Miranda McKellar

Mr. Sperling

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Water Reflects All Colors

When looking out at a pool on a bright day, specks of white light bounce back on us, the glare of the water. Only white was allowed on the water for a long time, segregating all other colors. It isn’t until we change the angle of light, a change in perspective, that the water begins to reflect all colors. However, this change only began after the storm, after decades of discrimination, like water building up in the clouds, until it all gets too extreme, too heavy, and comes down, falling apart. Segregation of the early to mid-20th century in swimming pools has had devastating effects that still linger today. However, the representation of historically disadvantaged/discriminated groups and the initiatives of organizations such as USA Swimming have been an impactful start to creating unity in the pool.

Leading up to the civil rights movement, racism, segregation, and violence plagued every facet of daily life for millions of African Americans. Schools, buses, restaurants, hotels, neighborhoods, and swimming pools at the time had been strictly segregated based on race. With swimming pools, in particular, being physically and visually vulnerable spaces, racist assumptions that sharing water with black people was dirty and would spread disease. Often as well, swimming pools weren't built in black neighborhoods at the same rate and quality as white neighborhoods; disproving the idea of segregation being “separate but equal” as blacks didn’t have nearly the same opportunities as whites in aquatics (and in general), displaying the hegemony of the white man.

It wasn’t until the 1950s and 60s that pushback of these racist policies began, and was often met with violence- such as young black men being dunked, punched, and beaten out of the water; or the shutting down of pools upon orders to integrate. As a result of this discrimination many black people today still have not learned how to swim due to generational trauma surrounding pools. Unfortunately, the risk of drowning is 1.5 times more likely for black people than white people. Ultimately, water safety (knowing how to swim) has turned into an indication of privilege rather than a safety precaution; which continues to cut off access to learning how to swim for disadvantaged groups today, similar to decades prior.

Unlike before though, many organizations have begun the push to get historically and economically disadvantaged groups of people in the water. For example, the USA Swimming Foundation, a subset of the national governing body for swimming, USA Swimming- annually sets aside and rewards Learn to Swim Grants to teach all children and adults the life-saving skill of swimming. This program helps reduce the cost of lessons for families both directly and indirectly (transportation), increasing opportunity. These grants also aim to get people to continue swimming for fitness, and experience the lifelong health and social benefits of the sport. By increasing the diversity of the swimming community, we decrease the likelihood of easily preventable deaths among disadvantaged groups by eliminating the class aspect of aquatic knowledge/safety.

On a local level, Southern California Swimming, a regional subunit of USA Swimming, also takes great care to increase diversity in the sport through DDEI (Disability, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) camps. Selected swimmers of minority groups have the opportunity to come together to improve upon their swimming skills and leadership to achieve excellence and gain representation in their communities. Through Swim Torrance, our local Club team practicing at the Plunge, there have been various swimmers over the years that have been able to attend the camp. As a result, the increased representation of minority groups in swimming inspires both their families and new generations of children to learn the skill and sport. Ultimately, there is an active push to increase the accessibility to swimming on all levels not only for the means of safety but also to create social unity in a historically divided space.

Overall, the battle against racism in aquatics isn’t over as many groups continue to be underrepresented in the space. Nonetheless, initiatives such as Learn to Swim and DDEI help provide resources and representation to minorities. Moreover, the development of social unity in the sport/skill of swimming in particular represents the greater improvements in diversity in society due to swimming’s discriminatory past. All in all, when perspective and views shift to the right angle, everyone can enjoy all the beautiful colors that water reflects if we work as a society to unlock that potential.