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Let's (not) meet at the pool: A Black Canadian social history of swimming (1900s–1960s)

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While sport has been touted as a bridge for racial equality, racial discrimination has been as present in recreational and sporting spaces, as in any other public spaces. Discrimination in these spaces can thus inform racial relations in a society. Few Canadian studies have been conducted on the development of racial discourses in the context of recreational spaces, especially from a historical perspective. Through the lens of swimming, a historically exclusive recreational and sporting activity, this paper aims at positioning swimming experiences within racial and power relations between Black and White people in Canada. The findings inform us that racial discourses were continuously reinforced in swimming spaces, and shaped Black Canadians' experience. The particularities of and similarities between the various cases discussed also underscore the nuanced and varied effects of pre-1970s informal racial discrimination policy in Canada.

Keywords: public spaces; swimming history; social relations; racialization; whiteness

La fausse idée selon laquelle l'espace sportif ou de loisir représente un sanctuaire contre le racisme reste omniprésente. Dans cet optique, la discrimination raciale dans ces espaces nous aide à étudier les relations interraciales en société. Au Canada, peu d'études historiques ont été conduites pour comprendre comment les discours tenant à la race dans les espaces publiques, surtout celles fondées sur des considérations ségrégationnistes, ont défini l'expérience des personnes racisées. Afin de comprendre les relations raciales dans l'espace publique canadienne d'antan, cette recherche avait comme intention d'examiner la pratique de la natation des Noirs au Canada au vingtième siècle. Il en ressort que des préjugés d'ordre raciales ont façonné de manière complexe l'expérience des Noirs en natation, qu'elle fût récréative ou compétitive. Avant les années 1970, étant donné l'absence de loi ségrégationnistes au Canada, l'exclusion n'était pas totale; cependant, sans recours à des sanctions anti-discrimination, il était tout aussi ordinaire de se voir interdit l'accès dans certaines espaces.

Mots clés : espaces publiques; histoire de la natation; relations sociales; racialisation; condition blanche

Socio-historically, when the assimilation of minority groups was low, and where public spaces were shared, discrimination usually followed. Equality, or lack thereof, has most been transparent in the social arena and through interpersonal relations between groups. Several authors (Dowling, Fitzgerald, & Flintoff, 2012; Kidd, 1995; Sohi & Yusuf, 1987) have noted that, even sport, the great and ubiquitous modern

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social activity, is not the great social equalizer it purports to be. In fact, power relations within the categories of gender, race, and class are co-constitutive with modern sport (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). Hence, historical exclusion from public recreation spaces occurred often, and had a deep impact on certain groups' practices and experiences within and excluded them from leisure and sporting landscapes. As such, analyzing recreational spaces offers an ideal vantage for an historical analysis of Black and White relations in Canada.

Despite Canada presenting itself as post-racial when it comes to Black people, particularly through the vivid image emboldened by the history of the Underground Railroad long used to contrast Canada with the ever-turbulent United States, it has long had to wrestle its own demons with Black people (e.g., see McLaren, 2004). Sport and recreation did not shield one from the hardships which they could face as a racialized individual. Discrimination and intolerance in leisure spaces could only enhance the pervasiveness of systemic racism; unlike racism in the labor or housing context which was exacted at the root of a group's means of survival, discrimination in leisure was, arguably, gratuitous, and only aimed at undermining a group's right to socio-cultural existence. Indeed, a group denied access through sport and recreation was effectively denied a means of cultural expression and development, of the means to gather socially. Thus, within several activities, including rowing, hockey, baseball, football, and a host of other organized and non-organized practices, racial discrimination delayed and/or stalled non-Whites' participation (this was recently explored in Joseph, Darnell, & Nakamura, 2012).

Unlike most sport activities, swimming was traditionally a utilitarian activity (Winterton & Parker, 2009) for which access varied often depending on period and location. As swimming developed into a sporting and leisure activity in the early twentieth century, it quickly became one of the most White-dominated activities (Wiltse, 2007, 2014). Then, swimming was promoted as a tool for strengthening the 'English race' (Love, 2007a). The ability to saturate swimming's image with White instructors, participants, and power holders (i.e., administrators, coaches, etc.) cemented the notion that the activity was, indeed, a 'White activity.' By convening in the racially unblemished and socially exclusive swimming spaces, White people could reaffirm their distinct identity and assert their 'superiority' (Wiltse, 2007). A similar example is that of skiing, another exclusively White activity in which non-Whites have been scarcely represented, thanks, in part, to an exclusionary culture (Coleman, 1996). Here, we also observe the intersection of race and class, as these spaces could also be inaccessible to all kinds of lower-class people. They were thus especially out of reach of people of color, who, through systemic racism, had been disproportionately disenfranchised and relegated to the bottom of the economic ladder (Mensah, 2010; Winks, 1997).

In his study of Winnipeg Beach (Manitoba), Barbour (2011) determined that, by gathering in a White-only space, White people could construct a White identity opposing them to the non-White Other. And, Mahoney (1997) remarked that, in a multiracial society, isolation from non-Whites contributes to the reinforcement of White privilege and promotes a sense of superiority and distinctiveness. Thus, the normalization of othered non-Whites' absence created a practice in which people of color were not defined nor given a space, ultimately facilitating their marginalization, both imposed and self-induced. Even in the absence of explicit laws, one did not invite themselves in an area when attitudes and customs dictated that one did not belong. Swimming spaces could also rely on spatial location and socio-economic geography (DeLuca, 2013) to

reinforce the dominance of Whiteness without explicitly excluding non-Whites (Barbour, 2011). The class divide also created a tangible barrier, as facilities were made unavailable in certain neighborhoods. The location of people of color in the lower socio-economic strata facilitated segregation, making it easier for White people to avoid integrated spaces.

As observed in the United States, in pools or beaches restricted to White-only patrons, whether 'accidental' or intentional, the homogeneous clientele meant that those spaces could 'operate with largely impenetrable [and] invisible boundaries' (DeLuca, 2013, p. 342). That is, limiting access had an indirect impact on equal swimming participation. The effects of this were not contained to a specific time. Rather, the long-term effect of that process is currently apparent in swimming, especially at the highest competitive levels. Today, 'swimming is more prevalent among affluent, White families, and often takes place in private, restricted venues with specific individuals, and thus is illustrative of a privileged social class position' (p. 344). Since swimming was made physically and financially more accessible for White people, they have subsequently dominated the activity (Wiltse, 2007, 2014).

While Wiltse (2007, 2014) positioned his analyses in the American context, from a historical perspective, it is understood that similarities can be drawn between the US and Canada's racial contexts. Historians (Barbour, 2011; B. Walker, 2009; Winks, 1997) have drawn important connections between American and Canadian socio-cultural contexts. However, this study suggests a parallel, but distinctive, Black Canadian experience. Socially segregated spaces such as public swimming spaces have played a role in reflecting and reinforcing racial ideologies (as per Verbrugge, 2010 and Wiltse, 2014), but so far, the Canadian literature has minimally explored how racial discourses were conveyed within swimming spaces. Using Black Canadians' swimming practices in the first half of the twentieth century as a lens, this paper examines racial discrimination through public recreational spaces. The aim of this exploratory study is to examine archival and secondary data and produce a swimming history narrative through which to understand the politics of race and space in the Canadian context. Through the analysis of historical experiences of Black Canadians in swimming, we position the sum of those experiences within the racial and power relations that existed between Black and White people in Canada.

Background

From the works of social historians (Inwood & Yarbrough, 2010; Smith, 2012), it is found that public swimming spaces were more than simple recreational spaces. While class was the main category initially used to limit access to public swimming spaces at the turn of the twentieth century, the restrictions gradually faded to concentrate on gender and race (Kossuth, 2005; Nzindukiyimana & O'Connor, 2013; Wiltse, 2007). Race was especially sustained as a category of discrimination in swimming spaces well into the twentieth century, especially as gender segregation faded away. Indeed, with men and women allowed to bathe together, the attention was turned toward keeping White women away from non-White men. Those spaces built a particular racial environment that catered to a White clientele and that worked to inhibit Black presence (Smith, 2012; Wiltse, 2007). Strict segregation between the groups created and strengthened race as a social category from which emerged specific racial identities, and whether real or constructed, those identities became attached to a space and made it unpopular to the

excluded factions (Smith, 2012). In this way, public spaces are intrinsically linked to racialized identities and they participate in the structuring and the re-production of racialization (Inwood & Yarbrough, 2010). In the case of swimming, this was further made apparent by the lingering of Whiteness's link to the activity into the twenty-first century. Only recently did a Black woman (Simone Manuel of the United States) win a gold medal in the swimming events – at the 2016 Olympic Games.

As Coleman's (1996) examination of a historically White exclusive sport has demonstrated, a majority White patronage had the potential to make an activity and the space in which it was practiced become unpopular to Black people. Recognizing the link between the social construction of race and social spaces, Inwood and Yarbrough (2010) added that 'we need to uncover and unpack the relationship between race and [space] and conceptualize it within its historical and geographical frameworks' (p. 299). The study of Black people's experiences in swimming in Canada inscribes itself in line with this objective. The question of race as it relates to Black Canadians has often been conceptualized as new, as Black people have been constructed outside of the national identity – as hyphenated Canadians, they are always arriving, and from elsewhere. Swimming history allows us to nuance the narrative and to underscore Black people's presence in Canada. Such work helps us better grasp the environment in which Black Canadians lived for so long as a racialized highly visible minority group.

Sport and race in Canada

Since the colonization of the Canadian territories, Canadian citizenship has narrowly been conceptualized around the White European identity derived from British and French settlers (Resnick, 2005; Smith, 2005). This is despite the presence of Indigenous people before colonization, and that of generations of Black slave descendants, refugees, and immigrants, as well as generations of Asian immigrants and workers in Canada. All White immigrants were not automatically included in the White Canadian identity, but whereas White immigrants could hope to blend in and become 'full-citizens' after one generation, Black immigrants had no such privilege (Kelly & Wossen-Taffesse, 2012). They continued to be regarded as Other, centuries after their arrival. Overall, the nature of the Canadian systemic and individual racism (J. Walker, 1985, 1997) was covert (Davis & Krauter, 1971). On paper, White people and people of color were no different; in practice, however, people of color and Indigenous peoples were at a clear disadvantage.

In the absence of explicitly racist laws or regulations, as could be found in the neighboring US, generic anti-discrimination principles could be and were arbitrarily interpreted (J. Walker, 1985). The Law did not intervene in surreptitious cases of racism, making racial minorities all the more vulnerable to it (Backhouse, 1994, 1999; B. Walker, 2009; J. Walker, 1985, 1997). Racial segregation in Canada, therefore, was circumstantial and inconsistent, and was largely reinforced by attitudes and tradition. Racial discrimination was embedded within the British colonies, and the legacy of slavery as well as the racial imbalances in the US were 'evidence' of the need for segregation.

In those circumstances, the inability for people of color to blend into the Canadian socio-cultural landscape unsurprisingly extended into the sport structure (Fosty & Fosty, 2008; Joseph *et al.*, 2012; Joyce, 2004; Mensah, 2010). Sport, a historically White male domain, one in which even White women had to struggle to enter (Hall, 2002; Kidd, 1996; Mensah, 2010; Morrow & Wamsley, 2017), can structure, construct, frame, and

articulate racial discourses. This is reinforced by its emphasis on bodies and physicality. On courts, fields, tracks, and other sporting surfaces, racial stereotypes can either be challenged or further legitimized (Carrington, 2010), depending on the sport and the time.

Certain groups have also had difficulty integrating certain activities simply due to the manner in which sport performance embodies a specific cultural identity (Kidd, 1996). In Canada, hockey is a significant example of an activity that was less welcoming because it was given a privileged status in the Canadian national White identity (Krebs, 2012). The sport's association with a White masculinity identity could not be easily subverted, and despite Black people's involvement in hockey since the sport's beginnings, they did not belong, especially in the early days. Those who 'made it' in mainstream hockey – Herb Carnegie from the 1930s to the 1950s (Carnegie & Payne, 1997), Willie O'Ree from the 1960s to the 1970s (O'Ree & McKinley, 2000), etc. – were marginalized and faced racial barriers. Hockey helps illustrate how the culture of a sport can influence who its mainstream participants are (Kidd, 1996; Krebs, 2012). It is an important note to make, as, historically, the color line made Black people's participation in sports a political endeavor, i.e., a challenge to social and economic norms with the potential to redefine notions about race, body, and gender (Carrington, 2010).

In sports such as boxing or track and field, Black people's representation has been greater and more asserted, in part due to a combination of socio-economic and cultural factors (Entine, 2008). Black Canadian athletes were competing in greater numbers in those activities, and, to a lesser extent, in baseball (mostly segregated) and football (Humber, 2004; Joseph *et al.*, 2012; Mensah, 2010), because introduction to those activities was more socially and financially feasible. That is not to say that Black people did not face any form of discrimination in disciplines less entrenched in White Canadian culture than hockey: in male football, for instance, '[athletes] fought against the racism that constituted an accepted part of Canadian culture and worked for social change amidst racial hierarchies' (Valentine & Darnell, 2012, p. 75). There were also obstacles on the track as illustrated by Ray Lewis (Lewis & Cooper, 1999) and Harry and Valerie Jerome (Jerome & Parker, 2010), three Black Canadian Olympians from the 1930s and 1960s respectively. Their narratives highlight the complexity of the cycle of discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage for which there is no clear starting point for analysis (Mensah, 2010). In examining discrimination in swimming spaces and the disadvantage that ensued from it, this paper provides an understanding of the effects and manifestation of racism in Canada.

Swimming and discrimination

The Black American experience of discrimination and resistance during the twentieth century has been explored in a number of studies. DeLuca (2013), Hastings, Zahran, and Cable (2006), Irwin, Irwin, Ryan, and Drayer (2009), Myers and Cuesta (2012), and Saluja *et al.* (2006) have focused on the prevalence of accidental drownings within the Black American community. Others, such as Hodge, Burden, Robinson, and Bennett (2008), Verbrugge (2010), Wiltse (2007, 2014), and Dawson (2006, 2009), focused on the social-history of Black people in swimming. General socio-historical analyses of swimming in Canada, the US, and Great Britain have mainly focused on gender, class, and/or ethnic exclusion (Bier, 2011; Borish, 2004; Cruikshank & Bouchier, 1998; Gomet & Terret, 2009; Kossuth, 2005; Love, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c), not race or Blackness. In

fact, outside the US, only a few studies have included race as a category of exclusion: Osmond and Phillips (2006) examined the intersections of sport and constructions of the Pacific Islander in racial discourses; Novak (2012) analyzed access to swimming in Colonial Zimbabwe; in Canada, MacNeill (2002) examined racial discourse in Canadian media Olympic commentating of the 2000 Games; and Rich and Giles (2014) concluded that the Canadian Red Cross swimming programs are dominated by a Eurocanadian discourse, privileging Whiteness in that space. Of the four studies, only Osmond and Phillips (2006) and Novak (2012) have presented a *historical* narrative of race in swimming, and neither is located in the Canadian context.

As demonstrated above, most of the understanding of Black people's societal, cultural, and historical experiences in swimming comes from the US, where the practice was greatly shaped by racial tensions. In the US, a longstanding culture of racial discrimination in swimming spaces, especially during the period when the sport surged in popularity, prevented Black Americans from adopting swimming the way White Americans did (Wiltse, 2014). That context underlined how the neglected effects of segregation allowed an issue of social injustice to develop into an unresolved societal problem with contemporary effects (Hastings *et al.*, 2006). Historical lack of access to swimming spaces has, indeed, been linked to the higher rate of accidental drowning within the Black American community (Hastings *et al.*, 2006; Wiltse, 2014). The absence of Black people from public pools had another consequence: by the late twentieth century, a myth developed around the idea that Black people could not swim (Dawson, 2006, 2009; Wiltse, 2014). This pseudo-scientific stereotype ignored (a) the deeper socio-cultural forces that prevented Black people's access to swimming spaces (Wiltse, 2007, 2014) and (b) the pre-colonial history in which Black people introduced swimming to White Europeans (Dawson, 2006, 2009; Osmond & Phillips, 2006).

Despite Canada's geographical and cultural proximity to the US, there is no indication in the literature that a similar phenomenon occurred in Canada. However, racial intolerance in other public spaces is documented in the Canadian context by a number of authors (Joseph *et al.*, 2012; Kelly & Wossen-Taffesse, 2012; Mensah, 2010; Winks, 1997). A racial history of swimming in Canada, therefore, is likely to include discrimination. It should be noted that the utilitarian aspect of swimming and the consequences of discrimination in swimming spaces distinguish swimming from other recreational activities. As the US context demonstrates, limited access to those spaces increased contemporary risks of drowning among the target population. This makes swimming spaces ideal for exploring racial relations and the effects of racial identities. Understanding the role of swimming spaces in Canadian racial relations is also an important step in diversifying Black Canadian history in a little-studied area. It is a way to better frame the construction of 'racialized social hierarchies' (Inwood & Yarbrough, 2010, p. 299) within the wider North American framework. Aiming to contribute to the expansion of the literature on the construction of race in public spaces, this study provides an examination of race as a category of exclusion in the Canadian context. For that, we examine the role of swimming spaces in the shaping of racial discourses and in defining Blackness and Whiteness in Canada in the twentieth century.

Definitions

The definitions of *White* and *Black people* are highly susceptible to socio-historical and cultural shifts whose scope goes beyond the objective of this work. It is, thus, necessary

to outline how they are conceptualized herein. The term *White people* is used to refer to the socio-economically dominant group who traced their ancestral origins to Europe. In Canada, this description mainly applies to British and French settlers, as well as to other Western and Northern Europeans who later immigrated to Canada. It should be noted that not all white-skinned/European descendent groups were always considered White. In the early twentieth century, for example, Eastern European immigrants were considered Other by the Anglocentric Canadian government (Kelly & Wossen-Taffesse, 2012). Nevertheless, these immigrants, and especially their descendants, were more easily integrated into the Canadian community than people of color, who remained on the periphery generation after generation (Winks, 1997).

The term *Black people* in this work refers to dark skinned people who identify themselves or can be identified as Black, and who can trace their ancestry to Sub-Saharan Africa, but who may have immigrated to Canada from other parts of the world. The term 'people of color' is also used to refer to people whose darker skin color made them unclassifiable as White: Eastern and South Asians, among others. It should be noted that, during the period under study, Black people were commonly referred to as 'Negroes,' 'Coloureds,' and 'dusky,' especially in the printed press.

Method and sources

The period of study was limited between the 1900s and the 1960s for two reasons: (a) in the early twentieth century, swimming grew in popularity from a utilitarian activity into a recreational and competitive activity (Bier, 2011; Wiltse, 2007; Winterton & Parker, 2009); and (b) limiting the study to the 1960s is aimed at preventing the findings from being skewed by the sudden transformation of the Black Canadian cultural demographic in the 1970s. Censuses show that, prior to the 1960s, a greater majority of the Black Canadian population was composed of third-generation Canadians (Milan & Tran, 2004), whereas, facilitated by the adoption of a multicultural policy in 1971, a greater number of Black immigrants from the Caribbean, the Americas, and from Africa entered Canada in the 1970s (Cooper, 2000; Milan & Tran, 2004). These immigrants had different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds than the previous majority of Black Canadians, which might have had an effect on their swimming practices in Canada.

The study was conducted using digital archives at the national, provincial, municipal, and organizational levels identified during a preliminary search. Organizational databases refer to documents from specific groups (e.g., the Africville Genealogy Society) found to be relevant in the preliminary research. Targeted archival documents comprised photographs (a vast majority of the total), newspaper articles, video recordings, books, and autobiographic accounts. When possible, material was accessed on site, and, whenever available, documents in French were also consulted.

The digital databases that were accessed included the City of Vancouver Archives, the Edmonton Archives, the Public Archives of Ontario, the library and collections of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, the City of Toronto Archives, the City of Ottawa Archives, the Ottawa Public Library, the Library of the University of Ottawa, the Archives de Montréal (Montreal Archives), the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (Québec Library and National Archives), the Nova Scotia Archives, the Halifax Regional Municipality Archives, the Africville Genealogy Society archives, the Library and Archives Canada, National Film Board of Canada, the CBC Digital Archives, the Archives de Radio-Canada (Radio-Canada Archives), and the Google

News Archives. The following English and French keywords were employed in combination: *Black/Negro (Noir/Négro)*, *swimming (nage/natation)*, *swimmer (nageur)*, *swimming pool (piscine)*, *bath (bain/baignade)*, *segregation (ségrégation)*, and *competition (compétition)*. The use of the now antiquated *Negro* was necessary, as it was widely used to refer to Black people during the period under review (1900s to 1960s).

Approximately 1500 documents were accessed, and a qualitative content analysis of the documents was conducted to uncover relevant cases/subjects to swimming (Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2012). For that, documents were processed and filtered (Creswell, 2015). This yielded little more than 20 cases. Cases were then inductively analyzed (Creswell, 2015). Adopting a reconstructionist/constructionist historical approach (as described by Booth, 2007), content (instances and discussion of Black people engaging in swimming) was then contextualized to produce meaning. Indeed, Booth (2007) outlined that each historical source format is embedded with specific knowledge, which the researcher seeks to understand by looking beyond the literal meaning to contextual discourses. The cases found are presented and studied in the Findings and Discussion section below, organized around two main themes: unimpeded swimming participation and racial discrimination in swimming spaces. These are interwoven within five different subheadings.

Findings and discussion

The findings are below presented alongside the discussion of their interpretation to construct a narrative. The narrative that emerges presents a complex image of race in swimming spaces, as full participation is found interlaced with segregation; there is no discernible pattern across the years. This reflects the Black Canadian literature (Backhouse, 1994, 1999; B. Walker, 2009; J. Walker, 1985, 1997) which asserts that, in the absence of explicit Jim Crowism, integration and exclusion were often a function of custom. The cases yielded by the archives and databases have been organized into five subheadings: Early years, Threading the color line, At the swim meet, Understanding 'Whites only' spaces, and Politicizing the pool.

Early years

For Black communities established near bodies of water, it appears that swimming was a familiar activity, whether for leisure or for utilitarian purposes. This was the case for Africville, an all-Black community that was first established on the shore of the Halifax bay (Nova Scotia) around the 1840s. In the 1960s, the municipality of Halifax relocated the culturally rich community as its residents were displaced and separated (Africville Genealogy Society, 1992). Although their practices were not systematically archived, the available records demonstrate that swimming was one of the primary leisure activity for Africvillians. The Africvillian attachment to water and swimming decades after the establishment of the community indicates that swimming was an activity that was practiced there for generations (Clairmont & Magill, 1973).

Proximity to water (Africville was located on the shore of Bedford Basin, part of the Halifax Harbour) made swimming almost a given for all. Swimming in the Bedford Basin was, in fact, one of the few liberties for the poorer residents of Africville (Africville Genealogy Society, 1992; Clairmont & Magill, 1971; Gray & Mackenzie, 1991; Precious, 1999; Welldon, 2009). Linda Mantley, a woman who grew up in

Africville, describes a community in which water was a great source of recreation, especially for children (Africville Genealogy Society, n.d.). Mantley's recollections remained ones of freedom and fun, despite a fall that left her afraid of water.

Other former residents of Africville concur with Mantley's account, and report swimming in the Basin 'right out in the ocean [...] tide in or out' (Africville Genealogy Society, 1992, p. 86; see also Grant, 2009). In the Halifax Harbour, one could find many sailors and fishermen familiar with advanced swimming skills, some of them Black (Precious, 1999). In fact, around 1920, a Black boatman named George Liston received a gold life-saving medal from the city for rescuing 'many drowning people' from the harbor (Fingard, 1992). When Africville was relocated in 1967, and most of the families lived in housing communities far from the shore, former residents still came to the bay at least until the 1990s (Clairmont & Magill, 1973; Mctair & Hamilton, 1994).

A report on Africville's relocation confirmed that, because it was home to many low-income families, swimming in Bedford Basin was one of the few affordable and accessible activities (Clairmont & Magill, 1971). Access to most of Halifax's municipal recreational facilities (swimming or otherwise) was particularly out of reach. Motivated by a complex combination of socio-economic, geographic isolation, and racial intolerance, Bedford Basin represented the only aquatic activity source for the community. This was despite concerns about the safety of the water in the basin (Clairmont & Magill, 1971).

A more individual case is that of Joe Fortes, a Black lifeguard and swimming instructor at a Vancouver (British Columbia) beach at the turn of the twentieth century (see Figure 1). Joe Fortes was not a native of Canada, and it is suggested that this may have positively impacted his success in Vancouver. Wong (2011) asserted that, having lived and worked in Liverpool (England), Fortes was more positively perceived by the English immigrant population living in Vancouver. However, as described below, Joe Fortes' Blackness was a factor in his work.

As described in the *Vancouver Sun*, Fortes was raised in Trinidad (British Caribbean) and moved to Liverpool as a teenager in the 1860s (Colman, 1952). In Trinidad, swimming was an obscure recreational activity at that period and there were very few safe swimming spaces; swimming pools were rare, and the open water of the ocean was too dangerous for casual swimming (Smith & Rogers, 2012). Once in Liverpool, Fortes acquired swimming skills while working as a municipal public bath guardian (Colman, 1952; Smith & Rogers, 2012). These skills garnered him some notoriety, especially after he won a swimming race across the River Mersey (Colman, 1952; Defieux, 1968; Smith & Rogers, 2012). For this race, Fortes received prize money in a ceremony presided over by the mayor.

Fortes eventually left Liverpool for Vancouver in 1884, where he took to swimming and teaching swimming at English Bay, a beach he participated in making physically accessible (Smith & Rogers, 2012). English Bay was populated by a great number of White British immigrants and Fortes was one of a minority of Black residents in the area (Wong, 2011). Fortes' work as a lifeguard and swimming instructor started on a volunteer basis, but it became a career once he was hired by the city in 1900. For more than 20 years, Joe Fortes was a familiar face at English Bay beach. During that time, it is estimated that three generations of children learned to swim with him (Smith & Rogers, 2012). Figures 2 and 3 show Fortes in his function as a swimming instructor with children and women.



Figure 1. Joe Fortes, circa 1905.

Source: City of Vancouver Archives, AM336-S3-2-CVA 677-440, Stuart Thompson fonds.

Despite his skills, Fortes did not participate in competitive swimming. The amateur athlete status ruled that those whose profession required the use of the same skills that would be used during competition could not compete (Kidd, 1996; Morrow & Wamsley, 2017; Nzindukiyimana & O'Connor, 2013). Individuals that had competed for money in the past were not eligible either (Morrow & Wamsley, 2017). Since Fortes had already participated in a race for prize money (Colman, 1952; Defieux, 1968; Smith & Rogers, 2012), and as he taught swimming for a living, he was ineligible for amateur status on two counts. However, it is estimated that some of Fortes' students later became members of the Vancouver Amateur Swimming Club (established in 1905) (Smith & Rogers, 2012).

As a lifeguard, Fortes is officially credited with rescuing at least 20 people, although Wong (2011) estimated that the number may have been higher. In 1908, members of the Vancouver Amateur Swimming Club personally presented him with a gold medal inscribed with the words 'Presented by the Vancouver Athletic Club to Joe Fortes for gallantry in saving life' ('Gold Medal for "Joe" Fortes,' 1908 cited by Smith & Rogers, 2012). Not only was Fortes the only Black lifeguard in the region, he also became the



Figure 2. Joe Fortes diving into water at English Bay, circa 1906.

Source: City of Vancouver Archives, AM336-S3-3-CVA 677–591, P.T. Timms fonds.



Figure 3. Joe Fortes [teaching swimming] at English Bay, circa 1912.

Source: City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 7–167, J.L. Quiney fonds.

first paid, Black or White, lifeguard in Vancouver (Smith & Rogers, 2012; Wong, 2011). His impact on the community went even further, as the press often cited Fortes as an example of good citizenship (Bangs, 1975; ‘Heroes and Hero Worship,’ 1925; Smith & Rogers, 2012).

Unexpectedly, Fortes’ Blackness did not seem to pose a problem for most White swimmers at the beach. He received ample support for his work (Smith & Rogers, 2012). But some resistance to his presence was found in a letter from a concerned parent who wrote to indicate that they ‘would not allow a coloured man or any other man to learn my

girls to swim [*sic*]. [...] men would not be allowed within a stone's throw of where the women bathed [...]’ (Ratepayer, 1900 [Letter to the editor] cited by Smith & Rogers, 2012, p. 67). While the parent was mostly opposed to the appointment of a male life-guard on a mixed-gender beach, and not to Fortes' skin color, they were not blind to the 'Black old man's' Blackness (Smith & Rogers, 2012). The Victorian society in which Fortes was embedded was not exempt from White supremacist ideals (Winks, 1997) and he still faced racial discrimination. To be sure, Fortes was never fully accepted in the Vancouver White community and, as a Black man, he was restricted in his social and professional ascent (Wong, 2011). Nevertheless, in a majority Anglo-Saxon White community with a significantly small Black population, Fortes most probably encountered more tolerance than average (see Wong, 2011 and Smith & Rogers, 2012 for more on Fortes' tenure at Vancouver beach).

In the early twentieth century, swimming was a more complex affair elsewhere in Canada. Notably, individual accounts illustrate the presence and effect of a racial discourse in Canadian society. Through an account of her father's boyhood experiences (ca.1910s), Carol Talbot, a poet, writer, and teacher from Windsor (Ontario), demonstrates how racial discrimination functioned to create less opportunities for Black people:

Dad and his young friends [...] knew why they could only swim, on those hot, humid, summer days of southwestern Ontario, at certain beaches. There was no pollution then along the seventy-five miles of sandy beach from Mitchell's Bay, at the northeast end of the country, westward along the shore of Lake St. Clair, the Detroit River and the north shore of Lake Erie, but blacks could only swim at four spots along that shoreline: the foot of Bridge Ave. in Windsor; Smitty's, west of the town of Sandwich; Waterworks Park in Amherstburg; and Colchester Beach. Private picnics grounds or bathing beaches, even for church picnics, bowling alleys or other amusement centres were even more definitely out of the question for blacks. Such signs as 'Whites Only', 'White Gentiles Only', 'No Jews or Coloured People Allowed', or 'Restricted Clientele' were not uncommon sights for his young eyes. (Talbot, 1984, pp. 68–69)

This type of racial and ethnic segregation was not an exception; similar cases appeared in other locations and in other time periods. Historian Robin Winks (1997), for instance, wrote about police patrolling Colchester (Ontario) region's parks and beaches in the 1930s to prevent Black people from using them. Interestingly, Colchester Beach is one of the four spots in which, according to Talbot (1984), Black people could swim a few decades earlier. This was emblematic of the fluidity of the Canadian color bar – discriminatory practices shifted on a whim (Adams, 2012). Individuals were not bound by specific anti-discrimination laws; these laws were generally open to interpretation (Davis & Krauter, 1971). Such circumstances, however, did not prevent everyone from practicing swimming. And, there are instances of Black youths taking swimming lessons early in the century: amongst the large number of pupils that Joe Fortes taught to swim, a few were Black (Howard, 1991); there is evidence that children from Africville learned how to swim and adopted swimming as a regular activity (Africville Genealogy Society, 1992; Clairmont & Magill, 1971); and, in his autobiography, Lincoln Alexander mentioned a time when he took part in a swimming lesson estimated to have taken place in 1930s Ontario (Alexander & Shoveller, 2006). Alexander's early encounter with swimming, however, was not positive:

One thing I can't do athletically is swim. I went for lessons once, and the instructor got the brilliant idea of moving the taller people toward the deeper end, which ended up being not such good planning from my standpoint. [...] As soon as I realised that swimming could be

life-threatening, I was assured that I would have a very short swimming career. I never did learn how to swim. (Alexander & Shoveller, 2006, pp. 24–25)

Following that unpleasant experience, Alexander gravitated more toward basketball. Growing up around Toronto, he and his peers were more interested in basketball than swimming (Alexander & Shoveller, 2006). Most relevant is the fact that Alexander's testimony of the swimming lesson was not imprinted with the racist undertones that he highlighted in his account of growing up Black in Ontario. Alexander did not hide the fact that he had to overcome racial barriers to become the first Black Canadian Member of Parliament and, as Ontario's Lieutenant Governor, the first Black to occupy a viceregal position in Canada.

It is not clear from his description whether the lessons were given to a mixed group of kids or otherwise. Indeed, in the 1930s and 1940s, Black people were not welcome in most establishments and could very much be turned away (Winks, 1997). Alexander's presence in the local swimming pool suggests that there was no color bar surrounding that space or that, at least, opportunity was given to Black youth to access safe swimming spaces during that period. This is an important distinction to make, as it is found that experiences varied through time and from location to location. There are few accounts about Black Canadians in swimming in the early twentieth century, but at this early stage, swimming spaces provided a site where important social issues could be unpacked. Note, for instance, Ontario open waters: although not accessible to a full extent, as above indicated, they were an affordable option and help underscore open waters as the most accessible swimming venue, as the below relates.

From 1924 to 1952, the Emancipation Celebration (meant to recognize the abolition of slavery in the British colonies) was organized every summer in Port Dalhousie, on the shore of Lake Ontario. For the occasion, many Black families from Ontario attended a large picnic during which many participated in swimming at the pool and at the beach of Lakeside Park's resort (Henry, 2010). Henry (2010) remarked that while many attendees were Black, a few White people also attended. Inclusion of swimming activities in such a large and regular gathering suggests that there was a demand for swimming within the communities and that attendees were somewhat familiar with the activity. Both Lincoln Alexander and Carol Talbot recall attending the Celebration with their families during their childhood (Alexander & Shoveller, 2006; Talbot, 1984), although neither of them specifically refers to the beach's swimming activities.

Carol Talbot grew up in Windsor in the 1940s and 1950s and regularly attended social events organized by the region's Black community, such as church picnics, which featured swimming. Talbot also recalls more swimming opportunities during her childhood, at school, or on a holiday in Michigan (in her memoir, she includes a photograph of herself and her family in what looks like a lake). Later, as a young woman, Talbot and her female friends opted out of swimming activities (Talbot, 1984). Talbot explained that this came from a reluctance to wet her chemically treated hair. It is worth pointing out that hair is underlined in the literature as one of the reasons why Black Americans, especially women, stayed and continue to stay away from swimming (Irwin *et al.*, 2009). More research is needed to determine the extent of the impact of hair concerns on swimming participation both today and in a historical context. This aspect should also be viewed through a socio-economic lens.

For Talbot and others whose experiences are recounted herein, swimming did not evolve much beyond childhood. However, accounts such as these suggest that swimming

spaces were generally familiar to Black people, despite the inconsistent nature of their access to it. Navigating public spaces as a Black individual in Canada in the early part of the twentieth century was a difficult task, and the recurring theme of the fluidity of the Canadian color line remains. Lack of prejudice in a space or establishment did not mean lack of prejudice everywhere, anytime. In that context, one could never know exactly which door was worth knocking on. For instance, in the early and mid-twentieth century, Barbour (2011) described Winnipeg Beach as an integrated space that helped make Winnipeg (Manitoba) an example of ethnic diversity. Unlike with most similar resorts in the US, 'People did not go to Winnipeg Beach to construct themselves as white Canadians against black Canadians' (Barbour, 2011, p. 9). Yet, at that very same period, two nearby private beaches on the shore of Lake Winnipeg specifically advertised themselves as exclusively White; there, people of color (Black or other) were explicitly refused entry (Barbour, 2011).

Threading the color line

The fluidity of the Canadian color line and the lack of racial equality laws (Adams, 2012) were further illustrated in cases where one could be admitted in an establishment one day and turned away from that same establishment the next. While there was a common-law obligation to treat everyone equally in public spaces, until the 1950s, the obligation only applied to public inns and common carriers. In other spaces, administrators disregarded equality with impunity (Davis & Krauter, 1971). An illustrative case is found in Calgary, in 1948. In a letter to the *Calgary Herald* editor, a reader claimed that a pool manager refused to admit a Black girl into his pool because of her skin color (Leask, 1948). In response, the manager was quoted as saying that 'Negroes' could always 'go down to the city pool if they want' ('Color Bar Enforced at Local Pool,' 1948). According to the manager, he only sought to please his White patrons and prevent his business from failing: 'After all, the public makes the rules, and they wouldn't stand for it. I have had complaints about Chinese and Negroes in the pool. So, I have to enforce this regulation in my pool' ('Color Bar Enforced at Local Pool,' 1948, p. 1).

This incident implied that Black people could gain access to that pool on other days, but that the manager had suddenly put his foot down. Indeed, Ted King, a former resident of Calgary, recalled swimming in that same pool unrestrained only a few years before (J. Walker, 1997). The manager's reaction appeared arbitrary and circumstantial and, as such, there were protests (Leask, 1948; Shaw, 1948; S.M., 1948). In their letters to the editor of the *Herald*, Shaw (1948) and S.M. (1948) lamented the kind of ignorance that led to such racial discrimination and called for better education on these matters. For Leask (1948), such 'outrageous' incidents broke down 'our ideals of freedom.' Leask added that they hoped 'that the public will make [the pool manager] understand that in Canada there has never been a color line recognized, and that all Canadian citizens have equal rights' (p. 4). It is unclear whether the writers were Black or White. There was no further report on the incident, or on whether the manager's policy stayed. But, what transpired in this case demonstrates that, while a few openly endeavored to maintain a color line, there were some who disagreed just as openly.

Ambiguous treatment of people of color was a consequence of having a society in which racial discrimination was governed by informal rules Walker (2012). In absolute numbers, people of color were clear minorities in Canada (Milan & Tran, 2004). In the socio-cultural context of the time, they had been pushed to the margins and were largely

isolated, although racial discrimination in Canada did not grow exponentially as their numbers increased. Historian J. Walker (1985) also added that, historically, there has not been a way to correlate racial tension with economic anxiety. As Walker wrote,

The constant factor was that there were certain things blacks were supposed to do and not do; while the specific things might change over time and among the Canadian regions, the principle remained that a person's activities and opportunities could be restricted by his or her colour. People could be denied service, denied a job, denied training, on the presumed meaning of the colour of their skin. (J. Walker, 1985, p. 22)

Thus, a semblance of people of color assembling seemed to create enough anxiety in the White population to warrant further discrimination. In the Calgary pool incident, people of color were tolerated only if their presence did not disturb White patrons. Since the pool was not a municipal institution, the manager was not subject to the by-law put in place by the municipal council to counter such discriminatory acts. In fact, 'Any by-law reaching beyond hotels, for example to include taverns or other places of amusement, were outside the authority of the council' (J. Walker, 1997, p. 172). The pool manager in Calgary was thus free to do as he pleased when faced with what constituted an excess of 'Coloured people' in his pool ('Color Bar Enforced at Local Pool,' 1948).

A contrasting image, however, was illustrated in Montreal (Quebec). In a photograph that depicts a group of children performing exercises on the side of the Verdun pool (located in a borough of Montreal) in 1943 (Figure 4), two Black girls can be identified in the majority White group. Dated a month later, seemingly at the same pool, Figure 5 depicts a Black girl in the process of paying her entrance fee. And in Figure 6, two subjects (a Black woman and a White man) are depicted in what is described as a demonstration of lifesaving maneuvers. The physical proximity of the subjects in Figure 6 is especially significant, as the discussion below establishes that, in many cases, racial segregation in swimming spaces was especially enforced to limit interracial



Figure 4. Swimming. Exercising, 23 June 1943.

Source: Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, P48,S1,P9649, Conrad Poirier fonds, Pistard Collection, Centre: BANQ Vieux-Montréal.



Figure 5. Swimming. Verdun Pool, 27 July 1943.

Source: Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, P48,S1,P9666, Conrad Poirier fonds, Pistard Collection, Centre: BANQ Vieux-Montréal.



Figure 6. Swimming. Merlyn Bryant; Laurent Mallette, 27 July 1943.

Source: Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, P48,S1,P9685, Conrad Poirier fonds, Pistard Collection, Centre: BANQ Vieux-Montréal.

mixed-gender contact. Moreover, the collection of dozens of photographs taken that summer at Verdun suggests that there were no Black boys/men in or around that pool.

Since Black people represented approximately 0.2% of the Canadian population during the 1940s, only a portion of which could be found in Montreal (Winks, 1997), the presence of Black individual swimmers and their visibility in these photographs is significant. Note that, without a deeper understanding of the circumstances under which the photographs were taken, their interpretation is limited. Furthermore, one must acknowledge that labeling of the individuals as Black may not be accurate. The original

source did not make note of the identity of the subjects, so the researchers inferred Blackness only based on external characteristics.

We observe how, when the law did not explicitly contradict them, some chose not to admit Black people into their establishments. This behavior was even more pronounced in the interwar years (J. Walker, 1985). Yet, exceptions continue to underscore the fluidity of the Canadian color line, which demands further analysis to better comprehend the factors that made the public draw or erase the line. Davis (n.d.) suggested that, in one segregated Vancouver public pool, there was a separate schedule for White and non-White people; the municipality abolished that policy in 1945 and decreed that everybody, whatever their race, creed, or skin color, should be admitted without discrimination. The inconsistent pattern of racial intolerance across Canada is further illustrated in the case of the Negro Community Centre in 1940s Montreal, where summer campers took trips to a local pool ('Negro Community Centre's Camp,' 1946). The Center was located in a predominantly Black neighborhood of Montreal, and children attending the camp were mostly Black. Notably, these trips were still taking place in the 1960s (Kunstler, 1966). Such cases indicate that discrimination was not reflected uniformly across Canada, and that the *modus operandi* was set locally and independently.

At the swim meet

The following four cases from the 1930s to the 1950s suggest that Black participation in competitive swimming was more tolerated. The highest barrier, in this case, was socio-economic class. With that said, while race remains a factor in the class struggle in the intersectional paradigm, a fully intersectional examination in this work, as per Collins (2002) and Hylton (2009), is complicated by the limited sources. The descriptions below ought to serve as a foundation for a future, in-depth, analysis.

The earliest case of competitive swimming found is that of Elmwood Singer, a Black swimmer from Detroit (Michigan), who participated in a Canadian National Exhibition 8 km race held in Lake Ontario (Toronto) in September 1936. Although he was among those who abandoned the race due to the low water temperature, his participation is still noteworthy. The *New York Times* reported that this was the first time a Black had taken part in that level of competition in Canada (Associated Press, 1936), suggesting that interracial competition was established at lower levels of the sport. Interestingly, several local French and English Canadian newspapers (Canadian Press, 1936; 'Frank Pritchard Gagne,' 1936; 'Pritchard Winner,' 1936; 'Pritchard Wins Swim,' 1936) did not mention the Black swimmer, or his milestone, in their reports.

Sources also indicate that Canadian media was just as silent in 1948 when an all-Black swimming team from Howard University (the historically Black institution from Washington, DC) participated in a tournament against the (apparently all-White) McGill University swimming team in Montreal ('McGill Natators Win,' 1948). According to the Associated Press (1948), it was the first time an all-Black swimming team had taken part in such a tournament in Canada. Again, no local newspapers confirmed this at the time.

That Canadian newspapers did not attract attention to the racial significance of the two events is one thing. They had involved Black American swimmers who traveled to compete in Canada. But that interracial competition was not as newsworthy for the Canadian press as it was for the American press is of interest. For the McGill meet in 1948, the lack of attention can also be due to the fact that Black swimmers were not a novelty, at least in Montreal. As Figure 7 indicates, at least one high school in Montreal

counted a Black swimmer in the late 1940s. Around that time, there was also at least one Black swimmer, Bob White, who swam and played water polo in the city. The athlete was quoted as saying that he competed in tournaments and in buildings which ‘a few years before had banned Jews and Blacks’ (Joyce, 2004, p. 35). White competed until the mid-1950s when he left to study in the US and to pursue a career that kept him involved in swimming.

White’s account begs the question of whether the Negro Community Centre’s children only started their trips to pools (‘Negro Community Centre’s Camp Starting Today on Mount Royal,’ 1946) after the 1930s, having been banned before then. Sources do not allow us to answer the question, especially due to the way discrimination operated without the need of explicit laws. However, both White and Figure 7 suggest that, even if Black swimmers were not allowed access to facilities in Montreal prior to the 1940s, by the end of that decade, Black athletes were not an uncommon sight at meets. Thus, it made it less likely for the press to underline the significance of the McGill–Howard meet even in the face of the local team’s victory.

Black (amateur) swimming appears sporadic compared to recreational participation. Of course, when swimming started developing as a competitive activity (from its roots as a simple utilitarian activity), the increasing cost of participating was partly responsible for discouraging participation of the lower classes (Bier, 2011; DeLuca, 2013). And, historically, most Black Canadians were in the lowest socio-economic classes, their mobility deeply affected by a mix of individual and institutional racism (Kelly & Wossen-Taffesse, 2012; Lewis & Cooper, 1999; Talbot, 1984; Winks, 1997). Although their situation varied between the 1900s and the 1960s, and slightly improved after the First World War, Black Canadians’ lower employment rates, lower incomes, and higher

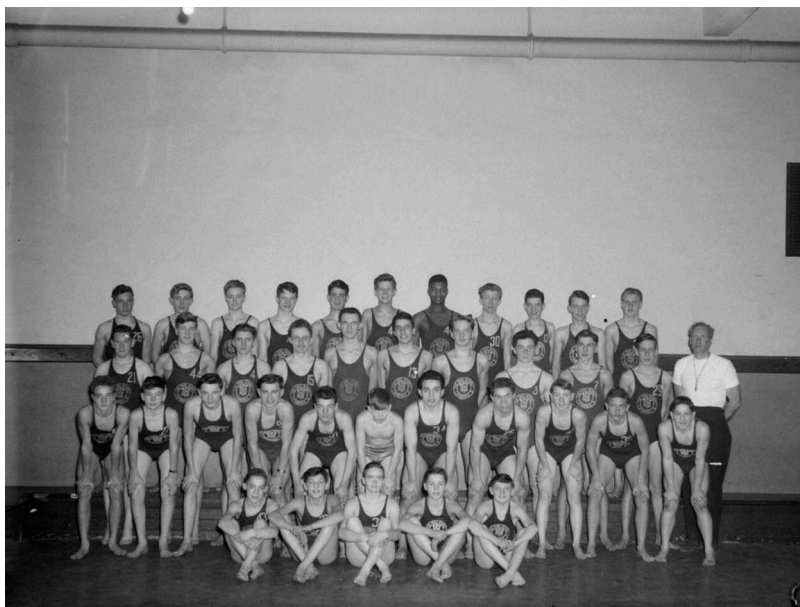


Figure 7. Group. Mt High School, 27 January 1947.

Source: Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, P48,S1,P15396, Conrad Poirier fonds, Pistard Collection, Centre: BANQ Vieux-Montréal.

unemployment rates continued to be linked to unfair treatment and racial discrimination (Brand, 1991; Mensah, 2010). A great majority of Black men worked in menial service jobs, while several Black women worked as domestics. In those circumstances, access to public spaces, including swimming, was negatively impacted (Bier, 2011; Wiltse, 2007). When Barbour (2011) stated that Winnipeg Beach was open to anybody who could catch a train to the resort, he rightly notes that train tickets implicitly discriminated against those who could not afford them. Winnipeg Beach may have been free of 'Whites Only' signs, but financial barriers ensured that Black swimmers' numbers would be reduced. It is possible that one may have had access to swimming through school, but the literature does not indicate that Figure 7's case was common. And nothing in the literature indicates that segregated Black schools, still active in that time, were likely to offer competitive swimming opportunities.

Within that system, progress in competitive swimming was difficult. Open waters could not always be relied upon as a training alternative either. Without adequate aquatic spaces, not to mention the diminished capability to afford the costs of participating in competitive swimming, Black people could not rise far in the sport. Instead, they turned toward more affordable activities, particularly track and field (as per Lewis & Cooper, 1999 and Mensah, 2010). As this study indicates, most accounts of Black people swimming in Canada barely involved more than dipping or wading in the water; Africville residents' unrestricted access to open water could hardly compare with facilities available to other Halifax residents (Clairmont & Magill, 1971). Furthermore, economically disadvantaged groups could not compete against those who trained in state-of-the-art facilities, had access to coaches, and had ample leisure time. Hence, lack of financial resources could limit access, or only opened access to inadequate facilities; this was both an economic and a racial issue, since racial minorities were more likely to be located at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. This demonstrates the complex link between discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage (Mensah, 2010), and also speaks to the simultaneous impact of multiple social identifiers as to how individuals cannot be reduced to a single social category (Collins, 2002; Hylton, 2005).

Interestingly, the Montreal swimmer's career suggests that the presence of Black people in the sport's administration had the potential to influence Black youth's participation in swimming. In the mid-1950s, Bob White left Montreal to study in the US (Joyce, 2004). He went on to work as the director of the Harlem (New York) YMCA's swimming program in the 1960s, and also served as the head of the swimming safety section in the Parks Department of New York City ('Westend Sport Association,' 1980). White then went back to Montreal in the 1980s to open the Westend Sport Association, a youth program which he co-instigated and for which he served as the water safety branch manager. The branch intended to prevent any aquatic tragedy by installing an effective supervision system during aquatic activities and by teaching lifesaving techniques ('Westend Sport Association,' 1980). The impact of this program is outside the scope of this work, but its instigation proposes widespread effect.

Understanding 'Whites only' spaces

The question raised by discrimination in swimming is, beyond the immediate injustice, what was the socio-cultural impact? To analyze the consequences, it is necessary to understand how swimming spaces were positioned within the wider sociological landscape. In this way, we can begin to draw a connection between the individual troubles

described so far, and public issues (Kelly & Wossen-Taffesse, 2012). In other words, the below attempts to link intolerance in swimming spaces and the reinforcement of systemic racism.

Swimming spaces are particularly pertinent in the study of racial ideologies' development. Historically, racial segregation most often concerned activities in which contact/proximity between Black and White people was perceived to be most likely. Fear of interracial contact was most widespread in those areas. In fact,

[Karl Gunnar] Myrdal [a renowned economist and sociologist] argued that the highest bar the white raised against the Negro was over intermarriage and sexual intercourse involving white women. Next rose the question of general etiquette and social courtesies, including dancing, swimming, eating, and drinking together. Of less importance to whites was the preservation of discrimination in the use of public facilities, such as schools, churches, and transport. (Winks, 1997, p. 471)

While this concerned US dynamics in the 1940s, Winks (1997) asserted that those same notions applied to Canada. As mentioned above, racial segregation was common in many public Canadian institutions (Backhouse, 1994; Davis & Krauter, 1971; Palmer & Palmer, 1985; J. Walker, 1997; Winks, 1997). Myrdal's argument exposes integrated swimming spaces, where barely clad bodies came near one another, as especially subject to segregation, more so than integrated schools, churches, and transportation. The swimming environment created unease, especially for those intent on preventing interracial contact between men and women (Wiltse, 2007). As Verbrugge (2010) noted, 'In the [...] pool, physical separation could instantly disappear: [...] bodies became tangible, active and exposed; interaction was intimate and unscripted' (p. 1208). Intrinsically, interracial socialization at a swimming pool or beach was just as intimate as eating and drinking together, and only just more tolerable than interracial sexual intercourse and marriage. While Victorian-era segregation in swimming spaces had centered on gender and class, in the Progressive era, mixed-gender policies became the new norm. Indeed,

social, cultural, and institutional transformation occurred during the first half of the twentieth century and involved the central developments of the period: urbanization, the erosion of Victorian culture, Progressive reform, the emergence of popular recreation, the gender integration and racial segregation of public space, and the sexualization of public culture. (Wiltse, 2007, p. 2)

The gender desegregation shift raised new concerns about race; in the early twentieth century, fear of contact between 'sexually deviant' Black men and White women was especially heightened in swimming spaces, and the 'best way' to counter the presumed danger was through racial segregation (Wiltse, 2007). Hence, racial integration in some Canadian swimming spaces was monitored to prevent interracial mixed-gender contact. Standing atop the racial, social, and economic hierarchy, 'the British-Canadian elite feared that proximity [between races] could promote sexual contact with "lesser" races which would "mongrelize" their [own] race' (Barbour, 2011, p. 16).

It should be noted that in the photograph series of the Verdun pool (of which Figures 5, 6, and 7 are a part), none of the photographs show Black children *inside* the pool, but, even more, no Black boy or men seem to appear in the series. The presence of White boys/men shows that there was no gender segregation at the pool. Considering the prejudices previously discussed, it is possible that this was reflective of a fear of interracial contact between Black boys/men and White girls/women. Further investigation

into the Verdun pool history is necessary to better comprehend the circumstances surrounding attendance. But nuancing the narrative, Joe Fortes' case suggests that Black men did not always inspire fear. [Figure 4](#) is especially illustrative, as Fortes appears with women in the water. The parent who expressed concern over Fortes teaching women and girls to swim suggests that some in the community expected men ('Coloured' or otherwise) and women to be separated in that environment.

The water medium itself appeared to be the source of discomfort. In the US, White people made a point to avoid sharing a swimming pool with Black people and went as far as to avoid touching water in which a Black person had swum (Wiltse, 2007). As Hoose noted, 'Where there were no laws, many White people became uncomfortable or fearful if [Blacks] dared to enter, as if the Blackness itself would ooze off in the water' (Hoose, 1989, p. 72). This was linked to a notion that Black people were carriers of diseases (Verbrugge, 2010). Although the same stereotype was not made explicit in Canada, the existence of a racial ideology in Canada founded on similar principles suggests that such prejudices were also present. Note also that Black people were not entirely prevented from accessing swimming spaces, just separated. In Vancouver pools in 1945 (separate schedules), in the Calgary case in 1948 (complaints about Negroes and Chinese in the pool), in the segregated beaches on Lake Winnipeg, or the patrolled beach in Colchester, separation was accomplished through (i) arbitrary segregation, (ii) outright discrimination with the option of an alternative swimming space, or (iii) scheduling. In addition to racial prejudice, the Calgary pool case indicates that economic pressure from the White-majority patrons was also a factor. Business owners had less to lose by catering to their White patrons at the expense of patrons of color (Mensah, 2010).

An important point to make is that interracial contact in the pool was frowned upon not only between men and women, but between women too. Verbrugge's (2010) examination reveals how, in the American Young Women's Christian Association (YW), an institution by and for women, Black women's proximity to White women was a source of contention. As the author explains, 'Inclusiveness [within the YW's programs] did not mean interaction; black and white girls rarely swam or played with one another during the YW's first half-century' (Verbrugge, 2010, p. 1193). Additionally, Black YW branches conducted their program in second-rate facilities with meager budgets and underpaid staff. White members of YW boards pretexted that Black women were different, diseased, and disruptive, revealing the White leaders' common desire to protect 'pure White women' from the contamination of 'unclean Black bodies,' whether male or female. In Canada, similar cases have not been reported in the literature, and this study did not yield such narrative. However, there are historical parallels between the two countries regarding Black women's equal opportunities struggle (among others, Brand, 1991; Bristow, 1994; Cooper, 2000; and Flynn, 2011 have explored the topic).

The manifestation of racial prejudice in swimming spaces was an extension of discrimination encountered in other spaces. This generally involved being turned away at the door and being told that the establishment did not serve their kind (Lewis & Cooper, 1999). For Ray Lewis, a Black Olympian from Hamilton (Ontario), this was the case when an acquaintance of his was refused entry at a Hamilton swimming pool (Lewis & Cooper, 1999). According to Lewis, the incident mirrored his own many encounters with discrimination in taverns, school, on football pitches, and in running competitions across Canada. In that way, restricted access to swimming inscribed itself in a pattern of barriers that Black Canadians had to navigate on a regular basis. And such happenings are not minor; although occurring on a small scale and often directed at one individual at

a time, they accumulate to define power relations and inform the politics on race on a much larger scale (Carrington, 2002; Peake & Ray, 2001). As articulated below, swimming spaces were so emblematic of racial discrimination that they became political tools in the struggle for racial equality.

Politicizing the pool

Despite the progress evident after the Second World War, racial intolerance remained an issue for Black Canadians. By the 1960s, swimming pools were a space around which unresolved inequality issues were debated. In 1967, the level of racial intolerance in swimming spaces was such that, during a meeting of young Black activists in Halifax, one suggested that going swimming was as an act of defiance to the racial oppression. At the height of the American civil rights movement, Burnley 'Rocky' Jones, a renowned African-Nova Scotian activist, had this to say about getting heard:

[People like Martin Luther King Jr.] are your autonomous leaders. Those are the guys that are leading a five, six, and seven hundred men game. Those are the guys – the organisers. [...] When you turn those guys [their followers] on and when you develop a confidence, and you can say to them: 'Come on! Let's do something! Let's go swimming!' And if it's not 'Let's go swimming' it's 'Let's boycott this joint' or, if it's not that, 'Let's all go down and apply for this job and if we don't get it then we're just gonna sit here and they're not gonna close it to us!' (Howells, Kemeny, & Tasker, 1967)

Jones implied that there was no question that race was the factor behind the lack of access to certain swimming pools, jobs, or public establishments. Going swimming was considered a statement against racial prejudice. From the 1940s to the 1960s, activists rallied against specific discrimination in public establishments, with the goal of forcing those establishments to cease their discriminatory practices (J. Walker, 1985). This was 'peaceful activism,' a form of activism adopted by the Black United Front, an association formed to fight for racial equality in Nova Scotia and elsewhere in Canada. Black civil rights campaigns had very precise goals. One was to get the management of public establishments, such as pools and skating rinks, to admit Black people. Since the 1940s, pools were in the list of public spaces that activists were intent on making more accessible (J. Walker, 1985). As confirmed by the activist's speech in Halifax, this was still ongoing in the 1960s.

The politicization of swimming, and the difficulties attached, were emphasized in the remarks by Jim Kearney of the *Vancouver Sun* when he commented on the Mexico Olympic Games (1968). He highlighted Black athletes' absence from swimming, not just in Canada, but also internationally. In his report of the iconic Black Power podium protest by John Carlos and Tommie Smith, Kearney asserted that:

As Jimmy Durante used to say, 'Everybody's trying to get into the act'. Okay, make that past tense because the act – track and field segment of the 19th Olympiad – is over. So too probably is Black Power politicizing, swimming is the big Olympic splash of the remainder of the Games. (Kearney, 1968, p. 19)

According to Kearney, the absence of Black people in swimming meant that there could be no more Black Power displays for the remainder of the Games. Swimming, Kearney wrote, 'is a pastime in which there are no Black Power politics because there is no Black Power. There is not a single Negro swimmer on the premises' (Kearney, 1968,

p. 19). Five decades on, Black athletes' absence from the Olympic pool has only minimally been remedied. Kearney's observation consequently justifies why young activists perceived swimming to be an act of defiance. Public swimming spaces could reinforce racial stereotypes and discrimination, but they could also become platforms on which the struggle for racial equality could be waged.

Conclusion

Swimming pools and beaches were some of the public spaces that commonly barred access to Black people in Canada. This was part of the structure that helped define the relationship of power between White and Black Canadians. In that way, swimming spaces played a role in the preservation of a racial hierarchy. Note that a longstanding American myth that Black people cannot swim (Dawson, 2006; Irwin *et al.*, 2009; Martin-Breteau, 2010; Wiltse, 2014) did not transpire in the sources examined. Thus far, MacNeill (2002) is the sole Canadian work that has produced evidence of that stereotype in Canadian society: MacNeill explored Sydney Olympic Games' TV broadcasts and Canadian journalists' reproduction of the myth's discourse when discussing the only two Black swimmers to compete that year. MacNeill's work, however, did not position its analysis in a historical context. Further research is needed to determine the presence of the notion that Black people cannot swim within Canadian society, past or present.

While this work focuses on anti-Blackness in its conceptualization around Whites-only spaces, further study should examine the exclusion of other people of color, notably the Chinese, in light of the Calgary pool manager's rhetoric. Most recently, Rich and Giles (2014) presented swimming as an activity where, today, Whiteness is performed and reinforced. Through this study, it becomes clear that, as the twentieth century progressed, racial discrimination in swimming spaces only diminished in intensity. A shift in attitude facilitated some change and the fluid color line may also have been partially a blessing in disguise. Palmer and Palmer (1985) notably reported that, following the Second World War, citizens began standing up against racism, especially thanks to media reports of various incidents.

Through that process, in 1924, the Edmonton (Alberta) municipal council overturned a motion made by an official to prevent Black access to public parks and pools (Winks, 1997). But such local initiatives did not necessarily reflect the reality across the nation. With a fluid and circumstantial (Adams, 2012) color line, racial prejudice manifestations were complex affairs that varied from location to location and from period to period. Ultimately, the swimming space represented many things for Black Canadians. It was not just a sporting and leisure space, it was a site for contesting racial prejudice in a society in which they enjoyed little social, political, and economic power. Between the 1900s and the 1960s, the struggle to enter swimming spaces made Black people visible in an exclusively White space. This narrative is essential; from a social history of a leisure activity emerges a complex Canadian history which challenges the myth of Canada as a benign non-racist nation.

The limitation of the sources does not permit us to delve deeper into the motivation of the various actors presented in this work. However, the accounts presented suggest that leisure, recreation, and sporting spaces are fertile ground for the exploration of subverted Canadian socio-historical narratives, ones that can help in the diversification of minority groups' narratives. Indeed, the particularities of and

similarities between the various cases discussed underscore the nuanced and varied effects of an informal racial discrimination policy in Canada. Without explicitly racist laws, racial intolerance could still prevail. While exclusion was not total, it was unpredictable.

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