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A “Queer-Looking Compound”: Race, Abjection, and the Politics of Hawaiian Poi

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ABSTRACT

The ecological, cosmological, and genealogic meanings of kalo (taro) and the foods made from it bind the practice of eating poi, an important traditional staple food, to both material and cultural concepts of Hawaiian identity. During the nineteenth century, the taste of foods like poi became a subject of debate among newcomers to the archipelago, who used the language of disgust, queerness, and civility to distinguish Euro-American whiteness from indigeneity through foodways. While discourses about the palatability of poi were, and still are, typically couched in the language of personal preference, an examination of historical sources reveal settler abjection to instead be a culturally conditioned approach to Native taste and foodways. This article uses the subject of kalo to extend histories of colonial tastemaking into the ongoing dimensions of settler terrain through discourse analysis of nineteenth century travelogues, popular media, and Native epistemology in order to reveal the interlocking logics of taste and territory.

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In 1866, American novelist Mark Twain (born Samuel Langhorne Clements) arrived in Hawai‘i on assignment for the Sacramento *Union*. Over the course of the following four months he prodigiously scribbled notes that reported on life in the islands, producing a detailed record of how visitors might experience nineteenth-century Hawaiian place and culture. His letters and newspaper articles portray the environment, the people, and – importantly – the foodways that he encountered. Like many travelogues of the time, poi in Twain’s work acts as metonym for Native sense and sensibility: their tastes, their manners, and their commensal relationships. At first mention in his correspondence series, which was later compiled, narrativized, and published as *Roughing It* (1872), readers are oriented toward the material dimensions of Hawai‘i’s food and its preparation:

The poi looks like common flour paste ... and is prepared from the *taro* plant. The taro root looks like a thick, or if you please, a corpulent sweet potato, in shape, but is of a light purple color when boiled ... The buck Kanakas bake it underground, then mash it up well with a

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heavy lava pestle, mix water with it until it becomes a paste, set it aside and let it ferment, and then it is poi – and an unseductive mixture it is, almost tasteless before it ferments and too sour for a luxury afterward.¹

In this passage, Twain takes a comparative approach: *kalo* is somewhat like a sweet potato. But lest readers mistake the soured *kalo* root for the “sweet” potato of the Americas, and its corpulence for soft curves, they are warned that their appetites will not be satisfied by this Native stand-in. While Twain concedes that, “nothing is more nutritious,” he nevertheless articulates a politics of taste that maps onto settler/native relationships as they developed across the nineteenth century and into the twentieth: that Indigenous foods, while abundant and healthful, fail to offer suitable gustatory pleasure for white eaters. Those familiar with contemporary travel writing will recognize Twain’s description as relatively common to the English-language literature of the Pacific, which at once primitivized and sexualized Native culture through material and affective registers.²

At the time that Twain’s letters were written, the Kingdom of Hawai‘i maintained an uncertain grasp on its sovereignty. Foreign missionaries, who had begun arriving in the 1820s, promoted Christian ideals that discouraged many Hawaiian cultural practices, including commensal habits. Forty years later, a civilizing mission in Hawai‘i was in full, if not complicated swing: missionary descendants entered into sectors of business and government, influencing lawmaking that valued Western social ideals; the predominantly foreign-owned sugar industry continued to expand, bringing with it imported contract laborers from Asia and elsewhere; and the Hawaiian monarchy adopted cosmopolitan forms of diplomacy that blended Native and Western manners.³ The development of foodways, particularly within the urban center of Honolulu, reflected Hawai‘i’s cultural and economic development: imported goods and their modes of consumption contended with Native foodways, bringing to the fore larger colonial concerns about intimate relations between bodies within tropical environments.

These concerns were made legible through rich descriptions of poi consumption that outsiders narrated, where adjectives of corpulence, tastelessness, pasty texture, and sourness indexed the indigenous staple food as unpalatable. It is therefore not surprising that the question of poi’s deliciousness has historically been a settler concern – a question about Hawai‘i’s traditional, everyday cuisine nearly always posed by an outsider looking in (indeed, the very definition of a staple food suggests normativity for its eaters). Likewise, Hawaiian language sources from the same time period reveal a food of unremarkable flavor – in that the deliciousness of poi appears far less worthy of debate among those who enjoyed it as part of their daily foodscape.⁴ While there are certainly moments when Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) discuss the flavor of poi, its taste appears predominantly used as a metric for determining food safety – particularly as poi manufacture industrialized at the turn of the nineteenth century. Broader debates on “good” taste were, in contrast, at their most vigorous via colonial organs: the stomachs, mouths, and mouthpieces of *haole* (foreign) settlers. This article therefore focuses on Western, instead of Native Hawaiian, reactions to poi in order to show how sensory flavor and social taste comprised ideological overlaps that have persisted into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Contextualizing Poi’s Flavor

While it is often suggested that the taste for poi is merely a matter of individual preference – that it’s “an acquired taste” – an historical view shows that collective palates are inextricably

bound up in colonial histories, in which diet, labor, and race help determine the parameters of what is delicious.⁵ For readers unfamiliar, poi is a Native Hawaiian staple food made from the baked or steamed corm of the kalo (taro) plant.⁶ To elaborate on Twain's description, the corm (or underground stem) of the plant is traditionally cooked in an imu (underground oven) for several hours and then hand-pounded with a pōhaku ku'i 'ai (stone pounder) on a papa ku'i 'ai (a wooden board).⁷ Small amounts of water are incrementally added as the corm is mashed to produce foods known as pa'i 'ai (kalo diluted with very little water) or poi (with enough water incorporated as to create a pudding-like consistency). Over the course of several days after its initial preparation the water catalyzes a natural fermentation process; as lactic acid builds within the food, poi increasingly takes on its characteristically sour flavor.⁸ Regular consumers of poi thus often refer to its "age" to indicate their preferred sourness. A humorous, but popular, book on "local" food, *Pupus to da Max* explains:

Depending on the amount of water you add, you get different consistencies. More water: two-finger or three-finger poi. Less water: one-finger poi. Note: You can buy fresh or day-old (or two- or three-day old poi). The older the poi, the more sour. Some people like it fresh, some like it sour.⁹

Partiality towards sourness – even today – often stands in as shorthand for indigeneity: the more sour the poi, the more culturally literate the eater.

Ideas that Hawaiianness can be expressed through taste preference extends back to the colonial encounter. For example, in 1893, the *Hawaiian Gazette* published an extensive piece on kalo ("particularly for the information of tourists and other newcomers to these islands"), which correlated palate to race, explaining that,

White folks who sometimes, for a change, indulge in a little poi, prefer it when it is fresh, but the natives like it to be somewhat sour or fermented, and some even have a strong partiality for very sour poi, or poi akia.¹⁰

Tastes for sour poi were furthermore often used to mark a Hawaiian's lack of civility or masculinity. One 1882 travel log noted that, "however civilized a native may become, he invariably prefers his dish of sour poi to the choicest dainties eaten by haoles."¹¹ This is a common refrain, in which descriptions for foreign audiences of what poi tasted like characterize the food as either inedible or unlike food at all. The editor of the *Atchison Globe*, Kansas, who published his experiences of visiting Hawai'i in November 1905, recounted his visit to a well-to-do household, where he dined with Mr. Emmeluth, a haole, who resided with his native wife:

The taro is ground into a paste, and after fermentation, becomes poi, on which the natives mainly live. I tasted the poi. It tasted like sour paste, and Mr. Emmeluth says it may be used as paste ... When the taro crop fails the natives make poi out of American flour, and it seems to answer the purpose, though it is light in color, instead of dark.¹²

Within these descriptions, the enjoyment of poi is used police the boundaries between Kanaka Maoli and haole, and the inevitable transgressions of daily life. The proximate relationships between Native bodies and foods has been a strong locus for haole (white) abjection, with many scholars recognizing that racist logics of edibility have long been central themes in works on "ethnic" foodways, including those of Pacific Island communities.¹³ Today, too, many visitors to Hawai'i today continue to enact the ambivalence of Twain and others by discretely discarding the small portions of poi that decorate their "luau plates" believing that they simply lack a personal preference.¹⁴ Without denying the biological function of flavor – that sour poi will taste equally sour on most tongues

–the interpretation of poi’s tastes and textures have been shaped by colonial histories that racialized differential palates.

‘Āina (Land) Ideologies

A brief review of how Hawai‘i’s twentieth-century transition from sovereign nation to United States settler state has shaped its contemporary food system is a helpful place to begin considering this broader trajectory of tastemaking. In recent years, the State of Hawai‘i has come under significant criticism for its inability to provide sustainable food sources for its residents. An oft-cited 2013 report on the archipelago’s food supply shows that only 11.6 percent is locally produced, with an alarming 88.4 percent of Hawai‘i’s food imported primarily from continental United States distribution hubs located over 2,300 miles away.¹⁵ This current state of precarity contrasts sharply with its historic agricultural productivity: in the Hawai‘i of pre-Western contact in 1778, diversified native agri- and aquacultures sustained a relatively dense population throughout the islands.¹⁶ Such a radical change in provisioning had everything to do with food and land. Over the course of the nineteenth century, foreign economic interest grew in Hawai‘i as a potential source for commodity sugar, resulting in the development of sugarcane plantations that overtook large tracts of agricultural land, diverted and monopolized fresh water sources for their irrigation, consolidated capital in the hands of American business leaders, and utilized a contract labor system that reinforced racial hierarchies.¹⁷ By 1893, some of those large business owners executed a forceful government takeover. Despite significant resistance from Kanaka Maoli, the newly formed Republic of Hawai‘i (1894) remained in place until the enactment of the Newlands Resolution in 1898, through which the United States unilaterally annexed Hawai‘i as one of its Pacific Territories.¹⁸ By the early twentieth century, the sugar industry began a steady decline, and Hawai‘i’s primary economy shifted once again. With cheaper export markets developing overseas by the 1980s and 1990s, the State of Hawai‘i instead invested in a tourism industry that overtook a substantial percentage of its total income, rising from less than 3 percent in 1949 to becoming the State’s “largest single contributor to [its] gross domestic product” in 2013, with over \$14 billion in annual revenue.¹⁹ The proliferation of resorts and hotels, as well as housing developments to accommodate Hawai‘i’s growing population, has often come at the expense of agricultural land, further limiting any remaining ability to grow sufficient foodstuffs for the Islands.²⁰

Against the backdrop of these radical economic and political changes, the Native Hawaiian population became systematically divested from their traditional subsistence modes.²¹ The health implications have been profound. By the 1960s, studies estimated that Hawaiians suffered from the second highest rates of obesity in the United States, as well as disproportionately high levels of diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease mortality (this in a State ironically ranked as one of the “healthiest” in America).²² The statistics were, in part, connected to diet. A “local” cuisine, comprised of multicultural foodways introduced by plantation laboring populations in the 1900s, along with industrial products – like SPAM – popularized during World War II, became an adopted culinary standard for Hawaiians.²³ High in sugar, fats, and salts, the cuisine known today as “local” food differs from the traditional diet, which is generally low in fat, high in complex carbohydrates, and moderate in protein.²⁴ Without wanting to construct artificial causality (indeed, two hundred years of complex Hawaiian history cannot be satisfactorily distilled in two paragraphs) I offer

these statistics as evidence of the structural dispossession – through loss of life, culture, and land – that settler colonialism articulates. For Patrick Wolfe, health epidemics, the seizure of territory, and cultural erosion are interlocking parts of a “structure” that always seeks a dual purpose: to “eliminate” native lives and, in turn, make land available for white settlement.²⁵

Just as settler dominance structures the contemporary foodscape in the Islands, so too has the concept of place been pulled into capitalist frameworks that elide Native orientations. Kanaka Maoli use the term ‘āina to distinguish their understanding of land from Western ideas of private property and national territory. ‘āina importantly translates into “that which feeds,” by etymologically elaborating the word ‘ai, which refers to both the act of eating and the object of food itself. So central is poi to this epistemology that Samuel Elbert and Mary Kawena Pukui assert in the *Hawaiian Dictionary* that the term ‘ai, “often ... refers specifically to poi.”²⁶ Thus Hawaiian worldviews show the production of their staple food to be fundamental to the construction of place through reciprocal relations: if you care for the land, the land will care for you. As a result, the Western idea of territory as introduced to Hawai‘i effects what Mishuana Goeman terms a “settler-colonial grammar of place,” where native peoples’ spatial constructions are contorted in order to accommodate legibility demanded by the settler state.²⁷ Constraints of capitalism (i.e. the 1848 Māhele, the plantation economy, contemporary real estate development) and governance (i.e. American Pure Food and Drug Laws, land use zoning laws) at once ruptured constructions of Indigenous space and kalo production within it.²⁸ The ecological, cosmological, and genealogical meanings of kalo and the foods made from it bind the practice of eating poi to both material and cultural concepts of Hawaiian identity.

Embodying Good Taste

Scholars like Parama Roy, Christy Spackman, and Jessica Hayes-Conroy and Allison Hayes-Conroy have shown how social and political power shape interpretations of sensorial taste by showing that taste is a sensation that not only operates upon the nose and the tongue, but also onto racialized, sexualized, and classed bodies as a whole.²⁹ Recently, a special double issue “On the Visceral” in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (2014) also interrogated this approach to embodiment, enjoining readers to re-focus analyses of consumption upon the “gut,” in order better to understand how contemporary structures of social inequality are manifested upon the body.³⁰ The issue editors write that:

Viscerality [is] a phenomenological index for the logics of desire, consumption, disgust, health, disease, belonging, and displacement that are implicit in colonial and postcolonial relations. Emerging from the carnal language of (colonial) excess, viscerality registers those systems of meaning that have lodged in the gut, signifying to the incursion of violent intentionality into the rhythms of everyday life.³¹

Their assessment offers a powerful intervention for thinking about how poi’s edibility has been classified across time by newcomers to Hawai‘i. Poi’s viscous shapelessness, its grey/violet/pink color, and its sour(ing) flavor not only contrasts with normative Western parameters of “good taste” today, but also articulates nineteenth-century colonialist relationships to Native foodscapes, which often denied good taste to the “uncivilized.”³²

Theoretical orientations towards the visceral are key to understanding how taste politics operate in the space between bodies and terrain because eating is, at its essence, a reproductive act. For Indigenous peoples, who know their ancestral homelands by enacting

human/nonhuman relations, ingestive connections are crucial elements of placemaking.³³ The logic then follows, that if settler society is premised, as asserted by Wolfe and others, upon the “elimination of the native,” and that the irreducible element of settler colonialism is land, then we might understand such articulations of taste (i.e. whether or not poi is palatable) as a discourse predicated on larger structures of dispossession both embodied and territorial.³⁴ I therefore use the subject of poi and aim to extend an analysis of colonial tastemaking through Native bodies and into the particular historic (and ongoing) dimensions of settler terrain. Because food is both edible and agricultural, we must keep one eye carefully trained on its historical context and the other on the construction of taste in order to execute a gustatory reading of its cultural meaning. For Hawaiians, who have experienced the structural dispossession of land and resources, taste and territory are profoundly co-produced.

The Logics of Territory and Taste

Reporting like Twain’s on the eating of poi rested upon concrete political impulses. Around the time that *Roughing It* was published as a collection, the American Territory of Hawai‘i had just been named. In its wake came a surge of interest among Americans for their “new possession,” particularly in regards to its agricultural potential.³⁵ As the expansion of sugar plantations buoyed its economy, discourses about Hawaiians and their right to land were necessarily mobilized to render them either undeserving or uninterested in agriculture and the capitalist economy. John Roy Musick, in his 1898 book about the American Territory of Hawai‘i, explained that,

the comparative ease with which the Hawaiians on their own land can secure their ordinary food-supply has undoubtedly interfered with their social and industrial advancement. Poi, it is said, has proved the greatest obstacle to the progress of Hawaiians. The ease with which the taro, the vegetable from which poi is made, can be grown, relieves the native from any genuine struggle for life, and unfits him for sustained competition with men from other lands acquainted with hardships.³⁶

Musick offers here a powerful example of the interlocking logics of territory and taste through labor, land use, and feeding. In it, the prime agricultural environment afforded by Hawai‘i’s climate has put the Hawaiian at a political disadvantage: they feed themselves too easily (with Musick apparently unaware of the back breaking work that kalo cultivation requires). Thus, an argument about agriculture (crops) also portrays poi (food) as a hindrance to the civilizing project, where eating, growing, and political placemaking operate in concert to either affirm or deny one’s sovereignty.

The creation of settler taste hierarchies in Hawai‘i throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which poi consistently ranked at the bottom, permitted discourses that talked at, around, and alongside native difference and its problematic persistence. Take, for example, a story entitled, “The Poi Eater’s Progress” – a play on the *Pilgrim’s Progress* – that circulated in *The Latter Day Saint’s Millennial Star* in 1893. Described as “a queer-looking greyish, sticky compound, resembling paper hanger’s paste,” one follows an histrionic dialog in the second person that describes a first encounter with poi:

As you raise it toward your mouth your nose takes cognizance of a sour smell that harmonises perfectly with the appearance of the poi ... By a sublime effort of will you keep your lips closed over the mouthful, while your companion looks on interestedly, evidently expecting to hear your palate scream with delight ... The poi is cold and clammy. The poi tastes like stale yeast; it

stings your tongue, and an unutterable disgust possesses your soul ... You can trace its progress through the oesophagus by the horrified shudder that organ gives as the mouthful passes along it; you can hear the villi in your stomach shriek as the frog-like lump makes its appearance among them, and you think you are going to die then and there.³⁷

While others around the same time aren't quite as dramatic – some are complimentary enough to call it “not unpleasant”³⁸ – there formed, nevertheless, a consensus that its texture and its taste were overwhelmingly objectionable.

In other common estimations, poi represented a food of savage sexuality part and parcel to its lack of palatability. Often, disgust for poi's taste compelled descriptions that collapsed together anxieties over “dirty” bodies as both hygienic and copulatory dangers. To continue the passage with which this article opened, Twain's description of Hawaiian poi manufacture continues with an account of its consumption worth quoting in length:

I think there must be as much of a knack in handling poi as there is in eating with chopsticks. The forefinger is thrust into the mess and stirred quickly round several times and drawn as quickly out, thickly coated, just as if it were poulticed; the head is thrown back, the finger inserted in the mouth and the delicacy stripped off and swallowed – the eye closing gently, meanwhile, in a languid sort of ecstasy. Many a different finger goes into the bowl and many a different kind of dirt and shade and quality of flavor is added to the virtues of its contents ... All agree that poi will rejuvenate a man who is used up and his vitality almost annihilated by hard drinking.³⁹

Twain reveals here several layers of the culinary colonial gaze, from texture to body to social practice. What for Kanaka are simple gestures of feeding become, in this depiction, gyrations of pleasure: not one finger, but many fingers, swirl around the bowl before entering a swallowing mouth, head thrown back in “ecstasy.” The sexualization of this moment is immediately recognizable (and the titillation of Twain's readers even easier to imagine). This is not a unique characterization of Hawaiians and their poi; in fact, it is a hackneyed example of many common descriptions of Native peoples that came before and after it well into the twentieth century.⁴⁰ At the heart of these discourses lay haole anxieties surrounding the productive and reproductive qualities of bodies and foods; that as the very “staff of life,” kalo consumption constituted a regenerative act that did not abide settler civility (for bed and table manners alike).

In such descriptions, ideas of queerness emerge literally and metaphorically. “The Poi-Eater's Progress,” quoted above, notably identifies queerness as a primary descriptor of the staple food. Twain's allusions to sexual performance furthermore expand nineteenth-century uses of queer (as a word then synonymous with strangeness and eccentricity) to accommodate more recent connotations of the word (in terms of non-normative subjectivities, sexual or otherwise).⁴¹ The collapsing of abjection, taste, and sexuality into a description of poi locates its consumption within a broader historical literature that shows how the language of eating is often employed in the “othering” of racialized subjects because the act of incorporation rests at the very heart of the colonial encounter. To consume, or “eat the other,” involves a complex politics of appetite, refusal, expectoration, and insatiety that becomes policed precisely because of the body's permeability: it is a frenzied contact zone rather than a sterile barrier between the civilized and the savage.⁴² To taste poi, the non-Native body not only takes in the material queerness of the food, but also the bodily flavors of those with whom the dish is shared. Undoubtedly, moments like this are potent illustrations of the viscosity that Sharon Holland, Marcia Ochoa, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins see as affective

indexes of taste and power.⁴³ Not only that, but their assertion that the metaphorical location of these feelings are anchored in intestines, bowels, innards – areas of the body less visible to normalizing colonial gazes – further classify poi's gustatory queerness.

Roots of Knowledge

Foreigners took a very oral approach to understanding poi, dwelling on mastication, taste, and discourse. But despite these discursive locations, poi is better conceived of as a food of the gut. The corm of the kalo plant, which contains starch granules a tenth the size of those found in the potato, is 98.8 percent digestible.⁴⁴ For this reason, it has long been a dietary favorite not only for the healthy, but also the infant and infirm.⁴⁵ Scientific studies today continue to recommend poi for its medicinal and healthful properties (even as access to the food became increasingly limited by high retail costs and relatively small production going into the twentieth century) and confirm what Hawai'i's indigenous people have long been aware of: that the fermented tuber provides an ideal nutritional base to support a large population.⁴⁶ However, even as poi's digestibility and probiotic benefits relate the food to late twentieth-century theories of the visceral, it is necessary to articulate its cultural specificity – not only within Hawai'i's settler colonial history, but also its Indigenous context: as a root of knowledge, genealogy, and sustenance.

The physiological benefits of poi for the gut are merely one facet of its cultural and cosmological importance. It is also a fundamental anchor for knowledge and personhood within Native Hawaiian epistemology. In 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language), the word na'au translates to “intestines, bowels, guts; mind, heart, affections; mood, temper, feelings.” Paired with the suffix “ao,” the word na'auao is elaborated to mean, “learned, enlightened, intelligent, wise; learning, knowledge, wisdom, science.”⁴⁷ This use of language reflects Kanaka orientations towards affect, thinking, and embodiment that are conceptually interlocked. As Manu Aluli Meyer explains in her study of Hawaiian epistemological structures, “to know something is to consider it via your emotions, your mind, and thus Hawaiians point to their stomach region when speaking of something of substance.”⁴⁸ Viscerality, and both the instinctual and conscious responses to “gut feelings” are constitutive elements of a Hawaiian's very being.⁴⁹

Finally, the symbiotic relationship between eminently digestible poi and the stomach as the epistemic center of Hawaiian identity is genealogical. Kanaka recognize deep ancestral connections to their 'āina through an origin story at which the kalo plant is central. The story of Hāloa, the common ancestor of all Kanaka Maoli, begins with Papa and Wākea, celestial beings representing the heavens and the earth whose coupling produced the world and everything within it. Multiple versions of this story exist, but in at least one version Papa and Wākea have a daughter named Ho'ohōkūkalani, whom Wākea impregnates twice. The first child, a stillborn, is buried in the ground outside the house. From that site soon grows a kalo plant that Wākea names Hāloa. The second child, also named Hāloa after the plant becomes the first Hawaiian person, his shared name reinforcing the genealogical ties that Kanaka Maoli have with the kalo root and the land in which it grows, as well as the relationship of mutual care and respect that Kānaka maintain with their food.⁵⁰ As scholars have furthermore noted, 'ohana, the word for family, also stems from the kalo plant: 'oha (meaning the kalo corm) is pluralized using the suffix -na in order to illustrate how kalo plants are reproduced from cuttings of older roots and stalks, much like children from

parents.⁵¹ These interconnected concepts of food, land, and knowledge serve as the basis for the central argument that I would now like to make: that the perceived inedibility – or queerness – of poi by haole newcomers to the Islands is deeply implicated in a history of both cultural marginalization and territorial dispossession.

Colonial Placemaking and Settler Tastemaking

To think through the meaning of food in relation to normativity, queerness, and indigeneity thereby requires attending to the matter of land. Indeed, it is compelling to ask when and how territory (as opposed to its earlier conception of ‘āina) becomes entangled in projects of sustenance and self-determination.⁵² Land can also become problematically conflated with the nation-state within settler discourses of ownership and belonging (which in turn, get refuted, challenged, and flat-out refused as a governing force over those who it does not equitably serve or have not consented to its power).⁵³ Territory is, therefore, a complicated term by which to anchor the disenfranchised. Even so, advocating for the importance of Indigenous foodways insistently points to the ecological and cultural importance of growing and cultivating one's own foods – and by extension one's ancestors – for survivance.⁵⁴ These material conditions, vital to the continuation of indigenous societies, are most urgently exemplified by regions like the Pacific, where climate change has shifted the habitability of many islands now bearing the burden of its most immediate effects, with rising water tables, drought, land loss, and a host of other anthropogenically driven threats to food security.⁵⁵ And they are further underlined by longer histories of ecological trauma experienced, for example, by Native American Tribes who adapted their foodways to climate changes experienced through forced relocation across a continent.⁵⁶ While resilience is a hallmark of Native survival *despite* displacement, material environments undoubtedly remain a key mechanism by which the “logics of elimination” imposed upon Indigenous people persist.

Academic and popular literature emerging from current interest in the local food movement does much to illuminate the indelible and complicated legacies of colonial settlement on placemaking and tastemaking in America. Alternative food practice has turned keenly toward notions of taste and place as interest in civic and ecologically conscious eating grows among America's liberal middle class.⁵⁷ In response to concerns over the industrialization and globalization of the American food system, the “local” has emerged as a framework for mitigating rising fuel costs, corporate irresponsibility, and the growing “geographies of nowhere” that (un)mark the American foodscape.⁵⁸ However, and particularly in Hawai'i, food miles and community resiliency are not the only drivers of “eating local.” Conflated in local food rhetoric is also a discourse about morality and good taste that gives social meaning to what (at least on the surface) appears to be a spatial concern.⁵⁹ In other words, collective lived experience through taste, among other things, constructs a territorial politics of food that privileges particular eaters (and makers and growers) over others.

It is also the very reason that kalo cultivation now prominently sits at the center of multiple projects that seek to restore Native Hawaiian self-determination and sovereignty. Today, to grow, pound, and declare poi both healthy and delicious is a political act. One can see these taste politics at play in Hawai'i as food activists argue for increased and legally supported access to indigenous staple foods. For example, in 2009, O'ahu-based kalo farmer and pa'i 'ai producer Daniel Anthony made news when the Hawai'i Department of Health (DOH) shut down his small commercial distribution due to the “unsanitary” nature of

his product. Anthony uses traditional methods to prepare his food, which he then sells to consumers by using a pōhaku and papa ku‘i ‘ai (both porous materials) in an open-air environment – violations of DOH commercial food regulations.⁶⁰ During what ultimately became a cultural standoff between Native Hawaiians and American government officials, the sanitation officer for Anthony’s district explained in the wake of his arrest that,

Mr. Anthony fails to realize that we are not living in ancient times where there were no regulations designed to protect public health. The DOH cannot stand idly by while Mr. Anthony continues to endanger the health of Hawai‘i’s people under the guise of cultural tradition.⁶¹

Such a statement elegantly reveals the fraught relationship that food continues to mediate between Indigenous peoples and American citizens in the postcolonial era – anxieties over contamination, indigeneity, and modernity remain staggeringly present within not only public, but also official discourse, about food safety and “cultural tradition.”

After nearly two years of debate, a bill passed in the 2011 Hawai‘i legislative session that legalized the sale of traditionally prepared poi within the State.⁶² The process of acquiring an exemption was accompanied by a visible public outcry: the cause received significant press, “Legalize Pa‘i ‘Ai” bumper stickers proliferated, and activists led by then-University of Hawai‘i law student Amy Brinker called to “Indigenize the Law” by recognizing that Western legal frameworks do not adequately accommodate native needs. Bill 101, known colloquially as “the poi bill,” excluded manufacturers of hand-pounded poi from the DOH’s certified food processing establishment requirements under several conditions: first, that pa‘i ‘ai manufacturers sell carefully labeled batches directly to customers; second, that hand-washing facilities are located at the place of manufacture; and third, that the maker attend a food safety class.⁶³ These stipulations comprise an exemption through which the law accommodates foods that resist the disciplinary frameworks of law through their cultural importance (such exemptions had been previously extended to products like honey and sushi).⁶⁴ This exemption within the health code now protects traditional pa‘i ‘ai and poi preparation as long as consumers agree to take on the risks of eating foods deemed “potentially hazardous” under the law.⁶⁵

The efforts of community activists to keep traditionally prepared kalo products in the Hawai‘i marketplace has been, by most accounts, a success. Today Anthony distributes his poi and pa‘i ‘ai through several avenues of sale that range anywhere from the back of his truck parked roadside to regularly stocked display tables in the produce section of Whole Foods Markets in the affluent neighborhoods of Kailua and Mānoa. In addition, the rising profile of Hawai‘i chefs committed to working with and honoring heritage foods has also expanded kalo’s eatership to those who might not relish sour poi, but willingly consume its less fermented counterpart when presented as part of an elevated dining experience. In fact, it is through the rising popularity of pa‘i ‘ai that kalo has begun a quiet migration away from its historical queerness. Pa‘i ‘ai is not only sweeter and firmer, but it also offers a friendly pairing with non-native foods: it can easily be kneaded into pizza “crust” or pan fried like a potato. Even if it isn’t (yet) a mainstream food, pa‘i ‘ai has now taken on cultural capital increasingly celebrated by natives and settlers alike. And it is here that we might also see the discourses of taste re-emerge to secure kalo’s place within a normative framework of cuisine from which it had so long been discounted. In a 2014 interview with Honolulu’s *Civil Beat*, Brinkerpa‘i ‘ai emphasized how, because of its taste, pa‘i ‘ai offered an ideal platform for indigenous food advocacy.⁶⁶ “There are people who may not like poi but find they love pa‘i ‘ai, with its mochi-like consistency and milky sweetness,” she argued.

“When someone with a newfound taste for pa‘i ‘ai has trouble finding it because there is not enough kalo to meet the demand, the stage is set for more folks to take up farming.”⁶⁷ In other words, capitalizing on the valued taste of sweetness – rather than more kalo poi’s more typical sourness, promised to bridge a return to kalo consumption, cultivation, and indigenous cultural practice.

Conclusion

Today, poi and pa‘i ‘ai coexist in the contemporary Hawai‘i foodscape, to be sure, but one has clearly risen in the gastronomic ranks to become one way that eaters can engage with the important native staple of kalo without coming up against their visceral aversions. New eaters of kalo – particularly pa‘i ‘ai – think with their mouths, not their stomachs; and they consume a food, rather than enact a genealogical connection. Their enthusiasm for it increases a market demand that promises profitability for farmers and cultural practitioners who, despite any sovereign politics they might have, must also make a living. Nevertheless, this pendulum swing from disgusting to delicious in the eyes of outsiders provides a platform for thinking, ultimately, through what “local” food means for the multiple and overlapping communities who have come to understand Hawai‘i as home.⁶⁸ Recognized as a spatial identity generalizable to alternative food commodity markets, as well as an ethnic identity *particular* to Hawai‘i’s multicultural labor history, the “Local-ness” inflected in Hawai‘i’s food movement today suggests that the links between “taste” and “place” are more than just economic concerns. The practice of “eating local” is also an indirect indictment of the structures of dependence imposed by the United States, which sustains tourism- and military-based economies by importing foods at great cost despite Hawai‘i’s potential for diversified agricultural abundance.⁶⁹ The politics of kalo has emerged from this historical legacy of gustatory discomfort, where the sour viscosity of poi inflects understandings of its social acceptability. Attention paid to palatability through consistency, flavor, and its emergence through the capitalist market continues to highlight the tensions that remain attached to kalo even as its legal and popular acceptance has secured a favorable place within the complex grammar of Hawai‘i’s local cuisine.

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Notes

1. Twain’s emphasis. I use a reprinted version here. Twain, *Roughing It*, 229–30.
2. Readings of Twain as either colonialist or a humorous subversion of the pastoral remain debated, as explained in Sumida, “Reevaluating Mark Twain’s Novel of Hawai‘i.” I read his text as examples of what Mary Louise Pratt calls a “contact zone,” where deeply subjective understandings of otherness and colonial subjectivity co-constitute, though “often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.” Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 8. For a good overview of the many ways the Western world envisioned and represented the Pacific, see Driver, *Tropical Visions*. For analyses specific to imperial encounters in Hawai‘i, see Costa, “Paradisical Discourse”; and Schroeder and Borgerson, “Packaging Paradise.”

3. Merry, *Colonizing Hawai'i*.
4. Hobart, "Tropical Neccessities," 151, 152.
5. These aversions are expressed in historic and contemporary literature, particularly in travel guides. I focus on primarily on the nineteenth century in this article, but this carries into the present day. See Friedman's *DK Eyewitness* that describes poi as "definitely an acquired taste," 193.
6. The Latin name of the taro, *Colocasia esculenta*, is singular, but it is a highly varied cultivar in Hawai'i. Out of an estimated 300 distinct cultivars by researchers in the early 1900s, University of Hawai'i's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources have identified and preserved 84 distinct types. Cho, Yamakawa, and Hollyer, "Hawaiian Kalo," 4; and Whitney, Bowers, and Takahashi, *Taro Varieties in Hawaii*.
7. Poi production is a labor-intensive process, from wetland kalo cultivation to culinary preparation. For an illustration of how the food has resisted efficient capitalist production, see *Proceedings of the Taro Conference*; and Aikau and Camvel, "Cultural Traditions and Food."
8. Nout, Sarkar, and Beuchat, "Indigenous Fermented Foods," 825.
9. Simonson, Sasaki, and Sakata, *Pupus to da Max*, 117.
10. *Hawaiian Gazette*, "Taro or Kalo."
11. Vincent, *Through and Through the Tropics*, 84.
12. *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, "Vacation Visit to Hawai'i."
13. See Long, *Culinary Tourism*, which includes a chapter on Hawai'i's many poke festivals; Molz, "Cosmopolitan Mobilities"; and Slocum, "Race in the Study of Food." For Pacific-focused studies, see O'Connor, "The Hawaiian Luau"; Gewertz and Errington, *Cheap Meat*; and Elias, "The Palate of Power."
14. *Travels in the Sandwich and Society Islands* (1856), *Reminiscences of Travel in Australia, America, and Egypt* (1883), *Sandwich Island Notes* (1854). I use luau here without its diacritical marks to flag these tourist events as a mere simulacrum of Kanaka Maoli forms of feasting.
15. Of the imported foods to Hawai'i, approximately 81 percent come from the continental United States and 6 percent from other foreign markets. Loke and Leung, "Hawai'i's Food Consumption and Supply Sources."
16. Although archaeological evidence shows that this could sometimes be distributed unevenly. Lincoln and Ladefoged, "Agroecology," 192. The Native Hawaiian population in 1778 has been estimated anywhere between 200,000 or 250,000 to just under 1 million. See Dye, "Population Trends," 2; and Stannard, *Before the Horror*, 32–37. A mere 45 years later, the Hawaiian population had declined to around 135,000, with many succumbing to the spread of foreign disease. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed*, 24.
17. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed*, 48–9. Also Kent, *Hawai'i*; Miike, *Water and the Law*; and Wilcox, *Sugar Water*; Takaki, *Pau Hana*.
18. It is imperative to note here that the Newlands Resolution provided the United States with no legal standing for its occupation of Hawai'i, as explained in Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood*, 28; and Silva, *Aloha Betrayed*, 160–63.
19. Hitch, *Islands in Transition*, 266; and Wilson, "Hawai'i's \$14 Billion Tourism Industry."
20. Edwin T. Fujii and James Mark, "The Impact of Alternative Regional Development Strategies," 42; and Gomes, "Farming Finds No Home."
21. Merry, *Colonizing Hawai'i*.
22. Ranked only behind Pima Indians. Shintai, Hughes, Beckham, O'Connor, "Obesity and Cardiovascular Risk Intervention Diet."
23. See Laudan, *The Food of Paradise*; Hiura, *Kau Kau*; and Reddinger, "Eating 'Local.'"
24. Tung and Barnes, "Heart Diseases," 110; and Shintai, Hughes, Beckham, and O'Connor, "Obesity and Cardiovascular Risk Intervention Diet," 1647S. The latter study showed that Native Hawaiians placed back on a pre-contact diet (referred to as the "Waianae Diet") experienced marked weight loss and successful adherence rates.
25. Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism."
26. Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*, 9.

27. I am building here upon Goeman, "Disrupting a Settler-Colonial Grammar of Place," and LeFebvre's theory of the cultural construction of space in *The Production of Space*.
28. Linnekin, "The Hui Lands of Keanae"; Krisnawata Suryanata, "Diversified Agriculture"; Goldberg-Hiller and Silva, "The Botany of Emergence"; and Hobart, "Tropical Necessities."
29. Roy, *Alimentary Tracts*; Spackman, "Leaky"; and Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, "Taking Back Taste."
30. Building upon Probyn's *Carnal Appetites*.
31. Holland, Ochoa, and Tompkins, "Introduction," 395.
32. For more on the coloring and valuing of certain cultivars, see Malo, *Hawaiian Antiquities*, footnote 2, 44. The normative Western palate is built, arguably, on the pillars of saltiness, sweetness, and fattiness that emerged from twinned histories of industrialization and Empire. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, and, more recently, Moss, *Salt Sugar Fat*.
33. Goldberg-Hiller and Silva, "The Botany of Emergence."
34. Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 387–409.
35. This term comes from Musick, *Hawai'i*, published to educate American readers on the benefits of the new territory.
36. Ibid., 67.
37. "The Poi Eater's Progress," 376, 377.
38. Sweetser, *One Way Around the World*, 22.
39. Twain, *Roughing It*, 230, 231.
40. On Hawaiian foodways, see Kashay, "Missionaries and Foodways"; on Hawaiians generally, see Imada, *Aloha America*; Merry, *Colonizing Hawai'i*.
41. "queer, adj.1." OED Online. Oxford University Press. December 2015, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156236?rskey=cTWUiS&result=2>.
42. I borrow this thinking here specifically from Parama Roy's *Alimentary Tracts* (2010) but am also referencing Judith Farquhar's *Appetites* (2002), Kyla Wazana Tompkins's *Racial Indigestion* (2012), and bell hooks's seminal essay "Eating the Other" (1992).
43. Holland, Ochoa, and Tompkins, "On the Visceral," 395.
44. Cho, Yamakawa, and Hollyer, "Hawaiian Kalo," 2.
45. Malo writes that, "Poi is such an agreeable food that taro is in great demand." *Hawaiian Antiquities*, 42.
46. Brown, et al, "The Anti-Cancer Effects of Poi." They write that, "Although never officially declared a probiotic, studies conducted in Hawai'i around the 1950s suggested that poi could be useful for the management of infant food allergies and weight gain in failure-to-thrive infants," 767. Also see Brown and Valerie, "The Medicinal Uses of Poi." The "revival" of Hawai'i's taro industry was the subject of a conference in 1965, although, it appears, as a means of capitalizing on agricultural exports to the United States "mainland." *Proceedings of the Taro Conference*.
47. Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*, 257.
48. It also connects Kanaka worldviews to the greater Pacific, where embodied knowledge and intellectual knowledge are also indistinct. Meyer, "Native Hawaiian Epistemology," 26.
49. I borrow here from Yee, "The Fragility of Things."
50. This mo'olelo is far more nuanced than I can do justice to in this space. For additional reading, see Malo, *Hawaiian Antiquities*, 238–44; Beckwith, *Hawaiian Mythology*, 293–306; McDougall, *Finding Meaning*, 91–3; and Silva, *Aloha Betrayed*, 101–2.
51. Diaz and Kauanui, "Native Pacific Cultural Studies."
52. The enactment of sovereignty does not necessarily require land. Mobility, diaspora, and other contours of home-making are shown to emerge from histories of displacement and are all signal in intersectional identity formation. Tompkins, "Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexuality."
53. It may be useful, then, to abstract out the notion of land to a more expansive analytic of environment, which has the potential to transcend the boundary-making of nationhood. Here I draw on Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*.

54. I borrow this term, which signals active ongoing Indigenous survival, from Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*.
55. Here I refer to overfishing and the ecological strains of commercial agriculture for export. Keener, Marra, Finucane, Spooner, and Smith, *Climate Change and Pacific Islands*.
56. Whyte, "Back to the Future."
57. Trubek, *Taste of Place*; Weiss, "Making Pigs Local"; and Bell and Valentine, *Consuming Geographies*.
58. In using "geographies of nowhere" I reference Schnell, building upon the work of James Howard Kunstler. "Deliberate Identities," 67.
59. Weiss, in his study of "local" North Carolina pork, helpfully asks: "What do we mean by *place* when we talk about its taste?" Weiss, "Making Pigs Local," 444.
60. Huff, "Health Officials Restrict Poi Pioneer."
61. Ibid.
62. Huff, "State Legalizes Hand-Pounded Poi"; and Cheng, "Got Pa 'i 'ai?"
63. Hawai'i Senate Bill 101, 2011.
64. Black, "Pounding the Issue."
65. The outcome, largely recognized as a significant victory for both indigenous rights and food sovereignty within the Islands, now buttresses a growing number of organizations that anchor their missions in the perpetuation of native foodways, including Kāko'o 'Ōiwi, Paepae o He'eia, and Ho'oulu 'Āina. Mikesell, "OK Sought for Traditional Taro."
66. Importantly, kalo cultivation has become central to indigenous resurgence projects that not only seek to occupy space, but to exercise embodied cultural practice that attends to the spiritual, affective, gustatory, and epistemological dimensions of Native Hawaiian identity. See especially Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, "Rebuilding the Structures that Feed Us."
67. Brinker, "Passage of Poi Bill."
68. Delind, "Of Bodies, Place, and Culture," 123.
69. Teaiwa coins the term "militourism" to signal how the two are interlocking parts of colonial economies, in "Reading Gauguin's Noa Noa."

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