



Decolonize The Surf: Exploring the History of Racism and Representation in California Surf Culture

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Overview

David Crellin created *Decolonize the Surf* for his Master of Fine Arts thesis in Digital Arts New Media. The project was created to present research about the history of representation and racism in surf culture and to encourage meaningful conversation in the surfing community around these issues.

A site-specific art and research project, Decolonize The Surf deployed over 400 surf-style stickers throughout surfing locales (surf spots, surf shops, cafes, parking lots, etc) from San Francisco to San Diego. The stickers, embedded with QR codes for scanning, introduce countervailing narratives that challenge typical surf histories and problematize assumptions of white normativity in the sport.

As part of the project's long-term goals, David hosted the first of a series of community forums on diversity in surf culture, held at the Museum of Art and History, in Santa Cruz on February 17, 2023. This event was held in conjunction with Porter College and the Department of Performance, Play, and Design at the University of California, Santa Cruz. It also featured surfers and activists Esabella Bonner (Black Surf Club Santa Cruz), Kayiita Johnson(Black.Surfers), and historian/anthropologist Paul Richardson.

An accompanying website, www.decolonizethesurf.com provides further research, as well as links to a number of public-facing resources including media, films, books, articles, and organizations that create opportunities for BIPOC to access the ocean, combat structural barriers to access, and further efforts to decolonize the surf.

Partnership

Crellin built a working relationship with community partners over the two years he attended UCSC's MFA program. He is in talks with MAH to feature part of the Decolonize The Surf research project as a part of an upcoming "history gallery" renovation, which includes Santa Cruz surf culture. This marks an important step in the dissemination of his research to the public and highlights MAH's commitment to advancing issues of diversity and representation.



https://decolonizethesurf.squarespace.com/work-1/#photo_gallery

"These organizations teach surfing and ocean skills to youth and adults of color, building community, and carving out a safe and welcoming place for POC to get their stoke on in the water."

Click on the link above to find out more.

Outcomes

Decolonize The Surf was awarded "Best of the Arts" at the 2022 Graduate Research Symposium at UCSC. In the same year, Crellin presented his work at the Prospectives!- Global Connects International Symposium, Albertay University, Dundee, Scotland. In 2023, he will present his research at the 21st International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities, Sorbonne Université, Paris, France, and the 16th International Conference on the Inclusive Museum, Vancouver, Canada.

The project was the subject of a feature article in the Winter issue of Santa Cruz Waves magazine, interviews with KQSD (with Bella from Black Surf Santa Cruz), and the "Off The Lip" radio show. Surf Simply magazine produced an extensive interview with Crellin speaking about the project and issues of representation in surf culture and can be found here- <https://surfsimply.com/magazine/decolonize-the-surf>

The project is also slated to appear in The Guardian newspaper later this year.

Goals

Decolonize the Surf exists as a scholarly research project and a community-facing intervention exploring issues of racism and representation in surf culture. The project utilizes popular forms of digital media technologies to break down barriers of access to scholarly communications and the research embedded throughout the project. The goal was to create a multivalent synthesis of research, scholarship, art, and embodiment as a contemporary expression of academic and public-facing knowledge production. The written thesis, "Troubled Waters: The Ocean As Contested Space in California Surf Culture" provides the theoretical and methodological basis for Decolonize the Surf, and supports its future scope and outcomes.

"Your project foregrounds the voices and images of so many community activists together in this engaging research project and interactive website to challenge centuries-old narratives. You unsettle assumptions while seeking to make the surf lineup and beaches inclusive places for all people, and lay bare how white privilege afforded opportunity for some while imposing racial barriers for others. I am convinced that by reevaluating "white surf culture," *Decolonize the Surf* will become 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."

- Kevin Dawson, Associate Professor of History, University of California, Merced, and author of *Undercurrents of Power- Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), winner of the Harriet Tubman Book Prize



Future Directions

In 2023, *Decolonize the Surf* is continuing to seek partnerships with academic and community organizations to further the research and the topics engaged, as well as explore opportunities to teach the material as a college course. Crellin is also seeking additional funding streams to evolve the project to include indigenous, gender, and queer perspectives, and grow the project as a traveling, on-site educational installation.

Further Reading

JUMP IN!

Here's a list of magazine articles to learn more about the need for diversity and representation in surf and beach life.

“Now's the Time for Surfers to Prove We Really Are Anti-Establishment”- Surfer Magazine

“Racism and Surfing with Selema Maskela”- Santa Cruz Waves

“Surfing Confronts Sport's Racist Past after George Floyd's Death”- NBC News

“Africans Surfed Long Before Bruce Brown Showed Up”- Surfer Magazine

“Black Surfers Reclaim Their Place On The Waves”- The New York Times

“They met in the DMs. Now they've sparked a movement to end racism in L.A. surf culture”- LA Times

“Six Black Surfers Throughout History You Should Know About”- Blavity

“Is surfing plagued with a racist streak?”- Huck Magazine



Photo by Sofly Surf School

"One of the things that is really significant is, as a black, bi-racial woman running an organization called “Black Surf,” a lot of the emotional labor and burden of explaining these nuances and realities that we experience are usually placed onto BiPOC leaders. I really, really appreciate the level of intention 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 designed and positioned in surf culture. It leaves the opportunity for people to get curious, which I think opens up dialogue." - Esabella Bonner, Founder, Black Surf Club Santa Cruz

Questions? Contact us.

David Crellin

www.decolonizethesurf.com

dcrellin@ucsc.edu

"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. Your project is furthering an important conversation within the surfing community and beyond, forcing those who find solace in the waves to come to terms with how they have arrived at this moment."

- Dr. Scott Laderman, Professor of History, University of Minnesota, Duluth, Scholar at the Center for Surf Research, and author of *Empire in Waves: A Politic History of Surfing* (UC Press, 2014).

"Whenever I encounter surfers who hold actively racist, sexist, xenophobic, and otherwise toxic belief systems, I am convinced they are entirely missing the point, and have learned very little from their time in the water. It's as if they are there solely to satisfy their egos, extracting value from the ocean with no respect, no stewardship, and no responsibility – hungry ghosts on floating planks. That kind of behavior, in my opinion, is a metaphoric form of coastal pollution."- David Crellin