

## COUNTRY QUEERS in collaboration with OUT IN THE OPEN

### SEASON 2 EPISODE 2 : Kū'i'olani Cotchay

DESCRIPTION: Kū'i'olani (she/they) is a queer, mixed-Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) living in their ancestral lands in Mākaha, Hawai'i. She is an educator, learning experience designer, musician/creative and plant person. In this episode Miguel Mendías interviews Kū'i'olani about Hawaiian history, lands, language, color theory, queerness, colonization, belonging, being of mixed Indigenous ancestry, and living in highly-gentrified, highly trafficked tourist destinations.

For this episode we're asking folks who are able to support a [gofundme](#) that Kū'i'olani and their friend Kahele have launched to create a māhū\* (nonbinary, trans) led project in Hawai'i. They write: "Primarily, this project aims to house QTBIPOC community and repair relationship to land, especially for Kanaka Maoli, Indigenous, and Black relatives. Secondary to this objective, is a focus on creative endeavors, both traditional and contemporary. In general, it is the continuation of ancestral practices alongside new media, arts, and music."

CREDITS: Created and produced by Miguel Mendías, with support from HB Lozito from Out in the Open, and Rae Garringer of [Country Queers](#). Sound Design by [Hideo Higashibaba](#). Audio editor: Rae Garringer. Editorial advisory dream team: [Hermelinda Cortés](#), [Lewis Raven Wallace](#), and [Sharon P. Holland](#). Music by Tommy Anderson and Podington Bear. Ambient recordings by Kū'i'olani Cotchay.

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*[Sound of Waves and upbeat song]*

**Kū'i'olani [Intro]:** Aloha mai kākou. 'O Kū'i'olani kēia ma Mākaha, O'ahu, i ke Aupuni Hawai'i. 'O kēia mau 'āina kahi a'u e noho ai nā 'āina o ko'u kūpuna, he mau Kānaka Maoli. Ke ho'olohe nei 'oe i ka Podcast "Country Queers", nā mo'olelo e pili ana i ka po'e "LGBTQ+" e noho ana i kua'āina.

Hello. This is Kū'i'olani in Mākaha, O'ahu, in the U.S. occupied Kingdom of Hawai'i. These are the lands of my ancestors, the Kānaka Maoli, or Native Hawaiians. You are listening to the Country Queers Podcast, stories about "LBGTQ+" people living in "the country

## **Miguel Mendías [Host]**

Hello, this is Miguel Mendías from Marfa, Texas. Today I'm interviewing my new friend, Kū'i'olani Cotchay. This interview took place when I was driving from the West Coast back to Marfa, Texas. I interviewed Kū'i'o from a weird little tiny house in the woods outside of Portland, Oregon, while trying to avoid smoke from ongoing forest fires. Kū'i'olani spoke to me from their home practically and ancestrally, in Hawai'i. We spoke over Zoom. Kū'i'o uses both they and she as their personal pronouns.

*[sound of baby chicks, and sound of waves]*

In the background of our interview, you may hear some animals. There were a couple of orphaned baby chicks that they had to bring inside to care for. And she has other pets as well, including her beloved dog, and a pet pink praying mantis - very large, friendly and apparently likes to be on camera. Kū'i'o maybe has a thing for insects. They found time to be interviewed between daily outdoor hunts on her family's land in Mākaha, Hawai'i. She was hunting outside for cockroaches small enough to feed the orphan chicks.

*[sound of raking leaves]*

Kū'i'olani is a recent friend. We met through signing on to work on these episodes for the Country Queers podcast. But it turned out that we had a lot of mutual friends. And I actually did remember meeting Kū'i'o, some several years ago in the Bay area of California. She lived in a punk house then, that one of my best friends lived in at one point, sort of a famous two story punk house in Oakland. When we started talking for Country Queers, I didn't really know what they looked like, and then I saw them on Zoom. And I immediately recognized them from the past. I remembered them as kind of a serious nerdy queer punk with a long, thick braid, who lived upstairs for where my friend lived, and as having sort of a pension for comfortable 80s fashion. They struck me as a talented, nerdy musician, type person. And that was really the gist of what I knew about them. I was talking to Kū'i'o recently about being in this sort of DIY, radical, queer punk scene back in the day, and how I think it's more common now for people to sort of put their ethnic identities front and forward. But it was talked about less at the time when we met, or at the time, I would have been crossing paths with them. 10 or so years ago, 10 years ago, people sort of identified as a queer POC or even QTPOC, And that was before people really said, you know, Indigenous Black centered person of color, QTBIPOC. So it was just like, you might see other POC on the scene, but I had no idea that Kū'i'o was Hawaiian at the time. I mean, I'm sure there were a lot of acquaintances that maybe didn't know that I was Mexican American. But that was kind of the punk scene of Oakland in the late 2000s, I suppose. Kū'i'o and I had an interesting time talking about what rural means, both in the scope of this podcast, and just in general. She mentioned how her town used to be rural, but people got pushed farther away from the city into more affordable rural towns, as Hawai'i got flooded with real estate, spectators and tourism and gentrification essentially.

One of the things we kept coming to and that we have in common is how we both live in places that very much have an Indigenous cultural identity that's well known and well documented. Another thing we face is having that cultural identity appropriated today by white settler colonialists who don't acknowledge in the least their own settler colonialism. We both live in places that are sort of hyper-gentrified, and places that depend heavily on tourism. So it can be strange talking about rural living, in a context of such a *heavily* trafficked place. At the same time, these places where we live, are geographically isolated, even if they receive a large influx of tourists.

Why people flock to my tiny town in Texas will perhaps be better explained in the episode where Kū'i'o interviews me. But for this episode, we will be talking about Hawai'i and touching a lot on being of mixed Indigenous ancestry and growing up in a culture that retains parts of its Indigenous identity. And of course, we will also talk about what it is like being queer and our respective places, not just the geographical places, but within our culture and traditions or in the multiple cultures that we grew up in, as bi-cultural people bi-cultural at least. Kū'i'olani is also well known as a volunteer of the Bay Area Girls Rock Camp. She has volunteered with them for over 13 years, and is currently working to develop online programming for the organization to make Girls Rock more accessible to rural youth and youth on reservations. Since returning to Hawai'i, she and another friend who was Kanaka Maoli, or Native Hawaiian, have begun fundraising for their collectively organized nonprofit land project which prioritizes QTBIPOC and Indigenous Hawaiian access to native plants, medicine, language, and cultural - as well as land centered connection

*[sound of waves and dreamy electric guitar]*

**Miguel:** Where is Mākaha?

**Kū'i'olani:** Mākaha is on the island of O'ahu in Hawai'i. On the west side at the end of the highway or freeway. It's the farthest place you can live if you drive west from town.

**Miguel:** And what is your relation to this place?

**Kū'i'olani:** So my relationship to this place is...I guess I'm trying to not do a Hawaiian history thing about the privatization of lands, but my family purchased this land, that I now live on, back in the fifties. So it's been in our family for about three generations, four if you're counting the new generation. I come to this particular place through actually not my Hawaiian side. It's through my Okinawan grandmother and my German grandfather. And this is the home my mother grew up in, and, for my Hawaiian family, we go back, much-more generations in this area. So, yeah, I have connections to Kaua'i, and Hawai'i island, and the island of Moloka'i mostly.

**Miguel:** My next question is how do you identify?

**Kū'i'olani:** Oh my God, this is so long too. Yeah, my pronouns are she/ her or they/them. I identify as queer. Some other words I use are lesbian, sparsely, maybe the word Dyke. (chuckle) I don't know. Um, and then, a Hawaiian word, which is *māhū*. Um, oh my God. I'm trying to not go into these long stories about them. Okay. Other words: I'm Kanaka Maoli, um, which is Native Hawaiian. I'm also Okinawan, um, Filipino or Filipinx and uh, German. And I feel like I have other terms I use for myself, but I'm going to stay there for now.

**Miguel:** I was going to ask if there's anything you want to add to how you identify, whether it's just that there's, you know, there's complications, or just something I didn't think of.

**Kū'i'olani:** I don't know. There's so many ways of identifying, I also identify with the terms QTBIPOC, and also like being indigenous and, like mixed race. But mixed in more ways than just race. I guess ethnically and culturally, and not just from my, you know, whatever. Not just from my Okinawan, Filipino, and German, and Hawaiian backgrounds, but also thinking of, um, you know, like queer culture and, um, you know, queer culture is also, there are many variations of queerness and, you know, you and I, I feel like come from kind of the similar DIY punk radical queer community.

**Miguel:** I was curious about where you live. I guess I have two questions. I wanted to ask where you live, which you've already kind of told us -- but is it like a house? Do you live with family?

**Kū'i'olani:** the property that we live on is about two acres. I live with my family right now: my mother, my brother, and my stepdad, and a bunch of animals. You might hear some wild chickens in the background.

**Miguel:** And have you lived other places?

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah So after I was born... My father grew up, I guess, poor and didn't have access to money and then had two children and, um, this is relevant because then he joined the military. He joined the Coast Guard, so he could always be by the ocean. A little while after I turned one, we moved to North Carolina for a little while, and then, um-

**Miguel:** Oh, wow. That's far.

**Kū'i'olani:** -- Sacramento, um, for a little bit. And then, I keep on wanting to say the indigenous names of all these places, but, um, Puerto Rico and San Pedro, um, and then sort of back and forth between

**Miguel:** Where's San Pedro?

**Kū'i'olani:** It's near Long Beach, like Southern California. And then sort of moving back and forth between, I guess, O'ahu mostly and the Bay Area, mostly Oakland. At this point in my life, I've probably spent about half my life, outside of Hawai'i and, the largest percentage of that has been in, like the Bay Area/Oakland area or Chochenyo Ohlone lands (chuckle).

*[sound of waves]*

**Miguel:** I am really curious about that because you had told me before, I remember, that you had lived in lots of places, but, I might ask you more about that. I was wondering if you could sort of describe the landscape of where you are now, where you live, like maybe some unique features of this place?

**Kū'i'olani:** In the ancient Hawaiian days, um, our, I guess leaders or *ali'i*, they divided the lands basically into districts. And the smallest, well, there's smaller sections called *'ili*, but um, most people would live in this thing that we call an *ahupua'a*.

It's a land division from mountain to sea, which would contain everything you would need in your life. So, you know, you have access to the ocean, you have access to the mountains and people would share. You know, if you're a fisherman you share with everyone in the community.

So this place actually, where I'm from, this house, this property is located in the middle of this sort of smaller valley. A lot of the *ahupua'a* on, on this side of the island are really divided by valleys. So, if I look back towards, I guess Northeast, we're almost hugged by these, this mountain range, with the largest mountain on the island of O'ahu is visible towards the back of my valley. That's called Ka'ala. And then if I turn the opposite way, I can see the ocean. So we have these beautiful mountains hugging this little part of land that then opens up into the ocean.

*[sound of waves and birds]*

**Miguel:** That sounds beautiful.

**Kū'i'olani :** Because we're on the west side, the way the trade winds are here, um, the winds come from east to west and, uh, most of the times of the year, and what happens is the mountains on the east side collect a lot of the rain. And so it's very green on the east side, but, um, the west side of the island, or sometimes called the 'leeward' side it's often drier than the "windward" side or the east side.

So Hawai'i has like two seasons, really like a dry season and a wet season, we're kind of moving into more of the wetter season. Um, so there's some green happening, but, um, often, you know, it's very like brown. And there's a lot of brown -- and yellows happening. I think it's very beautiful. When the sun's going down, the light is turning like that golden red color.

**Miguel:** Umhm.

**Kū'i'olani:** When it shines on these mountains, it creates these huge shadows, like beautiful shadows in the ridges because the mountains are also like slightly worn down on the side of the island. This area that I'm from is actually was the first part of this island that was being formed. when the volcanic eruptions were creating this island. I think it's the oldest part of the island. When you think of O'ahu, this island, sometimes if there's pictures of the mountains, it's usually super green -- and this picture is taken from the other side of the island.

**Miguel:** Umhm.

**Kū'i'olani:** Like the mountains on this side are never, I don't think, maybe once I saw a postcard of it on a very old, maybe like fifties or sixties postcard. I think that they're very beautiful. People think, uh, verdant green forests are more beautiful than dry brown grass, (dry laughter) but, um, I dunno.

A lot of areas in Hawai'i today are still in our traditional names and divided in those traditional ways. I think it's changing a little bit now really, like the ahupua'a system is set up so that people living there had all the resources they needed. And when we move into contemporary times, you know, resources are different than what they used to be hundreds of years ago.

Traditionally Hawaiian is - our histories are recorded orally. At the introduction of Western diseases, there's different estimates of the amount of population collapse we experienced. The highest estimate is about 90% population collapse so --

**Miguel:** Oh wow.

**Kū'i'olani:** When you think about peoples who have an oral history, and 90% of your people, really dying in less than a hundred years worth of time, like in a few generations, like two generations or even one, right? Those are the dark ages for us. Those are our family members. Those are our libraries of knowledge.

**Miguel:** It's really interesting to talk about all this before talking more about like identity, or especially queerness. That's what I was thinking as you were explaining.

*[sound of dreamy electric guitar]*

**Kū'i'olani:** there's so many things. It was hard to not even go into the history of land privatization or like, oh gosh...

I feel like a lot of indigenous, or most people, when you go back at some point in time, You know, land ownership wasn't a concept we had--When land privatization started happening, um - some Hawaiians still did it. I mean, there's always going to be indigenous people that don't buy into, I guess, Western colonial ways of living, you know, even I guess when the money system was introduced, Hawaiians I think were like, "Uh. Okay. like whatever, I'm growing my own food. Why should I work on -- I don't understand why I would work for you to make money for what??" You know. Sometimes I'm like, "do the colonizers have a playbook?" Because I feel like if you look at many places in the world, do you see them doing, you know, a lot of different tricks or strategies to get indigenous peoples to not even buy in -- it's like forced into these Western systems, you know, of labor or money or....

**Miguel:** Yep.

**Kū'i'olani:** Some of those ways that based in Hawai'i was, you know, people would buy up -- certain people; *haole*. Yeah. "*Haole*" is a Hawaiian word for a "foreigner." Some

people translate it as to mean “without breath”. You know, you can imagine Europeans coming to Hawai‘i and, um,

**Miguel:** “Without breath”?

**Kū‘i‘olani:** Yeah, “*ha*” is “breath” and “*ole*” is like “without”, so some people interpret that word, “*Haole*” as -- meaning “without breath”. So when you look at, uh, I guess a European person, because of the light skin, you would think that they don't have any breath.

**Miguel:** Like they're dead! -- like a corpse.

**Kū‘i‘olani:** Well, I wasn't gonna say that, but maybe [laughter]. You know, and I think there's a way some people still associate that, you know, there's, there's different ways to use it right now. Some people think it's a racial slur, but, or like, it can be derogatory. Um, it depends on how you're acting really. But, you know, it's our, it's our word that means foreigner. Um, some people think it only means white, but no, it's anyone whose ancestry is not from this land before 1778 or whatever, which is the year Captain Cook landed on these shores ... which he actually wasn't the first European here, but okay. Well, I'll just say that because the world thinks that (laughter)

**Miguel:** We could definitely spend hours correcting all the misconceptions and historical misconceptions. So, um, I'm never going to tell you not, I'm never going to tell you NOT to --

**Kū‘i‘olani:** Yes. I'm going to start taking notes because I'm forgetting what I'm saying. Land privatization. You know, they would buy up the land. So the water collects up in mountains and flows down from there and each island has an aquifer - water shield underneath it. Foreigners, *haole* would buy up these waters, the start of these water sources, you know, to divert to sugar plantations or pineapple plantations or whatever. And it would cut off access, that, you know, Hawaiian farmers had to water sources. And I felt like that was one way, they were like, “Okay, well now you have to work for us!”

So in Hawaiian thinking, the word we use in contemporary times for rich or English word rich is, uh, *waiwai* [vaivai] or *waiwai*, which is, -*wai* [vai] or *wai* is a word for water. Um, so, you know,

**Miguel:** Mhmm.

**Kū‘i‘olani:** -- traditionally, if you had a lot of water, you could grow a lot of food. You could have a larger population.

Oh, there's some chickens outside.

So if you think about, you know -- foreigners come in and diverting water sources to sugar plantations, which triggers the history of sugar in Hawai‘i (dry chuckle) directly connected to what we call the “Annexation of the Hawaiian Kingdom” and, or according to me, and many other Hawaiians, the contemporary U.S. occupation of Hawai‘i. Um,

anyways,-when I read about other colonized peoples, like, and I hear about different ways that we were forced and made to assimilate into whatever Western systems it's just like, it's like they would call it, it seems like colonizers had a playbook or called each other up, gave each other tips or something. I dunno.

**Miguel:** Does seem like that.

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah.

**Miguel:** I wanna ask you why you live, where you live.

**Kū'i'olani:** I talk about this a lot with a lot of indigenous people who are not on their ancestral lands and a lot of people that are mixed, but, um, the start of having a life that feels very compartmentalized has always been a challenge to me. I often and still do -- though I'm trying to not feel this way anymore -- I feel like I can be queer in the Bay Area, but not really *Hawaiian*. And I could be Hawaiian in Hawai'i, but not really *queer* ... even though I'm all of those things. And even though there are those communities in each of those places, like there is a large --it's not large --- There's a Hawaiian community in the Bay Area and there's a queer community in Hawai'i.

So, I moved back to Mākaha, I guess around three years ago, following a breakup and, to go to school, graduate school, to get a master's in education in learning design and technology. Yeah, moved back also to be with family and help fix up my family lands and also to start-a queer land project with, uh, another native Hawaiian, around queer community and growing plants, for Hawaiian arts and medicine,

**Kū'i'olani:** My friend Kahele, grew up mostly in diaspora, I think. Um, it's funny. We've been trying to meet each other for like over a decade. They've lived in various places, I think Seattle and New Orleans.

**Miguel:** So, is part of the land project, helping a diasporic people be able to come back and, like, reconnect, connect, and have this sort of community, too?

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah, it's intended to be a Hawaiian-led project, but with the focus of like QTBIPOC people. There's other aspects of this project, which is also about creating a space for creatives and artists, but especially QTBIPOC creators, I guess.

*[sound of electric guitar]*

**Miguel:** I guess I want to ask you - I'm just curious how, you know, how you relate to the term "queer" or like being queer, what your history is with that. If you want to talk about that?

**Kū'i'olani:** My identity or connection to queerness has slight variations on it, I guess. Um, like when I was in high school and the later nineties, I think I was just saying that I was "5% straight", but, um, I didn't use the word lesbian or bisexual then. And actually I hadn't even made out with anyone, but that doesn't matter, actually. Ok!

**Miguel:** Wait, so you literally told people you were 5% straight?



**Kū'i'olani:** Yes. It was still centered on “straight” or “heterosexuality”, huh? (wryly)

**Miguel:** (laughs) Well, what was the other 95%?

**Kū'i'olani:** “Super gay.” (laughter from both Miguel and Kū'i'o). I don't know. Maybe our percentages are always changing,

**Miguel:** Okay. In that case, what percent “Super gay” are you now? ... I'm just joking --

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah. I know it depends on how we're defining it! I'm like, I guess 99% now. It's like a hundred percent right now. I don't know.

**Miguel:** But you were telling people “I'm 5% straight.” So you -- what age were you when you were saying that?!

**Kū'i'olani:** Oh, probably sophomore -- started around 10th grade.

**Miguel:** In highschool?

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah. I realized I was gay or whatever, um, freshman year...

**Miguel:** Is that how you thought of it? Like gay or whatever -- at the time?

**Kū'i'olani:** Homosexual. “I'm a homo!” Um, I guess so I, I don't, yeah, I think I've just thought “gay” I don't think I started using lesbian till I went to college, probably.

**Miguel:** So you had also said you identify as, uh, and I'm sorry -- I'm going to be forever worried about my pronunciation -- but you identify also as *māhū*?

**Kū'i'olani:** Oh, yeah. Oh my God. That's a whole thing too. The closest thing that I could - way to explain it would be our version of two-spirit for being in the middle. And I think - in Hawaiian thinking, if I am understanding it correctly, I think everyone does have.....I don't know. It's not how we really talk about it, but like the masculine and feminine inside you. Right? And I think a lot of how Hawaiian culture is...there's a lot about balance or creating balance. If there's a male God for something there's often a female God for something. Or some people have the tattoo practice where the location you get your traditional tattoo has to do with, like, trying to balance out the masculine and feminine, I guess. I'm not an expert on this.

So māhū, you know, are people that are sort of in the middle. It's generally, that word is generally attached to trans women. I think for a long time or the way that I knew - understood that term as I was growing up is it was - I still think a majority of people use it in that way - that is about someone assigned male at birth that then is at some stage of identifying as a woman, or living as a woman.

*[sound of electric guitar]*

I do think it is a colonized lens. You know, we're looking at sort of traditional concepts or traditional roles, or words raised with Western culture, you know, even thinking in English and not thinking in our traditional ways, but yeah, I think so much of what I come to find when I'm studying Hawaiian language, or culture, history or whatever. It's

really about this indigenous understanding of context, you know, where sometimes with Hawaiian, like if you look at the word, it can mean many things. And, and it's like, well, how am I supposed to know?

Oh, and often it's just like, well, what is the context of the conversation or what you're speaking about? You know? So it's like you have to know context, which also sometimes includes specific place, you know? So, in that way, like indigenous thinking about the world, the concept of two-spirit is very broad, but also how it can be very specific, you know?

And like, when I think about so many things in Hawaiian, I really do, I feel that way about it. I didn't talk about a project, my like passion project, which is about, Hawaiian concepts of color and relearning those, and moving us, Hawaiians and others, towards seeing our environment, the way that our ancestors saw that place, you know. And that includes like, has to do with developing relationship with the lands you're on.

Color was the first thing that really, for me, in my Hawaiian learning helped me start to question or really start to see this, this, this ability or this way of thinking that's both broad, but also very specific. And the first little bread crumb about this was about the color blue, which, you know, a lot of people don't have a word for blue in their traditional languages. So there's not a concept of blue. And the word we learn actually -- when we're learning Hawaiian - is the word *polū*, which it's very clearly stated, in the dictionaries, that it's specifically a blue related to European things, whether it's like blue jeans or some blue dye from Europe, or like blue eyes. Well, there's some other words for blue eyes, but, um, *polū* is just the Hawaiianized, I mean, Hawaiianized English, word blue. So I know I'm going off on a tangent, but it's talking about this like way of seeing the world-

But the word that we really use in Hawaiian is *uli* or, or can use for "blue" is *uliuli*. It really talks about depth. If you look in the dictionary it says any dark color. Like the dark blue of the deep ocean or the dark green of the forest, the dark gray of a rain cloud, or the purple of a deep, like the deep purple of a bruise.

So like in Hawaiian thinking, it's this *word* or this *color* encompasses what we now would think of as many different colors. And so... in indigenous thinking it's like, it's both broad -- can be broad, but then you can use it very specifically, you know, to reference, just one of those things, but,

**Miguel:** Mmmhm.

**Kū'i'olani:** And then sometimes with the reference too -- sometimes you're referencing multiple things, and you're showing relationships between those things, by the way you talk about it. And I guess actually I'm going to bring it back to queerness, as I'm going down my path to like if you want to say "decolonize" or learn more about my culture and language, or trying to center, my thinking and perspective and life around, more traditional ancestral ways like this sort of-concept of something being both broad and specific, but also changeable and fluid. I started to realize that really my ability to understand my own Hawaiian culture, had already been practiced in my own life by

being queer. Not all queer people are like this, but I think especially-in our version of queer community,-it's very fluid and I think that's where a lot of queer ... I guess the queer *culture* is moving towards ... like even my pronouns -- I'm like, "Okay: she/her, or they/them; whatever." But you know, those words that we use, aren't *contracts* that we have to stick to for the rest of our lives. And I don't think a lot of people can understand that. Or it's like, yeah, I'm using this *word* or I'm identifying as this *thing*, but it might change. You've probably had friends who have transitioned. Or then de-transitioned. Or like just changed the pronouns they use, or how they identify and --

**Miguel:** Mhm

**Kū'i'olani:** -- so there's a sort of fluidity,-really a call for knowing the *context* and the relationship and like, I guess, the experience of being very present with somebody in a specific time, you know? But knowing that it's not always that, like, permanent also, or contextual. I know maybe I'm going off too much, but --

**Miguel:** No, I really relate to what you're saying. It is similar also. I think there's more fluidity, or more... in my culture, it doesn't... It doesn't necessarily need to be so strict? So, it's less rigid in a way? It's really complicated, but there is more of a-- fluidity, for lack of a better word. But context, actually, it's more like context, like what you're saying, this is why it's hard to translate these things too. And in communities that I've been part of that are- more have an indigenous mindset - it's more like, "Well, ok. If that's what *you* call it..." - you know?

**Kū'i'olani:** I don't know, there's a way that Hawaiians, some Hawaiians,-I find, people that I've had this experience with tend to be elders -- don't identify with -using the words "lesbian" or "gay" or "queer"

**Miguel:** Yeah! That's a whole 'nother thing!

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah, there's this whole attitude also, that, we're, by using all these terms, we're like, you know-

**Miguel:** -- Adopting colonizer culture. Yeah. 'Cause they're a colonial understanding.

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah so one thing I did my master's project, actually, based on the topic of teaching an online module on Hawaiian color theory and-I was reading different whatever academic papers in different fields, but there was a whole, there's a whole idea that color perception is based on land, language, and culture.

And I think that that goes for probably everything. So, our concept of color it's like, or how we think of it now is really based off of, well, the science of color, understanding the spectrum of light. Right? And, um, being able to create any color or on the, on that spectrum, or like even the hex color code and you break it down to these letters and numbers. Right? But like in indigenous thinking, it's like that color is this plant, you know, and then that plant grows only in these certain spots in the islands. Um, I'm going back to context, but yeah, the limitations of, of understanding your own culture when you're using a whole different language and a whole different mindset, you know? And then it's made more complicated by Christianity, as a tool of the colonizer, and the ways that

queer histories have been erased, like really deliberately. In Hawaiian history I can think of, uh, actually there's a very famous story that is okay. So Pele is a goddess that a lot of people are familiar with. Um, who's like, I don't know, goddess of, I guess, volcanoes. I don't know if you know about her, but, um...

**Miguel:** Yes, thanks to Tori Amos. No, I'm just kidding. Please forgive me...

**Kū'i'olani:** I forgot about that! Oh my God, Boys for Pele. I love that album... Sorry. I was going to start singing Tori Amos songs, but I'm not going to do that. Actually... no. No, wait, wait, okay. Dammit.

**Miguel:** Blasphemy!

*[ upbeat music ]*

**[BREAK]**

**[Host]:** Hey, friends, I'm HB Lozito. Because we know the impact of colonization on people, land, and resources, we're encouraging our white listeners with access to wealth to engage in an ongoing process of reparations.

Today, Kū'i'olani is asking you to support their project. This fundraiser is for a māhū (nonbinary, trans) led project in Hawai'i. Primarily, this project aims to house Queer Trans Black Indigenous People of Color community and repair relationship to land, especially for Kanaka Maoli, Indigenous, and Black relatives. Secondary to this objective, is a focus on creative endeavors, both traditional and contemporary. In general, it is the continuation of ancestral practices alongside new media, arts, and music. For Kū'i'olani, it is the cultivation of plants used in Hawaiian arts (and medicine) and the ongoing practice of developing these skills.

The link to their fundraiser, where you can donate and learn more about their work is in the episode notes, and over on our websites at [www.countryqueers.com](http://www.countryqueers.com) and [www.weareoutintheopen.org](http://www.weareoutintheopen.org)

Now, back to Miguel's interview with Kū'i'olani.

**[END OF BREAK]**

**Miguel:** Have you ever, in your personal relationships, or in the larger queer community, sort of like clashes, like maybe people not understanding your other parts of your identity? Especially ethnicity or cultural identity, family, things like that.

**Kū'i'olani:** Oh, all the time. Yes. I think that's part of, like, when I talk about having a compartmentalized identity. um, you know, I, I feel like, yeah, I feel like my queer friends, acknowledge and see, and accept me as being Hawaiian, but they're not Hawaiian. And then in my Hawaiian community, I feel, no, I don't feel like they can, they see who I am. Yeah. I guess in a lot of ways. And, and, I also feel like they don't accept my queerness and that, or my version of queerness, you know?

**Miguel:** How is your version of queerness wrong in Hawaiian community?

**Kū'i'olani:** Well, it depends...

**Miguel:** Or, what's not acceptable about it?

**Kū'i'olani:** Well, I don't know. I think, okay. So some people assume that there's just one kind of way to be queer or something. You know, where the, when I talk about having a hard time with this, with Hawaiians, they're like, but, I know so many gay people, or there were so many gay people in Hawaiian Studies, which I did my undergrad in Hawaiian Studies. And, like, you're talking about like less than 10 people. Like, what are you talking about, like, what if I told you, you could be friends with 10 people, you could choose between 10 people, you know?

**Miguel:** Yeahhhh. (chuckling)

*[ sound of dreamy electric guitar ]*

**Kū'i'olani:** Like do you fucking hear yourself? Sorry but it's like, that's like, almost always, like, one of the first things they're like, but, you know, there are gay people here. And I was like, um, you're talking about that one person that lives like two hours away, or on a different island, or that I would obviously never get along with? Well, but that's some of it

**Miguel:** Are those the visibly, like whatever "gay" quote, unquote or "out", quote, unquote people?

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah, I guess it would have to be the out people, but, you know, then there's some queer people that aren't out. Or I don't know. I think there's also, there is alsoooo, you know, there's so many kinds of ways to be queer. I think, some of the queer people I know here are, you know, which is a very Hawaiian way to be, which is, like, really centered on family. And I think the way it manifests sometimes it's like this, a family unit that is heteronormative.

**Miguel:** Heteronormative like quote unquote, mom, dad, children, or something...

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So I think it ends up looking like that... and there's, you know, and even Some Native Hawaiians go to church.

**Miguel:** To the Christian church?

**Kū'i'olani:** Christian churches. Um...

**Miguel:** I think you were telling me before that some people are very devoutly Christian, religious.

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah. And I...

**Miguel:** ... native Hawaiians.

**Kū'i'olani:** ...Guess I'm talking about my family. Well, yeah, being queer in Hawai'i is hard for many reasons?, yeah, we're talking about my version of queerness not being accepted. It's not necessarily true, I have, I know queer people, I have queer friends who are, I was going to say "radical", "politicized"...

**Miguel:** But you were saying being queer in Hawai'i is hard for many reasons.

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah.

**Miguel:** What are some of those reasons?

**Kū'i'olani:** I mean, some of it is the number of people.

It's like, I feel like my queer friends in the Bay, like, really SEE me, like all of who I am. Like whether or not they understand the Hawaiian part, they do to some extent, right? Especially if they're indigenous, or other Pacific Islander, or, you know, BIPOC. But, my experience in Hawaiian community is not one of acceptance, or to see me, like, all of who I am, or even appreciate it, you know? It's sort of like you're kinda weird or well that's "radical" -- which, I have a whole thing about the word "radical", but um, I don't always use that word--

**Miguel:** But is part of that, is it that thing that we were talking about earlier where people think like, oh, you've adopted something, I mean, this is so complicated in cultures that have been like forced assimilated. But where it's like, oh, you pick that up from, you know, those people from the colonizers, essentially..

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah, actually...

**Miguel:** That happens a lot in Mexican American culture where it's like, I mean, some people mistakenly are like, "oh, being gay that's for like Anglos over there. We don't do that in our culture." But it's actually the opposite. It's like, actually we had, that is a part of our culture. And then the colonizers came and they were extremely homophobic. I mean like violently so.

**Kū'i'olani:** There so many things I want to say (laughs)

**Miguel:** And but then you have all this repression from the Catholic church and then people who are like, oh, that's gay. That's not what we are. That's like, that comes from this, you know, those white liberal people. And it's like, no gay is, we were really gay before the white people came here and the white people didn't like it and they burned us at the stake for it because we were too accepting of gays people, quote, unquote gay. It's it's so fucked. I feel like I've heard a lot of people talk about this that are Mexican American and also Native American who struggle with this. Like, no, actually, you know, kind of want to be like, learn your history. The colonizers are the one who thought this was perverted, et cetera. And put all this negative shake on it...

**Kū'i'olani:** And yeah. And you've adopted that. You've adopted their thinking actually. It's the same in Hawaiian community, actually.

**Miguel:** You've yeah, you've adopted it through the Catholic - straight up through the Catholic church, you know. And also this loss of history and the loss of history is because of genocide and forced assimilation. That was the goal.

**Kū'i'olani:** Ugh. Oh my God. So many tangents. Yes.. And then there's a way that we're like, I don't know, police each other about what or ourselves about being whether we're "Hawaiian enough," or we're a "real Hawaiian", like I still have, you know, um, I think a lot of Hawaiians relate to that, especially, you know, with such a high population collapse. And a lot of us are mixed, you know, I think my experience with, you know, sharing all of my ethnic background with people on the continent, people are always like, "Wow, you're, that's exotic!" I'm like, that's not really, everyone in Hawai'i is very similar, you know? Like, and that has to do with a lot with like sugar plantation work and like, um, really having the communities of people around labor, you know, and, you know, so Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese people working together. So we're all a lot, a lot of people, Hawaiians are mixed with a lot of these things. So, but it also, then means, I think we're constantly, always like, am I Hawaiian enough?

*[sound of dreamy electric guitar]*

And one of the reasons I feel that way is because I did spend a large chunk of my childhood outside of Hawai'i. And that is where my wanting to create pathways back for Hawaiians in diaspora comes from, um, buuut. Yeah. There's this way that, like queerness gets attached to ways that we police each other, or even like-how I dress, like I wear chucks...you know people are like, oh, when I say I lived in Oakland, they're like, oh yeah, you look very Bay Area queer. I'm like, okay. Yeah. But, um, but then it gets read here, by Hawaiians, you know, I'm, I'm from this area where there's a large Hawaiian population, maybe the largest on this island. Um, and I am constantly, I constantly get stink eye and people also ask me if I'm from here, you know?

**Miguel:** Oh, so you get perceived as maybe a foreigner, or just different, othered?

**Kū'i'olani:** Othered or a tourist even sometimes.

**Miguel:** Or someone who's adopted foreign ways, or something?

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah, yeah. I was in Hawaiian studies, and, I feel like when you're in those kinds of environments, or even, the highschool I went to, where, it's just like, we're all Hawaiian and you see there's many ways to be Hawaiian and many ways Hawaiians look, you know, there's some people that are blonde and blue eyed. And, um, while that is an acceptance or an understanding, I feel like in those environments that are centered in Hawaiian culture, Hawaiian thinking, there's still a way that it's like, mmmmm, well, you're kind of weird though-

**Miguel:** Really?

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah. Not everyone. Largely, that's my experience.

**Miguel:** Everything you're saying is so hard because it brings to mind, I mean, it, obviously it brings up this issue of like these painful things about like colonization, but also it brings up another issue, which I think of is like, I mean, it's ongoing colonization, but it deserves its own category, which is tourism, you know? That's like a whole 'nother issue. I want to be like, what kind of problematic gays come to your people's place? (Cracking up.)

**Kū'i'olani:** Oh my God.

**Miguel:** Just kidding. I mean, it's just problematic people. But, the fact that it can, you know, be other queer people being the problem is interesting. I was going to give you a time check, but you said you wanted to keep talking. So I figured, I mean, I don't think this is the only opportunity we'll have, or you'll have, to ever explain all of these things, which it can feel like that. It can feel overwhelming, like how much... It sucks cause it's like we have this double job where we have to explain all this cultural stuff to people.

**Kū'i'olani:** 'Cause we talk about words, and concepts, or, then, like history. There's so many ways that I felt like, at least how I am, who I am in the world is, like, very impacted by the weight of my ancestors. And like, you know, there's that, that shirt that's like, I'm my ancestor's wildest dreams I saw kids wearing, you know, kids wearing it, like kids of color and I love seeing it. And then sometimes there's, you know, being indigenous or BIPOC, like, is very special in so many ways, but it also has, it comes with so much responsibility...

**Miguel:** Yeah, it does.

**Kū'i'olani:** ...for past, present, and future, you know?

**Miguel:** Mmhmmm.

**Kū'i'olani:** So to be someone that doesn't acknowledge that passed through your family or identify those things, I feel like releases you from your, your responsibilities or your, the weight of that, or like your ancestors it's like, it must, it feels so freeing in some ways. I wanted to move into this area, but maybe I'm just forcing it too much or something, talking about belonging, because I think really Americans have, have created this whole myth that, and a lot of white people or white Americans have this myth, and this, this approach to space, or land, or place as, like, they belong there. You



know? It's like, just because you're here doesn't mean (Weird noise, that interferes with audio for a moment) you belong here.

You know, we were in the Bay Area, it's still being heavily gentrified. And I would see these techies walk around with their fucking airpods or whatever expensive tech shit, in West Oakland. And, I'm like, "Oh my god, you would be fucking jumped. Why isn't someone jumping you right now?" You know? And, that sounds very mean to say, but what I was really, what I was reacting to, really, is like this like...

**Miguel:** Well, the entitlement, the entitlement.

**Kū'i'olani:** Yeah. It's entitlement. Yeah. It's entitlement.

**Miguel:** But how nice to just assume that you belong. Actually, you don't belong, you're the least belonging, actually, but you don't know that. And in other ways, we've grown up the whole time being told we don't belong, or we don't belong enough, or not enough for this group, or not enough for that group, especially being mixed. And also just constantly being told, my classmates, teachers, authorities, that my family is weird, or wrong, or different. No we're not, but we're not because we're not essentially white, Anglo enough, essentially.

**Kū'i'olani:** Omg, yes.

**Miguel:** Anglo is the word we use in the region where I'm from. That word may be unfamiliar to some people, but it basically means white. It's more complicated than that, but that's the word we use.

**Kū'i'olani:** The word *haole* is similar. A lot of people react to the term *haole*, in that way, that it's offensive. And it has to do with context. It's like, are you acting like a dumb haole? It really can be just descriptive. And, that's why I use it too. It means foreigner. And that's what you are. It's about relationship to place and acknowledging your relationship.

And it's, you know, the indigenous way of approaching land and spaces, is always, I feel like I'm always constantly thinking about that, when I'm not in my ancestral lands. And I'm even thinking about it, like, even in Hawai'i, places that my family is not connected to. Right? Like specific places, even if we're on the same island, like, I still think of myself as a guest there, in a lot of ways, you know?

Going back to—talking about belonging, this person just having this total unawareness and like just having this nice experience, listening to music. Meanwhile, I'm like laser eyeing them, with how upset I am. You know, and I have that one of the reasons I don't go to the beach sometimes, or like a lot of times actually, is because there are so many tourists that I don't...I want to be Cyclops and laser their heads off. Like, that's how I feel in my head because, and it's, which is very, uh sounds dramatic and really horrible, but to be having this internal experience, as an indigenous person, with all of what's happening in Hawai'i, all of the history that has happened. And then to be side by side with people that are totally unaware and totally ignorant, like sometimes choosing to be ignorant about it, and just having a nice vacation, is very difficult. I'll, like, go into the

water to cry, because I'm so upset being at the beach. And then there's a way that's like, I'm letting someone else control my access to my lands. It's, it's hard.

And then besides the beach, one other time that happened was, that made me so sad... So being on Mauna Kea during the protests, there were so many conversations I had with friends, you know, whether they're Hawaiians in diaspora or on, on a different island or my own family member. My sister who lives in Alaska, usually. I just would hear over and over, "I'm not Hawaiian enough" or "I don't know, hula", or "I don't know those chants" or, you know, it was just constantly hearing this from Hawaiians. But, then, seeing non-Hawaiians up there, which, you know, we like allies and accomplices, but it would be like, you guys like seeing these other people, that aren't Hawaiian, having this sense of feeling of belonging. When actually, this is all meant for you. This space is really for you and you're needed and wanted here.

I met Kahele, finally, up there and we're having a moment, um, before we said, bye. Mauna Kea, for a lot of people, for a lot of Hawaiians in diaspora, like called them back. A lot of Hawaiians are like, oh yeah, I need to go back home. And, I think, Kahele, at that time, was feeling it. And I was like, are you going to move back here? And they said, "I want to, but I feel like I'll never date anyone. And I won't have any community and I won't see any options with people for me to date." And I was like, yeah, but you could have friendship and family and the land, (laughs) so feeling like we have to choose between that.

And actually this was, this was maybe the start of my project I mean. I'd been thinking about, doing a queer land project for a very long time. I feel like I'm dating myself by making a Field of Dreams reference, but really, like "if you build it, they will come." Like, other queer people, like me, are not going to be here unless I stay here, or some of us stay here. It's this attempt to create that space that feels so lonely... and hard. And well Kahele is moving back and, yep, we're going to try and start this project together, it will be nice to do that.

I was trying to explain it to my therapist, but it's very hard, I can only have a relationship with Hawai'i in Hawai'i - with these lands, and these rains, and winds, this ocean, these plants, and that limits my access or relationships with queer community. And then it's made more difficult --I always have felt very connected to land and Hawai'i, and my culture, and history, but I have a really hard time with Hawaiian people. And, it has a lot to do with my queerness and colonization, you know?

And even Hawaiians, not realizing how colonized they are. Like, right now, -there are lots of Hawaiians who are Trump supporters, for example. And they're out here flying, you know, they're driving their huge trucks that are like, I'm Hawaiian. They're flying a Hawaiian sovereignty flag, next to a Trump's flag... wait, wait next to a Trump flag with wait, one more flag... a blue lives matters, American flag. I was like, "You guys, these things don't go together!"

**Miguel:** That's - reminds me of the south here on the, on the mainland, you know?

**Kū'i'olani:** I have a hard time and, I mean, it has to do with my experience in high school, with my own Hawaiian family. My grandma and her siblings, a few years ago, came to speak out against same sex marriage at the state Capitol. And they were in the news and I didn't even know about it, but my cousins had to repost it on Facebook or something, talking about how proud they were of our elders, you know?

And I, I like, I don't care about marriage, in a lot of ways. I mean, it's mostly symbolic, but the symbol, at least of being for or against it, in my own family is about being colonized or not colonized, or accepting me or not accepting me. Maybe. I dunno. I dunno if sometimes we do it to ourselves with feeling uh, rejected or not part of something. I mean, I think it's an experience of being mixed, being in diaspora, being queer. You know, never feeling enough or, like, we never completely belong some place.

*[sounds of waves, followed by waves under dreamy eclectic guitar]*

## **Rae Garringer [Host]**

Hey there, I'm Rae Garringer. Next time on Country Queers you'll hear Tommy Anderson's interview with Adria in Athens, Georgia. Adria Stembridge is a goth, neurodivergent, white, queer, trans woman who was born and raised in Georgia, where she still lives. Here's a clip of their conversation:

"So like I got exposed to a lot of I guess what a lot of people would consider "country lifestyle" early on. We didn't have farm animals, but we had everything but ... My dad had a little riding lawn mower, it was called a Sears Suburban. And back in the 60s and 70s, you could buy these little riding lawn mowers, which had like miniature three point hitches and you can attach you know, roto tellers, turn plows, cultivators, you name it. So you know, I would get to drive that because I could reach the pedals on it."

This episode was created and produced by Miguel Mendías, with support from HB Lozito from Out in the Open, and myself. Our fabulous sound designer for Season 2 is Hideo Higashibaba. Audio editing in this episode by myself.

Endless thanks to our brilliant editorial advisory dream team: Hermelinda Cortés, Lewis Raven Wallace, and Sharon P. Holland. Sharon was the editorial advisor for this

episode, thank you so much. And thanks most of all to Kū'i'olani, for sharing your story so generously with us all, and to Miguel for all the work and care you put into this interview and episode.

Music in this episode was written and performed by Tommy Anderson. Additional music by Poddington Bear. Ambient sounds in this episode were recorded by Kū'i'olani.

If you liked what you heard, please subscribe, rate, and review the Country Queers podcast. You can find all of our episodes and more about the project at [www.countryqueers.com](http://www.countryqueers.com). While you're there, please consider signing up to be a sustaining supporter of Country Queers on our [Patreon](#) page.

You can also find this episode on the website of Out in the Open, our co-facilitators of this collaborative Season 2 adventure, at [www.weareoutintheopen.org](http://www.weareoutintheopen.org). While you're there, check out and connect with their rad work building power of rural LGBTQ+ folks in the northeast!

Until next time...stay queer out there, friends!

**[END]**