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# Gender, race and researcher positionality in decolonial surf tourism research: lessons from the field

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## ABSTRACT

Current scholarship in the field of critical surf studies interrogates issues of gender, race and coloniality in global surfing tourism and culture. This literature focuses primarily on cultural discourse and tourism practice, yet has recently begun to examine researcher positionality in ethnographic and reflexive surf tourism research. As a novel empirical contribution to existing decolonial trends in surf tourism and intersectional surfeminist research, this article explores dynamics of gender, race and researcher positionality in conducting community-based participatory action research (PAR) in surfing tourism, through a year-long ethnographic project in Playa Hermosa de Cobano, Costa Rica. This contribution draws on discussions in feminist geography interrogating gendered and racialized dynamics in ethnographic and participatory research. Reflexive lessons from the field highlight the complexities associated with employing decolonial and poststructuralist feminist methods in critical surf tourism studies, particularly for white/white-assumed female-presenting researchers from the Global North working in Global South field contexts. These complexities include considerations of multiple researcher subjectivities related to postcolonial intersectional power dynamics in research team composition and throughout the PAR process.

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## Introduction

As the field component of a doctoral research project examining alternatives to conventional forms of development in sustainable surfing tourism, I conducted ethnographic research in the surf town of Playa Hermosa de Cobano, Costa Rica for the year-long duration of September 2019 to September 2020. Centering poststructuralist participatory action research (PAR) aligned with a diverse economies approach to development alternatives (Gibson-Graham, 1994), I worked with a team of local and foreign-resident community members to explore the potential for these methods to decolonize current research practice in the field of sustainable surf tourism (see Ruttenberg & Brosius, 2017; Ruttenberg, 2022). As the field study progressed, reflexivity provided a useful means to understand emergent experiences and complexities related to race, gender

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and positionality as a white-assumed<sup>1</sup> (Bueno-Hansen & Montes, 2019) female-presenting researcher from the Global North engaging with decolonial and poststructuralist feminist methods in a Global South surf tourism community.

While the research itself generated particular conclusions relevant to diverse economies and poststructuralist PAR as decolonizing praxis in sustainable surf tourism (see author, forthcoming), lessons gleaned from the experiences and challenges encountered in the field offer a different set of conclusions relevant to decolonial and surfeminist research in critical surf studies and feminist geography in Global South sports tourism studies. In particular, this process suggests that white/white-assumed, female-presenting surf tourism researchers engaging with decolonial and poststructuralist feminist methods may grapple with a range of challenges in the field related to gender/racial politics and researcher positionality, which may ultimately affect research processes and redirect outcomes in unforeseen ways.

Critical surf scholars have engaged with decolonial and surfeminist frameworks to examine cultural dynamics related to coloniality-patriarchy in what Ruttenberg and Brosius (2019) refer to as occupied surfscape territories and imaginaries (Icaza & Vazquez, 2017; Olive, 2019; Nemani, 2015; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). This body of scholarship includes discussions on surf localism(s) and diverse surfing subjectivities as resistance to white-male-dominated heteronormative modern surfing culture and associated neocolonial tourism development, as well as counter-narratives on non-modern surfing histories existing both prior and in parallel to Western colonization and appropriation (Walker, 2011; 2017; Laderman, 2014; Comer, 2010; 2017; Dawson, 2017; Wheaton, 2017; Ruttenberg & Brosius, 2017; 2019; Iisahunter, 2017; 2018a; 2018b; 2018c). Scholars have also engaged with feminist and decolonial methods in critical surf studies research, including reflexivity and (auto)ethnographies related to gender, race, sexuality (and their intersectionality), socio-ecological sensibilities, coloniality-patriarchy and globalization in surfing culture (Comer, 2010; Olive, 2015; 2020; Olive, Roy, & Wheaton, 2018; Comley, 2018; Mizuno, 2018; Nemani, 2015; Ingersoll, 2016); as well as participatory methods for decolonizing community-based surfing tourism research (Ruttenberg & Brosius, 2017; Ingersoll, 2016; Ruttenberg, 2022).

Together, these bodies of research have examined gendered, racialized and colonial-patriarchal dynamics in surf culture and tourism through feminist and decolonial frameworks and methods. They have not yet, however, offered a reflexive intersectional analysis of researcher positionality in participatory action research (PAR) in community-based surf tourism studies. Contributing to the existing literature, this article offers a reflexive inquiry into the field-based implications of researcher positionality in critical surf tourism studies across multiple axes of difference, power, and privilege, including race, gender, nationality, and class. This analysis draws from existing studies in feminist geography highlighting the multifaceted gendered and racialized power dynamics inherent in conducting ethnographic and participatory research (Gibson-Graham, 1994; Rose, 1993; 1997; Sultana, 2007; Cahill, Sultana, & Pain, 2007; Mollett & Faria, 2018; Schneider, Lord, & Wilczak, 2020). Aligned with intersectional feminist research in critical surf studies (Nemani, 2015; Olive et al., 2018; Comley, 2018; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019), this line of scholarship honors calls for postcolonial intersectionality as a means of 'messing with gender' by acknowledging the power implications of racialized colonial legacies across multiple axes of gendered privilege/oppression in development research interventions in the Global South (Schneider et al., 2020; Mollett & Faria, 2013; Sultana,

2007; Faria & Mollett, 2016). Self-reflexive conclusions from the field research experience connect these decolonial and feminist contributions on researcher positionality to critical surf tourism studies, with relevant lessons for feminist geographic sports tourism studies more broadly.

The article begins with a review of current literature on surf feminism and decolonial surf tourism studies and their related research methods, along with feminist geographic scholarship on gender/race dynamics in ethnographic and participatory research. Next, an explanation is offered for the poststructuralist PAR research methodology and methods of reflexivity employed in fieldwork, followed by a discussion of field research experiences related to gender/racial politics and researcher positionality. Finally, I offer a set of lessons from the field concerning the challenges and complexities associated with employing decolonial and poststructuralist feminist methods in critical surf tourism studies, particularly for white/white-assumed female-presenting researchers from the Global North working in the Global South.

### ***Research and methods in surf feminism and decolonial surf tourism studies***

Discussions on the multiple and entrenched power dynamics in global surfing culture are not new. Recognized as a culturally appropriated, whitewashed and male-dominated sport and industry, the 'state of modern surfing' and its associated 'surf tourism industrial complex' have been critiqued for the ways they perpetuate colonial-patriarchal and capitalist power dynamics in surfing spaces, both local and global (see Hough-Snee & Eastman, 2017). Surfscapes in the field study country of Costa Rica are no exception, where 'patriocolonial' constructs (Iisahunter, 2016) and neoliberal governance/governmentality in surf tourism destinations (Ruttenberg & Brosius, 2017; 2020) are differently experienced by surfers of varying genders, ethnicities, nationalities and social status. Given the ways women surfer-researchers subjectively negotiate these entrenched power dynamics across axes of gender, race and class, along with the implicated biases these common encounters might produce in our research, reflexivity provides a useful means of exploring subjectivity in surfing tourism research from the lenses of decoloniality and feminism, as other researchers have also contended (Ingersoll, 2016; Olive, 2015; 2019; 2020; Olive et al., 2018; Comer, 2019).

The emerging field of critical surf studies explores issues of gender, race and coloniality in global surf culture and tourism. Evers (2013) examined performative masculinity in surfing culture as perpetuating heteronormativity and male-dominated gender dynamics in modern surfing's foundational narratives and cultural imaginaries. As a response, 'surf-feminist' research, linking theory and activism, has explored 'girl localism' as representing a politics of resistance to male-dominated surfing culture; a 'global contemporary social movement' (Comer, 2010, pp. 17–18); and a means for women surfers to differentially navigate the multiple violences of settler coloniality and patriarchy in surfing spaces (Olive, 2019). These discussions center 'surf feminism' as:

a theory and action project working between publics of academia and global surfing ... a worldwide network connecting people, ideas, particular coastal geographies, online and real-time communities and microeconomies in surf industry, with activism focused on protests of sexism in surf media, access to ocean spaces, environmental health, and women's racial, economic, and reproductive justice (Comer, 2019, p. 1).

Prominent surfeminist research includes Cori Schumacher's (2017; 2019) characterization of the female surfer as a revolutionary subject challenging the constructed narratives on heteronormative sexuality and, drawing on Leslie Heywood's (2008) third wave surfer feminism, representing a subversive subjectivity at the levels of both politics and surf culture imaginaries. Gilio-Whitaker (2019, n.p.) offers an indigenous feminist perspective locating settler colonialism among surfeminism to both imagine 'a decolonizing praxis in surf culture' and highlight intersectional academic-activist networks in feminist surf spaces. Other surfeminist contributions include Comley's (2016) depiction of Mexican-American women surfers establishing 'territory' as gendered spaces; and lisahunter's (2018; 2018b; 2018c) interventions on queering and 'de-sexing surfing'. Olive (2019) contends with women's intersectional surfing subjectivities by focusing on surf localism in the context of 'patriocolonialism' (see also: lisahunter, 2016) to analyze the gendered, racial and colonial dynamics of female surf culture.

Surfeminist scholars have also engaged with feminist and decolonial methods in critical surf research including participant observation, reflexivity and (auto)ethnographies related to gender, race, sexuality (and their intersectionality), socio-ecological sensibilities, coloniality-patriarchy and globalization in surfing culture (Comer, 2010; Olive, 2015; Olive et al., 2018; Olive & Thorpe, 2011; Comley, 2018; Mizuno, 2018; Nemani, 2015; Ingersoll, 2016). This body of scholarship includes applications of feminist methods of reflexivity to analyze researcher subjectivity and embodied surfer experiences across multiple/intersectional axes in 'patriocolonial' surfing spaces (Comer, 2010; Olive, 2015; 2019; 2020; lisahunter, 2016; Comley, 2018; Mizuno, 2018; Nemani, 2015). Comley's (2018) intersectional analysis of Mexican-American surfing experiences in California drew from participant observation as a 'cultural insider' connecting her own background as a Mexican-American surfer with the experiences of her research participants. Olive (2015, pp. 501–502) engaged with feminist methods of reflexivity to situate her researcher subjectivity among socio-ecological relationships of surfing community and place, as mediated across multi-sited constructs of 'sex, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, age, class, and so on.' Olive's (2020) discussion on reflexivity in surfeminist research examines how participatory surf researchers are critically situated in the research context, where reflexivity offers a means of grappling with the intersectional complexities of situated researcher identities/subjectivities and multiple positionalities. Nemani's (2015) ethnographic experiences with female Maori bodyboarders in Aoteara/New Zealand centered a reflexive approach to her own Samoan/Maori 'brown female bodyboarder' researcher subjectivity, navigating dynamics of 'belonging and community related to settler-colonial politics' (as cited in Olive, 2019, p. 49). Mizuno's (2018, p. 88) autoethnographic account of surfing in Japan emphasized cultural hierarchies across surfcraft and gender, in which she 'found [her]self marginalized dually from the culture as a bodyboarder and a woman.' Finally, Olive et al. (2018) engaged with intersectionality as a conceptual and methodological framework for critical surfeminist studies, from an intersectional lens across axes of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and local/non-local status.

Other critical surf scholars emphasize the decolonial subject positionality of surfers confronting power dynamics in surfing culture and their attempts to subvert processes of neocolonialism exacerbated by global surfing tourism. These interventions include Walker's (2017; 2011) discussions of contemporary Hawai'ian identities and uniquely Hawai'ian surf institutions as presenting a meaningful challenge to hegemonic

imaginaries in modern surf culture. Similarly, Gilio-Whitaker (2019; 2017) offers multiple decolonial feminist interventions on unforgetting the native Hawaiʻian histories foundational to modern surfing narratives, recognizing indigeneity and its appropriation in California surf culture, and calling for a broader historical remembering of colonized California surfscapes. Dawson (2017, p. 149) explores the indigenous surfing histories of Atlantic Africa and Oceania resisting colonial imperatives and persisting in ‘amphibious spaces Westerns sought to physically and intellectually colonize.’ Hough-Snee and Eastman (2017, p. 101) describe the Salina Cruz surfing association in Oaxaca, Mexico as ‘a grass-roots civil organization aiming to protect local autonomy and to disrupt the hegemonic model of North–South surf tourism’.

Many critical surf scholars thus agree that global surf tourism represents a process of (neo)colonialism through modern amenity and real estate development, whereby local people in Global South surfing destinations are often subjected to the structural violences of settler colonial power dynamics (Laderman, 2017; Hough-Snee & Eastman, 2017; Gilio-Whitaker, 2017; Comer, 2010; Ponting, McDonald, & Wearing, 2005; Ruttenberg & Brosius, 2017; 2019; 2020). This critique draws on postdevelopment discourse to propose decolonial alternatives to development in sustainable surfing tourism via assets-based and critical PAR methodological approaches that recognize diverse economic practices of surfscape ‘commoning’ as decolonizing modes of counterhegemonic resistance to conventional development interventions (Ruttenberg & Brosius, 2017; 2019; 2020; Ruttenberg, 2022). This approach is proposed as an alternative to surf tourism-for-sustainable development frames common to other community-based sustainable surf tourism studies research (see Borne, 2015; O’Brien & Ponting, 2013; Ponting & O’Brien, 2014; Towner, 2015; Towner & Davies, 2019). The decolonizing approach thus echoes Ingersoll’s (2016, p. 3) self-reflexive ethnographic research in surf tourism, which calls for a ‘seascape epistemology’ to pull away from ‘the binary opposition between the ‘colonizer’ and the ‘colonized’ toward ‘alternative ways of knowing and producing knowledge that allow for empowerment and self-determination’ in surfing culture and tourism.

### ***Gender, Race and Researcher Positionality in feminist geography***

While the ethnographic and PAR methods described above have been employed in assets-based approaches to development alternatives, feminist geographers have identified a number of challenges and complexities for researchers related to gender and racial dynamics in conducting participatory field research. Schneider et al. (2020) offer a collection of narrative accounts on the feminist politics of fieldwork inspired by existing literature on researcher positionality forwarded by earlier feminist geographic studies (Rose, 1993; 1997; Sultana, 2007; Cahill et al., 2007; Mollett & Faria, 2018). Their study highlights how ethnographic research in contexts defined by patriarchal and market-based ethics shape North–South fieldwork relationships along gendered and racialized lines, offering researchers’ self-reflexive experiences as examples of how (mostly) women navigate gender/racial politics and power dynamics in the field. These accounts build on a body of literature in feminist geography that centers reflexivity as a useful method for avoiding ‘false claims of neutrality and universality’ common to normative masculinist fieldworker tropes that ‘flatten positionality’, fail to recognize tensions and erasures that ‘shape the production of knowledge’, and ‘conceal how the social positions of researchers and

research participants shape questions, methods, and findings (Rose, 1993; 1997; Sundberg, 2003; England, 1994; Mullings, 1994, as cited in Schneider et al., 2020, p. 521).

Offering insight into the ways gendered fieldwork encounters lead researchers toward adaptations that shift or shape their research projects, Schneider et al. (2020, p. 2) situate gender politics in field research as ‘part of patriarchal power relations—and their contestations—that connect us to women everywhere.’ This discussion also contends with the relative privilege dynamics of both decolonial and critical feminist lenses on researcher positionality that might ‘simultaneously account for our systemic privilege at structural and ‘global’ levels [as the ‘powerful Western researcher’ (Said, 1978; Chakrabarty, 2000)], and the recurring moments of powerlessness and vulnerability we experience in the field as female-presenting researchers’ (Schneider et al., 2020, p. 3). Sato’s treatment of ‘multiplex subjectivity’ offers a useful frame for conceiving of researcher positionality in decolonial feminist participatory fieldwork, negotiating intersectional power dynamics among research participants in the ‘mutual constitution of [our] positionalities’, both in the local context, as well as within the ‘multiple discourses in which one is differentially positioned as a subject at any given time’ in the complex processes of mutual, albeit unequal, knowledge production (Narayan, 1997; Foucault, 1980; Crenshaw, 1997, all as cited in Sato, 2004, p. 102). In her ‘feminist-informed self-reflexive analysis’, Sato (2004) situates multiplex subjectivity among Wolf’s (1996, as cited in Sato, 2004) three-dimensional framework of power dynamics in feminist field work, related to 1) power differences inherent in researcher and research participant positionalities (race, class, nationality, etc.); 2) power exerted during the field research process and relationships therein; and 3) power dynamics in postfieldwork writing and representing.

This body of literature is further nuanced by scholarship acknowledging the power implications of racialized colonial legacies across multiple axes of gendered privilege/oppression in development research interventions in the Global South, calling for a requisite centering of postcolonial intersectionality as a means of ‘messing with gender’ in participatory feminist research (Mollett & Faria, 2013; Sultana, 2007). Postcolonial intersectionality is thus proposed for recognizing ‘power inequities between global north and global south, shaped by the legacies of colonial racisms, as well as (colonial) patriarchies’ (Mollett & Faria, 2013, p. 118). This approach is also proposed for contending with the ‘paradoxical space’ inhabited by female-presenting researchers at the center and on the margin simultaneously, as ‘historically and spatially constituted subjects woven in racialized and gendered relationships of power in relation to those we [research with and] write about’ (Mollett & Faria, 2013, p. 123). Addressing ‘emotional geographies’ within feminist postcolonial geography, Faria and Mollett (2016, p. 79) raise questions on researcher legitimacy and access relative to ‘emotive reactions to whiteness’ among ‘subjects of color’ in the Global South, which they identify as unfixed from white bodies, but rather ‘historically produced and socioculturally and geographically contingent’, operating at the intersections among ‘messy, affective, and contingent racialized power’ in the field.

Contributing to existing explorations on how gender, race, and colonial dynamics have determined the practice and development of surf tourism, this article examines how these same dynamics shape research experiences in, and empirical findings about, surf tourism, particularly in PAR interventions that attempt to understand and undo the harms of coloniality-patriarchy in surf tourism spaces. As such, this article offers self-reflexive lessons



from my experience working with poststructuralist PAR methods for assets-based, decolonial alternatives to development in the surf tourism community of Playa Hermosa de Cobano, Costa Rica. My personal experiences in this milieu reflect the complex multiplicity of my surfer-researcher subject position(s) within these broader power dynamics, and have included sexualization, objectification, gender-based intimidation and misogynistic comments both in and out of the water; as well as relative benefits in terms of access to waves, sense of belonging and leisure time to pursue surfing and surf travel. Drawing on feminist geographic interventions related to postcolonial intersectionality as a novel contribution to the field of critical surf tourism studies, these lessons speak to the challenges and complexities associated with gender, race and researcher positionality, particularly for white/white-assumed female-presenting researchers from the Global North engaging with poststructuralist feminist and decolonial methods in Global South research contexts.

The following section describes the methodological framework and field research methods employed before turning to a reflexive analysis of the research process and lessons from the field that it generated.

### **Methodology**

Ethnographic and poststructuralist participatory action research (PAR) concerning decolonial alternatives to surf tourism development were conducted in the field site over the period of September 2019 to September 2020. PAR offers an approach to circumventing traditional top-down research processes that favor outsider intervention and reproduce dominant external narratives on and in local communities (Chambers, 2007; Kumar, 2008). By contrast, participatory approaches treat locals as subjects rather than objects, moving from extractive, elicitive research to creative, useful and practical community development interventions founded on internal perspectives and local capabilities. Borrowing from similar work done by Cameron (2003), Cameron and Gibson (2005) and J.K. Gibson-Graham (1994), and adapted to the sustainable surf tourism context by Ruttenberg and Brosius (2017), the intention behind the poststructuralist PAR methods employed was that, as modes of ‘researching back’, they might prove useful to the community itself in imagining and implementing alternative development frameworks, while also advancing empirical research in decolonizing sustainable surf tourism (see author, forthcoming).

Throughout the PAR research process, I engaged in self-reflexive autoethnography to critically reflect on my researcher positionality as an ‘outsider-within’ (Collins, as cited in Smith, 1999; Koot, 2016): a Western-educated white-assumed female surfer-researcher from the US and bilingual English/Spanish-speaking long-term foreign resident of Playa Hermosa, a surf tourism town mired in ‘patriocolonial’ surfing culture and the local colonial-patriarchal norms of ‘machismo’ (Iisahunter, 2016; Olive, 2019). This process of reflexivity as ‘a strategy to situate geographic knowledges and the researcher’s social location and background’ (Rose, 1997; as cited in Schneider et al., 2020, pp. 3–4) included regular note-taking and periodic journaling to reflect on both my positionality as a researcher and power dynamics experienced through the research process.

Drawing on the empirical scholarship in critical surf studies and feminist geography discussed above, reflexivity provided a relational means of ‘thinking through the researching self’, as implicated ‘in the messy interactions between spaces, places,



cultures, bodies, discourses, and power (Ahmed, 1998; Probyn, 1993)' and 'mediated through [my] researching subjectivity; [my] sex, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, disability, age, class, skill level and more' (Olive, 2020, pp. 123–124). In this way, reflexivity offered a methodology for grappling with my context-contingent and socially constituted researcher positionality, the complexities and contradictions of my 'multiplex subjectivity' in the local field context, the multiple discourses I represent, and axes of power/difference I inhabit at the intersections among coloniality-patriarchy and critical surfing tourism studies (Gibson-Graham, 1994; Sato, 2004; Olive, 2020). Seeking to 'address the push and pull between multiple [researcher] commitments and responsibilities to activism, the academy, the community and ourselves' (Cahill et al., 2007, p. 311), reflexivity thus provided a means for interrogating how decolonial and feminist researchers like myself can contend with gender/racial politics related to positionality in the field.

### ***Notes from the field: gender, Race and Researcher Positionality***

Drawing on existing relationships with community members and local organizations in Playa Hermosa, I convened and facilitated a seven-person core research team as the foundation for poststructuralist PAR research methods employed. As a research team, in keeping with the poststructuralist PAR methodology, we designed and conducted a series of community engagement activities including semi-structured group conversations, focus-group workshops and food-sharing events geared toward envisioning community surf tourism governance and conservation priorities, and leading to the mapping of the community's local assets and diverse economy. Research team members self-selected to participate and were motivated by an expressed shared interest in cultivating alternatives to development in the surf tourism community. The research team included A) local Costa Rican surfer and surf instructor in his mid-twenties, leader of the Playa Hermosa surf instructors' association; B) local Costa Rican bodyboarder and surf photographer in his early twenties; C) Venezuelan national and Costa Rican foreign resident of Playa Hermosa for 10 years, surf instructor and surf school co-owner in this mid-30's; D) local Costa Rican community resident landowner, farmer in his 60s; E) Swiss long-term foreign resident of Playa Hermosa, surfer; F) German research intern in her mid-20s; and G) myself, doctoral researcher and US-born foreign resident female surfer in my mid-30s with 15 years living in Costa Rica, including four years in Playa Hermosa at the time of research.

The demographic composition of the research team is described in [Figure 1](#) below according to age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, education, and livelihood to demonstrate the multiple axes of difference related to power and privilege useful for considering the gendered, racialized and (de)colonial politics associated with researcher positionality in the field context. It is important to note that all research team members, with the exception of the German research intern (F), were either local or long-term foreign residents of the Playa Hermosa community. All were cis-male, except for the research intern and myself, both cis-female-presenting and white/white-assumed, respectively. Of the six cis-male research team members, all were ethnic Latino, including one white-assumed Latino, with the exception of one white European team member. Two Costa Rican cis-female community members expressed interest in joining the research team at the

	Age	Gender	Nationality	Ethnicity	Education	Livelihood
A	Mid-20s	Cis-Male	Costa Rican	Latino / White-passing	High School	Surf instructor, surf camp co-owner/manager, leader of local surf instructors' association
B	Early 20s	Cis-Male	Costa Rican /French	Latino	High School	Professional bodyboarder, surf photographer
C	Mid-30s	Cis-Male	Venezuelan	Latino	High School	Surf instructor, surf school co-owner
D	60s	Cis-Male	Costa Rican	Latino	Unknown	Landowner, farmer
E	40s	Cis-Male	Swiss	White European	University	Property owner/manager
F	Mid-20s	Cis-Female	German	White European	University	Research intern
G	Mid-30s	Cis-Female	North American (US)	Jewish / White-passing	M.A. Graduate / PhD Candidate	Graduate student

**Figure 1.** Demographic Composition of Self-Selected Research Team Members

start, but ultimately declined engagement citing prior commitments, including family, motherhood and work obligations.

**Figure 1.** Demographic Composition of Self-Selected Research Team Members.

The self-selection of the research team was proposed in alignment with Cameron and Gibson's (2005) poststructuralist PAR methodology as a means of bridging academic and local knowledges, while seeking to build trust and collaborative ownership of the action-research process. While effort was made to 'translate' academic approaches among the mostly non-academic research team, this objective is not without its limitations given the incommensurability of working across epistemological and ontological difference in academic/non-academic groups. However, these limitations also allowed for experiences and associated challenges of beyond-binary postcolonial knowledge production aligned with decolonizing methodologies in sustainable surf tourism research, and inform the reflexive analysis offered here (Ingersoll, 2016; Ruttenberg & Brosius, 2017).

Borrowing from Wolf's (1996; as cited in Sato, 2004) framework for examining power in researcher subjectivity, as nuanced by Sato's (2004) feminist self-reflexive analysis discussed conceptually above, reflexive considerations presented here contend firstly with power differences inherent in researcher and research participant positionalities; and second, with power dynamics and relationships experienced during the field research process. This intersectional analysis deals specifically with my PAR experiences related to gender, race and coloniality in the field context of Playa Hermosa de Cobano, Costa Rica.

### ***Navigating power differences in researcher and research participant positionality***

Contending with Schumacher's (2019, p. 520) study into the challenges for female-presenting researchers of grappling with misogyny in participatory research contexts as

'part of patriarchal power relations—and their contestations—that connect us to women everywhere', I came to understand my researcher positionality in gendered subjection to 'patriocolonial' local/global surf culture and tourism contexts, as well as in broader socio-cultural realities common to field research scenarios (Iisahunter, 2016; Olive, 2019; Schneider et al., 2020). As regards my researcher subjectivity related to racialized power dynamics in the field, it is important to note that the community of Playa Hermosa, as well as the ethnic/nationality representation of the research team, are racially mixed and diverse, including predominantly Latino (commonly of mixed indigenous and European ethnicity) and white-assumed Latino of Costa Rican nationality and other Latin American origin; as well as (primarily) white European and North-American foreign resident settlers and visiting tourists. From a postcolonial perspective, we can understand the ethnic and nationality composition of the Hermosa community and research team as mired in the complex racialized North–South power dynamics manifest in everyday community relationships and researcher-participant interactions, as both a function of Costa Rican settler colonial history and the more recent neocolonial dynamics of surf tourism development in the area. Perhaps approximating Ingersoll's (2016) binary-blurring conceptualization of decolonizing surf tourism, categories of colonized/colonizer in the field research community are thus complex, unfixed and difficult to define, further validating the postcolonial intersectional approach to contending with researcher positionality related to gender and racialized politics in the field (Mollett & Faria, 2013; Sultana, 2007; Faria & Mollett, 2016). Contending with my own (assumed) whiteness, non-local foreign resident status, and Western academic subjectivity within the broader racialized power dynamics of researcher-research participant relationships, I came to acknowledge the complexity of my position as an 'outsider-within' through the lens of postcolonial intersectionality (Sato, 2004; Collins, as cited in Smith, 1999).

These gendered and racialized dynamics related to power differences among the demographic composition of the research team are illustrated in the following selections from a field journal entry written after our first meeting:

The first research team meeting was a lively exchange of ideas and brainstorming, though I felt frustrated and challenged throughout. I am concerned that the women community members who expressed interest in joining the research team did not attend [due to motherhood commitments and work engagements], which meant that the research intern and myself were the only women research team members present, where her role was to help organize documents and refreshments for the meeting, and I prepared and presented on the research approach and proposed project goals. It felt uncomfortable to share the PAR methodology with the group, as the academic language seemed misplaced and I probably didn't do a very good job at 'translating' it for a non-academic audience . . . . Trying not to act like 'the boss' or 'the leader' was difficult while having to assume a leadership role by facilitating the meeting and communicating to the group.

Gender dynamics proved challenging and skewed. The five men who attended the meeting regularly interrupted me to express their grievances about the state of tourism-related development in the community and seemed generally uninterested in the research methods. Their input was very useful for determining project priorities straight away, but my presentation felt forced, and my role became one of listener and recorder rather than facilitator. The gendered dynamic was impossible to ignore, and I was regularly spoken over and frequently interrupted. Trying to facilitate an all-male team in a very machista culture is a challenge, to say the least.

Regarding power differences related to researcher and research participant positionality, I came to acknowledge the demographic composition of the research team and our particular roles therein as a reflection of broader gendered, racialized and colonial dynamics in both the place-based politics of the research community and the wider milieu of global surf tourism. While gender parity among members was an objective, the composition of the research team was skewed male-dominated when female participants opted-out, citing household, motherhood and work obligations as their reasons for withdrawal. Reflecting perhaps both cause and outcome of gendered labor realities, the ensuing male-dominated research team enacting a leadership role in the community-based research process served to reproduce gendered social norms characteristic of coloniality-patriarchy.

From an intersectional postcolonial perspective, power differences related to gender among the research team were also subject to the complexity of acknowledging racialized and class-based dynamics related to North–South constructs in research relationships mired in colonial power relationships (Cahill et al., 2007; Smith, 1999; Said, 1978; Schneider et al., 2020). As the only two female members of the research team, and as white/white-assumed European and North American women representing academic institutions in this work, the research intern and I – as the convening member and facilitator of the research team – functioned in ‘paradoxical space’ related to gendered and colonial power dynamics (hooks, 1984; Rose, 1993; Collins, 1990; as cited in Mollett & Faria, 2013). Notably, this ‘paradoxical space’ included a role of ‘hegemonic positioning’ reflecting our whiteness, Western university affiliation in the production of knowledge, and socioeconomic privilege relative to the other team members (Nayak, 2005, p. 147 as cited in Mollett & Faria, 2013, p. 118); while we were simultaneously subjected to gendered treatment in multiple instances during the research process (Mollett & Faria, 2013).

In my case, this resulted in what felt like an exhausting dance between seeking to transgress underlying colonial/racialized hierarchies by ceding and equalizing power among the team from a decolonial researcher position, while also subjecting myself to gender-related pressures on ‘appropriate’ dress, behavior and modes of interaction with other community members, and the realities of confronting common misogynistic microaggressions. These instances included sexual jokes and innuendo in group settings, unwanted attention on my body, as well as comments on my physical appearance; and being spoken-over and ignored on occasion when in a leadership role at community events and team meetings. While uncomfortable to bear in any situation, I shouldered the burden of subjection to these gendered microaggressions as a means of ‘surviving’ the research process, which often felt like familiar recourse to my already well-practiced social survival responses to misogyny as part of simply being woman in the world, and being a woman surfer in a ‘patriocolonial’ surf tourism research context (Iisahunter, 2016; Olive, 2019; Schneider et al., 2020). As a means of contending with the gendered and racialized power differences among the research team, and the North–South-related dynamics occasioned by my positionality during the research process, I often employed the strategy of delegating much of the PAR process to the Latino cis-male members of the research team, whose positionality afforded them a greater affinity with and legitimacy among local community members. This strategy ‘worked’ as a means of engendering greater community participation and local representation in the

action research process, while simultaneously functioning as a means of decolonial power-sharing in the research team experience across intersectional axes of researcher positionality related to race, nationality and class. From a feminist perspective, however, this strategy also served to reproduce gendered norms of patriarchy by centering cis-male leadership and validating patriarchal tropes of male researcher legitimacy in the field (Rose, 1993; 1997). As an example, the local male members of the research team had greater success in convening local community members to join the broader community engagement events, presumably given a sense of trust and affinity as neighbors with shared histories and community grievances, but also perhaps as a reflection of gendered social norms and skeptical feelings toward white non-local researchers and the discourses we represent (Faria & Mollett, 2016).

### *Contending with postcolonial intersectional power dynamics in the research process*

The second consideration in Wolf's (1996; as cited in Sato, 2004) framework regards the power dynamics experienced in the research process, addressed in this section. Particularly relevant to the integrity of the poststructuralist PAR methodology, a significant moment of disjuncture arose in the research process, offering meaningful lessons related to the potential limits of my researcher positionality from the lenses of intersectional gender/racial politics and decoloniality in the field. An edited excerpt from my ethnographic field notes illustrates this moment, as follows:

Today we had a meeting scheduled for community members to gather in follow-up to the third phase of the PAR process, where we were meant to brainstorm project priorities and create strategic working groups to action these projects. Unexpectedly, only three of the seven research team members were present at the meeting, including myself, the research intern, and [Researcher C]. When the meeting was supposed to take place, the other four research team members communicated via the research team group chat to set up a barricade at the parking lot at the North end access to the Playa Hermosa beach in effort to prevent vehicles from driving along the beach. They organized and carried out this action simultaneous to the scheduled meeting time without informing us that they would be absent .... I worry they are no longer interested in being a part of the research team or continuing with the PAR process.

This has made me question my positionality as an outsider-insider, and my gringa-ness vis-à-vis the more slow-paced, non-confrontational Costa Rican culture. It feels like I'm forcing the methodology to satisfy my own research objectives and pushing things uphill that would never budge if it weren't for my forcefulness and do-it-at-all-costs researcher mentality.

Importantly, this disjuncture moment signaled the bifurcation of the research process into two separate project areas, at which point the core research team underwent a notable transition. As partially depicted in the excerpt above, four of the seven research team members chose to focus on preexisting community objectives outside the research team structure and PAR methodology, and instead engaged in ad hoc conservation actions without consulting or notifying all research team members, including myself, while also discontinuing their participation in ongoing research team meetings. This, in effect, resulted in a situation where there was no longer full research team consent to or participation in the final stage of the assets and diverse economies mapping process; the final phase of the PAR methodology was undertaken by three of seven

research team members, none of whom were native local to the community; and the four members of the research team who discontinued their participation in the project went on to pursue their prior community objectives and new conservation actions in parallel to and exclusive of the ongoing work of the remaining research team members. At this stage, completing the assets map and diverse economies assessment transitioned into a personal project to satisfy my research objectives, and ran in tandem with, but separate from, the work of the research team.

Reflexive considerations on this moment of disjuncture and the ensuing bifurcation of the research process speak to the intersectional power dynamics experienced among multiple axes of gender, race, local/non-local status, and coloniality in both my researcher positionality and the discourses it represents. While I sought to foster equitable decision-making and local agency among the research team as an ethical foundation for decolonial research, power differences and dynamics throughout the process may have proven a greater obstacle than originally anticipated, particularly when considered across these multiple axes. I ultimately felt I was ‘pushing’ the research agenda as the convening and facilitating team member without much buy-in from the group, particularly since the PAR methods were already crafted based on existing studies and adapted to the local community context, rather than generated organically by the research team. While research fatigue may have played a role in team members opting out of the process, I believe the ultimate disbanding of the research team is a reflection of this ethical methodological challenge regarding power dynamics in participatory research and my specific researcher positionality as a white-assumed, female-presenting foreign-resident researcher from the Global North and the power dynamics/discourses I represent vis-à-vis the local community members who initially joined and then left the research team. While we moved forward with the research objectives in tangible ways, I was left to wonder if, from an ethical perspective on participatory decolonial research, it was ‘right’ for me to engage in this type of decolonial fieldwork as an ‘outsider-within’ (Collins, as cited in Smith, 1999) whose ‘multiple [researcher] commitments and responsibilities to [decolonial feminist] activism, the academy, the community and [myself]’ (Cahill et al., 2007, p. 311) may have been mutually exclusive in this particular field context.

### ***Challenges, considerations, and conclusions***

The field study discussed here began as an exploration into decolonial alternatives to development in sustainable surfing tourism, employing assets-based and diverse economies mapping methods via poststructuralist participatory action research (Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Ruttenberg & Brosius, 2017; author, forthcoming). Methods of reflexive autoethnography and intersectional feminist-based reflexivity offered a means for critically analyzing power differences related to researcher and research participant positionality, as well as contending with power dynamics in the research process across multiple axes of gender, race and coloniality in the field. Drawing from feminist geographic interventions ‘messing with gender’ in colonial-patriarchal dynamics in Global South field contexts, reflexive considerations from this analysis speak to the relative privileges and vulnerabilities of ‘multiplex subjectivities’ (Sato, 2004) experienced by white-assumed female-presenting researchers from the Global North contending with both decolonial

and gender/racial politics in Global South fieldwork scenarios (Rose, 1997; as cited in Schneider et al., 2020).

Throughout the research process, reflexivity provided a meaningful mode of thinking through and about my role as action-researcher engaged in decolonial surf tourism research in a Global South field context. Reflexive considerations centered on the complexities and challenges of facilitating the research team through the PAR process as a white-assumed, non-local female-presenting researcher pursuing graduate research among a group of predominantly Latino cis-gendered men, with varying degrees of formal education and socioeconomic status. The power dynamics along multiple axes of gender, race, nationality and class were complex and challenging, leading me to perceive that I had confronted the limits of my positionality as a researcher seeking to engage in decolonizing community-based praxis in critical surf tourism studies. The intersectional gender dynamics of embodying a leadership role given power differences related to gender, race, class, local/non-local status, etc. were a challenge throughout. While I employed 'successful' strategies of decolonial power-sharing in the research process by ceding white-Western researcher privilege to Latino cis-male research team members, those same strategies also served to reproduce gendered norms of male researcher legitimacy, much to my dismay as a feminist researcher seeking to transgress such gendered power dynamics in the field (Rose, 1993; 1997; Sato, 2004). At the same time, I faced multiple gender-related microaggressions that may speak more broadly to the difficulties of inhabiting 'paradoxical space' for white-assumed female-presenting researchers engaging in poststructuralist feminist fieldwork and/or decolonizing praxis in 'patriocolonial' surfing spaces (Mollett & Faria, 2013; lisahunter, 2016; Olive, 2019; Schneider et al., 2020).

While it is difficult to know whether intersectional gender dynamics and/or relative social positionality among the research team contributed to the shifts and unanticipated changes in the research process, reflexivity throughout the experience was useful in contemplating power dynamics through the lens of researcher positionality and considering how best to proceed without compromising the integrity of the research project or my commitment to the decolonizing methodological framework. Finally, it is worth noting that while these challenges of researcher positionality and intersectional gender-related power dynamics proved difficult in terms of negotiating tradeoffs among decolonial and feminist research objectives, they were not ultimately insuperable, particularly regarding researcher 'commitments and responsibilities' to the academy (Cahill et al., 2007). In fact, teasing through these challenges in a reflexive way allowed for the completion of the diverse economies and poststructuralist PAR research process as a means of forwarding decolonial surf tourism studies research (author, forthcoming). Similarly, empirical lessons from this reflexive study may also serve the originally unintended objective of contributing to future feminist and decolonial research in Global South surfing tourism and feminist geographic interventions in sports tourism and development more broadly. Contributing to empirical discussions on researcher positionality in critical surf tourism scholarship, lessons from this study can support fieldwork considerations particularly for white/white-assumed female-presenting researchers from the Global North working in field contexts in the Global South.

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## Note

1. The term 'white-assumed' is used here, as opposed to 'white-passing', to connote the complexities of assumed racial identity in general, along with the social privileges/oppressions afforded by those assumptions, and my particular ethno-racial background as an Ashkenazi Jewish-American researcher (see Bueno-Hansen & Montes, 2019).

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