

## Imagining surfer girls: The production of Australian surfing histories

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Surfing in around the world has become a popular pastime, with millions of people now surf competitively and recreationally.<sup>i</sup> This includes growing numbers of girls who paddle out into surfbreaks along Australian coastlines. Of course, girls have been surfing for a long time, all around the world. In Australia, historical sources suggest that like men, women have been surfing since Hawaiian style surfboards were introduced in the early 1900s,<sup>ii</sup> but prevailing social attitudes and a lack of access to resources – money, cars and free time - often limited their participation. Today, things are more open and images of “the clear-eyed and superfit female surfer” are now commonly associated with Australian beach culture, and female surfers have come to stand “as the poster child for all that young women might become in the twenty-first century”.<sup>iii</sup>

However, despite the high numbers of girls surfing, and despite the achievements and high profiles of past and present competitive Australian female surfers such as Pam Burridge, Wendy Botha, Layne Beachley, Stephanie Gilmore and Laura Enever, the skills and experience of women and girls in the surf are still placed second to the men and boys. For example, of the twenty-seven inductees to the Australian Surfing Hall of Fame since 1985, only six have been women - the first in 1993 and the latest in 2013, with Layne Beachley inducted in 2006, the year she won her *seventh* world title. At the women’s competitive events run concurrently with the men’s, it has been an accepted practice that when the conditions get bad – when the swell drops off or the wind turns – they ‘send out the girls’.<sup>iv</sup> And while there are a growing number of girl-specific surf magazines and films, the presence of girls in mainstream surfing media remains limited. That is, girls who surf are still ‘girl surfers’, not ‘surfers’.

But in other ways, women and girls are finding their voice and are gaining attention and respect for how well they’re surfing. In niche surf magazines, in

films (for example, the recently released doco, *Stephanie in the Water*), and on social media, women and girls are part of surf culture not only as surfers, but also as writers, photographers, filmmakers, models, artists and environmental activists.

In this essay I am going to talk about the place of girls and women through the history of contemporary Australian surfing culture. But I want to make it clear early on that this is not going to be the kind of history that aims to reconstruct the past. Instead, I'm going to take a feminist cultural studies approach to discuss how girls who surf have been represented in certain ways in the past, and how this has come to impact on the ways we are able to think about girls and surfing today. There are lots of ways to think about 'feminism', but for me, feminism is about achieving equality in how we treat people and the opportunities we give them, no matter their sex or gender. It is about accepting that men and women can be different and that despite that difference, one should not be valued over the other. I realise that I have immediately thrown that scary word – feminist – straight into the mix, and I hope that this didn't cause anyone to roll their eyes or to stop reading. But I want to make it clear that this is a feminist project so that the entire discussion becomes an example of how feminist work can be done, the subtlety and diversity with which it can be approached, and the kind of politics and effects that motivate taking such a position. That is, I want you to know that:

This is what a feminist sports history looks like.

It is a way of doing history that considers the power relations that have contributed to the under or mis-representation of women and girls, and seeks to redress that. It seeks to add to what we already know of the past. It is an approach to history that looks for gaps and silences and wonders what it is that is missing and why that might be. It acknowledges that there might be other female ways of knowing the past, which in turn might have some bearing on the present.

Feminist scholar, Luce Irigaray wrote that when we see absences, it can limit what we can imagine for our present and future:

'I search for myself, as if I had been assimilated into maleness. I ought to reconstitute myself on the basis of a disassimilation. ... Rise again from the traces of a culture, of works already produced by the other. Searching through what is in them – for what is not there. What allowed them to be, for what is not there. Their conditions of possibility, for what is not there'.<sup>v</sup>

As I search for the presence and contributions of girls in the surfing past, I've noticed that representations of non-professional, everyday surfers like myself are very difficult to find, which is frustrating. Because I know women and girls have been surfing for a really long time in Australia. Gerry Wedd, who is a ceramic artist who includes women in his works about surfing history, once commented on my blog that:

gerry wedd: ... It is an interesting project. I tried really hard to get some images of quite notable girls from the late 60's early 70's such as Judy Trim and could only find one image thanks to Mick Mock [surf memorabilia collector]. It was from a newspaper column about 'ladies who surf' not from one of the dominant 'serious' surfing magazines. It's embarrassing to note that the US has generally done a much better job in this area.<sup>vi</sup>

As Gerry's comments show, the absence of women from surfing history is not just my observation. This is an issue for those of us looking to talk about women and girls who surf in Australian surfing culture.

The story of Australian surf history has become entrenched through a process of repetition through books, films, documentaries, autobiographies, magazines, artworks and websites. There are a growing number of well-researched surf histories and historical biographies, surfing magazines increasingly include images and stories from the past, and websites and other online media are curating personal and cultural histories of surfing. The surfing past is so popular that many surfers have begun to copy the 'retro' styles, aesthetics and equipment from the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

But with this interest in surfing history, it's important to point out that the focus has been mostly on men and boys. This is due to the kinds of artefacts that are used to tell surfing history - photographs, films, oral stories, letters, surfboards, magazines – which tell us the same stories over and over, and cement the dominance of young, white, heterosexual short-board riding men, and forget to include anyone else. Locating Duke Kahanamoku's demonstration in the summer of 1914/1915 as the beginning of surfing in Australia ignores that indigenous Australians have been using the oceans for more than 60,000 years, while more recently girls have been enthusiastic recreational and competitive surfers since at least the early 1900s. Leaving these stories out has effects beyond the ways we think about the past. It impacts how we think about surfing today.<sup>vii</sup>

Excluding girls from how we remember the surfing past means that girls continue to be left out of the ways we represent and imagine surfing *today*. From my experiences with surf media, many people just don't think of including young women in their publications, which has ongoing impacts on whether or how women are able to be included as surfers and in surfing culture. It limits the potential participation of girls, by making it harder for them to imagine doing so.

For example, next to a story I wrote for a magazine about girl's surfing, the magazine editor placed an image of a male surfer. When I pointed this out, he was shocked and told me he hadn't even thought of that and wondered if he would be able to find an appropriate image of a woman to include. A community radio announcer told me I was one of the first women on his show, which he thought might be because local girls lack the confidence to be interviewed on air. I suggested it might be because they lacked an invitation or that the self-confessed laddish-ness of the show was off-putting. He sheepishly agreed

*The Ninth Wave*, is a book published by respected magazine, *Australian Surfing World*. It presents 100 amazing surfing images, with a small explanation of the image by the photographer or surfer. In this book of 100 images, there was not a single woman included. Not as a surfer, a storyteller

or a photographer.<sup>viii</sup> This book was released in 2011 while Australian surfer, Stephanie Gilmore, was reigning World Champ for the 4<sup>th</sup> year in a row.

Outside of female-specific surf media and films, the message that gets sent is girls don't surf. Or at least, they don't surf well enough to be considered. This means that we still don't really know much about the experiences and contributions of girls in Australian surfing history. There are so few written histories, so few images, so little film footage that includes girls, and there has been so little effort to address this, that it is still possible for people to tell to me - which people do regularly - that girls just didn't really surf in the past. But that is not necessarily the case.

Because I see Australian surfer girls visible in many artefacts from the surfing past. I see them in the iconic 1966 film *Endless Summer*. There are Australian girls surfing in bikinis and flirting with the boys. I see girls in the *extra* footage in the documentary about Australian surf history, *Bombora*, which was released in 2010. I see them in the background of photos of the travelling male surfers of the 1960s and 70s. I read about them as wives and girlfriends in letters the now well-known men shared during that period. I see them in the personal photos that women show me on occasion. I hear about them in the stories that men and women tell me of their youth surfing along the east coast of Australia.

All of this means that in terms of surfing history, things are exciting. Because these days, I not only see the gaps and silences in my exploration of Australian surfing history, but I also see the 'traces' that Irigaray hints at. And increasingly so do others. For example, the magazine editors who publish my articles and stories, and those who contact me for a feminist perspective on proposed covers with women on them. Scholar and historian Gary Osmond continues to research Isabel Letham, revealing her as more than the girl Duke Kahanamoku took out into the surf in 1915, along with another young woman who was surfing in Sydney 1912, Isma Amor.<sup>ix</sup>

Surfer girls are also appearing in books, museum exhibitions, films or sections in documentaries, in photo captions or interviews in magazines, blog

posts, and artworks. The 2012 exhibition, *Surf City*, at the Museum of Sydney presented a range of artefacts from Sydney's surfing history, including many references to local girls, not least the Kurrunulla Wahines – an all-girls surf club from the 1960s. Rusty Miller's 2012 book, *Turning Point*, of photos of surfers in Victoria's Bells Beach and the north coast of NSW from 1970-71, includes images of several women and girls who surfed, as well as those who travelled with their surfing boyfriends. Miller presents these women as deeply involved in the cultural development of an alternative surfing lifestyle as the men were, and as making an important contribution. The written responses he includes from the people in the images reveal that these young women were seeking freedom and release from the social constraints they had grown up in, just as much as the guys were.

And there are more creative, fictive histories being presented as well. Although he styles her as the smitten, dewy-eyed, romantic paramour of Duke Kahanamoku, Phil Jarratt wrote a literary love story to Isabel Letham in his recent book, *That Summer at Boomerang*, developing her as a person, rather than a momentary historical character.

I'm particularly taken with the beautiful work of ceramic artist Gerry Wedd, who I mentioned to earlier. A surfer himself, Wedd makes tiles, urns, mugs and other objects, which he inscribes with archival images and text to create biographies about individual surfers. I have been gifted two of his pieces: a tile about Hawaiian surfer, Rell Sunn, and a coffee mug that has a range of ficto-historical images of surfer girls. I love them. A larger of his works (which has been bought by a Gold Coast City Gallery) is an urn dedicated entirely to a range of female surfers from the past and present. In his work, Wedd is responding to the gaps he sees in existing historical narratives by producing new artefacts.

The urn below features a bunch of famous and not so famous women surfers. It has been interesting looking over the history of the sport to see the fluctuations of representation of women in 'surf culture'. There is a conspicuous dip in images of girls actually surfing during the 'brown rice-country soul' period of Australian surfing.<sup>x</sup>

Another example is the mainstream film, *Drift*, which was released in Australian cinemas in 2013. The based-on-a-true-story film is about developments in surfing culture on the west coast of Australia. In addition to the male characters who are the centre of the tale, there are two women who are important to the story: Kat and Lani. In another film, these characters could have been reduced to 'mum' (Kat) and 'love interest' (Lani), but in this film they are given depth and independence of their own, not only in terms of going surfing, but also in contributing to cultural and technological developments. For example, while Kat doesn't surf, she sews the gear the boys sell in their surf shop. Without her skills as a seamstress, the brothers wouldn't have been able to sell wetsuits and screen-printed t-shirts. Kat's role in this story is not as a surfer, but as a contributor to the development of the lifestyle and industry of surfing, a role that continues to be overlooked because women like Kat didn't surf.

The girl in the film, Lani, does surf. She is a really good surfer in the 1970s, who tackles impressive waves with skill and confidence. And this is not met wonder from the men. Instead Lani is admired for her skill and daring as a *surfer!* She is so respected that she is asked to test the new boards that the boys are shaping so she can give her opinion on how the boards function in the surf. And she is included as though this was a reasonable thing for a woman to do in the 1970s, just as it was for the male characters. This film is a fiction, but it is a fiction that becomes part of the way we think about Australia's surfing past, so I was stoked when I saw it.

These new works do not speak over the existing histories, but speak alongside them by offering new aspects and interpretations. And all of this has pretty serious implications for those of us who research and write about surfing culture. As feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz explains 'the past always and essentially gives rise to multiple histories, histories undertaken from different perspectives of the present'.<sup>xi</sup> It is this recognition that any representation of the history of surfing is merely a creative interpretation of the past, which opens up possibilities for imagining a more diverse range of surfing histories for current and future generations. With an increasing

presence of women in the historical narratives of Australian surfing culture, there are fewer opportunities to tell me that women didn't really surf in the past. Or, if they didn't we can begin to find out why they didn't and avoid repeating the same mistakes again.

So to wrap this up, I know this has not been the kind of history that adds new dates and names to your knowledge of girls and surfing. But what I hope you leave with is a sense that the surfing stories we tell in the photographs we take, the articles we write, the magazines we read, the films we make, the conversations we have, the social media we post, these are all powerful. In how we talk about girls who surf – in the past and in the present – we are shaping the possibilities for girls in the future.

This means that as we imagine histories of the future, we can see the kinds of images and representations that will be included to represent girls who surf today and to include them in how we will remember this surfing past. Because currently, the lack of images of girls who surf in the past is shaping the ways we think about women who surf today – as cultural newcomers who did not much contribute to the development of surfing in Australia.

So what will the surfers of tomorrow think about girls who surf today based on the images, films, and other artefacts that we are producing today? Of course, we can't know that. But we can take it on ourselves as producers of artefacts and media to produce a range of images that will create more opportunities for girls and women who surf today and into the future.

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<sup>i</sup> Booth, 2004; McGloin, 2005; Waitt, 2008; Surfing Australia, 2012

<sup>ii</sup> Manly Library, 2010

<sup>iii</sup> Comer, 2010, p. 8-9

<sup>iv</sup> See for example, Braithwaite, 2013;

<http://www.australiansurfingawards.com/#!/hall-of-fame-inductees>

<sup>v</sup> Irigaray, 1984, p.11

<sup>vi</sup> Gerry Wedd comment on

<http://makingfriendswiththeneighbours.blogspot.com.au/2009/11/gerry-wedd-again.html>

<sup>vii</sup> Olive & Thorpe, 2011, ASSH

<sup>viii</sup> Olive, 2011, <http://kurungabaa.net/2011/03/21/the-ninth-wave-no-girls-allowed/>

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<sup>ix</sup> The work of Dr Gary Osmond at The University of Queensland has been very helpful in how I have come to know about Isabel.

<sup>x</sup> <http://weddwould.blogspot.co.nz/2009/10/girls-at-our-best.html>

<sup>xi</sup> Grosz, 2002, p. 1020

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