

## *Surfer Girls in the New World Order*

Krista Comer

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Reviewed by Stewart Sinclair, Loyola University New Orleans

Krista Comer's *Surfer Girls in the New World Order* reads as if you are surfing it. Reading the introduction feels like paddling arm over arm through the beach-breaks, constantly duck-diving, reverting to each of the footnotes, emerging just outside the breaks having navigated an intellectual confluence of feminist theory, ethnography, and regional studies. The next two hundred pages are the equivalent of what the author describes as blue skies and the perfect ride on a glassy wave. This is not because Comer ceases her academic rigor. Rather, she provides the skill set that the reader needs to combine seemingly disparate notions of place and femininity. The author has crafted an effective and scintillating critical examination that considers the political, environmental, and social ramifications of surfing, illustrating these points through events like the 2002 terrorist attacks in Bali, Indonesia, and eco-tourism in Sayulita, Mexico. Comer's 'surfer girl' is an example of how localisms and globalization are inextricably combined.

As Comer describes this figure, the surfer girl is not a subset of a counter-cultural movement, but one of several complex and hazily defined points of engagement in a conversation involving globalization, localism, environmentalism, and feminism. Comer's research emphasizes how every 'local' is the result of a global model or logic. To illustrate this shifting world of surfing sites and meanings, she draws on ten years of research, varying from close readings of books and pop-culture to studies in feminism and globalization. Comer deals as succinctly with surf films such as *Endless Summer* and *Blue Crush* as she does with Fredric Jameson's studies of globalization and the "untotalizable totality."<sup>1</sup>

There is as much care given to descriptions of boats "pushing off and returning to shore, leaving gasoline rainbows trailing behind in the water"<sup>2</sup> as there is to the subtle and at times astounding contradictions of surf culture. Comer's method is that of "transdisciplinary scholarship," working "between textuality, media, global tourism, and subcultural material life."<sup>3</sup> With this method, she takes sources as diverse as the Gidget novels and films of the late fifties and early sixties, and the development of Roxy Girl Surf wear and the "burkini"—across this wide range of source material, Comer carefully subjects each text to a uniquely critical and flexible practice of close reading.

The book is separated into two parts, the first titled "California Goes Global." This section handles the surfer girl within a historical context, examining the evolution of both

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1 Comer, Kristin. *Surfer Girls in the New World Order* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012), 13.

2 *Ibid.*, 1.

3 *Ibid.*, 11.

the public perception of women in surfing and the realities of their circumstances. In doing so, Comer refutes the notion that the progression of the surfer girl has gone from oppressed to some greater degree of counter-cultural acceptance. In other words, there is no clear progressive arc between the first Gidget novel in 1957 and the release of *Blue Crush* in 2002. In fact, Comer shows how the first Gidget novel set off a series of hostilities in surf culture that were relatively marginalized before its publication. Comer states that “prior to Gidget, gendered power struggles, a kind of leering anger at women in the water, did not characterize sub-cultural identity as it would thereafter.”<sup>4</sup>

Gidget represented the “moving center”<sup>5</sup> between the historical and idealized age of surfing based in its Hawaiian traditions and mythologies, and the crowds and “surfaris”<sup>6</sup> of Southern California that followed the film’s release. Malibu ceased to be an actual surfers’ paradise and became a bastion for tourists and baby-boomers. From this center that is not a center, masculine and localist trends sought unsoiled territory beyond California where the mythical surf spot still existed. Comer points to Bruce Brown’s surf film *Endless Summer* (1966) as the incarnation of these ideologies. The iconic cover photo, still ever-present in the dorm-rooms of adolescent males, is of several surfers holding their boards, walking toward the waves of an untouched beach. To Comer, *Endless Summer* “made explicit what was at least one conclusion of Gidget; it offered a response to the crowds. Flee.”<sup>7</sup> This was all a reaction to a novel that in many respects created a true counter-cultural female character. Gidget ignored the Cold War norms of motherhood and the nuclear family. She didn’t tie herself down to any boy, and she was not the pretty girl who sat on the beach watching the boys play in the water. She was part of the spectacle, not a mere subject to it.

Comer follows the trends in surf culture from this point. The tensions, performances, and hybridities of work and play that arise in the following years result in the hyper-masculinity of big-wave surf movies, as well as the representation of women in surf advertisements. This section, in relation to the whole, examines how Malibu localism becomes intrinsically tied to surfing globally (with all its consumerist ramifications). The surf camps, eco-tourism, and other aspects of global surf culture that arise from the Gidget era again come together in a single cultural object. Through *Blue Crush*, Comer examines the third-wave feminist surfer girl in the contemporary surfing scene. This time, the localism is the significantly more territorial and masculine Pipeline break in Hawai’i. While Comer neither endorses nor criticizes the film, she does cause one to pause and reevaluate what is at play in a film that seems easily dismissed, but in fact focuses and defines the surfer girl in public perception.

The second section of Comer’s book is titled “Globalization from Below.” Having established critical and historical contexts through the introduction and first part of the book, the final section digs deep into hot spots of eco-tourism. Comer describes trips to the Las Olas surf camp in Sayulita, described in camp brochures as a “reverse finishing

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4 Ibid., 35.

5 Ibid., 37.

6 Ibid., 7.

7 Ibid., 37.

school,” intended to “make girls out of women.”<sup>8</sup> These luxury campers call themselves surfistas, a term that brings together several of the book’s themes. In this complex locus, Comer explores NAFTA, eco-tourism, and even the ins and outs of Mexican international real estate markets. She develops these subjects through examinations of the cash flow through the Las Olas tourist circuit, and on a larger scale through research into Mexican “mega-destination construction efforts.”<sup>9</sup> Comer analyzes the falsity of touristic “green zones,” descriptions that act as “public relations soundbites for conscience-pricked American travel markets, rather than credible efforts to meet any kind of responsible tourism.”<sup>10</sup> These projects force local communities to relocate and divert money from local economies to U.S. businesses. Sayulita becomes another site for demonstrating the complex interplay of localism and globalization.

Nothing in Comer’s research resolves comfortably. Perhaps this is the nature of the New World Order: because a B-movie in Southern California can motivate a generation to turn the pristine oceans of the world into their playground, nothing can ever quite settle, but rather everything is subject to the perturbations of capital and liquid markets. Still, one finds earnest hope in the stories of the Paradise Surf Shop or the inspiring life of Hawaiian surfer Rell Sun. Comer has taken surfing, as examined through her own academic interests, and reflected on both the broad tides of globalization and the small wakes of real people in specific places.

She ends her book in Houston. The last photograph is of her niece Sammie in the North Shore Surf Club. They paddle out from the beaches in Galveston on the Gulf Coast, where surf goes to die. This is a provocative decision, compositionally speaking. Comer’s book provides lessons for other locations, recreations, exoticisms; it says a lot about the products of privilege and the precarious possibilities of globalization. The author breathed it as she grew up in Oxnard, California, and now is yet another sort of West Coast expatriate, profoundly influenced by the place from which she came, even seeking to reproduce it in a new place. Comer sees the same struggles in place, femininity, and culture as she did in California, combined with the pre-existing social conditions native to Texas. Here in Louisiana, possibly the only place in the United States with surf worse than Texas, there are a few die-hards who rode the almost mythical breaks at Fourchon Beach. These Cajun surfers have lately been kept from Fourchon as a result of the Deepwater Horizon spill. Meanwhile hurricanes are destroying the beaches faster than tourists at Waimea Bay. Comer’s work applies, even here and especially now.

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**Stewart Sinclair** is from Ventura, California. He studies composition and literature at Loyola University New Orleans, where he is currently analyzing the relationship between surf culture and environmental thought. He blogs regularly on this subject at [thedeepwaterbreaks.tumblr.com](http://thedeepwaterbreaks.tumblr.com).

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 133.