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Abstract:

In surf fiction it is common for wave-riders to be tested. The test of self – battling against nature, against others, and against one's own capabilities – is a popular thematic pathway for discovery, growth and freedom, as manifested regularly in surf-related fiction since its beginnings in 1849. This paper looks at the first three novels that featured surfing – *Mardi and a Voyage Thither* (Melville, 1849), *The Coral Island: A Tale of the Pacific Ocean* (Ballantyne, 1857), and *Kelea: The Surf-Rider, A Romance of PaganHawaii* (Twombly, 1900) – to examine why the authors wrote about surfing inconjunction with themes of battle and contest.

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Keywords: creative writing, surf fiction, surfing, Hawaii, contest, war, man, woman, youth, gender

Introduction

Surfing is a culture. Like any culture, there exist rites of passage, traditions, ideology, politics, and stories. When a culture tells a story it attempts to map meaning for those living within it. When myth or fiction is told within a culture, it is a projection of the speaker's understanding of the culture's past, present and future; it is an attempt to provide instruction for how members of the culture should behave.

Surfing stories have existed for more than a millennium, which is to say, they contain over a thousand years of beliefs and understandings passed on generationally through oral traditions or, more recently, as printed publications. From Pacific cultures, particularly Hawaii, knowledge about surfing comes down to us from island myths and legends. From western cultures, knowledge about surfing comes to us originally from navigational scientific journaling by explorers such as James Cook, and then from fiction and nonfiction accounts which followed. When surfing first appeared in fiction, its setting was either Hawaii or a tropical panorama that resembled it. This paper looks at the first three novels that featured surfing – *Mardi and a Voyage Thither* (Melville, 1849), *The Coral Island: A Tale of the Pacific Ocean* (Ballantyne, 1857), and *Kelea: The Surf-Rider, A Romance of Pagan Hawaii* (Twombly, 1900) – and examines why the authors wrote about surfing in conjunction with themes of war, battling and contest.

The first three novels are significant because they investigate key thematic areas that surf fiction later went on to occupy. In *Mardi*, Melville uses the war-like violence of the Pacific's big surf as setting for the central (white) character's test of himself and his understanding of the world. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* is about youth testing itself against adult paradigms in the context of battling against natural forces and human malevolence. And *Kelea* involves a female testing herself against males and the social expectations placed upon her. These novels share the idea that surfing was a Hawaiian cultural obligation, as well as a compulsive pastime, that white culture had no place engaging with.

Surfing in fiction was written, from the start, as a test of self or a contest: a battle against surrounding natural and cultural elements; a search for existential belonging; a way for characters to feel part of the natural world once more by succeeding in their struggle. Thematically, war fits into this dramatic context, as does growing from childhood into adulthood, and achieving equality as a woman. The idea of battling reflects worldviews expressed in surf stories from both the West and from Hawaii, where current surf fiction has its roots.

Before surfing was written into fiction, the Hawaiians turned wave-riding into a communal obsession. Unlike other Pacific coastal areas such as Peru and some parts of broader Polynesia, who likely adopted wave-riding as an efficient means to a day's work (Warshaw, 2010, pp. 21-25), Hawaii embraced surfing into its social structure.

> There was a looseness to the [Hawaiian] culture. Relationships between sport, religion, myth, work, war, family, and courtship were fluid – in this way surfing came to be entwined with almost all aspects of life. (Warshaw, 2010, p. 23)

Old Hawaiian myths offered guidance for how a tribe should structure their morality and social relations, and it was believed that individuals who held this cultural knowledge, or were somehow allied to it, brought prosperity to the tribe. For example, a chief or king would name himself 'Ku' in honour of the War God Ku so that 'canoe-builders, bird-catchers, and fisherman invoked him' to gain potency (Mackenzie, 1930, pp. 314-315). Consequently,

kahunas and surfboard craftsmen who worshipped Ku as their patron, blessed the tribe and the surfboards created by invoking Ku. In this cultural and storytelling context, the *olo* was the biggest Hawaiian surfboard and was reserved for royals, chiefs, and priests. It has been speculated that national war god Ku (also god of humbler arts like woodworking) received human sacrifices during a surfboard's building process. This was especially the case during times of war (Handy in Mackenzie, 1930, p. 314). The *olo* was often the board surfed in contests to settle conflicts between opposing tribes (Warshaw, 2010, p. 25). These details allude to surfing's combative undercurrents within the Hawaiian paradigm; undertones Britons and other Europeans were to view, but not to understand, upon their 'discovery' of the Pacific.

When the West arrived at the Hawaiian Islands and witnessed surf-riding first-hand, it was described by astounded navigators as a marvel, mystery, dangerous occupation, and challenge to white culture. The western worldview – which can be summed up as 'discover-and-conquer' – was dominated by adult masculine values; consequently, the sight of island natives sporting in big surf waves – a place of contest and harm no white man dared play in – challenged the masculinity of the conquest-driven colonialists. Those Westerners who first witnessed the surf-riders of Hawaii in the 18th century 'could look upon [surfing] as no other than certain death' (Samwell [1779] in Moser, 2008, p. 2). For the West at the time, danger was a masculine territory, and, of course, superior masculinity won wars. But surfing challenged ideas of white superiority and created doubts about white survival. To see Hawaiians – no matter their status, age or gender – incorporate death-defying surfing into their everyday lives frightened the white world and caused them to be terrified, while somewhat curious, observers. In 1779 David Samwell, one of Captain Cook's crew, wrote of the Pacific's absurd sport: '…these People find one of their Chief amusements in that which to us presented nothing but Horror & Destruction' (Samwell in Moser, 2008, p. 1). 'Fear and horror', Patrick Moser writes in *Pacific Passages*, 'astonishment and admiration: these were the contradictory responses associated with the first western descriptions of surfriding' (Moser, 2008, p. 2). But surfing was not an absurdity in Hawaii: it was a reality at the core of their belief systems. It was only an absurdity to the West.

With Hawaiian surf-stories already aligned to contest, conflict, and war via surfing's patron surfboard god Ku, and the West's worldview of power-to-the-conqueror-winner-of-battles an established cultural paradigm on the other side, foundations existed for surfing to be written in western fiction as a contest and a war-familiar occupation.

Mardi and a Voyage Thither: Surf and war

In 1849, Herman Melville wrote surfing into fiction for the first time in *Mardi and a Voyage Thither*. It was Melville's third novel, published two years before *Moby Dick* (1851). *Mardi* isthe story of a white male narrator (given the name of Taji by the islanders) who abandons his whaling vessel to explore the Pacific Ocean while searching for a mysterious young blonde woman he befriends briefly early on in the narrative. On one island, Ohonoo, he sees people surfing. In describing the scenes on this fictional island, Melville adopts the voice of discoverer

and writes about surfing in a tone that reflects the journals of Captain Cook and his crew. Melville uses war as the chief metaphor for wave-riding:

> As at Juam [another island Taji visited], where the wild billows from seaward roll in upon its cliffs; much more at Ohonoo, *in billowy battalions charge they hotly into the lagoon, and fall on the isle like an army from the deep*. (Melville, 1849, p. 314, our italics)

Melville was a whaler and an 'explorer' himself, and also a serviceman. From 1841 he was part of the Pacific whaling industry; in 1843 he worked at various jobs in Hawaii; and from there he joined the US navy and spent another year in the Pacific on board a military frigate (Forsythe, 1935; Moser, 2008, p. 101). One can surmise that the beauty of the islands was compromised for Melville by the fact that warships were docked in significant ports throughout the Pacific, with European and American powers lined up along various island groups – these symbols of war shrouding paradise. Melville was able to see first-hand the islands threatened by western ideals, technologies and politics. Working in Hawaii, Melville could learn that war was not only a part of the American-European agenda in the Pacific during the 19th century, but that it was also a part of the Hawaiian way of life.

In the chapter 'Rare Sport at Ohonoo' (pp. 314-316), the narrator's boat nears the island nation of Ohonoo and, as it approaches the outer reef, he sees surfers paddling across the ocean's rough surface in ranks, a levelled chaos that he cannot make heads-nor-tails of. It is like a battlefield, full of war-cries and daring. The phenomenon reflects Hawaiian combat practices. Melville writes:

> But *charge* [the waves] never so boldly, and *charge* they forever, old Ohonoo gallantly throws them back till all before her is one scud and rack. *So charged the bright billows of cuirassiers at Waterloo*: so hurled them off the long line of living walls, whose base was as the sea-beach, wreck-strown, in a gale.
>
> Without the break in the reef, wide banks of coral shelve off, creating the bar, where *the waves muster* for the onset, thundering in water-bolts, that shake the whole reef, till its very spray trembles. And then is it, that the swimmers of Ohonoo most delight to gambol in the surf. (pp. 314-315, our italics)

War is omnipresent as subtext in Melville's description of surfing. The natives gambol in dangerous territory, a territory the West cannot tame. The western worldview feared the deep of the sea. It was not a place the West gambolled. It was a place to die, or dump corpses. But the Island natives embraced its very nature – and risked the dangers beneath – that the West considered too dangerous. For Melville, the islanders' sport was a masculine feat to be reckoned with by the western observer.

> Ranged on the beach, the bathers, by the 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. (p. 315)

The swimmers of Ohonoo are gallant and bold. Diving into the surf, they free themselves from the laws of the land. They charge at the head of the trembling reef, nature galloping at their backs as they shoot toward the beach like loosened arrows. The wave is compared to a particularly American – and particularly powerful and dangerous – surge of water, Niagara, which makes this first observation of surfing in fiction complex. One interpretation might be that the surfers enter the sea to escape oppressive culture and attempt a return to nature to gain freedom from it. However, by giving the wave a western name, they also ride on / from the wave of western tyranny that forces them back to land:

> [T]he 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 theyride. 'Tis like *charging at the head of cavalry*: you must on. (p. 315, our italics)

In *Mardi*, the riders 'defeat' the waves in their display of bravery and masculinity, symbolic of protecting the Hawaiian way of life or a life that embraces nature over tyrannical cultures. Melville completes the picture by writing that the Hawaiians oiled their surfboards and hung them in their houses, a subtle metaphor paralleling what a worthy warrior might do with a prized weapon:

> For this sport, a surfboard 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. It is held in high estimation; invariably oiled after use; and hung up conspicuously in the dwelling of the owner. (p. 315)

In Melville's view, the oiled and displayed board symbolises the prized weapon that hangs above the soldier's mantel piece.

In *Mardi and a Voyage Thither* war is used as the metaphor to describe the wave-riders' feats in the natural world because in the European view, war and the surf are dangerous and complex environments where white men and their masculinity are tested. Melville writes: 'An expert swimmer shifts *his* position on *his* plank; now half striding it; and anon, like a rider in the ring, poising *himself* upright in the scud, coming on *like a man in the air*' (p. 315, our italics). These masculine pronouns and sentiments are not meant to be universal in their application. They don't refer to humans in general. They refer to *men* alone being challenged and passing a test of heroic manhood.

The Coral Island: Surf and the battle to become a man

In 1857, R. M. Ballantyne published his boys' adventure *The Coral Island: A Tale of the Pacific Ocean*. In a Pacific Island setting reminiscent of Hawaii and Melville's Ohonoo (published nine years earlier) the young adult and teenage protagonists of Ballantyne's novel

– Ralph, Jack, and Peterkin – observe and discuss surfing, which makes *The Coral Island* the second work of western fiction to reference wave-riding. The narrative centres around survival following shipwreck. The characters learn to live off the land and lagoon and adapt to their environment in new, brave ways. The work has been described as 'an imperialist and colonialist text, depicting brave British citizens at war with the primitive world' ('The Coral Island', 2019), and also as a pioneering novel '*for* boys and *about* boys, and it is even narrated *by* a boy, or at least, by a former boy' (Singh, 1997).

The Coral Island is an intriguing book for surfing because Ballantyne was the first author to write about surfing without having ever having witnessed it [1]. While numerous explorers' and missionaries' first-hand accounts had been published by the mid-19th century for Ballantyne to use as source material alongside Melville's novel, Ballantyne was probably most influenced by Captain Cook's journals (he later wrote the non-fiction work *The Cannibal Islands: Captain Cook's Adventures in the South Seas*, 1869) and by missionaries' writings (he had a keen interest in the Pacific missionaries, as evidenced by the later sections of *The Coral Island* itself). Ballantyne used the literature that had come before as a guide to writing about not only surfing but also the Pacific way of life. This method of writing from source materials steered Ballantyne towards writing about surfing as an aggressive activity reminiscent of both warfare and sports – ideal themes at the time for teaching a boy how to become a man.

Ballantyne begins by referring to wave-riding as a game, seeming to follow Melville who calls surfing a 'sport' allied to warfare (Melville, 1849, p. 314). *The Coral Island* reads: 'The other game to which we have referred was swimming in the surf … this is an amusement in which all engage, from children of ten to grey-headed men of sixty…' (Ballantyne, 1953, p. 227). Surfing as a game 'in which all engage' indicates that the Pacific culture depicted by Ballantyne (probably the source is Hawaii, although the narrative suggests they are in Fiji) leads a way of life with superior oceanic capabilities. Bloody Bill, one of the pirates who have captured the boys, says:

> "Each man and boy, as you see, has got a short board or plank, with which he swims out for a mile or more to sea, and then, gettin' on the top o' yon thunderin' breaker; they come to shore on top of it, yellin' and screechin' like fiends. It's a marvel to me that they're not dashed to shivers on the coral reef, for sure an' sartin am I that if any o' us tried it, we wouldn't be worth the fluke of a broken anchor after the wave fell. Butthere they go!"
>
> As he spoke, several hundred of the natives, amongst whom we were now standing, uttered a loud yell, rushed down the beach, plunged into the surf, and were *carried off* by the seething foam of the retreating wave. (Ballantyne, 1953, p. 227-228, our italics)

To adult onlookers, let alone to boys, surfing was a disturbingly frightening activity, one that evoked the danger of being 'carried off' without knowledge of how to return, not to mention the threat of shark attack (which happens three pages later when the lower half of

one surfer's body is literally *carried off* by a shark). The islanders understand the risks of being 'carried off by the seething foam of the retreating wave' (Ballantyne, 1857, p. 228), but for the white onlookers the scenario evokes deep insecurities. Pirate Bill uses the image of the broken anchor to describe the feelings of unmooring and dislocation surfing arouses. For the boys, we can deduce, the 'retreating wave' symbolises the time of being 'swept away' from boyhood into manhood with all its attendant dangers.

The outsiders observe surfing with awe and confusion. Pirate Bill comments that they (white men) would be worthless surfers [2]. The idea Melville used – that surfing seemed attuned to the manly, dangerous ethos of war – is followed up as Ralph's narrative continues:

> 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, 1953, p. 228, our italics)

Ballantyne indicates that the best surfers are those who *manfully* ride the (biggest) wave to shore – a feat which requires some recklessness and violence. According to the West's worldview, manfulness (bravery, resoluteness) won wars but also ensured distinction in other social contexts. Boys had to be taught to achieve manfulness and maturity in a nuanced way. Singh in 'The Government of Boys' writes that *The Coral Island* 'preserves the homiletic form of the educational tract, but it delivers the homily in user-friendly terms – and thus inaugurates a dominant tradition in the literature of boyhood' (Singh, 1997, p. 206). Ballantyne is the first author for teenagers to see the usefulness of surfing in fiction-writing as a catalyst for internal growth and understanding, albeit a biased colonial growth for Ralph and company.

Kelea, the Surf-Rider: Surf and the female wave-rider

In 1894, Alexander Stevenson Twombly served as the acting pastor of the Central Union Church in Honolulu. While in Hawaii he developed a love for the people. Twombly wrote three books about Hawaii after he departed Honolulu: two non-fiction works, *Hawaii and its People:The Land of Rainbow and Palm* (1899) and *The Situation in Hawaii* (1902); and a novel, *Kelea: The Surf Rider, a Romance of Pagan Hawaii* (1900), the third ever work of fiction to spotlight surfing. Praised for its historical and cultural accuracy, the novel centres

around a young woman, Kelea, a character modelled after the ancient Hawaiian princess/goddess of that name, and her love-interest Hookama, a budding chief. The narrative takes place during a war between the Hawaiian islands. Navigation and competency in the surf is a survival necessity during the battles, raids and other wartime activities featured in the novel. *Kelea, the Surf-Rider* is the first work of fiction to include surfing as seen from the participant's perspective. This makes it significant for a number of reasons; one in particular being that it is the first novel to attempt to understand the psyche of the wave-rider, and the role that surfing plays in life. Of particular interest is that the first surfer's perception examined in a novel is that of a female, albeit interpreted by a male author from a different culture:

> One day, seeing in the distance hundreds of bathers on the beach, enjoying a public festival or contest in surf-riding, all her prudence was swept away… With the single thought of her merry comrades, the dashing rollers from the sea, and a longing for scope and liberty to let herself loose, she became once more a wild barbarian, impetuous and heedless. (Twombly, 1900, pp. 283-284)

As part of her campaign to win Hookama's affections, Kelea has come on her own to the island of his enemies. She navigates the beach area near the royal house and – as stealthily as a thief or an assassin – joins the crowd at the traditional surf contest where the enemy warriors are competing with each other nearby. Upon entering the surf, she immediately makes for the biggest waves in the line-up:

> The crowds, excited by the exploits of swimmers on surf-boards and in canoes, were shouting and running up and down the beach, so that Kelea reached the white crested waves wholly unnoticed. Seeing a surf-board which had slipped from some bather's hand, she seized it and pushed it before her towards one of the higher breakers which the rest of the swimmers avoided. (Twombly, 1900, p. 284)

Only the best and most formidable male warriors ride the biggest and longest waves, but Kelea takes them on. This establishes her as not only equal to males, but also equal to the best warrior males:

> Lustily breasting the heavy waves, handling her board with *consummate skill* and watching for the loftiest comber, she rode the surf so audaciously and *skilfully*, that, drawing the attention of all, she was watched and cheered as the champion of the hour. (p. 284, our italics)

Then, under cover of the movement of the surf, she swims unseen to where the serious competition is happening, on the way 'borrowing a board from one of the women':

> Again the spirit of reckless daring came upon her, and … she joined the party of expert swimmers, who were contesting for a prize. With her usual boldness she sought the most dangerous surf, and, in the face of disadvantages distanced her rivals, *gracefully* guiding her course so as to approach the shore in the deepest water

> possible. (pp. 284-285, our italics)

The bold daring of Kelea's pursuit to win her love campaign continues Melville's ideas linking surf and battle and also Ballantyne's ideas linking surf to the values associated with personal maturity. Kelea's 'consummate skill' in overcoming the uncertainties of nature defines her femininity as equivalent to the most admirable masculinity. Twombly uses words like *graceful* and *skilful* to temper the male associations of words like *reckless* and *audacious*, and consequently produces authentic language to define the participant's experience of surfing. Although the novel is about warfare, Twombly removes the negatives of the war metaphor and instead, uses surfing as a tool to communicate Kelea's thinking and competencies – competencies she desperately needs in order to survive the novel's climactic battle.

Following the surfing contest, the conquered men declare 'that she must be some sea-goddess, a suggestion quickly caught up and repeated by the defeated swimmers, glad of any pretext to cover their failure' (Twombly, 1900, p. 285). From this point forward, Kelea adopts a victor's stance in the novel, a figure of resilience and power – a goddess-like status very different from her earlier proneness as victim praying for help from the surf goddess Herself. With Kelea as highly skilled and more than equal in the eyes of the men – and the reader – she can be seen as a worthy woman within, as well as being worthy of Chief Hookama's affections. Thus, in just the third surf novel, Twombly strikes a blow for female surfers. He expertly sets up an archetype. Using fluid Hawaiian culture as his guide, he establishes the woman's arc in surf fiction, and sets up surfing's first fictional hero as female.

At the novel's climax, Kelea enters the inter-island war. Her side is losing as the battle rages near the beach where she wowed the crowds. Reinforcements are on their way in a war-canoe fleet, but they have stalled trying to find the entrance in the reef to get to shore. Having established herself as the most daring surf-rider on the island, Kelea is able to use the surf as a means to win the battle for her tribe:

> Within a hundred yards of the little group of warriors, she suddenly wheeled on her course and sped over the sands towards the breakers. Before the surprised watchers divined her real intention, or thought of pursuing her, she had gained a large space and was in the midst of the rolling surf. Even then, the men were bewildered and could not believe that a woman would dare to breast the high, combing waves. One started to follow her but soon lost sight of her among the breakers; saying "She's gone crazy; let her drown!" he turned back.
>
> But the girl swam on. Now her muscular strength and skill in surf-riding came into full play. With strokes that sent her swiftly forward and skilfully diving to avoid the force of the larger, oncoming billows, while adroitly taking advantage of the receding waves, she swam for the inlet, which she had discovered on the day when she distanced all competitors in the surf-riding contest. Cool enough, even in the excitement of the struggle, to turn her head as she rose to the crest of a high wave, she saw that the contest still raged at the royal house. With renewed resolution on she ploughed, lifting her arms to signal the war-fleet.

> Fortunately, the surf-rider of Maui was in her element. Here was the consummate result of her life in the surf on the shores of her native isle. The waiting fleet outside the reef soon perceived her signals and steered in the direction to which she pointed. (pp. 380-381)

Kelea, like all heteronormative romances, is about masculinity and femininity. More than 120 years ago, it examined male and female social roles and introduced surfing as the setting for such examination to occur. Written by a white male (who was also a literary and political scholar) and set in a culture he had researched but also had to guess at, the narrative is as much a dialogue on female representation by Anglo-culture writers as it is a study of the Hawaiian woman. In fact, the novel does not have a single European character in it, and is entirely based on Hawaiian myths and the author's imagination, but this strangely brings both cultures into focus in a way that was ground-breaking for the year 1900.

Conclusion

The idea of battle entered surf fiction because it was similarly present in the world views of Hawaii and the West in the 19th Century. In the Pacific context, onlooking writers saw humans, their cultures, and nature pitted together in context-particular ways, and utilised these locally-presented elements to develop American and British narratives where the protagonists experienced conflict in the search for understanding, growth and freedom. When war is written in fiction, a literary critic has said, 'the hero may not win, but he sees. And his life, her life, will not be same after the seeing' (Gauch, 2008). The same may be said of all the battles humans encounter in life, whether they be in growing up, in forging a place in the world, or in facing death. Each of the first three surf novels link an idea of battle with surfing as part of their main characters' development towards seeing the world better.

Notes

1. '[D]espite Ballantyne's self-professed dedication to accuracy, he never visited the locales of *The Coral Island* and the details of the story indulge in theatrics and exaggerations drawn from the emerging descriptions of the South Pacific that had made their way back to England at the time' (encyclopedia.com, 2021).

2. An idea often explored in teen surf fiction novels (see Krauth & Sandtner, 2021).

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