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“Black Surfers” photographed by Fede Korte (2024)

The image, “Black Surfers,” shot by Fede Korte, is a beautiful photo of young men and their surfboards. What makes this image beautiful could include the extravagant hairstyles and colorful surfboards, but what gives this photo an incomparable aura is the very fact that young Black men are simply on the beach with their surfboards, enjoying recreational time with each other. While it may appear as an ordinary situation, this photo carries a deeper historical significance than its impressional aesthetics.

Encountering this image of black surfers intrigued me. I had realized that I had never seen Black people in this context before. This shocking realization made me understand my lack of prior exposure to an image of this content. Which is strange, coming from a person who grew up in the height of the technological advancement of the digital world. Having this exposure should have crossed my path years ago. Nonetheless, the very realization of my shock prompted my exploration into understanding Black people in the context of surfing.

This image highlights the importance of understanding the natural and initial reactions towards art and how it reveals the relevant cultural understandings of the observer. Thus, photography in this instance is a powerful tool for the communication of real-life events and challenges the perspectives of the consumer.

As someone whose father doesn't know how to swim and, from his knowledge, none of his close relatives know how to swim either, displays the realism of the disconnect between Black populations in the United States and aquatic activity. That being said, since childhood, my father expressed his fascination with my love for swimming and the ocean. I had not understood his emphasis on my love for swimming until researching the historical attributes that constructed this societal norm.

In the article, "A Long Overdue Look Into Black Surfing And Aquatic Culture," written by Seth Gabelsson and published by *Stab Magazine* discuss the origins of Black surfing in the West Coast of Africa. Gabelsson refers to the documentary, "*Wade into the Water: A Journey*

into Black Surfing and Aquatic Culture,” where University of California Associate Professor Kevin Dawson reveals the first historical account of surfing in West Africa. “Surfing is a 1000-year-old African tradition. The sport was independently developed from Senegal to Angola” (Gabrielsson). Gabrielsson provides source examples of European witnesses of the early encounters of surfing in West Africa. This includes “a German colonist who saw African parents tie their children to wooden boards and throw them out into the surf in 1640”(Gabrielsson). Centuries later, a more discernible correlation to the early practice of surfing was documented by another European explorer. “One poetic account from 1876 describes, ‘...with light boards under their stomachs. They waited for surf and came rolling like a cloud on top of it’”(Gabrielsson). These early encounters with West African surfing traditions show the deep historical connection of Africans and the Diaspora to the contemporary recreation of the aquatic sport. Illustrating the impacts of displacement and systematic oppression as the historical, political forces that have reshaped the relationship between Black people and surfing. Additionally, emphasizing the construction of disconnection and the loss of memory to the tradition that remains conspicuous in the present 21st century.

When thinking about surfing amongst West Coast Africans, the practice exists, but to a substantial degree, in relation to the commercialization of surfing for tourists. The *Condé Nast Traveler* article “In Western Ghana, Locals Are Reclaiming Their Surf Scene,” written by Briona Lamback, introduces Sandy Alibo, the founder of “Surf Ghana,” a non-profit organization that promotes surfing for education and empowerment. Lamback explains that the inspiration for “Surf Ghana” came from the disappointment of the lack of representation of African surfers on Busua Beach. When Alibo visited Busua Beach, Ghana, seven years before the article was

published in 2024, she noticed that a majority of the surfers were White people. She explains her disappointment with this issue, “‘I was a little bit frustrated to see that, even in Africa, there wasn't a lot of Africans surfing,’ says Alibo” (Lamback). Surf Ghana, on the contrary, is a way to encourage more Ghanaians to surf on their own beach and to reclaim their place in surf culture. Albido says, “‘It's about Black joy. It's about modernity and innovation.’” (Lamback). The mission for increasing the recreation of surfing amongst Ghanaians on Busua Beach is Black joy. In which Black joy is “resistance, resilience, and reclamation of Black Humanity” (Nichols). Therefore, the rise of Black surfing in Ghana should not be perceived as an ordinary occurrence but a powerful achievement of cultural reclamation and resistance. It challenges ruling societal understandings of Black people in the context of surfing, while reinventing their place within the aquatic sport.

Furthermore, Black surfing in the United States also faces challenges of underrepresentation due to systematic racial discrimination in aquatic spaces. The stereotype that Black people do not know how to swim has long existed in the United States. Consequently, witnessing Black people in surf environments is especially rare. This stereotype has often been surfaced with humor without much acknowledgement of the historical factors of its existence.

Across the United States, safe and convenient aquatic areas were prohibited to Black people. Swimming as a survival skill and, nonetheless, an enjoyable activity in many Black communities has been overlooked as a result of conformity during times of racial segregation. This was referred to as blue space segregation. Blue space segregation manifested from the “racialization of cleanliness and safety, “as well as intense fears of Black men interacting with

White women in bathing suits” (Roberts). Civil Rights activists began to protest the blue space segregation by organizing swim-ins at white only pools. A notable example is the St. Augustine swim-in at Monson Motor Lodge, where the manager of the motel poured acid into the occupied pool, resulting in the burns of several protestors. In the article, “Don’t Get In The Water: Blue Space Racism and the Drowning of Black Bodies” by Dr. Jennifer D. Roberts DrPH, MPH, University of Maryland School of Public Health, she mentions, “Similar to the St. Augustine, Florida swim-in at the Monson Motor Lodge on June 18, 1964, many of these civil rights protests ended in violence, humiliation and assault” (Roberts). This not only highlights the resistance of blue space segregation laws during the civil rights movements, but also the formulation of the association between water and unnecessary danger. The concept of swimming in many Black communities is thought of as an unnecessary activity that could often lead to safety hazards. “Black families have generationally avoided swimming as a way of protecting themselves from the racialized dangers of blue spaces” (Roberts). Therefore, excluding the interest of recreational water activity in Black communities has become a generational normality reflecting the persistence of a stereotype that is caused by generational trauma of racial segregation. Gabrielsson argues the common stereotype in its historical context. “Maybe the stereotype, ‘black people don’t swim’ — and by extension ‘black people don’t surf’ — is really just a cheap obfuscation of the cold reality that ‘black people weren’t allowed to swim’, and ‘black people *weren’t allowed* to surf’” (Gabrielsson). Surfing, therefore, is a reclamation of freedom and agency in aquatic spaces that had previously been limited to Black people. Understanding the reasons in which cultural realities continue to exist beyond the times of their creation is necessary for the appreciation and understanding of the impact of those who bring cultural change.

With the historical basis of Black aquatic history and surfing, it is important to now examine photography and film as a tool to reshape the understanding and reality of Black surfing. Observing the image, “Black Surfers” by Fede KorteZ, contributes to the collection of Black representation in surf culture. KorteZ, a South African-based photographer, directs his work towards capturing African culture through visual storytelling and cultural narratives. His objective for this photoshoot was to challenge a common stereotype that African men do not surf or swim (African Digital Art). The photoshoot was set at Busua Beach, Ghana, in collaboration with renowned Benin hairstylist, Afro Ele, to bring “the extravagant and stylish vibe” to the Ghanaian surfers and models captured in the image. By adding the element of colorful and intricate hairstyles to the surfers, it creates a distinct style to African surf culture. Making this image a deliberate message of reclamation of the sport. KorteZ captured an aspect of African youth culture that is often overlooked and produced it in an authentic and extravagant way.



Michael February shot by Photographer, Bosko.

This image is of Michael February, Africa's first non-white World Tour surfer. The image was retrieved from the *Stab Magazine* article, "A Profile In Color: A Portrait Of Michael February." In the article, *Stab Magazine* briefly discusses the experience of being a Black surfer in South Africa. February explains the injustices his father went through as a Black surfer in South Africa. "He flat-out wouldn't be allowed to surf some places. He went to a wave once, and the local crowd circled him and forced him to leave. I ended up winning a contest at that same beach when I was younger. I think that was a really special moment for him" (Stab Magazine). He later explains he luckily had not experienced the racial discrimination his father faced in the South African surfing scene. However, this puts Black surfing into perspective in another part of Africa where racial segregation and disparities from apartheid are still evident. This image shows February surfing in action, with quality lighting that allows for the photo to capture the vibrance of the water and his identifiable features. Many photos of action shots can cover the surfer's features with a dark shadow from the waves. However, this photo displays February's focus and immersion in the activity. Additionally, this photo shows February in a competitive surf setting, bringing a different perspective of Black surfing compared to Korte's photo. The difference lies in the practice. In the Korte photo the surfers are holding their boards as they walk on the beach. Their hair is intricately styled, displaying a distinct African style. They are dressed in water shorts signifying their intent for recreational surfing, and one of the surfers is wearing sunglasses, as another stylistic choice. Therefore, Korte's photo is primarily an image of editorial fashion photography, which still attains representational purposes due to the primary message of the photo. Nevertheless, the action shot of February captures a depiction of Black surfing in the context of competing in the predominantly white sport. Therefore, illustrating the ability of Black individuals excelling in the practice and displaying their talent in the competitive

scene of surfing. Both images work towards increasing the representation of surfing amongst Black communities, but contextualized in different ways that are both important to the deconstruction of stereotypes against Black people and aquatic sports.

These images of Black surfers show the significance of photography to challenge and reshape active social constructs. The ways in which photography functions as a useful medium of art is explained from the text, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin explains that photography is a useful tool of visual evidence for individuals who are unable to witness its realities in person. “...photographic records begin to be evidence in the historical trial [*Prozess*]. This constitutes their hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of reception. Free-floating contemplation is no longer appropriate to them” (Benjamin, p.26). The beginning of photography revealed a revolutionary breakthrough, that this art form has the ability to document concrete proof of unseen realities that limit individuals from contemplation and secure truth in their perception. Benjamin expands this idea by explaining that photography transcends geographical barriers of firsthand accounts, providing proof of existence to broader populations. “... And even when this perspective is no less accessible to the human eye than to the camera,... This is to say that mass movements, and above all war, are a form of human behavior especially suited to the camera” (Benjamin, p. 54). Photography prevents limited access to visual representations of realities, especially to those that are not accessible to individuals. This idea highlights the importance of photography in relation to expanding perspective across broader regions and populations.

Gabrielsson discusses the missing representation of Black surfers throughout history and the ways the documentary, “Wade into the Water: A Journey into Black Surfing and Aquatic Culture,” dismantles the continuation of the overlooked history of Black people in surfing scenes. “It strikes us that these are the exact cultural images that seemed to be missing, as if frozen in celluloid and abandoned in a box at a warehouse. This is precisely where the value of the film lies — if there is a lack of cultural imagery of black people surfing, here’s a whole trove of it” (Gabrielsson). In these regards, representation in the form of photography functions as evidence of the prior existence of Black people in surf scenes. It closes the distance between Black people in the context of surfing while signaling the encouragement of defying limiting social norms for new realities where Black people can thrive in aquatic spaces and surfing scenes again.

Overall, the image “Black Surfers” by Fede Korte demonstrated the power of photography in sparking curiosity through challenging the perspectives of the observer. The image revealed the importance of understanding the history of Black surfing and the contribution of racial discrimination and segregation in minimizing the participation of Black individuals in aquatic activities in general. Additionally, looking into the image of Michael February, it is clear to say that representation in the form of photography is impactful on dismantling societal understandings of Black people in surf culture. Photography, as Walter Benjamin suggests, serves as undeniable evidence that challenges the perspectives and opens access to new truths. Ultimately, these photographs not only reconstruct the understanding but demonstrate the existence of Black surfing is not contemporary it is a practice that is being reclaimed.

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