

H-Net Reviews

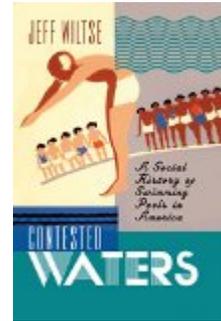
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeff Wiltse. *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 288 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3100-7.

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Spring Board: The Changing Meaning of the American Swimming Pool

Jeff Wiltse's *Contested Waters* traces the shifting social values and functions associated with municipal swimming pools in America over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As public spaces where reformers, social activists, municipal employees, judges, and citizens converged, municipal swimming pools provided a forum for the active shaping of American culture. From dense urban centers like Chicago and New York City to small towns in West Virginia and Kansas, Wiltse details the genesis, proliferation, and demise of municipal pools before voicing an impassioned plea for reinvestment in these valuable public spaces. An excellent and well-crafted social history, *Contested Waters* ultimately demonstrates how finding those responsible for change—be it among individuals on the pool deck or bureaucrats in city hall—is never an easy task for investigators or scholars.

Wiltse illustrates how municipal swimming pools' management of visitor behavior shaped pools as institutional tools for social change from the Gilded Age to the post-World War II era. Pools were public places where gender, class, and race intersected with evolving conceptions of public health, appropriate behavior, and leisure in America. Public pool promoters often reacted to visitors' actual or perceived behavior and institutionalized rules to maintain the appearance of order or democracy in the pool. For example, boisterous and naked working-class boys and men bathed in Philadelphia, Boston, and Milwaukee rivers because urban tenement housing offered limited indoor facilities.

When these bathers offended Gilded Age citizens' Victorian sensibilities, reformers justified the establishment of bathing pools on public health arguments. The new municipal bathing pools did not discriminate along racial or ethnic lines, but they did segregate genders while domesticating bathing. After 1890, while continuing to use public health to justify municipal pool construction, Progressive Era reformers and social activists changed the meaning of the pool, emphasizing fitness and "Americanization" over personal cleanliness: in Boston, New York City, and Chicago pools, city officials maintained gender segregation, and promoted pools to offer orderly exercise or unstructured play.

The "Swimming Pool Age" of the interwar era represented a "watershed" for municipal pools' social value and day-to-day operation (p. 212). After 1913, municipal pools around the country, now devoted to leisurely recreation, stopped segregating along gender lines. When city officials integrated pools along gender lines, they soothed their racial and sexual anxieties about placing white women in close proximity to black men by segregating public space along racial lines to exclude African American men and women. During this era, municipal pools proliferated throughout communities of all sizes primarily due to New Deal public works funding but were not always separate-but-equal facilities. These pools technically "democratized" access based on socioeconomic class, but not on the basis of race. Large urban communities in Wiltse's study generally provided multiple municipal pools for white swimmers, but only one or

two for nonwhite swimmers.

Two chapters on post-1945 swimming pools highlight the continued intersections of sexual anxieties, racial segregation, and class disparity. Small communities with single pools in states like Kansas or West Virginia, and cities like Pittsburgh and Washington DC with multiple municipal pools, navigated riots over integrated access and civil rights legal challenges to separate-but-equal pools differently. Legal challenges waged by African Americans seeking access to segregated pools often resulted in narrowly defined decisions, leading municipal officials to close all pools rather than face additional legal conflict in small one-pool communities. Other court cases ultimately set legal precedents for the famous school desegregation case, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). However, successful desegregation cases did not lead to integrated pools: poor whites stopped visiting pools while those with financial ability moved to the suburbs and founded exclusive swim clubs or built private backyard pools.

Wiltse substantiates his arguments ably with evidence drawn from extensive research in newspaper, municipal, and legal sources. One point is worth criticism: Wiltse argues against a historiographic trend that emphasizes consumption as the driving force responsible for defining American culture in the twentieth century. Wiltse asserts that municipal swimming pools—particularly Progressive Era and interwar pools—provide contradictory evidence to this dominant consumptive interpretation. Yet consumption continues to play a significant role in *Contested Waters*. Some municipal swimming pools charged admission and were operated as concessions by third parties. Furthermore, gender-integrated swimming pools provided a national platform for the promulgation of swimsuit fashion designed for seasonal

obsolescence, ushered in poolside beauty contests, and served as a forum for men and women to “visually” consume each other (pp. 89, 109). These few examples do not easily place municipal swimming pools beyond the consumer sphere responsible for defining American culture.

Wiltse’s geographic focus on the region north of Washington DC and east of the Mississippi River made the research more manageable, but one cannot help but ponder how this story might have looked in other regions, particularly in the American South. How did the southern climate, as well as the ample creeks, streams, and rivers influence municipal bathing, swimming, and recreational pool history? What did southern New Deal Democrats think about the money spent on massive municipal pools in other regions? Finally, how did race, class, and gender make the American South’s waters more or less contested?

Contested Waters covers a broad sweep of U.S. history, and social, legal, and cultural historians will find many familiar late nineteenth- and twentieth-century themes, such as the role of reform movements, definitions of public space, and civil rights. Wiltse’s book is valuable for its presentation of the physical geography of swimming pools, but even more importantly for inviting readers to see individual and personal behavior in public space as a form of social and cultural reproduction. As Wiltse illustrates time and again, the swimming pool’s history involved intensely personal experiences and values, while influencing and implicating significant themes of American social and political history. Without municipal swimming pools, Wiltse concludes, Americans lose more than an opportunity to personally interact with their neighbors; they lose a unique part of the American experience.

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