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Borderlands between the Ocean and the Land in Hawai‘i : Analysis through Issues of Natural Environment, Surfing, and Homelessness in Waikīkī

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This article aims to analyze issues regarding environment, surfing, and homelessness that appear in the surf zone (po‘ina nalu) and beach in Hawai‘i, specifically at Waikīkī in Honolulu. These are analyzed in the context of border studies.

First, the article discusses environmental issues. Waikīkī beach and its surrounding area is an important site for Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawai‘ians). However, due to colonization and development, the beach was extended and sea bottom modified. As a result, the water quality of the ocean worsened. Yet the natural environment at Waikīkī resists, and the reappearance of the ‘Āpuakēhau stream symbolizes such resistance.

Second, the article reflects on surfing. Surfing originates from Hawai‘i and other Pacific Islands, and is a cultural and ritual activity, in addition to being a sport. Although Waikīkī changed much after the arrival of settlers, Kānaka Maoli resisted and preserved the surf zone as their geographical domain. From the 1960s, Kānaka Maoli and non-Kānaka Maoli surfers collaborated to conserve the surf zone, while broadening their activities to fight for the public beach access rights of local people.

Third, the article focuses on homelessness visible at the beach. While luxurious hotels line the shore, many homeless people end up living near or on the beach in Waikīkī. Economic inequality and the high cost of housing are the main reasons for homelessness. Although immigrants from the Pacific Islands face severe poverty, many Kānaka Maoli people also struggle financially.

These three issues show how Kānaka Maoli people, their culture, and the natural environment have been neglected. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected Waikīkī. While the exclusion of homeless people from the beach continued, the natural environment recovered, and the local surfers returned to Waikīkī Beach. Theories and perspectives developed in border studies would help to analyze post-pandemic events in the surf zone and on the beach in Hawai‘i. Also, studies over land and the ocean of Hawai‘i would enrich academic discussions in the field of border studies.