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## History and Power: On *Pride*

### Introduction

Midway through Walter Hill's 1982 interracial buddy film *48 Hours*, Reggie Hammond (Eddie Murphy) walks into the middle of an all-white country music bar and declares: "I'm your worst nightmare. I'm a nigga with a badge." In doing so, he is actually signifying several things at once. Most immediately he is commenting ironically for the audience on the fact that he was, in fact, a prisoner on furlough impersonating a police officer, a living, breathing representative of the black criminal figure already deeply inscribed in the minds of the surrounding patrons. (Martin Lawrence would reprise this comedic conceit some fifteen years later as Miles Logan in another interracial buddy film, Les Mayfield's 1999 *Blue Streak*.) He was also making a point about the reversal of the normative legal authority in relations between blacks and whites, and especially between black and white men. But in assuming the position of the black cop, Hammond was actually violating a more general principle in the antiblack world: exhibiting qualities and qualifications supposed in the racist imagination to be foreclosed to black people. In this respect, Alonzo Harris's fate in *Training Day* can be read as a cautionary tale about the extension of such badges of honor across the color line. The presence of black men in occupations and pastimes previously reserved for white men scandalizes the very idea of privilege, but more insidiously it suggests that these same sites and activities can be corrupted from within. Jake Hoyt does his best to redeem the badge from degradation by

his black counterpart and, as we will see below, Coach Richard Binkowski (Tom Arnold) seeks in similar fashion to protect the purity of water against the threat of pollution posed by Coach Jim Ellis (Terrence Howard) and his team of black competitive swimmers. The nightmare of black infiltration in state and civil society is the flip side of the dream of racial equality, the slave power and the slave colluding unconsciously while engaged in conscious combat.

## Maritime Slavery

Blacks can't swim. It's an old joke, at least in the United States, serving as a humorous rejoinder to the curious looks and often-querulous comments solicited by the rare black swimmer among a field predominated by white teammates and competitors. The late Nell Carter—singer, dancer, actress and card-carrying black Republican—retold the joke to former African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela on a hot June day at the Los Angeles Coliseum. It was 1990 and Mandela was near the end of an eight-city tour of the USA following his historic release from nearly three decades of political imprisonment on the notorious Robben Island, four miles off the turbulent Atlantic coast of Cape Town. Many among the largely black audience of over seventy thousand laughed knowingly: "If black people could swim, slavery would have been impossible. We all would've swum back to Africa!" If Mandela could have swum back to the mainland, they mused, maybe things would have been different for President de Klerk's apartheid regime as well.

Blacks can't swim: the punch line evokes a pernicious and, it turns out, fairly recent stereotype insofar as it suggests some innate incapacity to acquire knowledge or skill set, or some natural incompatibility with aquatic environs (Associated Press 2008a). No one assumed the worst of Carter at this welcome ceremony for an icon of the global black freedom struggle. By contrast, one cannot help but recall the infamous comments made by former Los Angeles Dodgers General Manager Al Campanis on a 1987 episode of ABC's *Nightline* with Ted Koppel. When asked, per the theme of the evening's program, why there were no blacks in managerial positions in professional baseball on this fortieth anniversary of Jackie Robinson's historic breaking of the color line, Campanis, in a process of apparent free association, rationalized the persistent white monopoly by wading into the murky waters of analogy. "Why are black men, or black people, not good swimmers?" he asked rhetorically. The short answer: "Because they don't have

the buoyancy.”<sup>1</sup> On this account, blacks can’t manage for the same reasons blacks can’t swim, because they “lack the necessities.” Thinking and swimming are, of course, rational activities. In their absence, inertia wins out. The inimitable black comedian Paul Mooney signified on that old chestnut during his 2007 *Know Your History* performance at The Laugh Factory in L.A., offering that blacks had been barred from riding on the 1912 maiden voyage of the British-owned RMS *Titanic* because whites believed their “heavy nigger bones” would make them too much a liability. Membership has its privileges.

Surely, there is ample quantitative data demonstrating much lower rates of swimming proficiency and much higher rates of drowning deaths among blacks relative to whites in every age group and region of the country. According to a 2014 study prepared by the YMCA, for instance, nearly seventy percent of black children have not learned to swim (more than twice the figure for white children) and they are three times more likely than their white counterparts to die from drowning (the second leading cause of accidental injury-related death among youth) (Danielle 2015). Nearly three-quarters of all blacks report having never been involved in swimming, whereas the numbers are nearly the opposite for whites. But, given that some forty percent of black children have in fact learned to swim and nearly a quarter of all black people participate in some sort of swimming activity during their lifetimes, one must account for the remaining disparity. A child’s likelihood of learning to swim is strongly correlated with a range of sociological factors, including family environment (i.e., education and income levels, swimming proficiency, encouragement, and exercise habits), access to swimming facilities, and admiration of a highly competitive swimmer. Not surprisingly, the factors that contribute to the development of swimming proficiency are also strongly correlated with being white (or Asian) (Irwin et al. 2009). Lest we think that this is solely an outcome of the massive and growing racial wealth gap, it is important to add that class indicators account for well less than half of the difference in question (Powell 2010). In fact, “being Black reduces the odds of participation in swimming by approximately 60%, even while adjusting for age, sex, and household income” (Hastings et al. 2006, 908).

Among variables studied by a research team led by University of Memphis Professor of Health and Sport Sciences Richard Irwin was fear of water, or,

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<sup>1</sup>Koppel, not missing a beat, retorted: “I think it may just be that they don’t have access to all the country clubs and the pools” (Johnson 2007).

more specifically, fear of injury and death. Children develop fear of water if adult caregivers express fear of water, and that fear acts as an inhibitor. But why should black people fear the water in some *characteristic* way? Here we run into a sort of vicious circle. Fear of water inhibits development of swimming proficiency and lack of swimming proficiency amplifies fear of water and so on. This vicious circle begs the question: which came first in the historic instance, black aquatic incapacity or black aquatic aversion? Is this dilemma connected to a longstanding and transatlantic phenomenon akin to an African-derived cultural transmission or is it a more local and contemporary development linked to specific political and economic conditions? Pioneering research on the history of swimming published in the last decade would strongly recommend the latter conclusion, demonstrating that the widespread fear of water and general lack of swimming proficiency among black people in the USA are the exclusionary achievements of twentieth-century social engineering (Sugrue 2009).

Between the 1920s and the 1940s, public swimming as state-sponsored *bathing* (hence the moniker for the “suits”) for the boys and young men of the “unwashed” European immigrant and black migrant masses was in decline and public swimming as a popular recreational activity—and eventually as a major competitive sport—for white families emerged. As young white women entered the scene, and as laborers, professionals, and business owners of European descent intermingled with more frequency, even across generations, white communities systematically segregated blacks from municipal pools throughout the country, and perhaps nowhere more violently than in the North. The interwar years saw the increasing social and spatial incorporation of working-class European immigrant communities into the mainstream of white middle-class America, and this expansion of the social category of whiteness in the transition from industrial to modern society entailed a renewed policing of blackness at the water’s edge. “Pools became emblems of a new, distinctly modern version of the good life that valued leisure, pleasure and beauty. They were, in short, an integral part of the kind of life Americans wanted to live” (Wiltse 2007, 5).

“Blacks can’t swim” is, then, a deeply equivocal statement in light of recent scholarship, to say nothing of the living memory of black oral history. It signifies both that blacks are powerless to do so and that they are prohibited from doing so. In other words, the statement cannot decide whether the point is that blacks *cannot* swim (and therefore should be excluded from participation on the rational basis of public safety) or that they *must not* swim (and therefore should be excluded from participation on the irrational basis of public health). Or, rather, they must not swim *here*. The edict of

segregation in this case is pulled taut between its descriptive and prescriptive registers, prompting us to wonder about the relationship between the racist pseudo-science of leaden black bodies unable to float and the racist social practice of quarantining black swimmers from dissolving into liquid contact with whites. Is there a common logic underlying the claim that blacks are at risk in the water and the claim that whites are at risk in the water *with blacks*? Put slightly differently, is there some consistency between the notion that blacks are inherently deficient and the notion that this deficiency is, nonetheless, somehow communicable?

Historian Kevin Dawson has permanently disabused us of the notion that the statement “blacks can’t swim” holds water as an essentialist proposition. Of course, the power of a stereotype lies not in its status (i.e., is it true?) but in its function (i.e., what work does it do in a given discourse?). That being said, it never hurts to debunk a myth whenever one is able. In fact, “blacks can’t swim” is better termed an urban legend, given its roots in the reconfiguration of the city, especially the urban metropolises that served as points of destination for the millions of The Great Migration in the first half of the twentieth century. What Dawson reveals in his seminal article in the *Journal of American History*, “Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World” (2006) and the reader’s digest of his scholarship for *Swimmer* magazine, “African Swimmers Made History” (2010), is an archive of the rich aquatic history found throughout the African Diaspora, including what would become the United States. For the better part of the modern period, European accounts recognize not only that most Africans were sound and proficient swimmers, but that they also often displayed abilities far superior to Europeans.<sup>2</sup>

Enslaved African swimmers and divers were used variously for the expansionist projects of the major metropolitan powers in Lisbon, Seville, Amsterdam, Paris and London—salvaging valued supplies and *matériel* from sunken cargo ships; rescuing drowning or stranded crewmembers overboard; mining the ocean floor for the lucrative international trade in pearls; clearing swamps and creeks and rivers for the development of agricultural enterprise and commercial transportation routes; and, last but not least, providing entertainment for the slave-owning classes in “blood sport”

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<sup>2</sup>He writes: “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” (Dawson 2006, 1327). Or again: “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” (Dawson 2006, 1331).

contests against alligators, rays, and sharks (Dawson 2006, 1341–1350).<sup>3</sup> In fact, Dawson avers that advanced swimming, including the use of what we now call freestyle, may have arrived and proliferated in the New World as “the corollary of skills slaveholders desired” (Dawson 2006, 1339).<sup>4</sup> Though many Africans (and many Asian and Native people as well) swam freestyle throughout the modern period, “demonstrating its speed and strength to them for centuries,” Europeans and white Americans did not take up the form until after the 1912 Olympic Games where Duke Kahanamoku, a native Hawaiian with no formal training or competitive swimming experience, broke not one, but *two* world records using the stroke (Dawson 2006, 1134). The unparalleled talents of African swimmers and divers in the Atlantic world were so generally acknowledged that well-known French scientist and inventor Melchisédec Thévenot would opine in his 1696 *Art of Swimming*: “Swimming was in great esteem among the Ancients. But to come to our times, it is most certain that Negroes, excel all others in these Arts of Swimming and Diving” (quoted in Dawson 2010, 50). Thévenot was implicitly addressing the historical decline of European swimming as well, making a point that opens up a materialist explanation for why “whites can’t swim” became a veritable truism spanning the better part of an epoch. However, the disparity in European and African swimming capabilities did not lead the authors of this collective *reportage* to question their superiority as such. The genius of race, “a *complicated* figure, or metaphoricity, that demonstrates the power and danger of difference, that signs and assigns difference as a way to situate social subjects” (Spillers 1996, 80), enabled the

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<sup>3</sup>Regarding the latter role, Dawson writes: “Most westerners, however, probably did not believe that aquatic clashes demonstrated slaves’ bravery. True, whites seemed impressed. But many presumably perceived slaves’ ability to swim with ease while overpowering dreaded creatures as proof that they were animal-like savages. [...] In short, people of African descent were typically viewed not as brave, but as ferocious” (Dawson 2006, 1343–1344). Condescension notwithstanding, the specialized skills honed by enslaved swimmers and divers afforded them a circumscribed leverage: “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” (Dawson 2006, 1354).

<sup>4</sup>“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. [...] Thus swimming may have come to the New World as the corollary of skills slaveholders desired” (Dawson 2006, 1339).

Eurocentric imagination to sustain itself in the face of all that was eminently controvertible.<sup>5</sup>

When chroniclers noted that Africans were proficient swimmers, they may also have been signaling that such swimmers were animal-like. [...] 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. [...] 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. [...] 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. (Dawson 2006, 1332)

Consistent across these wildly divergent impressions of black aquatic facility—from supremacy to shortfall—is that the condition indexes for the wily observer the impossibility of a dynamic principle and the total determination of the permanent quality, a direct line from instinct to anatomy by which the latter supersedes and preserves the former in subsequent iterations.

## Municipal Segregation

During the July 13, 2009 episode of National Public Radio's *Tell Me More*, host Michel Martin talked briefly with historian Jeff Wiltse, author of the 2007 book, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, and Jim Ellis, retired junior high school math teacher and, since 1971, founding coach of the venerable Philadelphia Department of Recreation Swim Team (PDR), the first black competitive swim team to gain genuine national attention.<sup>6</sup> The segment's topic was the then widely publicized allegations of racism against The Valley Club in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania, a now-defunct private swimming facility located in an affluent and exceedingly white suburban setting about ten miles northeast of PDR's

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<sup>5</sup>Snead described racism as "a normative recipe for domination created by speakers using rhetorical tactics" (Snead 1986, x).

<sup>6</sup>Wiltse's book won the 2007 Author's Award from the International Swimming Hall of Fame. Ellis, for his life's work as coach and mentor to hundreds of Philadelphia-area swimmers, won the 2007 Presidential Honor Award, also from the International Swimming Hall of Fame.



impoverished North Philly headquarters.<sup>7</sup> The allegations against The Valley Club, which opened its tony doors in 1954 as the monumental *Brown v. Board of Education* was being argued, included harassment by club members and exclusion by club management of four or five dozen black youth who had arrived on June 29, 2009 as part of a planned activity paid for by a local non-profit day camp, Creative Steps, Inc. Adding insult to injury, Valley Club president John Duesler told the press when questioned about the campers' harassment and exclusion that there was "concern that a lot of kids would change the complexion... and the atmosphere of the club" (Martin 2009).

Wiltse and Ellis were invited to NPR's *Tell Me More* in order to provide historical context for an incident that was framed in the dominant media—and the community protests as well—as an anachronism. "Jim Crow swims here" read one of the signs held by the small multiracial group of Philadelphians picketing outside the gates of The Valley Club several days earlier. Evoking pre-civil rights legal practices and their attendant political culture to describe these post-civil rights era events put rhetorical pressure on the prevalent neoliberal narrative about a "post-racial America" consolidated by the landmark 2008 election of Barack Obama as President of the United States. Musings like this, wishful in the first and last instance about "the end of black politics" rather than the end of racial domination, were elevated to new levels of earnestness with indications of his candidacy's viability (Bai 2008).<sup>8</sup> Wiltse connected the Huntingdon Valley *faux pas* with a capsule history of the virulent (and ongoing) segregation of swimming facilities, a battle he argues was even more difficult and fated than that waged around public schools.

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<sup>7</sup>Since the initial allegations levied in a suit filed by several campers' parents and the US Department of Justice, and an investigation by the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission which found probable cause and issued a \$50,000 fine for slurs against one child, The Valley Club filed bankruptcy and the property was sold at auction for roughly \$1.5 m to the Philadelphia-based Congregation Beth Solomon Synagogue and Community Center (Nunnally 2010). Proceeds from the sale were distributed to creditors, to several local community organizations and to plaintiffs as damages (Roebuck 2012). The 2009 events at the Valley Club represent one of several recent high-profile incidents of antiblack racism at swimming facilities, including the 2011 Ohio Civil Rights Commission ruling against Jamie Hein, a white Cincinnati landlord who posted a "whites only" sign on the gate of an apartment complex swimming pool (Mandell 2012), and the 2015 police assault of 15-year-old Dajerria Becton in McKinney, Texas, a Dallas-Fort Worth suburb (Elizalde 2017).

<sup>8</sup>"For a lot of younger African-Americans, the resistance of the civil rights generation to Obama's candidacy signified the failure of their parents to come to terms, at the dusk of their lives, with the success of their own struggle—to embrace the idea that black politics might now be disappearing into American politics in the same way that the Irish and Italian machines long ago joined the political mainstream" (Bai 2008).



When black civil rights organizations began to score legal victories against their exclusion from municipal pools in the 1950s, white patrons and city officials began retreating to private neighborhood clubs and backyard pools, resorting to the dereliction or destruction of former recreation sites. Wiltse explained that white “suburbanites recognized that if they wanted to protect the social environment of their pools—in particular, if they wanted to exclude [blacks]—they had to create a private club [in] which they could then still legally exclude [blacks] whereas, if they opened up a public pool, they wouldn’t be able to do so” (Martin 2009). So even though municipal pools were legally desegregated, swimming, whether recreational or competitive, has yet to be integrated in any meaningful way. Ellis corroborated Wiltse’s broader history with examples from his local experience in Greater Philadelphia, relating that when his swimmers ventured out to suburban swim clubs for meets in the early 1970s, well after white flight had become entrenched, they were treated in much the same way as the Creative Steps campers described things in 2009.

Facing financial difficulty from diminished membership of late, The Valley Club had revised its policy to admit local day camps as part of a marketing campaign to enlarge the geographic base of its revenue stream. The strategy of subsidizing white middle-class families’ segregated R&R with poor black families’ meager fees-for-service would prove entirely self-defeating, as actionable discrimination against the unwelcomed guests was as likely there as humidity in the summer, and the ensuing legal fees and fines would push the struggling outfit into bankruptcy by year’s end (Grant 2010). Creative Steps, for its part, was in search of new swimming facilities for its membership largely because the local municipal pools previously utilized were closed or out of service, many as casualties of the Great Recession of 2007 (Brenna 2009).<sup>9</sup> Another way of saying this would be: Creative Steps was sojourning to the precincts of The Valley Club as a direct outcome of the same political and economic processes that continue to divide the two zones asymmetrically one from the other. The latter needs a pretty penny

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<sup>9</sup>Noted *Philadelphia Inquirer* architecture critic Inga Saffron wrote about the matter: “It is worth remembering why the summer camp, Creative Steps, Inc., contracted with the Huntington Valley Swim Club in the first place. The answer, of course, is that Philadelphia was only able to open a token number of its public pools this summer because of the nation’s devastating financial crisis, which has hit cities especially hard. The reduction in pool operations is just one more example of how America’s fifth biggest metropolis is unable to provide its citizens with the sort of quality-of-life amenities that suburban dwellers take for granted. Not that anyone would have ever confused Philadelphia’s no-frill public pools with those lush suburban oases like Huntington Valley, where the Olympic-size basins are surrounded by lawns and shade trees” (Saffron 2009).

to maintain a lush suburban oasis “surrounded by lawns and shade trees” (Saffron 2009); the former needs respite from an urban desert featuring only a mirage of basic swimming infrastructure (Hastings et al. 2006).

In the same vein, Ellis’s storied PDR Swim Team has been disbanded indefinitely because their home pool, a brand-new facility when it opened in 1980, now “needs two and a half million dollars’ worth of repairs” and so remains “shutdown today to a whole community” (Martin 2009). The irony is that this facilities closure and team disbandment occurred *after* Ellis and PDR were made the subject of a major feature-length film distributed by Lionsgate Entertainment. *Pride*, directed by Zimbabwean newcomer Sunu Gonera in his Hollywood debut, opened in March 2007 to mixed reviews and a poor box office performance. The immediate effect of the biopic was not to catapult Ellis and his veteran program into the national limelight (though he has made small rounds on the national and international speaker’s circuit) but to sharpen the blow of PDR’s imminent demise and his own early retirement.<sup>10</sup>

It is no shock, given the general trends, that less than one percent of competitive swimmers in the USA are black, or that only a handful of black swimmers have attained positions of international prominence to date (Lloyd 2016). Simone Manuel was the latest to join this select group, when she became the first black woman to win Olympic *gold* in Rio 2016, as a rising junior at Stanford University. She also set an Olympic and American record en route, and earned another gold and a silver medal that summer. Cullen Jones preceded Manuel with his own gold medal performance in the men’s 4 × 100 meter freestyle relay at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games; and he took home another gold and two silvers at London 2012. Maritza Correia became the first black woman to make the US Olympic Team in swimming, winning silver in Athens 2004 for the women’s 4 × 100 meter freestyle relay. She is also the first black *woman* to medal in Olympic

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<sup>10</sup>Membership at PDR had been in decline for some time prior to disbanding, from a peak of 175 in the early 1990s to roughly 30 in 2007. Ellis reported in a 2008 article for the London *Times*: “The movie came out and still no one has come forward to offer us better facilities. Why, in this day and age, should we continue to work in these poor facilities? I guess somewhere the colour issue is still there” (Slot 2008). Ellis also mentions in a 2007 article for *Ebony* magazine that he had been passed over for coaching positions at the University of Maryland and the University of Pennsylvania, despite having sent scholarship swimmers to their respective programs (John-Hall 2007). More generally, it seems in retrospect that the most extensive and critical coverage of Jim Ellis and PDR Swimming is Phillip Hoose’s 1990 *New York Times Magazine* article, “A New Pool of Talent.” There was another round of short pieces about Ellis’s life and legacy in outlets like the local *Philadelphia Inquirer* around the domestic release of *Pride* (Klein 2007), but none had the depth, complexity, and sensitivity of the earlier feature story.

swimming and only the second black swimmer to win Olympic medal for the USA. The first African American Olympic medalist—and first black US Olympic Swim Team member—was University of California, Berkeley alumni Anthony Ervin, who took gold in the men's 50 meter freestyle and silver in the men's 4 × 100 meter freestyle relay at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. (More recently, Ervin won his second gold in the men's 50 meter freestyle in Rio 2016, at the age of 35(!)—though his accomplishment, like Manuel's, was overshadowed by Michael Phelps's return from retirement to reinforce his reputation as the greatest Olympian of all time.) Enith Brigitha's two bronzes for the Netherlands in the women's 100 and 200 meter freestyle in Montreal 1976 made her the first black swimmer *from any country* to win Olympic medal in the sport. Suriname's Anthony Nesty became the second in Seoul 1988 when he out-touched US swimming great Matt Biondi to win gold in the men's 100 meter butterfly. This is all to say that the emergence of high-visibility black competitive swimmers in both the national and international arenas is very much an early twenty-first-century phenomenon.

Jones and Correia, at least, are aware of their collective novelty and the urgency that underwrites their recent success. The urgency is due not only to the symbolic value of breaking color lines in sports considered non-traditional for black participants, but also to the fact that swimming, unlike baseball or basketball or football or track (or golf or tennis for that matter), involves critical life-saving skills.<sup>11</sup> Both Olympians have participated in the privately-funded Make a Splash Initiative, a partnership of the non-profit USA Swimming Foundation and the corporate oil giant ConocoPhillips, designed to offer low-cost swimming lessons for black and Latino children at one of over two hundred local partners nationwide and, thereby, to help reduce the number of preventable water-related injuries and deaths among that population. Jones and Correia's good works and good examples are highlighted in Joshua Waletzky's 2009 independent documentary *Parting the Waters*, which follows the lives of several black and Latino youth seeking their own path to Olympic glory from the ranks of the Boston Elite Swim Team. Producer Jenny Levison perhaps overstates

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<sup>11</sup>As part of the lead-up to the domestic release of *Pride* in March 2007, AOL's *Black Voices* ran a tribute to "blacks in non-traditional sports." Among the featured athletes were Correia, bobsledder Vonetta Flowers, and speed skater Shani Davis, all recent Olympic medalists. But the inclusion in this list of tennis greats Venus and Serena Williams and golf legend Tiger Woods serves to blur the line between traditional and non-traditional sports, revealing how it is that, at one time or another and to greater or lesser degree, it was—and is—considered "non-traditional" for blacks to pursue and participate in *every* sport (Douglass 2007).

the case when she claims that in broaching the subject of race in swimming their film is “dealing with one of the *last* areas of segregation in our society.” But, in so doing, the project does insist rightly that the gross inequality of public investment in swimming infrastructure is a question of social justice.

On this score, social entrepreneurship makes for good human interest reporting, but it cannot begin to address the social structures that give rise to injustice.<sup>12</sup> While it may be laudable that Jones and Correia use their popularity to promote charitable giving rather than simply to chase lucrative endorsement deals, it is important to note that they are not, by any stretch of the imagination, joining the ranks of political organizers forging a culture of resistance or building a progressive social movement, as have many other prominent black athletes in the historic instance, from Paul Robeson to Muhammad Ali (Zirin 2008). Jim Ellis is in more ways than one their patron saint, having helped to blaze the trail for their athletic exploits and, even more, for the warm public reception of their athletic exploits, including considerable underwriting for their outreach efforts. Ellis, after all, has been priming the pump of black swimming talent since before Jones and Correia were born. He sent former PDR students Michael Norment and Jason Webb to the 1992 US Olympic Trials as the first black swimmers to qualify for the event (though neither made the team that year); and he sent participants to every Olympic Swimming Trials since that watershed.<sup>13</sup> Dozens of his graduates went on to swimming scholarships at notable colleges and universities. And so on. That he did all of this with ruefully underfunded, eventually ramshackle facilities at his disposal, and against the grain of deeply segregated institutional arrangements—local, regional, and national—makes his accomplishments the perfect blend of personal crusade and quiet heroism. Perfect, that is, for corporate-sponsored Black History and Hollywood mythmaking (Fig. 2.1).

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<sup>12</sup>The Make a Splash Initiative is easily the most extensive and capitalized effort of this sort, involving the national governing body for competitive swimming in the USA and a major multinational corporation regularly ranked in the Top 10 of the *Fortune* 500. Assuming that there are five million black children that do not swim (a conservative estimate), that this number will not increase in the future (which it likely will), and that at least half of the 100,000 children that Make a Splash claims to service each year went on to swimming proficiency (rather than taking a one-time lesson), it would still take *more than a century* for this national program to resolve the problem.

<sup>13</sup>Michael Norment, a college superstar and one of the top breaststrokers in the world throughout the 1990s, is also the son of Temple University Professor of African American Studies Nathaniel Norment, Jr. (Whitten 1998). Along with Sabir Muhammad and Byron Davis, Norment was one of the “great black hopes” to break the Olympic color line in that decade.



**Fig. 2.1** Coach Jim Ellis (Terrance Howard) considers the significance and difficulty of his task in Sunu Gonerá's *Pride* (2007). Image reproduced under terms of fair use

## Making Waves

*Boston Globe* film critic Wesley Morris—to my knowledge, the only black reviewer to make the esteemed “Top Critics” list at the *Rotten Tomatoes* online clearinghouse—described *Pride* as a “public-service melodrama” (Morris 2007). Given the film’s PG rating and its clearly intended family audience, the phrase is less a friendly jab in an otherwise sympathetic discussion than it is an apt description. Cynthia Fuchs, film and television editor for *PopMatters.com*, concurred, adding:

*Pride* brings something else that makes the after-school-special silliness seem secondary. First, and importantly, this is an uplift-the-race film where [unlike James Gartner’s 2006 *Glory Road* or Richard LaGravenese’s 2007 *Freedom Writers*] the inspirational coach/teacher/mentor is black. As well-intentioned as characters played [respectively] by Josh Lucas and Hilary Swank may be, this image (lit and designed with its significance in mind) resonates. This is enhanced by the fact that the kids’ very visible supporters at meets are the “community,” mostly anonymous black faces (parents and church members) who, despite the conspicuous device, do something unusual: they make a worthy political point. (Fuchs 2007)

Just what this “worthy” political point is requires further discussion. From one angle, despite its formulaic plot, sentimental scoring, mediocre writing and direction, and unremarkable performances, the value of *Pride* is in what

the film opens onto—on the one hand, the recent uptick in interest in black swimming history in academia, mass media, and independent arts; on the other, the fledgling attempts to cultivate a contemporary tradition of black competitive swimming in the United States (Hersh 1998). Witness, for instance, the International Swimming Hall of Fame's 2008 exhibit, "Black Splash: The Amazing History of Swimming in Black and White," at the Old Dillard Museum in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; the Annual Black History Invitational Swim Meet sponsored since 1987 by the Washington, DC Department of Parks and Recreation; the Annual National Black Heritage Championship Swim Meet organized by the North Carolina Aquablazers Swim Team since 2003; or the Annual Chris Silva Championship Swim Meet hosted for nearly fifteen years by the City of Atlanta Dolphins Swim Team as a memorial to the former college great, first black American record-holder, and Director of Minority Programs at the International Swimming Hall of Fame (Borenstein and Robb 1990). These grassroots efforts represent the impulse of the early Jim Ellis, "the Afro-wearing, dashiki-clad firebrand who chose swimming as his method of community activism back in 1971" (John-Hall 2007, 66), when it reaches past the individual to the collective.

From another angle, however, the political point of the film is disquieting. To the extent that the pursuit of swimming by blacks, from the recreational to the competitive, involves not only awareness of a need to dispel a stereotype but also an attempt "to establish and defend [the] right to participate in the general community of America" (Judy 1994, 221), an adjudication in the order of morality. What this means in the case of Ellis and his fictionalization as "Jim," a character played deftly enough by Oscar Award-nominee Terrence Howard, is that the story must construct a foil to highlight the grandeur of our protagonist and his contribution to what will be called "our house... our community." The film opens with a scene set in Salisbury, North Carolina. The year is 1964 and young Jim is in town with his teammates from Cheyney State College for a regional swim meet at the Blue Ridge Aquatics Center. Ellis did swim for a year at Cheyney State, the historically black college now called Cheyney University where he earned his BS in Mathematics, before the coach resigned and the team was disbanded.<sup>14</sup> But the four Cheyney State Chargers that first enter the screen as Jim's teammates are all white. And when the team coach, who is also

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<sup>14</sup>Cheyney University is the oldest historically black college or university in the country. It was established in 1837 by the bequest of Richard Humphries, a Quaker philanthropist, who was prompted by an 1829 antiblack race riot in his adopted hometown of Philadelphia—one of more than a half dozen to occur there between 1820 and 1850—to create the African Institute, or Institute for Colored Youth, "to



white, regretfully informs Jim in the hallway before the meet that the other presumptively all-white teams are threatening to cancel the event because “it seems somebody saw you get on the bus,” it confirms the film’s desire to rewrite Ellis’s story as one that was always already integrated. The effect of this opening gambit is to project antiblackness into an exterior and marginal space that blacks living and working in otherwise integrated places sometimes encounter, rather than a structural condition that blacks must navigate constantly across an array of occupations and a range of stations.

In the world according to *Pride*, white swimmers and coaches at the height of the civil rights movement, amid the rapid *privatization* of aquatics, participate unselfconsciously with their black teammate; they do not cave into the enormous social pressures to maintain recreational segregation; and they do not fail to come to the physical defense of a black man accosted by racist police and enraged white mobs—all in the backyard of a young Jesse Helms, whose nightly newscasts and weekly editorials on WRAL-TV (now a CBS affiliate) for the Raleigh-based Capitol Broadcasting Company were spreading the ultraconservative gospel of the New Right throughout the Upper South (Associated Press 2008b).<sup>15</sup> Coach Logan passes down to Jim a gem of patriarchal wisdom before taking a principled and fated stand: “My daddy always used to tell me, it’s a lot easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission.” Forgive us our trespasses, in the good name of competition, but when the cohort of white competitors refuse *unanimously* to enter the pool with Jim, and the police arrive on cue to forcibly remove the intruder from the premises, though he violates no ordinance, the coach’s sage advice changes abruptly. “Don’t fight ‘em, Jimmy!” he pleads.<sup>16</sup> We should underscore the fact that Jim’s insistence

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instruct the descendants of the African Race in school learning, in the various branches of the mechanic Arts, trades and Agriculture in order to prepare and fit and qualify them as instructors.” That is, vocational training as response to racist violence, discipline as antidote to punishment (Coppin 1913).

<sup>15</sup>In addition to his well-known racist, sexist, homophobic, and anti-communist positions, recently declassified documents suggest that Helms may also have been a contact for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, offering the services of his station to the law enforcement agency in its counter-intelligence operations against the civil rights movement (Kane and Christensen 2010).

<sup>16</sup>More properly phrased, Coach Logan might exclaim “Don’t YOU fight ‘em, Jimmy!” or “Don’t you FIGHT ‘em, Jimmy!” since the problem contained in the sentence is neither the verb (fight) nor the subject (Jimmy) in isolation but the particular combination of the two. Fighting against segregation is acceptable if it is initiated and led by a white man, on the black man’s behalf, and the black man is acceptable as long as he “works so hard to get here” and does not fight to get into the pool. This point dovetails nicely with the sage advice of that other paternalistic white man, Bink, the racist school principle and head coach of Main Line Academy Swim Team: “If you want respect in this game, then you’re gonna have to earn it! I know they taught you that at Cheyney State.” Coach Jim, now a college



here on the right to participate in a sanctioned athletics event and, moreover, the right to speak freely in complaint of a denial of participation is not *even* civil disobedience. Yet this modest proposal prompts the white father figure to intervene, first and foremost to keep Jim calm and then to announce to the crowd, “If they don’t want *us* to swim here, its fine, we’ll go home!” The police, as they are wont to do, shake down Jim in any case, and after a terse exchange of pleasantries Jim fights back, striking an officer or two before he is wrestled into submission. Jim is left at the close of the scene in extreme close-up, face down on the pool deck, a police officer’s foot pinning his head to the tile, sobbing audibly: “I got rights. I got rights. I got wronged, right?”<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 2.2).

On first blush, the film appears agnostic in the face of Jim’s plaintive query. Ten years later, the college graduate and veteran swim instructor is denied employment in a teaching and coaching position at the prestigious and lilywhite Main Line Academy for which he is surely qualified. Granted an interview on the strength of his *résumé*, Jim is summarily dismissed by Principal Richard “Bink” Binkowski (Tom Arnold) when the latter discovers the applicant in question is black. The rationalization is simple: “I don’t think a person like yourself could communicate properly with our students.” Bink doubles as Main Line’s head swim coach, so the two will meet again, on the deck, in a displacement of the classical education that runs through the field of mathematics onto the tutelary mission proper to the domain

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graduate and in charge of the PDR Swim Team counters this imperative with recourse to the reciprocal aspect of the social bond: “If you want respect, you give it.” Bink is adamant: “You *earn* it.” This is the final word and lesson. The triumph of the film hinges on Jim’s ability to earn the respect of this other and better white father, and he is to do so by instilling in his charges the proper desire for work. The desire for work, “the productive labor of modern subjects,” is the *sine qua non* of morality. In this scenario, confronting a derogation that associates blackness with amorality, “it is presupposed that authentic being derives from morality. That is, the nigger [‘a commodity-thing’] becomes the negro [‘a human identity’] through moral behavior, or good works, founded on morality as a governmental habit of thought (police as internalized control)” (Judy 1994, 230). More on this point below.

<sup>17</sup>The whitewashing of Jim Ellis’s educational past, the insertion of white allies and mentors in the place where there were likely black companions and comrades is consistent with a key aspect of Goner’s directorial vision: “‘In Africa, racism was legal for many years, so I grew up with it,’ Goner says. ‘I married a white woman and I had to deal with racism on a very personal level—people throwing bricks through your house, things like that. So when I read the script, that element didn’t surprise me. But I was determined to be authentic and to show different sides of people. I didn’t want it to be that any white person is racist, because that’s not true’” (Archer 2007). It might seem curious that anxiety about the depiction of *white* personality as homogenous would arise in a film centered on the efforts of *black* community to dispute its status as stereotype through its internal differentiation. However, the attempt to “set the world straight,” as the tagline reads for Josh Waletzky’s 2009 documentary *Parting the Waters*, and the redemption-through-differentiation of whites should be viewed as two sides of the same coin.



**Fig. 2.2** Young Jim looks on as his white competitors refuse to swim in the same pool. Image reproduced under terms of fair use

of sportsmanship.<sup>18</sup> As it turns out, discrimination carries perquisites. The standard fare rejection forces Jim into the overcrowded unemployment office where he is finally paired with the menial labor that will provide the condition of possibility for his ascent and his community's inspiration. Sent to prepare the condemned Marcus Foster Recreation Center for closure by the City of Philadelphia, Jim finds a diamond in the rough: among the dilapidation, a salvageable junior Olympic swimming pool. He will have to invest his own time and energy into this forsaken public work, but he cannot avoid appropriating municipal resources to that end—hundreds of dollars in unauthorized wages from the Department of Recreation, hundreds of thousands unauthorized gallons from the Philadelphia Water Department.

As Jim pilfers from the uncaring city government, a group of five black male youth, school kids all, squeeze the last few days out of a basketball

<sup>18</sup>As notable is Ellis' coaching achievement, his success as a middle-school mathematics teacher is barely understood. We know that a good number of those who have participated in PDR Swimming have gone on to undergraduate training, but we can gain no real sense of the impact that Ellis has had for the academic and intellectual development of his students in the classroom. How mathematics might also be approached as a form of community activism is exemplified well by the Algebra Project, founded in 1982 by former civil rights leader Dr. Robert P. 'Bob' Moses (Moses and Cobb 2001).

court just outside the pool's graffiti-covered doors. Before the hoops are finally removed by a city maintenance worker (played by Jim Ellis in cameo), the boys are watched (and watched over) by a local pimp and drug dealer, Franklin (Gary Sturgis), whose crew circles like vultures in search of carrion. Franklin's parked car is framed in the introductory sequence as if it blocks the forward progress of the yellow school bus that becomes the PDR Swimming transport. A stray basketball breaks Franklin's radio, putting Reggie (Evan Ross)—weak, stuttering, un-athletic, slight-of-frame, light-skinned—in his debt. Franklin targets this Achilles' heel in a bid to recruit Andre (Kevin Phillips), the alpha male and eventual captain of Jim's aspiring team, to his own drug dealing crew. The recruitment (which is actually a re-commissioning since Andre worked previously as Franklin's lieutenant until a non-fatal gunshot wound retired him from the set) is ultimately unsuccessful because Jim intervenes with force against Franklin's designs in a street confrontation that is crucial to the story's unfolding. The battle over Andre's loyalties, or, rather, his *custody*, represents the Appomattox of this miniature civil war. Franklin is defeated morally in this moment, but his desperation drives him to commit a very unpopular act of vandalism against the Foster Center, after it has become a proper hub of neighborhood activity by dint of Jim's trademark "pride, determination, resilience." Now acting in defense of territorial waters, Jim is authorized in dispatching Franklin and his minions, nearly drowning him to death in the process. And though Jim offers the obligatory apology to his team for the poor example his violent reprisal sets, issuing a self-imposed suspension from the coveted Eastern Regional Finals at the University of Baltimore, it is critical that, unlike events in 1964, no charges are filed against him for these multiple counts of assault and battery.

The showdown with Franklin is the last of three pool deck fight scenes in the film, a count that warrants our borrowing Wiltse's title as leitmotif. The first contest, as noted, opens the dramatic action and establishes the ethical problem to be adjudicated. The problem is elusive, however. Nestled in the theatrics of humiliation and peril, the problem, in the final analysis, is not that of normative white racist hatred but that of the black man's response to being wronged. The third contest is definitive because it allows the young swimmers to leave collectively the fold of their surrogate domesticity, and Jim's marked absence enables Andre, in particular, to emerge as *protégé*. But it is the second clash that proves most transformative. To give the newly minted PDR Swim Team suitable perspective on the stakes of their training, Jim takes them across town to face the best talents in the area. They receive their foreseeable thrashing from Main Line Academy with a bit too much good humor and aplomb until the showdown between the

two team captains, one black and one white, reveals that winners arrogate to themselves the right to cheat. Andre attempts to fight back, like young Jimmy in Salisbury, and the black and white teams clear the benches (Fig. 2.3).

Coach Jim and Coach Bink mediate, and in the heated altercation Jim is told flatly: this late-game infraction, like the pregame slights and taunts, does not matter because PDR was losing so badly in any case. We kicked you, in other words, *because* you were down. Your dismal performance bespeaks a general lack of discipline, a problem of the will, and that weakness earns you nothing but our contempt. Bink thus clarifies: “If you want respect in this game, you’re gonna have to earn it.” Earning respect from state-sanctioned white power is not related to the restricted economy of exchange. One does not simply give respect and receive it in return. That is, one is not respected for being respectful. One is respected for being strong, even if one is, like ghettoized black youth and their mentors circa 1974, in a position of relative powerlessness. This is an important elision because it redirects Jim’s project from empowerment and organization to strength training and character building. It is a moderate inflection of the era’s political term of art: self-determination. Those aspects of the Black Power era that might include alterations of public policy and mobilization of constituency



**Fig. 2.3** Coach Ellis confronts Coach Bink (Tom Arnold) for cheating and disrespecting the PDR swimmers. Image reproduced under terms of fair use

are left to the behind-the-scenes lobbying of the dark-skinned head of maintenance, Elston (Bernie Mac), who serves throughout the film as “uncle” in an interracial tale of parthenogenetic inheritance between (white) fathers and (black) sons.

If Elston represents the activist impulse in caricature, *homo civilis*, then Franklin represents the domestic enemy in drag, *homo criminalis*. Jim and Elston collaborate on the renovation project, enjoining the responsible black city councilwoman, Ms. Sue Davis (Kimberly Elise), to give the “good black man” the support needed to reform the principles of black masculinity and thereby rescue the community from itself. A black woman’s support in this instance means not only reversing the facilities closure and allocating permanent funding to the recreation center in her function as political delegate, but also, as is so often the case, non-interference with the organic development of the supposedly essential relation between black men and boys.<sup>19</sup> Sue’s maternal guardianship obstructs that relation; Franklin’s paternal imposition perverts it. Yet the supporting cast duo Elston/Franklin should not be thought in opposition to one another, but rather thought together in opposition to the third, exalted figure represented by Jim, what cultural theorist RA Judy (1994) terms ironically “*homo Africanus Americanus moralis*.”

The three operative terms—civility, criminality, morality—triangulate Jim’s passage between the Scylla of political radicalization, missing the mark by assuming paradoxically that blacks are rights-bearing and so have nothing to prove, and the Charybdis of lawlessness, “constituting a threat to the survival of the community by giving the police cause to attack” (Judy 1994, 226). Elston lives in a crypt of Black Power iconography, his advanced age reinforcing the obsolescence of all that is symbolized by the black fist and silhouetted African continent that adorn the dusty walls of the abandoned offices. Franklin, for his part, lives parasitically on the decomposing host neighborhood beyond the center’s mold and mildew. So, despite the early foregrounding of Jim Crow’s legacy, the battle that animates the film is an intramural one. Elston must be converted to Jim’s program. Sue must come to see his worth. Franklin must yield to his proprietary claim. In fact, the anticipated payback, in which Andre defeats his rival Jake (Scott Reeves) at the climactic regional meet to the sounds of James Brown’s famous anthem,

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<sup>19</sup>Among the various attempts to speak to this dynamic in recent black Hollywood filmmaking, David Marriott’s (2000) reading of John Singleton’s *Boyz in the Hood* (1991) and Wahneema Lubiano’s (1997) reading of Bill Duke’s *Deep Cover* (1992) remain among the best published thus far. A locus classicus of critique on the myth of the black matriarch is Davis (1981). See also Spillers (2003).

is painfully deferred by Main Line's spurious cancellation of their regularly scheduled appearance at PDR. In place of Andre's home crowd vindication against Jake, who kicked him in the teeth at their first meeting, we have Jim beating Franklin to within an inch of his life.

Unpunished physical violence modulates heteroclit black masculinity, and the narrows of the PDR credo must eschew transgression against the rules, written and unwritten alike. It must be law-abiding and mindful of racial etiquette, however retrenched, which is to say it must be self-policing, "exposed to the discipline of self-pride." "Protest" is not in its vocabulary, nor is "disobedience," even, or "demand," and the pursuit of power must be pried loose from the expression of pride and put to one side. Black Power, in whatever formulation, is contiguous with, if not identical to, black criminality.<sup>20</sup> Jim may be a badman, with a stiff spine, a sharp tongue, and a lion's heart; but he is not a bad nigger.<sup>21</sup> This discernment is the lesson of the three father figures that guide Jim's journey of self-discovery in the context of disavowed political upheaval. The interracial paternal trinity consists

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<sup>20</sup>This conflation is evident, for instance, in the scene of PDR's first meet at the Main Line Academy. When they enter the pool, one hears a background comment from a man in the all-white audience: 'Must be some kind of a protest march.' On the blocks before the final event, the 50 yard freestyle, Jake, Main Line's star swimmer, looks over at Andre, his counterpart, and says: 'Just be glad they took off the cuffs so you can swim, brother.' The two comments are understood to be seamless with the general atmosphere of hostility.

<sup>21</sup>See Judy (1994) for a discussion of attempts in black cultural studies to distinguish between these two figures in the wake of gangster rap. Judy spends considerable time examining the work of musicologist Jon Michael Spencer (now called Yahya Jongintaba), whose "argument for the heterogeneity of the badman and bad nigger is [meant] to establish rap's authenticity as an African American form by rescuing it from the 'genocidal' tendencies of the bad nigger" (Judy 1994, 220). For Spencer, the badman betrays a "strong sense of social propriety, [an] understanding that strict obedience to social codes is essential for collective survival. The badman is the self-consciously representative black, he is an instantiation of morality above the law" (220). He may, according to folklorist John Roberts, challenge "the unjustness of the law of the state," but he does so "while preserving the moral law of the community" (221). The bad nigger, by contrast, "doesn't obey the law and take moral responsibility for his actions" (227). Though a full discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this chapter, it can be said at least that the disassociation of the badman and the bad nigger is, for Judy, a decidedly postbellum project, having to do with the changed function of law in the assault on Radical Reconstruction and the formation of Jim Crow. He glosses Roberts' claim as follows: In the postbellum period, "maintaining internal harmony and solidarity within one's own community was a form of protection against the law of the state. In this understanding, the black community becomes the police in order to not give the police any reason or cause to violate it" (221). Saidiya Hartman (1997) has called this "the burdened individuality of freedom," a juridical vehicle for maintaining the "tragic continuities in antebellum and postbellum constitutions of blackness" (7). Judy is interested to understand how black collectivities manage circumstances in which, to bend the popular saying, the more things change, the worse they seem to get. What he finds is a measure of downward continuity from the jackboot of the state-authorized armed regulatory force to the striking fist and pointing finger of the teacher or coach in state employ. This is what Judy suggests in his identification of community with the police, that is, "police in the broader sense of governmentality" (Judy 1994, 226).



of Coach Logan, who trains young Jimmy and both emboldens and contains his will to fight; Coach Bink, who issues the challenge to which Jim must rise; and the late Marcus Foster, in whose memory PDR's home facility is named. Of course, the three fathers correspond with the three elementary terms of the endeavor: *determination* to overcome obstacles (Bink), *resilience* to recover from setbacks and losses (Logan), and *pride* to give worth and direction to the struggle (Foster).

## Pooling Resources

We conclude with a brief discussion of the final father, who is also the first. Midway through the film, after Elston has successfully persuaded Sue to rescind her order for closure, Jim presents his newly-minted team with a policy update freighted with an existential proposition. After asking rhetorically, "Do y'all remember the first gift that you was given after you made it into this world? What was it?" And, again, "What's the last thing that's remembered about you when you leave this world?" Jim declares, finally, that the *name* is the alpha and omega. He announces: "You are now the official representatives of the Marcus Foster Recreational Center." Having established their collective namesake in this fashion, Jim draws what might seem a small detail into the story's center of gravity. But who was Marcus Foster and what are we to make of the enigmatic and spectral presence of his name? An alumnus of Cheyney State College like Jim Ellis, he earned a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania. Foster went on to become a local hero, a celebrated educator and administrator serving with distinction for nearly fifteen years as a teacher and, after 1968, as principal in Philadelphia's Simon Gratz High School. He recounted that experience at length in his book, *Making Schools Work: Strategies for Changing Education* (Foster 1971).<sup>22</sup> Winner of the 1968 Philadelphia Award, one of the city's highest honors, for contributions to education and community service, Foster was eventually recruited to California and appointed in 1970 as the Superintendent of the Oakland Unified School District, the first black person to attain the position (Fig. 2.4).

Foster was a liberal reformer who promoted ideas of community participation in the decision-making of educational bureaucracy in order

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<sup>22</sup>For more on Foster's life and work, see McCorry (1978).





**Fig. 2.4** Coach Ellis gives his swimmers a lesson on technique. Image reproduced under terms of fair use

to counteract what he saw as a generally dysfunctional and adversarial relation between contemporary public schools and their constituents. He spoke directly to the importance of providing quality education for all students, especially those in districts serving the poorest neighborhoods of black ghettos. Most of his measures were embraced by local residents, but what some took to be his gradualism and willingness to compromise with law and order tendencies in municipal government drew criticism from radical political formations like the Black Panther Party. The latter's criticism never lost sight of the distinction between Foster and the state-authorized regulatory force of the police against which they were occasionally fighting live-fire street battles. Other groups were not so circumspect. On the evening of November 6, 1973, Foster was assassinated while leaving a meeting of the Oakland school board, shot to death in the parking lot by Joseph Remiro and Russ Little. The gunmen were members of an unknown quantity called the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) (Taylor 2002).

The SLA would go on to achieve a bizarre sort of notoriety the following year, when they committed the well-known but little understood kidnapping of Patricia Hearst, heiress of the renowned west coast media dynasty. It was the most popular news story of the year and much has been written

since about that period.<sup>23</sup> But while most of those born before, say, 1965 remember something of the Patty Hearst phenomenon, few know about the Foster assassination that preceded it. Nor are they aware of the fact that the SLA committed the act that would become their most infamous precisely in order to secure Remiro's and Little's release from custody. In short, without Marcus Foster, there is no Patty Hearst.

The SLA's actions were denounced nearly across the board by leftist organizations of the day. And though the outfit had fully appropriated the rhetoric and tactics of more legible revolutionary confrontations with state and capital, the SLA offered little in the way of program or platform. Even as an urban guerrilla faction, its connections, both practical and ideological, to the black liberation movement sometimes cited as impetus were tenuous at best. There were, save leader Donald DeFreeze (a.k.a. Cinque), no black members. And though they often took refuge there during the four-month period between the kidnapping and the fatal LAPD shootout, the SLA was *in* the ghetto but surely not *of* the ghetto. In *Slippery Characters*, literary critic Laura Browder describes the SLA membership as "ethnic impersonators" that functioned as "a parody of a black militant party." She continues: "the SLA members embodied stereotypes in their embrace of blackness and used their excursion into black identity to liberate themselves from the inhibitions they linked to their white selves. [...] Their performance of race was a thoroughgoing, if unselfconscious, satire" (Browder 2000, 225). Foster, then, is killed—assassinated—by a group of whites in "postwar blackface," whose short-lived career embodied the nightmare scenario in which black radicalism converges with black criminality at the direct expense of black morality. But if there is a more poignant example of how that convergence requires not only white psychic projection, but also white political performance, I have yet to see it.

Gonera awkwardly insinuates the Foster story into the film, playing fast and loose with the chronology of historical events. As noted, Ellis founded PDR Swimming in 1971, but *Pride* locates this founding three years later in 1974. This revision makes sense if the fictional recreation center is to be named after Foster, who is killed a year earlier. But there is an additional wrinkle. The Marcus Foster Pool in the Nicetown section of North Philly was not built and named until 1980, and it was constructed as a replacement for

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<sup>23</sup>The popular literature on the topic is too vast to cite, but see for example: Hearst and Moscow (1988), McLellan and Avery (1977), and Weed and Swanton (1976). For critical scholarly accounts, see Graebner (2008), Castiglia (1996), and Browder (2000). For award-winning fictional renderings of the affair, see Choi (2003) and Sorrentino (2006).

the failing Sayre Community Recreation Center in West Philadelphia, where Ellis had coached for almost two decades prior. So rather than depicting the Foster Pool as a site of renewal, the film transports it backward in time and introduces it as already in disrepair. Foster's legacy is thus refurbished or resurrected in *Pride* rather than commemorated and continued. There is something uncanny about this *faux pas*, both for the vision of school reform championed by Foster and for the vision of sports mentoring practiced by Ellis. We recall that the feature film, bestowing upon its audience gleaming facilities and crystal-clear waters, is released in the same year that the actual Foster Pool, on this side of the screen, is closed indefinitely, "shutdown today to a whole community." (The fact that Ellis also received the Presidential Honor Award from the International Swimming Hall of Fame that year is small consolation.)<sup>24</sup> So the image-track of a decrepit recreation center cut off from the support of public revenue is fully resonant with its referent. This is the wretched state of affairs that the fictional Jim Ellis called "*life* with no hoop": shooting baskets on a backboard with no achievable object, one's aim is returned to its source over and over again. Perhaps it is only fitting, then, that this commercial failure was meant to serve as a financial contribution to the regional economic recovery of the locations where it was produced in the wake of Hurricane Katrina: Shreveport, Baton Rouge, New Orleans.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ellis was forced to conclude his work at PDR as a result of the loss of public funding and he has since 2010 served as the coach of the Salvation Army Kroc Aquatics (SAKA) swim team, quickly building it into the premier competitive swim program in Greater Philadelphia (Ebony 2017).

<sup>25</sup>For extensive discussion of the grossly unequal post-Katrina social, political, and economic fortunes of the Gulf Coast region, and especially its poor and working-class black residents, see Haubert (2015), Huret and Sparks (2014) and Wailoo (2010).

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