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"A particularly desirable exercise for girls and women": Swimming and Modern Female Bodies in the United States, 1900s–1930s

Olaf Stieglitz

- 1 "Up with you, girls! Into the water, one and all!" In 1927, when humorist Corey Ford published this enthusiastic plea in *Vanity Fair*, he was strongly arguing for a more supportive attitude towards female swimming than before. Rightly so, he stated, the "sport of swimming for ladies is justly increasing in popularity year after year; for women of today are beginning to realize that, in moderation, it is a highly beneficial form of exercise, and may someday be a means of saving life". And although the article also contained elements of irony typical of Ford's style, it nevertheless addressed the practice of swimming (as distinguished from mere bathing) as useful, exciting and — when it came to the still troublesome question of clothing — even as liberating for women: "Surely the healthy girl need never be ashamed of exposing the glorious body which God has given her" (Ford 1927: 49).
- 2 Ford's essay underlines a remarkable change in attitude towards female swimming in the United States between the world wars, both as a spare time activity as well as a form of competitive sport. Not only white, urban lifestyle magazines like *Vanity Fair* now featured essays and photo stories on swimming in general and women's increasing opportunities practicing that sport. Likewise, many other periodicals, from daily newspapers to rather inexpensive special interest magazines such as *Physical Culture*, regularly discussed the benefits of swimming, the new landscape of recently built pools, the fast changing trends in bathing fashion, or the many records set and medals won by U.S. athletes at international championships. Moreover, parallel to this strong increase in press coverage, a market of advice literature developed, specialized in the different needs of men and women, beginners and experts, and ever more coaches advertised their services to eager customers (Wiltse 2007; Bier 2011).

- 3 For many reasons, swimming boomed in the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century. First, it played a significant role in the fitness and wholesome lifestyle discourses that appealed to many white urban middle-class Americans during the Progressive Era and after (Green 1986). "Doctors recommend swimming as the best all-round exercise. It is especially beneficial to nervous people. Swimming reduces corpulency, improves the figure, expands the lungs, improves the circulation of blood, builds up general health, increases vitality, gives self-confidence in case of danger, and exercises all the muscles in the body at the same time," reads the preface of a How-to-Swim manual published in the United States in 1912 (Dalton 1912: 15-16). After 1900, knowing how to swim and practicing it was integral for those middle-class Americans who believed in the possibilities of sports in promoting health and individual betterment.
- 4 A second reason for the popularity of swimming was that, although it was certainly an attractive competitive sport with championships and records, one could rather easily practice it as a pastime, in rivers, lakes, on the seashore or in one of the many newly built public and private pools (or tanks, as they were usually called at that time). In a way, many contemporaries regarded swimming as an activity linking a rural American past to its now urban present (Sprawson 1992: chap VII). And bringing swimming from the countryside into 'modern' towns and cities, almost all texts argued, was ever more necessary for safety reasons. Lifesaving had been considered a crucial practical knowledge for the many occasions when rural Americans were confronted with the dangers of water, and the now growing urban populations were generally thought to be much more ignorant when it came to water's harms. Learning to swim, many authors made perfectly clear, was a fundamental practical knowledge to master the many risks of an urban environment near riversides, canals, or harbors, and often they added statistics to validate their point: The numbers varied, but most authors figured that only about 20 to 25 percent of the American population knew how to swim, and the 'new immigrants' now populating the urban centers were not considered an active part in making that number rise.
- 5 Moreover, as a third reason for its rising popularity, many considered swimming as a particularly democratic physical activity for it seemed to be open to old and young, men and women, the well-to-do as well as the working classes (Dulles 1965: 356). Authors of older textbooks stressed the role of swimming in teaching leadership qualities for future military officers, but later texts broadened the civic usefulness of the sport. "The best ideals may be inculcated" by swimming, wrote Lyba and Nita Sheffield in 1927, "such as courage, self-confidence, leadership, a democratic spirit, good sportsmanship, self-sacrifice and heroic service. These ideals form a vital part of one's training for citizenship" (Sheffield and Sheffield 1927: xii).
- 6 That this vision of inclusion had many discriminating limits was largely eclipsed from contemporary debates. As were most sports and leisure activities, swimming and bathing were highly segregated practices at the beginning of the 20th century. Race was one obvious obstacle inhibiting people from swimming, not only in the South but in other parts of the United States as well. Still, as Jeff Wiltse argued in his social history of American swimming pools, at that time cities also strictly segregated pools along gender lines, and people from different classes likewise almost never swam together (Wiltse 2007). Around World War I, barriers along gender lines eased somewhat with the introduction and dissemination of commercialized leisure and

recreation facilities that explicitly favored the mingling of men and women, but class and most of all race continued to make a difference regarding who could swim when and where (Wolcott 2012). Although the overall number of swimming facilities increased largely since the 1890s, they were clearly erected at different locations serving different clienteles. Many cities set up municipal pools, mostly in inner-city areas and with Progressive reform ideas in mind; these places centered more around hygiene than they were about sport. Other pools were built as parts of the sporting facilities operated by private clubs. Next to athletic organizations, the most prominent among them were those created by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), or by ethnic organizations like the Hebrew Association (Henne 2015). These facilities were serving also inner city but somewhat more middle-class patrons. A third group of pools was created on campuses of universities, underlining the expansion of physical education at academic institutions for both male and female students (Verbrugge 2012). The differences among these establishments indicate that, despite rising numbers, the American swimming pool remained an institution of discrimination along lines of race, class, and gender.

- 7 In this essay, I am going to stress a different yet related characteristic contributing to that swimming boom. I am going to scrutinize swimming's role in charging the human body and its movements as explicitly 'modern,' as being part of an understanding that linked notions of modern life and its requirements and challenges to certain norms and ideals of physical appearance, ability, performance, and achievements (Stieglitz 2013). Placed in the center of that discourse was the emergence of a new swimming style, the crawl. The practice of swimming in general, and especially the motions of the crawl style became increasingly identified in terms of modernity strongly related to notions of gender, race, and age. For young white women, in particular, crawling offered opportunities to practice, to do modernity in public, to underline their active participation in a changing understanding of American urban life.

1. Swimming and Modernity in the United States after 1900

- 8 If swimming had already been quite popular in the U.S. around 1900, the appearance of the crawl style produced a swimming craze. Crawling had been 'imported' into America from Australia, and it fascinated many because of its speed and its 'naturalness;' this was — or so the narrative went — how swimming was practiced by South Pacific natives, corporeal movements that white Australians adopted and transformed into the fastest way to move a human body through water (Osmond and Phillips 2004). American Olympic swimmers like Charles Daniels or Louis Handley closely studied and 'refined' the style after the turn of the century, used it successfully at championships and grew into popular experts who explained this 'new science of swimming' to newspaper and magazine readers. When describing the style used by the 'human fish,' as Daniels was often called, journalists linked his natural talent to machine-age attributes: "His arms working with the rhythms of a perfect machine, pulled him steadily in the lead [...] He used the crawl stroke, and the ease with which he glided through the water would have given the impression of no great speed had it not been forced to the notice through the great lead over the other fast men" (*New York Times*,

December 13, 1908: 43). And Louis Handley summarized the importance of the crawl, deploying the vocabularies of modernity and Taylorism: "[The new stroke] must enable the swimmers to so reduce the effort that they can develop greater speed and endurance than was possible [before] on the same output of energy. It would be illogical to believe [...] that methods which allow the contestant to travel faster and farther without increasing strain, will not render equal service to the man or woman who swims for pleasure, exercise or necessity" (Handley 1927: 20). The quotation nicely summarizes the aspects of speed and efficiency that many commentators distinctly linked to the new stroke and that they strongly related to the necessities of modern, urban life.

- 9 Over the course of a few years, these swimmers substituted what had been known as the 'Australian crawl' with an 'American' variant of that style, further pushing forward the process of whitening a certain corporeal motion that started in the South Pacific. During the 1910s, Duke Kahanamoku, the famous athlete from the annexed islands of Hawai'i, should signify and visualize this effort. In his process of becoming an American star, Kahanamoku brought along 'natural' abilities with potential that white experts could refine for some national success on the Olympic stage — the Hawaiian won six medals at four Olympic Games. He served as a kind of 'missing link' that explained the Americanness of a new swimming style (Willard 2002; Davis 2015). Kahanamoku as "a native Hawaiian, with a natural inclination toward the water, and a boyhood passed largely in that matter, has a marked advantage" remarked the *Los Angeles Times* for instance in 1914, and the *New York Sun* commented two years later that "nature has endowed him with such tremendous natural strength and surrounded him with so many encouragements to swim that he simply can't help himself" (*Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 1914: 36; *New York Sun*, February 21, 1916, o.p.).
- 10 But not only these successful competitive athletes stimulated the popularization of the crawl. The performances of Australian-born swim artist Annette Kellermann were also immensely influential.¹ She came to the U.S. in 1907 and started out to become the first true female sports star not because she won medals but due to her exhibitions at amusement parks and vaudeville theaters. Such facilities were significant in transmitting the spectacle of moving bodies to large crowds of socially heterogeneous visitors (Rabinovitz 2004). But initially, her performances were scandalized (and as such advertised) when she was arrested in Boston charged with indecency because she was wearing one of her self-created, one-piece swimsuits exposing too much skin at arms and legs. It was this incident plus her necessity to earn money with her sport that closed the doors to the amateur world of competitive swimming and instead made her the most prominent performer in aquatic shows. Today, she is mostly remembered for her innovations in swimming/bathing fashion as well as for her career as a water ballet dancer that paved her way to Hollywood, the even more 'modern' transmitter for body images. Both aspects were crucial for the fact that she became a transnational reference for discussing the modern white female body, the body of the new woman, its proper appearance and scientific development, its capabilities and limits (Capatano 2008). Her textbook *How to Swim* (Kellermann 1918) was one of the first of its kind written by a woman for a female readership.

2. No Longer Against the Current: Swimming and the 'New Woman'

- 11 Also in 1918, *Physical Culture* magazine, one of the main outlets of fitness entrepreneur Bernarr Macfadden's empire of advice publications, printed a long article on learning to swim. Its author, George Corsan, served as the national head coach of the YMCA's swimming courses, and he had also been responsible for coordinating the training of American soldiers before they went over to Europe. In his article, Corsan used a combination of text and photography to underscore exactly those aspects that would dominate talking about swimming in the years to come: Crawling is easy, crawling is natural, crawling should be separated in the three different motions of the arm stroke, the leg kick, and breathing. And although Corsan addressed his article to men and women, choosing a female model for the images sent a decidedly gendered message (Corsan 1918). The essay is representative of the ambivalent process during which women became integrated into the American "sporting republic," to use an expression coined by sport historian Mark Dyreson: "As women's sports boomed during the 1920s, American culture transformed female athletes into icons of liberty. At the same time, American culture also transformed female athletes into objects of desire" (Dyreson 2003: 438; Welky 2008: 48-49).

Figure 1: Cover of *Physical culture*, Vol. 57 (6), 1927

Copyright, 1927, *Physical Culture Publishing Corporation*. Source: <http://libx.bsu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/PhyCul/id/4817>

- 12 In her survey narrative, historian Lisa Bier described the development of women's swimming in the United States as a long fight against the current of public opinion (Bier 2011). The image underlines nicely, how many obstacles confronted athletic

women inside as well as outside swimming pools over a long time. Nevertheless, conditions became more complex and nuanced after 1900, for sports and fitness culture became increasingly important aspects at least for young, white, middle-class girls and women (Cahn 1994; Brumberg 1997: 99-107). And while many sports considered too exhaustive were still not appropriate for them, the seemingly 'graceful' and 'effortless' swimming was. Moreover, medical discourse slowly started to change as well. The notorious debate that had linked sport to a weakening of female reproductive organs acquired a different tone vis-à-vis the emerging eugenic emphasis on strong, white bodies being able to sustain the 'white race's survival' (Vertinsky 1990; Stanley 1996; Park 2007). And the growing acceptance of public entertainment in towns and cities shared by men and women eased concerns about decency and 'appropriate' female behavior in public, although the question of clothing remained important for years to come (Kidwell 1968; Warner 2006; Schultz 2014; Wright 2015). Along with the increasing appropriation of public space by young white 'new women,' swimming became more and more visible, it grew into a symbol of modern American womanhood (Figure 1).

- 13 As Dyreson's remark underscores, this development lead to ambiguous results. Many swimming books and magazine articles on swimming topics maneuvered along that fine line that separated celebrating women's emancipation and their empowerment from the many new sexualizing demands of the postwar era. Images of athletic female bodies were particularly relevant in these negotiations. Reproducing photos in magazines and books had become both easy and inexpensive by now, and many publications did so with the twin purpose of depicting motions in close detail and charging them with sex appeal at the same time. The widely distributed publications of the Albert G. Spalding sports goods company might serve as a well-known example. In one of these booklets, *Swimming for Women* (Handley 1928), one could analyze the crawl style in numerous close-ups depicting young women in exactly those swimsuits that were advertised on the final pages of the very same publication. Ranging from \$ 5 — \$ 9, they were affordable for the potentially targeted group of costumers — white, urban, middle-class, well-educated and most likely wage-earning young women. Wearing short, bobbed hair and garments that expose bare arms, shoulders, and legs, the women depicted in these photographs added sports apparel to the contemporary Flapper outfit. These and similar commercials filled the pages of numerous magazines, and swimsuits became one important marker for the modern woman and the athletic, trained body she was now supposed to present in public (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Eleanor Holm on the cover of *Time*, Aug. 21, 1939

Copyright: Peter A. Nyholm. Source: <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19390821,00.html>

- 14 Next to aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart and tennis champion Helen Wills, portraits of young U.S.-swimmers such as Ethelda Bleibtrey, Gertrude Ederle, Ethel Lackie, Georgia Coleman, or Eleanor Holm appeared on the covers and in the pictorial sections of magazines like *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, or *Collier's*, their athletic bodies wearing tight swimsuits suggesting a strong relationship between athleticism, beauty and being a successful 'new woman' in public (Wiltse 2007: 97). "One of the weirdest of the many phenomena attendant upon the American sport scene is the worship ... accorded to lady swimmers," observed sports columnist Paul Gallico who noted that female swimmer "have been photographed, biographed, feted, pursued by millionaires, popped into the movies, lionized, and ... glorified, beyond all bounds of sanity and reason" (Gallico 1936: 49). When "Business Girls Should Swim for Better Posture," as another *Physical Culture* article explained, then they should do so as potential dates, wearing the newest fashion (Macfadden 1937).
- 15 Many considered swimming the crawl as especially suitable for women because it was attributed with 'feminine' characteristics like elegance, grace, and 'pleasantness;' the style seemed to combine 'modern' notions of speed and efficiency with the display of an athletic, 'healthy' female body. Louis Handley, now an influential trainer who mentored several successful women swimmers, described this nexus as such: Crawling "requires very little effort to hold an efficient, well mastered stroke, and this is one of the things which makes swimming a particularly desirable exercise for girls and women, as it permits them to practice at length without feeling any ill effects ... [The style] will enable girls and women to utilize more adequately their natural resources and either cover a given course faster, or last longer in an unlimited swim, than earlier styles" (Handley 1928: 10-11).

- 16 One individual athlete moved into the core of this debate, Gertrude Ederle. After participating at the Paris Olympic Games of 1924, Ederle turned professional and became the first woman to swim the English Channel in 1926. She used the crawl and swam faster than any man before her — for many commentators demonstrating how much the new stroke enabled women to make use of their physical strength (Vertinsky & Job 2005; Dahlberg 2009). When watching the still existing newsreels of that event,² terms like ‘grace’ or ‘effortlessness’ seem utterly inappropriate, but nevertheless, commentators explained Ederle’s triumph mostly as based on the superiority of the crawl style: The “American crawl, when properly executed, is no more tiring than brisk walking. Gertrude Ederle used the stroke for over fourteen hours in the English Channel. During this time, she kept up a steady stroke of thirty beats a minute, breathed naturally and went through the water with amazing speed, lowering the record by nearly two hours” (Sullivan 1934: 14-15). This remained the hegemonic reading of Ederle’s record-breaking undertaking, even though some commentators interpreted it as challenging or even crossing the boundaries of acceptable female participation in sports. At times, these critics referred to photos that were published by the tabloid *New York Daily News*, the main sponsor of the event. One of them showed the swimmer all greased up just before entering the water. For critics, this and other photographs signified the opposite of all that women’s sport should stand for. They reminded the American audience that athletic competitiveness and success, on the one hand, might easily come into conflict with standards of female public appearance and beauty on the other hand (Grahame 1926). But such voices remained marginal opposed to the general sense of pride that dominated coverage both nationally and internationally. Ederle’s broad shoulders now no longer signified unwanted masculinity in a woman but a strong American, ‘modern’ notion of femininity. Some commentators linked that idea to the newly acquired political rights for women and to the streamlined body of the flapper; others, more conservative in tone, chose to underline the willpower of second-generation immigrants that Ederle supposedly displayed. But all these ‘feminist’ appreciations remained bound to swimming. Sports writer Paul Gallico for example, a noted skeptic of women’s sport, explained why Ederle and other swimmers were exceptional: “The whole business may lie only in the imagination of a fastidious commentator [himself, O.S.] who doesn’t like hippy or muscly lady athletes, and none of these swimmers is that, because swimming is practically the only sport that develops long, flat, graceful muscles” (Gallico 1936: 58).

3. New Women, New Men: Swimming as Science

- 17 The debate over Gertrude Ederle’s achievements also referred to another aspect important for the linkage between swimming and modern bodies in the U.S. between the world wars. In 1930, the author of one popular swim manual declared that “what Miss Ederle does with her feet has no significance. She has such powerful arms and shoulders that she gets practically ninety-nine per cent of her propelling progress out of them. She swims more with her arms and less with her feet than any other swimmer I know, man or woman.” While notions of ‘naturalness’ and ‘effortlessness’ marked one important thread of the discussion, another one was strictly biomechanical in nature and it stressed competencies which were considered more masculine in character. Even the ‘greatest authorities’ became part of that dialogue, as we can see in this very quotation on Ederle’s style, which was authored by none less than Johnny Weissmuller

in his half textbook, half autobiography *Swimming the American Crawl* (Weissmuller 1930: 47). Without any doubt, Weissmuller was the embodiment of American swimming during the 1920s. His fame as a five-time Olympic champion was just the base for his body being highly visible in magazines, advertisements, and newsreels during a 'Golden Age of Sports' era of time that produced and consumed sport stars in unprecedented ways. When he became an actor and started to portray Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan in twelve motion pictures from 1932 onward, the public visibility of a crawl swimmer within U.S. popular culture peaked.

- 18 Talking about the crawl style in scientific terms started as soon as it surfaced in American pools; charging the crawl as a science helped in branding the 'American' variant as superior in comparison to the 'original Australian' one (Daniels 1922). Along with advancing photo and film technologies, the biomechanical analysis of the style reached ever new levels after the First World War. At first, much of this new knowledge circulated only among experts and coaches, but chiefly Weissmuller and his coach, William Bachrach, were responsible for pushing that material into the public realm (Bachrach 1924). The athlete and his physical motions became charged with the attributes of modernity. Weissmuller's body appeared to be a surface onto which American accomplishments could be inscribed, and it moreover signified a new, 'modern' masculinity that paired technical competence with looks and personality (Pendergast 2000). In countless advertisements and later in his adventure films, he combined his swimming excellence with the 'spectacle' of bare arms and a bare chest — seemingly 'natural' traits that were, in fact, the results of hard and scientifically guided training. With Weissmuller and his Tarzan movies of the 1930s, the processes of Americanizing the crawl and labeling it as specifically 'modern' came almost full circle. Showing the masculine physique and actions of Tarzan in Hollywood movies starring the most famous swimmer of his times literally crawling through the African jungle underscores the entangled genealogy of the American Crawl and its close relation to discourses of modernity. And he did that as the embodiment of the modern American man, superior both physically and morally — Hollywood could not have created a more convincing icon for selling its products abroad (Kirkham/Thumim 1993; Dyreson 2008).
- 19 During the 1920s, Weissmuller's success triggered a debate about how to 'refine' the 'naturally superior' style of the crawl by analyzing it as separated into three distinct motions — arms pull, leg kick, and breathing. Such observations had been common about older forms of swimming as well, as can be easily realized by the prominent practice of mimicking different motions in on-land exercises, and images of these parlor practices had a long tradition in How-to-Swim manuals. They marked a compromise between visual perception on the one hand, and limited photographic options on the other hand that did not allow for focused, truly educational depictions of fast motions, especially in or even under water. Inspired by the supposed easiness of the crawl, some experts declared parlor practices and images of them unnecessary, but those who held that opinion fought a fruitless battle. On-land practices and their representations remained indispensable for many authors, for two reasons: First, they remained important for teaching an analytical perspective on the style's individual motions: "In order to obtain the full benefit of the text the reader should know how to study or visualize the body in movement (that is, to think in a motor way), so as to apply each lesson most effectively" (Sheffield & Sheffield 1927: xii). Moreover, these images allowed the depiction of male and female stars and their bodies in motion; a

valuable tool in linking the motions of the crawl to modernity, physical capability, beauty, and success.

4. Grace and Empowerment: Swimming from the perspective of young white women

- 20 In 1934, the National Recreation Association published a report about the leisure activities of 5,000 representative American men and women. Like in many other surveys and studies of the early 1930s, this report was mostly motivated by the guiding question of change in American lives since the beginning of the Great Depression. In pursuit of this aim, *The Leisure Hours of 5,000 People* did not actively differentiate neither between men and women nor between different races or ethnicities; the report was tacitly concerned with the white middle class. Nevertheless, it revealed interesting insights into changing patterns of every day, spare time behaviors. Expensive outdoor activities were immensely declining in popularity; a first result of the report that could easily be expected. More surprisingly though, it also made clear that no sport was ranked among the top ten leisure activities in the U.S. — except for swimming that came in seventh, trailing behind reading, going to the movies, or cruising in an automobile (National Recreation Association 1934: 10). Further down, the report dealt more closely with this outcome, explaining that even swimming was suffering from declining popularity although it still excelled when compared to costlier and more socially marked sports such as tennis or golf (National Recreation Association 1934: 18).
- 21 This study and many others published during the interwar years offer opportunities for discussing the leisure time activities of ordinary Americans beyond the normative texts of advice manuals. Still, they also remain rather distant when it comes to actual bodies practicing sports or other physical culture exertions; they remain mute when asking how swimming, for instance, had been charged with racialized or gendered meaning. Other sources, although problematic in themselves too, may be of more help in this regard. Letters and somewhat longer narratives written by readers of *Physical Culture* magazine, for example, can be used to come up with more interesting results. Macfadden's magazine started circulation in 1899 and reached its peaks in popularity as well as influence in the interwar years after it struggled with censorship issues regarding its supposedly indecent or even pornographic content before (Adams 2009: 117-118; Ernst 1991). Other characteristics of that periodical also demand scholarly caution: *Physical Culture* propagated an unmistakable and unchanging message — that healthy bodies are productive and beautiful bodies, and that taking care of one's body is the ultimate responsibility of every citizen. All the features printed in *Physical Culture* must be evaluated against this backdrop; and the letters to editors and the reports submitted by ordinary readers of the magazine usually also argued along that line of thinking. These are important limitations, but from the perspective of a history of the body, these letters and narratives form a valuable group of sources. Read carefully, they offer a perspective from usually white, (lower) middle-class Americans sharing information about their physical culture exercises; and the proportion of women speaking out increased especially after the World War.
- 22 Swimming played a significant role on these pages of *Physical Culture*; next to bodybuilding and calisthenics — the cornerstones of Macfadden's fitness ideology — swimming was the sport most often discussed in the magazine. Swimming, the editors

and hired authors in their articles as well as the readers underscored ever again, should be considered a highly recommendable sport supporting all the health, efficiency, and beauty concerns that Macfadden himself pushed in his own publications. Trunks and swimsuits were maybe to most often depicted clothes in a magazine that still carried a reputation of indecency and doubtful morality. Hinting at one's swimming competence often served a double purpose for contributing readers: It demonstrated the 'right' knowledge about how to live up to the magazine's ideals and moreover offered a chance to present one's body in an aesthetic or even erotic photograph.

- 23 But the relevance of readers' textual and photographic contributions extended beyond affirming Bernarr Macfadden's fitness ideology and its ideal of a healthy and beautiful body. Many letters and longer reports broadened the narrative of swimming's usefulness and added aspects such as joy, fascination, and self-esteem, and especially women were remarkably frank in stressing these points. Some examples can highlight this emotional treatment of swimming. In September 1929, *Physical Culture* published a page-long letter from Florence, Italy. The young Italian woman swimmer had gotten hold to a copy of the magazine and now wanted to share her sporting experiences with American readers. She presented herself as a European who had 'learned' about her own corporeal capabilities from American role models and had now become eager to promote them: "The modern girl is really beginning to rival men in sports nowadays. And I am so glad, because the health and figure of the girl of today certainly is improving [...] [We girls here] are happy physical culture girls" (*Physical Culture*, September 1929: 74). If here expressing joy and optimism still remains (as usual) bound to imperatives of health and beauty, other sources hint at different aspects. A year later, a 29-year old woman from California emphasized how swimming helped her in achieving self-assertion when confronted with men: "It not only makes her independent, but it gives her a power to cope with men that a non-athletic woman misses. The old idea that an athletic woman is masculine is ridiculous. A woman can be as sweetly feminine and as athletically capable and healthy as a man can be gentlemanly and also athletic" (*Physical Culture*, September 1930: 60). Here, the author picked up the contemporary debate about so called 'muscle molls,' athletic women considered 'mannish' and often confronted with strong skepticism concerning their gender and sexuality (Cahn 2010). For many athletic women, swimming provided an excellent opportunity to evade such accusations or even oppose them openly. The many questions and comments dealing with swimming during menstruation, for instance, often served a purpose of (self-)asserting (e.g. *Physical Culture*, January 1939: 59; Mosher 1923). Another strategy is apparent in those images printed in the magazines that depicted women while performing water sport activities closely attributed to male characteristics such as grand speed or taking risks, water-skiing or aqua-gliding for example. Here, women were self-consciously crossing boundaries into 'men's territory,' they went swimming and while simultaneously "having a thrill," as one photo story called it (*Physical Culture*, August 1937: 35).
- 24 Two water sport motions were both quantitatively and qualitatively outstanding in their gendered dimension. One of them was platform diving, which entered the standard repertoire of what a 'modern girl' should be capable doing since Annette Kellermann had made it the apex of her shows. The other was crawl swimming. Sometimes, the style triggered many concerned questions, particularly regarding its breathing technique that many men and women found confusing. "[B]reath as normally as possible," one woman advised other readers of the magazine, "relax and keep your

prone body position" (*Physical Culture*, July 1930: 106; emphasis in original). Accompanying another report, the editorial staff added an image alongside the text depicting how to train correct crawl style breathing by using a wash bowl (*Physical Culture*, June 1930: 60). But beyond such doubts and concerns, most women first of all articulated expressions of physical competence when writing about their crawling experiences, and they especially stressed notions of speed and of a streamlined body progressing through water, attributes that many considered helpful beyond the pools as well: "[The swimmer] does not miss his strokes because of waves, and the person who would be healthy in the ordinary rounds of daily life cannot afford to miss strokes because of disappointments or minor difficulties [...]. which creep into the work of every day" (*Physical Culture*, October 1930: 77). And another female reader pointed out that she considered swimming and dancing not only the two most graceful and elegant sports for women, but also those that most strongly promoted the woman's cause in society (*Physical Culture*, January 1933: 77).

5. Conclusion

- 25 In the summer of 1928, readers of *The Hilltop*, the student magazine of Howard University in Washington, DC, found a remarkable article in that paper. It announced and celebrated the opening of the Francis Municipal Swimming Pool, and a large illustration shows university officials and male members of the swimming team standing next to the newly built facility. Howard University was (and still is) a traditionally black institution, and that fact makes the article and the image published in a small periodical mostly read by university members and alumni indeed remarkable. They remind us that swimming in the United States and the narratives revolving around the American crawl as a 'modern' practice constituted a predominantly white sphere during the first decades of the twentieth century, a realm of corporeal practice and knowledge characterized to a large degree by making African American men and especially women more or less invisible (Chambers 1986: 14-15). The result of this process of whitening the sport of swimming was the eclipse a long tradition of black swimmers in North America, a tradition that dated back to slavery and that contained at the same time aspects of exploitation as well as empowerment (Dawson 2006).
- 26 Moreover, and this has been the focus of this essay, the motions of swimming were also and more clearly coded along lines of gender. Swimming in the U.S. not only mirrored gender relations, it took an active part in negotiating and developing notions of masculinity and femininity within an intersectional social structure that related aspects of race, ethnicity, age, and capability to these categories. And in doing so, the actual motions of swimming were meaningful as well. During the early twentieth century, the new crawl style, fast, efficient, streamlined, and 'modern,' became increasingly intertwined with gendered norms and attributions, and it also offered an opportunity to perform such gendered notions in public and at times in unexpected ways. For a growing number of young white American women, swimming offered valuable opportunities for new, exciting corporeal experiences that many felt to have liberating consequences. But as this essay also demonstrated, the gendered assumptions bound to swimming in general and the crawl motions, in particular, were part of a more commercialized and sexualized world of American modernity that at the

same time set severe limits to experiencing sport as just a progressive opportunity. The "sporting republic" of the interwar period embraced its new female citizens, but it certainly demanded a high price for inclusion.

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NOTES

1. The spelling of Annette Kellermann's last name varies in sources and literature; I am using the one that she used when publishing her book *How to Swim* in 1918.
2. The newsreels are available among the Universal Newsreels on the Associated Press Archive website, <http://www.aparchive.com>. Moreover, Universal also features a channel containing their material on youtube.com.

ABSTRACTS

Swimming in the USA was booming during the early 20th century. It held an important part in ongoing health and fitness debates, it was popular as a spare time activity, and many considered it as a particularly democratic sport. Moreover, and this marks the key argument of this essay,

was swimming at that point charged with marking human bodies as explicitly 'modern,' as a practice that made normative notions and ideals of ability, competence and beauty especially visible. These attributions were closely linked to both gendered and racialized codes. Swimming, this essay argues, was supposed to create idealized male and female bodies. The development of the new crawl style stood at the center of that process. The article offers a close reading of the style's genealogy within the American context. Next to photographs, it analyses swimming textbooks but also letters and reports written by young women swimmers that allow for a closer look at the actual practice of swimming and how it was part of negotiating modernity in the US.

La nage aux États-Unis était une activité florissante au début du XX^e siècle. Elle jouait un rôle important dans les débats de l'époque sur la santé et l'exercice physique ; c'était une activité de loisirs populaire et beaucoup la considéraient comme un sport particulièrement démocratique. La nage à ce moment-là marquait les corps humains comme explicitement « modernes », une pratique qui rendait particulièrement visibles les notions normatives et les idéaux de capacité, de compétence et de beauté. Ces qualités étaient étroitement liées aux codes genrés et racialisés. Cet article cherche à montrer comment natation était censée créer des corps masculins et féminins idéalisés. Le développement du crawl était au centre de ce processus. L'article propose une lecture précise de la généalogie du style dans le contexte américain. En plus des photographies, il analyse les manuels de natation, mais aussi les lettres et les rapports rédigés par de jeunes nageuses qui permettent d'examiner de plus près la pratique réelle de la natation et la façon dont elle s'inscrivait dans le cadre des négociations sur la modernité aux États-Unis.

INDEX

Mots-clés: États-Unis, natation, modernité, corps, genre

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