From Gidget to Gonad Man: surfers, feminists and postmodernisation

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of the surfing subculture in Australia as evidence that some collective reactions to the process of postmodernisation can actually be detrimental to the status of women. The circumstances under which this has occurred in the surfing subculture are outlined, and possibilities for a feminist reaction to developments like those in the surfing example are discussed.

Introduction

Feminist theorists have vigorously debated the compatibility of feminism and postmodernism[1] but we must now also turn our attention to the effects on women of the postmodernisation *process*, particularly in the sphere of culture which is expanding in scope and power.[2] The blurring of public and private that accompanies the postmodernisation process has not necessarily undermined male domination, and may have merely served to shift the locus of its power. The fragmentation of such modern 'structures' and sites for identity construction as traditional class and gender categories[3] invites the rebuilding of 'micro-structures' within postmodern cultures. While fragmentation has emancipatory potential, such potential is contingent upon the nature of various reactions to the uncertainties created by the postmodernisation process.

The case study focuses on the changing status of women within the surfing subculture, which has itself been subject to continuing postmodernising processes. Two of these are accelerated individualisation (Baudrillard 1983: 132), which has fragmented the subculture into smaller niches and opened it to a multitude of subject positions, and hyper-commodification (Jameson 1984), which threatens group cohesion by opening the symbols of the surfing subculture to mass consumption. The study shows that the same postmodernisation process that initially opened space for the surfing sub-

culture to cut across class, race and gender lines also opened space for new structures to be created through collective male action within the subculture, that repeat or even expand upon old gender inequalities. On the one hand, the processes of individualisation and commodification that gave rise to the surfing subculture now threaten its continued existence as they accelerate. On the other, attempts by surfers to rebuild a sense of structure and to continue to define themselves as 'alternative' to their own construction of 'mainstream' society have taken place at the expense of women members of the subculture. Such male action in the surfing subculture has made use of stereotypes drawn from the patriarchal 'mainstream' but has been able to legitimise male power further by diffusing it through the increasingly privatised sphere of 'culture' where it can be labelled a 'lifestyle choice' and thus protected from feminist critique.

The conclusion is that a feminism of the postmodern *condition* is required, as well as a continued discussion of postmodernism. It must be recognised that oppressive structures can be reconstituted through male collective action in response to the uncertainties of the postmodern condition. Such recognition also holds hope for change in postmodern society. By exploding the myth that postmodern cultures exist apart from oppressive structures, legitimate space can be opened for a reclamation of subjecthood by women and a collective feminist response to those inequalities generated by reactions to postmodernisation.

Methodology

The case study used a variety of methods, including a close textual and pictorial analysis of approximately three hundred surfing magazines, in particular the letters pages, over a 25-year period; an analysis of surf films over a 30 year period, totalling seventeen hours of film; analysis of the surfboard as a socially shaped object; books written by experienced surfers; informal observation of surfers; and personal experience. I have relied most heavily on *Tracks* magazine, as it is the longest running Australian surf magazine (25 years) and has the widest circulation (40 000 per month) but have also used magazines with a smaller circulation. My inevitably subjective interpretation of this data has been aided by my own position in the surfing subculture, and the wide variety of methods used has allowed me to check the results of each against those derived from the others.

While these methods cannot claim to yield data that is 'representative' of 'reality' in the surfing subculture, this is because the subculture as an observable entity is now virtually non-existent. As will be discussed, the effect of the postmodernisation process on the surfing subculture is that the 'sub'culture now exists only through representation in the surf media that I have studied. Surf magazines are now the most readily available sites for the simulation of community among surfers and are a popular way for otherwise isolated small groups of surfers to tap into their simulated community. The magazines can only 'represent' the collective attitude as it is created and expressed by and within them. Thus the process of editorial selection in surf magazines is not the distortion of 'reality' but the creation of it. My references to the actions and

attitudes of the 'surfing subculture' are references to the collective purpose of surfers, particularly male surfers, as something that exists substantially when members of a group have an interest in maintaining their group identity (adapted from Swanson 1992: 176, 177), but exists only in the context of the simulated symbolic community of surfers.

The exclusion of women from the world created in surf magazines is important not because it 'represents' any collective attitude that exists in 'real life' but because women are thereby excluded from making 'legitimate' use of the symbolic resources needed to identify as a surfer, and that identity is thus denied them.

Surfing as postmodern

I see the current surfboard riding subculture as postmodern for two main reasons. First, the subculture originally formed as a result of the fragmentation of modern social structure as manifested in formal surf life saving clubs. When surf board riding was introduced into Australia in 1915, it was taken up almost exclusively by surf life savers as a club activity (Pearson 1979: 47). The collective identity of surfboard riders as separate from the Surf Life Saving Association (SLSA) emerged during the 1950s as SLSA officials rejected both the surfboard as a rescue craft and the act of surfing purely for fun. By the end of the 1960s, surf life savers and board riders could be identified as two separate and hostile groups (Pearson 1979: 61). Australian surf board riders in the 1970s described themselves as 'hedonistic', 'unconventional' and having a 'sub-culture image', while 'clubbies', the representatives of mainstream society, were described as 'conformist' and 'establishment types' (Pearson 1979: 114). As such modern sites for identity construction as neighbourhood, education level, occupation, and traditional class and gender categories continued to fragment, membership of a subculture that cut across the lines of class, race and gender became a more important basis for individual identity (Brake 1980).

Second, the rise of the specialised surfing media such as *Tracks* magazine, which first appeared in 1970 and which treated surfing as the basis for a whole identity, opened up possibilities for a 'symbolic community' (Gergen 1991: 215) of surfers to be simulated and held together solely by those media, with little or no material referent. Feelings of community and two-way communication between readers and the editorial staff of the magazine were immediately and clearly evident, with one female letter writer saying 'you really understand, don't you', and another, 'You write how we think and feel'(*Tracks* Issue 3 1970: 3 ; Issue 5 1971: 3 ; also April 1971: 3 ; September 1971: 3). In a later issue the editor stated that readers' letters 'help determine what the next issue will be' (September 1971: 3). Similar evidence can be found in the 1990s; for example, 'thanks to all the people who have written in to Tracks ... Tracks is definitely helping mould my future' (October 1992: 13). Suddenly, the boundaries of the subculture were set only by the limits of the 'communication network' (Shibutani 1955: 565), involving a shift in the locus of norm and value creation and maintenance away from isolated local groups and toward the 'broader [but simulated]

surf board riding subculture' (Pearson 1979: 14). The specialist surf media have thus become the most important site for the maintenance of a collective identity. Definitions of who is a member of the subculture and who is not now rely less on who actually surfs and more on who is represented through the surfing media. It can now be argued that the subculture as it is simulated through magazines and films *is* the surfing subculture.

The rise of the specialist surf media illustrates the point that the ambiguity generated by the spread of postmodernisation is leading people to become increasingly dependent on the media for the informational and symbolic resources they need to forge their own identities (Ball-Rokeach and Cantor 1986: 11).[4] The major difference, for my purposes, between modernist bases for identification and the fluid, media-based symbolic communities of post-modernity is that the boundaries of the latter need to be *maintained* to a far greater extent by their members. The maintenance of an 'alternative' image among surfers has become very difficult, due, on the one hand, to the para-doxical fact that the majority of surfers are themselves representative of the culturally privileged 'mainstream' (as most are white, heterosexual, middle class and male), and, on the other, to the proliferation of identities and subject positions in 'mainstream' society itself, so that the labels 'alternative' and 'mainstream' have lost meaning. By the late 1980s, the reaction of male surfers to this paradox was to seek to reclaim their collective subjecthood as it was apparently being lost to a myriad of voices. The subculture has constructed a picture of 'mainstream' society as one that tolerates feminism and gives women an easy ride 'at the men's expense' (*Tracks* September 1994: 92). The active construction of a 'deviant' image through exaggerated sexism, therefore, is seen as an effective way of maintaining 'difference' from what surfers define as the 'mainstream'. I will now explore two of the postmodernising processes which have taken place within the subculture itself, and which have provoked male surfers into attempts to reclaim difference through collective action: accelerated individualisation and hyper-commodification.

The individualisation process: the fragmentation of collective identity

The surfing subculture has undergone a process of individualisation since the 1970s that has accelerated to the point where the collective identity of surfers is under great strain. The process can be followed through an analysis of surfing films, magazines and accounts of older surfers. The 1964 film *The Endless Summer* illustrates the state of the surfing subculture before the frag-mentation process had taken hold. The two main surfers featured in the film were presented as symbolic of all surfers and were not named in the credits or promotional material. The film often shows surfers sharing a wave—a situation that might result in physical violence today. As leg-ropes had not been invented, a 'buddy system' was used where surfers would retrieve each others' boards after a 'wipe out'. Although good performances are ap-plauded, participating in surfing as a group activity is portrayed as much more worthy than individual ability.

The breakdown of a collective identity outside of the surf media had become noticeable by the mid-1970s. Attention became focused on individual performances as enthusiasm for competitive surfing peaked in the early to mid-1980s, and the creation of surf 'stars' through the media encouraged the hero-worship of individual surfers. In 1989 it was noted that 'those who board surfing's glory train have a highly developed sense of "I" and they need it' (*Tracks* December 1989: 149). Yet, perhaps influenced by the marketing requirements of sponsors, many surfers began to lose their distinctively 'subcultural' image. As attention focused more on the individual, he or she became less identifiable as a member of the subculture.

The fragmenting effect of the focus on competitive heroes also appears to have accelerated the individualisation of the everyday surfing session itself, to the dismay of some older surfers such as Nat Young, who wrote:

> Not long ago at the Pipeline I started hooting with glee when another surfer got an incredibly good ride. A couple of hotties [young surfers] looked at me as though I was from another planet when really I was just from another era (Young 1994: 181).

The 1990 film *All Down the Line* shows the individualisation process at an advanced stage. The front cover of the video has 'starring Tom Carroll' in large print. Most of the film is about Tom Carroll and group identification is virtually non-existent. Other surfers appear, but interaction between them is minimal. We get to see nothing of the lifestyles of any of the surfers featured, and in fact they appear to have no distinctive lifestyle apart from the act of surfing itself. Now, individual performance and enjoyment are the main focus of many surf magazines. One recent issue shows a photograph with the caption 'To dare to ride alone is the rarest courage' (*Underground Surf* Spring 1994: 2). The photograph is of a lone surfer in what might have been considered in the 1960s to be a dangerously isolated situation.

The fragmentation process has been aided and 'naturalised' by developments in surf technology.[5] The invention of leg-ropes in the 1970s made it much easier to surf alone and resulted in the demise of the 'buddy' system. The popularisation of a huge range of different surf craft, such as kneeboards, bodyboards and surf-skis, split the subculture into smaller, often hostile, niches. The dissemination of the surfing experience, through film and print, has further fragmented the surfing subculture by making its vernacular accessible to a wide variety of consumers.

Commodification and capture

The hyper-commodification of surfing took place at two levels. Almost as soon as the surfing subculture developed a recognisable image, it was appropriated by the mainstream market. During the 1950s and 1960s, the surfing theme was evident in music, fashion, films, slang and TV (Young 1994: 82). During the 1970s, the 'Sandman' panel van was marketed using the 'alternative' and 'rebellious' aspects of the surfing image. By the 1980s, models who were not surfers but had the right 'surfie' look began to get a lot of work in advertising. Many surfers used the letters pages of *Tracks* to com-

plain about such developments, accusing the general public of purchasing the image without first learning to surf (e.g., *Tracks* April 1972: 3; January 1984: 8).

Surfers themselves became dependent on the market either for corporate sponsorship, to maintain the illusion of the 'free' surfing lifestyle, or simply for access to the symbolic resources needed to identify as a surfer. Initially, while a sanitised version of the 'surfie' image was available for consumption by the public, surfers themselves had resisted commodification. When *Tracks* began in 1970, it was common for surfers to shape their own boards, and the 'ideal' lifestyle of the surfer was one of joblessness and 'self-sufficiency' (*Tracks* June 1973: 15). The symbols that surfers used to mark their group boundaries, such as scruffy clothing, long hair and marijuana use, were of little market value to potential sponsors. However, the mid-1970s heralded a surge in the popularity of competitions, a change of image, and the birth of the professional surfer. In order to gain sponsors, and finally get some of the benefit from the marketing of surfing, many surfers deliberately began to develop a more 'acceptable image, that of the clean-cut sportsman (*Tracks* May 1975: 10). Surf films have also been drawn deeper into the commercial web. From a list of surf films produced in Australia between 1961 and 1988, we can see a startling distinction. Prior to 1987, all the listed films were produced by individuals, who were almost always surfers themselves. After 1987, however, every listed film was produced by a 'surf company', such as 'Quicksilver' or 'Billabong'.

Even attempts to reject commodification have been marketed back to surfers as a 'lifestyle choice'. In the mid-1980s, for example, surf companies were quick to spot and exploit the tension between the new 'squeaky clean' surfer and the attempts of others to revive the old 'bad boy' image. In 1990, Tom Curren caused controversy by surfing through a competition on a board that contained no advertising stickers (Young 1994: 214), but this action and others like it simply resulted in an explosion of advertisements for 'clothing without the hype', plain black wetsuits and conservative designs on boards.

The commodification process was thus a two-fold one. First, the symbolism of surfing was appropriated by the 'mainstream' market. The commodity form then entered and fragmented the subculture itself and the unity of the antagonism against the commercial 'establishment' that was once expressed by surfers (many of whom chose to be unemployed) largely broke down. Surfers have been particularly dismayed at the commodification of their group symbols, as it has greatly diminished the value of those symbols for the drawing of boundaries between surfers and non-surfers. If anyone can identify with the subculture by, for example, buying a surf brand T-shirt, on what possible basis can real surfers express a collective identity?

These developments have resulted in the perception in recent years of a need to revive a strong sense of community among surfers. Surfers now realise that a distinctive identity can no longer be maintained through objects or appearance, and are thus turning to 'attitude' as a way of maintaining collective 'difference' and an 'alternative' image. In particular, they are choosing attitudes, such as extreme sexism, that they feel would be unacceptable to 'mainstream' society. For example, one magazine writer argues that:

We [should] encourage surfing to be publicly damned ... People don't have to fear us—they just have to NOT WANT TO BE US, not want to identify with a label that spells sick, perverted deviant (*Underground Surf* Spring 1994: 109).

The two main features of this newly created 'alternative' attitude are the masculinisation of surfing and the progressive exclusion of women. Thus, the redefining of group boundaries has been undertaken by male surfers, through the national surf media, at the expense of both surfing and non-surfing women.

The masculinisation of surfing

During the 1960s and for most of the 1970s, choosing to identify as a male surfer was a statement of a genuinely alternative form of masculinity, signified by long hair, which blurred gender boundaries, an anti-aggression, anti-achievement attitude and the desire to be close to nature through surfing rather than to master it. Surfers of the early 1970s proudly defined themselves as 'long haired weirdos' (*Tracks* June 1971: 7), as this identified them as unmistakably the opposite of the short-haired 'respectable' surf life savers who epitomised Australian masculinity at the time.

For a while, even gay male surfers were tolerated. In 1974, for example, an advertisement appeared in *Tracks* for gay surfers to form a club (September 1974: 30) and in 1981 *Tracks* ran an article entitled 'Why Gays Don't Surf—Or Do They?' (January 1981: 37). However, by the mid-1980s, debate was steered against homosexuality with such statements as '*Tracks* hates all poofters and thinks that they should be put inside a giant piston and squashed' (February 1983: 2). Even at this stage, however, it was still possible for both sides to be heard. Two or three years later, space for any debate was closed, so that gay surfers would not be heard at all and it would be assumed that 'surfer' and 'gay' were contradictory labels.

The perceived link between gay surfers and women appears to have caused the end of the tolerance shown to gay surfers. In 1985, for example, a *Tracks* writer argued that the 'anti-fag feeling [now] prevalent in the surf community' exists because 'the great Australian tradition of mateship stands threatened as men turn into women' (*Tracks* January 1985: 21). Male surfers continued to be sensitive about the gay issue without actually reopening debate about it. In 1989, when Dr Geoff, the writer of *Tracks*' medical advice page, left the magazine, he stressed to his replacement that his male readers/patients were 'healthy, happy heterosexuals' (*Tracks* October 1989: 35). Obviously, the gay male surfer had not ceased to exist by 1989. He had merely been rendered invisible and irrelevant, in preparation for the next target of the same tactic—women.

By the mid- to late-1980s, there were continuous and strenuous attempts to assert an image of masculinity, through surfing magazines, that was defined in opposition to women. The idealised image of the surfer is now an exaggerated version of the traditional hegemonic model that surfers once rejected. The image relies not on a specific body shape, but on surfing prowess, to the extent that even male 'Gladiators' contestants are now described as 'poncy' compared to male surfers (*Australia's Surfing Life* August 1995: 24). Film was a popular

medium through which to push the new 'tough guy' image, and a comparison of titles alone is enough to make the point. The 1970s featured such film titles as *Freeform* (1970), *Sea of Joy* (1971), *Morning of the Earth* (1972), *In Natural Flow* (1973), *Ocean Rhythms* (1976), and *Playgrounds in Paradise* (1978). Upon entering the late 1980s, we are confronted with such titles as *Mad Wax* (1987), *Performers 2* (1988), *Strike Force* (1988), *Savage Cuts* (1988), *Sultans of Speed* (1988) and *Wave Warriors* (1988) Any 'mainstream' tolerance of feminists or homosexual men is now regarded by many male surfers as evidence of the weakness of non-surfing men.

The masculinisation of surfing has been made to appear 'natural' and inevitable through the design of the surfboard. In the 1960s surfboards were long, heavy and not very manoeuvrable, so the emphasis was on what could be done *on* the board rather than what could be done *with* it. This had a somewhat equalising effect on the surfing styles of men and women, since many women could 'dance from the tail to the nose' (Young 1994: 148) as well as a man. When, from the mid-1970s onwards, the demands of competition led to a faster and more visible style of surfing, the short 'twin fin' was invented, which also 'helped women surfers tremendously' as it was light and easy to turn (Young 1994: 149). By the early 1980s, 'power' was considered a requirement of 'good' surfing style. When the three-fin 'thruster' was invented to enable 'power surfing', it was recognised that this was not a board to suit all conditions and all surfers (Young 1994: 194). By 1992, however, manufacturers were 'afraid to make more accommodating shapes for the broad spectrum of surfers for fear of tarnishing their imagined hard core image' (*Tracks* December 1992: 107). Thus the 'thruster', which privileges power over aesthetics and enjoyment (and masculinises the surfing experience even through its name!), now has a virtual monopoly among younger surfers.

The exclusion of women has been a necessary concomitant of the masculinisation process in surfing. Feminism introduces a contradiction for men 'between the project of erotic love and the requirements of patriarchal institutions' (Connell 1987: 217). Male surfers, at least in the symbolic sphere of the surf magazines, appear to have solved this conflict by abandoning the project of erotic love and distancing themselves from women, rather than by embracing feminism and continuing the critique of hegemonic masculinity that they had begun in the 1960s. Yet this is not simply an example of 'backlash'. Rather it is the result of a sustained project of maintaining difference against what surfers perceive to be 'mainstream' society with its surface appearance of tolerance for all. The next section outlines the effect of this new micro-structure on women and explores some of their responses.

From Gidget to Gonad Man: the 'disappearance' of women

Until about the late 1980s, gender boundaries in surfing were blurred, relative to 'mainstream' society, and women did have a place in the subculture. The 1964 film *The Endless Summer* shows a number of ordinary women surfing, with the narrator observing that 'Lots of girls surf ... and many of

them are very good'. The non-surfing women that were featured in *Morning of the Earth* were portrayed as ordinary members of the alternative lifestyle of which surfing was a symbol. In 1978, the film *Playgrounds in Paradise* featured Lynn Boyer, 'the top girl surfer in the world', and showed good footage of her in the water. In 1982, an advertisement for the film *Stormriders* invited viewers to 'see men *and women* pit their courage against the biggest waves ever filmed' (*Tracks* April 1982: 13, emphasis added).

Tracks also gave much editorial support and recognition to women surfers throughout the 1970s, until the mid- to late-1980s (e.g., November 1974: 23, 24; June 1976; June 1977; October 1985: 86). Male readers' comments included:

> I was really stoked to see that so many chicks are interested [in surfing] (*Tracks* December 1971: 3)

> [S]he really ripped ... everyone was cheering (*Tracks* April 1973: 3)

> [D]on't hassle chick surfers ... most of them are good' (*Tracks* February 1974: 3)

> There should be more women surfing today, the more the better (*Tracks* January 1985: 3)

Even the occasional 'sexy' picture of a woman in *Tracks* was often a head-to-toe shot showing the woman looking back at the camera, with the effect of balancing her status as 'object' with that of 'subject'.

While it has always been possible to find sexism in print and on film, until recently women were consistently accorded subject as well as object status. Women were therefore able to contest instances of sexism and assert their own interpretations of the surfing experience, which they regularly did through the letters pages. However, with the erosion of women's subject status and the denial of their place in the subculture, such challenges have become difficult and rare. Women are excluded, not by being denied access to the physical surfing experience itself, but through being denied access to the symbolic community of surfers as a basis for their own identities.

The exclusion of women

Women's exclusion was effected in two ways, which can be illustrated through an analysis of photographs and film. First, the social distance between women and surfers/magazine readers was increased beginning in the late 1980s, and the 'presence' and subjecthood of women were progressively denied. This was done using photographic techniques to prevent the woman/object from also acting as subject by returning the gaze of the (assumed male) viewer. For example, in a 1979 advertisement for the '*Tracks*' T-shirt, the female model is looking straight back at the viewer, with an expression that challenges 'his' gaze. By 1995, however, the advertisement had been changed. The model's head has been cropped out completely, she has had her back turned fully to the camera and her swimsuit hiked up, while a leering male in the photograph 'connects' with the male viewer and encourages his voyeurism. Both the sense of voyeurism and the social distance

between viewer and subject are heightened if the subject is unaware she is being photographed (Sontag 1977: 12), and so the vast majority of pictures of women on the beach are now taken from behind, often from a distance using a zoom lens (e.g., *Waves* March/April 1994: 67, 74). In the film *Wave Warriors III* (1988), different body parts of different women are shown successively, each for barely a second, which robs the women of a 'sense of presence', while the representation of male surfers in the film declares 'the seamless integrity of the real' (Krauss 1987: 107). The woman so represented is no longer even a whole 'object' but her pieces have been reduced to mere symbols of her status as object.

The second method of exclusion applied specifically to women surfers and involved the denial of their history and the misrepresentation of their abilities through photographs. The action shots of female surfers that were common in magazines in the mid-1980s had virtually disappeared by the 1990s. The argument of magazine editors that this is due to women's own 'lack of ability' rather than the selectivity of editors and photographers is easily refuted. *Tracks'* own previous issues include enthusiastic reports of the abilities of competitive women surfers (e.g., *Tracks* August 1982: 2; July 1982: 28; March 1983: 13; April 1983: 31; April 1985: 22; July 1985: 39). It is difficult to believe that by the late 1980s women surfers had experienced such a drop in 'ability' that magazines could no longer justify printing photographs of them. Eventually, however, some surf magazines were even asserting that such photographs had never existed at all (e.g., *Tracks* February 1990: 3). The choice to take or print one photograph over another is 'to *confer* importance [and] accord value' to the chosen subject (Sontag 1979: 28). Thus to photograph a male surfer in preference to a female surfer of equal or greater ability confers an importance on the *maleness* of the surfer, which 'justifies' future preferences toward males.

Distance translated into attitude

Beginning in the late 1980s, the predominant public attitude of male surfers toward women has become one of hostility and suspicion. Women are 'bitches basicly' (*Tracks* August 1991: 115, quoting professional surfer Sunny Garcia), are 'easily fooled' (*Tracks* August 1992: 51), but will 'use almost any means to get their own way; flaunting their sexuality ... demanding to be taken seriously then changing their minds at will' (*Tracks* April 1995: 139). While in the 1970s scantily clad women were thought 'beautiful', the attitude of the 1990s is: 'That sexy looking bitch, we tell ourselves, we know what she wants walking around dressed like that' (*Tracks* May 1994: 105). Photographs of women in G-strings are now run specifically 'to get up feminists' noses' (*Tracks* July 1994: 61). Feminists are 'lesbians and intellectuals' who 'are actually irrelevant to the debate, because they're so out of touch with their womanhood' (*Tracks* April 1995: 139). It was also suddenly discovered that 'women could not surf as well as men', as the 'top-heaviness' of a female surfer means that 'she will invariably topple over' (*Tracks* 1991: 11). Women are now begrudged good waves, even in world

title competitions, with one writer declaring that 'I'd have devoted twice as many pages in this magazine to the contest if they'd run the blokes [instead]' (*Tracks* May 1994: 72).

The surfing subculture has been able to draw on the patriarchal symbolism of 'mainstream' society to 'naturalise' its misogyny, using longstanding distinctions between nature and culture and between the sacred and the profane (e.g., Zimbalist Rosaldo 1974), despite predictions that such distinctions would be undermined as we exit industrial modernity (e.g. Beck 1992: 80, 87). Although many surfers still ostensibly support the environmental movement, the attitude of male surfers toward nature has shifted. Experiencing rather than mastering nature was once part of the alternative masculinity of male surfers, and surfing was said to represent the opposite of 'anything that upsets the balance of nature' (*Tracks* October 1970: 7). Now, it is said, surfers 'take on nature and win' (*Australia's Surfing Life* July 1995: 10). There is now far more emphasis on 'conquering' a wave than on simply experiencing it.

The relation of male surfers to nature/woman as Other is 'one of ambivalence: desire structured around fear' (Game 1991: 169). While the wild moods of the ocean are attributed to 'Mother Nature', those elements of nature that are essential for good surf—wind, tide, swell and sand movement—are cultivated and controlled by the surfer's male god 'Huey'. In the surfing world, women *are* disorder; their identification with 'Hueyless' Nature makes them unpredictable and out of control. As one regular *Tracks* writer asserts: 'Women's bodies are so full of hormones, they're like rampant junkies, ... dangerous [and] totally unmanageable' (*Tracks* April 1995: 139). It is no wonder, then, that the cognitive skills necessary to direct one's own body and to relate to nature (chaos) successfully, while remaining on the side of culture (control), are now seen as exclusively male abilities.

Women in the surfing subculture are now also associated with pollution and the profane, as opposed to the sacred, which is the domain of men (Eisenstadt 1992: 69; Douglas 1966). Women are described as 'evil' (*Tracks* December 1994: 103) and 'bad luck' (*Tracks* September 1995: 115), and the need is stressed for surfers to stay unpolluted by them. Hence the definition of a 'true Waterman', which includes 'hardly any drugs; hardly any women' (*Tracks* February 1990: 60). The girlfriends of fellow male surfers are 'ugly growths' (*Tracks* January 1990: 3), and the surfer himself is regarded as a 'lost mate' (*Tracks* January 1991: 11), likening any relationship with a woman to an incapacitating disease or even death. By contrast, the surfing experience and male surfers themselves are perceived as sacred. For example, the film *Morning of the Earth* opens with slow-motion footage of waves breaking, accompanied by background choruses of 'hallelujah', clearly indicating the 'religious' nature of the surfing experience. Surfers are considered 'enlightened people' (*Tracks* 1970 Issue 3: 12), 'God's chosen people' or 'supreme beings' (*Australia's Surfing Life* July 1995: 10). It is not surprising, then, that not only are meaningful relationships with women discouraged, but women are also not considered to be appropriate candidates for the sacred title of 'surfer'.

The constitution of postmodern structures

Thus the collective agency of male surfers/readers, magazine staff and advertisers has been effectively constituted as a new highly masculinised 'micro-structure' within the surfing subculture. This development illustrates the point that, while the proliferation of culture-based lifestyle groups can fragment and undermine oppressive modern structures, as the surfing subculture itself initially did, postmodern cultures *also constitute structures* that may be no less oppressive.[6] The potential problem is that the structures thus created are often assumed to be beyond the reach of social critique. This can, of course, have emancipatory potential. For example, an individual objecting to the showing of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras on television might be told that he or she does not have to watch it; it is often treated as symbolic of one valid way of life among many. Yet, equally, a woman complaining of *Tracks'* misogyny might be told that if she doesn't like it she can read *Cleo* instead. Surfers' misogyny, and the exclusion of women from the simulated subculture, it is implied, is simply one valid 'lifestyle choice' among many. Women are told that they are 'not ... in a position to demand equal opportunity' (*Tracks* May 1994: 10) within a subculture that has cut across the structures of modernity and created its own.

The strategies of women

Women in the subculture initially offered strong resistance to any attempt to marginalise them. Beginning with *Tracks'* fifth issue in 1970, many women wrote to *Tracks* encouraging others to take up surfing, thanking *Tracks* for printing stories on women surfers, complaining of discrimination, pointing out inequalities in competitions, and defiantly labelling themselves 'feminists' (*Tracks* Issue 5 1971: 5; March 1983: 15; November 1985: 49). Women's assertion of their views continued well into the 1980s; for example, while receiving a competition trophy along with some male surfers, and noticing the swimsuited women being used to 'decorate' the podium, Jodie Cooper heatedly asked contest officials why the presentation was so sexist (*Tracks* November 1985: 49).

Another common approach was for women surfers to try to avoid any appearance of threat to men, while at the same time asserting their own experience of surfing, and sometimes representing that experience as uniquely female. For example, 'Guys ... are starting to realise that girl surfers ... aren't trying to compete against them. I think of women's surfing as more being more feminine—more like ballet' (*Tracks* October 1985: 87). The book and film *Puberty Blues* might have been interpreted by outsiders to the subculture as a subversive *expose* by a female member of the subculture. However, a book review in *Tracks* dismissed the book as unrealistic and its author as unrepresentative of the subculture. At least one female surfer agreed, pointing out that learning to surf 'wasn't like in the movie ... where the girls ... were virtually Surfabout contenders after one afternoon' (*Tracks* October 1985: 86).

Over approximately the past ten years, progressively fewer letters from women readers have been printed in magazines, and many of those that are now urge other women to 'stop thinking so much about yourselves' and 'don't whinge' (*Tracks* March 1991: 11). Women are now *extremely* unlikely to identify as feminists; in fact some deliberately sign their letters 'Non-feminist', presumably to pre-empt any ridicule of their opinions (*Tracks* July 1994: 9). The source of the change is not clear. It may be due to editorial screening of women who write in attempting to reclaim their subjecthood as surfers. It may be that women are actually disengaging from the sub-culture because the identity of 'surfer' has been denied them and are 'going underground' to forge their own surfing identities. There is some evidence that women are withdrawing from the public face of surfing; for example, while there now appear to be more women surfing than ever before, and while the general popularity of competitions appears not to have declined, there are now far fewer women entering competitions than there were a decade ago (*Tracks* October 1994: 109). However, the change may also be due to women in the surfing subculture adopting a 'compliance' strategy, having internalised the assertion that they are in no position to demand equal access to the symbolic resources needed to identify as a 'surfer'. In the next section I argue that postmodern cultures need not be considered out of the reach of criticism, and that a feminism of the postmodern condition is both possible and necessary.

Catching the next wave

The case study has illustrated that the process of postmodernisation does not necessarily do away with gender oppression, but may merely diffuse and disguise it. However, feminist criticism has so far been aimed mainly at postmodern*ism* rather than at the postmodernisation *process* and reactions to that process. Brodribb (1992: 19), for example, argues that postmodernism represses women's truth and denies their subjecthood.[7] Yet there has been little criticism of actual developments in the cultural sphere. The surfing world already denies subjecthood to women, so that their status as Other, and thus the status of male surfers as subjects, can no longer be effectively contested. The proliferation of 'identity-dereifying' images thus 'constitutes as great a threat to women's liberation as do fixed, fundamentalist identities' (Fraser 1991: 175), with the threat arising not from the proliferation of identities *per se* but from the opportunities thereby created to diffuse patriarchy so as to conceal its power in culture and protect it from feminist critique.

The solution, I think, is to acknowledge that 'power diffuses itself through culture' (Maharaj 1995: 61), but to also reject the conclusion that 'power is everywhere and so ultimately nowhere' (Hartsock 1990: 350). We are then compelled to chase power down the capillaries of its diffusion and uncover its various cultural manifestations. That is what I have sought to do through this case study, and I have found the reassertion of gender hierarchies within a postmodernised (sub)culture that had appeared, initially, to undermine such hierarchies The very act of offering a feminist critique of the content of

fragmented cultures has the two-fold effect of exposing gender oppression within those cultures and of opening space for the reassertion of female voices within the culture, especially in areas where members of the culture profess to be immune from such critique. The feminist struggle is in need of *both* deconstruction and reconstruction (Fraser 1991: 175) and the surfing example highlights the necessity for a feminism that can deal with power relations at the level of culture.

What needs to be developed then is not necessarily a 'postmodern feminism', but a feminism of the postmodern condition. This first entails the recognition that women may be excluded from, or disadvantaged by, the rebuilding of 'the social' within postmodern society, as 'women's specific experiences [are] generated by intersecting structures which may derive from *any* social realm [including] culture' (Maharaj 1995: 57, emphasis added). We must then develop the tools to critique inequalities that arise *as a result* of reactions to the postmodernisation process. A feminist concept of structure suitable for the postmodern condition might be developed from the idea that structure is 'constantly being made and remade in a very active [collective] social practice' (Maharaj 1995: 52, 53). If structure is continually (re)constituted by practice, then structure is also 'vulnerable to major changes in practice' (Maharaj 1995: 53) and we can begin to open space for the reclamation of the subjecthood of women within the growing cultural sphere. Such an insight allows feminists to draw fragmented postmodern cultures back within the reach of social critique, while still acknowledging their plurality.

Of course, the case study itself raises questions such as whether postmodernity is capable of fostering scrutiny of itself, and the question of when resistance to postmodernisation may be defined as progressive and when it may be defined as conservative. However, such questions can be resolved only with more cultural case studies and debate of their results. As for the possible sources of women's power to reclaim their subjecthood in postmodernity, I believe that the very act of presenting a feminist critique of one aspect of the postmodern condition represents a source of feminist power, as it belies the unspoken assertion that patriarchy simply dissolves along with modernity.

Notes

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1 e.g., Benhabib and Butler, with reply by Fraser in *Praxis International* 11(2) July 1991: 137-177

2 I am distinguishing between 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernisation' (as in Brodribb 1992: 12, 13). I use 'postmodernisation' to describe the end of 'high' modernity, or 'metanarrative' (Lyotard 1984), without acknowledging a complete breakdown of the social.

3 The existence and nature of 'structure' is debatable, even in the context of modernity, but discussion of that point is outside the scope of this paper.

4 The authors cited treat ambiguity as an abnormal state but I see it as an inherent part of the postmodern condition.

5 For the links between technology and social processes see MacKenzie and Wajcman (1985)

6 The argument that 'culture' constitutes 'structure' is not new; see Eisenstadt (1992: 68).

7 Also see Hartsock (1990) and Christian (1988).

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