

AQUATIC PHOBIAS PERMEATED THROUGH AFRICAN AMERICAN
CULTURE, ECONOMICS, AND POLITICS

by

Jon Eric Groover

A Project Submitted to the Faculty of
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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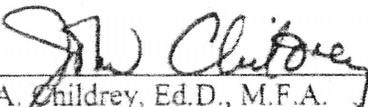
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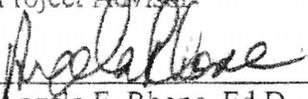
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This project was prepared under the direction of the candidate's project advisor, Dr. John Childrey, Professor of English, and has been approved by the members of his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

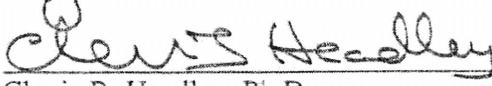
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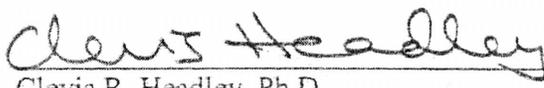
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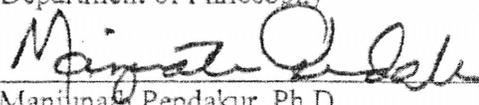
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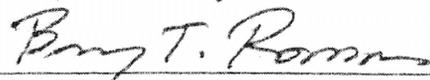
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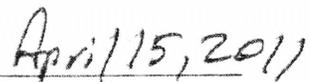
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ABSTRACT

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This Project involves looking at African American culture as it relates to swimming, water safety awareness, and water skills. The paper explores the myths and cultural norms associated with drowning phobias in African Americans to discover the root causes. Through historic accounts of African American culture one begins to uncover reasons why this culture became, in a sense aqua phobic. The paper will show what water sport professionals are up against, when working with a culture that is several generations removed from the water and their water skills. The ultimate goal is to draw attention to the importance of water safety and the ability to swim as a life skill.

DEDICATION

For Mable, Lester, and Louise and Buck. Always.

AQUATIC PHOBIAS PERMEATED THROUGH AFRICAN AMERICAN
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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

In this autobiographical statement about water, my desire is to speak about the importance of swimming, the financial rewards of knowing how to swim and, more importantly, the need for community awareness of water safety. My interest in this project comes out of my concern regarding the high incidence of drowning of African Americans within the south Florida community. Additionally, I believe that if swimming and water safety skills were properly introduced to this community it could go a long way to saving lives and enhancing the quality of life for this group.

Among the earliest memories of my life is a little creek in the woods that ran behind a white brick house where I lived in Memphis, Tennessee, in the early 1970s. This creek created a parental boundary for my desires of exploration of the woods. I was limited to exploring the woods under the direct supervision of an adult because of the water in the creek. At that time I had no swimming skill to speak of. In eastern Tennessee my Grand Paw Buck had a small lake house on one of the Tennessee Valley Authority man-made lakes called Watts Bar. There he would often take me fishing, always bundled in a lifejacket. I have vivid memories of passing grain silos in the middle of the lake. When I asked what the silos were for, I was told that they were used to store grain. There once was a farm under the lake, and the lake had been man-made. I think perhaps that information marked my first desire to explore underwater. I was absolutely fascinated by the idea of an underwater farm house and the possibilities of exploring it.

Water became an important part of my life as I learned through perseverance how to swim. My folks moved the family to the Republic of Panama. When I started first grade I found myself close to another flooded lake named Gatun Lake. Lake Gatun is located between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans on a 50-mile spit of land that is called the Isthmus of Panama and is divided by the Panama Canal. It was designed to connect these two oceans for commerce. My years in Panama exposed me to several water activities mainly because it was one of the more exciting things to do as water became an important part of my life. In looking back I remember a major hurdle for me at that time was to pass the swimming class so that I could acquire my B badge. This was a pass to get me into the pool without my parents having to go with me. I cannot even guess how many times I took the class before I got it. Basically it wasn't so much that a switch was flipped and I became a swimmer, but I just figured out what the instructor was looking for in order for me to pass. In fact, when I did come to this enlightenment, the instructor just passed me on the spot mid-class. I now had the freedom to swim when and where I wanted and more.

As the years went by, water became a more significant part of my life as the water highlights, and learning opportunities, became pivotal life lessons. Despite the fact that I passed my swim class and had obtained the B badge, I was caught in a rip current at a very early age off an island on the Pacific Coast of Panama. I remember swimming with all the energy I could muster towards my dad, who was wading between me and the beach. I was very much in a panicky situation losing ground as I was swimming towards the beach with all my might as my energy was fading fast. I was thinking to myself why isn't my dad saving me? Somehow I managed to swim to the right of the rip current, and

I was pushed back to shore by a series of large waves. I believed I was done with swimming when I finally made it back to shore that day. It wasn't until much later in life that I figured out what the big picture was with the rip current phenomenon and how to get oneself out of it. From that day, I learned to respect the power of moving water, something that had been alien to me coming from a stable artificial pool environment. Later in life I even learned to use a rip current to my advantage with certain sports, like surfing.

As I became even more involved with water, my respect and love of it also rose. Another near drowning experience that taught me respect of the water was on a trip to the mountains of northern Panama. I was exploring a small creek, and I was running off the side of the mountain, jumping from mossy river stone to river stone when I slid into the moving water and was swept over a small waterfall. I found myself caught in the base of the waterfall and unable to make any progress swimming towards the light, as I was being held under by the water. I was being held in place by vortices of the moving water as it moved surged over the small waterfall. This incident was another pivotal moment in my life which could have resulted in a vastly different outcome. Eventually I was able to position my legs in a place where I could spring board off the back wall of the waterfall projecting my body out of the grasp of the water's constant hold on me. Reflecting on this moment, in the context of the water, I realized that one has to be looking for that extra drive from deep inside to find a way out and not slip off quietly into the darkness.

Water became a sense of freedom and escape from everyday stress and, even perhaps, saved me from making some bad choices. In the early 1980s, my family moved back to the U.S. for a year and a half to a small town in north Florida. This move set the

stage for training in what has been my life's work as an adult. In the summer, my dad enrolled my two younger brothers and me into a sailing program at the Rudder Club in Orange Park, Florida. Sailing presented a great sense of freedom and the ability to explore the unknown. I really enjoyed this new-found freedom during the pre-diving years of being able to sail great distances and exploring. From Florida, my family then moved to Puerto Rico and I found myself living just outside San Juan. I finished high school on Ft. Buchanan, a U.S. military base in Puerto Rico. The school was heavily into drugs and alcohol, and I found myself continuing to learn to sail by picking up windsurfing and spending a lot of time on the water. In fact, I remember having my mother drop me off at the beach with my windsurfer. I had a pocket in the back of my harness where I'd leave change to call her to tell her where she could pick me up at the end of the day. The water off the coast of Puerto Rico, in a sense, saved me from getting involved in a potentially bad scene at school.

As I grew older, water became a continuing source of education and with it many financial rewards. After graduating high school, I found myself at Broward Community College which is now Broward College. As a freshman in 1986, one of the first courses that I signed up for was an open water SCUBA class. This started the wheels in motion for the diving program that I have built at Broward College. I also was offered a job during the first semester at the college's sailing facility. I thrived in this new work environment, sometimes at the cost of my studies. I found myself sharing my love of the water with students and opening their eyes to the possibilities of adventure and relaxation and at the same time teaching the required water safety. My former boss added snorkeling to our program to meet the growing needs of our student body. Consequently,

my boss sent me off to get certified as a dive master. This Dive Master Certificate meets the industry standard for one to lead snorkeling trips. In the process of making the dive master rating, I reconnected with my love of diving.

I made a connection between water safety and south Florida's SCUBA diving industry that led to the Broward College SCUBA program and financial rewards. This connection created a little niche that has allowed me to build the Broward College SCUBA program into what it is today. In the latter part of the 1990s, our facility was moved into temporary quarters to make way for the Outdoor World's Sportsman's Complex that was being built in the City of Dania Beach. Upon Broward College's return to Tigertail Lake we found the lake dredged to depths up to 60 feet, which made dive training possible. It wasn't long before the idea of starting a SCUBA program at the lake entered my mind. I also saw the potential the lake could offer as an alternative open water dive site when the weather is rough and could be dangerous and uncomfortable to new divers. One of the things I found not to my liking during my dive master days was that many of the local SCUBA instructors would take students out regardless of weather conditions. The instructors did this to maintain their personal schedules as opposed to putting the student's experience first. In fact, I found that many of the students back in those days would get dragged out to the ocean on really rough days and then have a bad experience. Many of them may have decided never to dive again. Part of what I did at the lake was to give local instructors an alternative to taking students out in really rough conditions by providing a safe and sheltered environment for training. The instructors could also maintain their schedules and not get backed up with students waiting for good weather.

Nevertheless, despite years of water safety training and many years of being in the water, near-death experiences can show themselves very quickly and viciously even with proper training. Cave diving has become very important to me and has added additional respect for the water and enclosed overhead environments. I have continued my cave training and have a much greater respect for the perils that come along with diving in caves and the importance of continuing to train to be a safer diver. This was a life lesson on environmental awareness and the importance of situational awareness. I enjoy passing on my love of the water to others and with that, a great respect for its beauty, power, and dangers.

These life experiences have led me to a lifetime of fun and excitement on the water as well as to a livelihood that I also enjoy. I'm in awe of the beauty and the power of water and the respect that it demands. The love and respect of the water is very dear to me, and there is nothing I enjoy more than to share these experiences with all of the wonders and dangers of water.

The purpose of this project is to convey a message of awareness and the need for training, and at the very least to help prevent African Americans from drowning and at best to share the respect and admiration that I have for the water.

The first chapter of this project is the introduction, which is followed by the second chapter—a synopsis of the African American experience as it seems to relate to water and the high percentage of African American drowning incidents. Chapter 3 contains literary reviews of Southern writers and their portrayals of African American experiences with water. Chapter 4 is an analysis of the statistics of drowning incidents of all races between Broward County, Florida, and Tarrant County, Texas. Chapter 5 is a

look at field observations with in the south Florida aquatic community, followed by Chapter 6 where a final observation is made in response to the discussion of aqua phobia.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2010 a large segment of the African American population in the southern United States live in fear of water. In my observations as a professional water sports instructor and as water sports coordinator of over 20 years in the south Florida community, I have seen and studied many cultural interactions of African Americans in and around water and related water sports. I have witnessed what I consider to be a large number of the African American population coming to my college water sports facility with fear, panic, and anxiety in their faces; they seem to have an overall fear and disconnect from having anything to do with water. Many times students decide to forgo an activity due to fear of the water, telling me or using phrases like “black people cannot swim.” This is a socially awkward phenomenon that occurs with fairly high frequency. However, I believe that anyone can learn to swim, while simultaneously I respect the root and depth of these fears.

This project examines some of the historic and possibly current economic and cultural trends, including the effects of federal housing policies that might explain why a fear of the water and the number drowning deaths in the African American population is higher than what is found in other demographic groups. This project will include anecdotal observations from other professionals and an informal analysis of vital statistical sources in the south Florida area. These statistics will be compared to a

comparable urban area of Texas while examining what has worked and what is being done to further understand and solve this anomaly of ethnic drowning. As a part of this project, I will also take a brief look at the water sports industry including boating-related accidents. At the very least, this project hopes to bring attention to the community for the need of swimming lessons with water safety instruction and water sport acclimation programs in the hope of changing a fear of water to a sense of enjoyment and respect.

Southern literature reflects particular insights into the roots of this legacy of aquaphobic awkwardness that continues to be problematic in African American culture today. Many of the authors in the Southern literature genre use reference to the water as a unique visual metaphor to convey social concerns and fears. Critical observations of Conroy, Rash, Dickey, Crane, and Oliver suggest and provide a taste of this literary perspective and its continued legacy. Pat Conroy's book, *The Water Is Wide*, is a metaphor of the isolation and segregation of children from the African American community. Conroy's book is based on his real-life experiences teaching the children of a former slave culture who were isolated from the rest of the world, living on Yamacraw Island, South Carolina. In his book, Conroy tries at great lengths to assimilate the children culturally to function in the world outside of their little island that has been lost in time. From a completely different perspective, Rash, in *One Foot in Eden*, writes of water and the poor people of the South being displaced by the wheels of progress, as their former communities are flooded by hydroelectric dams. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was a rather large program of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal to bring jobs and electricity to rural areas. The areas that were chosen to be flooded displaced the poorest of the poor who had the least amount of political clout, similar to

the placement of an interstate that runs through an inner city like Miami. Furthermore, Boorman's depiction of Dickey's novel *Deliverance* (1972) also has dark undertones, depicting the poor that were being displaced by the flooding of the wild environments in the name of progress. Dickey's book is a metaphor illustrating the fear of poor people whose lives were being displaced by progress due to the TVA hydroelectric projects. Crane's *The Open Boat* is an account of a small group of men in a life-battling event against the sea and against enormous odds. One can draw many conclusions from the work, which was based on a real life experience known to Crane. The human condition and resolve that was put into words accounting for this struggle can be applied to both the sailor culture that live in fear and respect for water to a culture that seems desperately afraid of the water. Kitty Oliver's book, *Multicolored Memories of Black Southern Girl*, contains the memories of an African American girl growing up in Jacksonville, Florida, in the 1960s. In the text Oliver describes the St. Johns River as a geographic barrier that separates African American communities from the rest of the Jacksonville area. These divides, whether natural or man-made such as an interstate highway system, keep many of the poorest neighborhood powerless and without a voice in the political arena. The poor communities described above live in a extreme of isolation.

These communities would have also been the typical neighborhoods that would not have public pools, as tax payers' dollars would be spent elsewhere. The preceding selection of Southern genre literary works depicts several metaphors based on beliefs that permeate through these pages begin to offer answers and racial implications for this cultural drowning phenomenon.

Beyond looking at a wide genre of Southern literature, statistical data from the Broward County Coroner's Office regarding all drowning cases of all races within the county will also bring attention to the problem. Over 7 years of statistical data were perused to determine whether African Americans are more or less likely to die by drowning than other populations when using the population census data for Broward County, Florida. Unfortunately, these statistics show a significantly higher death rate for African Americans. The statistics suggest the need for attention to be brought to this group so that they can start to become educated in the hopes of losing their apparent cultural fear or lack of respect for water and water activities. In addition, some comparisons have been noted between Broward County and a similar county in Texas as well as the state of Texas. The collected data suggests that this fatal cultural trend starts in the home and in the general environment in which these children are raised. Moreover, culturally learned phobias are reinforced, which can result in a lack of life skills. This project however goes beyond showing that the high drowning rates of this cultural segment does not begin solely in the home, but is actually a by-product of racism and greed.

Historically, in the post-slavery days of the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan, a white extremist group that promoted segregation, used fear as a means of maintaining it in the South. In addition, other economic factors also influenced former slaves living in the southern United States, wherein they were encouraged to leave the agricultural way of life they had known in the South for the big industrial cities of the North. In fact, there was a mass migration during the post-Civil War era to the Northern cities, which were not structurally ready for this huge influx of people. These new urban dwellers were met

with discriminatory segregated housing practices. These discriminatory housing practices were a by-product of a predominately white community trying to protect their property values and trying to control where people live based on race. The African American population was allowed to settle only in certain parts of the inner cities where they were culturally isolated from the other communities. Eventually, the federal government passed legislation to create the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) to help create jobs and to increase American home ownership in the early 1930s as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Part of the plan was to ensure 30-year mortgages so that more Americans could afford to buy homes. They also adopted a practice of trying to preserve neighborhoods by maintaining the same racial makeup and denying African Americans loans to buy homes. These federal policies and programs indirectly helped to keep segregation alive by enforcing unfair housing practices. In fact, large numbers of African Americans displaced large white communities who were living in the cities prior to the African American's. They now found themselves unable to go back to an agrarian lifestyle. Often, these areas quickly found a declining tax base from the new inhabitants, resulting in deteriorating infrastructure. These inner city areas quickly became ghettos; consequently, swimming pools and other amenities were not high on the list of improvements to the declining tax base. Natural swimming opportunities were also not easy to come by due to living in big cities which lacked clean water rivers and ponds. Furthermore, industries where many of these new urban African Americans found work often used the natural waterways as a means of discarding industrial waste which compounded the decay of the inner city. Many of these waterways became extremely polluted and the fish in these waterways became toxic and thus inedible due to these

industrial by-products and human waste. This is just one case of where the environment was trashed in the name of progress, void of an environmental consciousness. Often progress comes at a cost and in this case it was the environment that had to bear that price.

Unfortunately, until recently cities throughout history have treated their natural waterways as a way of disposing of waste; exposure to many of these waterways has been and is still often considered dangerous and unfit for swimming purposes and other waterway activities. Generations of African Americans who have lived in these inner cities and have become increasingly culturally removed from the water due to these lack of opportunities. In addition to the FHA supporting unfair practices to keep neighborhoods in the same economic demographics, the group worked to further distance the African American culture from mainstream American culture. Jim Crow laws segregated pools and beaches, further isolating African Americans from the white culture. Even Fort Lauderdale's International Swimming Hall of Fame was off-limits to the African American population as were the city's beaches. African Americans did have access to the beach in Dania, though they could only go by a ferry that ran on certain days during the year. What is now John Lloyd State Park was then the approved area for the beach-going African American population of Broward County for swimming and other aquatic activities. One could only imagine the time it would take to get to medical care via a ferry's schedule, thus further adding to the fear of the water by having the approved swimming beach so far isolated from help. All of these actions and practices had an effect on this population effectively removing and isolating generations of African Americans from access to water. The Jim Crow laws have been repealed, as well as

unfair housing practices, and many African Americans today find themselves living in neighborhoods with pools and other potential areas with waterways where a non-swimmer could potentially drown. The call to this awareness has never been more important than now; it is time to have everyone trained with basic swimming lessons and water safety skills. Often people drown while trying to save someone else, and armed with basic water safety training this could be avoided. Southern literature will elucidate why this cultural phenomenon exists; moreover, statistical data on drowning will reveal the relationship between African Americans and aquatic phobias. Interviews with aquatic education professionals will be conducted in order to come up with curricula aimed at an acclimation of this culture to water.

Informal discussions with a diverse group of aquatic professionals within the south Florida aquatic community provided subjective insight pertaining to African American comfort levels around water, with the aim to be able to prevent future drowning incidents in Broward County. These conversations, anecdotal in nature, provide many water sports professionals the opportunity to share thoughts and discussions within their circle with the single goal in mind to save lives and make their lives easier in the process. Ultimately the value of these discussions is to meet the needs of their students in successful water sport activities and programs encouraging everyone to get involved. There are all kinds of opportunities available for people with limited skill levels.

The expected outcome of this project is to bring awareness to the entire community, that African Americans have a greater chance of dying due to drowning than other racial groups in the community, the African American community needs to add swimming and water safety skills to their life skills. Moreover, information from this

project should help to lessen or eliminate the problem by encouraging the African American population to become water safe by learning to swim and taking advantage of the many wonderful water opportunities that are available to the public. It is also the hope of this project to break into this population of the non-swimmers and to get them interested in swimming lessons and other water related activities available in the South Florida area such as sailing and diving. These introductory swimming lessons are necessary, if for no other reason than to provide basic swimming skills that could be used in the case of an accidental exposure to the water whether it be in a bath tub, puddle, canal or any other source of water.

Moreover, this project has high hopes of helping eliminate this anomaly through an educational inoculation of the young children with proper water-safety skills. These simple skills that children can learn can save their own lives and perhaps that of others. In observations gained over my twenty years of experience working as a water sport instructor in Broward County, my personal, though anecdotal observations, are also going to be analyzed in addition to many professionals and many ancillary water sport professionals.

There is water everywhere in Broward County, and the state of Florida for that matter, and it is a shame to live here and not enjoy it and worse yet to live in fear of it. To live in fear of accidentally falling into water and not knowing how to swim is just unforgivable on the part of public authorities and parents. The African American cultural fear of water is valid but the myth that they cannot swim or learn to swim is just that, a myth. The drowning deaths of this group are in part due from the inability to swim which border on a crime and should be eliminated by advocating proper water safety classes to

combat this problem. Furthermore, it is the aim of this project for parents of all races, ethnic and cultural groups to get their children into a program to ensure they have a fighting chance of survival if they find themselves over their heads. It's also necessary to educate the younger generation of water sports professionals, reminding them to keep an extra eye on this group and be aware and considerate of the history of where this group is historically culturally arriving from as they enter the water. Thus this project hopes to bring awareness to this problem to help eliminate drowning deaths in the African American population. It is also the hope of this project to bring this awareness directly to civic groups and get non-swimmers aquatically acclimated again in hopes of eliminating drowning.

CHAPTER 2
HISTORIC SYNOPSIS OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE
AS IT RELATES TO WATER

A significant segment of the African American population seems to fear water and all related water activities. Based on anecdotal evidence and research in journals and books this project will dive in and explore African American swimming and water related experiences to try to understand this cultural fear of water. Moreover, it will also examine swimming opportunities, designed to acclimate people to the water and introduce them to water safety. An anecdotal look into the statistic evidence from the Broward County Morgue drowning by racial categories matched up to U.S. census data. Thus, this project suggests an explanation as to how this African American cultural fear of water phenomenon came about in the African American community. Dawson (2007) has shown that African Americans who were stolen from West Africa knew how to swim in order to provide food for their families and for recreational purposes:

Long before a single coastal or interior West African was enslaved and cargoed off to toil the length of his day under the skies of the New World, many had become adept swimmers and underwater divers. West Africans often grew up along riverbanks, near lakes or close to the ocean. In those waterways, many became proficient swimmers, incorporating this skill into their work and recreation. When carried to the Americas, slaves brought this ability with them,

where it helped shape generations of bondspeople's occupational and leisure activities. (P. 1327)

On the other hand, during this time many whites coming from colder northern countries of Western Europe probably could not swim. In an online *New York Times* article titled *Dive In; Everyone Into the Water*, author Zinser states "That divide, born of a slavery-era myth that blacks cannot swim, has created a world where black children drown at rates up to five times higher than white children, and has left competitive swimming bereft of minorities" (p. 1). West Africans knew how to swim before arriving in America. This project will look at exactly what influences caused a culture to lose these life skills.

Although there is not a tremendous amount of written material on the slave culture and swimming, there are many examples of African American slaves swimming for freedom often at distances thought impossible. Pitts (2007) argues that Africans were accomplished swimmers at the time they were brought to America.

In 1804, there were about 50 people who traveled in the Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's expedition. One of them was Clark's childhood companion and slave, York. On June 5, the journal of the expedition reported that York swam to a "Sand bar to gather Greens for Dinner". York was one of the few members of the expedition who could swim. (p. 1)

There was little to no evidence of a huge cultural fear of water from early historical accounts of African Americans. In fact, limited historical accounts show that the early African American population had swimming skills and were quite capable swimmers. In Wilkerson's book, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2011), she documents the stories of

African Americans who were a part of the African American migration out of the Jim Crow South.

He was from the Carolinas, where the plantation worker he worked for used to come down to the fields and flog the workers with a horsewhip if they weren't going fast enough, as a rider might snap a whip at a mule. One day, the owner came down with the hose whip, and the sharecroppers killed him. They swam across the river and never went back. That is all grandfather would say. (p. 51)

In addition to showing swimming ability, this passage also helps to show the human condition. One can only imagine the injustices and the motivation behind the migration.

During the post-Civil War period, as slavery was abolished, the African population was trying to gain a foothold with their newfound freedom. African Americans in a post-slave culture, well into the post WWI era, often found themselves leaving their agricultural environments and moving to the inner city, particularly in the northern cities of the United States in search of jobs and to escape the discrimination of the Jim Crow South. "The story of the Great Migration is among the dramatic and compelling in all the chapters of American history," the Mississippi historian Neil McMillan wrote towards the end of the 20th century. "So far reaching are its effects even now that we scarcely understand its meaning" (Wilkerson, 2010, p. 10). Meanwhile the aristocratic class of the South didn't want to see the inexpensive labor supply making a mass exodus. "It is the life of the South," a Georgia plantation owner once said. "It is the foundation of its prosperity... God pity the day when the negro leaves the South" (p. 162) Despite being the life of the South, African Americans were still treated poorly. However, despite their northern emigration, African Americans faced discrimination in

the housing market. Laws were put into effect purportedly to save property values by preventing persons of color from living in certain areas. Many inner city areas were on the decline, with little money allotted for infrastructure, including swimming pools. Doob (2005) argues discrimination on the part of the Federal Housing Authority.

In the 1930s the federal government became increasingly involved in local issues including housing, and by 1938 Federal Housing Authority (FHA) officials had accepted NAREB standards, declaring that ‘if a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes.’ (p. 71)

This decision on the part of the federal government helped to allow realtors, bank loan officers, and everyone else involved in housing to limit the efforts of the poorer African American who might try to move out of the inner city. The inner city infrastructure found itself in a state of disrepair, and that just added to the poor image of the African American population within the cities.

Dwellings that went for eight to twenty dollars a month to a white family were bringing twelve to forty-five dollars a month from black families, those earning the least income and thus least able to afford a flat rate at any rent, in the early stages of the Migration. Thus began a pattern of overcharging and under investing in the black neighborhoods that lay the foundation for decades of economic disparities in the urban North. (p. 270)

Jim Crow laws further limited their swimming opportunities by eliminating access to public pools that were designated as white only areas, despite there having to be “separate but equal” areas. However, public facilities designated for the separate but

equal areas for African Americans were inferior to the public facilities available to the white community. There is sparse evidence supporting many, if any, inner city swimming programs before the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s. Thus, the African American population became removed from much, if any, swimming opportunities. In addition to the lack of pools, many of the natural swimming areas were polluted by big industry in and around cities, particularly in the north. Consequently, African American culture continued to be isolated from water and opportunities to learn water safety as a result of external forces and public policy placed on the community as a whole.

Literary evidence of African American cultures losing their swimming skills is apparent in many works of the time notably in Pitt's 2007 article *Black Splash*. In stark contrast, this author remembers stories from the now deceased Kenny Rolle of Happy People's Marina in Staniel Cay in the middle of the Exuma Island chain in the Bahamas. From a former slave culture himself, Kenny speaks of his earlier days as a professional skin diver working in depths 60 ft to 70 ft. for two to three minutes at a time spearing fish to earn a living. This type of talent and skill set are hard to come by in this country. In fact these kinds of life skills are products of one's environment and are difficult to obtain yet are obtained out of necessity. The skills are a result of years of conditioning, unlike a whale's calf being born into an aquatic environment genetically programmed and ready to dive. These skills are learned by humans, and one's abilities and tolerances slowly acclimate over time. Thus, it seems swimming skills are a cultural product of one's environment and being exposed to opportunities in the water. This is in stark contrast to the generalized African American community in south Florida who have been several

generations removed from the water and have lost their swimming skills through fear or were hindered by urban myths that their race is unable to swim.

By the post-WWII era, African Americans found themselves racially segregated in hotels, restaurants, bathrooms, water fountains, and even swimming pools. By the 1960s African American demonstrated to gain access to the water as was the case in Fort Lauderdale with defiant blacks staging “wade-ins” to make their desire for beach access heard. This was a part of the civil right moment to repeal the Jim Crow laws. Pitts (2007) reminds one that there was discrimination not only at the beach but at the pools as well.

In the early 1960s Fort Lauderdale won in a national bidding process to host the National Swimming Hall of Fame. As part of their bid, the city of Fort Lauderdale agreed to build a new swimming and diving stadium and museum building to house the Hall of Fame. What is less well-known about the ‘swimming capital of the world’ was the total exclusion of African Americans from this experience.

(p.1)

Blacks fought for the right to gain beach access in Broward County and eventually were allowed go to an isolated beach at the north end of Dania Beach, now known as John Lloyd State Park. The only catch was that they had to take a ferry to get there, and it only ran on certain holidays. So at best, they had won limited access to the “colored” beach. In the same manner, African Americans won the right to their own colored beach in Miami at Virginia Key adjacent to the land fill and sewage treatment facility. The *Miami Herald* website has documents that recount an article and position on African American historic swimming experiences within Dade County in 1945. The article describes the actions by a “group of negroes testing their right to use county-

owned bathing beaches (who) trooped up to Baker’s Haulover area” to splash in the surf. They alerted the sheriff’s office in advance, the article states. Eugenia B. Thomas, widow of Lawson Thomas, did not go to the wade-in, but shared his version of the encounter: “They went into the water, and the sheriff comes out and says, ‘Get out of the water.’ ‘Are you going to put them in jail?’ Thomas asked. The deputy stammers. Thomas tells the group, ‘go back into the water,’ which generates more stammered protests from the deputy.” No arrests were made that day. But historians later would hail the moment as the start of the Civil Rights movement in Miami. Shortly afterward, Eugenia Thomas said, county commissioner Charles Crandon called Lawson Thomas’s law office. “Tell Thomas to come down here and we’ll work something out,” she said Crandon told her husband. The compromise was Virginia Beach, which opened in August 1945 (Robinson, 2008).

Virginia Key, like Dania Beach, also required a ferry service for access to the beach. Recently in the 1990s African Americans and the South Florida Board Sailing Association fought off developers and saved the beach as an African American historical site. With the onset of desegregation, African Americans slowly gained access to pools though for many of them with the passage of time they had, unfortunately, learned to fear and avoid the water. Wilkerson (2011) presents the historic importance of the Great Migration:

The Great Migration would not end till the 1970s, when the South finally begun change—the white-only signs came down, the all white schools opened up, and everyone could vote. By then nearly half of all Black Americans—some forty

seven percent—would be living outside the South, compared to ten percent when the Migration began. (p. 10)

Overall lack of access to swimming opportunities over many generations has left a large segment of the African American population without the skills necessary to neither swim nor the urgency to seek water skills. Hastings, Zahran, and Cable (2006) state:

Drowning is defined as death from asphyxia within 24hours of submersion in water. The World Health Organization [WHO, 2004] estimates that each year between 400,000 and 700,000 accidental drowning and submersion deaths occur globally. Furthermore, low levels of economic and social development are associated with higher rates of death by accidental drowning and submersion.

Data on death by unintentional drowning are underreported globally, especially in low- and middle-income countries. (p. 895)

Additional studies show that African Americans are more likely to drown than whites in this country. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that children 4 years old and younger are more likely to drown than members of other age groups.

During 2001-2002, an estimated 4,174 persons on average per year were treated in U.S. hospital emergency departments (EDs) for nonfatal unintentional drowning injuries in recreational water settings. About 53% required hospitalization or transfer for special care. During 2001, 3,372 persons suffered fatal unintentional drowning in recreational settings. Nonfatal and fatal injury rate were the highest for children ages 4 years and younger and for males of all ages. (CDC, 2007)

A study that combined U.S. census data for Broward County, Florida, for 2005 and drowning statistics for Broward County from 1999-2006 by race is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Drowning Statistics for Broward County From 1999 to 2006

Race	Percent of Total Population per 2005 Census	Percent of Drowning Deaths Broward County 99 – 06,	Percent of Drowning Deaths Broward County 99 – 06, 0 – 4 Years of Age
Whites	48.5	60.0	50.0
Blacks	24.9	28.0	41.0
Hispanics	21.9	37.0	4.0
Asians	2.9	3.0	5.0
Native American	0.3	7.0	0.0

Note. Census Data from Broward County Coroner’s Office

African Americans represent 24.9% of the total population of Broward County according to the 2005 U.S. census data. However, African Americans represent 28% of drowning deaths in Broward County, demographically a higher rate of drowning rate than whites, based on census data. Moreover, the 0-4 year-old age group goes up to 41% for the African American in Broward County compared to 50% for whites, though they encompass over 48% of the population. These data should be found shocking and unacceptable because a race of human beings representing a little less than 25% of the population has their offspring between the ages of 0 to 4 years representing 41% of the drowning deaths in Broward County.

This kind of statistical research shows a deficit in the overall swimming skills of the African American population, not only in Broward County but nationwide. From coroner's office notes, many of the African American deaths were described as accidental exposures to water as opposed to intentional exposures to water activities in the statistics of the white race. Hastings et al. (2006) state:

The negative effects of inequalities become social injustices when public policies fail to adequately alleviate the condition that gives rise to the inequality or when the conditions are neither publicly defined as a social problem nor brought to policy makers' attention. At first glance, the absence of a well-developed swimming infrastructure or restricted access to swimming programs may not appear to represent social injustices. But we argue that absence of a swimming infrastructure or restricted access are social injustices suffered by individual in different countries or status groups in a country under the following societal condition: The risk of drowning is a serious health concerns because of the omnipresence of bodies of water; the majority of the impoverished population lacks water safety knowledge and swimming skills; and no policies are effected to counter the principle of social exclusivity that restricts access of low-income status groups to swimming programs. (p. 898)

During the Civil Rights movement, African Americans fought for desegregation, for the right to go to public venues like pools and beaches. Wilkerson (2011) reports this tragic example. Carl Sandburg, the future poet who was then a reporter for the *Chicago Daily News*, recounted it this way: "A colored boy swam across an imaginary segregation line. White boys threw rocks at him and knocked him off a raft. He drowned" (p. 272). The

years of being aquatically oppressed has made cultural changes within the population creating a water phobic generation, “Drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury-related deaths to children ages 14 and under” (Pasadena Fire Department, 2007).

This aquatic phobic population might shed their fear by aggressively fighting against it as the community did during the Civil Rights era. African American children should have swimming skills and water safety acclimation experiences. To be surrounded by the waters of Broward County and live in fear of the water is unfortunate for aquatically phobic citizens. It is imperative that water sport professionals and civic groups urge parents to take the extra step in making African Americans feel safe and welcomed at water facilities and to be extra vigilant during their water activities. Furthermore, it is imperative to suggest and encourage additional training beyond the basic skills and to reiterate that programs and water sport opportunities are available to African Americans. As water sports professionals, it is our duty to do everything possible to inform the public and to keep them safe through our programs. Notwithstanding the African American population’s fear, they may need a little more hand holding in and around the water, and it is vital that everyone knows where they are coming from as swimmers.

CHAPTER 3

SOUTHERN WRITERS VIEW RACE, CLASS, AND WATER

Southern literature is often a reflection of the dark side of the former slave culture and dysfunctional family relationships. Arguably, these problems may not be unique to the South. However, it seems to be a major underlying influence that still has a phantom presence in Southern culture today. Whites in the South still seem to be uncomfortable having lost the Civil War and, in some ways, continuing, for 100 years, to fight the war while doing little for racial equality. Many areas in the southern United States were never populated with an educated white community; in other areas, whites had wealth and political influence as a direct correlation to an economy based on the hard labor of a slave culture or later, a tenant culture. Given the politics of education and money during this post-Civil War time, on the high side a wealthy governing aristocratic society formed and on the low side, poor whites found themselves in competition with and resenting the newly freed African Americans. African Americans have reminders of inequalities between the two races. Many of these racial and family problems are obvious, others much more subtle. Nevertheless underlying influences are found in the literature of this area, many related to water. Many of the authors like Gaines, Conroy, Oliver, Rash, Dickey, and Crane reflect the social problems of the South which are interwoven in the authors' pages as they develop their characters. Each of these Southern authors offers a uniquely different taste of the culture and social problems of the South.

Gaines' experiences of time and place give a feel of what it was like being a person of color living in the South in the 1950s. In a *Lesson Before Dying* Gaines uses a unique Southern dialect to give the dialog a rich twang, imposing a genuine feel of the language of the time. In addition, the use of phonetic spelling in Jefferson's diary gives this novel a realistic feel of life and the conditions and the lack of emphasis on education of the African American population. Moreover, there were several comparisons made to the lack of equality between white and African American segregated schools, not to mention that the whites spent about three months longer in school each year. Picking and harvesting the crops came first over their educations for African-American children. What positions in the community were available to the educated African American anyway? Perhaps the only positions for an educated person of color were a school teacher or a man of the cloth. Most every position of importance in *A Lesson Before Dying* seemed to be held by whites with no room for the person of color. Evidently they were not even able to serve on a jury; imagine the irony of "a jury of your peers."

African Americans in the 1940s in Louisiana are portrayed in Gaines' novel as just being living tools in the agricultural community, as animals in the barnyard like hogs. They might be free but they were still at the mercy of a world ruled by whites for whites without the same privileges, like swimming facilities. Gaines portrays the hopelessness of the situation and the injustice of the time; the reader is constantly reminded of the hierarchy of this society, for example, the subtle mention of the Civil War monuments on the courthouse steps. One way in which Gaines effectively shows racism is the respect that white people demand of African Americans in social situations all through his work. If this respect is not given, the African American was seen as defiant and the social

consequences followed. In the end, Jefferson walks into the closet where he was to be electrocuted, tall as proud and defiant of the white man. Jefferson's legacy was a sense of hope that was kept alive in the African American community through word of mouth. This hope gives others in the community and those close to Jefferson the will to do their best to help their young to learn that they are not hogs; in fact, they are humans living in less than humane conditions. In the end Paul, the white deputy sheriff, broke the cultural barrier and showed respect for Grant Wiggins the teacher, giving the reader hope. An education in the African American population of this time seemingly had little value or use; very little time or resources were put into educating colored children, much like the case of the children of Yamacraw Island, as told by Conroy.

The title of Conroy's book, *The Water is Wide*, is a metaphor that rings true throughout the novel. The story itself is a unique perspective on a people who were isolated, forgotten, and forsaken on an island surrounded by a seemingly unbridgeable moat of water. The word water is used figuratively and literally in the title and represents many barriers to the inhabitants of Yamacraw Island: a huge literal geographical body of water surrounding the island with its perils as well cultural isolation. The residents of Yamacraw, being isolated, had become culturally unique, though at the time Conroy wrote of his experiences in the 1960s through the 1970s few would have recognized the significance of it. Conroy, finding himself isolated and one of two teachers on the island, decided to open the world up to these children of Yamacraw. The children were illiterate and had no concept of the world beyond the shores of their little island. Conroy's approach to teaching the children was a method of discovery that in turn added value by opening their eyes to the world beyond the waters that surrounded their own isolated little

island, thus giving a purpose and value to why the children needed to learn. The children were left to their own devices; they were content to live on the little island just barely eking out a survival, as the island could only support so many. Conroy makes the connection to the fact that many of the young children end up going off to the mainland where they are ill-prepared and stand little chance of making it. The children have been isolated prior to Conroy's arrival and saw no tangible value to be obtained from the education system that the school board on the mainland dictated for the children to learn. By exposing the children to the outside world, Conroy hoped to inspire the children to learn and have a fighting chance in the real world. That being said, Conroy's *The Water is Wide* metaphor sets the stage for his educational answer for the children, which is to build a bridge. The process of building the bridge, although imaginary, is one that overcomes the barriers, allowing the children a window to the world and showing the value of an education. The adding of a value statement as an educator who introduces new materials is not only a sign of a good teacher but also catches the attention of the students. Conroy spends time to acclimate his student to swimming in the waters off their little Island, metaphorically preparing them to survive wider barriers.

The non-standard educational approach that Conroy takes in order to teach the children isolates him professionally and engenders the disapproval of his superiors. Our innovative young teacher soon finds himself also isolated to his own island, fighting to survive. Conroy has his own bridge to cross with the oppressive design of a white school board. He loses the fight with the school board and his job. In the end, this actually gave him an opportunity to relate the experiences about which he wrote in *The Water Is Wide*.

Much like Gaines, Conroy shows the criminal inequalities and discriminations that were quietly being sheltered on Yamacraw Island.

Racial inequalities were never as obvious as they were when Conroy spoke about a schoolhouse built to school a single white child on the Island. Conroy wrote this book, the first of many, launching his career as an author; one would only hope he remembered the children who gave him his opportunity and experiences in which he wrote. One cannot help but think about how the children of the island's lives ended up; moreover, how wide the water is for the children growing up in Yamacraw today. Conroy, upon arriving on Yamacraw, realized the social and economic hurdles as well as the literal one. Conroy, by taking the children and opening their eyes to the outside world off their little island, began to narrow the waterway metaphorically. These different standards in education are a popular theme in literature of the South; however, Oliver takes it a step further by being one of the first to risk it all in the movement to fight for equality in the educational system.

Multicolored Memories of a Black Southern Girl (2004) is a wander through Oliver's childhood memories growing up a young African American in Florida. The telling of her childhood memories allows an insightful look into colored neighborhoods divided by water in the Jacksonville area. Oliver's depiction of her neighborhood and the divisions of neighborhoods due to the river and boundaries set by the water demarcating where one can travel is astounding. Through studies of cultural geography, one realizes the importance of the automobile on the landscape and how they kept families connected. However, in Oliver's case, a lack of transportation divided the African American neighborhoods. After WWII the Levitt homes began sprouting up in the suburbs, which

allowed returning military veterans to buy homes and commute with their new cars (a byproduct of the war machine), something unheard of to this point. What became clear to the reader was that African Americans were for the most part left behind in the wake of the new white automobile landscape. Furthermore, to add insult to injury, the white urban flight to the suburbs left many inner city areas in a state of disrepair while the automobile landscape further divided the poorest of inner city neighborhoods. This practice was not unique to the south; it had occurred all over the country with the creation of the interstate highway systems in the 1950s, which further divided intercity neighborhoods. White southern politicians furthered this division by drawing lines on the maps that divided the colored person vote. The St. Johns River also runs through the center of Jacksonville, further dividing its residents. Oliver's story continues with her experience of being one of the first colored students to go to the University of Florida; this could have been a life-threatening experience with the white opposition. This further supports the argument of Gaines and Conroy of the racial inequalities of the education system in the South.

Oliver's account was a first-hand experience which paints a grim picture of African Americans looking for education, not to mention the other social pressures and limited career choices of an educated person of color. This move to Gainesville was a huge step for Oliver; although she was physically less than 100 miles from her mother and home in Jacksonville, it might as well have been a thousand miles. There were all sorts of racial perils. Oliver describes the separation of the African American communities within the greater Jacksonville area. Much like the children of Yamacraw Island in *The Water Is Wide*, the fact is that the bridges in the Jacksonville area are long and unsuitable for foot traffic, and the river is much too wide to swim. This geographic divide separates the

African American population of the greater Jacksonville area and further hinders a melding of the city's populations both culturally and politically.

Southern authors also could not ignore a phenomenon that had been happening through the South with the building of hydroelectric dams, which brought electricity into homes throughout this region. One might think that part of President Roosevelt's New Deal was to spend some money on impoverished backward isolated mountain areas that may have been perceived as an embarrassment to this country. The Tennessee Valley Authority, or TVA, is one of these power companies that made huge alterations on the landscape; for example, several sections of the Tennessee River were dammed up in the name of flood control. The irony is that large urban areas such as the city of Chattanooga are safe from flooding because several dams upstream regulate water levels, but other people living upstream of the flood structures lost everything due to the damming and flooding their homes, land, and livelihoods. Naturally, authors would gravitate to the stories of displacement and hardship in the soon-to-be-flooded sparsely populated area. Rash and Dickey are two such Southern authors who write about changes that came about due to the hydroelectric damming projects by the TVA.

Rash is from this Tennessee Valley region and used the effects of damming as the setting for his novel *One Foot in Eden*. Rash's book (2002) is unique in that the story was told in short segments from the point of view of his cast of characters, each one having a section in which they can tell their story. These mosaics of narratives come together in a unique way to share the story with the reader. The general plot of this book is the interaction of a husband and wife who are unable to conceive a child, which began to ruin their relationship. The wife, with the help of an old widowed lady suspected of being a

witch, seduces a farm boy back from the war on a neighboring farm. After a child was conceived, her husband killed the farm boy in an argument. Water is commonly used throughout this novel in both positive and negative ways. One such example of this is a chapter titled “The Husband” where the husband, Billy, wakes from sleeping,

I slept a few hours so black and deep beyond even dreams. I woke in the dark. For a moment I laid there not even recollecting what had happened yesterday. Then it all came rushing on me like a dam broke open and I knew no matter how long I laid there I’d not gain a wink of sleep more. (Rash, p. 142)

This was a clever use of a metaphor in a dark way that ties the setting into the main theme of this novel. Rash cleverly uses water as a positive aspect when the wife, Amy, conceives her child with the farm boy, Holland, amidst her darkest sin in the following passage:

I closed my eyes and went back years to quilt-washing days, recollecting how once a year in the spring Daddy and Momma would pile the quilts and washing powders and pails and the wash pot and all us young ones into the back of the pickup and we’d bump down the dirt road to the Whitewater River.

‘You all go fetch the dry fire wood.’ Momma would say. ‘Me and your daddy will empty the truck.’

We’d fill up our arms and take it back to where Daddy built his fire. All the while Momma filled the pot with pails full of river water.

When the water got hot and bubbling and Mamma had dropped a washing powder in, Daddy took a big stick and doused the first quilt. He chucked the quilt

to keep it under, then a ways later him and Momma both used sticks to haul it between them to the shallows.

Me and Ginny did the rest. We carried the quilts out to where the river was most to our belly buttons and swished and twisted the quilts clean. The current would be strong against us. We'd dig our feet into the white sand to hold our balance. It was a good, pure feeling to be out in the river on warm spring day, knowing that come cold weather months later you'd lift quilts up to your chin and smell the washing powders and the damp river. But it was more than that. It was knowing something could be made clean no matter how soiled and dirty it got. (p. 84-85)

Rash uses the water as a means to relive a wholesome childhood memory for Amy as she tried to conceive a child in sin. Furthermore, he enhances one of water's unique characteristics as a natural solvent by making an analogy to its cleansing properties with an almost religious quality for forgiveness. This passage also enhances the reader's image of the living conditions and amenities available, depicting a poor rural agricultural area.

Rash (2002) again uses water and its interaction with earth materials to emphasize the conception of Amy and Holland's child. Although this moment is the highlight of Amy's sin, water is used once again to show the positive attribute of life. In fact, some believe that life came out of water.

Then I felt something else, something deep inside of me, a kind brightness welling up and spreading all through my body like spring water when it bubbles

out of the ground. At that moment I knew certain as anything ever in my life that Holland's seed had took root inside of me. (p. 88)

Rash (2002) continues with the use of water when Amy and Billy reunite. Water in this passage is used in a positive way through the use of light and darkness to cast doubts about their relationship. In addition, water once again performs a cleansing through a sort of dilution effect.

It was like I was opening up our bodies swirled together like two creeks becoming one. Then it was like as if my body was nothing but water spreading out into the dark, each ripple taking me farther and farther away from all that burdened me. (p. 96)

Ironically, Amy describes her body as nothing spreading out through the water as she forgets that her sin parallels Amy and Billy's deaths. Isaac loses both of the parents who raised him and they are buried with his biological father's remains in an unnatural watery grave behind the Carolina Power Companies new hydroelectric dam because he lacked the life skills to swim.

But none of that matters anymore. It doesn't matter how many Indian mounds are here or what flowers or bugs or birds. If you found chunks of gold big as a baseball it wouldn't matter now. That dam's built, and the gates are closed. It doesn't matter if you're living or dead. You don't belong here anymore. Every last one of you hillbillies is going to be flushed out of this valley like shit down a commode. (p. 184)

These people may be poor but they are people with culture and a story to tell; Rash (2002) capitalizes on this. His use of water's lightness and darkness correlates to

good and evil; in the end all is forgotten when it is buried under a newly formed reservoir, similar in part to Boorman's 1972 account in *Deliverance*.

Being expendable, flushed out, is also the feeling one gets from the locals in Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972). This film takes place in a setting where the poor uneducated locals are being flooded out by the power company to enhance the quality of life for others elsewhere. The locals are saving what they can as the flood waters of the dam inch along, encroaching on their small backward and the dying town. This included recovering the dead from their graves and moving them to high ground, among other things. Perhaps the town was not, to a certain extent, ready for weekend warriors up from the big city for a weekend of recreation.

Similarities can be drawn between the treatment of poor people being displaced by water in the country and the poor inner city communities being divided by interstate highways built on the cheapest land that can be found. Where these interstates divide families and communities, they destroy the vibrancy of these communities by driving a highway through their hearts, all in the name of progress. Furthermore, the metaphor of being flushed out makes one think of the exterminating process of roaches; one can draw a conclusion that the poor are like insects. Meanwhile, right or wrong, Boorman's (1972) weekend warriors went into the weekend with little respect for the locals. Things are different up in the hill country, as the weekend warriors soon found out when they were sodomized by a couple of locals. Boorman's film takes place, for the most part, on a desolate stretch of river; the use of the water here takes many forms. Boorman's depiction gives water a sense of adventure and danger and yet retains a sense of the beauty of the land. Boorman wants to show the beauty of the land before it is buried

under hundreds of feet of water. In addition to the adventure and beauty of the land, the power of the water is also symbolized by the helplessness it brings these weekend warriors. It brings out the respect due the land, the water, and the people. In the end, after several deaths, these weekend warriors go back to the city, and let the past be buried by the rising water from the dam.

This use of water to hide the past was also used in the films *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Avnet, 1991) and *Mississippi Burning* (Colesberry, 1988). In both works, highway vehicles were used as coffins to hide murdered bodies in the water only for them to be found later like an open book to the past. In the case of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, it was to dispose of an abusive husband who had lived out of town and had mysteriously disappeared. In the case of *Mississippi Burning*, it was to dispose of three Civil Rights workers who were viewed as a threat to the white way of life with talks of voting rights for blacks. Boorman's 1972 film also shows how the poor and their inexpensive properties are easily forgotten in the greater good of public work projects. The task of moving gravesites to high ground and leaving behind everything one knows and or cannot carry is terrible. Bad attitudes amongst the locals were understandable.

A common theme with Southern authors is the use of water to create metaphors and analogies throughout their works. Water is life and without it human beings would be reduced to dust. Water also plays an important part with agriculture, power, and, more recently, the recreation industry. Water falls to the earth and is absorbed, thus recharging the aquifers and becoming part of the earth material where we live and build our homes. Flooding of the valleys in the South left an impression on these Southern authors. It also presents dangers and perils and forms natural barriers on our social landscape. Boorman

(1972) uses this flooding to explore the attitudes of the people involved. The flooding of the region due to the dam divided and separated families and neighborhoods much like the building of an interstate highway through the poorest sections of an intercity.

Crane's *The Open Boat*, set in 1897, depicts four men who find themselves in a lifeboat between Cuba and Florida. The significance of this is that none of the men foresaw themselves in this survival situation. Granted that safety at sea and search and recover teams have come along way since the turn of the 1900s, but there is still inherent risk involved in being at sea. Basic swimming skills would go a long way toward surviving in a dangerous situation like this. On average, Americans tend to be a little heavier, thus better insulated and more buoyant now. Basic swimming skills are the key in a situation like this in order to keep one's wits about you to help with the overall chances of survival. Crane depicts the basic human spirit of survival of these men in the lifeboat and the necessary will to survive needed to overcome the odds and to continue to fight for days in order to survive. Crane shows what is needed to fight the odds on the water, and how one must look deep inside to find the energy and the strength to survive whether or not one had had any safety training.

In the end, Gaines, Conroy, Rash, and Oliver dissect the South and paint an image that pervades the region regarding to race, education, and lack of equality. The authors, though writing in different regions in the South, all make similar comparisons of the inequalities and the pervasiveness of the racial isolation in the South. These works give tremendous credibility to the evidence of racism and social problems of the South, through stories and an account of some childhood memories with similar underlying themes and written from different perspectives. These sampled authors use water as a tool

metaphorically, socially, and often the water as a firm barrier to be bridged. Conroy even uses it as a metaphor in his title, *The Water is Wide*. Also, Oliver describes in her book *Multicolored Memories of a Black Southern Girl* the St. Johns River as a social boundary that separated the African American population from the rest of Jacksonville, Florida. Others, like Boorman (1972) and Rash (2002), use water in their novel and movie to mark a change on the landscape communities. In fact, many of these stories are based on real-life events that uprooted entire families who had been living on the land for generations. Most of these families lived in areas of poverty in the hill country of the South where, for geographical reasons, farming and other forms of work were somewhat impractical because of a lack of efficient means of getting their products to market. One may dive into the effects of water on Southern people and its effect on Southern literature. Conclusions can be formed about the African American population, the treatment they suffered, and swimming. Additionally readers will make some connections as to how a group's culture could become somewhat removed from the water.

CHAPTER 4
OBSERVATIONS OF DROWNING STATISTICS BETWEEN
BROWARD COUNTY, FLORIDA, TARRENT COUNTY, TEXAS,
AND THE STATE OF TEXAS

Examining the data from Table 2, from the Broward County Coroner's Office once more as one compares and contrasts with data in Table 3 from the Tarrant County, Texas, Coroner's Office, one will ascertain that there is an unusually high drowning rate for the African American population. These observations will also look at the demographics of drowning deaths for the whole state of Texas and compare them with data from the two counties. In all cases the drowning statistics will be compared to the U.S. census estimates for 2008. Moreover, additional information from the University of Memphis, Tennessee, adds further concerns to these problems. The data suggest that the drowning deaths of African Americans are statistically higher than other races, evidence that adds merit to this project. The comparison of the tables demonstrates that these problems are not uniquely inherent to Broward County. In fact, when looking at all of the evidence one suspects it to be a nationwide problem. Furthermore, this project will suggest why the drowning rates are higher for White people in Broward over the White people of Tarrant County. In addition this project will look at boating activities and the correlation to drowning.

Table 2

Drowning Death Statistics in Broward County, Florida

Race	Estimated % of Population Census Data 2008	Percent of Total Drowning Deaths 1999 – 2006
Whites	47.3	60.0
Blacks	25.5	28.4
Hispanics	24.0	7.3
Others	3.2	4.3

Note. Data from Broward County Coroner’s Office and U.S. Census Data.

Table 3

Drowning Death Statistics in Tarrant County, Texas

Race	Estimated % of Population Census Data 2008	Percent of Total Drowning Deaths 1999 – 2006
Whites	54.2	55.0
Blacks	14.2	16.8
Hispanics	26.0	21.8
Others	5.6	6.4

Note. Data from Texas Department of Health Services and U.S. Census Data.

First look at drowning deaths in Broward County (Table 2) compared to Tarrant, Texas (Table 3). When comparing the drowning deaths of African Americans, one

notices that the percentage of deaths drops considerably from 28.4% to 16.8%. This phenomenon might be explained by looking at the corresponding population data that correlates somewhat proportionately to the population data of each county. Thus, this puts the findings of African American drowning deaths in Tarrant County on an even keel with that of Broward County since Tarrant County has proportionally a smaller African American population. In both counties the African American drowning deaths are higher than their corresponding representation of the population. This observation causes concern. It also shows that high-risk drowning deaths of African Americans are not isolated cases in Broward County, but more of the norm. In addition, the white drowning deaths of Broward County (Table 2) also drop when looking at the drowning deaths of Tarrant County (Table 3), going from 60% in Broward County to 55% in Tarrant County. Moreover, this drop in drowning deaths for whites has an inverse relationship with the population percentage of whites that inhabit these two counties. Anecdotal observations tend to make one believe that an explanation for this is that Tarrant County, being landlocked (in the Dallas-Fort Worth area of Texas) and lacking a nearby ocean, perhaps there are fewer water sports activities for its population. Another area of concern is the comparison of Hispanics between the two counties with similar representation of percentage of populations with Broward at 24% and Tarrant at 26%. However, this is where the similarities end, with drowning deaths going up from 7.3% in Broward to 21.8% in Tarrant County. Perhaps this can be explained by the socioeconomic levels of Hispanics living in Tarrant County. The Hispanic population of Texas is largely made up of migrant workers from Mexico representing a lower socioeconomic level. The drowning data for the whole state of Texas (Table 4) reflect

what is found in Tarrant County with no alarming anomalies in comparison. Any unexpected death is a tragedy, and it is even worse if it could have been avoided.

Table 4

State of Texas Drowning Death Statistics

Race	Estimated Percent of Population Census Data 2008	Percent of Total Drowning Deaths 1999 – 2006
Whites	47.4	49.6
Blacks	11.9	13.8
Hispanics	36.5	31.7
Others	4.2	4.8

Note. Data from Texas Department of Health Services and U.S. Census Data.

In Broward County, African American drowning deaths are very similar to the statistics in Texas—just one more indication of the problems with drowning facing African Americans and the need for swimming skills to be taught to this group helping to eliminate these avoidable tragedies. While the African American population may generally fear the water and respects it enough to stay clear of it, the white population seems to embrace it and have a general lack of fear. Driscoll, Harrison, and Steenkamp (2004) argue the dangers in consuming alcohol on the water.

Alcohol is widely used in association with recreational aquatic activity in the United States, but there is minimal information regarding the extent of use elsewhere. A priori and anecdotal evidence suggests that alcohol is an important

risk factor for drowning associated with recreational aquatic activity. Specific studies provide good evidence supporting this, but the extent of increased risk associated with alcohol use, and the attributable risk due to alcohol use, is not well characterized. Drowning appears to be the overwhelming cause of death associated with recreational aquatic activity with alcohol detected in the blood in 30%–70% of persons who drown while involved in this activity. The few relevant studies on degree of increased risk suggest persons with a blood alcohol level of 0.10 g/100 ml have about 10 times the risk of death associated with recreational boating compared with persons who have not been drinking, but that even small amounts of alcohol can increase this risk. The population attributable risk seems to be in the range of about 10%–30%. (p. 107)

While those groups that have basic understanding of water safety skills and feel comfortable around the water at the same time seem to throw caution to the wind when it comes to common sense around the water, the water, for many groups, is viewed as a recreational area that thinks alcohol should be added to the mix. One of the biggest problems with boating is the definition of what constitutes a boat. There are ship's motor boats, sailboats, airboats, rubber rafts, and inner tubes which all are meant to float someone. What about inflatable pool toys—do they fall under the definition of a boat? Again much like the need for swim lessons, boating safety presents a whole new area of safety to be informed about in addition to local and federal laws. From swimming pools to sand bars there are many areas where parties occur and stupidity will prevail. Granted that could still be drowning deaths, but they require a whole different format of education to combat the problem. All boats and boating areas are different and require a different

skill set for safe operation. In the great outdoors one may feel comfortable being intoxicated while being on a boat; however, there are a number of things that can change quickly where a person would need to be on guard. For example, changes in the weather or some sort of mechanical malfunction on board or even other intoxicated boaters can quickly change what began as a relaxing day on the water. This may account for a large number of drowning incidents that occur where the water sport enthusiast is over confident and does not adhere to common safety measures until it is too late. Only recently have statistics begun to be kept on alcohol related water deaths. With nearly daily reports of DUI related accidents and occasional reports of drowning at parties, it does not seem to be a far stretch that alcohol maybe involved in many more water related incidents than reported. There is no claim that the African American community has a higher statistic in alcohol related water incidents, but this serves as a general reminder that must be heeded in any successful program to curb water related deaths.

Thus, from comparing drowning statistics between Broward County, Florida, and Tarrant County, Texas, and the state of Texas there are some discoveries. First, the African American population has a higher chance of drowning than that of the general population. Second, the white community seems to know how to swim but is way too comfortable on the water and could stand to learn some respect. Generally, the two groups have something to offer each other when it comes to water safety: fear and respect. Between the two counties in Florida and Texas, the drowning statistics have remained similar despite small differences in the overall population represented and drowning deaths are from non-intentional exposure to the water. While the corresponding statistics for the white community's drowning incidents drop for Tarrant County, it could

be explained that there is a lack of available water activities. A reading of this data suggests that there are different reasons for the drowning. Water safety education has to be approached in several ways in order to prevent or lessen future drowning incidents. Some of the population has little to no swimming skills, and another portion of the population seems over-confident in their water skill level. By exposing all of the children to introductory swim lessons the outcome would save many lives just by having everyone trained with the very basic skills and confidence to swim, if exposed to water. Confident swimmers and water sports enthusiasts need to have more education in water safety classes to keep them apprised of additional water related dangers as they engage in different types of water sports. Each area requires additional training with trained water sports instructors.

Historical observations by Allen and Nickel (1969) in the *Journal of Negro Education* testify that there are problems with African Americans learning essential life-saving swimming skills. “From the various reasons biological differences noted, it can be deduced that comparative lack of buoyancy among Negroes (males at least) may be the result of a real difference in specific gravity.” (p. 409) Therefore, African American are the real underdogs in the swimming world. Cultural isolation resulted in generations of African Americans denied access to swimming opportunities.

The water can at times be angry and powerful beyond the ability of even the best human swimmer’s ability to combat its forces and should be respected. Sailing and diving students at Broward College are taught to check and/or be able to read the weather as an additional part of their training and ultimately to respect the effect that the weather has on the water in order to stay safe. Again, the importance of swimming skills should be

considered a necessary life skill and should be encouraged to be a normal part of the African American experience.

This specific population needs to have extra attention, as a water sport professional, one needs to be prepared to go the extra mile and do a little extra hand holding so that their experience is a safe one and the water acclimation process is smooth and non-threatening. Moreover, it is up to the water sport professionals to ensure that their experience should be a good one and that they will continue learning and developing these skills.

CHAPTER 5
FIELD OBSERVATIONS WITHIN THE
SOUTH FLORIDA AQUATIC COMMUNITY

The need and urgency of this project was raised through many gatherings of various professional water sports groups' conversations and chance remarks over my professional career of more than 20 years in the south Florida water sports communities. My teaching experiences in sailing, windsurfing, as well as diving and swimming have given me a wealth of insight and information helping my career as well as forming the urgency in addressing the problem of water related deaths among African Americans. Over the years, professional water sports instructors commonly swap stories and training methods to better enhance their programs and to better meet the needs of their student populations. While this project went beyond these anecdotal chats, they are important in trying to find out what really holds merit and to suggest what actions to remedy and reduce these statistics.

Recently two SCUBA instructors at a neighboring college with a much more established SCUBA program than Broward College revealed some interesting insights. These two water sports professionals often spend time comparing notes to help meet the learning needs of their individual students. Though these chats are informal, they go a long way toward identifying and meeting the needs of the diverse student population and keeping safety foremost, while continuing to sharpen their own skills. In sharing

experiences and problems with African American students, several experiences were brought up. One observation was that they have found some have ultra-thin athletic body types devoid of fat. While in many circles this is a culturally desirable attribute to have, when it come to swimming there are two things that are going to work against that body type. One issue is that a body devoid of fat tissue is more prone to get chilled more quickly while in the water, which can lead to hypothermia. Secondly this condition also renders the body negatively buoyant which in turn makes students with this body type have to work much harder to stay at the surface in order to breathe. According to Mael (1995), “Numerous researchers have demonstrated that Black Americans as a group have less subcutaneous fat and are less buoyant than whites” (Baker & Newman, 1957; Burdeshaw, 1968; Campbell, 1991; Lane & Mitchum, 1964; Malina, 1972). “Blacks as a group have denser bones, resulting in denser lean body” (Malina, 1972; Schutte et al., 1984). Subcutaneous fat is adipose tissue directly beneath the skin surface, as opposed to fat surrounding organ and muscle tissue. Lean body mass refers to all nonfat body mass, such as muscle, bone and organs (p. 480)

In another observation, many in the African American population put a lot of time and economic resources into their hair styles, which are not water friendly. This can make a person with this kind of hair treatment stay distant from water, even from the rain for fear of losing an investment of time and money. “The texture of Black’s hair requires more styling care after swimming, so that even recreational swimming demands greater time commitment, making swimming less attractive to Black women” (Campbell, 1991; Wessel, 1994; Woodham, 1994) (p. 488). One could compare it to a person who has stitches, a cast or some other medical element that keeps them from getting wet making

them some what aqua phobic. While these traits are not only found in African Americans, they seem common place and they may hinder the desire to swim, when coupled with urban myths that say that African Americans cannot swim anyway. This may be a factor that seems to keep some African Americans out of the water.

These two aquatic professionals shared an informal theory about a major difference in the African American population with the stereotypical facial features that are found with many people of this race. The flat broad nose is an open pathway to allow water in, inducing coughing; water gets into the lungs, yet another obstacle for this population to overcome. Airway control is one of the most important skills that one can master when learning how to swim. It sounds very basic but it is a critical skill that one learns in order to keep the water only where you want it. It is similar to a child learning to swallow food and liquids, and make sure that they go down the right way. The professionals' conversation continued into the designs of modern dive mask: none of the designs seem created with noses in mind. Having had similar experiences with African American students at Broward College, this topic of the conversation intrigued me. Although I have had my own experiences with some of my students who had problems with their masks, I had never put it into words before. "Dr. Blanche, who has studied drowning data for 15 years, said 'the differences by race have been constant over the years,' adding that 'few people feel comfortable reporting these differences'" (Zinser, 2006).

Regardless of whether or not the shape of the nose makes a difference, one of the most important things that one learns when beginning to swim is airway control. This is a basic breathing skill that keeps one breathing air while at the same time not allowing

water in the airways. A person who is not acclimated to the water is likely to inhale water that might induce coughing and lead to distress and panic. Even a small amount of water in the nose can lead to a tickling sensation that might cause a beginner swimmer to panic. Adjusting to facial differences and learning airway control is a critical skill set that could be thought of as a life skill—a life skill that is necessary to have in order to increase the odds of survival in accidental submersions. To this point a lot of the beginning SCUBA training is teaching airway control in the water coupled with acclimating to the underwater breathing equipment. This initial training is all performed in shallow water where students can easily stand up and be in the atmosphere breathing ambient air, a situation close to what they are accustomed to. This allows the students to experience SCUBA without jumping into the deep, and keeps students well within their comfort zones allowing them to acclimate without stress.

It is not the point of this study to make everyone love the water and be great swimmers; it is however, to strongly recommend that everyone get basic lessons and exposure to water. During the process of learning to swim, the beginners experience some water safety training in case they need to save someone. To this point again it is the duty of water sport professionals to get the beginner's first exposure right and ensure that the experience goes well. Water sport professionals must be sensitive to any special cultural needs. Moreover, in the event of accidental exposure to the water, the informed and trained student can hit the water safely.

A follow-up call was made to Sea Vision Mask manufacturing company in St. Petersburg, Florida. A conversation was held with their customer service person; it was learned that they make no special designs for broad and flat noses. Follow-up questions at

several dive shops rendered similar findings. Further questions were directed to the Diver's Alert Network (DAN), a health insurance company for divers worldwide with doctors available by phone 24 hours a day. A quick call to the DAN revealed that they do not collect data by race although they do collect data based on gender. DAN had nothing to contribute as far as the diving industry is concerned with any differences regarding nose shapes and drowning. This perhaps is a potential new market for someone to supply specialty diving mask to people who have broad noses. Not to mention what a rewarding opportunity it would be for someone to open the last frontier here on earth to people who have noses not fitted for current masks and who may not be able participate due to an ill-fitting mask. It is always interesting to see and test the new equipment designs each year and perhaps sometime soon masks that deal with the face's broad nose will be created. Speaking with some students from the Broward Fire Academy revealed that a large majority of the African Americans prefer one particular mask out of the two choices that are given to them for fire safety. These masks provide a steady source of air while in the fire environment that is frequently devoid of oxygen as well as laced with poison gasses. Though this doesn't have a direct connection with drowning, it is related to facial features that might affect the ability of a mask to seal. To further add merit to this problem during a visit to an the exercise science program at a major university in south Florida, I spoke with a few of the instructors and found out that their equipment also has to be modified to fit athletes with a broad noses.

The coroner's comments on the African American population who drowned in Broward County between the years of 1999 and 2006 began to show a trend. This uncovered some vast differences in the activities of the different demographics and the

levels of exposure to drowning these groups assume. What becomes obvious to the reader is that the African American may have had little or no intention of getting wet in the first place. More likely, these were accidental exposures to water and the drowning could have been avoided if the person had the skills to swim. The coroner had comments such as: Man retrieving a ball from the canal; Victim was in a car that went into a canal; Fell into a pool; Drove into canal while being chased by police and, probably the saddest victim, left unattended in tub. The point that is surfacing here is that a large segment of the African American population in Broward County lives in fear of the water. The drowning that occurs is not from recreational activities on the water, but from coincidental exposure to the numerous bodies of water here in south Florida. Looking at the white population's cause of drowning from the same report, there were some cases of falling into a canal or pool; however, noticeably more of the victims were doing water-related activities such as boating, diving, and sailing.

Taking a look at the coroner's comments beyond the fact that the victim drowned, one begins to see a trend. It seems important to examine the activities that the victims were involved in prior to their demise. Furthermore, we will also briefly examine the sport of teak dragging and the senseless deaths it had left in its wake, before it was outlawed. A drowning trend that authorities have recently become aware of is "teak dragging." This is where one drags off of the transom of a motor vessel while underway in semi-displacement speed in order to kick up the biggest wave possible. The idea is for the teak dragger/potential victim to release from the transom and surf the stern wake. For many years authorities were placing the cause of death as drowning. Upon further investigation it was found that the victims were being asphyxiated by boat fumes and

passing out prior to physically drowning themselves. Most of these drownings occurred with accomplished swimmers and water sport enthusiasts.

The U.S. Coast Guard advised this week that a sixth person had died from carbon monoxide poisoning suffered while taking part in a new boating activity known as 'Teak/Drag Surfing.' The Coast Guard stresses, 'Teak/Drag Surfing' is a very dangerous activity and advises boaters and water sport enthusiasts not to participate in it.

In 'Teak/Drag Surfing,' a person hangs onto a watercraft's swim platform and allows themselves to be dragged through the water. As the vessel gains speed, and is producing a large enough wake, the person lets go of the swim platform and body surfs in the wake. The odd name of the potentially deadly activity comes from the wood often used to make swim platforms teak.

The most deadly danger of 'Teak/Drag Surfing' is that it places the participants directly in the path of the vessel's exhaust where they breathe in dangerous levels of carbon monoxide. (Teak/Drag Surfing Deadly, 2010)

The point here is that people who died from this activity typically had a lot of exposure to water sports and knew how to swim. Though this project did not find any demographic record of teak drowning, one would be led to believe that this is more of a sport for affluent people and who are comfortable around the water. That being said, drowning in this sport is not a case of lack of water safety skills or fear of the water but more of a case not knowing the dangers of breathing fumes from a combustion engine or just Darwinism. Thus the Coast Guard and other Marine law enforcement agencies have their own battles to prevent incidental drowning due to stupidity.

Another conversation with a head life guard at a local city aquatics complex revealed that he had his own take on African Americans and swimming. He has taught many children's "learn to swim programs" over the years. Due to his experiences he has found a common problem when instructing African American children, which is that their mothers would often signal panic through their own fears from the safety of the pool deck. This is very disruptive and can even be dangerous when the other kids pick up on the panic energy. Consequently, he commonly asks the parents to leave the area to regain control of his class's learning environment. This is a great example of a water sport professional who can control the learning environment to ensure the safety and learning outcome of his class.

CHAPTER 6

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

In conclusion, there are no absolutes that can be made about the subject. However, statistical data plus a context found in American literature and interviews with other professionals within the aquatic industry shows that there is an elusive problem which permeates the research. While this study is not scientific in nature, much of the information was gathered informally from concerned and experienced water sports instructors in the south Florida community. These professional observations were made by numerous water sport professionals who instruct from the kiddy pool to open water. Moreover, the author has 25 years of additional experience working with diverse groups. Thus, this anecdotal evidence forms a clear perspective of problems encountered throughout the south Florida water-sports scene. The evidence adds proof and validity to this project and helps to shed some light on this problem. In addition the project uncovers evidence that the problems are not isolated to only Broward County or the state of Florida but is more of a nationwide problem.

Furthermore this problem is even found interwoven in the Southern literature genre. Such authors as Rash, Oliver, Conroy, and Crane have all used water as a metaphor in their own unique ways within the pages of their novels. The literature depicts that not only is the water used metaphorically, but it also has been used to shape communities and raise the standard of living at the cost of the poor.

In a much less metaphoric sense, Dawson's (2007) article shows evidence that the African American population embraced swimming, and it was part of the culture in Africa prior to the slavery era. Pitts (2007) writes about a young slave named York who was an avid swimmer and who was noted in the records of the Lewis and Clark expedition. In fact, it took generations of oppression for these fears to emerge and dangers to be realized. It is post-civil war when the fears really begin to fester having been removed from the water, and one can start to see how this culture could become so far removed from the water. Ex-slaves began migrating northward after the Civil War finished, in search of a better life. They found themselves in the inner city within the industrial belt. The population also found themselves living with polluted waterways downstream from industries with no real swimming opportunities. In fact, the cities were in decay due to major shifts in the tax base. Doob, in his 2005 book *Race, Ethnicity, and the American Mainstream*, also points out how unfair the housing practices were and how the African American population was retained within the inner city. He also shows how these unfair housing practices were supported by the federal government and how they encouraged segregation of the races to protect property values. This rule in and of itself limited the option of African American citizens to the inner city regardless of whether they had the means or not to buy outside of the inner city. Moreover, as the inner city decay went on, the quality of life, swimming pools, and opportunities were not on the agenda. Furthermore, in south Florida African Americans were denied access to the white beaches and pools though they had limited access to the African American beaches. The right for African Americans to enjoy the beaches and pools in Florida was one of the benefits won with the civil rights movement which repealed the Jim Crow Laws.

However, winning the rights to the beach and pools didn't automatically come with the skill set to safely use such resources. In fact these resources are under utilized by the African American population due to the general fear of the water. The African American population needs to break away from this urban myth and realize that they can indeed learn to swim. However, more needs to be done to get this population trained with the basic skills that can save their lives in the case of accidental submersion. Though the broad nose facial feature may not be the most common nose type in this country it needs its own considerations and perhaps this is not an area that should have a one size fits all tailoring. This is perhaps a great business opportunity for someone to make a specialty product. The African American population does have some exceptions to this urban myth.

Cullen Jones was a 2008 Olympic gold medalist in 2008 in the 4 X 100 meter freestyle relay race. Not only did he help to win and take gold with his team but he also set a world record time for his part, He is also African American, an African American who is breaking the mold within his race by showing that African Americans can swim.

On February 20 at 1 p.m., 2008, Olympic swimming gold medallist Cullen Jones will speak to children about what it took to go from Irvington, N.J., to winning gold for the U.S.A. at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. He will chronicle his near death experience (almost drowning), learning to swim at the YMCA in Newark and becoming one of the most compelling Olympic athletes of our time. (Lagomarsino, 2010)

Cullen Jones, being a near drowning victim himself, defied the odds and learned to swim at the Young Men's Christian Academy (YMCA) in Newark, New Jersey. Not only

did he learn to swim but he liked it and was good at it. Consequently, he is now a role model for others to learn to swim. Thus, Cullen Jones disproved the urban myth that African Americans cannot swim by winning a gold medal for the world to see in the 2008 Olympics. Cullen Jones is also aware of the drowning problem that plagues African American culture, and he is willing to give back. In fact, he is using his celebrity status as a gold medalist to help attract African Americans to get involved with local swimming programs. The local programs are not so unlike the program where he first learned to swim and overcome his fears and near drowning experience. There is hope that these drowning trends within the African American race will start improving over time with access to designated guarded swimming areas and learn to swim programs designed to teach all the children to swim. Cullen Jones is a shining example of these programs working, and it is fantastic that he is giving back to the programs and community where he first received his opportunities.

Thus when examining the coroners' data, many of the African American drowning incidents did not seem to be directly related to normal water activities. Instead the deaths were more like accidents where the victims hardly even got wet. Perhaps if we treat all the children of Broward County as having a potential drowning disease then we could inoculate them against this disease with mandatory swimming lessons at an early age. Lessons should be made available to all of our children as well as the opportunities to enjoy the water. Hastings et al. (2006) states:

Mortality rates are lower in areas where rates of swimming participation are comparatively high. Insofar as rates of swimming participation are a partial reflection of swimming infrastructure, residents in areas of comparatively lower

rates of unintentional drowning have greater access to swimming instruction. (p. 910)

Not everyone has to like water sports but everyone should be able to swim, particularly in a county like Broward, where you have canals, lakes, pools, rivers, and the Atlantic Ocean surrounding you. There are many inherent risks in being around the water. Learning swimming skills and respecting the water will go a long way to reducing one's risk around the water. The importance of water safety has never been so important with families moving into homes with pools and hot tubs, with children who do not know how to swim. With water safety training one can learn to save someone without even getting wet and at the very least with minimum danger to oneself. It seems that there are a lot of incidental drownings and or dangers that come along with access to the water that could be made safer.

Again, this project is far from being a scientific study. However, it reflects plenty of anecdotal evidence and uncovers alarming trends that warrant further study. Information contained in this project was obtained from professional water sports instructors with over 25 years of professional interaction within the field. While some of the professionals' views may reinforce the stereotypes, the bottom line is that anyone who lives in south Florida surrounded by lakes, canals, detention/retention ponds, estuaries, and the Atlantic Ocean needs to have a basic understanding of how to swim just to feel safe around water. As far as the myth goes, it is just a myth. The African American student population that I have witnessed has had some of the best swimmers I have seen as well as some of the worst. It is also the hope of this author that they continue their education and water acclimation and learn of environmental situation awareness and

be able to make good decisions that will keep them and their families safe. The author of this project feels deeply that anyone can be taught to swim or learn to swim.

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1994	American Red, Cross Life Guard
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