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A Legacy of “Aloha”

The Politics of Homonationalism and Empire in Queer Hawai‘i

GREG PŌMAIKA‘I GUSHIKEN

Senior Thesis (Political Science)

Mentor: Dr. Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller

Morgensen (2011) postulates that LGBT settler projects employ “the apparent existence and acceptance of marginal sexual subjects in “primitive” societies” as justification for their own claims to rights; however, by exploiting Indigenous histories in their activism, these settler projects generate “implications for nonnative political attachment” to Native conceptualizations of desire (Rifkin, 2014). In summation, the propagation of settler LGBT rights is often predicated upon the suppression of Indigenous voices and the progression of an LGBT nationalist empire. Analyzing the implications of settler colonialism and homonationalist discourses after the 2013 Hawai‘i Marriage Equality Act, this paper critiques the ways in which settler LGBT projects equate Kānaka Maoli desire and resistance with Western conceptions of sexuality and capital. This analysis begins with a critique of the queer “nonnative political attachment” found in “The Legacy Of Aloha: What Marriage Equality Means To Hawaii,” an article from the Huffington Post’s Queer Voices column, which erases Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) resistance and replaces it with a new imperial projects in an “inclusive” Hawai‘i. This field of inquiry continues with a rhetorical analysis of Kānaka Maoli who were against the 2013 Marriage Equality Act. This paper argues that these Kānaka did not oppose the legislation because they were homophobic but, instead, because they aimed to identify the epistemological dissonances between Western liberalism and Kānaka movements for Eā (sovereignty). Through this analysis, I call upon queer settlers to acknowledge their complicity in crafting and reproducing settler binaries and urge Kānaka to challenge the captivity of our desires.

In a 2014 *Huffington Post* article entitled “The Legacy of Aloha: What Marriage Equality Means To Hawai‘i,” Nathan Eagle, a reporter from the *Honolulu Civil Beat*, praises the passage of the Hawai‘i Marriage Equality Act. Opening with the story of Baehr

and Dancel, who were plaintiffs in the landmark marriage equality Hawai‘i Supreme Court case, Eagle interviewed legislators, recalled the tumultuous political battles of the Hawai‘i Marriage Equality Act and discussed Conservative legislators’



My name is Gregory Pōmaika‘i Gushiken and I am a queer Kanaka Maoli from the Wai‘anae Coast of O‘ahu. I am a 2018 graduate of the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa with degrees in English and Indigenous politics. This article is a subsection of a chapter from my political science Senior thesis titled *In Search of Queer Paradise: The Politics of Settler Homonationalism in Hawai‘i*, where I examined the connections between settler colonialism, homonationalisms, and the political tensions of a Hawai‘i under American occupation. I plan to continue this research at the intersections of demilitarization, multicultural empire, and (queer) Indigenous resurgence in the Pacific as a Ph.D. student in Ethnic and Critical Gender Studies at the University of California, San Diego, beginning in the 2018–2019 academic year.

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attempts to shoot down the bill. Most striking in Eagle's narrative, however, is the scene following passage of the Hawai'i Marriage Equality Act, where "couples—gay and straight—exchanged kisses as they wiped away tears, [as] Willie K and Amy Hanaiialii set the mood with their rendition of John Lennon's "Imagine." This subtle juxtaposition of Hawaiian culture, in the form of music, is notable because this positioning of Hawaiians in the background is indicative of our intended secondary role in the actualization of multicultural empire. In the current context of LGBT liberation, Kānaka Maoli bodies must disappear into the sphere of complacency and submission to dominant homonationalist imaginations found in the discourses of marriage equality. It is this contention between the ornamentalization of Kānaka Maoli bodies in the rhetoric of inclusion that this article aims to problematize by critically analyzing discourses posited by settler newspapers and by juxtaposing the perceived homophobic speech acts of Kanaka Maoli in legislative testimony, mass media, and print media. Collectively, this analysis suggests that articulations of Kanaka Maoli who opposed marriage equality legislation as homophobic do not contend with larger systems of settler colonialism through which their anti-legislative, as opposed to anti-LGBT+, rhetorics are framed.

More explicitly, however, the third section of Eagle's piece titled "From a Queen to a President," is an obvious reference to Queen Lili'uokalani, the last reigning monarch of the Kingdom of Hawai'i and the imposition of a settler state. Eagle championed then-governor Neil Abercrombie for his liberal attitudes toward marriage equality. Stating that the Hawai'i State legislature "set aside individual views and listened to what their role was in terms of upholding the constitution,"² Abercrombie implies that this legislative decision liberates all people. However, Abercrombie's consequent equation of Kānaka values and settler liberties in this section is more than just a simple abandonment of struggle.

Eagle paints a vivid picture of Abercrombie and his wife walking through Washington Place, the former residence of Queen Lili'uokalani, as they stop to admire a portrait of the Queen, captioned, "If we could but see our likenesses, could we not learn to be tolerant of our differences?" Eagle creates a line break in the text before finally continuing with, "That's the queen speaking," Abercrombie said. "That's the legacy of aloha."³ In this statement, Abercrombie, a white settler, not only interprets the intentions of the Queen to fit his political actions but also disregards the likely political context from which this statement emerged. In 1893, the Kingdom of Hawai'i was overthrown by a group of sugar planters and businessmen in a coup

d'état with the intention of turning over sovereign authority to the United States of America.⁴ Before this incident, however, Lili'uokalani and the Kingdom of Hawai'i were already facing various political tensions. In 1887, Lili'uokalani's predecessor, King David Kalākaua, signed what is now known as the "Bayonet Constitution." Because "violence had procured the king's signature to it," the Bayonet Constitution was "signed . . . under absolute compulsion."⁵ Consequently, as Lili'uokalani writes, "two-thirds of [the Hawaiian people] declared their dissatisfaction with the old [constitution] for it was a document originally designed for a republic,⁶ hastily altered when the conspirators found that they had not the courage to assassinate the king."⁷ Lili'uokalani, thus, attempted to promulgate a constitution that would actually serve the interests of the people; however, her attempt was met with the aforementioned overthrow and plan to cede Hawai'i to the United States of America.

Lili'uokalani likely framed much of her speech acts in response to the political discontent of her people and the occupation of the Hawaiian Kingdom by the United States of America. For example, in promulgating a new constitution, Lili'uokalani stated her position of "protest against the ratification of a certain treaty, which . . . has been signed . . . to cede [these] Islands to the territory and dominion of the United States."⁸ Lili'uokalani makes clear in her autobiography that the very action of writing her memoir was done with the intention of resisting American occupation and statehood, something that Abercrombie and, in effect, the marriage equality law embodies. This narrative of resistance and legislation under duress calls into question the quotation referenced by Abercrombie and the "legacy of aloha" that he draws from it. In the final pages of her memoir, Lili'uokalani makes a plea for the people of Hawai'i to the very nation that ripped away their sovereignty, and their humanity:

Oh, honest Americans, as Christians hear me for my down-trodden people! Their form of government is as dear to them as yours is precious to you. Quite as warmly as you love your country, so they love theirs. . . . The people to whom your fathers told of the living God, and taught to call "Father," and whom the sons now seek to despoil and destroy, are crying aloud to Him in their time of trouble; and He

1 Eagle, Nathan. "The Legacy Of Aloha: What Marriage Equality Means To Hawaii." *Huffington Post*. (Huffington Post, 14 November 2013)

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Liliuokalani. *Hawaii's Story by Hawaii's Queen*. (edited by Glen Grant. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990) 105.

5 Ibid.

6 In this instance, Lili'uokalani refers to "republic" as a government run by those whose interests and intentions run contrarily to that of the Kingdom of Hawai'i, involving the removal of the monarchy and current government.

7 Lili'uokalani. *Hawaii's Story by Hawaii's Queen*. (Grant, Glen, ed. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990)

8 Ibid.

will keep His promise, and will listen to the voices of His Hawaiian children lamenting for their homes.⁹

In this excerpt Lili'uokalani makes two claims—that all people, as Christians, are equal under the ethical framework of Christianity and that all people, regardless of race or creed, are equally worthy of respect and dignity. Returning to Abercrombie's brief analysis of the words under the Queen's portrait, the implication of equality is constructed differently than Abercrombie's interpretation. Because Abercrombie uses the quote to further a settler structure in a settler state, it is ironic that he sums up the legacy of "aloha," a Hawaiian value, as a means of justifying a nonnative political interest. In the context that Lili'uokalani likely intended it, the concept of equality was intended to humanize Kānaka and the chastise the colonial violences committed against us.

Thus, the very appropriation of this quote is done so in complete disregard to imperialist histories. Abercrombie does not contend with the oppositional attitudes Lili'uokalani had towards the annexation and eventual statehood of Hawai'i, nor does he acknowledge that this "legacy of aloha," absent the liberation of Kānaka from centuries of colonization, creates epistemological dissonance. The naming of Indigenous speech acts as a validation for modern settler legislative action enacts Rifkin's theory that settlers use Native histories as "implications for nonnative political attachment."¹⁰ By depoliticizing the struggles faced by Lili'uokalani and the Hawaiian Kingdom, Abercrombie claims "the modern sexual rights of citizens in a white settler state"¹¹ to justify the victories of marriage equality, which is at its core, a settler formation, contrary to Lili'uokalani's pleading intentions in that statement. In a simple speech act, Abercrombie reiterates colonial violences and contorts them to fit the multicultural agenda of settler sexualities in the imperialist imagination of the conceptualized queer paradise Hawai'i is forced to become.

Native Resistance and Cognitive Dissonance

According to Kānaka Maoli scholar ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui, the epistemological difference between "land" and "āina" is that Kānaka have a familial and direct relationship have to āina, while foreigners are often interested solely in the marketization of land.¹² Kānaka Maoli, thus, regard the place of Hawai'i

as a sibling—a living being that ought not to be exploited by the infiltration of further settling and consuming. Despite centuries of colonization, this value of mālama āina is prevalent even in the perceived homophobic rhetoric of Hawaiians who opposed the Hawai'i Marriage Equality Act, as their rhetorical nuances are often grounded in protecting and preserving place. Economic value and the accumulation of social justice capital ensured by marriage equality are, thus, unimportant to many Kānaka, whose well-being is not improved by these colonial measures of progress. In addition, because queer Kānaka face "an additional level of burden due to colonial ideas about sexuality and gender identity that is rarely discussed,"¹³ the reproduction of Western ideals of same sex marriage and queerness does not challenge broader systems of colonialism where Kānaka face "high unemployment, catastrophic health problems, low education attainment, large numbers institutionalized in the military and prisons, occupational ghettoization in poorly paid jobs, and increasing outmigration that amounts to diaspora."¹⁴ Naturally, with this relationship to land in mind, opposition to marriage equality within the Kānaka Maoli community came armed with not only the ethos of Judeo-Christian morality, but also, without surprise, the pathos of colonization. As the monolith of imperial idealism embodied by the Hawai'i United for Marriage campaign flew in lobbyists and organizers from across the country,¹⁵ Kānaka began to see this onslaught of White men and women wielding bullhorns and Western jurisprudence as invaders to an otherwise tranquil Hawai'i. This fear is most clearly constituted in a feature in *Honolulu Magazine* highlighting the debate on marriage equality, where a legibly Kānaka man comments that, "[m]arriage is between man and woman... Gay marriage is not hawa, (sic.) or not pono, not right. Don't come here to disturb our [Hawaiian] culture and laws."¹⁶ In this instance, the speaker clearly defines gay marriage as a disturbance to "Hawaiian" culture and laws; although still adhering to a Western morality of marriage as sacred, he still makes the point that further invasion from elsewhere is neither welcome nor accepted by his idea of a Hawaiian people. While the speaker is read by Western liberalism as a self-hating Native, the weight of his claim that for-

13 Stotzer, Rebecca L. "Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity/ Expression Discrimination and Victimization among Self-Identified LGBTQI Native Hawaiians in Hawai'i." *Journal of Indigenous Social Development*. vol. 3, no. 1. August 2014, 13.

14 Trask, Haunani-Kay. *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999) 7.

15 Otsuka, Cuyler. *Aloha, Marriage Equality: Unsettling Gay Constructions of Paradise*. (Oberlin: Oberlin College, 2014) 14–15.

16 Lee, Diane "10 Faces of Hawaii's Gay Marriage Debate," *Honolulu Magazine*, October 2013, accessed February 25, 2014, <http://www.honolulumagazine.com/Honolulu-Magazine/October-2013/10-Faces-of-Hawaii-Gay-Marriage-Debate/>.

9 Ibid.

10 Rifkin, Mark. *Settler Common Sense: Queerness and Everyday Colonialism in the American Renaissance*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 7.

11 Ibid.

12 ho'omanawanui, ku'ualoha. "This Land is Your Land, This Land was My Land." in Fujikane, Candace, and Okamura, Jonathan Y, eds. *Asian Settler Colonialism*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 124.

eign intervention in the islands is destructive is not farfetched by any means. Similarly, Otsuka found in interviewing various activists and community members that, on the other side of the situation, “[a] small group of white mainland progressives who [demanded] policies such as same-sex marriage [had] implicitly expressed the viewpoint that ‘locals’—the settler term for Asians and Polynesians who were born and raised in Hawai‘i—are to be educated and may be pushed around in order to gain political rights.”¹⁷ Here, in conjunction with Nā Mamo o Hawai‘i’s statement, it becomes clear that the agenda of settler activists is singular—the assertion of a Western “progressive” LGBT agenda that does not account for Native land or lives. Because, as ho‘omanawanui makes clear, Western conceptions of land—and, in this sense, relationships to other human beings—are rooted in a desire to accumulate capital, the need to maintain a relationship with the land and its Indigenous people is nonexistent.

During the several days of public testimony for and against SBI, one testifier, another legibly and self-identifying Kānaka man, stated:

Now, I want to speak to the Hawaiians. It’s time to wake up and it’s time to rise up [...] The island state is rooted in aloha. This special interest group (gay rights groups), I believe, from the mainland is (sic.) taking our aloha and using it to market its agenda. The last time that happened, we lost our queen.¹⁸

The speaker immediately identifies his audience: Kānaka Maoli. Through this identification and positionality, the speaker also attempts to construct the White, gay activists as the Other—which may manifest itself as, “a conceptual framework around a notion of Us-versus-Them [that pretends] that the principal consideration is epistemological and natural—our civilization is known and accepted, theirs is different and strange—whereas, in fact, the framework separating us from them is belligerent, constructed, and situational.”¹⁹ The construction of the other in this instance is done whilst conjuring a singular event in Hawaiian history that invokes a certain trauma—the annexation of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i. While the speaker does not directly reference the event, when he states that “the last time that happened, we lost our queen,” it is clear that he is attempting to channel the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in order to identify with both those for and against marriage equality who identify as Kānaka. While this identification of

the mostly-White activists for marriage equality as the Other may seem to be exaggerated, and that the speaker is, simply, colonized into the norms of homophobia, what he says at the end of his testimony is shocking—that he would like to see rights for civil unions expanded.²⁰ It is thus clear from this testimony that to dismiss Hawaiians as simply homophobic and one-dimensional is problematic, not only because it subverts the already repressed narrative of colonization in Hawai‘i, but also because it does not account for their “real” attitudes towards homosexuality and queerness. This complication of hegemony calls into question how queer activists in Hawai‘i have viewed Hawaiians and how they ought to fully engage with the Indigenous people of these islands. Additionally, the discursive image of Lili‘uokalani in this instance is important to note because the depoliticization of Native death and genocide is key to ascertaining empire for colonial regimes. When the speaker mobilizes the overthrow the monarchy and the discursive death of a nation as praxis against this legislation, they directly challenge the framing of “progress” postulated by marriage equality groups. That is, through the refusal of liberal politics, the speaker enacts a mode of Indigenous resistance, albeit one not free from the spirituality of colonial power. Thus, by recognizing the political nature of Lili‘uokalani and the overthrow, the speaker attempts to circumvent colonial assertions of progressivism, imploring listeners to question not just discourses of liberty and progress but also colonialism and the way it takes shape in these policies.

A more powerful Kānaka voice against marriage equality, however, was found in a conservative commercial titled “Perpetuating Hawai‘i’s Covenant with God,” where ten Kānaka declared “that the bible is the highest law in the land.”²¹ Among these ten people, according to Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua’s blog post on queer Indigenous theory in Hawai‘i, was Colette Machado, Chairwoman of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, an institution “responsible for administering funds and lands intended for the benefit of Native Hawaiians.” In addition, the commercial also asserts that “Same-sex marriage will affect [the Native Hawaiian²²] traditional sense of ‘ohana.”²³ With this clearly Native voice in opposition to marriage equality, many queer Kānaka and our allies attempted to clarify that homophobia is not a “traditional” Hawaiian value, as Native anti-mar-

17 Otsuka, Cuyler. *Aloha, Marriage Equality: Unsettling Gay Constructions of Paradise*. (Oberlin: Oberlin College, 2014) 36.

18 Occupy Hawai‘i. “Testimony on SBI to Legalize Same Sex Marriage Day 3 Part 1.” *Youtube*, 3 November 2013, <https://youtu.be/ZyX6Pas8hvo>

19 Gregory, Derek. *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq*. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 24.

20 Occupy Hawai‘i. “Testimony on SBI to Legalize Same Sex Marriage Day 3 Part 1.” *Youtube*, 3 November 2013, <https://youtu.be/ZyX6Pas8hvo>

21 KodomoNoTameNi. “Perpetuating Hawai‘i’s Covenant with God.” *Youtube*, 25 October 2013, <youtu.be/3yqMNtCgxZw>.

22 The Office of Hawaiian Affairs refers to the Indigenous peoples of Hawai‘i as “Native Hawaiians” as opposed to “Kānaka Maoli”

23 Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, Noelani. “Ka Le‘a O Ke Ola: Queer Indigenous Studies, Hawaiian-Style!” Blog post. *Indigenous Theory Mānoa*. Blogspot, 31 Oct. 2013. Web. 4 Apr. 2017.

riage equality groups had claimed. Activist-scholar ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui states that, in regards to the “traditional” nature of ‘ohana purported by Kānaka against marriage equality, “our Hawaiian kūpuna recognized the beautiful diversity and complexity of humanity and our relationships with each other. They recognized the need to accommodate social systems that would not needlessly discriminate or ostracize ‘ohana.”²⁴ By articulating the complexity of human relationships in Hawaiian culture, ho‘omanawanui effectively clarifies the error in the argument for a “traditional” ‘ohana, which, in fact, often consisted of same-sex, non-monogamous relationships. This commercial thus creates a cognitive dissonance across genealogies and colonial binarisms not only in its assertion that religion is the “highest” law but also the implication that same-sex marriage is antithetical to Hawaiian traditions. The commercial does, however, also articulate that the people present “are against the special session because it denies the people of Hawai‘i the right to be heard.”²⁵ While it can be said that the “right to be heard” is clearly employed in this instance to invoke a sense of betrayal amongst constituents—implying that, by holding a special session, the government does not value the community’s voice—at the core of the commercial is the message that external meddling, such as marriage equality, is not welcome in Hawai‘i. The right to be heard is not simply a cheap gimmick to advance conservative values; it bears the potential to be a call for self-determination.

Similarly, Kānaka scholar Dr. Vaili Kanuha notes that Kānaka Maoli who opposed the marriage legislation regarded the issue as a “white” problem.²⁶ Groups such as Nā Mamo o Hawai‘i worked to build queer-Native alliances; however, tensions between the two groups persisted. In a statement in collaboration with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a member of Nā Mamo stated that:

While the Kānaka Maoli²⁷ were asked to join the LGBT justice struggle, this courtesy was not returned....no engaged, ongoing relationships were built with the larger Kānaka Maoli community. The larger LGBT movement did not understand

the importance of protocol, courtesy, and the establishment of trustworthy relationships in this regard, and so an initial opportunity to build those relationships was lost [and they] did not have an understanding of Kānaka Maoli history or the struggle for decolonization and sovereignty from a Kānaka Maoli perspective.²⁸

This disregard for Native agency bolsters the previously mentioned testifier’s claim that marriage equality activism in Hawai‘i is a White construction. This attack on place, Indigeneity, and the rhetorical situation is, however, not new for “progressive” politics in Hawai‘i, and reinforces the resistance of Kānaka against marriage equality because these actions show clear intentions of building a liberation absent their decolonization. Western queer activism, more broadly, proposes a certain type of integration and subjugation. In this vein, Morgensen postulates that because “white men argued on behalf of all sexual minorities that their civil rights and national belonging” were validated by the existence of Native American “homosexuality,” the methods through which many LGBT rights and liberties are won are predicated upon the suppression and discursive appropriation of Indigenous bodies.²⁹ The consequent view of many gay activists toward Hawaiians, as outlined previously, is paternal and antagonistic. The cultures and histories of Hawaiians are easily used to justify Western queer projects such as gay marriage. All other external forces, such as a colonial history of state-mandated religion and the abolition of Indigenous spirituality, are thus erased; all “homophobic” behavior, or, rather, behavior that deviates from the will of Western progressivism, is thus blasphemous to a secular conceptualization of progress.

With these contentions in mind, it is clear that the infantilization of Kānaka seen in the opposition to the Marriage Equality Act is indicative of a succinct method of Native erasure and demonization. Because the epistemologies that the Marriage Equality Act is rooted in are indicative of a broader imperial agenda, equality, in this constitution of it, is exclusionary of Natives and others who may not benefit from this law, disregarding the traumatic histories that have shaped these ideological frameworks of homophobia and a disdain for continental interference. Western law is thus insufficient to account for the traumas queer and Indigenous people face in navigating the complex hegemonies of modern Hawai‘i. While the expansion of rights and liberties is crucial, the harsh reality

24 ho‘omanawanui, ku‘ualoha. “Living True Aloha.” *Hawai‘i Independent*. (Hawai‘i Independent, 30 Oct. 2013)

25 KodomoNoTameNi. “Perpetuating Hawai‘i’s Covenant with God.” *Youtube*, 25 October 2013, youtu.be/3yqMnTcGxZw.

26 Anbe, Brent., Carvajal, Jaymee, Reichel, Keali‘i, Xian, Kathryn, and Zang Pictures. *Ke Kulana He Māhu: Remembering a Sense of Place: A Documentary*. (Honolulu, Hawai‘i: Zang Pictures, 2001)

27 Kānaka Maoli: lit. a Full-blooded Hawaiian person. The word kānaka maoli, however, has evolved to denote a person of Native Hawaiian or part-Native Hawaiian ancestry who identifies with the Indigenous experience of oppression, liberation, and culture. Definition from: Pukui, Mary Kawena, and Samuel H. Elbert. 1986. *Hawaiian dictionary: Hawaiian-English, English-Hawaiian*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1986)

28 American Friends Service Committee. “AFSC Hawai‘i Gay Liberation Program: Activist Materials Addressing Tourism.” (*GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. 8, no. 1, 207–25, 2002)

29 Morgensen, Scott Lauria. *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) 211.

of the legal system is that law cannot mend historical violence. To blame the Hawai'i Marriage Equality Act for racist and imperialist rhetorics employed by both marriage equality activists and the repressed voices of Kānaka Maoli is insufficient. Because the system itself is made to create these tensions between oppressed settlers and Native peoples, we cannot truly understand "liberty" and "equality" without questioning the Western jurisprudence and its iron fist that rules over our captive islands.

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