

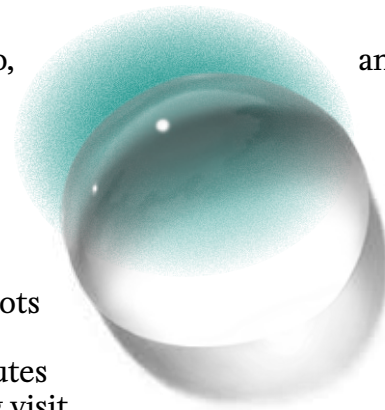
CONFESSIONS OF A SWIMMER

AXEL
ANDERSSON

“Confessions of a swimmer” is the first chapter of historian and writer Axel Andersson’s book “The Colonial Swimming School” (published by Glänta in 2016). The book draws a global history of swimming: between swimming cultures and transmission of body techniques. In the book, Axel points at how crawl—as a once forgotten swimming style in the West—is re-introduced through colonialism and appropriated as a western technical knowledge.

The scout from Wapakoneta, Ohio, was a certified pilot before he got his driving licence. But now, he seemed a bit nervous, for understandable reasons. It’s not every day that you experience something for the very first time. It’s 1969, and Neil Armstrong’s boots are blindingly white against the sooty lunar gravel. Nineteen minutes into the two-and-a-half-hour-long visit, he is joined by his colleague, Edwin ‘Buzz’ Aldrin. Both are veterans of the Korean War. This time, there is no enemy as such. The astronauts perform a long line of carefully prepared experiments. For a few minutes, Aldrin tries different ways of moving in this environment, whose gravity is equal to one sixth of Earth’s. He jumps in his big, white suit. Like a wrapped-up preschooler among puddles. A dance in weightlessness. You can’t see any facial expressions behind the visor, but it’s not hard to picture a smile.

Sixteen years later, a little boy in a mill town in western Sweden experiences similar weightlessness. In other words, a repetition. And this time, it’s more about tight-lipped survival. Gravity lets go without the subsequent smile. But everything else is right. Children don’t have to go to space to understand. The moon landing had been shown on TV. A foot angled against the tiles of the swimming pool floor to kick off. The boy’s body floats up towards the surface, to then slowly sink again. His arms fold out as if

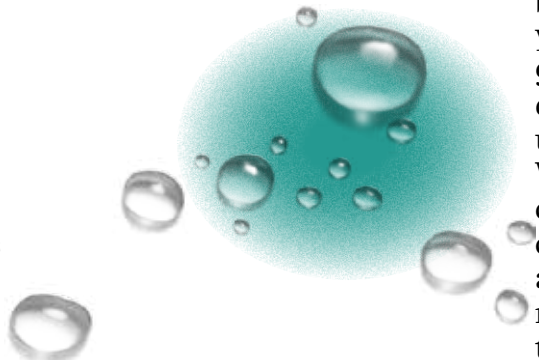


an invisible fan had been placed between them. It’s supposed to be breaststroke. It’s not breaststroke. The boy is cheating.

He tries to avoid the audience. It’s better if nobody sees his leaps. They are absolutely not to be immortalised like the moon landing. The best thing would be if they remain a private story, one that you can try to forget. Swimming instructors patrol the edges of the pool. They are armed with giant aluminium hooks, exaggerated bishop’s staffs, wandering to and fro as if on ramparts, looking down into the moat. But that’s not what’s happening. In reality. Sometimes, they bend down to offer advice to a child who isn’t doing very well. If someone starts flailing about and losing concentration, they lower their staffs. The boy focuses on Buzz Aldrin’s hops. He touches his foot to the bottom when the adults look away. When his head goes under the surface, he clenches his eyes closed compulsively. He can’t even watch underwater documentaries on TV; looking under water is out of the question. Just thinking about it fills him with terror. It’s twenty-five metres to the other side. An eternity. It feels like an atmosphere almost devoid of air. Blood rushes through

his body. But eventually he arrives, and climbs up the ladder. Feeling the weight placed on his shoulders is surprising. He runs to the changing room on his tiptoes, but is no longer light as a feather. Cheating is wrong. He knows. Is it possible to say that this was an emergency? Space is as frightening as it is fascinating. Water, on the other hand, provokes almost nothing but anxiety, at least under the surface. No matter how hard he tries, learning to swim seems impossible. He has given up. Nobody has noticed. He feels an emptiness. As if he were invisible. Nobody even tells him to go slower across the cool tile floor.

In the summers, Swedish newspapers are filled with gruesome drowning accounts of people who were swimming one moment, and disappeared into a silent death battle the next. Over one hundred people's dreams and expressive faces are erased every year in the murky waters of Nordic nature. They are often men, and alcohol is often involved. Evening dips leading to eternal night. Another large group is children. Suddenly, the number of young ones playing at the beach is reduced by one. Someone ends up under the surface.



Drowning is the most common cause of death among young children in Sweden.¹ Adult women, however, are markedly underrepresented in these statistics.²

These statistics show a picture of different societies, and expose more differences than those between the genders. Drowning deaths are an issue of class, and in the end, of colonial fault lines. Every year, 450,000 people drown in the world. Far more than the number of comrades of Armstrong's and Aldrin's who fell in the Korean War, and even 50,000 more than the number of Americans who died fighting for the US's star-spangled banner during the country's four years in the Second World War. 97 per cent of those who die from drowning currently disappear under the surface in what the World Health Organization now calls low- and middle-income countries. An African man is twice as likely to drown as a European man, and an African woman three times as likely to drown as a European one. Similarly, the differences between European low- and middle-income earners and high-income earners respectively are enormous.³

The fact that poverty and the risk of drowning go hand in hand is evident from Swedish history too. In 1890, 1,078 Swedes met their deaths through drowning; the number of deceased persons per 100,000

people was then greater than for the African men of today (21.7 and 19.2 respectively), the group currently fairing the worst in international statistics. Since then, the curve has pointed downwards: in 1940, 475 people drowned, in 1990, 169.⁴ From historically low numbers during the first decade of the 2000s, there has now been a slight increase; 137 people disappeared into the depths in 2014, and almost nine out of ten of them were men.⁵ In 1898, drowning was the most common kind of violent death in Sweden.⁶ The reason for the high numbers was mainly a lack of swimming ability, which, throughout history, has mostly affected children, whose ability to evaluate risks is poorer than adults'. Only slowly, and through mass education from organisations such as the Swedish Life Saving Society, did the trend turn around. In 1899, only 12 per cent of Swedish schoolchildren could swim, a number that had risen to over 22 per cent in 1913.⁷

The Swedish curriculum's swimming ability requirement was clarified in September, 2007. Swedish schoolchildren must now, at the end of sixth grade, be able to swim 200 metres, of which 50 backstroke, but according to a 2010 report from the Swedish National Agency for Education, 8.3 per cent of the students don't reach the goal.⁸ Reports about dramatic differences in swimming ability within the city of Stockholm came out in 2012. In Östermalm, a wealthy part of the capital, 67 per cent

of children in second grade had some swimming ability before they came to the Sports Office's swimming training; in poorer parts of the city with a higher share of children born outside Europe, like Tensta, the figure was four per cent.⁹

Liberal Commissioner of Education Lotta Edholm's response to the exposed inequality was that 'all children have different starting points. Many come from cultures where being able to swim isn't considered as important.'¹⁰ 'Children of foreign origin who are unable to swim' has, in Sweden and large parts of Europe, appeared as a new category of drowning victim.¹¹ There are frequent discussions about how swimming ability is 'viewed,' i.e. swimming's cultural dimension. The fact that Sweden has been going through a cultural revolution since 1890, changing from a drowning to a swimming nation, is talked about less often. And one thing that is practically never discussed is that swimming used to be 'viewed' as important in large parts of the world, and that swimming ability was far more widespread outside Europe than within the continent's borders.

Talking about 'cultures' risks leading to static stories about 'peoples.' And in cases where cultural changes over time are discussed, it's mostly in terms of 'development' or implicit civilisation advancement. History is, however, far more complex than that. Swimming is indeed culture, there is nothing 'natural' about

different ways of staying above the surface and moving through water. Swimming is a technique, and as such it has been invented, taught, passed on, and often also forgotten. The simple difference between nature and culture is that culture requires teachers to train new generations. This is a book about how the West lost its swimming teachers during the Middle Ages, and found them again in the modern era. More specifically, it's about the fastest and perhaps most refined swimming technique, the *crawl*, a technique that the swimmers of the West learned around the turn of the twentieth century from a world that had retained its swimming ability—the world they had colonised.

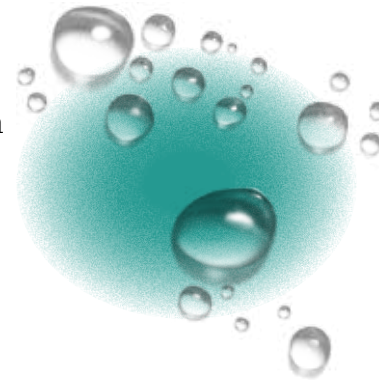
There are two stories about how the little boy in the mill town in provincial Värmland learned to swim. For a long time, his childhood visits to the waterside were a frequent form of torment. He had cheated his way to a swimming badge in order not to have to get in the water. Instead, he brought books to the beach, read and fantasised, and eventually became an 'I'.

The first time I learned to swim cannot be described in any other way than as a swimmer's origin story. It was, of course, in the classical Mediterranean Sea. The sea of Odysseus and Leander. The night I ran through was warm and black as ink. I flew over

the edge of the Turkish pier and fell for an eternity before I hit the soft embrace of the water. I sank wondrously and for a long time before everything changed and my body rose. The mere thought of doing something similar had previously filled me with terror. Once I reached the surface, I discovered two things: I wasn't scared, and I could swim. Something fantastic had happened.

Or had it? This is where grammar's first person singular disappears into a familiar story. Sudden exposure and then conversion. The story has been written many times. It's a product of European romanticism with its epiphanies and individual victories. I can, contrary to my rational reasoning ability, deceive myself into believing that I learned to swim when peer pressure on a school trip dissolved my judgement, and I ran straight into the Mediterranean. That is not what happened, of course. Swimming isn't a reflex. I had received instruction on how to swim in the municipal swimming pool before my test. I had also seen others swim. The fact that I cheated signified fear rather than lack of ability. The fear of water needed merely to be incapacitated for one crucial moment.

I *could* swim, but that was it. A slightly desperate and splashing breaststroke, for a few minutes. Even though I



was basically an adult, I was still unable to swim one length in the pool. And the requirement for my development was probably not more nightly dips. The missing component was teachers.

Swimming is part of what French anthropologist Marcel Mauss described as *les techniques du corps*, or 'the techniques of the body' in a classic lecture from 1934. They include basically all our movements. How we walk and how we stand, how we sit and eat and run and make love. All of this, we learn from teachers. Even Buzz Aldrin's hops were the result of a kind of education. Not at astronaut school, but at nursery or among friends he played with. It's thanks to technical stories that we can see through the romantics and their baggage of innate talents, natural skills, and predetermined destinies. In Europe, swimming is intimately connected with the romantic movement, which has led to its historical background being forgotten. The purpose of a technical, anti-romantic approach is to remember, to recall the forgotten.

But for technical history to be fully understood, the term 'technique' must also be reviewed. The bodily technique that Mauss spoke of, and the mechanical technique or technology that our information society is so fascinated by, can be understood as a situation in which a certain form only includes given content, one function. Thus, in technology, individual intertwinements between form and content

appear self-evident, even natural. All the parts come together in one unit, like a body movement or a computer. Eventually, it becomes difficult to separate form and content from each other, which can make trying to understand what happens when a technique is mastered incredibly frustrating. Suddenly, the penny drops. We are able to ride a bike, or swim, and we don't think about it anymore.

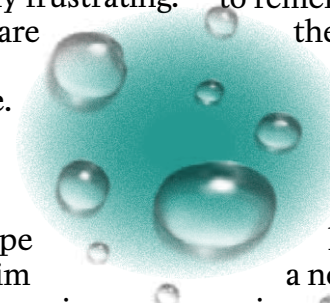
So, the West had to learn to swim again, especially when it came to the crawl. It was a historic process. People in Europe had largely forgotten how to swim at the beginning of the modern age, i.e. from the end of the Middle Ages to the end of the 18th century. Only one technique, breaststroke, remained, and played an important role in swimming's renaissance, which was connected to the early 19th century's romantic cultural currents, with their classical ideals and fascination with nature. What we call the crawl seems to have disappeared completely, however. This technique was 'imported' from places outside the West in the colonial world, in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The West attended a colonial swimming school.

This view of swimming's history could be presented as a body technique unit, but it's not complete if we don't, for a moment, keep the parts (form and content) separate. On the other side of 'technique' are the mediums, such as the text in which

the technique is recounted (mediated or metaphorised). In the story, it becomes possible to separate form and content. The story, which can also be an image, is the only chance we have to learn a technique, and, perhaps more importantly, to remember that we have learned it. When

the technique appears monolithic, it means either that we don't understand it, or that we have forgotten that we once learned it. This can have far-reaching effects. In swimming's case, it has meant that the importation of a non-European movement could be so incorporated into Western culture that many people now believe that westerners are *naturally* good swimmers. In other areas of our technological reality, this can lead us to give enormous power to the few who manufacture and provide our technology and technological systems. Which is what is currently happening in our high-tech society. Only a small number control and understand the devices and structures that have become essential for society at large.

Media played an important role the second time I learned to swim, for real this time. I was in La Paz, Bolivia, and incidentally lived close to a swimming pool. 3,600 metres above sea level, the lack of oxygen means that gravity feels doubled. A simple stroll takes effort for a recent arrival, and running is a real challenge. One side of the swimming pool building was made



of glass, and the building was high up, just by the edge of the steep valley, a crease in the Andes, to whose sides La Paz clings. From the somewhat lowered angle in the water, you could see through the windows, straight across the space of this valley. Your gaze would land on the highlands, northeast of the city, and on the Andes *cordillera*, mountain range, a never-ending row of six-thousand-metre-tall peaks reaching for the sky. Thus, in one direction, if I did breaststroke, I had the pleasure of sinking down into the water with my stroke, to then rise out of the blue and see all this. There was often a layer of fresh snow on the peaks, as if someone had carefully dusted them with icing sugar.

The swimming pool in which I tried to learn to swim was also used by conscripted seamen from the nearby military compound. The navy lacked a swimming pool, and had to use the municipal one. Since Bolivia lost its beaches to Chile during the War of the Pacific in 1883, the soldiers also lacked a sea. Each year, thousands of conscripts are prepared for life on non-existent ships on a sea they don't have access to, yet. They must master techniques, like swimming, which will one day fulfil a purpose. There is something beautiful in the idea of a nation instructing its citizens in something that remains a dream.

Unlike me, the young, conscripted, Bolivian men had an instructor. I began studying instructional videos on YouTube

ahead of each session instead. What I saw was a fascinating mediation of technique. The more professional videos used underwater images and slow motion. The knowledge of my new teachers seemed unlimited. Once I achieved moderate success in mastering a steadier version of my previously splashing breaststroke, it was time for the crawl. It didn't take long to discover a number of breaststroke and crawl hybrid techniques. Soon, it became just as interesting to understand how the techniques appeared and were passed on by various teachers around the world as it did to learn them.

We, and by this I mean a human collective that includes both Bolivians and Swedes, have often learned that the West is responsible for most of the world's technological advancement. From the political institutions of the Greeks to the looms of Lyon and Manchester, and the Apple computers of California. The rest of the world has had to adapt and try to catch up. Reality is, of course, more complicated. The crawl technique may appear insignificant in the context, but it's simultaneously deeply emblematic. The story of how the West learned to swim in the colonial world is an

illustration of the kinds of processes that are rarely discussed, and even less frequently studied. Oblivion has been, and is, colonialism's tool of choice. A new, post-colonial history requires memory to play a more active role, and in a wider sense than remembering the terrible crimes that were and are part of the ravages of colonialism.

The idea of *naturalness* is often oblivion's best ally. Part of Western mentality has been based on the idea that white people are naturally superior to groups who don't physically look like westerners, and who live in other cultures. According to some, this supposed superiority is evident in white people's ability to think rationally, and to master certain body techniques, such as swimming, for instance. The defence for these kinds of arguments has often been that other groups are good at other things.

Naturalness is a deceptive argument in scientific clothing, which has little to do with science. Next to nothing is natural on a general, human level. The physiologically biggest differences in what we look like can be found between the genders, and these differences are the same in all ethnic groups. When it comes to expression, only our reflexes can, in any way, be described as natural, even if they have developed evolutionarily over time. But it's about as hard to build cultures from reflexes as it is

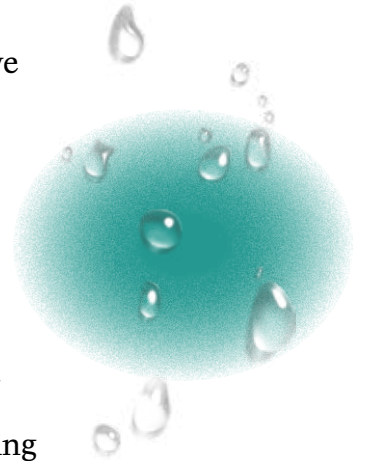
to learn to swim by jumping into the water without prior skills. Man is a technical being, and has been since long before we invented what we now commonly refer to as technology. Humanity is actually a process, a becoming that is characterised by the ability to retain skills across generations. Even animals, mainly other primates, can become part of a similar process of becoming more and more human-like as they practice the same ability. This 'retaining' of skills takes place through constant re-teaching, which, in turn, is only possible through mediums; body language, tales, songs, written stories, sound recordings and moving images.

Belief in *naturalness* has been so strong in the West that it has also put on an irrational costume. When it comes to swimming, the romantic movement was crucial for disseminating the idea that this activity was natural, a way of distancing oneself from mechanical society. At the end of the 18th century, and the beginning of the 19th, when Europeans sought out beaches and waters, they were harbouring a desire to be reunited with nature. The central poets of the time, like Lord Byron and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, spread an image across the European continent of swimming as the perfect way to embrace the elements. In swimming, the body not only observed nature, but entered into a palpable coexistence with it. The deep waters were also, ultimately, a symbol of the sublime, limitless reach of the natural world.

The swimmer became a hero, and separate — like heroes are — from the every-day, human world, which comprised predictable, mechanical ugliness. Even if the romantics, inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were often proponents of (an exotic glorification of) 'primitive' man, very few seriously believed that non-Europeans had the graces required to become swimming heroes.

The romantic swimmers have their clear place in the cultural history of swimming, but it's a mistake to let oneself be seduced by their ethno-centric flirtation with nature. Even in their version, 'naturalness' becomes a barrier to, rather than an aid for, understanding history. We have a lot to thank the romantics for, but as interpreters of technology and mediums, they're pretty useless. The fact that their ideas still have so much power is as confusing as it is problematic. Part of the reason can be found in colonialism. Throughout romanticism, the West could claim that even its nature worship and spirituality were expressed in ways that were superior to other cultures'. The 19th century saw the beginnings of a kind of argument that remains to this day: non-Western peoples have now adapted to the West so much that they have degenerated. This made and makes it possible for white men and women to play at being 'indigenous' on a level that better lives up to the created fantasy of indigenous peoples.

In this story about swimming, the already mentioned French anthropologist Marcel Mauss and his conclusions about techniques in humanity's culture play important roles. One of the techniques that fascinated Mauss was indeed the crawl, which then, around the mid-1930s, had become the most popular style of swimming in France. His conceptualisation of body techniques benefits from being combined with a much later theory about what colonial reality looked and looks like. In the 1980s and 1990s, various ideas based on a criticism of the Western interpretative prerogative within the humanities developed models for understanding colonialism beyond the binary division between the known and the unknown, which was part of the colonial exercise of power. At the beginning of the 1990s, American language and literature researcher Mary Louise Pratt formulated theories around *contact zones*, a term to describe the contact zones where tangible colonial meetings took place, and where new, fragmented and hybridised realities were created for



both the colonisers and the colonised.¹² The meetings were often violent, of course, and the game was rigged in the Western party's favour. At the same time, this era of genocide saw constant negotiations about positions, and exchanges of ideas and techniques. New, mixed cultures were created in the meeting between people, who, in many cases, had neither chosen nor desired these meetings. These contact zones still exist to a very high degree, as colonial patterns still dictate our world, and because the societies of today (like ours) are as multicultural as they've always been. They also exist on digital platforms, and before that, they could be found at the cinemas. That's where the audience of the time, like Mauss, could go to look at non-European techniques. The idea of contact zones allows us to understand the environment in which techniques are mediated against the background of colonialism. It breaks down the binary image of an essential West that disseminates its knowledge and power across the world, and where other people simply adapt. What appears instead is a different, and far more complicated world, with a history that is global in every way.

Translation: Lisa Klevemark

- 1) *Varför drunknar barn? En retrospektiv studie över barn som drunknat i Sverige 1998–2007 (Why Do Children Drown? A retrospective study of children who have drowned in Sweden 1998–2007)*, Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2007.
- 2) 376 women died in drowning incidents from 1997 to 2011. During the same period, 1,778 men died in incidents. Johanna Gustavsson, Lena Olsson and Ragnar Andersson, *Drunkning i Sverige 1997–2011 (Drowning in Sweden 1997–2011)*, Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2013.
- 3) M Peden, K McGee, G Sharma, *The Injury Chart Book: A Graphical Overview of the Global Burden of Injuries*, World Health Organization, 2002.
- 4) Numbers collected by Jan Schyllander, Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, in an email to the author on the 3rd of September, 2014.
- 5) "Antal omkomna till följd av drunkning under 2014" ('Number of Deaths from Drowning in 2014'), *Swedish Life Saving Society*, <http://svenskalivraddningssallskapet.se/media/dokument/2014/drunkning-slugiltig/drunkningsolyckor-2014.pdf> (20th of October, 2015).
- 6) Sven R Holmberg (editor), *SLS 100 år, Svenska Livräddningssällskapet Jubileumsbok 1898–1998 (SLS 100 Years, Swedish Life Saving Society Anniversary Book 1898–1998)*, 1998, p. 14.
- 7) *ibid.*, p. 15, p. 58.
- 8) *Uppföljning av simkunnighet i årskurs 5 (Follow-Up of Swimming Ability in Grade 5)*, Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010, p. 2. The goal applied to grade 5 until 2011, when it was changed to grade 6.
- 9) The percentages relate to composite breaststroke. Ellinor Nilsson, City of Stockholm's Sports Office, in an email to the author, 12th of September, 2014.
- 10) "Stora skillnader mellan Stockholms simskolor" ('Major Differences Between Stockholm's Swimming Schools'), *Dagens Nyheter*, 20th of July, 2012.
- 11) *Varför drunknar barn? (Why Do Children Drown?)*, 2007.
- 12) Beginning in the article 'Arts of the Contact Zone', which was published in 1991. In it, Pratt gave the most concrete definition of her otherwise highly ambivalent term when she wrote about contact zones as 'spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in the world today'. Mary Louise Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', *Profession* 91, p. 34.