

INTERVIEW WITH GLEN THOMPSON

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Abstract Glen Thompson is a research fellow in the History Department at Stellenbosch University (Stellenbosch, South Africa). His PhD dissertation was titled *Surfing, Gender and Politics: Identity and Society in the History of South African Surfing Culture in the Twentieth-Century*. He has published several journal articles and book chapters on the history of surfing, among other topics. He also runs the website <https://writingsurfinghistory.org.za/>. In this interview, which took place in Muizenberg (in Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa), on January 16, 2019, he speaks about his academic career, sports history in South Africa, research interests, surfing, and sport archives.

Keywords: Sport History. Historiography. South Africa. Surfing. Apartheid and post-apartheid.

Entrevista com Glen Thompson

Resumo Glen Thompson é pesquisador associado no Departamento de História da Universidade Stellenbosch (Stellenbosch, África do Sul). Sua tese de doutorado intitulou-se *Surfing, Gender and Politics: Identity and Society in the History of South African Surfing Culture in the Twentieth-Century*. Ele publicou vários artigos em revistas científicas e capítulos de livros tratando da história do surfe, entre outros assuntos. Ele também edita o site <https://writingsurfinghistory.org.za/>. Nesta entrevista, realizada em Muizenberg (Cidade do Cabo, Cabo Ocidental, África do Sul) em 16 de janeiro de 2019, ele fala sobre sua carreira acadêmica, história do esporte na África do Sul, interesses de pesquisa, surfe e arquivos com documentação sobre esporte.

Palavras-chave: História do Esporte. Historiografia. África do Sul. Surfe. Apartheid e pós-apartheid.

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Rafael Fortes: Can you tell me about your formative academic years – your undergraduate and graduate studies?

Glen Thompson: I started my university life in 1990 at the University of Natal, in Durban, what is now the University of KwaZulu Natal, Durban campus. That was just as apartheid's demise became a reality. These early years of political transition in South Africa were formative to my thinking. The radical analysis of South Africa in terms of politics, society, and economy began to shift toward identity and culture as I started at university. You could say that everything was pretty much "new". There were opportunities to look at new topics and ask new questions as South Africa moved towards becoming a democracy. While the influence of the political struggle was still important, now democratization opened up new perspectives on South Africa's past. So that period of change informed my academic work.

I took English and History as my major subjects in my undergraduate years. Bringing together both, specifically drawing on literary theory, informed my postgraduate interest in the writing of history. I remember lectures in literary theory dealing with critical theory, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, Marxism, and postmodernism as exciting areas to explore. And then when I started doing my Honours—in the context of South Africa, an Honours degree is a specialist year in a single subject, and I had chosen History—I brought together what I had been reading in English literary studies with historical studies and stumbled onto the field of historiography. My interest in historiography informed my post-Marxist approach to history for my Master's degree.

My Honours degree was made up of taught courses and a mini-dissertation. For the dissertation I worked on the history of charismatic Christianity, looking at the social and political context of a local church in Durban, South Africa. I was interested in ideas of religion, society, and politics at the time.

I wrote my Master's thesis on the late apartheid period, focusing on charismatic Christianity again.³ I looked at the historical reasons why a faith-based community of largely white middle-class South Africans moved from an apolitical position in the late 1970s to be open to politicization and democratization by 1994. I used oral history and magazines as my source material. It was during my Master's studies that I became familiar with working with sources outside of the formal archives.

³ Glen Thompson, "Ministering to the Oppressed: Change, Power and Faith in some of the Independent Charismatic Churches in Durban during the 1980s," Unpublished MA Thesis, History, University of Natal, Durban, 1996. My last publication on this topic was "Transported away": The spirituality and piety of charismatic Christianity in South Africa (1976 – 1994)," *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*, v. 118, March 2004.

These were some of my academic influences and interests during my formative university years. The topic of my Master's research was not the usual social and political history to be writing about at that time in the History Department at the University of Natal, Durban, which was more southern Africanist and Africanist focused.

What about your PhD dissertation? What was the general reaction to it?

The beginnings of my PhD were in the late 1990s. After I finished my Master's degree I started teaching in the History Department at the University of Durban-Westville, which is now the Westville campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I taught there for two years.⁴ In that period, I left behind my work in charismatic Christianity and I started working on the history of surfing and masculinities. I began working on what would eventually become my PhD project, which I only formally started in mid-2009. So, there is a more than ten-year difference in thinking about the project and starting on the PhD program in the History Department at Stellenbosch University.

My main supervisor was Professor Albert Grundlingh, a prominent social historian who writes on South African sports, namely, cricket and rugby, contextualizing them within both the apartheid and the post-apartheid periods. He has also written a history of the beach relating to an Afrikaner Nationalist holiday resort in the southwestern Cape.⁵ So, there was a nice fit between his broader historiographic interests and my interests in surfing history.

The PhD sets out a socio-cultural and political history of surfing in South Africa from the late 1940s to the present. The thesis contextualized surfing within local and transnational factors. It asked, why is surfing seen as white, male sport in South Africa and found the roots of that idea in the intertwined histories of the emergence of the sport of surfing in the country, the influence of 1960s Californian surfing culture, and how beach apartheid shaped racial segregation in the waves. The study then challenged the received view of South African surfing as primarily white and male by looking to the hidden histories of black surfers and female surfers in the making of local surfing. It also showed how surfing as an amateur and professional sport in the 1970s and 1980s was shaped by the international boycott against apartheid sport. In considering the present, the study traced how surfing after 1994 attempted to move towards social transformation in the new South Africa, and how the presence of the apartheid past continued to haunt surfing. In short, it is a critical history of the accepted narrative

⁴ Thereafter, I left full-time academia and have worked in the public and private sectors. I returned to lecturing from 2006 to 2009, teaching part-time in the History Department at Stellenbosch University.

⁵ See GRUNDLINGH, Albert. *Potent Pastimes: Sport and Leisure in Modern Afrikaner History*. Pretoria: Protea House, 2013.

of surfing as a care-free sport.⁶

From 2009 to 2014 I worked the dissertation and attended several conferences to see how people would react to this work. Some academics were dismissive of my studying surfing, although there was an acceptance of sport history. But it was more the fact that it sounded like I was a surfer doing history. But in my conference papers I was talking to a history which happened to deal with surfing. I was addressing the political themes of race, class, and gender in southern Africa, especially when considering surfing as racialised sport during the beach apartheid period. This, I think was of scholarly interest to those who are studied the politics of everyday life, lifestyle, consumerism, and youth politics. Many of the talks I gave were well-received at conferences and seminars, even though I was usually introduced as “the surfer”.

When I finished the PhD there was a little bit of media attention about my work from the local press. An article got published about me as “Dr. Dude”,⁷ not exactly the view I was hoping for when they drew on the popular perception of the surfer. I was also interviewed for an online surf media site.⁸ But the mainstream print surf media never mentioned my thesis. Even though they were aware of my work. There has been some silence when it comes to the reception of my critical history of surfing within South African surfing circles.

I was also interviewed by an early morning TV show, *Expresso*, about surfing in post-apartheid South Africa.⁹ That was a positive engagement and focused on black surfing lives. And then I’ve had the opportunity to be involved in two documentary films that focused on black surfing in South Africa. I was interviewed to give historical context to surfing.¹⁰

Are you a lifelong surfer?

I started surfing when I was in my early teens. It seems like it was always going to happen because my family enjoyed holidaying at the beach when I was growing up. I started surfing when an older cousin of mine gave me his surfboard in the early 1980s. I took to waves and haven’t left the sport. As a teenage school-goer, I was very passionate about the sport. I would probably have been called a *grom* in today’s terms.

⁶ THOMPSON, Glen. *Surfing, gender and politics: Identity and society in the history of South African surfing culture in the twentieth-century*, PhD thesis (History), Stellenbosch University, 2015.

⁷ See <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/news/2015-04-05-dr-dude-rides-waves-of-sas-surfing-history/>.

⁸ See <https://www.wavescape.co.za/surf-news/breaking-news/tube-doctor.html>.

⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2gYxW0Vt9s>.

¹⁰ *Freedom Riders*. Producer: Matt Davis. Australia: ABC News Foreign Correspondent, 2016 and *Can’t Steal Our Vibe*. Dir. Graham Nash. USA: VANS, 2018.

In my university years in the early 1990s I started thinking critically about surfing and my position as a surfer. I started looking at my social interactions when I went to the beach and began reflecting on that experience and the historical context of surfing.

Over the years (I turn 50 this year) surfing has remained part of my sporting experience, part of my lifestyle experience, but also an activity that I reflect critically on. Essentially, I am researching surfing from the inside, as someone from part of that sporting world.

In which South African cities have you lived during your surfing life?

My surfing life started in Durban. I grew up surfing there. I had a grandfather who lived in the southern Cape, near George, at Victoria Bay, and I used to surf there in the school and university holidays. And then, when I came to Cape Town in 2000, I started surfing here. Those three places have informed how I have experienced surfing. And there are also a number of places in between Cape Town and Durban too, including Jeffrey's Bay.

But the main thing to say is that through my early years of surfing I was a shortboard surfer. In my twenties I challenged myself on that perspective as I truly believe that what type of surfboard you ride informs the consciousness that you bring to your surfing life. I have experimented with different boards, sizes, and shapes. I have been involved with longboarding, stand-up paddleboarding, and even bodysurfing, as different ways of riding waves. Where I surf, why I surf, and with what I surf are important to me and intimately linked together in my surfing life.

What about your experience of the archives? Are sporting sources available in South Africa? What about sources related to surfing?

In researching surfing, I especially focused on the surf magazine archive, which essentially is located in two places: *Zigzag's* offices have back issues, and the South African National Library has deposited records. However, even as a teenager, I had started a collection of surf magazines, including *Zigzag* and other now defunct surf magazines. Over the years I kept on adding to that collection and filling in the gaps. For the issues I couldn't get from *Zigzag's* back issues—because they have a policy of not releasing a magazine if they have less than 10 issues in their own possession, so you cannot actually purchase them—I then went to the South African National Library and I photocopied the relevant pages. In building my surf magazine archive, I also bought surf magazine collections from surfers or magazines were given to me.

I found additional source material when conducting interviews. One of my ways of finding information and talking to people was by entering

surf contests, specifically longboard surf contests. I surfed longboard contests at the national level. At these contests were many surfers who were surfing in the 1960s and are still surfing today.

Another part of the surfing archive were old newspapers. I have been tracking down articles that covered surfing. In addition to archival research, I've used online repositories within academic institutions, which have been doing press clippings about politics and sport, including surfing.

Essentially, there is no one place where an archive on surfing can be found in South Africa. And I think this would apply to a lot of other marginalized sports, like action sport or water sports. While these sports have a formal organization for amateurs and professionals, they don't have publicly accessible records. So, you have to do a lot more work to get to them. Much of the research process is about the sourcing of primary materials and identifying who has access to those documents or where any archives could be located. You have to track down who was the surfing association head at the time, but they may or may not have the material. I ended up filling in the gaps in the archive by conducting oral history interviews.

Are you able to read in Afrikaans? How important is the knowledge of a second language to your research?

Yes, I can read Afrikaans, and it has been very useful in terms of being able to access newspaper sources, as some of main daily or weekly newspapers are in Afrikaans. There are also Afrikaans television shows, and interviewing Afrikaans-speaking informants. Understanding Afrikaans does give me access to some nuances within surfing culture, although surfing is generally seen as an English-speaking sport.

But if you look at who is surfing at different beaches, from Muizenberg in the Western Cape all the way up to Durban in Kwazulu-Natal, you see black, brown, and white people at the beach, you cannot just assume that they speak English. Some of the jargon that surfers speak, that emerged in local places along the coast, is informed in part by English or Afrikaans words, as well as indigenous languages.

What role do different South African languages play as far as sources and scholarship within sports history and sport studies in South Africa?

More recently there is more of an isiZulu language influence on surf culture in Durban, while in Eastern Cape and in around Cape Town there is an isiXhosa language influence. While I have a limited understanding of the languages, when I engage with surf development programs I have observed how those programs have created a surf language that comes from the participants speaking isiZulu or isiXhosa.

In many cases, this is providing a new lexicon for South African surfing.

One experience comes to mind. After a Waves for Change¹¹ surf contest, I think in 2014, I was one of the few white English-speaking surfers who paddled out with the majority of isiXhosa-speaking black youth. In the water, they were talking isiXhosa, and while I could understand a few words, I was treated as an outsider—which made me mindful of the exclusion of others through language at other surf spots.

That does address the question of knowing a second, or even a third, language in South Africa. I think it is increasingly important, as scholars come to surfing, that they understand isiXhosa or isiZulu. To understand the lives of black surfers, to get to their experience through language, it would be important to speak these languages.

To date, I know of one effort to codify surfing competition rules, and the names of surfing moves, in isiZulu. I am not yet aware of that in isiXhosa. I know that the isiZulu rulebook was used in Durban for an surfing development program's surf contest, where the whole event was run in isiZulu.

So, in that case, there is a clear need to understand an African language to talk to the surfers but, as in some areas in the Western Cape, you would be speaking in Afrikaans to black or brown surfers whose home language is Afrikaans.

When I asked you for this interview you replied saying that you do not really consider yourself a sports historian. Why?

I have always considered myself as a historian interested in social-cultural issues. Sport happens to fit within that category. When I started working on surfing as an area of interest, I saw similar social and political themes to those I had studied in my Master's research on religion. I saw sport as a lifestyle culture that could bring out issues of race, class, gender, and politics. In that way, I stumbled into sports history. I do see my work fitting within the historiography of southern Africa and within other fields, for example, in critical surf studies,¹² and as such I am doing the history of sport. But maybe there is a more specific way to think about it. I am doing the history of a sporting tradition that is also a critical enquiry into its place within the broader historical context. I am not just interested in the narrow domain of the sport and the achievements of its heroes. I want to contextualize why those sporting icons had power, how they were able to access their resources, what was the political context in which that happened, and how those factors provided for a cultural context that gave meaning to surfing. And that is why I don't consider myself a sports historian, but

¹¹ <https://www.waves-for-change.org/>.

¹² See HOUGH-SNEE, Dexter Zavalza and EASTMAN, Alexander Sotelo (eds.). *The Critical Surf Studies Reader*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2017.

maybe I have become one along the way?

Sometimes it strikes me how researching about surfing allows me to challenge mainstream conceptions about sport. So, in the case of South Africa, how does your work relate to previous efforts, such as the books by Douglas Booth and John Nauright, both published in the 1990s?¹³

Both contributions are really helpful to giving a background to the broader context of sports and politics in South Africa during the apartheid and immediate post-apartheid periods. John Nauright and Douglas Booth have built on these publications by writing on post-apartheid sport. They located sports history within mainstream history, especially in positioning how sports and politics was crucial in understanding South African society. I have been able to frame my surfing work by looking at the themes that they raised, to see how surfing fits their historical narrative of mainstream sports.

Surfing intersects with the broad spectrum of sports—soccer, rugby, cricket as well as golf, athletics and tennis—even though it is not a mainstream sport. Booth and Nauright’s work are clearly focused on mainstream sports, those popular sports in society with sportspersons from a cross-section of the population. But surfing is a small, marginal action sport, seen as a white sport, and a privileged sport because it requires access to the beach and specialized equipment to ride waves. But like mainstream sports, surfing also has hidden histories, maybe more hidden than in some of those sport associations aligned to non-racial sport in cricket, soccer, or rugby, as there is no archive available for non-racial surfing. But there were organized non-racial clubs in surfing that were governed by the South African Surfing Union during apartheid.¹⁴ So, these hidden surfing histories due to the racialization of South African sport would fit within the context set out in Nauright and Booth’s studies.

I also draw on other historians for my surfing studies. Albert Grundlingh, as I mentioned, has written social histories of sport and the beach. I also draw on the work of John Hyslop, a social historian who wrote about consumer culture and lifestyle in 1980s and 1990s South Africa.¹⁵ His work enabled me to contextualize my understanding of surfing as a sub-cultural and lifestyle activity, and how surfing followed a different trajectory from other mainstream field sports.

¹³ BOOTH, Douglas. *The Race Game: Sport and Politics in South Africa*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998 and NAURIGHT, John. *Sport, Cultures and Identities in South Africa*. London: Leicester University Press, 1997.

¹⁴ Non-racial sport was aligned with the anti-apartheid politics of the South African Council on Sports (SACOS). Although, the South African Surfing Union was not a formal member of SACOS, it adhered to SACOS’s philosophy.

¹⁵ HYSLOP, Jonathan. “Why Did Apartheid’s Supporters Capitulate? ‘Whiteness’, Class and Consumption in Urban South Africa, 1985–1995.” *Society in Transition*, v. 31, n.1, 2000.

Surfing is based in the ocean, an individual riding waves, and usually out of sight, unless you are at a popular city beach. In focusing on surfing I am extending the work of other southern African scholars to consider the beach as a social space. And at the beach, surfing's racial and gender relations can be seen. Here I have studied how masculinities and white privilege worked together to provide social capital to white men who surfed and how that has excluded black male surfers and white female surfers from the sport.¹⁶

So, my PhD dissertation and my work outside it, in chapters and journals, has attempted to work with race and gender as two categories of analysis looking at social exclusion and inclusion within surfing from the apartheid to the post-apartheid periods.¹⁷

Do you follow what has been done in general sports history in South Africa? What is the field like today?

Yes. It is part of my ongoing reading list. Ashwin Desai has recently published a work on post-apartheid cricket and there are others scholars revisiting some of the myths associated with mainstream sporting traditions.¹⁸ There is ongoing work on cricket and rugby by Albert Grundlingh. Peter Alegi writes on soccer, and he recently co-edited a special issue on sport in the journal *Radical History Review*, in which I did a review on water sports.¹⁹ I also attend sport history conferences to hear about new research. So, I am keeping up to date with the literature focused on southern Africa and Africa, and on sports history in other parts of the world.

I am also interested in sports studies more generally, sports sociology, sports anthropology, and leisure studies. I read pretty broadly in critical surfing studies. These help me understand sport in the past and present.

¹⁶ For masculinities studies I drew on MORRELL, Robert, ed. *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg, London and New York: University of Natal Press and Zed Books, 2001.

¹⁷ See THOMPSON, Glen. "Otelo Burning and Zulu surfing histories," *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, v. 26, n. 3, 2014, THOMPSON, Glen. "Pushing under the Whitewash: Revisiting the making of South Africa's surfing Sixties" in HOUGH-SNEE, Dexter Zavalza and EASTMAN, Alexander Sotelo (eds). *The Critical Surf Studies Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017 and THOMPSON, Glen. "A tale of two surf contests: Gender, sex and competitive surfing in South Africa during the late 1970s and early 1990s" in LISAHUNTER (ed). *Surfing, Sex, Genders and Sexualities*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁸ For example, see the range of sports history papers presented at 2017 Sports Africa conference held at the University of the Free State on the theme "Sporting Subalternities and Social Justice", <http://sportinafrica.org/conference/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/SportsAfrica2017ConferenceBooklet.pdf>.

¹⁹ THOMPSON, Glen. "Review Essay: Disturbed Waters: New currents in the history of water sport," *Radical History Review*, v. 2016, n. 125, May 2016. This issue, titled *Historicizing the Politics and Pleasure of Sport*, was edited by Peter Alegi and Brenda Elsey.

How does sports history relate to general history in South Africa?

Sports history in South Africa was marginalized in relation to mainstream history probably until the 1995 Rugby World Cup. That moment of nation building provided an opportunity to study reconciliation and race and the importance of sport in a newly democratic South Africa. Suddenly there was international attention on South African sport. The Soccer World Cup in 2010 did a similar thing to foreground sports history.

South Africa returned to international sport after apartheid and that generated interest in writing about sport. Before that sport history was not seen as a viable topic to write about. Sport, even non-racial sports histories, were seen as less important to the immediate political issue of gaining liberation. Sport was seen as a site of social liberalism instead of political liberation, even though sport was a place where people could get together and become politically conscientized.

Since apartheid fell, and since new ways of thinking about the past have moved from socio-political history towards cultural history, sport has become an important part of understanding how race, class, gender and identity work within a newly democratized South Africa, and make visible how some of the legacies of the apartheid past still remain in the present. Then there was the building of new stadiums for the Soccer World Cup and all the money spent by the government on sports. These contemporary sport infrastructure issues have been picked up by sports historians. That is another reason why, I suppose, sports history has become a lot more mainstream in the last decade. Since 2009, I have attended Southern African Historical Society conferences and there has been sport history papers presented on a wide range of topics, from motor racing to my work on surfing, to soccer, rugby and cricket, among others. And there are new scholars entering the field, who are currently doing their PhDs.

You mentioned some topics in the post-apartheid period. What do you think are promising research topics in the apartheid era, besides those specifically related to segregation?

I think the persistent issues of race, class and gender that broadly relate to the ideas of identity and society remain crucially important. But what is important is the political economy that structures those identities.

An area in which a lot of sports studies and sports history have focused on is formal, organized mainstream sport. I think there is lots of room for work on informal or marginal sports in the apartheid period. And more so, possibly, on amateur sports. Then there is the intersection between amateur and professional sports. Professionalization opens up

research on consumerism and globalization. That leads to consideration of visual media and its role in disseminating information about sport. Sportspeople relied on magazines or newspapers in the past as well as television and video to keep informed about their sport. New research on how, and for whom, visual media was produced offers new perspectives on how sports were represented and for what purposes.

In many cases the official histories of sport organizations have been written by the organizations themselves. These histories needed to be contextualized and critiqued. For lifestyle sports, this would include looking at how available leisure time intersects with socio-economic privilege and political values. And how these sports connect, or don't connect, to broader, global movements due to solidarity over discrimination due to race, class or gender.

There is a really important need for comparative histories of sports. John Nauright and Douglas Booth's early work provide the basis for a synthesis of mainstream sports. To date, there have been a lot of studies on specific sporting traditions. What needs to happen is comparisons across those traditions and within periods, and also comparisons across regions. Cross-national comparisons would be a fruitful way of making sure that South African studies do not always seem particular and not located within apartheid legacies but actually part of global trends. One avenue could be a South-South study between South African and Brazilian sports.

Then, back to the present, the Olympics, of course, is a big theme, especially for a country like South Africa, which returned to the Olympics in the post-apartheid era. Surfing and other action sports are demonstration sports at the 2020 Olympics Games in Tokyo and could provide new research avenues on action sport in a global context.

Beside your sport related research, what do you like to read as far as academic literature?

I have recently been taking my research in a new direction, building on my social-cultural focus and I am now reading a lot more in the environmental humanities literature. I am looking at social-natural histories. This relates to my thinking about the intersections of people, creatures, and things, that is; intermingled histories of surfers, sharks and sewage.

So, I am interested in a more environmental history approach to surfing. It is a more complex history of surfing and the beach than what I was writing about in my earlier work, and reflects on my lived experience of the beach in Cape Town, and Muizenberg beach in particular.²⁰

²⁰ The interview took place in a restaurant overlooking Muizenberg Beach.

Other than that, I have been reading the cultural histories of clouds and tsunamis, among my other interests. [Laughs].