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Space Invaders in Surfing's White Tribe

Exploring Surfing, Race, and Identity

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Surfing's White Tribe

As has been well documented, surfing has a long history as a Polynesian cultural form that, through colonization, was appropriated by white North Americans and Australians in the mid-twentieth century. As part of this process of appropriation, the activity was redefined and reorganized, drawing "nostalgically on an imagined cultural authenticity from Hawai'i's pre-colonial surfing past."[1] Since the 1950s, the quintessential image of the surfing body has been "phenotypically White," specifically, a young, white, male subject, slim, toned, tanned—but not dark skinned—with a mop of sun-bleached hair.[2] Fuelled by the Hollywood beach movies, and the surf music craze epitomized by the Beach Boys, in the United States the white, blonde surfer became so iconic he—and increasingly she—became the face of California.[3] As Walker details in *Waves of Resistance* this Colonial appropriation has not been without resistance in Hawai'i . Yet this particular image of surfing has subsequently been perpetuated more globally in both the surfing niche media and through wider mass media surfing discourses. Thus, although surfing's imagery as a white, male, youthful, privileged activity and space is a relatively recent and contextually specific social construction, globally it has been, and remains the hegemonic one.[4]

My focus in this chapter is the experiences of surfers who do not fit this hegemonic ideal—specifically, those racialized as nonwhite. Surfing participants often claim—indeed believe—that surfing culture is inclusive of all, and that race and gender don't matter. However, despite a desire for an inclusive and cosmopolitan citizenship, as I illustrate, surf culture and the surfing media continue to perpetuate what Chivers-Yochim terms an "imagined community" of whiteness.[5] This chapter draws on a research project that explored the formative and contemporary experiences of minority ethnic surfers, predominantly African Americans, who lived and surfed around Los Angeles, California. I explore how these black surfers negotiate space and identity in the surfing culture, and their experiences of belonging and exclusion.[6]

First, I situate the case study within a broader understanding of sport, whiteness, and exclusion, highlighting research that reveals surfing in the United States and beyond as a gendered and racialized space. I also consider the central and problematic roles that surfing media and industry play in developing our sporting imagination. I then turn to the contradictory experiences of belonging of the black surfers in my case study, identifying some of the difficulties and barriers experienced by these surfers carving a space in a white-dominated cultural practice. While some aspects of their experiences and identities were shared with white and other ethnic-minority surfers, what was most revealing was the range of difficulties or constraints that many of these surfers had faced and which they saw as barriers to other African Americans becoming surfers.

Surfing, Whiteness, and Inclusion

Given the close association between whiteness, surfing and Western imperialism, the paucity of research on surfing and ethnicity is surprising.[7] The voices of minority ethnic and indigenous surfers are often absent from surfing culture, media, and research. This is an absence, however, that has started to gain academic and media attention. Of particular significance is Isaiah Walker's detailed history of the changing role and meaning of surfing in Hawaiian cultural identity. He details how throughout the twentieth century indigenous Hawaiian's have successfully resisted and challenged colonial hierarchies and categories through surfing spaces. While my empirical focus in this chapter is California, I highlight some of these more international sources to illustrate that these are issues that affect many dominant surfing nations, including Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and countries in South America.[8]

Kyle Kusz's work has been foundational in highlighting that, in the United States, "extreme sports" including surfing have become important contemporary sites of whiteness, celebrated as the "symbol of a new American zeitgeist," promoting and reviving traditional and specifically white American values, including "individualism, self-reliance, risk taking, and progress."[9] These sports are represented as cultural spaces that are overwhelmingly white, yet "rarely ever imagined as a racially excusive space."[10] That is, whiteness acts as an invisible and unmarked norm to most whites. As Krista Comer highlights, racial and national-based tensions exist between the dominant blonde "California surfer girl" image and other discourses and experiences of surfing in the United States, such as the "Muslim surfer girl."[11]

Glen Thompson's historically rooted research on surfing masculinity in South Africa reveals the history of black Zulu experiences of the South African beach and

surfing, and changing representations of surfing as a white sport pre- and post-apartheid.[12] Thompson illustrates that although surfing as a sporting lifestyle is undergoing transformation, and has been opened up to all ethnicities, there is a persistence of "racialised cultural relations."[13] This is vividly illustrated in Thompson's work on the documentary *Otelo Burning*, a film that provides the context for a broader discussion of the history of black male surfers in KwaZulu-Natal, and the range of ways in which the "Zulu surfer" has assumed meanings.[14] While surfing waves is presented as "more individualistically redemptive (and hedonistic) than socially transformative for these participants, surfing is presented nonetheless as a metaphor for changing subjectivities."[15]

In the Australian context, the racialized geographies of the contemporary Australian surf beach are clearly evident in the punitive treatment of "outsiders" documented in discussions of localism. The power of contemporary discourses to exclude bodies racialized as nonwhite from surf spaces has been graphically illustrated in the so-called race riots at Cronulla Beach in December 2005.[16] A number of commentators have begun to unpack the whiteness of the "quintessentially Australian surf space," recognizing that surfing's whiteness is rooted in, and associated with, the white settler Australian identity.[17] Colleen McGloin most systematically explores the genealogy of the relationship between surfing, the nation, and white masculinity in Australian culture.[18] As she writes, "in white conceptions of nation, the Australian male surfer represents the national corpus . . . the individual body of the male surfer, often represented within mainstream surfing texts as white, blond, tanned, fit, competitive, and heterosexual. The ocean is his performative place of becoming."[19] Importantly, McGloin also explores contemporary indigenous surfing culture, highlighting that

indigenous surfing has gained increasing momentum in communities across Australia. Drawing on research with Aboriginal surfers and elders, she argues that there is "a distinction in philosophy and practice, in conceptions of the beach and the ocean."[20] Aboriginal ways of understanding and relating to the ocean are, she suggests, different from dominant white representations of surfing and beach life. The perspectives of Aboriginal participants and contributors provide a counterdiscourse, contesting dominant projections of nation and of surfing as a form of cultural expression.

Mihi Nemani also reveals indigenous experience of the ocean. Her research focuses on understanding intersecting experiences of gender and ethnicity in New Zealand body-boarding culture. Drawing on interviews with male and female Maori, Pacific Island, and in New Zealand European body boarders and her own experiences of being a Samoan-Maori elite brown body boarder, Nemani's research provides a fascinating perspective on how indigenous participants negotiate space in a place that is predominantly white.[21] She argues that a unique form of cultural capital exists among Maori and Pacific Island participants in which respect, courtesy, and fairness were given more value than demonstrations of physical capital.

Surfing's Global Village? The Industry and Media Rhetoric

The media play a central role in developing our sporting imagination, and surf media are no exception. Surfing has long seen, and represented itself as, a leisure practice that embraces a style of life that offers a different and better way of living than the mainstream.[22] Yet despite various claims to ethical, environmental, and humanitarian credentials, the surf industry and media are often exploitative, operating in unethical

ways and manipulating various non-Western communities and their resources, such as reefs.[23] The surf media also continue to play a role in racializing surfing, reproducing constructions of surfing as a white male space, adopting stereotypical discourses about black athleticism and erasing the black surfer subjectivity.

In this context, the colonial imaginary informing the surf safari genre of discovery films like *The Endless Summer* (1966) has received most widespread commentary and critique.[24] Although this genre continues to infuse contemporary mainstream Hollywood surf films and niche media, travelogue discourse is usually based on white, heterosexual, privileged young men from the Global North searching out perfect waves in "exotic" distant lands, often around the Global South. Racial stereotypes underpin this narrative, emphasizing cultural and racial differences, suggesting that postcolonial countries and subjects are more primitive than the "civilized" West. For example, where images of black subjects are used, they tend to be as the native Other, depicted in traditional clothing or performing primitive tasks like fishing or hunting for food. Occasionally, local surfers are portrayed, but predominantly the white surfer befriends and tames the primitive native black Other, with whom he shares an affinity for nature and the ocean, the basis of the soul surfing ethos and transcendent experience.[25] As Lewis argues in his reading of *The Endless Summer*, the "romantic project" of the surfer seeks to "parenthesize issues of indigenous poverty, global exploitation and apartheid through good-humoured engagement with locals as curios."[26] While the "pilgrim surfer" is not oblivious to the different material conditions of the local communities where he travels, such difference cannot "detract from the importance of [his] journey for spiritual enlightenment."[27] The film aestheticizes less powerful cultures into First World texts, creating a form of "Orientalism and

exploitation" wherein the naturalness of surfers' subject position as white, male, and Western is reinforced.[28]

For the participants in my research, US surf media was seen to play a central role in sustaining the myth that surfing was a white activity, denying or erasing the potential for black surfer subjectivity. Some of the black surfers interviewed said that the postcolonial mentality in film and media travelogue was one of the aspects of surfing culture that most angered them: "Because what you're saying is, you're going into these third world countries, [and] we are still uncivilized. You came, you're going to teach us how to surf! . . . It amazes me to think that we are so . . . and I'm going to say [that we are the worst offenders in the] United States because I don't see it [this attitude] so much more in other places, as we [US citizens] feel like we have to find everything. Our white culture has to discover everything. You don't need to discover us [people of color]; we've already been here."[29]

The surf film genre, however, encompasses a broad range of styles and formats.[30] One of the more progressive recent developments is the emergence of art house films and surfing documentaries. These often focus on challenging dominant discourses about surfing space and identity, and appear to have gained traction with audiences at international surfing film festivals, where there is a "growing appetite for 'indigenous' surfing stories."[31] Poignant examples include *Wave of Change* (2002), which explores Balinese surfers, and *Surfing the Healing Wave* (1999), an Australian indigenous surfing film that foregrounds personal histories, and asserts Aboriginal conceptions of nation and country through the cultural practice of surfing and conceptualizations of the ocean.[32] As noted earlier, *Otelo Burning*, a Zulu-language film with English subtitles, presents young black men searching for freedom through surfing in late apartheid

South Africa. It premiered at the Durban International Film Festival (July 2011) and has subsequently gained significant academic attention.[33] Particularly relevant to the present chapter is *Whitewash* (2011), which explores "the complexity of race in America through the struggle and triumph of the history of black surfers."[34] The film, which emerged during my research project, resonates with many of the themes discussed herein. These independent filmmakers challenge dominant histories and myths about surfing culture and history, including representations of race, gender, and sexuality, disrupting the idea that there is a lone, monolithic surfing culture or history.

Surfing Culture, Inclusion, and Exclusion

Researchers have established that in the United States, black and minority ethnic (BME) peoples underutilize nature-based outdoor recreation spaces and resources, including beaches.[35] Their research has identified a range of sociocultural, economic, and practical barriers for these communities' ability to access general recreational spaces. Through the course of my discussion, I outline how many of these barriers have also hindered BME participation in surfing. Initially, the surfing lifestyle can be expensive, with high-performance surfboards and wetsuits costing several hundred dollars. In addition to the financial outlay, there are also practical barriers, such as transport of person and board to the beach. Garcia and Baltodano's study exemplifies that "people of color and economically disadvantaged communities disproportionately lack efficient access to the beach."[36] They cite city bus stops up to "half a mile from a public path to the beach" that create "a significant burden," particularly for those with young children or recreational gear.[37] The most exclusive surf beaches, such as Malibu (in the most affluent, predominantly white communities), were those that were least accessible by public

transport.[38] Yet while such economic and logistical barriers to participation in lifestyle sports are consistently acknowledged, often absent in understandings of beach underutilization by BME groups are considerations of "the historical and cultural patterns of oppression" that become systematically embedded in "society's norms and daily practices."[39]

The Spatialization of Race

To understand the contemporary experiences of black surfers in the United States requires a historical and spatial perspective, considering the impact of formal and de facto segregation on the African American community, and how the spatialization of race has had—and continues to have—a profound impact on the use of beaches by black communities. That is, the contemporary California beach suburbs, like many other seaside spaces, are constructed through "imaginary notions of whiteness."[40] Reinforcing historic patterns of segregation, postcolonial anxiety has fueled white flight from inner city urban areas to the seaside suburbs, spaces that operate as places of white retreat and safety. As research across contexts, including white suburbia and the countryside, has shown, "ethnic minorities are made to feel out of place" in these nonurban spaces.[41]

Exploring how these issues affect beaches and surfing spaces, literature investigating how racialized "social relations are spatially expressed" proves particularly useful.[42] This turn to spatiality has been influential in revealing how sporting spaces are gendered, sexualized, and racialized, as well as how "power geometries" of "white space [are] produced and exercised on the bodies of Others."[43] Nirmal Puwar's book *Space Invaders* is a seminal text in illustrating that "some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked as trespassers, who

are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined (politically, historically and conceptually), circumscribed as being 'out of place.' Not being the somatic norm, they are space invaders."[44]

In the remainder of this chapter I seek to understand the ways in which black surfing bodies reside in and take up space, and if BME bodies are made to feel out of place, rendered as Other to this surfing collectivity. I highlight some of the historical, cultural, ideological, and economic factors that underpin and sustain the difficulties experienced by a group of African American male and female surfers in California. While some factors are clearly specific to these individuals and the Californian context, other factors are also applicable to other geographic spaces and other groups of minority surfers.

Developing the Surfing Habitus

In his account of how leisure preferences are acquired and reproduced, which he terms *habitus*, Bourdieu suggests that a range of cultural factors, including an individual's upbringing (i.e., education, family influence, community, peers), values, and disposition, are central in acquiring both the taste for, and experience of, leisure activities.[45] For Bourdieu, taste is not just the result of individualistic choices, but rather is socially patterned, and a key means by which the social distribution of symbolic resources is organized. Bourdieu's work helps us consider the ways in which participation and accessibility in surfing is related not only to material factors—their cost (economic capital)—but also to the cultural and physical capital required, or rather, the particular and distinctive cultural knowledges that participation demands, and the ways these knowledges are embodied, in gestures, manners, and being in space.[46]

While Bourdieu was primarily concerned with the reproduction of social class, his theories have increasingly been used to explore the gendered and racialized aspects of (body) habitus, and how they are reproduced historically and spatially. [47] Cultural capital in sporting activities like surfing includes the range of cultural, social, and historical knowledges and resources a person possesses, and can take various forms from the embodied to the institutionalized. These knowledges are passed on from generation to generation, but can also be learned through various life experiences. The surfing habitus is also "corporeally informed by social position and expectations."[48] It is a marker of distinction, and a signifier of identity based on maintaining similarities and differences between selves and others. Habitus, gender, and race operate in becoming an insider in a cultural field like surfing: "people are differentiated as to the extent to which they are included, and the extent to which they are insiders in accordance with how well their habitus is adjusted to the demands of the field."[49]

Thus, habitus can help explore the degree to which BME individuals share or are invited to participate in the dominant cultural habitus, and ways in which they are excluded.[50]

Water Enlightened and Whiteboy Wannabes: Childhood Experiences, and Family Life

Following Bourdieu's theory, family influences and values are central to acquiring the habitus for visiting the beach and the ocean. Many of the surfers I interviewed were exposed to the beach and the water through their families. Yet they were in the minority, recognizing that black families tended not to go to the beach: "I wouldn't call it

a white thing, but we don't do it so regularly. Black families that are quite 'water enlightened' do. But they're still a minority. You know, the majority of people that live in the inner city don't use the facilities of the beach. They don't feel for whatever reason either comfortable because they're brought into it [from outside], or because there's not enough black people down there to allow them to feel comfortable."[51]

Despite being water-based families and strong swimmers, none of the black surfers I interviewed had grown up with surfers in their families or family-based friendship groups. The attitudes of their parents ranged from support through ambivalence to hostility. Josh, who became a competitive surfer, had complete support from his family. His mother saw surfing as something positive, and so drove him to the beach and to surf contests: "My mom was very proud that her son could surf so well and was happy that I found something that I was so passionate about."[52] However, among some families surfing had retained its 1950s-rooted public image, still associated with juvenile delinquency and drug use.[53] That is, surfers were characterized as youth who "shied away from order and structure" and who were "wasteful and selfish."[54]

School-based friendships and associations led to some interviewees' first surfing experiences. However conversely, as Michael recounted, his son grew up enjoying beach life with his family and surfing with classmates, but as a teenager he rejected surfing in favor of activities popular with his black peers, such as basketball. Josh also highlighted that school was an environment where people took issue with him surfing and not playing basketball: "They figured since I surf I was trying to be white which was totally NOT why I surfed."[55] Irrespective of experiences or opportunities, the perception of surfing being a white sport remained an issue for many black families and communities. Jennifer recounts, "I think it's a difficult thing when I talk to young black people and I try

to encourage them to come out and try the sport. They look at me and just go 'that's a white sport.'<HT>"[56] This experience was widespread among interviewees. Stevie recounted how driving around his neighborhood with a surfboard on the roof of his car provoked comments like, "Oh you're trying to be a white boy." Michael reflexively narrated the personal difficulties he experienced "being black, and being a surfer" in the (black) middle-class neighborhood where he lived: "I kind of found myself when I was young in limbo, in no man's lands. You know, I knew I couldn't really fit in with the traditional white surf community down there, so to speak. I didn't really fit in here in the black community because people would call me an Uncle Tom, they'd call me an Oreo, they'd call me a white boy, 'oh you're a white boy wannabe.'<HT>"[57] As Erickson et al.'s research exploring African Americans' use of nonurban leisure spaces in the United States illustrates, because "recreating in natural areas" is not considered a "black thing" to do, those who choose to take part risk "being associated with 'white culture' by other African Americans, and are perceived as rejecting African American culture."[58]

Such cultural values are not fixed, however, but shift over time. Younger participants recognized that attitudes to youth and BME participation in surfing culture have changed, suggesting that parental and community disapproval was less widespread than for previous generations. Nonetheless, these accounts clearly illustrate how ideas about racial difference, "racialized structures," and "ways of seeing the world" were reproduced in school and family life and through sporting participation.[59] Stereotypes about race were reproduced in and through both white and black communities.

Cultural Stereotypes: "Blacks Can't Swim"

In 1990, at an event in Los Angeles to celebrate Nelson Mandela's release, African-American comedian Nell Carter "joked with the seventy thousand spectators, most of whom were black, that swimming was 'un-black'; if blacks knew how to swim, he said, there would be no African Americans because their enslaved ancestors would have all swam back to Africa."[60] While this common stereotype about black bodies is rooted in racial ideologies—that is, historically constructed differences, not biological facts—it is nonetheless a stereotype that is widely perpetuated by the media, and by black and white Americans. In the documentary *Whitewash*, African American youth at an inner-city basketball court are shown laughing at the notion of them swimming.

Statistics also drive these erroneous beliefs, illustrating, for example, that more minorities in the United States drown than whites.[61] A study by *USA Swimming* suggested that 70 percent of the African American children surveyed had no or low swimming ability, in contrast to 42 percent of white children.[62] Swimming is clearly a powerful signifier in differentiating the black body from the white body, and these myths have ongoing relevance for developing a surfing habitus.[63] Interview participant Jennifer suggested that a lack of swimming proficiency is "one of the main reasons why blacks don't surf."[64] She recounted training to work for the Coast Guard and being amazed that many black recruits couldn't swim. Numerous economic and cultural factors contribute to contemporary African American children being less likely to swim confidently, many of which were alluded to in interviews.[65]

Many of the surfers, however, were cognizant of the fallacy of these discursive constructions of blacks as nonswimmers: "black surfers and black watermen know that there is a heritage, an African heritage of watermen, and waterwomen, and that goes all

the way back . . . but culture is powerful."[66] Jennifer suggested that "other minorities," particularly Hispanics, frequented the beach much more than the African American community, arguing that visiting the beach was a part of their diasporic community's identity, and did not seem to have the same connotations as a place of fear.[67] The effect of this, she suggested, was to help break down stereotypes about the beach and surfing as white spaces: "And they've got much stronger tradition with the water and using the beach for picnics and for families' events and for parties, because they did it in their homeland. And they felt comfortable doing it and they don't seem to have some of the same stigmas that we have, that belief that if we go down there we're not going to be able to have fun because white people are going to keep us from it. And they go and do it, and it changes the dynamic."[68] Jennifer's observation is supported by research exploring the use of beaches and urban parks in the United States.[69] Both studies suggested that Hispanics used these recreation sites primarily for social gatherings such as family picnics, illustrating that people from different ethnic groups construct "different meanings for natural space based on their own values, cultures, histories, and traditions."[70]

Perceptions about surfing's exclusivity as a white sport remain widespread. These surfers discussed how they had been affected, at least initially, by stereotypical views about what blacks did and didn't do, but once they had their first taste of surfing, those stereotypes—including self-imposed ones—were quickly broken. As Alicia contended, as a kid she spent a lot of time with her family at the beach, but never asked her mother if she could try surfing because she assumed "surfing was for rich people, that could afford to buy that stuff."[71] Thus, as outlined in Wolch and Zhang's analysis of the use of beach space in California, "race and class matter."[72]

White Racism in Beach Spaces

Racism was part of everyday life for most of my interviewees, particularly when growing up, and surfing spaces were not immune, as many graphically recounted:

> "I didn't like to go there [the beach] because I felt very uncomfortable. People ignored you, they didn't talk to you, they stared at you, they threw things at you, they slit your tires, they wrote with wax on your car, they keyed your car and scratched names, you know . . . [names] like 'niggers go home' and things like that, with regularity. So it was really an uncomfortable situation. . . . But you know we experienced racism everywhere, so you know I live in the inner city of Los Angeles, it's a black community in which all my life I've experienced some sorts of racism, and at the beach, I've experienced quite a lot."

Interviewees recognized that racial harassment today is much less prevalent than it was in the 1960s, but observed that racism nonetheless continues to exist, often taking more subtle forms. As Carrington highlights, racialized bodies "can become subject to a panoptic form of white governmentality" that seeks to oversee, control, and regulate the behavior of black people and is underpinned by the constant threat of racial harassment and violence.[73]

Drawing on Bonilla-Silva's influential work on the concept of "colorblind racism," Burdsey argues that there has been a shift to more subtle forms of racism, such as racial microaggressions, defined as "brief, everyday exchanges" evident in "gestures, looks, or tones."[74] While surfers I interviewed who had been the recipients of physical abuse were in the minority, most had experienced or witnessed verbal racism in some form, or

a particular look or stare. The stare or gaze operates to make minority ethnic individuals feel unwelcome or out of place, and is significant in their surveillance.[75] As Michael recounted: "When you're the only black person sitting out there you know it. And the general vibe in the water sometimes became tense. The staring and the twisted facial expressions sometimes gave way to a slur or negative comment."[76] Alicia suggested that "I have never been aggressively or negatively approached," but that "you are looked at—people stare at you." Alicia believed the stares were benevolent: "It's just odd, not something that is common, they don't know how to place me and I understand that and accept it."[77] As Carrington discusses, being black in a white space can provoke intrigue and fascination as well as surveillance. However, he also argues that while this "new fact of blackness" appears to be more tolerant, it is nonetheless a "moment of post/colonial racism, a double bind. Of intrigue and interest and objectification and racialized inscription all at once."[78] Furthermore, the effectiveness of these microaggressions is their often "subtle and unconscious character," and their "accumulation over a period of time."[79] Jennifer admitted she often felt fearful, and at times fear stopped her surfing altogether: "There were no black people surfing at [surf break]. I would drive up to [place] to sit and watch because I was too afraid to join in."[80]

The Surfing Brotherhood, Race, and Belonging: Contradictory Discourses

Michael argued that surfers themselves were more enlightened than most beach users. He saw the values of surf culture as inclusive and not exclusive, commenting, "Generally the reaction was great because surfers, I think, are enlightened people." Michael was not alone in holding the belief, as well as desire, that the surfing brotherhood was inclusive

of all backgrounds. Stevie outlined how surfing in the 1960s had "a sense of communalism" and an openness to difference. Despite being the only black surfer, he was soon "one of the group": "So, you could go to beaches and say, 'can I use your surfboard?' 'Sure use my surfboard, go and play around in the water.' They don't do that at all now, but that was very common."[81]

Josh, an elite, lifelong surfer in his 30s who had competed regularly, said he had not experienced *any* racism when surfing, nor had he really even thought about race, suggesting that, if anything, black surfers were generally seen as "cool." "I've never experienced racism while surfing. Sure, I've had clashes with people in the water but it had nothing to do with my skin color. . . . Tell you the truth I don't think about skin [color] while I'm in the water. I have my focus on getting another wave and thinking about what I'm going to do on it. Maybe if I'm in the water with other black surfers I notice color but I tell myself that it's nice to see that they discovered surfing."[82] Crissy, who had successfully become an elite female surfer in the United States, claimed she was "welcomed with open arms" by the elite surfing fraternity, but experienced "real issues" with her own (black) community.[83]

Nonetheless, many of these narratives were contradictory: their accounts gave numerous examples of ways they were marked as different (looks, stares, etc.), and described exclusion or racism instigated by surfers. Yet they didn't want to see surfers as the problem. Their belief in the inclusivity of the surfing brotherhood, made it hard for black participants to hold white surfers accountable. As Puwar highlights, in many spheres "the systematic fantasy of imagined inclusiveness makes it difficult to see racism" and to confront the fact that racism exists.[84] As illustrated in many sporting contexts, this color-blind ideology is so entrenched in many Western sports that

"minority ethnic participants can also enforce its interpretive framework."[85] For example, research has shown that individuals adopt various strategies seeking to "simultaneously downplay or deny incidents of racism while trying to exonerate those accused of engaging in such acts."[86]

Despite having experienced racist incidents with white surfers, Michael blamed those (nonsurfers) who lived in middle-class white beach communities: "The people that dwell there, they are not necessarily exposed to a variety of things, one of which is black surfers. And they feel entitled to the ocean already, believing that it's theirs and they could fence it."[87] Yet in conversation, he also recognized that he didn't *want* surfers to be the problem. Having worked hard to become a surfer, and having started to see himself as a surfer, he needed, at least discursively, to disavow surf culture as being excluding or racist. In subsequent conversations I discussed this contradiction with him, and he conceded that the racism he experienced at the beach came from both surfers and nonsurfers, although the latter was more prevalent: "Yes I do find it difficult to talk badly about anyone or anything that I identify myself with . . . I think you're right about me not wanting to see surfers in that light."[88]

Alicia suggested that white surfers held a range of views, from "respect just for being a surfer, and being good at what I do" to "exotified [*sic*] just because you have a different skin color." Yet she believed that once she had developed a level of involvement and commitment to be considered a real surfer, she gained insider status and respect: "If you get to the level in which you can truly say you *are a surfer*, that level of commitment to the ocean, then you see like-minded people who are doing the same. But if you get past that threshold, other surfers who are at the same place, some sort of positive energy and connection that's really not about color or gender or anything, it is

just about acknowledging that we are people who love the ocean; and how lucky we are to be able to get to that point. And I just feel very lucky, like being in on a secret, a nirvana with no connection to people, just water."[89]

As Puwar discusses, in the process of becoming an insider, individuals racialized as nonwhite develop what Bourdieu calls a "feel for the game."[90] This is an "embodied form of knowledge and skills that operate beneath the level of conscious discourse" that arises from achieving a level of "synchrony between their habitus, its social trajectory and the institutional space"—or here, as Alicia outlines, in the cultural field of surfing.[91] As Alicia argues, there is an "unspoken understanding" about being a real surfer. Moreover, implicit in the feel for the game is a "denial of the body," a narrative that "prides itself on being based on neutral standards that apply across the board to everybody."[92] Thus, by describing surfing as a spiritual activity, about connecting to water/nature and not bodies, Alicia was able to negate the importance of the visible embodiment of gender and race. As she put it, "a community was open to me by my commitment to surfing."[93]

This belief that commitment to the surfing *activity* superseded other factors was widespread. The association between the "complicity of habitus and field and social capital" that these surfers had achieved through their commitment to surfing has "immense implications for the opportunities that are made available."[94] Certainly, in some spaces and contexts, these surfers were able to feel at home, to become, as Puwar terms it, "familiar strangers" who have in Bourdieu's terminology gained "ontological complicity."[95] The beach was described as a different and liminal space; as Michael put it, kind of like a "foreign country" outside of social control: "Surfing is an exclusive thing, it takes part in the time of day when other people are asleep or doing something else,

and we could go and just be, and enjoy and do that. . . . from six in the morning to . . . eleven in the morning . . . when we were surfing we were . . . brothers. . . . And so we all got to just go and be, and hang, and it didn't matter."[96]

Conclusion

In this chapter I have highlighted a range of the cultural, structural, spatial, and ideological difficulties of being a minority ethnic surfer in a white culture and space. The experiences outlined here need to be understood as contextually specific to the place and time and are certainly not generalizable to all minority ethnic surfers or surfing spaces. Yet it is a starting point in deconstructing and challenging our often-uncritical acceptance of surfing culture, media, and space as an important contemporary site where privileged white masculinity is both constructed and reproduced.

The surfers in this research were not a homogenous group; their surfing identities were shaped by a multitude of experiences that differed in relation to factors including (but not limited to) gender, social class, life stage, and residence. Therefore, it was not surprising that while some surfers had been able to transcend difficulties and had become lifelong surfers, for others, the varying forms of exclusion and white racism they experienced continued to have an impact on their surfing experiences.

Following Puwar, I have described these surfers as space invaders who, as Michael reflexively illustrated, didn't fit in with the "traditional white surf community" or "in the black community" but were "in limbo, in no-man's lands."[97] Most experienced some exclusion from the black communities, ranging from hostility to being called a variety of abusive names such as "white boy wannabes," "Uncle Toms" and "Oreo cookies." Yet in some spaces and contexts they were able to feel at home.[98] These black

surfers found various ways to negotiate their insider identity and difference in these surfing spaces, and their surfing experience provided a space of relative freedom. As Alicia put it, "Through surfing I came to realize Bob Marley's lyrics 'Heaven is here on Earth,'<HT>" while for Josh, "My love of surfing outweighed the negative feelings I had when I was told I was trying to be white."[99] While recognizing that the idea of insider and outsider is fluid and complex, racialized minorities do "become in significant ways, insiders."[100] Nonetheless, blackness is still conditional, and measured in relation to a narrowly prescribed set of roles and an imagined community from which the black surfer is still at least partially excluded.

For some, this marginality had been channeled into wanting to confront, challenge, and change the opportunities and experiences for black surfers, and the culture and representation of surfing. Individuals have been active as filmmakers and writers, contesting mass media depictions of surfing and providing opportunities to get more people on the beach and into the water. As Michael suggested, their unique experiences gave them "something that's special . . . we carry a little greater gratitude." In rejecting stereotypes and thinking and living differently from most white surfers, Michael suggests that black surfers embody, and can promote, "an expanded image of self and black culture."[101]

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[1] Thompson, "*Otelo Burning*," 325.

[2] Kusz, *Revolt of the White Athlete*, 136.

[3] Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures;* Stenger, "Mapping the Beach"; Comer, *Surfer Girls.*

[4] Wheaton, *Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sport.*

[5] Chivers-Yochim, *Skate Life.*

[6] I use the term *black* in this chapter to refer to self-defined African American surfers. While some factors are clearly specific to these individuals as members of an ethnic minority in the cultural context of California, other factors explored here are applicable to both other geographic spaces and other groups of minority surfers.

[7] Laderman, *Empire in Waves.*

[8] Usher and Kerstetter, "*Surfistas locales.*"

[9] Kusz, "Extreme America," 209.

[10] Kusz, "Extreme America," 207.

[11] Comer, *Surfer Girls*, 228.

[12] See Thompson, "Judging Surf Culture" and "Reimagining Surf City."

[13] Thompson, "Reimagining Surf City."

[14] Samuelson and Thompson, "Introduction," and Thompson, "*Otelo Burning*."

[15] Samuelson & Thompson, "Introduction," 305.

[16] Barclay and West, "Racism or Patriotism?" and Evers, "The Cronulla Race Riots."

[17] Waitt, "<HT>'Killing Waves,'<HT>" 78; McGloin, "Surfing Nation(s), Surfing Country(s)."

[18] Ibid; McGloin, "Surfing Nation(s) Surfing Country(s)."

[19] McGloin, "Aboriginal Surfing," 94.

[20] McGloin "Aboriginal Surfing," 93.

[21] Nemani, "Getting Deep" and "Being a Brown Bodyboarder."

[22] See"; Comer, *Surfer Girls*; Wheaton, "Identity, Politics, and the Beach."

[23] On claims of positive impacts, see Thorpe and Rinehart, "Alternative Sport and Affect"; Wheaton, "Identity, Politics, and the Beach." On manipulation of reefs in surfing destinations, see Ponting and O'Brien, "Liberalizing Nirvana."

[24] See Beattie, "Sick, Filthy, and Delirious"; Lewis, "Between the Lines"; and Ormrod, "Endless Summer."

[25] See Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures*, and Stranger, "Aesthetics of Risk."

[26] Lewis, "In Search of the Postmodern Surfer," 70.

[27] Lewis, "In Search of the Postmodern Surfer," 71.

[28] Lewis, "In Search of the Postmodern Surfer," 71.

[29] "Jennifer," interview.

[30] On the diversity of surf film genres, see Beattie, "Sick, Filthy, and Delirious"; Booth, "Surfing Films and Videos"; Ormrod "Representing 'Authentic' Surfer Identities."

[31] Samuelson and Thompson, "Introduction," 305.

[32] On the latter film, see McGloin, "Surfing Nation(s), Surfing Country(s)."

[33] See Samuelson and Thompson, "Introduction," which introduces the special number of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* coordinated by the duo.

[34] Woods, *White Wash.*

[35] Garcia and Baltodano, "Free the Beach"; Wolch & Zhang, "Beach Recreation."

[36] Garcia and Baltodano, "Free the Beach," 201.

[37] Garcia and Baltodano, "Free the Beach," 201.

[38] Garcia and Baltodano, "Free the Beach," 201.

[39] Erickson, Johnson, and Kivel, "Rocky Mountain National Park," 531.

[40] Nayak, "Race, Affect, and Emotion," 2375.

[41] Nayak, "Race, Affect, and Emotion," 2372.

[42] Neal, "Rural Landscapes," 443.

[43] Doreen Massey in Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 7; Carrington, "Leeds and the Topography of Race," 201.

[44] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 8.

[45] Bourdieu, *Distinction.*

[46] Bourdieu calls all forms of power "capital," and discusses different forms, such as cultural, symbolic, economic, and physical capital, thus recognizing that wealth is not just economic (or political) but also symbolic (Wheaton, "Habitus"). These different types of wealth, which are inherited or accumulated, and tend to be unevenly distributed, constitute part of a person's habitus. Through the formation of their habitus, people acquire cultural capital, a "range of cultural competencies" that "makes particular activities more or less accessible for them" (Haywood et al., *Understanding Leisure*, 240).

[47] Puwar outlines how Bourdieu's ideas, particularly "a feel for the game," helps explain how minorities become insiders in institutions dominated by whiteness. See Atencio, Beal, and Wilson, "The Distinction of Risk"; Erickson, Johnson, and Kivel, "Rocky Mountain National Park"; Thorpe, "Bourdieu, Feminism and Female Physical Culture" and "Bourdieu, Gender Reflexivity, and Physical Culture."

[48] Evers, "The Cronulla Race Riots."

[49] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 125.

[50] Burdsey, "One of the Lads," 764.

[51] "Jennifer," interview.

[52] "Josh," interview.

[53] On associations of surfing with drug culture, see Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures*; Lawler, *The American Surfer*, 126–40; and Ormrod, "Issues of Gender," 2.

[54] Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures*, 95.

[55] "Josh," interview

[56] "Jennifer," interview.

[57] "Michael," interview. Such derogatory terms are discussed in Nayak, *Race, Place, and Globalization*, and Carrington, "Double Consciousness."

[58] Erickson et al., "Rocky Mountain National Park," 540.

[59] Carrington, *Race, Sports, and Politics*, 175.

[60] Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers," 1354.

[61] Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers," 1354. Of course, *where* people swim may be a key factor attributing to this statistic, with whites being more likely to have access to safer swimming pool environments.

[62] Finlo Rohrer, "Why Don't Black Americans Swim?" *BBC News*, September 3, 2010, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-11172054. In one study, respondents were asked if they could swim across a 25-yard pool.

[63] It is also the focus of an insightful editorial by Tetsuhiko Endo, "Debunking the Stereotype that Blacks Don't Swim," *The Inertia*, February 20, 2012, http://www.theinertia.com/surf/debunking-the-stereotype-that-blacks-dont-surf-or-swim/.

[64] She described the documentary *White Wash*, which "shows an interview with African American youth at a basketball court in New York, laughing at the notion of them swimming."

[65] Of course such experiences are not universal but context dependent. As explored in Wheaton, *The Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sport*, street children in Durban, South Africa, grow up in proximity to the sea and learn to swim and surf in the ocean.

[66] "Alicia," interview.

[67] "Jennifer," interview. This fear of water, and natural places more generally, is widely commented upon. See Wheaton, *Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sport.*

[68] Wheaton, *Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sport*.

[69] Wolch and Zhang, "Beach Recreation," and Garcia and Baltodano, "Free the Beach," 197.

[70] Ibid., 250, 197.

[71] "Alicia," interview.

[72] Wolch and Zhang, "Beach Recreation," 437.

[73] Carrington, "Fear of a Black Athlete," 107.

[74] Bonilla-Silva, "Racism Without Racists"; Burdsey, "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore," 268.

[75] See Puwar, *Space Invaders.*

[76] "Michael," interview.

[77] "Alicia," interview.

[78] Carrington, "Leeds and the Topography of Race," 176.

[79] Burdsey, "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore," 268.

[80] "Jennifer," interview.

[81] "Stevie," interview.

[82] "Josh," interview.

[83] "Crissy," interview.

[84] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 137

[85] Burdsey, "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore," 275.

[86] Burdsey, "That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore," 268.

[87] "Michael," interview.

[88] "Michael," interview.

[89] "Alicia," interview.

[90] Puwar, *Space Invaders;* Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, 56.

[91] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 127.

[92] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 132.

[93] "Alicia," interview.

[94] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 129.

[95] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 129.

[96] "Michael," interview.

[97] "Michael," interview.

[98] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 129.

[99] "Alicia," interview; "Josh," interview.

[100] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 119.

[101] "Michael," interview.