Blurred Lines: Gender, subjectivities and surfing
Intro

- Surfing in Australia is described as sexist and exclusive.

- But my recreational surfing experiences are fun, pleasurable and inclusive.
  - Olive, 2008

- So, how do women understand, experience and negotiate the male-dominated and masculine culture of surfing in Australia?
Method

- Ethnographic approach:
  - Interviews
  - Going surfing (participant observation)
  - Blogging

- Capitalised on the existing relationships I had to surfing (wave-riding), surfing culture (history, media, and cultural knowledge) and to other surfers (local and other crew).

- Helped to develop ‘critical distance’.
Method

... a lot of fun!
Interviews

- 11 women/18 interviews

- White, lower middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, recreational, longboard, female surfers who are an accepted part of their surfing community.
Interviews

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Interviews

Georgie: ... it’s not just your surfing... a girl could surf better than them, but she won’t take that natural place in the lineup out there... I s’pose there’s guys that would say... that happens to them out there as well. I’m sure it does... I just think it would probably happen to a girl more.

Georgie: ...I’ve had paddling advice, from a [guy] who I didn’t think surfed that much better than I did... and I sort of felt like the only reason he was saying it was because I was a girl. Because I didn’t think that he would say it to a guy of the same ability as me.
Interviews

**Abi:** ... there’s definitely weird stuff that happens because... I’m a girl...But, I think I have an advantage ‘cause I’ve surfed for so long and... I can avoid a lot of those situations, because I can go ‘Ok! This is feeling a little awkward’ and... I can, move out of the situation a lot faster than, a lot of other people, so I can avoid a lot of it.
*Skye:* ... I don’t hang out with people who... are like that. The people I do hang out with are supportive and, um, appreciate me surfing.
Going surfing
Realities

Moving north from Byron Bay to live and work and study in Brisbane for the past few years has meant a big shift in my access to surfing. In the past I would surf at least once every day and had an ongoing and real relationship to conditions, banks and spots that were working. I could walk over from my house or jump in the car and drive into town in ten minutes if I wanted. Surfing was easy, accessible and cheap, and a major, everyday part of my life. From Brisbane the nearest break is about an hour away, which is not so dramatic in the scheme of things. However, in terms of my own realities, it feels much further.

My life in Brisbane and the commitments I have here mean that I lack the resources to surf - namely time and money. The hours and costs involved in driving to and from the coast limit my opportunities, and the work I moved here to do has also taken up much more of the time and energy I have available for other things.

Sometimes, I get really bummed about it. Especially when, like this past weekend, there is decent swell. At these times I get texts and calls and invitations from home,

*Come home! There's swell! Why aren't you coming down?*

Or much worse (and meaner) is,

*Haha! Did you see how much swell there is? And you're missing it! Haha!*

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Do I stay or do I go?

The sun was setting, a storm was brewing, the waves were small, the crowd was thick and the air was cold...

But as I stood on the beach, pondering my options, Izzy and Joe convinced me to stay!
Gender, culture, power and agency

- Cultural power structures define and value participation.

- ‘Good’ surfing has been understood as aggressive, explorative, risky, strong and high-performance, which might be limiting for the ways many female (and male) surfing performances are valued.

- Women’s ongoing and alternative surfing approaches are disruptive to these understandings and values.
Post-structural, feminist and cultural theory

- ‘Subjectivities’ are way we embody the complex negotiations between identities, culture, understandings, histories, experiences and physicalities, at an individual level.

- ‘Agency’ is implicit in the never-ceasing intersection of our subjectivities

See, Foucault, 1988; Probyn, 2003; Rose, 1996
Cultural potential of subjectivities

Women are implicitly and inevitably writing themselves into surfing as they do it – reproducing, disrupting and affecting the spaces and subjectivities they encounter.
Thank you
References