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# Center for Gaming Research

## Occasional Paper Series

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### NINTH ISLAND, LAS VEGAS: HAWAIIAN GAMING TOURISM AND THE CALIFORNIA HOTEL\*

*Cynthia Van Gilder & Dana R. Herrera*

**ABSTRACT:** Many people do not realize that Las Vegas, Nevada is home to a unique niche tourism: it is overwhelmingly the vacation destination of choice for residents of the state of Hawai'i, even affectionately termed the "Ninth Island." Many credit the strong Hawaiian interest in Las Vegas to the fact that there is no legal gaming in the state of Hawai'i, however, data indicates that it is not just the opportunity to gamble that bring Hawaiian tourists here, but also the specific amenities and experience offered at one particular hotel and casino, The California Hotel. Nicknamed "The Cal," this establishment is overwhelmingly the Hawaiian choice for sleeping, gambling, eating, and socializing. Although the exterior of The Cal still reflects its original identity as a California-themed establishment, the interior reveals its forty-year history of transformation into a Hawaiian home-away-from-home, with island themed décor, banquet rooms labeled in the Hawaiian language, and multiple eateries offering Hawaiian favorites. This paper examines the "tourist imaginary" created at The Cal by the Boyd Gaming Corporation, and suggests that it has become a "lovemark," that is now part of the Hawaiian pan-ethnicity known as being a local, or *kama'aina*.

**Keywords:** Hawaiians, tourism, gaming, Las Vegas, lovemark

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There are many facets to understanding the special relationship between Hawaiians and Las Vegas. We have been exploring the phenomenon of Hawaiian travel to Las Vegas for several years now, given talks, and published two very different articles on this work so far (Van Gilder and Herrera, 2015; Van Gilder and Herrera, in press). In January of 2018 we were honored to come to the University of Nevada,

Las Vegas as Eadington Fellows. This paper considers what brought us here to the UNLV Special Collections and Archives and how we have added to our thinking since undertaking that research.

Several years ago, when we first started looking around to get a sense of what had been written about Hawaiians in Las Vegas, we found articles in major newspapers, like *The Los*

*Angeles Times*, or the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*. We also found articles in tourism and trade magazines, but nothing that had been written by academics, and nothing with theoretical analysis. Instead we found pieces that basically reported the fact that Las Vegas had a significant niche tourism of Hawaiians and that this tourism was focused on The California Hotel in downtown Las Vegas. To the degree that any of these articles asked or addressed the question, “Why do Hawaiians love Las Vegas so much and go there so often?”, the answer always lay in gambling. We have a whole collection of quotes from popular news media with statements such as “a well-known Hawaiian passion for gambling” (Downes 2002).

As anthropologists, these seemed to be hopelessly inadequate explanations to us. First of all, Hawai‘i is one of the most ethnically diverse states in the country. We are well familiar with its history of immigration, population replacement, and population mixing. We really were not buying any kind of biological explanation of racial affinity for gambling explanation. Plus, many cultures have gambling traditions and there is more than one way to scratch that itch. We turned to the anthropology of tourism for some analytical models and theoretical ideas that would help us begin to understand what we were absolutely convinced was a cultural phenomenon.

In the anthropology of tourism, the concept of the tourist imaginary is used to describe the set of ideas and values a tourist associates with a destination. These imaginaries are constructed from a combination of advertising, word of mouth, and other cultural sources such as depictions in movies, television shows, or books. They are what makes a tourist buy a ticket and make the trip. The desire to participate in the imaginary of a place. The travel or tourism industry is in the business of cultivating and selling these imaginaries. When choosing how to spend their time and money, travelers have a dizzying array of destinations to select from. Do they want to go to romantic and cultured Paris? Adventurous and ecologically educational Costa Rica? Even once having decided on a destination, visitors have countless options of how to organize their experience to bring the imaginary to life.

Today, Hawai‘i as a destination has a very well-known and powerful tourism imaginary that draws five million mainland American tourists each year to Hawai‘i. It is one of a domesticated tropical paradise. Tourists expect to find a culture of relaxation, indulgence, flower leis offered by welcoming locals, beautiful beaches, fancy fruit-filled drinks, etc. It is exotic, with its ukulele music, hula girls, pidgin accents and whole pigs cooked in earth ovens, but also English speaking and safe for Americans – it is a state after all. This is the combination that is promised for visitors to Hawai‘i.

Another aspect of this research that is fascinating is that in the traditional tourism literature which employs the dichotomy of “hosts” and “guests” to talk about the structural relationships in the travel experience, Hawaiians always figure as hosts (Smith, 1989; Smith and Brent, 2001; Buck

1994). They live in one of the most popular destinations in the world and a significant percentage of its inhabitants are employed in one way or another in the hospitality or tourism business. Nowhere did we see literature asking, “where do people who are traditionally in the structural position of hosts, go to become guests?” Or as we have said, “if you live in paradise, where do you vacation?” What is the imaginary that captures their attention and tourist dollar?

Specifically, we asked, “what is the Hawaiian tourist imaginary of Las Vegas that keeps these folks captivated by Las Vegas?” To begin to develop our model of the Hawaiian tourist imaginary of Las Vegas, we started with the wonderful book on *The California Hotel* by Ogawa and Blink (2008) from which we learned an oral history of the hotel from the point of view of the Boyd Gaming Corporation, and particularly the Boyd family, and John Blink who held several executive level positions at the California hotel, including Director of Sales and Vice President of Marketing.

The book tells the story of how, after building his first hotel from the ground up in 1974, Sam Boyd found himself in financial trouble and unable to attract the southern California clientele he had counted on. He then recalled how in his teens he had lived in the islands and worked on a gambling barge that sailed from Hawai‘i, and got the idea to target Hawaiians to come to his hotel. He and Blink appeared on O‘ahu tv shows, contracted with local travel agents, and relentlessly flied grocery stores, churches, and civic organizations trying to build interest in Las Vegas. For example, knowing that Coors beer was in high demand, yet limited supply in Hawai‘i, the Boyds would bring cases with them from Nevada to cultivate local relationships. Sam Boyd particularly succeeded with his all-inclusive vacation packages which included flight, hotel stay, and meal tickets to be used at The Cal.

The Ogawa book details how in the early days of courting his new Hawaiian clientele, Boyd stocked the Cal with ordinary Vegas buffet items like roast beef and mashed potatoes. He discovered that interestingly, Hawaiians like to eat like Hawaiians even when they are on vacation. Blink explains how Hawaiians taught them about the proper type of sticky rice and their love of oxtail soup. One chef remembers, [Boyd asking] “Why would Hawaiians want to eat local food when they eat that in Hawai‘i all the time? ...I said you have to cater to Hawaiians, and I put a menu together. We started a Hawaiian buffet...lomi salmon, lau lau, kalua pig, chicken long rice, teriyaki items, and kalbi ribs. I tell you, within ninety days, the Hawaiians were playing and stay at that place, and it became very successful. At that time they were only serving 400 lunches and dinners a day. I tripled that to 1,500 to 2,200 just on dinner” (Ogawa and Blink, 2008, p. 42). With some effort, including importing rice cookers and a head chef from Hawai‘i, The Cal adjusted its offerings to honor that preference. Today, the company runs four charter flights per week and they are usually sold out well in advance.

Ultimately, William Boyd attributes his father’s status with the Hawaiian people as the basis of their success. “Really,

the most important thing was they considered my dad to be a local boy because he had lived in Honolulu. He had run a gaming establishment there. They thought he was one of them and that's why they've been very loyal to us [and] we've been loyal to them" (Boyd, 2013, p. 153). In the narrative of the Ogawa and Blink book, Sam Boyd is credited with having single-handedly developed the Hawaiian appetite for Las Vegas. In short, the book essentially tells a creation myth with a larger than life than life hero that created the Hawaiian interest in Las Vegas out of nothing.

One thing is definitely true, over and over again, all roads in Hawaiian Vegas led us to The California Hotel. It is the undisputed hub of Hawaiian Las Vegas. So much so, that for almost twenty years Las Vegas has been referred to as Hawaii's ninth island.

With this in mind, we next focused our attention on the built environment of The Cal. What messages does it send to its patrons? How does it constrain and enable certain tourist experiences? We applied what you might call a semiotic approach to reading meaning from the spaces, to put it simply, considering how they are organized, labelled, decorated, and used.

If you are unfamiliar with The Cal, the exterior of The California Hotel reflects Sam Boyd's original intention and vision for the facility, with large California themed murals on its exterior. There are wilderness explorers (perhaps fur traders?), men panning for gold, and a steam train labelled, "California Express." Pine trees, mountains, and streams are the landscape location markers in the backgrounds of the scenes. These murals make a fairly obvious association between the California Gold Rush of 1849 and the prospective customer's ability to "hit it rich" on the gaming floor of the hotel (see also Van Gilder and Herrera, 2015).

On your first visit, one would naturally expect upon entering the building to encounter signifiers of 19th Century California, such as saloon doors or dealers with bandana printed neckerchiefs. Instead, signs announce that, "Aloha is spoken here." Dealers and cocktail waitresses wear aloha shirts, the carpet has plumeria blossoms worked into the design, and sprinkled liberally around the gaming floor are slot machines with Hawaiian themes. For example, you can play the "Pau Hana" video poker game. *Pau hana*, literally "done work," is used in contemporary Hawai'i to reference the weekend or "happy hour" at the end of an individual work day. There are also gaming machines themed with "Diamond Head," the famous volcanic crater at Waikiki Beach on O'ahu, and "Shaka Five Way," a hand signal associated with Hawaiian surfing and "hanging loose."

Food offerings include a buffet stocking traditional and modern Hawaiian favorites such as ox tail soup and *lomi lomi* fish. Upstairs, you can visit a "crack seed" shop, have some Lappert's ice cream, or drop in to the "Aloha Specialties Restaurant," which is essentially a "plate lunch" establishment resembling dozens you could frequent in the islands. Here, you can have Spam *musubi*, Portuguese sausage and eggs, and even a *loco moco*, all with the traditional plate lunch sides: a scoop of white rice and a scoop of mac

salad (macaroni). Specials are announced on tattered slips of paper taped to the wall menu and Aloha brand *shoyu* (soy sauce) sits on each table. If you linger long enough in the sitting area of the restaurant, you are bound to witness an unexpected reunion, most likely taking place in Hawaii's local pidgin. The hotel's banquet rooms are also upstairs and have Hawaiian names, such as "The 'Ohana Room" ('ohana means family in Hawaiian), and "The Maile Room" (maile, or *Alexia oliviformis*, is a plant often used to make leis). These are the facilities where the Hawaiian high school reunions (mentioned above), birthday parties, and anniversary celebrations take place.

Returning, then, to the question we posed above, "What is the tourist imaginary that Las Vegas, and specifically, The Cal, offers to the people of Hawai'i?" It is obviously a compelling one that speaks to deeply held values and satisfies deeply felt needs. In fact, we argue that in the last 40 years, The Cal has become a Hawaiian's Hawaiian fantasy.

The state's current political reality is beset by ethnic tensions, gross economic inequalities, and struggles for political sovereignty and control of land. Native Hawaiians are overwhelmingly represented in the homeless, alcoholic, and incarcerated populations, while at the same time the programs designed to help them, in many cases funded by legacy grants from the overthrown monarchy, are under increasing attack from non-native Hawaiians who want a piece of what they see as unfair, racially based, government handouts. Tourism is increasingly seen as a burden on the local population, taxing local infrastructure and precious environmental resources such as water. Especially, on O'ahu, the highways are clogged with tourists' rental cars, the best beaches, restaurants and even supermarkets and shops are full of tourists. The cost of living is driven up and up by the tourist and foreign investment dollar.

*But not at the Cal.* At the Cal, a miniature Hawaiian world has been created without the tensions and overcrowding so prevalent back home. At the Cal, everyone from Hawai'i is Hawaiian, indigenous or not. Cultural elements the locals have in common are celebrated and sanitized into a tourist bubble of harmony without the inconvenient truths and tensions of power and inequality. Here, contemporary Hawai'i is unproblematized, and tensions reduced. Here, locals mix and mingle regardless of socio-economic status or ethnic background. In short, the Hawaiian imaginary of Las Vegas is the local, or *kama'aina*, fantasy of Hawai'i. Here nobody asks you to put on a coconut bra and perform "native." Here you do not fight mainland tourists to get into your favorite lunch place. Here you can see friends and family and celebrate island culture in peace.

We argue that The Cal is what in the field of branding and marketing, is known as a "Lovemark" (Roberts 2004). It has become sewn into the lives of families and the cultural identity of Hawaiian locals. The significance of The Cal has moved beyond brand loyalty and into a critical signifier of identity. Coming to Las Vegas and staying at The Cal has become part of what it means to be a Hawaiian.

In the editor's introduction to a special issue of the

*Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, Dr. Graburn and his coauthor, Dr. Maria Gravari-Barbas (2011), remind us that early travel writing often employed the trope of it's like "heaven on earth," to describe tourist destinations. This is a phrase that has been used countless times to market Hawai'i to outsiders.

Again, we argue that gambling per se, is not central to what keeps Hawaiians coming back to Las Vegas. Rather The Cal is a tourist's "heaven on earth" of a different order – importantly, here Hawaiians can enjoy Hawaiian culture, and each other, socializing with people from home, "at home". At The Cal, aspects of contemporary Hawaiian culture shared by all "locals" are celebrated, most notably in the forms of décor, music, and especially, food.

Last year the Cal renovated its facility from top to bottom. Their press release sought to reassure patrons that although they now boasted a more contemporary and sophisticated décor, the traditional aloha spirit for which they were known, and loved, remained unchanged. We read this new Cal as a mature, self-assured manifestation of its Hawaiian identity. It is the undisputed heart of Hawaiian Vegas. The signifiers of Hawaiianness are now built into features such as the main gaming floor bar's façade, but are of a more subtle nature. Employees still wear aloha shirts. The background décor, however, has been upgraded to a more contemporary and sleek pan-Asian theme, with bamboo motifs, for example. The main hotel bar on the first floor is framed by vintage photos of Hawai'i, including surfing legend Duke Kahanamoku, hula girls, Diamond Head volcano, the Royal Hawaiian Band of the late 1800's, and the Boyd family. The two histories, Hawaiian and the Boyds, are symbolically intertwined in this display. There are no captions on the photos, once again emphasizing the status of The Cal's insiders. One either knows who and what is depicted in the photos, or they do not.

The Cal referred to its new style in promotional materials as, "modern Hawaiian colonial design." We take this statement as overt confirmation of our original reading of the space: "here you will not find the grass huts and *tiki* statues of old Hawai'i, here the post-plantation, multicultural Hawai'i is celebrated." As we contemplated the press-releases and promotional materials associated with the 2016 renovations at The Cal, we became eager to examine other, earlier press-releases and to understand how the Boyd Corporation had understood this property and its patrons over the years. In short, we wanted to analyze the discourse surrounding the marketing and branding of The Cal over time. To this end, we came to the Lied Library's Special Collection and Archives at University of Nevada, Las Vegas to look at the collections of Boyd Gaming Corporation's internal newsletters, annual reports, promotional videos, and other marketing materials to see how they have constructed the identity of The Cal.

Discourse analysis is an analytical technique for examining language. Derived from the work of Michel Foucault, discourse analysis encourages us to critically examine what is being said about a particular topic and by whom

(Foucault, 1978; Van Gilder, in press). It asks what is being talked about, or highlighted? What is not being talked about, or downplayed? Who is doing the talking, for what audiences, and in what contexts? What are the real-world effects of the messages being communicated? For example, we found that in the earlier promotional brochures in the Collections here, exclusively European American models were used in the photos meant to promote The Cal. The Hawaiianness was signaled by a few palm trees, but if you didn't know better, those might represent Las Vegas. Over time the brochures became more explicitly Hawaiian, for example, with the introduction of the slogan, "Aloha Spoken Here." The images in the most recent brochures and advertisement contain images of patrons of mixed descent, many with phenotypically Asian features. This trend was generally reflected over time in the promotional videos from the collections we watched.

Inspired by our findings here, we have now expanded our search through online historical newspaper databases. Thanks to Dr. David G. Schwartz, we have also been contacted by a representative from The Cal, itself which may allow us to access more of the company's archived materials we found so valuable here. What are our next steps? As we paged through the library's boxes of materials, we knew we needed to find some theoretical ideas that would help us understand and analyze the role of branding, marketing, and advertising in American culture. Here at UNLV we began to read the work of the famous anthropologist of American consumerism, Grant McCracken and his work on consumption, advertisement, and the feeling of being at home. In addition to our ideas around a "lovemark," we are exploring theories of meaning-making and construction of identity as it pertains to The Cal (McCracken 2005). These should help us begin to illuminate the processes by which the Hawaiians repurposed the Las Vegas experience into a vehicle for self-expression and community building.

With this latest round of research, thanks to our Eadington Fellowship, we have established a reasonable understanding of the larger context of The Cal and the history of Hawaiians in Las Vegas from the point of view of The Cal, but that is only half of the story. The construction of a brand, of a lovemark, is a dialectical process in which the product/company negotiates with the consumers. Advertising expert Kevin Roberts describes how "Lovemarks appeal to the senses, arouse passion, connect to people's personal stories [and] tap into their dreams" (Roberts, 2004, p. 57). To that end we want to collect oral histories of particular individuals and families, detailing their experiences in Las Vegas and at The Cal, in a traditional anthropological ethnographic fashion.

In our experience, the Hawaiian interest in Las Vegas permeates nearly every rung of the socioeconomic and educational ladder. For some it is an aspirational destination: they hope to be able to go one day, or they went once in years past and now long to go again. For others, it is a cherished part of the yearly cycle. It is not unusual to meet people who come once, twice – even three and four times per year.

And have been doing so, in some cases, for decades. The one aspect all of these folks, these “people of Hawai’i” as one headline referred to them, have in common is being a local, or *kama’aina*, Hawaiian. In other words, this is a question of culture. A question for anthropology.

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## Notes

\*Please note that portions of this presentation appear in the following:

Cynthia Van Gilder and Dana R. Herrera

forthcoming “(Re)Presenting Paradise: The Hawaiian Imaginary in Las Vegas” in *Tourism and Architecture: Simulacra, Virtualities, Fictions*. Nelson Graburn and Maria Gravari-Barbas (eds.). London: Routledge Press.

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### About the Authors

Cynthia Van Gilder earned her MA and PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, where she researched the sociopolitics of Polynesian archaeology, ethnic identity, and narratives of cultural heritage. Since joining the Anthropology faculty at St. Mary's College of California, Van Gilder has published on gender and household archaeology in Hawai'i, the use of practice theory in archaeology, and the anthropology of tourism. This "Hawaiian Vegas" research builds on her long-standing interests in how narratives of cultural identity are constructed, experienced, and maintained, particularly in ethnically diverse Hawai'i.

Dana R. Herrera earned her MA and PhD from the University of California, Davis, where she conducted ethnographic research on the intersections of race, gender, and religion with political affiliation in the Philippines. Since joining the Anthropology faculty at St. Mary's College of California, her research has included identity construction in online gaming communities, the Filipino diaspora in Central Europe, and the anthropology of tourism. This "Hawaiian Vegas" project builds on her long-standing interests in the economics of tourism and globalized patterns of ethnic migration/movement, particularly among diverse Asian communities.

### About the Occasional Paper Series

In 2010, the Center for Gaming Research launched an Occasional Paper Series that publishes brief studies of gambling and casinos with a policy and public-interest orientation.

These papers are generally between three and six-thousand words, written with the intent of informing the public discussion of gambling and casinos. Topics include gaming history, casino management, and studies in sociology, economics, and political science related to gambling.

Authors include faculty affiliated with the Center for Gaming Research, particularly Eadington Fellows. As part of their residency, fellows complete a paper for the series.

In June 2013, the UNLV Gaming Press published *Frontiers in Chance: Gaming Research Across the Disciplines*, a collection of many of the papers in the series. For more information about this book, please see <http://gamingpress.unlv.edu/>.

A full set of the papers are available at: <http://gaming.unlv.edu/papers.html>



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The Center is committed to providing support for scholarly inquiry into all aspects of gaming. We serve as an unparalleled resource for students, faculty, and independent scholars.

Students, faculty and community members interested in academically-oriented gaming research are welcome to use the collection and the resources of the Center.

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