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SWIMMING IN A SEA OF NO'S: CONTROLLING AND MANAGING THE NEW YORK PUBLIC  
POOLS

by

METTE LÜTZHØFT JENSEN

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York.

2018

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Mette Lützhøft Jensen

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies  
in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

Swimming in a Sea of No's: Managing and Controlling the New York Public Pools

by

Mette Lützhøft Jensen

Advisor: Sarah Chinn

*Swimming in a Sea of No's: Managing and Controlling the New York Public Pools* traces the genealogy of the regulations, surveillance, and rules employed at New York public pools. The thesis discusses the intent and implications of the spatial strategies created to order and control the environment surrounding the swimming pools, and discusses how municipal public pools as specific, local landscapes manifest broader social and cultural processes. The main focus is on the transformation of the pools during the 1980s and 1990s, two decades after the fiscal crisis in 1975, when the pools had become defunded, dysfunctional spaces. By tracing the fluid interplay between the problems that arose at the pools, the public imagination, and the following response from the city, this analysis attempts to illuminate how the pools were a key part of the overall emergence of neoliberal public strategies to remake New York, and to remove what was considered urban disorder. Widening the scope even further, this thesis also traces the genealogy of swimming pools back to New York's first public baths. I argue that the changing political definition of pools, as well as their symbolic and cultural significance, reflect the changing understanding of shared space throughout American history.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval page.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Part 1: A Brief History of Swimming in the United States.....	6
Part 2: 1980s: Dreadful Pools in a Dangerous City.....	12
Part 3: 1990s: Zero Tolerance—Both In and Out of the Pool.....	19
Part 4: 2000s: Pools in Bloomberg's Luxury City? .....	37
Works Cited.....	46

## Introduction

On a hot summer day in 2014, Sharon Coppola, a 70-year-old grandmother, took her 11-year-old granddaughter to the Tottenville Pool in Staten Island. Dressed in all white and a grey t-shirt, she was denied entrance—only white t-shirts are allowed at New York public pools, she was told. A couple of days after Ms. Coppola and her granddaughter returned, this time wearing a white t-shirt with the print of a colorful bike on it. Once again, Ms. Coppola was denied entry because of her t-shirt. It had to be white, and only white. Instead of sitting on the deck, Ms. Coppola watched her granddaughter swim and play from a chained-off alleyway next to the pool. The grandmother was very upset about the t-shirt rule, calling it “ridiculous” in the *Staten Island Advance*, who reported on the story.

“The rules are nothing new. We've had them year after year,” said a Parks Department spokesperson, after the newspaper reached out. “You've got to follow the rules if you want to be in the pool” (Rich, 2014).

\*\*\*

New York's Parks Department operates 34 outdoor pools, 19 outdoor mini-pools, and 12 indoor pools. The outdoor pools are free and open to the public from late June until Labor Day. Thousands of New Yorkers use the pools every summer, which are spread relatively democratically over the five boroughs, covering most neighborhoods. I consider the municipal pools, and especially the outdoor public pools, a great asset to the city. These pools, many of which are massive enough to fit thousands of swimmers, are equipped with diving boards, sun chairs, and a team of lifeguards. It's a great place for families to escape the New York summer heat and for kids to splash around and learn how to swim.

While being sites of great virtue, the New York public pools are simultaneously among the city's most heavily regulated, ordered, and surveilled public spaces. Besides the rules around white clothing, a visit also mandates a bag search, a thorough review of bathing suits (due to a requirement of mesh lining, users may not swim in their underwear or regular clothes), and a check to make sure the guest has brought a padlock (which must be a standard master or combination lock) (“Pool Rules”).

Ms. Coppola is not the only one who has come to know the pools' strict enforcement. Breeze through Yelp reviews, and it's clear that many New Yorkers either know about the intricacies of the pool rules, or they have found out the hard way. A reviewer named Annabelle L. awards the John Jay Pool on the Upper East Side one star out of five, due to “a thousand of nonsensical rules”:

“First you need to bring your own lock, and they require this is a MASTER lock. then you must put aaaaaallll your belongings in your locker; for instance no way you could keep water and snacks with you at the pool, or even a jumper in case you are cold.”

Another more experienced pool-goer, Brenna M., advises anyone thinking about going to an outdoor pool to “bring a combination lock. They will not let you in without one.” She advises that you follow the many rules and requests from staff (“Shake out your towel to prove you aren't smuggling in contraband”) in order to enjoy this free, “hidden gem” (“John Jay Pool and Recreation”).

Though all urban public spaces (streets, parks, beaches, libraries) are regulated, ordered, and surveilled to a degree, the pools surpass them all. Parks, for example, have rules that prohibit unapproved vendors, loud music, sponsored events, fires, and biking (“§1-05 Regulated Uses”). But there are no rules on attire, and access to the parks does not depend on bringing or not bringing certain items. You can enter any park and stay there as long as you don't break the rules; public pools cannot be entered before guests have complied. Central to my thesis is the question: Why? What makes the pool a

different sort of shared public space, and what has led to these intense efforts of controlling its patrons? To answer these questions, my thesis focuses on the New York public outdoor pools and their cultural, social, and political transformation from the late 1970s through today. I argue that beginning with the New York fiscal crisis in the 1970s, New York public pools as a public space have transformed in accordance with the neoliberal shift of municipal governance in New York, set off by dramatic reductions in federal, state, and municipal funding. These changes led to new spatial ordering strategies at the municipal public pools, which today are sites of rigorous regulation, restriction, and surveillance.

I examine the genealogy of the various decisions that transformed the outdoor public pools, and how the development of the public pools reflects the development of the city after the fiscal crisis. This crisis birthed the neoliberal New York we know today, bringing with it the emergence of a new neoliberal approach to spatial strategies. I examine how this shift affected New York's municipal pools by focusing on three key historical moments. First, in response to New York's 1975 fiscal troubles, crisis resolution measures paved the way for popular austerity policies and resurgent fiscal conservatism, marking a shift of attention from social service programs to market stimulation. The city's poorly funded outdoor pools crumbled and became sites of “urban disorder.” Second, local instabilities, social issues, and rising crime rates during the second half of the 1980s created new challenges in managing the city's pools. Widely reported incidents of on-site gang shootings, drug dealing, and sexual assaults stigmatized them as centers of urban crime and juvenile delinquency. Third, by the 1990s, the neoliberal ideologies that had started as crisis resolution measures in the economic sphere, moved into the governmental sphere, shaping urban policy. This set in motion a cascade of regulation—increased security measures, surveillance, police presence, and crowd control measures—with consequences for New York and its low-income residents, who cool down at the pools

during New York's sweltering summer heat.

We cannot fully understand today's pools as shared spaces without starting from the beginning: the Progressive Era, when urban social reformers built New York's first public baths. The reformers understood the pools (and their purpose) through values of mental and physical hygiene, which dominated the period's political and cultural ideologies. Moving through time, I explore how the conception of swimming pools as a shared space transformed through each new era—from Jim Crow to the New Deal and the civil rights movement. Along the way, we see how exactly each era has reflected the national and local ideals of how space should operate.

I claim that even though the public, political, and cultural understanding of shared space is dynamic, the dualism of pools as both sites of democratization as well as control, conflict, and regulation remains constant. The idea of the public sphere as a site of political deliberation and participation, and therefore an essential part of democracy, is well-established in the literature (Smith and Low 17). Furthermore, commentators have focused on public space as having the potential of providing universal access and a sense of positive belonging for all. Geographer Don Mitchell sees the fight over public space as central to the fight for social justice, claiming that “revolutions entail a taking to the streets and a taking of public space” (Mitchell 149). In this view, the pools represent the consummate democratic public space with potential for vibrant community life. As put by social historian Jeff Wiltse, public pools “offer an informal social space—a meeting ground—where people separated by social differences, large yards and high fences, busy lives and electronic entertainment can interact and communicate face to face” (Wiltse 207). However, the same scholars who laud the positive potential for public shared spaces also emphasize their ambiguity and complexity; public spaces can act as sharp tools of exclusion, targeting certain classes or groups of people. Historian Daniel T. Rodgers

conjectures that any form of social policy works to “impose discipline” on mind and body (23). To fully understand municipal pools, we must investigate this double bind of shared space as a public good as well as a site of discipline (Adiv 19-20).

But pools are unlike all other public spheres in one particular way. Simply: space is shared, intensely. Swimmers dress down and expose their bodies in ways usually reserved for the private sphere. This makes pools sites of sexuality and eroticism. Swimmers (almost naked strangers) share one (relatively small, completely fixed) body of water with no inner delineations, the close proximity leaving open the door for touch. And they aren't just sharing the water, but the bacteria within. This forms communal trust, not just in the pool (I won't urinate if you won't) but even before swimmers arrive on deck (I'll shower if you will). Add to all of this the fact that there are a large number of people in relatively little space, especially compared to most beaches, parks, and playgrounds. This creates the potential for a more frenetic atmosphere, harder for authorities to control. Lifeguards must keep an eye out for roughhousing, as well as the myriad safety concerns water adds to the mix (breath-holding contests, the possibility of drowning or injury).

All of these unique spatial features contribute to the need for measures of discipline, as well as resistance by and negotiation from pool-goers, shaping swimming pools into a singular shared space. As Jeff Wiltse points out, you just need to look at swimming pools to know how Americans relate to one another across social lines (Wiltse, “America’s Swimming Pools”). Wiltse's seminal book (2007) focuses on the history and cultural significance of pools in the northern United States, dedicating most of his research to municipal pools before 1970. I add to his (and others’) work by focusing on the development of New York municipal pools after the 1970s, and how their environment reflects the wider cultural and political moment of the 1980s and 1990s, through today. The development of New

York's public pools through the growth-obsessed era of Michael Bloomberg introduces new complexity to this claim. In the final section, I explore how the unique spatial characteristics of swimming pools, as well as their history as a contested site, excluded them from being a part of the so-called CEO-mayor's vision of New York as a “luxury city.”

## Part 1

### 1890 – 1975: A Brief Historic Overview of Swimming Pools in New York

#### *Swimming Pools to Reform the Working Class*

Before swimming pools, New Yorkers still had to find ways of cooling themselves down in the summer. In the late nineteenth century, swimming in the East and Hudson Rivers was a central part of male working-class life (Wiltse 66). In Sidney Kingsley's 1935 play *Dead End*, a gang of juvenile boys are portrayed growing up in the slum neighborhoods of Manhattan's Lower East Side, plunging, usually naked, into the East River. *Dead End* depicts how the boys use “shocking jargon that would put a truck-driver to blush,” hustle, fight, gamble, and happily jump into “the sewerage at the foot of the wharf” (11, 13). And while the rivers might have been cool, they were also beyond filthy. According to oral histories, the young men swimming in the Hudson River faced a liquid wasteland of condoms, garbage, rats, and worse. As one swimmer put it, “As a matter of fact, the first intestines I ever seen, came floating down there once” (Wiltse 78).

Between 1868 and 1888, New York established 15 free open-air summer baths along its waterfronts, the shape and depth of modern swimming pools, filled with river water. These pools were very popular with working-class patrons, who used them as a safer and (at least somewhat) cleaner alternative to the city rivers. The floating river pools exemplify how even the very first public pools were surrounded by conflict and social control—as well as how the patrons negotiated and resisted that power. The guests, young working-class men, considered the pools a place to have fun, splashing around and escaping the city heat. The authorities, however, considered them a means to promote cleanliness, and imposed a twenty-minute time limit for bathing. On hot summer days, young boys

could be seen traveling between floating baths, dirtying themselves up in the process, in order to be readmitted into the cool waters (Williams, *The Great Unwashed* 19).

During the Progressive Era, urban social reformers in New York and many other major U.S. cities built public baths, both showers and giant, shared tubs, as part of the public bath movement. The bath reformers saw the masses of unwashed workers living in New York slums as not only an economic and sanitary problem, but also a threat to the social stability and unity of the community. The bath reformers insisted that cleanliness was a way for the industrial poor to acquire the middle-class habits of refinement and modesty. In other words, bathing would transform them into good Americans. Nativism also played a role in the rationale for public baths, as the bath reformers believed that regular bathing habits would have an effect on the Americanization of the immigrant, who, they argued, was unclean (Williams 52). Historians ironically note that there is no evidence that the slum-dwellers themselves were actually interested in having public baths, as bathhouses were rarely filled. It was only when public baths started to be considered recreational spaces that they gained public popularity.

The first municipal indoor pools were opened in New York in 1906 and 1908—both in working-class, immigrant Manhattan neighborhoods. As in pools in other northern cities, working-class members of all ethnicities swam together, but women and men swam separately, due to Victorian era ideals. While other northern cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia were prolific pool-builders, New York was late to the game. In 1910, a city official named John Purroy Mitchel proposed building a large, outdoor swimming pool and athletic complex in Central Park, modeled on the outdoor pools of Chicago and Philadelphia. The project, however, was abandoned; middle- and upper-class citizens didn't want to risk working-class culture encroaching on their park, which they considered their “oasis of genteel recreation” (Wiltse 70). Even the play reformers, who lobbied for public playgrounds and

recreation spaces in the city, had greatly opposed it, differing greatly from their counterparts in other cities. While playgrounds were seen as a means to pull kids off the streets and promote directed, organized play (socializing them into disciplined and moral citizens), New York play reformers saw swimming pools as unfit for this purpose, as they tended to be boisterous, rowdy, and unorganized, thus making them hard to control. Instead, working-class New Yorkers got their first outdoor pool in 1911 on a strip of Coney Island, far from the genteel, orderly residents of the Upper East and West Sides (Wiltse 74-75).

*Democratized Swimming for Everyone—Except African Americans*

From the 1920s to the 1940s, thousands of new swimming pools were created across the U.S., many capable of accommodating thousands of swimmers at a time. Shared public space was a central part of President Roosevelt's New Deal policies. To the Roosevelt administration, public pools and parks symbolized democratized access to recreation, while investments in public works helped bring the nation out of economic depression after the Great Recession (Gutman 532). Quite contrary to the Progressive Era, municipal pools were now intended to promote family and community sociability, to be shared spaces where all the city's residents would swim together, regardless of class—and gender. Around this time swimming pools became gender-integrated for the first time. The Roaring Twenties included women's right to vote, as well as a defiance of old Puritan values regarding how women should look and act. At the swimming pools, the burgeoning liberation of femininity expressed itself in the shrinking of swimsuits between 1920 and 1940. As Wiltse observes, this was also the starting point of swimming pools acting as eroticized shared spaces (Wiltse 87).

New York was home to the largest pool-building project in the country, due in part to the work

of Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, who secured federal funding. In the summer of 1936, 11 immense Works Progress Administration (WPA) pools opened to the public. They were distinguished works of architecture, built in record time by relief workers and quickly packed with people. The summer of 1936 was one of record-breaking heat, and more than 1.79 million New Yorkers swam in the new public pools, over 600,000 of which were children under 14 (Gutman 532). Scholars have shown that the progressive, liberal moment of the New Deal, however, was not as rewarding for all Americans (Lieberman; Katznelson). African Americans were not welcome in these new, supposedly communal spaces. As with much of the public policy of the time, racial prejudice was ingrained in urban development. Furthermore, Wiltse argues that the racial segregation of pools was highly connected to their gender-integration. The popular understanding of the time was that whites and blacks should not swim together; in particular, African American men were seen as a sexual threat to white women. This racist fear was heightened at the swimming pool, due to the intimate nature of pools as a shared space and the state of communal undress (Wiltse 156; Smith 43). This racist stereotype was strongest in the Jim Crow South, where pools were segregated by law. But de facto segregation also kept African Americans out of the pools where white New Yorkers swam. Robert Caro argues that Moses was influential in keeping pools racially segregated by locating the city's WPA pools in either white or black neighborhoods. Moses also kept the pool water cold, believing that "while not cold enough to bother white swimmers [it] would deter any 'colored' people who happened to enter it once from returning." If that wasn't enough to keep African Americans away, the "flagging" of white swimmers (staring, gawking, etc.) would do the trick (579). Other scholars disagree with Caro's analysis. Marta Gutman argues that even though Moses was a racial conservative, and even though structural racism meant that "the color line ran through pools in racially segregated neighborhoods,"

Moses did actually welcome both black and white children at the pools for swimming programs. This sets New York apart from most other cities, she argues, which succeeded in segregating public pools during the New Deal (Gutman 532-533).

### *Privatized Swimming in the Suburbs*

When, in the 1950s, federal rules desegregated public spaces, and African Americans could also benefit from public pools, investment by white public officials dropped. In the South, local governments often preferred to fill their pools with concrete, or even bulldoze them, than allow mixed-race swimming (Smith 46). When middle-class, white Americans moved to the postwar suburbs, the privatized residential pool became a suburban institution. This change is well-illustrated in the short story “The Swimmer” by John Cheever, seminal chronicler of New York suburbia. Here, the white middle-class protagonist takes a break from his mundane existence and becomes a surreal sort of suburban explorer, discovering a new route home by swimming through all his friendly (and unfriendly) neighbors' pools until he, cold, fatigued, and disillusioned, finally reaches his own. In “The Orphaned Swimming Pool,” John Updike tells the story of a “heavenly blue” suburban pool, which almost takes on a life of its own after its owners' marriage, not as secretly as they would like, dissolves, and the scrutinizing neighbors invite themselves over.

At this point, swimming pools came to illustrate how Americans had come to view private space as safer than shared public space. By privatizing public space, the proprietor gains the ultimate control of who to let in or what behavior is acceptable. As documented by Blakely and Snyder, the transformation of pools can be seen as a precursor to the gated communities that sprang up all across

the U.S., starting in the early 1980s.

*Cooling Down Urban African American Youth*

After a long period of dwindling interest in public pools, large cities once again started a “pool-building spree” in the mid-1960s—but with a much different rationale than before. In the mid-1960s, cities across the country experienced race riots and violence, a response to racial injustices and growing civil unrest. New York built 84 pools between 1966 and 1971 (many of which were so-called “mini pools”), with the intent of alleviating the city’s social tensions, which, it was believed, sweltered among unemployed and poor African Americans during the summer months. With the help of federal “anti-poverty” funds, New York, like many other cities, placed the majority of pools within African American “ghettos” (Wiltse 181-182). This meant that, by the 1970s and 1980s, tens of millions of mostly white middle-class Americans swam in their private backyard pools or suburban pool clubs while most African Americans and Latino Americans swam in inner-city municipal pools (Wiltse 2). In the 1970s and 1980s, New York also entered a new era of fiscal austerity, and once again the popular understanding of shared, public space was to be reconstructed.

## Part 2

### The 1980s: Dreadful Pools in a Dangerous City

On the morning of October 30, 1975, New Yorkers picked up their issue of the Daily News to read a startling headline: "FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD." President Gerald Ford had decided to deny New York the federal assistance it needed to avoid bankruptcy. In the eyes of the Republican president, the city had brought its fiscal troubles on itself, through decades of reckless public spending. As Kim Phillips-Fein has pointed out, the fiscal crisis marked a political opportunity for the Ford administration to teach America's liberal cities a lesson on public spending (Phillips-Fein 97). New York City had been the epitome of urban liberalism, flooded with (unionized) blue-collar workers who received decent wages—an example of how the government could alleviate problems of poverty, racism, and economic inequality. Historian Joshua Freeman called it “an island of social democracy in the midst of postwar America” (Phillips-Fein 5). New York had pushed the egalitarian ideologies of Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society program further than the rest of the country—especially the elimination of poverty and racial injustice—which was why the national fiscal crisis hit New York especially hard. When the country went into recession, New York was the home of large-scale programs that were made inexpensive or free to the public: the subway system, playgrounds, free museums and colleges, and the largest, most elaborate system of public swimming pools in the country.

In the 1970s, the national economy went into a severe recession. The crisis was caused by a combination of decreased growth after the booming postwar decades, increased oil prices after several oil shocks in 1973, and rapid inflation caused by the end of the Bretton Woods Agreement (Phillips-Fein 1). Within a short timespan, New York experienced a dramatic loss of manufacturing jobs; half a million vanished between the late 1960s and mid 1970s. At the same time, the city's white population

was packing up and moving out to the suburbs, as federal policies promoted urban disinvestment and “white flight” from the inner city. In New York, many neighborhoods were low-income, and so as the economy eroded, a great number of people were in need of city services, putting immense pressure on the city economy (Phillips-Fein 22). In order to correct its deficit and pay back its debt, the city cut its expenses dramatically, entering a new era of austerity economics. This strategy relied on a restructuring of the government, as well as new policies focusing on tax subsidies, incentive zoning, and deregulation. To revive the city, New York shifted away from its earlier commitment to community development and human capital and looked towards the market and its financial elites (Sites 40). And the strategy seemed to be working. As Mayor Edward Koch won a third term in 1985, New York's Manhattan-centered, private wealth-run economy was booming, the tourism industry was on the rise, and white-collar yuppies could be sighted everywhere downtown. Many poorer areas, however, didn't profit from such reinvestment; those neighborhoods saw continually increasing rates of inequality, joblessness, homelessness, infant mortality, drug-related violence, and overall crime (Sites 47).

The impact of the cutbacks was especially visible across the city's public recreation spaces: parks, playgrounds, and pools. According to geographer Themis Chronopoulos, by the late 1970s, it was “obvious that New York’s 38.5 square mile park system had fallen into grievous disrepair.” The number of parks employees had been steadily declining. Garbage was not being collected. The Parks Department lacked functioning equipment and had to postpone many projects because of planned renovations (Chronopoulos 109). During this time, some pools closed entirely, and most crumbled into disrepair. Between 1970 and 2000, overall attendance dropped steadily. By the 1980s, the New York public pools were in “dreadful” shape, a situation not unique to New York. In the 1970s and 1980s, public pools across the northern states followed a similar pattern of being “plagued” by violence,

rowdiness, gang war, drug dealing, and vandalism (Wiltse 182).

### *The “Uncontrollable” McCarren Pool*

One of the pools deteriorating the most was McCarren Pool, located at the border of the Greenpoint and Williamsburg neighborhoods, in northern Brooklyn. Built by Robert Moses in 1936, McCarren Pool was one of 11 massive WPA pools constructed during the New Deal era. It served thousands of children and adults—especially those from working-class neighborhoods. The decline of McCarren Pool has perhaps a more dramatic history than most other public pools, but it serves as a useful example of how pools failed during this time period, and what exactly the consequences were.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the pool would often open late because of mechanical problems. Some days, the pool didn't open at all. Many of the showers became inoperable. Garbage floated in the water. On top of these eyesores, the chlorination system was frequently malfunctioning, causing children to get skin rashes. Records show that the number of pool employees decreased, and the diminished staff had difficulty disciplining the large number of pool patrons. When employees called the police, they found the department was as overextended as they were; frequently the officers didn't even show up. The pool area became vandalized, and parks employees were slow to repair the fences, making trespassing and further vandalism even more likely (Chronopoulos, “The Politics of Race” 110). In the post-World War II period, the neighborhood's racial makeup had changed, as Latinos and African Americans began to move to Brooklyn in great numbers and became the majority users of McCarren Pool—all while the pool staff stayed mostly white. Chronopoulos claims that the new presence of non-whites in the neighborhood was resented by many of the white locals, who argued that it had been taken over by prostitutes and criminals and other “undesirable” people (Chronopoulos,

“The Politics of Race” 108). The scene at the pool was, in short, a mix of racial resentment and systematic malfunction, all of this rendering the pools “uncontrollable.” Ultimately, white locals rallied to have McCarren Pool closed. In 1983, it finally did, due to an accidental flooding of the filter plant—and would go on to remain closed for more than two decades. The planned renovation of the pool was put off because of opposition and protest from white locals, some of whom wanted to shut it down entirely and replace it with a soccer field (Mendell 1986). They also discussed compromising, simply by reducing the size of the pool, so it would be able to accommodate much fewer than the current capacity of 6,800. The main argument for scaling down the pool was to make it easier to control the crowds, thus reducing undesirable behavior (as well as undesirable people). This simple measure of crowd control was also employed at other WPA pools (Chronopoulos, “The Politics of Race” 110). The immense size of the pool had once been a testament to the great vision of urban developers: that community spaces should be at the core of public life. But after the fiscal crisis, the understanding of public space was rapidly shifting away from such a positive view. Soon, mirroring the negative opinion of the general public, the pools became defunded. They were now an example of problematic shared space.

### *Dangerous City, Dangerous Pools*

This perception was further exacerbated by New York's increasing crime rate, starting in the 1980s and soon reaching volumes not seen since the 1930s, significantly higher than the U.S. average. The causes were multiple, but most important was the dramatic increase in poverty and homelessness between 1980 and 1993, the effects of dramatic spending cuts on employment and training, as well as drastic cuts in welfare benefits to the poor (i.e. direct financial support, food stamps, and medical

benefits). Add to this the Reagan era's deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, who were released into communities without adequate resources to support them. On top of everything, the emergence of crack cocaine in 1985 opened up an explosive, new market for drug sale (Bowling 537; Searight and Handal 249-250), a dilemma the police force (which had been dwindling since the cutbacks of the fiscal crisis up through the early 1980s) struggled to combat (Chronopoulos 119).

Through the 1980s, the number of Parks Department employees decreased significantly. In the 1930s, Parks Commissioner Robert Moses had about 30,000 parks employees at his disposal. In 1986, the Parks Department had a total of 4,951 full-time budgeted positions, a number that declined gradually to 3,261 in 1992 (Chronopoulos 109). Likely due to the same mechanisms at work at McCarren Pool (a decrease in pool employees, poor maintenance, and general dysfunction), the pool staff found it even harder to discipline their charges. On multiple occasions throughout the late 1980s, the Parks Department requested more police enforcement at the pools, complaining of neglect from the department. In the summer of 1988, the monthly report from the Department of Parks and Recreation detailed around 50 fights, riots, and attacks on agency personnel at Staten Island pools and beaches. According to the Parks Commissioner, the problem resulted from: "the overwhelming number of 16-25 year olds who behave inconsiderately and disrespectfully."

In addition to fighting, they play loud music, smoke, drink, eat in the immediate pool area, and bathe in their street clothes and shoes. Often, they do not use the regular entrance but climb over the fences. At the larger pools, fights have broken out between 'diving gangs' who try to monopolize access to the diving boards ("Monthly Report for December" 1988).

The summer after, in 1989, two different shootings occurred at two Manhattan pools. The first shooting, at Lasker Pool in Central Park, wounded one person. The second, a few days later at Highbridge Pool in Upper Manhattan, wounded three and tragically killed a 13-year-old girl. *The New York Times* called the shootings “drug-related,” which painted the pool as a highly dangerous place: “A day at the pool can be a tense experience. Gangs stake out territories in the pool area. They often pick fights at the slightest provocation” (Lorch 1989).

*The New York Times* does not mention any evidence that the shooting was gang-related, but by assuming the involvement of gangs, the newspaper helped construct the incident as part of a growing threat (which already occupied much of the public's mind). In *Random Violence*, Professor of sociology and criminal justice Joel Best discusses the rising fear of gangs (and gang initiation rituals) in the early 1990s, observing how single incidents often were used as evidence of widespread problems and social crises. He concludes that this dynamic often led to the adoption of new laws, evidenced by bag checks becoming standard protocol at the entrance of the pools. I also find it plausible that the contemporary “white t-shirt rule” (only white t-shirts and hats are allowed in and out of the pool) was introduced as a result of concerns over gang activity. I haven't been able to track down the decision for this particular rule, but in 2015, the *New York Post* wrote that the “white t-shirt rule” was first introduced “as an anti-gang measure, after an explosion of violence,” including the fatal shooting at Highbridge Pool in 1989 (Jamieson 2015). In 2007, Borough Parks Commissioner Thomas Paulo also alluded to gang activity as the rationale behind the white t-shirt rule in an interview with the *Staten Island Advance*. Paulo explained that the rule was intended to eliminate “those kinds of symbols. It is to remove anything that might promote antagonism in the pool environment” (“Crackdown on wardrobe at city pools” 2007). The first time an article mentioned the rule was in 1999, when a *New York Times* reporter describes his

day at the pool:

“I would learn that the pools are a place of rigid rules as much as of fluidity and freedom: only white hats and T-shirts, no radios, no food, no newspapers” (Martin, “A Day in the Water” 1999).

### *Controlling Behavior at the Pools*

The idea of removing gang symbols in order to control conflict and violence is not new. During the 1990s, U.S. inner-city elementary and secondary schools experienced a resurgence in dress codes in an effort to quell rising youth involvement in gangs. The logic behind dress codes is that gang violence is not only associated with certain clothing and symbols (which denote gang membership), but that they *produce or encourage* violence when worn to school. Some sources say that controlling dress through regulation from authorities has proven to be effective. However, scholars have noted that the link between school attire and gang violence hasn't been fully proven, and neither has the assumption that dress codes prevent students from joining gangs (Crockett and Wallendorf 120). Because dress codes destroy the identity of the gang, proponents *assume* they work—and yet, youths who want to display gang identity find other ways. In light of this, it seems dress codes mainly work as a statement to the public that school administrators are in control of the situation (Crockett and Wallendorf 121-122). These same dynamics are likely at play with the “white t-shirt rule.” If pool patrons wish to express membership to gangs or other violent groups, they don't need a colorful shirt to do so. Most importantly, the rule sends a message to the public that pool officials are in control. Sociologists, beginning with Michel Foucault, have argued that the ultimate power of social control lies in the “microphysics” of control—such as attitudes, beliefs, and values. This includes expression through clothing. In prisons, the generic uniforms prisoners are compelled to wear help erase the prisoners’

individuality, which again helps to bring their conduct ‘into line’ (Reiter 586). The same rationale seems to be behind the dress code rules of the pools, which were becoming increasingly hard for the authorities to control. The “white t-shirt rule” was only the beginning of a new era of regulation attempting to control the pools. As disorder increased, so did media attention, forcing municipalities to reshape how they understood shared space.

### Part 3

#### 1990s: Zero Tolerance—Both In and Out of the Pool

The budget of the Parks Department was continually, drastically reduced. By the summer of 1991, there was simply no money to open the pools. The previous summer, only a select few had opened, leading to many of the city's 100,000 fire hydrants being used as “ad hoc pools,” which used up about a million gallons each day (“City Will Open” 1991). The act was vandalism of public property, of course, but it can also be seen as the only way of cooling down in lieu of actual pools, and a way for the youth to “talk back” to the city who had taken away access to spaces they considered theirs. Historian Joe Austin argues that, around the same time, graffiti artists were using their writing as a way of “talking back” to the city, as “part of the larger, dispersed, and ongoing struggle for public space among marginalized groups in the United States” (Austin 4). Graffiti artists' acts of social criticism were, however, deemed as nothing but malignant vandalism. It is likely that the authorities and the public saw the actions of those kids in this same light.

Parts of the public did support the existence of municipal pools, but the rationale was not based around the rights of urban youth. Echoing the same opinions of the 1960s, they thought the pools should serve as a way of keeping urban youth out of trouble during the hot summer months. In a letter to the Office of the Mayor, a worried New Yorker shared his ideas on how to keep the pools open in spite of a shrinking budget. He explained this was of great urgency, as the contrary would lead to trouble, as “many young men and women may find it difficult to stay away from trouble during the hot summer months ahead” (Rivera 1991). It's ironic that, while increasingly being thought of as sites of disturbance and trouble, public pools were also spaces where delinquent youth ought to be “placed” to avoid trouble—spaces which would keep the troublemakers fenced in, away from the rest of the city.

*Private Money and Public Pools*

The pools eventually opened, but not because it received necessary public funding. In July, Mayor Dinkins initiated a fundraising campaign, which he named “Do it for New York”—an attempt to raise enough money to keep the pools open until Labor Day. The mayor pleaded for “all New Yorkers to give what they can to help keep the heat of this recession off the backs of our young people” (“Remarks by Mayor David N. Dinkins” 1991). Without private money, the pools would have to close again for the remainder of the summer. The mayor’s plea didn’t go without notice. Shortly after, a grant of \$2 million was donated by the Sol Goldman Charitable Trust, a nonprofit created by one of New York’s richest real estate moguls, Sol Goldman. Ironically, Goldman earned his wealth working in the booming real estate market during the 1980s, incentivized by the same tax breaks from which the pools were suffering (Saxon 1987). This desperately needed injection of cash serves as a good example of how private money increasingly partnered up with municipal governance in New York’s new urban neoliberalism. After the fiscal crisis, New York turned to the private sector and philanthropy in order to build and maintain public spaces.

*Pool Disorder Becomes an “Emerging Issue”*

The Sol Goldman Charitable Trust donation kept the pools open the summer of 1991. The funding, however, worked more as a Band-Aid than a solution to the ongoing problems of the defunded public pools. In spite of the earlier efforts of Mayor Koch to quell urban unrest by spending more on police (at the time, the greatest expansion of the city’s three police forces), the situation only worsened after 1985, with homelessness and poverty rates reaching record highs. New York’s public, shared

spaces became sites where “urban disorder”—such as the drug trade, homelessness, graffiti, and street crime—was most visible (Chronopoulos 119). Letters to the Department of Parks and Recreation indicate that homeless people using the pools worried locals in the Lower East Side. In one letter, a resident of the neighborhood named Elizabeth Acevedo wrote that “our park is being used as a shelter and now our swimming facilities are being turned into public bathhouses” (Acevedo 1990).

In the spring of 1990, the Office of the Mayor was sent several memoranda from the Parks Department, in which the newly appointed commissioner, Betsy Gotbaum underlined that “insufficient pool security” remained one of the departments “major concerns” for the approaching summer season. The department requested six police officers at each Olympic-sized pool, and two at the smaller pools, in order to establish early measures of “crowd control and security” (“April Monthly Report” 1990). The request was denied. In his response, First Deputy Mayor Norman Steisel cited budget reductions, and argued that the amount of police coverage the commissioner had requested was “very costly.” Steisel advised that the department instead employ their Parks Enforcement Patrol officers at the pools (Steisel 1990). As summer rolled around and the pools opened, Commissioner Gotbaum’s tone became more urgent. In the June monthly report to the Office of the Mayor, the now “deeply concerned” commissioner highlighted the public pools as the most “emerging issue”, because they continued “to attract illegal activities and periodic outbursts of violence.” To make her case stronger, the commissioner attached the past week’s “morning reports”, documenting that multiple pools had experienced vandalism and group assaults. At Staten Island’s Lyons Pool, “35 youths forced their way into the pool and started to harass patrons.” At another pool in the Bronx, a patron had dropped a gun on the deck. The commissioner requested more NYPD officers, reasoning that “it is hard to imagine that NYPD would not cover any gathering of over 500 youths, and yet still the assumption is often that

such crowds in a park's pool are not a matter for their concern” (“June Monthly Report” 1990). A handwritten note on the bottom of the memorandum, possibly by the First Deputy Mayor Norman Steisel (to whom the memorandum was directed), provides an interesting insight into the municipal understanding of the pool’s problems. It reads:

“Donna—we have been told that pool attendance decline after July. Perhaps the worst of this is over. They don't need PO—they need to lobby for gun control.”

This comment likely reflects how the Dinkins administration initially viewed the problems at the pools as a reflection of the city's problems with gun violence and drug dealing. As the troubles escalated in the following years (catching the attention of the media), this view changed.

### *The “Whirlpooling” Menace*

On July 7, 1993, *The New York Times* published an article titled “A Menacing Ritual Is Called Common in New York Pools.” The article described how a 14-year-old girl had her bathing suit top “ripped off” by several boys, one of whom also “inserted his finger in her vagina.” The article further reported that the attack was not a stand-alone incident. According to the reporter, Michel Marriott, swimmers and supervisors at several other city pools said that “whirlpools,” in some form, had long been a feature of inner-city swimming pools:

“They call it ‘the whirlpool,’ and pool employees and regular swimmers say it has become a common, if malevolent, ritual of these sweltering summer days at some of New York City's municipal pools (...) Groups of teenage boys lock arms and shoulders and move in circles through the expanse of blue, churning the cool, chlorinated water, chanting rap lyrics and fondling girls at will.” (Marriott 1993).

The Parks Department reacted promptly, arranging a poolside news conference. At the event, Parks Commissioner Betsy Gotbaum argued that the incident was due to “horseplay” that “got out of hand.” She promised, however, to enhance security at the pools, and insured the press that four, instead of one, police officers would be patrolling the Crotona Pool in the future (Marriott 1993). A few days after, two other sexual attacks were reported. In one, a 14-year-old girl had been fondled and had her bathing suit top ripped off by 5 to 10 boys at the People's Pool in Brooklyn. In the other incident, two girls (11 and 12) told the police that they were swimming in the Haffen Park pool in the Baychester section of the Bronx when they were lifted up and fondled by a man in his 30s. Though very different types of assaults, the article placed them both within the “whirlpooling phenomenon” (Faison 1993). More attacks followed in the summer of 1993. 24 days after the first attack, a total of 17 girls had been sexually assaulted at the pools, resulting in 30 arrests (McFadden 1993). The following two summers, headlines of sexual assaults and whirlpooling at New York public pools were frequently seen in the news. In 1994, stories of sexual assault were reported during the opening of the pools, July 5–13, and arrests were made in “8 out of 10 cases” (“Make the Pools Safe for Everyone” 1994). But the rest of the summer saw no more incidents. In the 1995 season, only one incident was noted, a 12-year-old girl who was the victim of a group attack. It seemed the whirlpooling phenomenon had come and gone. The next and only group attack since was reported in 1999 (Adiv 165).

### *Locating the Cause of Whirlpooling*

The sexual assaults likely garnered interest (from both the media and the public) for several reasons. One was the naming of the phenomenon (“whirlpooling”), which shaped the sexual attacks into a coherent, singular phenomenon (Adiv 162). This can be partially justified, since several of the

reported attacks shared the same characteristic of being perpetrated by a group. But then again, several attacks were reportedly carried out by individuals. In all cases between 1993 and 1994, the media spoke of incidents within the context of whirlpooling. This exaggeration of the organization and scope of the problem did not go unnoticed by the Parks Department, who, in departmental monthly reports, complained about how the *Daily News* specifically attempted to “stir up anxiety” with an article on the Sunset Pool in Brooklyn, which had the headline “Pool of Fear” (“Weekly Report #26” 1994). In 1994, new Parks Commissioner Henry J. Stern (who served from 1983 to 1990, and then again from 1994 to 2000), wrote that “although the newspapers have loosely used the term whirlpooling in reporting on some of these incidents, we have in fact not experienced ‘whirlpooling’—numerous males forming a whip-like human chain and acting in concert to assault female bathers—since the pools opened” (“Weekly Report # 25” 1994). The Parks Department tried to counterbalance the fear and anxiety that had resulted from the attacks. Their responses ranged from the departing Parks Commissioner Betsy Gotbaum's outright dismissal of the problem as “horseplay”, which had gone on since “time immemorial” to Stern, her successor, who framed the attacks as “isolated incidents,” arguing that the pools were as safe as ever. According to him, the many reported attacks reflected how women had learned it was okay to come forward (Wolff 1994).

By perpetuating the term “whirlpooling,” the media used rhetoric to shape public perceptions about the crime that was taking place. According to historian Joel Best, rhetoric is the most powerful determiner for which concerns society perceives as a crisis. When used strategically, rhetoric shapes public perceptions, making us believe in the urgency of a problem. This idea is closely related to the sociological concept of “moral panic,” where rhetoric is used to make claims on a cultural problem. This process often entails exaggerating and expanding the scope of the problem’s organization and

novelty. This kind of melodrama, Best argues, has a universal appeal (Best 80-81). With melodramatic descriptions of the incidents, the news media that reported on the “whirlpooling” attacks helped shape public perceptions of the crime. One newspaper detailing the events all the way from Montreal, Canada, described the victims as “prey” (Channing 1993). Closer to home, *The New York Times* described the assaulters as “a floating posse” “menacing every unprotected girl” (Marriott 1993). Sociologist Stanley Cohen describes “moral panic” as when a person (or a group) becomes defined as a threat to societal values and interests—a “scapegoat” or “folk devil” onto which public fears and fantasies are projected. And the media will typically present the threat using stereotypes, Cohen argues. The underlying cause of moral panic is something entirely different from its object, however. It is the “cultural strain and ambiguity” caused by social change (Hunt 631).

New York had surely witnessed cultural change. Starting in the 1950s, “white flight” had changed the racial makeup of New York from 6.1 percent African American in 1940 to 28.7 percent in 1990. At the same time, urban poverty rates for black Americans had increased sharply. By the 1990s, New York had become a city “fraught with racial tension” (Mexal 6) and the public imagination was fixated on a particular kind of black masculinity. In November 1995, the political scientist John J. Dilulio Jr. published an essay in the *Weekly Standard* called “The Coming of the Super Predators,” arguing that the generation heading towards adolescence around this time was unusually deprived because these young people were growing up in what he called “moral poverty” (Dilulio 1995). Professor of English Stephen Mexal observes how, starting in the 1980s, black bodies and culture were seen as a threat towards the restructuring of urban economies and governance. The white fear driving this threat, Mexal argues, “can be seen in brief eruptions of urban bourgeois panics and the mass media fascination with race- and class charged episodes.” Among the most acute examples of this dynamic

was the rape of the Central Park jogger that constructed the racially loaded term “wilding” (Mexal 105). This is not to say that what the young people at the public pools experienced did not happen, or that the fear of attacks was merely a product of mass hysteria. Commentators have stressed that it is important to consider that real fear about crime is intimately related to moral hysteria about crime, and that the mass media serve and exaggerate such public fears (Hunt 637). It is equally important to point out that, however real the fear was, the moral hysteria was racialized. Instead of focusing on the victims of the crime, and their race and vulnerability (most victims were likely women and girls of color), the public imagery focused only on the race of the assaulters.

In the press coverage of the sexual attacks at the public pools, expressions and terms were employed which painted a gruesome picture of the experience of swimming in the city’s public pools. The language alluded to the authorities as having lost control of the pools they were supposed to keep safe. One article described a “whirlpool,” which started out playfully but “spun out of control,” and was an “intimidating force of nature to stop” (Marriott 1993). In many articles, the pools were described as “crowded” (Marriott 1993, Faison 1993, McFadden 1993) and words expressing the heat (“sweltering summer days”; “another oppressing day”) helped to construct the idea that the hot setting of the pools caused the attacks.

In her dissertation, geographer Naomi Adiv analyses how the sexual attacks were explained by reporters, government officials, and the public. She cites articles which, either directly or indirectly, point to rap music, behavioral problems, and an “uncontrolled culture of urban masculinity” as being to blame for the sexual attacks. These referrals are pregnant with race anxiety (167). An example is the first article published on whirlpooling by *The New York Times*. Both the reporter and interview subjects suggest that the attacks are “symptomatic of a growing sexual hostility between young boys and girls,”

and a culture of “misogyny on the rise,” from which “comes the music, and from that comes the t-shirts and slogans and chants that influence how young people think” (Marriott 1993). Media reports also mention the young boys chanting a line from either of two popular rap songs at the time, named almost identically: “Whoomp! (There It Is)” and “Whoot, There It Is.” The mentioning of the rap song works to root the problem in African American culture. In the summer of 1993, the line “Whoomp, there it is!” was “the hottest phrase in the country”, according to *The New York Times*, who noted that “very few people outside of the black urban environment are aware of this phenomenon” (Herbert 1993). As a response, Mayor Dinkins rolled out two campaigns in 1993, called “Don't Dis Your Sis” and “Halt the Assault,” intended to stop pool assaults. The mayor also hoped to “get rap groups to write songs encouraging their listeners to treat women with respect” (McLarin 1993). The “hip” language of the campaigns, and the mayor's focus on rap music, “tell us a great deal about where he (and likely many others) located the source of the violence,” Adiv notes (168). Though I agree to a great length with this analysis, I think it's important to mention that Mayor Dinkins did, in fact, make it clear in an interview that rap music wasn't to blame for the attacks:

“What's to blame is society (...) We, each of us, must do better by our young people in terms of behaving as role models and expressing our displeasure at behavior we know is not proper” (McLarin 1993).

Aside from race, the media also had a major effect on the municipal understanding of shared space in the 1990s. Explanations in the media located the problems of disorder and especially sexual violence as a spatial problem inherent to the unique characteristics of the swimming pool—a “spatial panic.” By using the technology of language and naming the sexual attacks a site-specific name, “whirlpooling”, the pool attacks were framed as incidents that only happened in water. This tied the

attacks directly to the space and the water in which the crime occurred, and not to sexual violence on a greater scale. This framing divorced the attacks in the water from the problems of sexual violence in other kinds of public spaces, as well as private space, where most sexual assaults occur (Adiv 168). The attacks were also removed from the context of the social tensions and local instabilities of New York in the 1990s.

This framing—that the problems were inherent to the pools and the way they operate as shared spaces—was only possible because of the unique spatial key features of the pool. As discussed earlier, pools are sites of sexuality, close proximity, and possible intimacy due to the sharing of a single body of water. When framed as a site that invited specific problems due to its very nature, it made the people managing it responsible for the problems occurring in and around them. In this logic, the solution to the problems naturally also had to be site-specific. On July 7, 1994, Commissioner Henry J. Stern told *The New York Times* that, in order to control crowds and put an end to any undesired behavior, the administration was considering segregating the pools by sex or age. This, he reassured, would be “a simple and cheap approach” (Martin, “Segregating by Sex” 1994). The idea of segregating the pools was short-lived, possibly due to the mixed reactions to the initiative. Instead, the Parks Administration chose another site-specific solution: an increase in security, policing, and crowd control measures.

### *Mayor Giuliani's War Against Urban Disorder*

Right around the time of the “whirlpooling menace”, the city elected a new mayor. In January 1994, Republican Rudolph Giuliani stepped onto the podium at New York City Hall, declaring in his inaugural speech that change was coming to New York. The change, he asserted, would be “built around law and justice” and a reversal of “the growing trend of ever-increasing tolerance for lawless

behavior” (“The New Mayor”). Mayor Giuliani kept his word. During the mid-1990s, he introduced a now-famous spatial ordering strategy to reduce crime levels called the “Zero Tolerance” policy. This was a particularly muscular version of the “Broken Windows” philosophy, based on the idea that, if tolerated, any indicator of “urban disorder” (from panhandlers to drunks, rowdy teenagers to loiterers) could lead to serious crime. According to this logic, minor incivility should be controlled and reduced with the same rigor as dangerous crime. “Urban disorder,” such as graffiti, symbolized “the spiraling loss of public authority,” as one editorial in *The New York Times* put it. Reinstating authority—by, say, scrubbing the subway free of graffiti, or displacing prostitution and drug dealings from the public eye—would in turn help quell crime (Chronopoulos 91). Mayor Giuliani also secured an immense increase in the police force. Soon after taking office, he hired around 7,000 new police officers, and appointed William Bratton as Commissioner of the NYPD. Bratton set out to reform the way the police force operated, rejecting any sort of ‘root cause’ theory in regard to crime. He argued that attempting to understand the social correlations of crime—such as poverty or unemployment—had led nowhere. In his mind, the root cause of crime was, simply, the criminal (Bowling 542).

Giuliani's mayorship illustrates how neoliberal ideology had shifted from being pervasive in the economic sphere to now also expressing itself in urban governance. Neoliberal ideology supposed that the free market would order individuals and their activities, whereas the liberals before them had sought to order individuals through social policies. Themis Chronopoulos argues that neoliberals were “overwhelmed” by the effects of human displacement visible in public space. The solution became a strategy of “banishing” the disorderly individuals, whereas earlier (non-neo) liberals had sought to “produce orderly individuals” (2). Because crime dropped in the same period that Zero Tolerance was implemented, Giuliani and Bratton claimed that the strategy worked. Even though many commentators

have rejected this boast, the political value of cracking down on urban disorder had made its imprint, and cities all over the world have since embraced the strategy (Beckett and Herbert 33).

*Policing crowds at the pools*

Zero Tolerance was also the age of crucial spatial transformations at public swimming pools. As mentioned earlier, in 1990, Parks Commissioner Betsy Gotbaum had urged the Office of the Mayor to assign more police officers at the pools. Her request had been denied, but attitudes changed dramatically in the following years, when the stories of sexual attacks in the public pools started breaking. These media accounts, as well as the subsequent interdepartmental correspondences, show that, as sexual attacks were reported (and reporters increasingly demanded answers from the authorities), the number of police officers patrolling or assigned to the pools increased significantly. In 1993, 64 city police officers were patrolling the pools (McFadden 1993). In 1994, each of the more than 50 outdoor pools had been assigned at least two, and as many as six, police officers. Even then, Mayor Giuliani vowed to increase reinforcements (Wolff 1994). The language of the Parks Department going forward also indicated that the rhetoric of the Giuliani Administration had made an impact. When speaking to the press about developing strategies to end the sexual attacks, Park Commissioner Henry J. Stern asserted that the Parks Department wouldn't "tolerate any lowering of the quality of life" (Martin, "Segregating by Sex" 1994).

Reportedly, the increased police presence at the pools consisted of NYPD officers—not the Parks Department's own officers, who traditionally had worked at the pools. In fact, while officers were being increasingly deployed at New York pools, the Parks Department's own staff was being cut. Parks employees had gone from 4,341 in 1991 to 2,548 in 1995, a reduction of 41% ("Parks and Recreation

Critical Issues” 1994). In February 1994, Parks Commissioner Stern tried to advocate that his 2,541 employees be exempt from the upcoming fiscal budget cuts, arguing that the park personnel wore uniforms (uniformed agencies, such as the department of police or sanitation, were exempt from the cuts). If the department was reduced even further, he warned that the agency would be “unable to provide adequate security at outdoor pools, parks, and recreation centers” (“Adjusting Parks Severance Program” 1994). The Parks Commissioner’s plea illustrates what appears to be a vicious cycle central to the urban governance strategy of the time: as the number of Parks employees and Park Enforcement Patrol officers at the pools was decreased (because of budget cuts), the number of NYPD officers were increased (to reinstate order). The strategy also put pressure on the Parks Department in another way: as the previously varied work of the remaining Park employees (maintaining park grounds, removing litter, caring for plants) was reduced to only policing, the parks were, of course, neglected, falling further into despair and disrepair. This paved the road for private philanthropy to take over the maintenance (and control) of the city’s parks.

### *New Ways of Controlling Crowds at the Pools*

After the Department of Parks (and the media) had located the root of the behavioral problems at the pools—a site-specific “spatial panic”, caused by the unique nature of pools as shared spaces—a solution began to take shape. This would be, of course, a new spatial strategy created to better control unruly crowds. In 1994, in a departmental monthly report, the Parks Department stated that new operating plans would “avoid, or at least minimize, the sorts of behavioral problems at City Pools that were widely reported last summer” (“Outstanding Issues” 1994). These procedures added to the already existing ordering strategies, such as mandatory bag checks and, possibly, “the white t-shirt rule”, which

may have been adopted in the preceding years.

One of the first crowd control initiatives divided the day into “sessions” at select pools in the Bronx and Brooklyn—ostensibly the pools which had seen the most behavioral issues. The strategy was, simply, to clear the pool of swimmers between morning and afternoon shifts.

“We believe this will have a calming effect and reduce overcrowding in the afternoon, as a significant number of patrons who have been in the pool for several hours in the morning will choose not to wait around for an hour to gain readmission,” explained Parks Commissioner Henry J. Stern in his monthly report to the Mayor's Office (“Monthly Report for May” 1994). This strategy can be seen as an attempt to create an institutional boundary in order to control the size of the crowd in the pool. Elias Canetti argues in his psychological study *Crowds and Power*, that if crowds are not somehow interrupted, they will want to grow (23). The following year, the idea of dividing the pools into sessions became a citywide procedure. Today, the pools still enforce the one-hour break between two sessions of swimming. There has, however, been no mention of the original intent behind the rule—that is, that pool patrons leave the pool in order to calm down the “frenetic atmosphere.” Today, the stated rationale is simply that there is a “break for pool cleaning between 3:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m” (“Free Outdoor Pools”).

The Parks Department also adopted new ways of ordering through direct spatial changes. In 1994, rope dividers were used to divide the pools into sections, which, as the Parks Department explained it, would also make it easier to control “unruly behavior.” Again, the experiment targeted only select pools in Brooklyn and the Bronx. The large pools in the Bronx were divided into three sections, each of which was designated for different types of activity. One was made into a “Quiet Zone,” while another, called the “Lap Swim Zone”, was reserved for swimmers. Finally, the remaining

section, the “General Swim Zone,” was reserved for swimming, water play, hanging out, and every other water activity the pool had been used for previously (“Monthly Report for May” 1994). Today, pools citywide are still divided into sections; for example, those who wish to swim laps have their own section. I believe many consider it a welcome initiative, creating more opportunities for a variety of leisure activities at the pool. This, of course, was not the original intent behind the initiative; it was a spatial ordering strategy to make the pools easier to manage, and to control behavior.

Finally, in 1996, a height requirement was adopted requiring swimmers under the age of 16 to stand 8 inches taller than a pool's maximum depth, or be accompanied by a parent or guardian at least 18 years old. This rule was adopted after a 5-year-old girl, left unattended, had drowned at the Betsy Head Pool in Brownsville (Herszenhorn 1996). This rule is still in place today (“Pool Rules”).

While some initiatives became permanent, others didn't. The Parks Department experimented shortly with a requirement that, as patrons entered the pool, they had to sign in, presenting a membership card acquired with an acceptable form of ID (“Monthly Report for May” 1994). This initiative was only tried at pools in the Bronx and was abandoned for unknown reasons.

The Crotona Pool in the Bronx was the first site to have camera surveillance installed (“Monthly Report for May” 1994). By 1996, security cameras had been installed at 20 pools (“Weekly Report #82” 1996). In the 1980s and 1990s, security cameras became increasingly common in both private spaces (e.g. high-class private premises—often gated communities) as well those semi-public (such as shopping malls) and public (the streets and public transport spaces) (Koskela 245). The introduction of security cameras at the pools provided authorities with the ultimate social control tool. Geographer Hille Koskela argues that “through surveillance cameras the panoptic technology of power has been electronically extended, making our cities like enormous panopticons.” In fact, this

technologizing of space is affecting its very nature. It makes space “a container,” where the person looking through the monitor is alienated from the people being watched. They become anonymous “doll-like bodies lacking personal qualities,” and so the technical equipment that separates the two sides of surveillance “makes it difficult for the space to be recognized as a lived, experienced space” (Koskela 251).

Even though these new rules and restrictions may seem minor or benign when written on a poster, many journalists have been baffled by how strictly they were actually enforced by pool staff. In 2003, *The New York Times* reporter Daniel J. Wakin wrote about his experience going to the Riverbank State Park Outdoor Pool in Upper Manhattan, a process which, he wrote, resembles “dealing with invasive and heavy-handed airport security.” Mr. Wakin dubbed the pool “a sea of no's” and described how he witnessed a family of four being questioned three times about their swimsuits:

“Do you have mesh? May I see, please?” Having mesh, it seems, is one of the many rules that make a dip at Riverbank seem like a visit to the penitentiary swimming pool.”

On the Parks Department website, it is stated under “Pool Rules” that “bathing suits must be worn on the deck and in the water. Men’s bathing suits must have mesh linings.” I have not been able to trace back the origins of this requirement. It is possible that it was initiated later than 1999, where my archival research ends—or that records documenting the initiative are simply missing in the (rather incomplete) archives from the period. A part of the rationale behind this rule is, ostensibly, to prevent people from swimming in their clothes. The logic at play is that swimsuits are supposed to be cleaner than street clothes. However, as Naomi Adiv points out, the rule may simply make kids wear their bathing suit all day, “making it as dirty as anything else” (158). The rule may be arbitrary, but it serves its clear-cut purpose of social control. According to the British anthropologist Mary Douglas, the idea

of fighting dirt to secure “purity” is about much more than hygiene. It is a vision of order, making or keeping the environment understandable and ready for action. Ultimately, imposing ideals of purity on people is the attempt to control or influence them.

To visit one of New York's outdoor public pools, patrons must bring an approved padlock. This rule is in place, again ostensibly, to ensure that guests lock up most personal items (including their phone, wallet, and clothes) and not bring them onto the pool deck. The earliest mention of the rule I found is from a 2004 news article describing the business opportunities owed to the many rules. Outside of Astoria Pool in Queens, vendors have set up little shops, where all the supplies required to get into the pools can be bought:

“We have everything for them to get in,” the vendor Mr. Ahl, who drives in from Long Island with his sister during the pool season to sell their products, told *The New York Times*. The reporter concluded that “when lockless or lining-less pool-goers are turned away, and many are, the Ahls are there to take care of them” (Vandam, 2004).

Much in line with other spatial strategies, the padlock rule helps control behavior. But it also makes it impossible to go swimming on an impulse without already being familiar with the pool rules (not all pools have vendors outside with supplies ready). Either you read up on the rules, or you ask someone in the know—or you're not going.

### *The Institutionalization of Zero Tolerance at the Pools*

Since the 1990s, crime rates in New York, as well as the rest of the country, have dropped dramatically. Between 1990 and 1997, the number of homicides in New York City plummeted from

2,262 to 767, a 66 percent decrease. From 1990 to 1995, there was a 64 percent reduction in robberies, and by 2002 the overall violent crime rate was lower than ever before (Bowling 534, 544). The policing of the pools, however, has continued. In a news report from 2012, a South Bronx pool was described as having five police officers by the pool's entrance. When it opened that same summer, McCarren pool had two police officers assigned all day. Both were activated shortly after the pool's opening, as "fights broke out with a lifeguard over backflips and several arrests were made." The Thomas Jefferson Park Pool in East Harlem had "two police officers standing out front who were quickly called in to settle a dispute between a parks supervisor and a patron who refused to put away her phone by the pool" (Bellafante 2012). These examples further demonstrate how the Zero Tolerance ordering strategy has been institutionalized at the pools.

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Even though the pools are still strictly regulated today, they appear more inclusive than they have ever been. They are no longer segregated by gender, race, class, or citizenship. In the past, the pools had charged very minimal fees for entry, but, according to Adiv, all fees were abolished by 1989 (105). The pools, now free for everyone to enter, provide seemingly universal access. However, this claim is complicated by the regulations, ordering, and surveillance that came into effect in the 1990s. What do the posted rules, the regulations on the behavior of lifeguards and staff, and the strict requirement of swimming attire mean to the pool-goers' sense of belonging within the space? As Adiv points out, access is not just about whether someone *can* enter a space, but, if they are allowed to enter, *how* they do it (Adiv 29-30). At the same time, swimming pools need rational strategies of social

control (as any shared public space does). Perhaps these strategies are even more warranted in the case of pools, because the absence of control could be unsafe (possibly deadly) or unclean (a possible health hazard). As geographer Loretta Lee reminds us, public space cannot be understood through the singular conceptualization of free and democratic versus repressed and controlled—it is both at the same time: “The challenge is to appreciate these complex modalities and to make the most of the positive while resisting the worst” (Lee et al 233).

New York’s public pools are shared spaces of relaxation, play, and socialization. It is for these reasons that they have attracted, and continue to attract, the public—even if it means being continuously subjected to the power of authorities.

## Part 4

### Luxury Swimming Pools in Bloomberg's Luxury City?

As New York entered a new millennium, the city was once again on a road to change. In the mayoral elections of 2001, Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire businessman and CEO of the media and financial services company *Bloomberg LP*, spent \$74 million of his own money on his campaign. This was not only five times what his opponent Mark J. Green spent, it was a new high for a municipal campaign (Brash 70). During his campaign, Bloomberg asserted that the city, suffering from the fiscal effects of the World Trade Center attacks, needed a mayor with his business experience. New York must have agreed in some way, because the “CEO-mayor” won the election, keeping the title for three full terms.

Bloomberg was the political embodiment of the neoliberal policies adopted by the city since the fiscal crisis. As described in part one, the municipal government of post-crisis New York turned towards nonpolitical expertise and management, often drawn from the private sector. Mayor Bloomberg promised to deliver a pragmatic and (seemingly) apolitical corporate approach to reshaping government policy. This worked as the logical extension to the already institutionalized neoliberal approach to urban governance (Brash 2). With Bloomberg behind the wheel, the city was finally able to transform into the New York we know today—the white collar-colonized, private wealth-run engine of capitalism, its glossy \$1,886 per square foot highrises reaching for the sky.

Bloomberg took to the task of bettering the city as a CEO would go about bettering his company. He treated the city government as a corporation, with businesses as clients and residents as customers. The city itself was a product that needed to be sold in order to ensure growth (as this growth would balance out budgets). To ensure the sale, it needed to be marketed and branded. Under

Bloomberg's mayorship, New York was rebranded as a luxury city in order to attract businesses, investors, and visitors, and keep the city from having to lower its taxes even further (Brash 111–112). Urban rebranding efforts didn't start with Bloomberg, and as sociologist Miriam Greenberg has shown, various branding schemes had already been employed to remake the image of New York as a disorderly, dirty, and crime-ridden city into one that was modern, safe, and business- and tourist-friendly (not to mention incredibly wealthy). The most famous example is the “I♥NY” campaign of the late 1970s (10–12). But, according to Greenberg, the Bloomberg administration “normalized and institutionalized the branding approach to an unprecedented extent” (13).

During the Bloomberg era, luxury housing projects shot up across the city, and especially in Williamsburg, Greenpoint, West Chelsea, Harlem, and downtown Brooklyn. Some parks and open spaces saw substantial development, especially along waterfront areas (Brash 122). The high-end eighty-story office and luxury housing district, Hudson Yards, basically an extension of Midtown Manhattan overlooking the water, served as the capstone of the Bloomberg administration's urban and economic development strategy (Brash 123). The High Line in Chelsea, a park built atop a railroad viaduct, came to represent an archetypal urban park of the Bloomberg era: a luxury space, catered toward an increasingly wealthy neighborhood, that created growth as a tourist destination (Loughran 50). The High Line was created through the efforts of Friends of the High Line, the private group that manages the park. The maintenance and control of the city's parks through public-private partnerships had been pioneered by the Central Park Conservancy in 1980 and institutionalized further through the 1990s by both Republican and Democratic mayors. During Bloomberg's mayorship, public-private partnerships, concession agreements, and philanthropy became the main sources of funding for the development and maintenance of public space. Some public spaces, such as library branches, have even

secured funding by selling the land they were placed on to private developers. These developers then construct new libraries—still owned by the city—with housing above (Nathanson 2017). For example, the Brooklyn Heights branch of the Brooklyn Public Library has been sold to a private developer who has redeveloped the land into a luxury condo tower with a new city-owned library (“280 Cadman Plaza West”).

The conclusion of my thesis is complicated by the development of public, shared space in the Bloomberg era. Up to this point, I have shown that the understanding of shared space at any given time is reflected not only in the cultural and political significance of swimming pools, but in how the pools are managed and controlled. In the Progressive Era, the purpose of shared space was to transform the unwashed masses into “good Americans.” In the New Deal years, pools were communal spaces, in sync with the liberal, egalitarian ethos of the time. Since the pools were racially segregated, they became symbols of how New Deal liberalism compromised its egalitarian principles to maintain the alliance between southern segregationists and northern politicians. During the 1980s and 1990s, the environment (and conversation) surrounding the pools reflected the defunding of city services, racial tensions, and high crime rates. This was the moment that, in the American imagination, the pools started to be seen as dangerous shared spaces. The city focused on quelling urban disorder by dramatically increased policing efforts and implementing a zero tolerance approach to even benign signs of urban disorder. Soon the pools became policed spaces, governed by strict rules and regulations, as well as spatial ordering strategies.

As pointed out by Naomi Adiv, the growth of public-private partnerships, park conservancies, and concession agreements after the fiscal crisis (and especially through the Bloomberg era) “suggests that the free pool should not exist” today (8). I would rather say that the neoliberal turn of urban

governance suggests that the free pool should have developed into a *much different* public space than it is today. As the environment of the public swimming pool has reflected the given political, economic, and cultural ideology of the time, I would expect the swimming pools of the Bloomberg era to reflect the ideology of the “luxury city.” It’s not hard to imagine how the image of vast, renovated, glossy swimming pools could be marketed to New Yorkers—and especially to tourists who visit the city in the hottest months of the year. It’s likely that some of the largest pools could be transformed into quasi-public, corporate spaces comparable to Bryant Park, where profit-making vendors make the park a growth-creating shared space. Southwest Airlines runs a café in the park (The Southwest Porch), and in wintertime the park has an ice-skating rink sponsored by CitiBank (CitiPond) that covers the entire lawn. The bank’s advertisements are prominently displayed rink-side, along with logos of corporate advertisers, such as Coca-Cola.

One public pool did (briefly) follow a similar route as some of New York's private-sponsored parks. After being closed for 23 years, McCarren Pool in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, reopened as a performance space, renovated with private funding. In 2005, the concert promoter Live Nation gave \$250,000 to the City Parks Foundation, a private non-profit entity, to move forward with basic stabilization and safety improvements to the pool's structure. The renovation was initiated as a venue for a choreographer named Noémie Lafrance, who proposed a site-specific dance performance called “Agora,” and also helped raise funds for renovations. The result came the summer after, when the city, in partnership with Live Nation, organized a series of concerts at McCarren Pool with tickets priced between \$29.50 and \$39.50. The space that had been a contested (and very neglected) site for decades was finally revived as a heavily corporate-branded performance venue, albeit one that mainly catered to the young people gentrifying Williamsburg and Greenpoint, rather than the pool's original demographic

(Chronopoulos, “The Politics of Race” 118). It took six more years before McCarren Pool reopened as a functioning pool, after extensive renovations in 2012.

The corporatization of McCarren Pool has proved to be the exception rather than the rule. So why haven't public pools transformed along with the rest of New York's corporately run or philanthropically funded shared spaces? The answer to that question starts well before Michael Bloomberg. As previously mentioned, the neoliberal transformation of New York dates back to the fiscal crisis. It was in the 1980s that public-private partnerships, park conservancies, and philanthropic funding of public space began. By the 1980s, philanthropy had become a desired, fashionable endeavor among the country's most wealthy, due to government downsizing, the growing inequality gap, and high-profile coverage of donors (Eikenberry 587). As stated, in the 1980s, an array of partnership organizations was born, including the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation, which runs and funds Bryant Park in Midtown Manhattan. The park was renovated by urban developer Dan Biederman and has become a million-dollar business. The Central Park Conservancy raises 75 percent of Central Park's annual budget, mostly through private donations (“About Us”). But even though the parks, soon after the fiscal crisis, garnered private philanthropic interest, it was an entirely different story with the New York public pools. Besides from the Sol Goldman donation in 1991, private money has not flown towards the pools. Why? Scholarship on philanthropy shows that people tend to give to causes with which they can identify, and to which they are physically or emotionally attached—as opposed to causes or issues that truly need to be addressed (Eikenberry 588). In fact, wealthy philanthropists who provide the bulk of charitable dollars tend to give to organizations from which they or their family directly benefit (or have benefitted from in the past). For example, they tend to give a lot to their university; for the rich, this often means already well-endowed Ivy League schools. In 2012, hedge

fund manager John Paulson pledged a hundred million dollars to the already well-heeled Central Park Conservancy, the largest gift to a public park. Paulson was intent on preserving the “urban oasis” in which he often ran or biked—and which his Fifth Avenue apartment overlooks (Soskis 2013).

I find it likely that public pools have not garnered the same attention from wealthy philanthropists (on whom New York relies so heavily) because they are not spaces the wealthy attend themselves. The privatization of pools was the start of the segregation of pools along class lines. Beginning in the 1950s, middle- and upper-class Americans would increasingly swim at private, suburban pools, and the lower-class would convene at public municipal pools. What happened to the pools illustrates the political implications of the privatization of public space, as privatization reinforces existing patterns of racial and class segregation (Kohn 8). Today, both New York City and its suburbs are brimming with private options for swimming, catering to a wide range of wallet sizes. A membership to one of the most prestigious pool clubs in New York, Soho House, costs between \$1,050 and \$3,200 yearly, not including the \$300 application fee—paid regardless of whether or not you are fortunate enough to be accepted (“Soho House New York Membership”).

Philanthropy aside, the pools could still have developed into corporate-run, private-public shared spaces, like the city's parks. And yet, they have been left out of the glossy remake of postindustrial New York. Perhaps they simply failed to fit in with Bloomberg's vision of growth. Along with most parks, catering towards poor communities and immigrants, they weren't seen as having enough potential for growth and profit. Urban sociologist Kevin Loughran argues that in contemporary urban governance, private funding flows towards communities of wealth, or to those that have growth potential—like the High Line in Chelsea. The development of urban public spaces, in other words, hinges on a continuum of privilege (49-50). Many public swimming pools are located in low-income

neighborhoods, such as Bushwick, Harlem, and Red Hook—those with little “growth potential.” But several are also placed in or nearby affluent neighborhoods. Take for example the Lasker Pool in Central Park, or the Hamilton Fish Recreation Center next to Alphabet City in Manhattan's Lower East Side. As mentioned before, this could have something to do with private money flowing towards spaces the wealthy use themselves. I suggest, however, that the combination of the unique spatial features of the pools and their problematic history lies at the heart of the answer. It is through this lens that we can understand why neoliberal urban governance, as it took shape in New York during the 2000s, has remained uninterested in public swimming pools.

As my thesis sets out to show, there has always existed a consistent duality between the pools as either democratizing sites of public life, or sites of conflict, regulation, and social control. This constant negotiation of power has delineated the municipal pools since the very first time New Yorkers jumped into them. I argue that this dynamic has been more intense at public pools than at most other public space because pools are more *intensely* shared spaces. Pools are at once sites of safety, health, sexuality, and intimacy. These unique traits have made swimming pools attractive spaces to politicians, urban reformers, and public health officials from the Progressive Era up to the present day—but not to neoliberal urban developers. Their interest in urban spaces lies mainly in their potential to create fiscal growth and gentrification.

The pools' unique characteristics are at the center of their recent problematic history. In the 1980s and 1990s, the pools came to be seen as dangerous sites in the public imagination after episodes of violence, disorder, and sexual attacks were widely reported in the news media. Other shared spaces, such as public parks, were constructed in similar ways. But after the New York crime rates went down, public parks were able to transform their image from being disorderly and crime-ridden areas into safe

spaces. In spite of public pools also becoming safe, communal, and family-oriented spaces, they may not have shed their *potential* to be dangerous sites in the same way public parks have. Perhaps this is because parks, in contrast to pools, were not seen as the root cause of their own ills. The violence at the swimming pools was framed as a site-specific problem simply because the pools are an intensely shared space. I believe the pools' potential to be perceived as dangerous or problematic sites makes them fundamentally undesirable to private money.

Aside from directly self-serving interest, wealthy people donate to causes that build a legacy. As the British billionaire John Caudwell put it, philanthropy is about what you'd want to see on your tombstone (Henley 2012). In 2008, the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue, the biggest library in the city, changed the name of its main building to the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, to honor the Wall Street financier who contributed \$100 million to the institution (Santora 2008). Would Mr. Schwarzman have made such a huge contribution to a shared, public space if it had the potential of being involved in a scandalous series of sexual attacks, as witnessed in the 1990s “whirlpooling menace”? Or if it could be the site of tragic drowning accidents? Or what about an outbreak of disease through water-transmitted bacteria? In this light, a library, park, or school (especially an Ivy League university) seems like a much safer bet.

The pools are marked by the urban governance strategies enacted onto them, as well as the many ways they've been conceptualized in the public imagination. Some of these strategies have been shed, and some have remained. Many of the strict rules and spatial ordering strategies initiated in the 1980s and 1990s are still in place at the pools—only the rationale behind them has changed. Today, the Parks Department explains the hour-long afternoon break as “a break for pool cleaning” (“Free Outdoor Pools”); nowhere is the rule's original intent mentioned—to force pool-goers to leave,

resetting the pool's dynamics. The Parks Department explains the "white t-shirt rule" as a precaution to ensure dye doesn't run into the pools, hardly explaining why the same rule applies to those on the deck (Rich, 2014).

But there is an irony in this analysis of the public pool as a palimpsest, on which history (both good and bad) has been written. While the pools have transformed over time, they have simultaneously remained the same. The pools today are still free. They are still a space where New Yorkers can participate in communal activities. They are still in public hands. Across New York neighborhoods, they seem to have resisted the gentrification many other public spaces have bowed to—even in the most thoroughly gentrified neighborhoods, like Park Slope and Williamsburg, where other public spaces, such as playgrounds, have transformed along with the locals. It seems that even though the "problematic" character of the pools have made them a poor match for private investment, growth-minded funding, and gentrification, it has been crucial in their resistance of the latest neoliberal transformation. They are, in essence, a last holdout against gentrification. When interpreting the history of the pools through this lens, the very story of urban swimming pools becomes one not mainly of control and discipline, but of resistance. Pools have been bulldozed out of racist fears, threatened by urban sprawl, and stigmatized as dangerous spaces, and still they remain open. When budget cuts kept them closed (probably for the first time in the history of municipal pools), the urban youth answered back by opening fire hydrants, sending millions of gallons of water into the streets. These teens were sending a powerful message to the city about the role that municipal pools play in New York communities, especially for kids and youngsters. They were showing the people in charge that they would put up a struggle before losing a public space they considered theirs, and a part of their right to the city. I understand their actions not as vandalism, "moral poverty," or delinquency. In fact, I think

there was a message hanging in the heavy, humid air above the drenched streets in the summer of 1991:

Keep your hands off our swimming pools.

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