Shaping Lives: STATUES AS BIOGRAPHY

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Statues commemorating individual athletes, teams, and other sports figures are commonplace: far from being an outmoded commemorative form, statuary is valued in sport and new examples are increasingly frequent. In Brisbane, for example, a statue of indigenous cricketer Eddie Gilbert was unveiled in 2008, and a growing phalanx of sporting statues borders the Melbourne Cricket Ground. The phenomenon is not unique to the Antipodes, and sport statues are found throughout the Western world. Despite their proliferation, however, sporting statues are under studied by sports historians. This is consistent with our preference for examining written sources, and statues are not alone among material objects as overlooked sources. Existing research on statues tends to focus on two overlapping areas: statues as art, and as artefacts of social memory. Examples of the first include aesthetic analyses of statues within an artistic, cultural or ideological context. The social memory approach, while not ignoring these dimensions, considers statues primarily


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as reflections of present-centred perspectives on the past.3

As valuable as the social memory approach is, it does not separate statues conceptually from other types of monuments, including memorials, cairns, grandstands and other built physical structures intended to commemorate. In a social memory approach, the body of the person depicted is secondary to the fact of the monumental commemoration itself. Art historian Randolph Starn has argued that the appropriation of individual identities through statues constitutes a symbolic ‘body snatching’ to fit the contemporary needs of a commissioning group or community.4 He is right in one sense, but the ‘snatched’ body remains nonetheless, and is fore and centre in describing the person depicted. It is the body, perched on its pedestal, that commands attention and through which stories are communicated.

In this article I position statues as a unique monumental form because of their concern with the human body and its representation. Artistic studies of statues have always emphasised the body, and social memory approaches also acknowledge the physical character of sculptural forms. In a sports context, Synthia Sydnor highlights corporeal importance by exploring the physical presence, dynamism and allure of Michael Jordan as cast in bronze in the Spirit monument in Chicago.5 While I, too, focus on the cast and sculpted body, I go further and consider the primacy of the body in understanding statues. To do this, I interpret statues as biographies. New understandings of what might constitute biography beyond the traditional written text, which have emerged from debates within the field of biography studies, are useful for reconceptualising statues. As a broad genre that includes visual culture and that acknowledges the marriage of commemoration and curiosity, biography offers a useful lens on the connections among the subject depicted, the audience’s responses and the stories they generate. If monuments are ‘public, lasting, visual expressions of narratives’, then statues tell specific biographical stories that enmesh with overarching narrative aims.6


The first section of this article engages current debates about biography, and by what legitimate means biography can be constituted. The second considers how statues of sporting individuals might function as biographies. Finally, I draw upon statues of legendary Hawaiian swimmer and surfer Duke Paoa Kahanamoku to illustrate their biographical dimension. I argue that biography complements rather than disrupts a social memory approach by focussing on the subject of the commemorative practice as an integral part of the larger relationship between that subject and society.

‘New’ Biography

Biography today is a hotly contested topic, with debates not only about its distinction from history and fiction but also about its domain. Conventionally, the emphasis is on words — biography as ‘life writing’ or ‘writing of lives’ — that attempt to cover an entire life, or good portion of it, often in chronological order. But there are challenges to these specific definitions. While most biographies are indeed about people living or dead, consider the following book titles: \textit{God: A Biography}; \textit{Biography of the Unborn}; \textit{Biography of a Kangaroo}; \textit{Biography of a Cathedral}; and \textit{Biography of an Idea}. Even when the subject is a person, biography has not been restricted to conventional life spans since the publication of Alexander Solzhenitzyn’s \textit{One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich} in the 1960s. And, increasingly, scholars argue for broader recognition of biographical genres. Nigel Hamilton contends that ‘the term “biography” needs to be redefined to encompass the many, many different ways in which real-life depiction is practiced in Western society’:

Like the painted images on late Egyptian mummies, the myriad biographical depictions we are producing today — artistic and inartistic, noble and tacky — will form the record we leave of ourselves to posterity. This alone surely means that biography’s history and praxis are worth further study — and, as the third millennium gets under way, makes a redefinition of biography” long overdue.  

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Others argue that the genre is not limited by ‘defined properties’ but rather is a ‘dynamic field of production’.12 Increasingly, scholars define biography in its broadest terms as a set of cultural practices that recognises visual culture.13 Statues, in their proliferation — both ‘artistic and inartistic, noble and tacky’ — are arguably a biographical genre within this broad definition.

While ancient statues are seen as a historical form of biography because of their story-telling capacity in a pre-literate age, contemporary statues are rarely seen as biography despite the admission of other visual media such as portraits and paintings as biographical.14 Sport studies is no different: scholarly writings on the genre of sport biographies have not considered statues, and those writings on sports statues do not primarily address them as biographies.15 This makes perfect sense given traditional understandings of biography and existing, fruitful approaches to sports statues; however, a consideration of biographical properties of statues and the interpretive usefulness of these has merit.

Statues as Biography

Two biographical dimensions of statues come immediately to mind. First, statues almost always contain written biographical detail, typically in the form of interpretive plaques that summarise key dates and events, and their importance to the statue cannot be underestimated.16 Plaques are intended to commemorate and explain, but also to direct audiences: visual forms alone are considered to be ‘relatively unfocussed and out of control’, and thus need to be contained by captions and text.17 Before a plaque was attached to the Duke Kahanamoku statue at Waikiki beach in Honolulu, four years after it was

13 For example, see Ibid., p. 9.
erected, many visitors puzzled over his identity. Plaques, then, are designed to yield raw biographical information, however this is necessarily synoptic and typically a narrow, specific activity, event or contribution is described. Rarely would a plaque contain information not available and expanded elsewhere. Biographically, this dimension of statues is limited.

Second, statues themselves have biographies — gestations, genealogies, creators, births, homes, carers and visitors. The Kahanamoku statue in Honolulu, for example, was the culmination of a decades-long campaign, the apogee of a line of previous sculptural representations, and the product of a contested and highly deliberate artistic process. It was proudly unveiled and presented, and is decorated, celebrated and regularly visited. Statues have lives of their own, worthy of recording and especially valuable to a social memory analysis. This biographical dimension is particularly useful in highlighting authorial involvement, in this case sculptor, designer and/or commissioning group. Unlike with written biographies, where the author is known and subject/object connections may be made explicit (but not always are), artists are often unidentified on statues and their relationship with the object is obscured.

While plaques and a statue’s history are important, they are not the only or even the most important biographical dimensions of statues. The body itself, although inextricably linked to broader social, cultural and political forces, is central to any statue. The body is the immediate object of attention through which the individual is viewed, interpreted and celebrated. Whereas a social memory approach emphasises the motivations in choosing that individual or that particular representation over others as a way of linking past and present, a biographical approach complements this by focussing on how the literal shaping of the objectified individual influences understandings of the past in the present. Through the body, statues tell stories about the subject and its relationship to the present.

Biography extends beyond the appearance of the statue and into its interrelationships with onlookers. Statues have been critiqued as antithetical to the commemoration of a life because they concretise a particular truth in a ‘frozen’ point-of-view. This criticism wrongly presupposes that statues are indeed static in their presence and impact. As historian Madge Dresser argues, statues ‘may be petrified personifications of the past, but audiences


19 Osmond, Phillips, and O’Neill, ‘Putting up Your Dukes’.

and associations change.21 Like a good written biography that promises new insight into the object’s personal life, an effective statue will arouse the curiosity of visitors, as indicated by interactive actions such as touching, climbing, reading plaques, and photographing. Indeed, Hamilton names the ability to arouse curiosity as an essential function of biography.22 Statues satisfy human curiosity by offering ‘factual’ insights and also through their physical presence. Sydnor demonstrates this in her analysis of the voyeuristic element surrounding the Jordan statue and her investigation of its liminality: ‘it is human yet it is not, it lives and moves, yet it is still’.23

The relationship of the statue with its audience generally offers one key to interpreting statues through a biographical lens. In arousing curiosity, a statue must connect and integrate at some level with its audience. Biographical critic David McCooey notes that one person’s story is always the story of others.24 This explains the appropriation of individuals to represent broader themes in statuary forms of commemoration, but also underlies the appeal of statues as evokers of feelings, memories and identities in their onlookers. These are affective responses, understood in its broadest sense as involving feelings and emotions but more generally as a form of thinking, intelligence and understanding.25 Like written biography, statues can affectively engage different individuals at different levels.

Observing, measuring and recording audience responses to public monuments and statues is difficult and rare. Interviews with visitors are necessary; how else to separate out snap-happy tourists, who simply use a statue as a prop for their holiday image, from visitors whose engagement with the statue is more intimate, personal and meaningful? One exemplar, although not of a statue, is a recent American book based on year-long observations of ‘Rocky runners’, visitors who recreate Sylvester Stallone’s iconic run up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the Rocky movies.26 Sydnor’s engagement with visitors to the Jordan monument is

While audience-response studies are important, another and perhaps more viable approach to a study of statues as biographies entails consideration of their form — poses, stance and stature, for example — and specific details of representation, including generational, gender, racial and personality dimensions.

**Kahanamoku Statues as Biographies: Written on the Body**

Duke Paoa Kahanamoku (1890-1968), Hawaiian Olympic swimmer and pioneer of modern surfing, is internationally celebrated by multiple monumental commemorations. Among these are public statues in Honolulu (erected 1990), Sydney (1994), and Huntington Beach, California (2001), and another planned for Christchurch, New Zealand. In addition, a statue of Kahanamoku has featured in an American play. I have previously considered how campaigns for the Honolulu statue and a postage stamp successfully harnessed Kahanamoku's memory to surfing, which enjoyed renewed popularity, legitimacy and global reach by the 1990s. Similar analyses could be made of these other statue examples using a social memory approach. But how can these statues operate biographically through depictions of Kahanamoku's body? To address this, I will consider the following criteria: age, national identity, activity and personality.

**Age**

Age is most significant in the Huntington Beach monument, where Kahanamoku is depicted as youthful, and in Honolulu where he is distinctively middle aged. At Huntington Beach he is not only young, but taut, trim and muscled with a luxuriant head of hair. He resembles the prototypical young male surfer who shops at the adjacent surf store and frequents the nearby beach. Kahanamoku stands with his board ready to join them in the surf, as he did in the 1920s at Huntington Pier. This youthful portrayal is no accident. Youth is a privileged sporting age, and the statue was created by local businessman, Aaron Pai, for the dual purpose of commemoration and commercial promotion. This is the story of a young Kahanamoku who helped pioneer surfing in Huntington Beach, and who is designed to connect with youthful visitors to the beach, shop and nearby International Surfing Hall of Fame.


By contrast, Kahanamoku in Honolulu is decidedly middle aged. Physically he is still strong and muscled, but he is broader, stouter and older. Here his visage captures the metaphorical wisdom of age. These dimensions link Kahanamoku with local memories: he lived virtually his entire life in the city and when he died there in 1968 he was a well-known public figure. Moreover, his age commands respect in Hawaiian society. This is a story of surfing, as indicated by the inclusion of a surf board and the text of the plaque — which describes him as the ‘Father of International Surfing’ — but it is even more the story of Kahanamoku the respected Hawaiian son and hero, of a whole life valued. In both examples, age is a key biographical feature in linking this historic figure with the present.

Nationality
At both Honolulu and Huntington Beach, Kahanamoku is also realistically depicted in the sense that the statues were modelled on photographs. He is therefore recognizable as an indigenous Hawaiian, most importantly through his physiognomy. Here, his Hawaiian-ness is vital to the intended stories. In Sydney, no such attempt at realism was made, and Kahanamoku is physically unrecognisable. The fact that he came from Hawaii to visit Australia, and encouraged local surfers to adopt the Hawaiian pastime, was a deliberate message of the overall monument and park of which the statue is the focal point, but here there was no need to make him physically resemble either himself or a generic Hawaiian. In this narrative, Kahanamoku is important as the instigating figure of Australian surfing, not in and of himself.

In terms of nationality and ethnicity, the most interesting statue will be in Christchurch. Currently the statue exists only in the minds of the creators, in newspaper reports and planning submissions, and in the draft sketches of the commissioned artist, Shayne Baxter. A Māori carver and surfer, Baxter draws inspiration from Kahanamoku’s Polynesian roots and from the cultural relationship between Māori and Hawaiians. His highly stylised and decorated model for a wooden statue at New Brighton beach (Christchurch), where Kahanamoku surfed in 1915, incorporates a carving of Kahanamoku riding his board amidst intricate Polynesian and Māori motifs. While commissioned by a Christchurch surf shop owner, and backed by New Zealand surfers, the design reflects Baxter in ways that other, more conventional, statues do not as openly reveal the hand of their ‘authors’. Kahanamoku was feted as a Māori cousin when he visited New Zealand in 1915, but this is coincidental to Baxter’s vision: he did not know this background and was instead personally inspired by his own

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sense of a shared Polynesian kinship with Kahanamoku. As at Honolulu and Huntington Beach, but for different reasons, nationality is vital to this particular narrative.

**Activity**

Surfing as an explicit activity in both the Sydney and Christchurch statues reflects its centrality to Kahanamoku’s memory at both places. It is at Honolulu, however, where an activity is most prominent for interpreting Kahanamoku biographically, although here the action is simply a gesture—arms outstretched in greeting. This is not a passive pose, but is designed to reflect Kahanamoku’s real-life mantle as the Ambassador of Aloha. The gesture invites interaction, and people regularly stop to pose for photographs and drape lei across his neck and arms. A web-camera directed on the statue allows for a new level of technically mediated interaction. Of all the statues, Honolulu offers the greatest potential for studies of affective and audience responses.

Also notable for its portrayal of activity is the statue featured in the stage play, *Duke Kahanamoku vs. the Surfnappers*, written by Eric Overmyer, which was commissioned by the Honolulu Theatre for Youth and premiered in 1994. On stage, the statue comes to life: ‘Duke, wearing shorts and vintage aloha shirt, steps up on pedestal and becomes [the] Waikiki statue of Duke Kahanamoku, arms outstretched’. The action is symbolically compelling, as argued by Kenneth Gross:

> The fantasy of a statue that comes to life is as central a fable as we have. Time and again, we find texts in which the statue that stands immobile in temple or square descends from its pedestal, or speaks out of its silence…it is one of our oldest images of the work of magic, one of our primitive metafictions.

This dramatised incarnation is liminal — like Jordan in Chicago it lives yet it does not — and reflects the animistic appeal of the Honolulu statue on which it is based. Through the liminality represented by the statue’s actions, key aspects of Kahanamoku’s personality are narrated.

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33 Ibid., p. 297.

Personality

In terms of personality, the Honolulu and theatrical Kahanamoku send the strongest messages. At Honolulu, the representation is one of modesty, humility and wisdom. His depicted age and outstretched arms help reflect this, as does the accompanying plaque which repeats words from his funeral oration: ‘He has honored his name, he has honored his race, he has honored his state, he has honored us all’. The dramatised statue of Overmyer’s stage play also valorises elements of Kahanamoku’s personality in addition to simply eulogising the athlete. This is an inspirational play, in which the animated Kahanamoku urges children to follow their dreams: ‘When you put your mind to it, you can do anything.’ This is the sage, experienced Kahanamoku of Honolulu. Here the representation aligns with a spate of children’s sports biographies that have appeared over recent years, many of which are inspirational parables. Personality is not a central biographical feature of the other statues, which focus on Kahanamoku’s global surfing contributions rather than his persona and its salutary dimensions.

Conclusion

A biographical approach to sports statues is neither traditional nor problem-free. Yet, it has the potential to focus attention on the body, and in so doing to distinguish statues from other types of monuments by offering a new way of seeing. In focussing on a statue’s appeal to human curiosity as well as on its primary commemorative function, biography highlights the particularities of sculptural form and suggests, if not answers, questions about the affective nature of such monuments and their interrelationship with audiences. Statues constitute a form of living biography — neither static nor fixed — which provides meaning through its features that are interpreted by an interactive community.

This article has surveyed stories told about Kahanamoku through his various statuary commemorations in his homeland and in places where his memory lives. This is intended as an indicative rather than comprehensive reading. What has not been achieved here, and what is lacking elsewhere, is a study of the monuments’ affective properties via audience responses. As Holly Thorpe argues elsewhere in this volume, consumers of memories are a neglected leg of the memory triad that includes objects of memory and producers of memory. Visitor responses to Kahanamoku statues might be conducted at any of the material sites discussed here, but the most fruitful site for this would undoubtedly be the Honolulu statue with its regular associated ceremonies and webcam rituals. Such a study would enrich

the biographical study of Kahanamoku and complement existing social memory approaches to statues by exploring the ongoing, lived relationship of the past in the present.