

A photograph of a person lying on their back on a sandy beach. They are wearing a black wetsuit. Their legs are raised high into the air, bent at the knees, with their feet pointing towards the sky. The background shows a calm ocean and a cloudy sky. The person's reflection is visible in the wet sand in the foreground.

# Surfer Girls

*in the New World Order*

Krista Comer

Surfer Girls in the New World Order



**Surfer Girls in the  
New World Order**

Krista Comer

**Duke  
University  
Press**

*Durham &  
London 2010*

© 2010  
Duke University Press  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the  
United States of America  
on acid-free paper ∞  
Designed by Jennifer Hill  
Typeset in TheSerif by  
Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication  
Data appear on the last  
printed page of this book.

*For my father*



# Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

*Critical Localisms in a Globalized World*

## Part I. California Goes Global

ONE Californians in Diaspora 35

*The Making of a Local/Global Subculture*

TWO Wanting to Be Lisa 76

*The Surfer Girl Comes of Age*

## Part II. Globalization from Below

THREE The Politics of Play 117

*Tourism, Ecofeminism, and Surfari in Mexico*

FOUR Countercultural Places 162

*Surf Shops and the Transfer of Girl*

*Localist Knowledge*

FIVE Surfing the New World Order 205

*What's Next?*

Notes 231

Bibliography 257

Index 271





## Acknowledgments

Traveling the world to study surfing is not exactly a hardship and over the course of a ten-year project I have happily accumulated many debts that are a pleasure to acknowledge. I am fortunate to have received support from Rice University's Mosle Fellowship from 2001 to 2004, and generous support thereafter from the dean of the School of Humanities at Rice, Gary Wihl. I am also very grateful to have worked with Reynolds Smith, Duke's senior acquisitions editor. This is one of the final books Reynolds saw through to its end before pursuing his own projects in retirement. From his first solicitation of the book to the final production phase, Reynolds offered me wisdom as well as an old-fashioned kind of friendship between editor and writer. I am glad to have had him as my editor for a time.

I have named many surfers over the course of the book, but I would offer particular thanks here. In California, appreciations go to Jane MacKenzie (Jane at the Lane), who initially introduced me around the Santa Cruz scene. The filmmaker and photographer Elizabeth Pepin of San Francisco brought her insider's sense of subcultural life to my questions and I was saved many errors of judgment by her helpful corrections and no-nonsense analytic mind. We commiserated about gender politics, surfing, and big business over sushi lunches and time at Pacifica—the most female-friendly and gender-bent surf spot on the planet (where else does one find Drag Surfing?). Pepin's photographs of women are featured throughout these pages and the black-and-whites from Pacifica are among the most beautiful I've ever seen. I look forward to collaborative projects we have in the works.

The community that collects around Paradise Surf Shop in

Santa Cruz generously shared themselves and the vision for their shop and town with me in over a decade of conversations. Sarah Gerhardt and I met when she was still a PhD student of chemistry at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and just coming off the enormous feat (a few months earlier) of being the first woman to surf Mavericks. I was deeply admiring of her and (not alone here) anxious on her behalf since she intended to surf it again the very next day. Anyone who has contemplated Mavericks will appreciate its appeal and terrifying challenge. But for a woman to think of that singular spot as a terrain of her own possibility: even after a decade of getting used to Gerhardt's presence in the Mavericks lineup, I still find it tremendously inspirational. Izzy Tihanyi, of Surf Diva in San Diego, gave of herself when she had a new baby daughter—and her business smarts, self-possession, and travel between sites of “fun” and feminism are models for effective community-building today. When Izzy says, as a throwaway line, that she'd like to teach Hillary Clinton to surf, or Chelsea, one imagines picking up a newspaper at some future time that covers the story.

In Mexico, I greatly appreciate the time and accessibility of Bev Sanders, the owner of Las Olas surf camps, to answer my questions. Not many business owners will open their internal workings to researchers and I hope to have done her political commitments some justice. I have talked over the years to many surfers who worked at Las Olas as instructors—formally on tape and informally as we sat in the time warp familiar to people who gaze a lot at waves and their riders. All of these conversations informed my sense of what it means to travel the world today as local and global female citizens, and though I do not quote everyone, each woman individually, I appreciate the time and thoughts they shared. I also would thank Patty Southworth of Captain Pablo's, and the owners of Villa Amor, especially Mary Ingram. All of them showed me gracious hospitality, and I wish my final political assessments of the economy underwriting Villa Amor could have been more affirming of this kindness. I also thank the Mexican women and girl surfistas at Sayulita, for it takes a particular courage and self-regard to enter a sea of images and real-time Cali girls, and to talk to a researcher (potentially critically) about these topics when she herself calls the Cali-girl image to mind.

I also wish to thank surfers and their friends living in Jeffrey's Bay, South Africa, where I did ethnographic work in 2006, having gone to Cape Town as a member of a Mellon Foundation U.S. delegation. The classic surf film

*The Endless Summer* (1966) invented Jeffrey's Bay as a global surf spot—now one of the world's great surf meccas. I was eager to investigate it. The Mellon trip was organized by Roland Smith, vice provost at Rice University. It offered the opportunity for African American educators and allies like me involved with Mellon to meet with Bishop Tutu, tour Robbin Island, and talk with University of Cape Town people about affirmative action in the New South Africa. I managed to tear myself away from Cape Town and also spend time in Jeffrey's Bay. From safari outdoorsman Paul Versfeld I heard stories about Mickey Dora, who stayed at Paul's home. The lifelong surfer Andy Thuysman told me tales of J-Bay's early surf museums housed in his leather shop. Cheron Kraak, managing director of Billabong, South Africa, fit me into her day on a moment's notice and told me about her life as a South African hippie and seamstress, longtime female surfer, and eventual entrepreneur. She has a keen sense of local and global girls' and women's surf culture. It became instantly clear to me why she was named businesswoman of the year for the Eastern Cape Province in 2000. Rupert Chadwick, curator of the present-day J-Bay Surf Museum and contest director of the first event held at Supertubes in 1982 (the prototype for the Billabong Pro today), told me incredible stories of his days as a "black sheep" surfer and white African National Congress party activist.

Brenton Williams of South Coast Surf School provided much insight into white surfers' efforts to reach across the chasm of apartheid in the new South Africa in the federally-sponsored Surfing Development Initiative. For Williams, the effort was up close and personal as he is also the adoptive father of fifteen-year-old Samuel Mabetshe (b. 1991), one of the luminary young surfers born in the adjacent shantytown of Tokyo Sewale, who came up through the ranks at J-Bay and about whom a television documentary aired in September 2005 on South Africa BC3, *The Healing Power of Nature: Perfect?* Samuel also shared with me tales of his life and his transformation through surfing from a five-year-old street boy to a young man with prospects for education and a surfing career. Though a few local women—Kim Meyer, local longtime surfer, and her teenage daughter, Wanda Meyer—surf Supertubes and have surfed the world with the surfer and shaper (and husband and father) Mikey Meyer, there was not on the ground a girl localist presence sufficient for me to investigate and include in the present volume. Kim Meyer and Williams both noted the male bias of local surf culture. I have included in the bibliography a record of these oral histories in

the event other researchers might find them helpful. I thank both the locals there and the Mellon delegation for all they taught me about African race politics, gender, and surfing.

When it wasn't clear in the early years of the project that anyone in academia believed surfing was a serious topic, and some referred none too admiringly to "that Gidget book," I received letters and e-mails from generous people in different parts of the world who sent material, commented on work in progress, suggested grad students contact me, and provided general encouragement. These gestures of recognition—from Alice Echols, Robin Weigman, Eric Lott, Patrick Moser, George Lipsitz, Lawrence Buell, José David Saldivar, Mike Willard, and James Clifford—sustained me, allowing me to hold on a bit longer. At a crucial point I attended a conference in Brisbane, "On the Beach," sponsored in 2000 by the Cultural Studies Association of Australia. I wish to thank my colleagues there who, being not so alienated from water culture, delighted in this work and did not find it so foreign to scholarly pursuits, including especially Ian Buchanan, Margaret Henderson, P. David Marshall, Clifton Evers, and Paul Scott. At a later crucial moment I attended the "A New Girl Order?" Conference in London in 2002. There, I was exposed to work on contemporary girlhood that completely outstripped any thinking happening about girls in the United States, and I particularly want to thank Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill for conversations about surfing and girls, and also Valerie Walkerdine.

Talks given over the years helped me figure out the interface between globalization and surfing. I would thank the American Cultures and English Department at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and Phil Deloria, Maria Cotera, and Penny Von Eschen; also, Priscilla Ybarra and Baird Callcott at the University of North Texas, Denton, and Patrick Moser of Drury University. I also thank Donna Kabalen of Monterrey Tech, in Monterrey, Mexico. It was a generous opportunity and a challenge to be invited to present my work on Mexican surfing and tourism to Mexicans in English and Spanish (their bilingualism more sophisticated than mine). Such conversations between U.S. Studies and Mexican Studies opened new collaborations with Latin Americanists at Rice, including the distinguished Beatriz Gonzalez-Stephan and a recent wonderful addition to the Rice faculty, Luis Duno-Gottberg. Their encouragement and thoughts about surfing as a border epistemology have allowed us all to imagine new routes of intellectual

travel between Latin American Studies, studies of the United States and the Mexico borderlands, and U.S. Western Studies.

xiii

Also at Rice University I am grateful for the community of interdisciplinary feminist scholars who are my daily companions in the Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Feminist resources at Rice are exceptionally deep and strong. I presented both early and nearly-finished work on this project over a ten-year period and appreciate the comments and encouragements of Lynne Huffer, Colleen Lamos, Betty Joseph, Susan Lurie, Helena Michie, Rosemary Hennessey, Melissa Forbis, and Elora Shehabuddin. Elizabeth Long and Cecilia Balli read the manuscript word for word more than once. From non-Rice contexts, Noël Sturgeon offered formal comment that aided my final revisions. Melani McAlister and Nan Alamilla Boyd, friends from graduate school in American Studies at Brown University, have been especially encouraging. I have also enjoyed an abiding sense of community in the Western Literature Association for fifteen years, and have been giving papers out of this book for at least ten years now. I thank Neil Campbell, Susan Kollin, Susan Bernardin, Nancy Cook, Melody Graulich, Chad Allen, Bill Handley, Nat Lewis, Bonney MacDonald, and especially Stephen Tatum, whose friendship and scholarly work mean the world to me.

I deeply thank my husband José F. Aranda Jr., who I believe has been almost as interested in this project as I, and who brought me additional materials on surfing out of his huge appetite for reading newspapers, long after I wished never again to read anything about surfing. He sat with me through a very long three-week intensive writing period that saw the completion of the first draft, a gift no one else could or would have given me. From her travels and avid readings, my mother, Jean H. Comer, has supplied me with important newspaper clippings from San Francisco, San Diego, London, and Australia. My sons, Benito and Jesse, have gone to surf school and supported their mom's research as boogie boarders in the waters of California and Mexico but most often in Galveston near our Houston home. Two of my four sisters surf, all of us are ocean swimmers, and one memorable day several years ago all five of us Comer sisters with our kids, our partners, and my mom were out in San Diego, in full wet-suited familial force. My mother raced us all to the water and won, lording her win without apology. That day no doubt owes an unpayable debt to my late father,

## *Acknowledgments*

xiv

Stuart Comer, to whom this book is dedicated. Although not a surfer, he was my first exposure to bohemian Western men: a swimmer, diver, skier, dancer, golfer, cardplayer, and singer. He was also ever the businessman. While difficult to have as a father, he breathed life into the everyday and offered up a legacy of creative restlessness.

## Critical Localisms in a Globalized World

In the fall of 2002—hurricane season—I left Houston for a research trip to Sayulita, Mexico, a fishing village turned surf town on the Pacific coastline, north of Puerto Vallarta. Sayulita’s beach is modest by Mexican resort standards: it’s rocky in patches, the sand a grainy gray. The northern point remains an active fishing venture with small boats pushing off and returning to shore, leaving gasoline rainbows trailing behind in the water. In fact, Sayulita is not a resort. It’s an internationalist surf town, and at its center is a single surf spot, a consistent and clean reef-breaking wave that gamey beginners will more or less be able to manage. I wanted to go to Sayulita to study a women’s surf camp, Las Olas, specifically to study transnational athletic play (fig. 1). Las Olas is owned by an American woman surfer from northern California and has been in operation since 1997. At the time I visited, travel and sport media were just beginning to widely profile it as “the world’s premier surf safari for women,” or “the Golden Door of surfing camps.”<sup>1</sup>

To use the word *camp* to describe the environment in which women learn to surf in Sayulita is a bit like calling teatime in Meryl Streep’s away-tent in *Out of Africa* a form of wilderness refreshment. One weighs the distant roar of lions against the sterling tea service. Las Olas headquarters are housed in “la Casita,” a small bricked building distinguished by a mural of a woman in the curl of a wave. This is where classes are held and where surfboards and other gear are stored. The building sports a single bathroom, a private room for massage, a gravity shower rigged via pvc pipe, and a small kitchen. Exiting the headquarters one finds the amenities of town: some shops, a few one-story inns with rooms opening onto courtyards, and restaurants serving tequila, ginger shakes,





1 “We make girls out of women,” Las Olas promotional postcard.

and fish tacos—surfer food. Rising behind the town proper is so-called Gringo Hill, a collection of a hundred single-family homes bought as get-away places by retirees and surfers whose principal residences remain in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Built following the inauguration of NAFTA, the neighborhood mixes styles: beach bungalows and mountain houses uniquely held together with Mexican colored-cement work. If simplicity characterizes the Las Olas headquarters and the town of Sayulita, the nighttime accommodations of “campers” have more in common with Gringo Hill. The price of the package, about \$2,250 per week inclusive, puts people at Villa Amor, a cluster of beautifully appointed villa spaces built directly into coastal mountains.<sup>3</sup> Each villa (like the homes on the Hill) makes for an architectural work of art. The colorful whole of them, terraced up the mountainside amid bougainvillea and hibiscus, affects an elegant mountain treehouse.

On the particular early evening of our arrival, dark thunderheads hung back offshore. From the terrace of my own villa’s open-air living room I saw a world of infinite blue sea. At dusk the local fishermen and boys waded in the shore break to drag up onto the sand by thick ropes and bare hands their small boats for the night’s tie-up. There was mild talk of a hurricane somewhere in the Pacific. I took a quick dip in the living room’s soaking pool

and marveled. About a half mile down the beach the surf spot was going off—a bit of a storm wave, I speculated, sloppy but strong. More than a few surfers took the opportunity. For all of us recent arrivals, mostly Californians, the wide eyes and unconscious exclamations of “wow!” and “my God!” indicated that we jointly experienced this moment as having journeyed to paradise.

In the context of surf camps currently in international operation—upwards of one thousand across the globe, training several hundred thousand would-be surfers in the past five to ten years<sup>4</sup>—I had chosen to visit Las Olas because it advertises itself as a “reverse finishing school” that makes “girls out of women.” Given the hard-won second-wave feminist victory by which adult females had come to be understood in U.S. culture at large as women and *not* girls, I wondered: what were the political causes and effects of this cheeky new vernacular? If the renunciation of woman for girl might be read as a depoliticization of previous gains, there was also something more going on. The Las Olas “Manifesta” explicitly frames the camp’s purpose as an effort to foster female political consciousness and power.<sup>5</sup> The founder of Las Olas, Bev Sanders, a middle-aged American surfer and ecoactivist, believes that environmentalist action necessitates human connection to the natural world as a precursor. By playing in the ocean, “developing a friendship with the ocean,” Sanders claims that women better manage “to speak up for what we believe in, the rights of our families and communities, or on behalf of an abused ocean or forest.”<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, this transformation from environmental to other politicized consciousnesses occurs in subcultural daily life more frequently all the time. If closing the gap between humans and nonhuman nature constitutes a familiar environmental ideal, the Las Olas strategy for nurturing it is new. Empowerment lies specifically in the link between girlhood and play: “[Our] strength can be discovered by the little girl inside who just loves to play in the waves.”<sup>7</sup>

That October the camp comprised twenty-five campers, about a dozen of them middle-aged women who called themselves the “Hot Flashes.” Their name refers to a group of thirty or so Bay Area women who play soccer, basketball, and softball in various northern California sports leagues. They also serve as extended family to one another. Most are divorced, single mothers who have helped raise one another’s children. What unites these women beyond sport and motherhood is their extremely loud humor,

spontaneous skits, song, dance, theme parties, and girlish intense teasing. These women travel with costumes (nuns' habits, clogs, feather boas) "just in case" circumstances arise in which masquerade should come in handy.

In style and behavior the Hot Flashes cut a strikingly different generational profile than did the Las Olas surf staff. Ranging in age from twenty-five to thirty-three, the staffers' belly shirts, bikinis, long hair, and pedicures called attention to them as young, hetero-sexy, definitely "hip and cool." In addition to teaching surfing during the Southern Hemisphere surf season, these younger women formed their own network, trading among each other (as well as providing for guests) massage therapy, yoga instruction, chiropractic knowledge, and know-how about surfing the world's best breaks as women.

In the past decade Sayulita has seen a parade of surfing women pass up and down its cobblestone streets, heavy longboards balanced atop their heads. Such a sight, with local variation, has become common in other places where female-only surf camps make their homes: Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Brazil, California, Florida, Hawaii, Australia, Bali. To be sure, these constitute new forms of contemporary femininity *and* of surf culture, even as they invoke, for me personally, the sense of coming home to a familiar world. I spent much of my younger life in California surf and beach subcultures, not as a surfer or even a wannabe but as an ocean swimmer whose everyday world was structured by the water, its people, and its economies. I had my home base on Silver Strand Beach in Oxnard (an hour north of Los Angeles), a tiny community of bohemians, surfers, and Vietnam veterans living cheaply in beach bungalows. In feeling, the Strand had that "wrong side of the tracks," dogtown kind of defiance captured so memorably in the skateboarding documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys*.<sup>8</sup> During summers as a young teen, one of the mothers would drive my girlfriends and me from town out to the beach. Over time I came to know the local surf crew, a rough bunch of working-class guys with a deep-rooted group ethic and a reputation for territoriality. They looked out for each other. As I got older and discovered the heavy hostilities directed against rebel girls by suburban neighborhoods like mine, I claimed the Strand as an alternative home. When I dropped out of the University of California, Berkeley, after a year-long stint begun in 1975 when I was sixteen, I returned.

For the next ten years I came and went between the Strand and other coastal towns, sometimes in college, always working jobs related to grow-

ing flowering plants. I lived inside what today I would call a string of West Coast countercultures. At the time I believed my life was more real and responsible (in a cosmic sense) than were the aspiring lives of my college-bound middle-class peers who seemed to be living according to plans someone else had made for them. Eventually I got a real estate license and with my boyfriend (a working-class surfer/carpenter-turned-contractor) made a living by building and selling beach houses. We planned to make enough money to start a farm.

But with the Reagan era in the 1980s the countercultural edge started to disappear from Oxnard's everyday scene. Surfers who had become real estate agents now worried over the prime rate and stopped surfing. Some faded away or bottomed out; a few turned up dead. Like so many places up and down the coast, Oxnard's beach spaces began their conversion into tourist destinations, debating a name change to Channel Islands and inaugurating the annual Strawberry Festival to draw visitors. The money to be made by selling pieces of this new scene's edge moved to the front of collective local attention, a response to the dilemma of how locals were to remain on a beach getting more expensive by the day. In an agony of mixed feelings, I followed the advice of a family friend and went east to Wellesley College. There people would not (as they had in Oxnard) hate the "stuff about women" that I espoused. I matriculated in my mid-twenties as a paying-my-own-way continuing education student, suffering a culture shock that had no name.

By all indications I had left behind a personal "local scene" with no profound relationship to anything beyond its borders—until the mid-1990s, when surf culture, female surfers, and the language of surfing the Web became instant and widespread features of twenty-first-century life in the global village. When I arrived in Sayulita nearly twenty years after I had left California, I already had a deep feeling for the everyday lifeways of surfing subculture, its self-understanding as a collective stitched together by international surf breaks even while a sense of some specific local home served to center individual identity. But the nature of this local/global subculture and its implications for large-scale social transformation had dramatically changed. Females, especially girls, were now crucial to the public face and overall currency of the subculture, as was its leadership in issues of coastal environmentalism and the new "responsible tourism" movement.<sup>9</sup> Surfing claimed new kinds of "new social movement" activities.<sup>10</sup> As I saw it,



2 Surfing the new world order, *Cricket Magazine* for children.

the subculture had experienced a rocket launch into global prominence because new, globe-altering technologies had become harnessed to surfing as both a lifestyle and a structure of feeling. That is, in the spirit of the great C. L. R. James's (1963) work on cricket and empire, surfing was about far more than sport.<sup>11</sup> Of all of the metaphors that might have served to describe computer users' relationships to cyberspace, "surfing" had caught on. People all over the world today surf the Internet; they do not fly or sing or paint it. Nearly overnight this particular way of "doing" cybertechnology became normalized.<sup>12</sup>

The present book grew out of my need to understand the various implications of "surfing" for surf subculture and well beyond it. Since the end of the Cold War the values and language associated with surf culture have articulated some of the most consequential changes in both local and global cultural and economic life. The practice and metaphor of surfing mutually inscribe the comings and goings of travels in the new world order with the relaxed Hawaiian "Aloha" spirit of surf subculture (fig. 2). The structures of feeling that historically underwrote surf subculture—to relax the work mandates of Protestant masculinity and to bridge racial divides and connect with peoples of the world on pacifist terms—have been adopted and





3 Kuta tourist district in the aftermath of the Bali bombing by al-Qaeda, 2002.

adapted to serve in more official capacities as among the governing cultural logics of mobility and desire in the new world order. Surfing as a language for imagining contemporary global mobility suggests pleasurable, creative, and freeing outcomes.

But such celebratory rhetorics linking surfing and the techniques of governance associated with postindustrial freedoms and pleasures gloss over a hornet's nest of subcultural contradictions and histories of domination—not the least of which concerns surf “surfari.” The terrorist bombing in 2002 by al-Qaeda of The Sari, a nightclub in the heart of the Kuta tourist area of Bali well known as an internationalist hangout of surfers, indexed from a different point of approach surfing's coming of age as a metaphor for Western culture.<sup>13</sup> Via headlines that read, “Surfboards Used as Stretchers,” chilling reports arrived of nearly 200 people (in addition to 346 wounded) killed in Bali, many of whom were Australians and Americans on surfari (fig. 3).<sup>14</sup> A second attack in Kuta in 2005 killed 20 and injured more than

200. Whether discourses that join surfing and freedom are defensible as arguments either about globalization or about the subculture of surfing in its global dispersions will be among the thorny subjects to follow.

In the time it's taken to research and write this book (I began in 1998), images of surfer girls in U.S. popular culture have gone from being occasional and exotic visual anomalies to having become mainstay figures of desirable, global twenty-first-century womanhood. Much of this book grapples with how and why this change came to be and why any of us should invest intellectual and political efforts in the topic. At my project's beginning materials about surfing came from surfers and subcultural media outlets like surf magazines and films or videos, select surf museums, individual oral histories and personal collections, as well as a few popular histories.<sup>15</sup> I gratefully catalogued each newspaper clipping or attic-box memento sent to me by the women and girls who participated in the project. A sense of feminist social movement characterized our time together as it became clear that interviews and conversations with me formed part of larger efforts underway in women's surfing to create new public cultures able to counter the raunchy masculinism of surf media and to transform women's in-water everyday experience.<sup>16</sup> All of us commented with surprise as surfing females began to cross over from subculture to mainstream.

At around the time the Hollywood blockbuster surf film *Blue Crush* appeared in 2002, the cataloguing work entirely got away from me—"ran away," I want to say, in the sense in which Anthony Giddens uses the term to describe globalization.<sup>17</sup> The surf archive produced by subculturalists exploded to include some few hundred mass-market paperback books, many of which documented surfing history and some of which now overtly dealt with female surf issues.<sup>18</sup> In popular visual culture especially, surf-girl images began to proliferate in ways that no individual researcher could hope to track. Suddenly everywhere one looked—on big city billboards, in mall stores, in McDonald's "Happy Meals," in advertising culture across many media, in newspapers' "Life" and "Travel/Leisure" sections, TV awards programs, reality shows and children's programming, in bookstores' "how to" areas, on video shelves, and in a variety of sports media in languages from English to Portuguese, Japanese, French, German, Spanish, Dutch, and Afrikaans—the clear-eyed and superfit female surfer (including the toddler) stood as the poster child for all that young women might be-



4 Kia'i Tallett, daughter of Sally Lundburg and Keith Tallett, on the Big Island of Hawaii. Photograph by Elizabeth Pepin.

come in the twenty-first century (fig. 4). The figure even inspired parodist critique (figs. 5 and 6).

But if in popular culture and print media the imagery and rhetorics of surfing have become ubiquitous, little of an intellectual or critical nature has been written about surfing—and (with a few exceptions) nearly nothing has come from U.S. universities about the U.S. scene.<sup>19</sup> To be sure, surfing has been written about extensively and well by surfers turned popular historians and journalists like Matt Warshaw, Drew Kampion, and Nat Young.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the English-speaking world has read about surfing for two hundred years from literary pens as different as those of Captain James Cook, Mark Twain, Isabella Bird, Jack London, James Michener, Thomas Wolfe, and Kern Nunn.<sup>21</sup> As a topic of critical inquiry, however, surfing has barely registered. Two anthropological studies of surfing produced in the mid-twentieth century—one focused on Hawaii, the other on Australia and New Zealand—remain sources for most recent popular histories.<sup>22</sup> Scattered journal articles exist as well. The New Zealander Douglas Booth has been publishing on Australian beach culture, the pleasure and discipline of competitive surfing, and gender since the mid-1990s, as have the Australians Margaret Henderson and Leanne Stedman.<sup>23</sup> Two essays—one by





5 Lonely Surfer Squaw (1997).  
By Lori Blondeau, Cree,  
Saulteaux-Gordon First Nation.



6 Hula girls holding hand grenades. From "Aloha Oe." Surfer/Artist Kevin Ancell,  
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, May 2000.

Rob Shields, the other by Robert Preston-Whyte—emphasized global spaces of touristic play and specific subcultural sites like Durban, South Africa.<sup>24</sup> *Kurungubaa: A Journal of Literature, History, and Ideas for Surfers* put out its first issue (again from Australia) in 2008.<sup>25</sup>

To date, however, just a single scholarly book has appeared, *Surfing and Social Theory* by the surfer and geographer Nick Ford and the sociologist of sport David Brown, both at the University of Exeter.<sup>26</sup> Theorizing from a growing body of ethnographic and social science scholarship about surfing in the U.K., Oceania, South African, and Pacific contexts, including a number of unpublished dissertations, Ford and Brown evaluate the evolving social geographies of seascapes and beachscapes, enumerate types of surfing bodies, assert a particular surfer's gaze, and deal variously in the gender, culture, history, and media of surfing. Their work is synthetic, designed to make surfing intelligible to social theorists. For Ford and Brown the topic of surfing focuses a discussion of the mind-body interface, and through it they forward forms of living knowledge with the potential to rewrite the mind-body dualisms of Western scholarly tradition.

Like most engaged in this developing transdisciplinary scholarship on surfing, I, too, work between textuality, media, global tourism, and subcultural material life. I also use ethnography as a form of cultural analysis attuned to questions both of representation and of lived reality. By analyzing real existing identities (in the ethnographic sense), reflexively locating issues of authorship in relation to that archive, I hope to attend with greater reliability to the voices of others and to what they tell us (as James Clifford might say) about travel, dwelling, and the translation between them.<sup>27</sup> But if *Surfing and Social Theory* serves as a companion text to my own, alert to putting analytic pressure on "surfing," I am less interested than its authors are in the experience of actual surfing or in theorizing what Ford and Brown call "the dream glide." Nor will readers find an emphasis on Hawaii, though recent work to theorize a New Pacific and Pacific Orientalism bodes well for future research.<sup>28</sup> My own project prioritizes *onshore* social life and its relation to gender. I place my emphasis on gender and politics, the gender of globalization, and tracking the global implications of the influential local California surf scene. Most important, I am interested in the production of contemporary girlhood and in tracking it "from below."

The visibility of surfer girls, I will argue, forms part of a much larger discourse about First World girlhood and the future of the Western world. The

articulations of this discourse are many and contradictory. Psychological literature of the last decade addressed anorexic “Ophelias,” back-stabbing “queen bees,” gangbanging “locas,” and poor “ghetto girls,” as well as high-achieving “alpha girls,” emotionally balanced “gamma girls,” and strong, sporty girls able to wear the athlete’s “game face.”<sup>29</sup> Feminist educational organizations like the U.S. National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) founded special projects and advisory committees to assess the status of girls’ mental and physical health, as well as to advocate broadly for girls’ life flourishing.<sup>30</sup> The Feminist Majority Foundation, National Organization for Women, and the National Council also developed outreach initiatives for young women. Australian, Canadian, and British Youth Councils, public commissions, the Council of Europe, YMCAs and YWCAs, and countless transnational NGOs were charged with similar tasks.<sup>31</sup> A host of transnational activist organizations—most devoted broadly to “teen empowerment”—were established, often led by girls or young women.<sup>32</sup> Organizations focused on young women in media were set up in the United States for example, the Center for New Words, Women in Media and News, and the Women’s Media Center. Feminist blogs such as “Feministe” and “Feministing” were also initiated. The social import of these combined activities suggested not just new opportunities for girls in the wake of feminism but also Western girlhood as one masthead of journeys into a new world order.

In a fundamental way the crossover phenomenon of surfers into mass culture has served as confirmation of arguments I had been formulating about surfing as a diasporic public culture visible on the ground in many outpost surf breaks around the world, as well as about surfing as an emergent keyword of globalization processes and practices. Surfing as a globalist trope suggests that the social possibilities generated by the circulation of international capital, new information technologies, and people in transit will prove freeing, much as board surfing is popularly understood to be freeing. Surfing thus constitutes a rhetoric of optimism about the potential of globalization to advance the global good. Since women are surfing’s most advertised global fresh face—national and international icons for all that is ostensibly “free” about Western gender conventions—the topic of surfing calls out for commentary to feminists in particular. To “surf” the Web or the new world order is to be in the midst of an argument, an ideological project, about the ethics, gender, and regional Hawaiian and California

borderlands style of globalization. What particular local history has permitted such global designs?<sup>33</sup> What possibilities and disciplining mechanisms go with surfing territory?

Not long ago Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi edited a set of impressive essays in what became for me an important entry point into the emerging field of global studies: *The Cultures of Globalization*.<sup>34</sup> Some of globalization's most prominent theoreticians made appearances—David Harvey, Walter Dignolo, Enrique Dussel, Leslie Sklair, Noam Chomsky. Jameson prefaced the volume by noting that the essays' ranging perspectives on globalization showed "this area up, not as a new field of specialization, but rather as a space of tension, in which the very 'problematic' of globalization still remains to be produced."<sup>35</sup> I had come to the text hoping to learn how better to identify defining dynamics of the new globalized economy and world political system. Like many people I could murmur something about expanded communications technologies, new financial markets, new forms of mobility (whether of people, capital, or information). Surfing had emerged as one possible expression of the problematic of globalization, I believed. Surfing had set people, money, goods, and ideas into motion in ways that created new forms of identity, sociality, commerce, and politics. Jameson's sense of globalization as a topic that confounds traditional academic disciplines—"[it] concerns politics and economics in immediate ways, but just as immediately culture and sociology, not to speak of information and the media, or ecology, or consumerism"—to my mind could have easily been taken as a statement about surfing.<sup>36</sup> But how did one devise an approach to go after Jameson's "untotalizable totality?"<sup>37</sup>

What I ultimately took away from *Cultures of Globalization* were lessons in and examples of the production of the problematic itself, what Jameson calls the "intervention of a practical relationship to it [globalization]."<sup>38</sup> Such an intervention, he thought, if done successfully, would force a new theoretical practice that might close the gap between "sciences and cultural sciences, as well as theory and practice, the local and the global, the West and its Others, but also postmodernity and its predecessors and alternatives."<sup>39</sup> In particular, I was drawn to Jameson's notion that this new theoretical practice would go hand in hand with the creation of a new culture and a new politics.<sup>40</sup> What I had observed in surfing were precisely new global/local cultures and political formations in emergence, ones related to

gender, race, the environment, and global citizenship. Persuaded that one key to mapping theories of globalization would be creating “practical” relations to it, I began to imagine a method that could grasp, alongside surfing as global discourse, the simultaneous fact of surfing as a global/local subculture. But mine was a project about women, feminism, and gender, not typically the concerns of global theory or subcultural or youth studies. In *Cultures of Globalization* Jameson acknowledges as much by noting that the global dilemmas lying afield of the essays’ frameworks include “the conflicted strategies of feminism in the new world system.”<sup>41</sup>

No doubt because gender so often remains unmarked in global theory, it would take some time before it dawned on me that I had been thinking in global studies directions all along by way of women’s studies and its theorization of the role of capitalism and imperialism in exploiting global sexism to create new sources of cheap labor. A special issue of *Signs*, “Globalization and Gender” (2001), recalled the feminist work of the 1970s and early 1980s and of what was then called “the new international division of labor,” as well as more recent work on migration and diaspora, all of which examine relations between gender and political economy to point out the conspicuous inattention in recent theories of globalization to issues of gender.<sup>42</sup> If the more influential of globalization approaches focus on “the effects of new kinds of capitalist accumulation, such as structural adjustment, expansion of markets, technologies of media and finance, and neocolonialism,” gender analysis has simply not figured. Carla Freeman questions why, when feminism so persuasively demonstrates the centrality of gender to all networks of production, consumption, distribution, we get so much gender-neutral macroanalysis and history of new economic forms alongside microanalyses of women’s “fit” into structures as supposedly gender-free workers or nationals.<sup>43</sup> The problem with such oversight, as the *Signs* special issue makes clear, is a failure to consider questions of agency in relation to women, to consider “whether and why globalization can also provide opportunities for certain groups of women to leave the worst excesses of patriarchal oppression behind,” even as “globalization exemplifies capitalism’s worst tendencies of expansion and domination.”<sup>44</sup> Situating gender at the center of theorizing globalization puts the specificity of gender in conversation with issues of agency and social movements, political economy and identity formation.<sup>45</sup>

Recently, feminist scholars in girls’ studies have taken up precisely this

theoretical challenge to argue that an emphasis on First World girlhood offers one way to investigate the global and its dominant regimes of subject production. In 2001 a conference in London titled "A New Girl Order?" put the expanded presence of girls in the public sphere of Western societies in recent years into overt dialogue with large-scale social and economic change. That conference initiated a flourishing of scholarly activity.<sup>46</sup> Girls are being constructed not only as a "vanguard of new subjectivity," the sociologist Anita Harris argued sweepingly in *Future Girl*, but also as ideal late modern subjects on whose choices and powers of self-regulation could be modeled the future of the Western world.<sup>47</sup> Drawing on Ulrich Beck, Harris emphasized the concepts of risk and individualization when coining the term *can-do girl* to stand in for the popularized figure able to make good on the gains of feminism and thus meet the demands of a new historical moment for change-adaptive and self-inventing citizens.<sup>48</sup> The can-do girl looks after her personal and economic development without recourse to the state or civil society, certainly a much-needed skill given the privatization of services formerly assumed to form part of the modern welfare state. But if this attention suggests the celebration of girlhood, Harris (following Michel Foucault) sees a regulatory process underway, one that constructs girls into these very same roles. The feminist sociologist Angela McRobbie, the so-called godmother of girls' studies, concurs: "'Girls,' including their bodies, their labour power, and their social behaviour, are now the subject of governmentality to an unprecedented degree."<sup>49</sup> Subject to greater forms of regulation still is the opposite of the can-do girl, the "at-risk girl," that other figure of late modern anxiety. But if her life circumstances (class or race especially) create obstacles to success in work, schooling, or consumption, any failure to achieve will be understood as a case of poor planning and personal irresponsibility, not of structural disadvantage. The notion of structured opportunity or disability, like the former safety net function of the liberal welfare state, has been superseded by a neoliberal world order centered ideologically on already liberated individuals.<sup>50</sup>

The claim for girlhood as a late modern social space in which neoliberal definitions of national and global citizenship are achieved finds a kind of echo in the activist organizations and bodies of writing associated with U.S. third-wave feminism. In the confusions of the immediate post-Cold War period, and like so many university intellectuals and public policy makers trying in those years to understand the rapid and uneven expan-