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Liz Rohan
University of Michigan-Dearborn

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The Dolphins and the Bodily Arts: Swimming as a feminist rhetoric and pedagogy at the Detroit, Michigan Women's City Club Pool, 1924 to 1975

By Liz Rohan¹

Abstract

This micro historical case study introduces US progressive-era feminist swimming pedagogy as a “bodily art.” It showcases the interplay between culture, rhetoric, feminism and pedagogy during a boom time in the city of Detroit when female athletes competed in the city’s open waters and discourse about women’s swimming was circulating nationally. It suggests that historical cultural constructs can be models for future culture building.

Keywords: feminist rhetoric, feminist pedagogy, Detroit, women’s sports, women’s swimming, bodily arts, body arts

Introduction

This historical case study features the interplay of rhetoric, culture, and the material, including bodies, that built and sustained a pedagogy at a swim club within the Detroit Women’s City Club founded in the 1920s. Dolphin club writers, teachers and coaches co-opted cultural constructs celebrating female swimmers for their particular ends during a boom time in Detroit. As money poured into the city because of the auto industry, and as the city grew in girth exponentially from twenty-eight to 139 square miles, the city’s architecture and the new way of living, including automobile dependency, became models for other cities.² Situated on a river between the Great Lakes Huron and Erie, and nest to the tributary water. Lake Saint Clair, the city was also a destination for national open water swimming events for competitive female swimmers. The Woman’s Aquatic Club, founded in Detroit in 1914, sponsored national open water swim events in the Detroit River and Lake Saint Clair for decades.³ Thus, the Dolphins contributed to and benefitted from circulating rhetoric celebrating the female swimmer in a city expanding and under a national microscope.

This study situates bodies as central to the cultural production of rhetoric and pedagogy, contributing to Debra Hawhee studies of “rhetoric’s emerge in a network of cultural educational practices through and by the body” in ancient Athens.⁴ This study also shows how culture and rhetoric can build and sustain a pedagogy that requires movement of bodies and that is also place-

¹ Liz Rohan is a Professor of Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. With Gesa Kirsch she is the editor of *Beyond the Archives: Research as Lived Process* (Southern Illinois Press, 2008). Her research that reflects her ongoing interests in pedagogy, feminist research methods and America's progressive era have appeared in journals such as *Rhetoric Review*, *Composition Studies*, *Pedagogy*, *JAEPL*, *Reflections*, *Composition Forum*, *Peitho* and also in several book chapters.

² Peter Gavrilovich and Bill McGraw, *The Detroit Almanac* (Detroit: Detroit Free Press, 2000), 45; Arthur Pound., *Detroit Dynamic City* (New York City: Appleton Century, 1940), 120.

³ “Woman’s Aquatic Club in Forty-Eighth Year,” *Detroit Women’s City Club Magazine*, October 1962, 18/23.

⁴ Debra Hawhee, *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 6.

based, in this case dependent on access to water. The Women's City Club pool and also the city of Detroit itself were both companion and centerpiece for the production of rhetoric about women's swimming, and circulating rhetoric about women's swimming pedagogy--similar perhaps to the *gymnasia* as a site for invention, expression and the overall production of culture in the Ancient Greek context that Hawhee studies. As Hawhee explains, the *gymnasia* "contributed to the development of rhetoric as a bodily art: an art learned, practiced, and performed by and with the body as well as the mind."⁵ The Detroit women's city club pool likewise enabled processes of the mind and body highly mediated by rhetoric in their club magazine. The Detroit Women's City Club was also exclusive to white women, indicative of a segregated club culture at the time in Detroit and in the US. It did however welcome single women into its fold. The typical member at the club was either a professional or a married philanthropist who was a leader in other Detroit clubs and civic organizations.⁶

The Dolphins' emphasis on swimming, fitness and competition as cultural efficacy also informs Hawhee's understanding of *kairos* integrated with the orchestral movement of bodies. It furthermore considers *kairos* in a feminist context, particularly relating to first-wave feminist discourse and the means of persuasion it enabled during its heyday of circulation immediately after women got the right to vote in the US. The women who ran the Dolphin club's swimming program, and the coaches and swimming instructors who supported it, took their opportunities for granted in a flush city. In this place, and also this place in time, building a pool just for women would not have seemed an extravagance or women's agency as athletes or employees a new or ominous threat. Women who created the Dolphin swim club culture promoted swimming as a right for their members and their members' children through their programming and their rhetoric. This rhetoric, including descriptions of swimming techniques, mimicked articles in national publications, like those of the relatively new Women's Swimming Association (WSA), which published detailed tips and stroke advice for new and aspiring swimmers.⁷

As this Detroit club flourished and Detroit boomed, swimming was becoming the most popular form of recreation during a boom time also for the building of municipal pools. By 1929 outdoor pools had increased "almost six-fold from a decade earlier" in cities and suburbs across the US.⁸ Many Americans were flocking to pools first because of better sanitation and also because there was less nativist anxiety among whites due to stricter immigration laws and therefore more tolerance for rubbing elbows in an intimate space with the unwashed, usually quite literally. Racism and hyper-segregation excluded most African Americans from municipal pools but easing gender norms, and the new bathing suit styles, circumvented previous cultural codes that had restricted mixing of the sexes at swimming pools and beaches. Families could now recreate together in a more relaxed setting at local pools and beaches because of the more abstract cultural constructs allowing it and the more specific material resources such as the new female bathing suit.⁹

The growth and development of this 1920s feminist club culture relatedly measures how synchronistic and intentional culture-building can produce a sustainable pedagogy. As Seltzer

⁵ Hawhee, "Bodily Pedagogies, Rhetoric, Athletics, and the Sophists Three Rs." *College English* 56, no 2 (2004), 144.

⁶ Report of the Nominating Committee," [Detroit] Women's City Club Records, Box 1, Folder 9.

⁷ Lisa Brier, *Fighting the Current: The Rise of American Women's Swimming* (New York: McFarland and Company, 2011), 104.

⁸ Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 93.

⁹ *ibid*, 102.

argues, “[M]aterial realities, cultural practices, and physical bodies shape and persuade,”¹⁰ and this study of the Dolphins pedagogy developed in a sweet spot in time shows how rhetoric shaped and was shaped by a specific space: a pool, and also other more abstract material resources like white privilege. Jessica Enoch considers the legacy of the US schoolhouse for studying how women engaged with and manipulated ordinary spaces and also circulating rhetorics that were being consumed and produced by female teachers during a cultural moment. Rhetoric informed female teachers’ pedagogical practices when teaching became gendered as a female vocation and as the schoolhouse was culturally constructed as a woman’s domain.¹¹ One swimming pool is featured here as another kind of ordinary classroom, a modern if not contemporary *gymnasia*, a space that women manipulated, mediated and embodied for their own ends as athletes, teachers and parents.

This study credits the success and relative longevity of the Dolphins swim club to a specific brand of first-wave feminist discourse and its mediation and circulation in mainstream presses. This feminism acknowledged the celebrity sports hero such as swimmer Trudy Ederle as inspirational, but bolstered foremost the everyday participant, co-constructing an imaginary community of female swimmers competent at any level. Pedagogy was built into the sustainability of the swim club because participation by all its membership was a foundational principle. For anybody or everybody to use the pool, anybody or everybody had to know how to swim as well.

The factors of circulating media at the national level influencing this pedagogy potentially transformative to the body and spirit at this Detroit club furthermore teaches the significance of “social circulation” in building cultural movements. Social circulation, defined by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch, is “a metaphor to indicate the social networks in which women connect and interact with others and use language with intension” and also a mechanism for measuring activism and community building that is rhetorically shaped.¹² Circulating images of swimmer Ederle and her ilk in the media fashioned swimming as powerful, and the crawl, a stroke newly conceived, as a specific mechanism of this power, imposing significant cultural meaning into an otherwise ordinary process: learning to swim. This physical power was also perhaps symbolic as well since it required movement and mobility. Dolphin members who were aspiring swimmers were theoretically in the same company of the first female American Olympian swimmer, Ethelda Bleibtrey, who got her start through the WSA hoping swimming would be therapy for the curvature of her spine from a case of childhood polio.¹³ The social action embedded in a swimming pedagogy was linked broadly with women’s rights and also the personal efficacy of individuals like Ederle and Bleibtrey. The layered influence of national discourse on the Dolphins, and their enactment of cultural scripts through pedagogy, also affirms Anne Gere’s argument that US progressive-era women “club members carried out cultural work that aided a refashioning of the nation.”¹⁴ The Dolphin swim club proliferated and participated in a culture of female athleticism that celebrated the national star athlete and the every-day athlete on location.

¹⁰ Jack Selzer, “Rhetorical Bodies. Habeas Corpus: An Introduction,” in *Rhetorical Bodies*, eds. Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley (University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 8.

¹¹ Jessica Enoch, “A Woman’s Place Is in the School: Rhetorics of Gendered Space in Nineteenth-Century America,” *College English* 20, no 3 (2008).

¹² Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch, *Feminist Historical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*. (Carbondale: Southern University Press), 101.

¹³ Barney David E Barney, “American Genesis: The 1920 Archeology of Women’s Swimming in 1920 Olympic Games. (London, Ontario: International Centre for Olympic Games, 2008) <http://library.la84.org/SportsLibrary/ISOR/isor2008y.pdf>. Accessed November 29, 2017, 213.

¹⁴ Ann Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women’s Clubs 1880-1920*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 5.

The significance of social circulation as a foundation for a feminist bodily art argued in this study relies on the methods of microhistory, which entails a study of the club's pedagogy as its particulars relate to dominant cultural scripts, such as the popularity of swimming contests for women, primers on swimming for women, and the embrace of the female sports hero. A partial or local history can still inform an insight about the whole. As microhistorian Georg Iggers argues, "A history dealing with broad social transformation and one centering on individuals can coexist and supplement each other."¹⁵ And as Giovanni Levi similarly argues, microhistory "accentuates individual lives" but shows also how "individual cases can serve to reveal more general phenomenon."¹⁶ Because the Dolphins embraced a swimming pedagogy as their primary founding initiative when interest in the sport peaked among feminist women in the US and Europe, the Dolphins were average witnesses to a broad cultural pattern, particularly first-wave feminism. But their resources—a new club pool, a city surrounded by water, and a magazine to mediate their work as athletes, teachers and feminists—were at the same time exceptional, enabling their legacy, and hence the opportunity for us to study it. The eventual shuttering of the Detroit Women's City Club building and pool in a then and now socioeconomically depressed and racially divided city like Detroit, parallels also a waning civic democracy sponsoring swimming and might be a fitting backdrop to ponder the relationship between swimming, material culture and rhetoric, particularly when using an activist lens, which will be discussed in the conclusion.

Cultural Contexts: Women's Swimming in the US

Swimming or teaching swimming was not culturally constructed as a feminine activity in the US until the 1920s even though drowning had been a big problem in Victorian America. Women were particularly disadvantaged in water because of their copious clothing. But the tragic sinking of the ship, the *Slocum*, in 1904 in part birthed a feminist movement for swimming. Most of the ship's passengers who drowned during a pleasure cruise for a work party were women and children.¹⁷ One effect of the new interest in swimming among women and for women was the highly mediated career of Ederle who swam the English Channel in 1926 and whose athletic efforts were publicized in papers in the US and Europe. Ederle was among other female swimmers to inspire and actually create swimming suits to reduce drag and friction and who made the American crawl a household term. Ederle was also one among other feminine sports heroes of the day, such as pilot, Amelia Earhart, and tennis player, Helen Wills, who modeled freedom of expression through the mass media while also fashioning comfortable, loose clothing.¹⁸ Charlotte Epstein, a sports hero of another sort, founded the women's swimming association (WSA) in 1914 and encouraged the teaching of swimming to women and also lifesaving courses while creating opportunities for women to compete in amateur swimming meets across the US.¹⁹ Opportunities for women to work as lifeguards meanwhile opened up during World War I when men were drafted

¹⁵ George G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: from Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 104.

¹⁶ Levi, Giovanni. "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing.*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1991), 109.

¹⁷ Glenn Stout, *Young Woman and the Sea. How Trudy Ederle Conquered the English Channel and Inspired the World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2009), 8-9

¹⁸ Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York, Knopf, 1983), 270; Susan Ware, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993), 25.

¹⁹ Bier 103; Barney 212.

or enlisted to fight.²⁰ The 1920s was also the heyday of a new magazine called *The Sportswoman*, edited and authored by women, that circulated stories of female athletes, many swimmers, with a special emphasis on participation over winning,²¹ a complement to the messages and programming created by the WSA. The subjects in *The Sportswoman* were all white women, the typical beneficiaries of the new feminist culture emphasizing women's efficacy, individuality and equality with men.²²

About the Detroit Women's City Club

The Dolphins swim club was founded in a key time for feminists in American culture post-Suffrage and pre-Depression when women athletes like Ederle drew crowds and accolades, when major newspapers covered women's swimming events, and when Detroit was also a destination for national swimming events featuring competition among Ederle's rivals. A national swimming club held its championship open water swim events in Detroit in 1925, which included the 880 yard swim (when Ethel McGary beat Ederle's record), a half mile swim, a two mile swim and diving contests.²³ Women swimming in Detroit made front page news in 1927 when the Woman's Aquatic Club sponsored a 24-mile swim across Lake Saint Clair. Seventeen women entered the race but only seven finished.²⁴

The Dolphins swim club was founded in conjunction with the completion of building the Detroit's Women's City Club that was finished in 1924. Formed on paper just five years before, the club building was funded as a type of co-op, by 7,000 participating members in a remarkable synergy--which suggests a degree of optimism and agency among its stakeholders. Its architect was the husband of a member of the club, Mary Perry Chase Stratton, who was an artist that designed the tile for the pool built in the basement of the building. Stratton's career is further memorialized in Detroit and its suburbs by tiles she designed for homes, schools and other public buildings, known at Pewabic Pottery.²⁵ The clubhouse was a den and showcase for Detroit women's proliferating power. In addition to the pool, the club had a restaurant, rest rooms, a lounge, committee rooms, an auditorium, and 56 bedrooms for out of town members and guests. Some members also presumably lived at the club.²⁶ Two years after the women's city club building was finished three groups of philanthropists raised money from local charities and corporate stakeholders in a "Building for the Womanhood of Detroit" to fund an addition to a settlement house run by an elite woman's club, a new Y.W.C.A. building and a woman's hospital.²⁷

²⁰W. E. Longfellow, "Women Life-Savers: Their Feats and Skill and Daring Win Recognition by the Red Cross," *Ladies Home Journal*. June 1920, 128.

²¹ Stephanie Twin, "Introduction," in. *Out of the Bleachers: Writing on Women and Sport*, ed. Stephanie Twin (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), xxxiii.

²² Ware, 141.

²³ "Miss M'Gary Breaks World Swim Record.," *New York Times*. 7 August 1925. 11.

²⁴ *ibid*; "Woman's Aquatic Club in Forty-Eighth Year"; "Women to Compete for Aquatic Titles," *New York Times*, 2 August 1925. S4.

²⁵ Julie Teran, ed. "Stratton, Mary Chase Perry." *Encyclopedia of Detroit*. Detroit Historical Society. [Detroithistoricalsociety.org](http://detroithistoricalsociety.org). Web. Accessed November 17, 2017.

²⁶ Helen Bower, "How the Detroit Women's City Club Was Started," [Detroit] Women's City Club Records 1919--1977, Burton Historical Library, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Box 1, Folder 9.

²⁷ "Social Pioneering," Borgchild Halvorsen Papers, Edsel and Eleanor Ford Estate Archives, Grosse Pointe Shores, MI.

As mentioned earlier, the Detroit Women's City Club was a white women's club in part because, as was the case generally across the US, women's clubs were segregated in Detroit.²⁸ African Americans had been flocking to Detroit from the Southern US to look for and secure jobs in the growing auto industry, but housing for newcomers was scarce. Newly arrived migrants were crammed into just a few neighborhoods in the city with subpar living conditions. Social class tensions were high not only between whites and African Americans, but also between migrant African Americans and established elite African Americans, some who worked for the city's philanthropies.²⁹ Overall, founding members of the Detroit Women's City Club were "colorblind" to the extent that racial segregation was an assumed construct. The historical prejudice built de facto into the club's founding would eventually be called out in the 1960s, a point I will return to. By this time in US history, women's club culture had long ago lost its efficacy,³⁰ and this Detroit club had become otherwise anachronistic at this point just as it was too expensive to maintain the building that housed it.



The Detroit Women's City Club Building, completed in 1934

Rhetoric and Pedagogy at the Women's City Club Pool

The Detroit Women's City Club had a full itinerary of swim lessons for swimmers of all ages with its particular market of course being its female members and also its members' children for whom learning to swim was a prescribed necessity that relied on rhetoric to promote it. In 1927, swimming instructor James Jones claimed in a column for the club magazine, "It is the plain duty of every parent not only to be able to swim himself, but that his children...are taught early in life to swim."³¹ Two years later, and before the Depression cut into the club's resources, one of the city's best female swimmers, Janet Cotton, was put in charge of the pool, showing swimming's

²⁸ Jayne Morris-Crowther, *The Political Activities of Detroit Clubwomen in the 1920s: A Challenge and a Promise*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 38

²⁹ Kevin Boyle, *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004). 106, 119

³⁰ Gere, 262.

³¹ James Jones, "Splashes from the Pool." *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*. September 1927. 9.

impact in supporting athletes and building careers for working class women, which was trending also in the US.³² The Dolphins' encouragement of swimming for all reflects a brand of feminism among sports enthusiasts at the time that Stephanie Twin identifies as "play for play's sake."³³ This feminism de-emphasized competition and also paralleled rhetoric by swimming advocate, Australian writer and suffragette Annette Kellerman who championed "swimming pools for all."³⁴ Participation for all at the Women's City Club was also practical since the pool was expensive to maintain and pool parties and events were required to meet monthly operating costs.³⁵ Perhaps to club leader's credit, and tight with the club's mission, men were only allowed to use the pool on Sundays.³⁶ Dolphin Secretary, Elizabeth Curtis described the swim club in 1927 as "a whole group of women whose whole thought and idea has been for no personal glory, but for the greater good of the club as a whole."³⁷

The mediation of swimming in writing in the club newspaper, "Dolphin News," paralleled national and circulating rhetoric about swimming and swimming for women in particular, further exemplifying the relationship between, rhetoric, culture building, pedagogy and the bodily arts, and furthermore providing a concrete example of "social circulation" in practice. The WSA published a newsletter with columns that went into great detail about swimming strokes and how to improve them.³⁸ Nationally published swim coach Lawrence Handley wrote a book for women about swimming as he meanwhile created an assembly line of instructors at his swim school.³⁹ Kellerman, who also promoted a svelte and practical body-hugging swimsuit, had published a book even earlier, *How to Swim*, particularly for women.⁴⁰ An essentialist feminist and a practical thinker, she encouraged women to the sport because of their particularly attributes with a shout out to the men who might be otherwise threatened:

I believe swimming to be the best sport in the world for women. Swimming is a graceful art and women can swim more gracefully than men. What tis more, they can swim with almost as much strength, and, at least in distance swims, very nearly equal men's records. I am not trying to shut men out of swimming. There is enough water in the world for all of us.⁴¹

Kellerman's book includes photographs of swimmers and divers encouraging associations between women, beauty and swimming, an arguable primer for the feminine bodily arts.

Swimming was also personal for Kellerman who overcame a childhood handicap by becoming a strong swimmer. Kellerman's point of view also features a problematic byproduct of the new interest in women's swimming: another opportunity for women to be viewed as sex objects with an emphasis on their physical attributes, a factor of the bodily arts perhaps not relevant or problematized in ancient Greece. The highly publicized careers of professional female swimmers

³² Elizabeth Curtis. "The Swimming Pool Repeats its Special Classes for November," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*, November 1929. 17; Brier, 25.

³³ Twin, xxxi.

³⁴ Brier, 51.

³⁵ Mrs. James L. Dickson, "Swimming Pool Committee," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*. June 1929. 42.

³⁶ "Swimming Pool Schedule," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*, Sept-October 1929, 17.

³⁷ Quoted in "Dolphin History," [Detroit] Women's City Club Records 1919-1977. Box 2, Folder 7.

³⁸ Bier, 104

³⁹ Bier, 103

⁴⁰ Bier, 47

⁴¹ Annette Kellerman, *How to Swim* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918), 38.

were inevitably fused by voyeurism. As Jeff Wiltse explains, “Newspapers . . . filled their pages each summer with gratuitous photos from local swimming pools. In virtually every instance, the photos showed svelte and attractive young women in and around the pool.”⁴² Or as Lisa Bier astutely puts it, “It seems that as long as there have been bathing suits, there have been ways of making women feel bad about wearing them in public.”⁴³ At the same time and beyond the water in pools and the open water, the new female swimming craze also buoyed careers of female journalists like Marguerite Marshalls who wrote a column about women go-getters and published an influential interview with Ederle.⁴⁴

The rhetoric in “Dolphin News,” penned frequently by Curtis during its incipient years, and also by the club’s revolving swim instructors and swim coach team, echoes Kellerman’s ideology that swimming is particularly feminine and feminist. The claims of these writers furthermore feature the interplay between rhetoric, culture, feminism, material realities, and pedagogy during this era and also show how macro trends shaped micro perspectives at the Detroit club. In 1926, Dolphin swim instructor, Jean Roberts, suggested swimming was a right for women: “Every woman should know how to swim. No exercise will bring greater return in pleasant recreation and improved health, and swimming is easy to learn.”⁴⁵ Echoing Kellerman, Roberts claimed that girls and women are “naturally buoyant,” explaining that they could simply push off the side of the pool when holding their breath. An anonymous author of a later Dolphin column admitted the difficulty of swimming, but celebrated the liberation of mastery for those who learned later in life after forty, and particularly for those who “have never been particularly athletic.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, this author asserted, swimming was now part of every young person’s education. In an announcement about the previously mentioned Detroit swimmer Janet Cotton taking over the running of the club pool, the author imagined the pool teeming with “Detroit’s girlhood,” that is, all of female-Detroit. A similar feminist ideal was also emphasized by Curtis when she suggested that learning to swim is one way to get in touch with one’s humanity. Swimming wasn’t just exercise: “Humans came from water. now we are compelled to learn at great effort the thing which that other form [of human] took for granted.”⁴⁷ To Curtis, learning to swim was not just an obligation, but a natural right. This local rhetoric came from the top. Epstein of the WSA considered opportunities for women to swim and dive as an equal rights matter, and therefore a fitting complement for women who had just earned the right to vote.⁴⁸

From its inception and until the early 1930s when funding for the club magazine was temporarily cut and hours at the pool were cut along with momentum for its programming,⁴⁹ the Dolphin’s swimming pedagogy was aligned with the rhetoric circulating at the national level associating swimming well with women’s power and mobility. Increased interest in the club pool in 1926 was credited to “the amazing performances of Miss Ederle” who had recently swum across the English Channel.⁵⁰ A club trend also encouraged women to associate their athletic goals with Ederle’s swimming style, the front crawl, the fastest and most efficient stroke, recently invented.

⁴² Wiltse, 117.

⁴³ Brier, 22.

⁴⁴ Stout, 106

⁴⁵ Jean Roberts, “Splashes from the Pool,” *Detroit Women’s City Club Magazine*. October 1926, 21.

⁴⁶ “A Spring Story About the Swimming Pool,” *Detroit Women’s City Club Magazine*. May 1929. 16.

⁴⁷ Curtis, “The Swimming Pool Announces its Annual Children’s Christmas Party,” *Detroit Women’s City Club Magazine*. December 1929, 19.

⁴⁸ Barney, 211.

⁴⁹ “May Bulletin,” [Detroit] Women’s City Club Records 1919—1977, Box 1, Folder 9.

⁵⁰ Roberts, 21.

Clubwomen who could not swim the front crawl, like Ederle had when swimming the English Channel, were put into beginner swim classes even if they were competent in the pool using other strokes. As Curtis put it in 1926, “Everyone seems to realize the importance of the crawl since Miss Ederle swam the Channel on that stroke; and all are eager to cooperate in the attempt to make the Dolphins a club of real swimmers.”⁵¹ Celebrity swimmers were also close at hand for Detroiters. The city had recently hosted the previously mentioned outdoor swim event in August of 1925 where Ederle’s rival, Ethel M’Gary, had set a new world record.⁵² Two years later, a Detroit women’s aquatic club hosted the 24-mile swim marathon for women, which attracted athletes from all over the country.⁵³

These events covered in the *New York Times* that name individual female swimming stars feature the female sport hero popular at the time, illustrating also a mainstream interest in female athletes. While the coverage potentially commercialized women’s bodies, the women’s athleticism also modeled aspirational behavior for women like the Dolphins. By 1930, several Dolphin club members who had previously been afraid of the water were regulars at the pool, which included sixty-nine year-old Mrs. Carson who, having learned the front crawl and breast stroke, competed in a Detroit half-marathon swim event.⁵⁴ Writers for the “Dolphin News” embraced local competition, but also learning and participation for all swimmers, which aligned their emphasis with the circulating rhetoric of the day. Again, Curtis described the Dolphins in 1927 as “a group of women whose whole thought and idea has been for no personal glory but for the greater good of the club as a whole.”



The pool in the basement of the Detroit Women’s City Club, featuring its Pewabic tile

⁵¹ Curtis, “Dolphin News,” *Detroit Women’s City Club Magazine*, December 1926. 44.

⁵² “Miss M’Gary.”

⁵³ “24 Mile Swim.”

⁵⁴ Lloyd Senglaub, “Swimming Notes: News of the Marathons,” *Detroit Women’s City Club Magazine*, April, 1930. 13.

The Pool as Classroom and Movement as *Kairos*

Particularly symbolic of inclusion as method for the Dolphins, the club sponsored a do-it-yourself, do-it-at-your-leisure winter indoor marathon in the club pool that took the swimmer on an imagined course around and inside Detroit's signature park, Belle Isle. This island sits in the Detroit River and hosts also several canals and a small inland lake. A swimmer's distance was determined by shaking "a small leather bottle." A swimmer's completion of the marathon depended on luck and skill, dependent on how many lengths that she was assigned via the roll of the bottle. Swimmers were also encouraged to try the front crawl when completing the marathon in the pool. The imagined participation in an open water swim in this indoor contest paralleled competitive events for women on location such as a mile swim across the Detroit River the summer of 1929.⁵⁵ The Dolphin's pedagogy also built in difference, in this case chance, as a method for skill building, further illustrating its reliance on *kairos* as a dynamic propelling swimming as a bodily art, a form of expression and an argument about women's efficacy.

The Dolphins' emphasis on water safety and the offering of a lifesaving course also reflects pedagogical methods current with national trends and circulating rhetoric, including the extension of the pool's "classroom" beyond its walls, featuring also *kairos* on location. A 1926 Dolphins coach who formed a lifesaving course for club members philosophized that "one was not but half a swimmer until they became a life saver."⁵⁶ By November of 1927, lifesaving courses in fact centered the direction of "Junior Dolphins," the arm of the swim club designed for teenage children.⁵⁷ While supporting lifesaving for young people, Curtis also emphasized a play for play's sake philosophy and also the gospel of safety promoted particularly to women at the time: "Remember Dolphins, most of us will never break many records for swimming or diving, but we can all become accredited members of the Red Cross life-saving course."⁵⁸

The emphasis on lifesaving and water safety among the Dolphins echoed one mission of the WSA that "looked upon swimming as an essential item in the education of every member of [the female] sex, because proficiency means self-protection and the ability to save others from drowning."⁵⁹ As Brier suggests, American women and children were recruited particularly for "spreading the gospel of water safety."⁶⁰ Swimming was rhetorically constructed as particularly feminine during this period, in this case emphasizing the relationship between water safety and women's maternal instincts, a delayed response perhaps to the 1904 sinking of the *Slokum* when women were helpless to save themselves and their children. American women who pursued their lifesaving badges were local heroes to lifesaving expert Commodore Longfellow, a contributor to the *Ladies Home Journal* and *The Sportswoman*. According to Longfellow, Helen Goodale of Pontiac (Michigan) "motored approximately 100 miles and braved a storm" to take her life saving qualifications. A mother of two in California, Helen Riemer, was so inspired by a lifesaving course that she "conduct[ed] a free-swimming campaign and put on a water pageant as a result."⁶¹ Riemer, inspired to spread her passion as a mother of children who knew how to swim, extended the mission of other feminists who promoted proficiency in swimming as a must for women and children.

⁵⁵ "Swim Notes," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*. July-August 1929., 24.

⁵⁶ "Dolphin History."

⁵⁷ Curtis, "Dolphin News," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*, November 1927, 23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Quoted in Brier, 102.

⁶⁰ Brier, 57.

⁶¹ W. E. Longfellow, W. E. "Women Lifesavers Cherish High Ideals of Service," *The Sportswoman*. November 1927, 66-67.

The Dolphins Post Peak

The Depression stymied momentum for the Dolphins when the club's finances were strained financially along with Detroit's and the nation's. The club immediately shed about 1000 members although the yearly fees were modest, \$15.00 a year (\$269.00 2017 dollars). Low participation was a problem because of the expense of maintaining the pool. Furthermore, while the Detroit's Women's City Club pool may have been a novelty in 1924, more pools were being built during the Depression when the Works Program Administration financed municipal pools across the nation.⁶² The female sports heroine was also less popular in national media at the same time that, perhaps symbolically, media sweetheart Amelia Earhart went missing in the Pacific during a flight around the globe, the beginning of the end for first-wave feminism as the female sports hero became anachronistic as a national role model.⁶³ *The Sportswoman*, which had begun boldly in 1925 with "the mission of realiz[ing] the necessity of spreading the gospel of healthy and sane physical activities for women,"⁶⁴ that had circulated news of amateur women athletes who golfed, swam, sailed, played field hockey, and tennis, was in 1936 a shell of itself. Its final issue featured articles about fashion alongside advertisement for men's gifts.⁶⁵

The Dolphins nevertheless continued and grew their swim program for another forty plus years even as the female sports hero was less influential in US dominant culture. During these years, the swimming pool maintained its status as the jewel of the club and its resources were both maintained and enhanced. As more members joined and returned to the club in 1936, a new coach was hired coach, Stanley Bryda, a former diving star.⁶⁶ Bryda helped to restore activities at the pool to near normal, which included a round the world swim in the pool reminiscent of the indoor marathon imagined around Belle Isle.⁶⁷ By April 1939 an adult female swimmer was featured on the front page of the club magazine and by 1940 the pool had its highest attendance in its history.⁶⁸ In 1941, the dressing rooms were modernized with new mirrors, light fixtures, furniture, a sound system and a microphone.⁶⁹ In 1943 a female coach, Dorothy Neihus, was hired. Neihus had a BA and an MA with additional credentials from the Red Cross aquatic school.⁷⁰

While post-peak programming at the women's city pool was more focused on children's accomplishments than feminist adult athletes, the child swim star at the pool was also bred as tomorrow's female sports star. In 1949, four young women who got their start at the pool were national long distance swimming champs at the Women's National AAU Long distance team championship.⁷¹ The club also continued to bolster the careers of women who taught and promoted swimming, including longtime female coach, Edith Lippert, who took over the swim club programming in 1961 and developed a swim and stay fit program and a distance swimming program in the pool.⁷² Lippert, and a previous coach John Hussey, were role models for Jennifer Parks, a Detroit swimming youth and collegiate swimming star who competed in the 1960 Olympic

⁶² Wiltse, 93-95.

⁶³ Ware, 247.

⁶⁴ "Under Its Present Management, *The Sportswoman*, March 1925. 1.

⁶⁵ As one example, the ad entitled, "Puzzled? Something for him," *The Sportswoman* October 1936, 26.

⁶⁶ "Introducing Stanley Bryda," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine* February 1936, 7.

⁶⁷ "Dolphin Doings," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*, February 1937. 25.

⁶⁸ "Club Notes," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*, January 1941, 13.

⁶⁹ Margaret Ward, "Swimming Pool Committee," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*. June 1941, 12.

⁷⁰ Emma Weeks, "New Coach in our Pool," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*, June 1943, 21.

⁷¹ John Hussey, "Coach Column," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*, October 1949, 6.

⁷² Jennifer Parks, correspondence with the author via Facebook Message, June 19, 2017.

trials and became a swim coach for Michigan State University.⁷³ The club as a whole continued to provide leadership opportunities for women who were otherwise discouraged to pursue careers during the conservative era of the 1950s, such as the Dolphins' pool committee director who did not swim herself but whose children were on the swim team.⁷⁴

Despite hiring a new female swim coach when Lippert moved on, a robust swim team for children that interfaced with the city's other clubs such as the Detroit Yacht Club and the Country Club of Detroit, swimming lessons, a youth lifesaving program, and special events regularly held at the pool,⁷⁵ the club did not have enough members to meet its bills when the city of Detroit shed its white elite members who flocked to the suburbs. In fact, the Dolphins had 23 participating members who still met monthly, and the pool was still being used for recreation and parties, when the larger club, desperate for members in its final days, put the building up for sale in 1975.⁷⁶ After leaving its building, club members could retain their membership at the Detroit Yacht Club or the Detroit Boat Club where the club's furniture was moved. The Detroit Boat Club shortly thereafter was unable to maintain a sustainable membership, the building was closed in 1996 and the furniture was sold at auction.⁷⁷

Culture and circulating rhetoric outside of the club could not sustain the club either. The closing of the women's city club, along with its pool, paralleled a national divestment in pool building. Many US municipalities built their pools in the 1920s and the 1930s, a momentum of civic investment that was stalled in Post-World War II America. Some municipalities built and opened pools as a response to civic unrest in 1960s US cities, but by the 1970s the building of pools, particularly public pools, was not a national priority as private backyard pools became trendy.⁷⁸ Although the Detroit's Women's City Club pool was technically private, it had long provided a civic function for its members who joined the club in search of creating and maintaining a community of civic-minded women. Its original mission, aligned with national feminist discourse celebrating women's equality, had also brought together a cross generation and cross social class of people who used the pool.

Conclusion and Implications. What Can be Learned?

Hawhee argues the relevance of bodily arts in ancient Athens to contemporary classrooms while considering several applications. As she points out, the academy has typically prioritized minds over bodies. She promotes sports discourse as a "sister art" to a study of rhetoric for its comparative value as interdisciplinary study.⁷⁹ A study of women's swimming during its heyday in one city might be metaphorical to any pedagogical context when measuring resources for success, considering the interrelationship between, rhetoric, culture, and the material that is under

⁷³ "Hall of Fame: Jennifer Parks: Wayne State Warriors." Wayne State University. wsuathletics.edu. Web. Accessed November 17, 2017.

⁷⁴ Caroline, Romczick (former Detroit women city club swimmer, daughter of last pool committee chairperson), personal interview, August 19, 2017.

⁷⁵ "City Club Swim Team 1970," *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*, May 1970, 13. "Introducing Our New Pool Director." *Detroit Women's City Club Magazine*. December 1970, 14.

⁷⁶ Viola M. Wolfe, "Annual Report of the President May 1975." [Detroit] Women's City Club Records 1917 to 1977, Box 2, Folder 7.

⁷⁷ Mary Louise Drennan (former Detroit Women's City Club Member), interview with the author, June 27, 2017; Robert DuMochelle (Detroit auctioneer and son of member of the Detroit Women's City Club pool committee), personal interview, June 17, 2017.

⁷⁸ Wiltse, 181-9.

⁷⁹ Hawhee, "Rhetorics, Bodies, and Everyday Life," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Vol 33, no. 2 (2006), 156-7.

studied. With these potential applications in mind, assuming still the value of particulars in a microstudy, in this conclusion I consider the role of rhetoric in shaping pedagogy most generally and swimming most particularly at Detroit's Women's City Club and sponsored foremost by the Dolphins through their bodily arts, including their rhetoric.

That woman studied in this case study were white is significant. While swimming is no longer gendered as male, the closing of pools in urban areas of the US, along with other cultural factors, has contributed to an ongoing racial divide in the US about who swims to the extent that African-Americans are nearly twice as likely to drown than Caucasians and that ten people drown in the US every day.⁸⁰ A recent study cites several reasons why minorities are less inclined to be swimmers: they or their parent fear drowning, they lack parental encouragement, they lack swimming skills, they are worried about their physical appearance and they lack access to a pool.⁸¹ The women of Detroit's Women City Club who founded the Dolphins were white and elite, but their culture and their pedagogy addressed the problems cited in this recent study. That is, issues that prohibit many African Americans from swimming at one time could apply to most American women at one time as well, and to women like my grandmother, a white ethnic, who grew up poor but who apparently also sported an Ederle-like swim suit in the late 1920s (reference to photo). A swim cap she held in her hand suggests the suit was not just for show. A swim cap she held in her hand suggests the suit was not just for show, symbolizing that, interest in swimming among women between 1920 and 1930 skyrocketed in part because of the less restrictive feminine bathing suits, more acceptance of women at pools and beaches alongside men, and, probably most significantly, 2,000 pools being built in the US.⁸² More recently, the 2009 recovery act in the US, reminiscent for some of the Depression's Work Program Administration, with its supposed boondoggles, actually prohibited the building of swimming pools.⁸³

⁸⁰ "Did You Know?" *USA Swimming Foundation*. www.usaswimmingfoundation.org. Web. Accessed November 17, 2017.

⁸¹ Irwin, C. et al. "Constraints Impacting Minority Swimming Participation." Presented to USA Swimming, University of Memphis, May 26, 2010. Web. <https://www.usaswimmingfoundation.org/docs/librariesprovider1/mas/2010-constraints-impacting-minority-swimming-participation-report.pdf>. Accessed November 17, 2017.

⁸² Wiltse, 96

⁸³ Robin Pogrebin, "Saving Federal Arts Funds: Selling Culture as an Economic Force. *New York Times*. 15 February 2009. Web. Accessed November 28, 2017.



The author's grandmother in 1929
Chicago sporting the Kellerman
style bathing suit

That said, the female sports hero might still be relevant for influencing pedagogy, in this case swimming pedagogy, particularly suggesting the role of social circulation for developing pedagogy and the social circulation of rhetoric promoting its value and shaping its practices. When African-American female swimmer Simone Manuel won a gold medal in the 2016 Olympics, the media immediately speculated its impact on a black swimming culture, wondering if this sports star would inspire more black children to learn to swim.⁸⁴ This speculation suggests the power of culture and mediation to create systemic change in general and as this change relates more particularly to who learns what and why. But white American female swimmers in the US progressive era also benefitted from a substantive supporting material culture, the building of swimming pools. This deficit of key resources for a particular pedagogy suggests also the significance of this infrastructure, which is unfortunately no longer prioritized in contemporary

⁸⁴ Gretchen Reynolds. "Will Simone Manuel Inspire More Black Children to Swim?" *New York Times*. 15 August 2016. WEB. Accessed November 28, 2017.

times even though drowning continues to be a national problem, particularly for minorities. Students and teachers need classrooms, in this case swimming pools.

The exclusive nature of the Dolphins swim club and the club magazine that was used to mediate the club's activities in a city divided by social class and race, then and now, is also a dilemma when celebrating feminists of the past for their astute use of the available means of persuasion to achieve quite measurable material ends rhetorically, materially, pedagogically, bodily. These historical Detroit feminists had blind spots and they were products of their time. As alluded to earlier, until 1967 when it garnered criticism, an informal rule prohibited African-Americans from using the club above the second floor, even though nothing official prohibited their application for which eligibility was simply stated as “[a]ny woman who is interested in the welfare of the City of Detroit and the State of Michigan.”⁸⁵ This discriminatory rule had been upheld at the club informally and had motivated some club members to resign in the 1960s.⁸⁶

These club women's racism evidences a culture that divided de facto white swimmers from black non-swimmers. Segregation and white flight from cities to suburbs excluded African Americans from mass access to public swimming pools afforded to many white Americans during the twentieth century, and when the sport was allegedly democratized. Enoch suggests a generative approach to feminist legacies when studying feminist culture, particularly as it relates to pedagogy, that might credit the women of the past for their methods in using material space and constructing and responding to inevitably limited scripts, constructed culturally and also rhetorically. Case studies featuring historical feminists can be one method for understanding how “[i]nhabitants of space” both rhetorical and physical “can resist old and invent new practices within a variety of constraints.”⁸⁷ In its heyday, the Dolphins swim club benefitted from cultural scripts that celebrated the female sports hero who was white. A generative approach to feminist legacies could be fair to the Dolphins, a complement also to a microhistorical methodology that studies the particularities of culture as well as its generalities. It would acknowledge the limits of historical cultural constructs that democratized swimming for some, yet excluded minorities de facto. It would study the particulars that enabled the swim club's success and sustainability as a “palimpsest,”⁸⁸ which honors its history that can be mined for some of its tools as a blueprint for future culture building.

A generative approach to feminist legacies does not naively ignore factors such as class and race, when suggesting that progressive-era feminist swimming pedagogy can to be a model in our own world still divided by social class and race. The Dolphins rhetorically co-constructed a pedagogy that included their efficacy and proliferated their survival by emphasizing also a process. To these historical feminists, learning to swim was a right. But, complicatedly, learning to swim is still a privilege in contemporary American culture, in part because there is not enough cultural support for the pedagogy that might democratize it fully, which would necessitate more swimming pools and therefore more civic support. To put it simply, rhetoric and culture worked hand in hand to build this bodily arts pedagogy in a flush 1920s Detroit. It could work again. Women like the founders of the Dolphins had been at one point ostensibly excluded from swimming because they were women until cultural constructs shifted to “allow” it, and before dominant cultural scripts in the 1950s de-emphasized female athleticism, participation-for-all and the female sports hero all

⁸⁵ “Special Application for Membership.” [Detroit] Women's City Club Records 1917-1977, Box 8, Folder 5. O'Brien, Colleen Obrien. “Anti-Bias Effort a Possibility at Women's City Club, *Detroit Free Press*. circa May, 1967, press clipping in [Detroit] Women's City Club Records 1917-1977, Box 1, Folder 13.

⁸⁷ Enoch, 292.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

but disappeared. We might never be as flush as the Dolphins in 1920s Detroit. At the same time, what once was possible for a few women in the one-room schoolhouse of a club pool could be reinvented in a new context, and, once again, on a broader scale, and in other classrooms not just a pool.