Abstract: As a consequence of the dominance of men in recreational Australian surfing culture, the productive potential of the relationships between women who surf has been largely overlooked. However, as a (growing) minority, women who surf tend to know other women who surf, making relationships between women significant. This discussion explores the tensions in how women who surf in Byron Bay avoid and yet engage in the male-dominated politics of recreational surfing, and how this has shaped my own research contributions to surfing culture. In particular, it was their focus on relationships that impacted my approach to research and cultural participation. The women I interviewed were more interested in thinking through the possibilities, ethics and effects of various forms of action for women who surf more broadly, rather than explaining which were the most effective for getting more waves themselves. This had implications for my own research practice, and how I conducted myself in 'contributing to the public good' (Turner, 2012, 6-7) by producing resources for cultural change that aimed to be 'relevant to the actual, concrete lives of women' (McLaren, 2002, 13).

Keywords: physical culture; surfing; women; ethics; feminist cultural studies; public scholarship

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**Going surfing**

Contemporary surfing is the activity of riding waves on a buoyant surf-craft. Primarily taking place in the ocean¹, surfing involves skills such as ocean knowledge, confidence in the water, physical strength, balance, flexibility and persistence. As a physical activity, it creates relationships to people, places and communities, and has developed strong global and local cultures (Evers, 2009; Stranger, 2011). Surfers often emphasize the impact surfing has in their everyday lives, such as Joel Tudor in the November 2009 issue of *Surfer* magazine,

Surfing is so diverse; for everyone it has a different meaning and purpose in their lives. For me surfing is a tribe, not a fucking sport. It’s my family.

Clifton Evers (2006) argues that experiencing surfing is key to understanding its culture and history: if you don’t surf, if you don’t catch waves, then you are not a surfer. With performances and experiences so important to being culturally recognised as a surfer, the historical dominance of men in surfbreaks around Australia has meant that women continue to be excluded from access to waves, as well as cultural media and histories. Since women remain a minority in surfing culture, it is primarily men who surf who continue to benefit from existing cultural knowledges, assumptions and hierarchies and, who are most implicated in regulating and maintaining existing ways of going surfing (Olive, McCuaig & Phillips, 2015).

Margaret Henderson (2001), Douglas Booth (2001) and Clifton Evers (2004) argue that until male surfers recognise that there can be possibly different, female versions of surfing, women will continue to struggle to be accepted and valued as surfers. As Henderson (2001) explains it,

Surfing is a territorial form of pleasure, dreams, and nostalgia. Postmodern surfing thus becomes a fantasized last frontier for sometimes anxious men and youths (329).

In trying to make meaning out of their surfing experiences, relationships and identities, men who surf have established ways of surfing that help them understand

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¹ Surfing also happens in rivers (most famously in China, Wales (UK) and Indonesia), lakes (including Lake Michigan, USA) and in purpose-built wave-pools.
how surfing is performed and what it means, but which also establish cultural boundaries that limit these understandings (Evers, 2004; 2009).

However, this emphasis on men ignores the role women continue to play in creating themselves a space in recreational surfing culture. Recently, a number of projects about women and surfing have used ethnographic methods to illustrate how women who surf centralise other women in their everyday surfing cultural experiences (see for example, Fendt & Wilson, 2012; Knijik et. al., 2010; Roy, 2014; Spowart et al, 2010; Waitt, 2008). This includes my own work, which explored how women who surf in my hometown of Byron Bay, Australia, understand, experience and negotiate the male dominated culture of surfing (Olive, 2013a; Olive, McCuaig & Phillips, 2015). My research was a response to the disconnection I found between literature that located women as marginalised and sexualised by surf media and culture (Henderson, 2001; Stedman,1997), and my own experiences as a recreational surfer in Byron Bay, where I felt included and encouraged. Media representations of highly skilled, professional female surfers do not reflect the experiences of competent, recreational female surfers. To address this, I took everyday, lived experiences of recreational surfing culture as my starting point, shifting away from media representations of professional surfing. Also, my study focused on longboard surfing. Longboarding (riding boards 8 feet or longer) is located as graceful, flowing, and feminine, with women prevalent in the recent resurgence of interest in this style of surfing (Warren & Gibson, 2014). Longboards and shortboards require different approaches to surfing, leading to a different cultural politics than the shortboarding cultures that had previously dominated research about surfing.

To explore how women understand, experience and negotiate surfing culture at an everyday level, I went surfing and participated in surfing culture in Byron Bay as much as I could: I went to surf films, art exhibitions, festivals and parties, hung out and chatted in the beach carpark, and talked incessantly about surfboards, swimsuits and surf media. I interviewed a number of local women, whose ideas and insights became the core of the project. The women I interviewed were local, regular and competent surfers. Collectively, they were slim, heterosexual, able-bodied, and largely white, but were otherwise diverse in terms of age, surfing ability, type of employment, relationship and motherhood status, and other factors. Finally, I published a blog, which had a cultural rather than academic focus in that it was
written in a style that encouraged engagement and feedback from surfers (Olive, 2013b; 2015). The analysis took a feminist cultural studies approach to explore power relations, subjectivities, individual ethics and embodied pedagogies. In this way I examined the ways women not only experience culture, but how they negotiate it, thus exploring women’s participation as part of a complex cultural whole.

Because of my focus on everyday surfing rather than media representations, accounting for the ways that people do not ‘exist in the form of thought’ (Couldry, 1996, 141) was a recurring point in the project. We do not think our lives, we live them, so in this project I aimed to find an approach that allowed me to consider how culture, space, bodies, sex and gender are both conceptual (imagined) and real (material). Focusing on lived experiences had implications for how I engaged with what I was finding through going surfing, interviewing participants and responses on my blog. These issues were important to think about, because as Graeme Turner (2012) argues, cultural studies should always be ‘concerned with its contribution to the public good’ (6-7), while for Margaret McLaren (2002), feminist research ‘must be relevant to the actual, concrete lives of women’ (13). Turner and McLaren reminded me that as well as the maintenance of rigor and critique, feminist cultural studies research requires critical reflection about the ethics and politics of scholarly practice, and I became committed to making a contribution to the ‘public good’ of surfing – one that was culturally appropriate, relevant and productive. I wanted to make a contribution that mattered to women who surf (Olive, 2015). In this way, the research approach, method, findings, and dissemination became intertwined.

Drawing on my findings about how women negotiate the male-dominated culture of surfing, the rest of this discussion explores how women who surf in Byron Bay avoid and engage in politics in surfing culture, and how this has shaped my own contributions to surfing culture (Olive, 2013a). For women who surf in Byron Bay, relationships between women were central to their capacity to negotiate the male-dominated surfbreak. Rather than explicitly resistant negotiations, it was the caring and supportive nature of their choices about how to behave in the surf – as women and towards other women – that I found most effective and inspiring. These negotiations establish women’s presence in the waves in ways that assert their authority as surfers, and which can be understood as the consequences of an ethical relationship to their understandings of surfing culture. The women I interviewed were more interested in thinking through the possibilities, ethics and effects of various
forms of action on women who surf more broadly, rather than adopting those that were the most effective for getting more waves themselves. The approaches of my participants to the politics of the surfbreak showed me ways to effectively participate in the established surfing cultural system, while still doing it my own way and not making things harder for other women.

Women who surf: A differentiated minority

As a consequence of the dominance of men in recreational Australian surfing culture, the productive potential of the relationships between women who surf has been largely overlooked. However, because they remain a (growing) minority, women who surf tend to know the other women who surf where they live, making relationships between women significant.

Sophie²: Well this is a surfing area, as you know. And people go 'Aw! Yeah, you know, Byron Bay is, you know, we’re so lucky, you have girls here', and you know yourself that there’s only, um, they’re all our friends! They’re all our close friends and we love all of them (...) We’ve all met through the water, we have! But still, two hands and we’d be done!

Women who surf in Byron Bay did not see themselves as culturally marginalised because they are women, but as a differentiated minority because they are not straight, white men.

Abi: Okay, let’s say you paddle out [into the surf], and it’s all guys sitting out there. If you’re a guy you paddle out. You think the guys look twice? They don’t look twice. If you’re a girl! You paddle out, let’s say you’re not even in a bikini. (...) So you, there’s not the sex appeal thing. Do you think they look twice? Yeah! They’ll look twice. They’ll definitely look twice. They’ll probably check you out the whole time. Your, your waves will not go unnoticed. (...) If it was just a kid that fits the normal, I mean if it was a European guy in speedos, everyone would look at him twice too. But if it’s a guy that’s your typical Anglican kind of surfer guy wearing normal boardies and whatever, looking the surfer role kind of thing, it will go unnoticed. A girl, even looking the surfer role, would probably go more noticed than a guy.

² Pseudonyms used throughout.
Abi suggested that any difference to the “normal” male majority is, not only femaleness. However, Renee pointed out that when it comes to women, differentiation keeps them from accessing full participation and respect in the surf.

**Renee:** And ‘cause still too, there’s still the less respect anyway, in the surf. ‘Cause you could put an amazing, male surfer and a female together and the guy’s always gonna get more praise. Like he’s gonna get more praise from men. Because obviously [women are] the minority in the water.

In part due to their differentiation, the women I interviewed had a nuanced understanding of the culture and space of surfbreaks, and they were able to see the advantages and disadvantages of different responses. This is not to say that explicitly engaging in cultural politics was important to them.

**Skye:** I really hate it when the ego gets brought into surfing, and when I find myself dragged into that.

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**Sophie:** I believe its politics, always politics. I don’t care what anyone says. You can be a new girl off the block, you can be a new guy off the block, and you can get that one surf. But after that, its politics, and its always gonna be politics, and its, how you play the game (...) I’m different now. I don’t really wanna be part of any of it anymore. I just, um, I really just want to surf.

Like Sophie, all the women I spoke with ‘just want to surf’. They understood that behaviour that transgressed or challenged exiting politics and cultural norms could have consequences, so they avoided explicit resistance to their differentiation. But this did not mean they remained entirely neutral in terms of how people access waves in a busy surfbreak.

**Establishing cultural voices of authority**

According to Michel Foucault (1988) our knowledges and behaviours are learned through our social, cultural and subjective relationships to people around us. Nikolas Rose (1996) suggests that asking ‘in relation to what demands and what forms of authority’ we come know the world (139), helps us highlight the specific and contextual nature of cultural power networks in which we operate. That is, whose are the voices of authority we allow to influence our behaviour and how do we identify them? Understanding the voices of authority we are responding to is important for,
following Foucault, all subjects possess power to maintain and/or respond to the status quo. In power relations, actions have consequences: if women who surf resist the status quo, men may respond and renegotiate their position. But this can be as limiting for men as well as women. As Rose explains, those who govern us must maintain a performance of their own ideals in order to regulate what is normative, right or moral, thus limiting their own possibilities for cultural participation. Yet it is within this constant negotiation of authority – such as the negotiations amongst men and women who surf – that change is also possible. Differing from notions of hegemony, for Foucault, power should always be considered as a potential and productive relationship for all stakeholders in the relationship (Foucault, 1980).

In previous research about women and surfing, the ways women negotiate male-dominated surfing culture has been mostly described in terms of how they are enabled or constrained by men. Yet the relationships between women who surf are equally important and meaningful. Of course, the voices of authority of women upon women are not always enabling. For example, the norms and demands of male surfing voices of authority can be embodied by women as well and, as Gordon Tait (2000) argues, ‘subjectivity is where government is at its most effective’ (141). For example, while Skye doesn’t like aggression in the surf, she admits that she still judges whether women’s surfing performances are ‘good’ by existing, male dominated criteria.

**Skye:** I think women surf differently to men and I actually find it a bit off-putting when I see girls that surf really aggressively like men (…) But I do think men look at it like, ‘Oh yeah. You know, she surfs’. And even I found myself being judgemental if I’m watching a girl shortboarding in a competition thinking, ‘Oh, that’s not as good as the guys.’

Skye recognises that she judges women against existing ways of valuing surfing, but she is also able to reflect on this, noting that her ideas are influenced by established cultural notions of ‘good’ surfing. Resonant of Tait’s (2000) argument about the effectiveness of subjectivity, Gordon Waitt’s (2008) study included female participants who ‘borrow and approximate the social processes found within certain groups of young men-who-surf’ (89). This is apparent in the way 21-year-old Alice, admits that she ‘specifically targets inexperienced young women’ (89).
Alice: Well, obviously you never want new people at your break. It’s not so much new surfers as little girls in their Roxy gear getting out there, thinking that they’re awesome. And, they just sit there, or get in the way.  

In rejecting the ‘little Roxy girls’, Alice is defining how real female surfers look and act, as well as what they wear. And yet like the women I interviewed, Alice also admits that,

Alice: It’s good not to be the only girl out there.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Alice: I don’t know. I guess sometimes it’s just intimidating being the only girl out there. It’s a bit of a boy’s club.

This was apparent in my interviews as well.

Georgie: I’ve had experiences where because there is many other women out there that it’s been great, and you’ve sort of bonded and stuff. And then I’ve had the exact opposite happen, where (...) the couple of girls in the water will be more competitive with you than the guys would be. And, won’t even acknowledge you (...) I mean I suppose maybe they think well, they don’t, just because you’re a girl, they don’t need to talk to you. Like, you know, you’d sit out there and you wouldn’t say g’day to all the guys that are in the water.

Rebecca: And the guys don’t say hi to all the guys either.

Georgie: Yeah exactly. So then maybe they’re just like, well, just because you’re a girl they don’t need to. But I don’t sort of view it that way. I sort of feel like we’re in the minority, a bit, and we need to stick together and support each other out there and stuff. But probably, you know, most girls I’d say would feel that way, in my experience.

As is clear in Georgie’s and Alice’s comments, the same way that men do not always feel the need to establish relationships with the other men in the surf, women do not have to be friendly to each other. However, for the women I interviewed – who aim to get waves without acting like the guys – there is an expectation that women will not make things harder for other women in the surf.

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3 ‘Roxy’ is a mainstream, international female surfwear and clothing brand, which is a sponsor for professional women surfers and surf competitions and is associated with clean cut, smiling, feminine surfer girls.
Yes! Come out here whenever you can!

It is in this space of individual ethics where the capacity for change emerges – once women identify that they are replicating established cultural understandings that marginalise women, they have the option to respond and change this behaviour. For example, Georgie told me that she gets frustrated in the surf when men continually paddle past her, effectively jumping the queue and taking waves before she can get them. I asked whether she’d be willing to use the same tactic in response, but for Georgie, the access to waves that she might gain was over-ridden by how she wanted to be perceived more generally as a surfer.

Georgie: [When I’m having trouble getting waves] I try and think of those surfers that, that get out there and they get waves (...) but still are able to, um, maintain a positive energy and, and share. (...) ‘Cause I’d hate to do that [paddle into lots of waves] and then have people go ‘Oh, there goes that girl who just keeps, you know, paddling up the inside and blah, blah, blah, and she’s so annoying’, like, I’d hate to think that I’d turn into one of those surfers.

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Sophie: (...) you just gotta be determined. You know, just try and stay really calm and be really rational about it and, try not to, you know, cross over to the dark side really. I mean, once, once you, walk those, those steps, one you start to be like them then, you’re like them then aren’t you.

‘Paddling up the inside’, ‘dropping in’ and ‘snaking’ are common tactics used to steal waves from other surfers and were forms of behaviour that were especially frustrating for the women I interviewed. Like Georgie and Sophie, most participants explained they avoided doing particular things unless they saw no other option or wanted to make an especially strong point. In this way, women were reflexive about their relationship to the culture of surfing and made an ethical decision not to ‘cross over to the dark side’, not to act like the guys. That is, they choose not to surf in any way are available to them, but attempt to behave in ways that won’t make access to waves harder for other women. For example, the use of sexual capital was a slightly divisive issue for women I interviewed, with some more bothered by the potential impacts of this kind of behaviour.

Mel: I think we do have advantages in the water, being female. You know, accidentally maybe dropping in on someone, which does happen. (Laughs) Not that
you intentionally, should never intentionally do it, but I think that you can get away with it, definitely. ‘Cause you can smile, you know, and put that little girly, cheeky grin, which is, to take advantage.

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Georgie: (...) I think it’s a whole package thing. (...) I s’pose I’ve seen those girls drop in on guys, and the guys do nothing. Whereas I mean I could say for certain if a not-so-good-looking chick in a wetsuit was to drop in on them (...) I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t necessarily work, like. But I have, yeah I have definitely seen girls using that. (...) And I mean, maybe she’s just going ‘Oh well. I’m not getting waves any other way, I’ll just use whatever works for me’. I don’t know what her, you know, what she’d be thinking about that, but I sit there and think, well, as another girl sitting in the water I’m waiting my turn and I’m not just, you know, dropping in and, I don’t know. I just sort of think it gives girls a bad name.

The women participating in my research were all aware of the male-dominated nature of surfing culture and the ways they were positioned within it. With this understanding they made a number of explicit and considered choices about how they were willing to participate in the lineup, such as what they wore or not paddling up the inside. These women were not interested in becoming surfers in existing terms, but aimed to continue participating in the surf in ways they were comfortable with as individual women. This did not mean rejecting established ideals of surfing, but instead involved negotiating them from their own female understandings of surfing culture.

One of the most common ways that women who surf in Byron Bay responded to their differentiation was by establishing relationships with other women in the surf, and by being kind to each other. This was important to all of the women I interviewed, each of who talked at length about the women they surf with, as well as how they try to be friendly to other women in the surf. This was not only to the women they already knew, but also to women new to a surfbreak, or visiting.

Peta: I’ll always, like, say hello and acknowledge [other women] cause I think even though there are a lot more women and particularly around here, still, still the minority. (...) I always hoot [cheer] chicks on waves.
Shared understandings and relationships between women who surf, however fleeting, are valued for the feelings of shared experiences they represent. As Abi explained, to transgress them feels insulting and disrespectful.

Abi: (...) If you’re one of like, two women out, and the other girl drops in on you, I really, that’s a pet peeve for me (...) because, usually there’s not an equal number of men and women out in the water at the same time, it’s like, you need to be like, ‘Yes! Come out here whenever you can!’ You know what I mean?

How women in Byron Bay surf is not simply a product of a male-dominated surf culture, but of how they understand their relationships and obligations to other women who surf, who share their minority position. Whether maintaining existing knowledge or establishing new ones, women who surf have power and authority of their own. For the women I interviewed, this meant avoiding performing the kinds of behaviour and attitudes in surfing that do not wish to see in other surfers.

**Doing research and contributing to change**

The approach to cultural politics of the women I interviewed is echoed by Michael Silk and David Andrews (2011), who argue that cultural research should be ‘about helping people to empower themselves, determining what research can do for them (not us), and placing knowledge at their disposal to use in whichever way they wish’ (p. 14). But this is a tricky proposition. As Silk and Andrews discuss comprehensively in the same article, the researching positions we take are subjective and politically motivated, often in response to what we locate as an imbalance of power relations. A clear point from my project is that due to the nature of cultural power relations we can never predict the directions of cultural change, so perhaps we need to be more considered and more positioned in the ways we feed our research back into public and cultural spaces (Olive, 2013a). In this way, the work we produce has the capacity to become what Alun Munslow calls an ‘interventionist form of cultural criticism’ (Munslow, 2010, 6).

In my own attempts at ‘interventionist forms of cultural criticism’ I have been lucky to find examples amongst a number of researchers who publish their work in a range of ways, such as Holly Thorpe’s well-written and thought-provoking articles in women’s board sports magazine, Curl, and Clifton Evers’ (no longer operating) blog, Blownglass, and his founding role in the publication and website, Kurungabaa: A journal of literature, history and ideas from the sea. Clif later invited me to become a
contributing editor to both the journal and blog versions of *Kurungabaa*, an opportunity that was educational and productive (see, Olive, 2013a; Olive & Thorpe, 2011). Following their lead, I attempted to make a ‘contribution to the public good’ (Turner, 2012, 6-7) of my own that was critically developed through the research I was doing.

To do this, I wrote about women and surfing on my own and other blogs and in surf magazines, and spoke at surf festivals, art exhibitions, on radio, at schools and at women’s surfing forums. I wanted to respond to established cultural “voices of authority” (Rose, 1996) – in this case, men who surf – by promoting the participation and contributions of women within surfing culture. However, to do so meant becoming a cultural voice of authority myself, which presented immediate questions about the kinds of ideas I should discuss, as well as how these ideas might constrain others in turn (Olive, McCuaig & Phillips, 2015; Nealon, 2008). My work focused on a relatively privileged group and did not engage with issues such as race/ethnicity, (dis)ability and homophobia, so I wanted to minimise how I might be speaking over diverse female surfing experiences. These methodological and ethical obligations played on my mind throughout the project, but ultimately, it was the women participating in my research who helped me find an approach to contributing that made cultural sense. The interviews contradicted my expectations about what I might find and pushed my thinking into a messy space of ethics and pedagogy (Olive, McCuaig & Phillips, 2015). They showed me possibilities for developing a cultural voice of authority that aimed to be enabling for more and different women.

Writing into surfing culture has been productive in contributing female perspectives, understandings and experiences back to a culture dominated by men, as well as providing opportunities for other women to join in the conversation. This is really important – to remember that the research I do and write is not about me (Couldry, 1996; Olive, 2013b). In developing my contributions, I kept in mind the surfing ethics of the women I interviewed helped me find ways to get my stories across without making things harder for other women. This did not mean being coy in my ideas, but it did mean carefully considering the possible cultural readings of what I published or said about women’s experiences of surfing. It also meant avoiding overly prescriptive descriptions of how women should surf, how women should behave in the surf, and how men should treat them, and instead making space for more varied female surfing perspectives. Like the women I interviewed in Byron Bay,
I focused less on critiques of individual women in the surf – which might have contributed to their on-going cultural marginalisation and differentiation – and instead focused on positive, enabling examples of women’s participation in and contributions to surfing culture. Like Abi and Peta, I tried to remember that I ‘need to be like, “Yes! Come out here whenever you can!”’ to other women and to ‘always hoot chicks on waves’.

Over time I discovered that being a female writer in surfing culture made me no less of a minority than in the water. In fact, perhaps more so. On several occasions I was told in conversations and online that my writing voice was a ‘unique’.

[peterbowes]:... Nice work Bec, your voice is unique (2010).

Overall, this uniqueness was received as a good thing. In my online writing, I was overwhelmingly encouraged by readers, both female and male. However, I often still find myself located secondary to male cultural voices. A recent example was my participation on a surf festival panel about ‘Women and Surfing’, where there were only two female participants, with the session chair a man who was sat between us. After speaking at length about his support and promotion of women’s surfing (all true), he asked us different questions, one at a time. Frustrated, after a finishing my own response I began to ask what the other woman thought of that and hand the microphone across the chair to her waiting hand. Together we were able to make it easier to hear what the other thought by renegotiating how the panel ran and how we were able to speak.

The effectiveness of this kind of approach was illustrated in a comment left by Karen under a blog post I wrote on Kurungagbaa, about the absence of women in a book about ‘The 100 Greatest Images of Surfing’. Karen (2011) reflected that Kurungabaa, was ‘the only [website about surfing] where I have always felt that my contribution would be more than tokenism’ and that,

…despite constant encouragement from [my partner], the first post on K’baa [a collective blog] that I felt the urge to engage with was Bec writing on women in the surf. It was an entry point for me and, once I had got my toes wet, I kept coming back.

The continued marginalisation and sexualisation of women in surf culture, media and history is highly problematic, yet my participation in the online surf community engaged Karen in conversation in an ongoing way. The efforts by male contributors
to develop an inclusive space were key in creating space for my own contributions, as well as Karen’s. However, my own contribution to these online and offline discussions as a woman was important in encouraging the participation of more female voices in an historically male-dominated cultural space.

**Conclusion**

As I have written elsewhere with Holly Thorpe (Olive & Thorpe, 2011),

... we have found that it is possible to engage in productive ethical and cultural conversations in the field, but this requires careful consideration of the unique social dynamics and local politics, a reflexive consideration of our role within it, as well as an intimate understanding of the broader culture within which we are working... (432)

The ‘field’ we describe includes cultural media and in all cases, such exchanges are largely possible because of the cultural, local and/or caring relationships surfers share, and the mutual understanding and, perhaps, respect that come from that. This is true in our publications, as well as in the field.

**Georgie**: (...) ‘cause as soon as you make some sort of relationship with somebody by making eye-contact and saying hello, then you don’t, you can’t just go and snake them and do all those things that people that can get waves do.

In this way, the core themes that emerged from the interviews – relationships and the individual ethical negotiations of cultural power relations – offer researchers possibilities for how to engage in practices and pedagogies toward cultural change. Contributing back to surfing culture was my attempt to use my identity as a surfer by taking responsibility for its possible effects on other surfers. As the ever wise Sophie explained to me,

**Sophie**: [Byron Bay] is an area of, that there’s girls and there’s still only a really small amount of girls that surf here. And, and when you look at all the girls that we know, they’re all gutsy and, you know. They’re, they’re not, ah, shrinking violets.

Sophie’s words remind me of Lawrence Grossberg (2012) when he explains that asking challenging disciplinary questions such as these ‘is not a matter of berating cultural studies or those who practice it, but of challenging us to think beyond the

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4 Particular thanks to Clifton Evers, Stu Nettle and Kim Satchell
institutional constraints and habits to which we have become accustomed’ (66-67). These kinds of participatory and embodied critical interventions can be rewarding and productive, but they also require high levels of personal and professional vulnerability in cultural worlds with rules of engagement different than those in universities. As with other forms of public scholarship, by exposing ideas in a public and semi-interactive media, researchers are open to nasty, trite and personal attacks. This has been one of the myriad experiences I have encountered participating in surf media and culture (Olive, 2015; Olive & Thorpe, 2011). However, contributing in this way has helped me reflect on my own cultural relationships and participation and the kinds of obligations that come with that. As Jennifer Ho (2010) explains, contributing back to the cultural community I am researching reminds me that ‘I must hold myself accountable to practice in my scholarship what I preach in my blog’ (190). That is not to say that such approaches to making cultural contributions are easy. However, by taking a cue from women who surf in Byron Bay, as researchers we ‘just gotta be determined’ and not be ‘shrinking violets’. This does not mean telling people how to act or what to do, but, like the women who surf in Byron Bay from who I learned so much, we should contribute in ways that don’t make things harder for the people we wish to support, and which replicate the kinds of behaviours we would like to see in others.

References


