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Review: White Wash

White Wash by Ted Woods; David Woods; Airrion Copeland; Dan Munger; Ted Woods;
Harmony Lucas; Meg Bernando

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Film and Electronic Media Reviews

Reviews in the film and electronic media section of The Public Historian are solicited on projects across the spectrum of media-based historical activity. Reviews evaluate historical features, miniseries, or docudramas produced by or of interest to public historians that are distributed nationally through theaters, broadcast or cable television, radio, or cassette or disc. Reviews also appear of projects designed for limited geographical distribution, smaller or more focused audiences, or more specialized public historical purposes. Each review both describes and evaluates the production(s) under critical consideration. These reviews are of two general types: one focusing on single works; the other surveying a topical or thematic field or comparing presentations on a single subject in different media, from different production times, or from different points of view.

The reviews will acquaint public historians with the range of possibilities that exist in the arena, encourage them to become involved in the use, evaluation, preservation, and production of such materials, and help thereby in the process of enlarging the historical experience of the public with whom they interact.

G. H.

White Wash. TED WOODS, writer and director; DAVID WOODS, executive producer; AIRRION COPELAND, DAN MUNGER and TED WOODS, producers; HARMONY LUCAS and MEG BERNANDO, co-producers. Produced by Trespass Productions LLC, 2011. One hour, 21 minutes.

In September 2011, the Ohio Civil Rights Commission found that landlord Jamie Hein, who is white, violated the Ohio Civil Rights Act after she posted a “White Only” sign at her duplex’s swimming pool. Hein claimed that an African American girl’s hair products clouded the pool, thus she was within her rights to protect her property. The film *White Wash* provides historical context for racial incidents like these and further explores how racism, sport, and American culture are inextricably linked.

Ostensibly a narrative about African American participation in surfing culture, the documentary *White Wash* makes a broader contribution to American Civil Rights history. The film delineates the social and cultural forces that restricted African Americans and other communities of color from fully participating in American aquatic activities, thereby limiting their access to surfing. To tell this story, the filmmakers include a number of authority figures and public historians, including Lee Pitts, renowned swim instructor; inter-

national surfing stars Kelly Slater and Rob Machado; in addition to traditional academics, such as Professor Charles Ross, University of Mississippi and Alison Jefferson, doctoral student in public history at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Further, neo-soul icons, folk singer Ben Harper and Tariq Trotter of the Roots band, share narrating duties. These combined voices are necessary to explore fully the lingering impact of racism on sport and American culture, and on African American youth expression.

The film begins with the history of colonialism in Hawaʻii, specifically the exploits of James Cook during the eighteenth century. Surfing, or “wave riding” as the indigenous community knew it, was only one of many cultural practices that were destroyed or lost as a result of European colonization. In fact, the activity was banned in Hawaʻii for approximately one hundred years. By the early twentieth century, with the help of white journalist Alexander Hume Ford, surfing became central to Hawaiian tourism. Motivated by his passion for surfing, Ford moved to Honolulu and later became a promoter for Duke Paoa Kahanamoku, a native Hawaiian regarded as the father of modern surfing. Although he was dark-skinned, whites welcomed Kahanamoku when he visited the mainland and participated in various surfing and swimming events in the 1910s. Duke gained access across the country to public pools and beaches that were off-limits to African Americans and other people of color.

Water safety instruction began and was standardized in 1914, and the “Golden Era” of swimming in the United States followed. And yet, segregationist practices restricted African Americans from fully participating in aquatic activities. Although blacks had limited access to most public beaches, some communities did offer reprieve at blacks-only locales like The Ink Well (Santa Monica, CA) and Chicken Bone Beach (New Jersey). It was in spaces like these that African Americans established their own aquatic traditions. For instance, in the 1940s, Santa Monica native Nick Galbadon, who was of black and Mexican descent, developed his surfing skills at the “Negroes-only” Ink Well. Galbadon is generally considered the first black surfer.

White Wash further documents the under-reported histories of African Americans in the West. Many blacks were lured away from the South and Southwest by the false promise of a better life near California’s sunny beaches. Although their experiences may have been better than those of blacks remaining in the Jim Crow South, racism still existed in the West, often in the form of restricted housing covenants that dictated where non-whites could live. *White Wash* includes rare footage of “wade-ins,” peaceful demonstrations whereby African Americans across the country protested racial segregation at public beaches. Like sit-ins and other protests of the day, these demonstrations often concluded in violent one-sided confrontations. By contrasting these images at the beach—shot in black and white film—with picturesque color scenes of individuals surfing, the film makes a statement about the legacy of racial violence in the United States.

Only the final third of the film focuses on the specific experiences of contemporary African American surfers, and it includes interviews with Rick

Blocker, David Lansdowne, Solana Lansdowne, Andrea Kabwasa, and Rusty White, who share their individual coming-of-age stories. This group of interviewees reveals the challenges they have faced—from whites and other African Americans alike—for participating in a sport that largely is regarded as “white.” Through these talking heads we learn how African Americans have internalized racial stereotypes, like the idea that blacks do not have buoyancy and cannot swim. It is implied that to surf, one must break away from cultural tradition and simply pursue individualistic interests. In this way, catching waves represents racial transcendence and the ocean serves as a racial utopia. Given the weighty messages preceding this section, this theme feels flat and one-dimensional.

Despite this shortcoming, *White Wash* is an effective text. On the surface, the film is about black surfers, but it also encourages the viewer to question the very notion of “blackness” and to consider the diversity within African American culture. There is a dearth of scholarship concerning race, gender and sports in popular cultural studies; and this project brings much-needed attention to the field of sports history and African American culture more generally.

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