With the emergence of a globalized capitalist economy, discussions regarding social
meanings of things are constructed more around symbols: how things are represented and
categorized, rather than practice: how things are produced and consumed. Especially in Hawai‘i,
where tourism has a strong presence in the landscapes and the lives of people, issues concerning
representation of “Hawaiian culture” are widely argued both in the business and academic arenas.
Lei, which is generally regarded as a “Hawaiian cultural commodity,” circulates widely within
both the everyday life of the local community and the tourist industry. While much of the
discussion of lei is centered on its representation and authenticity, its production processes
remain unrevealed. Who are the producers? Under what conditions do they make lei? What are
the local and extra-local connections involved in the production process? Through following the
chain of production and consumption, my project aims to outline the interconnectedness of
people and their social activities in relation to today’s capitalist economy. Choosing lei as a
product of research is, therefore, a challenge for naturalized thinking processes about culture and
its connection to everyday material life.

1. Underlying Philosophy

The representation of Hawaiian culture both in tourist settings and in the local-political
setting has been argued over the years. In this section, I will review the literature on the
commodification of culture and the multi-cultural discourse of culture: issues of representation. I
will then explain the limitation of arguments that are centered on representation and authenticity
and explore the possibilities of reconceptualizing culture that results from people’s everyday
experiences and practice. I then offer my goal for this portfolio project and the means I use to
achieve it.

Reviewing the Representation Issues: Tourist Discourse

COME TO LIFE IN HAWAI‘I

A map of the Hawaiian islands is studded with photos of ‘natural’ beauty, such as
mountain landscapes, deserted beaches, and the smiling woman on the cover holding a
flower lei and wearing a huge red hibiscus behind her ear (…) She stands in front of a
profusion of green leaves, midriff and shoulders bare, as if just emerging from the tropical
rain forest to receive us and help us “come to life in Hawai‘i” (Desmond 1997, 87).

Jane Desmonds’ description of a 1993 glossy brochure from the Hawaii Visitors Bureau
offers a typical representation of tourist shows in Hawai‘i. She asserts that there is “an active
construction by the tourist industry of a notion of a Hawaiian Native” (85). Tourist discourse of
“Hawaiian culture” in brochures, hula performances and other tourist activities has been severely
criticized by numerous scholars over the years (Buck 1993, Goss 1993, Halaulani 2004,
“commodification of culture.” Commodification of culture is, by Greenwood’s words, “culture
being reified and transformed into a marketable item-when customs become tourist attractions”
(Greenwood 1977, quoted in Linnekin 1997, 215). Lockwood defines it as “island cultures being
commoditized, degraded and sold to tourists as entertainment” (2004, 24). Trask puts it as the “prostitution of Native cultures through tourism” (1999, 137).

The significance of presenting a flower lei is apparent in many tourist advertisements and guidebooks. Lei are depicted as a symbol of “aloha and friendship” in tourist guide books and brochures and also in the instruction books about lei-makings (Ronck 1997). Presenting a lei as a tourist attraction is important because it adds “sensory integrity through the scents and colors of flowers” and reminds tourists that tradition exists in reality (Diamond 2008, 40-44). While lei is not studied as much as much as hula, many scholars have analyzed the role of lei in tourist discourse of Hawai‘i (Buck 1993, Desmond 1997, Diamond 2008, Goss 1997).

**Hawaiians at Heart: Multi-culturalist Representation**

Another discourse that has recently been criticized is the harmonious representation of Hawai‘i: “we are all different [ethnicities] under the same culture.” This multi-culturalist representation of Hawai‘i is promoted mainly by the state government, which is reiterated by state-related business organizations such as tourist industry, banks and insurance companies.

**LEI DAY THE MAY DAY**

With the lei as an organizing principle, the flowers of May 1st were being transformed into an effective symbol for the indigenization of the peoples of Hawai‘i on the basis of what they all were supposed to have learned from, or given by, the natives. On May Day, the peoples of Hawai‘i no longer needed to become English; they could become Hawaiian (Friesen 1996, 28).

Steven Friesen analyses the creation of Lei Day and argues that Lei Day “supported by powerful Honolulu institutions” provided “an arena for the reconsideration and construction of identities amidst the demographic, political and economic changes that had occurred over several decades” (1996, 31). In the face of ethnic tensions that were apparent during the territorial days in Hawai‘i, aloha expressed in the giving and receiving of lei was the recommended antidote for ethnic tensions (31).

While Friesen analyzes the political process of lei representation in Hawai‘i, Eiko Kosasa offers a distinct political claim against the multi-culturalist discourse of lei. According to her analysis of “Japanese settler photographs,” lei worn by settlers “signify the colonial possession of Hawai‘i” and “represent their acceptance, support, and participation in the colonial system that subjugates Native peoples” (2008, 222). Lisa Kahaleole Hall offers a similar line of discourse, evaluating that the idea of “Hawaiians at Heart” works as “an ultimate appropriation” and causes the loss of “our control over the meaning of Hawaiian identity” (2005, 404, 410).

Both tourist and multiculturalist discourses of Hawai‘i are actively promoted by the state and the tourism industry, and are utilized as a tool to gloss over the political struggles of the different ethnic, gender and class groups in Hawai‘i. Especially amongst the descendents of those who were first to experience Western colonialism in Hawai‘i—now called Native Hawaiians—there remain much concern over and protests against the exploitation caused by the state and the globalized capitalist industry. Hawaiian nationalist scholars have resisted state-promoted tourist and multi-culturalist policies by utilizing the debates over authenticity and ownership of Hawaiian culture (Kamahele 2008, Hall 2005, Trask 1999). Anthropologists such as Jocelyn Linnekin and Roger Keesings on the other hand have engaged in analyzing Hawaiian nationalism arguing that nationalist movements have invented and constructed “Hawaiian
culture” in order to meet their political goals (Keesing 1989, Linnekin 1991). The debate over this “invented tradition” triggered a further argument over “insider/outsider” boundary of academic research. However, the more the arguments have become centered on representation and authenticity, the more they have become a matter of “who has the authority to represent indigenous culture” (Feinberg 1995, 93). The resistance then has turned into a movement for “cultural sensitivity”: how sensible can “others” be to meet the criteria of authenticity. However, is culture about who has authority to represent it, or even what people “represent” it as?

**Culture, Production and Consumption**

The concept of culture has been defined and redefined numerous times throughout different disciplines. As Raymond Williams describes, culture in cultural studies has been interpreted “as the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life” (2009, 35). Relationality is emphasized in studying culture to take “all aspects of the social formation” into account in order not to abandon “the commitment to complexity, contingency, contestation, and multiplicity” (Harding and Pribram 2009, 3). However, those who are called “makers of distinctions,” i.e., academic scholars and critics as well as politicians and developers, have rather committed to pointing out “which way of life are made and made known” (Mitchell, 111). In defining “which way of life,” people have often used the category of race, ethnicity or nationality to differentiate one specific culture from “others.” Such cultural differentiation, according to Marshall Sahlins, is the result of an “indigenization of modernity” (1999, 411). In his analysis, cultural differentiation occurs from the “growing similarities” people share through capitalism and modernity (411).

What is thus missing in the study of culture, according to David Harvey, Don Mitchell and Nicholas Garnham, is the analysis of the underlying capitalist system of production. As Garnham suggests, the “capitalist mode of production and consumption has certain core structural characteristics” in the formation of culture (1993, 502). He further argues that one cannot understand the struggles of people “without an analysis of the political economic foundation and context of the cultural practices that constitute those struggles” (1993, 502).

These claims and analyses of culture can be applied to the case of lei production. Those who focus on representation and authenticity of lei— including the state, tourist industry as well as scholars and critics— do not transparently acknowledge the capitalist system of the commodity production. In other words, all parties tend to view lei as something “hovering somewhere above the material social and economic workings of everyday life” (Mitchell 1995, 112). Harvey argues that such phenomena “conceal any trace of origin, of the labor processes that produced [the commodities], or of the social relations implicated in the production” (1989, 300).

Through following the chain of production and consumption of lei and revealing the interconnectedness of people and their everyday lives, there might be a new way to reconceptualize culture beyond the binary picture of “insider/outsider” or “authentic/inauthentic” and provide us an opportunity to engage in a wider analyses of the social systems of cultural production in relation to the globalized capitalist economy.

**Laying Out the Lei Stories**

Thus, in my portfolio project, I aim to present stories of the production and consumption of commercial lei. There are four main questions that I intend to answer: “Who are the producers? Under what conditions do they make lei? What are the local and extra-local connections among production activities?” In order to answer these questions, I have surveyed the literature,
newsletters, and statistical reports. I have also conducted ethnographic field work, which includes participant observations and talk story sessions (casual open-ended interviews). I did not limit the study to one specific group of people or situation, since the purpose of my portfolio lies in understanding the overall sense of connectedness between people and activities throughout the lei production process. Dorothy Smith calls this type of ethnography “institutional ethnography,” which “begins in people’s experiences” and proceeds from there to discover the “dimensions of the social that transcend the local” (2006, 3). The principle is simple: to find out “how things are actually put together” and “how it works” (2006, 2). The project treats social activities of institution as a starting point and hooking on to activities and relations both horizontal and vertical (Widerbirg 2004, 5).

As for writing a story, I am influenced by Downwind Production’s Historic Waikiki project and their philosophy of “stories” as I intend to submit the stories to their website. Downwind Productions attempts to collect a “thousand stories” to “problematize the notion of a space having only one history” (Chan 2004, 65). The website is particularly interested in “things that tourist industry won’t tell us” and “stories that have been left out that can help us understand what happened here and the world over” (Downwind Productions’ website). Thus, I interpreted and composed stories through my own lenses and with particular intentions: stories about what I thought the tourist industry would not tell and what I thought was left out. While some stories I have shared with people I interviewed, some are heavily dependent on my observations. This can be criticized as another representation of culture, and I accept that critique. However, I tried my best not to construct an abstract theory which is not rooted in the actual activities of people and environments. I am open to any criticism, suggestions and corrections as discovering, changing and developing are important in my personal and academic growth. Enjoy the stories!

2. Lei Stories

Before going into the actual lei stories, I would like to the outline the brief history of lei and the associated industry. Knowing the historical background is important to situate a person or an event within certain political and social situations, providing us a clearer and deeper understanding of what has happened before and what is going on now. After going through the history, I will list the lei stories from the lei stands, flower growers, international flower connections to my personal reflection on flower and lei production and consumption. The stories are written in a creative writing style merged with a mixture of recorded interviews, ethnographic notes and personal observations.  

History

The practice of decorating the body with natural materials has been found in many parts of the world throughout history. Neck chains of shells and bones have been found in some of the most ancient human graves (Kuck 1956, 4). In Hawai‘i, lei of fruits, seeds, human hair and foliage are depicted in early paintings and drawings of Hawai‘i. Lei were considered an integral part of people’s everyday lives and, according to Marie McDonald, the concept of “kino lau” was the underlying idea of wearing, giving and receiving the lei (2007, xi). “Kino lau” indicates that “a leaf, a flower, a stream did not represent a deity but was at any moment one of the physical manifestations of that deity” (xiii). Lei, thus were believed to carry the power of nature gods and spirits. Giving a lei to a complete stranger was considered to bring “a danger that it would be misused, perhaps even to bring bad luck or evil upon oneself or one’s family” (Abbot
1992, 124). Up until the early 19th century, only a few varieties of flowers used for lei grew in the islands. With the rise of incoming trade ships and businessmen and missionaries settling in, new varieties of flowers that are now commonly used for lei, such as pikake, plumeria, roses and carnations were introduced.

After the conquest of O‘ahu by Kamehameha in 1795, which brought unified rule over all the islands save Kaua‘i, a centralized kingdom and a capitalist world system were established in Hawai‘i (Sahlins 1992, 2). With the growing influence and power of powerful businessmen, by the 1840s “the central government was for all intents in the hands of Whites, mostly Americans” (Sahlins 1992, 3). According to Josephine Puninani Bird, with the growing need for cash income and increasing demand for lei, people started to commercialize (commoditize) lei around 1870s (1987, 3). Toward the end of the 19th century, around the time when the kingdom of Hawai‘i was overthrown by the American military coup d’état, sailing vessels with passengers started to arrive at Honolulu harbor. By 1901, lei sellers were present on the sidewalks of downtown Honolulu in the area of Hotel, Maunakea, and Kekaulike streets (Oral History Project 1986, xxxiv).

It was around this time that a number of business executives and shareholders in large commercial firms, such as Amfac and Castle and Cooke, began importing what they considered luxury flowers—orchids, antheriums and other tropical flowers (Wood 2006, 59). A powerful Honolulu banker and politician, Samuel M. Damon, who is the founder of Damon Estate, imported vast numbers of luxury tropical flowers and built the famous Moanalua Garden after he received the entire Moanalua ahupu‘a‘a after Princess Pauahi Bishop’s death in 1884.

Commercialized lei businesses were emerging; however, records during this time show that people still made and wore lei in every part of their daily experiences. Lei was offered to gods as well as chiefs and kahuna lapa‘au (healing priests). Farmers, dancers, nursing mothers, street cleaners, and school children made and wore lei (McDonald 1978). Lei sellers at this time were mostly women who had the skills of making lei. They collected flowers from backyards, “picking what they could from their own yards and neighborhoods” (Oral History Project 1986, xxxiv). They rarely purchased flowers during this time since there were only backyard growers. Most of the lei sellers did not have a name for their business.

We have to get up five o’clock in the morning…We used to pick up flowers every morning before we go to school. We soak it down, keep it cool, then we come home and we string it up…And we worked hard for so cheap—Moana Umi (302).

We used to go up the mountain, pick up the maile [from the mountain in Nu‘uanu]…Not only maile, they have gingers…Then at the same time, my father pick up the mangos, and the guavas, and catch all the fish in the rivers. Because as you go and pick up your greenery, pick up your greenery first, put ‘em all in the bag. As you come down the stream, you start picking your—get fish, o’opus, all that, right at the stream—Martina Macalino (134).

In 1927, the lei business underwent a significant change. Matson Navigation Company’s luxury liner service between California and Honolulu started their service, bringing in more people and more demand for lei. The Hawai‘i Tourist Bureau estimated 200 lei sellers near the harbor and Chinatown in 1931. Lei sellers were gathered in lines, holding up lei in their hands, pushing and rushing to customers (Kurk 1956, 8). The growth of tourism and the changing demography of plantation workers during this period affected the growing numbers of
commercial flower nurseries. As more people were making their livelihood and/or extra income on lei-selling, regulations and ordinances were enforced on the lei sellers during the 1930s.

They made it a law where we couldn’t sell leis on the sidewalk unless you had an alley that you can go into or a store that you can go into. But what was the saddest part of it all is we were too young to know better… at that time we were wiser or smarter, even thinking that we could also buy a building there on Maunakea Street. Or even the lei sellers, they got together, buy the block or half a block of a building. Put all their monies together, make a little corporations, see they could have brought a spot in there. And say, “This is ours. We can all sell leis right there for a lifetime because we own the building”—Moana Umi (Oral History Project 1986, 312).

During the World War II period, the number of visitors declined, and many of the lei sellers acquired war jobs, making nets and camouflage equipment. After the war ended in 1945, military naval air station, John Rogers Airport, was turned into a civilian airport and commercial aviation resumed, drawing many lei sellers to the airport. Airport lei sellers set up their businesses on Lagoon Drive near Nimitz Highway. They converted their old trucks into lei stands with wooden board and nails on it to hang the lei.

We just build a stand on. No more electricity over there. Just a dark road and don’t even have street lights. What we have is gas lanterns. We hang it onto the stand. This is how it started—Moana Umi (374).

Beginning in the late 1940s, more regulations on lei sellers both in Chinatown and at the airport were imposed. The Honolulu Board of Supervisors completely banned lei selling at Irvin Park in 1955 and the Hawai‘i Aeronautics Commission moved airport lei sellers (only members of lei sellers association) into Territory built shacks at Lagoon Drive. The move was suggested by a Damon Estate representatives claiming that “lei sellers on the airport road are using property illegally since the lots go right out to the road and belong to Damon Estate” and selling lei there was “a violation of a zoning ordinance” (Oral History Project 1986, A-3).

The lei business after the war became more complicated and turned into an industrialized business. There were both small-scale backyard growers and commercial nurseries, but some of the commercial nurseries grew and turned into flower wholesalers. Larger buyers such as hotels in Waikiki, the Hawai‘i Visitors Bureau, and the Chamber of Commerce placed their business with the florists, not the lei sellers. Backyard growers made pre-strung lei to sell to the lei stands and the wholesalers employed lei stringers to make lei to meet larger orders for the hotels.

After the incorporation of Hawai‘i to the U.S. in 1959 and the launching of the jet airplane services in the same year, the overall situation of the lei business changed again. The demand for lei increased rapidly due to the acute rise in the numbers of tourists coming in. As the business market broadened, and the demand for lei was ever more expanding, the newly arrived migrants, especially people from the Philippines and other parts of Southeast Asia, became involved in growing and, making leis in their backyards or hired as lei stringers in the back of lei stands.

So, you get the Filipinos or like some of the other stands, they get Vietnamese or something. I mean, they come. When you tell ’em work, they work. You tell ’em stay home and they’ll stay home (....) That’s why, you find all the lei stands today, most of them are Filipinos. ’Cause they’re good workers. They’re dependable. Of course, they can’t talk English so good, but they’re really good workers. And most of them, you can trust them.
They honest. So that’s why, it makes it easier for me and make it easier for us by not being there—Abigail Burgess (430).

After the 1970s, “the hybridization, packing, chilled storage, and rapid distribution” of flowers transformed the world market for the flower business including lei business (Ziegler 2007, 55). The growth of mass tourism in the 1980s boosted the necessity for flowers available all the year around, which led large scale flower growers to switch to the mass producible orchids, roses and carnations. With the introduction of biotechnology such as cloning and hybridization, and jet airplane with chilled storage, lei flower production sites moved to outside of Hawai’i. Large-scale commercial nurseries that were growing orchids, carnations and roses either switched their production to potted and cut flowers or closed their farms and turned themselves into flower wholesalers that imported large amounts of flowers from overseas.

More and more imported flowers became dominant in the lei industry in the 1990s. Mass produced dendrobium orchid flowers replaced the plumeria lei as the most common lei used for hotels, tourist shows and packages. Single dendrobium orchid lei pre-strung in Thailand started to appear in the Hawai’i market sometime in early 1990s. Since 1993, the amount of imported Thailand orchids had increased “by 30 percent each year” (Suryanata 2002, 80). Deluxe dendrobium orchid lei also pre-strung in Thailand started coming in around the early 2000s. In 2007, $4.5 million worth of orchids were imported to Hawai‘i, as both pre-strung lei and loose flowers. The number of commercial flower nurseries had declined by almost half from 95 in 1992 to 46 in 2007 (Hawaii Agricultural Statistic Service, 1997, 2007).

Throughout the history of the lei and its industry, one can see the change from a subsistence livelihood to well-established businesses based on a cash economy. The lei industry started with making lei with whatever flowers grew in one’s backyards and selling them at wherever one could find a spot along the streets. With the development of tourism and the global capitalist economy, however, lei sellers expanded their enterprises to become the lei stands with business licenses and private stalls; backyard growers became commercial nurseries, and commercial nurseries later became wholesalers. The lei industry, as well as any other industry in today’s world, has experienced a major industrialization processes.

**Today’s Lei Industry: The Lei Stories**

The following stories are composed from recorded interview texts, field notes and jottings as well as information from local newspapers. In writing the stories, I have changed the plural form of “lei” to “leis.” The word choice of “leis” follows better with the word usage of people who I talked to. I have also changed the personal names and place names upon people’s requests.

**Lei Stands #1**

Keeping a lei stand in Waikiki is hard work. You come in the morning, get your stall set up, sort out flowers, sit and string leis, talk to your customers, answer questions and sell leis. So many times people come and ask for directions so you almost feel like you are working at information booth. While making lei, you constantly hear the noise of people talking while walking, music from stores, and cars passing by. It is important to find your friends to watch over your stand for a minute or so since you don’t want to close up and unlock your stall all over again to just go to the bathroom or to go get lunch. Work hours are from 10am to 10pm but often times you end up staying till 11pm or 12am. Besides selling lei, you have to order flowers, pick them up on your way, pay bills, the rent and taxes.
This would be a typical day for Aunty Kalani, the present owner of the lei stand. Her grandmother started her business not as a lei stand but selling lei flowers on the street near the Honolulu harbor sometime between 1928 and 1930. That was the time right after Matson launched a passenger liner between California and Hawai‘i. She then moved to Waikiki to sell leis and also Hawaiian food on the street of Kalakaua. During the 1940s and 50s, she and her family members sold leis right outside of the Moana Hotel. The lei stand has been moving around, both voluntarily and forcibly between the street of Ka‘iulani and Lewards.

The present lei stand is kept by Aunty Kalani and her daughter who herself is already a grandmother. Their policy for selling lei is to “go local.” Always give discounts to locals and buy flowers from locals; “doesn’t matter whether you Chinee, Japanee or Filipino, somebody who was born and grew up here.” Aunty Kalani refuses to sell pre-made orchid leis from Thailand. When she doesn’t have enough leis in the refrigerator, she buys pre-made orchid-tuberose leis from a local flower nursery. She brings plumeria flowers picked from backyard and lawae leaves from the mountain. She used to order Vanda orchids from a wholesaler in Big Island but recently stopped ordering since “they don’t last very long” and “lose money.” From wholesalers she buys certain amount of orchid flowers from Thailand, roses and carnations from Latin America. They are cheap and long lasting, “and tourists like flashy kine.”

She reminisces about good old Waikiki, where there were still “plenty local people” and people were just nice. “Now people are all about making money, where’s the Hawaiian way go?” she adds. In addition to paying the rent, she has to pay taxes and utility bills. “We gotta make money too yea?” she once told me. Last year she opened her lei stand on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years Day. Work seems to have been getting more and more difficult and rougher for Aunty Kalani who is now over 65 years old.

**Lei Stand #2**

“Hawaiian Grown, Hawaiian Sewn” was the catch line for the Leilani lei stand. The owner, Charlotte, began her lei business in 2007, taking over her mother in law’s lei stand. She claims that her stand is the one and only Hawaiian-owned lei stand in Chinatown. When you go inside the shop, you immediately see the copy of a news article with a picture of her family members stringing leis at her shop. Next thing you see is a poster saying “You’re Local Stay Local Buy Local.” In fact, another goal of her lei stand is to claim their flowers to be 100% local.

Their orchids and maile come from Big Island, carnation from Maui, and other flowers from the nurseries all over Oahu. In trying to continue to buy local flowers, she says, “Time like this is scary, but if everybody helps out a little bit, you know, everybody will be okay.”

In the back of her lei stand, 6 lei makers are sitting and stringing leis. They come early morning around 5 am and finish whenever the flowers are gone. One day I helped out opening gingers. After soaking the buds in water, one person opens the flowers, the other person strings. Since the workers were chatting in Ilocano, I didn’t understand what they were talking about. But all seemed curious about me, probably wondering why I am helping them out all of a sudden. They asked about my school life, where I’m from and if I have a boyfriend or not. They also were curious if I was getting paid helping them. On that day I helped, we stayed until 4pm. The lunch break was only 30 minutes, from 11:30 to 12pm. Once it hits 11:30, the lei makers take out their bento boxes from their bags and microwave them and start eating. Since I didn’t bring any lunch that day, everybody gave me bit of their lunch. When it turns 12pm, they put away their lunch and snacks and started stringing again.
Although this lei stand aims to be a 100% local operation, they also get premade orchid leis from Thailand. The busiest time of the year is from April till May. That is a slow season for flower production in Hawai‘i. In order to make profits during that time, they order Thai orchid leis from a wholesaler. “Orchids are good for shipping to mainland, ‘cause they last long” Charlotte says. When asked about the flower growers in O‘ahu, she added, “Over here too, more and more immigrants are growing flowers and making leis,” “they are nice, but most of them, they are not local.”

When I returned to the lei shop a year later, the stand was closed. I asked the next door lei shop about the closure, the person told me “they went bankrupt.” I thought about Charlotte, the lei makers in the back and “not local” backyard flower growers. I wondered where each of them went afterwards.

Flower Growers #1

Both Yamazaki and Kawamoto are over 80 years old, yet they still go out to the field every morning. Mrs. Kawamoto grows pikake near Kaimuki in O‘ahu, and Mr. Yamasaki grows Vanda orchids on the Hamakua side of Big Island. Each grew more flowers in the past, but since growing flowers requires intense physical labor, they grow a much smaller amount of flowers now.

Mrs. Kawamoto has a 5,460 square feet pikake farm in the neighborhood in Kaimuki. “I work outside, make leis everyday. No more Sundays!” she tells me. Mrs. Kawamoto has been in the business for over 50 years. She and her husband first used to grow vegetables but slowly switched to growing pikake since growing vegetables takes too much work, planting and replanting seeds. She used to make large number of pikake leis but now only makes around a dozen each day and sell them to individual customers and local flower shops. “All my kids grown up already, got jobs and families so this is more like an exercise for me,” she told me.

Yamazaki has Vanda orchid farm just outside of his house in the Hamakua side of Big Island. He started growing orchids in 1946, right after finishing his year-long military service in Tokyo. He worked as an officer in the Allied Occupation Army of U.S., censoring letters coming in to the Japanese and American “communists” captured in jail. After he came back, he worked as a mechanic for a nearby sugarcane plantation. He first got a potted orchid plant from a physician named Mr. Oto and then started to grow several varieties of orchids for supplemental income. After the closure of the plantation, he focused mainly on the nursery business. Both of his brothers grew orchids, and until recently one did the breeding as well as tissue culturing. He now only focuses on growing Joaquim Vanda orchids for leis. These are still grown within Hawai‘i since they do not travel well.

“Now is the winter time so no more flowers” he told me when I visited his farm. He drives to town and brings in his flowers every week to the second biggest wholesaler in the Island of Hawai‘i. His wife strings leis with Vanda orchids he grows and supplies them to KTA, a local supermarket chain. While many of the supermarkets in Oahu switched to ordering leis from wholesalers, stores in Hawaii‘i still buy directly from small scale flower growers.

Flower Growers #2

Backyard Growers are the most flexible people in the lei business. They pick flowers and leaves from their backyards, on the streets, from mountains or from parks. If they have a house with a yard, they grow what they can grow in the backyard. They stay home and string leis and bring them in to the wholesalers, florists, and lei stands. They make most of the intricate leis with
flowers that cannot be imported to Hawai‘i or exported from Hawai‘i: leis with puakenikeni or pakalana, poepoe (circular) style leis of crown flowers with bozu, ku‘i lau (back and forth) patterns, leis of firecracker flowers or cigar flowers, and various kinds of haku leis. Some also grow vegetables to bring in to Chinatown and farmers markets.

Mrs. Lee is a retired backyard flower grower and a lei maker. After the end of the Vietnam War, she came to Hawai‘i in 1979. A few years after she migrated, she started to learn how to make leis from her neighbor. Sometime early in the 1980s, she began making leis for wholesale, lei stands and flower shops. Indeed, she made “so many leis for so many places.” I visited her house and she showed me her garden and pictures of leis that she used to make. In the pictures, there were Micronesian-style leis of ginger and hibiscus, cigar leis and mokihana with mock orange leaves. There were also pictures of different kinds of haku leis both for the neck and head. She told me that she still makes some haku leis for old customers, and until pretty recently she made other kinds of leis. But right now she is too busy “studying Buddha” to become a nun so she does not want to be distracted with making money. I asked how much she used to sell her lei and how long it took to make one. She answered “sell only $5 for Micronesian, and haku...maybe $7 or 8.” “It only takes 15–20 minutes” for her to make one lei, both haku and Micronesian. “Before it took one hour, but I got better,” she adds. The amount of money she gets for one lei is less than one third of the actual selling price at the lei stand. However she says, “I used to make good money, you know, working all day all night.”

I tried to talk to other backyard lei makers, but I found it most difficult to talk to this group of people. Since many of them are migrants in Hawai‘i and do not pay taxes and/or have overstayed, they were afraid that revealing their personal information to me would lead to danger. One Lao family explained this to me and I understood the situation. Afterwards, I did not push myself to ask any further questions.

**Flower Growers #3**

The number of large scale commercial lei flower nurseries has been declining since the early 1990s. This is due to the shift of large scale production of lei flowers from Hawai‘i to elsewhere in the world where the costs of land and labor are much cheaper.

Besides this shift of production site, there is one large scale nursery that is still surviving today. One tuberose nursery, located in Waimanalo, produces 80 % of the total tuberose consumed in Hawai‘i. Tuberose does not travel well and is particularly susceptible to climate changes. That is one of the reasons why the nursery is still in great demand. However, the size of the farm has shrunk from having over 200 workers to 50 workers today, including the lei stringers. The powerful and popular dendrobium orchid leis have impacted on the demand for tuberose use for leis.

This flower nursery has two farms in Waimanalo and Haleiwa. They grow most of their tuberose in Haleiwa and gingers in Waimanalo. The Haleiwa farm is located on land leased from Bishop Estate after the shutdown of the Waialua sugar plantation. The total lease is 235 acres, but only 50 or 60 acres are farmed at any particular time.

The day begins early for these workers, going into the field around three in the morning. Flower picking is finished before noon. Both flowers are vulnerable to wind and high temperatures, so it is important for workers to read the weather. After picking the flowers, the workers start weeding since the weed problem is the biggest challenge in the field.

There are about 15 lei stringers at the Waimanalo farm stringing single leis with tuberoses-orchids and tuberose-ilima as well as Micronesian gingers. During the April/May high season,
they hire more helpers for making pre-strung leis for local lei stands, flower shop and wholesalers. The lei makers are all women, mostly from the Philippines. The farm allows the lei makers to bring their children to work so that they can watch their children while stringing.

The owner of the nursery told me that the situation has been “harder and harder” and “[I] cannot even treat my workers a few hundred dollars extra for working so hard.” She says she has to follow the law and give workers medical insurance and other benefits; otherwise the business gets into some trouble.

**Wholesaler #1**

Watanabe Floral is the largest floral wholesaler and retail flower shop in the islands. Their sales are almost 10 million dollars each year, and they supply more than half of all the flowers that are purchased in Hawai‘i.

Earnest Watanabe aka “the rose king of Hawai‘i,” was the the former president of Watanabe Floral. He started to grow roses right after World War II, when he came back from Australia where he worked as a translator for U.S. Military Intelligence Service. Upon his return from Australia in 1946, he started to grow roses in Kahala with a few plants he imported from Texas. He later moved to Hawaii Kai to continue growing roses with his wife. The urban development in Hawaii Kai during the 1960s forced him to move to Waianae but by the end of 1970s, he became one of the prominent commercial rose growers in the islands.

Right after his son graduated from college, they became interested in expanding their business. The father and the son visited one of the largest rose growers, Mount Eden in California. The farm they visited was not only growing roses but operating a wholesale business at the same time. Watanabe soon started importing carnations from California and established a retail shop with wholesale business office in Kalihi in 1987.

Earnest Wanatabe passed away in 2002, and the company again expanded their business to larger markets focusing on the “big box retailers.” The company has slowly reduced the numbers of farms and in September 2008, closed the last remaining farm in Big Island switching into a full-line wholesale and retail business company. “We used to grow roses for leis but now all imports” the lei manager of Watanabe told me. As a matter of fact, Watanabe Floral was the first Hawaii floral company that started importing roses from South America during the 1990s.

Lei sales make up a significant part of the revenues at Watanabe Floral. In 2003, Watanabe Floral partnered with a trading company and together they started importing single orchids and pre-made orchid leis from Thailand. Although they had other competing wholesalers, their premium orchid leis soon became popular among the “big box retailers” such as Wal-Mart, Costco, Sam’s Club and Foodland. “A big chunk of revenues comes from orders from mainland also,” the manager says. As giving leis at the graduation ceremonies is becoming more popular, the demand for leis is growing in the continental U.S.

Other kinds of leis that cannot be exported outside Hawai‘i are made all from backyard growers in Oahu. Every Tuesday and Thursday, each backyard lei maker drops off their leis between 7am to 11am. Many are migrants and a few are retired flower growers. Although leis made by backyard growers are popular among the locals, they only make up a small portion of the total sales of leis.

Until today, most of the pre-strung leis from Thailand have to go through customs and get inspected in Hawai‘i. That is why many of the wholesalers and their partnered trading companies are located near the airport area in O’ahu. It seems like their partnership is working very well, however, the situation might be subject to change in the future. What if the orchid farms in
Thailand start direct export of pre-made leis to the customers? What if other wholesale companies in Hawai‘i start importing cheaper leis from elsewhere in the world? In fact, roses from Africa and China are on the rise. The company will have to find another way to survive and expand. Economic survival is a never ending process.

Thai Connection #1

Lei Anuhea, Lei Kenoe, Lei William....These are the names you see on the plastic boxes of dendrobium orchid lei at Wal-Mart. They are what people call, “fancy kind” or “deluxe” leis. Different colored dendrobium orchid flowers are folded and strung into lei. The style is somewhat similar to Maunaloa style but each lei has different varieties of colors and designs. They are packed individually in clear plastic boxes and sold for $17.78 each. The price is surprisingly cheap if you compare this to locally produced Maunaloa lei that are sold at almost double this price.

Dendrobium orchids from Thailand have been in the Hawai‘i flower industry since the 1980s. Orchid growers in Hawai‘i first started importing Thai orchids to meet demand during the slow winter season. For a long time, loose flowers and single strung orchid leis were dominant imports. It was around the late 1990s and early 2000s when wholesalers started importing pre-strung “fancy leis.”

The largest flower wholesaler in the islands, imports around 25,000 leis from Thailand per month. In the month of May, the busiest graduation season, they bring in about 100,000 leis. I talked to one lei manager of the wholesaler company and he introduced me to his Thai partner, Sing, who does all the importing business.

One afternoon, I visited Sing’s office. It was located in a small building in Kalihi, and the interior looked like any other small business office. Sing established his company in 2003 after his graduation from the MBA program at Hawaii Pacific University. His parents run orchid nurseries in the suburbs of Bangkok. When they were visiting Sing while he was still in school, his mother saw the leis in Chinatown and came up with the idea of making pre-made orchid leis in Thailand. Now she patents over 200 designs of orchid leis in Thailand. The orchid farm they own covers approximately 200 acres, and the farm produces 1 million flowers per week. The main market for cut flowers is Japan, while most lei flowers are sold to Hawai‘i and the Continental U.S. They also ship both sprays and leis to other parts of the Pacific including Guam and American Samoa.

Besides the farm, Sing’s family has a factory for lei making. They employ 150–200 mostly female lei makers who string orchid leis every day. Some designs are very complicated and take over three hours and 300 flowers. When Sing’s mother comes up with a new design, she demonstrates it in front of these workers and teaches them how to reproduce the design. “They are pretty quick to learn,” Sing says. Although he didn’t tell me how much the lei stringers are paid per hour, one orchid grower who has visited another farm in Thailand told me that the workers are paid $2–4 a day.

Premade leis are shipped twice a week. When the flowers arrive, they get stored in the warehouse in Kalihi and hired drivers drive their truck for distribution. They deal with some of largest stores and business organization such as Wal-Mart, Costco, Sam’s Club, Foodland, Long Drugs and the Polynesian Cultural Center.

Sing and his family recently started importing pre-made pikake leis. That’s their new market. Sing’s father told me he has already invested money in building a large greenhouse for pikake near their orchid farm.
Thai Connection #2

So why are Thai orchids so widely used? Thailand is the largest producer of orchids as well as the world center for laboratories for dendrobium orchids. How it became so is another story.

The development of orchids in Thailand is closely related to the history of orchid research at the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources at University of Hawai‘i (UH CTAHR) at Manoa. In 1950, UH launched two main orchid research programs: one on micropropagation and another on hybridization. Leading researchers were Dr. Haruyuki Kamemoto (for breeding) and Dr. Yoneo Segawa (for propagation). Micropropagation or tissue culturing, which is a biotechnology for cloning plants, was developed by joint research programs during the 1960s between University of Hawai‘i and Kasetsart University in Thailand. According to the current UH CTAHR professor who was also trained under Segawa, most of the leading figures in Thailand who developed large scale orchid laboratories and the industry were trained at UH.

There are about 10 large-scale commercial laboratories in Thailand. Most focus on tissue culturing; some do both breeding and propagation. One cutting can ultimately result in 10,000 plants. It only costs around 8-10 cents to produce each plantlet in Thailand, while in Hawai‘i this costs about a dollar.

UH CTAHR developed a genetic engineering project on dendrobium orchids few years ago, crossing orchid genes with the genes of the silk corn moth to make disease and fungus resistant orchids. The project is now temporarily on hold because “it’s not worth the expense,” considering the budget situation and public opposition to GM crops, according to one professor at UH.

Consuming Lei, Keeping Them Clean and Pretty

One vegetable farmer in Waimanalo told me that in regards to pesticide use, flower farms are the worst. Pesticides and chemicals contained in wind and run-off water from flower farms are affecting farm crops as well as the surrounding environment for residents. Many growers store outdated chemicals outside, which also impacts the soil and water.

While growing organic vegetables is becoming a trend in recent years, this has not had much affect on the flower industry. Signs proclaiming “organically grown flowers” are rare at flower shops or at supermarkets. This is because; first, people don’t care too much for flower ornamentals since they are not “eating” flowers, and second, it is hard to grow pesticide-free flowers since the esthetic expectation for flowers is much higher compared to vegetables. The bottom line for most people is that flowers should look perfect, without any scars or spots. For dendrobium orchids, growers spray chemicals at least 20 times throughout the plant’s life, in addition to chemicals used in propagation and soil fertilizers. Thai grown orchids do not have to follow regulations for toxic chemicals which people have to have a registered license to use in Hawai‘i. Thanks to virus resistant hybrids and large amount of chemicals used, dendrobium orchids last the longest, that is why they are so popular among the lei sellers and wholesalers. However, one lei maker told me she washes her hands thoroughly after making a few leis of these.

Graduation in May in Hawai‘i is a large event, and giving lei for the graduates is a “tradition” for all the people in Hawai‘i to enjoy. The biggest wholesaler in Oahu imports 100,000 leis from Thailand in the month of May alone. Considering this is but one wholesaler, how many lei are consumed in the graduation season? A couple of million, maybe. Everybody rushes into lei stands, supermarkets and flower shops to give leis to graduating family members and close
friends. Few make leis on their own. We buy, give, wear and throw away leis, taking the chemicals in and out.

Reflection
Recent newspaper articles have reported the tough situations for local lei stand operators and commercial nurseries that “compete against” and “suffer from” cheap Thai orchid lei (Kamhis 2000, Christensen 2000). Articles oftentimes portray a scenario of “foreign versus local” leaving no room for discussions about agency and giving the impression that Thai flowers came all of a sudden from nowhere. However, in this dualistic picture of “foreign versus local,” the complex histories of the capitalist growth of the lei industry are lost. People who first started importing orchids were the local flower farmers who wanted to make a profit by meeting the increasing lei demand generated by tourism. Just like Watanabe Floral, many larger commercial nurseries slowly closed their farms and established wholesale businesses. “Local” wholesalers are now the biggest importer of orchids to Hawai‘i and the exporter of commercial lei to the Continental U.S.

In addition, the University of Hawai‘i has also contributed significantly to the development of hybridization and cloning technology for dendrobium orchids, which led the mass production of orchids in Thailand. The technology of so-called micro-propagation was developed as a joint program between Hawai‘i and Thailand. As for pesticide use, both “local” and “foreign” farmers utilize pesticides and chemical fertilizers when growing the flowers, negatively impacting the water and soil as well as the surrounding environment.

Small businesses like lei stands have been having difficult times in recent years as one can tell from the shutdown of the Leilani lei stand and the difficult situation that Aunty Kalani faces at her lei stand in Waikiki. In resisting against the larger globalized flower enterprise, both lei stands have utilized symbolic labels of “local” or “Hawaiian.” The term “Hawaiian” and “local” were often used interchangeably, and sometimes contradictorily. As seen in the story of Leilani Leistand, “Hawaiian sewn” refers to ethnic Hawaiians, while “Hawaiian grown” involves a geographic boundary. “Local” follows similar distinctions; however, she often excluded migrants working in flower farms as “locals.” The meaning of “local-ness” and “Hawaiian-ness” thus shifts depending on the situation, sometimes utilized as resistance, sometimes as advertisements or the mix of both.

With the development of tourism and the globalized capitalist economy, the lei industry has experienced a major change from a subsistence livelihood to profitable businesses based on a cash economy. Today the labor intensive intricate leis are either produced overseas or by the migrant workers living in Hawai‘i. The costs of labor in both sites are much cheaper than those who work as a “legal” waged labor at local flower wholesalers or lei stands. Wholesaler business enterprises are producing most of the profits out of surplus values made by cheap labor in and outside of Hawai‘i. Stories of the actual people who are engaged in the making of lei we purchase at lei stands, supermarkets and flower shops do not usually appear in the mainstream media or the public discourse, but when they do, they are superficially depicted as “illegal” or “foreign.”

Conclusion
From following the complex history of the lei industry and social activities that are involved in the production processes, one can see that the binary picture of “foreign versus domestic” or “local versus not local” does not quite explain the actual social realities of people and activities that are connected to each other. The lei industry, as well as any other industry in today’s world,
has experienced a major industrialization process. As Immanuel Wallerstein suggests, the “capitalist economy is a system built on the endless accumulation of capital” and what makes this system possible is “the commodification of everything” (1991, 31). If the capitalist economy exists out of the commodification of everything, commercial lei and its production processes are commodified as well.

Fetishism on finished commodities or arguments solely focused on representation often blurs the problems of the capitalist mode of production and tends to simplify the underlying layers of socio-economic-political conditions. The discourse of the “commodification of culture,” thus, should not be bound only to the idea that some specific and “authentic” culture has been commodified, but instead should open up to a perspective that recognizes the commodification of everything as part of our current culture.

As Garnham, Harvey and Mitchell suggest, “culture” is inseparable from relations of production and consumption— and of power” (Mitchell 1995, 113). The power is, according to Mitchell, “constructed out of the materials of everyday life, transforming the material practices through which everyday life proceeds” (113). Thus the realities of the difficult economic situations of every small-scale lei stands and the lei makers in and outside of Hawai‘i, the dominant position of wholesalers, and the issue of biodiversity of flowers cannot be separated from “culture.”

While culture is about “a way of life,” there is a whole range of cultural practices which constitute our culture: artistic forms, texts, architectures, and different forms of commodities. Giving and receiving lei is also a cultural practice. In fact, it is a practice engaged in everyday by everybody: tourists, non-tourists, locals, non-locals, teachers, office workers and children. Regardless of one’s position or identity, all give and receive lei.

Giving and receiving lei, in fact, does leave positive sentiments among the majority of people since it is a practice of showing and experiencing affection and love. However, we often forget that production and consumption is part of our “cultural practice” as well. We tend to focus only on the moment of “buying” or “giving” lei and analyze and argue from that particular moment of practice. However, lei do not only exist at that moment, they are produced and consumed: grown sometimes cloned, stringed and sewn, shipped and displayed, bought and trashed. If we take all these processes of cultural practices into our “culture,” there might be a new way to re-imagine what kind of way of life we want for ourselves and all the living beings around us.

As a final note, I would like to thank all the people who have helped me and supported my portfolio project. I would like to especially thank all my committee members as well as people who have spared their precious time to talk to me and let me observe their daily experiences. Since I have especially committed myself to collect stories and connect different groups of people and events, I failed to engage in deeper analysis of each group’s background history and information. There should be many more voices and stories included. Although this portfolio project is my last piece of product with my formal academic education, I hope to continue to follow the lei and other commodity production as well as to learn from people’s everyday experiences and practices. Thank you for reading!

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Notes

1 Although colonialism in Hawai‘i is often dated to the arrival of Captain James Cook, archeologist Tom Dye indicates that commoners’ access to resources were already altered and exploited by the chiefs long before the arrival of James Cook (Dye 2007, 5).

2 Kaua‘i chief Kaumuali‘i surrendered to Kamehameha in 1810 without overt conflict.