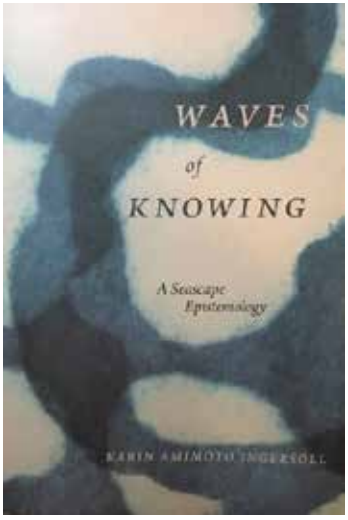
Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology

By Karen Amimoto Ingersoll, University of Hawaii Press, 2016, 204 pages. ISBN-13: 9780822373803

Reviewed by Dina Gilio-Whitaker



Twenty years ago, Linda Tuhiwai Smith gave us her groundbreaking book, "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples," unleashing new generations of scholarship on the countless ways indigenous peoples build place-based knowledge. Some of the most innovative research in indigenous studies has come from Polynesian scholars (like Smith) doing reclamation work in language, cultural regeneration, and sovereignty and geopolitical studies. In Waves of Knowing, the author articulates a "seascape epistemology," a distinctly Kānaka Maoli way of understanding Native Hawaiians' relationship to place that extends beyond the bounds of land as we normally conceive of it, to include the ocean that surrounds them.

Ingersoll contends that Hawaiians' relationship to the ocean constitutes an oceanic literacy that constructs a Kānaka Maoli way of knowing the world, primarily through traditional arts such as surfing, fishing, and navigating. This literacy is contained in what she calls archives, comprised of ancient Hawaiian-language stories (mo'olelo) and chants (oli), ethnographic observation, and is influenced by other culture makers like artists, hula dancers, poets, and musicians. Ingersoll explains that while it's not necessary, she does "use Western thought and philosophy to develop a Kānaka epistemology in part because contemporary Hawaiian identities are intertwined with a colonial legacy" (28). In this way, she is able to erect a seascape epistemology that is not confined to a distant past, but is modern and relevant to today's Kānaka Maoli.

Ingersoll draws on her experience as a surfer, combined with mo'olelo, oli, and emerging scholarship on surfing to define an embodied knowledge upon which Native Hawaiian surfers can reclaim an ancient sport that was central to Hawaiian lives, but that has also been appropriated almost beyond recognition. Recuperating surfing within a cultural context by centering it in the Hawaiian seascape thus makes it available to Kānaka people as a way to (re)connect to a national identity altered by colonialism, but also as a framework to access spiritual knowledge. Such knowledge exists at the intersections of language, indigenous place names, ancestral connections to those places, and traditional stories about them. Inherent in Ingersoll's narrative is also a critique challenging a modern surf industry that bears partial responsibility for the massively destructive Hawaiian tourist industry.

For Ingersoll oceanic literacy "becomes an aesthetic logic that remembers through performance. The movements of the body interact with language, reading, and writing so that literacy does not merely employ the eyes, brain, and fingers but also a kinesthetic engagement

with one's surroundings" (93). She disavows that an oceanic literacy is an "authentic" indigenous knowledge; "[i]nstead, oceanic literacy offers a means of constructing a fluid identity anchored in place. An indigenous identity is a subject in process as opposed to one in stasis, or one that is already complete" (93). This embodied knowledge affirms an "ontological affectivity" which values knowing the world through one's senses. In fact, it is precisely this kind of knowing, she argues, that is necessary for successful ocean voyaging based on traditional techniques unmediated by technology.

Drawing from Hawaiian voyagers Nainoa Thompson and Bruce Blankenfield and their decades of experience on the traditional sailing vessel Hokule'a, the reclamation of Hawaiian voyaging was not possible without borrowing from Western technology and traditions of other Pacific Island peoples. It was nonetheless possible to regenerate a Hawaiian concept of navigation that relies upon the ability to "see" in a Hawaiian way, characterized as *ho'omoeã*, (meaning, to imagine deliberately), and invoking mana (spiritual power). In so doing, Kãnaka navigators "enter into an intuitive state of being" (150) that perceives oneness with the elements. Considering theories of travel, Ingersoll juxtaposes Western ideas that create binaries of inside and outside, "us" and "them," "reveal[ing] distinct political dynamics within [them]" (144), to a Polynesian concept that instead "approaches the ocean and surrounding islands as imagined extensions of self, avoiding the creation of a colonial ideology founded in binary oppositions…" (145).

In the final chapter, the author maps out a seascape epistemological praxis, imagined through the creation of ka hãlau o ke kai (school of the sea). She proposes various hales (houses) located in various ahupua'a (traditional districts) that would teach the ocean-based arts to youth, engaged through 'Ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language). These would include, among other cultural skills, surfing, sailing, paddling, navigating, fishing, diving, and the building of fish ponds to perpetuate ocean literacy. As practice- and place-based education, the school would embrace a diverse approach to learning: "Practice- and place-based education allow for both oral and written words, for both rational and emotional theory, for both cognitive and experiential study" (163).

Despite the limitations of writing in the English language, *Waves of Knowing* is an elegant way of articulating an indigenous Hawaiian epistemology. Understanding the ocean as undifferentiated from land reflects a holistic view of the "environment," and Ingersoll is able to cogently mark the unbroken connections between Kānaka Maoli, ancestry, land, and ocean, even in the face of historical disruptions. Some will undoubtedly recoil at what will be perceived as an essentialist perspective, namely non-native surfers. As a surfer, I say with certainty that virtually all surfers perceive a spiritual quality to the act of surfing and would argue that Hawaiians don't have a corner on the market of spirituality when it comes to surfing. Ingersoll would agree, and she addresses this in her text. She acknowledges that non-indigenous surfers can experience a type of ocean literacy and intimate connection with the sea. Her point, however, is that for Native Hawaiians that relationship exists within a cultural context mediated by language and ancestral ties, knowledge that is inaccessible to non-Hawaiian surfers.

Ingersoll's prose is sometimes poetic, appearing to veer away from conventional academic language. This can be disconcerting until one realizes that her text exhibits the kinds of rhythms and idioms observable in the

Hawaiian language when translated into English, but it is reflective of the affective aspects she is arguing for in a Hawaiian seascape epistemology. Ultimately this book is a valuable contribution to the literature on indigenous methodology, and will also contribute to the growing literature in critical surf studies. ■

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About the Reviewer

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