



## The foamy politics of surfing in Hawaii

Marie Lecuyer

### review of

Ingersoll, K. A. (2016) *Waves of knowing: A seascape epistemology*. Durham: Duke University Press. (PB, pp 216, \$24.95, ISBN: 978-0-8223-6234-0).

In *Waves of knowing: A seascape epistemology*, Karin Ingersoll (2016) deploys a historical and ethnographic account of surfing as a practice both emerging along and against colonialism in Hawaii. Surfing, here, is not only a topic, it is a method and a analytic trope to apprehend colonialism from the perspective of the sea. By so doing, Ingersoll develops an ‘oceanic’ onto/epistemology that challenges land-centric concept of space and colonial perspectives on island life. Surfing and life by the sea are in fact apprehended by the author as aquatic modes of existence. More than an ethnography of surfing, Ingersoll proposes an ethnography carried *in* surfing and *in* water. In spite of it being a dry medium, the book incarnates the ocean’s wavy temporalities and reads like a swell, with the theme of liquidity keeping unfolding chapter after chapter like recurring foamy waves.

As a minor gesture adding onto the author's argument and her use of Heidegger, which has been criticized by Sloterdijk for being too earth-oriented (ten Bos, 2009), I'll suggest that Ingersoll's ethnography feels like what could be termed a 'foamy' politics of surfing situated at the intersection between land and ocean-based cosmogonies merging in the wake of colonialism. 'Foam', as the philosopher of spheres Sloterdijk (2004: 23) puts it, is 'air in an unexpected place' and refers to the merging of air and water composing a functional and semiotic associated milieu in which one becomes in relation to the medial environment. In this paper, I bring in Sloterdijk's concept of foam as an analytic to read through Ingersoll's book. The concept seems to me very much present yet only tangentially as it is never stated as such in the book. Foam speaks to a capacity to breath underwater as Ingersoll puts it. Foam refers, in the first part of this paper, to one's way of dwelling in water and becoming the wave. In the second part, the foam speaks to one's capacity to resist neocolonial strong currents washing out the island of Hawaii.

### **Dwelling in the fold of a wave: Foam as an associated milieu**

In *Waves of Knowing*, Ingersoll apprehends the postcolonial politics of Hawaii through surfing and the concept of seascape, and by so doing, she does more than unmaking a water/land dichotomy. Whereas capitalism is a terrestrial or land-centric onto/epistemology that understands the world in terms of solid discrete entities easily set into dichotomies, a 'seascape' offers an amphibian and corporeal understanding of the environment. In a seascape epistemology, Ingersoll suggests, surf becomes a potential mean for re-imagining an amphibious relationship to the territory as being made of water as well as air or land. She thinks the two spaces relationally as an associated milieu where the sea is a lived and inhabited place rather than an empty space distinct from earth. For an island society, the ocean is the continuity of land. On that conception of smooth territory, Ingersoll quotes Kanaka poet, artist and fisherman Imaikalani Kalahela: 'For me, the Pacific is our back yard (...) We don't have fences between us and our cousins in Samoa, we just have really long back yards' [Provenzano, 2007 in Ingersoll, 2016: 179]. It is a long garden without fences and simply made of a different materiality. It is thus not a mere space but a life support system, what Ingersoll calls a mode of dwelling in

Heidegger's term, in which people associate functionally and semiotically to an environment.

Rather than something to be mastered and discovered, as a colonial ideology of the wave holds, a seascape ontology considers one's relationship to the ocean as a becoming where 'ocean and surrounding islands [are] imagined extensions of self' [145]. This becoming is what the author calls the 'ocean-body assemblage' where the body becomes the wave. The ocean-body is thus a foamy associated milieu formed by the environment and ocean-based human techniques, a complex assemblage from which meaning emerges, giving the sea and the people inhabiting it a particular form of existence. The ocean becomes a meaningful milieu for who knows how to pay attention and read its movements. In her book, Ingersoll speaks for example of the surfer who knows how to read a wave, its beginnings and ends and knows how the wave is to unfold. Surfing is an onto/epistemic practice whereby one can become attuned to and literate in the textures of the sea. The body becomes the main medium for an oceanic literacy based on the kinetics and sensorial affinities of the surfer or sailor in relationship to water. The ocean and its literacy continually de- and reterritorializes striated lines of the jetty made of concrete as well as static coordinates framing one's relationship to the territory. The surfer or sailor of such onto/epistemology does not vectorize herself through metrics of longitude and latitude but figures her location indexically.

This oceanic literacy gives way to a form of dwelling where the ocean is an inhabited place that makes sense to the people engaging with it. The ocean informs a fluid identity, grounded yet in movement. This liquid situatedness, or identity multisitedness in both land and sea, is what Ingersoll refers to in native Hawaiian language or language of the sea, as the 'mana' of an ocean-body assemblage that allows one to be 'rooted while finding routes' as the author says, borrowing the expression from James Clifford [105]. This 'foamy' identity in-between land and sea, air and water, is not only situated in a moving and heterogenous continuous space (which thus becomes place), it is also situated in liquid time where one is always caught in simultaneously occurring temporalities. Identity is here a shape-shifting concept, shifting along different temporalities. It encompasses multiple modes of being in time, whether it be what the author refers to as capital time of 'waiting in line

at Starbucks' [114] merging with 'the national time as [she] put quarters into a state-erected parking meter' [115]. These linear chronological times differ from a non-quantitative indigenous time when the surfer enters the water. This latter time is one of duration stretching or contracting in relation to the surfer's experience to the milieu, and which reenacts and honours Hawaiian ontology and epistemology. By paying attention to the liquidity and merging of different ways of being happening simultaneously, Ingersoll moves beyond reproducing another dichotomy of pitting colonized and colonizer against one another. Ingersoll looks rather for what she calls an 'autonomous identity' that thrives in spite of a colonial pressure. Surf, as an ontological posture that informs a way of being, resists dichotomies of a land-centric regime of power and engages in decolonial politics.

### **Surfing the colonial tide: Foam as resistance**

Ingersoll states that the onto-epistemic practice of surf was first (imperfectly) washed away by colonialism and Victorianism and is now still being undermined by the surf industry which began in the 1940s. Colonial rule and Victorian mores of the turning of the 20th century first pushed out of the water the surfing practice in Hawaii. Activities relating to water and involving nudity were considered immoral by missionaries. Moreover, missionary politics abolished Kanaka (native hawaiian) sacred practices of surfing. In fact, 'with surf chants and board construction rites, sport gods, and other sacred elements removed, the once ornate sport of surfing was stripped of much to its cultural plumage' [Finney and Houston, 1996 in Ingersoll, 2016: 48]. After WWII, surfing took off as a tourist industry, but rather than reviving a practice that has always been alive on the island, surf tourism fed neocolonialism. Ingersoll shows how surf tourism came with an infrastructure that affects life on the island whether it be because of constructions on the beach, surf schools and too many surfers monopolizing space, as well as because of a Western and colonial ideology of discovery and conquest of the 'perfect' wave. This ideology of domestication of the 'wild' relies on the assumption that the ocean is an alien and empty space to be tamed, and contribute to washing out and erasing locals' presence from the sea and landscape.

Despite colonialism, Ingersoll argues that surf as an onto-epistemic practice has always survived. Even within the strong rolls of the colonial and neocolonial wave, pockets of resistance, like bubbles of air, emerge. She speaks for example of famous Hawaiian paddler Kanuha visiting Pele, a volcano goddess in lava, and whose performance, although mediated in Western media, enacted a Kanaka ontology. The author recognizes the permeability of air and water as much as spaces both Indigenous and modern, both spiritual and capitalist. The foam can be found in Ingersoll's book in the kind of associated milieu mentioned earlier, but foam is also read as resistance, that is as pockets of air that remain available inside's the surfer's lungs when she is crushed under the wave of colonialism. Throughout the text, Ingersoll injects such bubbles with Hawaiian terms increasingly present as one reads. By doing so, the author incarnates the seascape she depicts of Hawaii. She performatively offers a postcolonial point of view by pointing at the practices of those who continually live and resist within, or in fact surf the wave of colonialism. By mixing English with vernacular terms, the author and surfer also signifies her position in the middle of a colonial history she cannot escape but can only move through, moving in fact between temporalities pertaining at times to land centric and water durations.

Reading Ingersoll's account of surfing raises the question of how to resist strong currents without exhaustion? How to surf a neocolonial regime of accumulation? To surf neocolonialism, Ingersoll proposes a foamy kind of education where students learn about and practice native and modern modes of navigation, mixing experience-based mode of knowing like surfing, learning of oral stories and star mapping, to be weaved with modern knowledge such as physics of the wave. The political resistance is to be corporeally enacted through other means than solely cognitive ways of knowing. This kind of politics as experience rather than state-based politics, she argues, can further decolonize knowledge and science and foment sustainable modes of existence. This foamy mode of knowing is also found in the methodology of the book, which moves between land-based forms of knowing like archive and ocean-based experience of surf and sailing.

The politics of water that she addresses are decolonial politics precisely by the fact that the concept is not narrowly circumscribed to the realm of the state. Rather, politics is understood as ethics and aesthetics located in the body and

its extensions. The ocean-body incarnates a potential for de- and reterritorializing a state-striated territory. This potential for reterritorialization lies in the production of indigenous literary forms portraying the sea relationally. It also lies in the surfer's corporeal knowledge and capacity to think outside of the state's mindset to embody the navigation, to think like the ocean and envision her destination synaesthetically. Ingersoll speaks about Nainoa Thompson's experience as a sailor finding her way at sea through the sensation of wind and wave as well as light from the moon. This kind of intuitive corporeal knowledge challenges cognitive/analytic knowledge. It is a speculative epistemology whereby the 'body-ocean' is not relating to space in terms of metrics but does so by paying attention to material indices, an attention that is possible if one can let go of a state mindset and becomes the wave.

Surfing, as a mode of existence, is a mode of resistance and resilience that is made possible by learning how to 'breath' underwater while ducking underneath the wave to re-emerge after it. Surf becomes a fruitful metaphor to think a postcolonial politics of how to navigate turbulent waters, how to resist without exhaustion, and how to reroute the wave's potential to one's advantage without being crushed by it, that is using the wave's force to propel new becomings.

The 'oceanic' turn Ingersoll's proposes with her book will be inspiring to anyone working on island habitats, matter at sea and of postcoloniality. Ingersoll's proposition to think 'amphibiously' is an invitation to take into consideration the materiality of the milieu to think notions of situatedness and more-than-human agency in non-striated ways. Along but also beyond De Certeau's notion of tactics, what I take from the book is a kind of speculative mode of resistance in a constantly moving and shifting reality. Ingersoll's book is in fact a forceful invitation that I gladly take on to think the permeability of milieu, identities and epistemologies.

## references

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### **the author**

Marie Lecuyer is a PhD candidate in Social and Cultural Analysis at Concordia University, Montreal. Her research is situated between anthropology and media studies and focuses on more-than-human after life trajectories.

Email: [marie.lecuyer@mail.concordia.ca](mailto:marie.lecuyer@mail.concordia.ca)