

Project Title: Titanic

Project Summary:

Like the formative years of many youth, mine were marked by a great affinity for water -- deep bodies, currents, real and imagined creatures beneath -- and an inability to swim. Still, I would hastily don a rainbow bathing suit and 'swim' in the tub filled to the brim; my parents would take me to the Love Park wading pool during summers as a toddler. There were also the televised synchronized swimmers; an introduction to Esther Williams in the young adult novel, *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself* by Judy Blume; *Splash!* the Movie; outings with my best friend and her mother to Galveston beach where we shared waves in a tiny, inflatable raft (part terror, part exhilaration)....

These experiences are not unique to me, the draw to water even in the face of aqua illiteracy. Based on both casual observation at public pools, and social research, there appear to be seemingly far fewer black/African-American girls and women willing to take the dive. Why is this?

Why don't black girls swim?

And why don't we give more attention to those who do? I would like to explore and dismantle myths, stereotypes, and institutional blocks that have contributed to the number of non-swimmers through interviews with participants and community members; as well as a project that sees participants through from the first strokes to a realized, rudimentary (gloriously clunky) synchronized swimming routine tailored to their abilities. The raw aesthetic of newfound success will aid in retelling Titanic sink or swim stories.

Longer Project Description:

According to the 2014 American Red Cross Water Safety Poll of over one-thousand people, women and individuals living in urban areas are least prepared to perform a set of five basic water safety skills defined in the survey as the abilities to:

- 1) swim 1 minute without a flotation device
- 2) surface with water covering one's head
- 3) safely enter and find a way out of the water
- 4) exit a pool without a ladder
- 5) swim the length of a standard pool without stopping

80% of Americans surveyed self-reported an ability to swim, while only 56% of those could actually perform the skills; 18% of those unable to perform the tasks expected to supervise a child near a body of water over the summer of 2014.

According to the same survey, 69% of African-Americans claimed an ability to swim, while only 33% of African-Americans could perform basic water safety

skills. 36% of American women in general reported a low ability to perform all five.

All swimmers who took lessons were significantly more likely to pass the skills test.

Being both black and a woman potentially places one in a variety of dangerous situations, of which drowning is mostly preventable. As a black woman, I am aware of many issues of swimming that often get in the way – they are not innate. Most are symptoms of social and cultural constraints, while others are the result of a lack of health or fitness. Some are seemingly superficial to others (hair); while those such as religious modesty, scrutiny, shaming by successful swimmers, obesity, scarring (keloid, mastectomy), remnants of institutional and neighborhood segregation, lack of access (financial or social) to safe swimming areas, inability to travel to public swimming bodies (lakes, etc.) ask a greater emotional or monetary cost than some are able to meet.

While not harboring illusions of change, I feel strongly that if this project offers potential to help save a single life either directly or peripherally through awareness, then this will have been both a personal and community success. It is also my hope that the new skill set will open a few new doors for social interactions and events for the participants, as well as an interest in furthering aquatic vocabulary.

During the project, it is my goal to assist in the diminishment, if not removal, of obstacles that keep the selected/nominated women from learning to swim. They will be provided with suits and equipment, fees, bus fare, facility parking, and snacks, so that excuses for missing lessons are removed from the equation. Conquering discomfort and showing up will be their only responsibilities.

In addition to video documentation of a basic, synchronized swimming routine, the results of our talks and activities will be shared both online and at Emancipation Park Community Center. There, I would like to screen a documentary film on black swimmers and surfers, and host a follow-up discussion session with a local athletic swimmer and willing participants of the project. The goal will be to bring attention to local free and low-cost swim instruction resources, such as the American Red Cross public park summer sessions, and university and college pools and natatorium classes. If there is sufficient interest and support, as a follow-up I would like to set up a Kickstarter account for swim scholarships for low-income women of a variety of racial backgrounds (and men who demonstrate need) to enroll in classes throughout the year. The initial project is not intended to exclude, but rather include women of particular backgrounds with particular stories that I would like to tell in this particular project.

In addition, I too will take (remedial) lessons prior to initiating the participatory

part of the project. While I eventually took American Red Cross swimming lessons in elementary school, an inability to maintain the practice over the years along with stressful experiences in the water have led me to question my own swimming abilities. It is only fair that I practice what I preach.

My work is a good fit for such a project, as I find relatable humor in dark observations and present in ways that lead to questions rather than dead-end assumptions.