

Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World

Kevin Dawson

Long before a single coastal or interior West African was enslaved and cargoed off to toil the length of his days under the skies of the New World, many had become adept swimmers and underwater divers. West Africans often grew up along riverbanks, near lakes, or close to the ocean. In those waterways, many became proficient swimmers, incorporating this skill into their work and recreation. When carried to the Americas, slaves brought this ability with them, where it helped shape generations of bondpeople's occupational and leisure activities.

From the age of discovery up through the nineteenth century, the swimming and underwater diving abilities of people of African descent often surpassed those of Europeans and their descendants. Indeed, most whites, including sailors, probably could not swim. To reduce drowning deaths, some philanthropists advocated that sailors and others learn to swim. In 1838 the *Sailor's Magazine*, a New York City missionary magazine, published the inscription on a city placard titled "Swimming." It read: "For want of knowledge of this noble art thousands are annually sacrificed, and every fresh victim calls more strongly upon the best feelings of those who have the power to draw the attention of such persons as may be likely to require this art, to the simple fact, that there is no difficulty in floating or swimming." Similarly, Theodorus Bailey Myers Mason's 1879 pamphlet, *The Preservation of Life at Sea*, claimed, "The great majority of people cannot swim, and strange as it may seem to you, there are many who follow the sea as a profession who cannot swim a stroke." Mason then proclaimed that, as part of their instruction, all United States Naval Academy cadets should be taught to swim.¹

Kevin Dawson is an assistant professor of African American history at Fairfield University. This essay received the 2005 Louis Pelzer Memorial Award.

The author is grateful for the generous grant support of the Ford Foundation, Huntington Library, and Frank C. Munson Institute of American Maritime Studies at Mystic Seaport: The Museum of America and the Sea. The writer expresses special thanks to his friend and adviser, Daniel C. Littlefield, who read and commented on earlier drafts of this article. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2004 Southern Historical Association Conference and the 2006 National Association of African American Studies Conference. Special thanks are due to the author's wife, Liliana, who assisted in researching this article.

Readers may contact Dawson at <kdawson@mail.fairfield.edu>.

¹ Nicholas Orme, *Early British Swimming, 55 BC–AD 1719: With the First Swimming Treatise in English, 1595* (Exeter, 1983); Richard Mandell, *Sport: A Cultural History* (New York, 1984), 179–80; Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789; New York, 1995), 258n167; J. Frost, *The art of Swimming: A Series of Practical Instructions on an Original and Progressive plan. To which is added, Dr. Franklin's Treatise* (New York, 1818), frontispiece; "Swimming," *Sailor's Magazine*, 11 (Jan. 1839), 152; Theodorus Bailey Myers Mason, *The Preservation of Life at Sea: A Paper Read Before the American Geographical Society, February 27th, 1879* (New York, 1879), 2–3; Thomas Tegg, *The Art of Swimming* (London [c. 1805–1824]), 5–6; Richard McAllister Smith, *The Confederate First Reader: Containing Selections in Prose and*

The history of slavery has largely been a history of fields—tobacco, sugar, indigo, rice, and cotton fields. The most influential works on slavery have properly focused on agricultural bondage and how it shaped slavery's development and defined the majority of owner-slave relationships. A few historians, such as Richard Price, W. Jeffrey Bolster, David S. Cecelski, Michael Craton, and Thomas Buchanan, have studied maritime slavery, the work of enslaved people in sailing, fishing, and whaling.² A handful of scholars have mentioned slaves as swimmers, but there has been no sustained study of their recreational and occupational swimming and underwater diving.³ Although most bondpeople were agricultural laborers, that did not preclude swimming. Most plantations were located near waterways to facilitate the transportation of slave-produced goods to market, and rice plantations throughout the Americas were typically situated on tidal waterways, which were vital to the irrigation of this crop.⁴ Thus, large numbers of plantation slaves had ready access to waters in which to swim.

Since the mid-twentieth century, scholars have increasingly appreciated slaves' ability to transmit African skills and practices to the Americas and have examined how cultural retentions shaped the development of both black and white sociocultural institutions.

Poetry, as Reading Exercises for the Younger Children in the Schools and Families of the Confederate States (Richmond, 1864), 20–21; William Percey, *The Compleat Swimmer; or, The art of Swimming: Demonstrating the Rules and Practice Thereof, in an Exact, Plain and Easie Method. Necessary to be Known and Practised by all who Studie or Desire their own Preservation* (London, 1658), v; Benjamin Franklin, *The Art of Swimming Rendered Easy* (Glasgow [1840?]), 3–4, 8–9; Archibald Sinclair and William Henry, *Swimming* (London, 1893), 27, 186–280; Everard Digby, *A short introduction for to learne to swimme. Gathered out of Master Digbys Booke of the Art of Swimming. And translated into English for the better instruction of those who understand not the Latine tongue. By Christofer Middleton* (1587; London, 1595), 3–4; Richard Nelligan, *The Art of Swimming: A Practical, Working Manual. Graphically Illustrated from Original Drawings and Photographs, with a Clear and Concise Description of All Strokes* (Boston, 1906); Melchisédec Thévenot, *Art de nager. The art of Swimming. Illustrated by Proper Figures. With Advice for Bathing. By Monsieur Thevenot. Done out of French. To which is Prefixed a Prefatory Discourse Concerning Artificial Swimming, or Keeping ones self Above Water by Several small Portable Engines, in case of Danger* (London, 1699), i–viii, 1, 4–5.

² Richard Price, "Caribbean Fishing and Fishermen: A Historical Sketch," *American Anthropologist*, 68 (Dec. 1966), 1363–83; James Farr, "A Slow Boat to Nowhere: The Multi-Racial Crews of the American Whaling Industry," *Journal of Negro History*, 68 (Spring 1983), 159–70; W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 10; David S. Cecelski, *Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 2001); Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People from Aboriginal Times to the End of Slavery* (Athens, Ga., 1999); Gail Saunders, *Slavery in the Bahamas, 1648–1838* (Nassau, 1985); Roger Smith, *The Maritime Heritage of the Cayman Islands* (Gainesville, 2000); Virginia Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda, 1616–1782* (Columbia, Mo., 1984); Thomas Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves and Free Blacks and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill, 2004).

³ Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1972), 123; Cecelski, *Waterman's Song*, 88–89; Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 130; Price, "Caribbean Fishing and Fishermen," 1376; N. A. T. Hall, "Maritime Maroons: Grand Maroonage from the Danish West Indies," in *Caribbean Slave Society and Economy: A Student Reader*, ed. Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd (New York, 1991), 391, 396; Jorge L. China, "A Quest for Freedom: The Immigration of Maritime Maroons into Puerto Rico, 1656–1800," *Journal of Caribbean History*, 31 (nos. 1–2, 1997), 51–87; Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 23–24, 107, 178; John Thornton, *Africans and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (New York, 1992), 135.

⁴ Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Plantation Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill, 1972); Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana, 1985); Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill, 1986); Arthur Pierce Middleton, *Tobacco Coast: A Maritime History of Chesapeake Bay in the Colonial Era* (Baltimore, 1989); Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1988). On rice growing, see Wood, *Black Majority*; Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Chicago, 1991); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, 1992); William Dustinberre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (Oxford, 1996); Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); and Joyce E. Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit: Agricultural Innovation and Modernity in the Lower South, 1730–1815* (Chapel Hill, 1993).

In his 1933 book, *The Masters and the Slaves*, Gilberto Freyre asserted that slaves “Africanized” Brazilian culture by infusing it with African traditions. Melville J. Herskovits’s 1941 book, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, challenged the assertions of U. B. Phillips and E. Franklin Frazier that slavery denuded bondpeople of their African heritage, arguing that shards of African culture, especially those pertaining to dance, music, religion, and art, were carried to the Americas.⁵

Before the 1970s, historians generally examined slavery from the planters’ perspective, largely overlooking how bondpeople shaped the plantation system and the Americas. Considering slavery from the slaves’ viewpoint, John Blassingame’s 1972 book, *The Slave Community*, explored how African transmissions and retentions shaped bondpeople’s recreational activities. In 1974 Peter Wood’s *Black Majority* considered how slaves’ African rice-growing traditions influenced South Carolina’s development and the creation of its syncretic white and black cultural identities. Daniel Littlefield’s 1981 *Rice and Slaves* extended Wood’s analysis by documenting that South Carolina rice planters sought to import slaves from ethnic groups with rice-producing traditions so they could exploit the slaves’ abilities. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall in 1992 and Judith A. Carney in 2001 explained how rice planters elsewhere in the Americas similarly exploited Africans’ rice-growing culture for their own material gain.⁶

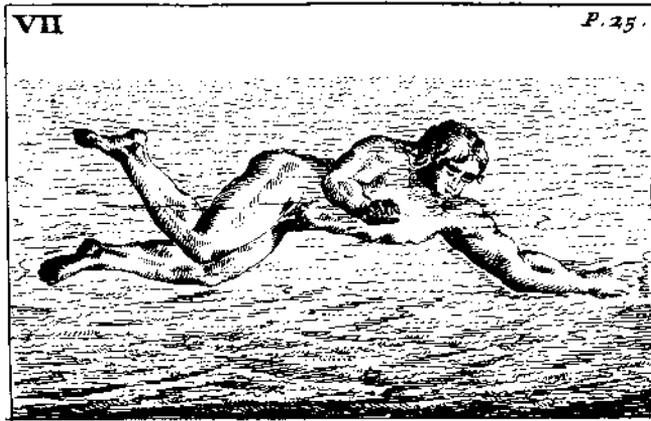
This article considers how slaves carried swimming and underwater diving skills to the Americas. It seeks to enhance our understanding of slavery by exploring how a cultural retention that scholars have heretofore neglected shaped bondage. First, it compares the swimming abilities and techniques of westerners and Africans in order to demonstrate the African origin of slaves’ swimming abilities. Next, it examines how slaves incorporated swimming into their recreation. Finally, since slavery was a labor system, this article explores how slave owners used bondpeople’s swimming and diving skills in lucrative occupations. Because occupational diving was dangerous and required exceptional skill, it sometimes influenced white-slave relationships, leading whites to reward slaves’ ability by granting them limited privileges.⁷

In his account of sport culture, the historian Richard Mandell has contended that during the colonial period most westerners could not swim, but that if “they learned to swim at all it was the dog paddle to save themselves in an emergency.” Travel accounts suggest that some whites used variants of the breaststroke, in which both arms are extended forward and pulled back together in a sweeping circular motion, while the legs are thrust out and pulled together in circular frog kicks. The breaststroke is only slightly more advanced than the dog paddle, and many whites who used it apparently kept their

⁵ Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, trans. Samuel Putnam (1933; New York, 1966), 287; U. B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1929), 194–99; U. B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (1918; Baton Rouge, 1966); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago, 1939); Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York, 1941).

⁶ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); Wood, *Black Majority*; Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves*; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*; Carney, *Black Rice*.

⁷ On ways maritime occupations could ameliorate the conditions of bondage and increase racial parity, see Price, “Caribbean Fishing and Fishermen”; Farr, “Slow Boat to Nowhere”; Bolster, *Black Jacks*; Cecelski, *Waterman’s Song*; Craton and Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*; Saunders, *Slavery in the Bahamas*; Smith, *Maritime Heritage of the Cayman Islands*; and Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*.



In the seventeenth century Melchisédec Thévenot attempted to transform swimming into an art by developing theories on how to swim gracefully. *“Another Way of turning or rolling round,”* Melchisédec Thévenot, *Art de Nager, The Art of Swimming, Illustrated by Forty Proper Copper-Plate Cuts, Which Represent the Different Postures Necessary to be Used in that Art* (1696; London, 1789). *Courtesy the Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Reproduced by permission.*

heads above water. That reduced their speed and endurance and made their version of the breaststroke similar to the dog paddle. In the sixteenth century, European theorists began publishing treatises on swimming. Most advocated versions of the breaststroke, while excluding discussions of the swim stroke now known as the “freestyle,” “Australian crawl,” or “crawl.” The historians Nicholas Orme and Mandell have explained that swimming theories targeted literate nobility and gentry, evolved largely as analytical speculation on the “ideal forms of swimming,” did not draw on the knowledge and experience of swimmers, and thus had little influence on contemporary swimming practices.⁸

Conversely, coastal and interior West Africans, like Native Americans and Asians, used variants of the freestyle, enabling Africans to incorporate swimming into many daily activities. With alternate overarm strokes combined with fast scissor kicks, the freestyle is the strongest and swiftest swimming style. Travelers mentioned that many Africans swam and that they, unlike westerners, preferred the freestyle to the breaststroke. Significantly, several observers referred to the breaststroke as the “ordinary” method of swimming, indicating that whites used it.⁹

⁸ Mandell, *Sport*, 112–13, 179–80; Digby, *Short introduction for to learne to swimme*; Percey, *Compleat swimmer*; Thévenot, *Art de nager*; Tegg, *Art of Swimming*; Frost, *Art of Swimming*; “Swimming,” 152; Sinclair and Henry, *Swimming*; Nelligan, *Art of Swimming*, frontispiece, 12–14; Orme, *Early British Swimming*, 46, 52, 62–65.

⁹ On Native Americans’ and Asians’ strength as swimmers and use of the freestyle, see Mandell, *Sport*, 180; Thévenot, *Art de nager*, vii–viii; Nelligan, *Art of Swimming*, 27; Sinclair and Henry, *Swimming*, 97–105; William Strachey, *The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania* (1612; London, 1953), 66; Clements Markham, ed., *The Hawkins’ Voyages during the Reigns of Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth, and James I* (1847; New York, 1970), 157–58, 314; George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians: Written During Eight Years’ Travel (1832–1839) Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indian in North America* (1844; 2 vols., New York, 1973), I, 96–97; Pierre Antoine Tabeau, *Tabeau’s Narrative of Loisel’s Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, ed. Annie Heloise Abel (Norman, 1939), 74; John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America* (1817; Readex Microprint, 1966), 160–61; George Frederick Kunz and Charles Hugh Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl: Its History, Art, Science, and Industry* (1908; New York, 2001); Charles Warren Stoddard, *Cruising the South Seas: Stories by Charles Warren Stoddard* (1904; San Francisco, 1987), 93–95; 117–18; Hiram Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Islands* (Hartford, 1847), 382–83; Walter Colton, *Deck and Port; or, Incidents of a Cruise in the United*

Over more than three centuries, western travelers to West Africa reported that Africans were sound swimmers; several noted that they generally swam better than Europeans and described their use of the freestyle. In the late sixteenth century, the Flemish adventurer Pieter de Marees commented on Gold Coast (Ghanaian) Africans' freestyle technique, observing "they can swim very fast, generally easily outdoing people of our nation in swimming and diving." In 1606 the Dutch merchant Pieter Van den Broecke noted that many of the Africans at Gorée Island, Senegal, were "extraordinarily strong swimmers." In the late seventeenth century, comparing the freestyle used by the Fante of Elmina, in present-day Ghana, and the breaststroke employed by Europeans, the commercial agent Jean Barbot asserted "the Blacks of Mina out-do all others at the coast in dexterity of swimming, throwing one [arm] after another forward, as if they were paddling, and not extending their arms equally, and striking with them both together, as Europeans do." Similarly, in 1923 the anthropologist and colonial administrator Robert Sutherland Rattray noted that Asante men and women at Lake Bosumtwi, about one hundred miles inland from Cape Coast in present-day Ghana, used the freestyle. Asante "men are very fine swimmers and some show magnificent muscular development. They swim either the ordinary breast stroke [like Europeans] or a double overarm with a scissor-like kick of the legs." On October 15, 1844, the U.S. Navy officer Horatio Bridge reported an incident that revealed that the swimming abilities of Kru from Liberia surpassed those of whites who could swim. Five Europeans and five Kru were aboard a boat that "capsized and sunk. The five Kroomen saved themselves by swimming until picked up by a canoe; the five whites were lost."¹⁰

Sources on Native American swimming provide further evidence of westerners' unfamiliarity with the freestyle. While in North Dakota in the late 1830s, the painter George Catlin explained that the Mandans' use of the freestyle made them stronger swimmers than whites. Detailing their overarm technique, he stated it "is quite different from that practiced in those parts of the civilized world, which I have had the pleasure yet to visit."¹¹

Numerous accounts by European and Euro-American travelers, slave traders, planters, and government officials from the sixteenth century through the 1840s reveal fascination with Africans' superiority as swimmers. But the writers rarely say explicitly why this skill fascinated and impressed them. Such authors' literary objectives differed. Some were interested in scientific inquiry, adventure, or discovery. Others supported the slave trade and slavery. Yet, as the historians David Brion Davis, Winthrop Jordan, Philip Curtin,

States Frigate Congress to California. With Sketches of Rio Janeiro, Valparaiso, Lima, Honolulu, and San Francisco (New York, 1850), 352–53; Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (1872; New York, 1962); and Ben Finney and James D. Houston, *Surfing: A History of the Ancient Hawaiian Sport* (Rohnert Park, 1996). For references to the "ordinary" method of swimming, see Franklin, *Art of Swimming Rendered Easy*, 15; Richard Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* (1673; Portland, 1998), 53; P. E. H. Hair, Adam Jones, and Robin Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678–1712* (2 vols., London, 1992), II, 545n50; R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford, 1923), 63; and Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, I, 97.

¹⁰ Pieter de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, trans. Albert Van Dantzig and Adam Jones (1602; New York, 1987), 26, 32, esp. 186–87; Pieter Van den Broecke, *Pieter Van den Broecke's Journal of Voyages to Cape Verde, Guinea, and Angola, 1605–1612*, trans. J. D. La Fleur (1634; London, 2000), 37; Hair, Jones, and Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 532; Rattray, *Ashanti*, 63; Horatio Bridge, *Journal of an African Cruiser: Comprising Sketches of the Canaries, the Cape Verds, Liberia, Madeira, Sierra Leone, and Other Places of Interest on the West Coast of Africa* (New York, 1853), 174.

¹¹ Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, I, 96–97.

Kathleen M. Brown, and Jennifer Morgan have explained, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century, xenophobia and ethnocentrism led many writers to emphasize the difference between Africans and westerners as a way of championing whites' purported social, religious, cultural, and political superiority while alleging African savagery and barbarism. Thus, it is probable that westerners' comments on Africans' swimming abilities aimed to differentiate whites from Africans.¹²

When chroniclers noted that Africans were proficient swimmers, they may also have been signaling that such swimmers were animal-like. Travelers often compared blacks' genitals to those of animals and contended that blacks engaged in bestial, lascivious intercourse. Travelers argued that like animals African women did not suffer labor pains, which were considered a punishment for Eve's transgression; thus they were not part of the same divine creation as white women. The writings of swimming theorists indicate that many westerners believed that, whereas animals instinctively knew how to swim, it was unnatural for humans to swim without logical instruction. In 1658 William Percey declared, "man doth not altogether naturally Swim as other creatures do, but immediately descends towards the bottom." The editor of the 1840 edition of Benjamin Franklin's swimming treatise similarly noted that "man cannot swim with the same faculty as many of the inferior animals, which seem to be led by instinct to use the proper action for their preservation, while rational creatures, being aware of their danger, grow fearful or impatient, and begin to struggle, which has the effect of making them sink in the water." Since swimming theorists argued that logic was required to enable humans to swim, whites could conceivably have thought that people of African descent swam because they had used reason to overcome their fear of water. Whites, however, asserted that blacks were incapable of logic and reason. In 1774, while trying to determine Africans' status in nature, Edward Long, a resident of Jamaica, argued that

they have no moral sensations; . . . they are now every where degenerated into brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful, and superstitious people, even in those states where we might expect to find them more polished, humane, docile, and industrious. . . . They are a people without taste, without genius, or discernment. . . . Their intellect rising to but a very confused notion, and imperfect idea.

Likewise, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in the 1780s, Thomas Jefferson claimed that "in memory [blacks] are equal to whites; in reason much inferior, . . . and in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous." Since whites did not believe that people of African descent were capable of logic or reason, they implied that animal-like instincts enabled blacks to swim naturally.¹³

¹² David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966), 446–82; Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes towards the Negro, 1550–1812* (Baltimore, 1969), 3–43; Philip Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850* (Madison, 1964), 34, 43–44, 56, 318–19, 391–92, 414–15; Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 13–41, 107–36; Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004), 12–16.

¹³ On the travelers' accounts, see Davis, *Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 446–82; Jordan, *White over Black*, 33–35, 39–40, 158–59, 163, 464, 501; Curtin, *Image of Africa*, 28–57, 391–92; Betty Wood, *The Origins of American Slavery: Freedom and Bondage in the English Colonies* (New York, 1997), 20–29; Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, 39; and Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 16. Digby, *Short introduction for to learne to swimme*, 4–5; Percey, *Compleat Swimmer*, 2, 6–9; Franklin, *Art of Swimming Rendered Easy*, 3; Thévenot, *Art de*

The early modern Europeans who commented on Africans' prowess as swimmers came from a culture where, some scholars argue, swimming had been in decline. Scholars have found that many ancient Greeks and Romans were adept swimmers who used the freestyle, but that most whites from the medieval period through the late nineteenth century could not swim. During the Middle Ages, numerous factors caused a devaluing and discarding of swimming. The historian Nicholas Orme analyzed the decline in English swimming. Medieval English and Norman sources, Orme concluded, present "a picture of swimming both pessimistic and unfavorable. The activity of the swimmer is compared with the fate of the damned" because swimming seemed a hopeless struggle against mother nature. According to Orme, changes in warfare that favored heavily armored and mounted knights precipitated a change in attitudes that diminished the importance of swimming. Before armor was used, military tactics incorporated swimming. But the weight of armor rendered such tactics impossible. Simultaneously, many European doctors urged people to avoid swimming because immersion in water supposedly upset the balance of the body's humors, causing the diseases that ravaged the Continent. Because people typically swam nude, some Catholic Church officials tried to discourage it for moral reasons.¹⁴ Cold winters undoubtedly limited the part of the year when those Europeans who so desired could hone their swimming skills. Furthermore, many westerners believed that bodies of water were filled with both mysterious dangers such as "noisom vapours" and large populations of ravenous creatures.¹⁵ Consequently, by the fifteenth century, the freestyle was apparently forgotten, and sources indicate that the few Europeans who swam used the breaststroke.

Although the Renaissance witnessed a slight revival in swimming, sources indicate that most whites remained reluctant to swim, making them less adept than many blacks, Native Americans, and Asians. Indeed, in his 1696 swimming treatise, Melchisédec Thévenot explained that "swimming was in great esteem among the Ancients." "But to come to our times," he observed, "it is most certain that the Indians, and the Negroes, excel all others in these Arts of Swimming and Diving. It is to them the Ladies are obliged for their Ornaments of Pearl; they are the Divers who fish for them; they are also very useful for recovering Anchors and Merchandizes that have been cast away."¹⁶

nager, 1–3; Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica; or, General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of that Island: With Reflections on its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws and Government* (1774; 3 vols., Montreal, 2002), II, 353–56; Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York, 1984), 266; Curtin, *Image of Africa*, 43.

¹⁴ Orme, *Early British Swimming*, 26–29, 46, esp. 22; Mandell, *Sport*, 18, 22–24, esp. 24, 60–62, 112–13, 179–81; Sinclair and Henry, *Swimming*, 1–20; Georges Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (New York, 1988); Lawrence Wright, *Clean and Decent: The History of the Bath* (London, 1960); Fikret Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity* (New York, 1995); A. S. Turberville, *English Men and Their Manners* (London, 1926), 117–26; David Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths, and Basin: The Story of Domestic Sanitation* (Stroud, 2002); Françoise de Bonneville, *The Book of the Bath* (New York, 1998).

¹⁵ On westerners' swimming-related fears, see Mandell, *Sport*, 179–81; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 307; William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts. Containing a Geographic, Political, and Natural History of the Kingdoms and Countries: With a Particular Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present Condition of all the European Settlements upon the Coast. . . .* (1705; New York, 1967), 283; Percey, *Compleat Swimmer*, 11–12; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment: Adventures of the First Slave Regiment Mustered into the Service of the United States During the Civil War* (1869; Toronto, 1962), 156; and John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America, from the year 1772 to 1777. . . with an Account of the Indians of Guiana and Negroes of Guinea* (1796; London, 1963), 57.

¹⁶ Orme, *Early British Swimming*, 46; Thévenot, *Art de nager*, vii–viii; Frost, *Art of Swimming*, vi; Nelligan, *Art of Swimming*, 27; Strachey, *Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania*, 66; Markham, ed., *Hawkins' Voyages*, 157–58;

The breaststroke remained the preferred western style of swimming through the early twentieth century, but in the late nineteenth century, British swimmers, led by J. Trudgen, began systematically attempting to imitate the freestyle used by indigenous South Americans. Trudgen, however, combined the freestyle's overarm stroke with the breaststroke's circular frog kick, creating the "Trudgen stroke." It was not until after the United States tryouts for the 1912 Olympics that most westerners apparently began using the freestyle, even though blacks, Asians, and Native Americans had demonstrated its speed and strength to them for centuries. On August 11, 1911, the Hawaiian surfer Duke Kahanamoku, who had never been trained and had not competed in a formal match, decisively demonstrated the speed of the true freestyle with his scissorlike "Kahanamoku kick" by breaking two world records. After winning the Olympic Gold Medal for the hundred-meter freestyle and breaking another world record, Kahanamoku toured America, Europe, and Australia, demonstrating his surfing and swimming skills.¹⁷

Until the late nineteenth century, westerners were evidently averse to the freestyle because it generated more splashing than the breaststroke. According to theorists and practitioners such as Franklin and Theodorus Mason, swimming "should be smooth and gentle." Since splashing was deemed unsophisticated, the freestyle was regarded as unrefined and un-European when compared to the sedate and harmonious breaststroke. Thus, as the scholar Richard Nelligan indicated, even though the breaststroke is one of the most rudimentary strokes, many westerners ironically regarded it as the most refined and graceful. The reluctance to splash, or perhaps inattentiveness, may explain why Trudgen and others did not use the scissor kick. Indeed, George Catlin's observation on Native Americans' use of the freestyle reveals that, although some whites recognized that it was a stronger stroke than the breaststroke, they regarded it as uncivilized. "By this bold and powerful mode of swimming, which may want in the grace many would wish to see," wrote Catlin, "I am quite sure, from the experience I have had, that much of the fatigue and strain [the breaststroke placed] upon the breast and spine are avoided, and that a man will preserve his strength and his breath much longer in the [freestyle's] alternate rolling motion, than he can in the usual mode of swimming, in the polished world."¹⁸

One striking difference between African and western swimming practices was that many African women swam, while western women generally did not. Western women probably refrained from swimming because most people swam nude, and western standards of modesty did not tolerate public disrobing by white women.¹⁹ African women

Tabeau, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, ed. Abel, 74; Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America*, 160–61.

¹⁷ Sinclair and Henry, *Swimming*, 88–98; Nelligan, *Art of Swimming*, 26–29; Finney and Houston, *Surfing*, 81, 86; Joseph Brennan, *Duke: The Life Story of Hawaii's Duke Kahanamoku* (Honolulu, 1994). The Bishop Museum in Honolulu contains a permanent exhibition detailing Duke Kahanamoku's swimming accomplishments and influence on Western swimming.

¹⁸ Frost, *Art of Swimming*, 9; Orme, *Early British Swimming*, 164; Franklin, *Art of Swimming Rendered Easy*, 14; Digby, *Short introduction for to learne to swimme*; Mason, *Preservation of Life at Sea*; Nelligan, *Art of Swimming*, 12–17. Manuscript illustrations suggest that the breaststroke was the most common European swim stroke and that the dog paddle and back- and sidestrokes were widely used, yet they do not depict the freestyle. But, as Nicholas Orme warned, illustrations are imperfect documentations. Artists may not have understood or clearly observed the swim strokes of their day, and they may have employed artistic license or adhered to artistic conventions. Orme, *Early British Swimming*, 38–40. Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, I, 97.

¹⁹ De Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, trans. Van Dantzig and Jones, 186; Rattray, *Ashanti*, 63; Hair, Jones, and Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 501n16; Ligon, *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*, 53; John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina* (1709; Chapel Hill, 1967), 158; Octavia V.

were not so constrained. Because Africans felt less shame than westerners about publicly revealing their bodies and because the African climate was hot and humid, African women did not completely clothe their bodies. They often disrobed when swimming in the presence of men without shaming themselves. After describing males' swimming proficiencies, the sixteenth-century traveler Pieter de Marees commented that "many of the women here [West Africa] can swim very well too." Robert Rattray wrote in the early twentieth century that Asante women were "as expert as the men, and this I quite believe, as I used to see whole family parties alternately wading and swimming along the lake shore instead of following the road running between the villages."²⁰

Travelers reported that many coastal Africans learned to swim very young, either right after learning to walk between the ages of ten to fourteen months or after they were weaned at approximately two to three years of age. "Once the children begin to walk by themselves, they soon go to the water in order to learn how to swim and to walk in the water," wrote Pieter de Marees. In the early eighteenth century, William Bosman commented "the Mother gives the Infant suck for two or three Years; which over, . . . they [are] able to go . . . to the Sea-side to learn to swim."²¹

After parents taught them the fundamentals of swimming, children improved their skills by playing in the water and observing the techniques of stronger swimmers. While at Elmina, Jean Barbot saw "several hundred of boys and girls sporting together before the beach, and in many places among the rolling and breaking waves, learning to swim." He contended that Africans' strong swimming abilities "proceed from their being brought up, both men and women from their infancy, to swim like fishes; and that, with the constant exercise renders them so dexterous." Such observers were perhaps expressing the be-

Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage; or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves, Original and Life Like, As They Appeared in Their Old Plantation and City Slave Life: Together with Pen-Pictures of the Peculiar Institution, with Sights and Insights into Their New Relations as Freedmen, Freemen, and Citizens* (New York, 1890), 24; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 157, 161, 165; Belle Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter* (New York, 1900), 37–38; Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 7, 57.

²⁰ De Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, trans. Van Dantzig and Jones, 186–87, esp. 187; Hair, Jones, and Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 501n16, 532, 639–40; Ligon, *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*, 53; A. C. de C. M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freemen in Portugal, 1441–1555* (New York, 1982), 39–40; David Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe, 1450–1850* (Oxford, 2002), 14; Rattray, *Ashanti*, 63. See also Hugh Crow, *Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool; Comprising a Narrative of his Life, Together with Descriptive Sketches of the Western Coast of Africa; Particularly of Bonny; The Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants, the Productions of the Soil, and the Trade of the Country. To which are added, Anecdotes and Observations, Illustrative of the Negro Character. . . .* (1830; London, 1970), 44; and John Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo, Including Observations on the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants. With an Appendix Containing an Account of the European Trade with the West Coast of Africa* (1823; London, 1966), 138–39.

²¹ De Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, 26; Bosman, *New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 121–22. On swimming, see also Hair, Jones, and Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 532, 501n16, 640; Adam Jones, ed., *German Sources for West African History, 1599–1669* (Weisbaden, 1983), 103; and William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea: Describing the Customs, Manners, Soil, Climate, Habits, Buildings, Education, Manual Arts, Agriculture, Trade, Employment, Languages, Ranks of Distinction, Habitations, Diversions, Marriages, and Whatever else is Memorable among the Inhabitants. . . .* (1774; London, 1967), 210. On nursing practices, see Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (New York, 1990), 55; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York, 1993), 44; Richard Steckel, "Women, Work, and Health under Plantation Slavery in the United States," in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington, 1996), 57; Barbara Bush, "Hard Labor: Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," *ibid.*, 202–3; de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, trans. Van Dantzig and Jones, 26; and Hair, Jones, and Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 532, 501, 640.



D. O. Dapper described seventeenth-century Africans diving for gold nuggets that accumulated on riverbeds at the foot of waterfalls. Dapper took little interest in the production of images, and the publisher, who had not visited Africa, probably had all the engravings made. *D. O. Dapper, Description de l'Afrique . . . Traduite du Flamand (Description of Africa . . . translated from Dutch) (1668; Amsterdam, 1686)*. Courtesy John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.

lief, which Philip Curtin noted, that children of African descent, like animals, matured more quickly than those of European extraction.²²

Having learned to swim early, many coastal and interior West African men and women incorporated swimming into their recreational and work activities. The swimming abilities of several disparate ethnic groups were so strong that, independent of Polynesian influence, they invented surfing. Africans in Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Gabon, and possibly the Congo-Angola region surfed. On November 16, 1834, while at Accra, Ghana, James Edward Alexander wrote that "from the beach, meanwhile, might be seen boys swimming into the sea, with light boards under their stomachs. They waited for a surf; and came rolling like a cloud on top of it."²³ Canoe men used their swimming skill daily. As dugout canoes left the beach, watermen often swam alongside them to help keep their bows pointed toward oncoming waves to prevent them from tipping. When a canoe

²² Hair, Jones, and Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 532; Curtin, *Image of Africa*, 43.

²³ Finney and Houston, *Surfing*, 88; Ben Finney, "Surfboarding in West Africa," *Wiener Völkerkundliche Mitteilungen*, 5 (1962), 41–42; Jones, ed., *German Sources for West African History*, 109; Hair, Jones, and Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 532; James Edward Alexander, *Narrative of a Voyage of Observation among the Colonies of Western Africa, in the Flag-Ship Thalia; and of a Campaign in Kaffir-Land, on the Staff of the Commander-in-Chief, in 1835* (London, 1837), 192; Thomas Hutchinson, *Ten Years' Wanderings Among the Ethiopians* (1861; London, 1967), 227–28.

overturned in the surf, canoe men swam to save their lives and “being excellent swimmers and divers recover goods from the upset canoes.”²⁴

Although most western travelers did not venture into Africa’s interior, upcountry accounts indicate that many inland peoples could swim. In his famous autobiography Olaudah Equiano, an Ibo from present-day Nigeria, commented that some interior peoples could not swim, but others were adroit. Shortly after being kidnapped into slavery in the mid-1750s, he saw Africans in what is now Nigeria’s interior swimming in a large river. Having never previously seen either a large body of water or someone swimming, Equiano, who could not swim, was amazed. He recalled, “I was often very much astonished to see some of the women, as well as the men, jump into the water, dive to the bottom, come up again, and swim about.” When Robert Rattray visited Lake Bosumtwi, he noted that Asante were powerful swimmers, adept in both the breaststroke and freestyle, which they used to cross the lake and to catch fish.²⁵

The Scottish explorer Mungo Park’s account of two journeys deep into Africa’s interior in 1795–1797 and 1805 reveals that many inland peoples were good swimmers and that many Europeans could not swim. When Park crossed the Senegal River near the town of Kayee (Kayes in present-day Mali) on December 28, 1795, a “few boys swam after” Park’s horses, urging them on. On July 29, 1796, after leaving the Bambara capital, Segou (now in Mali), over five hundred miles inland, Park observed a fisherman dive underwater to collect and set fish traps. The fisherman’s lung capacity was so great that he was able to remain submerged “for such a length of time, that I thought he had actually drowned himself.”²⁶

During his second expedition, Park was accompanied by forty-three other Europeans. After they crossed the Bafing River about three hundred miles inland in present-day Guinea, a canoe carrying three soldiers overturned near the opposite bank. “The natives from the shore swam to their assistance, yet J. Cartwright [a soldier] was unfortunately drowned. The natives dived and recovered two muskets, and Cartwright’s body.” Park and the other surviving European party members died because they could not swim. During a battle on the Niger River against Africans, they drowned after jumping overboard. Only an enslaved canoe man and the interpreter and guide, Amandi Fatouma, lived to carry Park’s journal back to British officials and tell of his demise.²⁷

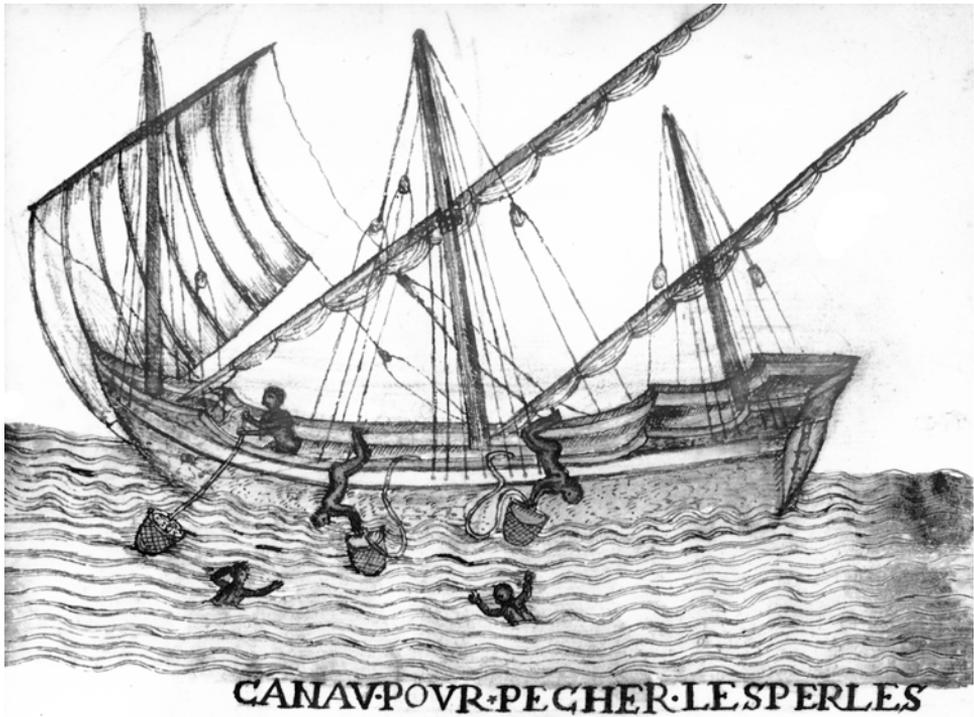
Many Africans developed large lung capacities that permitted them to remain submerged for a considerable time. Travelers frequently noticed the Africans’ underwater diving abilities. While on the Grain Coast (now part of Liberia) from 1599 to 1600, Johann von Lübeling witnessed the theft of European trade goods by an adept diver. “They can swim below the water like a fish, as they proved there. One of them, who had a pewter tankard of beer in his hand and a soldier’s helmet on his head, jumped into the water with them and swam thus a great distance underwater; then he re-emerged and jumped

²⁴ Hair, Jones, and Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 497n3, 501, 510n20, 529–32, 544n45, 545n46, 545n50, 573n8, 640; de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, trans. Van Dantzig and Jones, 26, 32, 186–87; Jones, ed., *German Sources for West African History*, 12, 103, 109, 219; Crow, *Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool*, 34, 39–40.

²⁵ Equiano, *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, esp. 54, 79; Rattray, *Ashanti*, 61–65.

²⁶ Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa: Performed under the Direct Patronage of the African Association, in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (1799; New York 1971), 71–72, esp. 72, 210–11, esp. 210; Mungo Park, *Travels of Mungo Park containing Book One, The First Journey: Travels in the Interior districts of Africa. and Book Two, The Second Journey: The Journal of a Mission to the Interior of Africa in the Year 1805* (London, 1954), 53–54, 161.

²⁷ Park, *Travels of Mungo Park*, esp. 319–20, 352, 365, 368–72.



This manuscript painting by one of the French Huguenot artists who accompanied Sir Francis Drake to the West Indies in the late sixteenth century illustrates how enslaved divers on Margarita Island off the coast of Venezuela harvested pearl oysters. When diving, they carried “hoop-net” baskets fastened to the canoes by ropes. As divers ripped pearl oysters from the ocean bed, they placed the oysters in the baskets, and after a diver surfaced, his basket was pulled to the surface. Divers could thus use both hands to gather oysters. “*Canau pour Pecher les Perles*” (*Canoe for pearl-fishing*), *Histoire Naturelle des Indes* (The natural history of the Indies), early 1590s. Courtesy the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. MA 3900, f. 57.

into his little boat, which his companion had to bring to him. Thus he got away with the helmet and tankard, and no-one could overtake him.” In the eighteenth century William Bosman explained how Ivory Coast Africans’ diving provided a spectator sport for whites: “You are probably acquainted with the expert Swimming and Diving of these *Negroes*, which I have several times seen with Surprize. Whenever they were on Board, and I threw a string of Coral, or any thing else into the Sea, one of them would immediately dive after it, and tho’ almost got to the bottom fetch it up again. This they seldom missed of, and were sure of what they brought up as their Reward.”²⁸

Some littoral Africans incorporated swimming into forms of trial by ordeal. After visiting Whydah (Ouidah in present-day Benin) in 1698, Bosman wrote that if “any Person

²⁸ On Africans’ diving ability, see Rattray, *Ashanti*, 63–65; de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, trans. Van Dantzig and Jones, 186–87; Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, 210–11; Equiano, *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 54; Hair, Jones, and Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 544n45; Elizabeth Helen Melville, *A Residence at Sierra Leone. Described from a Journal kept on the spot, and from Letters Written to Friends at Home* (1849; London, 1968), 113; and Richard Burton, *Wanderings in West Africa* (1863; 2 vols. in 1, New York, 1991), I, 195. Jones, ed., *German Sources for West African History*, 12; Bosman, *New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 491.

is accused of any Crime and denies the Fact," he could clear his name by trying to swim across a river "to which is ascribed the strange Quality of immediately drowning all the Guilty Persons which are thrown into it; [contrary to the European manner of trying witches]." But since, according to Bosman, all the Africans in the area were "very expert, I never heard that this River ever yet convicted any Person; for they all come out." Some Ibo (in what is now Nigeria) used a similar method to determine guilt or innocence. There the rivers that the accused traversed were populated with sharks. Thus culpability was determined by the ability to swim well and to elude predators.²⁹

When misfortune befell a slave ship, the swimming abilities of the coastal, littoral, and interior Africans aboard were tested. On September 10, 1830, two British naval vessels enforcing the ban on slave trading, the *Black Joke* and *Friar Rosamond*, chased the Spanish brigs *Rapido* and *Regulo* into the Niger Delta's Bonny River. "During the chase, they were seen from our vessels to throw their slaves overboard, by twos, shackled together by their ancles, and left in this manner to sink or swim, as best they could! Men, women, and young children were seen, in great numbers, struggling in the water," Peter Leonard, a British naval surgeon, wrote. "Several managed, with difficulty, as may be supposed, to swim on shore."³⁰

As Africans were taken to the New World, many of them carried swimming and underwater diving skills with them. From the early sixteenth century on, slaveholders realized that slaves' swimming and diving abilities could be profitably exploited. Consequently, some slave traders targeted Africans with swimming skills for capture and sale to New World colonies in need of their skills.³¹ A few slaveholders preferred slaves with swimming skills, but many more seemingly favored slaves from African regions where skill in swimming was probably widespread. The slaveholders' decisions were based on the belief that slaves from given regions worked hard, rebelled less, or possessed desirable skills unrelated to swimming. Scholars have detailed many South Carolinian, Georgian, Louisianian, and Brazilian rice planters' desire for slaves from African rice-growing regions. Since Africans often cultivated rice along waterways, which were used to irrigate that crop, many Africans from rice-growing areas were probably proficient swimmers. In the British West Indies and, to a lesser extent, South Carolina, slaveholders preferred Gold Coast Africans, often called Coramante. Many of them may have been swimmers. Thus swimming may have come to the New World as the corollary of skills slaveholders desired.³²

²⁹ Bosman, *New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 328, 359; Crow, *Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool*, 34–36, 43–44; Hair, Jones, and Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 640; Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo*, 138–39. In reporting on the Ibo trial by water, John Adams may have drawn from Hugh Crow rather than from personal observations.

³⁰ Peter Leonard, *Records of a Voyage to the Western Coast of Africa, in His Majesty's Ship Dryad, and the Service on that Station for the Suppression of the Slave Trade in the Years 1830, 1831, and 1832* (1833; Nendeln, 1973), 233–35; Daniel Mannix with Malcolm Cowley, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518–1865* (New York, 1962), 210–12; Richard Drake, *Revelations of a Slave Smuggler: Being the Autobiography of Capt. Rich'd Drake, An African Trader for Fifty Years—From 1807–1857; During which Period he was Concerned in the Transportation of Half a Million Blacks from African Coasts to America* (c. 1860–1865; Northbrook, 1972), 59–62.

³¹ De Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, trans. Van Dantzig and Jones, 186.

³² On preferences for Africans from rice-growing regions, see Wood, *Black Majority*, 55–56; Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves*, 9–10, 109–14; Carney, *Black Rice*; and Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 59, 121–22, 137. Jerome S. Handler and Frederick W. Lange, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados: An Archaeological and Historical Investigation* (New York, 1978), 20–29; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 235–36, 257; Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545–1800* (New York, 1970), 100, 102–5, 113. "Coramante" is not an ethnicity. It refers to Fort Kormantin, a

The sports culture historian Richard Mandell has written that “if there were indigenous sports among the imported Africans, they left no trace.” Yet many slaves participated in recreational and theatrical swimming activities that were evidently based on skills developed in Africa. Slaves swam for recreation and enjoyment. In the evening, many slipped into the water to cool off, relax, and wash away the day’s troubles. In Guiana in the 1770s, John Stedman observed that swimming was slaves’ “favourite diversion, which they practise every day at least twice or thrice.” Recalling his youth in antebellum North Carolina, Bill Crump said, “We wucked in de fie’ls from sunup ter sundown mos’ o’ de time, but we had a couple of hours at dinner time ter swim or lay on de banks uv de little crick an’ sleep. Ober ’bout sundown master let us go swim ag’in iff’ en we wanted to do it.” On April 13, 1804, Dr. George Pinckard observed the recreational swimming of a Barbadian bondman.

In one of our late walks we . . . met with a slave who was amusing himself by exercises of uncommon agility in the sea. Not an otter, nor a beaver, nor scarcely a dolphin could appear more in his element. He was quite at play in the water, and diverting himself in all kinds of antic tricks, and gambols. He dived to the bottom—swam in a variety of ways—walked or paddled along like a dog—concealed himself for a long time under water—laid himself at rest upon the surface, and appeared as much at his ease, in the ocean, as if he had never breathed a lighter, nor trodden a firmer element.³³

Slaves’ swimming habits extended beyond such impromptu amusements. Bondpeople and scholars have discussed slaves’ competitive sporting activities, including boxing and wrestling matches and foot, horse, and canoe races. They have contended that such activities could enhance self-esteem and make enslavement more bearable. Many slaveholders believed that sports allowed slaves to vent their frustrations without threatening the stability of slavery. Though such activities typically occurred away from white supervision, some slaveholders organized slaves’ recreational activities, especially contests they could wager on, such as races and fights.³⁴ John Stedman noted that adolescent slaves in Guiana

Dutch-built, slave-trading castle on Ghana’s coast. According to the fort’s guide, Louis Armstrong believed his ancestors passed through this fort, and his signature is in its guest book.

³³ Mandell, *Sport*, 180; Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year’s Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 214; Benjamin A. Botkin, ed., *Slave Narratives, a Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves. North Carolina Narratives*, vol. XI, part 1 (Washington, 1941), 208; George Pinckard, *Note on the West Indies: Written during the Expedition Under the Command of General Sir Ralph Abercromby: Including Observations on the Island of Barbadoes, and the Settlements captured by the British Troops, upon the Coast of Guiana; Likewise Remarks Relating to the Creoles and Slaves of the Western Colonies and the Indians of South America. . . .* (1806; 3 vols., Westport, 1970), II, esp. 148–49, 150. See also J. G. Clinkscales, *On the Old Plantation: Reminiscences of His Childhood* (New York, 1916), 7–9, 26, 29, 35–36; Stacy Close, *Elderly Slaves of the Plantation South* (New York, 1997), 20; Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 1855), 36, 65; Charles L. Perdue Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, 1976), 325; and Kate E. Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and his Wife “Vina” after Forty Years of Slavery* (Syracuse, 1856), 229–30.

³⁴ Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 105–9; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1972), 569; David Wiggins, “Good Times on the Old Plantation: Popular Recreations of the Black Slave in the Antebellum South, 1810–1860,” *Journal of Sport History*, 4 (no. 3, 1977), 273–74; Mandell, *Sport*, 180; Betty Wood, *Women’s Work, Men’s Work: The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia* (Athens, Ga., 1995), 135; Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gaming in the Old South*

competed in informal swimming contests. They swam “promiscuously, in groups of boys and girls, and both sexes exhibit astonishing feats of courage, strength and activity. I have not only seen a negro girl beat a hardy youth in swimming across the River Comewina . . . but on landing challenge him to run a two mile race, and beat him again, naked as they were; while all ideas of shame on the one side and of insult on the other, are totally unknown.”³⁵

Slaves also swam in formal, planter-organized contests. David Wiggins and Eugene Genovese have explained that southern planters occasionally organized boxing matches that pitted the champion fighter of one plantation against that of another. They apparently organized similar swimming contests. John Clinkscales contended that in the antebellum years one of his father’s South Carolina slaves named Essex was “by odds the best swimmer on my father’s place” and possibly even the county, suggesting his reputation was perhaps earned in interplantation contests. In the seventeenth century Richard Ligon observed a planter-organized contest in which Barbadian slaves had to catch a duck placed in a large pond. The captor was awarded the duck, presumably to eat or sell it. The proprietor of these Sunday “recreations,” Colonel Drax, “calling for some of his best swimming *Negroes*, commanded them to swim and take this Duck; but forbad them to dive, for if they were not bar’d that play, they would rise up under the Duck, and take her as she swome, or meet her in her diving, and so the sport would have too quick an end.” Describing the slaves’ use of the breaststroke and freestyle, Ligon said “in this chase there was much of pleasure, to see the various swimmings of the *Negroes*; some the ordinary ways, upon their bellies [like Europeans], some on their backs, some by striking out their right leg and left arm, and then turning on the other side, and changing both their leg and arm, which is a stronger and swifter way of swimming, than any of the others.” The winner was a “*Negro* maid” who, being absent when the rules were announced, “put off her peticoat behind a bush, that was at one end of the Pond, and closely sunk down into the water, and at one diving got to the Duck, pull’d her under water, and went back again the same way she came to the bush, all in one dive.” The duck would have been taken from the young woman and the game resumed, but the feat so impressed Ligon that he asked that she be allowed to keep the prize, and his request was granted.³⁶

Whether organized by slaves themselves or by slaveholders, contests probably offered the winners prestige in the slave quarters. They indicated that bondwomen could beat their male counterparts. In addition to providing enslaved participants and observers with merriment, the communal nature of such contests, as of other recreations and sports, probably enhanced slaves’ sense of community.³⁷

Some slaves fused swimming to blood sports when they fought sharks, alligators, and manta rays to amuse themselves and to demonstrate their skill and strength—and perhaps their manhood. Scholars who have studied slaves’ concepts of honor and manhood

(Princeton, 1996), 34–35; Equiano, *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 70; Henry Bibb, *Narrative and Life Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (1850; New York, 1869), 23; Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year’s Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 214.

³⁵ Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year’s Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 214.

³⁶ Wiggins, “Good Times on the Old Plantation,” 273; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 569; Clinkscales, *On the Old Plantation*, 7–9, 26–29, 35–36. Richard Mandell defined “formal” sporting events as those announced in advance with invited spectators; what these slaveholders did fits the definition. Mandell, *Sport*, xiii, 180. Ligon, *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*, 52–53.

³⁷ Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 105; Wiggins, “Good Times on the Old Plantation.”

have asserted that slavery nullified the advantages of being men in patriarchal societies for bondmen by refusing them the fruits of their labor, destroying marriages, and preventing them from publicly defending their honor and asserting their masculinity.³⁸ It is not clear how much bondpeople adhered to their enslavers' concepts of honor and manhood, but bondmen may have used aquatic blood sports to display and affirm their masculinity.

Many westerners regarded bodies of water as dangerous and were terrified of marine creatures. Describing South Carolina in 1769, a poet wrote: "Frightful creatures in the water/ Porpoises, sharks and alligators" swam. Thus, slaves' ability to traverse water with what whites perceived to be apparent ease while fighting creatures that petrified whites was doubly impressive. Manta rays, which can weigh two tons and measure twenty feet from wing tip to wing tip, frightened many westerners, who dubbed these fearsome-looking, though harmless, creatures "devil rays" and "vampire[s] of the ocean." Consequently, they were astounded when slaves battled them. In the mid-eighteenth century an African-born Beaufort, South Carolina, slave named May leapt onto the back of a manta ray to put the "whole weight of his body to the force of the [harpoon] stroke," before diving into the water and swimming back to the boat he jumped from, a feat that "delighted" its enslaved oarsmen. When William Elliott recounted May's tale, he exclaimed: "Had he belonged to the Saxon or Norman race, he had probably been knighted, and allowed to quarter on his shield the horns of the devil-fish, in token of his exploit!" May, however, remained enslaved, and his daring apparently earned him no reward except praise.³⁹

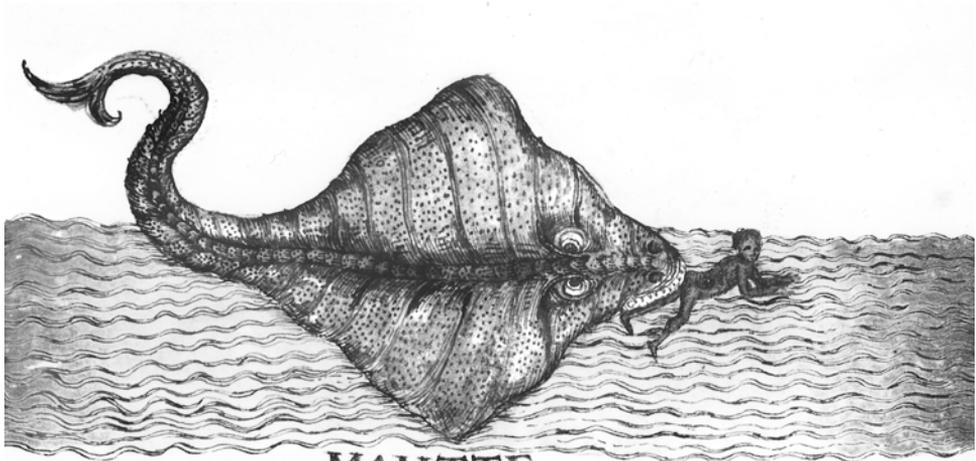
Slaves waded and swam into waterways to seize and wrestle alligators to the shore, where awaiting bondpeople decapitated them with axes. These exhibitions drew crowds of slaves and slaveholders, who, from the safety of shore, closely observed bondmen showcasing their strength and bravery. Slaves' egos and reputations were undoubtedly further inflated when white spectators exhibited fear. The former Georgia planter R. Q. Mallard recalled that when he was young and "somewhat callow," he occasionally took "to a tree until assured that the decapitation was a success!"⁴⁰

Slaves' swimming dexterity and daring were most forcefully exhibited when they fought sharks. In the Carolinas in 1700 John Lawson observed "some Negro's, and others, that can swim and dive well, go naked into the Water, with a Knife in their Hand, and fight the Shark, and very commonly kill him, or wound him so, that he turns Tail, and runs away." In 1790 an anonymous traveler to the West Indies wrote, "Negroes have been known daring enough to go into the water, in order to give battle to a shark, and have returned victorious, towing their adversary." This display so overwhelmed the chronicler that he or she bemoaned the possible demise of slavery, saying "if they can go into an unnatural element, in quest of hideous monsters, for the sport of engaging with them, it

³⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South," *American Historical Review*, 93 (Dec. 1988), 1228–52; Craig Thompson Friend and Korri Glover, eds., *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South* (Athens, Ga., 2004); Robert Staples, *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society* (San Francisco, 1982).

³⁹ The 1769 poem is quoted in Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia, S.C., 1998), 155. Todd Balantine, *Tideland Treasure: The Naturalist's Guide to the Beaches and Salt Marshes of Hilton Head Island and the Southeastern Coast* (Columbia, S.C., 1991), 124; William Elliott, *William Elliott's Carolina Sports by Land and Water: Including Incidents of Devil-Fishing, Wild-Cat, Deer & Bear Hunting, Etc.* (1859; Columbia, S.C., 1994), 15, 18–19.

⁴⁰ R. Q. Mallard, *Plantation Life Before Emancipation* (Richmond, 1892), 26–28; Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the years 1774 to 1776*, ed. Evangeline Walker Andrews (New Haven, 1921), 149–51; Ambrose Gonzales, *The Black Border: Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast* (Columbia, S.C., 1922), 121–24.



MANTTE

Ce poisson est fort grand & nuy moind
 Maliceuse & font Les Noigrés plongés
 En La onde pour prendre les perles Je
 Le gottent sur eux pour les faire noyer
 En appra. Les Noigrés

One of the French Huguenot artists who accompanied Sir Francis Drake to the West Indies in the late sixteenth century painted this image of a manta ray catching an enslaved pearl diver. The accompanying caption may be translated: “This fish is very large and no less vicious; when the negroes dive into the sea for pearls it jumps on them to make them drown and afterward eats them.” Manta rays do not eat humans, but this image conveys westerners’ fear of harmless marine creatures and perhaps their recognition of the daring of pearl divers in the face of such dangers. “*Mantte*” (*Manta ray*), *Histoire Naturelle des Indes* (The natural history of the Indies), early 1590s. *Courtesy the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, MA 3900, f. 47.*

will leave us to wonder at their submission to the yoke of slavery; to wonder that ever a rebellion can be suppressed; to wonder they do not prefer the gallows and the gibbet to the hoe and the whip.” While such accounts seem to be hyperbole, Hawaiians went to greater extremes to prove their courage by diving into the water to noose sharks and drag them to shore alive.⁴¹

Such battles may have provided slaves with some sense of control over their immediate lives, while enabling them to take pride in and display their skill and audacity. Accounts suggest that the slaves were participating in public demonstrations of brawn, daring, and manhood. The bondmen were also undoubtedly aware that they possessed skills their enslavers lacked, which may have afforded them a secret sense of superiority.

Most westerners, however, probably did not believe that aquatic clashes demonstrated slaves’ bravery. True, whites seemed impressed. But many presumably perceived slaves’

⁴¹ Lawson, *New Voyage to Carolina*, 158; Wood, *Black Majority*, 123; *A Short Journey in the West Indies, in which are Interspersed, Curious Anecdotes and Characters* (2 vols., London, 1790), I, 27–30, esp. 29–30; “Cabin Boy’s Locker,” *Sailor’s Magazine*, 13 (Sept. 1840), 29; Bingham, *Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Islands*, 382. The Hawai’i Maritime Center in Honolulu has a display that includes a description of Hawaiians’ wrestling sharks to shore.

ability to swim with ease while overpowering dreaded creatures as proof that they were animal-like savages. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson discussed prevailing views on blacks' bravery, writing: "They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it be present." That perception, as Winthrop Jordan and Philip Curtin have argued, enabled whites to dismiss and recast slaves' bravery as instinctive ferocity, like that of a lion, and not true courage, which depended on intellect and virtue. Westerners often described blacks as having high, animal-like thresholds of pain, asserting, for example, that blacks could better withstand tropical heat, humidity, and disease than whites and that corporal punishment caused them little pain. Thus whites could minimize the danger aquatic creatures posed to slaves. In short, people of African descent were typically viewed not as brave, but as ferocious. John Lawson suggested that slaves were so fearsome that they terrified sharks. Such a view, despite the apparent contradictions, enabled westerners to describe blacks as both cowardly and ferocious. Indeed, in *The History of Jamaica*, Edward Long asserted that blacks were "savage, cruel, and . . . cowardly." Thus true, virtuous bravery remained the domain of whites, who reaffirmed their sense of superiority and downplayed the threat to bondage that filled the anonymous Caribbean sojourner with such distress.⁴²

Like their African ancestors, many slaves born in the Americas learned to swim young, perhaps between four and six years of age. Several accounts describe enslaved children who were between seven and twelve years old swimming. Such children seemed comfortable in the water, indicating that they had probably learned to swim when they were still younger. On February 2, 1773, among the first sights that greeted John Stedman's eyes as he entered the Suriname River after crossing the Atlantic Ocean were "groups of naked boys and girls promiscuously playing and flouncing, like many tritons and mermaids, in the water." He then stated that "the scene was new to all," suggesting that European children did not swim. Frederick Douglass recalled that near where he lived in Maryland in the 1820s when he was seven or eight "there was a creek to swim in, at the bottom of an open flat space, of twenty acres or more, called 'the Long Green'—a very beautiful play-ground for the children." Enslaved parents, family members, and the entire slave community probably taught children to swim, just as they instructed them in gardening, cooking, sewing, hunting, and enduring bondage.⁴³

Though it is impossible to determine the percentage of slaves who swam proficiently, sources suggest that many did. Discussing the abilities of Barbadian slaves in the 1640s, Richard Ligon stated, "Excellent Swimmers and Divers they are both men and women."

⁴² Davis, *Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 460–61, 472, 476–77; Dusinger, *Them Dark Days*, 184; Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 264; Jordan, *White over Black*, 28, 39–40, 260–64, 459, 517, 525, 536; Curtin, *Image of Africa*, 43–44, 223–34; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 1992), 4, 329, 347; Long, *History of Jamaica*, 354.

⁴³ Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 7; Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 33–37, 40, 42, 60, 70, esp. 65; Perdue, Barden, and Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 325; Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington, 1995), 67–80; Wilma King "Suffer with Them till Death: Slave Women and Their Children in Nineteenth-Century America," in *More than Chattel*, ed. Gaspar and Hine, 147–68; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985); Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 503–19; Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work*, 31–34, 40–43; Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*; Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York, 1986), 169–78; Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (New Brunswick, 1989), 115–31.

Although Stedman, who was raised in Holland, could swim, he admitted that most Guiana slaves were much better swimmers and divers than he. While Robert Walsh was traversing Brazil in the 1820s, he concluded that most slaves could swim, dubbing them “amphibious.” Francis Fedric, who was enslaved in Virginia and Kentucky during the mid-1800s, contended that most bondpeople could swim, saying “unlike most slaves, I never learned to swim.”⁴⁴

In the American South standards of modesty probably prevented adult bondwomen from swimming. Caribbean and Latin American slaves maintained many West African customs and mores, most lived in relative isolation from whites, and the year-round heat kept the majority from wearing much clothing. Consequently, bondwomen there, like their African counterparts, probably faced little stigma when they swam nude. Stedman penned several accounts of male and female bondpeople swimming together nude without being thought immodest or immoral. Likewise, Richard Ligon detailed the swimming prowess of the nude Barbadian bondwoman who captured a duck. Even though slavery placed American bondwomen, who performed much the same work as bondmen, outside southern gender conventions, white and black society still encouraged and forced them to conform to many of those conventions. Female slaves themselves may have internalized southern mores. Thus, while enslaved female children may have disrobed to swim or play in the water, once a female slave reached puberty, black and white southerners would have viewed such actions as immodest. As bondwomen entered adolescence, they probably felt that swimming was no longer an acceptable activity.⁴⁵

In *Born in Bondage*, the historian Marie Jenkins Schwartz asserted that slaveholders did not encourage their slaves to learn to swim because they felt swimming did not increase slaves' economic value, aided them in escaping, and might lead to drowning and the loss of valuable human property. Indeed, many slaves incorporated swimming into their repertoires of resistance. But swimming could increase a bondman's usefulness and monetary worth, and some slaveholders encouraged it.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ligon, *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*, 52; Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 7–8, 57, 86, 154, 157–58, 164, 192, 214; Robert Walsh, *Notice of Brazil in 1828 and 1829* (2 vols., Boston, 1831), I, 281; Francis Fedric, *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky* (London, 1863), 1–2.

⁴⁵ Wendolyn Midlo Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba* (1971; Baton Rouge, 1996), 13–17, 23–24, 152–53; Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 7, 57, 214; Ligon, *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*, 53; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 237–38, 249, 264, 270, 283–84, 286; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988), 47, 109, 196, 202–3, 216, 222–23, 294, 296–97, 298, 440n45; Benjamin Drew, ed., *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee; or, The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Boston, 1856), 221; Rogers, *Albert, The House of Bondage*, 24; Kearney, *Slaveholder's Daughter*, 37–38; Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners: The Civilizing Process* (New York, 1978), 131–33, 138, 162–63, 165, 164, esp. 187; Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 144–65; Michael Craton, *Searching for the Invisible Man: Slavery and Plantation Life in Jamaica* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 142–43.

⁴⁶ Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 101, 130. On swimming and resistance, see Hall, “Maritime Maroons,” 387–400; China, “Quest for Freedom,” 51–87; Douglas Hall, ed., *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750–86* (Hong Kong, 1989), 54–55; John Andrew Jackson, *The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina* (London, 1862), 23–24; James Pennington, *A Narrative of Events of the Life of J. H. Banks, an Escaped Slave, from the Cotton State, Alabama* (Liverpool, 1861), 37–41; Clinkscales, *On the Old Plantation*, 16–19; Solomon Bayley, *A Narrative of Some Remarkable Incidents in the Life of Solomon Bayley Formerly a Slave in the State of Delaware* (London, 1825), 5–7; James Lindsay Smith, *Autobiography of James L. Smith, Including, Also, Reminiscences of Slave Life* (Norwich, 1881), 16–20; David Turnbull, *Travels in the West Indies. Cuba; with Notices of Porto Rico* (London, 1840), 365; Al-

Some whites advocated the use of slaves as lifeguards. While Dr. George Pinckard was in Barbados, he wrote on April 13, 1804, that slaves' swimming expertise "renders the negroes peculiarly useful in moments of distress, such as in cases of accident at sea or in the harbour." When young John Clinkscales of Abbeville County, South Carolina, swam, his parents entrusted his life to a slave named Essex, a renowned swimmer. Indeed, throughout the Atlantic world, slaves' swimming proficiency and whites' inability were juxtaposed when maritime accidents compelled blacks to save drowning whites. In 1805 the Barbadian slaveholder Robert Haynes sent his three sons to an English school along with a slave named Hamlet, who, Haynes reported, "saved the life of my son George" when he fell "overboard whilst landing at Liverpool." Similarly, a white clerk "who could only swim a few strokes" slipped off a "ship's gangway" in Baltimore Harbor and was pulled by the current "far out in the harbour." His enslaved friend Zamba, who had been raised on the "south bank of the river Congo, about two hundred miles from the sea" and had become "quite used to the water in Africa and could swim like a seagull," dove in after him. As Zamba described the event in his 1847 autobiography, "After a few minutes' strenuous exertion [I] made up to my friend, who was just at the moment sinking; having seized him by the coat collar with my left hand, I continued to keep afloat until a boat (several of which were pulling hastily to our assistance) came alongside and hauled us in." After a Brazilian steamer ran aground and began to break apart, a black sailor named Simao "swam through the furious breakers" thirteen times to save as many passengers.⁴⁷

While the role of the lifeguard never became widespread, throughout the Americas bondmen worked as underwater divers, harvesting pearls, salvaging cargoes from shipwrecks, and clearing riverbeds. Perhaps as a result of the tradition that barred women from maritime trades, bondwomen apparently were not used as divers, even though many African women on both sides of the Atlantic were proficient swimmers. Or perhaps their exclusion resulted from the tradition that bondwomen could not escape the drudgery of field labor for a specialized occupation as readily as bondmen did.⁴⁸

Slave divers were highly skilled, and after the Native Americans who had dived for pearls were killed off by disease and overwork, their diving abilities were unrivaled. Many could dive ninety-plus feet deep. (When a diver descends below about sixty feet, the air in his lungs is so compressed that buoyancy becomes negative, which causes him to sink rather than float.) Since divers descended to great depths, their eardrums sometimes burst. Though not fatal, this was painful and could cause temporary loss of equilibrium. How divers acquired their abilities is unclear. But the lung capacity and the composure required to work at such depths suggest that they had learned to swim at an early age. When diving, many held rock weights to help them descend quickly without expending valuable

len Parker, *Recollections of Slavery Times* (c. 1835; Worcester, 1895), 29, 47–48; and Isaac Johnson, *Slavery Days in Old Kentucky. A True Story of a Father Who Sold His Wife and Four Children* (Ogdensburg, 1901), 29–30.

⁴⁷ Pinckard, *Note on the West Indies*, II, 149, 321; Clinkscales, *On the Old Plantation*, 26; Robert Haynes, *The Barbadian Diary of General Robert Haynes, 1787–1836* (Hampshire, 1934), 26; Zamba, *The Life and Adventures of Zamba, an African Negro King; and His Experience of Slavery in South Carolina* (London, 1847), 1, 168–70; Frederic W. N. Bayley, *Four Year's Residence in the West Indies, During the Years 1826, 7, 8, and 9* (London, 1833), 486; H. G. Adams, ed., *God's Image in Ebony: Being a Series of Biographical Sketches, Facts, Anecdotes, etc., Demonstrative of the Mental Powers and Intellectual Capacities of the Negro Race* (London, 1854), 159–60.

⁴⁸ De Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, trans. Van Dantzig and Jones, 186–87; Crow, *Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool*, 44; Equiano, *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 54; Ligon, *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*, 53; Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 214; Craton, *Searching for the Invisible Man*, 142; Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work*; Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 144–65; Beckles, *Natural Rebels*; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 105.

oxygen to swim downward. In the 1820s, while touring Gulf of California pearl fisheries worked by Native Americans, Robert Hardy witnessed the dangers and difficulties in diving for pearls. "If it be difficult to learn to swim, it is infinitely more so to dive," wrote Hardy. Though Hardy was apparently a decent swimmer, his small lung capacity and the pain that water pressure caused his eardrums inhibited his diving ability.⁴⁹

Like masons, carpenters, seamstresses, industrial laborers, Big House cooks, and blacksmiths, divers apparently enjoyed the privileges that slaveholders bestowed on skilled bondpeople. William Dusinberre's study of Low Country South Carolina and Georgia rice plantations provides an analytical framework for studying enslaved divers. Dusinberre argued that manipulative slave owners granted privileges to bondpeople to make them more dependent and to "elicit the required facade of cheerful subordination." The most important privilege a slave could receive was placement in a skilled occupation. That, Dusinberre contended, enabled slaves to evade the monotony of field work, to find some dignity in their labor, to enhance their self-esteem, to gain the regard of their fellow slaves, and sometimes to obtain cash payments, all of which benefited their lives and those of their families and friends, most of whom were field hands. In addition, skilled slaves were often trusted by their owners, who frequently allowed them to work free of direct white supervision.⁵⁰

Yet because skilled occupations were privileges, slaves could be stripped of their positions at their owners' whim, for misconduct or in demonstration of owners' authority. While plantation production would have quickly ceased without the labors of skilled slaves, such as carpenters and blacksmiths, particular bondpeople might be rotated in and out of skilled positions without output being disrupted. As Dusinberre and Peter Kolchin have noted, many occupations, such as cooperage and carpentry, required only seasonal or part-time labor. Hence, slaves with such skills often found themselves in the fields when their specialties were not required. Dusinberre also concluded that rice planters frequently hired whites for tasks requiring exceptional proficiencies.⁵¹

While this model seems generally applicable to enslaved divers, they possessed abilities few other slaves, Native Americans, or whites had. Thus divers may have enjoyed more of an advantage than other skilled bondpeople. True, diving was typically seasonal, and when not engaged in it, divers performed other labors. Yet they and their owners undoubtedly knew how hard it was to replace them. Consequently, as long as divers could execute their duties and there was diving to perform, their positions were relatively safe. Compared to other skilled bondpeople, divers probably faced less danger of being stripped of their positions as a result of minor infractions or their owners' caprice. In addition, scholars who have examined the work experiences of free and enslaved black watermen have argued

⁴⁹ Sinclair and Henry, *Swimming*, 110–11; Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 6–7; Howard Larson, *A History of Self-Contained Diving and Underwater Swimming: Prepared for the Office of Naval Research under the Auspices of the Committee on Undersea Warfare* (Washington, 1959), 7–26; R. W. H. Hardy, *Travels in the Interior of Mexico: In 1825, 1826, 1827, and 1828* (London, 1829), 231–60, esp. 250; Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 154.

⁵⁰ Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days*, 179–210, esp. 190; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 51–54, 105–9; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 294–98, 392–98; Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 31–32; Bayly Marks, "Skilled Blacks in Antebellum St. Mary's County, Maryland," *Journal of Southern History*, 53 (Nov. 1987), 537–64; Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves*, 93–95, 106; Carney, *Black Rice*, 94–97; Richard Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the British West Indies, 1623–1775* (Baltimore, 1973), 107–18, 339–40; Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York, 1994).

⁵¹ Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days*, 192, 196–201; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 109.

that maritime occupations could create some racial parity. Divers may have benefited from the same dynamic, although there is not enough evidence to support this claim decisively.⁵² Divers evidently differed from other skilled bondpeople in another significant way. Most skilled slaves ascended to privilege by gaining competence in western artisanry. Divers' abilities were African-derived; they demonstrated the vitality of African cultural transmissions and retentions and their power to shape the Atlantic world.

The privileges that skilled slaves received were not the fruit of benevolence. As Dusinger and Kolchin have explained, slaveholders bestowed favors to extract more labor, and in turn more wealth, from skilled slaves' limbs and minds.⁵³ While diving was an arduous, dangerous occupation that taxed divers' health and claimed many lives, enslaved divers gained respite from field labor and material reward. Hence, like other skilled bondmen, divers lived existences of privileged exploitation. Their skills brought them rewards, while earning substantially more reward for their owners.

Spanish colonists along Venezuela's Pearl Coast were the first westerners to exploit enslaved African swimmers. Initially, Native Americans were forced to dive for pearls. As diseases depleted their numbers, Spanish colonists looked to West Africa for laborers. Commenting on this practice, Pieter de Marees said Gold Coast Africans "are very fast swimmers and can keep themselves underwater for a long time. They can dive amazingly far, no less deep, and can see underwater. Because they are so good at swimming and diving, they are specially kept for that purpose in many Countries and employed in this capacity where there is a need for them, such as the Island of St. Margaret in the West Indies, where Pearls are found and brought up from the bottom by Divers."⁵⁴

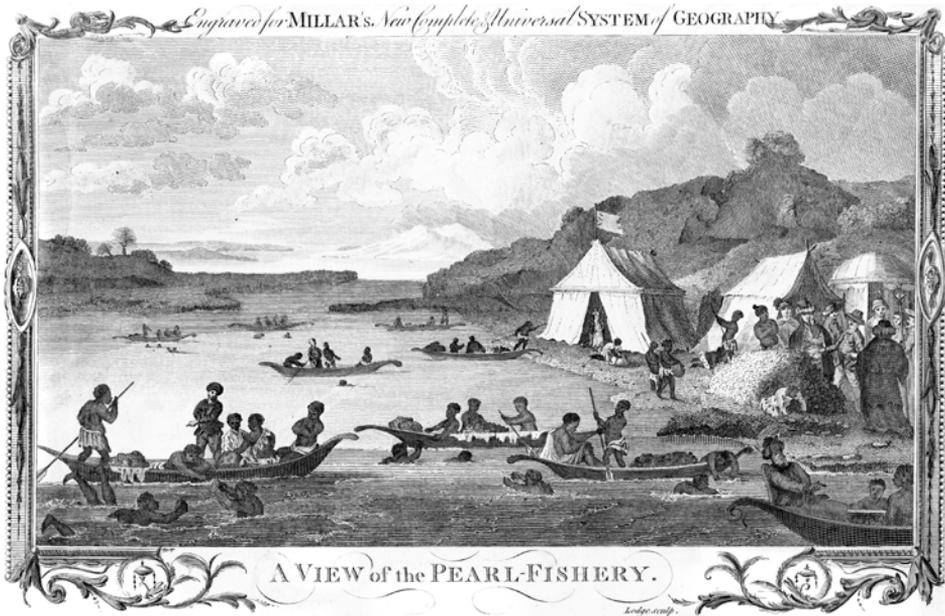
In the morning each pearl canoe set "sail for the oyster bed or pearl fishery, which generally" lay in waters over eighty feet deep. Divers held rocks to help them descend rapidly. Describing diving on Margarita Island in the early seventeenth century, the friar Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa said, "when they dive under water, they carry a little net or reticule, fastened by a rope to the canoe." As they ripped pearl oysters from their rocky fastness, they deposited them in the nets, "and with great speed and skill they come with this to the surface." While catching their breath between dives, they frequently "receiv'd a glass of Wine and a Pipe of Tobacco" as refreshment. Ironically, both would have impaired their diving abilities. Visiting Margarita Island in the late sixteenth century, after overfishing had precipitated the decline of its pearl fishery, Richard Hawkins was impressed with the island's "expert swimmers, and great deervers," who "with tract of time, use, and continual practice, ha[d] learned to hold their breadth long underwater, for the better atchieving their worke."⁵⁵

⁵² Price, "Caribbean Fishing and Fishermen"; Farr, "Slow Boat to Nowhere"; Bolster, *Black Jacks*; Cecelski, *Waterman's Song*; Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*.

⁵³ Dusinger, *Them Dark Days*, 178–210; Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 53.

⁵⁴ Jose de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias: en que se tratan de las cosas notables del cielo, elementos, metales, plantas y animals dellas, y los ritos, y ceremonias, leyes y gobierno de los Indios* (Natural and moral history of the Indies: Descriptions of notable things about the sky, elements, metals, plants, and animals, and rituals and ceremonies, laws and government of the Indians), 1590, ed. Emundo O'Gorman (Mexico City, 1962), chap. 15; Sanford Alexander Mosk, "Spanish Pearl Fishing Operations on the Pearl Coast in the Sixteenth Century," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 18 (Aug. 1938), 392–402; R. A. Donkin, *Beyond Price: Pearls and Pearl-Fishing, Origins to the Age of Discoveries* (Philadelphia, 1998), 321–22; Francis Augustus MacNutt, ed., *Bartholomew de Las Casas: His Life, His Apostolate, and His Writings* (New York, 1909), 374–83; de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, trans. Van Dantzig and Jones, 186.

⁵⁵ Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa, *Compendium and Description of the West Indies* (c. 1634; Washington, 1942), 51–52; John Ogilby, *America: Being the Latest and most Accurate Description of the New World; Containing the Origin*



This probably exaggerated image of piles of pearls reflects European perceptions of the wealth that enslaved pearl divers harvested from the seabed. “A View of the Pearl Fishery,” George Henry Millar, *The New and Universal System of Geography Being a Complete History and Description of the Whole World. . . .* (London, 1782). Courtesy Kevin Dawson.

Divers were entitled to a portion of the harvested pearls, which they were frequently forced to sell to their owners. Vázquez de Espinosa described the transactions: “on certain holidays they lay on a table or elsewhere excellent suits of clothes or other valuable articles of clothing, and the Negroes come out with the clothes, and their masters with riches.” Still, some divers accumulated enough wealth to purchase their freedom. Despite the material gain pearl divers obtained, they were permitted little autonomy. At night they were locked in dormitories, not to prevent them from running away, but to keep them from engaging in sexual intercourse. As Vázquez de Espinosa explained, “chastity is necessary, to such a degree that if anyone among them did otherwise, he would be unable to fish or dive under water, but would stay on the surface like a cork.”⁵⁶

Pearl diving was strenuous, life-threatening work. An oceanic trench near the Pearl Coast channels cold water into the otherwise-warm Caribbean waters, causing the year-round ocean temperature to hover at 60–70 degrees Fahrenheit. The cool waters induced exposure-related illnesses that sometimes culminated in death. Pearl divers’ eardrums sometimes burst so that “the blood gushed out of their Mouths and Noses when they came above Water to breath.” Sharks attacked divers; some divers drowned; pirates kidnapped, injured, and killed others. Unlike other enslaved swimmers, pearl divers faced

nal Inhabitants, and the Remarkable Voyages Thither. The Conquest of the vast Empires of Mexico and Peru, and Other Large Provinces and territories, with Several European Plantations in those Parts. . . . (London, 1671), 227; Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 323; Markham, ed., *Hawkins’ Voyages*, 313–15; Samuel de Champlain, *Narrative of a Voyage to the West Indies and Mexico in the Years 1599–1602* (London, 1859), 7.

⁵⁶ Vázquez de Espinosa, *Compendium and Description of the West Indies*, 51–52; Champlain, *Narrative of a Voyage to the West Indies and Mexico*, 7; Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 320.

harsh punishment: they were severely beaten if they could not obtain the desired quantity or quality of pearls.⁵⁷

Before the 1545 discovery of silver deposits in Peru, enslaved divers on the Pearl Coast probably generated more wealth than was produced anywhere else in the Americas. Pearls from the region were an important international commodity. Most were exported to Europe, where some were reexported to the Middle East, and still others were carried to Africa, where they were exchanged for slaves, ivory, gold, and other goods. The wealth enslaved pearl divers generated did not lead to reduced work loads nor to emancipation. Rather, their valuable service encouraged their use in other marine occupations. When Spanish treasure galleons sank, enslaved divers did salvage work.⁵⁸

By the mid-sixteenth century, the Spanish had decimated the population of indigenous West Indian salvage divers. They began employing Africans to recover goods from sunken ships. The nearly complete shift to enslaved salvage divers of African origin occurred after a twenty-eight-ship treasure fleet sailed into a hurricane on September 6, 1622, one day after leaving Havana. Aware that enslaved pearl divers dove to great depths, Gaspar de Vargas, who was in charge of the salvaging operation, requested twenty divers. After the enslaved divers recovered some silver bars and other valuables, a storm forced Vargas to return to Havana. The Havana politician Francisco Nuñez Melián obtained a royal contract permitting him to salvage the sunken and unlocated galleons. He took a contingent of enslaved divers to the wreck area along with a diving bell, which trapped a pocket of air underwater, allowing divers to obtain oxygen without surfacing. Melián promised to emancipate the first slave who found a galleon. One day an excited diver surfaced, shouting that he had located the treasure ship *Santa Margarita*. He was granted his freedom.⁵⁹

These Spanish successes set the precedent for employing enslaved salvage divers. When Bahamians, Bermudians, Caymanians, and Floridians began “wrecking,” or recovering goods from grounded or sunken ships, in and around the perilous Florida Straits during the eighteenth century, they typically employed at least one slave who could dive to a depth of seventy feet.⁶⁰ Wrecking was a significant industry for the region’s residents. But because ships did not sink often enough to make wrecking a full-time profession, most wreckers were sea turtles and fishermen who sporadically benefited from others’ misfortune. Many nineteenth-century Connecticut fishermen, especially those from Mystic, wrecked off the Florida coast during the off-season to augment their incomes. Though no evidence could be found, they may have hired enslaved divers and, after Britain abolished slavery in 1834, free black Bahamians, Bermudians, and Caymanians, as well as free and enslaved Floridians.⁶¹ No wrecker or observer left a detailed description of wrecking divers, so their treatment is largely unknown. Yet because these slaves possessed skills their owners lacked

⁵⁷ Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, ed. O’Gorman, 168–69; Ogilby, *America*, 227; Mosk, “Spanish Pearl Fishing Operations on the Pearl Coast in the Eighteenth Century,” 295, 399; Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 321–29.

⁵⁸ J. H. Parry, *The Spanish Seaborne Empire* (Berkeley, 1990), 51; Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 318–24, 327–29; Mosk, “Spanish Pearl Fishing Operations on the Pearl Coast in the Eighteenth Century,” 397; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 10; Van den Broecke, *Pieter Van den Broecke’s Journal of Voyages to Cape Verde*, trans. La Fleur, 27, 58.

⁵⁹ John Viele, *The Florida Keys*, vol. III: *The Wreckers* (Sarasota, 2001), xii, 5–10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 24, 26, 71–72; Daniel McKinnen, *A Tour Through the British West Indies, in the Years 1802 and 1803, Giving a Particular Account of the Bahama Islands* (London, 1804), 140; Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 23–24, 107, 178; Craton and Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*.

⁶¹ Viele, *Florida Keys*, III, 72; Buddington Family Collection, 1706–1986, Manuscripts Collection (G. W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, Conn.); Elam, George, and Thomas Eldridge Papers, 1828–1867, *ibid.*; Mason R. Packer Papers, c. 1832–1856, *ibid.*; *Vesper* (Ship), Journal, 1846 September 15–1849 June, *ibid.*

and because maritime activities could ameliorate the conditions of bondage, the divers probably fared better than plantation slaves. Moreover, the scholars Barry W. Higman, Michael Craton, Virginia Bernhard, and Roger Smith have depicted slavery as less severe on Bermuda, the Bahamas, and the Cayman Islands than elsewhere in the Americas.⁶²

In the antebellum American South, some bondpeople's swimming abilities were used in clearing fisheries of debris that could ensnare fishing nets. Slaves cleared two types of fisheries. Some worked for their owners on waterways near the owners' property. Others were hired out to commercial fisheries in coastal estuaries. Charles Ball, by his own account an expert swimmer, explained that while he and two other South Carolina field hands were employed as seasonal fishermen by their owner, they also cleared the Congaree River of debris. Though the work was cold and hard, it was a welcome escape from field labor.⁶³

In the mid-1850s, Frederick Law Olmsted penned a detailed description of North Carolina's intercoastal fisheries that reveals enslaved divers' dexterity. "The shad and her-ring fisheries upon the sounds and inlets of the North Carolina coast are an important branch of industry, and a source of considerable wealth," he wrote. "The men employed in them are mainly negroes, slave and free." Work on the fishery entailed long, dangerous hours. The most hazardous aspect was clearing the fishing grounds, which had required the use of "seventy kegs of gunpowder the previous year." In many places, coastal subsidence had submerged swamps, leaving the "stumps of great cypress trees, not in the least decayed, [that] yet protrude from the bottom of the sounds." Enslaved divers were key to their removal. After divers had ascertained the position of the debris, "two large seine-boats are moored over it." Divers fastened a chain to the stump or log, which they hoisted to the surface using a windlass rigged to the boats. When a stump would not yield and the power of the windlass pulled the boats' sides "to the water's edge," a more dramatic technique was employed. With the stump still chained to the boats, a diver placed a long, iron-tipped spike on the stump, which sledgehammer-wielding slaves in the boats drove into it. Once an approximately ten-foot cavity was made, the pole was removed. A diver inserted a cylindrical canister containing several pounds of explosives into the void. The charge was detonated while the stump was still chained to the boats, and the resulting explosion, combined with the upward force of the chains, wrenched the stump free. Olmsted described the scene:

the diver has come up, and is drawn into one of the boats—an iron rod is inserted in the mouth of the tube—all hands crouch low, and hold hard—the rod is let go—crack!—who—oosch! The sea swells, boils, and breaks upward. If the boats do not rise with it, they must sink; if they rise, and the chain does not break, the stump must rise with them. At the same moment the heart of cypress is riven; its furthest rootlets quiver; the very earth trembles, and loses courage to hold it; "up comes the stump, or down go the niggers!"⁶⁴

⁶² Price, "Caribbean Fishing and Fishermen," 1364, 1371–72; Farr, "Slow Boat to Nowhere," 165; Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 68–69; Cecelski, *Waterman's Song*; Barry W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Baltimore, 1984); Michael Craton, *Founded upon the Sea: A History of the Cayman Islands and Their People* (Miami, 2003); Craton and Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*; Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*; Smith, *Maritime Heritage of the Cayman Islands*; Saunders, *Slavery in the Bahamas*; Sandra Riley, *Homeward Bound: A History of the Bahama Islands to 1850 with a Definitive Study of Abaco in the American Loyalist Plantation Period* (Miami, 2000).

⁶³ Charles Ball, *Fifty Years In Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave* (New York, 1859), 206–13.

⁶⁴ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; with Remarks on their Economy* (London, 1856), 351–55, esp. 351 and 354; Cecelski, *Waterman's Song*, 74–75, 88–89; Edmund Ruffin, *Agricultural, Geological, and Descriptive Sketches of Lower North Carolina, and the Similar Adjacent Lands* (Raleigh, 1861), 183.

“Up comes the stump, or down go the niggers!” This embellished line suggests that divers were expendable, that their lives were worth little more than a stump stuck in the mud. By Olmsted’s account, though, they were highly valued, both for their skills and for the revenues they generated. “The success of the operation evidently depends mainly on the discretion and skill of the diver,” wrote Olmsted. “Some of them could remain under water, and work there to better advantage than others; but all were admirably skillful.” A fishery operator told Olmsted that the previous summer his divers had used this method to remove over one thousand stumps.⁶⁵

The divers worked largely free of direct white supervision. When not diving, “and, while the other hands are at work, they may lounge, or go to sleep in the boat.” Unlike most slaves, they were permitted to consume alcohol freely, and when “a diver displays unusual hardihood, skill, or perseverance, he is rewarded with whisky; or . . . money.” The divers earned substantial monetary bonuses of from a “quarter to half a-dollar” a day, which sometimes enabled them to purchase their freedom. Though privileged, these divers were not lazy. Pride in workmanship and material rewards drove them to excel. Olmsted was told that “the harder the work you give them to do, the better they like it”; even though they frequently suffered from “intermittent fevers,” they could not be kept out of the water. He concluded that these bondmen worked arduously in a perilous, yet privileged, profession. “What! slaves eager to work, and working cheerfully, earnestly and skillfully?” he exclaimed. “Being for the time managed as freemen, their ambition stimulated by wages, suddenly they, too, reveal sterling manhood, and honor their Creator.”⁶⁶

A close look at enslaved divers expands our understanding of the lives of skilled bondpeople. All divers apparently enjoyed privilege. Some were granted their freedom; many accumulated enough wealth to buy their freedom. Fishery divers seem to have been highly trusted. They apparently worked away from white supervision, and although slaveholders typically forbade bondpeople to carry weapons, such divers were trained to use explosives. Time and location significantly affected how divers were treated. Perhaps because Spanish colonists could import numbers of slaves with diving skills and because there were still some indigenous divers, pearl divers apparently suffered harsher treatment than other divers. Nonetheless, pearl divers received privileges denied most Latin American plantation laborers.

While most skilled slaves’ positions of privileged exploitation depended on skill in western artisanry, divers’ abilities had an African basis. The only western diving technology a few fettered divers used was the diving bell. But diving bells were expensive and seldom used.⁶⁷

Divers probably took great pride in their skill. They knew that they could descend to depths few others could and that they had proficiencies whites lacked. They braved cold waters, the dangers of underwater pressure, and sharks. Their diving ability not only made them exceptional among slaves; they, along with Greek sponge divers and Japanese and Middle Eastern pearl divers, were exceptional in the human race.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Olmsted, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 353–55.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 354–55.

⁶⁷ Though the diving helmet was invented in 1825, helmets were not widely used until the mid-nineteenth century, and no evidence suggesting slaves used them could be found. Larson, *History of Self-Contained Diving*, 4–26.

⁶⁸ Donkin, *Beyond Price*; “The Sponge Fishery,” *Sailor’s Magazine*, 12 (June 1840), 314; Nels Johnson, “Ahmad: A Kuwaiti Pearl Diver,” in *Struggle and Survival in the Middle East*, ed. Edmund Burke III (Berkeley, 1993), 91–99; Sinclair and Henry, *Swimming*, 98–105; Kunz and Stevenson, *Book of the Pearl*, 85–156, 189–252.

This study demonstrates that bondpeople's swimming activities touched their everyday lives in important ways. In an age when few westerners could swim, many slaves mastered the skill. Recreational swimming allowed field slaves to relax and cleanse themselves. When bondpeople competed in races or battled marine creatures, they exhibited their skills and won material rewards, which probably enhanced their prestige and self-esteem and increased the slave communities' sense of cohesion.

Slaveholders probably had to treat enslaved swimmers and divers differently from most other skilled bondpeople. Owners could replace most slaves who possessed land-based proficiencies with other competent slaves without interrupting production much. They could not dismiss divers without causing significant work disruptions and even stoppages. Enslaved divers thus resembled the antebellum industrial slave laborers whom Charles B. Dew has described. Through years of apprenticeship, which could begin when they were boys, some industrial bondmen became highly skilled laborers who made themselves indispensable to iron making. For example, in 1847 the Tredegar Iron Works purchased thirty-two slaves and groomed them for over a decade, making them the elite of its fettered population. The time, attention, and money dedicated to their training suggests that replacements could not be readily obtained. Indeed, Dew argued that their positions were secure unless a catastrophe occurred that forced the liquidation of assets, such as the factory owner's death. Furthermore, industrial slaves seem to have had lifelong appointments that might be passed from father to son. Divers too probably began learning their skills when they were young boys. There is no evidence of diving positions passing from father to son. But enslaved divers would have needed to become proficient swimmers by an early age and to swim regularly to develop the lung capacity and composure required to work calmly and smoothly in strenuous conditions without panicking and using up their oxygen, a reaction that would lessen their efficiency and could cost them their lives. Thus, if slaveholders wanted to train slaves as divers, they probably identified young, proficient swimmers whom divers could tutor.⁶⁹

Consequently, as slave owners engaged in the continually negotiated relationship with their slaves that Ira Berlin has described, they doubtless had to concede some autonomy to their divers and to temper claims to absolute authority. In salvaging goods from sunken ships far out at sea or clearing debris from inland fisheries, slaveholders did not have the luxury of discharging a diver to exhibit their authority or to punish an infraction, and severe beatings could unfit divers for work. Slave owners wanted diving jobs completed quickly and successfully, and they could not easily replace divers. Furthermore, slaveholders may have realized that they were privileged to own slaves possessing such a rare and lucrative ability. Thus, slaves employed in salvage, fishery, and sometimes even pearl diving had leverage to exact privileges from their owners.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Charles B. Dew, *Ironmaker to the Confederacy: Joseph R. Anderson and the Tredegar Iron Works* (New Haven, 1966), 27; Dew, *Bond of Iron*, 26, 171–219. Hardy, *Travels in the Interior of Mexico*, 231–60; Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 154.

⁷⁰ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 1–4. Virginia Bernhard stated that Bermudian bondpeople taught many white islanders to swim. Yet wreckers' tendency to have at least one enslaved diver suggests that those whites could not dive to great depths. Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 23–24, 107, 178.

The dignity divers found in their labor and their desire for wealth, which Olmsted declared led them to work “cheerfully, earnestly and skillfully,” also opened them to manipulation and exploitation. David Wiggins argued that much of southern antebellum bondpeople’s recreational life was bound to rural institutions and shaped by plantation labor. Corn shucking, hog killing, fodder pulling, wheat threshing, and logrolling were major festive occasions that combined work, social gathering, and recreation. Thus, Wiggins asserts, these tasks were completed without “any sense of real physical exertion. Instead, the slaves found these activities to be a source of physical pleasure and emotional release.” To enhance that pleasure, planters organized corn shuckers into teams that competed to see which could shuck fastest.⁷¹ Whites similarly manipulated divers’ sense of pride and desire for material wealth to make them work longer and harder than they otherwise would have. As in corn shucking, whites used competition to motivate divers. Francisco Melián enticed salvage divers to find wrecks by offering them freedom, while North Carolina fishery divers’ competitiveness, as well as monetary and alcoholic rewards, spurred them to dive even when ill.

Though the work was grueling, enslaved swimmers and divers welcomed the escape from the monotonous, backbreaking labor their enslaved brothers and sisters performed in the agricultural fields of the Americas. But slavery, no matter the occupation, was always hard work, and the privileges divers enjoyed were restricted by the fetters of bondage. Being a slave, even an enslaved diver, meant subjugation, harsh treatment, and never-ending toil. Still, enslaved swimmers and divers used skills of African origin to make slavery more bearable, sometimes winning existences of privileged exploitation.

Epilogue

Evidence that many slaves were strong swimmers raises issues about present-day American society. Since many American slaves were adroit swimmers, why are there no dominant African American competitive swimmers? The author has observed that many black West Indians and West Africans are proficient swimmers. Having spent time in black communities in California, New York, and the American South, he is familiar with the belief of many African Americans that swimming is a “white” activity. At the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum June 30, 1990, celebration of Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, the late African American comedian Nell Carter joked with the seventy thousand spectators, most of whom were black, that swimming was “un-black”—if blacks knew how to swim, he said, there would be no African Americans because their enslaved ancestors would have all swum back to Africa. The audience that had come to hear Mandela speak, including the author, understood the joke.

The author’s awareness of this black-held belief made historical accounts of West Africans’ and slaves’ swimming activities surprising and intriguing. Many white Americans believe that blacks are less capable of swimming than whites. Some whites believe that blacks’ bones are denser and that they are thus less buoyant than whites. The news media have reported on white and black Americans’ perception that blacks cannot swim. Most infamously, the then Los Angeles Dodgers’ vice president Al Campanis was fired in 1987 after he told Ted Koppel on the tv show *Nightline*, among other things, that blacks were

⁷¹ Wiggins, “Good Times on the Old Plantation,” 278–80, esp. 278.

not “good swimmers” because they lack “buoyancy.” Referring to Marine Corps data on the October 13, 1993, broadcast of *60 Minutes*, Commandant General Carl E. Mundy Jr. stated that black officers who had attended Basic School at Quantico “do not shoot, swim or navigate as well as whites.” In 2003 a Haitian American city councilman of African descent “asked [the North Miami] police to drop the [department’s swimming] requirement because he said blacks historically cannot swim.” In response the *Miami Herald* reported that North Miami police chief Gwendolyn Boyd-Savage, who is black, knows how to swim. But, the paper said, “Statistics have shown that minorities drown in disproportionate numbers to whites. In 2001, blacks in Florida were 50 percent more likely than whites to drown, according to the most recent figures from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.”⁷²

It is unclear why many twentieth-century African Americans abandoned this African transmission after they had retained it for some three hundred years. Segregation and cities’ unwillingness to duplicate expensive recreational facilities for blacks deprived black neighborhoods of swimming pools, as well as golf and tennis facilities. In 1940 E. B. Henderson noted that Washington, D.C., had “three inadequate indoor and two outdoor pools for Negroes, whereas there were nearly fifty pools for other swimmers.” In 2004 Florida International University psychology professor Marvin Dunn explained that blacks have traditionally lacked the resources to pay for swimming lessons or to gain access to pools.⁷³

But why, when denied access to swimming pools, didn’t African Americans swim in rivers, lakes, and the ocean? Perhaps the black community’s rejection of swimming was not caused solely by limited pool access. It also seems to show a coherent choice no longer to swim in natural waterways. As with the banjo (another African transmission), swimming was perhaps widely rejected because it came to be regarded as a “white” activity.

⁷² R. L. Allen and David Nickel, “The Negro and Learning to Swim: The Buoyancy Problem Related to Reported Biological Difference,” *Journal of Negro Education*, 38 (Autumn 1969), 404–11, quoted in Jack Shafer, “Lost in the Flood: Why no Mention of Race or Class in tv’s Katrina Coverage?” *Slate*, Aug. 31, 2005 <<http://slate.com/id/2124688/>> (Nov. 18, 2005); *Washington Post*, Nov. 16, 1993, p. A. 14; *ibid.*, Aug. 27, 1998, p. D. 4; *Miami Herald*, April 22, 2004, p. 1B.

⁷³ E. B. Henderson, “The Participation of Negro Youth in Community and Educational Programs,” *Journal of Negro Education*, 9 (July 1940), 416–24; *Miami Herald*, April 22, 2004, p. 1B.