In Dangerous Fun, sociologist Ugo Corte, a professor in the Department of Media and Social Sciences at the University of Stavanger, Norway, journeys over one fall, four winters, and one spring to the big wave ‘mecca’ of Waimea Bay on the North Shore of Oahu, Hawai’i in an effort to provide a ‘sociohistorical perspective’ (p. 205) of the inner elite of global big wave surfers. Corte seeks to understand what motivates an ‘insider’ group of elite surfers (some professionally paid as such, others as amateurs), both men and women who risk their lives at speeding down the faces of waves sometimes exceeding sixty feet high at Waimea Bay.

The book employs a Durkheimian perspective to create an embodied ethnography of ‘situated behavior’ (p. 21) of big wave surfing, where Corte utilizes social psychology, sociology, and religion and nature expert Bron Taylor’s schema in Dark Green Religion (2009) to understand the spiritual dimensions of the practice and how big wave surfers are socialized into ‘dangerous fun’ at the ‘magnet place’ (p. 197) of Waimea Bay, which to many surfers worldwide is a sacred place. Categories of big wave surfing he explores and adumbrates in the study include how big wave surfing for its practitioners can be fun; generates group belonging; produces ‘emotional energy’ (enthusiasm; drive; Collins 2004); precipitates self-transformation; is spiritual and contains rituals; generates collective effervescence; develops anchored relationships; builds solidarity among a kind of elite priesthood; is marked by fateful moments and fateful situations that generate inner speech (internal dialogue surfers undertake to convince themselves to catch big waves and to assure themselves they will not die); and places surfers in death-defying situations of ‘escalating reciprocity’ (Farrell 2001) with others in the ‘in-group’ and with the ocean itself. He uses a variety of sociological tools to weave together his ethnography, including interaction ritual theory (Collins 2004), theory of process, understandings of violence and aggression, the sociology of collaborative circles (Farrell 2001), the sociology of fun (Fine and Corte 2017; 2019), a life course perspective, and the theorizing of edgework (Lyng 1990) all to help the reader understand what motivates this cadre of elite big-wave surfers.

Although theorizing about human/nature interactions is not the central focus of this fascinating book there is still quite a bit of value in it for journal readers. The ‘thick description’ sociological approach to develop a longitudinal ethnography of a group of surfers suggests a robust method from which other religion and nature scholars can learn and emulate. Corte also articulates how ‘activities that put us in close contact with nature are becoming increasingly popular’ (p. 108), thus
justifying such a method of study. His method of study is further justified when recognizing that people increasingly live in a ‘disenchanted world in which this emotion [excitement in nature], and its authentic experience, are increasingly sought after, manufactured, and sold’ (p. 244). The book may be especially valuable for those interested in seeing an in-depth analysis relevant to Taylor’s earlier argument that surfing constitutes a form of aquatic nature religion (Taylor 2007; LeVasseur 2021). Corte’s analysis exemplifies how such analyses can illuminate sporting and quest activities in the natural world and thereby be helpful for scholars looking for social scientific methods to study ritualized and group-based athletes whose practices are deeply entangled with the natural world. Corte’s Dangerous Fun is a valuable addition to the sociological understanding of such social phenomena.

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References