



The Frontline

A Surfer Dives Into Her Heritage and Love for the Ocean

#The Frontline #Identity & Community #Ocean Life #Environmental Justice

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Kimiko Russell-Halterman is a surfer working with Black and Brown youth. She talks to The Frontline about how her ancestry inspires her work.

When Kimiko Lorraine Russell-Halterman pulls up to Surfers Point, California, I know she's a certified veteran surfer. She's rolling in her rugged white Toyota Tacoma truck with her green surfboard poking out the back. As she pops her head out of her driver's seat, the first thing I notice is her infectious smile and her halo of curly brown hair as she runs to embrace me in a hug.

Surfers Point in Ventura County is where Russell-Halterman (who lives in Santa Barbara) meets her L.A. friends when they want to surf together. We'd planned to

get into the water together, but the ocean is tranquil this morning. There isn't enough action to ride. Plus, Russell-Halterman recently tweaked her back on a surfing excursion.

"The ocean touches all the shores that my people come from, which is very special," Russell-Halterman tells me about her love of the ocean. "There's this mystical feeling when submersed in water that [makes] the edges of your body blend away, and you're part of something much bigger, both in space, but also in time."

Like most surfers I know, Russell-Halterman has a laid-back yet grounded outlook on life that I like to think comes from having spent a decade paddling past the ocean's break again and again to catch one more wave even after being pummeled by salty seawater. Her skin is tanned from long days in the sun and her face creased by her constant smile.

But the 28-year-old isn't just any surfer. Russell-Halterman has been working to decolonize and bring accessibility to the sport through her work as an environmental educator with [Brown Girl Surf](#), an organization where she teaches young girls and non-binary youth to connect with the ocean and nature. She identifies as mixed-race: she's Black, white, and Japanese American. As a second-year doctoral student at the University of California at Santa Barbara, her research focus is a storytelling project where she's interviewing members of Brown Girl Surf on their cultural outdoor practices.

"I'm sort of trying to carve my own path because I'm interested in what is often called outdoor education, but in my mind, [it's also] tapping into nature, connection through education, and how important that is for our communities of color," Russell-Halterman explained.



Although surfing may have roots in 12th-century Polynesia, the sport is portrayed in the United States as overwhelmingly white and dominated by men. In 1998, Sharon Schaffer became the first Black woman surfer to compete professionally in the U.S. Up to 70% of Black people in the U.S. don't know how to swim. That separation from nature, Russell-Halterman told me, is due to a history of white supremacy that has left a legacy of violence.

I know what Russell-Halterman is referring to. It's the ways in which the U.S. government has historically segregated Black people—to the point where they weren't even allowed in the same waters as white beachgoers. And those inequities still echo today when we consider who is able to purchase waterfront property and own physical real estate that designates access to the ocean. In the early 1900s, systemic policies displaced Black landowners of seaside properties—few if any saw the economic benefits of the resorts and beach towns developed over the next century. Just one example is Bruce's Beach in L.A. County, which was taken from Black families during the Jim Crow era under eminent domain.

Beginner surfers, like myself, can find it daunting to dive into this sport when you don't see many people who look like you. But Russell-Halterman has found her own allies and friends along the way like her colleagues and close friends, Marlim Reynosa Ricardo and Sutara Nitenson.

Russell-Halterman glowed as she talked about the friendships that have made all the difference in her work. Nitenson first met Russell-Halterman when they joined the Brown Girl Surf team at the same time. Nitenson described an almost spiritual-like connection between the three of them that's threaded the activism and organizing they do together.

“We were on this first staff bonding hike, and the three of us were walking together and talking about our names. We all realized that our names mean water or have water in them in our mother tongues,” Nitenson recalled. “I think that's when we were like, *Oh my gosh, this is really magical!*”

That sisterhood is a deep part of who Russell-Halterman is. She talks a lot about chosen family, but her blood relatives have also influenced her passion for the ocean and her sense of justice.

“The ocean touches all the shores
that my people come from.”

KIMIKO RUSSELL-HALTERMAN
BROWN GIRL SURF





Her grandparents on her mom's side met in Japan where her grandfather was an African American soldier stationed in Yokohama and her grandmother a seamstress from Okinawa working nearby. They married and moved back to her father's hometown in Philadelphia where they raised Russell-Halterman's mom, Dr. Margaret Russell, who now teaches constitutional law at Santa Clara University. Being mixed race was uncommon at the time, Russell said. It made her hyper-aware of the racial injustice she saw affecting her community.

Russell eventually met and married Russell-Halterman's father who is white. As Russell-Halterman and her siblings came along, their mom decided to raise them in Oakland instead of Santa Clara where she was teaching because she wanted them to live in a diverse city. She named Russell-Halterman after her two grandmothers: Kimiko and Lorraine. She wanted her children to take pride in their own mixed heritage, so she developed their sense of racial justice from a young age. For her daughter's 16th birthday, Russell took her on a civil rights pilgrimage to Alabama set up by California Rep. Barbara Lee.

"We walked across the Selma bridge," Russell said. "Kimi's birthday is March 7, which is also historically the day that John Lewis and others walked across the Selma bridge [in 1965], so I felt there was something very compelling about that."

Although Russell herself never learned how to swim, she started taking her daughter to lessons at around 3 years old after her daughter Russell-Halterman had to be rescued from a swimming pool. And when it came time for her daughter to choose a college to attend for her undergraduate studies, Russell remembers that proximity to the coast was a priority.

For Russell-Halterman, her connection to the water is tied to a matrilineal heritage and history. She tells me ruefully that language hasn't been passed on well as she is sansei, or third-generation Japanese American. She knows only the word onibaba in Japanese, which roughly translates to "devil woman" in English. I laugh because I, too, have had moments where my parents will switch to Mandarin if they want to shit-talk in public.

But Japanese culture has made its indelible mark on her in other ways—like the golf-sized moon on her right inner forearm. Russell-Halterman tells me it was inspired by a Japanese folklore her mother would tell her about how a rabbit ended up pounding mochi on the moon. Peering closely, I could almost make out the silhouette of a rabbit-shaped crevice in the moon's landscape.



Russell-Halterman's most recent trip to Okinawa, Japan, in 2019 led her and her mother to ama divers on the coast of the Mie Prefecture in the city of Toba. It was there that Russell-Halterman had the chance to witness a millennia-old tradition of Japanese women divers who harvest from the sea floor—without oxygen tanks —by just holding their breaths.

“It was such a gift to get to go out on the boat and see these women who looked like my grandma pulling up huge bags of seafood and bobbing up to the surface,” Russell-Halterman said. “It was very special and very empowering ... To be able to tap into that knowledge that this already exists has been a big part of like my journey of connection to nature and growing in my relationship in the ocean.”

Russell tells me she took the trip to see the ama divers, in part, to understand from where her daughter's passion for the ocean stems. And while Russell-Halterman herself can't know for certain whether she shares ancestry with an ama diver of the past, seeing those women work together and fish for sustenance influenced her own relationship with the ocean. While living on Catalina Island as a marine science instructor, she learned how to harvest from the ocean floor herself, free diving while using a spear gun, a Hawaiian sling, or other methods of fishing with her bare hands. After seeing the ama's ocean practices, she found a renewed appreciation for the simplicity of subsisting from the sea floor.

"[I've taken] inspiration from the ama," Russell-Halterman said. "It feels so right to harvest shellfish and learn how to catch lobster with my hands and harvest uni ... That feels so in tune with the ocean."

Ama culture is threatened by dwindling shellfish and a decreasing number of women entering the profession. Orié Iwasaki of the Toba Chamber of Commerce and Industry said the tour she led Russell-Halterman and her mother on was created with those concerns around sustainability and keeping interest in ama culture alive.

As an educator, Russell-Halterman's goal isn't to tell kids that "humans are bad for the environment," as she put it, but rather, to teach them how to reconnect and be harmonious with nature. She describes her work as living and breathing, synchronous with the community she's invested in. She's informed by radical educators like bell hooks and Bettina Love.



"This idea of being a teacher in environmental education feels very different to me from the idea of *I need to teach kids how to be sustainable*," Russell-Halterman said. "It's more like *Wow, I'm blessed to be in community with young people who are exploring and nurturing and being joyful in their relationship with nature.*"

Even though this is the first time we meet in person, Russell-Halterman's openness and refreshing frankness throughout our conversation make me feel like we've known each other for years instead of weeks. Her magnetic yet quiet confidence drew in even the curious dogs and wandering toddlers who occasionally interrupt our interview—one of whom shyly offers us a flower. Russell-Halterman greets them all with the same gentleness.

As our time on the beach comes to an end, Russell-Halterman shares that she's about to go help a friend move into their new home. She's got a headache from the sun's glare, but that doesn't stop her. The why is simple: Halterman shows up for people in her life. That's why she's so devoted to her work—not for the glamour or success—but for the deep joy of helping others. That's where she's happiest, especially when those moments lead her to her board where she can rest in the wide expanse of ocean.

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