



Invisible Lines in the Sand: LA's Ban on Bathing Suits in the 1910s¹

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Can beaches reveal the tensions that run through society at a given moment in time? Here, Elsa Devienne shows how Californian beaches in the early 20th century crystallized tensions resulting from the gradual rejection of Victorian values and exposed, via the way people presented their bodies, the changes under way with regard to moral order and American society.

In the late 1910s, Los Angeles was the scene of a series of arrests of bathers and beachgoers. The individuals arrested, caught wearing bathing suits in the street, on streetcars, or in local stores, had infringed a municipal ordinance making it illegal to wear bathing suits in urban spaces. We are all familiar with the early-20th-century photographs² showing police officers, in suits and ties and with measuring tapes in hand, checking the length of bathing suits deemed too short and revealing worn by female bathers emboldened by the erosion of Victorian standards of modesty. However, the real issues, in the case of the arrests considered here, lie elsewhere. Specifically, it was not merely a question of measuring the length of bathing suits and deciding whether or not they were legal, but rather of circumscribing the spatial boundaries beyond which a bathing suit could no longer be worn. Despite the significant controversy they generated in the local press, we actually know very little about arrests of this kind: historians have tended to focus on the rapidly shrinking bathing suits of the period, with the bathing dress of the early 20th century gradually giving way to the bikini, invented in 1946 (Sohn 2006; Granger 2008, 2009). The question of where a bathing suit could be worn says a lot about the changing ways in which people chose to present their body in public in the 20th century: what action did police take to try to restrict bathing suits to the beach, or even to the water only, and what do the controversies surrounding bathing suits in the city reveal about the authorities' attitudes to women's and men's bodies in urban spaces?

¹ This text is an abridged version of an article published (in French) in the first issue of the journal *Modes pratiques* (Devienne 2015): www.modespratiques.fr/numeacutero-1.html. The text of this article is available online at the following URL: <https://hal-univ-paris10.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01640461/document>.

² See: www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b45864.

Figure 1. A plain-clothes police officer measures the length of a woman's bathing suit on a beach in Washington, DC (1922)



Original title: *Col. Sherrell, Supt. of Public Buildings and Grounds, has issued an order that bathing suits at the Wash[ington] bathing beach must not be over six inches above the knee.*

Source: National Photo Company Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

The roots of the controversy

The controversy surrounding the wearing of bathing suits in the city bears similarities with certain very contemporary issues. From the banning of shorts and other skimpy clothing in Italian churches to recent municipal orders banning the burkini on certain French beaches, scandals abound as soon as one looks into the significance of an item of clothing (or the absence thereof) in a specific place, particularly when this place is considered sacred or deemed to embody republican values. Incorporating this spatial dimension into the history of bathing suits therefore means taking into consideration the spaces and boundaries ascribed to this garment and the way in which bathers, through their daily practices, managed to subvert them.

In the early 1910s, most American seaside resorts had in place an ordinance stipulating that a bathing suit covering the shoulders and extending as far as the knees must be worn. These outfits – a ballooning dress for women and a close-fitting bathing suit for men – were designed only for bathing: once out of the water, bathers were expected to return to the bathing establishment where

they could wash and get changed. The beach, and adjacent areas even more so, remained spaces where people dressed in everyday city clothes.³

Figure 2. Bathers and walkers on Rockaway Beach, Queens, New York (1903)



In the early 20th century, the beach was a place where people wore their everyday clothes. Bathing suits were worn exclusively for bathing in the water, and it was understood that bathers should change back into their normal clothes as soon as they came out of the water.

Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

From the mid-1910s, this situation began to change as several factors converged. Some of these disrupted the established order, as in the case for the one-piece swimsuit for women – a bathing costume made of dark material that was relatively close-fitting and extended as far as the

³ See: www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.33b05370.

hips, making it easier to swim. The arrest of Annette Kellermann,⁴ the “Australian Mermaid” famous for her swimming achievements, who was apprehended wearing this new kind of costume on a beach near Boston in 1907, helped to publicize it throughout the US. Second, the fashion for sunbathing was beginning to spread among the middle and upper classes, and this necessarily encouraged people to uncover their bodies more than previously (Cocks 2013). Conversely, at the same time, other developments were helping to bolster conservative forces on local scales: in the 1910s, seaside resorts on the Los Angeles coast, such as Venice and Santa Monica,⁵ gradually changed from being seasonal resorts to residential cities in their own right. Many white-collar workers moved to the coast and commuted between the seaside and the offices of downtown LA. Soon, a small local elite became established that sought to act as moral guardians, protecting the respectable reputation of the city and its residents.

Figure 3. Annette Kellermann poses in her famous black one-piece bathing suit (1919)



This bathing costume would lead to her arrest on Revere Beach, near Boston, in 1907.

Source: George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

⁴ See: www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ggbain.03569. Note that the spelling of Kellermann’s name fluctuated, but the version with two n’s was the original spelling, and the version used by Kellermann herself in the byline of a *Washington Post* article she authored, as well as on certain movie posters.

⁵ Both resorts formed part of the urban fabric of the Los Angeles metropolitan area but were separate municipalities at this time. Venice was absorbed into the city of Los Angeles in 1925, while Santa Monica remains an independent city (albeit surrounded by the city of Los Angeles on three sides, with the ocean on the other).

Maintaining the separation between sand and city

It was in this context that controversy emerged. A growing number of bathers, dressed in the latest fashionable bathing suits, were engaging in ball games or sunbathing on the beach in order to expose their skin to the sun. Worse still, certain beachgoers were increasingly venturing into the adjacent streets while still in their bathing costumes. This behaviour, now considered unremarkable and even to be expected, sent out shock waves in a society where the uncovered body was never exposed to the gaze of others in public spaces. Hostile reactions – emanating in particular from local religious authorities and upper-class ladies’ clubs – grew in number, and arrests began to be made. As Santa Monica’s chief of police explained, there was no question of apprehending bathers “because of the type of bathing suit worn”;⁶ rather, it was a matter of restricting beachwear to the beach, or even, in the case of some particularly conservative municipalities, to the ocean and foreshore. In Venice, for example, the city council opted to take a strict line, and decreed that bathers “must neither lounge nor go east of a point 20 feet east of [the] high tide line”⁷ while wearing only their bathing suits. In both cases, the goal was to maintain a watertight boundary between the city, where usual social conventions would continue to be respected, and the beach, where the authorities had to agree to be more flexible if they wished to attract workers on day trips and tourists from the east coast.

The ordinance was controversial locally – members of the local business elite supported a measured approach while religious leaders were in favour of a strict interpretation of the text – but, above all, it was difficult to enforce in practice. Despite the erection of signs on the beaches by the municipalities concerned, confusion reigned among bathers. One journalist, for instance, remarked that the boundary beyond which it was mandatory to wear a robe “isn’t indicated by a rope”, and that “[i]t’s just as easy to cross as the equator”.⁸ Furthermore, what rules applied to promenades, streetcars and shops? In the end, it came down to the police to interpret the rules and arbitrate on a case-by-case basis. In 1916, a 22-year-old woman was arrested for boarding a streetcar in a bathing suit, but was eventually released without a fine, “after a severe reprimanding by the police matron”.⁹ In the same year, a 16-year-old boy was reprimanded for entering a store in his bathing suit,¹⁰ while a few weeks later a young woman was arrested and taken to the police station for “buying groceries in the business district, half a mile from the beach” while “dressed in a fetching bathing suit of the latest style and cut”, over which she was wearing “only a short coat” that did not reach her knees as required by the ordinance.¹¹ It therefore appears that the ordinance was enforced more diligently when women breached the rules.

Regulating the female body and the notion of leisure

Evidently, the interpretation of the ordinance varied according to the circumstances. When certain wealthy residents complained that wearing a high-quality robe over a wet bathing suit ran the risk of ruining the fabric, the chief of police tried to pacify the situation by explaining that the ordinance did not concern individuals returning home after bathing in the sea, but rather was targeted more

⁶ *Santa Monica Bay Outlook*, August 19, 1916, p. 1. Available online at the following URL: <http://digital.smpl.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/outlook/id/42177/rec/6195>.

⁷ *Santa Monica Bay Outlook*, May 15, 1915, p. 1. Available online at the following URL: <http://digital.smpl.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/outlook/id/45301/rec/5807>.

⁸ *Santa Monica Outlook*, April 12, 1917, p. 2. Available online at the following URL: <http://digital.smpl.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/outlook/id/51553/rec/6389>.

⁹ *Santa Monica Bay Outlook*, July 29, 1916, p. 1. Available online at the following URL: <http://digital.smpl.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/outlook/id/42321/rec/6177>.

¹⁰ *Santa Monica Bay Outlook*, July 29, 1916, p. 1. Available online at the following URL: <http://digital.smpl.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/outlook/id/42321/rec/6177>.

¹¹ *Santa Monica Bay Outlook*, August 10, 1916, p. 2. Available online at the following URL: <http://digital.smpl.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/outlook/id/43454/rec/6187>.

particularly at “girls who like to put on bathing suits and lie around on the sand, but who never go near the water”.¹² Judging by these words, it was therefore less a question of limiting the presence of bathers in swimming costumes in the city than of regulating the intentions of those – and those women in particular – who went out in this attire. But certain female bathers were not fooled and saw quite clearly that the law concerned them more than their male counterparts: in a letter addressed to the chief of police, one young woman accuses men of “bothering [their] poor heads a dreadful lot about the women’s attire” and advises the police to pay greater attention to some of the men on the beach, who “look mighty vulgar also”.¹³ If the question of the exposure of the female body in urban spaces was at the heart of the controversy, this was no doubt because the place of women in public space had been changing profoundly at the beginning of the century, with a generation of educated upper-class young women reaching adulthood who rejected the conventions of the day, were getting married later, and were enjoying fulfilling lives outside the home (Patterson 2005). Those who would later be known as flappers in the 1920s – when the phenomenon would reach almost epidemic proportions – smoked in public, bobbed their hair, and wore sleeveless dresses. At the end of the 1910s, these young women were still few in number, but their sudden arrival into the public space worried those who still held on to a conservative vision of the place of women in society. By pointing fingers at the young women who sunbathed on the beach, they hoped to limit the exposure of this new phenomenon.

These kinds of discourse also reveal the tensions that were coming to the fore following the collapse of the Victorian moral order and the emergence of a new concept of leisure within American society. At the turn of the century, the success of new commercial leisure pursuits such as the cinema, dance halls and amusement parks contributed to the development of a mixed-sex mass culture that was dissociated from moral considerations regarding the value of rest (Kasson 1978; Peiss 1987). For the most zealous supporters of Victorian morality, bathers contravened the ordinance not only when they were in the street but also when they simply remained on the beach in a swimming costume without being able to invoke any of the hygienist virtues of sea bathing to justify their attire. While it is true that the new sensibilities that underpinned the “invention of the beach” (Corbin 1990) emerged in the 19th century, it is also important to highlight this major transformation that occurred in the early 20th century and made the beach – albeit not without recriminations – a place for idleness and showing off one’s (immobile) body on the sand.

What the sand reveals

By the late 1910s, municipal councils – where the local business elite tended to dominate – were leaning towards a relaxation of the ordinance, to the chagrin of local pastors. Ultimately, the issue would be resolved once and for all on the ground, through the action – or inaction – of the police. In Santa Monica, not a single bather was arrested in 1918. So, when Alta Johnson, “a very pretty young matron”,¹⁴ was apprehended by police on July 17, 1919, while she was out buying bread for her picnic on the beach, the news made waves. As far as the city council was concerned, the resort’s positive touristic image was too important to allow religious leaders to lay down the law – especially as, in reality, there were already too many beachgoers in bathing attire in the city’s streets for the trend to be reversed. Faced with this tide of daily transgressions by the city’s bathers and the unwelcome media coverage of the Alta Johnson affair, the municipal authorities eventually gave in and repealed the ordinance.

¹² *Santa Monica Bay Outlook*, August 18, 1916, p. 8. Available online at the following URL: <http://digital.smpl.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/outlook/id/42240/rec/6194>.

¹³ The letter is reproduced in the *Santa Monica Bay Outlook*, August 17, 1916, p. 1. Available online at the following URL: <http://digital.smpl.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/outlook/id/40154/rec/6193>.

¹⁴ *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, July 18, 1919, p. 1. Available online at the following URL: <http://digital.smpl.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/outlook/id/54056/rec/7063>.

Although the controversies surrounding the bathing-suit ban in the city may seem anecdotal at first glance, they reveal a moment in history when the body moved into the public space: the beach of the 19th century, where people dressed just as they would in the city, gave way to the beach we know today, where semi-nudity is the norm. They also highlight the existence of invisible boundaries that criss-cross the urban space. In this case, in the 1910s, the bathing suit was considered inoffensive when worn on the sand and in the sea, but suddenly became a threat to the social order when worn on asphalt. Similarly, in the 2010s, wearing a long skirt and a headscarf takes on a whole other dimension when the wearer moves from the street to the beach. Ultimately, the sand reveals tensions that play out elsewhere – namely around women’s bodies and the values that regulate their exposure.

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To cite this article:

Elsa Devienne, translated by Oliver Waine, “Invisible Lines in the Sand: LA’s Ban on Bathing Suits in the 1910s”, *Metropolitiques*, 13 July 2018. URL: <https://www.metropolitiques.eu/Invisible-Lines-in-the-Sand-LA-s-Ban-on-Bathing-Suits-in-the-1910s.html>.