[The critical surf studies reader](#), edited by D. Z. Hough-Snee and A. S. Eastman, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2017, 480 pp., US\$104.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8223-6957-8, US \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-6972-1

When I saw the call to review this volume, my eyes leapt to SURF, bypassing 'Critical studies reader'. This was naïve on my part. This is a collection of 'Critical theory' contributions, where critical is used with its ideological meaning. That is, it aims to 'question power, domination, and the status quo', in order to change society as well as studying it. I should alert readers that whilst I am indeed a surfer, I am not a critical theorist. I also fall into many categories whose views, historically, have been privileged: old, white, male, heterosexual, Anglophone, academic, scientist. I have, however, argued that individual opportunities and choices for leisure and recreation, as well as attitudes to nature and the outdoors, are all embedded in human cultures. So that is a point of contact with this compilation, which compares current and historical surfing experiences of individuals of different genders, ethnicities, languages, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The editors claim (p.8) to question 'the appropriation of surfing studies within corporate university models', and to 'resist surfing's academic institutionalisation in profit-driven fields'. The book is published, however, by Duke University Press, and many of the chapters are rewrites of journal articles by the same authors. It is also very much an academic text, not written for the general public. So that editorial claim seems somewhat surprising. Perhaps this is a paradox of critical theory in general. On a practical note, the pages are printed in an unreadably tiny font. Of course, that is a criticism of Duke University Press, not the editors.

Many of the authors use complicated jargon, which obscures what they are trying to say. No abstracts, summaries, or highlights are provided. The chapters do not specify aims or methods. References are provided as chapter endnotes, linked to a bibliography. To check how authors' arguments are linked to previous literature needs endless double look-ups. Most references are to books, or to popular rather than academic literature. The authors take different approaches to critical theory, without specifying what their perspectives or positions may be. There are no author bios or even addresses, so unless they happen to mention it, we don't know where the contributors are from, or even whether they are surfers. I had to search for each individually, using Google Scholar®, to get any sense of their research interests. The reader is left trying to discern messages amidst tangled pieces of tiny tortuous text.

Many of these messages, once we find them, seem to be rather obvious. The world has a history of colonialism, some of which affected or involved surfing. Globally, there is a

continuum of individual privilege. Well-off young white male surfers from wealthy nations are privileged, relative to women, people of other colours and ethnicities, and people without the money to buy surfboards. People play power politics, everywhere. Big surf clothing brands, together with the professional World Surfing League, have manoeuvred to gain control of surf industry revenues, whilst those who work at the bottom of the production pyramid earn little. Surfing has spawned global corporations that use it to sell fashion, clothing and entertainment, paradoxically by advertising non-conformity. Some surfers have used their looks to promote their careers, and others object to this. Personalities of individual surfers differ considerably, and this includes those of historical significance. Their attitudes and behaviours were influenced by cultural and material circumstances. Some overcame considerable adversity. None of these observations seem particularly novel or noteworthy.

From a leisure studies perspective, researchers with interests in surfing will find nuggets of novelty in this volume, but no major new insights. Few chapters in this book cite the surf tourism literature. That literature has already addressed politically sensitive issues, such as: access to surfing sites (Buckley, Guitart, and Shakeela 2017); skills and knowledge transfer (Buckley and Ollenburg 2013); links to the fashion and entertainment industries (Buckley 2003); conflicts between surfers (Beaumont and Brown 2016; Usher and Kerstetter 2015) and local community involvement (O'Brien and Ponting 2013; Towner 2016). Few studies in the surf tourism and leisure literature, however, have adopted a critical theory perspective (Martin and Assenov 2012).

What, then, can we glean from the carefully constructed scholarship of these 18 chapters? Stories, of individual cases or people. Exposition of language and its effects, in Hawai'i and elsewhere. Case studies or historical accounts from Australia, Chile, China, Hawai'i, South Africa, USA. Reminiscences of surf writers, extracted from archival surf magazines. Perspectives from local residents at surf tourism destinations. The political economy of the surfing industry, and the lives of surfboard shapers. These details are interesting, even if some have been published previously. The intended audience, however, is not clear. Perhaps the authors want surfers and surf industry representatives to consider the social implications of their actions. Few surfers, however, are critical theorists, so it seems unlikely that any of them will find or read this book. Perhaps the authors want to propose that other surf researchers could adopt a critical theory perspective, or to alert other critical theorists that surfing is worthy of study. Fair enough.

The editors have elected not to write a closing chapter, so there is no coherent conclusion. If there is an overall theme, perhaps it is this. For most surfers, surfing is a very focussed physical activity, but it is still leisure. It provides powerful positive

psychological capital, insulation against stresses. For most surfers, this ability to separate surfing from social stresses is a huge benefit. The authors of this volume, however, seem to argue that this amounts to wilful blindness. By going surfing, surfers can escape their own stresses, but in the process, they may be imposing stresses on other less privileged individuals. Surfing is embedded in society, and can be a means to discrimination. Perhaps this is true, but does it not also apply to every aspect of life and death, for other species as well as humans?

Perhaps I may conclude with my favourite quote from this book. It is a translation, not written by any of the authors. To me at least, it is more powerful than any theory. It is about a female Hawai'ian surfer named Kelea. It was written long ago, but it could equally apply to many of her modern counterparts, including some whom I am sometimes privileged to surf with. Kelea paddled out way past the main line-up, and waited for a big set to come through.

'As she caught the wave, she showed herself unsurpassed in skill and grace. The chiefs and people who were watching burst out in cheering.'

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