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Original Paper

Embodying the Ineffable: An Exploration of *Switch*, the First-ever Exhibition of Queer Surfing

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Abstract

This paper explores the first ever exhibition of queer surfing, also known as Switch: An Exhibition of Queer Surfing, Against the Binary Against Hierarchy, which hosted more than 40 non-binary, trans, and queer surfers at Linda Mar beach in Pacifica, California in June 2023. Switch intended to serve as a non-traditional showcase of queer and trans wave riding, without divisions based on gender, board, or body. This paper investigates how Switch aimed to resist male hegemony in surf culture, and renegotiate the dominant values ascribed to contemporary surf culture, with its emphasis on professionalization, competitiveness, and conformity. Employing a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants and organizers of Switch to explore how they perceived the event and its larger implications. Through thematic analysis, this study found that Switch cultivated queer possibility and articulations of liberation for study participants. Switch was regarded as successful in affirming their queer and surfer identities simultaneously, presenting opportunities to envision what a queer future in surfing may look like. The findings indicate that queer surfers seek to create alternative spaces within this social practice where the vibrancy and joy of queer culture can be boldly and aesthetically surfaced.

Keywords

Switch, Surfing, Queer, Trans, Inclusion

Introduction

Surfing is a queer practice. Early surfers have been described as “outcasts” and “renegades” who rejected the norms (Enzig, 2022; Finnegan, 2016; Marcus, 2006). While the predominant culture of surfing today is deeply hegemonic — masculine, homophobic and patriarchal — there remain individuals and organizations who are committed to a queer possibility in surfing. Two notable organizations dedicated to “queering the lineup” are Queer Surf, located in San Francisco, and Benny’s Club, established in New York City. This paper examines the collaboration between these two organizations in their inaugural event, *Switch: An Exhibition of Queer Surfing, Against the Binary Against Hierarchy*, an exhibition aimed at showcasing queer and trans wave riding. *Switch* took place on June 17, 2023 in Pacifica,

California, a coastline city twelve miles south of San Francisco.

Organizations such as Benny's Club and Queer Surf have emerged to expand the boundaries of what surf culture might look like. Queer Surf and Benny's Club have made it their mission to provide access, opportunity, and safety for queer individuals to participate and engage with surfing (Benny's Club, 2024; Queer Surf, 2014). Through surf lessons taught by queer surfers and beach meetups for queer individuals, Queer Surf and Benny's Club aim to 'queer the lineup' both literally and figuratively. *Switch*, a showcase featuring over 18 heats, hosted more than 40 non-binary, trans, and queer surfers. The event's promotional materials emphasized that the purpose of *Switch* was to showcase the skills of queer and trans surfers, deliberately avoiding the conventional binaries seen in traditional surf competitions—such as categories based on gender, board, or age.

The purpose of this study is to explore how this event resisted the hegemonic values ascribed to surfing; as such, this case study fills a gap in the literature by surfacing queer and trans surfers' voices. The research question for this inquiry was: In what ways, if any, did *'Switch: An Exhibition of Queer Surfing, Against the Binary Against Hierarchy,'* serve as a site of resistance to dominant values associated with contemporary surf culture?

Literature Review

Historians locate surfing's origins in the Pacific Islands around 3-4.000 years ago, with early roots older than established writing in Hawaii (Finney & Houston, 1996; Tristram & Wilson, 1993; Moore, 2011). With the annexation of Hawaii by the United States in 1898, surfing became one of many island practices appropriated by dominant mainland culture. Surfing grew in popularity in the United States in the 1950's; it was during this period that the quintessential image of "the surfer" was born (Lawler, 2010). As Wheaton (2017) points out, "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" (Wheaton, 2017, P. 242). This modern image of the "surfer," a clear departure from its indigenous origins, has been pervasive across Western media.

Previous research in the field of contemporary surfing has explored the ways in which surf culture champions hegemonic masculinity (Booth, 2001; Lisahunter, 2018). While some may see surfing as "alternative" or resistant to dominant ideologies in sport, the culture has participated in celebrating masculinity and condemning homosexuality for decades. There is a prevalence of homophobic language and strict gender binaries seen in contemporary surf culture, which happens both on and off the beach (Evers, 2006; Waitt, 2008). Perhaps ironically, this image of the American "surfer" is often connected with a counter-cultural ethic (Westwick and Neushul, 2013).

As has been previously explored by scholars, those adopting a counter-cultural ideology often reproduce the very values they aim to be resisting. For example, Beal (2004) explores themes of hegemonic resistance and reproduction in skateboarding: "Skateboarders try to distinguish themselves from 'mainstream' sport…but simultaneously their claims to distinctiveness obscure their mainstream forms, including social inequity…skaters will claim that their activity is open to all…yet simultaneously the

informal male networks tend to restrict and control female participation" (Beal, 2004, P. 32).

Booth (2013) points out that the idealism of surfing being counter-cultural has been replaced by a competition style ethic. Commercialism quickly shifted the surf industry from "backyard operations" to full-fledged corporations, where the structure and style of a surfing event more closely mirrored modern, mediated and commercialized sport (Booth, 2013). Competitive surfing today is controlled by the International Surfing Association (ISA), the World Surf League (WSL), and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). In 2020, surfing officially became an Olympic sport (World Surf League, 2024). The World Surf League Championship Tour surfers are regarded as the best surfers in the world, competing across the globe to be crowned World Champion at the end of the season. Surf journalist Derek Rielly describes the state of surf culture today as an "increasingly aggressive, conservative and competition-driven industry whose primary goal is to attract more participants, [which] has overridden the once fiercely anti-establishment culture that regarded the line-up as an escape from the bullshit of the world" (Rielly, 2000, P. 35).

Surfing scholarship has explored masculinities and the experience of male surfers in navigating their communities (Booth, 2001; Booth, 2008; Waitt & Warren, 2008). Scholars have made connections between the conquering of waves and the desire to prove manhood and display dominance in peer groups (Evers, 2004). The violent language of mainland surf culture speaks to this masculinity — terms like "rip" "shred" "cut" "slash" "destroy" and "kill" are frequently used when describing performance on a wave (Waitt & Warren, 2008). Although women remain a minority in surfing, there have been significant contributions to the literature which have highlighted the multifaceted and often painful experiences of women surfers. As Lisahunter (2018) points out, women's participation in surfing has historically been conditional, shaped by expectations of hypersexuality and femininity rather than ability (Lisahunter, 2015; Schmitt & Bohuon, 2022). However, there has been significant growth in women and girls' interest in surfing, and, as such, the scholarship has reflected this development (Comley, 2016; Olive et al, 2015; Wheaton, 2013). Scholars have identified the participation of women & girls in surfing as a cultural boom (Olive et al, 2018).

The reproduction of heteronormativity in dominant surfing culture has been well established (Evers, 2006; Roy, 2016; Wait, 2008). Heteronormativity, coined by Warner (1991) refers to the experience and production of heterosexuality as normal and right, encoded into all aspects of society. As Lenskyj (2012) notes, "the concept of heteronormativity encompasses both homophobia and heterosexism, that is, active prejudice and discrimination against sexual minorities, as well as the implicit ideological assumptions that shape societal attitudes and practices (Lenskyj, 2012, P. 139). Additionally, as Finley points out, "heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity should be interpreted as logics of colonialism" a fitting interpretation given the indigenous roots of surfing as cultural practice (Finley, 2011, P. 33; Westwick and Neushul, 2013; DePond, 2019).

Performances of heterosexuality are pervasive in surf culture through the sexualization of women surfers and the often explicit nature of surf chat amongst men in the lineup. As Evers (2006) points out,

homophobia is crucial to preventing "homosocial bonds becoming interpreted as homoerotic and affirming the supposed heterosexual preference of male surfers" (Waitt, 2008; Evers, 2006, P.87). Roy (2016) recognizes that exploring issues of sexuality in surf means investigating all of the spaces where surf culture functions; she writes, "exploring the issues of sexuality in surfing does not just mean paying attention to what happens in the waves, it means paying attention to what happens on the beaches, in car parks, in surf shops, cafes, pubs and many other places besides" (Roy, 2016, P. 197).

Despite the reliance on hegemonic masculinity in modern sport, it has been suggested by previous scholars that queering sport is possible, yet challenging, due to the strict sex segregation historically seen in athletics — from youth to the professional level (Anderson, 2002; Travers, 2006). As Schmitt & Bohoun (2022) point out, "male and female bodies in sport are hierarchically ranked to justify the 'biological superiority' of men and to support the segregation of sports based on sex" (Schmitt & Bohun, 2022). Rothblatt (1995) identifies the relevance that competitive sport plays in upholding societal segregation beyond sport, based on reinforcing the belief that inherent differences exist between the sexes. The arena of organized sport must undergo a queer restructuring to curate, as Travers (2006) suggests, "a more nuanced approach that sees sport increasingly organized according to a gender continuum rather than a binary" (Travers, 2006, P. 432). To queer sport would challenge the assumptions of such fundamental differences between the sexes and dominant forms of cisnormativity seen in competitive sports. In practice, this intentional queering of sport as resistance to dominant ideologies occurs regularly.

For example, skateboarding as social practice has been acknowledged in the cultural zeitgeist for its perceived resistance to the inequalities seen in more traditional sports. Scholars Geckle and Shaw, in their article: "Failure and Futurity: The Transformative Potential of Queer Skateboarding" challenge the notion that skateboarding hosts an inherently progressive agenda and instead argue that skateboarding remains a largely hetero-masculine domain (Geckle & Shaw, 2022). Simultaneously, these authors identify a population of radical, queer skateboarders who have resisted previous understandings of what it means to be a skater and how to 'do' skateboarding. They use Halberstam's concept of "queer failure" and Muñoz's concept of "queer futurity," to identify how a queer potential in skateboarding is possible — where individuals can be both skaters and queer (Halberstam, 20ll; Muñoz, 2009).

Geckle and Shaw understand Halberstam's concept of "queer failure" as a deliberate and international failure, which, as they argue "can be 'a way of refusing to acquiesce to the dominant logics of power and discipline as a form of critique'. By refusing and critiquing dominant logics, failure also proffers alternative ways of existing and operating in society. It can be thought of as 'opting out' of the restrictive conventions of normative society to forge a new path" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 88; Geckle and Shaw 2020). They further this idea by saying that queer failure is "not a lack of success as much as it is an unwillingness to adhere to the hegemonic terms of success defined by a heteronormative, capitalist society as 'reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation'" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2; Geckle and Shaw, 2020).

Geckle and Shaw describe José Esteban Muñoz's concept of "queer futurity" as "'doing something else' when it feels like there is 'something missing'... these acts defy the conventions of the present to escape it, even if just for a moment, and inspire other possible ways of doing and being in the future. Futurity is a belief that things can be different, and things can change. It is a hopeful act of imagining, inspiring and building alternative futures rather than reproducing the present" (Muñoz, 2009, P.153, 154; Geckle and Shaw, 2020). And yet, Geckle and Shaw point out that true queer futurity "is not enough to just receive the world and experience it differently, but the radical queer subject must also act back on the world and actively engage it in transformative ways" (Geckle and Shaw, 2020).

Queer failure and futurity provide the framework to better understand how queer acts of resistance can create alternative ways of existing and operating in other sports, such as surfing. When the queer skaters, as seen in Geckle and Shaw's study, are deliberately "failing," as in resisting traditional notions of what is considered "good," they are refusing the hegemonic standards and logics that have been set to continually oppress queer people. As Halberstam points out, "queer failure is not a lack of success as much as it is an unwillingness to adhere to the hegemonic terms of success defined by a heteronormative, capitalist society" (Halberstam, 2011, P. 2). The seemingly defiant actions that Geckle and Shaw identify in a group of queer skaters, pose a potential for new ways of doing skateboarding.

According to Muñoz, "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (Muñoz, 2009, P. 1). Thus, the skaters in Geckle and Shaw's study are committed to a truly queer practice in skateboarding, envisioning a future that is not cis, straight or confining. The queer skaters identified in Geckle and Shaw's study reconfigured skate culture, redefining what it means to be both a skater and queer. Utilizing Geckle and Shaw's analysis of queer failure and futurity in skateboarding, we identify how the queer surfers and organizers in Switch offer future possibilities in redefining traditional meanings of surfing.

Methodology and Methods

Transfeminism and queer theory provide the conceptual framework to understand the diversity of gender presentations seen at Switch, while also recognizing the lived experiences of the participants (Koyama, 2003; Plummer, 2005). This qualitative study utilized six semi-structured interviews with four event organizers of *Switch*, as well as two individuals who were strictly participants. The purpose of these interviews was to explore the co-constructed meanings that individuals ascribed to their experience at *Switch* from an oral-history perspective (Seidman, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Foregrounding the voices of the trans, non-binary, and queer individuals in this study was central to exploring this event as a unit of analysis. Moreover, semi-structured interviewing allowed for flexibility in conversation, as participants were encouraged to share new thoughts and ideas as they became apparent (DeJonckheere, 2019).

Positionality

We utilized a perspective of transfeminism and queer theory in this study, which encouraged us to interrogate our own internalized patriarchal and heterosexist concepts of gender. Transfeminism

challenges the notion that people are categorized into only two sexes when in fact a continuum of biological and psychological features may be a more accurate way of portraying the diversity of individuals. Additionally, queer theory recognizes the voices and experiences of individuals who have been suppressed, allowing them to describe these experiences in greater depth (Gamson, 2000).

Our epistemological assumptions as queer researchers, athletes, and the first author's identity as a surfer meant that we were able to approach this work from the position of insiders. The first author has been surfing for more than two decades on both the East and West coasts of the United States, and as such, was familiar with the language and cultural practices of surfers. Additionally, since the first author formerly served in an organizing role and as a Board Member for Benny's Club, she had developed close relationships with other queer surfers and had access to conversations and environments that are not open to the public at large. It can be argued that the emic perspective of the authors is a benefit in this research, as opposed to a limitation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Nevertheless, we acknowledge the potential biases that our backgrounds as a queer athletes and scholars may have on the interpretation of the study's findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

This project began by attending and observing *Switch*. The first author arrived one hour prior to the event, and stayed until the event's closing, taking field notes and observing the scene from the sand. A few months after the event, the first author utilized convenience sampling with participants and organizers of *Switch.* Contact was initiated via text or the Instagram direct messaging feature to set-up interviews. During this time, organizers shared planning documents to provide further context and background information on the event's origins and structure. Prior to interviewing, an interview protocol was created with questions to elicit the most relevant information about Switch from participants and organizers, while simultaneously honoring their lived experience of the event (Siedman, 2019). As names are critically important for transgender individuals, participants in this study were not "renamed" as to not inadvertently gender participants in this study. As such, participants in this study will be referred to alphanumerically as Participant A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, and A6.

In order to collect data for this inquiry, participant interviews were conducted via a third-party platform (Zoom). Prior to recording the interviews, verbal consent was acquired from participants; once consent was given, the Zoom interviews were recorded and then uploaded to Otter.Ai for transcription purposes. Otter.Ai is a transcription software that develops speech to text transcription using artificial intelligence. Although Otter.Ai completed the initial transcription, all six AI transcriptions required thorough cleaning which was conducted by hand. It is important to note that Otter.Ai struggled to transcribe certain words and phrases, such as: "queer", "trans", "surf", and "nonbinary." This demonstrates that these terms may not be included in the dominant lexicon.

Interviews ranged between 30 minutes to just over one hour. An inductive methodological approach to coding the transcripts was employed in order to allow the data to guide the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first step in this coding process was to make some general observations that stuck out upon

completing the interview and editing the transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 2014). Once an initial list of notes was created, the cleaned transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose for coding. Using Dedoose coding software, data was analyzed using hierarchical content analysis. After coding in Dedoose, the researchers coded all interviews again by hand to further analyze the data for emergent themes.

Demographics of Participants at Switch

Demographic data of the total participants of *Switch* 2023 was not collected by organizers. However, organizers did collect data for the following year, *Switch* 2024. Organizer A6 mentioned via email that the demographics for "2024 and 2023 were very similar." The largest group of participants in Switch 2024 identified as of 'European Descent' with 24 responses. This was followed by those identifying as 'Mixed Ethnicity' with 10 responses, while the category of 'African Descent' had the fewest participants, with only two individuals self-identifying in this group. The majority of participants in Switch 2024 identified themselves as 'Queer' with 34 responses, followed by 'Lesbian' with 14 responses.

Table 1. Interview Participant Demographics

Identifier	Pronouns	Role
A1	They/Them	Participant
A2	They/She	Organizer
A3	They/She	Organizer
A4	He/They	Organizer
A5	He/Him	Participant
A6	They/She	Organizer

Results

Six parent codes and 33 second order codes emerged from the Dedoose coding of the interview data. From this hierarchical coding, three key themes emerged as significant: (1) Surfing as Contested Ideological Terrain, (2) Switch as an Articulation of Liberation, (3) Switch as Queer Possibility.

Discussion

Surfing as Contested Ideological Terrain

"That is just part of surf culture, I suppose you're always getting harassed" (A2).

Surfing, both the practice of the activity and the culture surrounding it, elicited feelings of discomfort and joy for study participants, resulting in an inherent complexity that they ascribed to surfing as a whole. Four out of six individuals in this study were met with significant obstacles as they attempted to enter surf culture. Participants described the challenges of starting their surfing practice, noting the difficulty of navigating culturally complex and unfamiliar terrain. They described feeling judged by surfers, both in the water and in other surfing sites such as surf shops. As A6 mentioned, "Surf culture is awful. I mean, the solution is like… design your life around avoiding surf culture…. surf culture is pretty vicious, you

know" (A6). As described by A6, the culture of surfing is more than just unfriendly, it is hostile enough to be avoided.

Harassment, exclusion and conformity in surfing were critical experiences for participants in this study (A1, A2, A3, A4, A6). Harassment was something that the majority of participants experienced multiple times throughout their surfing careers. Harassment took shape for participants via explicit bullying both in and out of the water, often utilizing language that was specifically homophobic, as well as physical instances of abuse.

As a kid, as a teenager, men are trying to pick fights with you all the time— show you your place or whatever. What was different for me is the nature of the harassment is often homophobic, even if they're not necessarily actually accusing you of being gay. But you know, if you are, it hits different (A2).

While the literature points out that homophobia and homophobic language are rife in surf culture, the invocation of homophobia as a means of intimidation is prevalent within normative surf culture, whether one presents as visibly queer or not. Moreover, A2 clearly articulates the impact of this specific cultural homophobia that occurs when cis, straight surfers share the surf with individuals who present as visibly queer (Evers, 2006). As made evident by other participants, the harassment prevalent in surf culture is something that becomes embodied and habitualized.

One such example, brought up by A6, is the concept of the "kook" — a word for a rookie surfer who lacks understanding of the culture and rules and is, therefore, a perceived nuisance in the lineup. This word can often be heard when a beginner surfer makes a mistake on a wave, or as a descriptor for someone who is surfing poorly. For A6, the concept of the "kook" felt reflective of the culture of surfing at large — uniquely exclusive and harsh. As A6 pondered, "What other sport or activity or hobby in the world has a derogatory label for someone who is learning something, and is being brave and putting themselves out there?" While "kook" is commonly used to describe beginner surfers, often, it is wielded as an insult to experienced surfers who may be unconventional, a nonconformist, or seen as "other" in the lineup— such as a queer person. As made clear by A6, the fact that mainstream surfers have a unique word for someone who does not fit the cultural norm is indicative of the symbolic violence inherent to the social practice. A6 went on to directly analogize kooks to queers, stating queers had always been labeled as kooks. Although, A6 seemed unfazed by the "kook" label, describing that as a queer person, they've been labeled their whole life. "Label us all day long, every day, like, we've already survived that…our skin is already a little bit thicker."

Participants in this study spoke to the bodily intimidation and discomfort they felt navigating the surf industry as a queer person — especially as it pertains to the revealing bathing suits or constricting wetsuits that surfing often requires. As A2 mentioned, "You know, straight people can actually just go to take a lesson. Putting a queer body into a wet suit is like, a little bit more complicated" (A2). The wetsuit or bathing suit worn during surfing was described by participants as problematic and painful, leading to feelings of emotional dissociation such as being out of body (A2, A3, A4). As A3 described, "It's not comfortable to walk into a surf shop and ask for a wetsuit, ask for help or ask for a lesson. People say all

the time, they did a lesson and were totally intimidated, got misgendered, got the wrong gender wetsuit or just that the instructor had no queer competency at all" (A3). At best, being misgendered or given the wrong gender wetsuit could discourage a trans person from surfing, and at worst it could cause significant distress and harm (Freeman, 2018). For the participants in this study who found surfing attire in which they felt comfortable, they were often subject to judgment by other surfers in the lineup who reacted negatively to their bodies or apparel of choice.

The heteronormative, patriarchal, and homophobic nature of the surf industry was felt deeply by all participants, especially A3, a former professional surfer, who was forced to remain closeted to maintain their professional standing in the early to mid 2000s. This individual was explicitly told by their team manager they could not be out as queer and that they should "keep that [their identity] under wraps" (A3). This participant reported that many of the other surfers with whom they traveled and trained at the time were also queer and closested, and that there was an unspoken rule amongst their professional surf team that you could only act on queer desires once you were back in the house. For A3, professional surfing was not a space where their queer identity could flourish, and they were forced to look elsewhere for queer self-actualization and acceptance.

While the larger hegemonic culture surrounding surfing was viewed as problematic for the individuals in this study, the embodied experience of surfing elicited feelings of joy and spirituality. Participants cited a sense of liberation and lack of attachment to both their bodies and the outside world that repeatedly brought them back to their surfing practice. Surf scholar Clifton Evers describes this sensation as the surfing body: "an exchange of forces where I affect and am affected (Evers, 2006 P. 233)." Individuals in this study echoed this sentiment, speaking to their ability to harness energy while they were surfing, and the freeing nature that it offers. A2 described the ocean as a place where they could push back against societal expectations, exploring their gender through expression in the surf.

It [the ocean] was the space where I had rejected the norm, where I felt confident to reject the norm… and I guess surfing was like my drag in that way. Like, after rejecting the norms, I was like, maybe I can put my wrist like this, maybe I can just feel my body and not think about how the movements of my body are measuring up against like, good, normal, positive things that society, that like surf culture respects (A2).

Similarly, A5 described their surfing as a dance — allowing them to express themselves in their most authentic form. The dynamic nature of surfing allowed for participants to constantly be challenged, stimulated, and express themselves in alternative and unique ways. While surfing as a whole felt complicated and contested for participants, they described the ocean as a liberating space to be held, regardless of what state they are in. The surfers in this study were engaged in an everyday practice of what Muñoz referred to as, "working on and against" surf culture through small acts of resistance in and out of the water.

While participants in this study found solace and comfort in the ocean, the majority of interviewees did not participate or engage in surf competitions. They described their avoidance as being due to intimidation, lack of opportunity and community, or a fundamental skepticism about its value.

Additionally, participants did not feel that these more formal and structured surf spaces could be friendly to queer surfers or be synonymous with collective queer action. *Switch* emerged in response to this gap. Importantly, participants expressed a clear desire to explore the spiritual and transcendent dimensions of surfing within a shared, queer space.

Switch: An Articulation of Liberation

"We decided to do an exhibition to showcase and celebrate queer, [and] trans surfers, and to do it in a space where their whole self is being celebrated and they're free to express themselves however the fuck they want" (A3).

As it became apparent that participants in this study felt drawn to the practice of surfing but discomfited within the culture, the relevance and inspiration for *Switch* became clearer. Organizers of *Switch* aimed to not only resist the hegemonic values reinforced by the mainstream surf industry but also attempted to create something new in the global surf imaginary. Organizers made it clear that Switch should not be understood as an industry standard surf competition; instead, it should be conceptualized as a space of resistance, where experienced queer surfers could gather as a community, celebrating and queering the surf. As such, over 40 experienced queer surfers, across generations, came *together* to participate in *Switch*, surfing radically in jerseys of various colors. Additionally, Switch provided a site to document the queer surf talent that exists, highlighting that queer surfers are visible and active.

The organizers of *Switch* aimed to communicate the radicality of the event through their marketing materials. As stated in their Instagram registration announcement: "All genders, all boards, all bodies. Non-traditional celebration of trans/non-binary/queer expression in the waves." They further communicated their "expectations" and "vibes" of *Switch* in emails to potential participants, sharing statements like, "think less competitive contest and more light-hearted, fun, very queer and celebratory showcase of queer and trans wave riding. There is no elimination, and everyone who wants to surf 2 times/rounds will." As made clear by organizers, the event espoused inclusion, camaraderie, and queer joy.

Prior to Switch, much of the work of Benny's Club and Queer Surf had been focused on empowering non-surfers and beginner surfers; however, one of the main goals for Switch was to provide a space where the attention was on elite and professional queer surfers. A2 and A3 spoke to the notion that queer community building has not occurred within the established or professional surfing communities, so they hoped that by gathering the "shredders from back in the day, like all the lesbian, gay, surfers from back in the day" (A3) they could facilitate a space where the overlapping identities of these individuals could thrive. "We wanted to think about a way to bring that feeling, that space of possibility, to the surfers who just aren't going to Benny's Club and Queer Surf, because they're professionals. We want to do queer community building in a subset of people, an extremely niche subset of people, that really need it" (A2). Echoing A2's statement, A3 shared the importance of *Switch* being a space where surfers could act authentically, without fear of criticism or judgment.

[*Switch*] is a space where their [queer surfers] whole self is being celebrated and they're free to express

themselves however the fuck they want. They don't have to, you know, code switch once they get to the sand, because their sponsor is there, or a prospective sponsor is there, and they don't want to explain their gender or pronouns or something (A3).

The notion that *Switch* could serve as a unique site of healing for experienced or professional queer surfers was echoed by other participants (A6, A4, A3, A2), as they aimed to honor the "shredder homos from back in the day" (A3) who may have been subject to violence and pain while competing on the professional circuit.

Organizers extended invitations to queer professionals (both publicly out and not) to participate in *Switch*, with the hopes of creating a documented account of elite queer surfing and elite queer surfers. According to A6, there is no collection, archive, book, or history of elite queer surfers that exists today; as such, there was a motivation for organizers to showcase the talent of this population. As A2 stated, "[*Switch*] is in part, an exercise in visibility…Queer surfers are not just being pushed into the whitewater, like many of them are very good…. so there's a desire to just expose" (A2).

For organizers, *Switch* was intended to be an undeniably queer space — an epic, flamboyant, amalgamation of queer culture in the surf. Cultivating this environment required several deliberate decisions by organizers, some of which included drag performances throughout the event; locating *Switch* in Linda Mar, one of the closer beachers to the historically queer city of San Francisco; and extending invitations to relevant and notable queer community members. A6 mentioned that they wanted *Switch* to feel like "a queer party on the beach" but with an elevated circle of talented surfers. These intentional queer actions translated to, as A2 described, *Switch* feeling like a real, queer, community space.

There's something special that happens when you get a bunch of queer people together… [queer] community spaces are really magical, they're like little temporary, alternative societies that come and go, but when you're inside of them, it's experiencing the possibility of doing everything differently. Like, you can organize a society differently. It's not just like this idea of utopia, you can make it happen. (A2)

Creating a truly queer surf environment felt fundamental to organizers, as *Switch* was intended to be witnessed by the larger surfing community. As A2 said, "you know, we're making a queer space here, and we're making it for the public eye — sharing you know what happens when we get together and surf together."

Figure 1. Eve Swallows Performing at *Switch*

Note. Photo Credit is Chris J. Russo

While the format of *Switch* can be seen as fundamentally different from an industry-standard surf competition, *Switch* elicited queer radicality within the surfing landscape. Organizers went beyond cultivating space for queer surfers; they built an entirely new infrastructure for them to surf within. It seems that a queer surfing — in practice, culture, and ocean — was made possible at *Switch*.

Switch as Queer Possibility

"Thank you for fucking with the beach culture, thank you for taking this dry ass like scene and like, messing with it, with it and subverting it" (A6).

As Geckle and Shaw found within the queer skaters they studied, *Switch* presented possibilities for new paths forward, and it allowed alternative values to flourish. Queer surfers came together to share space, create new relationships, celebrate their queer identities while surfing, and have fun — an experience that many queer surfers have rarely, if ever, been afforded. As A4 described, *Switch* was "a free for all" to "showcase talents with no pressure of having to achieve or succeed in any way" (A4). A2 went on to explain that *Switch* was an intentional act of "doing something different." According to A2, they felt that *Switch* had intentionally tried to avoid the industry's standard of "success" — refusing previously constructed understandings of "good surfing." The lack of pressure for *Switch* surfers to achieve a narrowly defined standard furthered this sense of queer possibility, paving the way for new and alternative ways of being in the surf.

While *Switch* provided a structure and sense of formality to the surfers participating in the event, it purposely failed to adhere to the values and rules that the International Surfing Association sets for a surfing competition (International Surfing Association, 2022). Organizers chose not to have winners, losers, or elimination rounds, and encouraged a set of surfing values that exist almost fully in contrast to those set by the ISA. According to *Switch* organizing documents that were shared with researchers, organizers aimed "to encourage expressive surfing… embodying the ineffable." Organizers recognized ineffable surfing as "the sensations of surprise, a decision that we would not have made, spontaneous and

functional reaction to the wave, vicarious joy, a shift in the viewer's idea of what is possible, confidence in your body and self on the waves" (Switch Organizing Documents, 2023). The values organizers ascribed to "ineffable surfing" can be seen in direct contrast to the judging criteria that the ISA sets for a surf competition: speed, power, and flow (International Surfing Association, 2022).

Switch organizers opted out of having a set of judges for the event. Instead, participants and observers could vote on accolades for surfers, using a Google Form to record their praises. Some of accolades that *Switch* surfers could receive were: "Gayest takeoff (gay as in good or gay as in style), Biggest bottom-energy (happy wave sub), Strongest finish (most emotional climax/best /pullout), Rail game (using the whole board through maneuvers and generating speed), Serving (style or looks), Top–to–Bottom Pipeline (critical maneuvers)" among others. These accolades can be interpreted as more than just creative and unconventional, but as a queer failure, rejecting the conventions of normative surf culture.

While participants could cast their votes on accolades for individual surfers during the event, organizers ultimately decided to let participants self-identify which accolade they wanted to take home, seemingly disregarding the voting process. While the pivot to self-identified accolades may not seem significant, one organizer highlighted the importance of this decision in the aftermath:

We had folks choose their own accolade, which was a way of leaning into, like, queer self-identification. Rather than someone else placing a label on you, you had the opportunity to, you know, say, like, no, actually, this is what I was going for, this is what it felt like, this is what I wanted. That was really fun and liberating and felt very queer; that you are who you want to be, you are who you identify as you are, who you tell us who you are, and you're surfed how you tell us you surfed as opposed to us us telling you how you're surfed as someone on the outside. So, I felt like that was absolutely queer. (A6)

Figure 2. Participant Accolades as Ribbons

Note. The photo was shared and taken by Queer Surf organizers

Both organizers and participants alike acknowledged the accolades as being representative of the values of *Switch*, as well as in how they contributed to an air of lightheartedness and queer joy. As A5 pointed out, "The fact that there wasn't a first-place winner and it was just about different silly categories kind of took the aggressive side out of *Switch* and made it more about just expressing yourself and having fun with other people" (A5).

Accolades were one of the ways that organizers aimed to renegotiate, challenge, and purposefully fail at achieving the surf industry's perceived standard of what being a "good surfer" means and what "good surfing" looks like. According to A2, Switch was a practice in resisting the norms set by the surf industry — and potentially showcasing alternatives for a new relationship to it.

I think part of *Switch*, for me, was like… can we put words to the kinds of things that define good surfing, beyond these boring gendered, athletic criteria that we're stuck with right now… There is something that when you see it, you're like, that was good surfing, but it's not always the most proficient surfer that's doing it. So, trying to put words to what's happening in those moments."

This effort to redefine good surfing reflects a fluid and dynamic quality of experience and performance that is simultaneously emotional and aesthetic. Participants spoke to the surf industry's values as being overly restrictive and formulaic, suggesting that they detract from the collective beauty of surfing. A2 went on to describe the social utility of surfing, in their mind, as an ability to "to shed all signifiers and to just be in the body, totally uninscribed," and that the surf industry's focus of hegemony, monetization, commercialization and professionalization has led to a barrier preventing surfers from achieving their true potential (A2). As such, creating *Switch* served as a form of critique to both the industry and culture as a whole; or as A6 said, an exercise in "fuck[ing] with their format," while simultaneously prioritizing a new form of ethics — a queer future of surfing.

Participants in this study described the surf industry as overly serious but *Switch* as a deeply "unserious and silly event" (A1). Surfers seized the opportunity to surf in unconventional ways during their heats — throughout the event, surfers could be seen board swapping, surfing tandem, backwards, pouring drinks over their heads, and doing headstands on their boards. By eliminating the competitiveness associated with a surf event, organizers felt that participants were more likely to come together as a collective to create something new and as they stated, "magical." As A6 mentioned, "It's not about getting a perfect 10, it's about our collective efforts."

Figure 3. *Switch* Participants Surfing Tandem

Note. Photo Credit is Gillian Stargensky

For organizers, *Switch* was a distinct effort in a new queer worldmaking. The queer surfer no longer must adhere to the conventions that the surf industry has set for them; they can build their own queer future. For participants, *Switch* showcased a future where queer culture and identity could thrive in the surf. Specifically, it presented a new vision for queer surfers. For A6, now that they have built this future, there is no going back: "It's hard to look back once you know how good it can be. How surrounded by like-minded people, like you don't have to explain your politics, you don't have to explain your aesthetic or your gender, or your art. Like, oh, we just get it" (A6). As A2 went on to say, "Because *Switch* happened, because it was an open format, and it worked, it's a lot easier to be like, you don't have to do it that way." These important sentiments demonstrate the multiple potentialities of both *Switch* as a novel event and queer surfing as a viable social practice.

Future Implications: The Future of Switch, the Future of Queer Surfing

"The momentum is so good. It feels so good."

The goal of this research was to explore the inaugural S*witch: An Exhibition of Queer Surfing, Against the Binary Against Hierarchy* that occurred in 2023 — yet, since this research began, *Switch* occurred for

a second time in June of 2024. The second iteration of *Switch* was organized entirely by Queer Surf, as Benny's Club was unable to participate. *Switch* 2024 attempted to address some of the structural and conceptual components that organizers had outlined in their initial reflections, such as making *Switch* feel like an even queerer site to resist hegemony in surf culture. A6 mentioned that one of the structural changes in 2024 was the addition of surf relays, where participants could only use alternative surf crafts, not surfboards. This effort, according to A6, made the event feel "playful and more of a celebration, and centered joy and ridiculousness. It kind of shifted the narrative on wave riding… making sure all bodies all boards message is out front" (A6).

Additionally, *Switch* 2024 included the first ever "T for T" heat, meaning, only trans individuals were surfing together in one heat. "T for T" felt especially meaningful for A6, who reported that as far as they know, *Switch* 2024 was the first time ever documented "that it was only trans folks in the water catching waves together" (A6). The "T for T" heat opened additional ideas for A6, who shared that this heat "just cracked open a whole new way of looking at things and thinking about things. Maybe we'll do a BIPOC one [heat] next time…. like, let's keep this going" (A6). Additionally, *Switch* 2024 offered additional modes of queer artistic expression, such as performance art as well as drag, which was a goal they had outlined in initial interviews.

Switch 2024 was described by A6 as "still scrappy and unrefined" with ambitious goals to continue in 2025. Although the first two iterations of *Switch* occurred in Northern California, organizers have their eyes set on a *Switch event* in Southern California, as they hope to continue creating new connections for queer surfers. As *Switch* prepares for its potential third iteration in 2025, further research might include a longitudinal study of this event to track how it evolves over time. A longitudinal study may provide an even deeper exploration of the queer worldmaking that is occurring at *Switch*, and how it changes over time, location, financial resources, and diversity of participants.

Additional research may also explore other queer affinity groups like Benny's Club and Queer Surf who are utilizing sport as a vehicle of queer liberation. For example, scholarship might explore the ways these groups seek to build and deepen queer communities while simultaneously changing the landscape of a given sport. These studies may explore how these affinity groups provide space for queer individuals to congregate and mingle, providing new sites for social interactions that mainstream sports have previously discouraged. Finally, researchers might consider applying Geckle and Shaw's application of queer failure and futurity to other social practices beyond just surfing and skateboarding. Expanding the scope of this research may illuminate the broader impact of queer worldmaking across various sporting communities, offering insights into how these spaces are challenging norms and radically reshaping the culture of sport itself.

Conclusions

Maintaining dominant ideologies present in surf culture have led to the oppression and exclusion of marginalized groups, such as women, people of color and LGBTQIA+ individuals (Evers, 2004). And yet, despite the visible presence of male hegemony and homophobia, queer surfers, such as those present

at *Switch*, are participating in the practice in new and transformative ways. Organizations such as Benny's Club and Queer Surf seek to realize a more inclusive climate in surfing, one where a diversity of individuals can thrive. This paper has analyzed *Switch: An Exhibition of Queer Surfing, Against the Binary Against Hierarchy*, an event which featured over 40 queer and trans surfers. Participants of *Switch* showed off their surfing abilities, aiming to embody the ineffable by riding waves and putting queer joy on display. Surfers and organizers of *Switch* aimed to resist the culturally significant markers present in surf culture today, while simultaneously creating an alternative set of values associated with this traditional social practice.

The notion that *Switch* served as a site of resistance within the greater hegemonic surfing landscape was felt deeply by participants, but not without its own limitations. As such, it is crucial to acknowledge that while where there was resistance, there was also reproduction. All the participants interviewed in this study had suggestions regarding certain elements of *Switch*, but the unanimous feedback among participants was that *Switch* felt "very white". When organizers of *Switch* reflected on the lack of racial diversity at the event, they agreed that the whiteness of the event was a weakness, and that they are actively brainstorming how to ensure that future *Switch* events would feel more racially diverse. Even acts of resistance such as *Switch* must be cognizant of the inadvertent ways in which they excluded and or othered some potential participants.

Switch served as an articulation of queer failure and greater possibility in surfing. Geckle and Shaw's article, *Failure and Futurity: The Transformative Potential of Queer Skateboarding*, offers a framework for applying the concepts of queer failure and futurity to *Switch*. *Switch* purposely failed at being an industry standard surf competition, and instead, resisted hegemony in surf culture by building an alternative future more aligned with their espoused values. The queer surfers who participated in *Switch* actively reconfigured surf culture, redefining what it means to be both a surfer and queer.

Findings from this study support current literature and indicate that queer surfers strive for a more expansive and inclusive understanding of surfing. By interviewing six participants and organizers of *Switch*, this study has showcased a pageantry of liberatory expression and a joyous exhibition of social resistance. Three key findings can be drawn about the state of surf culture, and the relevance of *Switch* within the global surf landscape:

1. Surf culture is currently a contested space for queer and trans individuals. Participants in this study felt unwelcomed by surf culture at large, citing experiences of exclusion and harassment. Navigating traditional surf spaces led to feelings of bodily discomfort, ultimately impacting study participants' engagement with surfing. Simultaneously, participants sought out and engaged with surfing, as the embodied act facilitated emotional connection and spirituality.
2. *Switch* served as an articulation of liberation for participants, showcasing that it is feasible to create meaningful experiences in surf culture that elicit inclusion. *Switch* served as an example that surf culture is neither static nor immutable. In fact, queer individuals can thrive in the surf. *Switch* was historic, not only due to the gathering of so many talented queer and trans surfers, but also because participants found

freedom in the open ocean, pulsating with queer joy, energy, and possibility.

3. The legacy of *Switch* confirms that surfers are ready for a culture that is more inclusive, vibrant, and safe. Participants reveled in their experience of queer possibility. As more queer people refuse to acquiesce to the dominant culture when entering the surf, the growth of a queer ocean becomes increasingly possible.

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