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Troubled Waters
The Ocean as Contested Space in California Surf Culture

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction
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in

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by

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ABSTRACT

David Crellin

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California defines much of its identity in the public imagination through the sport and cultural formations of surfing. This identity has been almost exclusively associated with white men as the accepted standard bearers of surfing's evolution and excellence. This narrative runs parallel to the larger political and social discourses of Whiteness and racialized exclusion in American society. My project, "Troubled Waters: The Ocean as Contested Space in California Surf Culture," explores the history of racism and representation in the formation of the so-called "California Dream" of surfing, interrogating white supremacy in surf and beach popular culture along the California coast, and presents research to understand and engage surfing and surf culture through a framework of greater diversity, equity, and inclusion.

DEDICATION

"If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."- **Lilla Watson**

This project is dedicated to surfers of color, their allies, and all who ***act*** to dismantle racism and white supremacy, striving to create a society based on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to many people for the generosity of their time, insight, inspiration, scholarship, lived experience, encouragement, and critiques for helping to make this project a reality, including but not limited to:
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Thanks to my partner Colleen, our son, Aidan, the Basha/Chemers family, and my thesis committee advisors, Professor Marianne Weems, Chair, Professor Dr. Michael Chemers, Professor Dr. Karlton Heston, and Professor Dr. Alison Rose Jefferson.

Introduction

Surfing presents itself as a locus of physical and spiritual transformation, a realm in which to explore our relationship to the natural world, and a cultural space welcome to all who choose to engage in it, yet is overwhelmingly, unflinchingly, and protectively white. This strategy of espousing inclusion and connection while practicing exclusion and erasure centers whiteness as normative, rendering it invisible and dangerous. This double move allows surf culture to elide accountability for its colonial settler identity and romanticize its appropriation as embrace, inscribing the ocean as yet another site of white supremacy and a "performative place of becoming."[1] As an anti-racist intervention into the white space of surf culture, *Troubled Waters: The Ocean as Contested Space in California Surf Culture* deploys a network of interactive, locative, digital media strategies, destabilizing surfing's self-identification, challenging its accountability, engages in anti-racist education and action, and foregrounds the experiences of people of color throughout surf history and its contemporary cultural formations.

[1] McGloin, Colleen. *Surfing Nation(s) Surfing Country(s)*, pg. 305, Saarbrucken: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, 2008. Print.

Historical Context

It is commonly held that surfing traces its origins to ancient Polynesia. 12th century Polynesian cave paintings depict proto versions of people riding across ocean waters on planks of wood. Alternately, in Peru, archeologists have found evidence that native cultures there engaged in a form of riding waves as early as pre-Inca times, atop a watercraft known as a "caballito de totora" (little horse of totora), totora being the name of the reed from which the vessel was crafted.[2] Additionally, a form of surfing taking place in Ghana, on the Cape Coast of Africa, was documented in 1640, as the first written account on that continent.[3] However, most scholars today acknowledge surfing's lineage as occurring through Polynesia generally, to Hawaii specifically. Pre-contact natives in Hawaii evolved surfing, or "He'e Nalu," literally meaning "wave sliding" in Hawaiian, into the worldwide phenomenon we know today. While there are somewhat differing accounts as to what may have constituted the origins of surfing, what is clear is that all the credible histories of surfing's genesis sprang out of cultures and countries of color, and it was only in fairly modern times, did white, western peoples "discover" this ancient cultural form and sport. White North Americans (and Australians) quickly appropriated surfing throughout the mid-twentieth century, continuing to the present day. While attempts to make

[2] Larco, Hoyle R. *Los Mochicas: T.2*. Lima: Museo Arqueologico Rafael Larco Herrera, 2001. Print.
[3] Dawson, Kevin. "A Brief History of Surfing in Africa and the Diaspora", *Afro Surf*, pg. 23, 2021. Print.

surfing popular with Americans reaches as far back as the late-1800's (notable authors and public figures Jack London and Mark Twain tried and wrote about surfing), after Hawaii became a state in 1959, foregrounding whiteness as the central focus of surfing identity became stratified, with California as its epicenter. In her essay, "Space Invaders in Surfing's White Tribe: Exploring Surfing, Race, and Identity," Belinda Wheaton points out, "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. Fueled 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 that he- increasingly she- became the face of California."[4] This "imagined community of whiteness"[5] constrained and transmogrified efforts to open up surfing to other ethnicities, foreclosing opportunities for surfers of color to fully resist colonial hierarchies, knitting surfing to a number of other contemporary sporting activities as a site and "symbol of a new American zeitgeist," based on the neoliberal (white) imperatives of "individualism, self-reliance, risk-taking and progress."[6] This romanticized narrative of white superiority relies on casting images of people of color as the sublimated Other, able to provisionally access the ocean, but unable to unlock

[4] Wheaton, Belinda, "Space Invaders in Surfing's White Tribe: Exploring Surfing, Race and Identity," *The Critical Surf Studies Reader*, Zavalza, Hough-Snee D, and Eastman A. Sotelo, editors, pg.190-191, 2017. Print.
[5] ibid
[6] Kusz, Kyle. *Revolt of the White Athlete: Race, Media and the Emergence of Extreme Athletes in America*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007. Print.

its true potential, which is the sole province of the manifest destiny of whiteness. Nowhere is this more on display than the 1966 Bruce Brown film, *Endless Summer* where, "white, heterosexual, privileged young men from the Global North" travel to Africa to seek the perfect wave, while interacting with local people of color as the fascinated, and simple primitive. In truth, Africans were surfing "long before Bruce Brown showed up,"[7] yet this project of colonial inscription serves to foreground whiteness as the normative expectation in surfing cultural forms, and thus can be seen to "parenthesize issue of indigenous poverty, global exploitation, and apartheid through good-humored engagement with locals as curious."[8] Portrayals of this kind are rife throughout surf history, merging seamlessly into the America settler mentality and perspective of racialized discrimination, erasure, and exclusion. While in the last dozen years, surfing has undergone a level of self-reflection as to its racist legacy and contemporary issues of representation, there still exists a troubling persistence of "racialized cultural relations."[9]

Toni Morrison in her book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, states, "Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable,

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[7] Dawson, Kevin, "Africans Surfed Long Before Bruce Brown Showed Up", *Surfer Magazine,* September 11, 2020, internet resource https://www.surfer.com/features/africans-surfed-long-before-bruce-brown-showed-up/

[8] Lewis, Jeff. "In search of the Post-modern Surfer: Territory, Terror and Masculinity." Qtd. in Wheaton, pg. 181

[9] Thompson, Glen. (2011). "Reimagining Surf City: Surfing and the making of the post-apartheid beach in South Africa." *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. 28. 2115-2129. 10.1080/09523367.2011.622111.

pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable." [10] As an act of destabilizing and disrupting these regimes of white supremacy and hegemony, Colleen McGloin views surfing by indigenous peoples, "as a pedagogical force" and a "precolonial practice" to be "understood as a revival of surfing according to epistemically relevant knowledges: a decolonizing pedagogical force that foregrounds oppositional ways of knowing and being as a deliberate reversal of power."[11] I offer that this decolonizing force can also be deployed by persons of color in the United States, as a potent and generative strategy of resistance. Additionally, McGloin offers Walter Mignolo's theorizing of these strategies as a form of epistemic disobedience, an act of decolonial thinking, as "an unveiling of the epistemic silences of Western epistemology that is grounded in the body politics of knowledge,"[12] and embedded, after the French social theorist Bourdieu, in the embodied social habitus.[13] Historian Dr. Alison Rose Jefferson, in her book, *Living the California Dream: African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era*, recognizes these epistemic silences, her research broadening the understanding of how African American (and by extension, people of color, broadly defined) experience, history, investment and participation, "recast the significance, meaning and place of leisure by recognizing African-American agency and action, giving a more complex understanding of the

[10] Morrison, Toni, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, p 59, 1993. Print.
[11] McGloin, Colleen, "Indigenous Surfing: Pedagogy, Pleasure, And Decolonial Practice" *The Critical Surf Studies Reader*, Zavalza, Hough-Snee D, and Eastman A. Sotelo, editors. pg. 211, 2017. Print.
[12] Mignolo, Walter D. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, Culture & Society*. 26 (2009): 159-181. Print.
[13] For more on this, see: Bourdieu, Pierre, Richard Nice, and Tony Bennett. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 2015. Print.

American experience in the West" that "complicates defining a public past for citizens and their civic identity. The social meaning of these places and their histories is a powerful tool in developing a more inclusive definition of the collective past and civic identity."[14] By engaging in acts of epistemic disobedience, the resulting forces destabilize entrenched modes of social habitus, opening up new ways of thinking and being.

Methodology

"Progressive art can assist people to learn about the forces at work in the society in which they live."- Angela Davis[15]

Initial Investigations

Troubled Waters: The Ocean as Contested Space in California Surf Culture, was initially conceived as an "in-gallery" installation, designed to create an aesthetic presence evocative of beach and surf culture typical of a California coastal locale. In this first draft, the floor of the installation space, approximately 12' x 12', was to be covered in beach sand, seaweed, driftwood, and washed-up detritus. In locations strategically placed on the beach tableau, there would be a series of four horizontally situated 28-40" video monitors. The walls of the gallery space would serve as media

[14] Jefferson, A. R. "Living the California Dream: African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era**,"** Introduction, pg. 3, University of Nebraska Press, January 2020. Print
[15] Davis, Angela. Seen on mural by author, Alameda, California, 2022. Artist, Anonymous.

screens, surrounding the viewer, encompassing them in a simulacrum of an oceanic environment. (See Figures 1-2)

Figure 1

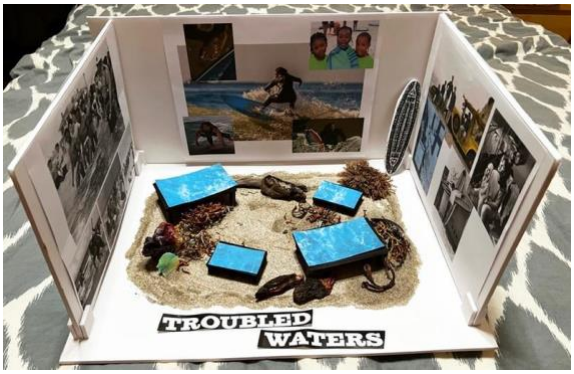

Figure 2

Content, on all projected surfaces, was to be comprised of archival still and moving images, historical documents, audio narratives, sound recordings of ocean waves, and original footage of surfing, surfers, beach and oceanic environments designed to "float" across all of the monitors and projected wall spaces, placing the viewer in the center of the ocean as an ongoing site of contested natural space, revealing the historical record of surfing as tracing a similar trajectory of structural and systemic racism evident throughout American society.

While the above concept held much aesthetic appeal and potential as an immersive installation, it left a primary and central question unanswered. Investigating early documentation and research, I found a "post-it" note that held a foundational inquiry into what the project must seek to define- "who is this project for?" (See Figures 3-4)

Efforts to answer that question effectively would necessitate reevaluation of my project research inquiries and projected outcomes.

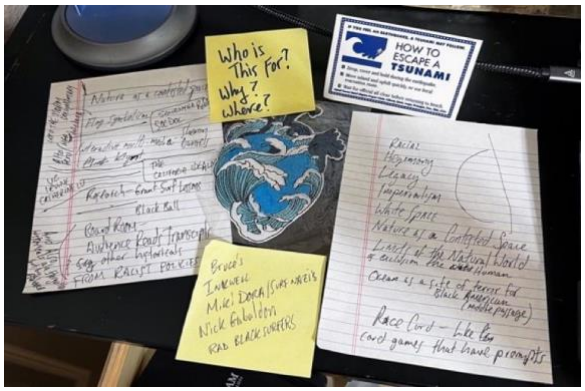

Figure 3

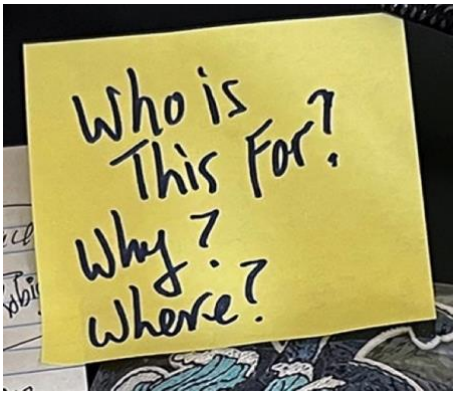

Figure 4

Upon reflection, I realized that the project's primary function and raison d'être was to engage white surfers and surf culture. The realization made it clear to me that I would need to rethink the physical presence of the project, i.e.- its "delivery device", from the ground up. The ensuing period found me visiting local surf sites throughout Santa Cruz County to discern clues about how I might proceed engaging surfers and surf culture in situ and at relative scale, while retaining the ability to deliver content in an effective and accessible manner. Early iterations simply envisioned the previous gallery project as a form of mobile installation, but those ideas were ultimately discarded in favor of seeking a more effective means to integrate the project into the culture itself, as opposed to hoping surfers would take the time to engage the mobile exhibit, either going to or coming from the water. On November 28, 2021, while driving through the Pleasure Point surfing area of Santa Cruz looking for any

inspiration into how to pivot the project, I walked past countless street signs covered with surf stickers and other decals emblematic of surf culture's aesthetic presentation and self-identification. (See Figures 5-7)

Figure 5


Figure 6

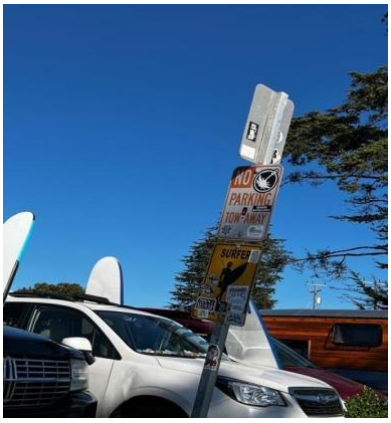

Figure 7

The concept of using stickers in some fashion to engage in an anti-racist, surf project presented an intriguing possibility, but I did not possess sufficient data set to base an informed decision as to the reach and presence of stickers in surf culture. I spent the rest of the week visiting as many local surf sites as possible and contacted friends in other cities to investigate whether this aspect of surf culture was, in fact, a common occurrence and facet of surf identity. Upon witnessing its replication time and time again in my own research at surf spots in and around Santa Cruz, then receiving responses from friends in other cities throughout California that confirmed my findings, I realized that I had discovered a conceptual framework that would enable me to interrogate contemporary surf culture and its legacy of racism using an aesthetic and tangible expression of one of surfing's cultural touchstones, the surf

sticker. Now lay the task of how to effectively utilize the stickers as a mean to intervene into the culture and deliver content that could challenge surfing's hegemonic narrative and stimulate discourse toward positive change.

Stickers, as typically utilized in many culture manifestations, can present a strong graphic image and several powerful words, but in and of themselves, are not well-suited to transmit a larger body of ideas. Upon researching methods of information dispersal through contemporary marketing and social media platforms, I realized that QR codes as a strategic intervention, presented a viable solution to my dilemma. They would enable me to expand the potential of a sticker, extending the immediate impact past its prima face graphic and textual content by exposing the user to ideas and media contained on the other side of a simple scan, all using the ubiquitous mobile technology we carry with us every day, our mobile phones. (See Figures 8-9)

Figure 8

Figure 9

Combining the aesthetic and graphic immediacy of surf stickers with the information capable of being transmitted through the QR code interface, I now was able to design the project anew, answer the question, "who is this for?", place the project in situ, and re-imagine the stickers as a "guerilla" methodology for inserting anti-racist content and activist engagement into surf culture where it lives and functions. The QR codes would enable me to embed the visual and audio elements compiled from my research and documentation regarding the history of diversity, representation, and racism in California surf culture, and insert it into surf culture as a site of provocation and discourse.

Project Evolution

The components of the project presently involve three, intertwined aspects- one an on-site, locative intervention into the culture of surfing through the use surf-style sticker decals and printed cards embedded with QR codes and placed at notable surf locales in cities and beach communities from San Francisco to San Diego. The second component is an accompanying website which functions as the main source of information and research, linking the QR codes from the stickers to the archival video and still photographic material, offering a repository of films, books and magazine articles that look critically at racism and representation in surfing, presenting a network of organizations of color who are changing the landscape of contemporary surf culture, and through numerous calls-to-action, encouraging participation in making surfing more inclusive, diverse and equitable. The third facet of the project is

an art installation in a gallery setting providing access to the website, featuring collaborations with local artists and community members, as well as additional documentation enabling attendees to engage the project outside of traveling to surf locales and their adjacent cultural expressions. These three aspects form a network of digital media engagement that defines and supports the project's research inquiries.

"Decolonize The Surf" Sticker Project

Initially, I researched and created designs intended to mimic surf stickers and imagery already prevalent throughout the culture of surfing. (See Figure 10) After testing those stickers designs at several local surf sites in Santa Cruz, I discovered they were too similar to the stickers already posted, and as such difficult to distinguish them from those extant.

Figure 10

Based upon the results of that trial run, I redesigned the stickers to feature an image evocative of surfers (both male and female identified) of non-European descent,

intended to provide countervailing visual imagery to the hegemonic whiteness almost exclusively associated with surf culture and marketing, added the inclusion of what was to become the call-to-action associated with the project, Decolonize The Surf, and set these elements against a bright “caution sign” yellow background for maximum visibility. (See Figures 11-12)

Figure 11

Figure 12

Over the course of two weeks, from March 19- March 31, 2022, I drove down the coast of California in my Subaru Forester, sleeping at state parks, roadside motels, and lodging with friends, disseminating the physical components of my project, approximately 10-12 hours per day. (See Figure 13-15)


Figure 13


Figure 14


Figure 15

Over 400 stickers and cards were placed at over 60 surf breaks, adjacent locales, and on surf vehicles in 40 cities, beginning in San Francisco to the north, extending the project's reach as far as San Diego to the south. (See Figures 15-23) The bulk of the stickers and cards were placed in full view of passersby, while others, were placed surreptitiously, somewhat "under the radar," for the purposes of ensuring safety on my part. With few exceptions, all the stickers were placed where there was already a presence of surf sticker culture- on street signs, light poles, posts, fences, guard rails, trash cans, dumpsters, outdoor showers, pier pilings, telephone booths, and on windows of surf shops, restaurants, and cafés.

Figure 15

Figure 16

Figure 17

Figure 18

Figure 19

Figure 20

Figure 21

Figure 22

Figure 23

The 5”x5” stickers, and the 5”x3” cards are embedded with a series of QR codes which, when scanned, lead the viewer to short, archival video footage. The videos

challenge and interrogate the presumptive narrative of surfing's historical and cultural evolution as one of unquestioned and invisible whiteness. The stickers and cards, by virtue of the imagery and the call-to-action slogan "Decolonize The Surf" printed on them, constitute a strong anti-racist statement of their own accord, forming the first point of entry to experience the project as a whole. Each of the four QR codes embedded on the various stickers and cards corresponds to a given video, however, differing stickers in the series were distributed across each location to create several different possible opportunities to engage the materials therein. The archival footage included in the short videos was compiled from historical and contemporary photographs, audio narratives, films, books, magazine articles and newspaper clippings. Their sources ranged from academic publications and articles, historical conservancies, and newspaper archives to documentary films, YouTube videos, popular surf magazines, and surf related books. The project videos range in length of time from approximately forty-five seconds to approximately one minute twenty seconds and are purposely short in duration, intended to selectively insert a destabilizing provocation that disrupts normative pre and post rituals of surfing without demanding too much immediate attention on the part of the viewer.

One of the four videos, entitled "Troubled Waters," is a photo montage illuminating the overwhelming representation of whiteness in the marketing of surf identity, and the deeply troubling aspect within sections of white surf culture that has aligned itself

with signifiers of white supremacy, calling themselves “Surf Nazis.” This imagery is underscored by audio narration from voices of color bearing witness to the pervasive racism that abides in the contemporary surf scene. (See Figures 24-26)

Figure 24

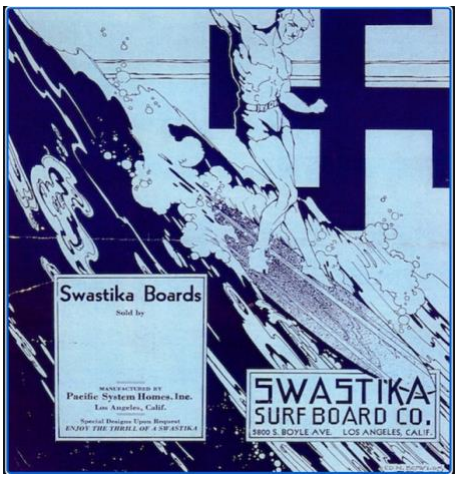

Figure 25

Figure 26

The next two videos address surfers of significance and their relative representation in the pantheon of surf history and lore. The first of those videos is centered around

Nick Gabaldón. (See Figures 27-28) Born and raised in Santa Monica, an Afro-Latino of Black and Mexican descent, he is the first documented Black surfer in California. Nick would often paddle from his home surf spot at Santa Monica's Bay Street Beach (designated by white racists as "The Ink Well") twelve miles north across the ocean to Malibu pier, to surf the bigger and better waves there, only to paddle twelve miles back home, after a full day of surfing. Without a car, hitchhiking or other forms of ground transportation more often than not, unsafe options for a black man in 1940's America, to travel from Santa Monica to Malibu. By all accounts a credible surfer and an upstanding, trustworthy human being, Nick died tragically at age 24 after attempting to ride his surfboard between the pilings of the Malibu pier during a big surf swell. It is only in the last decade that Nick Gabaldón has received well-deserved remembrance, accolades, and placement in the history of California surfing.

Figure 27

Figure 28

This in contrast with the third video in the series, which chronicles the disreputable and racist behavior of one of surfing's longboard legends of the 50s and 60s, Miki Dora, a.k.a. "Da'Cat." (See Figures 29-31)

Figure 29

Figure 30.

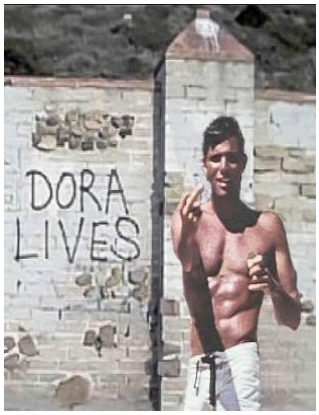

Figure 31

Dora, a career criminal, was an avowed racist, boasting of his love for American Nazis and eventually moving to apartheid-era South Africa. Nat Young, world surfing champion in 1966 and 1970 is quoted as saying, "Dora's take is to push the Black man under. He's a supreme racist, always has been. He believes absolutely in white supremacy."[16] Dora himself often used racial slurs and advised acquaintances to put all their money in gold before Mexicans and Blacks poured over the border and ruined the economy.[17] Dora and his Malibu crew, according to Matt Warshaw, former editor of Surfer Magazine, figured out that Kathy Kohner, the real-life inspiration for the popular 1950s and 60s television and film character Gidget, was Jewish. Her father, Frederick Kohner, fled Nazi Germany for California and, when his daughter took up surfing, wrote the novel that became the film and subsequent TV series. Dora and his Malibu crew responded to the news about the Kohners' ethnicity by planting a

[16] Rensin, David, and Sean Runnette. *All for a Few Perfect Waves: The Audacious Life and Legend of Rebel Surfer Miki Dora*. Old Saybrook, Conn: Tantor Media, 2020, pg. 169
[17] ibid

burning cross in their driveway.[18] Throughout this period, far from approbation, Dora was featured on the cover of countless magazines, starring in movies and television shows, enjoying near celebrity status. Though some contemporary surfing publications have re-examined Dora's racist behavior, his reputation thrives to this day as a legend in surfing history and is still considered by many, the undisputed "King of Malibu."

Rounding out the four videos is the examination of an early site of racialized contestation along the Southern California coast, Bruce's Beach, situated in Manhattan Beach, California. Purchased in 1912 by Willa and Charles Bruce, the property was developed into a popular beach resort for African American families. (See Figures 32-34) Racially biased policies of eminent domain essentially and practically stole the property from the Bruce's in 1927 under the guise of turning it into a public park. The city razed the resort buildings and the property sat fallow for nearly 40 years. It was only after city officials began to worry that the Bruce family members might sue to regain their land, that the property was utilized for the purpose for which it had been originally taken.[19] In September of 2021, close to 110 years after Willa and Charles Bruce originally purchased Bruce's Beach, Governor Gavin

[18] Daniel, Duane, "The Long, Strange Tale of California's Surf Nazis", *The New York Times*, September 28, 2019

[19] Xia, Rosanna (2020-08-02). "Manhattan Beach was once home to Black beachgoers, but the city ran them out. Now it faces a reckoning". Los Angeles Times. Retrieved 2020-08-02.

Newsome signed Senate bill SB796 into law, giving the descendants of Charles and Willa Bruce the power to have their land returned to them once proper lineage could be established. Less than two months after the bill was made law, a white attorney (and Civil War apologist) Joseph Ryan, sued the County of Los Angeles to stop the transfer of the land to the Bruce family descendants. Most recently, in April of 2022, the Los Angeles Superior Court ruled against Joseph Ryan, clearing the way for Bruce's Beach to return to the descendants of Willa and Charles Bruce.[20]

Figure 32

Figure 33


JUNE 27, 1912.—[PART I.] 15

COLORED PEOPLE'S RESORT MEETS WITH OPPOSITION.

Figure 34

After viewing any of the above quartet of videos, the viewer is immediately taken to the next stage of the project, the accompanying website, www.decolonizethesurf.com, which constitutes a deeper engagement into issues of racism, representation and white supremacy in surf history and culture.

[20] McDermott, Mark, "Court Ruling- Attempt to halt Bruce's Beach land transfer", EasyReader, September 23, 2022, https://easyreadernews.com/court-ruling-attempt-to-halt-bruces-beach-land-transfer-rejected/, online resource

Decolonize The Surf dot Com

The project website, www.decolonizethesurf.com, serves as a site of accountability, activism, a repository of information and resources, a place to bear witness and honor the contributions of people of color in surfing, and a virtual meeting space for the surf community in general, white surfers specifically. The website was designed to encourage engagement by and for surf culture, the language and colloquialisms deployed within the site reflecting surfing's lexicon based on my experience growing up within surfing and the coastal communities of Southern California.

The evolution of the website is an ongoing process and informed at every step of the way by the advice, conversations, and mentorship of scholars, creatives, surfers and organizations of color, as well as members of my thesis committee, who generously offered their insights, feedback, critiques, and perspectives. The organization of the website is structured into several different engagement categories, outlined as follows: Landing Page, Content, Community, Action, Resources, About and Acknowledgements.

Landing Page

The first image encountered on the website is that of the George Floyd Memorial Paddle Out, in recognition of the death of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Hundreds of surfers gathered at Moonlight Beach in Encinitas California, on June 3, 2020, paddling out into the water and observing eight

minutes 15 seconds of silence, the amount of time that racist police officer, Derek Chauvin placed his knee on the neck of Mr. Floyd, causing his death by asphyxiation and trauma. After returning to shore, surfers, in solidarity with those on the beach, gathered to spell out the word “Unity” in a phalanx of surfboards, surrounded by the community in attendance. (See Figure 35) This action was one of many similar “paddle outs” in remembrance of George Floyd, and in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Figure 35

Immediately below the photo is the greeting, “Welcome. This is a conversation. And now that you are here, you are a part of the conversation.” This salutation is intentionally designed to frame the users experience as one of participation,

responsibility, and dialogue. Scrolling down from this reception, users encounter the first aspect of the Contents section, the “Decolonize The Surf” sticker project.

Contents

The “Decolonize The Surf” sticker project portion of the Contents section offers a brief explanation of the sticker project, examples of the stickers, embedded links to the videos linked in the QR codes, and a photo gallery exploring the numerous surf sites and locations along the coast of California where the stickers have been placed. This section also features a call to action, encouraging anyone who sees the stickers “out in the wild” to take a selfie, noting where they saw the sticker, and send both photo and information to the project’s email address for inclusion in the website photo gallery. This call-to-action is an additional point of engagement designed to foster connection, build community, and amplify the reach of the project.

The next section of the Contents page is entitled “Talk Story” and is a collection of audio narratives recorded by surfers of color sharing their experiences of life on, at and getting to the water, as well as their thoughts on racism in surfing and what surf culture must to do to decolonize the surf. The genesis for this idea was born out of a conversation with respected surf scholar, historian and long-time surfer, Professor Dr. Kevin Dawson. During our time together, he recounted a few of his experiences growing up as a young surfer in Southern California. Hearing his story, told in his own words, was deeply powerful. It was the impact of his recollections that gave rise

to my idea of archiving personal stories as audio narratives and making them available on the website, as a means to bear witness to the legacies of racism in surfing.

The term "Talk Story" has its origins in native Hawaiian culture and is a phrase that signifies, among many things, the sharing of wisdom, knowledge, and legacy. Native Hawaiian Rosa Say, author of *Managing with Aloha* and TalkingStory.org, speaks of talking story thus, "Our Hawaiian ancestors did not pen a written history of our islands. Information was passed generation to generation verbally, with the ʻŌlelo (the language and spoken word) and in storytelling. Today there is much effort in our Hawaiian renaissance to record what we know about our past history before the kūpuna (our elders) forget and can no longer tell it to us. Still today, for us to communicate and dialogue is to 'talk story.' There is so very much I personally have learned from the ʻōlelo form of teaching, perhaps most of all that anyone who speaks has the potential to be my teacher. I only need listen as well as I can, quieting the voices in my own head."[21] As much of the history of surfing owes its origins to the Kanaka Maoli, or indigenous Hawaiian peoples, "Talking Story" becomes an appropriate concept from which to listen and learn from voices of color as they share their experience and wisdom.

[21] Quoted in https://www.shelivesaloha.com/blog/talk-story, online resource

Community

One of the core values of this project and addressing the legacy of racism in surf culture is to bring greater awareness and attention to the many organizations of color that are teaching surfing and ocean skills to youth and adults of color, creating a place for people of color to feel safe and welcome along the coastal leisure spaces of California. (See Figure 36) Each of the respective logos on the website clicks through to the URL of the organization listed. Throughout my extensive research for this project, I communicated with and interviewed individuals from many of the organizations below. They have spearheaded events, initiatives, legislation, and organizations, all in service to increasing inclusion, diversity, equity and representation in surfing and beach access for people of color. I was eager to learn about the work they were doing, humbled by their gracious encouragement, and honored by the supportive acceptance of the project (and myself) in allyship with their activism and community building goals. In collaboration with these groups, the project has served to amplify their efforts and increase awareness regarding issues of representation and diversity in surfing.

Figure 36

Action

The Action page, with its rallying cry, “The Power of The People,” focuses on organizations that work to change the laws that continue to marginalize people of color and their equitable access to coastal leisure spaces, each of the respective logos linked to the URL of the organization listed. (See Figure 37) These organizations work specifically to change public policy, ensuring the beaches and oceans are safe, clean, and accessible to all. A portion of their efforts are engaged in community building and skills acquisition in the water for people of color, but their central focus is across the political landscape, in conservation, education and legislation.

Figure 37

Below the Action organization logos, is an area, entitled “Stay Connected!”, where users can input their contact information to receive updates on efforts to decolonize the surf, information on upcoming events in surf communities of color, and opportunities to find out how they can be a part of making a positive change in surf culture.

Resources

The Resources page of the website is divided into three areas- Movies, Articles, and Books. Each section provides an opportunity to become more informed about racism in surf culture from the vantage point of the three respective mediums, with links to their corresponding access.

Movies

The first section, Movies, is nestled under the sub-heading “Chill,” and highlights four documentaries that range in focus from the “whitewashing” of surf culture to the participation of surfers of color throughout the history of surfing, then an exploration of the life of the first documented Black Surfer in California, Nick Gabaldón, the fourth delving into the presence of surfing and aquatic culture in the African diaspora. (See Figure 38-41) The selections range in length of time from slightly under thirty minutes to just under two hours. This section is bookended by the offering, “May these films inspire you to help make sure the ocean is a place of inclusion, diversity and equity for all.”

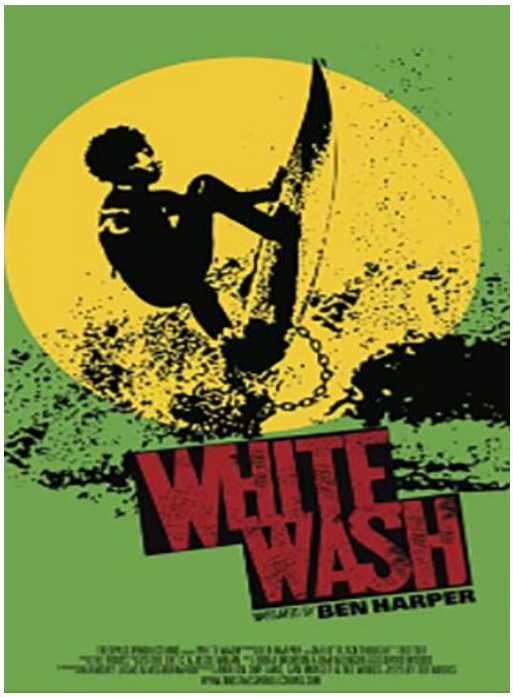

Figure 38

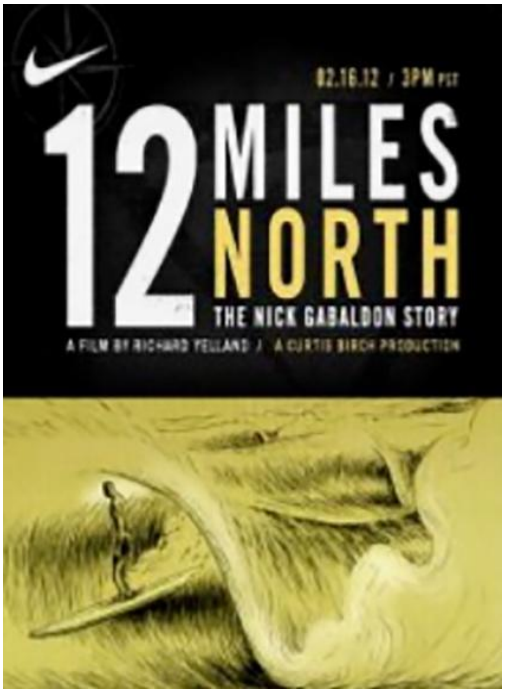

Figure 39

Figure 40

Figure 41

Articles

This section begins with the call to action, "Jump In!" and offers a compendium of eight magazine articles, published in popular surf magazines, news outlets and independent media. The articles explore the history of racism in surf culture, contemporary racialized problematics in surfing, correctives to the historical narrative of surfing's evolution, and accountability as regards the lack of diversity and representation in surf and beach life. The associated links connect users to such varied sources as *Surfer* Magazine, The *New York Times*, *the LA Times*, NBC News, and independent media outlets, *Blavity* and *Huck* Magazine.

Books

For those motivated and willing to investigate further, the "Book" section encourages users to get "In The Barrel", (a term meaning to enter into the central part of the enfolding wave, or the "tube"), take a deep dive, and explore the histories of people of color in surfing and aquatic life. Here they will find links to five books from scholars, activists and creatives covering a wide scope of topics- *Waves of Resistance: Surfing and History in Twentieth-Century Hawaii* by Professor Isaiah Helekunihi Walker, "*Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora*" by Professor Kevin Dawson, "*Living the California Dream: African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era"* by Dr. Alison Rose Jefferson, "*Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing*" by Scott Laderman, and "*Afro*

Surf" by Mami Wata and Selema Masekela. The presence of these publications stand testament to the growing field of research and scholarship connecting the colonial settler project and political construct of hegemonic whiteness, with the lineage of racism and erasure throughout surfing's history, offering new insights and narratives that place people of color at the center of surf life and culture.

About

The page labeled "About" on the website briefly explains the impetus for the project and includes a statement that calls for surf culture to commit to making substantial and lasting change. The text is included here-

> I was raised in Southern California and spent almost all my time in the ocean. As a white person, I was in a privileged position to access the beach and ocean without question or discrimination. I grew up ingesting a false narrative about the history and culture of surfing and beach life. A story that normalized and foregrounded white experience, while erasing the participation and historical impact of people of color in creating, defining, and shaping the sport of surfing. This project was borne out of a sense of anger and shame to have been part of a racialized culture that created and allowed such intolerance and divisiveness to exist.
>
> We must look deeply and critically at the white washing of surf culture, its participation in perpetuating racism, and the lack of representation and inclusion that persists in surfing to this day. Will the surf community embrace the generative lessons surfing has to offer- freedom, equality, community, and respect, or will we dishonor those values, as well as our oceans and beaches, by continuing to turn a blind eye to injustice?
>
> If surfing culture does not commit to making a real, lasting, and structural change, the echoes of racism and exclusion will continue to lie beneath the surface of the waves as a form of oceanic pollution, coastal decimation, and climate disaster, troubling our waters and poisoning our humanity.

> My hope is that this project promotes a reevaluation in white surf culture, brings greater awareness to surfers of color, scholars, activists, and creatives working to change surf culture, and opens further space to reimagine the beach and ocean as places of equity, inclusion, diversity, and community.

The above statement on the website is concise for the purpose of brevity, providing information to clarify my position as artist and scholar, but it reveals only a portion of the larger context, which I feel is important to include in this writing.

The project "*Troubled Waters: The Ocean as Contested Space in California Surf Culture*" originated from a casual suggestion on the part of my MFA advisor, Professor Marianne Weems, during the first year of my tenure in the Digital Arts New Media (DANM) program track, as part of the Department of Performance, Play and Design (PPD), at the University of California, Santa Cruz. As I was mulling over potential ideas from to base my capstone thesis project, she remarked that "someone" should do a project on the history of racism in surfing, perhaps being aware that spent most of my free time in the ocean, in and around surfing and had grown up in Manhattan Beach, California. I agreed it was an intriguing source of inquiry, but at the time I had my sights set on exploring other aspects of my research interests. I found, however, that I kept returning to her remark over the ensuing months. As it had clearly piqued my curiosity, I made the decision to do a little bit of preliminary research, if for nothing else, to whet my curiosity and, if truth be told, dispel what I felt at the time might surely be a tangential aspect of our country's larger racial reckoning.

Once I began to explore the history of racialized behavior across the history of surfing in general, and specifically along the California coast, I was shocked to discover how pervasive and abiding surfing's racial history was, and to what a great degree it fell in lockstep with the systemic and structural constructs of race in the colonial settler project which undergirds much of this country's origin story. This understanding forced me to examine and evaluate my own ignorance, tacit acceptance, and complicity in acquiescence to the invisible structures of whiteness that operate in the fabric of our political, social, and civil bodies, and to what extent I had ingested this poison. These realizations made it clear to me that this project was not only necessary as an academic, aesthetic, and social enterprise, but that it was critical to my personal integrity and understanding. If was to become a responsible citizen and anti-racist ally, I would need to begin to cleave myself of a lifetime of advantage, and unquestioned access, "step up" and use my privilege to put some (white) skin in the game. It was from this humbled but determined vantage point, that I began the journey of education, understanding, perspective, introspection, and collaboration that would provide the foundation enabling to create this project.

I quickly became aware of the intense desire I possessed toward engaging the work ahead, as well as the trepidation and hesitation associated with exploring topics so intermingled with my personal upbringing, social position and cultural D.N.A. Each day, I vacillated between excitement, passion, and intellectual curiosity on one hand,

shame, timidity, and fear of approbation on the other. The more I studied and researched, the more conversations I had with scholars, creatives and individuals of color and their allies, the more I was able to understand how the construct of race operates, and the better I was equipt to make visible the construction of my own whiteness and fashion the appropriate tools adequate to the tasks ahead. The more I learned intellectually and as an exercise in embodiment, the greater my capacity for understanding my own complicity, expanding my capacity for action and change. The process, as are all processes which constitute acts of becoming more fully connected to our humanity, are continual and ongoing. Through the generosity of a community of kind, rigorous, challenging, vivid, dedicated, and courageous individuals, both in and out of the Academy, I have been connected to work of the utmost importance, dignity, and joy by embarking on this project.

Acknowledgements

The final section of the website recognizes the people, organizations, and institutes who, without their participation, intellectually, philosophically, physically, structurally, financially, and spiritually, this project would have likely remained a passing statement from a professor to a graduate student. While acknowledgements at end of a project can seem pro forma, I can state with all sincerity and conviction that all (and more) included in my acknowledgments formed a matrix of support and encouragement, enabling me to gain the necessary vantage point from which to create

this project. This section also highlights the imperative of seeking intersectional allyship and methodologies when engaging race and social justice praxis.

Coda- MFA Thesis Exhibit

A third note in the triad of the project (though played in a minor key), is my installation as part of the 2022 Digital Arts New Media (DANM) MFA exhibit, *Unforgetting*, housed in the Digital Art Research Center, at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This installation presents another passageway in which to engage the material of the project, especially for those who do not frequent coastal locales or inhabit surf culture at large. The installation features an 8-foot-tall surfboard with artwork designed by Santa Cruz artist Tyler Filkins, spray-painted with a beach and ocean scene over which the words “Representation”, “Diversity”, “Equity”, “Inclusion” and “Decolonize The Surf” have been “tagged”, graffiti-style (See Figures 39-40).

Figure 39

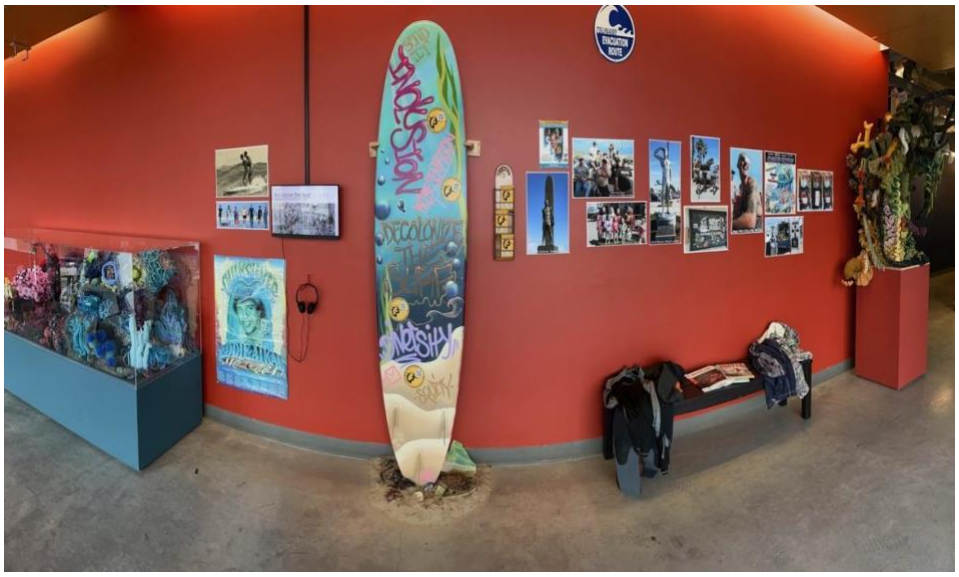

Figure 40

Adjacent to the installed surfboard hangs a series of photographs taken during my sojourn installing the surf sticker component of the project. I chose subjects that were not typically featured in the hagiographic documentation beloved of glossy surfing magazines. The photos offer vivid examples of some of the habitués and socio-cultural products that inhabit the coastal environments in which many surf locales are situated. They underscore the overwhelming representation of white (male) persons as the normative, ergo invisible, protagonist in the story of surfing in California. (See Figures 41-48)

Figure 41

Figure 42

Figure 43

Figure 44

Figure 45

Figure 46

Figure 47

Figure 48

Below the photographs, a black bench, decorated with items typical of surfing life (wetsuit, rash guard, swim trunks, sweatshirt, flip-flops) flank a half dozen surf magazines. A sign above the bench encourages attendees to “leaf through a surf magazine and count how many white people you see, and how many people of color.” (See Figures 49-51) This activity provides another opportunity to witness the lack of representation that functions at every level of surfing. A wall mounted monitor provides gallery attendees with touchscreen access, enabling them to explore the website and the contents therein. A wooden container carrying the stickers and printed cards hangs on the wall of the gallery space with a sign asking them to take a sticker or card, place them at surf spots (stickers) or on surf vehicles (cards), take a photo and send it to the project email address. This strategy encourages participation in the project as a community endeavor and increases the “viral” capacity for anti-racist intervention and allyship.

Figure 49

Figure 50

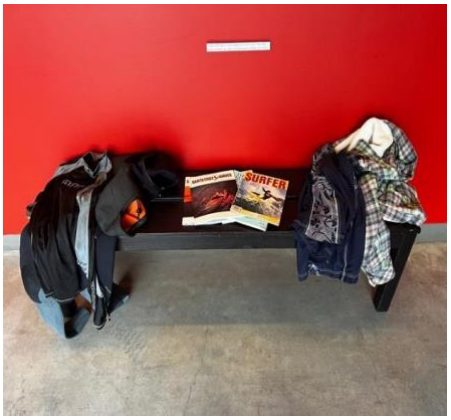

Figure 51

Activism

The project's scope includes outreach and activism within surf marketing. I contacted two, prominent local businesses in Santa Cruz, California, meeting with them to talk about why representation matters in surf culture, and to ask them to increase the diversity of their visual representations in that regard. Hula's Aloha Grill now features on permanent display a photograph of Nick Gabaldón. (See Figures 52-53) Cowell's Surf Shop, has on display the same photo of Nick Gabaldón, as well as another of a group of African American surfers from a 1983 Surfer Magazine article, "The Black Surfers of the Golden State." (See Figure 54) These actions were not meant to be comprehensive but deployed to engage community participation, if only as small measures of accountability and awareness.

Figure 52

Figure 53

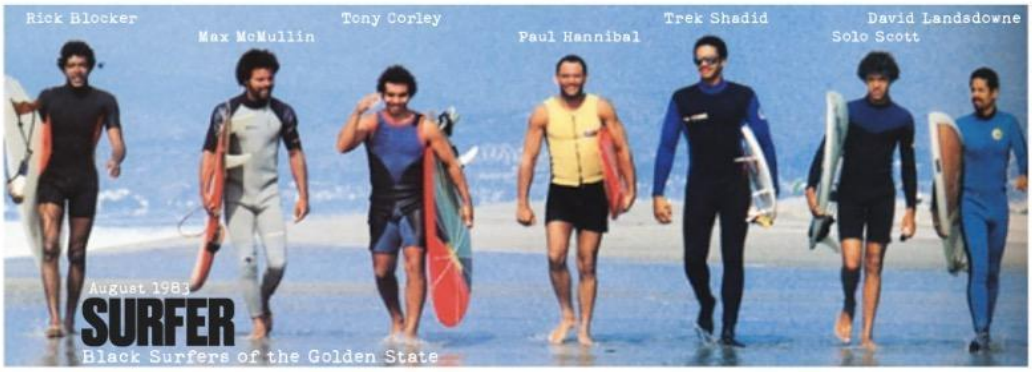

Figure 54

Situating Troubled Waters

My project, *Troubled Waters: The Ocean as Contested Space in California Surf Culture,* intersects with, and occupies the territory of several artistic, activist, and popular culture practices- in situ installation art, locative technology and digital media, "guerilla" intervention and activist strategies, grass-roots marketing, and contemporary street art, graffiti, and sticker culture. The location-based deployment of the over 400 stickers and 100 cards throughout over 40 cities, and 60 locations which constitute the *Decolonize The Surf Sticker Project*, adopts the immediacy and temporal methods utilized by street art, graffiti and sticker culture, through its adhering of the decals on public buildings, structures, walls and signage. This strategy is imbricated with that of activist inventions into the public sphere, as information disseminated throughout a large geographic area serves to form a pervasive and collective voice targeted at a specific set of issues it seeks to address and change. From the standpoint of an installation art engagement, the project

disaggregates a specific central location in which to seat itself, instead dispersing its message in "viral" fashion, distributed across the landscape of a monoculture, in this instance, white surf culture, its seeds of information carried on the winds of the Commons. This viral strategy is also an aspect that intersects with the above activist, political outreach. The QR codes embedded on the stickers and cards place the project into the realm of locative technology, users scanning the codes to access the mediatized and internet content contained within the project website, decolonizethesurf.com. The website itself constitutes a digital repository of information and resources as an educational forum and anti-racist strategy, a townhall or public meeting space of sorts, encouraging dialogue, participation, introspection and accountability, and a platform in which to acknowledge and amplify voices of color and their allies engaged in efforts to foment greater equity, diversity, and representation throughout all aspects of surf culture. The two case studies below explore artists whose work intersects with aspects of my own, through content, form, or both.

Yrneh Gabon: Sole to Soul Walking on Water

The first project is Yrneh Gabon Brown's, *Sole to Soul Walking on Water*. Yrneh is a Jamaican born, multi-disciplinary, mixed media and performance artist, based in Los Angeles. On his website, yrnehgabon.com, Yrneh states that he "seeks to balance and intersect artistic representation with social activism and social commentary,

particularly regarding issues pertinent to Africa and people within its Diaspora."[22] This balance between realm of aesthetics and activism is precisely where my praxis lies, and the project created by the artist, *Sole to Soul Walking on Water* connects both aspects of this balance and intersection.

Sole to Soul Walking on Water, the artist's MFA thesis project for the Otis College of Art and Design's Public Practice program, investigates the import and legacy of the first documented black surfer in California, Nick Rolando Gabaldón. Gabaldón, an Afro-Latino, was born on February 23, 1927, in Los Angeles, growing up in the Pico neighborhood of Santa Monica (90404 area code), a section of town known as "Black Santa Monica," according to the artist.[23] The Pico neighborhood, a thriving community of Black and Latinx-owned family businesses, has remained largely ignored by history keepers and undervalued for its cultural assets, especially in light of the mainstream depictions of Santa Monica focused on beach life in consumerism.[24] Gabaldón integrated the exclusively white surfing community of Malibu in the 1940s, dying tragically at age 24, in a surfing accident at the Malibu pier, on June 6, 1951.

[22] Gabon Brown, Yrneh. Website, https://www.yrnehgabon.com/about, internet resource
[23] Phone conversation with the author and Yrneh Gabon Brown, April 12, 2022
[24] 18th Steet Art Center 2015-2016 Catalogue, https://issuu.com/cropcollective/docs/18thst_final_e-book_2017-11-30_v06_ , online resource

Yrneh's work explores Gabaldón life as an individual, and as a mythopoetic expression of the courage and tenacity of persons of color in American society. The artist's installation was created across several differing media and locations-a gallery installation, accompanying video art, and a locative, public performance. In the first instance, inside the gallery, Yrneh constructed tableaus evocative of the beach and surfing life. Sand covered one part of the gallery space, punctuated by a surfboard with Gabaldón's visage painted on it, projected video of the artist surfing (Yrneh took surfing lessons as part of the project), and a mound of sand upon which are stationed a pair of army style boots, paying homage to the time Gabaldón spent serving in the Navy reserve during World War II. Another portion of the gallery housed a suspended, multi-paned door frame upon which were hanging a wetsuit, rash guard, and bathing suit. (See Figures 55-56)

Figure 55

Figure 56

Outside of the installation space in the adjacent patio, a standing sculpture of empty picture frames reached toward the sky, nestled against a large tree covered in dozens of pairs of shoes, from the base of the tree to the top of the picture frames. (See Figure 57)

Figure 57

The third component of the project involved the artist metaphorically recreating the journey Nick Gabaldón would often make, paddling from Santa Monica, twelve miles north to surf the Malibu pier. The artist, dressed in clothing later repurposed in the doorframe portion of his gallery installation, walked twelve miles from Santa Monica to the Malibu Pier, carrying a bright orange surfboard on which was etched the letters "NG" for Nick Gabaldón, and "90404," the signifying area code for Nick's Pico neighborhood. (See Figures 58-59)

Figure 58

Figure 59

Situating my project in the context of Gabon Brown's *Soul to Sole Walking on Water*, immediate similarities become apparent. We both engage histories and legacies of persons of color, addressing an underrepresented yet notable figure in the history of surfing, enact strategies of locative art practice, and deploy the distribution of activist and anti-racist messaging in and across the public sphere. My inclusion of a surfboard as a central icon of my gallery installation echoes Yrneh's placement of the Nick Gabaldón surfboard featured prominently in his work.

In speaking with the artist in a phone conversation, it was clear that several of our project outcomes and objectives ran parallel, while others were specific to the nature of our individual practices, as well as the ethnic and cultural identities we inhabit. Yrneh Gabon Brown, a Jamaican born, Black man, could artistically render aspects of Nick Gabaldon's life, such as the video projections of the artist surfing the Santa Monica beach where Nick once rode his board, and the twelve-mile walk from Santa Monica to Malibu, in a way that would not be culturally or respectfully

appropriate for myself as a white person. And I, as a white person, was perhaps, at times better situated to insert myself into the very belly of the beast of white surf culture, generally without fear of repercussions or danger. These different positionalities aside, our project aims often intersect, tracing at times a similar line, an oblique angle at others, yet charting a similar path of exploration. I can envision the works existing side by side, offering complementary perspectives within their range and scope.

Róza El-Hassan: QR Codes for Syria

The second work, I explore and situate in relation to mine, is *QR Codes for Syria*, by Róza El-Hassan. El-Hassan, born in Budapest, is an artist and activist of dual Hungarian/Syrian nationality. She has gained international recognition for her dedicated involvement in social and economic issues, political activism and explicit solidarity with the refugee seekers and victims of humanitarian catastrophes.[25] *QR Codes for Syria* was conceived as a response to the crisis in Syria and its chilling effect on the ability of its cultural institutions and artists to exist. El-Hassan states, "I would like to support those who use non-violent weapons like a poem, a blog, a video a painting by showing their works in international shows and lectures, by creating a future foundation for art and education."[26] She contacted numerous museums, as well

[25] The Swedish Arts Grant Committee, https://www.konstnarsnamnden.se/default.aspx?id=20966, online resource
[26] International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, Museum Watch Actions, https://cimam.org/museum-watch/museum-watch-actions/qr-codes-syria/, online resource

as the Venice Biennale, asking them to distribute QR codes that link to non-violent images and messages from civilian and art activists. These images and messages took in the form of painting on the sides of walls, chalk drawings on small chalkboards, graffiti, and other mediums, as well as links to the websites and Facebook pages of Syrian organizations and groups, in order to create a lifeline to the art, history, performance and community of Syria's artist, creatives, and scholars. (See Figures 60-63)

Figure 60

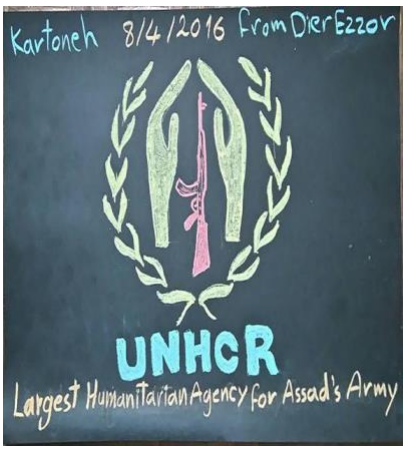

Figure 61


Figure 62

Figure 63

The immediacy expressed by these artists, accessed through the QR code interface, expanded their reach exponentially, far beyond the attempts to censor dissent in a totalitarian regime. This potential is beautifully rendered by El-Hassan, "These messages are appropriately expressed with urgency. Hundreds of groups and individuals publish them daily on internet. Some of the messages are hidden behind abstract QR codes created with all the subversive tools of critical expression. Art is rich and splendorous in times of change."[27] While my project is not situated in the existential stakes experienced by a country under immediate siege, the need to participate in every measure possible to disrupt, dismantle and decolonize racism, as part of America's "original sin," is necessary and urgent.

El-Hassan has astutely surmised the utility and agency embedded in accessing QR code technology as a means to engage a user, "QR codes are simultaneously efficient

[27] Art Leaks, QR Codes for Syria, May 23, 2013, https://art-leaks.org/2013/05/23/qr-codes-for-syria/, online resource

ways to access these realms with the help of a mobile phone and an internet connection. You take a picture with your mobile and another picture appears. No language and text are in-between. The choice to activate it or not is within the viewer. It is up to each to decide if she or he wants to see the hidden reality behind the structure."[28] This function of the QR code interface was one of its most compelling and performative aspects, driving the decision to include and implement them as a portal to encounter the scope and breadth of my research and art activism.

El-Hassan utilized QR code technology to focus attention and amplify the voices of those seeking change through non-violent art and activism, by fostering communication, participation, and a vital connection to those who share communality of experience, and the allies who support them. Art, especially as an extension of activism, can often be best served by de-centering the artist and shining a light on the issues in question. I share this outlook and recognize a similar methodology at play in *QR Codes for Syria.* Her work in this piece utilizes her relative privilege as an international artist of renown, using it as an accelerant to foreground the work of others and serve as a repository of information and resources. This strategy was one of the foundational premises present at the conception of *Troubled Waters: The Ocean as Contested Space in California Surf Culture*.

[28] Art Leaks, QR Codes for Syria, May 23, 2013, https://art-leaks.org/2013/05/23/qr-codes-for-syria/, online resource

Results, Conclusions, & Future Evolutions

I define the project metrics for "Troubled Waters: The Ocean as Contested Space in California Surf Culture" based on aesthetics, reach, and community impact. These represent goals determined at the outset of the project's research and creation.

Aesthetics

There were three main areas of aesthetic consideration in the conception of *Troubled Waters*- the "Decolonize The Surf" sticker project, the website, decolonizethesurf.com, and the gallery installation.

"Decolonize The Surf" sticker project

The "Decolonize The Surf" sticker project, sought to intervene into surf culture by replicating the "look and feel" of an important aspect of surfing identity, surf stickers, while retaining a unique imprimatur enabling them to be boldly and easily discernible. Additionally, the conceptual design of the sticker project, with the inclusion of the graphic of a surfer of color and the statement "Decolonize The Surf," was conceived as a "standalone" call to action and provocation in its own right, deploying and transmitting a bold anti-racist and activist message, regardless of whether the user engaged the project further or not. However, these images, in addition to the embedded QR codes, also function to pique the users' interest, compelling them to scan the QR code or visit the website. I draw the reader's attention to the above photo documentation as visual evidence as to the stickers

efficacy in creating a strong visual statement, and their successful integration into extant surf sticker culture. (See Figures 14-22)

Decolonize The Surf dot Com

The primary consideration of the website's design and functionality was to create a user-friendly, visual, linguistic, and embodied experience for primarily white surf culture. It is purposefully non-didactic, conversational in tone, and visually rich. The website features many photos common to surfing, providing an inviting visual experience while decentering whiteness as its primary palette, and foregrounding representation by surfers of color. The text, focused on accountability within the white surf community, is by and large non-academic, drawn from colloquial speech typical of surfers, based on my personal experience growing up in and around surf culture. The audio narratives were recorded in casual settings, on the respondents' phones, as intimate, first-person accounts documenting the experiences of surfers of color, presented in a powerful but accessible manner designed to engage the listener intellectually and emotionally. The resources included on the website offer several avenues to access materials addressing racism, diversity, and representation in surf culture, creating opportunities for education, reflection, and action. The aesthetic and content presentation of the website component of the project is in keeping with the goals initiated in its conception.

Troubled Waters Gallery Installation

Designing a physical representation in a gallery setting necessitated a different aesthetic approach, one that would give a sense of the project's scope, hint at its locative nature, and place attendees into the milieu of surf culture. In addition to accessing the website on a touchscreen monitor, stickers, and cards with the embedded QR codes are available throughout the installation, affording users the opportunity to engage the project as someone might at a typical surf site. The centerpiece of the installation is an 8-foot-tall surfboard, spray painted by a Santa Cruz artist, standing upright, its base resting on a bed of beach sand. Surf gear, clothing and surf magazines festoon an adjacent bench, bringing the viewer further into the world of surfers and surf life. Photos of my outreach within surf marketing at local Santa Cruz businesses, as well as photo documentation of surfing's overwhelming whiteness flank the exhibit, framing the content in-between, asserting a call and response regarding the project's central interrogations. The above strategies were consistent with my design and concept ideas for this aspect of the project's presentation. Ancillary components of the project that added additional aesthetic considerations and interventions, are two stickers based on popular surfing cultural products, the Screaming Hand icon, and Mister Zog's Sex Wax, which were altered to reflect the project's messaging and focus. (See Figures 64-67)

Figure 64

Figure 65

Figure 66

Figure 67

Reach

Approximately one month after deploying the “Decolonize The Surf” sticker project, engagement has been recorded at over 300 unique users, across the four QR codes embedded on the stickers and cards. (See Figure 68)

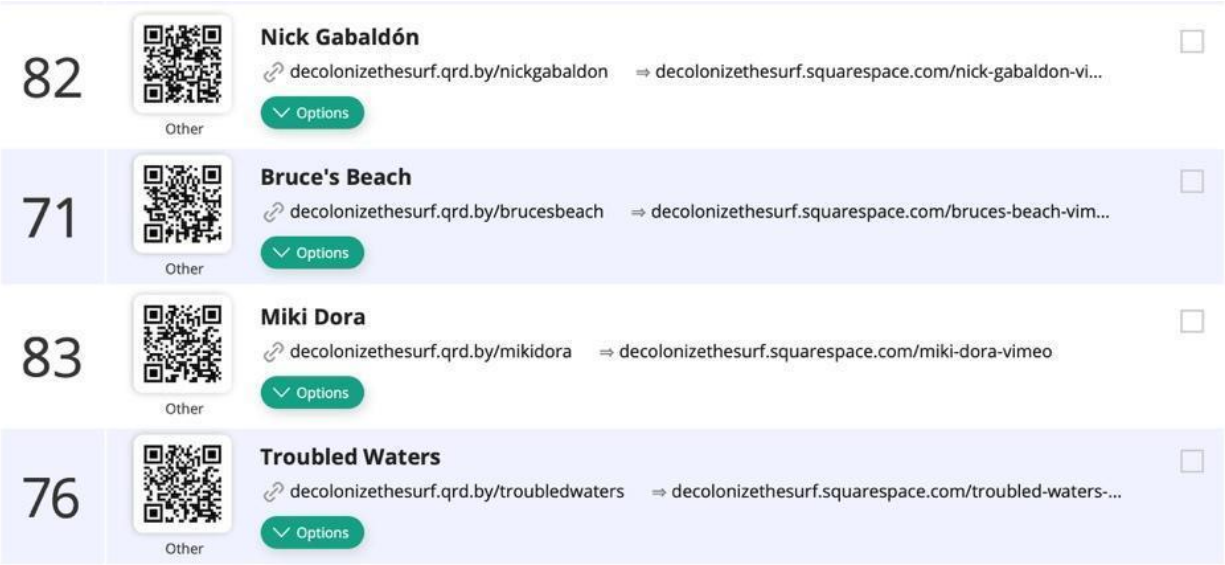

Figure 68

The QR code GPS location function, as constructed by the QR Code providers, offers basic data as to the distribution of the user engagement throughout the coastal cities where the project was deployed. The tracking data function from the QR Code providers appears to be somewhat porous and inconsistent, as several cities were subsumed into their larger regions or counties, while other user tracking was counted in the “Other” category, though this may be due to location protection measures initiated by individual users or their operating systems. The data is useful however, to recognize general trends in the distribution of user response by city and region. (See Figure 69)

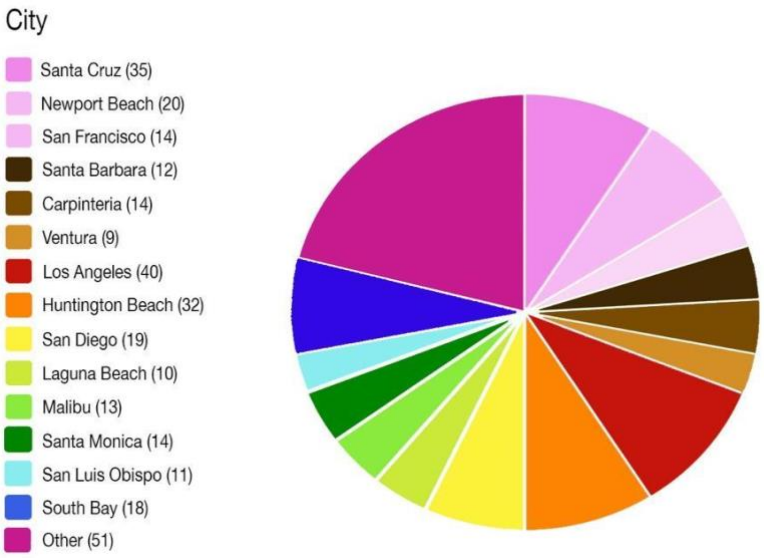

Figure 69

This above data, if extrapolated across twelve months, would indicate over 4000 unique users experiencing the project content. This number could likely increase substantially by envisioning a modest exponential growth curve due to social media, press and word of mouth.[29] (See Figure 70)

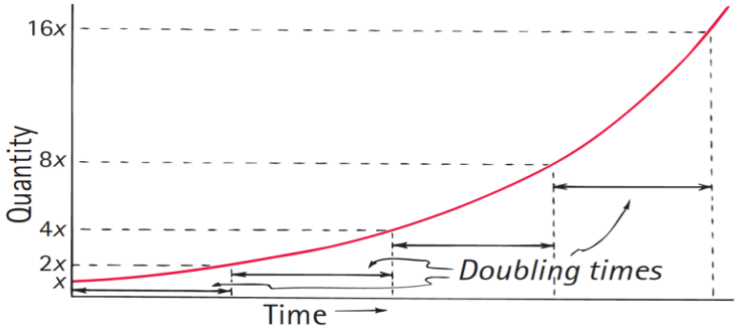

Figure 70

[29] Hewitt, Paul G., "Exponential Growth and Doubling Time", *National Science Teaching Association*, Volume 87, Issue 9, July/August 2020, https://www.nsta.org/science-teacher/science-teacher-julyaugust-2020/exponential-growth-and-doubling-time, online resource

At the outset, I had no data from which to base user response to the sticker project might be. With no project of this kind extant in surf culture, I was wading into unknown waters. I was hopeful to have at least a modest engagement from which to record data and information. Much to my delight, the amount of user engagement has been robust, consistent, and trending upwards. If the above projections prove out, it will exceed any aspirations projected at the project's inception.

Community Impact

As a creation of anti-racist and activist art, a foundational and primary metric for success lies on the project's engagement with, and impact within, the community in which it is situated. In the context of this project, that community is surfing, as a sport and as a culture. Defining one of the project's imperatives, "who is this for?", delineated two primary and intertwined objectives- intervention into white surf culture, and foregrounding the work of persons of color engaging surf culture. The "Decolonize The Surf" sticker project and its attendant videos, the materials found on the website engaging surf culture through a critical lens, the calls to action running throughout the project, and the reportage photo documentation in the installation are strategies deployed to challenge presumptive narratives and make visible the construct of whiteness operating throughout surf history and culture. Documenting the centrality of persons of color throughout surf history, and amplifying the work of organizations, individuals, creatives, scholars of color and their allies traces a parallel trajectory in "Troubled Waters," expanding the conversation and breadth of the

project's scope. Website links, readings, movies, photographs, and audio narratives center the experiences of people of color, bearing witness to a thriving community who are working to make surfing more equitable, inclusive, and diverse. During my research and dissemination of this project, I met with dozens of people of color engaged in changing surf culture for the better. They became my advisors, mentors, teachers, friends, and helped guide this project at every step of the way. I contacted several of them to ask their opinion of the project's impact from their perspective. The first response is from Kayiita Johnson, founder of Black.Surfers, Inc, an organization based in the Bay Area of Northern California:

> Your work has already made an impact in the communities I'm part of. Santa Cruz Waves, a pillar of the Santa Cruz surf community, shared your work on their IG story. Families within Santa Cruz made plans to go see the exhibit. My coworkers at Cruise have gone to your site and learned how privilege shows up in the surfing world - something they thought wouldn't happen in surfing. [30]

The second communication comes from indigenous activist and surfer, Leah Avilez Brown who contacted me to offer her perspective as an indigenous person:

> I have to tell you seeing this page is exactly what I had experienced growing up in Carlsbad living across the street from Terramar and surfing there from about the time I was 12-18. I lived there from birth to 18. My dad is part indigenous, Luiseno, and recently I visited a museum called Agua Hedionda with my kids. Agua Hedionda is near Terramar and there is evidence of the Luiseno who lived there. I feel very lucky to have lived where my ancestors lived. I didn't know it at the time, much like many indigenous people today, their past and connection to their communities was severed in the colonizers push for assimilation. I always know I was Luiseno, and now I knew I lived near the same Ocean they did. And I swam in the same ocean they did. And I fished in the same ocean they did. The worst part about the colonization

[30] Johnson, Kayiita, Black.Surfers Inc., email correspondence, April 27, 2022

> efforts is that the whole North San Diego County area is mostly white and none of my ancestors live on their ancestral homelands. But I did. And I feel lucky. In other words, fantastic job creating awareness and (building a great website) focusing on what BiPOC have felt and know for a long time. ✊🏾[31]

Dr. Kevin Dawson, Associate Professor of History, and Interdisciplinary Humanities Graduate Group, Chair at the University of California, Merced, and author of *Undercurrents of Power- Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora*, winner of the Harriet Tubman Book Prize, added his insights:

> Thanks for inviting me to participate in your "Decolonizing the Surf" project. This is a really thoughtful, creative, unique, and impactful endeavor, that is so much more than I had anticipated. Your ability to bring the voices and images of so many community activists together in this
>
> engaging interactive website to challenge centuries-old narrative is impressive. I like how you brought yourself into the project, not as a self-aggrandizing centerpiece, but, instead, to unsettle assumptions while seeking to make the surf lineup and beaches inclusive places for all people. Dave, you make yourself vulnerable to lay bare how white privilege afforded opportunity for some while imposing racial barriers for others before stepping into the background to document an alternate/parallel surf culture that has been thriving despite racial impositions. I am convinced that by reevaluating "white surf culture," "Decolonizing the Surf" will realize your "hope" and goals by becoming an influential pivoting point in changing surf culture to make it more diverse and inclusive. Thank you for your time, consideration, and commitment to decolonizing the surf.[32]

Steve Estes, Professor and Chair of the History Department at Sonoma State, and author of *Surfing the South*, reached out to me to write this:

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[31] Avilez Brown, Leah, Instagram message, April 24, 2022

[32] Dawson, Kevin Dr., email correspondence, April 27, 2022

> Dave, The web exhibit is great. I really like the documentary shorts, and I love the idea of using the medium of stickers to get the message out. Stickers are such an integral part of the commercial side of surf culture. Why *not* co-opt the medium for a social good rather than for financial gain. Great work![33]

Dr. Scott Laderman, professor of history at University of Minnesota, Duluth, scholar at The Center for Surf Research, and author of *Empire in Waves: A Politic History of Surfing*, offered his perspective on the import of the project:

> The 'Decolonize the Surf' project is an unusually creative way of introducing surfers who might not otherwise be aware of it to the complex history and ongoing legacies of the pastime they so greatly enjoy. Modern surfing's history is deep and rich, but, like the history of California more broadly, it is one grounded in empire building and a whole host of 'isms' - especially with respect to race, gender, class, and sexuality - that have gotten buried under more popular narratives of freedom, rebellion, and
>
> pleasure. Through the sticker project and accompanying website, Dave Crellin is furthering an important conversation within the surfing community, forcing those who find solace in the waves to come to terms with how they have arrived at this moment.[34]

Community activist, founder and executive director of Black Surf Club Santa Cruz, Esabella Bonner and I were guests together on "Unheard Voices" on KSQD with host Gloria Nieto, on April 15, 2022. During the broadcast, Bella had this to say:

> One of the things that was really significant about Dave reaching out to me is, as a black, bi-racial woman running an organization called "Black Surf," a lot of the emotional labor…burden of explaining these nuances and realities that we experience are placed on to me…not me, myself, but onto usually BiPOC leaders. I really, really appreciate is, the level of intention

[33] Estes, Steve, email correspondence, May 1, 2022

[34] Laderman, Scott, email correspondence, May 11, 2022

> and depth that's gone into the resources that are a part of the project, and the voices that are a part of it, and providing this opportunity for people to educate themselves on their own terms. I really appreciate the way the stickers are positioned. It leaves the opportunity for people to get curious, which I think opens up dialogue.[35]

Activism within local surf culture and marketing has yielded additional opportunities to assist in the project's impact. Hula's Island Grill, one of Santa Cruz' most popular institutions, is decorated entirely in a surf and tiki motif, with hundreds of photographs of surfers on the walls, almost exclusively white and male. The project was successfully able to provide at least one countervailing image with the inclusion of Nick Gabaldón, the wall of the restaurant, as a permanent installation. Cowell's Surf Shop, one of the most frequented surfing establishments for locals and tourists in Santa Cruz County, now also features a similar photo of Nick Gabaldón, as well as a photo of seven Black surf icons Rick Blocker, Max McMullin, Tony Corley, Paul Hannibal, Trek Shadid, Solo Scott, and David Lansdowne, from the 1983 issue of Surfer Magazine. These two establishments are visited by tens of thousands of people each year, who now have the opportunity to expand their knowledge about the impact of people of color in the history of surfing.

Finally, the project website functions a repository of education and information about surf history, anti-racist intervention, as well as a central access point for organizations

[35] Bonner, Esabella, Black Surf Club Santa Cruz, interview, "Unheard Voices", KSQD Radio, April 15, 2022

of color in surfing. The website has and will continue to be an impactful resource and meeting space to further the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion within surfing.

Conclusions

There are several aspects of my project to consider when arriving at my conclusions. The research and implementation of it has been an academic, aesthetic, and personal pursuit. As an academic endeavor, I have been exposed to a wealth of scholarship in history, critical theory, race studies, documentary and archival methodologies, digital media practice, and art as public practice. Aesthetically, the project forced me to learn and create outside of my established praxis, ergo, "comfort zone." It required me to rethink and reimagine what my practice could contain. I found my twenty-five-plus years as a working professional creating live performance was of great benefit in envisioning best practices for presenting the content and form of the project's scope. Approaching the project as another form of live performance opened possibilities that a formal, didactic, or purely academic approach would have certainly foreclosed. Additionally, as a seasoned circus ringmaster and carnival barker whose working model is by and large based on in-situ, improvisational and "in the moment" creative expression, I was able to marshal skills and inhabit a persona that was both "myself," and an enhanced, performative version of myself, informed by my cultural understanding of surfing's milieu, its lexicon, personal comportment, rules of engagement and social habitus. This ability enabled me to negotiate a wide variety of

personalities and situations, as well as avoid a level of scrutiny I might have otherwise encountered immersing myself in surf culture.

There are however, two distinct instances in which I became aware that my status, ergo safety, as part of the hegemonic and normative representation in surfing, i.e.- white, male, was reliant upon obfuscation and secrecy surrounding the true nature of my project, and what I was doing as I visited surf locales. The first was in Cayucos, a small town north of San Luis Obispo along the California coast, early in my road trip to disseminate the surf stickers. As I wandered through the town placing stickers on various light posts, surf shop windows, street signs, etc., I walked past a group of seven or eight white males outside of a skateboard park, ranging in age from thirty to fifty years old, dressed in clothing evocative of skateboard and surfing culture, hanging out on the trunks of their respective vehicles or standing adjacent to them, drinking beer, smoking cigarettes, and passing around joints of marijuana. I was immediately aware of their fixed gaze as I walked past, clearly being identified as an interloper and outsider. Sensing the air of potential danger, I put the Decolonize The Surf sticker I had intended to place on the side of the skateboard park, quietly back in my bag and walked past them towards the beach boardwalk. I receive the same look and air of aggression returning in the other direction, and quickly made my way past. I had no doubt that if I were to have placed a sticker in view of their gaze, I would have invited conflict and, owing to the nature of the sticker's content, would have violated the white space of their gathering and its implicit contract. That said, I was

also fascinated with what they represented as part of the surf culture, viewing it as an opportunity for additional documentation for the project, but one that I had not yet found the inroads to explore. As I drove away and continued my journey, I realized I would need to create persona that would enable to interact in spaces where my status as a white man was contingent and under revision. I decided henceforth that faced with a similar situation I would introduce myself as a freelance reporter, photo documenting California surf lifestyle, and ask if I might take their photos as part of a journalistic assignment.

It was with the addition of this persona (and its limitations) that I found myself in the second, compromising and potentially unsafe scenario. At the tail end of my journey, I was deploying the stickers in Pacifica, California, a small coastal town approximately twenty miles south of San Francisco. A small shopping center stands adjacent to its well noted surf site, Linda Mar. On weekends, the parking lot of the shopping center, the centerpiece of which is the "NorCal Surf Shop" (a surf establishment whose graphic lettering is reminiscent of Iron-Cross era, Nazi Germany), transforms into a sizable gathering of white surf culture, tailgating on the back of their vehicles, drinking beer, and hanging out. I estimate there were probably close to 150 people spread out throughout the parking lot, congregating in groups by the dozens, of which there were no persons of color that I could see, and only a handful of women. It was as close to the very definition of "white space" and "localism" as one could expect to encounter. But armed with my freelance journalist

persona (and a lifetime of performance skills), I confidently strode up to a group of individuals piled into the back of a pickup truck and spilling over onto the sidewalk in front of the surf shop. I told them about the "article" I was writing and asked them if they would mind if I took their photos. They were more than happy to oblige, identifying themselves as the "Pedro Point Crew," arranging themselves around the truck, adopting their own personas and self-presentation for purposes of the photos and their place in surf history. (See Figures 41-42) The one young woman in their group pulled me aside afterwards, asking very excitedly and emphatically if I might give her my contact information so as to send her the photos, to which I obliged. After exchanging a few further pleasantries, I made my way back towards Linda Mar beach to continue the sticker project. However, upon leaving the parking lot as I walked to the beach, I reflexively looked over my shoulder and found one of the members of the group following me, intently watching my every move. Again, as in the previous circumstance, I realized my status was under scrutiny and subject to revocation. I quietly held a sticker at my side, gazing out at the beach as if to take in the surf conditions and those out in the water. After a minute or so, the person watching me turned around and headed back to his group. Once he was out of sight, I placed the sticker on the intended metal sign and briskly made my way back to the car. When I was getting into my car, two more of the individuals from that group drove by me with the same intent gaze, nodding at me in passing. I had a distinct feeling that they were now sizing me up and looking for further information as to my presence there. Fortunately, I got in my car and drove away without issue. That

evening upon returning to Santa Cruz, I reached out to the young lady who had asked to be contacted and sent the photos. Based on her avid request, I assumed I would hear from her in short order. However, I receive no response, even after a second, and third follow up on my part. Reflecting on her "about face," and the furtive behavior of her compatriots, I came to the conclusion that they may have discovered the stickers, figured out I was more than likely their agent provocateur, then followed me to my car, my "cover" being blown. Based on their actions and the overall tenor of the parking lot and its habitues, I would not risk returning to the NorCal Surf Shop parking lot, for fear of reprisal.

Some of the personalities I encountered during my trip down the coast were similar in type to ones I had grown up around as young person. This illuminated the fact that my environment and social habitus had, on some level, inured me to the structures of whiteness as an invisible presence permeating almost every sphere I inhabited as a youth. Exploring and interrogating those structures deeply in the course of this project has been a challenging, decisive, terrifying, and rewarding personal journey, as well as an intense academic and aesthetic pursuit. It has shaped and solidified my praxis, prioritizing socially relevant and important issues as the primary focus of my work moving forward. On the level of community, it has broadened the scope of my collegial mentors and peers, expanding my friendships and creative collaborators to include a more fully diverse, culturally fecund representation of human perspective,

creativity, and intellect. I cannot envision a better project to have chosen for my MFA thesis candidacy, nor to my evolution as an artist, scholar, educator, and human being.

Future Evolutions

Moving forward, I will seek to grow the project's breadth, reach, and impact by adding additional content to the videos, audio narratives, community, action, and resource pages, as well as an events and updates section, a real-time comments box, and expansion of the photo gallery section to feature a sub-gallery of images from users who discover the "Decolonize The Surf" stickers in situ. I am researching avenues to create a traveling educational exhibit as a mobile "surf van" that could travel to universities, middle and high schools, communities, and surf groups. I will be applying for grants, scholarships and other revenue and funding sources to expand the project as described above. I will also be seeking sponsorship from museums and galleries to place my installation in their exhibition spaces.

Additionally, I will begin the process of broadening the projects scope, through research into indigenous marginalization, discrimination and erasure in surf history and culture, and further into areas of queer, disability, and gender studies. My intention is to continue "Decolonize the Surf" as an ongoing anti-racist, activist art project and community resource, possibly as a 501c3 non-profit organization, for as long as is relevant. I am also exploring the potential for utilizing the template I have

created in this project as a tool to intervene and address other aspects of social justice issues and urgencies.

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