

ONCELLY SATURDAY MORNING Last June, my wife and I woke up at 6 a.m., sleepily loaded a surfboard into the car, and drove down to Rockaway Beach in Queens, about an hour southeast from where we live in Brooklyn. A few days prior, I'd come across an Instagram post for a protest in support of Black Lives Matter set to take place in the water, organized by the East Coast chapter of the Black Surfing Association, or BSA, a nonprofit dedicated to mentoring young surfers and diversifying the sport. My wife and I had participated in marches and rallies before, but the idea of a water protest sounded—I don't know—refreshing. A part of me was curious too: Surfing is by and large a white sport, one co-opted from native Hawaiians. Who was going to show up?

Admittedly, this demonstration was taking place during an especially tough stretch of the pandemic for us: Loved ones back home in California were battling COVID, friends were losing jobs left and right, and grotesque images of police brutality swirled around all of it, like phosphine fumes seeping into our chest cavities. I was experiencing frequent bouts of listlessness, zapped of all energy one moment and incandescent with white-hot rage the next. Mostly, though, I was feeling unmotivated. I'd gained 10 pounds and was stuck in a fucked-up, interstitial headspace where the future was a blur on the horizon, just out of reach. In a city like New York, without social tethers to hold you down, it can be perilously easy to just float and float and float.

We parked the car a few blocks from the beach. The surf was flat; there were no waves. My wife laid a blanket out on the sand as I slipped into a wetsuit, scrubbed some wax onto my single-fin, and glided out under a clear blue sky with hundreds of other people. There they were, a whole taxonomy of New York City surfing, bobbing in the water: grannies on soft-tops, Black guys with locs, Japanese guys with unnatural locs, tiny long-haired grooms with the buoyancy of inflatable pool flamingos. Glorious weirdos took their spots in the lineup next to immaculate yuppies. It was an otherwise impossible triangulation of people in neoprene.

The water was unusually cold. We positioned ourselves into a circle and shouted all the usual protest refrains, slightly off beat. We splashed water for the dead. And despite the lack of waves, the current that day was strong, and we all had to paddle constantly to keep from drifting eastward, efforts that distended the circle we'd tried to form. Later I'd come across an aerial photo taken by a drone far above us. Our protest circle was more of a heart.

I left the beach that day feeling not exactly recharged, but better, like my own internal computer was no longer running on low-battery mode. There was something almost spiritual about paddling out there on the open ocean with hundreds of other people—belonging, however briefly, to an idea that was in service of something bigger. It felt like the best possible permutation of church.

OPENING PAGES

all jerseys, subjects' own

Bode

all shoes and socks, subjects' own

ON BOUGUENNEC shirt, shorts, and hat, his own

Oakley

ON KANAYAMA his own pants

South? West?

glasses, his own

ON WILLIAMS sweatpants \$375

Aries

ON BAJRAMI his own tracksuit

Puma

headband, stylist's own

ON SAUNDERS jacket \$1,550

Balenolaga

pants \$1,020

Rick Owens

ON KASAGI shorts \$68

Jungmaven

track pants \$250

Adidas Originals

by **Wales Bonner**

ON DRYSDALE shorts \$450

Thom Browne

ON ASAGO shorts \$150

Adidas Originals

by **Wales Bonner**

sweatpants \$690

Thom Browne

ON FERNANDEZ t-shirt \$1,100

Dior Men

shorts \$790

Valentino

hat \$35

Conner Hats

ON KOMUREK his own jacket

Bode

THESE PAGES

ON ASHIMA SHIRAISHI tank top \$35

The North Face

pants, her own

her own shoes

Ashima x Brain

Dead Zenist for

Evio

ON HISATOSHI SHIRAISHI jacket \$445

pants \$340

Homme Plissé

Issay Miyake

sweater \$1,080

Vivienne Westwood

x **Andreas Kronthaler**

boots \$195

The North Face

his own socks

Gold Toe

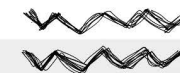
glasses, his own

Over the next few months, I followed the BSA closely, curious about the community it had managed to build. One morning in April, I drove back down to the beach to meet with Lou Harris, 49, who founded the East Coast chapter of the BSA in 2016 with the goals of making Black surfers like him more visible and, together with a close-knit crew of BSA volunteers, teaching kids from the area how to surf and skate. (I arrived with an old shortboard I wanted to donate

that had been gathering dust in my apartment, but more on that in a bit.) In person, Harris, who has two Wu-Tang tattoos, is bouncy and incapable of sitting still. "He has the energy of someone who's 25," says Kevin Amuquandoh, a graduate student who volunteers with the BSA. Until recently, Harris worked full-time as a night doorman on the Upper East Side and would schlep back down to the beach to give local kids free morning surf lessons.

Harris tells me he made the decision to start the organization when he learned about a teenager who started a fire in Coney Island that ended up killing a police officer. "When the police found out it was a 16-year-old Black kid, they said to him, 'Why did you do it?' And he said that he was bored," recounts Harris. "That blew my mind. This police officer would be alive if only this kid had an activity!" He knows that making himself and the people around him visible—whether that's grinding

out long days in the community or posting constantly on social media—is important if he hopes to change tired old ideas of who gets to be seen as a surfer. "When I first started giving surf lessons, there was this one lady on the phone who didn't know I was Black," says Harris. "When she got to the lesson, she was looking for the instructor. I said, 'It's me!' And she said, 'No, you're not Louis!'" These days, the BSA is a motley yet tight-knit cluster of friends who, with Harris at



ASHIMA AND HISATOSHI SHIRAISHI

The 20-year-old rock climbing prodigy and her father, Hisatoshi, 70, who has served as one of her coaches.

"There's a strong connection between psychological wellness and climbing," says Ashima. "A lot of it has to do with trusting other people when they're belaying you and your life is in their hands."



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