



# Is farming sexy? Agro-food initiatives and the contested value of agriculture in post-plantation Hawai'i

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## ABSTRACT

Following the decline of plantation agriculture in Hawai'i, widespread agro-food initiatives espousing narratives of food localization and sustainability have proliferated across the islands. These initiatives reflect divergent value regimes that emerge from vicissitudes of commodity and social relations in post-plantation Hawai'i. These emergent value regimes are discursively and materially negotiated by a new generation of aspiring farmers. This paper examines the ways in which the co-existing visions of farming for values and economic value in farming contribute to the revaluing of agriculture in Hawai'i. We argue that the growing visibility of agro-food initiatives that depict farming as sexy facilitates novel opportunities for farmers to draw value from the diverse economies of agriculture. Inadvertently, however, it normalizes the hardships faced by small farmers and further obscures the enduring structural challenges in Hawai'i. This article contributes to scholarship on the politics of value and diverse economies within the shifting political economy of agriculture.

## 1. Introduction

*"Farmers used to want their children to become doctors and lawyers; now doctors and lawyers want to farm."*

Agribusiness Incubation Program Director, November 2016

A musical parody of "Sexy and I Know It," the 2012 YouTube video, "I'm Farming and I Grow It," by the Peterson Farm Brothers<sup>1</sup> describes their passion for agriculture and lives as young, vibrant farmers. With lyrics such as "I got passion for my plants and I ain't afraid to show it," and "when I am in the field, I try to raise crops to the maximum yield," their videos have attracted more than 35 million views and counting. The Peterson Brothers represent the literal materialization of American celebrity chef Mario Batali's (2014) proclamation that "Farmers are the real rock stars" (cited in Phillipov and Goodman, 2017), and are just one of the myriad ways popular cultural representations of farming as sexy have mushroomed throughout the U.S. and beyond (Elliott, 2013; Ndemo and Weiss, 2016). More broadly, the proliferation of celebrity farmers (Phillipov and Goodman, 2017), organic farm volunteering programs (Mostafanezhad et al., 2015), urban farmers' markets (Clendenning et al., 2016), agritourism (Flanigan et al., 2015), and farm-based music festivals (Gibson and Connell, 2012) reflect growing trends in popular culture to celebrate local food production and take back food provisioning from the alienating agro-food industries.

At the turn of the 21st century, two broad narratives on agriculture and food have emerged: (1) the conventional productionist narrative that focuses on increasing the quantity of food through the industrialization of agriculture; and (2) the alternative narrative that emerged in response to what were perceived to be the noxious effects of industrial agriculture on human health and the environment (Allen et al., 2003; Lang and Heasman, 2004). The alternative agro-food narrative has historically been defined by what it is not, rather than what it is for. Its proponents embraced a wide array of social and ecological values, often within the neoliberal logics of consumer power. Critics point out that many movements inspired by this narrative are hampered by contradictions that limited their capacity to inspire a broader transformation of the food system (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Born and Purcell, 2006; Guthman, 2008). Alternatively, other scholars argue that these efforts must be understood through the lens of food citizenship and the politics of place, thus reorienting the movements' goal from promoting responsible consumption to cultivating citizenship based on ecological integrity and social justice (DeLind and Bingen, 2007; Morgan, 2010; Kimura and Suryanata, 2016). Building on these insights, we consider the increasingly visible role of agro-food initiatives (AFIs) such as festivals, educational workshops, fairs, tours and other events in creating new spaces of engagement where more people enlist in broader projects of social change.

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<sup>1</sup> Greg, Nathan and Kendal Peterson are fifth generation farmers in rural Kansas who made the videos to promote agriculture. They had not expected the amount of attention they received, which they attributed to the fact that "a lot of people in this country are still connected to the farm in some way." (Greg Peterson, April 2013 cited in Elliott (2013).)

We examine the case of AFIs in Hawai'i where global competitions and high costs of farming has reduced the profitability of conventional farming (Suryanata, 2000, 2002; Gomes, 2015; Pape, 2016). With the decline of plantations, small diversified farms now dominate the agrarian landscape (Melrose et al., 2016). While in the US, the number of farmers and ranchers is declining, according to the Hawai'i Census of Agriculture, between 2002 and 2012, there has been a thirty percent growth of new farms (USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2014). Except for the seed corn sector that is dominated by a handful of large seed corporations, a sheer majority of new farms are small, with annual gross revenues of less than \$25,000. The contribution of agriculture to the state economy thus remains small, amounting to just 0.5% of the state's GDP in 2015.

Many of the new small farmers struggle to make ends meet, and resort to creative ways to cope with the high costs of farming in Hawai'i (Mostafanezhad et al., 2015). In many cases, the growth of AFIs is driven by the need to supplement farm income, which in turn, has provided new and diverse spaces of public engagement with farming. These developments allow AFI participants to reframe agro-food issues in the context of their personal experiences and ethical considerations, emotions, and values. In the process, they rearticulate narratives around the future of food and agriculture in Hawai'i. These narratives can be influential in shaping policy and social perceptions, and in motivating people to act (Roe, 1994; Sandercock, 2003; Lejano et al., 2013).

To theorize how the value of agriculture in Hawai'i is generated as well as contested through the growing number of AFIs, we draw on Anna Tsing's (2015) analysis of value production along the matsutake mushroom commodity chain. Tsing illustrates how vacillations between commodity and gift modes of exchange animate different regimes of value, explaining how value in gift systems is constructed through a range of social obligations and reciprocation. We draw on this conception to analyze AFIs to highlight exchanges that build communities, social ties, and citizenship while producing, yet not always profiting from, agricultural commodities. These theoretical insights help us to explain how, despite the closure of plantations and the diminishing profitability of local farming, new farms and AFIs have proliferated across the Hawaiian Islands. For many farmers, the value of farming is constituted through the circulation in and between commodity and social systems of exchange.

We consider how AFIs are constituents of a broader assemblage of discourses and practices around farming, food and agriculture. While distinct, each initiative is temporally and discursively linked to preceding and future agrarian ideals, which project diverse visions of agricultural revitalization. As participants in these initiatives engage in both capitalist and non-capitalist relations that yield diverse values, they reframe and reproduce the narratives on the future of farming in Hawai'i. AFIs have become sites where the value of farming is expressed and negotiated by organizers and participants alike.

In this paper, we demonstrate how for many agricultural entrepreneurs in Hawai'i, the viability of their operations increasingly hinges on their ability to realize the social value of agriculture in the diverse spaces of engagement created by AFIs. We argue that the growing visibility of farming for values and the concomitant depiction of farming as sexy in popular culture has inadvertently normalized farmers' efforts to draw value through varied forms of non-capitalist relations, while obscuring the political economic reality that continues to challenge Hawai'i's farmers.

In the following section, we provide an overview of the intersection of theories of value and diverse economies literature that frame our study. We then describe our case study of AFIs in Hawai'i, including the decline and rebirth of agriculture in the state, followed by a discussion of our methods. In our findings section, broadly organized into *farming for values* and *values in farming*, we examine the discursive and material practices that motivate and sustain AFI participants. We conclude by examining how a new generation of aspiring farmers navigate the

political and economic implications of this ongoing discursive and material struggle in post-plantation Hawai'i.

## 2. Diverse economies of value

Historically, anthropological studies of value focused on non-commodity forms of exchange. These studies illustrated how value is cultivated through social relations. Bronislaw Malinowski's early ethnography depicted how Trobriand men contributed significant energy to create a tidy and productive garden through which they gave away extra produce to relatives-in-law. The fact that this was not a reciprocal relationship, in that the man's family was gifted produce from the brothers of his wife rather than his sister's family, demonstrated the cultural rather than economic rationale behind these decisions (Malinowski, 1922). Franz Boas' Kwakiutl potlatch (1897) and Malinowski's Trobriand Kula exchange (1922) provided ethnographic examples of how wealth was measured, not by accumulation, but by how much one could give away.

In the mid-80s, Arjun Appadurai examined the social construction and politics of value in his influential essay, 'Commodities and the Politics of Value' (1986). This essay provides a basis from which scholars have examined regimes of value in commodity cultures. Following Simmel (1907), Appadurai argues that value is not rooted in labor, but rather from exchange. This conception of value diverges significantly from Marx's theory of value, in which the value of a commodity is based on the labor time invested in its production. Alternatively, Appadurai observes how commodity value and exchange are socially mediated by differential interests among actors. As a result, different regimes of value are the outcome of the political processes of negotiation. More recently, Tsing's work on matsutake mushrooms distinguishes gifts from commodities and explains how: "Just as exchanges of armbands and necklaces anchor the Melanesian kula, with pig and yam transactions on the side, gifts of personal experience and sociality-in-the-making hold together the matsutake hunt" (Tsing, 2013: 25), which in itself is not alienated labor.

Building on diverse economies research, scholars have identified the value of alternative, non-capitalist "economic transactions, labor practices and economic organizations that contribute to social well-being worldwide" (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 615). Led by those in the Community Economies Collective, a range of geographers and anthropologists, among others, have started to rethink how we account for value that is created by non-capitalist exchange. Using conventional monetary accounting, the value of exchanges such as bartering, volunteered labor, farmer co-ops or corporate social responsibility campaigns may seem insignificant. Yet scholars of diverse economies point to the performative value of such endeavors in facilitating alternative futures or "other worlds" (Roelvink et al., 2015) as well as in serving as a source of solidarity within communities (Jonas, 2010; North, 2007; Fickey, 2011; Lejano et al., 2013).

Using the iconography of an iceberg, Gibson-Graham et al. (2013:11) illustrate how what is usually regarded as the economy is but a small set of activities by which we produce, exchange and distribute value. Others have reexamined Marx's labor theory of value and documented relationships between circuits of value and labor. For example, Tsing (2013: 24) refers to "supply chain capitalism" to describe how commodities are produced by labor power that is simultaneously capitalist and non-capitalist. She illustrates how value is created through the tapping and transforming of non-capitalist relations in diverse social economic niches. Such niches are reproduced in performances of cultural identity that sponsor "new forms of creative accounting and the auditing of immaterial value" (Tsing, 2009: 149), in which people work for reasons other than conventional wage-and-benefits packages. Drawing on this work, we can conceptualize the value of farming in Hawai'i in building communities, social ties, and citizenships while producing agricultural commodities.

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