Gendered Gateways
Australian Surfing and the Construction of Masculinities in Tim Winton’s Breath

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Riding Waves has a long history in the Pacific Islands and Australia. While there is no recorded history of the early beginnings of surfing, it is commonly understood that Hawaiian royalty, by means of surfing, already demonstrated their aptitude, heroism, and superiority to their people more than a thousand years ago. Social status was reflected in the use of different equipment; thus, Hawaiian chiefs “used to ride huge ‘olo’ balsa boards” while the common man “had to ride smaller ‘alaia’ surfboards.” It is easy to imagine that such quixotic beach sport must have appealed to native and foreign watchers alike. Lieutenant James King’s travel diary A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean (1784) might be regarded as one of the first records notifying the Western world of the prowess of the Hawaiian surfers. King, who joined Captain James Cook’s third Pacific voyage, had taken over Cook’s task of recording the expedition after the latter was killed by resisting Hawaiians on 14 February 1779. In an entry dated March 1779, King describes Hawaiian ocean pastimes and beach culture as follows:

Whenever, from stormy weather, or any extraordinary swell at sea, the impetuosity of the surf is increased to its utmost height, they [the Hawaiians] choose that time for this amusement [...]. The boldness and


address, with which we saw them perform these difficult and dangerous manoeuvres, was altogether astonishing, and is scarcely to be credited.³

Obviously, King is full of praise for the skilled and brave Hawaiian sportsmen. Yet, despite King’s enthusiasm it would take another seventy years or so before the beach was thought of as a public recreation area and seaside resorts were established in the Antipodes. One of the first resorts opened in Botany Bay in the 1840s, and was followed by Swansea in Tasmania, which then became popular for its sea-bathing.⁴ It is commonly accepted that in Manly, New South Wales, the Vanuatu islander Tommy Tanna first shared his secrets about riding the waves and his techniques of bodysurfing, back then known as body shooting, with a number of adolescents in the 1880s.⁵ When, in 1907, the Surf and Life-saving Association of Australia (SLSA) was formed, members started to differentiate their aims eagerly from a Hawaiian life of supposed debauchery. Dissociating itself from such a way of life, surf lifesaving was based strictly on military-style drills, and surfboards seemingly became only acceptable to the SLSA after members proved their usefulness in rescue operations.⁶ The sports historian Douglas Booth summarizes the situation as follows: “By the 1930s lifesavers were the lords of Australia’s beaches and icons of masculinity, discipline and humanitarianism.”⁷ Consequently, the lifesavers were highly respected in Australian society, for it was they who readily risked their lives for the safety of the beach community. The iconic figure of the lifesaver defied the sea in general and the surf in particular, as was proven during the dramatic events of 6 February 1938. On that day, three freak waves hit crowded Bondi Beach during a surf race and more than three hundred people were eventually rescued by the heroes.⁸ Even today, this historic date, also known as ‘Black Sunday’, haunts Australia’s national imagination and echoes powerfully in oral folklore and national mythmaking. Such examples of ultimate male heroism might well explain why in the context of surfing even the slightest notion of pleasure irritated both young and older Australians, albeit for different reasons. The practice soon stirred a heated public discussion about the flawlessness of

⁶ Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures*, 87.
⁷ *Australian Beach Cultures*, 65.