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Parting the Waters of Bondage: African Americans' Aquatic Heritage

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, when the United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) began compiling racial statistics on drowning death rates, it has been painfully obvious that African Americans are far more likely to drown than their white counterparts. While segregation denied black people access to most public swimming pools and racial violence transformed natural waterways into undesirable places for swimming, perceptions that swimming is an “un-black” or “white” pursuit have discouraged aquatics within African American communities, rendering black Americans far more likely to drowning than their white counterparts. This article is based on the author’s historical scholarship, which uses historical records including newspaper accounts, slave narratives, white-authored travel accounts to Africa and the American South, plantation records, and ship logs to consider aquatic traditions in the African diaspora. Tracing African American’s aquatic practices from Africa to America before documenting its twentieth-century decline, this article challenges notions that swimming is historically “un-black.” Over the past decade, this author has collaborated with swimming advocates to use this history to encourage black swimming in communities throughout America. By further documenting and disseminating African Americans’ swimming heritage, this article seeks to promote aquatics and, thus, reduce drowning death rates.

Keywords: slavery, African diaspora, Atlantic Africa, slavery, swimming, aquatics, surfing

Beaches, for African Americans have long been both places of pleasure and subjugation; places where they were told that aquatics were not for them. My affinity for water goes back to about the age of three months when I started learning to swim. Having spent much of my childhood at Southern California beaches, I regularly swam through turbulent surf or parted the waters of the indoor and outdoor pools dotting my landscape. Perhaps it is not surprising that my earliest memory of racism occurred one hot summer day while playing along the water’s edge at Cabrillo Beach, California during the late 1970s when about six years old. Asking my white playmates if they wanted to cool off with a swim, one boy, who was a couple years older than me, replied that “colored people don’t swim.” “Colored” was an unknown term in my lexicon. Still, I recognized his remark as an insult. Being a strong swimmer I challenged him to a race. Despite my impressive Afro and tie-died S peedo, I easily restored my youthful honor. Yet, the victory was hollow. The boy’s remarks were indelibly engrained upon my psyche, creating lingering anxieties that aquatics were somehow not for African Americans like me even as my lived experiences in a multi-racial community where I routinely swam with white, black, Asian, and Latinx family members and friends told me otherwise.

As my friends and I entered adolescence, we became a multi-racial crew of dedicated surfers, taking buses to every Orange County beach. When wintery storms churned up big surf, we voyaged northward to the Santa Monica Bay, passing through Compton upon the RTD bus, the acronym for Regional Transit District, which, during the 1980s, was colloquially known as the “Rough, Tough, and Dangerous.” Along this route, issues of race and aquatics were occasionally raised when African American bus riders jokingly reminded me that black people do not surf. I politely laughed, but never found the joke amusing.

Traveling across the country, I was often reminded of the words of my racist playmate and fellow bus riders. Beyond the borders of my youthful community I seldom saw black swimmers and only encountered six other black surfers. Jackie Robinson Park, across the street from my grandmother’s Harlem apartment, had a pool, but, during summer months, it was so full one could not properly swim. During the winter, it stood cold and empty.

For over fifty years, prevailing beliefs have claimed that swimming was something African Americans should not engage in. Claims that black Americans do not swim are commonly accepted and publicly professed. During the June 30, 1990 Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum celebration of Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, late African American comedian, Nell Carter, joked with the 70,000 spectators that if black people knew how to swim there would be no African Americans to greet Mandela because their ancestors would have swum back to Africa. The overwhelmingly black audience, including the author, got the joke. Many white Americans similarly believe that black Americans are not proficient, with some concluding it results from biological differences. Among other reasons, some believe black people’s bones are denser, making them less buoyant than white people. For instance, Los Angeles Dodgers’ vice president Al Campanis was fired in 1987 after telling Ted Koppel on the TV show *Nightline* that black people were not “good swimmers” because they lack “buoyancy” (Koppel, 1987; Allen & Nickel, 1969; Shafer, 2005).

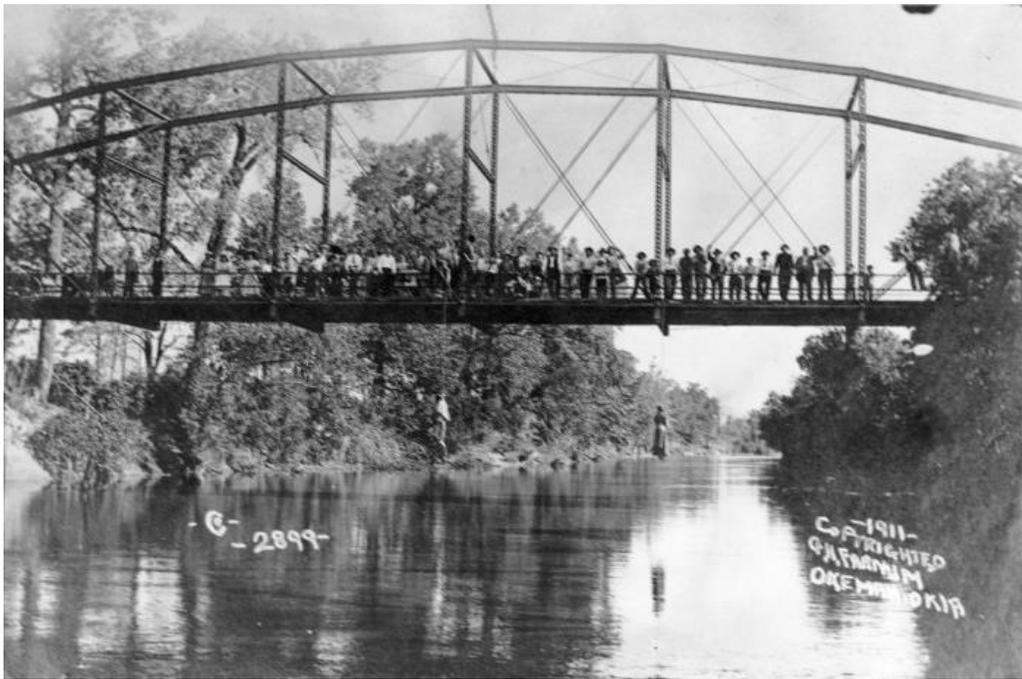
Despite the recent successes of African American Olympic swimmers, aquatics remain at the periphery of acceptability within African American communities. Black-held myths purportedly explain the absence of black swimmers. Some claim the Atlantic slave trade was so traumatic that it transformed water into a foreboding element, causing captives and their descendants to fear waterways. Others believe slaveholders instilled pervasive fears by using water tortures to discourage running away. Sources indicate that water-based punishments were rarely used, and that these, and other, historical memories were created during the 1960s, as there is no documentation of them before this time. Myths incorrectly link the absence of black swimming to the cruelties of bondage.

Nineteenth and twentieth-century racism, more than any other factor, discouraged black swimming. Segregation and cities' unwillingness to duplicate expensive recreational facilities deprived black neighborhoods of pools, preventing many black people from acquiring this lifesaving skill. For example, in 1940, Washington, D.C. had "three inadequate indoor and two outdoor pools for Negroes, whereas there were nearly fifty pools for other swimmers" (Henderson, 1940, pp. 416-424; Wiltse, 2007).

Beginning in the 1870s, Jim Crow Era racial violence steadily transformed natural waterscapes from places of leisure to sites of racial subjugation, making them undesirable places to swim. From the Reconstruction Period through the 1950s, slipknots and rope transformed Southern U.S. bridges from recreational places where black youth leapt into rivers into lynching bridges where black bodies eerily hovered in mid-air, unable to complete their descent into the refreshing waters below. Simultaneously, white swimmers refused to share waterways with African Americans. The Chicago Race Riot of 1919, for instance, began when Eugene Williams, a black youth, inadvertently floated on an inner tube into waters reserved for whites. Pelted with bricks for his transgressions, Williams was knocked unconscious, drowning in the waters where he sought relief from the summer heat. Many rivers and lakes became the final resting place for the weighted-down bodies of lynching victims. Most infamously the lynched body of 14-year-old Emmett Till, was beaten to death and dumped into Mississippi's Tallahatchie River. (Chicago Commission on Race Relations; Tuttle, 1970; Karhl, 2012; Hartman, 1997)

Tragically, myths, misperceptions, and the enduring legacies of racism have converged, resulting in African American aquatic inadequacies that have, for decades, produced numerous black deaths, while claims pertaining to a lack of buoyancy allow Americans to sidestep the heartbreaking consequences of racism. Sources indicate that starting during the 1870s, Jim Crow racism increasingly forced black swimmers off natural waterways. Then, during the early twentieth century pool segregation prevented most African Americans from accessing public pools. Both of which prevented many black Americans from becoming proficient swimmers. Today, perceptions that aquatics are "un-black" or "white" discourage many African Americans, making black Americans statistically far more likely to drown than whites (Center for Disease Control, 2004). In 2008 the *Boston Globe* reported: "Nearly 60 percent of African-American children can't swim, almost twice the figure for white children" (Crary, 2008). Since the 1990s, the United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) has determined that African Americans are six to ten times more likely to drown than white Americans and has repeatedly labeled the black drowning death rate an "epidemic" (Center for Disease Control, 2004; Center for Disease Control, 2016) In 2016, the United States CDC concluded

that “African American children 5-19 drown in swimming pools at rates 5.5 times higher than those of whites. This disparity is greatest among those 11-12 years where African Americans drown in swimming pools at rates 10 times those of whites” (Center for Disease Control, 2004, para. 4; Center for Disease Control, 2016).



Lynching of Laura and L. D. Nelson

Photographs 1a, b, c. Laura and L.D. Nelson were lynched May 25, 1911 near Okemah, Oklahoma on a railroad bridge spanning the North Canadian River.

Parting African Cultural Waters

Modern American circumstances belie the deep cultural waters of African Americans' aquatic heritage. Most African Americans can trace their ancestry to Atlantic Africa; a region where water was, and remains, a prominent geographic feature. Atlantic Africa is framed by thousands of miles of coastline; bordered by the Senegal River in the north; embraced by the sweeping arch of the Niger River to the northeast. The Congo River plunges deep into its southern reaches, where biannual rains push the Congo out of its banks, transforming the region into Africa's largest swamp. Throughout Atlantic Africa rivers, lakes, and seas were defining elements in many people's lives; inspiring societies to develop cultures that valued aquatic fluencies, allowing their members to incorporate swimming and underwater diving into their work and recreational lives. For a millennium, Africans have sublimely suspended their bodies in Atlantic Africa's liquid infinities and dove into its depths. African bodies have long stirred the muddy waters of mighty rivers, bathed in the Atlantic's brine, and, when day was done, basked upon riverbanks and seashores. Sources reveal that most African-descended people, both in Africa and enslaved in the Americas, were as comfortable in the water as they were upon land. Their story—stretching from the fifteenth to late nineteenth century—defies modern assumptions that black people cannot swim. Parting the historical waters of bondage reveals the centuries-old cultural meanings of water and swimming carried from African to New World waters.

As European merchant-adventures began sailing down Atlantic Africa's coast in 1444, most were impressed by African swimming expertise as they came from societies that had devalued and virtually abandoned swimming during the Medieval Period, because, among other reasons, it was deemed immoral as people swam nude, while doctors believed immersion in water caused disease. In 1455, Venetian merchant Alvise de Cadamosto observed two men in what is now Senegal swim "a long hour" through storm-swept seas to deliver a letter to his ship anchored "three miles off shore" and return "with a reply," proclaiming those living around the Senegal River "are the most expert swimmers in the world" (Crone, 1937, p. 34; 37). During the 1590s, Dutch merchant, Pieter de Marees, observed that Africans on the Gold Coast, or what is now Ghana, "can swim very fast, generally easily outdoing people of our nation in swimming and diving" (De Marees, 1987, p. 186–187).

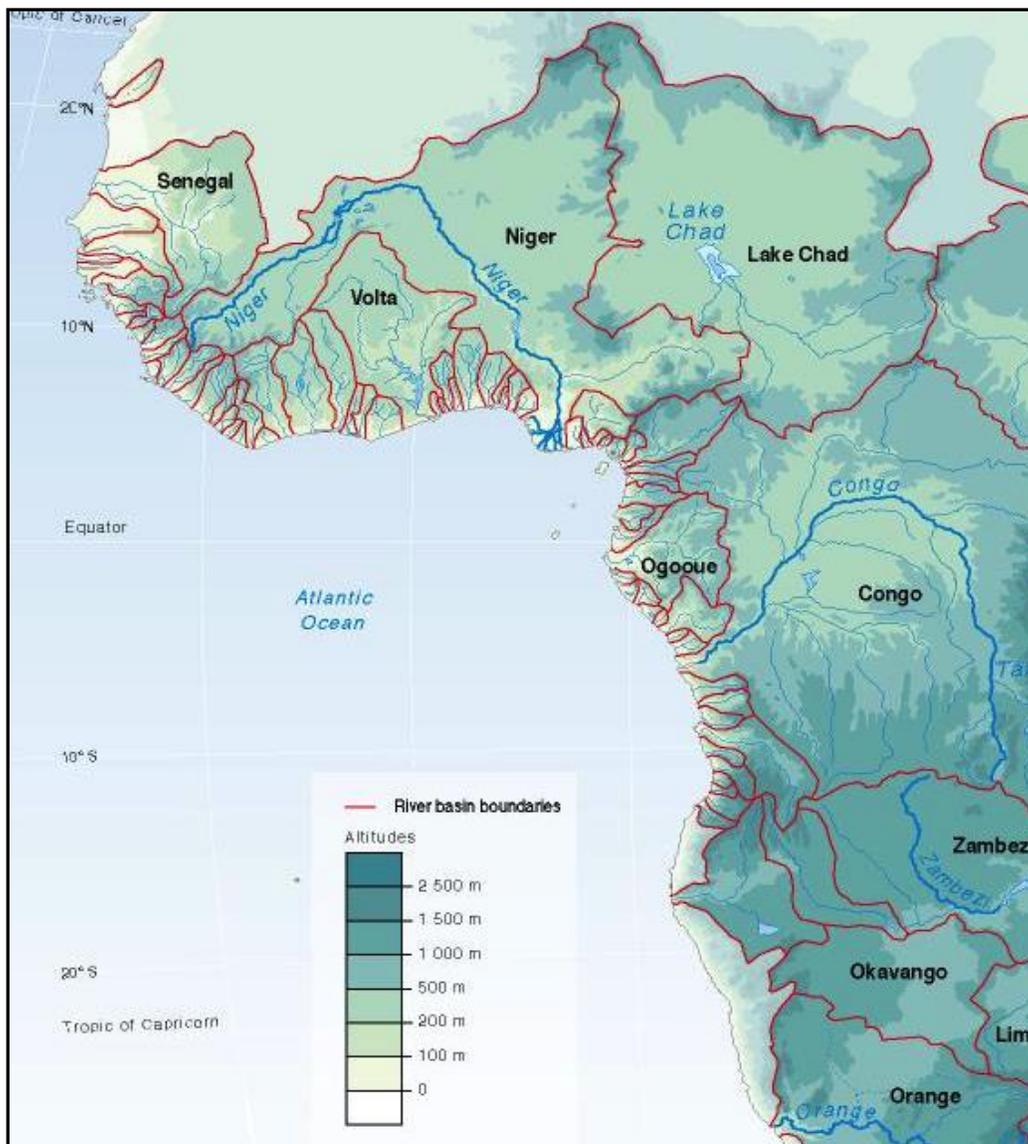


Image 1. This map depicts the riversystems and watersheds in Atlantic Africa, illustrating how water was a defining feature in many people’s lives. (Wolf, 1998)

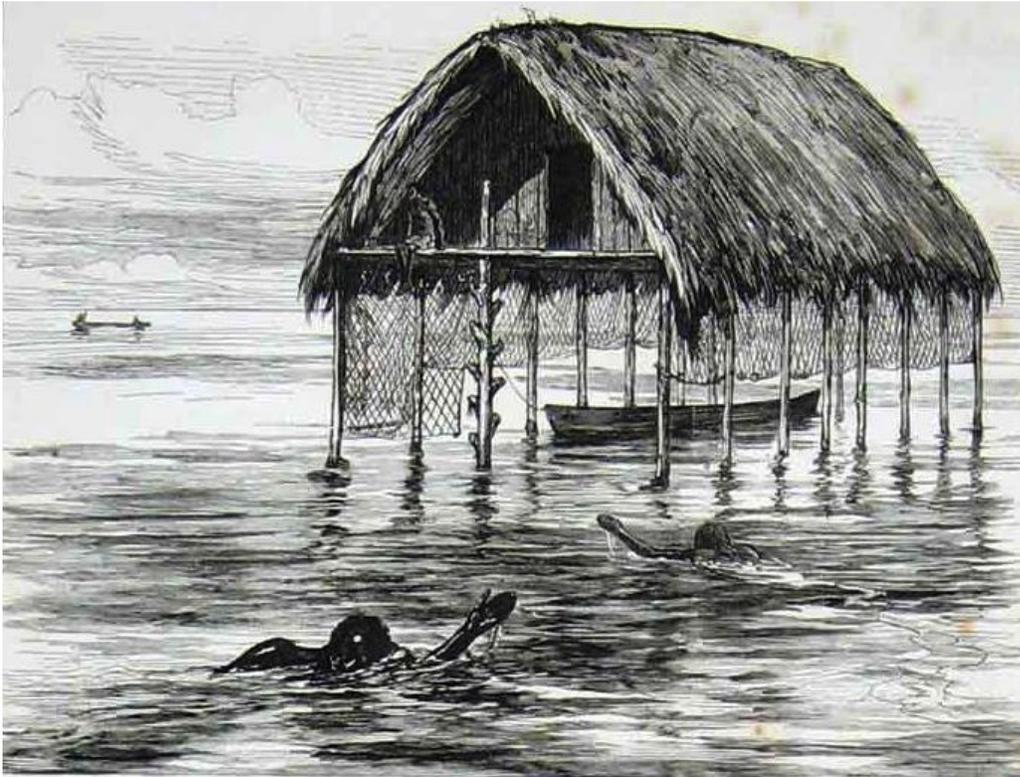


Image 2. “Lake Dwelling on Lake Mohrya.” This stilt-village was built in Lake Mohrya, situated on the Lualaba River, a headstream of the Congo River. Residents swam or canoed between structures and to shore to tend their agricultural fields. Note the swimmers’ use of the crawl, which Africans developed centuries before Australian Richmond Cavill was credited with *inventing* in 1898 “Australian crawl” after learning it from Alick Wickham (1886-1967), a Solomon Islander schoolboy living in Sydney. Verney, *The Illustrated London News, An Illustrated Weekly Newspaper*, April 22, 1876.

Africans also developed more proficient swimming techniques than Europeans. During the Medieval Period, Europeans became averse to the crawl, commonly called the “freestyle”, because it generated splashing, and, felt swimming “should be smooth and gentle” (Frost, 1918, p. 9). The crawl was judged savage, while the breaststroke, which is one of the most basic strokes, was deemed refined and civilized (Dawson, 2018).

While white swimming remained underdeveloped, Africans perfected variants of the crawl, concluding its alternate over-arm stroke and fast scissor-kicks,

which make it the strongest and swiftest style, was the proper method. Despite Western perceptions of civilization, travelers realized Africans' use of the crawl made them far stronger swimmers than Europeans and often detailed the abilities of members of specific ethnicities (Dawson, 2009; Dawson, 2018). Comparing the crawl used by the Fante, a Gold Coast people, to Europeans' breaststroke, Jean Barbot asserted "the Blacks of Mina [Elmina, Ghana] out-do all others at the coast in dexterity of swimming, throwing one [arm] after another forward, as if they were paddling, and not extending their arms equally, and striking with them both together, as Europeans do" (Hair, Jones & Law, 1992, p. 532; Dawson, 2009). Likewise, in 1923, anthropologist Robert Rattray said the Asante (an ethnic group in what is now Ghana) "are very fine swimmers and some show magnificent muscular development. They swim either the ordinary breast stroke [like Europeans] or a double overarm with a scissor-like kick of the legs" (Rattray, 1923, p. 63).

Another striking difference between African and Western aquatics was that many African women were strong swimmers, while white women usually could not swim. After describing men, de Marees noted, "many of the women here can swim very well too" (De Marees, 1987, p. 187). Rattray similarly wrote that Asante women were "as expert as the men, and this I quite believe, as I used to see whole family parties alternately wading and swimming along the lake shore instead of following the road running between the villages" (Rattray, 1923, p. 63).

Africans valued swimming as a skill capable of extending fortunes and saving lives. Parents inculcated aquatics into children at a young age; transforming waterways into safe play spaces. Toddlers were taught after learning to walk between the ages of ten to fourteen months or after they were weaned at approximately two to three years of age. "Once the children begin to walk by themselves, they soon go to the water in order to learn how to swim," wrote Pieter de Marees (De Marees, 1987, p. 26). In 1705, Dutch merchant, William Bosman, commented that "Mother gives the Infant suck for two or three Years" then they went "to the Sea-side to learn to swim" (Bosman, 1705, p. 121-122).

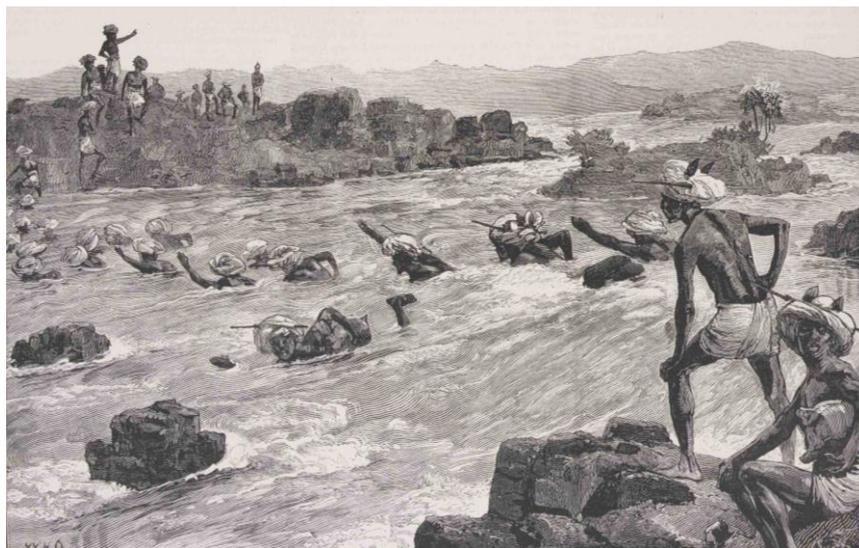


Image 3. This image depicts Dongola men in the Sudan using the “high elbow” of the crawl while crossing rapids, illustrating the widespread use of this stroke within Africa. These men were part of a British military expedition. British troops apparently could not swim well enough to traverse the river and were shuttled across in boats. “The Nile Expedition for the Relief of General Gordon,” *Illustrated London News*, Vol. 85, October 4, 1884, p. 316.

The Pleasures of Recreational Swimming and Surfing in Africa

Humans do not instinctively swim; hence we must consider why Africans *chose* to. Swimming permits people to glide weightlessly through liquid depths as body and water slipped into fluid motion. Africans recognized swimming was a life skill, method of personal cleanliness, and healthy form of exercise. Swimming was a sensual experience, is a rhythmic, dynamic pursuit that defied terrestrial forms of locomotion, stimulating the skin’s nerve endings as they came in contact with warm tropical waters and cool surface breezes. Yet, we must not romanticize swimming. Unlike walking, swimming is a struggle for survival, and, as described elsewhere, in the Americas, it became a form of exploitation as enslavers forced captives to pearl divers or salvage divers who recovered goods from sunken ships. (Dawson, 2006; Dawson, 2018)

After teaching children the fundamentals, parents promoted expertise through play. Boyrereau Brinch, who was raised along the Niger River during the 1740s in what is now Mali, explained that Bow-Woo peoples regarded swimming as “a usefull” and “pleasing amusement.” His “father and mother delighted in my vivacity and agility; on this occasion, every exertion on their part seemed to be made use of, to gratify” him (Prentiss, 1810, p. 68-69). Many societies affixed

spirituality to gliding through this potentially deadly element, crafting charms to guard against drowning and marine creatures. Brinch's father gave him "ornaments," instructing him to "not get drowned." Safeguarded by prowess, amulets, and buddy systems, parents encouraged children to explore their liquid worlds (Prentiss, 1810).

Youth swimming and surfing was one of the first sights that greeted Westerners' eye as they approached African shores. At Elmina, Barbot watched "several hundred . . . boys and girls sporting together before the beach, and in many places among the rolling and breaking waves, learning to swim," concluding Africans' dexterities "proceed from their being brought up, both men and women from their infancy, to swim like fishes; and that, with the constant exercise renders them so dexterous" (Hair, Jones, & Law, 1992, II, p. 532). Sierra Leonean children were

as fond of playing in the water as ducks, and spend much time in that way, when not otherwise engaged. They seem to be perfectly at home in the water, and swim about for hours without any signs of tiring (Thompson, 1858, p. 184).

Similar scenes unfolded in the interior. Near Timbuktu, French explorer René Caillié "amused" himself "by observing a group of young negroes of both sexes, who were bathing, dancing and gamboling about in the water" (Caillié, 1992, Vol. II, p. 5-6).

Scholars generally believe the first account of surfing was written in Hawai'i in 1778. They are only 140 years too late and some ten thousand miles off the mark. The earliest written record was penned on the Gold Coast of Africa during the 1640s. Swimming expertise enabled Africans to independently develop surfing in what are now Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Cameroon, Liberia, and Congo-Angola region. Atlantic Africa shares traits that inspired surfing throughout the Pacific, including thousands of miles of warm, surf-filled waters, and sea-going water people who knew ocean rhythms and surf patterns and were powerful swimmers. Importantly, surfing was only developed by societies with deep aquatic connections. It gauges African understandings of fluid environments and aquatic valuations (Dawson, 2018).



Image 4. Atlantic Africa possess few natural harbors and European rowboats were too slow to efficiently pass through the surf. Hence, most goods and people had to be brought through wave in surf-canoes. When launching from the beach in big surf, canoemen often swam alongside surf-canoes to help keep their bows pointed seaward. When canoes overturned they dove to recover them. Wilhelm Sievers (1891). *Afrika; eine allgemeine landeskunde* (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut), p. 116.

German merchant Michael Hemmersam, who was a superficial observer, provided the first known account of African surfing. Believing he was watching Gold Coast children learn to swim, he wrote parents “tie their children to boards and throw them into the water” (Jones, 1983, p. 109). Barbot penned the next known account in 1679, noting that children at Elmina learned “to swim, on bits of boards, or small bundles of rushes, fasten’d under their stomachs, which is a good diversion to the spectators.” Such lessons would result in many drowned children; not proficient swimmers. As noted above, Africans learned at an earlier age and with more positive reinforcement. These children were surfing (Hair, Jones & Law, 1992, p. 532).

Later accounts are unambiguous. In 1834, while at Accra in what is now Ghana, an English traveler wrote: “From the beach, meanwhile, might be seen boys swimming into the sea, with light boards under their stomachs. They waited for a surf; and came rolling like a cloud on top of it” (Alexander, 1837, p. 192). An account from Cameroon documented people surfing in small, six-foot long canoes that resembled surfboards.

Four or six of them go out steadily, dodging the rollers as they come on, and mounting atop of them with the nimbleness and security of ducks. Reaching the outermost roller, they turn the canoes stems shoreward with a single stroke of the paddle, and mounted on the top of the wave, they are borne towards the shore, steering with the paddle alone (Hutchinson, 1861, p. 227-228).

Spirituality of Water

Water was a central element in the spiritual traditions of many peoples throughout Atlantic Africa. Many believed large bodies of water, like rivers, lakes, and seas, were sacred spaces and the dwelling places of spirits. Relatedly, it was averred that the realm of the dead lay beneath the ocean or a large river and that ancestral spirits could be evoked to assist one during times of need. Sources indicate that emersion in water while swimming through or paddling across its surface on paddleboards or in dugout canoes could strengthen connections to the spirit world and the deities residing in these liquid infinities. (Dawson, 2018)

Water was a spiritual realm. Water *simbi* were prominent deities in the Congo-Angola region. They arrived in the Americas with their enslaved believers. As primordial nature deities, they resided in objects that linked the living and spirit worlds and were pervasive and central to aquatic spiritual understandings. Inhabiting streams, rivers, lagoons, ponds, and marshes, they were especially prevalent in distinctive waterways, like water falls, hot springs, and rapids, where the “roar of water crashing over cataracts sounded like simbi crying out.” Those residing along the Congo River’s north bank near the riverport of Boma said *simbi* cried “‘Kill, Kill,’ (*vonda, vonda*),” warning how a perplexity of eddies threatened to sink dugout canoes. *Simbi* demanded and rewarded respect and punished disobedience (Brown, 2013, p. 117). Though not ancestral spirits, *simbi* represented the original inhabitants of a particular place, deeply rooting communities to a region while legitimizing their claims to it. *Simbis*’ arrival in the New World permitted captives to intellectually and spiritually colonize waterscapes; making them existential extensions of Congo-Angolan communities (Brown, 2013; Weeks, 1914; Young, 2007).

In some African societies, water was a medium where accused persons proved innocence during aquatic forms of trial-by-ordeal. After visiting the Gold Coast, Ouidah (now in Togo), and Kingdom of Benin (now in Benin and Nigeria), Bosman wrote if “any Person is accused of any Crime and denies the Fact” they could clear themselves by swimming across a river, “which is ascribed the strange Quality of immediately drowning all the Guilty Persons which are thrown into it . . . the Innocent come clear out of it without Damage.” Since, everyone in the area

was “very expert, I never heard that this River ever yet convicted any Person; for they all come out” (Bosman, 1705, p. 359; 452).

The Kalabari, in what is now Nigeria, determined culpability by one’s ability to elude sharks, as slave trader Hugh Crow witnessed at New Calabar. A man accused of “misconduct” was “sentenced to swim across a narrow creek” containing sharks. Following a spiritual ceremony, he was

compelled to swim off, while I stood in breathless apprehension of his speedy destruction. The spectators shouted vehemently as he swam along, and to the great astonishment of all, and my no small delight, the poor fellow reached the opposite shore in safety! Even his enemies now considered him perfectly innocent (Crow, 1830, p. 43-44).

These were spiritual tests in which one’s inability to swim was taboo while sharks, which were considered deities, sparred the innocent and destroyed the impure. To drown or be devoured were proofs of spiritual decay. Those who perished were posthumously jettisoned from society, their names never again mentioned (Adams, 1823). Such traditions reflect the strong secular and spiritual values many societies placed on swimming and water (Anderson & Peek, 2002; Drewal, 2008; Murphy & Sanford, 2001).

Aquatic Forms of Work

Many Africans incorporated aquatics into work routines. As canoes were launched through the surf, canoe-born merchants and fishermen often swam alongside to prevent capsizing by keeping bows pointed seaward. If dugouts overturned, mariners swam to save their own lives, and, as Barbot reported, “being excellent swimmers and divers recover goods” (Hair, Jones & Law, 1992, Vol. II, p. 544; de Mares, 1987; Jones, 1983).

Others were underwater divers. Men and women harvested oysters for their meat while their shells were burned to produce lime for construction. Carpenter Rock, Sierra Leone was “celebrated for its excellent rock oysters, which are brought up in quantities by divers” (Burton, 1991, Vol. I, p. 195).

Divers played a central role in some states’ political and economic development by obtaining forms of currency and export commodities. The Kingdom of Kongo controlled Luanda Island, where *nzimbu* (cowry) shells were harvested for circulation as currency. A sixteenth-century traveler reported that women harvested *nzimbus*, penning

women dive under water, a depth of two yards and more, and filling their baskets with sand, they sift out certain small shellfish, called Lumanche,

and then separate the male from the female, the latter being most prized for its color and brightness (Pigafetta, 1818, p. 18-19).

Elsewhere people dove for gold. Jean Barbot reported that the “Kingdom of Sakoo” produced “much gold, which the blacks fish for, diving under the rocks and into the waterfalls” (Hair, Jones & Law, 1992, Vol. II, p. 338; Heywood and Thornton, 2007).



Image 5. “Diving for Gold Nuggets.” D. O. Dapper, *Description de l’Afrique . . . Traduite du Flamand* (1668; Amsterdam: 1686), p. 293.

Interior peoples similarly incorporated swimming and diving into their work, as documented by English explorer Mungo Park. When crossing the Senegal River in 1795 a “few boys swam after” Park’s horses, urging them on (Park, 1791; p. 210-211). Near the Bambara capital, Segou, located over five hundred miles inland in what is now Mali, Park observed a fisherman dive underwater to set fish traps. His lung capacity permitted him to remain submerged “for such a length of time, that I thought he had actually drowned himself” (Park, 1954, p. 53-54, 161, 336).

Peoples of the Upper Congo River were equally expert. “Riverine people can remain under the water for a long time while attending their fish-nets, and this habit is gained from those infantile experiences,” wrote English explorer John Weeks (Weeks, 1914, p. 299-300). English merchant Edward Glave similarly observed ivory merchants hide elephant tusks underwater to prevent theft, penning:

“It was curious to see a native dive into the river and fetch up a big tusk from his watery cellar for sale,” a task requiring considerable ability since they could weigh in excess of one hundred pounds (Glave, 1892, p. 200).

Cultural Currents in the African Diaspora

The Atlantic slave trade funneled African traditions into the New World. Incessant waves of African humanity broke upon America’s shores, where captives establish cultural beachheads, before plantation slavery carried this sea of humanity inland. Importantly, most plantations were built along navigable waterways to facilitate the transportation of slave-produced cash crops to ports and overseas markets. These locations afforded vast cultural spaces for captives to recreate and re-imagine African aquatic fluencies allowing them to find pleasure in bodies brutalized by their enslavers.

It is often assumed that slaveholders discouraged swimming as it could facilitate escape while water tortures rendered captives afraid of water. Some deterred slaves from learning “the art of swimming,” as Solomon Northup discovered when kidnapped from New York State into Louisianan bondage (Northup, 1853). Alabama bondswoman Annie Davis explained how her owner attempted to beat aquatic desires from her body with a “good tanning” every time he caught her swimming. Still, the pleasures of swimming outweighed fears of drowning and physical punishment, with many captives using this African tradition to find pleasure in their bodies notwithstanding their enslavers’ commands. Indeed, Davis proclaimed, “every chance I got and no one around I went in the water,” using swimming as a form of cultural resistance (Rawick, 1972, p. 112).

Some slaveholders forbade swimming at certain times or places. Most realized it was impossible to regulate the minutia of captives’ lives and sources do not indicate that slave owners engaged in sustained concerted efforts to prevent swimming. More importantly, slaves’ resolve to swim precluded designs to stop them. Likewise, there is no evidence that horrors experienced on the ocean during the Atlantic slave trade discouraged large numbers of captives from swimming. Indeed, historical documents illustrate that many captives swam shortly after being offloaded in the Americas (Dawson, 2018).

Swimming aided family members living on separate slaveholdings to visit each other, with or without their owners’ approval. At night, Richard, a Louisiana husband in an away-marriage, “would slip off” and swim across the bayou to see his wife, Betty. His enraged owner “told the patrollers every time they caught Richard on the plantation where Betty lived to beat him half to death. The patrollers had caught Richard many times, and had beat him mighty bad” (Albert, 1890, p.

24-25). Still he swam, further illustrating slaveholders' inability to prevent captives from carving out pleasurable opportunities in the midst of exploitation.

Many bondpeople became strong swimmers despite the impositions of bondage. Documents indicate that the parents of American-born captives began teaching their children between two and four years-of-age and that many children who were roughly seven years-old were strong swimmers, indicating they learned several years prior. After fundamentals were learned, children improved through water play, observation, and advice. While parents were laboring, elderly slaves looked after many children, providing shore-side instructions. (Dawson, 2018).

African-descended youth on both sides of the Atlantic equally used beaches and inland waterways as playgrounds, frolicking in the surf and swimming along inland riverbanks and lakeshores. In 1788, an English merchant noted that at Sherbro Island in Sierra Leone "children are playing in the water all day long" (Matthews, 1788, p. 51). A German sailor likewise explained: "Each day on the seashore at Cabo Corso [Cape Coast] one sees an enormous crowd of children, bathing [swimming] in the harbour and becoming accustomed to swimming at an early age" (Jones, 1983, p. 219).

Similar scenes unfolded along American shores. Near Frederick Douglass's boyhood home in Maryland "was a creek to swim in, . . . a very beautiful play-ground for the children" (Douglass, 1855, p. 65). Likewise, former Virginia slave John Washington recollected how the Rappahannock River was the favorite play spot for enslaved youth. They slipped off "to the river to play with some boat or other which I could always get or swim." Once, while clandestinely swimming they hurried, nude from the water, when a boy "cried out here comes the Overseer!" Unfortunately, they found refuge in "Pison Oak," paying a steep price for their adventures (Blight, 2007, p. 175—176).

Play is a liberating pursuit and group swimming facilitates bonding and socialization as each generation internalized inherited practices. Waterscapes provided settings for developing social skills, crafting a sense of group cohesion, and enhancing real-world aptitudes, like leadership, responsibility, and loyalty. Brinch documented this socialization processes. He and "thirteen of my comrades" swam in the Niger, where, a "perfect union prevailed; all had a noble emulation to excell in the delightful sport before us; we plunged into the stream, dove, swam, sported and played in the current; all striving to excell in feats of activity." He also illustrates how swimming was conveyed to the Americas, as he and his swim-mates were kidnapped into bondage (Prentiss, 1810, p. 70; Dawson, 2018, p. 23, 32, 45).

In 1918, Annette Kellerman, a movie swimming performer, encouraged Americans to swim, penning:

For the woman who swelters in her kitchen or lolls in a drawing room, for the man who sits half his life in an office chair, an occasional swim does as much good as six months' vacation. That weary feeling goes away for once in the cool, quiet water. Tired men and tired women forget that stocks and cakes have fallen (Kellerman, 1918, p. 53).

Slaves understood the cathartic pleasures of sliding into the drink long before Kellerman lifted her pen.

Enslaved women and men ameliorated their grim circumstances by incorporating recreational swimming into beach cultures centuries before sun-tanning whites leisured along seashores. After toiling for their owners all day, many slipped into the water to cool off, relax, and scrub the filth of agricultural labor from their exploited bodies. "We wucked in de fie'ls from sunup ter sundown mos' o' de time, but we had a couple of hours at dinner time ter swim or lay on de banks uv de little crick an' sleep," recalled Bill Crump of North Carolina (Rawick, 1972, p. 208). During a visit to Jamaica, an Englishman saw bondpeople lounging on the beach with "others refreshing themselves by swimming in the tepid water" (Foulks, 1833, p. 46).

Swimming contests also provided moments of joy in bondpeople's lives. Slaves engaged in competitive sporting activities, including boxing and wrestling matches and foot, horse, and canoe races to aver their self-worth and community identities, which helped make enslavement more bearable. Likewise, many participated in informal and formal swimming contests and aquatic blood sports that transformed waterscapes into stages for "community performance rituals" (Desch Obi, 2008, p. 92). Aquatic contests, like sports events and other forms of performance ritual, were entwined with social and cultural meaning, permitting women and men to enjoy their bodies while demonstrating skill, courage, and finesse to attain honor among peers (Mandell, 1984, p. xiii, 180).

When British soldier, John Stedman, was stationed in Guiana during the 1770s, he observed adolescent slaves compete in informal swimming contests. They swam

in groups of boys and girls, and both sexes exhibit astonishing feats of courage, strength and activity. I have not only seen a negro girl beat a hardy youth in swimming across the River Comewina . . . but on landing challenge him to run a two mile race, and beat him again (Stedman, 1796, p. 376).

John Clinkscales contended that during the antebellum years one of his father's South Carolina slaves named Essex was "the best swimmer on my father's place" and possibly the county, suggesting his reputation was earned during inter-plantation contests (Clinkscales, 1916, p. 35—36).

Aquatic contests could include blood sports, with African-descended people on both sides of the Atlantic fighting sharks, alligators, and other marine creatures to demonstrate their skill, strength and manhood. Scholars who have studied slaves' concepts of honor and manhood have asserted that slavery nullified the advantages of being men in patriarchal societies by refusing bondmen the fruits of their labor, destroying marriages, precluding them from protecting loved ones from abuse, and preventing them from publicly defending their honor and asserting their masculinity. Fighting marine creatures was derived from African traditions and, in the Americas, allowed bondmen to assert claims of masculinity and honor (Dawson, 2006; Dawson, 2018).

Sources suggest that Africans could attain and maintain honor and manhood while fighting marine animals. Jean Baptiste Labat observed that "Negroes will venture to attack [a crocodile] if he be in shallow Water: For this Purpose they wrap a piece of Ox-Hide about their left Arm, and taking a Bayonet, or Assagaye, in their right Hand," stabbed crocodiles in the eye or throat. A man near the fort at Saint-Louis on the Senegal River made "it his daily Exercise to engage these Animals wherever he saw them" (Astley, 1745–1747, p. 362).



Image 6. While this image does not precisely reflect how Africans swam or waded into waters to fight crocodiles, it captures the daring and danger of aquatic blood

sports (Shobel, 1821).

Courage was equally exhibited while fighting sharks. Jacques Lemaire recorded how men killed sharks near the surface, saying: “As he turns on his Side, they dive underneath, and cut open his Belly” (Astley, 1745–1747, p. 362). In Sierra Leone, the Bullom, and members of other ethnic groups, fought “ground-sharks,” which were apparently bull sharks. Likewise, “Fishmen,” an imprecise identity for maritime peoples in what is now Liberia, attacked “a shark in the water without hesitation” (Rankin, 1836, p. 200).

Other Africans fought hippopotamuses, the most dangerous animals to humans. During the 1880s, English explorer Samuel Baker watched two men swim across a river to harpoon a bull hippopotamus basking on an islet. Submerging until a few feet from the hippopotamus, they rose and “hurled their harpoons, and swimming for some distance under water, they came to the surface and hastened to the shore lest an infuriated hippopotamus should follow them” (Baker, 1884, p. 74–76).

Enslaved people carried this tradition to the New World where some fought an array of aquatic creatures. Manta rays, which can weigh two tons and measure twenty feet from wing tip to wing tip, frightened many westerners, who dubbed these fearsome-looking, though harmless, creatures “devil rays” and “vampire[s] of the ocean.” In the mid-eighteenth century, an African-born Beaufort, South Carolina slave named May leapt upon the back of a manta ray to put the “whole weight of his body to the force of the [harpoon] stroke,” before diving into the water and swimming back to the boat he jumped from, a feat that “delighted” its enslaved oarsmen. When William Elliott recounted May’s tale, he exclaimed: “Had he belonged to the Saxon or Norman race, he had probably been knighted, and allowed to quarter on his shield the horns of the devil-fish, in token of his exploit!” May, however, remained enslaved, and his daring earned him nothing more than praise (Elliott, 1994, p. 18–19).

Similarly, slaves waded and swam into waterways to seize and wrestle alligators to the shore, where awaiting bondpeople decapitated them. These exhibitions drew crowds of captives and slaveholders, who, from the safety of shore, observed bondmen showcasing their strength and bravery. Slaves’ egos and reputations were undoubtedly further inflated when white spectators exhibited fear. Georgia planter R. Q. Mallard recalled that when he was young and “somewhat callow,” he took “to a tree until assured that the decapitation was a success!” (Mallard, 1892, p. 26–28)

Placing these accounts in the deep broad cultural currents of the African diaspora we can consider how they fulfilled many of the same functions as other performance ritual sports (like foot and horse races and African forms of martial arts) in which individuals exhibited their strength, skill, agility, and muscular bodies. While many frays were impromptu, some were well-attended events whose communal nature promoted group cohesion and solidarity. Comradery was cultivated along waterways where blood sports and swimming competitions occurred as community members cheered for favorites. These were festive events accompanied by food, drink, music, and dance. Inter-plantation swimming matches allowed those from different estates to solidify discrete community identities while simultaneously creating a broader sense of solidarity by framing bonds with captives on neighboring slaveholdings. When slaves organized contests, they defined themselves as a community, reconstructing “African-based community-forming and individual-empowering rituals” that extolled their sense of gender and honor (Desch Obi, 2008, p. 93).

Blood sports provided slaves with a sense of control over their immediate circumstances, while enabling them to take pride in and display their skill, audacity, and muscular physics. Within African communities, aquatic exhibitions functioned as rites-of-passage, like warfare and martial arts, demarcating the transition into adulthood. Blood sports served the same function, while also allowing men to advance their social status. Male honor was bound to heroism. Since many of the marine creatures African-descend men fought posed a threat to humans and livestock, their destruction could have been seen as heroic acts, leaving no room for anyone to question slaves’ bravery and masculinity (Desch Obi, 2008; Dawson, 2018).

Blood sports were a form of cultural volition removed from white interference that instilled a sense of control over one’s bodies and immediate circumstances. Unlike sporting events arranged by slaveholders, slaves organized aquatic duels. Whites witnessed some, but slave owners did not encourage events that could have ruinous consequences on their human property. Hence, blood sports permitted bondmen to claim masculine identities distinct from the influences of enslavers (Dawson, 2018).

Conclusion

Scholars increasingly evaluate how cultural resilience was a powerful mechanism of slave resistance. According to historian James Sweet, (2011, p. 6) even as European expansion swept Africans to the Americas, “European domination was rarely a forgone conclusion, particularly in those spaces where Africans and their descendent figured prominently in the overall population,” which included most of

the American South. In recreating the sights, sounds, and textures of African daily life through foodways, language, musical expressions, agricultural techniques, spiritual practices, and an array of other traditions, captives silently but forcefully proclaimed that they would not be like their enslavers. Non-swimming enslavers failed to culturally and intellectually colonize New World waters, allowing slaves to purposefully layer African cultural and spiritual exactitudes and practices onto waters that once held Amerindian meaning. Viewed through this lens of cultural resistance, it becomes evident that aquatics enabled captives to express pride in traditions markedly different from slaveholders (For cultural resistance, see: Dawson, 2018; Gomez, 1998; Morgan, 2004; Sweet, 2003; Young, 2007).

Until recently, scholars did not recognize swimming's African roots and Atlantic routes. Despite the high rates of suffering that the slave trade and slavery imposed upon enslaved people, these institutions were incapable of crushing captives' African cultural heritage. Rather, both facilitated cultural retention. Every time slave ships regurgitated slaves upon America's docks, African traditions were reintroduced into bonded communities, reminding members of past lives. The Atlantic slave trade, which was abolished in 1807, caused American slave cultures to remain predominantly African until the 1830s, when most African-born slaves were either old or had died. American-born captives may not have understood the African origins of their swimming traditions. Long after the 1830s, bondpeople recognized that aquatic practices made their culture decidedly different from that of white Southerners who were largely inefficient swimmers (Dawson, 2018; Gomez, 1998).

The abolition of slavery witnessed the dramatic decline of black swimming as Jim Crow laws, which began to be enacted during the 1870s, re-imposed racial/social hierarchies of power resembling those that existed under bondage. Simultaneously, white Americans began creating a beach culture that, for the first time, caused them to value lakeshores, riverbanks, and beaches as leisure places. Seeking to make these waterscapes their exclusive domain, white Americans deployed laws and extralegal forms of racial violence and intimidation to drive black Americans from natural waterways that had long been scenes of pleasure and denied them access to public pools during the twentieth century. By the 1960s, African Americans had long forgotten the historical memories of their expulsion. In this parched vacuum, they created new cultural memories that incorrectly blamed slavery and the slave trade for the absence of black swimmers. While racial violence precipitated the decline of black swimming during the late nineteenth century; today beliefs that swimming is an "un-black" sport discourages many African Americans from engaging in aquatics, relegating them to the shallows (Dawson, 2018; Kahrl, 2012; Wiltse, 2007).

The ending of Jim Crow segregation (circa 1971) opened oceans, beaches, lakes, rivers, and public pools to all. Yet, accessibility did not counter the tragic consequences of discrimination. Swimming advocates can use African Americans' swimming past to dispel the myths that continue to discourage aquatics and impose disproportionately high drowning death rates upon their community. We find the historical waters filled with black bodies suspended in the drink, diving into its depths, and basking upon its shores. This history invites African-descended people to take the plunge, while encouraging all Americans to delve deeper into our shared history to become advocates for change.

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