Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing. By Scott Laderman. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press. 2014. pp.256. £18.95. ISBN 9780520279117.

In popular culture surfing is often represented as an activity promoting freedom and the romance of seeking the perfect wave. One of surfing's Grand Narratives is that of the surf safari, hunting out new waves to conquer and 'conquer' is a loaded term. Conquer locates surfing historically and culturally as a product of imperialism and colonialism. However, surfing itself articulates , colonial discourses in its search for and conquering of new waves and this is reflected in the title of Laderman's book, *Empire in Waves.* According to Laderman surfing cannot be regarded as a politically neutral act for it, 'exists in a political universe' (164). No matter how pure a surfer's motives might be they are constructed by three interrelated strands of surf culture; globalization, commercialism and race.

The triple strands of globalization, commercialism and race are represented starkly in Laderman's account of *The Drifter* (2009), a film starring Rob Machero. At the beginning of the film, Machero bemoans excessive commercialism and the surfing crowds in Bali and goes on a surf quest for a spiritual encounter with nature. Machero's articulation of rebellious, soul surfing values are shown in meditation, riding motorbikes, anti-technological sentiments (throwing away his mobile phone), and playing with and instructing native children in surfing. Yet, *The Drifter* is a film whose countercultural vision of soul surfing conceals its commercial and racial roots. It is produced by Nike as part of a corporate plan to access lucrative surf markets. Nike is also implicated in the exploitation of workers in the developing world. The same 'brown-skinned locals', Laderman points out, are fetishised as exotic others in the surf media that praise the destinations of the developing world as Edenic paradises.

Laderman demonstrates how this racialised Other is present from surfing's early history when Western cultures encountered and colonised Hawaii. Surfing was an integral part of Hawaiian cultural and spiritual rituals. Although not banned outright, it was suppressed by missionaries. However, from the later nineteenth century surfing was exploited as a promotional tool of the tourist industry. It was popularised by writers such as Jack London, Mark Twain and taken up by mainly white tourists who appropriated the sport as their own. Nevertheless, the sport was also popularised and disseminated across the Pacific Rim by Hawaiian surf pioneers such as Duke Kahanamoku. Indeed, as the spiritual home of surfing, Hawaiian surfers have been esteemed in globalised surf culture from the early twentieth century which seems to suggest a colour blindness at the heart of the sport. However, as Laderman illustrates, surfing has been negligent or ignorant of racial issues and how they impact on the sport in its cultural contexts. Take South Africa, for instance. Bruce Brown's hyperbolic, and partly fabricated, description of the perfect wave at Cape St. Francis in *The Endless Summer* (1966) led to an influx of hundreds of surfers, eager to make this perfect ride. However, the film, produced at the height of apartheid, never mentioned any problems with race while also showing few black South Africans. Laderman shows how the problems of apartheid continued into the 1980s and are demonstrated in a comparison between the diverse experiences of Hawaiian, Eddie Aikau with Billy Hamilton and Jeff Hakman. The latter two were treated to an extensive surf safari round the country as opposed to Aikau being barred from his hotel and having to obtain special dispensation to surf on 'whites only' beaches.

Surfing boomed in the 1950s with a growth in the surf media, magazines and the development of new technologies to produce cheaper and lighter surfboards. Surf films and

magazines promoted many developing world surf spots as paradises untouched by the corruption of the modernised world. An instance of the promotion of such a surf spot is in the early 1970s when Indonesia was promoted in films such as *The Morning of the Earth* (1972) and in *Tracks* and *Surfer* magazines suggested surfing was an act of countercultural rebellion. These promotional travelogues visiting enchanted islands seemed unaware of the wholesale slaughter and torture of vast numbers of people by the ruling militia. Indeed, as Laderman notes, surfers were regarded as cultural ambassadors by the Indonesian government which was supported by America in its fight against communism. Thus, surfers were implicated in American foreign policy in Indonesia in the 1980s. A further problem surfing exacerbated was the perennial problem faced by many tourists; the destruction of the untouched and perfect destinations through their popularity and development by businesses and large corporations.

Global corporations and big businesses have also enacted empire building enterprises in surf culture. From early surf-originating companies such as Quiksilver and Billabong, Laderman notes how the commodification of surfing is exploited by multi-national corporations. Two polarised components of surfers' attitudes towards corporate development are identified by Laderman as purity vs commercialism. Some surfers, as noted in the discussion of *The Drifter,* articulate a distaste for crass commercialism and regard surfing as a pure experience. However, it is impossible to detach surfing from its commercial roots. Another, more cynical type of business has now emerged where corporations outside surfing wish to buy into the sport. Two such businesses are Nike and Hollister. Where Nike engages with the surf industry in the production of films and sponsorship, Hollister, however, uses surfing as a money making machine without giving back to the sport. Laderman rightfully notes the

simulacra Hollister built their image on a fabricated myth of surf romanticism and promoted it to an audience of customers who wished to buy into the myth of surfing and did not care that it was a simulation. Laderman shows how all of these companies, and companies such as Quiksilver, exploit their workers in the developing world whilst also exploiting the myth of surfing.

There are lone voices and attempts to politicise or make surfers more aware of the inequalities and hypocrisy inherent in surfing, for instance professionals such as Cori Schumacher who boycotted competitions in China in protest at their poor human rights track record. Or Tom Corrall who boycotted South Africa in the 1980s because of apartheid. But Laderan proposes that surfing needs to acknowledge its ethical and moral responsibilities more aggressively.

Laderman's polemic of the paradoxical aspects of surfing highlights the connections between commercialism and race that have not, as yet, been substantially explored. That Laderman is also a surfer enables him to provide an insight into a culture that tends to be difficult to access for those who do not participate. Laderman's book framed my own research in its wider context and provided a much needed debate on surfing as a politicised sport. However, Laderman neglects some elements of surf politics such as surfing's responses to gender. Surfing is a masculinised sport and female voices are relatively silenced or subject to exploitation as 'eye candy' in surf media. He also does not explore the ways some surfers seek authenticity by supporting small businesses and locality which counters some of the corporate exploitation. Nevertheless, Laderman has presented meticulously researched historical material and his writing style is clear and accessible.