decade living in a federal penitentiary.

The earth had crumbled from the adobe house as it fell into ruin. David's mother took him to Albuquerque for work, and the house's dark windows stared aghast as weeds and cacti crept over the fields. David's brother was supposed to care for the house, but he was a drug addict.

Sitting within the earthen walls, David joked about his childhood. "I was raised by people on acid and mushrooms, man, while my dad was gone. When my sister and cousin used to babysit me, man, fuck. I survived." He laughed.

David returned when he was fifteen years old. His father returned from prison, and together they worked to rebuild the house. They refurbished the walls, and ran electricity from solar panels. They devised a rain catchment system for the house's water. They were not able to bury pipes, for the house was on sacred land. When they finished, David's father gave David the land and the house, and told him to steward it as his own.

Now, David's land is a nexus for positive community building. The fields are places for cooperation, interaction, and bonding in the unique empathetic camaraderie that forms from spilling sweat and blood into soil for a common goal.

Explicitly, the common goal is to cultivate food, and to sell the food. Implicitly, the goal is to cultivate a culture that will give the youth a meaning, a purpose, a pride, and a positive support group that will allow the community to thrive.

"I would like to stick around Red Willow for one reason and one reason only," the manager of Red Willow, a local Pueblo food initiative, told me amongst tomato plants. "That's these guys," he pointed to Pueblo kids washing plants. "I want to be the positive influence in their lives." The manager had been raised by a single mother in poverty. Elliot mentored him at Red Willow, and helped him grow into the position of manager. We watched his employees, children, who were no longer working but were mock sword fighting with sticks, chasing one another through the fields, and laughing. Their manager, smiled. "This is a positive influence."

The youth are creating an agricultural movement to channel the current and future generations away from the social ills that plagued many of their own childhoods. They are helping their culture flow away from mainstream denigrations of Indigenous technologies and practices; denigrations that can foster internalized racism by shaping perceptions of personal worth. They are bolstering positive gauges for social value in a culture that in modernity faces barriers to achieving the mainstream personal value correlated to financial success.

The youth of the Taos Pueblo are attempting to channel their culture to new ways of success, into spaces where they can grow. They are gaining the knowledge, tools, and friends they need to create and cultivate. Through this, they are gaining a pride that is passed to others, encouraging the rest of the community to bloom.

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The interview was finished and uneaten pasta sat cold on the table. Elliot and Jamie held the door, smiling and waving as we stepped into the night. The rain had passed, but clouds hung low, hiding the mountains in darkness. I walked with my partner down a gravel path that ran beside Elliot's house, like a tunnel beside a tall thicket of sunflowers. In the sunlight, a break in the flowers would have shown Jamie's kitchen garden, where Elliot's mother had gathered herbs to cook for a fence-building party the day before. If the darkness had lifted, I would have seen new fence posts in Elliot's field, built by the community for Jamie's horse. If the darkness lifted, I would see T'aitöna in the distance, a valley of spirit mountains cradling our campsite home.

The darkness did not lift until morning, but we found our way through the night.

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A storm was blowing in from the mountains. David's field was mostly irrigated, and the evening was falling in a reddish gold light. Clouds stacked and billowed and swirled and climbed, teasing the mountains with their magnitude as thunder purred. A double rainbow arched over green foothills, while the western mesa glowed under a blue sky striped with the slates of three distant storms. The sun dropped below the clouds just as it began to rain. Light lanced across the land, accentuating the raindrops like beads of golden fire. It rained between the

rainbows and sun, between the aspens and the desert. The drops fell fat and heavy, cold and slow.

In the twilight, below the mountains and within the smell of dark earth and clean rain, I felt something profoundly human and alive. With a gentle patience, Elliot coaxed the seedlings towards the sun. With equal care, the seeds drew the Pueblo together, weaving connections through the people as roots through a rich soil.

Rain fell. We hefted our shovels and ran from the fields, joining the others within the warmth of David's home.

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