

Educating Sustainability and Semiotically
Figuring the Corporation as a Citizen:
A Case Study

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<Abstract>

Contemporary corporations headquartered in the U.S.A. are increasingly seeking to reconfigure themselves as corporate citizens. Using ethnographic data gathered from a corporation in Hawai‘i, this paper examines anthropologically how a corporation called “HLC” sought to express corporate citizenship and figure itself as a corporate citizen by engaging in education for sustainability. By partnering with a local college, the HLC Company cofounded the “Sustainability Education Institute” (a pseudonym) and created various educational programs and cultural practices that promoted sustainability as a locally meaningful and inhabitable sign of cultural citizenship. In educating sustainability and making it a locally recognizable mode of performing citizenship, the HLC Company, in turn, created the grounds of which the corporation could narrate itself as no longer a legal fiction but a ‘corporate citizen,’ which belongs to an actual community of sustainability-conscious social actors. It is argued that it is only through the creation and circulation of meaningful signs of citizenship that corporate entities can semiotically configure themselves as corporate citizens and legitimize their citizenship claims in corporate narratives and discourses.

[**Keywords**] corporate citizenship, sustainability,
corporate narrative, cultural practice, anthropology

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I. Introduction

How does a corporation come to resemble a citizen? Corporations have long been considered classic exemplars of a legal fiction (Maine 1986). They are seen by the courts as fictional entities, things, or organizations that become “truths” only by means of the law (Oh 2007). They are granted legal rights to act ‘like’ a person for the purpose of profit making and on behalf of the shareholders. By legal definition, corporations are legal persons.

However, we are witnessing a different phenomenon in the twenty-first century. With the rapid diffusion of the discourses of “corporate social responsibility (CSR)” and “corporate citizenship,” corporations are now being asked to act like social persons and citizens. Numerous companies around the world, and particularly in the USA, are responding to these requests. The question is, through what social and cultural processes and corporate-internal procedures can this be done? How can a corporation –consisting of not one but multiple social actors–come to act as a single unified entity and a citizen? On what grounds can corporate claims to citizenship be made and legitimized? To which communities do these corporate citizens belong to? How do we explain the mechanism by which a corporation can transform itself into a citizen (if indeed it succeeds to do so in the eyes of the general local public)?

In this paper, I approach corporate citizenship as a public sphere discourse that challenges canonical views of corporations as legal persons. Just as it is only through CSR discourses that comment upon

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the social responsibilities of corporations that corporations can transform into ‘social persons’ capable of performing responsibility (Koh 2010, 2013), the production and circulation of discourses of the citizenry roles and responsibilities are essential to the transformation of corporations into citizens. Corporations can only come to resemble and act ‘like’ citizens through circulating a set of discourses on corporate citizenship that “regiments”(Silverstein 2003, 196) what it means to be a citizen and what needs to be performed to gain citizenship. So, how does an individual company come to engage in producing and circulating discourses and narratives of citizenship?

In order to examine this process empirically; this paper takes an anthropological approach to examine how a corporation has carried out its community relations(CR) activities in the name of corporate citizenship. I examine how a company called “HLC” (a pseudonym) in the US state of Hawai'i, collaborated with a local college and established the “Sustainability Education Institute” (a pseudonym, hereafter the ‘Institute’) at the college, with the goal of disseminating the sustainability concept and sustainable practices in the island of Hawai'i. Using theories and methods of cultural and semiotic anthropology, this paper examines how the HLC company, with consent from the members of the Institute from the college, has set the goals of the Institute’s educational programs and activities in a way that enables the corporate entity to express (i.e., represent) citizenship and interactionally position itself as a citizen of the larger (albeit corporate-defined) community.

It will be shown that in promoting the education of sustainability through the Sustainability Education Institute, the HLC corporation has come to establish its own mode of performing citizenship by making “sustainability” a locally meaningful and recognizable semiotic “sign”(Peirce 1998) of cultural citizenship. The HLC Company also seeks to make legitimate claims of belonging by creating a network of social actors who not only recognize but also help to promote

sustainability as a sign of citizenship. Based on these findings, I will argue throughout my paper that it is through the social and the cultural processes of creating, fixating, and circulating “sustainability” as a sign of cultural citizenship among the target local communities that a corporation can claim and legitimize itself as a ‘citizen’ of that community.

Corporations are typically not composed of one but many individual natural persons. Hence, theoretically, they are granted the rights to act ‘as if’ a single natural person. What this paper hopes to make clear is that if indeed a corporate entity (that is, a legal person) can come to resemble and be recognized as a social person or citizen, it is only through discourses and narratives that utilize certain semiotic signs as indexical signs of corporate citizenship and/or corporate personhood.

In the following sections, I first discuss the theoretical and methodological framework that guides this study. I then discuss how the HLC Corporation and the Sustainability Education Institute at the local college developed educational programs so that “sustainability” as a sign-vehicle is promoted as an inhabitable sign of local-Hawaiian citizenship. In doing so, I also explicate how the HLC Company semiotically figures itself as a single, recognizable, corporate citizen in a community of sustainability-conscious local social actors. Later, by using data gathered from a publicly held event that promotes the educational activities of the Institute as contributing to bringing about a “sustainable Hawai‘i,” I examine how a corporation can perform or enact citizenship.

II. Literature Review

Corporate social responsibility and corporate citizenship are increasingly gaining anthropological attention (Welker 2009; Kirsch 2010; Rajak 2011; De Neve 2012). This increase of anthropological

interests is welcoming especially since, although there has been a continuous stream of anthropological research on corporations (see Urban and Koh 2013 for a review), ethnographies of modern corporations produced as a result of a long immersion at corporate sites (as sites of CSR and corporate citizenship production) are rare.

Existing ethnographic examinations of CSR and corporate citizenship have mostly been studies regarding the mining industry. A study of the mining company in Indonesia, Welker (2009) revealed how managers of “Newmont Corporation” provoked an attack on environmental activists in the vicinity of the Batu Hijau mine by enrolling and aligning with local village elites who acted with a moral purpose to pursue development. Her study revealed that Newmont managers’ provocation of violence was culturally rooted, in local knowledge, practices, and circulating narratives; and that “CSR has... produced fresh zones of struggles and new forms of violence” (Welker 2009, 148).

Rajak’s (2011) book examines the CSR claims and activities of another transnational mining corporation operating in South Africa and Europe called the “Anglo American.” Rajak argues that the Anglo American Company justifies its exploitative activities against South African farmers, factory laborers, and adjacent local communities through the rhetoric of CSR and ethical capitalism. She argues that “power is accumulated and exercised through the practice of CSR” (Rajak 2011, Kindle Locations 294-295) and that the performance of virtue “becomes a crucial mechanism by which corporate structures reinvent, reproduce and extend their authority, not only over the economic order, but over the social (and indeed moral) order” (Kindle Locations 307-308).

Kirsch (2010) also examines CSR in the mining industry, but his work focuses more on the rhetoric of sustainability. He writes that when mining companies claim sustainability, they are only interested in their own “economic sustainability” (vis-à-vis, environmental and

social sustainability). In another work, he further criticized corporate morality claims as examples of “corporate oxymoron”(Benson and Kirsch 2010). In these cultural anthropological examinations of CSR and corporate citizenship, corporate citizenship is largely considered a sub-discourse of CSR. These studies have highlighted the usual negative social effects that accompany or are brought on by corporate social activities carried out in the name of CSR. Anthropological treatment of corporate citizenship that provides analyses of the semiotic, linguistic and cultural production of corporate citizenship is currently nonexistent.

Although the linguistic and semiotic anthropological study of corporate citizenship remains inchoate, there has been an increase of interest in the more general concept and social practices of citizenship. In these studies, anthropologists have asked how different social actors around the world engage in constructing cultural meanings and practices of citizenship in a wide variety of social contexts. These studies attend to how citizenship is discursively and semiotically expressed. It further analyzes what might be the functions of such expressions within the larger contexts in which the studied actors were situated. In many of these studies, anthropologists have built upon insights offered by the “discourse-centered approach to culture,” which this paper also utilizes (Sherzer 1987, Urban 1991, Farnell and Graham 1998).

The discourse-centered approach to culture clearly differentiates itself from other approaches to discourse such as the sociolinguistic approaches to discourse, the postmodern approaches to discourse, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In the discourse-centered approach to culture, the term “discourse” refers to everyday spoken language – language in a broad sense, including speech, writing, and other paralinguistic and nonlinguistic features. In other words, language here is conceived of not as *langue* but as *language-in-use* (and therefore, ‘talk’). Discourse-centered approach views discourse as “the means by which social action, cultural knowledge and social institutions are

achieved, maintained and enacted”(Farnell and Graham 1998, 414). Conceived in this manner, cultural, linguistic and semiotic anthropologists who adopt this approach, view culture as ‘lodged’ in concrete observable – linguistic and nonlinguistic – signs. And they focus on the analyses of the uses and effects of signs in complex social-interactional and cultural processes. A large number of anthropologists utilizing the discourse-centered approach to culture are also semiotic anthropologists, interested in analyzing sign processes using insights (mostly) from Peirce’s semiotics.

Reynolds and Chun’s (2013) recently coedited special issue of *Language & Communication* entitled “*Figuring Citizenship: Communicative Practices Mediating the Cultural Politics of Citizenship Age*” is a good example of a citizenship study that builds upon insights of discourse-centered approach to culture. This special issue was wholly devoted to examining how children and youth of various countries engage in various modes of communicative practices and how that affects the process of culturally constituting and figuring themselves as citizens. Chun (2013) examined how female students of a public high school in the State of Texas differently understood the meaning of pledging allegiance to the USA and the Texas flag. In her analysis, we saw that students differently (and semiotically) configured themselves as different “styles” of citizens (for example, “patriotic” versus “cool” citizens); and that these cultural practices were performed semiotically and in relation to “local ideologies of race, nation, and class.” [needs page citation] Figueroa’s (2013) work examined how mothers of mixed-status Mexican families employed certain “discursive and semiotic features of *testimonio*” (559) to develop an interactionally emergent form of a narrative and to practice civic participation symbolically.

Cody (2009) provided another relevant study on the cultural and semiotic construction of citizenship, which is not a part of the above-mentioned special issue. In rural south India, Cody observed that

social activists encouraged women of a lower caste to sign petitions in documents that were filed with local government agencies. By examining how local activists utilize signatures as signs, he revealed that through the act of signing, the lower caste women are recontextualized (Silverstein and Urban 1996) from a 'marginal citizen' to a 'governed population of the local government' because signatures serve to "inscribe subjects to citizenship" (, 347). By focusing on the uses of specific linguistic and nonlinguistic signs, these linguistic and semiotic anthropological studies have provided an understanding that citizenship is an effect that is accomplished via various complex social and cultural processes of –linguistically and semiotically–producing and inscribing meanings in everyday local cultural practices.

In this paper, I also focus on how language and sign use mediates the social and cultural processes whereby corporations transform or 'figure' themselves as citizens. The significance of this work is that it focuses on the production of the sign of corporate citizenship—a topic that has yet to be examined linguistic/semiotic anthropologically with empirical data gathered through field research. In the following sections, I will analyze the social and cultural processes whereby corporations can *come to* figure themselves as citizens and legitimize their corporate citizen status with respect to the local and global communities of corporate stakeholders.

III. Making “sustainability” a sign of cultural citizenship

When I first approached HLC, my initial research goal was to understand how HLC as a legal fiction acted upon the hegemonic discourse of corporate social responsibility by expressing HLC as a socially responsible corporate person in various marketing and public relations texts. The HLC Corporation was a land development

corporation that had been operating three major business segments with two subsidiaries focused respectively on growing pineapples and operating a resort. At the time of research, the company was reorganizing its business with a new focus on sustainability. Prior to my research inside HLC, I conducted anthropological fieldwork outside HLC in order to understand how CSR was performed as a community relation activity. My research was carried out at the Sustainability Education Institute housed at a local college. As briefly mentioned in an earlier section, HLC was a cofounder of this Institute. I spent a year in 2005 carrying out participant observations and interviews. Through its support of and engagement in the Institute's education of sustainability, the HLC Corporation wished to 'share' its business focus of sustainability with the wider local community.

According to the CEO of HLC, HLC's involvement in the education of sustainability was an "expression of HLC's social responsibility to the wider community." This implied that "sustainability" was considered a representation of corporate citizenship at HLC. HLC provided 200,000 US dollars of seed money to the Institute for the first two years. Four HLC employees were engaged in the Institute as staff and committee members. The company also opened up some of its land and properties for the Institute's educational use. The vice provost of the college and several of its faculty were members of the Institute's staff and committee. The college also provided classrooms and the kitchens of the college dining center to further education in the application of sustainable agriculture. Later, two foreign universities also became cofounders of the Institute. HLC employees introduced a scholar of sustainable agriculture from a Costa Rican university and a scholar of sustainable engineering from a Swedish university. Together, the four entities (three higher education institutions and the HLC corporation) had come together with the aim of disseminating practices of sustainability through K-12 education, college level education, degree offerings, and workplace education programs.

In the early stages of the Institute's formation, an important area of agreement among the cofounders was their decision that all of the Institute's activities would be physically located on the island in which the Institute (including the HLC company and the college) was situated. This idea was proposed by the HLC Corporation, and the representatives from other partnering entities gave consent that all student activities were to be conducted in the specific Hawaiian island on which the Institute was located. That is, all K-12, college, and postgraduate students who wanted to learn sustainability had to learn and practice sustainability on the island, and the Institute would fund researchers and scholars insofar as their work was carried out within its boundaries.

Let us note why this decision was important for the Institute (i.e., HLC and the college), especially in relation to citizenship. According to HLC's employees, HLC's corporate stakeholders were not geographically limited to Hawai'i. The company operated offices in California, and also targeted customers in the western continental USA. It also had a group of global stakeholders including customers and supply chains in South America, East Asia, and South Asian countries. The decision to carry out sustainability education inside the island thus perplexed me, at least at the time when I did research. If the HLC company's involvement in the Sustainability Education Institute was simply an "expression" of HLC's corporate citizenship (as the CEO conveyed to me during an interview), what was the need to define the recipients of HLC's corporate citizenship activities to local Hawaiian audiences, especially when the company can easily extend the audiences to non-Hawaiian stakeholders by means of simply, for example, providing research funding for students who wish to study elsewhere? The Institute and HLC could still claim to be educating and promoting sustainability by choosing more convenient venues of performing institutional citizenship.

I conducted a participant observation of a series of the Institute's

strategic planning meetings. In these meetings, all of the members of the Institute from all four cofounding entities participated. A few of the strategic plans developed in these meetings are as follows.

<Table 1> The classroom as a site of replicating sustainability as a sign of cultural citizenship

GOAL 4 (LIVING LAB)	
Responsible Person(s): Executive Officer	
Objective 1:	
Create living classrooms to serve as a model for others interested in creating sustainable communities.	
Action Strategies:	
●	Identify examples of sustainable living within the community of [name of the Hawaiian island]
●	Identify and pursue opportunities to create living classroom models.
●	Engage students, community members and other stakeholders in these learning labs to pursue the integration of theory and practice.

Table 1 is one of the goals set forth during the Institute's strategic planning meeting, specifically in relation to K-12, college, and workplace education offerings. This goal was about creating the educational context as a "Living Lab" where students could engage in hands on learning and training of sustainable agriculture practices (for example, edible landscaping, permaculture, composting, etc.). The Institute's members viewed the diversity of Hawai'i's ecological realms as a rich "lab" whereby the concept of sustainability could be taught and the practices of environmental sustainability transmitted. They sought to utilize Hawai'i's environment (and HLC's lands) as a "lab" where students could directly experiment with methods of practicing environmental sustainability.

However, the goal was not limited there. The more important part

of the goal was that these living labs would “serve as a model for others interested in creating sustainable communities” (see “Objective 1”). It is understandable that the Institute would want to utilize Hawaii’s natural environment as a “living lab” of sustainability education, but what was the purpose of making these classrooms a “model” for other sustainability initiatives? The specific actions necessary in order to fulfill this larger goal were also outlined (see “Action Strategies”). The committee and staffs decided that the Institute would (1) “identify examples of sustainable living” within the island communities, (2) “identify and pursue opportunities to create living classroom models,” and (3) “engage students, community members and other stakeholders in these learning labs to pursue the integration of theory and practice,” in order to create a classroom “model.”

<Table 2> Organizational networking as effort to define a community in which the ‘corporate citizen’ belongs

GOAL 10 (K-12 LEADERSHIP)	
Responsible Person(s): Executive Officer	
Objective 1:	
Foster relationships with K-12 public and private institutions, to develop student and teacher interest in pursuing sustainability.	
Action Strategies:	
●	Identify and pursue internship opportunities for K-12 students with [name of the Hawaiian island] employers.
●	Identify and pursue opportunities to enter the classroom and integrate sustainability in learning.
●	Explore opportunities for teacher training.

Table 2 is another example of the Institute’s strategic plan set forth, this time in relation to “K-12 Leadership.” It was decided that the goal of K-12 leadership was to “foster relationships with K-12

public and private institutions, to develop student and teacher interest[s] in pursuing sustainability” (see Objective 1). In order to foster relationships and to develop interests in sustainability education, the Institute would take specific Action Strategies, specifically (1) “identify and pursue internship opportunities for K-12 students with… employers,” (2) “identify and pursue opportunities to enter the classroom and integrate sustainability in learning,” and (3) “explore opportunities for teacher training.”

Why was the goal of K-12 leadership not focused on providing student leadership opportunities that further enhanced the educational content of sustainability? Why was it focused on the application of knowledge rather than, for example, the enhancement or the specialization of knowledge? Why did the Institute want to engage in developing social relationships with local employers and teachers? What purpose does organizational social networking efforts serve in terms of the Institute and HLC’s claims to citizenship?

The questions raised by a review of the Institute’s plan can be answered as follows. First, it was noted that the HLC wished to (and the Institute agreed to) conduct educational activities within the geographic boundaries of the island in which the Institute (and the HLC) was situated. In making such a decision, HLC and the Institute’s rationale was that in doing so it would allow the entities to position themselves as citizens *with respect to* the local-State community. In order for corporations to make claims that they are citizens, there first needs to be communities or societies to whom they can claim citizenship. The HLC Company wished to position itself as a corporate citizen, and the college also wished to position itself as a institutional citizen of specifically the Hawaiian community. This was the explicit intent of HLC’s CEO and the vice provost of the college. Around 2005-2006 (the time when my research was carried out), the sustainability rhetoric and practice had only begun to infiltrate into local communities. Hence, by geographically limiting the Institute’s

educational activities to those carried out inside the island, the Institute would increase the possibility of *exposing* signs of sustainability as signs of the Institute's practice of State citizenship. It would also increase the chances of broadening awareness of the meaning of sustainability within the local communities as signs of cultural citizenship. This is why it was important for HLC and the Institute to have students and scholars engage in sustainability practices on the island. From an institutional and corporate standpoint, education was a site where the dissemination and circulation of signs of corporate and institutional citizenship were possible.

Secondly, the Institute sought to, and subsequently did, create classrooms as "living labs" that served as a "model" for other sustainability initiative organizers. The reason why the Institute created "living labs" that served as "models" was because the purpose of the "labs" (for example, the "Community Garden") was not merely to serve a place where students were educated of sustainable agriculture. Rather, the so-called labs were aimed to be places where students and local community members could learn Hawaiian-cultural practices of citizenship. The goal was to create a place where the replication of cultural practices of citizenship is possible –this was the rationale behind the use of the word "model" here. The Community Garden for example was not simply an ordinary classroom where a unidirectional transmission of knowledge occurred. More ambitiously, it was where the education of Hawaiian-cultural practices of citizenship began, where students and community members acquired knowledge that they could practice *outside* the classrooms (because they are inhabitable signs of citizenship), and further *replicate* practices of sustainability, outside the classroom, as performances of cultural citizenship in their everyday lives.

At the Community Garden, students indeed learned sustainability practices such as making non-chemical biodegradable composts, selecting, planting, and growing non-invasive plants that were friendly

to the Hawaiian land, designing an edible landscape, and harvesting and cooking Hawaiian cuisine using these plants at the college's dining center. Hence, these students were learning how to inhabit signs of Hawaiian-citizenship through the education of sustainable agriculture at the so-called living labs. They were learning how to figure themselves as agents of Hawaii's sustainable future with respect to the local community. They were in other words learning how to inhabit signs of Hawaiian-sustainable citizenship outside the "living labs."

This was the motive of the Institute when its members decided that the classroom should serve as a model for other sustainability movement organizers. Ambitiously, the Institute sought to make sustainability a sign of Hawaiian-cultural citizenship and disseminate those signs in order to bring about a sustainable Hawaiian island. In the meantime, the Institute and HLC were simultaneously creating signs of their institutional and corporate citizenship. In essence, sustainability was being promoted as sign *indexing* (or, spatiotemporally pointing to) and thus *evidencing* HLC's 'corporate citizenship'. The educational activities of the Institute were sites where the cultural process of creating and disseminating signs of Hawaiian citizenship and corporate citizenship were taking place.

Lastly, it was asked why the Institute sought to develop social relationships with non-students such as local employers and teachers rather than focus more intensively on, for instance, curriculum enhancement of K-12 leadership. All these decisions were quite unconsciously made: The members of the Institute simply stated that it was a "natural extension" of the sustainability education. However, by focusing our attention on the uses of "sustainability" as a culturally meaningful sign (and further as concrete evidences of corporate citizenship), we can understand that this decision was a meaningful one in light of corporate legitimization of their citizen status. In short, by "fostering relationships" with local community actors and developing organizational networks, it has now become possible for the Institute

to create a tangible so-called community of sustainability-conscious social actors. This decision had a community building effect. Whereas the decision about how to create classrooms pertained to making 'what' (i.e., sustainability) a sign of citizenship, and was therefore a cultural process, this decision pertained to a determination of 'to whom' sustainability is a sign of citizenship, and was therefore a social process of corporate citizenship).

By reaching out and forming social relationships with local employers and teachers, the Institute can now point to a tangible – and no longer metaphysical – community of actual Hawaiian citizens who acknowledge and help to disseminate “sustainability” as a sign of citizenship and thus also of HLC’s corporate citizenship. The formation of social networks, in other words, is the formation of a community of those who know, use, and perpetuate sustainability and practices of sustainability as signs of an inhabitable and thus performable cultural identity. The HLC corporation can legitimize their discourses and narratives when they claim that they are a ‘corporate citizen’ because there is now a formation of an actual community of sustainability-conscious social actors. They can justify their corporate citizen status by pointing to the company’s belonging to a community of sustainability-conscious citizens.

To summarize, the educational activities of the Sustainability Education Institute was conducted inside the small Hawaiian island because doing so enabled the circulation of signs of sustainability as signs of corporate citizenship in the State. The students at the Institute’s “living labs” were taught how to inhabit the abstract construct of cultural citizenship. Students were not simply learning sustainable practices – they were learning how to use “sustainability” to semiotically constitute themselves as citizens. As a result, the HLC Corporation was engaged in a cultural process whereby it, as a corporate entity, may also be seen as performing citizenry social actions. Additionally, through the organizational networking activities of

the Institute, HLC created an actual community to which it belongs as a citizen. Through its engagement in the Institute’s education of sustainability, the HLC Corporation created the grounds by which it can justify its corporate citizen status with respect to an actual community consisting of ‘real’ social actors (i.e., natural persons).

IV. Narrating and performing corporate citizenship

After the Institute began implementing its strategic plans and started some of its educational programs, it held a community-wide public event. In order to introduce the Institute and spread news of its activities, the committee invited local community residents, local employers, and employees of public and private organizations including state government officials to a Hawaiian luau. This luau – a traditional Hawaiian feast that is usually accompanied by Hawaiian entertainment – took place at the yard of an old plantation house overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Approximately 150 guests attended.

This was the only publicly held event that introduced and promoted the Institute. Between 5pm and 5:45pm, guests arrived and were served drinks and beverages. Between 5:45pm and 6:30pm, dinner was served in the luau buffet style. Between 6:30pm and 6:45pm, the four representatives of the four cofounding organizations of the Institute gave speeches. The order in which these speeches were made was (1) the CEO of HLC, (2) the vice provost of the local college, (3) the sustainable agriculture scholar from a Costa Rican university, and lastly, (4) the sustainable technology scholar from a Swedish university.

The CEO of the HLC Company first extended his thanks to the owner of the old plantation house where the luau was being held. His speech then moved onto his personal vision of the future of Hawai‘i

and how that future “should be” one that is sustainable. “Hawai‘i should be sustainable,” he said, and that “sustainability provided a uniquely Hawaiian model of change.” “Sustainability” here was narrated as a “Hawaiian future,” which in turn was modeled upon the past life styles of ancient Native Hawaiians. The topic of his speech was to promote sustainability as a vision of the community’s future but based on a historical narrative of Native Hawaiian pre-colonial life as a narrative of sustainable future living. The CEO, after aligning the future of Hawai‘i with Hawai‘i’s ancient past, concluded his speech by suggesting a couple of reasons why investment in sustainability is a socially “worthy” and “valuable cause.” Following his speech, the vice provost of the college spoke of how the education of sustainability provides “a basis for an economically sustainable Hawai‘i.” The two professors of foreign universities then shared their stories of the positive social impacts of sustainability in different countries and economies. Afterwards, from 7pm to 8pm, guests freely engaged in interacting and conversing with one another while a local band performed Hawaiian music.

<Figure 1> Events as venues of narrating and performing corporate citizenship



It is important to note that this public event was not on the surface an event for the HLC Corporation. The significance of this event for HLC in light of its demonstration of corporate citizenship is precisely that it was not an event that will be spoken of in local mass media reports and reported speeches as the event of HLC. This was an event to be reported as the Institute’s event and function to publicly promote sustainability as a significant topic of public discourse. As a local newspaper reported four years after the event in 2008, the evening represented the Institute’s “launch event,” as the introduction of a “new paradigm of Hawai‘i’s future.”

The function and significance of this event for HLC’s corporate citizenship was that it allowed the HLC Company to passively showcase its dedication to a “sustainable Hawai‘i.” It was an opportunity to directly prove its corporate citizenship –through action and not rhetoric. The content of the CEO’s speech focused not on narrating the corporate citizenship of HLC. The speech focused instead on narrating the future of the local community (that is, a “sustainable Hawai‘i”). Specifically, the CEO narrated the community’s future in relation to –not the contemporary state of Hawai‘i but –a narrative of Native Hawaiian past. He drew an iconism (i.e., a semiotic ‘likening’) between the future and the past and thereby made the future a palpable reality because he utilized the popular narrative of Native Hawai‘i in order to semiotically figure and transform those present at the event as social actors capable of bringing about a sustainable Hawai‘i community.

In his speech, the HLC Corporation simply remained an economic ‘tool’ or ‘engine’, which ‘helped’ to bring about sustainability in Hawai‘i. His speech did not in any way put forth the message that ‘HLC is a good corporate citizen’. His message was that HLC was simply contributing to the education of sustainability because sustainability “is” the model of Hawai‘i’s ideal future (that is, ‘ideal’ because it is modeled upon a romanticized past).

The very act of supporting the activities of the Sustainability Education Institute and holding the event became concrete signs of HLC's corporate citizenship. By narrating the future of Hawai'i as a sustainable one, the corporation was positioning itself as a co-participant (along with the rest of the guests) in the realization of the ideal future, which "we all should move forward to." There perhaps was no need to deliver a speech of HLC's corporate citizenship. The event itself was already a recognizable performance of HLC's corporate citizenship in the eyes of the event-participating public. By figuring the company as a social agent engaged in activities that will bring about positive changes, and narrating its status as a citizen of the larger State community, the HLC Company transformed itself as a legitimate 'corporate citizen'.

In a similar manner, the HLC Corporation continued to propagate corporate citizenship narratives in other various corporate entextualized events and texts. In corporate narratives, HLC continued to textually and semiotically figure and interactionally position itself as a participant (just like natural persons) in the realization of a sustainable Hawaiian future. Various performances of corporate citizenship – such as HLC's support of the education of sustainability through the Institute, the creation of sustainability farms where diversified agriculture were planted, the achievement of LEED(Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification for its community development projects, the use of recycled packaging materials for packaging and selling its products (e.g., pineapple), and the "up scaling" of old department buildings and utilizing waste materials – were highlighted as performances of HLC's corporate citizenship. These narratives were widely publicized through mass mediating devices such as advertisements and newsletters. Below is an excerpt printed and distributed to HLC's employees in their paychecks:

"... At our Community Garden, HLC is 'growing growers'. In this

Community Garden where HLC works with the Sustainability Education Institute to offer opportunities to K-12 students, students are growing and harvesting fresh fruits and vegetables and helping to create [name of the Hawaiian island]'s sustainable economy and environment. HLC's [names of employees working at the Institute] are closely working with our island's youth. They are rewarded with the experience of contributing to bringing about [name of the Hawaiian island]'s environmental sustainability."

In this narration of HLC's involvement in the education of sustainability, the recipients of HLC's corporate citizenship activities (i.e., students) are not only learning to grow and harvest sustainably selected and planted fruits and vegetables. They are also "helping to create [name of the Hawaiian island]'s sustainable economy and environment." The corporate narrative of citizenship highlights students as social agents, specifically, as agents changing "our island" for a better future. Students were figured as local citizens because "sustainability" is now a sign of citizenship. This was how the HLC Corporation, a legal fiction, could also anthropomorphize itself as a corporate citizen. Now, by "growing" the island's youth as citizens, the HLC Corporation is also a citizen who performs sustainability activities as signs of its citizenship.

V. Conclusion

Through an anthropological case study of a Hawaiian corporation's community relation activities and specifically the corporation's support for the education of sustainability, this paper examined the cultural and social processes involved in corporate claims to citizenship, by tracing the mobilization and the use of "sustainability" as a semiotic sign of cultural citizenship. In the case of the HLC Corporation, the grounds

by which corporate citizenship claims can be made were created through (1) a cultural process of making sustainability a sign of cultural citizenship and (2) a social process of creating alliances with other local organizational and community actors. Through these interwoven but separable processes, the corporate entity laid grounds by which it can be locally recognized as a corporate citizen, and one that belongs to a community of those who have stakes in common. The local effect of these corporate community relation activities was an elevation of “sustainability,” a semiotic sign, as a locally specific mode of performing citizenship.

Recently, there has been growing interests in the field of linguistic and semiotic anthropological analyses of the cultural construction of citizenship. However, studies that examine corporate citizenship or institutional citizenship have yet been produced. It is hoped that this study may contribute to the discussions surrounding citizenship by offering an ethnographic and semiotic analysis of how corporate entities as legal fictions can transform themselves into citizens.

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