Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 65 October 2021

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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To cite this article: Moser, P. (2021). Origins of the paddle-out ceremony. In Nigel Krauth, Sally Breen, Tim Baker and Jake Sandtner (Eds.) *Creative writing and surfing*. TEXT Special Issue 65. <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.28070>

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Origins of the paddle-out ceremony

Abstract:

My essay is part literary journalism and part memoir. The main narrative traces the origins of the paddle-out ceremony by following the surfers who developed this unique tradition in the late 1970s. The creation of the ceremony reveals an important aspect of surf culture: not only honouring a select group within the culture – big-wave riders – but enacting a mutual desire for cultural unity between Hawaiians and Californians. The ceremony also charts the growth of surfers over the past few decades from countercultural figures to community-minded activists. Paddle-out ceremonies have been held to support such varied causes as Vietnam veterans in Southern California, the protection of dolphins in Japan, and saving Kirra Point in Australia. A complementary narrative (the memoir aspect) tracks my realisation as a writer trained in Western scholarly traditions that I would have to acknowledge the limitations of textual evidence – the written word – if I was to understand a ceremony that began in a culture that relies on oral histories to carry on their traditions. My goal in writing this essay is to try and reflect the cultural unity that created the paddle-out ceremony by combining written and oral histories that evoke key aspects of surf culture identity.

Biographical note:

Patrick Moser teaches creative writing at Drury University (Missouri, USA). He is the editor of *Pacific Passages: An Anthology of Surf Writing*. He collaborated on two memoirs with world surfing champion Shaun Tomson: *Surfer's Code* and *The Code: The Power of "I Will."* Additional surf writing has appeared in *Kurungabaa*, *Bamboo Ridge Press*, and *The Surfer's Journal*. His latest academic article on surf history, 'The Hawaii Promotion Committee and the Appropriation of Surfing', appears in the *Pacific Historical Review* (Fall, 2020). He is currently completing a biography of Hawaiian surfer George Freeth, forthcoming by the University of Illinois Press in Spring, 2022.

Keywords: creative writing, surfing, paddle-out ceremony, literary journalism, memoir

Out past a spot known as the Blow Hole (so named because a large coral head blows up sand when big waves roll in), and beyond First Break, the canoes fanned out and formed a circle. After a short prayer, and sometimes more singing, the ashes were scattered on the water, followed by the flowers. When the beachboys broke circle, the flowers they left behind formed a lei. The beachboys then turned and, shouting, raced toward shore, dedicating the wave they rode in to the departed surfer.

Grady Timmons, *Waikiki Beachboy* (1989, p. 163)

For many years I have been interested in researching the traditions that form contemporary surf culture – the rites and rituals that make us who we are and define us as a cohesive yet loose-knit community. Sometimes my searches involve common words and expressions that surfers use in their everyday lives. The term *surfer* itself, for example: when did people first start using it, and what did it mean to them? Where did the expression *dawn patrol* come from? Who came up with the ideal of *soul surfing*? These are the oddball questions that send me down the rabbit holes of our collective history.

Our traditions reveal our origins and our identities: who we are and who we want to be. One of my deepest rabbit holes has been the paddle-out ceremony. I wanted to know everything about it: the who, the how, the where, the when, and the why. I thought that if I could find the answers to these questions, I would have a better understanding of what makes surf culture special. As a surfer, I know it's special. But I wanted to convey its unique qualities to non-surfers as well.

My first inclination, as a scholar trained in Western universities, is to begin with a timeline. For surfing that means locating specialty books and reviewing back issues of *Surfer* and *Surfing* magazines to find the earliest mention of the paddle-out ceremony – the who, the how, the where, and the when – so that I could get to the why. For me, this last question was the most important one to answer because it would tell me about the motivations of the people involved. If you want to understand surf culture, you have to understand the motivations of surfers themselves.

But origins are tricky things. I would eventually discover that the bedrock of my scholarship – reliance on textual evidence – would not be strong enough to reveal the final answers. As a writer and scholar, I would have to acknowledge the limitations of the written word if I was to understand a ceremony that began in a culture that often relies on oral histories to carry on its traditions.

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Jay Moriarty drowned the day before his 23rd birthday. Jay was on a photo shoot in the Maldives, a beautiful chain of atolls in the Indian Ocean. He was due to meet his young bride

Kim in Europe the next day to celebrate his birthday and run a summer surf camp for his sponsor, the wetsuit company O'Neill. During a break in the work, Jay grabbed a pair of fins and a mask and went off by himself to sit on the ocean bottom in forty-five feet of water, part of his big-wave training routine. Jay blacked out and never made it back to the surface.

Eleven days later, on June 26, 2001, at Jay's home break in Santa Cruz, California, several hundred surfers paddled out with Kim, and she spread Jay's ashes into the Pacific. She then waved everyone in – three enormous circles of surfers, their hands joined for the ceremony – and they shared stories about Jay. I wasn't there that day – I didn't know Jay Moriarty – but I have a photograph from the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* that captured the moment.

Figure 1. Jay Moriarty's paddle-out ceremony. Source: Dan Coyro

It's an aerial shot, and the picture has stayed in my mind over the years because of the sheer mass of surfers clumped together over the kelp beds, their bright boards and wetsuits standing out against the darkened surface of the water. The photograph is a tribute to the Santa Cruz surf crew, a tight-knit bunch who've gained a reputation over the years as radical, innovative wave riders. It's also a tribute to surf culture's final rite of passage, the paddle-out ceremony, where family and friends join hands in a circle and say *aloha* to a loved one.

No evidence of a circle remains in the photograph, just an enormous pack of surfers. But I wondered about that circle. Not where it had gone, but where it had come from. I started surfing as a teenager in the late 1970s, and as far as I knew surfers had always performed this ritual. I

happened to be in Waikīkī in March 2005 when Bobby Krewson, pioneer surfer on O‘ahu’s North Shore and a longtime beachboy, passed away at the age of seventy-two. After the ceremony near the Duke statue (entertainer Don Ho crooned a eulogy and commented, ‘Besides being a great surfer, a good friend and true beachboy, Bobby was probably Waikīkī’s greatest lover’), three outrigger canoes carried Bobby’s family, friends, and his ashes out to the reef in front of Duke’s restaurant. It was the traditional beachboy ceremony, as old as the beachboys themselves, but no surfers paddled out. And no circle.

I was surprised. The beachboys have been the life force behind surfing’s popularity for over a hundred years, steadily churning out stoke from warm water and gentle waves. They are the origin of modern-day surf culture. If the circle didn’t come from them, I thought, then who?

Of course, the circle does trace its origins to the beachboys. After I started researching the ritual, I found the words that open this essay in the final chapter of Grady Timmons’ *Waikiki Beachboy* (1989, p. 163). It’s possible the three canoes at Bobby Krewson’s memorial service had formed a loose circle, and I’d missed it from shore. But I was still interested in how surfers had adapted the beachboy tradition to their own needs, paddling their boards out and joining hands in a Kumbaya moment – atypical behavior, to be sure, especially among the more feral of the species. Who had started this tradition? And when?

Surfers have a reputation as loners, which makes the paddle-out ceremony even more impressive. The hundreds who’d shown up at Pleasure Point for Jay Moriarty came to honour a young man who managed, by the sheer force of his personality, to build bridges between groups of surfers often at odds in Santa Cruz: longboarders and shortboarders, young surfers and old, East Side and West Side. Jay had been literally catapulted to fame in 1995 by a heart-stopping wave at Maverick’s, a big-wave break in Central California that has become famous for generating swells that most surfers only see in their nightmares. The subsequent *Surfer* magazine cover shot of sixteen-year-old Jay hanging in the lip of a twenty-foot wave, a breath away from a crushing wipeout (May, 1995), ended his days working at Pleasure Point Pizza and began a career as the latest overnight, over-the-falls sensation.

But Jay had staying power. Seven years later he was in the Maldives preparing to be head instructor for O’Neill’s Surf Academy in Europe. The last time anyone saw him alive, he was pulling himself down a buoy rope to practice deep-water breathing exercises. He died alone, blacked out, which is hard to take considering how many people would have dove in the water to save him had they only known.

Jay is the reason why surfers have the paddle-out ceremony: to say goodbye in a way, most importantly at a place, that resonates most strongly with the person’s spirit. Surfers’ close proximity to waves – our obsession with them – is the group’s most palpable difference from non-surfers. For all our disputes over board lengths, age, or territory, the paddle-out ceremony reminds surfers of what we hold in common. I understood all this, appreciated surfers’ need to reaffirm their values after losing someone like Jay, a guy whose life reflected those values so strongly. After all, he’d not only dedicated himself to riding waves, but in the spirit of the

Waikīkī beachboys, he was also committed to teaching others to ride them. But all my musing over Jay wasn't getting me any closer to the origin of this ceremony.

It's a morbid task looking up dead surfers. I went to my bookshelf and started pulling down old issues of *Surfer* dating back to the early 1960s looking for any mention of a paddle-out ceremony or photographs of surfers floating in a circle. Duke Kahanamoku, the most iconic surfer of the twentieth century, died in 1968. Butch Van Artsdalen, the first King of Pipeline, died in 1979. Pop Proctor, "The World's Oldest Surfer", died in 1981 at the ripe age of ninety-nine. All had their ashes spread in the traditional beachboy ceremony – Duke at Waikīkī, Butch at Pipeline on the North Shore of O'ahu, and Pop near Dana Point Harbor, in Southern California. None of the articles (Severson, 1968, p. 57; Pezman, 1979, pp. 66-67; Jensen, 1981, p. 70) mentioned surfers paddling their boards out or joining hands in a circle. After paging through twenty-two years' worth of magazines, my eyes strained and blurry, I realised I'd missed someone.

Eddie.

I grabbed my hardbound volume of *Surfer* from 1978. Sure enough, I found a circle of mourners sitting on the beach at Waimea Bay where Eddie Aikau had lifeguarded and rode (at that time) the world's largest waves (Bakutis, 1978, pp. 89-90). The one-page article beside the photograph didn't say if the circle of people had carried out to the water, so I looked into Stuart Coleman's *Eddie Would Go* and found my Golden Ticket. 'When the family members and friends were settled in the outrigger canoes on the beach,' Coleman writes of that day, 'they paddled into the Bay's placid, blue waters. Clyde [Aikau] led the way followed by over a hundred surfers on their boards... The surfers then gathered in a circle and shared stories and tributes to Eddie' (2004, p. 240).

I'd found the circle all right. Or at least *a* circle. Was it the first?

The answer is no, as it turns out. But Eddie was there for the first one. Two years earlier, on July 30, 1976, he led the ceremony at Waimea Bay for Jose Angel, a big-wave surfer and mentor to Eddie who'd died in a coral-diving accident. As Coleman tells the story,

After bidding Jose farewell and aloha, his friends paddled their boards out to the lineup where he used to surf and formed a circle. Holding hands, they shared memories and stories about him and then threw their leis into the center of the circle. (2004, p. 164)

As far as I knew at the time – this was the fall of 2008 – Jose Angel was the first surfer to have a paddle-out ceremony held in his honor. How did this come about? Coleman writes that, according to longtime big-wave rider Peter Cole, 'Eddie took [Jose's] loss hard and wanted to do a special tribute to his memory.' Since Eddie lifeguarded at Waimea Bay, he got a permit to hold the ceremony there and 'became the spokesman that day' (2004, p. 164).

What inspired Eddie and the others to paddle their boards out?

I didn't know. It's important to note that no one spread Jose's ashes that day because there were no ashes to spread. Like Jay Moriarty, Jose had probably blacked out after jumping into what he believed was two hundred and fifty feet of water to harvest black coral (he'd grabbed a twenty-pound weight off the boat deck to speed his descent). It turned out the depth was three hundred and forty feet, and that weight had pulled Jose to his death. They never recovered his body. I wondered: Could the lack of ashes have inspired Eddie to improvise this ceremony, to do a special tribute to Jose's memory because the normal beachboy tribute required an urn of ashes?

One thing I knew, a single day doesn't make a ritual. Even if Eddie hadn't been the force behind the paddle-out ceremony in July 1976, his death two years later, in March 1978, sealed the ceremony's transformation into ritual. The circumstances surrounding his death have become legend: he volunteered to paddle his surfboard twenty miles to the island of Lana'i after the Polynesian voyaging canoe *Hōkūle'a* had capsized in a storm. Eddie's fifteen crewmates were rescued by the Coast Guard less than a day after he left, but Eddie, like Jose, was never found. He was thirty-one years old. Coleman reports that Eddie's brother Clyde carried a sacred volcanic rock in place of Eddie's ashes, 'the embodiment of Eddie's *mana*', and placed it at the bottom of Waimea Bay where Eddie had wanted his ashes spread 'so he could keep watch over everyone' (2004, p. 240). It was after Clyde surfaced that the surfers gathered in a circle. The ceremony continued to grow throughout the following decade with the inauguration of "The Eddie", a big-wave surfing contest where surfers repeated the ritual at the beginning of the contest's waiting period (Ambrose, 1991, p. F 1).

The presence of traditional Hawaiian beliefs at Eddie's memorial sent me deeper into Hawaiian culture and a practice called *ho'okupu*, defined in the *Hawaiian Dictionary* as 'ceremonial gift-giving to a chief as a sign of honour and respect' (Pukui and Elbert, 1986, p. 186). Ka'iani Haili, an instructor of Hawaiian language, writes:

Ho'okupu is a traditional protocol among the *Kanaka Maoli* 'O Hawai'i (indigenous people of Hawai'i) that is dictated by *hō'ihi* (respect) for the host, land, ancestors or gods. It establishes a connection between the giver and the receiver that is culturally appropriate. (Haili qtd in Whitney, 2007)

Elaborating on the definition, Haili explains:

A *ho'okupu* is an offering of symbolic significance for the occasion. It may be a certain type of food or plant, a song or chant, perhaps even a rock or water from your homeland. Sometimes the item is dictated by the particular ceremony, other times, by what the individual feels is appropriate. In offering the *ho'okupu*, as the word indicates, one asks for growth; that one's request be granted; that there be a reciprocation; that there be an exchange of *mana* or life force. (Haili qtd in Whitney, 2007)

I imagined that Eddie Aikau, not having Jose's ashes and drawing inspiration from his Hawaiian roots, showed his deep respect for Jose by offering him a *ho'okupu* that took the form of what surfers call today the paddle-out ceremony. The circle of surfboards, the hand-joining,

the storytelling, and the cast-off leis all added up to ‘an exchange of *mana* or life force’ between the surfers above and the surfer below, a ritual that becomes most powerful because the ceremony occurs at a place that itself resonates with the departed surfer’s life force. For Jose Angel and Eddie Aikau, that was Waimea Bay. For Duke and the beachboys, Waikīkī. For Jay Moriarty, Pleasure Point.

I’d gone pretty far among the books and magazines in my office, but my line of inquiry was potholed with suppositions. My next step was to try to talk with the people who were on the beach at Waimea in July 1976 and find out what they might know about Eddie’s intentions and the Hawaiian traditions behind them. A local contact sent me the email addresses of Ricky Grigg and Peter Cole, and we started an intermittent correspondence. Randy Rarick, the longtime organiser of the Hawaiian Triple Crown surf contests, was organising a surf auction at the Neil Blaisdell Center in Honolulu in mid-July 2009. Since Grigg would be there, I thought it would be a good chance for me to meet him in person and get all of my questions answered.

*

Dr. Ricky Grigg, professor emeritus of Oceanography at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, was a fit seventy-two in the summer of 2009. He’d retired in 2000 but maintained an office in Honolulu, which is where I called him after I arrived. We had exchanged emails about the paddle-out ceremony and found time to talk at the surf auction.

Grigg, who passed away in 2014, distinguished himself early on in life. At eighteen he won the inaugural paddleboard race from Catalina Island to Manhattan Beach, a grueling eight-hour, thirty-two-mile run. In 1967 he took a break from his Ph.D. studies at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in Southern California, flew to Hawai‘i, and won the most prestigious surf contest in the world, the Duke Kahanamoku Invitational, held that year in crushing twelve to eighteen foot surf. The man had flair. He was equally accomplished as a scientist. In 1980 he discovered “The Darwin Point”, the area in the northwest Pacific where islands in the Hawaiian chain submerge or “drown”. He’d been enraptured by coral his entire adult life; this interest, and riding big waves, were the catalyst for his close friendship with Jose Angel. Grigg was on the boat the day Jose Angel grabbed his twenty-pound weight and dropped over the side, the last person to see him alive.

‘We probably had the traditions of Waikīkī in mind,’ Grigg recalled when I asked him to tell me about the paddle-out ceremony for Jose Angel. His words were measured, thoughtful. ‘But Waikīkī was such a different kind of place.’ More of a party atmosphere, he explained. The beachboys were public figures and their ceremonies involved more pageantry, always a nod to the ever-present tourists. ‘For Jose,’ he said, ‘the ceremony was more personal, more pure.’ He paused a moment as if reaching back to that day, then mentioned that the ceremony reflected Jose’s death: ‘He went quietly in the water, by himself.’

The small group paddled out, held hands, and said a prayer. They were an all-but-forgotten sect within the broader surf community, men who’d committed much of their lives to riding the

biggest waves in the world, an obsolete pursuit after the shortboard revolution of the late 1960s. Surfers in the 1970s were interested in riding shorter boards, in getting tubed, in joining the ranks of the newly-formed professional world tour. Waimea Bay was the hoary star of a by-gone era, a raging giant whose loud outbursts a younger generation of surfers ignored. Most of them, anyway.

Jose Angel's paddle-out at Waimea was unique, Grigg told me, because Jose was the first original core pioneer of big-wave surfing to pass away. Most of the men – like Jose and Ricky Grigg – were Californians who'd come to Hawai'i in the 1950s and bonded together in the winter surf. Many of them made the Islands their permanent home. Grigg took me back to the day in 1976 when the paddle-out ceremony was born on the North Shore: 'We never found his body, so we had this idea to memorialise Jose at Waimea and use plumeria flowers instead of ashes to symbolise Jose, and to form a circle around the flowers once they had been dropped into the water. We held hands in order to connect the circle and all said a private prayer. I think the original idea was something Peter Cole and I came up with.'

Peter Cole, a retired mathematics teacher from Punahou, echoed Grigg's sentiments via email. Like Grigg, he mentioned the traditions of the Waikīkī beachboys and recalled the simple nature of Jose's ceremony:

Eddie and I each gave an eulogy and then many followed suit. We gave the eulogies in the back of a red pickup truck. After the ceremony we came up to our house at Rocky Point and partied into the night. Ricky and Fred Van Dyke were very much involved in helping Eddie and I organise the event. (Cole, October 28, 2008)

I could see the strong influence of the beachboys in the ceremony. The big difference was the surfboards. I asked Grigg what had inspired them to paddle boards out rather than canoes. He scoffed a bit: 'Nobody rides Waimea in a canoe.'

Of course. I felt like an idiot. We were talking about Waimea Bay, not Waikīkī. These men, as Grigg said, were committed to big-wave surfing, not to the traditions of the beachboys. This was their niche, and they needed a special ceremony to commemorate it. The paddle-out was their way of honoring Jose and reaffirming the group's select identity as big-wave surfers.

There were canoes at Eddie Aikau's ceremony at Waimea two years later. You can see them clearly on the beach in the *Surfer* magazine article (Bakutis, 1978, p. 90). Grigg told me the canoes were for Eddie's family and people who didn't surf. Eddie was a lifeguard, more of a public figure than Jose, and the way he died – trying to save others – enlarged the group of mourners beyond a small clique of big-wave riders. The ceremony was much bigger and involved the local Hawaiian community. Their cultural traditions, as Stuart Coleman describes in *Eddie Would Go* (2004, p. 240), took on a prominent role that day.

The paddle-out ceremony was modified for Eddie Aikau because of who he was: a flexibility built into the Hawaiian practice of *ho'okupu*. The offering one makes, to repeat Ka'iani Haili, *is dictated by the particular ceremony, other times, by what the individual feels is appropriate*.

Because of this flexibility, the ceremony has grown well beyond funerary rites for an individual. Over the years we've seen paddle-outs in Southern California to honour Vietnam veterans, in Japan to protest the commercial slaughter of dolphins, and in Australia to raise awareness about the loss of Kirra Point (Bass, 2007; SurferToday, 2009; Surfing Magazine, 2007). The *ho'okupu*, first adapted by a small group of surfers in 1976 to commemorate a friend and a shared dedication to big-wave surfing, charts today the continued *kupu* or growth of surfers themselves into community-minded activists.

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I sat about six rows behind Ricky Grigg at the Hawaiian Islands Vintage Surf Auction. It was late in the evening. The most sought-after balsa boards had long sold – one for \$39,000, the other for \$40,000 – so the room had quieted down. I had a chance to sit back and check out the crowd, and that's when I spotted Grigg sitting next to his wife. I remembered something he'd mentioned to me earlier that day, either specifically about Jose Angel's paddle-out ceremony or life in general for the Californians who'd migrated to the Islands. He said, 'The Hawaiians allowed us to join culturally with them.'

When I first arrived in Honolulu, I wanted to pin down the one person – Eddie Aikau, or Peter Cole, or Ricky Grigg, or Fred Van Dyke – who'd said on July 30, 1976, 'Let's grab our boards and paddle out.' Or something like that. I wanted to know who had come up with the idea of the paddle-out ceremony. That person would be the origin.

But I never did get a name. There probably isn't one. I shared my research with lifelong Waikīkī surfer John Clark the following year. Clark, the author of *Hawaiian Surfing* among many other books, helped fill in some gaps for me and opened up additional possibilities. He mentioned that since Hawaiians traditionally did not cremate their dead, the idea of including ashes in the paddle-out ceremony was probably the influence of Japanese immigrants among whom cremation was an accepted practice by the late nineteenth century. So the burial ritual of the Waikīkī beachboys was itself an early example of disparate cultures coming together.

Clark also brought up the possibility of the 1970s Hawaiian Renaissance influencing Jose Angel's paddle-out ceremony. He told me:

One of the things that happened then was that a song called "Hawaii Aloha" evolved into an anthem for the movement. It was always sung at the end of an activity, whether it was a meeting, a rally, a protest, or whatever, and everyone would join hands while they were singing it. At the end of the song, they would raise their hands for the final line... It's not hard to see that the "Hawaii Aloha" ritual would have been in everyone's consciousness when Jose Angel's paddle-out was arranged. If you think about it, the two rituals are almost identical. (Clark, November 25, 2010)

To add another layer to the history of the ceremony, Clark called on surfing legend Wally Froiseth in May 2010. Froiseth, who passed away in 2015, mentioned to Clark that the beachboys had been doing the paddle-out ceremony since he was a kid at Waikīkī in the 1920s.

Froiseth indicated that members of Waikīkī's famous surf club Hui Nalu always organised the event: 'They would make a circle with the surfboards surrounding a canoe in the middle that was used to scatter the ashes. Once the ashes were scattered, then everyone threw their leis into the circle' (Clark, May 28, 2010). Once the surfers raced to shore, Froiseth added, they'd pack up their boards and canoes and leave the beach 'to show respect to the person who died and leave the ocean to him for the rest of the day' (Clark, May 28, 2010). Froiseth's recollection of Hui Nalu taking charge supports the observations of Margaret Gibson and Mardi Frost in their 2018 article for the journal *Mortality* – 'Surfing and Ocean-Based Death Ritual: the Paddle-out Ceremony' – that without 'the elder structure in Native Hawaiian culture' a paddle-out ceremony can often become disorganised, with participants not understanding their particular role or how to proceed (Gibson and Frost, 2018, p. 9). Though California and Australia have developed surfing tremendously over the past century, understanding the rituals of surf culture – why we do what we do – often requires digging into the Hawaiian roots of the sport. Those roots include a healthy respect for tradition among Native Hawaiians, an aspect that continues to attract mainlanders and others to surfing, especially when those traditions encompass spirituality and a sense of communal identity – both key elements in the paddle-out ceremony – that Westerners may feel lacking in our everyday lives.

With Wally Froiseth's input we've come full circle, so to speak. My attempts to pin down the origin of the ceremony over the past two decades have led me back to the rituals of the beachboys as recounted in the oral history of Froiseth, whose authority I'll take over any book or article I can track down. My own growth as a scholar is to accept that there may be no one person to find, no single date to mark on a calendar. Jose Angel was likely the first surfer outside of Waikīkī and the beachboy tradition to have a paddle-out ceremony held in his honor, but the ceremony itself is the result of multiple cultures joining together over the years – Native Hawaiian, Japanese, Californian – celebrating a particular life and the values they hold in common. That photograph in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* of Jay Moriarty's paddle-out ceremony has the best title: 'Surfer Convergence'. I check my dictionary to be exact, and I find that *convergence* means 'to approach one common center or single point'.

It's a comforting thought that every paddle-out ceremony, while celebrating the life of an individual or bringing about social awareness, re-enacts the desire for cultural unity and mutual understanding.

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