Dialectical Anthropology
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-026-09853-8

PERSPECTIVE

Alienated pleasure: on surfing in Portugal

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Abstract
Drawing on my fieldwork on surfing in Portugal, I zone in on a contradiction between surfing's romanticized image as countercultural and (at least) at variance with capitalism by virtue of its association with nature and antithesis to work; and a reality of surfing's comprehensive commodification, detrimental social and ecological effects, and buttressing of the very work-life it purportedly rejects. I argue that surfing's representation as fun and liberatory is an alienated response to these entanglements in capitalism. Its packaging as a hard to communicate pastime whose appeal can only be accessed through corporal first-hand accounts reproduces precisely the obscuring effects of this alienation.

Keywords Surfing · Counterculture · Alienation · Pleasure · Portugal

No book has gone further in unlocking the mysteries of surfing than Pulitzer Prize winning *Barbarian Days*. Recounting his lifelong surfing adventures, *New Yorker* staff writer William Finnegan provides a stirring glimpse into what surfing feels like. Yet he falters in the face of his own ambitions. "My utter absorption in surfing had no rational content. It simply compelled me… I could not have explained why I did it," he writes about his youthful obsession. As an adult and already published writer, he still wavers: "now that I was planning to write about it, I found myself wondering how much of the actual thing I could hope to convey to outsiders" (Finnegan 2016).

Finnegan's hesitation hits up against an image of surfing that outsiders have long entertained. It is crystallized in representations like the 1991 movie Point Break, which boosted surfing's popularity with romanticized imagery already circulating in shows, music and magazines. The movie's tanned and athletic surfers live outside of mainstream society, rejecting materialism and embracing a nomadic, thrill-seeking lifestyle. It portrays surfing as sexy and cool as well as spiritual, respecting nature

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Published online: 23 July 2026

while courting pleasure and adrenaline; and as so shrouded in mystery that the only way an FBI agent can truly understand it is by becoming a surfer himself.[1]

Anthropology has wrestled from its inception with the same challenge pinpointed by the book and the movie, namely, how to grasp and communicate foreign experiences. The challenge has been explicit when, like surfing, these experiences have presented themselves as ineffable. A common strategy that anthropologists have employed is participant observation of the kind that centers embodied (as opposed to verbally conveyed) experiences. A key advocate of this approach, Thomas Csordas, put forth that the body is not a mediator of experience but its site: we encounter the world directly though our senses. The task for anthropologists is to attend to how people inhabit their bodies by engaging with their postures, gestures, sensations, rhythms and moods (Csordas 1994). Michael Jackson, another advocate, added that fieldwork is less about interpreting symbols than about dwelling with others in the immediacy of life and being drawn physically into the experience of others (Jackson 1998).

This ambition is far from being uncontested. Anthropologists informed by critical theorists such as Judith Butler, who saw bodies as regulated and constructed through discourse and normativity, and Michel Foucault, who studied the body as a site of biopower's inscription, have offered alternative views. Among them is Michael Taussig, who examined the internalization and mimesis of dominant power structures. He showed how colonized subjects embodied certain practices of colonizers as means of navigating and sometimes subverting power dynamics. Embodiment, Taussig concluded, is never free from power, just as sensory experiences are historically and socially constructed; troubling the idea of an unmediated bodily experience anthropologists might access directly (Taussig 1993).

As influential as this and similar critiques have been, it remains common in the anthropology of sports and physical activity to seek privileged insight through first-hand accounts. In their survey of this subdiscipline, Kass Gibson and Michael Atkinson (2017) claimed that the most enriching and reality-congruent ethnographies of physical culture have been embodied first-person studies. Cognizant of differences in social and economic positioning between ethnographers and their interlocutors, they insisted that such studies nevertheless draw out similarities in the experience of people engaging in physical activity (Gibson and Atkinson 2017).

A key example of this strategy is Loïc Waquant's ethnography of boxing in Chicago (2004). Drawing on his experience boxing at a Chicago's South Side club whose patrons were African Americans from backgrounds far less privileged than his, Waquant described the experiences they nevertheless shared in common, such as corporeal wholeness and flow. He argued that boxing's moves could be fully apprehended only in action, and that boxing lay at the very edge of what could be intellectually grasped and communicated. To understand boxing required immersion: learning its constitutive moments from the inside (Waquant 2004).

[1] The concealments of this image are well documented in scholarship, which highlights surfing culture's implication in colonialism and particularly in American imperialism after the U.S. annexation of Hawaii; the ways in which its exoticism is mirrored in American cold war cultural diplomacy; surfing's obscuring of indigenous histories and of land dispossession; and the inequalities of race, gender and class under the surface of its branded progressiveness (Komer 2010; Laderman 2014; Moser 2024; Nardini 2018).

The ineffability that Waquant attributed to boxing is asserted regularly and emphatically about surfing, considered an embodied and pre-reflective being-in-the-world through which identity, emotion, aesthetics, and experience are constituted (Ford and Brown 2006). When I asked surfers about how surfing felt, almost all of them rehearsed some version of the romanticized image of surfing and insisted that you had to experience it for yourself. Some suggested that I learned how to surf myself and, though skeptical at first, I finally did learn the rudiments of surfing.

Portugal ranks among the top global surfing destinations, branded as Europe's surfing capital due to its year-round waves, its mild climate, and its varied coastline. Over the past two decades, surfing has transformed Portugal's coastal towns into surfing destinations, stimulating local economies while straining local infrastructure and ecology. Its centrality in global surfing culture makes Portugal an ideal spot in which to study this culture's contradictions.

In what follows, I draw on accounts of surfing in the literature, in public discourse and in social media, on interviews I conducted with non-professional surfers of varying levels, and on participant observation in three popular surfing beaches in Portugal (Carcavelos, Costa da Caprica, and Peniche), to critically assess the representations of surfing. In the first part of this paper, I do so with respect to the image of surfing as countercultural and (at least) at variance with capitalism and its work ethic. In the second, I tackle surfing's association with pleasure. My argument will be that surfing's representation as a fun and liberatory is an alienated one, stemming from and masking surfing's entanglements in capitalism, and that the insistence on its ineffability obscures this.

Commodification and Work

When I met Christina, her hair was wet from the morning's surf. She wanted to eat and recharge before getting back in the water. She arrived at Portugal from Austria a couple of days earlier for a work conference that would begin the following day, and she was intent on spending her free time surfing. She learned how to surf about ten years earlier. She made many mistakes at first, smacking her head against the surfboard and whatnot. It wasn't fun until she could finally surf with greater ease. Why did she push herself then? Because she really, really wanted to be cool, she laughed. Now that she was older, it was different: she surfed for life balance, since her job was quite demanding. Did the surfing give her balance, I asked. Not yesterday, she shrugged: it's been a while since she last surfed, and she was struggling. This morning, though, it started getting better and she hoped her performance would improve.

In *The Anthropology of Sport*, Niko Bessnier, Susan Bronwell, and Thomas F. Carter (2018) have drawn attention to the ways in which sport fuses experiences otherwise contradictory such as playfulness and seriousness, leisure and work, individualism and collectivism, pleasure and violence, hierarchy and equality, morality and corruption. Surfing epitomizes this fusion, particularly with respect to the first dyads: playfulness and seriousness, leisure and work. As Christina's account hints at, fun is an elusive goal and struggle is ubiquitous. A surfer's testimony on Reddit r/surfing confirms that it could be fun for maybe 0.005% of the time: the rest consists of checking the surf report, driving around, putting on a wetsuit, walking to the break,

paddling, getting yelled at, paddling, yelling at some kook who almost killed you, missing a wave that you had priority for, getting cleaned up by the wave behind it, getting stuck in the kelp, almost drowning, sitting on the outside hyperventilating, riding the whitewater in on your belly, walking back to the car, taking your wetsuit off, driving home, washing your wetsuit, and taking a shower.

Still, the cool factor that Christina mentioned is a recognizable component of surfing, as practically all of its cultural representations show and, indeed, cultivate. More than that, it is monetized. Critics have detailed how the surfing subculture is broadcasted through surfing fashion and appropriated by the surfing industry as a marketing tool (Guibert 2007; Sayeux 2008; Stranger 2011). Its most recognizable brands are publicly traded while multinational entities and corporate sponsored professional surfers gross millions of dollars annually (Hough-Snee and Eastman 2017). The artifacts of surfing, which include boards, wetsuits, clothing, accessories, magazines, books, memorabilia, videos, competitions, tourism, and surfing schools, garner even higher profits (Booth 2017). To afford the gear, the time off, and travel to surfing destinations, surfers must at least be economically stable. The success of the commercial and film industries in promoting surfing's "cool factor" has subverted its own promise, then, with pervasive commodification (Ford and Brown 2006).

To my eyes, Christina *was* cool, at least compared to many other surfers I saw on the beach whose performance was unimpressive and whose physiques deviated from the supple and tanned pop culture images. But I could see how coolness would be difficult to sustain. It must have been as elusive as the more mature "balance" that Christina was hoping for. The promise of balance is precisely the appeal that surfing holds for many of its practitioners. "When the ocean is rough, you have to focus so much that you forget about your life and worries. And when it's calm, it's therapeutic," told me one surfer. "It's so liberating to clear your head like that, even if just for a short time," said another. One surfer explained that you had to be so attuned to the sea and that it tethered you to the here and now: "You forget the chaos of daily life."

Such salutary effects notwithstanding, all of these surfers had to return to their work-lives. Whatever pressures they were hoping to escape were waiting for them on land. This might be the reason why so many of the accounts on social media express frustration at not being able to spend more time surfing – complaints of which I have also heard plenty. The moments of disconnect that surfing provides are few and far between. This is so, not merely because most surfers have jobs and responsibilities and do not live right by the beach. But also, because when they do surf, they have to contend with the consequences of surfing's popularity. So, at least, on beaches where you have to wait for your turn to catch a wave and be assertive against pushy or clueless fellow surfers – another common complaint.

Many surfers I met said they were drawn to surfing because of its connection to nature. They liked the beach and appreciated learning about waves and currents and partaking in an activity that harnessed these forces. A middle-aged surfer told me that these days, everyone was on their phones all the time whereas surfing placed you alone with the sun, the open air and the wide ocean. "It's an entire philosophy," he added: "The Atlantic is a force, it throws you around like a speck of dust." Learning to manage this force attuned you to nature rather than technology. Since at one point in our conversation he mentioned two teenaged sons, I asked him whether they surfed

as well. Rarely, he said: surfing was better suited for people his age who were not as addicted to social media.

Much like the cool factor and the balance, the ecological sensibilities of surfing have proven rather ambiguous. While some scholars have argued that surfing encouraged responsibly over ocean health (Olive 2023), others contended that for all their gestures to nature, surfers have not demonstrated an ecological ethos (Hill and Abbot 2009). Critics have pointed out the environmentally unfriendly repercussions of surfing's popularity – the overcrowding of beaches, the transformation of one-time fishing villages into surfing hubs, and the more general resource extraction resulting from surfing's commodification and particularly surfing tourism; even as a few grassroots efforts try to overturn surfing's harms (Borne and Ponting 2017; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Heberling and Kamper 2025; Ruttenberg and Brosius 2025).

The balance that comes from disconnecting from work-life and reconnecting with nature aligns with sport's alleged function as providing tension-balances and emotional arousal within socially accepted limits (Dunning and Elias 1986a). This balance is marred, however, by the pressure to perform. There is too much performance in surfing, conceded Finnegan (2016): style is everything. Critics have deemed the emphasis on performance enslaving rather than liberating (Hoberman 1984). The pressure to perform also marks the limits of practitioners' commitment. Often, when I asked people if they were surfers, they first said no and only later admitted they have been surfing for however many years. Few felt confident enough in their skills to call themselves "real" (by which they meant highly skilled) surfers. Some would grow frustrated or even stop surfing when they performed poorly.

Critical theorists have gone so far as to compare sports to work. Christopher Lasch claimed that sport satisfies a craving for gratuitous difficulty. Precisely when sports come to be valued solely as an escape, they cease to be one. Qualities such as prudence, calculation and caution invade them, and they become assimilated through bureaucratic capitalism into everyday life (Morgen 1991). Theodor Adorno claimed that sports seek to restore to the body some of the qualities of which the machine has deprived it, only to then train the body to serve the machine more inexorably (Adorno 1981 (1941). Tony Collins argued that sports had been integral to capitalism's expansion because their inherently competitive nature dovetailed with dominant conceptions of the competitiveness of human nature. Indeed, modern sports represent capitalism at play, in its competitiveness and idealization of the body (Collins 2013).

Surfing has been considered a limit case to this kind of theorizing for two reasons. First, despite surfing's sportification, it remains controversial to call it a sport. Many of its practitioners consider it, rather, a lifestyle and even a religion or philosophy of sorts. Yet, infusing surfing with so much seriousness merely proves the point that critical theorists claimed about the (capitalist) pressure to perform. That this performance, in surfing, is also of a countercultural identity intensifies the frustration of surfers who struggle to sustain such an image contra the demands of daily life.

Another reason for which surfing might be considered a limit case is that it has traditionally been represented in direct opposition to work. Kristin Lawer (2011) has written that a defining feature of surfing culture has been its bohemian "beach bum" sensibilities. This image has inspired philosopher John Rawls to address what he called "the Malibu surfer problem" in the context of his epic *A Theory of Justice*

(1971). Rawls introduced a conception of justice as "fairness," in opposition to the utilitarian basis of liberal democracies. For Rawls, a just distribution of wealth would be fair to the least advantaged, guaranteeing an annual income for each member of society regardless of their talents and work. But this principle did not apply, per Rawls, to lazy surfers who would unjustly take their share without pulling their weight.

Over the years, others have riffed on the question of free riders, with surfers singled out (as male and white counterparts to the "welfare queen") as lazy and work resistant (Lawler 2011, 2017). Recounting examples of this, Lawler argued that there was nevertheless real potential for the anti-workism of surfing r to inspire people to collectively work less. She even found in this counterculture a challenge to the middle- class identity associated with surfers in signaling resistance, joy, and solidarity rather than privilege, exclusion and aggression (Lawler and Roberts 2025).

The realities of surfing challenge this notion. American surfers' erstwhile dreams of alternative lifestyles vanished when the surplus that funded it dried up with the economic recession of the early 1970s. Only consumer capitalism represented the possibility for such livelihoods and countercultural lifestyles, at least to the gifted few (Booth 1995). Not only have all of the surfers I met prioritized (though seldom happily) work but also, they considered work and surfing as complementary.

For many, surfing was a way of recharging for work. So, a digital nomad who spent weeks at a time at seaside rentals. He told me his ideal day was working until 4pm and then going out to surf, which allowed him to focus entirely on both. I followed an online discussion in which surfers consulted each other about how to surf as much as possible despite working fulltime. "I think if you're solid at your job it's typically encouraged to make time for yourself and keep a work-life balance," one of them said: "Typically, after I surf, I feel energized and get more work done as a result." A manager at a large company told me that surfing made her become better at her job: every time she encountered difficulties at work, she would gain confidence by recalling the challenges she had overcome in surfing.

Other surfers I asked about their work drew lessons from one to the other. One said that you derived pleasure in surfing from reflecting on your progress. "The same applies to work and life," he said: there were always hardships but "nothing is worthwhile without being thrown around a lot." Another surfer changed jobs from accounting to marketing. He said he applied to his work-life the lessons he learned from surfing: you missed one wave, you caught another. A third, from France, was vacationing in Portugal after selling the startup he founded. When I asked why he was not staying longer, he explained that he could not stop working: he already had ideas for the next startup. He enjoyed his job because it was hard and consisted of many small steps. When I asked what he liked about surfing, he described it in virtually the same words: as not so easy and as comprised of many small steps you had to learn and master.

Pleasure and Alienation

So far, I have laid out a discrepancy between the image of surfing as an absorbing, close-to-nature, anti-work counterculture, and a reality in which practitioners partake in surfing's commodified and environmentally unfriendly logic, prioritize work, and

seek in surfing a complement to it. Some commentators have claimed, as a result, that surfers are not rebels but hedonists: far from trying to change the world, they seek merely to have fun. Surfing, in other words, is all about pleasure (Laderman 2017). In fact, whatever other association of surfing, fun and pleasure take front and center stage, both in the media and in the ways in which surfers themselves talk about it. So much so that it is rarely questioned.

Pringle (2015a, b) claimed that the hedonistic aspects of surfing were linked to other pleasures such as the joy of being in the water, the social connections and identities formed, and the possibilities of attaining a "flow" (sometimes described as a "stoke") state. He attributed this pleasure to the rush of catching a wave and of one's body accelerating while maintaining balance (Pringle 2015a, b). Elsewhere, this pleasure has been described as a more serious kind of fun, involving risk-taking and thrill-seeking, a fusion of fear and euphoria, a catharsis and ecstatic loss of self (Stranger 2011).

Time and again, surfers told me there was nothing like the pleasure of surfing and hardly a way to communicate it to outsiders. The reputed high of riding a wave was the reason for which surfers encouraged me to learn how to surf so that I would "get it." And so, I attended a weeklong surf camp in the Portugues town of Peniche. A former fishing village turned world-renown surfing destination, Peniche is paradigmatic of the subsequent transition from local production to tourism; dovetailed by economic opportunities for some alongside social problems and environmental degradation (González 2025). Its surf schools and transient visitors have been identified as undermining residents' long-term interests (Ponting et al. 2023).

In Peniche, I met men and women from around the world who came to learn how to surf or to improve their surfing skills. The time and financial resources they could mobilize for this endeavor stood in stark contrast to those of the surfing coaches, most of them Brazilian migrants, who earned little, cohabitated, and held second jobs. I also met many local and seasoned surfers in Peniche who frequented its beaches as often as they could. The camp provided me, then, not only with the rudiments of surfing but also with an opportunity to observe and have repeated conversations with surfers of every level.[2]

I learned how to catch waves and maintain my balance on a surfboard, riding these waves to shore, although I never did learn how to manipulate the surfboard. With occasional strong currents and turbulent waters, I certainly experienced the risk-taking aspects of surfing. That said, I never did "get it" in the sense of enjoying the experience. The fabled high felt more anxiety-inducing to me than pleasurable.

It helped me form a more complicated picture of surfing's hedonism. When I complained about having to get back into my still-wet wetsuit only two hours after the day's first surf session, everyone in my group agreed this was a drag. On a day in which the conditions were particularly bad, I decided to skip the afternoon session. My surf-mates said they would love to do the same but felt that they "should" be surfing for reasons of self-discipline, self-esteem, the hope of losing weight or for having

[2] My experience paralleled that of Corte (2022), talked into trying to surf "small" big waves in his study of big-wave surfers in Hawaii. Refering to Waquant's musings about boxing, Corte claimed that it helped him better understand these surfer and provided him with opportunities to observe their interactions.

paid in advance for all the classes. A couple admitted that if it wasn't for the classes being taken as a group, they would also bail out early, or that they wished the coaches themselves canceled a class or two. The only time during the surf camp in which I felt like a true hedonist was on that afternoon when I was sipping a sangria at the beach bar while my classmates were battling the rough seas.

What, exactly, was fun about surfing, then, I asked everyone I spoke to (since they all rehearsed the orthodoxy that surfing was fun). A few said that the fun lay in the challenge, and in the results that they saw for their efforts: learning how to master the sport. This included a surfer who told me he had nightmares about being caught under the waves. A longtime surfer said it was precisely the difficulty that got her hooked: if it was easy, she would grow bored by it. Another cited character development. He was a bit of a control freak, and it was healthy for him to be at the mercy of sea. "Maybe it's precisely the suffering that we like," said another. A few claimed it was fun in that it helped keep their minds off other things. On a group outing, one woman told us about a vacation she took in Egypt. All they did there was relax in a field tent and occasionally ride a camel. One time they saw a snake and that was "the big event" of the vacation. "Which did you enjoy more," I asked her: "Egypt or surfing?" "Egypt!" she exclaimed and everyone laughed in recognition.

The only ones who insisted on the unambivalent fun of surfing were our coaches whom, as mentioned, were underpaid for their long hours of physically taxing work. They all held second jobs, and some described their failed attempts at finding higher paying jobs. But they also said there was no substitute for surfing. For them, underscoring the pleasurable aspects of surfing appeared to be a way of coming to terms with and redeeming their material predicament.

Back at the beach bar, I spoke to experienced and sometimes lifelong surfers. One of them told me he moved his family to an apartment not far from the beach in order to be able to surf year-round, including in the winter when it was cold and rough. "That's when your love of surfing is tested," he said: "You really have to force yourself to go out there." I asked why he did, since it was clearly not for pleasure. He explained – as other veteran surfers had – that it was an addiction. "If three weeks go by and I haven't surfed, I feel edgy and restless." On a different occasion, a self-employed programmer told me it sometimes took self-discipline *not* to work and to go surfing instead. He would make himself do it, knowing he would appreciate it after the fact. Then, there was this on Reddit r/surfing: "You have to commit to see your progress… only if you're a warrior, you may survive and enjoy it."

The most poignant description I heard was from Hugo, a Lisbon native who has been surfing for about twenty years. The appeal of surfing to him was that you were always learning new things and pushing your limits. Otherwise, it could be a drag: he needed at least an hour to get to the beach and an hour to return home, not to mention the warmup, assembling his equipment, getting into the wetsuit. Since he worked full time, this meant he could only surf on weekends and vacations. Sometimes, the conditions were not ideal, and he still went because what else would he do on a weekend? Sit on the sofa and have another coffee? "It's a routine: like people needing to shower in the morning, but for working out." When the conditions were good, but he was in the office, he grew agitated. It was an addiction, he admitted, but a healthy one. If not

for surfing, he would go mad, grow fat, become depressed. Surfing kept him fit and in a good mood.

So much for hedonism! Most surfers I spoke with, when pressed, described it as more of a body-discipline and/or an addiction. In a volume on pleasure and sport, Robert Rinhart (2015) drew on Johan Huizinga's famous study of play as a free activity (2016 [1938]) to claim that sporting pleasure, too, was absorbing, an activity free of material interest, which proceeded within its own boundaries and according to its own rules. Yet there were more complex and sometimes-malevolent pleasures that came to dominate certain sports, mixed with pain and frustration (Rinhart 2015).

In the same volume, Richard Pringle recalled how Huizinga (2016 1938) considered play as paradoxically unproductive and productive. It not only produced pleasure, but was also related to the production of drama, dance, sporting contests, and human culture more broadly. The pervasiveness of contemporary sports could be explained as the outcome of pursuing multiple and diverse pleasures such as the joy of winning, the pleasure of becoming a respected sportsperson, the thrill of play and the satisfaction of being fit (Pringle 2015a, b).

Pringle and Rinhart (2015) held that pleasure in sports had the potential to be transformative. Michael Roberts (2018) went further in finding in play (as manifested in sports and other leisure activities) a foreshadowing of the freedom that capitalism denied. He advocated fighting for shorter work hours as a strategy to increase the amount of time dedicated to play. This would transform the organization of the workplace, and it would create new cultural forms that had nothing to do with survival or the reproduction of the accustomed standard of living (Roberts 2018).

Stranger (2011) made a related argument specifically for surfing. He examined the possibilities surfing offered for intense fear and euphoria, and for a transcendence of the self. Stranger broke these possibilities down into foundational transcendence (ecstatic moments of risk taking), cultural transcendence (consciousness of surfing's neotribal formations), and social transcendence (the sociality that occurs around it). He claimed that such transcendence rolled back the disenchantment of everyday life and challenged the rational frameworks of capitalism. Surfing is no longer an alternative lifestyle but normalized and omnipresent. Reflecting on this, Stranger claimed that far from surfing having become integrated into the mainstream through its commodification, the mainstream is becoming more postmodern, open to the aesthetic reflexivity of surfing subculture (Stranger 2011).

Such arguments are usually pitched against critical theory's suspiciousness of leisure and leisure-time activities. E.P. Thompson (1967) has long ago maintained that industrial society has given rise to the idea of leisure by sweeping away the old system of duties and creating a world of "free laborers." People could spend their free time as they pleased, so long as their non-work activities reinforced their competence as consumers and workers. And they could freely develop their capacities, provided these capacities reinforced competitive individualism and increased profit margins (Dunning and Elias 1986b).

Along similar lines, Laurence Hinman (1978) argued that insofar as leisure is justified only if it results in increased productivity, it is alienated. In the capitalist world, leisure is dominated by private property or transformed into a consumer activity. It represents an escape from work while facilitating its reproduction. The freedom it

exemplifies is trivial because it is set aside from the world and not meant to transform it. Finding meaning in leisure is futile so long as achievements in this realm are secondary to the realm of production. Not only can play and sports not change reality: they reinforce the alienation of the labor from which they derive (Hinman 1978).

This assessment chimes with aforementioned accounts by surfers about surfing as a way to disconnect from work or to balance it, allowing them to return to their work and everyday responsibilities without being overwhelmed by them. It also voids of significance of the straightforwardly hedonistic aspects of surfing. As one surfer put it, there is no other activity which requires so much effort to extract such brief moments of fun. Or as a surfer explained on Reddit r/surfing, "for me [surfing is] being away from everyone needing things from me. When I get home from surfing, I'm much happier to be around people."

Even the pleasure, as surfers I pressed on this point admitted, is ambivalent. Many ended up describing it in terms of discipline and addiction (confirmed also by Corte 2022 in his study of big-wave surfers) which, for all of hedonism's connotations of freedom and even anti-capitalism, imply the very opposite: a (self-)submission and compulsion.

I'd like to tarry with the Hinman's (1978) notion of leisure being alienated. In his classic study of alienation, Bertell Ollman (1971) drew on Karl Marx's writings to categorize four kinds of alienation: alienation from the product of labor, in that workers do not own what they produce; alienation from the act of labor, in that work becomes forced; alienation from species-being, in that humans lose their creative and communal essence; and alienation from other people, in that capitalism turns social relations competitive and exploitative. Ideologies like individualism and consumerism make the domination and exploitation endemic to surplus accumulation seem natural, while the illusion of choice (usually reduced to consumer choice) masks everyone's dependence on the capitalist dynamic. Needs are created and then satisfied provisionally through commodities, a temporary gratification that distracts one from the inescapability of alienation (Ollman 1971).

More recently, Jaeggi (2016) unpacked the affective dimension of alienation. Drawing on Marx and on critical theory, she argued that capitalism produces and perpetuates alienation through commodification, instrumental rationality, and social structures that inhibit genuine self-realization. Alienation is the distorted relationship with oneself, with others, and with the world, which occurs when the conditions that enable individuals to realize their needs and capacities are obstructed. Because alienation entails a breakdown of authentic self-relation, people's expressions may be contradictory and defensive, making alienation difficult to grasp (Jaeggi 2016).

An example of this contradictory expression shows up in activities like surfing in which pleasure is promoted. Surfing is typical of aspects of contemporary capitalism in which, as Žižek (1999) suggested, pleasure essentially becomes a duty. When subjects are expected to have a good time and enjoy themselves, they are bound to feel guilty or as having failed when they do not.

My sense is that alienation underlies the common insistence on and, indeed, internalization of, the hedonistic attributes of surfing. Without discounting the genuine pleasure that skilled surfers derive from surfing, for most of surfers the pleasurable moments are elusive. They are elusive socially, that is, available only to those who

can afford them and in measured quantities at that. And they are elusive in their association with discipline (in the case of beginners) and with addiction (for seasoned surfers), both of which smack of unfreedom. The insistence on pleasure, in its reach for a positivity that is denied, appears to be precisely the distorted relationship with oneself and the word that Jaeggi diagnosed.

This sheds a different light on the theory that Stranger (2011) put forth about contemporary society having absorbed some of the transcendent attributes of surfing culture. In fact, as the first part of this article rehearsed, surfing has become fully commodified, carries a negative ecological impact, and serves to balance and thereby to reassert the priority of work, even as it markets itself as countercultural, anti-work and close-to-nature. The association of surfing with hedonism obscures this dissonance by giving it a positive and affective spin, concealing some of the unfreedoms of capitalism behind a highly appealing pastime. The insisted-upon ineffability of surfing – magnifying its mystery and romance – serves to obscure these uncomfortable entanglements. What is absorbed in contemporary society, then, is not the self's "transcendence," as Stranger (2011) had it, but rather its imminence, or confinement to an alienated existence.

Conclusion

I began this account by revisiting the contested yet never abandoned notion that personal experience, particularly with respect to physical and purportedly ineffable practices like surfing and sports more generally, grants the ethnographer privileged insight into the unmediated experience of other. I deployed this strategy without, however, suspending critical disbelief. The insight that my exercise granted me was not access to a universal experience of surfing as packaged in its cultural representations and rehearsed by its practitioners. Rather, I learned that there was an additional level of mediation to surfing on top of those that the critical literature points at and that my own research confirmed.

In the first instance, the image of surfing as countercultural and even anti-capitalist by virtue of its association with nature and antithesis to work and to the mainstream (being "cool" or "philosophical") comes up against two major barriers: its comprehensive commodification and attendant social and ecological harms (the costs of and bars to participation, the transformation of fishing villages into surfing hubs, the overcrowding of beaches); and the fact that surfing remains secondary to and sometimes buttresses the very work-life it purportedly rejects, insofar as surfers seek in it a restorative balance to work.

In the second, more profound instance, stands the representation as spontaneously hedonistic and even transcendent and therefore liberatory, of a practice that (with some digging) reveals itself as elusive and as smacking of domination ("challenging," "self-discipline," "addictive"). The assertion of pleasure obscures the nature of surfing as countercultural-appearing yet capitalist-affirming. It does so by rendering surfing as a highly appealing yet hard to communicate pastime. The ethnographic strategy of prioritizing a corporal first-hand account of a romanticized sport, then, risks reproducing the alienation encapsulated in this romance.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank Tim Burger, Alina-Sandra Cucu, and Matan Kaminer for their excellent suggestions, the peer reviewers for further suggestions, and *Dialectical Anthropology* editors Jaume Franquesa and Anthony Marcus for supporting such a controversial piece.

Funding Open access funding provided by FCT|FCCN (b-on). This work was supported by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, Individual Grant 2023.07780.CEECIND.

Declarations

Competing interests
The author declares no competing interests.

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