This paper seeks to examine and analyse the manner in which three coming-of-age or rites-of-passage films — *Gidget* (1959), *Puberty Blues* (1981) and *Blue Crush* (2002) — seek to portray the relationship between female adolescence and surfing. In a sport that remains predominantly white, middle class and male — recreationally, professionally and in its key representations — these three films provide historians and cultural analysts with a suitable terrain to explore that relationship through focusing a lens on the interaction between content and context. Surfing's relationship to sex and gender appears to crash onto the shore of popular culture in waves of inconsistency, contradiction and extremes. Scholarly examination is warranted to further our understanding of gender issues, female adolescence, patriarchal anxiety and the shifting cultural significance of the surfing lifestyle.
Surfing Hollywood: History, Heroes and Hodads

Following on from the explosion of teen films made in Hollywood in the late 1940s and the 1950s linking adolescents to juvenile delinquency (e.g. Devil on Wheels (1947), The Wild One (1954), Blackboard Jungle (1955) and Rebel Without a Cause (1955)), Gidget (1959) provided welcome relief to an American public that was becoming uncomfortably accustomed to seeing its young people portrayed in the cinema as rebellious, antisocial felons rejecting the American Dream and seemingly devoid of the Protestant work ethic. Doherty (2002) reminds us that juvenile delinquency was a national preoccupation in the 1950s and that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover had claimed the domestic menace of delinquency was second only to Communism as a threat to the American way of life. Discussing the perceived threat to mainstream America posed by Biker iconography in the 1950s, Phillips (2005) points to the teenagers of the 1950s possessing:

[a] new cohesive generational sensibility, spurred by increasingly rapid social change, new economic freedom, and common generational experiences, particularly high school. This led to tremendous interest in and criticism of them on the part of parents, cultural leaders, and elected officials.

Stratton (1985) argues that besides the hippies, white America has produced two subcultures - bikers and surfers. Thompson (1966) writing about bikers and Irwin (1973) writing about surfers, share the point of view that both subcultures were products of discontent, disillusionment and a refusal by many veterans and civilians to return to what they viewed as petty pursuits of pre-war America. Although surfing asserts fundamentals of capitalism - consumerism and individualism - its most skilled devotees, experts and heroes in the 1950s were involved in the pursuit of non-productive, hedonistic leisure. Time magazine ran a series of articles in the late 1950s that linked surfing with the various symbols of delinquency that had
already made their mark on the landscape of popular culture. The conflict inherent in surfing being approached by youth as a ‘lifestyle’ and pursued constantly, rather than as a sport undertaken as a part of structured leisure time, subsided temporarily in the late 1950s when teenagers were identified by advertisers as a market to be exploited. Ormond (2002) writes that at this time there “was a change in attitude from the teenager as a threat to the teenager as ‘clean teen’, a phenomenon with which surfing was associated.” Surfing was becoming more accessible for youth, partly due to the development of surfboards which were cheaper, lighter and both easier to manoeuvre and transport.

A wider availability of the motor car also assisted surfers to move from beach to beach and to transport their boards.

By 1959 when the Columbia Pictures Corporation released Gidget, the ‘mean teen’ films of the American International Picture studio had extensively exploited the genre that shared moral panic ingredients including gangs, violence, anti-authoritarianism, rock and roll and motorcycles. Gidget fuelled the teen surf and sand craze in American cinema and popular culture that was to endure until the mid-1960s, when the interest in these ‘clean teen’ films waned and less frivolous concerns were beginning to resonate with American youth. Wedged between the ‘mean teen’ films and anti-establishment and counter-cultural films (e.g. Hallucination Generation (1966), The Hooked Generation (1968), Psych Out (1968), Easy Rider (1969)), roughly two dozen low-budget surf and sand films were made by Hollywood studios.

Surfing was still ‘extraordinary’ in the 1950s and there were no more than “a couple of thousand” surfers on the coastline of the United States. 

Columbia, Alta Vista, Patton and American International Pictures made, as mentioned, around two dozen beach films from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s and during that period, surfing’s elevation in popular culture saw it surpass rock and roll as the

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national youth fad of choice. By 1961, rock and roll icon Elvis Presley would be combining surfing and popular music in the film Blue Hawaii.

Most of these films are more appropriately understood as beach films rather than surfing films. With the exception of Ride the Wild Surf (1964), which contains a surfing sequence filmed at Waimea Bay, the films tended toward formulaic romances and contained little surfing. Leuras (1984: 127) reminds us that the films were often dismissed for being “unbearably thin” and that surfers “cringed” at the films because they saw them as recipes for hodad invasions. Surfers resented the beach being represented as an extension of the suburban back yard and this resentment was partly based on the explosion in the number of people taking up the sport. Malibu was the first break to suffer from overcrowding. Warshaw (2003: 360) claims that at Malibu there was “up to 150 surfers in the lineup at the same time by the summer of 1961.” The films were almost universally loathed or completely ignored by surfers because of the mass interest they created in an elite sport and equally dismissed by critics for mindlessly presenting the comforting conformity of the American teen prancing about in a perpetual summer where white kids have a good time.

Many of the narratives of these beach films seem to exist in an historical vacuum devoid of social conflict and excised of overt sexuality; yet the films struck a chord with American youth throughout the country and this was reflected at the box office. Beach Party (1963) set box office records, despite the stars being Italian-Americans (Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon) playing southern Californian surfers. Bikini Beach (1964) was American International Picture’s biggest-grossing film ever and Muscle Beach Party (1964) cost $300 000 and grossed $12 million.
But it was Columbia Pictures’ *Gidget* that had the biggest impact on American youth, providing moral guardians with a reprieve from teenage movies based on social disruption. *Variety* expressed relief that *Gidget* was a teenage comedy in which the kids are, for once, healthy and attractive young people instead of in some phase of juvenile depravity. Stecyk (2002: 121) claims the *Gidget* phenomenon and subsequent franchise to be “the most successful and longest-running episode of teenage exploitation since Joan of Arc.”

**Gidget: Turning on the Suburbs**

*Surfing is out of this world. You can’t imagine the thrill of shooting the curl. It positively surpasses every living emotion I’ve ever had.*

Hollywood screenwriter Frederick Kohner based his novel - *Gidget - The Little Girl with Big Ideas* - upon stories about the Malibu surfing fraternity told to him by his fifteen-year-old daughter Kathy, the youngest of his two daughters. Kathy had started surfing the previous year. Frederick Kohner was a Holocaust refugee who had settled in Brentwood, an affluent suburb of Los Angeles. He had earned an Oscar nomination for best original story for *Mad About the Music* (1938). Kohner was best known for writing light comedies, some of which were adapted to musicals, such as *Three Daring Daughters* (1948) and *Nancy Goes to Rio* (1950). He was also credited as one of the writers involved in Laurel and Hardy’s last film, *Atoll K* (1951), which was later released in the United States as *Utopia* (1954).

The 156-page hardback copy of *Gidget* was published by New York’s George Putnam’s Sons in September 1957 and sold about half a million copies. *Life* magazine assisted in the publicity for the book by publishing *Gidget Makes the Grade* and including photos of
Kathy Kohner and some of the surfers featured in the novel. *Life* reported that among the surfers themselves, “the novel (Gidget) made hardly a ripple. ‘If I had a couple of bucks to buy a book,’ said one ‘I wouldn’t. I’d buy some beer.’” Warshaw (2003: 224) claims Kohner’s book “is both funnier and darker than the like-titled movies and television shows that followed. The surfers talk dirtier, and the tedium and peril of ’50s suburban living are rendered as vividly as the easygoing good times.” May (1999) suggests that the novel expanded surfing’s fashionable influence in Los Angeles high schools. Kohner sold the rights to *Gidget* to Columbia Pictures for $50,000 and adapted his novel into a screenplay. The film appeared in cinemas in 1959, the same year that another enduring icon of idealised, wholesome, American teenage femininity – Barbara Millicent Roberts or Barbie - made her debut wearing a ponytail and a striped swimsuit at the American Toy Fair. But Barbie did not surf. *Gidget* would travel to Hawaii and Rome in subsequent films and the *Gidget* franchise would expand to three television series and a musical. *Gidget - The Musical* was co-written by Frances Ford Coppola and performed in California in 2000.

**Gidget, Lolita and Anxious Dads**

Another novel by a European immigrant involving a young female – Nabakov’s *Lolita* – was published in the United States by *Gidget’s* publisher in August 1958. Stillman (2002: 124) claims favourable comparisons were made, with some critics hailing Kohner’s work “for its authentic evocation of a curious subculture.” Nash (2002: 341) has argued that the overt sexuality of *Lolita* is “fundamentally the same sexuality which undergirds father/daughter relationships in more ‘wholesome entertainment’” such as *Gidget*. Both novels share in the creation of father-figure anxiety due to the representation of adolescent femininity as a disruptive force.

The issue of adolescent femininity framed as a sexual problem has attracted attention from a number of scholars. Whitney (2002)
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argues that Oedipal conflicts give Gidget its structure and keep its protagonist within the well-policed boundaries of the patriarchal realm. Scheiner's (2000) study of the representation of girls in popular film between 1920 and 1950 found that sexuality was the dominant theme in girls' construction on film and that this theme was most often expressed through "parental anxiety about chastity" (Nash, 2002: 343). Such readings see the longevity of the Gidget franchise as owing a good sum of its endurance to the ability to reproduce the dominant ideologies of middle-class, heterosexual adolescent femininity. Further more Gidget provides instruction on the apparent logic of the sensible repression of desire and female subordination to the authority of male and family expectation.

Gidget: Surfing Around Conformity
Gidget revolves around the beachside adventures of Frances Lawrence (Sandra Dee) and her romantic interest, Moondoggie (James Darren). Frances is persuaded by her friends to attend the beach where "gorgeous hunks of male" can be found. Frances is neither as well physically developed or as interested in boys as is her friend Patty (Patti Kane). Patty points out that Gidget is "more fish than dish. To put it bluntly, the kid's studied up on about everything but sex." At the beach, while her friends vie for the attention of the surfer boys, Frances resolves to ride the waves. She buys a board and with the endorsement of "Kahoona" (Cliff Robertson), Frances is renamed Gidget (a cross between a girl and midget) and accepted into the surfers' group as 'one of the boys'.

Admired by all the college boys who are on the beach for summer vacation, Kahoona proclaims that surfing is his full-time passion, "not a summer romance." When Gidget realises Kahoona does not have a goal in life other than to surf, she confronts his lack of ambition with the question: "doesn't everyone need a goal?" Although unconvinced by "The Gidge" as he calls her, the seeds of doubt regarding the worthiness of his 'surfbum' lifestyle are planted.
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and Kahoona will return to the ambition once apparent during his Air Force training as a pilot for the Korean War.

Within the affectionate confines of the middle-class-cum-nuclear home, Gidget is provided with ‘womanly’ advice from her mother. Mrs. Lawrence (Mary Laroche) points to a tapestry handcrafted by Gidget's grandmother, that states: “To be a real woman is to bring out the best in a man.” McParland (2001: 7) claims the tapestry hangs on the bedroom wall of the film’s heroine “like a life buoy on an ocean liner.” There is no mistaking that this tapestry signifies both ideology and purpose – taming and controlling Moondoggie and Kahoona. Upon learning that Kahoona has taken a job with Trans-State Airlines and that Moondoggie wants her to wear his pin, Gidget subtly acknowledges her grandmother’s sage advice, exultant that she was the reasoning force behind encouraging Kahoona and Moondoggie to make responsible choices. In reverence to his parents’ authority, Moondoggie will return to law school after giving Gidget his promise pin. Gidget triumphantly wears Moondoggie's pin knowing that her grandmother’s motto turned out to be right. While she breathlessly declared her surfing exploits as ‘the ultimate’ she later declares that her feelings for Moondoggie were ‘the absolute ultimate.’ Surfing was no more than a casual, youthful summer expedition before the real business of lifelong commitment through marriage, domestic tranquillity, conformity and middle-class aspiration. Indeed, surfing was a summer romance.

In Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media, Douglas (1994: 4) writes that “one of my highest ambitions was to be just like Gidget, popular, cute and perky.” Nash (2002: 345) views ‘perky’ as an idealised trait of femininity that “bridged the polarities of sanctioned masculinity and femininity”. Douglas (1994: 108) also argues that ‘perky’ was “assertiveness masquerading as cuteness” and that it provided “fabulous camouflage” for a female to achieve aspirations without having to abandon the conventional
characteristics of submissive and subordinate feminity that remain obligatory to accumulate and preserve approval from patriarchal culture. Gidget’s ‘perkiness’ was never threatening and never sought to contest Cold War patriarchal authority.

Gidget forever altered surfing’s image, as screenwriters carved out a “highly romanticised beach atmosphere replete with tribal overtones: bonfires, ukulele sounds, flames from tiki lamps danced on the beach, all backed by the rolling beat of bongo drums” (Crawford, no date). These depictions assisted in the popular imagination positioning sensual images of the beach and surfing lifestyle in opposition to a dominant Cold War culture of conformity.

In Gidget, as Crawford (no date) points out, “questions about sexuality, careers and leisure are raised and answered” so as to infuse the symbolic world of surf culture in post-World War II California with a lesson in morality. Sandra Dee emerged as a sweet, old-fashioned, virginal throwback to more conservative values. The all-American girl showed that teen rebellion did not have to be angry and angst-ridden but could be frivolous and fun - providing it was merely a temporary diversion from middle-class obligation. Gidget ushered in the morality of the “clean teen” picture which appealed to young women filmgoers in the late Eisenhower-era, while offering attractive young women in bikinis and the thrill of surfing to young men. Surfing did not really matter in Gidget as much as a well-defined value system that acknowledged patriarchal power through privileging heterosexual femininity, middle-class responsibility and commitment to conformity.

**Puberty Blues: Not Just Happy Memories**

*We wrote 'Puberty Blues' because at that age you have no objectivity about what's going on with you, you think that that's normal. And we wanted to show the girls that they didn't have*
to be sperm spittoons, you know, they could have another identity." (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2003)

*Puberty Blues* is a semi-autobiographical novel written by Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey, who both grew up on Sydney’s southern beaches. The novel is set in the early 1970s and was first published by McPhee Gribble in 1979 when the authors were twenty years of age. Lette and Carey had started writing together when they were thirteen and moved into a flat together when they were sixteen. They became the satirical duo, The Salami Sisters, and gained a newspaper column with *The Sun-Herald* newspaper in Sydney. The hedonistic and anti-authoritarian pre-eminent representation of surfing that was already in widespread circulation in Australian society was explained and exploited throughout the book. A number of feature films that used the Australian surfing subculture for subject matter and had helped establish this representation were already in circulation and included *Highway One* (1977), *Summer City* (1977) and *Palm Beach* (1979).

The book was re-issued in 2002 by Pan MacMillan and contained forewords of contesting perspectives by two iconic Australian women: Kylie Minogue and Germaine Greer. Minogue (2002: ix) nostalgically recalls the guilty pleasure of a thirteen-year-old being “whisked away into a world of boys, the beach and best friends” and states that reading the book provided a “fond memory of my early teenage years.” Greer’s foreword lacks such sentiment and is anti-nostalgic, pointing out that the “tribal society into which Debbie and Sue are so painfully and destructively inducted still rules in the dead reaches of suburbia” (2002: xi). Greer elaborates that the fear of abject boredom that so terrified and motivated Debbie and Sue to resist suburban, middle class conformity and its inherent expectations remains potent in Australia today. Greer argues that the boredom “has deepened into total inertia and deep silence; in most of the endless streets of Australian suburbia absolutely nothing is
happening except behind the closed doors of teenagers’ bedrooms, on the Net and on the phone” (2002: xii).

The film of the novel was undertaken by a team helmed by Bruce Beresford, whose previous directing credits included comedic ‘ocker’ films that addressed subject matter pertinent to post-war Australian identity and masculinity. Beresford (2003) claims he bought a copy of Puberty Blues from a newsagent while waiting for a bus in North Sydney and that he became instantly attracted to the subject matter and its authentic voice. Joan Long, who had written and produced Caddie (1976) and The Picture-Show Man (1976) had already acquired the rights to the book with the intention of making Puberty Blues into a film. Long (National Film and Sound Archive, no date) wrote that she had been attracted to the “humour and authenticity about young women growing up; I felt we’d seen enough films about teenage boys.” Long produced the film, Margaret Kelly co-produced and wrote the screenplay.

The film is ranked at forty-two on the Australian Film Commission’s compilation of the top performing Australian-made films in Australia between 1966 and 2004. Speed (2003) has pointed out that the only other film centrally focused on the lives of teenagers that sits above Puberty Blues in this list is Looking for AliBrandi (2002). Cunningham (2004) acknowledges that what makes Puberty Blues “so memorable and popular is the way it tapped into the trash-talking vernacular of the surfing subculture, especially as filtered through high school students.”

Sun and Surf and Sand and Sex
For censorship reasons, Debbie and Sue are portrayed as sixteen-years-old in the film, while they are thirteen in the novel. This significantly shifted the issue of adolescent sex into a morally safer realm of state sanctioned sexuality because sixteen is the age of heterosexual consent in New South Wales. Lette later claimed that:
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“The one thing I didn't like about the film was that in the book, the girls are 13 . . . that gave it its whole poignancy, that the girls are so young when they're going through that, but they had to escalate the girls' ages to 16 for the film, for censorship reasons, so that was a real shame.”\(^{13}\) *The New York Times* film critic Janet Maslin (1983) claims the film “overplays” the “mechanical, unromantic, nature of the sex between its characters” and further comments that while Beresford’s adaptation may be “true to the novel” and “even true to life,” in the “context of this essentially gentle movie, it’s just a little too hardhearted.”

However, there seems to be little in *Puberty Blues* that lends support to the thesis that Beresford’s rendition of the novel is an essentially gentle film. The representation of young male surfers and their predatory attitudes towards girls in the film strongly resonates with the recollection of Australian surfing champion Nat Young when he describes teenage sex at Collaroy beach on Sydney’s north shore in 1963. Young wrote:

> The Grunter was really into group sex and we all greeted her with open flies every time we saw her getting off the school bus. This began happening a few times a week on a regular basis, then every weekend when all the crew at Collaroy would join the queue . . . Other girls from our beach started to get a bit jealous of all the attention the Grunter was getting and some decided it was better to join her if they couldn’t beat her. The competition was terrific. “Brenda the Bender”, “Sally Apple Bowels”, the list got longer and longer and we had plenty of activity down at the beach in between riding waves. (Young, 1998: 25-26)

Similarly, such an attitude would seem somewhat entrenched in Australian male surfing culture before Young’s recollection. The suggestion that group sex involving many males and a single female
might be one way to pass the time between surf s is implied in the
cartoon attached to this article. The cartoon was printed in the
second and final edition of Australia’s first surfing magazine, *The
Australasian Surfer*.¹⁴

![Cartoon Image]

(The permission of the artist is gratefully acknowledged.)

Friends Debbie Vickers (Nell Schofield) and Sue Knight (Jad
Capelja) are seeking to be accepted as part of a surfing subculture in
Sydney. The girls find that acceptance among the group is premised
upon compliance with, and involvement in, delinquent activities.
Virginity should be surrendered as soon as possible. Control and
acceptance within the clique is attained through self-policing,
subservience and accommodation of the desires of “the top surfer”
boys. Boys surf, girls watch. Boys demand, girls fetch. Girls request,
boys repress. Boys are active in the ocean, girls are passive on the
beach. Girls are expected to watch the boys surf. The relationships
among the girls other than Debbie and Sue are clearly predicated
upon discussion of sexual activity. Just as Gidget challenged the
Kahoona about his need for a goal, Debbie repeatedly questions the
boys as to why they don’t want to “do something” and she
challenges them to consider that there is more to life than just surfing or thinking about surfing. Fiske (1987: 69) has noted that the physical sensation is the main point about the meaning of surfing. The interest in physical sensation and pleasure makes its youthful male practitioners and their ‘life of sensation’ a threat to the disciplined rigour and responsibility concerns of the middle class. Conflict between girls and boys concerning physical sensation, passivity and action and responsibility and hedonism is at the centre of the film’s concerns.

**Greenhills: Status Migration**

In the film’s opening, best friends Debbie and Sue first appear as explorers traipsing through the sand of a densely populated metropolitan Sydney beach, in search of the utopian Greenhills where homelife, middle-class expectation and conformity can be forgotten, boredom can be avoided and social status as “dickheads” can be transcended. But like the “Italian family groups” that have arrived in the “dickhead land” of South Cronulla from where Debbie and Sue are fleeing; arrival, presence and visibility will not immediately denote acceptance. Just as the Italian family groups must earn acceptance in their new country, Debbie and Sue must earn acceptance into Greenhills through participation in a conformity of rebellion that represses individual identity to the demands of a homogeneous group. Debbie’s narration explains the desire for social mobility between three identifiable areas of Cronulla Beach: South Cronulla, North Cronulla and Greenhills. Arrival in Greenhills is challenged by other young women who ask among themselves what “they” are doing “here” and are dismissive of the new arrivals as “brown-nosers” and “crawlers.” This is done through off-screen dialogue to create a sense of disembodied voices that reflect an homogenous attitude rather than an individual opinion.

The opening scene in *Puberty Blues* reveals that the metropolitan beach, the mythical yet ineffaceable icon of Australian
egalitarianism, is as socially stratified as the variety of postcodes that lie just behind its boundaries. Clearly, there are divisions based upon social capital. Schofield (internet source, 2005) claims the segregation and hierarchy reflected her own beach experience at Bondi:

‘Em and I weren’t exactly dickheads, or ‘westies’ as we called them, but we weren’t in the top gang either when we first made our moves on Bondi.’ There was, however, a similar delineation of zones. The coolest of the cool hung out on the hill above South Bondi with the best view of the waves. There was another gang, the Rock Crew, who oiled their bulging biceps around an exposed rock just down from the southernmost ramp off the promenade. These guys surfed a bit but mostly they were interested in modelling menswear and plucking the spunkiest chickies off the sand. Way down at the northern end of the beach was Dagsville — no one ever surfed there unless the swell was really pumping.

Similar to the beach, the surf is also divided into territories that rely upon social capital. The first detailed image of surfing in Puberty Blues is diametrically oppositional to surfing’s popular representations that emphasise individuality, freedom and communion with nature. Five board riders and a surf-ski take off on one wave, demonstrating little regard for surfing etiquette and no concern for violating surfing’s ‘first commandment’ of not dropping in, which Warshaw (2003: 165) suggests is “generally considered nothing less than wave theft.” As the camera pans and follows the male surfers on the wave, a labyrinth of heavy industry that lies just beyond the beach at Kurnell comes into frame. The surfscape suggests a highly competitive, technological, urban environment — which is precisely the conditions that most Australian boardriders surf in most of the time.
Paul Scott

Surf Culture: Gendered Boundaries All Around

The determination of territory in the surf is authorised by the male surf club members who have state sanctioned control of the space. There is a recent history of conflict in Australia, particularly in New South Wales, between the popular image of selfless, bronzed heroes of surf clubs and individual, hedonistic surfboard riders. Conflict still occurs on Australian beaches between the two groups and often concerns the positioning of swimming flags for bathers and how such location can interfere with surfboard riding. At Greenhills on another day just like any other day, when the boys are surfing and the girls are on the beach supposedly observing the feats of the boys, Debbie expresses that she wishes “we” had a surfboard. The passivity of sitting, waiting and watching has motivated Debbie’s desire to participate in the boys’ activity. Sue is supportive of her friend and suggests asking the boys for a loan of a surfboard. Maintaining the thematic consistency throughout the film where girls are defined in opposition to boys, one of the Greenhills’ girls states that “Girls don’t surf.” When Sue asks if she can borrow the board from Strach, he asks “what for?” It is inconceivable that a girl would ask to borrow a surfboard, because “girls don’t surf.” Debbie wants to borrow a board and a “clubbie wanker” wants to take Glen’s board for allegedly riding between the flags. This is too much for Strach. A girl can not borrow his surfboard and an authority figure cannot confiscate a surfboard that belongs to his mate. Strach attaches great importance to the maintenance of possession of a surfboard by its rightful owner, as it is the commodity that symbolises subcultural identity. Despite having been refused the opportunity to borrow Strach’s surfboard—“because you might ding it”- Debbie and Sue and the other Greenhills girls cheer on their boyfriends involved in the beach fight. Beresford treats the matter as farcical and accompanies the slapstick with the Dick Dale genre of surf guitar fury, in a scene that can best be viewed as a misplaced homage to the Hollywood beach films of the 1960s. However, it further emphasises that the beach is the site of multiple contestation.
Both the territory of the beach and the ocean are highly stratified and hierarchical spaces where egalitarianism exists only in myth. Despite the lifesavers having state sanctioned control of the beach and the ocean, the Greenhills surfers use social capital to give and refuse access to territory. Nowhere is this more apparent than when a paddle-out is undertaken to commemorate the death of Gary.\textsuperscript{15} Gary’s surfboard is impaled with a tree branch, Debbie’s friendship ring is placed on the branch and the board is paddled out into the line up. The board is pushed out to sea, accompanied by Danny declaring with an authority vested in him by the other surfers that “the beach is closed for three days.” Only the boys paddle out to farewell a fallen comrade. The girls, not surprisingly, remain behind on the beach next to a bonfire fuelled by petrochemicals and are excluded from this symbolic burial at sea. The girls are excluded from equal participation in the male rituals of death as well the male rituals of life.

Gendered behavioural boundaries extend to rudimentary bodily functions and are suppressed by the girls in the company of boys, with the narrator explaining that:

Girls never ate in front of their boyfriends. It was considered unladylike to open your mouth and shove something in it. We were also busting to go to the lavatory, but that was too rude for girls. Our stomachs rumbled and our bladders burst.

While Debbie’s “never” eating remark loses some of its potency because of its implied sexual connotations: “it was unladylike to open your mouth and shove something in it,” it does raise concerns around eating disorders.

The visibility, positions and space that the girls can attain within the subculture are limited by the resistance and control mechanisms of both the girls and the boys. Concerns regarding essential bodily
functions and what was considered ‘ladylike’ emphasise an orientation towards an idealised femininity that is built upon middle-class values and is subservient to dominant patriarchal expectations.

**Boys and Surfboards: Subservience and Liberation**

Debbie and Sue reject their roles as “rooting machines” and the limitations of passivity on offer through the Greenhills gang. They emerge from a shop with a surfboard and carry it together across a street while being abused by boys on the street and boys in cars. Sue ashamedly says that: “Everyone will see us.” Debbie replies: “Too bad.” They and those around them understand that to publicly possess a surfboard is to transgress social boundaries. There is symmetry at play here that echoes the beginning of the film. Debbie and Sue again trapse along the same stretch of sand that took them to Greenhills. They are returning to where their highly anticipated but ultimately unsatisfactory exit from “dickhead land” had commenced. They are carrying their own surfboard, whose symbolic potency has transcended a paradigm of oppression, passivity and boredom and now become a symbol of potential liberation and independence.

In *Puberty Blues*, the surfing subculture is represented as a site that acts as a magnet to the girls in the film because it represents an opportunity to defy the stultifying boredom of suburban conformity, yet as Speed (2004:57) points out, the subculture and its limitations upon the same girls motivates “their eventual defiance of its customs.” Gender tensions and anxieties can be seen throughout the film. While the girls may be passive in many scenes, Dermody and Jacka (1988: 173) note that the boys are simply the girls’ “temporary adornments, of little importance or character.” The hostility and outrage that is expressed by the boys when Debbie and Sue take to the water on a surfboard is a reaction to the challenge posed to the structure of a subculture that feminism was yet to assail. Boys were appealing to Debbie and Sue because they represented liberation.
from the boredom of family existence. But ultimately boys were more oppressive than the family environment. The film’s resolution of defiance against the status quo within the subculture can be seen as a liberating strike for independent action. Surfing symbolises both oppression and liberation for the female protagonists. The film did encourage female participation in surfing, but not everyone was enthusiastic, as Lette (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2003) notes:

Well, when *Puberty Blues* came out, because, I mean, it was a strong feminist tract, and it had an immediate impact . . . the year *Puberty Blues* came out, it was 99 percent girls going out on their surfboards and we could see an immediate roll-on effect from the book and the film. But what really depressed me when I went back there is . . . that the boys had accepted the women surfing, but it was the other women that hadn’t accepted it.

In twenty years time, *Blue Crush* would put such concern to rest while raising different issues pertinent to women and surfing.

**Blue Crush**

*At various cultural moments, surfing has appeared as the embodiment of everything cool and wild and free; this is one of those moments. To be a girl surfer is even cooler, wilder, and more modern than being a guy surfer: Surfing has always been such a male sport that for a man to do it doesn’t defy any received ideas; to be a girl surfer is to be all that surfing represents, plus the extra charge of being a girl in a tough guy’s domain. To be a surfer girl in a cool place like Hawaii is perhaps the apotheosis of all that is cool and wild and modern and sexy and defiant.*

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Blue Crush is based upon the article “The Maui Surfer Girls” by journalist Susan Orlean which originally appeared in the 1998 Fall edition of Outside magazine under the title “Life’s Swell” (quoted above). Orlean’s article captures a moment in the girls’ lives when surfing and aspiration is all that matters. Underlying that moment was an anxious query regarding the future of the girls who are teetering on the brink of surfing either becoming a profession or a pastime. The dream of becoming sponsored surfers must be maintained for as long as possible for the girls in Orlean’s story, because the likelihood of becoming lifetime wage-slaves is too confronting.

The film’s title was purchased from Bill Ballard, whose 1998 documentary about female surfing carried the same name. It was the first Hollywood-made film that features women surfers since Gidget (1959) and Warshaw (2003: 68) claims it is the most expensive surf movie ever made. The screenplay was written by John Stockwell and Lizzy Weiss. The film’s main characters are Anne Marie (Kate Bosworth), Eden (Michelle Rodriguez), Lena (Sanoe Lake), Penny (Mika Boorem) and Matt (Matthew Davis).

The film contains a familiar ‘sports movie’ storyline tradition about an underdog overcoming fear and doubt so as to achieve a personal best in an upcoming event. Anne Marie dreams of witnessing a woman on the cover of a major surfing magazine. She was a junior surfing champion but hit her head on coral during a bad wipeout at Pipeline on Oahu and is having some doubt about her ability to compete at the same venue during the Pipe Masters’ competition. The competition is only a matter of days away and to do well in the competition could lead to lucrative sponsorship deals and therefore assure a future of surfing for profit rather than surfing for leisure. The film addresses issues including abandonment, truancy, surrogate family, friendship, fear, prostitution, exploitation and self reliance.
Reviews of the film were polemical. Podolsky (2002) in Detroit’s Metrotimes was particularly scathing, claiming the film was a ‘pathetic excuse for cheesy fun in the sun... Blue Crush doesn’t even bother sugarcoating its thin characterizations and one-dimensional plot with entertaining dialogue... Somewhere, Frankie Avalon is turning over in his tanning bed, wondering where it all went wrong.” In a similar vein, Mr. Cranky saw Blue Crush as providing a valuable lesson for girls everywhere:

“A]bandoning your dreams to have sex with a football player pays handsome dividends indeed... “Blue Crush” is essentially a porn movie, without the actual porn. The characters and story are so contrived and awkward that it’s painfully clear their only purpose is to kill time until the next set of money shots of pile-driving surf off Oahu’s north shore. (Mr Cranky, 2002)

Scott (2002), writing in the New York Times, was not as harsh as some of his peers, yet saw the film as “the latest example of a subgenre that might be called ‘feminexploitation’ (earlier examples include Bring It On and Charlie’s Angels). The idea is to find heroines who are strong, tough, capable and resilient, but who also look fabulous in bathing suits and other revealing attire”. Scott saw the film “as a late summer guilty-pleasure.” Spencer (2002), writing for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Triple J website, asserts that “while it might scream “boobs, babes and bikinis”, this female surfing flick has a lot more going on”.

Grrrrl Power or Pretty Woman Meets Baywatch Barbie?
Some critics of Blue Crush were hostile to the union between Matt and Anne Marie, seeing it as derivative of the morality at play in Pretty Woman. After paying her for surfing lessons, pro-footballer Matt invites her up to his room in the hotel in which she is employed as a maid. As an employee of the hotel, Anne Marie explains she is concerned about the “coconut wireless” that will see the island
quickly aware of a maid entering a guest’s room for a purpose other than cleaning. Aware of her status and concerned for her reputation, she goes to Matt’s room via a back stairwell. Upon entering, she uses the bathroom and folds a towel as if she was working. Matt announces that he has “found the money” that he had hidden. Anne Marie inquires whether he had hidden the money “from the maid”, suggesting an ambiguous tension regarding her presence in the room. Against faint protests from Anne Marie, Matt gives her one thousand dollars, ostensibly for seven days of surfing lessons. Anne Marie asks Matt if he is trying to buy her. Matt claims he “doesn’t want to lose her”; and they kiss and begin undressing. Anne Marie’s confusion regarding whether she was still working when she first entered the room has been clarified – she has taken on the role of sex worker. She transforms from maid to desirable guest as she prances in the luxury of Matt’s hotel room, ordering room service and drinking champagne.

After sleeping with Matt, she receives further gifts, including an Armani dress. Back at the shared house, Eden claims that she now looks like Matt wants her to look. Penny responds that Anne Marie looks “like Baywatch Barbie” and asks whether Matt is also going to buy her breast implants. While Matt will be leaving in a few days with a tan, Eden asks Anne Marie to think about what she will be left with besides shoes.

The class division between NFL pro-footballer and a motel domestic worker is reinforced to Anne Marie when she overhears the partners of other NFL players discussing the way Matt had “made her up.” They also discuss Matt’s predilection for “slumming,” his preference for “cheap Barbie dolls” and remember his relationship with a Denny’s waitress. Anne Marie confronts Matt and states “I know what I am and I am fine with it . . . I’m the maid that you slept with on vacation . . . I’m the great story you tell when someone asks you how you learnt to surf.” Anne Marie realises she is little more than a
temporary tourist souvenir that Matt can discard without experiencing buyer’s remorse.

‘Haolewood’: We Grew Here - You Flew Here
The North Shore of Oahu contains some of the most photographed and professionally competitive surf breaks in the world. Competition for waves is tough and there is a defined pecking order maintained by local “enforcers” who maintain a preferential hierarchy. On any given day during the North Shore winter, there can be 150 surfers at Pipeline, and as Stockwell points out in his narration of the Blue Crush DVD, “those surfers don’t care what sex you are - they aren’t giving up a wave to you.” Racial and ethnic tension simmers in what is one of the most ethnically diverse states in the world. That tension exists in the surf breaks as well as on land. There is a long history of race and class conflict in the Hawai’ian islands, in which those with economic power (plantation and business owners, the military, professionals) tend to be foreigners and the working class is local. There remain unresolved issues surrounding Hawai’ian sovereignty and a political movement exists to reaffirm independence.

Blue Crush contains the seemingly obligatory surf movie scene that shows conflict between local surfers and those from another place. In Hawai’i, hyper-localism manifests itself in a number of ways including tensions between recreational surfers and professionals, between locals and haoles 17 (pronounced howl-ees) and between board riders and boogie boarders. In Blue Crush, the star of the film is a white girl, while her friends are non-white. Hawai’ians challenge the right of Matt to be surfing “their” waves and to be with a local girl. Hawai’i’s huge non-white population has been rendered largely invisible in the film. The hotel housekeeping supervisor is the most clearly non-white character and she is cast as a scoundrel who sacks Anne Marie for objecting to rudeness from tourists. The film casts aside racial issues underlying, for instance, the “locals only” beach scenes. The most objectionable buffoons in the film are African-
American footballers who leave discarded condoms about the room as well as vomit in the bathroom. While the tension between these privileged athletes who have transcended racial politics because of their sporting prowess and the aspirant professional surfer girls is resolved in the film, no such resolution exists with the local Hawai’ian non-white male surfers.

Surfploitation
There may well be some merit in Mr Cranky’s observation that Blue Crush is a “porn movie without the actual porn”, although it may be more appropriate to see the film as part of a genre that Marsh has called ‘surfploitation’. Jacobs claims that the characteristics of surfploitation include the use of surfing and surf culture as a plot device/background for lurid stories (often capitalising on the free-spirited lifestyle stereotype to support whatever misadventures ensue) surf articles used as filler pieces between nude or semi-nude pictorials, and the use of surf imagery to promote or sell a product, as in advertisements or magazine covers.

In recent years, there has been an enormous increase in the involvement of women in surfing, and Blue Crush has assisted in encouraging females to take up surfing. Magazines, surf camps, and commodities including surf labels tailored specifically for women who surf, are continuing to grow. Yet in surfing magazines generally, women continue to be (un)dressed in bikinis, bent over on the beach, and photographed to sell surfing commodities to males. The contradiction is obvious and the surfing media, including Blue Crush, make it far easier to see a women modelling bikinis than to see one surfing in boardshorts.

Conclusion
While all three films have ideological limitations, they do challenge the prevailing attitudes of their epochs regarding women and surfing. Gidget, Puberty Blues and Blue Crush are different to most films
that depict surfing because the main characters are female and they surf. The films share their origins in literary works that were adapted to the screen and all explore adolescent female sexuality and family relationships.

_Gidget_ is significant because it ushered in the 'clean teen' theme that would dominate representations of teenagers in Hollywood until the mid-1960s. _Gidget_ was instrumental in a move away from the 'mean teen' films of juvenile delinquency of the 1950s that had drawn criticism from government agencies including the FBI. _Gidget_ showed that summer holidays and surfing were meant to provide middle-class teenagers with a temporary respite from the impending responsibility and conformity required of a dutiful citizenry. It showed that the role of a mother was to reproduce the status quo and provide sage advice to a daughter about the home-making role of women in a Cold War climate. The film showed that the family unit provided both a refuge from confusion about sexuality and a comforting reassurance regarding 'normal' teenage concerns. _Gidget_ propelled surfing onto the shore of popular culture and forever romantically mythologised and commodified the sport internationally as symbolic of youth, freedom and individuality. Most interestingly for the 1950s, the existing hyper-masculinity surrounding the sport of surfing was challenged when it was brought to the attention of the world through the story of an adolescent girl.

_Puberty Blues_ shows that adolescent female liberation and happiness could only be achieved through action and a rejection of passivity and subordination. Unlike the happy suburban 1950s nuclear family life represented in _Gidget_, suburban 1970s family life in _Puberty Blues_ was depicted as abjectly boring for a teenage girl wishing to explore her life beyond the confines of an identity determined by commodity consumption and church attendance. Chastity should not be cherished as it is in _Gidget_. Virginity should be surrendered as soon as possible to ensure peer acceptance. Debbie's mother's
concerns with appearances and the career prospects and social status of her daughter’s suitors alienated her daughter. Sue came from a family without the presence of a father and where her mother was largely absent. Sex was represented in the film as a dutiful commodity to be used by girls to gain attention from boys. Importantly for the time, it sent a clear message that the quest for self-worth for adolescent girls could not be addressed through achieving popularity with peers. *Puberty Blues* shows that surfing could symbolically represent liberation from gendered boundaries.

*Blue Crush* is significant because it is the first film where the main protagonists are female and they surf to realise personal ambition and to escape from poverty and exploited labour. Parents are absent and the girls provide a family environment for each other. The film depicts the female characters surfing Pipeline. Pipeline is one of the world’s most dangerous waves, a place where for decades hyper-masculinity has been established through acts of risk-taking physical bravado. The film’s commitment to female athleticism is perhaps compromised by the relationship between Anne Marie and the football player, but Anne Marie’s tough upbringing, low socio-economic status and forced role as a mother to her younger sister can perhaps explain her desire to sacrifice her independence for economic and emotional security. The dream of becoming more than a Hawai’ian tourist souvenir is interrupted when others point out her social deficits and the footballer’s penchant for brief liaisons. *Blue Crush* suggests that one can only rely on oneself and that overcoming personal fear of failure is a most worthy pursuit.

**Notes**

1 See: Gidget, *Surfline* [http://www.surfline.com/surfaz/gidget.cfm]
2 Hodad was a popular term in the 1950s and 1960s used by surfers to describe those who pretend to be competent surfers.
3 *Gidget*: 1959.
A cardboard surfboard accessory was created for Mattel’s Surf City Line in 2000 and numerous Barbies have been issued with a surfboard as a standard accessory (e.g. Barbie Loves Spongebob Squarepants and Barbie California Girl). When Mattel announced in 2004 that Barbie and Ken had “grown apart” and were going their separate ways, Barbie was reinvented as Cali Girl Barbie. Cali Girl Barbie had found a new friend in Cali Guy Blaine, who had just moved to California from Sydney, Australia. The toy-boy boogie boarder is described by O’Connell as “the strapping surfer from Oz . . . just exotic enough to be appealing, while not so much so as to be disconcerting.”

See:
http://www.businessweek.com/bw/daily/dnflash/feb2004/uf200402171253db042.htm

Glottal stop (') is used in the word Hawai‘i throughout this article out of respect for Hawaiian language and culture.

Gidget - The Musical was produced by the Orange County High School of the Arts with public performances during August 3 - 6, 2000. Coppola has long held an interest in surfing. Apocalypse Now (1979) contains a scene where Colonel Kilgore orders an aerial napalm attack to destroy a Vietnamese village so he can surf a point break with other US servicemen. When Kilgore is told: “it’s pretty hairy in there, it’s, it’s Charlie’s Point”; Kilgore replies: “Charlie don’t surf.” The screenplay for Apocalypse Now was written by Coppola and John Milius. Milius also co-wrote and directed the surfing film Big Wednesday (1978).

Lolita was completed in 1953 and was first published in France in 1955. Five American publishers (Viking; Simon and Schuster; New Directions; Farrar, Straus; and Doubleday) rejected the novel for fear of prosecution for obscenity.


Top Australian films at the Australian box office, 1966 to 31 December 2004

http://www.abc.net.au/dimensions/dimensions_in_time/Transcripts/s780748.htm

Ibid.

From The Australasian Surfer, 1961, Number 2, page 32.

Paddle out commemorations have become widespread among surfers in recent years. It would seem that the paddle out funeral in Puberty Blues is the first of its type to be represented in film. Screenwriter Margaret Kelly wrote: “On Page 33 of the book they mention the traditional surfer funeral and the beach being closed for three days. My son is a surfer and he knew about the tradition of surfer funerals - which may have (and probably did) originate in Hawaii”. (personal correspondence, June 2005). In Joseph Brennan’s 1994 biography of Duke Kahanomoku, Brennan describes Duke’s Waikiki service as follows:

The urn was taken to a waiting outrigger canoe and, accompanied by an armada of other canoes and small craft and surfers on boards, paddled out to sea. Mr. Akaka,
Nadine Kahanumoku, and Dean Morrelt were in the urn-carrying canoe with Sergeant Kahanumoku as steersman. The paddlers were Duke’s brothers and close friends. Additional canoes carried more relatives and loved ones. Talk was hushed and low. The lead canoe halted and Duke’s ashes were reverently put over the side. Many strew bright lei upon the water. Soon the sea was an undulating carpet of plumerias, carnations, orchids and pikake. The Reverend Abraham Akaka’s voice lifted: “Pao was a man of aloha. God gave him to us as a gift from the sea, and now we give him back from whence he came.” As though in blessing, a rainbow brightened the shoreward sky as paddlers swept the canoes to the beach.

There were global paddle-out commemorations for the victims of the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, the 2004 tsunami and for the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings. The Surfrider Foundation organised a paddle-out to remember the tsunami victims and a Surfrider media release (10 January 2005) claims that ‘To form a Ring of Remembrance, surfers paddle out beyond the break into blue water and form a circle, often throwing flowers onto the water and joining hands as a symbol of united respect. A symbolic splashing of the water and a minutes’ silence is then observed.’ See: http://www.surfrider.org.au/events/tsunami/media10Jan05.htm


Haole, in the Hawai’ian language, means “foreign” or “foreigner”; it can be used in reference to people, plants, and animals. It is also used in Hawai’ian Pidgin to mean “white” or “Caucasian.”


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Paul Scott


