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*On the Absence of Latino Participation in Aquatics:  
Historic and Socioeconomic Barriers at Municipal Pools  
in Southern California*

**ABSTRACT:** *Focusing on Southern California, this essay discusses the absence of Latinos in aquatics – such as swimming, diving, and water polo. On the basis of newspaper articles, oral history interviews, and other materials, the author argues that this absence derives from historic and socioeconomic barriers, including policies and exorbitant fees, that Latinos had to face at municipal pools throughout the region.*

**KEYWORDS:** *U.S. history; California history; Latino history; Mexican-Americans; aquatics; municipal pool (plunge); Colton; San Bernardino; Lopez v. Secombe; oral history*

*Introduction*

At the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Mexican diving team won fourth place in the Men’s Synchronized 10M Platform,<sup>1</sup> much to everyone’s surprise, as nobody had expected these athletes from Mexico to score so high. Against all odds and competing against countries like China and Great Britain, they showed the world their capabilities and only barely missed earning a medal. In celebration of his team’s success, Mexican diver Diego Balleza Isaias took to social media and stated, “Los MEXICANOS somos capaces de dar el infinito,”<sup>2</sup> which translates to “MEXICANS, we are capable of giving infinity.” Isaias—alongside others, like Osmar Olvera, Juan Celaya, Alejandra Orozco, and Andy Garcia—continues to make his country proud, as diving is the top medal-producing Olympic sport for Mexico with fifteen medals total (so far).<sup>3</sup>

Historically, countries with large populations of European descent, such as Great Britain, Hungary, Australia, and the United States of America, have dominated aquatic sports like diving, water polo, and, of course, swimming. One has to look no further than the epitome of men’s swimming, the United States’ very own Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian ever.<sup>4</sup> So, at the 2020 Olympics, against the odds, the Mexican diving team made an impact on the world stage, with many looking toward this Latin nation that had competed with such pride and valor. The moment was of particular interest to me personally, as I am a Mexican-American who participated in aquatics while growing up: learning to swim in elementary school, playing water polo on the high school’s varsity team, and becoming a lifeguard during my junior year. My career in aquatic sports extended well beyond high school. For over ten years, I worked as a water safety

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<sup>1</sup> “Tokyo 2020 Diving Men’s Synchronised 10m Platform Results,” Olympics, [online](#).

<sup>2</sup> Diego Balleza Isaias (@diegoballezaoficial), “MEXICANOS somos capaces de dar el infinito,” Instagram, September 15, 2021, [online](#).

<sup>3</sup> “Mexico (MEX),” Olympedia, [online](#).

<sup>4</sup> “Michael Phelps,” Olympics, [online](#).

swimming instructor, an aqua fitness instructor, a pool manager, a recreation specialist, and eventually as an aquatics coordinator for multiple city recreation departments throughout Southern California's Inland Empire. However, I consistently noticed that I was in the minority in the field of aquatics: most of my teammates and work colleagues were white, and very few were Latino. Now, if the World Cup is any indication, Latinos are no strangers to sports. Even American-rooted sports like baseball, football, and basketball routinely feature people of Latino descent,<sup>5</sup> but rarely aquatics. Thus, the question arises: Why is there such a noticeable absence of Latinos in aquatic sports?

### *I. Historiographical Deficits*

Considering the respective historiography, one soon notices another absence, namely, that of specific scholarly research on the role of Latinos in aquatic sports. While there are studies—like Eric Chaline's 2017 monograph *Strokes of Genius: A History of Swimming*—that address the history of swimming in general,<sup>6</sup> specific works on Latinos in aquatic sports seem to have been more or less nonexistent until recently. Therefore, to answer my question, I found myself turning to news coverage, journal articles, and statistics, as well as oral history interviews and historic court cases pertaining to this topic. Fortunately, the historiography of aquatics with regard to other minorities, specifically African Americans, is already extensive. For example, Jeff Wiltse's 2014 article "The Black-White Swimming Disparity in America: A Deadly Legacy of Swimming Pool Discrimination" reveals that "[p]ast discrimination in the provision of and access to swimming pools is largely responsible for the current swimming disparity and thus indirectly responsible, at least in part, for the current drowning disparity."<sup>7</sup> Wiltse has also authored a monograph, *Contested Water: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (2007), which discusses the "social history of municipal swimming pools in the northern United States," because it allows us "to study the public lives of Americans from [the perspective of] many different and often overlapping social groups: working-class whites, women, African Americans, immigrants, children, and the middle class."<sup>8</sup>

So, to address the Latino disparity in aquatic sports, I use the respective historiography on other minorities and on the social history of municipal pools. As for its timeline, my essay reaches back to the period between the 1930s and 1960s and then jumps to the period between the 2000s and the present. The gap between the 1960s and 2000s is noteworthy because, during this time, the history

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<sup>5</sup> Adrian Burgos, *Playing America's Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Eric Chaline, *Strokes of Genius: A History of Swimming* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Wiltse, "The Black-White Swimming Disparity in America: A Deadly Legacy of Swimming Pool Discrimination," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 38, no. 4 (2014): 366–389.

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010; originally published in 2007), 6.

of pools in America was quite turbulent. According to Wiltse's entry on "Swimming Pools" in the *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, between the 1960s and 2000s, "proliferating suburban communities often chose to build private swim clubs instead of public pools,"<sup>9</sup> thereby making access to pools much more difficult for less privileged demographics. In his 2016 article, "Disturbed Waters: New Currents in the History of Water Sport," Glen Thompson argues that the history of water sports continues to be "political, whether their participants see this or not, as determined by local, national, and global conditions."<sup>10</sup>

## II. Defining "Latino"

While this topic has global implication, my essay specifically examines Latino participation in aquatic sports in Southern California, with a primary focus on the Inland Empire, particularly San Bernardino County, since that is where I reside. To explain my use of the term "Latino:" while others might use the term "Hispanic" to denote a person from a Spanish-speaking country,<sup>11</sup> I find that term too broad, as it includes people from the European country of Spain. Meanwhile, the term "Latino" denotes individuals from Latin American countries, generally encompassing nations and regions colonized by Spain and Portugal, such as Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. While Spanish—and, in Brazil's case, Portuguese—is the dominant language in all of these countries, the term "Latino" is more inclusive as it also encompasses the members of the native Indigenous populations who may not speak Spanish, such as the Yucatec Maya, Nahuatl, Quechua, or Guarani. Also, for the purposes of this essay, the term "Latino" is meant to be inclusive of all genders, men, women, and non-binaries. Meanwhile, the term "America" refers to the United States of America and the term "American" to a citizen of that country.

Beyond this, the term "Mexican" is used to denote a person from the country of Mexico, while the term "Mexican-American" is used to denote a person who was from Mexico, or has familial ties to Mexico, and is now living in the United States.<sup>12</sup> This could be a first-generation immigrant, a second-generation child of immigrants who grew up with full Mexican heritage in the United States, or even a third-generation grandchild, such as myself. One of the challenges in discovering primary sources on this topic arises from the fact that the term "Latino" is relatively recent, whereas, historically, different terms were used. Because the setting for this essay is Southern California, the term commonly used in the past was either "Mexican" or "Mexican-American."

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Wiltse, "Swimming Pools," in *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, ed. Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast (Detroit: St. James Press, 2000), 4:590–592, Gale eBooks.

<sup>10</sup> Glen Thompson, "Disturbed Waters: New Currents in the History of Water Sport," *Radical History Review* 125 (May 2016): 199–205.

<sup>11</sup> "What's the Difference between Hispanic and Latino?" Britannica, [online](#).

<sup>12</sup> "Mexican America: Glossary," Smithsonian Institution, [online](#).

Living in the United States further complicates matters concerning race and ethnicity. A person who identifies as “Latino” can be of any race, as there are Afro-Latinos, Asian Latinos, white Latinos, or native Indigenous. Due to centuries of colonization, most Latinos are racially Mestizo, a mix of European and Indigenous blood. However, this genetic indicator does not exist on the U.S. Census, and it leaves many Latinos and Hispanics at a loss as to how they should identify. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, “Hispanic” is not a race.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, “Mexican” has not been a racial identity on census forms since the 1930s.<sup>14</sup> This change is a result of the efforts of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), founded in 1929, who advocated for Mexican residents in the United States to be recognized as full citizens and thus treated as “white.”<sup>15</sup> Today, however, a person of Latin American descent typically does not identify with white America and leaves the race question unanswered, only choosing to be identified as a person of Hispanic or Latino origin. According to the data gathered by the 2020 census, 62.1 million Hispanics are living in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Looking exclusively at California, as of 2020, there are over 15 million Latino and Hispanic people living in the state,<sup>17</sup> making up around 40 percent of California’s total population. Narrowing it down to the Inland Empire, “Latinos now comprise a majority of the region’s population at 51.5% – an estimated 2.37 million people.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, despite such high population numbers, very few Latinos can be found in aquatic sports.

### III. Latino Participation in Aquatics?

Since ancient times, humanity has been drawn to the water and developed sports pertaining to it.<sup>19</sup> “Aquatic sports” is any physical activity that occurs in or around the water. In the Olympics, such sports include swimming, artistic swimming, diving, and water polo,<sup>20</sup> along with surfing, which made its Olympic debut at the 2020 games in Tokyo.<sup>21</sup> In the simplest of terms, water polo is a sport consisting of two teams of seven players each (six field players and one goalkeeper) in a deep

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<sup>13</sup> “About the Hispanic Population and Its Origin,” U.S. Census Bureau, [online](#).

<sup>14</sup> Gene Demby, “On the Census, Who Checks ‘Hispanic,’ Who Checks ‘White,’ and Why,” NPR, June 16, 2014, [online](#).

<sup>15</sup> Demby, “On the Census,” [online](#).

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Jones, Rachel Marks, Roberto Ramirez, Merarys Ríos-Vargas, “2020 Census Illuminates Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Country,” U.S. Census Bureau, August 12, 2021, [online](#).

<sup>17</sup> Erin Duffin, “California: Population, by Race and Ethnicity 2021,” Statista, October 6, 2022, [online](#).

<sup>18</sup> “¡Aquí Estamos! A Data Profile of Latinos in the Inland Empire,” UC Riverside Center for Social Innovation, [online](#).

<sup>19</sup> Chaline, *Strokes of Genius*.

<sup>20</sup> “Aquatics at the Olympics,” Topend Sports, May 2016, [online](#).

<sup>21</sup> “Surfing,” Olympics, [online](#).

pool, where players aim to score by throwing a ball into the opposing team's net.<sup>22</sup> Diving is a sport where individuals jump off a platform or springboard into the pool, usually performing incredible acrobatics while airborne before entering the water.<sup>23</sup> Artistic swimming, formerly known as synchronized swimming, is done either solo, with a partner, or in a group, with individuals performing a synchronized choreographed routine, usually accompanied by music.<sup>24</sup> Surfing involves using a board to ride the face of a wave and navigate back to shore, with a surfer being judged based on their performance on the waves.<sup>25</sup> Swimming, finally, is the exercise of moving one's body through the water with a combination of arm and leg motions.<sup>26</sup> In swimming, there are four main strokes: freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke, and butterfly. These sports range from individual to team, and all require great athletic skills.

With so many people of Latin American descent in California and numerous sports to participate in, it is quite shocking that there is hardly any Latino participation in the Golden State's aquatic sports and aquatic sports teams. In a 2008 newspaper article published in the *Los Angeles Times*, journalist Tony Barboza discusses why there is such an absence of Latinos in aquatics, examining the swimming gap and how cities are just starting to open swimming pools in predominantly Latino areas like Santa Ana and Los Angeles.<sup>27</sup> Barboza writes that "[t]hrough the city [of Santa Ana] is at the core of sun-soaked Orange County, public pools are scarce and Latinos—who make up 78% of the population—are drawn more to soccer. To promote health and safety, Santa Ana high schools are encouraging competitive swimming and water polo among Latinos, who don't traditionally participate in those sports."<sup>28</sup> Barboza goes on to say that this "push is part of a larger effort to promote physical fitness and prevent drowning. Studies show that most Latino children nationwide cannot swim. The community is also battling the stereotype of swimming as a sport for the white and wealthy."<sup>29</sup> According to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Latinos are among the highest casualties of drownings.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Latinos have one of the highest rates of at-risk swimming among all minorities, which can lead to

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<sup>22</sup> "Water Polo," Olympics, [online](#).

<sup>23</sup> "Diving," Olympics, [online](#).

<sup>24</sup> "Artistic Swimming," Olympics, [online](#).

<sup>25</sup> "Surfing," Olympics, [online](#).

<sup>26</sup> "Swimming," Olympics, [online](#).

<sup>27</sup> Tony Barboza, "Santa Ana Is Getting in the Swim," *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 2008, [online](#).

<sup>28</sup> Barboza, "Santa Ana Is Getting in the Swim," [online](#).

<sup>29</sup> Barboza, "Santa Ana Is Getting in the Swim," [online](#).

<sup>30</sup> Tessa Clemens, Briana Moreland, and Robin Lee, "Persistent Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Fatal Unintentional Drowning Rates Among Persons Aged ≤29 Years—United States, 1999–2019," *CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 70, no. 24 (2021): 869–874, [online](#).

drownings.<sup>31</sup> In a study conducted in the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics at Case Western Reserve University's School of Medicine in Cleveland, Ohio, researchers Rho Henry Olaisen, Susan Flocke, and Thomas Love discovered that

[d]rowning is the leading cause of death for children ages 1–4 and the second leading cause of death for children ages 5–14 in the USA...African American, Native American, and Latino children are at two to eight times greater risk of drowning resulting in death compared to their white counterparts...The rapidly expanding Latino segment of the U.S. population, in combination with the substantially greater risk of drowning resulting in death among Latino children, points to a potentially growing problem in this regard if left unaddressed.<sup>32</sup>

Statistics from the Red Cross Aquatics Division and other aquatics associations, like the California Parks and Recreation Society (CPRS) and the Southern California Public Pool Operators Association (SCPPOA), likely present similar findings.

This essay argues that Latinos have historically had limited participation in aquatics due to three primary factors: policy, economics, and culture. First, policies were set forth that prohibited Mexicans from swimming in municipal public pools. Secondly, in terms of economics, public pools built in white neighborhoods were exclusively accessible to the upper class, and access to private pools was essentially impossible, opening up a debate on the role of class in struggles over public versus private pools. Finally, generations of Latin Americans perpetuated their cultural attitudes and beliefs toward water, contributing to a lack of swimming proficiency, while language barriers made the widespread adoption of swimming difficult. A combination of these factors made it nearly impossible for many Latinos to enjoy the water, become proficient at swimming, and develop their skills enough to join aquatic sports.

#### *IV. Policies Jeopardizing Access*

Since the 1920s and 1930s, when municipal pools like those in the city of San Bernadino and the city of Colton (directly southwest of San Bernardino) first opened, municipal governments enacted policies prohibiting Mexican-Americans from using these public pools that were commonly referred to as "plunges." Visual sources from the first half of the twentieth century generally depict white patrons as the ones using the pools.<sup>33</sup> As we shall see, testimonials and oral history interviews from South Colton residents describe their experiences with municipal pools: the discrimination they faced in the 1940s when trying to use public facilities that white people enjoyed, the conditions imposed upon them so that they could

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<sup>31</sup> Carol C. Irwin, Richard L. Irwin, Nathan T. Martin, and Sally R. Ross, *Constraints Impacting Minority Swimming Participation: Phase II Qualitative Report* (Memphis: University of Memphis, 2010), 7, [online](#).

<sup>32</sup> Rho Henry Olaisen, Susan Flocke, and Thomas Love, "Learning to Swim: Role of Gender, Age, and Practice in Latino Children, Ages 3–14," *Injury Prevention* 24, no. 2 (2017): 129–134.

<sup>33</sup> "Colton Plunge," historical postcard, [online](#).

enter the facilities, and the alternative of swimming in the Santa Ana River when they could not use the pools.

The Colton Plunge opened in May 1920.<sup>34</sup> In the same month, under the headline “New Colton Plunge Is Formally Opened,” the *Enterprise* newspaper of Riverside reported as follows:

COLTON, May 15.—The formal opening of the Colton Memorial Park plunge took place Friday afternoon with a capacity crowd thronging the bathhouse and pavilion. Enthusiasm, which brought conviction of the fact that the plunge will not prove only a welcome playground for this city, but for lovers of water sports all over the valley, was rife. Following an hour’s program of music and public speaking, the plunge was thrown open for bathing at 3:15 and into its crystal depths flocked scores of bathers. The cement platform surrounding the pool was lined three and four deep with spectators. A series of races on the west side of the bathhouse preceded water races. The municipal plunge is one of the largest open-air pools in the state. It measures 90x180 feet and varies from 9 to 2 feet in depth. It is filled with clear mineral water flowing from warm wells at a temperature of 85 degrees. More than 90 dressing rooms with offices, alundry [*sic*], drying rooms, etc., surround the pool on the west, north, and south side, while a latticed rest pavilion and refreshment booth bound it on the south.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the fact that the Colton Plunge was patronized by thousands of Colton residents and aquatic enthusiasts from far and wide, access to the pool was restricted for minorities, particularly Mexicans who were prominently represented in the South Colton community.

The South Colton Oral History Project, a study sponsored by California State University, San Bernardino’s Pfau Library and California Humanities, aimed to document and preserve the history of “South Colton, a 1.3 square-mile ethnically segregated Mexican-American community within the city limits of Colton, California, in the time period from 1890 to 1960,” whose residents “were isolated from the larger, more economically and politically powerful part of the city.”<sup>36</sup> The project reveals the policies that were enacted to limit access to municipal facilities. In his interview, South Colton resident Bobby Vasquez describes the discrimination he faced when attempting to access public pools as a child in 1944: “Well, the thing was that we used to go swimming where we could find a place to go. The park in North Colton was off-limits to us because it was all white, and no Mexicans were allowed.”<sup>37</sup> In his interview, Augie Caldera, the grandson of Juan

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<sup>34</sup> “New Colton Plunge Is Formally Opened,” *Enterprise* (Riverside) 60, no. 227, May 16, 1920, UC Riverside Center for Bibliographical Studies and Research, California Digital Newspaper Collection, database. See Larry Sheffield, *Images of America: Colton* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 83: “The Colton Plunge, built in 1921 [*sic*] in the Municipal Park, now Cesar Chavez Park, was billed as the largest open-air swimming pool in California. The unheated pool was supplied with warm water by a well donated to the city by Ormiston L. Emery. People came from as far away as 100 miles to enjoy the refreshing water.”

<sup>35</sup> “New Colton Plunge Is Formally Opened,” *Enterprise* (Riverside) 60, no. 227, May 16, 1920.

<sup>36</sup> “South Colton Oral History Project,” CSU San Bernardino, [online](#).

<sup>37</sup> Bobby Vasquez and Rudy Oliva, interview by Tom Rivera, San Bernardino, December 16, 2013, transcript, CSU San Bernardino South Colton Oral History Project Collection, 5, [online](#).

Caldera (a local entrepreneur who sought to “make a better life in Colton for those of Mexican heritage”), talks about an “era of strictly enforced, segregated Colton,” stating that “Mexican people were not allowed to swim in the Colton Plunge except on Fridays.”<sup>38</sup> And the only reason they could swim on Fridays was because Friday was the day before Saturday, when the water was changed.<sup>39</sup> For individuals like Bobby Vasquez, being unable to access the public pool meant finding alternative places to swim: “So, we used to go wherever we could find a place to go swimming. There were a lot of places that we found: canals...La Sección—the reason they called it La Sección is because right next to that canal was some boxcars where railroad workers used to live...We used to go swimming in that canal there...We used to swim naked sometimes in the Santa Ana River.”<sup>40</sup> Other residents describe having to build smaller pools in South Colton because they were banned from the public pool in North Colton.

The discrimination found in Colton was also prevalent in San Bernardino. Mexicans and those of Latino descent were not allowed to access the public swimming pool. While Colton dealt with these racist policies internally, San Bernardino would find these racist and discriminatory policies challenged in court. In the summer of 1943, three Mexican children and the priest J. R. Nuñez, were refused admittance to the Municipal Plunge based on their race. At that time, Mexicans were only allowed to swim one day a week at the Perris Hill Plunge Pool, namely, on Sunday, the day before the pool was cleaned—purportedly because of the danger posed by the pesticides, dirt, and diseases Mexicans came in contact with while working in the fields.<sup>41</sup> When demands for greater accessibility were denied by Mayor W. C. Seccombe and the City Council of San Bernardino, newsman Ignacio Lopez and other members of the city’s Mexican community filed a lawsuit.

*Lopez v. Seccombe* became the first landmark court case for desegregation to include public facilities like pools.<sup>42</sup> This “1944 class-action civil rights lawsuit” in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California ultimately “determined whether the Mexican-American residents of San Bernardino, California, should be allowed to use the city’s public pool.”<sup>43</sup> Even though *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) had upheld state-mandated segregation laws and established the doctrine of “separate but equal,” the respective “separate but equal” facilities

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<sup>38</sup> “Juan Caldera Gains Colton Sports Hall of Fame Induction, Was Independent Sports, Entertainment Entrepreneur One Hundred Years Ago,” *Inland Empire Community News*, November 30, 2016, [online](#).

<sup>39</sup> “South Colton,” *Five Views: An Ethnic Historic Site Survey for California*, California Department of Parks and Recreation, Office of Historic Preservation, 1988, [online](#).

<sup>40</sup> Vasquez and Oliva, interview, 6, [online](#).

<sup>41</sup> “*Lopez v. Seccombe* Public Pool Discrimination Case Reenacted,” *Service Industry News*, September 30, 2022, [online](#).

<sup>42</sup> *Lopez v. Seccombe*, 71 F. Supp. 769 (S.D. Cal. 1944), [online](#).

<sup>43</sup> “*Lopez v. Seccombe*,” *Service Industry News*, [online](#).



for the use of Mexican-Americans simply did not exist. The only alternative was swimming in canals or the Santa Ana River. As a result of the 1944 legal challenge, city parks and recreational facilities, specifically the Perris Hill Plunge Pool, were ordered desegregated. The U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California ruled that

[t]his Court finds as true that the respondents' [i.e., the City's] conduct, as aforesaid, is illegal and is in violation of petitioners' rights and privileges, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States of America, and as secured and guaranteed to them as citizens of the United States, by the Constitution of the United States of America, as particularly provided under the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments. That petitioners are entitled to such equal accommodations, advantages, and privileges and to equal rights and treatment with other persons as citizens of the United States in the use and enjoyment of the facilities of said park and playground and to equal treatment with other persons and to the equal protection of the laws in their use and enjoyment of said privileges as provided, and afforded to other persons at all times when the same is open and used by them.<sup>44</sup>

Throughout the 1950s, desegregation resulted in a number of policy changes being enacted to allow Latinos access to public pools. Rudy Olivia, a lifelong resident of the city of Colton, explains in his interview that "[a]fter the war [i.e., World War II] and after the fellas came back from the war, they opened up the swimming pool for us, and they did away some segregated sections in the theaters – we could sit anywhere we wanted to."<sup>45</sup> Although Mexicans were now able to access the pools legally, it would soon become more difficult for them to access these pools due to economic reasons.

#### V. Socioeconomic Barriers

According to a 2010 study by Karen D. Berukoff and Grant Michael Hill, "[s]ocioeconomic status has been shown to be a prime factor in swimming proficiency because children who grow up in the middle and upper classes are more likely to have regular access to swimming facilities."<sup>46</sup> While the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California had struck down the segregation of public pools in 1944, thereby enabling greater physical access, economic factors now prevented Latinos from swimming, which meant that they did not develop the skills necessary to do so. The history of swimming pools in America perfectly mirrors the country's prejudiced and discriminatory beliefs. Wiltse's article "Swimming Pools" in the *Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* establishes that it was intentional to build new swimming pools in upper-class neighborhoods only:

Just as many white Americans chose to avoid living next to Black Americans during this period by moving to restricted neighborhoods, they chose to avoid swimming with them by joining

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<sup>44</sup> *Lopez v. Seccombe*, 71 F. Supp. 769 (S.D. Cal. 1944), [online](#).

<sup>45</sup> Vasquez and Oliva, interview, 29, [online](#).

<sup>46</sup> Karen D. Berukoff and Grant Michael Hill, "A Study of Factors That Influence the Swimming Performance of Hispanic High School Students," *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education* 4, no. 4 (2010): 410.

private swim clubs or building backyard pools. African and Latino Americans, many of whom continued to live in large cities, were left to swim at deteriorating public pools.<sup>47</sup>

The barriers minorities faced when trying to access pools still exist today. Like so many things, it all comes down to money, and it must be noted that “time” is money too. Accessing pools costs money, and swimming lessons cost money. Swimming lessons require a time commitment (i.e., money) by parents or guardians, and developing swimming skills that are going to be suitable for any meaningful participation in aquatic sports costs time (i.e., money). Building pools in areas where there are none costs money, and staffing pools with trained—and multi-lingual—personnel costs money. Pools in underserved communities continue to pale in comparison to pools in affluent communities in terms of size, equipment, staffing, and hours of operation (and the latter is, of course, crucial to developing swimming skills). Historically, “[m]iddle- and working-class Blacks competed with working- and lower middle-class whites for the use of public pools, while wealthy whites swam at private pools.”<sup>48</sup>

One has to look no further than one’s own city to witness the privatization of public programs, which demonstrates the marginalization of minorities when it comes to access to public aquatic programs. Consider the demographics of those who register for private swimming lessons versus those who register for public swimming lessons. The former tends to lean toward affluent, white families who wish to sign up their infants because of the danger posed by having a pool in their own backyard, while the latter tends to lean toward families who sign up their elementary-aged children for lower-priced group lessons because that is what they can afford.

#### *VI. Cultural Aspects*

Finally, there is a culture around pools. Pools have traditionally been white areas, whereas Mexicans and other Latinos have been involved elsewhere. Due to a combination of the previous factors, involvement in aquatic programs and sports has not been cultivated among Latinos over multiple generations, leading to their minimal to nonexistent participation in aquatic sports. If parents do not swim, neither do their children,<sup>49</sup> creating a generational cycle that perpetuates limited involvement in aquatic activities among Latinos.

For those who are trying to break the cycle, language can also pose a barrier.<sup>50</sup> It is no secret that language plays an essential factor in the delivery of swimming lessons, and matters become complicated when the delivery language differs from one’s home language. In their examination of the “effect of swimming lessons on

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<sup>47</sup> Wiltse, “Swimming Pools,” 592.

<sup>48</sup> Wiltse, “Swimming Pools,” 591.

<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Pharr, Carol Irwin, Todd Layne, and Richard Irwin, “Predictors of Swimming Ability among Children and Adolescents in the United States,” *Sports* 6, no. 1 (2018): 8.

<sup>50</sup> Olaisen, Flocke, and Love, “Learning to Swim,” 133.

skill acquisition improvement,” Olaisen, Flocke, and Love point out that, during their study, “[s]wimming instruction was delivered in English, a clear limitation, particularly among the youngest age, as English is often not formally introduced to Latino immigrants in this community until the first year of elementary school.”<sup>51</sup> The study was intended to mimic the most likely circumstances for Latino children who engage in swimming lessons, therefore it preserved English as the instructional language.

Fear is also a contributing factor that builds a culture of not swimming in Latino families. Berukoff and Hill explain that “[f]ear appear[s] to be a major psychological influence that negatively impact[s] the ability of swimmers to perform basic swimming tasks.”<sup>52</sup> Where exactly this fear originates requires further study. It may derive from Mexican folk tales that caution young children away from the water, like the tale of *La Llorona*, a malevolent spirit associated with bodies of water. Historically, in Latin American countries where there were no municipal pools and no one proficient enough to teach the community members to swim, folk tales were used to warn children of the dangers of playing near bodies of water.

Finally, there are very few role models in aquatics that minorities can look up to,<sup>53</sup> but hopefully this will change over time. For example, Mexican-American artistic swimmer Anita Alvarez participated in the 2016 Rio Olympics, and Tony Azevedo, a Brazilian-born American, has been the first U.S. water polo player to compete in five consecutive Olympics.

### Conclusion

The historic absence of Latinos in aquatics can be attributed to a variety of factors, including regulations that prohibited and limited Mexican-Americans from accessing public pools, economic barriers that made pool access exclusive and effectively impossible, and the resulting culture and generational cycle of non-swimmers. If there are Latinos in these spaces, it is a rarity, and they still face discrimination by virtue of being a minority existing in a predominately white space. From personal experience, I have witnessed that even when a Latino attempts to break into aquatics, they start at a disadvantage compared to their white counterparts because they are starting the sport later in life and are having to work harder to compensate for their gap in skills.

Current aquatic professionals have shared their thoughts on minorities in aquatics, particularly what the industry is doing to become fully diversified, inclusive, and equitable. A 2004 article in *Aquatics International* addresses systemic disparities and provides a guide to reparations and actions that need to be taken

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<sup>51</sup> Olaisen, Flocke, and Love, “Learning to Swim,” 133.

<sup>52</sup> Berukoff and Hill, “Study of Factors,” 417.

<sup>53</sup> Barboza, “Santa Ana Is Getting in the Swim,” [online](#).

for aquatics to be more diverse and inclusive.<sup>54</sup> Aquatic professionals advocate for the hiring of more people of color, for offering more swimming lessons at a low or reduced rate, and for providing swimming lessons in multiple languages, especially Spanish. In the words of Tara Eggleston Stewart, “[i]mproving minority participation in aquatics is not just an urban issue; it’s a national issue. As aquatics professionals, we have the power and resources to reduce these statistics...one lap at a time!”<sup>55</sup>

In 2023, a *U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan, 2023–2032*, was released, and it includes—in its chapter on “Action Recommendations” under the header “Water Safety, Water Competency, and Swimming Lessons”—several long-overdue propositions: “Develop and implement minimum national educational standards that include considerations to ensure water safety programs are delivered in a culturally competent, trauma-informed, anxiety sensitive, and historically and socially relevant manner.”<sup>56</sup> “Promote the involvement of aquatics, education, and health and safety organizations, and specifically aquatic sport governing bodies, to invest in, and collaborate with, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) to advance water safety, develop aquatic leaders, expand community education, and conduct land- and water-based training within the college and university system and the surrounding communities.”<sup>57</sup> Like the Mexican divers at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics who inspired the world, this essay hopes to inspire others to find their passion, move toward diversity and inclusion in aquatic sports, and prove that Latinos deserve to have their space in aquatics.

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<sup>54</sup> “A Diverse Pool,” *Aquatics International*, January 1, 2004, [online](#).

<sup>55</sup> Tara Eggleston Stewart, “Statistically Significant: Why High Minority Drowning Rates Should Matter to All of Aquatics,” *Aquatics International*, April 1, 2012, [online](#).

<sup>56</sup> *U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan, 2023–2032* (Washington, D.C.: USNWSAP, 2023), 31, [online](#).

<sup>57</sup> *U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan, 2023–2032*, 32, [online](#).