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Abstract:
This paper examines the first 90 years (from 1849 to 1940) in the development of surf fiction. It focuses on how, at the genre's beginnings, the view taken of surfing was shaped by the colonial worldview, with its attendant super-narrative of white cultural and individual superiority, marginalisation of non-white traditions, and disrespect for others' values and practices. The period can be divided into two phases. The first extended from 1849 to 1920 with pioneering novels by Herman Melville, R. M. Ballantyne and others, including Jack London's 'The Kanaka Surf' (1916), the long short story which we claim brought surf fiction to a new-found maturity in terms of cultural respect. The second phase, from 1921 to 1940, included lesser writers Stuart Martin, Don Blanding and Claude La Belle whose novels continued to trace the white world's attempt to come to terms with the cultural and racial influence that surfing had begun to exert. Most surf-depicting fiction in this first 90 years was set in Hawaii and written in the Adult Adventure or Boys Adventure genres. This article examines how early surf fiction traced the impact of indigenous-based surfing on imperial-based white thinking, and proposes that some creative writers were sensitive to the on-going cultural appropriation of surfing and the lessons surfing could teach the colonialists about individual, racial and cultural respect. When the earliest creative writers tried to surf, they admitted they were inferior, but they admired Pacific Islander expertise. During the first 90 years of surf fiction, the narrative perspective moved from the colonial observer gaze to the participant view. Fiction sought to outline the growing Western awareness that surfing would be a key influence on cross-cultural thinking.

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Introduction

This paper examines the first 90 years (from 1849 to 1940) in the development of surf fiction. It focuses on how, at the genre's beginnings, the view taken of surfing was shaped by the colonial worldview, with its attendant super-narrative of white cultural and individual superiority, marginalisation of non-white traditions, and disrespect for others' values and practices. The period can be divided into two phases. The first extended from 1849 to 1920 with pioneering novels by Herman Melville (*Mardi and a Voyage Thither*, 1849) and R. M. Ballantyne (*The Coral Island*, 1857) published in the mid-19th century. From 1900 onwards, A. S. Twombly's *Kelea: The Surf-Rider, A Romance of Pagan Hawaii* (1900), Max Nodaway's *Rollo in Hawaii* (1908) and Jack London's collection of Hawaiian stories *On the Makaloa Mat* (1919) are of particular interest for how they reflected changes taking place in white attitudes to Hawaii and surfing. London's long short story 'The Kanaka Surf' (originally published in 1916 and included in his 1919 collection) brought to surf fiction, we claim, a new-found maturity in terms of the white gaze on surfing, and opened up a literary space for discussion around cultural appropriation and new colonial awareness of individual, racial and cultural respect. The second phase, from 1921 to 1940, included lesser writers such as Stuart Martin (*The Surf Queen*, 1925) and Don Blanding (*Stowaways in Paradise*, 1931); these authors continued the white world's attempt to come to terms with the emergent cultural and racial influence that surfing had begun to exert. By our count, five surf fiction monographs were published between 1849 and 1920, and from 1921 to 1940 eight new fiction monographs and two poetry books featured surfing. These counts include novels for adults and children, and a short story collection. Beyond the monographs, occasional surf stories and poems appeared in the popular *Paradise of the Pacific* and *Mid-Pacific* magazines from 1909 onwards (DeLaVega, 2004).

Most surf-depicting fiction in this first 90 years was written in the Adult Romance, Adult Adventure and Boys Adventure genres, where the narratives generally subscribed to white-view values, as was also the case for non-surf fiction set in other parts of the South Pacific in the same period by adult and children's fiction writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Louis Becke, Beatrice Grimshaw, George Manville Fenn, and Henry De Vere Stacpoole (see Krauth, 1983). The earliest surf-aware fiction was generally set in Hawaii and depicted surfing as an activity the Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders invented and performed extremely well while white men floundered at it. Europeans typically stood on the shore to watch surfers, and when two early creative writers did try to surf, they admitted they were hopeless (Twain, 2020 [1872]) or inferior (London, 2008 [1907], p. 141). But by the time of the second phase, white characters in fiction (both male and female) had taken up surfing and succeeded at it, as had actual expatriates and locally-born whites in Hawaii. The major impact of the emerging surf fiction genre from 1849 to 1940 was that writers began to question the white worldview. The white onlooker's super-narrative of dominating and marginalising others was challenged by the supposedly primitive Islanders' beliefs surrounding, and practice of, surfing. Surfing required advanced physical skills, alertness in mental strategy, and extraordinary courage. These were characteristics associated with the superiority of the white race, not with 'benighted pagans', as the super-narrative saw them. In fiction and poetry up to 1940, surfing developed from being merely an aspect of Pacific island settings which gave local colour to a work, to

being part of a central white character's moral and social development in the narrative; something done by local figures in an exotic landscape observed by superior white characters from a loftier world became, instead, a potential test for, and proof of, inter-racial equality and respect.

In the genre's second phase, between 1920 and 1940, white characters in novels stopped being merely observers and regularly gave surfing a crack. Inevitably it meant they accepted the tutelage of the Islanders and crossed cultural boundaries to make friends with them as respected equals. In these works, mainly written by American writers, young white heroes and heroines advanced from respectful onlookers to surfers themselves, acknowledging the heroism of the locals. By this time, the United States had stepped into Hawaii and made it a colonial 'possession'. So, it was nationally important that Americans should understand what went on there. It is noticeable that of the first thirteen full-length surf-depicting fiction works published, nine were written for juveniles and children – Hawaii was clearly on the American educational agenda. But the culturally challenging phenomenon of surfing was part of the adult political learning process too. Jack London's 'The Kanaka Surf' (1916) had answered the question that lingered after Mark Twain was dumped by his 'prodigious billow' (Twain, 2020): 'Could whites surf as well as Islanders?' London's journalism and fiction said, 'Yes, they could', and writers like Blanding and Martin confirmed it. Additionally, the commitment and hours of practice required for surfing mastery entailed so much exposure to the Pacific sun that white skin could become *brown*, identical to local Islander skin, so that Hawaiians and Americans in this circumstance did not display radically different skin colour. In the second phase of surf fiction writing, surfing was identified as an activity which broke the black / white binary of the colonial gaze to suggest a visible equality between races.

In our estimation, the American writerly engagement with Hawaii between 1849 and 1940 was egalitarian in its treatment of the local Islanders and their culture; Hawaii was celebrated, admired and accepted, rather than scorned, admonished and repudiated as had been the pattern previously for writers of major European nations moving in on the less-developed world as a setting and subject for fiction.

The first phase: Surf fiction 1849-1920

When the earliest works of surf fiction were written in the 1840s and 50s, colonial attitudes prevailed. The voyages of James Cook and others had filled in significant geographical unknowns, but the Pacific's indigenous cultures remained sketchily detailed to the rest of the world. For the white colonial gaze, the Pacific was a last frontier no different from Africa, the Americas and Asia during the previous 400 years – that is, a place to 'discover' and plunder. Between 1750 and 1850, colonial powers eyed off all parts of the Pacific, sending expeditions to take scientific measurements, assess natural assets, observe local cultures, and compute strategic possibilities, thus producing a kind of writing seen in British (and other) navigators' journals which focused on potentially useful discoveries employing detailed observations made with scientific rigour. Turning to explorers' journals and early missionary accounts as

source material (see Moser, 2008, pp. 15-48), the earliest surf fiction writers took the viewpoint of the scientific observer; they saw surfing as an exotic marvel, a puzzling new aspect of human possibility. Even though surfing prowess did not fit easily into the black/white colonial gaze, it intrigued early novelists as a challenge to the prevailing white mentality.

The United States, having recently rid itself of colonial oppressors and gained independence, had a vulnerable west coast fronting the Pacific and was keen to extend its influence and protect its interests by pursuing industries such as whaling, seal fur-trading, cane-growing and sandalwood-trading. Herman Melville was part of the US thrust into the Pacific when he spent four years there (1841-1845) variously working on a whaling ship and as a clerk in Honolulu (Forsythe, 1935; Moser, 2008, p. 101). He introduced the first-ever surfboard riding incident to fiction in Chapter XC ('Rare Sport at Ohonoo') of his novel *Mardi and A Voyage Thither* (1849). Melville set the incident on a fictional island called Ohonoo (sounds like Oahu?) and called his fictional whaler 'Arcturion' (sounds like his real ship *Acushnet*?). Key things about this first description of surfing in fiction are: Melville described the activity from the viewpoint of an admiring outsider, and he described the whole scene in terms of a cavalry charge, where the Pacific waves' onslaught resembled a foe threatening to overwhelm the board riders as if they were at war – a view which was intended, in fact, to create sympathy for the surfers (see Sandtner and Krauth, 2021).

Adhering to the colonial navigator principle that new observations should be made with scientific rigour, Melville described surfing in objective detail. After explaining that '[f]or this sport, a surf-board is indispensable: some five feet in length; the width of a man's body; convex on both sides; highly polished; and rounded at the ends', he continued:

> Ranged on the beach, the bathers, by hundreds dash in; and diving under the swells, make straight for the outer sea, pausing not till the comparatively smooth expanse beyond has been gained. Here, throwing themselves upon their boards, tranquilly they wait for a billow that suits. Snatching them up, it hurries them landward, volume and speed both increasing, till it races along a watery wall, like the smooth, *awful verge* of Niagara. Hanging over this scroll, looking down from it as from a *precipice*, the bathers halloo; every limb in motion to preserve their place on the very crest of the wave. Should they fall behind, the squadrons that follow would whelm them; dismounted, and thrown forward, as certainly would they be run over by the steed they ride. 'Tis like charging at the head of cavalry: you must on. (Melville, 1964, p. 239, our italics)

While *Mardi* is a highly complex novel overall, grand in its ambitions but unruly in its achievement, it depicts riding waves on boards exactly and compellingly. There are many things wrong with this odd novel, but the first description of surfing in fiction is not one of them. By his use of the battle metaphor to describe the challenges overcome by talented board-riders, Melville may have fashioned a metaphor about how Pacific Islanders would have on their hands a racial and cultural war with western civilisation which they would simply have to flow with, but definitely he saw at the start the idea that surfing was all about the contest, and the trial of the self against the environment. Melville was a masterful recorder of challenges to the human psyche as *Moby Dick* (published just two years later in 1851) amply demonstrates.

In *Moby Dick*, the symbol for the greatest human challenge arrived out of the deep ocean as it might arise out of the depths of one's own soul. Part of *Moby Dick*'s DNA lies in Melville's description of Pacific surfers taking on the 'awful verge', the 'precipice', of the wave in *Mardi*. '[Y]ou must on', he said about surfing. You must ride with your destiny and be equal to its demands.

The second work of fiction to depict surfing was R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island: A Tale of the Pacific Ocean* (1857). The novel is recognised as a juvenile reader classic. As with Melville, the surf-rider's situation was described in terms of a contest:

> For some time the swimmers continued to strike out to sea, breasting over the swell like hundreds of black seals. Then they all turned, and watching an approaching billow, mounted its white crest, and each laying his breast on the short, flat board, came rolling towards the shore, careering on the summit of the mighty wave, while they and the onlookers shouted and yelled with excitement. Just as the monster wave curled in solemn majesty to fling its bulky length upon the beach, most of the swimmers slid back into the trough behind; others, slipping off their boards, seized them in their hands, and plunging through the watery waste, swam out to repeat the amusement; but a few, who seemed to me the most *reckless*, continued their career until they were launched upon the beach and enveloped in the churning foam and spray. One of these last came in on the crest of the wave most *manfully*, and landed with a violent bound almost on the spot where Bill and I stood. (Ballantyne, 1991, p. 237, our italics)

Again, the novelist's description of surfing is compellingly accurate. The most 'reckless' surfers are seen as the best surfers, but the daring involved is interpreted as acting 'manfully' not irresponsibly. This was the interpretation key to the challenge surfing presented to white culture. Manful daring won wars, discovered new lands, and created empires. Surfing seemed like an activity absolutely attuned to the imperial ethos. But white men didn't do it. And one of the reasons was: they were scared of sharks.

As part of the same surfing scene, where the white heroes are on the beach gazing at the surfing display, Ballantyne wrote:

> We turned hastily towards the direction whence the cry came, and had just time to observe the glaring eyeballs of one of the swimmers as he tossed his arms in the air. Next instant he was pulled under the waves. A canoe was instantly launched, and the hand of the drowning man was caught; but only half of his body was dragged from the maw of the monster, which followed the canoe until the water became so shallow that it could scarcely swim. The crest of the next billow was tinged with red as it rolled towards the shore. (Ballantyne, 1991, p. 239)

The young white adventurers who worked so brilliantly to survive shipwreck on their coral island, could not compute the contiguity of wonderful surfing and awful shark attack. In white fiction, the description of newly-discovered surfing followed by reference to shark attack continued through the second phase up to 1940. It represented a white attitude to surfing which

operated paradigmatically, we think, as a sort of cultural excuse for the fact that white cultures did not surf, and were having difficulty embracing it as an activity. So surfing was indeed a clear and present challenge to white superiority as recorded by novelists from the start. It brought out fears about white survival in ways that the 'mere' enslavement of Africans in Africa, or the 'simple' taking of a continent like Australia, did not.

Also significant in the first phase were A.S. Twombly's *Kelea: The Surf-Rider, A Romance of Pagan Hawaii* (1900) – which introduced the expert female surfer to fiction – and Max Nodaway's *Rollo in Hawaii* (1908) – which was the first boys' adventure book to be set wholly in Hawaii.

Kelea: The Surf-Rider is a hybrid: a Romance genre novel entirely featuring Hawaiian characters, based on legendary stories about the Hawaiian princess Kelea. The excellent Author's Note at the end of the book (Twombly, 1900, pp. 401-402) positions it in terms of its sources and the writer's attitudes. Twombly was a clergyman and an American intellectual with realistic liberal views. In the context of his times, Twombly produced a narrative which tapped into the 'noble savage' tradition but at the same time accepted as culturally apt ideas like polygamy, women being equal in society, women taking part in surfing and warfare, and other views not held by colonialists. He was definitely a supporter of the idea that Hawaiians were in many ways equal to whites, although we feel that for the sake of not drawing too much attention to his radical argument, he inserted strategically at times the old chestnuts of white superiority of character, sensibility, capability, etc. But Twombly did not denigrate Hawaiians or surfing, as some missionaries did, and he showed Pacific Islanders as highly capable thinkers, with highly complex social structures, who were skilled in operating their laws, housing, navigation, and warfare. He specifically praised them – against the colonial grain – for their deep emotional capabilities and poetic sensibilities. He apologised for the highly sensitive female character Pa'aloha, who is Kelea's rival, admitting she has a white woman's sensitivities – but clearly, he introduced her into the work as more than just fantasy window-dressing. We think she is more 'speculative' than 'fantasy', in fact a propositional argument, a devil's advocate move: Pa'aloha carries ideas about the perfect white woman in all her frailty and emotionality (a character from Romance fiction which Pacific adventurer Beatrice Grimshaw, for example, rejected in her novels). Twombly inserted those 'frail white woman' characteristics into the narrative as a foil for his equally admirable, highly physical, sometimes erratic (but also very female) Kelea who rides a surfboard with the best of them and falls in love with the hero Chief by stalking him with a passion that does not destroy her, as Pa'aloha's pathetically immobile, constantly suffering love does her.

This is a complex book. It fits with Martin's later *The Surf Queen* (1925) in interesting ways, and also with how surfing was viewed at the turn of the century – as if it were a sort of fantasy itself where stitched-up whites could see a beautiful thing born out of passion (the later-defined classical Greek god / bronze statue surf-rider) and wanted to be part of it, not just observers of it, but their moral framework disallowed their participation.

Max Nodaway's *Rollo in Hawaii* (1908) was the next fiction after Ballantyne 50 years earlier to bring surfing to the juvenile reader, and the first to do so in the 20th-century. The subtitle of

Nodaway's novel was elaborate. It read: *A Tale of Thrilling Adventures, Amid Volcanoes, Fire Fountains and Tropical Wonderlands; Into which is Woven a Vivid Description of those Mystic Isles, Where Fire and Water have Built up a Delirium of Chaos and Beauty* (Nodoway, 1908, title page). Included in this 'Delirium of Chaos and Beauty' was surfing. The teenage heroes Rollo and Russell are holidaying in Hawaii with their uncle and decide they will have a go at surf-board riding. They arrive at Waikiki from Honolulu on horseback and initially watch the board riders. White boy hero Rollo says surprisedly: '"Why, the surf boards are very much like my mother's ironing board … I always thought they were miniature canoes."' (p. 31). Then he says to Russell: '"Now, we'll try it ourselves and 'astonish the natives'"' (p. 31). The narrative continues:

> The boys were good swimmers, and soon took their places on the surf-boards before the onrushing billow. But in a twinkling it rolled them over and over, and bumped them several times on the sand. When [locals] Barney and Kalani hoisted them into the canoe by the legs, they were very glad to return to their natural element. (p. 31)

The white heroes are no longer so cocky:

> "Russell," said Rollo, "the delights of this surf-riding are not quite what they are cracked up to be. I'm thinking that being run through a thrashing machine would be almost as jolly."
>
> "I'm with you, Rollo. Surf-riding may be a mighty good thing in the abstract, but excuse me from the concrete, particularly this sharp coral concrete. When you've been thumped several times on a coral rock, and swallowed a quart of brine (more or less), the poetry of the thing disappears. But, wasn't it glorious to see those little Kanaka rats beat the big canoe in the race?" (p. 32)

With no further comment, the white boys happily head off to a Chinese restaurant where reading the 36-item menu takes up almost a page and a half of the novel, about the same amount of space given to surfing.

Nodaway's 1908 novel confirmed Mark Twain's 1872 idea that surfing was beyond the capabilities of whites. Twain had said:

> I tried surf-bathing once, subsequently, but made a failure of it. I got the board placed right, and at the right moment, too; but missed the connection myself. – The board struck the shore in three quarters of a second, without any cargo, and I struck the bottom about the same time, with a couple of barrels of water in me. None but natives ever master the art of surf-bathing thoroughly. (Twain, 2020)

In the first decade of the 20th century, white surfing needed a PR breakthrough.

The pivotal work of fiction: Jack London's 'The Kanaka Surf'

A key moment in the progress of early surf writing and the white worldview occurred in 1907 with Jack London's non-fiction journal piece 'Riding the South Seas Surf', first published in the popular American *Woman's Home Companion*. This wasn't fiction, but an amalgam of memoir, creative nonfiction and essay genres. It was experimental for its day, as were others of London's works, due to his skill at crossing boundaries between nonfiction and fiction and his application of rare literary and creative sensibility to the hard facts of his real adventures. London's 1907 colonial gaze on the surfer at Waikiki involved exquisite detail, unusual cultural understanding, and an empathetic cross-cultural view:

> Where but the moment before was only the ocean's wide desolation and invincible roar is now a man, erect, full-statured, not struggling frantically in that wild movement, not buried and crushed and buffeted by those mighty monsters, but standing above them all, calm and superb, poised on the giddy summit … in the free air and flashing sunlight, and he is flying through the air, flying forward, flying fast, as the surge on which he stands. He is a Mercury – a *black* Mercury. (London, 2008, pp. 138-139, our italics)

London's 'black Mercury' surfer continued to be published around the world for a decade as arguably the best publicity surfing ever received. For example, the article was republished in 1908 in Great Britain in the universally-read *Pall Mall Magazine*, and in the same year in far-flung Brisbane in the local *Queenslander* newspaper, then reappeared in the popular *Mid-Pacific Magazine* in 1915. The various titles it appeared under included 'The Joys of the Surf Rider' and 'The Psychology of the Surfboard'. It was also adapted as a chapter in London's Pacific-voyage memoir *The Cruise of the Snark* in 1911, under the title 'A Royal Sport'. In that book, four years after publishing the original version, 'London changed the words "black Mercury" to "brown Mercury" and "burnt black by the tropic sun" to "burnt golden and brown by the tropic sun"' (Moser, 2008, p. 335). London (or at least his editors, with whom he must have agreed) was clearly aware of the racial issues involved in his description of the surfer, since we know he wrote at other times about comparative racial capabilities and eugenics (see Craig, 2017).

London's revised 'brown', not 'black', view of the surf-board rider brought surfing into newly significant focus. The 'brown Mercury' could actually be a white man with a great tan doing the surfing. London knew about tanning. While on his 1907 travels in the Pacific, described in *The Cruise of the Snark*, he was thinking about the idea that a suntan could turn a white man into a black man. On the voyage he wrote an autobiographical novel called *Martin Eden* (published in 1909). In it the main character looks at himself in the mirror:

> The brown sunburn of his face surprised him. He had not dreamed he was so black. He rolled up his shirtsleeves and compared the white underside of the arm with his face. Yes, he was a white man, after all. (London, 1970, p. 31)

At the time of London's visit to Hawaii in 1907, as Cater points out, numerous *haoles* (whites) had taken up surfing (Cater, 2020). Although London changed *black* to *brown* in Chapter VI

of *The Cruise of the Snark*, he had clarified the matter of indigenous surfing supremacy in Chapter IV:

> As I write these lines I lift my eyes and look seaward. I am on the beach of Waikiki … and through the white crest of a breaker suddenly appears a dark figure, erect, a man-fish or a sea-god, on the very forward face of the crest where the top falls over and down, driving in toward shore, buried to his loins in smoking spray, caught up by the sea and flung landward, bodily, a quarter of a mile. It is a Kanaka on a surf-board. And I know that when I have finished these lines I shall be out in that riot of colour and pounding surf, trying to bit those breakers even as he, and failing as he never failed, but living life as the best of us may live it. And the picture of that coloured sea and *that flying sea-god Kanaka* becomes another reason for the young man to go west, and farther west … and still west till he arrives home again. (London, 1961, pp. 58-59, our italics)

It was not easy for a writer to say that an 'inferior' race could do something better than the white race in the early 1900s when European, British and American cultures oriented inevitably towards the inferiority of a dark skin. Writing genres conventionally subscribed to the white worldview. London himself, a macho sex-symbol of his times and culturally representative of the superior white adventurer, here acknowledged that surfing was a skill that white guys (himself included) didn't do so well. But they had to make amends; they had to do it equally well, if only for white pride's sake. Mark Twain had asserted no white man could ever do it, but London acknowledged it to be an educative challenge for the American white man to go beyond his wild west Californian frontier and tackle a new American frontier in Hawaii. The experience of surfing in Hawaii offered the American male new understanding of his capabilities, new insight into who he was internationally, and better thinking about where he really came from. 'Riding the South Seas Surf' was an astounding statement for its times. Seeing Hawaiian 'natives' (as they were spoken of then) in the god-like form of a Mercury, a Hercules or an Apollo, constituted a significant step away from the accepted colonial view of Pacific Islanders.

In fiction, London provided the mirror-image to his 1907 journal piece by depicting, in 1916, two white men and a white woman in the same god-like surfer terms he had previously presented the adept Hawaiian board-rider. London's story 'The Kanaka Surf' was first published in 1917 as 'Man of Mine' in *Hearst's Magazine*, then republished in 1919 in his story collection *On the Makaloa Mat* (called *Island Tales* in the UK). Its main characters, Ida and Lee Barton, are a Hawaiian-born white woman and a long-term expatriate white man. They cause perturbation when they emerge onto Waikiki beach from the bath-house, not because they are consummate physical specimens wearing revealing (for 1916) swimming suits, but specifically because of Ida's 'affront of superiority' which she achieves by 'the totality of her [sic], the sweet and brilliant jewel of her femininity'. This 'totality' bursts upon the onlooking tourist dowagers, matrons and maids, causing them to gasp in alarmed 'moral shock' (London, 2017, pp. 182-183). Something else, however, affronts another group on the beach – the members of the Waikiki Outrigger Club, the first surf club in history. In their eyes, as a white

couple the Bartons should not swim out and head straight for the most challenging and dangerous surf – the Kanaka surf – 'the big, bearded man surf that roars far out beyond the diving-stage' (p. 191). The 'captain of Number Nine', in charge of one of the canoe crews who performed surf rescues, watches with alarm because he thinks a double-drowning is imminent and prepares to take the crew out into the big surf.

It transpires that the Bartons are superb body-surfers, symbols of a new sort of white presence in the islands: 'they were not malahinis [newcomers]. *They belonged*' (p. 199, our italics). This is the view of the captain of Number Nine whom London describes as:

> a bronze Hercules of twenty-two, the whitest blond man ever burned to mahogany brown by a sub-tropic sun, with body and lines and muscles very much resembling the wonderful ones of Duke Kahanamoku. (p. 194)

Lee Barton and the captain of Number Nine (who is based on George Freeth) [1] are the first confidently drawn, absolutely capable white male surfers in fiction. At the same time, Lee's glamorous wife Ida is as good at surfing as he is. They do have their problems together, but these are to do with love, not surfing, as the rest of the story shows. London's narrative contained the best descriptions of surf, of body-surfing, and of board riding in his time, and possibly that is still the case. 'The Kanaka Surf' is the first work of fiction to use surfing as integral to the structure and meaning of a story, to analyse surfing as a construct within white / western / American culture, and the first to fit that analysis seamlessly and effectively into a narrative about white American identity. It used surfing at Waikiki as a test not just of the two main characters but also as a test of the gaze of the conventional onlookers, the privileged American-Hawaiians and the American tourists to Hawaii who look on, applying their race-driven gaze to the surfing drama which unfolds. This is very much a Gatsby-era story (although published almost a decade before Fitzgerald's masterpiece). It pits love against how things look on the outside; it opposes deeper moral values and depth of character against the trappings and glamour of success. London's story is a test of the American Dream, as seen at its edges in the first of its 'territorial possessions', Hawaii.

At a moment in history when the United States was fully coming of age as a colonial power to match the best of them (those being England and France, which the US had beaten off in the race to grab the Hawaiian Islands in the previous century) the story plays out history in symbolic terms. As London explains, the 'kanaka surf' (man-surf) is the dominant surf, where the really big waves form. The inshore surf is the 'wahine surf' (woman-surf) where the waves are not so testing and dangerous. The definitions are challenged straight away because the gorgeous Ida is just as competent as the handsome Lee in the big surf out the back. In describing their capabilities, London gives the narrative viewpoint to the swimming champion, captain of the beach lifeguard crew:

> The captain saw the first kanaka wave, large of itself, but small among its fellows, lift seaward behind the two speck-swimmers. Then he saw them strike a crawl-stroke, side by side, faces downward, full-lengths outstretched on [the] surface, their feet sculling like propellers and their arms flailing in rapid overhand strokes, as they spurted speed

> to approximate the speed of the overtaking wave, so that, when overtaken, they would become part of the wave, and travel with it instead of being left behind it…
>
> And they did it! "*Some* swimmers!" the captain of Number Nine made announcement to himself under his breath. (pp. 195-196, italics in original)

The white couple receive the imprimatur of the brown-skinned expert (who is a white version of Duke Kahanamoku). But better still, he endorses their skill and knowledge in *not* taking a following wave:

> …it was evident that the man and woman knew big water. No racing stroke did they make in advance of the [giant] wave. The captain inwardly applauded as he saw them turn and face the wave and wait for it. It was a picture that of all on the beach he alone saw, wonderfully distinct and vivid in the magnification of the binoculars. The wall of the wave was truly a wall, mounting, ever mounting, and thinning, far up, to a transparency of the colours of the setting sun shooting athwart all the green that merged blue even as he looked … a kaleidoscopic effervescence of transfusing rainbows.
>
> Against the face of the wave showed the heads of the man and woman like two sheer specks … in the last tick of safety and the first tick of peril … he saw the woman turn her head and laugh to the man, and his head turn in response. Above them, overhanging them, as they mounted the body of the wave, the beard, creaming white, then frothing into rose and gold, tossed upward into a spray of jewels … side by side, and six feet apart … they dived straight under the over-curl even then disintegrating to chaos and falling. (pp. 197-198)

The Bartons swim back steadily to shore and the captain discards his binoculars (a version of the previous century's scientific observation) and crosses them off his list of problem swimmers. 'They belonged', he concludes, 'they were *kamaaina* [accepted as Hawaiians]' (p. 199). However, the Bartons continue 'to arouse the disparaging interest in the breasts of the tourist ladies' (p. 199) whose onlooking gaze remains subject to contemporary prejudices and white insecurities.

In London's story the onlooker view of the surfer seen in fiction for the previous 60 years suffered a wipe-out. The white man and woman are no longer stuck on the sand feeling inferior in a world designed by imperial ideology for whites to *never* feel inferior. The consummate surfers are not Hawaiians, nor are they Americans giving it a good go and failing. Nor is there any sense that surfing is something that only Pacific primitives do. In fact, the Bartons are whites who newly possess surfing just as the US newly 'possessed' Hawaii. But London stresses the great equality of his white and brown characters in this moment. The other Greek gods in the story are the Hawaiian Outrigger Club members – the lifeguards of their day – who get ready to head out to save the two who are either 'super-man' and 'super-woman' or ignorant (p. 189), but who then realise their own superhuman skills are not required.

'The Kanaka Surf' is a big, and beautifully complex, story. It draws together themes about attitude to race and gender in the colonial worldview, the particular history of Hawaii where whites were forced to admire local skills, and the orientation which the US attempted to follow

in the anxious project of taking on a colony and administering it. The reason why such a situation was particularly fraught, was that it reflected on the colonising power itself. Jack London undertook his analysis in terms of the American Dream where the finest-looking 'American' couple were also equals to fine Hawaiian surfers. And all those fine surfers, brown or browned by the sun, were equal to the fine Greek gods.

'The Kanaka Surf' is an underrated work. It introduced to surf fiction major themes and issues which the genre went forward with. It was about white male and female identity. It was about gender relationships and race relationships. It was about white mastery seen as equal to brown mastery. We mentioned above the scene where the white duo is caught in time and place waiting, way out back, to catch the monster wave, with expert Hawaiians on the beach watching on. This is a scene way more iconic than Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr rolling in the shore break in *From Here to Eternity* (1953). Burt and Deborah got wet in the shallows; what Lee and Ida Barton did was test love and race and culture for Americans (and the world) out in the dangerous deep. Jack London's scene turned the racist colonial gaze upside-down; the Hawaiians became the analysing onlookers as the whites performed surfing.

London was the only creative writer for adults to tackle the surfing theme during the period between Alexander Twombly (1900) and Eugene Burdick (1956). Don Blanding picked up London's themes but, for all his wonderful perceptions, described rather than analysed surfing in his fiction for teenagers. After London, adult fiction writers were obliged to raise questions related to the American psyche and the white psyche in general. No longer could surfing as a cultural indicator be dismissed as Mark Twain had done – 'None but natives ever master the art of surf-bathing thoroughly'. As an indicator of Hawaiian prowess, surfing's relevance to American and white aspirations had to be examined and explained. London started that process in 'The Kanaka Surf' – he not only changed the focus from child to adult, he changed the focus from Hawaii to the US. His story was about changing the colonial gaze on surfing.

The second phase: Surf fiction 1921-1940

The most prominent genre published in the second phase was juvenile fiction. Don Blanding's *Stowaways in Paradise* (1931), John F. Cowan's *Capturing a King's Calabash* (1934) and Larry Barretto's *Hawaiian Holiday* (1938) established for young readers a pattern followed until the 1950s and 60s: each plotline took the main characters on didactic tours of the Hawaiian Islands, albeit with the didacticism thinly veiled as either a boys' adventure or a family holiday with dramatic consequences. The pattern followed the real-life itinerary of a comprehensive tourist holiday: the arrival of the ship at Honolulu, local boys diving for coins, Hawaiian songs and music, leis around necks, etc, and ended with the sad farewell, throwing of leis into the sea off Diamond Head, the ukulele strains of 'Aloha Oe' in the background, and the voyage home.

The recipe required that the juvenile American characters came for a limited stay and in the process went through the standard observations and experiences that a Hawaiian visit offered. This comprised: encounters with Oahu, especially Honolulu and its markets, the surfing beach

at Waikiki, the precipitous pass and upward-flowing waterfall in the mountains behind Honolulu, and the active volcanoes and lava fields on the big island of Hawaii. Also included were: brief experiences of village life, architecture of houses, luaus, traditional stories, coral reefs, fishing methods, coconut plantations, sugar-cane fields, making leis and weaving clothes, tobogganing down grassy hillsides, etc. All the while the young reader absorbed the historical, geographical, geological, economic, cultural and linguistic features of Hawaii. The keywords for these novels, we can see, were 'education' and 'entertainment' – the learning acquired was important to the conservative political process whereby the Hawaiian Islands were being welcomed into, and subsumed under, burgeoning American culture. Almost every fiction book written for children and teenagers between 1908 and 1940 followed this educative pattern; they also included a glossary of Hawaiian words and a schema for pronouncing the new exotic language. In these books there is usually a juvenile white male character who sees surfing from the beach at Waikiki and wants to give it a try, accompanied by a Hawaiian pal as mentor. Sometimes, there is a young female, perhaps his sister, who thinks surfing looks too scary and stays away from it.

The first book to feature white boys' attempts to learn surfing was Claude La Belle's *The Bailey Twins in the Philippines* (1930). The novel was part of a series of six books 'For Boys 12 to 16 Years' (La Belle, 1930, p. 2). The Bailey Twins were wealthy-family East Coast schoolboys who had adventures both at school and on vacation. In this book the author takes them on a travel adventure that involved sailing the Pacific to China and Japan. On the way their ship calls at Honolulu for a day. During that day, the one thing the boys want to do is learn surfboard riding at Waikiki beach. The Twins find some helpful 'native boys' who offer to 'take them out beyond the breakers and instruct them in the art of surfboardriding [sic]', although one of the Hawaiian boys warns: '"I am afraid you won't be able to learn in a short time"' (p. 81). The Twins take the heavy surfboards out and manage to achieve rides back in while lying down. The conclusion drawn from the lesson is:

> Riding a surfboard is an art acquired by long practice… The native youths were adepts at it, and laughed heartily when the Americans attempted it, only to fall off when a heavy breaker literally shot the board out from under their feet. After some practice they were able to ride in lying flat on it like a sled, but standing was too much for them. (p. 82)

At the end of *The Bailey Twins in the Philippines*, the Twins save their adult party from Chinese pirates (by pluckily making contact with the American navy) but still they can't stand up when riding a surfboard. We have to admit that, as we approached the climactic end of the novel, we thought the Twins would save the day by doing something amazing (and only believable in fiction) on surfboards, but it didn't happen. That means the Waikiki surfboard-lesson was there as a coded message from the author: teenagers do have their limits, even if the Books for Boys fiction genre liberated them to be apparent supermen.

In Don Blanding's *Stowaways in Paradise: Two Boy Adventurers in Hawaii* (1931) the teenage characters stay much longer in Hawaii than a single day. Blanding himself lived in Honolulu for 14 years and became an important arts figure there, recognised as an artist and a writer (he

was dubbed the unofficial 'poet laureate of Hawaii' [Poemhunter, 2021]). *Stowaways in Paradise* is beautifully written, often in the Blanding poetic style which involved the amassing of visual tableaux and detailed images: for example, in describing the Honolulu oriental markets (pp. 30-31), or an island luau feast (pp. 97-99), or the sights during a horse-riding adventure in the crater of a volcano (pp. 121-123). The 13-year-old boys Micky (white American orphan) and Pua (his Hawaiian buddy) go through the standard adventures – investigating the markets, night-time fishing trips, visits to mountains, volcanoes, blowholes, dead craters, lava tubes, lava flows, making earth ovens and leis, weaving clothes, tobogganing and, of course, surfing. Blanding's long residency in Hawaii meant his knowledge was participatory, not gained through mere observation. In addition, his exquisite black and white illustrations graced the pages throughout. (These still sell on websites advertising t-shirts and furnishings today.)

In the narrative, the two boys – *haole* and Hawaiian – have an equal partnership: each has knowledge the other benefits from, although this does not prevent them from getting into life-threatening scrapes. There is high mutual admiration shown between the races in 'a land that promise[s] good exploring and adventure' (p. 22). In his earlier 1924 collection of poems set in Hawaii, *Paradise Loot*, Blanding had already described the surf in terms of its war-like challenges:

> Line after line the green battalions of the sea
> Charge to defeat against the fortress of the land… (Blanding, 2000, 'Black Point', p. 15)

and he had described surfers in Jack London terms:

> Gods of the sea … like winging gulls they soar,
> Light as the spray that stings their bronzy breasts… ('Sons of the Surf', p. 14)

Young Micky's surfing lesson (1937, pp. 37-39) begins with the notion of an education in a culture different from the American way:

> No Hawaiian boy's education is complete unless he knows how to ride the surf boards. There are only a few places in the Islands where the right kind of surf drives in to the shore. Waikiki Beach has the finest surf… Micky thought that the surf riding was the most thrilling thing he had ever done. (pp. 37-8)

Blanding's detailed description of what Micky needs to learn about surfing incorporated the layout of the surf at Waikiki dependant on the break's distance from shore (e.g., 'the great surf that is called the king's surf' where 'huge deep-water waves charge towards the land like avalanches of green' [p. 38]). He also described how skilled beach boys, on paddling out, 'tossed handfuls of water over their shoulders to the sea gods' and how they 'idle and play' until the right wave comes along, whereupon one of them 'would cry out, "*Huki*, *huki* … pull, pull". Instantly there would be furious paddling with their arms to gain speed' (p. 38).

> The trick of riding the surf lay in keeping the board on the *down* slope of the wave. The boards bucked and pitched like bronchos [sic], and the unskilled riders were flung off. But the experts could kneel, rise, and stand with arms outstretched while they rode like winged gods with the foam and spray streaming past them. (p. 38)

Micky doesn't learn in a day. Over a realistic period of practice, he 'count[ed] himself lucky if he made the long trip to shore lying on the board' (p. 38).

> But day by day he improved until the proud time when he stood up and made the entire trip, swaying, balancing, and lurching. Pua rode alongside him, cheering wildly. Micky wished that [his dead father] could see him. He would be proud of his Micky. (pp. 38-39)

While suggesting that traditional American culture will recognise the skill of the surfer, Blanding did not suggest that surfing was without its dangers. Mickey has a very close call when his heavy board 'hit him a fierce crack on the head' (p. 39), but this was not the conventional danger imagined by the old European gaze epitomised in the shark. It was a danger inherent in human ability, in surfing itself. Whites could not say they were scared of surfing because of sharks; the real danger was that they might kill *themselves*. Micky's great aptitude was persistence. He did not rely on a supposed cultural superiority gained from whiteness, or Americanness. Later in the book he attempts body-surfing and comes a cropper: 'But he was just stubborn enough to go back into the water and try it again, until he could body-surf as well as the rest of them' (p. 104).

A key feature of John Cowan's *Capturing a King's Calabash* (1934) was that this novel for boys gave a greater sense of Hawaii as a place of modern industry, not just natural wonders. Several of the adventures for the young characters here involved sugarcane processing, cement mining, hydro-electricity generation, the cattle industry (and how the cattle were swum out to ships because there were no docks for loading) alongside the old favourite of surfing. This introduced a new context in which surfing might be seen. Cowan's Chapter 1 was entirely devoted to surfing at Waikiki, but this is not surfing seen as alien to modern youth – as part of the ancient world of natural wonders – rather, it is seen as belonging in the civilised world. While he learns to surf, teenage Larry takes movies of other surfers and of the organised activities of the Waikiki Outrigger Club. The point is made that the boys get to the beach on the street car (Cowan, 1934, p. 10), and Keolo (who seems to possess skills equal to the then celebrated Duke Kahanamoku) insists on explaining the modern production of surfboards not from the traditional Hawaiian timbers, but from Californian cedar or redwood (pp. 11-12). Young Larry approaches the skills of surfing with overconfidence – not with apprehension at all – and suffers a spectacular wipe-out which humiliates him in front of his friends and the beach crowd (pp. 13-14). But the response from those around him is not that he, as a white boy, is incapable of the traditional sport, but rather that he has 'more nerve than … acquaintance with [the] tides and that plank' (p. 14) and that all he needs is more practice. Nothing at all is suggested along the lines of Mark Twain's idea, 60 years earlier, that 'None but natives ever master the art of surf-bathing thoroughly'. In his quest to learn to surf and to gain possession of a sacred traditional object (the eponymous calabash), Larry's condescending attitude

towards aspects of Hawaiian life persist and are ultimately, it must be said, rewarded. But he has to go through a lot of trouble to reach his goals. The reality for Hawaiians by 1934 was: they were solidly part of the modern world, a territory of the USA for more than a generation. The reality for Americans by 1934 was that they had taken on Hawaii as a culture and they needed to come to terms with it.

In 1938 Larry Barretto published *Hawaiian Holiday.* It is perhaps the classic novel based on the family holiday to Hawaii. A typical American family (parents, teenage son and daughter, and younger son) do the tourist tour. Regarding surfing at Waikiki, Barretto writes:

> It looked easy, but the children noticed that long before the shore was reached most of the riders had tumbled from their boards in a shower of spray. Those who did it best were the Hawaiians and two boys of about Frank's age [12-year-old] who were as dark as Hawaiians. Only their shocks of yellow and red hair showed they were not natives. "They must have been here for a long time to get as burned as that," Mrs Gordon said…
>
> "Do you think you could do that?" [10-year-old] Molly asked. She was quite sure she could not.
>
> "I'd like to try," Frank said wistfully. "I'd certainly like to try…" (Barretto, 1938, pp. 29-30)

A local boy offers to teach Frank, and seven pages later Frank is engaging with the deeper spiritual aspects of the activity:

> "He has even learned to call on the sea gods for big waves," Kalama said.
>
> "What do you mean by that?" Mrs Gordon was interested.
>
> Frank explained to her, rather embarrassed. It seemed that whenever the natives brought their boards or the outrigger canoes to the point where the surf formed they would throw a handful of water into the air, which was a means of asking the gods to bring them a good wave to ride on. (p. 37)

In *Hawaiian Holiday* sophisticated, deeply felt elements of surf riding were being discussed for young readers, not just for adult readers.

By 1940, the revolution that Jack London brought to surf fiction, by making it something the white characters should admire, respect and culturally embrace had become the norm. Marge Lally's poem 'Surf-Riders' (1940) provided a fitting close to the second phase of literary surfing:

> Bronze gods….
> Six abreast….
> Graceful as Apollo,
> Riding the cresting waves.
> …Happy surf riders,
> Careless and free….

> The beach is their limit….
> Where the sand stops the sea. (Lally, 1940, p. 25, ellipses in original)

Here, Hawaiian and white surfers have become indistinguishable due to their bronzed skins, and both are equal to classical gods. A racial melding has occurred, as also a moral one. The naked Greek bronze could be appreciated for its physicality so long as (for the white culture) a moral recalibration occurred to dissociate it from the religiously immoral. The viewer could participate in the gaze, as well as in the activity itself, without compromise. Lally's interesting suggestion that the surfers' freedom and happiness is limited to the water – that on shore things are different – provides an entrée into cultural discussions of surfing's influence that would dominate in later decades.

Conclusion

This article examines how early surf fiction traced the impact of indigenous-based surfing on imperial-based white thinking, and proposes that some creative writers were sensitive to the on-going cultural appropriation of surfing and the lessons surfing could teach the colonialists about individual, racial and cultural respect. When the earliest creative writers tried to surf, they admitted they were inferior, but they admired Pacific Islander expertise. During the first 90 years of surf fiction, the narrative perspective moved from the colonial observer gaze to the participant view. Fiction sought to outline the growing Western awareness that surfing would be a key influence on cross-cultural thinking.

Note

1. We are indebted to one of the reviewers of this paper for this piece of information.

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