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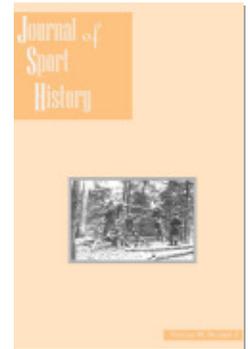
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*White Wash* (2011) by Ted Woods (review)

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*White Wash* (2011). Directed by Ted Woods. Distributed by Trespass Productions. 78 mins.

—SEAN DINCES  
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Be it at local beaches, public swimming pools, or open fire hydrants, “the water” has often formed the backdrop of America’s long and ongoing history of racial conflict. In 1919, whites’ efforts to ensure segregation at Chicago’s beaches sparked nearly a week of race rioting on the city’s South Side. In the decades leading up to World War II, whites, as historian Jeff Wiltse notes, “quite literally beat blacks out of the water” at municipal swimming pools.<sup>1</sup> In 1949, whites in St. Louis attacked black bathers following the order by the mayor to integrate public swimming pools, and in 1966 police harassment of black children frolicking in the spray from an open fire hydrant sparked more rioting in Chicago, this time on the city’s West Side.

As one might expect, the water’s endurance as a site of exclusion for African Americans meant that it also served as a setting for sustained Civil Rights struggle. In the early 1960s, at beaches and pools ranging from Warren, Ohio, to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, black Civil Rights activists organized a series of “wade-ins, using the water to take aim at whites” “massive resistance” to integration in the wake of *Brown v. Board*. But despite widespread success in integrating public beaches and swimming pools, a flourishing culture of aquatics within the African-American community remains unrealized to this day, and perhaps no activity betrays this as starkly as American surfing. Despite significant market expansion in recent decades—especially in the context of a growing population of female surfers—the sport remains overwhelmingly white. Ted Woods’s 2011 documentary *White Wash* seeks an explanation as to why, and in addition to historicizing the enduring racial homogeneity of surfing, provides space for African-American surfers to articulate what it means to participate in a sport where their presence is often seen as a form of cultural trespass by blacks and whites alike. In terms of crafting a popular history of the racial politics of surfing, the film is more often than not successful. However, it ultimately wipes out as a result of its insistence on decoupling the current demographic profile of surfing from the material conditions confronted by African Americans in the post-Civil Rights Era.

Using interviews with a wide range of professional and amateur surf historians, as well as black surfers themselves, the first part of the documentary effectively debunks myths about the growth of surfing in the U.S. as the outcome of benign cultural interchange, situating it squarely within the history of European colonialism and American capitalism. In fact, European missionaries banned surfing in Hawai‘i in the nineteenth century, and the sport only gained wide purchase among whites in the United States after entrepreneurial boosters in Hawai‘i repackaged it as a tourist activity. Moreover, new historical evidence suggests that Africans living on the coast of what is now Ghana practiced wave riding before slave traders established a beachhead there, forcing many local coastal communities inland. So, while early surfing was decidedly non-white, its transmission happened almost entirely on terms dictated by whites.

The film continues by outlining the reasons behind the underrepresentation of African Americans in surfing. The legacy of slavery looms large in this story, as slave traders and owners did their best to stamp out African aquatic culture in order to minimize slaves' ability to escape by swimming. After emancipation, *de jure* segregation in the South and *de facto* discrimination in the North and West limited blacks' access to beaches and later public pools. This protracted history of exclusion, according to Woods and his interviewees, fed popular ideas about blacks' allegedly "natural" aversion to water and watersports like surfing—an idea that has only gained popularity in recent decades as African Americans have excelled more and more in terrestrial athletic pursuits while their representation in the elite tiers of sports like surfing and swimming remains miniscule. The documentary is at its strongest at this point, deftly juxtaposing the role of racial violence in African-Americans' absences from aquatic culture with first-person accounts of black surfers that put to rest essentialist assumptions that race somehow predetermines one's ability to excel at a sport like surfing.

However, the rest of the film—the final third, more or less—disappoints. Rather than interrogating why, despite the successful integration of beaches in the 1960s and the continued growth of surfing's overall popularity, black participation has yet to expand significantly, Woods packs the remainder of the movie with a mosaic of inspirational cuts of his conversations with black surfers. The surfers interviewed all agree that the joy found in surfing outweighs having to hear "black people don't surf" at every turn. These clips also give the viewer a feel for the overwhelming skepticism that black surfers have to contend with, both from whites who assume that African Americans simply do not surf and fellow blacks who often view surfing as capitulation to white culture. But unfortunately, *White Wash* offers little commentary on why the handful of African-American surfers remain just that—a handful. Instead, it jumps from the story of desegregated beaches to interviews with black surfers as if to make the argument that the best way to increase the number of black surfers is to get the word out that some black people actually surf.

Of course, the reality is more complex and has to do with the historical intersection of race, class, and space in America at the end of the twentieth century. The continued exclusion of blacks from full economic citizenship in the U.S. makes it unrealistic for most to take up a sport like surfing, which has high cost barriers to entry relative to other "alternative" sports such as skateboarding. And the situation has only worsened in recent decades. As political scientist Adolph Reed states bluntly, the reality for most African Americans in the last thirty years has entailed a "worsening of material conditions, a narrowing of life options, increasingly institutionalized marginalization, and an expanding regime of social repression and police terror"—all despite the fact that formal racial equality remains enshrined within U.S. law.<sup>2</sup> Recent research from the Pew Center confirms this, suggesting that median black household wealth dropped from \$6,700 in 1984 to \$4,900 in 2009 (the numbers for white families were \$77,000 and \$92,000, respectively).<sup>3</sup> The economic barriers to black participation in surfing, however, never come up in the film. Nor does the movie address the fact that the continued economic marginalization of blacks guarantees their *de facto* segregation from the moneyed coastal communities in which surfing enjoys the highest participation rates. The film thus opts for a feel-good resolution in place of a serious consideration of why most black kids could not surf even if they wanted to.

Despite its flaws, *White Wash* is a refreshing departure from the typical surf documentary, which generally consists of a hackneyed travelogue of professional surfers traveling to “secret spots” in search of the “perfect wave.” Moreover, the first half of the film will be especially useful for history and sociology courses that aim to deconstruct tiresome clichés about racial “dispositions” toward particular sports. Hopefully, the film will serve not as the final word on why so few blacks surf but rather the beginning of a broader conversation about why the sport has remained tightly sealed off from the African-American community.



<sup>1</sup>Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>2</sup>Adolph Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 117.

<sup>3</sup>“Twenty to One: Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Highs between Whites, Blacks and Hispanics,” *Pew Research Center on Social & Demographic Trends*, 26 July 2011, p. 29. Figures are in constant 2009 dollars.