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Brennan, Daniel

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## **Surfing like a Girl: A Critique of Feminine Embodied Movement in Surfing**

Daniel Brennan

*My paper explores the position of women in the sport of surfing. It is my contention that within the sport of surfing there remains many forms of oppression which have not been given appropriate attention in feminist studies. In this paper I employ Iris Marion Young's analysis from 'Throwing Like a Girl' to the sport of surfing. Young's paper offers many insights into forms of domination and oppression which pervade the sport, and which are demonstrated through the restricted movement of female surfers. I conclude by making suggestions for how to address these issues in surfing through a greater promotion of big wave surfing.*

Feminist theorists have pointed to oppressive features within the largely masculine culture of professional surfing; however, what remains to be analyzed is how this oppression impacts the actual performance of the surfer on the wave. Feminist analysis of pop-culture phenomena, such as the film *Gidget*, and the novel, film, and television series *Puberty Blues*, have described the masculine dominance of surf culture (Wendkos 1959; Beresford 1981; Rutsky 1999, 12-23). Other feminists, represented by Leslie Heywood, have argued that surfing presents a chance for women to challenge oppression through participation within surf culture (Kane 1995, 217-218; Heywood 2008, 63; Spowart, Burrows, and Shaw 2010, 1199). Heywood writes that the image of the female athlete “enacts an ideological structure between the supposed world of economic possibility and its attainment” (Heywood 2008, 68). Thus female neoliberal agents can buy into the image of the surfer-girl and the independent femininity associated with it (Heywood 2008, 67-69). I take issue with Heywood's optimism and instead suggest that, despite the increased participation of women in professional surfing, oppressive social structures continue to influence women's ability to move while riding waves.

I employ Iris Marion Young's exploration of gender and movement to argue that the difference between the way in which female and male surfers move while riding a wave displays gender power-relations. The innate difference in male and female physiology does not wholly account for the discrepancy in gender motility; there is a social aspect to motility which must be considered. These differences in gendered motility are most discernible at the sport's elite professional level, so my focus will be on motility in professional surfing. I conclude the paper with an examination of the

feminist potential of “big wave” surfing. Big wave surfers surf waves greater than twenty feet high. I claim that in big wave surfing, many of the sexist elements of surf culture can be avoided. In big wave surfing the performance of the surfer tends to take precedence over the sexual characteristics of the athlete.

### **Feminist Theory and Surfing**

Previous feminist analysis of surfing has been limited to media depictions of gender and the objectification of women in surf media and popular culture (Rutsky 1999, 12-22; Nash 2002, 341-356; McMahon 2005, 281-289). Anthropologists have shown how gender, space and identity might be represented in the large amount of data that can be found in surf culture (Waitt 2008, 75-94; Stranger 2010, 1117-1134). The general conclusion of these studies is that surfing is a highly masculine culture in which women are seen as outsiders transgressing a male domain. However, these analyses still leave a space for philosophical critique. That surfers have created a sexist culture is not in dispute. However, some feminist critics of surfing have advanced the argument that women’s participation in the culture of surfing is a potential activity of liberation (Dorfman Knijnik, Horton and Oliveria 2010 1180-1181; Spowart, Burrows and Shaw 2010, 1198-1199). These authors recognize that women have historically been unwelcome participants in surfing and that sexist elements still pervade the culture. Nonetheless, they argue that the act of participating in surf culture can be a meaningful response to that oppression.

In their 2003 article, Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin suggest that, through images of female athleticism in corporate advertising, mythologies that depict women as weak and inferior are directly challenged (Heywood and Dworkin 2003, 45). They write, “Any day you can walk into your local gym and see women sweating alongside the men and walking in the same proud way, owning their bodies like never before” (45). Heywood and Dworkin are attentive to the problems that many women experience in sports, such as coaches or male athletes not respecting personal boundaries, but overall they claim that the image of the female athlete is a powerful image for contemporary feminism (45-46). Heywood later extends this argument to focus on women’s surfing (Heywood 2008, 63-82). For Heywood, the positive features of the female athlete are exemplified in the image of the ‘surfer-girl’. She argues that surfing is symptomatic of the commodification of athletic pursuits, and this has aided the inclusion of women in such pursuits. Georgina Roy explains Heywood’s view in terms of women’s increased powers of negotiation. The female surfer’s feminist potential lies in her ability to negotiate the challenges and opportunities of a neoliberal era that uses the image of the female athlete to market a “youthful femininity” (Roy 2011, 142). The iconography of surfing has allowed women admittance into what was previously a male-dominated pursuit (Heywood 2008, 63). Thus, for Heywood, surfing offers “stealth feminism” in a more concentrated way than many other sports. Stealth feminism engages in feminist critique without using an overtly feminist vocabulary (Heywood and Dworkin 2003, 40). The female surfer is an iconic image which empowers women without making an obvious feminist argument – thus the challenge to oppression from surf culture can be said to operate by stealth. According to Heywood, the female surfer is the iconographic version of beauty: a toned body, tanned skin, and sun-bleached hair. Therefore, as the image of the surfer-girl is loaded with representations of independence, opportunity and agency, surfing offers a compelling version of “girlpower” (Heywood 2008, 68).

An example of both the dominant cultural ideals associated with neoliberalism and what were previously countercultural ideals of independent femininity, female surfers occupy a signal crossed space, and show just how far independent femininity has absorbed into the dominant ideal (Heywood 2008, 79).

The hijacking of the female image by corporate marketing is criticized by Angela McRobbie, who is wary of how a dominant ideal might serve ideology as well as offer emancipatory potential (McRobbie 2008, 548). McRobbie claims that in order to better understand its full implications, feminists need to understand what is happening in the appropriation of the icon of the young girl. Roy also cautions that although the surfer-girl image is presented as one for any woman to emulate, it might also be an image which forces women to participate on men's terms (Roy 2011, 147). That is, women might have only very limited access to surf culture without aspiring to the corporatized image of the surfer-girl.

Praise of the surfer-girl as a powerful feminist image further depends on the conception of feminism in play. The claims of Heywood and Dworkin rest on a reading of the history of feminist theory as a succession of waves. This is a problematic approach as it reduces feminism to a series of 'moves'. A reading of the history of feminism as a sustained multi-faceted critique provides a more accurate depiction of feminism than Heywood's reductive account. Heywood and Dworkin present the cultural power of the female athlete as a result of a fight taken on by 'third wave feminists,' a fight that has resulted in greatly enhanced opportunities for women. For Heywood and Dworkin, this enhancement undermines criticism by second-wave feminists, who point to forms of oppression in the structures of everyday living. On such a reading, we have moved past the need for second-wave criticism and feminists should be in the business of promoting participation. The empowering force of consumption is the driver of feminist activism, not the sport itself. Heywood admits that such empowerment is dependent upon a strong economy, as this 'stealth feminism' is dependent upon an ability to consume commodities involved in the surfer-girl image and its cultivation (Heywood and Dworkin 2003, 40; Heywood 2008, 63). This fits within a wider neoliberal feminist movement which, rather than asking wide-ranging questions about collective social-justice for women, instead looks to frame liberation in individualistic terms (Rottenberg 2014, 419). Jayne Caudwell holds to account Heywood for her reductive reading of the history of feminism (Caudwell 2011, 117-121). Caudwell argues that Heywood and Dworkin depict second wave theorists as advancing a simplistic "objectification thesis" which is only concerned with identifying patriarchy (117). Caudwell argues that a more complex interplay between feminist theorists of all waves is a far better way to approach criticism, as the contributions of all feminists combine to shed better light on issues facing women today (122).

Interestingly, Heywood's neoliberal praise of surfing's emancipatory potential pervades the contemporary surf industry. Mainstream surfing media put great energy into promoting the surfer-girl as an image of autonomy and self-determination. The problems inherent in this are immediately apparent. The 'men's' magazine *Playboy* has recently published a list of the twenty surfer-girls who have, in their view, the 'sexiest' *Instagram* accounts (Misulonas 2015). In reporting on the *Playboy* article in one of the internet's most popular surfing websites, *The Inertia*, surf journalist Alexander Haro admits that the list objectifies women. However, he says he appreciates this objectification as the women are sex symbols because of their athleticism, rather than how much of their body they reveal in photographs (Haro 2015). He writes:

Part of what makes surfing so attractive to the masses is the surfers themselves. Time in the ocean makes you fit and tanned and makes your hair look good. Attractive is nice in the same way that smart is nice and funny is nice: it's attractive. Playboy's addition of totally-not-Playboy girls to a Playboy list is a refreshing bit of evidence that revealing doesn't have to be the benchmark for sexy (Haro 2015).

There are clear parallels between Heywood's analysis of surfing's feminist potential and the surf journalist's account of the icon of the surfer-girl. Both views, I argue, are dangerous. By rejecting the value of second-wave critique of oppression wholesale, we lose valuable tools for pointing out oppressive structures within surf culture, structures that might limit the freedom of women to fully participate in the sport. In her study of institutionalized sexism in sport, Ann Travers argues that participation in sport is not enough to promote liberation or even equality. For Travers, the unequal terms of participation in various sports do little to defeat androcentric bias (Travers 2008, 79). I think Travers is right. Despite an increase in female participation in surfing, the oppressive features of the world of surfing impact on the way that women participate in the sport and, in particular, the way women tend to move on a wave. Glossing over these oppressive features misses an important insight that should undermine confidence in the extent of the liberating potential of surfing. If the terms offered to women for their participation in sport stifle their ability to actualize their potential movement, then that is of significant concern for feminism.

### Surfing like a Girl

It might be argued that female professional surfers tend to move on a wave in a more restricted way than men. There is a major push currently to increase the media coverage of women's professional surfing, which is a good thing for raising the profile of women's surfing. However, we must be wary of a corresponding proliferation of the more sexist elements of the sport. Through the rise in popularity of women's surfing over the last decade, the performance of women in the sport has improved dramatically. Female professional surfers exhibit a far higher performance today than in previous generations. However, when one undertakes a comparison between the maneuvers performed by men and women on a wave, the woman's maneuvers are still far less dynamic.

The prominence today of the surfer-girl image in mainstream culture is traced by Leslie Heywood to the fame of former world champion surfer Lisa Anderson in the 1980's and early 1990's (2008, 73). Anderson is the quintessential sun-bleached blonde, athletic, toned surfer whose ability was clearly greater than other female professionals at the time. She dominated competition, winning the world title four times. Anderson was known as a better surfer than other female professionals because she could "surf like a man". Essentially, Anderson was able to bring a masculine approach to surfing whilst also maintaining a feminine appearance. Surfing has since struggled with incorporating femininity into performance. High-performance surfing of the kind expected by professional athletes is a far different thing from the corporate image of the surfer-girl. The two are largely in opposition. It is hard to meet the requirements of the image of the surfer-girl and perform dynamic surfing maneuvers. This difficulty is well captured in an awkward moment in a recent video promoting two surfing professionals Bianca Buitendag and Johanne Defay (Mace 2014). Buitendag claims in the video that femininity in surfing is a beautiful thing, and that gender comparisons should not be made in regards to performance.

However, at the very moment this claim is being made, a series of semi-erotic shots of Buitendag in a bikini is shown. A pause in the motion of the camera frames her buttocks as she then throws her hair in a cliché shampoo-commercial-like arc. Only once this performance is completed is there footage of surfing. Indeed, the entire video can be divided into two parts: femininity and surfing. The femininity part depicts the surfer-girl frolicking on the beach in a bikini; the surfing part shows women riding waves. This video is far from unique. Surfing is today promoted through short online-videos, and this awkward separation between femininity and performance pervades the great majority of female surf videos. My claim is that the inability of surfing culture to reconcile performance and femininity detrimentally impacts women's motility. Women surfers are at once expected to be an erotic surfer-girl and an athlete in motion. The natural opposition of these expectations and the dominant pressure for women to match the surfer-girl image rewards those who look the part more than those who perform best.

According to Iris Marion Young, difference in movement between genders is not due to some mysterious feminine essence (2005, 29). Young aligns herself with Simone de Beauvoir and argues that it is the situation of women which might affect their movement and not their essence. However, Young claims that Beauvoir failed to adequately explore the relation between the woman's body and her socio-historical surroundings, and how that relation affects movement. Young does not think that a woman's anatomy is the main cause of differences in movement, but that it is the way in which women sense how their bodies move in their particular situation that causes them to move in a more restricted way than men while performing the same physical activity (Young 2005, 29-31).

The culture and society in which the female person dwells defines woman as Other, as the inessential correlate to man, as mere object and immanence. Woman is thereby both culturally and socially denied the subjectivity, autonomy and creativity that are definitive of being human and that in patriarchal society are accorded the man. At the same time, however, because she is a human existence, the female person necessarily is a subjectivity and transcendence, and she knows herself to be (Young 2005, 31).

The tension between objectified immanence and subjective transcendence that Young describes is a good fit for an analysis of surfing. On the one hand, the oppressive forces in surfing's male-dominated culture limit the experience of autonomy available to women; it is harder for women to catch waves at a crowded surf break, there is pressure to wear revealing swim-suits, and there is a pervasive view that women are inferior participants in the sport (Waitt 2008, 77-78). On the other hand, female surfers believe that the full range of surfing experiences should be open to them. Following Young's line of argument, we can say that the reason that the movements of professional female surfers are less dynamic than their male counterparts is found somewhere in this tension.

Surf Journalist Jannia Irons has argued in mainstream surf media that men have a more open range of movement on a wave because of their superior strength (Irons 2013). She cites a study in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* as evidence of her claims. However, the cited study makes no such claim (Eurich, et al 2010, 2821). The article only focused on the 'pop up' movement in surfing. This is where the surfer transitions from paddling to standing on the board. The authors did find that men had more strength in this movement. However, the article's conclusion is that women can tailor their training to make up for any

physiological gaps. It is interesting that this article was taken up by *Surfer* magazine, a surf magazine with a large global readership, as they uncritically argue that women are limited in surfing by strength factors, ignoring the conclusion of the article they cite as evidence. This points to a real effort on the part of surf culture to perpetuate the myth that physiological differences between genders affect the ability to surf. In fact, one can take the strength argument out of the equation in many instances by pointing to evidence of pre-teenage boys surfing with a greater range of movement than many professional female surfers at the peak of their careers.<1> Young points out that it is not usually brute strength alone that makes for differences in movement; instead, how the body as a whole is used differentiates typical gender movements (Young 2005, 33).

In citing the examples of 'throwing like a girl', 'running like a girl', 'climbing like a girl', 'swinging like a girl' and 'hitting like a girl', Young argues that in all of these phenomena the woman's whole body is not put in a fluid and directed motion, but rather concentrated in one body part. To this list we can add 'surfing like a girl'. When executing a turn on a wave, a male professional uses his entire body to throw the surfboard around. He approaches the top of the wave at a 90° angle and through a complex interplay of shoulder, core and leg movement, turns the board dramatically, 180° or more. The best examples of such a turn involve pushing the fins of the board out of their set track in the wave. (This is called 'breaking the fins-free'.) Such a turn generates a great deal of spray as water is displaced and this constitutes a major component of the visual appeal of the turn. Larger turns score higher points in a competition. Female professional surfers have mastered the approach to the wave; however, the turn itself is generally less dynamic and the 'fins free' turn is less common. Also, the high point of men's competitive surfing, at this moment in time, involves aerial maneuvers performed above the breaking wave. In men's competition, these are a regular occurrence. Conversely, such maneuvers are only starting to enter into a small number of women's repertoire, and when they are performed, they are limited in their height and dynamism. While women are not attempting many aerial maneuvers, men are consistently landing highly technical movements involving twisting and turning while elevated above the wave.

Returning to Young's analysis of the modalities of motility, it is possible to offer a theoretical explanation for this gap in performance level. Young identifies three modalities of feminine motility: an ambiguous transcendence, and inhibited intentionality and a discontinuous unity. Ambiguous transcendence refers to the way that a body's immanence remains in its attempts at transcendence through movement. That is, the body remains as a restriction rather than a means of grasping or manipulating the world (Young 2005, 36). Young points to the way that women typically do not move their whole body in performing tasks. The movement required of the surfer to execute tricky maneuvers requires a whole-body movement, and it is undeniable that such whole-body movement is less in evidence and is less dynamic in female professional surfing than in male professional surfing. With training, one could be expected to learn whole-body movement. Indeed, increasing performance levels by female surfers is evidence of this. However, my contention is that other oppressive features, such as the eroticization of the female athlete, contribute to a reflexive self-awareness that inhibits the full possibilities of non-ambiguous transcendence from being realized.

Inhibited intentionality refers to the way that a woman's body moves towards a projected aim with a sense of being able to fulfil the project; however, this movement is tempered by a corresponding sense of not being able to complete the action (Young 2005, 36). The work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty informs Young here. For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is not an "I think that" but rather an "I can" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 139). The world is understood in terms of possibilities and movement is the realization of certain possibilities. Young

argues that many women regard tasks that are within their means as being too difficult. I can only speculate as thus far there have been no empirical studies on the matter, but it seems likely that the inability to attempt aerial maneuvers, which are a regular mainstay in the repertoire of male surfers, is due to an inhibited intentionality. It is as if, while on the wave, there is a corresponding “I can’t” to counter the “I can” of consciousness. Such maneuvers are clearly within women’s physiological capacities, especially as teenage boys who have similar physical strength to female professionals complete them regularly. Perhaps the seeming inability of women to complete the most dynamic surf movements such as aerial maneuvers derives from a lack of intention to attempt the maneuver. It is as if the aerial maneuver is seen as possible but, in approaching the appropriate part of the wave, self-reflection intervenes. The maneuver comes to be seen as something that cannot be accomplished and is thus not attempted.

Young also argues that a modality of feminine bodily existence is that the body moves in a discontinuous unity with itself and its environment (38). A continuous unity is found in the way that many bodily movements come together in performing a single task. In feminine bodily movements such unity is discontinuous. Young argues that this break in continuity comes from a self-referential element in women’s movement, in that women see themselves as the object of movement rather than its originator. Whether through a sense of being more afraid of being hurt, of not being in control, or not capable of completing the task, a woman typically moves only a small part of the body required to complete a task rather than uniting many small movements at once. There are two main reasons for considering discontinuous unity as a modality of movement for female surfers. First, the ‘macho’ element of surf culture is obvious (Waitt 2008, 77). Large waves have the potential to inflict harm. Surfing commentators have tended to argue that a man’s body is better able to deal with the physical harm a wave can inflict (Skenazy 2014). This is exemplified in the choice of venues for professional competitions. Currently, only males compete in the dangerous surf locations. Women are for the most part denied the ability to compete in waves of consequence. The other reason for considering the prevalence of a discontinuous movement in women’s surfing lies in Young’s claim that women can sometimes see their bodies as *things* which need to be coaxed into action (39). As women understand their body as an object to be looked at, the male gaze intensifies the self-referential element of motility.

Young, in her later reflection on her ‘Throwing Like a Girl’ finds that her essay ignores the increasing participation in sport, and therefore misses the fact that women’s motility is being redefined. She argues that her earlier essay is too focused on gender rather than lived body. Young’s criticism is echoed by Dianne Chisolm, who claims that female participation in extreme sports, such as climbing, shows that through participation women can cultivate their body’s motility (Chisolm 2008, 18). Similar conclusions have been reached by Beth Preston, who argues that Young is too focused on non-habitual activity. Consequently, she elevates masculine activities of open bodily comportment, such as throwing or running, to a higher level than those of closed comportment (Preston 1996, 167-169). The problem with identifying femininity in closed bodily comportment is that activities such as military units marching on parade, which obviously have a restricted movement and are thus a mode of closed bodily comportment, cannot be said to be feminine or deficient modes of motility. Preston, employing the thought of Merleau-Ponty, argues that it is through habitual activity that bodily existence is most easily revealed. Thus, overcoming restrictions on movement is a matter for habituation, not gender (Preston 1996, 177-178). Chisolm asserts that a woman can approach climbing as a body that is able to be transcendence – that is, she can become habituated to the motions of climbing and through habituation experience the body as

transcendence. Insofar as a body, through habituation, can develop flow (flow is the positive opposite of Young's concept of discontinuous unity), the body offers a path through the oppressive structures of a male sport. Chisolm's analysis of climbing is an interesting consideration for this analysis of surfing because, for Chisolm, climbing is neither feminine nor masculine and, consequently, modalities of feminine embodiment are not of concern for performance in the sport (Chisolm 2008, 20). Chisolm argues that, even though the majority of participants in the sport are male, the female climber still cultivates a style and technique of climbing which is not restricted by the masculine dominance of the sport. Thus, female climbers display positive modalities of motility as they habituate movement on the cliff-face. For Chisolm, the body has a natural intelligence which allows women to freely navigate while climbing, as they use their entire bodies to overcome the obstacle of the cliff. In terms of surfing, my point has been that where the cultivation of motility should be possible, there is an obvious difference between male and female surfers. Positive modalities can be recognized in the performance of female surfers; however, it is still the case that they move in a more restricted way than male surfers.

There is a danger in regarding the lived body as independent of gender, as Chisolm does. The essential insight in Young's essay is that gender has far reaching effects on the lived body. Like climbing, surfing is a sport which requires the entire body to acquire an intelligent capacity to read the natural landscape. The body then employs that intelligence to navigate the landscape. So without rejecting Chisolm's positive modalities we can still affirm Young's less optimistic analysis. The woman riding the wave is learning and expressing a lived bodily intelligence, and that intelligence is being limited through its gendered identity in surf culture.

Sandra Bartky has defended Young against her self-criticism of her earlier essay. For Bartky, despite increases in participation, there are still cultural structures which enforce gender distinctions. Bartky argues that in analyzing the situation of women, any victimization might be well disguised, even from women themselves (Bartky 2009, 50). Hence, even though society has reduced the amount of restrictions on women's body's, for example by allowing women to wear pants and thus move with more dexterity, phenomena are still prevalent within social structures that affect movement and the experience of the body. Bartky gives examples of the man monopolizing the best chair in the house, or dictating the terms of use for a special room in the home (e.g. the den or pool room) (Bartky 2009, 50). This is also the case in surfing. In competitions where men and women's events are run concurrently, the male surfers take the lion's share of the better surf conditions. Furthermore, the possibility that female surfers see themselves as the object of the male gaze might also impact motility.

### **The Feminist Potential of Big Wave Surfing**

Iris Marion Young's critique of sexist social institutions and practices and the way they impact on female motility provides an excellent framework for critiquing contemporary surf culture. Furthermore, the analysis of the objectification of female surfers in the male dominated surf culture has shown the current relevance of Young's critique. I have demonstrated the flimsiness of the position that the ability of any woman with the financial means to buy a board and bikini can potentially challenge oppressive features of surf culture. I have also demonstrated that the existence of sexist structures in surf culture restrict the degree of transcendence open to women in surfing. The phenomenon of surfing like a girl has wider implications for describing the general situation of women and for critiquing 'third wave' theorists who argue for stealth feminism through participation. Participation alone is not enough for liberation if the terms of that participation continue to objectify women and force bodily immanence.

To balance the pessimistic tone of this criticism, I will end the paper by exploring some more promising opportunities for feminist activity within surfing. My analysis has shown that it is the eroticized image of the surfer-girl that is most problematic. Hence, locating an appropriate image to take its place, which also stands a reasonable chance of succeeding, would be a positive way to advance. Despite the criticism of neoliberal feminism developed earlier, I am aware of the reality of the solidity of the surfer-girl image in surf culture. Hence, any claim to abandon this icon would fall on deaf ears in the surf community. Working within the existing framework of surf culture, I contend that there is potential for feminist activity in placing a greater emphasis in surf media on the exploits of women big wave surfers. Images of women riding large waves avoid many of the problematic effects that are found in the usual image of the surfer-girl. It is important to note that the image of the female big wave surfer still affirms the positive traits of the surfer-girl, such as transcendence, which are celebrated in the image of the surfer-girl.

The volume of water in big waves is tremendous, and the spectacle of surfers riding such waves is awe inspiring. There is also an interesting lack of masculine adjectives to describe the action when commenting on the big wave performances. Whereas, on a smaller wave, a good surfer “shreds”, “carves up”, or “destroys” a wave, in big wave surfing the nomenclature takes on a markedly less aggressive tone. The aggression, if expressed, is used to explain the behavior of the wave: it “explodes” or “unloads”. Carl Thomen has argued that when one witnesses a surfer riding a large wave of consequence, the combination of a perceived karmic connection to the wave and to nature at its most powerful give rise to a feeling of deeply felt awe (Thomen 2010, 319). Writing on what makes surfing’s most accomplished athlete, Kelly Slater, such an incredible spectacle on large waves, Thomen writes:

When we watch Slater in full flow on a Pipeline bomb, we are witnessing the meeting point of the highest form of athletic aesthetic and the beautiful, terrible dynamical sublime that Kant and Schopenhauer so revered. Seen at close quarters, from the shoulder of the breaking wave, it is a truly spiritual experience (327).

The awesome feat of riding big waves is difficult to eroticize. Against the spectacle of a twenty foot wave running off for over 200 meters, the erotic objectification of the athlete is difficult to achieve, as the wave dominates the picture. The surfer is depicted in a beautiful dance of athletic death defiance. The performance is of over-riding importance. John Fiske has argued that when one looks at surf-media depictions of surfers on large waves, the surfer is unidentifiable, as the size of the wave ensures that the surfer is very small in the picture (Fiske 1989, 66). For Fiske, photos of surfing become “an abstract statement of man’s closeness in nature” (67). Fiske contends that the celebration of nature in a photograph of a large wave goes beyond the cultural force of surfing and instead depicts an image of nature focused, not on the individual, but on a species encounter with nature. In the image of the surfer on a large wave, the cultural image of the surfer-girl has no purchase. Such surfing would challenge many of the sexist structures of the sport on which it was created. Women’s participation in big wave surfing has the potential to transform the dominant view of surfing as a masculine encounter with nature. Female big wave surfing can change the narrative of surfing to a species encounter with the sublime.

The ultimate achievement in surfing is to become completely encased in a breaking wave; this is known as being 'barreled'. It is an achievement not demonstrated with consistency in women's professional competition, partly because historically women have not competed in waves that are hollow (and therefore dangerous) enough to provide opportunities for this maneuver. However, in early 2015, Hawaiian female professional big wave surfer, Paige Alms, was recorded riding one of the largest barrels of the Hawaiian winter (when the largest swells are directed at Hawaii) (Surfing Magazine 2015). In addition, Felicity Palmateer, in June 2015 rode the largest wave ridden by a woman in Australia (LaMontagne 2015). Palmateer's wave is also one of the largest ridden by anybody in Australia. The images of Alms and Palmateer, tiny against the mountain of water underneath them, are full of the sublime transcendence that surfers, surfing well, display. Alms has been vocal (ironically in the *Surfer* article that perpetuated the gender strength myth) that physical strength is not the only requirement of a big wave surfer and that mental attitude is more important (Irons 2013). She has also claimed that more women would participate in big wave surfing if there were sponsorship money for them to travel to the spots where the large swells are. My hope would be that more women would find the image of Alms to be iconic of surfing instead of the neoliberal image of the surfer-girl. Such an icon would challenge prevailing oppressive structures in surfing that serve to bolster the view that women surfers are more timid by nature, that they are more susceptible to being hurt, and that they are better as pretty beach adornments than serious surfers. Alms' and Palmateer's achievements show a performance continuum in surfing and not a gender division. Images of their surfing challenge the dominant ideologies of male superiority and eroticized femininity. Such an overcoming would be a positive move to make in light of the clear picture that Iris Marion Young's work has allowed us to draw of contemporary surf culture.

## Notes

1. See for example Shaun Ward's short film *Hurley Youth*.
2. There are some promising winds of change on this front with women's competition taking place in the large waves of Fiji and Maui continuing from the 2014 season. Furthermore, an invited group of four women have been allowed to compete in a one-off heat during the men's Pipe Master's for the last two years. ("Pipe" or Banzai Pipeline is a large and dangerous wave in Hawaii).