Elizabeth Wilkinson’ review of Karen Eva Carr’s *Shifting Currents: A World History of Swimming*

Karen Eva Carr starts our long human journey in the water before we are even humans, taking us back to one-celled beings, four billion years ago. Because hers is a world history, she has a lot of space and time to cover. Her first two chapters take readers to multiple origin points that show “most early people all over the world were strong swimmers” (49). The early chapters especially, but all the chapters generally, are dotted with illustrations that provide the visible proof of bathing, swimming, and sometimes of drowning. Carr’s musings about humans’ natural *inability* to take to swimming – “Humans are even worse at swimming than chimpanzees and gorillas” (17) – exists alongside her celebration of it “throughout history as a fun social activity open to everyone” (355).

Many stories of swimming emanate from historical accounts of battles in or near the sea, and mostly from victors who glory in their adversaries drowning or, if they could swim, becoming easy targets splashing about in the water. The exception to humans acquiring the skill of swimming, and one of the early turns of her text, comes in the third chapter, “A Northern Swimming Hole,” in which Carr cites the Ice Age as a reason for many forgetting how to swim. Here, she begins to delineate how swimming “both attracted and repelled” certain groups of peoples, and she begins a long and detailed explanation of swimming used as a marker for class hierarchy and social power. Interestingly, sometimes it is the *inability* to swim that signifies high standing.

Later in the historical chronology, Carr provides evidence for swimming as a way of life, socially or for work, as contrasted with swimming performatively, as a sign of social status. Although in a few earlier as well as more contemporary moments, she shows swimming together with reading as a marker for upper-class status or as aspirational for the middle class.

An abundance of folkloric anecdotes woven throughout provide one of the many pleasures and benefits of this text. Carr offers stories by Ovid (who apparently enjoyed swimming) warning that swimming naked got Arethusa in need of rescue by the goddess Diana to avoid a “hotter and more eager” Alpheus alongside a Turkish trickster story of Juha teasing one of his wives about her ability to swim. Truly, the breadth of her historical evidence is impressive, and the many pieces of narrative evidence exist alongside illustrations from cave drawings in Egypt, depictions on Greek urns and in Aztec floor mosaics, and pictorial stories unfurled on Japanese scrolls. These and so many others give her leave for informative commentary on who could swim and when and why, as well as who couldn’t or didn’t or wouldn’t.

The text’s numerous visual representations had me wishing to see them all large and in full color, which would be, of course, beyond any academic publication’s budget. I can’t help but think one of the most difficult tasks for Carr in compiling the text in its entirety must have been choosing which ones made the cut for the two, full-color sections of about a dozen illustrations each. Italian boys cliff diving, Japanese pirates sinking boats from China, the Buddha swimming to aid fishermen in trouble, Greek women who might be Amazons diving into pools – these are just a small smattering of the copious depictions Carr provides and comments upon.

Some of Carr’s darkest and most difficult to read chapters – “Floating for Witchcraft” and “Ducking Stools” – detail the ways water is used for trial, torture, un/intended executions, and suicide. In earlier chapters, she includes a number of instances when swimming was presented as a dangerous segue to sex, whether the sexual encounter be desired or resisted, sinful or celebrated. In the “Witchcraft” and “Ducking” chapters, we see the unfortunate extreme in instance after detailed instance of victims, predominantly women, suffering heinous acts intended to punish or silence them. The onslaught of one torturous scene after the other without reprieve proves to be difficult reading. Fortunately, for women’s studies scholars, a later section offers celebrations of swimming as a vehicle for the fight for women’s rights and suffrage.

Historians will find the familiar here, but through an interesting new lens, and sports studies aficionados will get a deeper understanding of the inexorable intertwining of our corporeal physical activities with our constructions of societal modes, customs, and laws, through the ages. My desire to read Carr’s text stemmed from an interest in swimming, generally, and in books about swimming, including Lisa Bier’s **"Fighting** the **Current:** The Rise of American Women's **Swimming,** 1870-1926" and of course Lynn Cox’s wonderful memoirs “Swimming to Antarctica” and “Swimming in the Sink.” And I can’t help but think of the beautiful short story, “Wet” by Laurie Colwin and the poems “Competition” by Mariah Burton Nelson and “To Swim, To Believe” by Maxine Kumin, that take readers into the mundanity and mystery that is swimming. Carr’s historical take on the social power of swimming puts it in conversation with texts that focus on a much smaller slice of swimming, race, and power, such as Julie Checkoway’s *The Three-Year Swim Club*; additionally, Carr joins (apologies for the pun) a wave of recent works on swimming, including *Why We Swim* by Bonnie Tsui and *Splash! 10,000 Years of Swimming* by Howard Means.

What a reader can take away from this history are the many ways that societies have constructed narratives out of the human relationships with bodies of water and how those narratives work to construct hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and gender. Carr’s commentary is both interesting and helpful and, at times by her own admission and by the necessity that is the writing of a long history, informed conjecture. She makes note of her own speculations within the text and more universally at the end when she writes, “Our ideas are too often only rationalizations of what we wish to confirm, or of what we assume to be normal”; she acknowledges that “many of the ideas in this book will probably turn out the same way, and a hundred years from now they, too, will be superseded” (355). While this may be the case, the copious references gathered together in her almost 100 pages of endnotes offer up a collection that will remain useful for many years to come.