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Howes & Osorio, eds./The Value of Hawai'i

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INTRODUCTION

CRAIG HOWES

The striking cover of this book brings into focus the themes and the ambitions of its contributors. The main photo shows a Hawai‘i classroom, probably in the 1950s. Cut out numbers and the letters of the alphabet run along the walls just below the ceiling, but someone—probably the teacher—has written the word ALOHA in even larger letters on the blackboard. The two children are staging a display of Hawai‘i’s status as a separate place, with its own history, and as somehow part of the American union. The little girl holds up a silhouette of George Washington, who’s looking backward, apparently at the approaching silhouette of Kamehameha, which the boy in the arts-and-crafts tricorned colonial hat has just finished making. (The scissors are still in his right hand.)

Neither of the children is looking at these iconic profiles. The little girl is gazing up at someone outside of the picture. “Is this what you want?” Lost in himself, the little boy isn’t looking for understanding, or approval. He isn’t looking anywhere. Gaye Chan, the cover designer, has also superimposed an open bankbook from the mid 1950s over part of the photo. In Hawai‘i, this was a time of economic and social transformation that culminated in statehood, and it was also a time when people were intensively debating the price of paradise.

It’s a striking cover because these somber, even bewildered children don’t look anything like those beaming multiethnic young faces found in most statehood photographs. In fact, these children represent more accurately our current situation, which is forcing us to ask urgent yet uneasy questions about how Kamehameha and George Washington do see each other these days, if at all, and also about whether aloha is the most important thing in this scene, or just a scribbled-in afterthought.

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Oscar Wilde once said “A cynic is someone who knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing,” and the past generation of executive and

legislative activity in Hawai'i could certainly stand as evidence that we have become a community of cynics. Governor Cayetano began his first term in 1994 by grimly announcing that we were in a disastrous budget crisis. Since then, we have lurched our way through a perpetual state of economic emergency. World and national events certainly played their part in creating this chaos. An economic recession covering the last half of the 1990s, followed by 9/11 and two wars, and concluded by the biggest economic collapse since the Great Depression have obviously affected tourism and the military, just to mention only the biggest drivers of our economy.

But if anything, Hawai'i itself has changed even more profoundly. Sugar and pineapple have disappeared, bringing to a close the large-scale agriculture that all but defined the islands for over a century. (Can you imagine what plantation owners—and plantation workers—would have thought in 1910 if you had told them that in 2010, only 1.6 percent of Hawai'i's population would be working in agriculture?) Perceptions of unions, those hugely formative forces on the course of twentieth century Hawai'i history, have shifted from the private to the public sector. In 1949, striking dock workers brought the territory to a standstill; in 2001, it was teachers and government and public employees.

What's frustrating about the current stagnation or decline in the quality of life in Hawai'i is that in certain areas we have traditionally done things much better. As our contributors point out, our healthcare provisions, our long-term commitments to environmental protection and historic preservation, our public and private advocacy for culture and the arts, our labor agreements that secured pension benefits, disability support, and a living wage, and our vigilant efforts to function as a productive, multiethnic, and equitable society have placed Hawai'i high on the list of comparatively progressive and peaceful places on earth. But as public debate and public policy have degenerated into an unending hunt for what we supposedly don't need or can't afford to provide ourselves, the daily news becomes indistinguishable from the equally depressing debates in California, or Illinois, or Washington, D.C. What's most troubling about the current public debates over education, social services, healthcare, the environment, and cultural preservation has been the expressed indifference, or even open antagonism, to any efforts at keeping these institutions from slouching toward total dysfunction. We deserve better.

There's been good news, and bad news. The balanced budget requirement in Hawai'i has prevented the bankruptcy disasters of states like California and Illinois. That's good. But in the past few years, the executive branch's refusal to raise state revenues at a time when expenses were steadily climbing has moved us toward what led California to disaster—rising costs for prisons,

schools, universities, social services, and infrastructure, but an absolute inability, thanks to Proposition 13 and other constraints, for government to pay for essential services at a time when the self-inflicted collapse of the business sector has made them most necessary.

One of the strongest convictions that emerges from this collection is that letting certain services and institutions drop below a certain point is not only imprudent, but immoral. No one should be capable of walking out of negotiations to announce that the number of school days in a year will be dramatically cut. No one should be able to argue that the laws and mandates designed to keep government accessible, honest, and responsible don't apply to the executive or legislative branch, or can be bargained away. And no one should be able to argue for increasingly punitive law enforcement, long-term incarceration, and literal exile, while at the same time refusing to admit that the community has any responsibility to address the problems that contribute to homelessness or crime. This book can stand as a snapshot of sorts—a state of the State, compiled in early 2010. But its primary function is to provoke discussions of what is right—at first, in the period before the 2010 elections, but also into the future, as we keep our focus on what is valuable about Hawai'i to us, and how to care for this place that we love.

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The idea for this book came just before dawn on October 26, 2009, as the co-editors were jogging through Mānoa Valley. We've done this roughly three times a week for years, and we run slowly enough so that we can talk the whole time. The conversation turned to the 2010 elections, and whether we could expect anything other than a continued gutting of the quality of life we cared about, and a sense of helplessness before the whims of economic and government forces that were all but defining these islands. Somewhere near the University of Hawai'i Press on Kolowalu Street, we started talking about a collection of essays that would talk about how we had gotten into this mess—we're both strongly convinced of the importance of history—and then would offer responses that didn't just focus on the bottom line. These would be essays about the value of Hawai'i, not the price.

We agreed that we needed to bring more people into the discussion, so we contacted Meda Chesney-Lind, Mari Matsuda, Neal Milner, and Deane Neubauer, because they were extremely familiar with sectors of the community that we weren't, because they have all been very public advocates for a better, more equitable Hawai'i, and because they all knew people who would be good potential contributors. We met briefly in mid-November, and batted around topics that might be covered, and the names of possible writers. We

also agreed that we needed a brief—one paragraph—description of the collection to send along when we invited people to contribute.

These things stayed until late January, when we decided that if the book was going to appear well before the 2010 elections, it needed to happen now. So we met again in late January and early February, and came up with roughly thirty topics for essays, potential writers for each topic, and some backup names, in case the first person we approached said no. (Almost no one did.) We invited more than two dozen writers and asked them for an essay of about 3,000 words on the subject of their most passionate concerns. We asked them to describe how Hawai'i has arrived at the current state of affairs, and to include recommendations for addressing the problems. We wanted people to write for general, not specialist readers, and to have the essays done by March 29—a deadline of roughly seven weeks for most contributors, but an even shorter time for others.

Each contributor chose the approach and style that seemed most appropriate for the topic. Some essays are anecdotal and autobiographical. Some are highly schematic. Some have charts and graphs, others have photos. One has a recipe. We also asked each contributor to supply, if appropriate, a list of further resources, in addition to the ones quoted in the essay, for readers interested in finding out more about the essay's topic. The result is what you hold in your hands.

This book is not a repair manual. Although the writers propose solutions large and small to the challenges that face us, these essays encourage the entire community to enter into discussions about Hawai'i's future. Along the way, the essays also provide information about our past and present that can help inform these discussions—considerations often lost when people are under the budget-cutting knife.

This book is not a shared manifesto. The contributors are a diverse group. (We knew we were probably on the right track when some writers expressed reservations about other participants.) But they all really know what they are talking about—that's why we asked them—and they all share a concern about the current condition of Hawai'i, and a belief that our ways of thinking as a community have to change. We need to refocus, to remember, and to rededicate.

And though it's similar in certain ways, *The Value of Hawai'i* is not just an update of *The Price of Paradise*, Randall W. Roth's edited volumes of 1992 and 1993. The major differences are in timing, focus, and tone. *The Price of Paradise* appeared at the end of the Waihee years, with their booming revenues, major expansions of social programs, funding for virtually universal healthcare, and substantial increases in public employees salaries and benefits to make up for preceding years of neglect. A major theme of *The Price of*

Paradise was that government, and particularly state government, was too big and intrusive. “Normally,” Roth writes in his introduction, “state and county governments are content to regulate businesses; here they compete with them.”¹ What a change in less than twenty years! As many of our contributors point out, government now often does neither.

The perspective and method in *The Price of Paradise* were also different. “Most of the authors are economists,” Roth wrote, “the others are journalists, lawyers, an educator’s educator and a demographer.”² The essays were also very short, and tended to deal with very specific topics—“Golf Courses,” “Airport Expansion,” and nine different essays on taxes. For the most part, our essays are somewhat broader in scope, and although they are still short, their writers had more space to inform and advocate. But perhaps the best way to describe the difference appears in *The Price of Paradise* itself. After granting that “there’s more to ‘quality of life’ than just dollars and cents,” Roth then expresses the hope that “environmentalists, sociologists, moral philosophers, and experts from other fields will continue and expand the dialogue.”³ *The Value of Hawai‘i* grants this wish. Although two of our essayists also wrote for *The Price of Paradise*, the others represent the array of voices Roth suggests—and we have added social activists, nonprofit administrators, artists, and Hawaiian nationalists to his list.

Finally, as its subtitle suggests, *The Value of Hawai‘i* assumes that we need to know how we got into the current state of affairs, and that we need to change attitudes as well as policies if we hope to restore, and to be directed by, what is truly valuable about Hawai‘i. Roth notes that for economists, “the long run is more important than the short run.”⁴ We agree, but for our contributors, the short run is almost always a mistake, because “the long run” starts in the distant past.

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Though many themes emerge from these pages, here are a few that show up repeatedly.

I. Hawai‘i will remain economically, socially, and ethically troubled as long as we refuse to come fully to terms with Hawaiian claims to land and sovereignty. Though the supposed reasons offered have changed with every decade, our government and judiciary have consistently delayed, avoided, and denied. Following this strategy of neglect, as a community we’ve withheld infrastructure funding, questioned the legitimacy of entities we have ourselves created to address the issues, negotiated agreements explicitly intended to prevent resolution, and most recently, actually proposed through legislation simply to sell

the contested lands as a one-time budget bailout. Until Hawai'i deals with this more than a century-old injustice, bad faith will continue to haunt everything that we do or don't do. That's why the current status of Hawaiians—not as a separate issue, but as a factor that must shape all decisions—is so important to so many of these essays.

II. The collapse of support for regulatory and service agencies has been disastrous for Hawai'i. The essay might be about the economy or water, about Hawaiian sovereignty or Hawai'i's forests, or about the arts, homelessness, or prisons, but the essayists all agree that the gutting of government departments and agencies, and the cutting of funds for the many organizations responsible for Hawai'i's arts, culture, and human services, have not only had obvious impacts—the growing numbers of the homeless, the virtual impossibility of our artists, social workers, cultural practitioners, and community organizers to sustain their work—but has also encouraged exploitive and destructive business and development practices to flourish. Especially in the last few years, the executive branch has seemed committed to a policy of destroying the government's ability to plan, preserve, nurture, or enforce. (Apparently the Superferry got the message that filing Environmental Impact Statements is for losers.) As many of our contributors point out, one surefire strategy for turning things around at least somewhat would be to demand that the government have the will, and expend the resources necessary, to enforce its own laws. For whatever reasons, it currently doesn't.

III. Partnerships between government and “the private sector” are essential—either one without the other is a recipe for disaster. We are the unfortunate heirs of thirty years of a national demonizing of government, and a knee-jerk faith in an unregulated private sector, that together have damaged all of us profoundly. And at present, Hawai'i actually seems to be out of sync with at least some national trends. The hardline combative approach to budgeting and taxation in the State's executive branch over the past few years seems to assume that in addition to children, the homeless, the troubled, and the disabled, all public employees, nonprofit workers, artists, and educators are basically welfare recipients. Gratitude for any support is the only appropriate response; furthermore, as dependents, these groups have no real right to express an opinion about their conditions of employment, or about the overall direction of Hawai'i, because their status as objects of charity makes them by definition self-interested. (It's not going too far to say that some people will reject out of hand many of the essays in this book precisely because the people writing them have spent years studying their subject.) This illusory polarizing

of government and “the real world” of the private sector also makes possible some patent contradictions in general attitudes. Why for example is it a cardinal principle that you get what you pay for, unless you’re paying for infrastructure, education, social services, and public protections, where it’s assumed that more can always be done with less? Or to put it another way, how many businesses and independent contractors would accept the obligation to do 100 percent of the agreed upon work, or supply 100 percent of the products, for 40 percent of the necessary money, simply because times are hard for the purchaser? We need much more frequent and productive discussions of what infrastructure and services are essential for a decent society, and then we must accept the need to pay directly and consistently for them, regardless of economic upheavals, major or minor. Hawai‘i has demonstrated repeatedly in the past that the people here value and are willing to support such services. Or as one of our contributors put it, “When I go to the all-candidates meetings, I’m going to ask ‘Which of you is going to raise my taxes?’ Because the person who says ‘I will’ is the one who will get my vote.”

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The confused little girl and boy on the cover are now likely in their late fifties, and if they still live here, they’re probably still confused. But seeking approval from somewhere else, or escaping into our own thoughts, can’t be options now. We have to grow up. The tools for breaking out of this malaise surround these children, and us. Education. A sense of the past—Hawaiian and American, for better or worse. And aloha.

Read the essays in this book, and you’ll have a better sense of what some other people believe is important about Hawai‘i. Much of what is valuable here we owe to those who came first—who cultivated this place, who preserved it, who came to know it in all the ways that humans have found to love where they live, and who still have undeniable claims to it that must be recognized. And we also need to value our distinctiveness today. The entire world recognizes this, even if only as a tropical fantasy, but we all need to remember to recognize it as well. To quote a bumper sticker, “This ain’t da mainland.” That’s good, and it’s also our greatest cause for hope. If nothing else, the writers in this collection demonstrate repeatedly that for all the impact of external economic and political forces, we can change course.