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“Lifeguards and Ladies”: Gender, Sport and the History of Public Swimming Pools

The public swimming pool is a local (and global) site where the identity politics of the everyday is negotiated through and upon nearly naked bodies. It is a center for hygiene, physical education, leisure, and sport where patriarchal gender relations have been reproduced by dominant discourses about public health and the citizen's body. It is also a space where girls and women have negotiated power over and between these male-centered ideologies and made a home for themselves. Turn of the century discourses that sought to train and educate the female body for reproduction envisioned leisure swimming as an appropriate activity for girls and women. By 1950, however, women had taken their aquatic opportunities into the masculine realm of athletic competition: across North America, competitions for women in swimming, diving and synchronized swimming were flourishing thanks to the historical acceptance of female bodies in public pools.

Crystal Pool in Vancouver, British Columbia is a good example of a space and place where dominant discourses about disciplining the female body through hygiene, physical education and leisure were taken up by women. Crystal Pool is a site where social relations of gender (as compounded with Victorian notions of race and class) were negotiated in and through the bodies that inhabited it. While people of color and the poor were merely tolerated as patrons, Vancouver's white, middle class girls and women fared comparatively well. Analysis of gender and the internal geography of the pool and records of gender and patronage

provide evidence that the constant articulation of swimming as an appropriate exercise for women by turn of the century medical practitioners, contributed to the consistent and rapid development of competitive aquatics for women (often by women) during the rest of the century. By the Post-War period, a time in Canadian sport history that Michael Messner and others have suggested is best characterized by armored football players and “bare and vulnerable cheerleaders,” proved to be an opportune moment for women to choose to participate in sports like synchronized swimming, a space where women could be both “lifeguards and ladies”.