The Rhetoric of Surf: A Lexical and Archetypal Migration of Los Angeles Counterculture into Popular Culture

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[Y]oung men in trunks, and young girls in little more, with bronzed, unselfconscious bodies . . . they seemed to walk along the rim of the world as though they and their kind alone inhabited it . . . and they turn into precursors of a new race not yet seen on the earth: of men and women without age, beautiful as gods and goddesses, with the minds of infants.

William Faulkner, Golden Land

For William Faulkner, the “young . . . bronzed, unselfconscious bodies” lying on the beach and dipping in the surf epitomized his vision of the golden land of Los Angeles. While Los Angeles is a hub for the production of culture—most notably Hollywood—it is also historically responsible for producing much of both the verbal and visual aspects of surf culture. The epicenter for this production exists on the edge of Los Angeles County in the beach community of Malibu. From the surfers who inhabit Malibu’s Surfrider Beach, to the Hollywood productions that film surf-themed movies, to the novels that depict the world of Gidget and Moondoggie, these notions of beach life have permeated the worlds far beyond this idyllic beachside locale.

In this essay I will argue that the Hollywood generated surf movies as well as surfing texts have inculcated language and images particular to the surfing culture of the 1950s, through the 1970s, into the zeitgeist of popular culture, reaching its peak in the 1980s. The semantic shift of language to suit the purpose of the culture industry, as well as the burgeoning surf industry, is generated in its purest form by the surfers that are active in the culture of surfing: both industries benefit from the commodification of selling surf culture and the beach-as-a-lifestyle to the uninitiated masses.
Many of the inhabitants of 1950s post World War II Los Angeles were ready for a culture that could be easily consumed and surfing culture would provide a veritable feast. Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, in their 1947 essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” highlight the power, as well as the numbing effect, of the culture industry in recreating everyday life that can be easily consumed by average Americans, including such cultural products as “film, radio, and magazines” (94). Horkheimer and Adorno pessimistically observe, “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness” (94). I argue that the surf culture in Los Angeles, in its earliest phase, operated in direct opposition to the stultifying effects of the “Culture Industry” by not only rejecting cultural norms, but also repurposing language and images to retain some sense of identity and agency for themselves. They created a counterculture on the beach that rejected the real world culture of the work-a-day, nine-to-five, middle class aspirational existence. According to surf historian Matt Warshaw, surfers already had a history of distancing themselves from mainstream society . . . [and] the trend intensified after the war . . . [for] surfing wasn’t so much a refuge from society as an alternate universe. And because California during those crucial postwar years was also birthing modern American pop culture, that alternate universe was in short order broadcast around the globe. (96)

Much of the literature, film, and texts made about surfing were generated relative to consumer demand. The producers of surf related media infiltrated the surf culture to extract authentic vocabulary and style to then be replicated in their literature and movies. These texts, which targeted teenagers and young adults, both male and female alike, were not limited strictly to the Los Angeles region but were disseminated to a global audience.

Popular surf culture brought the “exotic” to Southern California, mostly by World War II veterans returning to Los Angeles from the Territory of Hawaii and bringing commodified remnants of the Hawaiian culture with them, most notably the Aloha shirt. According to Elizabeth Traube in her essay, “The Popular” in American Culture, “Because exoticism is not an inherent attribute of certain cultures but a discursive
operation, nothing prevents its transposition from foreign to domestic phenomena" (129). Adopting the surfing fundamentals, as well as the language and rituals of the Hawaiian surfers, Malibu surfers quickly appropriated and localized the Hawaiian world of beach and surf, creating a Los Angeles surf identity that was based on what Californians regarded as the exotic Other.

The *Gidget* franchise was most responsible for the popularization of surfing culture, but it has also been lambasted for the creation of the commercialization of surfing culture. *Gidget, The Little Girl with Big Ideas*, the 1957 novel by Frederick Kohner—about his beach loving teenage daughter, Kathy Kohner—was then turned into the 1959 movie *Gidget*, which was then turned into the 1965 *Gidget* television series. Many credit *Gidget*, in its myriad forms, as the prime mover that brought surfing culture into the American mainstream. According to Warshaw, when the novel *Gidget* first arrived on bookstore shelves, “It earned reasonably good notices . . . made the West Coast best-seller lists, (out performing Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, which came out a few weeks earlier), and eventually sold more than a half million copies” (158). This novel, movie, and television series would set in motion the production of the new, youth-based identity of post war Los Angeles: Southern California as the prosperous pop culture capital of America. Kohner’s novel took the countercultural allure of surfing and placed it squarely in the laps of teenage America, stretching the beach all the way to middle America and beyond. *Gidget* made it possible for every American girl to find her own Moondoggie without necessarily having access to the beach.

The *Gidget* novels and films supplement the American lexicon with words and phrases such as shoot the curl and surf bum. Arguably Kahuna, an appropriated Hawaiian term, is the expression from *Gidget* that has had the greatest reach and influence throughout American culture. In the movie *Gidget* the Great Kahuna is both the authority as well as the anti-authority—the kahuna and the surf bum. Kahuna connotes a person in authority or someone whose influence is primary to those around him, while the surf bum retains its lexical significance as a metaphor for someone who abdicates his or her societal responsibilities in favor of hedonistic pursuits. According to Serge Kahili King, the Hawaiian definition of kahuna is either “a caretaker . . . a person
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with a profession,” or a “priest or healer,” depending on the source of the definition (huna.org). The Kahuna character does not necessarily fit any of these definitions, but more likely he is the surf bum who has appropriated the debased Americanized version of a kahuna as a great leader. This appropriation is reminiscent of the imperialistic machinations that allowed for the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, showing little regard for ancient Hawaiian culture and language.

At the same time, the Americanization of the term Kahuna also democratizes the term. In terms of visual rhetoric, some of the more compelling images in the movie Gidget are the surfing scenes in which the only surfers on the beach and in the water are the acolytes of the Great Kahuna—Moondoggie and his pals. The striking fact is that in every surfing scene everyone in the group shares the same wave. The proprietary concept of “my wave” has not yet permeated this Edenic enclave. If the Great Kahuna adhered to his true Hawaiian identity, his followers would not be allowed to share this wave with him as it would violate the ancient Hawaiian cultural norm of surfing as the sport of kings. Gidget’s Great Kahuna/surf bum, though an architectonically flawed character, embodies a paradox: he is both a democratic member of the elite and someone occupying the margins of society—the surf bum, a character that will become deeply embedded in the American lexicon as well as the American psyche.

Next to the Great Kahuna, Gidget’s name (the conflation of girl and midget) also becomes a significant cultural signifier. Gidget is a seemingly innocuous, innocent teenage girl from the San Fernando Valley, high atop the Los Angeles basin. Initially, she seems to exercise little female agency. Gidget looks and acts the part of the stereotypical good girl until she is bitten by the surfing bug. Gidget then spends her free time hanging around the beach with older boys and men not necessarily because of post-adolescent sexual desire, but because she feels the clarion call of the surf and the sea. Gidget seems instinctually to know that the liminal space where the beach meets the ocean is a Rubicon of sorts, a threshold that once crossed can never again be uncrossed. It is, for this teenage girl from Los Angeles, her escape from paternalism that permeates her temporal world. If she can successfully paddle out to the line up and pull
into a wave and surf, she will transcend the conservative constraints of 1950s America. To cross this Rubicon, she must negotiate the fraternal gauntlet that is Moondoggie and his beach cohort. There is an uncomfortable coarseness to their hazing of Gidget, but she endures this trial with her dignity intact and earns her place in the surf lineup: this then transforms Gidget from the good-girl, reflecting 1950s gender norms, into a subversive icon. In the essay *Surfing the Other: Ideology on the Beach*, R. L. Rutsky raises the notion that the rhetoric of the beach movies of the 1960s are light, yet subversive at their core: “Thus, the beach is represented as a place of freedom, where the responsibilities of work, school, and marriage are temporarily suspended in favor of the playful hedonism of parties, surfing, teenage sexuality, and romantic flings” (14).

While the obvious victory for Gidget is that she can surf her favorite beach with her male companions unmolested, she has also gained power over her new constituency, who regard her with respect. While she does not demand her place in the lineup through force or coercion, her role seems preordained in some manner, as other Southern California teenagers follow her lead to the beach. Her character has magically transcended the fourth wall of the silver screen and influenced a generation of adolescents to embrace all that it means to be a surfer. Gidget quite innocently markets surfing as a lifestyle choice—hedonism as an attainable and viable option.

The most pronounced challenge to the influence of Gidget and her crew will come from Miki Dora, the most famous Malibu surfer of the 1950s and 1960s. Dora was one of the first surfers to realize the power and allure of the rhetorical strategies engendered in the surf culture. Dora’s disillusionment with Hollywood’s commodification of surfing consumes his ideology, and he becomes somewhat of a Jeremiah—a modern doomsday prophet for the sport of surfing. He clearly understood the problematic paradigm shift caused by the publication of Kohner’s *Gidget*. For Dora and his predecessors, the surfing world prior to *Gidget* was the true counterculture, an existential challenge to America’s capitalistic dream, not Kohner’s sock hop in the sand.

Many categorize Miki Dora as the antitheses of Gidget, but they are not dissimilar in some respects, as he and Gidget began surfing at about the same age. Warshaw notes, “Dora did not become a full-time surfer until 1950, at age fifteen . . .” (118).
Where these two surfing icons begin to diverge is in their nicknames. Gidget is certainly a patronizing name for a young girl, paternally relegating this diminutive female character into the realm of the female subaltern. Miki Dora’s main nickname “da Cat” is meant to highlight his fanciful footwork and hotdogging abilities on the surfboard, as well as lionize him as the premier surfer at Malibu.

With the influx of new Gidget-inspired surfers flooding the beach at Malibu, Dora’s territorial instinct began to take shape in his declaration of “my wave” strategy to keep anyone from infringing on his surfing paradise. Dora was protective of his surfing sanctuary of Malibu and fought back with moral indignation. The concept of “my wave” began to create a rhizomatic propagation—by way of Dora’s public rants—that resonated throughout the surf world and that invoked proprietary rights to the waves at local surf breaks. In 1980 a Malibu-based band, The Surf Punks, released their second album titled My Beach, which included the popular song, “My Wave.” This lyric from the song became the unofficial anthem for surf localism:

This is my wave baby  
Don't cut me off  
Dropping down left  
Eat the rocks  
....................  
My waves baby  
Gonna break your face  
Go back to the valley  
And don't come back

These first two stanzas are emblematic of Miki Dora’s dystopian visions of the surf scene at Malibu and give evidence that the rhetoric of Dora’s crusade has taken on a life beyond its creator’s personal cause.

While promoting his role as a rebel and iconoclast, Dora had proclaimed a dim future for surfing. Stecyk and Kampion in Dora Lives relate a story from a Surfer Magazine article called “Surfing Stuntman” where Dora is questioned about his “ruthless” attitude on the waves at Malibu. Dora responds: “Actually, these guys (other
surfers) are thieves and they are stealing my waves. If I get it first, it belongs to me" (62). This was the beginning of localism in Southern California and his “my wave” attitude not only permeated other breaks in the region, but also remained in the surfing zeitgeist, instituted by surfers to protect their perceived proprietary rights to their local surf break.

Although many viewed Dora’s rants as bluster meant for media consumption, others argued that his rants were a legitimate concern. Dora is challenging any historical or present power that undermines his personal freedom to surf. Dora on Gidget and Malibu:

My only regret is that I did not torch Gidget’s palm-frond love shack . . . with all of the cast and crew inside. What a glorious imu oven it would have made. We could have had a kamaaina luau with Hollywood long pig as the main course. The Hawaiians ate Captain Cook; it is unfortunate that the rest of us at Malibu learned so little from these gallant combatants. (51)

For Dora, not unlike Gidget, the liminal space between the beach and the ocean is also a Rubicon, but in his case he embodied the qualities of Julius Caesar, felling the intruding surfers as if they were the reincarnation of Pompey’s army. Dora adopted this role as self-proclaimed lawgiver, for he regarded surfing as his constitutional right, part of his rightful quest for “the pursuit of happiness.” Stecyk and Kampion offer a lucid assessment of Dora’s angst through his vitriolic rhetoric in defense of Malibu as a sacred space:

He brought theatre and a sense of cinema to the sand. He surfed seriously but with an easy grin, was mean as an assassin, but seemed also sensitive and hurt by it all—the ending of his era . . . the loss of Malibu to the clutter of the mindless masses that brimmed over from the San Fernando Valley and crowded his perfect waves with their inane stupidity and crass ignorance. (9)
Dora did not mellow with age as he clung to his righteous anger well into the later years of his life. In the 1990 documentary directed by Bill Delaney, *Surfers*, Miki Dora shares his view of surfing as a palliative cure for the quotidian routine:

My whole life is this wave I drop into, pull up into it, and shoot for my life. Behind me all this shit goes over my back: the screaming parents, teachers, police, priests, politicians, kneeboarders, windsurfers—they're all going over the falls into the reef. And I'm shooting for my life. And when it starts to close out, I pull out, catch another wave, and do the same goddamn thing again. (*Surfers*)

Dora's response to the past as well as present invasions of Malibu loosely resembles St. Augustine's *Just War Theory*. With his “my wave” tactics, Dora employs, through aggressive verbal rhetoric, two of Augustine's four main criteria—Just Cause (a wrong has been committed to which war is the appropriate response) and Right Intention (the response is proportional to the cause)—in his attempt to send these interlopers back home.

Dora's surf discourse, especially his “my wave” philosophy with its exceptionalist ideology, permeates the language of other surfing groups. In Tom Wolfe's 1968 collection of essays, *The Pumphouse Gang*, he recounts his time spent with the cocky, young surfing cadre of famed Windansea beach in La Jolla, California in the self-same titled essay “The Pumphouse Gang.” This essay reflects on the difference in rhetoric among various surfing locales, especially in regard to the Malibu surfers. To characterize this San Diego surfing site, Wolfe features some of the local Windansea surfers and notes their use of the word “panther” and “mee-duh” to describe themselves, saying it back and forth to each other, repeating the words often: “The black panther has black feet…black panther…pan-thuh…mee-duh” (19). At first glance this seems to be childish, nonsensical banter. There is no real explanation by Wolfe as to why these surfers are referring to themselves as “panthers” but it is interesting to note that the surf rhetoric in this case is employed to persuade the intended audience of their animalistic prowess on the beach, as opposed to in the water. The word mee-duh is meant to be an intimidating reference to a somewhat purposeless, secret organization known as the
Mac Meda Destruction Company, instigated by surfers Jack Macpherson and Bob Rakestraw. According to the Mac Meda website, “Rakestraw...[was] commonly known as Bob, and to his friends as “Meda”, after a word he used as a swear word” (macmedadestruction.com). The word “mee-duh” functions without a true meaning, except for the fact that it is meant to unsettle and annoy anyone in its path. This crew of Windansea surfers appear to be using their rhetorical strategies as a weapon—as linguistic self-aggrandizement, a puffing up of feathers, a trumpeting of exceptionalism, but also as an act of subversion to upend and agitate cultural norms of polite society and against anyone who intrudes on their beach.

In a later example in the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*, Robert Duvall’s iconic character Colonel Kilgore, echoes not only Dora’s Augustinian principles and “my wave” ideology, but also the language of Gidget’s Great Kahuna/surf bum. Kilgore is a leader of men, a hawkish warrior, but more importantly—a surf bum. During an extremely violent battle where the goal is to take possession from the Viet Cong an excellent point break that Kilgore would like to surf, the Colonel finds that he has a famous Southern California surfer—Lance Johnson—in his midst. Colonel Kilgore orders one of his surfing soldiers to ignore the battle in front of him and go out into the water and surf. Kilgore states to the reluctant soldier: “You either surf or fight” (*Apocalypse Now*). In a later scene Kilgore responds to one of his soldier’s remonstration that it’s too dangerous to surf because this point break belongs to Charlie, even though there are no Viet Cong in the water surfing. Kilgore famously upbraids the soldier: “Charlie don’t surf!” (*Apocalypse Now*). This is a now popular, often-repeated, catch-all phrase that indicates that the quest—certainly for Kilgore—is greater than the seemingly paltry reality of the present moment. “Charlie don’t surf!” is a post-colonial edict, a fiat of imperialistic superiority that exemplifies, in a compact phrase, all of the tenets embodied in the idea of American exceptionalism, embodied by Dora’s “my wave” surfing ideology.

By the time that the 1978 iconic surf film *Big Wednesday* was shown in American theaters, the idealistic Malibu surfing era was already coming to a close. *Big Wednesday* is the moody antitheses of the early surf movie *Gidget* in many respects, but both share a similar impact on popular culture through the use of verbal and visual
rhetoric. *Big Wednesday*, a nostalgic redux of the surfing culture, written by Dennis Aaberg and John Milius and anchored by its three main characters—Matt Johnson, Jack Barlow, and Leroy Smith—was expected to be a financial success at the box office during its original run, but failed miserably. Movie critic Pauline Kael contends that Milius, the blustering director, misfired: “The surprise is not that Mr. Milius has made such a resoundingly awful film, but rather that he’s made a bland one” (nytimes.com).

Kael then begins to focus on the language of the characters of *Big Wednesday*, first landing on the word “radical” as having a negative connotation in the movie. Matt offers the word radical as a challenge to his friend Jack to inspire camaraderie through action: “. . . come on, summer’s almost over. Let’s get radical” (*Big Wednesday*). Matt’s version of the word radical is a call to adventure, an opportunity to create a definitive moment in their collective lives. Matt’s semantic shift in definition for radical is idiomatic for the Southern California surfer, but through the vehicle of film it will filter through the vernacular of whatever discourse communities participate in the viewing of *Big Wednesday*. The popular language in surf culture is, in many instances, a repurposing of words in an organic attempt to reify a concept that may actually defy a semantic definition, or in some instances a creation of original phrases to introduce a concept. For example, the character of Leroy, aka “The Masochist,” foregrounds the proprietary concept of “my wave” in his aggressive tactics to keep others off his choice of waves, echoing Miki Dora’s primary concept.

While it may be true that Milius missed the mark somewhat, *Big Wednesday* went on to become a cult classic and certainly one of the most influential surf films of all time. The title of the movie has transcended its function and made its way into the lexicon of popular culture as a metaphor for a heroic cultural experience. The term *Big Wednesday* is often used in surf parlance to describe a very big swell, but it also connotes something else: a paradigm shift for those who choose to participate in the epic surfing event.

*Gidget* is often lambasted for the commercialization of surfing culture—and interestingly enough, *Big Wednesday* is attempting to rectify this degrading of the sport by portraying its three heroes as idealistic soul surfers. *Big Wednesday* fails in its
rescue of surfing’s spiritual purity because, ironically, it becomes the next vehicle for the commodification of the surf industry. In its own defense, the *Big Wednesday* script does address the issue of the problematic commercialization of the surf culture but it offers no judgment on, nor prescribes a cure for its capitalist ailments: it merely illuminates the inherent commodity fetish in the artifacts of surf culture.

If *Big Wednesday* acts as a watershed movie for surfing discourse, the 1982 movie *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* demonstrates the ways that surf rhetoric undergoes a series of transformations. Sean Penn portrays the character Jeff Spicoli as a high school version of the Great Kahuna/surf bum. While Spicoli may appear on the surface as a pot-smoking ne’er-do-well, he is a leader of men—in terms of his surfer buddies—and he sets the ideology and rhetorical strategies for his cohort. The line most often attributed to Jeff Spicoli is his response to the notion that he should get a job: “All I need is some tasty waves, a cool buzz, and I’m fine!” (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*). This becomes the mantra of the modern surf bum or anyone who just wants to “tune out” for a while, refusing to become a working cog in the capitalist machine. It is also possible to credit Jeff Spicoli with popularizing the surfing jargon “gnarly,” and for breathing new life into the words “bitchin” and “bogus.”

A paradigmatic piece of visual rhetoric displayed by Jeff Spicoli is the still popular black and white checkerboard slip-on Vans shoe. While this may have simply been a costuming choice for the character, these shoes have become synonymous with Spicoli and with the recursive reality of all that he embodies as the surf bum. While this particular shoe existed before Spicoli, this shoe has turned into a cultural artifact—an instantaneous declaration by the wearer that he or she has embraced, in some manner large or small, the qualities of Jeff Spicoli. Even now, to invoke the name Jeff Spicoli is to label someone as the ultimate slacker and surf bum. What is learned about Spicoli by the end of the film is that when he applies himself, he can achieve (per his successful prom night meeting with Mr. Hand), that he lives by a strict code of the beach, and that he can be heroic when called upon. This last trait is evidenced by his foiling of a robbery in progress at the convenience store, in which he accidently distracts the perpetrator while Brad Hamilton throws hot coffee in the robber’s face. In reality Spicoli saves the
day, but in an altruistic gesture, he gives total credit to Brad by yelling: “All right Hamilton!” (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*). This is a selfless act that does not go unnoticed by Brad Hamilton, but appears to go unnoticed by the public at large.

The word dude, often uttered by Jeff Spicoli and his stoner friends, is perhaps the most popular word that is associated with surf culture. According to the Urban Dictionary, the first definitions offered are the following: “A word that americans [sic] use to address each other, . . . [p]articularly stoners, surfers and skaters,” also “The Universal Pronoun,” as well as an adjective as an “expression of emphasis, amazement, or awe” (urbandictionary.com).

In terms of philology, the origins of dude are a bit nebulous, but the word dude is presumed to be an American invention. According to Seth Lerer, in his essay, “Hello, Dude: Philology, Performance, and Technology in Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee,*” the word dude first appears in literature in Mark Twain’s 1889 novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court.* According to Lerer, “The word dude was picked up in the early 1880s to define the new dandy of that movement. But it had appeared earlier, in the late 1870s, to emblematize the fancy or fastidious man of the city” (482). Lerer relates that even Mark Twain has shifted the definition of dude to suit his metaphorical needs: “For Twain, the knights of Arthur’s kingdom are the ‘iron dudes,’ creatures of posturing and dress-up” (482). He is creating a new version of a dude in the questing knight—someone who is historically shown to be heroic—but in Twain’s case, he has labeled the knights buffoonish. The “iron dude” does not retain the social aloofness of the dude in its 1883 iteration. Certainly, by the time the word dude reaches the 1960s in America, it connotes some form of a countercultural hippie figure, and then transforms into Spicoli’s 1980s surfing dude, and shifts again three decades later when it furthers the paradigm of dudeness in Joel and Ethan Coen’s iconic 1998 movie, *The Big Lebowski*. Jeffrey Lebowski, aka The Dude, it seems, is the ultimate slacker. While The Dude is a bowler and not a surfer, he embodies many of the qualities of his logical predecessor, Jeff Spicoli, diverging only in the respect that The Dude prefers a “beverage” to a bong hit. All these examples demonstrate the semantic shifts of words
and the influential power of discourse communities to transform the meanings of signifiers.

Oddly, it is just as the surfer-as-a-lifestyle commercialization emerges in the late 1980s that the generating of new surf language begins to fade from popularity. According to Matt Warshaw, “By the mid-eighties, the second surf boom was on . . . it was bigger than the Gidget-launched craze of the sixties, and it lasted until 1990 when it crashed with a familiar abruptness” (387). Surf companies were ramping up their products and production to commodify surfing to a level previously unknown to the sport. In the beginning, surfing belonged to a select few that were perceptive enough to appreciate its natural charms: now surfers would be used to sell the sport as a lifestyle for those millions of people who have no access to the beach.

The surf industry’s marketing machine effectively usurped and appropriated surf discourse in order to commodify the beach lifestyle. For example, the Gotcha brand surf wear line would embrace the territorial rhetoric espoused by surfers, suggesting that the Gotcha brand made the surf wear consumer appear to be “local.” Gotcha instituted its 1980s marketing campaign with a two-part ad using a “loser” of some iteration in the first image with the caption, “If You Don’t Surf, Don’t Start.” The second image juxtaposed with the first image is of a Gotcha team rider with the caption, “If You Surf, Never Stop” (Warshaw 390). This is an obvious homage to the Miki Dora “my wave” ideology as well as a brilliant, shame-based promotional tactic to sell clothes by giving the consumer the ability to subvert the “locals only” ethos only through purchasing their brand of clothes—or more importantly, purchasing the lifestyle. Dora’s “my wave” rhetoric was initiated as a preservation tactic but has now been appropriated as a capitalist tool. It would be interesting to know if Dora would view this as one more incursion on his paradise or if he would applaud the marketing team at Gotcha for figuring out an interesting ploy to further manipulate the surf interlopers from the San Fernando Valley and beyond.

The 1980s surf-wear industry deftly recognized that the rhetoric and principles of surfing was not dissimilar to the world of skateboarding and that it was also a burgeoning market, prime for exploitation. The language and ideology of surfing blended
seamlessly with the world of skateboarding and brought the beach to the landlocked in a way that made the *Gidget* phenomenon seem minor in comparison:

Skateboarding borrowed from surfing and built upon the foundations of its water-born equivalent while inventing itself in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s, during its second generation of popularity and as equipment evolved, skateboarders took to riding empty pools, drainage ditches, and the giant concrete pipes of water irrigation projects. (*Beautiful Losers*, 129)

Skateboarding substituted concrete and wooden surfaces for waves in the parts of the world where waves are nonexistent. If the surf breaks are either overcrowded or unavailable, skateboarding is the means to replicate the riding of waves on any surface available or imaginable: skateboarding is a natural progression from surfing both physically and linguistically. Much of the language and performance of surfing permeates the skateboarding culture. In the 2002 documentary film *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, director Stacy Peralta and writer Craig Stecyk reveal the connection of skateboarding to surfing with their homage to Hawaiian surfer Larry Bertlemann. Peralta notes that the ethos that informed the rhetoric of the Z-Boys’ skateboarding style was taken from a Hal Jepson surfing movie called *Super Session* starring Bertlemann. Zephyr team rider Bob Biniak states in the movie: “We used to skate this place Bicknell hill (next to the beach in Santa Monica) . . . looking at the surf doing cutbacks like we were riding a wave” (*Dogtown and Z-Boys*). Peggy Oki, another Zephyr team rider, refers to Larry Bertlemann’s tight cutbacks—during which he would slide his hand along the wave—in relation to skateboarding Bicknell hill: “We’d work on our Berts” (*Dogtown and Z-Boys*). The Zephyr team skaters created a skateboarding maneuver, named after a progressive Hawaiian surfer—one they learned about from a surf movie they saw at the Santa Monica Civic Center—that would permeate newly formed skateboarding magazines and ultimately have a national reach.

The goal of *Big Wednesday* was to attempt to portray the idyllic life of the soul surfer, someone only interested in surfing for the sake of surfing, by connecting to nature through the riding of waves. The triumvirate of Matt, Jack, and Leroy tried to hold on to the youthful aspects of surfing for as long as they could. Artist and filmmaker
Thomas Campbell is currently making this same argument—through his art and his surf films—that the concept of the soul surfer is, perhaps, surfing’s highest ideal.

Campbell’s 2009 surf movie, *The Present* is an homage to Bruce Brown’s 1966 surf classic *The Endless Summer*. *The Endless Summer* was intended to be an anti-establishment rejection of the localism prevalent in surfing at the time in that it promoted the journey over result-oriented, proprietary behavior. This movie depicts the journey that the soul surfer must participate in: a surfing grail quest to find a wave as perfect as Malibu somewhere else in the world. In *The Present*, Campbell takes a stand against localism, the commercialization of surfing, as well as the focus on specialization, in terms of what kind of surfboard a person should ride and how that shape or style of board cements one’s identity as a surfer.

In *The Present*, surfers Alex Knost and Michel Junod travel to Africa in suit and tie with surfboard under arm, emulating Robert August and Mike Hyson in *The Endless Summer*. Campbell narrates his movies and in this narration he introduces new words to the surfing lexicon. He refers to those riding longboards in his movie as “wave sliders and loggers,” and he describes their globetrotting surf trip as “a logging adventure” because of the shape of the older 1950s to late 1960s-style heavily glassed, longer surfboards (*The Present*).

A surfer who appears often in Campbell’s movies is longboard sensation Joel Tudor. Tudor is a stylemaster on the waves, but he is keenly aware of the Southern California surfers who have articulated the past ideology for the sport. In an interview, Tudor relates that Miki Dora is a primary ideologue for him. Miki represents the “lifestyle side” as well as his anti-commercialism beliefs (*The Present*). These younger surfers like Joel Tudor have not only embraced the physical elements and limitations of surfing’s golden years but they are also generating lexical shifts that bring new language to the surf culture that begin to bridge the past with the present. Campbell is attempting, in *The Present*, to return surfers to that time and place of the surfing Eden, to a place where there was a purity to surfing that is untainted by the promotion of surf contests and rampant, soul crushing commercialization. Campbell is attempting to put the bite
back into the surfing apple by bringing the past into the present. His movies are a refiguring of the rhetoric of surf and what it could ideally mean to be a surfer.

Be assured, there will always be an audience for the quixotic waterman as long as people are fascinated by the allure of surfing and the language of its counterculture rebellion. Miki Dora was the recipient of many nicknames but the one that might be most accurate is “The Black Knight.” Dora, in many respects, shares some qualities with the knight errant Don Quixote, but he is also the admixture of King Arthur, Lancelot, The Fisher King, and Galahad combined. The Sandra Dee version of Gidget is interestingly heroic—not as Guinevere—but perhaps in the vein of a latter-day Joan of Arc, as she uses her surfboard as a sword and her persuasive charms as a shield.

The language and rhetoric of surf culture serves an important purpose in American culture: it allows its audience to connect with their inner rogue without having to journey alone into the darkest part of the forest—or the sea—to begin their personal quests. The surfing anti-hero provides the template and the language, offering the world an alternative to the traditional heroic.


*Big Wednesday* Pt03 - Morning Glass Riders


*Great Philosophers.* “Augustine: Just War”.


*Surfers.* Dir. Bill Delaney. Perf. Miki Dora, Johnny Boy Gomes, Mike Cruickshank. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3M0NX1lcCiQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3M0NX1lcCiQ) Web. 22 April 2015.


