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Free Time

Elora Apantaku, 2011

When I first started writing this paper, the only point I was trying to make was an unconnected thesis that teaching kids how to swim is fun and black children are surprisingly warm and fun to hug. But the ideas grew. As a biracial individual growing up in America, race unfortunately became a big issue for me as soon as I was old enough to realize it was the most notably different thing about me. But this essay explores how I managed to find a safe haven away from the turmoil in the outside world, where race, as I discovered, means a lot more than it should. And because of recent events on campus, I can only assume American racism isn’t dead, despite many claims after Barack Obama clinched nomination on November 4th. This paper is pertinent because it shows the struggle of one person working a summer job and simultaneously finding freedom, somehow, in our world today.

My summer job was hard work: 9 to 5, 5 days a week. I’d be found in a freezing pool lying at the base of my high school’s natatorium. The calories I lost through shivering between shifts I’d attempt to replace with full boxes of honey nut cheerios—they’d get mooched by co-workers, or begged for by the kids with pudgy outstretched hands. I didn’t mind them asking though; I loved them—especially the kids. Even when they cried about getting in or blatantly stated they hated swimming. It was my job to teach them how, and I didn’t mind calming their irrational fears of the water because I, having swam for fourteen years, and having taught swimming for three, knew there was absolutely no way they would drown.

We were called Guards—the teenagers who taught five to twelve year olds how to swim. I still have no idea why. Many of us weren’t Lifeguard certified, so some of us couldn’t actually, if it unfortunately arose, guard a child’s life. I was in that category, but then again, I never intended to be a swim instructor. I was called in by a friend to sub, on one summer’s day with nothing else to offer. Figuring it would be a fast way to make thirty bucks, I accepted. It was nerve-wracking. B and Trish were the managers; one an old man with an unceasing love for candy, despite being a diabetic, who was either plotting a prank against you or was unsatisfactorily cranky, the other a middle-aged woman who when not smiling looked like she might kill you; like Hawkfish would eye me warily from their perches on the deck. One or the other would keep pulling me aside.

“Don’t always say good job. Make your comments constructive.”
“Start them off with the arrow first.” What’s an arrow?

“Smile more.” I can’t. I’m too paralyzed from fear.

That was my first day. I left the locker room shaking, wrapped up in a soaking towel. Once the sun hit my bare shoulders, I promised never to go back. But people kept asking me to sub. Having experienced one day of being a Guard, I knew that they of all people needed days off. I couldn’t say no. So I went back.

I slowly began to find small things to enjoy about the job. B was always managing to send someone’s sack lunch out into the middle of the pool floating precipitously on a kickboard. One small child kept quacking like the legion of rubber ducks we kept in the toy bin. In between lessons, guards would run over to the fiberglass turquoise diving boards and try to “outsplash” each other. One boy named Tomas, who was as old as the number of fingers on his extending hands, who still lisped and dreaded being left alone in the pool, would always run straight out of the locker room and sit on my lap, begging for a lesson from his favorite teacher. Our lessons were not constructive. “I’m a monkey! Ee-ee-oo-ah! I’m a frog! Ribbit!” And he’d push off against me while maintaining a tight safe grasp around my neck. “I’m a cat! Meow! Hiss!” And he’d bare his bright white baby teeth.

The next summer I applied to be a full time Guard.

The job was an escape from the collapse of the usual comfort I could count on from my friends. They didn’t understand me, couldn’t recognize the non-expressible pain I felt from being everything I didn’t choose to be: half-black, diabetic, depressed, female. They judged me on the way I looked, made comments that caused me to cringe and later cry, but refused to be blamed for how their judgments made me feel. Here I was seen and respected for one of the few traits that I had actually strived for. I had actively pursued becoming a better swimmer. And here, the kids and fellow guards respected me for all that I had actively achieved.

There were four lessons given daily, and each lesson was more or less an hour. Thirty minutes of instruction, ten minutes of the holy free time that kids would beg for, pull shorts to demand for, and then twenty minutes of in between time for changing and shuttling around from pool to parents. The class booklet described the program as helping children to:

Develop skills that have lifelong benefits! Beginners will learn correct stroke techniques while they become more comfortable around water. Sessions consist of 30 minutes of instruction (by members of the New Trier Guard) and 10 minutes of free play.

The first hour of the day belonged to the TWIGs. Every year during orientation, we’d sit down along the deck to listen to B overview everything that we’d need to know before we started teaching—what to teach at all the stations, beginning with the novice level one extending to the swim-club ready level six. It was never a long talk. Many things you’d pick up as
you went. He’d be stern about many things, but he’d chuckle when he’d talk about the TWIGs. “They’re a handful,” then he’d laugh, and the first-timers would eye each other with nervous smiles.

The TWIGs, which I later found out stood for Together We Influence Growth, were different from the other classes. For one, they stopped by the pool for lessons every day, but before and after, they also engaged in other camp activities. They knew each other so well that they were our loudest group. They didn’t mind yelling across the deck or the pool to have their fellow campers watch how well they had learned to a new aquatic skill. They were also, as their name tried to suggest, racially diverse.

The pool is located in an affluent suburb, where the average income for a family is $150,000 for a family. The African-American population is 0.7%. I, myself, at only 50% African, was still a rarity in the area. To see fifty black city children walking, hand in hand, with fifty white suburban children down the sun bleached sidewalk to go swimming, here, was like waking in some kind of bizarre dream. And yet they’d always be there the next day.

Having grown up in the city many were unable to swim. Their emotions about the five feet of water stretching out in front of them ranged from paralyzing fear to a crazed determination to learn, no matter what. Often I’d be stuck in the trenches, teaching the overcrowded level one. There hardly wasn’t enough room on the wall to hold all the kids, so they clung to each other, clung to their teachers, or climbed out of the pool, and sat, freezing, on the ledge.

There were two five-year-olds in the Twig class who were both very small, but they had big eyes and high pitched voices prone to enter into louder fits of laughter. Upon seeing them, I made a quick prayer that not all black people looked the same to me. But they were twins, thank god. Omani and Caylin were their names. “No, he’s Omani!” was a common phrase I’d hear on the pool deck before lesson. They were constantly engaged by the guards, who thought they were adorable incarnate. They couldn’t swim though. After lesson, one day, B’s adult daughter offered a theory that they had never swam before in their lives. I believed it. Omani spent his lessons curled up around the sides of his instructor, either to keep from turning to ice, or to avoid contact with the water. When he was in my group, he was my favorite. I’d never admit this to the kids, but it was something of a fact that the pool would become as icy as the arctic sea if you did nothing but stand around, halfway submerged in it. I would have to control myself to smile without chattering teeth. The less cold I appeared, the warmer they’d feel. But it was a painful endeavor. This twin that clutched to me out of fear was actually the warmest kid I’d ever held. Come to think of it, of all the kids I’d ever touched, hugged, or held, it seemed that the darker the child’s skin, the more relief they’d give me from the bleak water. I wondered if this was true, or if it was all in my mind.
A couple years later, my chemistry professor would define black body radiation as such:

As black objects absorb the most energy, black objects must also emit the most energy.

\[ \lambda_{\text{max}} = \frac{2.90 \times 10^6 \text{ nm} \cdot k}{T_k} \]

I wondered if having experienced so much, they were naturally warmer than other kids. In the years before and since, I have hugged many white kids. It never feels the same; I can never feel that same fever building within them.

My father had been born on a rickety taxi boat out in Leeki Lagoon, an inlet from the Atlantic ocean. As a result of African tribal superstition, he was kept away from bodies of water—least he be taken by water spirits. My mother had been born too late to take advantage of title IX, yet early enough to cheer on her younger sister at swim meets. My dad can float. My mom will sidestroke if properly begged. Despite their sparse aquatic competence, they still bought a house with a backyard pool, to prove how far they’d made it in life.

I myself started swimming when I was five years old. Before this I had been a dancer—of sorts. The grainy home videos testify that it was best that I had stopped. I hadn’t made it into the first swim club I tried out for. I remember being confused and scared at the thought of swimming in a strange pool, without a parent to guide me. Tears streamed down my face. My mom found a club that didn’t have try-outs. Soon I was swimming three times a week.

I was not a fan. It was hard work, especially when I turned nine and had to swim eight times a week in the summer. My skin was dry, and I always reeked like the insides of a Laundromat, chlorine clung to me so. I begged my mom to let me quit. I whined, I complained. “I hate swimming!” I’d yell when I couldn’t imagine going back to the natatorium, ever, again.

“You only have to keep swimming until you turn eleven, then you can quit whenever you want.” She told me, one day, in exasperation. I had jumped up and cheered. At age ten I became part of a state championship relay. Because of this, I thought I had a future in it. I’m still swimming, eight years later, so I guess I guessed right.

My mom made me keep to swimming with more enthusiasm then she applied to making me stick with basketball or soccer. At the time I thought it was because swimming was the most physically demanding sport, invented to torture me. It’s easy to run around with a ball; mundane and exhausting to repetitively stroke from one side of a pool to the next. For an upper level psychology class, a swimmer on my college team asked me why I swam, when very few African-Americans are in the sport (I am barraged by friends and acquaintances with psychology questions, because I am an oddity—half-white, half-black. It seems race relations remain one of the more difficult human
behaviors to understand). I recounted the story of how my mother wouldn’t let me quit.

Later that day, I called my mom, and told her about my conversation. She laughed. Then she told me why she kept pushing me to stay a swimmer. “I wanted you to be in an individual sport, so that coaches couldn’t be biased and keep you from playing in games because you were darker. I thought they’d have to let you swim if your times were the fastest—which they often were.”

I often wondered how my mom felt as the white mother of three, African-American-looking daughters. I’ve seen Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, seen the scene where the mother of the white woman who’s about to marry a black man explains truthfully, that she doesn’t care who she marries, but doesn’t know if the 100 million Americans who oppose their union in the first place, will ever come to accept their children. I guess my mom had understandable concerns about the way the world might treat us—even if she never spoke of them explicitly to us, the affected.

Back in level one, I had a girl whose fear of drowning was colliding with her determination to swim. The result was frustrating. She could touch the bottom; I had held her small, skinny hands while she momentarily touched down onto the tiled bottom with probing feet, still gasping air like a fish on land. She was seven; she wore a cap to cover her dark braids and a white, Hannah Montana swim suit. I gave her a pair of old goggles that I had gotten for free as a division one swimmer. She loved them. Still she wouldn’t swim to me unless I was holding at least one of her hands the entire time.

I wasn’t easy on her. After each lesson I would get out of the water, kneel down on one knee, look her in the eyes and tell her not to be scared, to just try it, because she could swim, and why didn’t she think she could? She’d be fine. I had been swimming for fourteen years. I had yet to drown. Each time she’d look at me: “I want to learn how to swim”. And I believed her.

And she believed me. She tried everything I told her. Keep your face in the water. Hum to keep water out of your nose. Arms straight. Don’t bend your knees. Even when I wasn’t her teacher, I kept informed on her progress. During free time I would see her tottering from fear and the element, floating in an inner tube, trying to swim solo along a lane line, gripping it tightly, as the waves from the other kids splashing pushed her up and down. With the goggles I had given her, she’d put her face in the water for a few seconds, take it out and look astonished. That’s all I had wanted.

I often wonder what about swimming makes it so mesmerizing; why people think going to the lake or swimming in pools constitutes a luxury. It’s not something people get tired of, perhaps because it is one of the few activities one can never quite adjust to. It is always a novel interaction between just you and the water. You are alone, but you are surrounded. The feeling never dissipates, whether it’s your first time swimming
ever, or if you reckon you’ve been swimming too much for the last decade. The feeling of weightlessness is something I still find mesmerizing—even after spending so much time in pools. At any moment, I think, if the laws of physics were to just go out, I’d be crushed to the bottom. I think that’s why swimming elicits fear and joy simultaneously in young children learning for the first time.

In the outside world, people will treat you like an oddity. I know. I’ve gotten the dumb questions, gotten the weird looks. I’ve heard words that make me feel like giving up; that make me feel uncomfortable being myself. I’m still living in a country where this comment: “Fuck Obama. That nigger ain't ever gonna win. He'll probably get shot down before January,” can remain posted in a blog without being taken down by anyone. In the aftermath of Obama winning the presidency, I still felt dissatisfied by the response of millions of Americans. Hopefully, one day, in the country where a half-black, half-white man can be elected president, people won’t hail it as historic, or extraordinary. It just will be.

At least until then, from 9 to 5, Monday through Friday, most of the summer, I am free. I have found a haven, where the outside world no longer exists. My outward appearance no longer matters. I am just a person, teaching fellow humans how to swim.