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ale Barbour’s *Undressed Toronto: From the Swimming Hole to Sunnyside, How a City Learned to Love the Beach, 1850-1935* is at once a history of Toronto’s waterfront, a history of public bathing, and a history of the body in nature. Barbour innovatively positions bathing as a window into the cultural challenges and new social mores of urbanizing Toronto at the turn of the twentieth century. In response, this roundtable keys in on the “bathing boy” and his behavior at the shore (what Barbour terms “vernacular bathing”), and the role of nature in this activity.

Sarah Schrank opens the roundtable by pointing out key themes in *Undressed Toronto* that resonate for both scholars of the body and the environment, including late-nineteenth century understandings of nature and the cultural significance of the nude body in it. Schrank also considers how new controls over the physical spaces of the beach and of bodies at the beach accompanied urbanization. Nude bathing symbolized, she writes, a moment of “negotiation between nature and city; the working-class and the middle-class; and the past and the future.” Yet the negotiation proved anything but easy. Further highlighting this contested transition, Bruce Kidd focuses on Barbour’s argument that “vernacular” swimming spaces evolved into the “beach”— manmade, supervised sites for clothed male and female bathers of all ages. As Schrank and Kidd both point out, Barbour links the evolving debate over what made an appropriate bathing costume to the histories of urban recreation, bodily display, and middle-class reform. Kidd asks Barbour to explain more about swimmers who were uninterested in moralists’ vision of the modern beach—who resisted? How? What experiences did they seek out at the beach, and what meaning did they assign them?

Ken Cruikshank points out that the twentieth-century rise of the bathing suit did not necessarily simplify debates about swimming. The heterosocial world of the government-run beach brought with it, as Barbour shows, middle-class moral expectations of propriety via clothing regulations, safety through lifeguards, and a rebuilt environment. Cruikshank compliments Barbour for showing the way “vernacular bathing” persisted in the face of (inconsistent) government oversight. Cruikshank also picks up on the symbolism of nude bathing, pointing out that bathing suits rules introduced new questions around the archetypical nude in nature. Vernacular bathing might preserve authentic masculine experiences and stave off the softening influences of modern urban life. He also asks Barbour to further consider how the relatively skimpy swimwear available at the end of his history, in the 1920s and 1930s, was not unlike what vernacular bathers had previously worn. To what extent did bathing suits change swimmers’ bodily display?

*Undressed Toronto* successfully links the history of coastal environment management and rules concerning bodies at leisure as Toronto came of age. Evolving ideas about the body in public and the body at risk, Daniel Ross points out, were central to the
The evolution of bathing from an unregulated male activity to a common leisure activity. Ross commends Barbour for showing that bathing was always more than an issue of propriety. Inspired by the limits of moralists in this history, Ross asks Barbour to reflect on the limits of urban reform in Toronto. He also asks the author to situate Undressed Toronto in the history of how public spaces like the beach became a democratic arena that unified diverse urban populations.

Dale Barbour, in his reply, picks up on the roundtable’s attention to swimsuits, nudity, and the male body in nature. Barbour explains that he sees the “undressed” nature of nineteenth-century Toronto not just in skinny dippers but as a metaphor for the city’s lack of regulations. The rules of the modern city, he explains, were but forming at the turn of the century. His term “vernacular bathing” was meant to include the lack of regulations about where to swim and the lack of security in urban swimming. The beach of the twentieth century, Barbour explains, was an official, and more formal space. Yet the transition was not clear-cut. Nineteenth-century vernacular bathers were not always totally nude, and vernacular bathing continued even with the rise of formal swimming spots. Barbour also reflects on the roundtable’s theme of bathing in a “state of nature”—and what that mean for the body as well as for cultural understandings of green spaces in North America’s rapidly industrializing cities. This is a longstanding question in environmental history, and Barbour, Ross, Schrank, Cruikshank, and Kidd manage to bring out absorbing facets for fresh consideration.

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to pause here and thank all the roundtable participants for taking part. In addition, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, H-Environment Roundtable Reviews is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate.
Dale Barbour’s impeccably-researched study of Toronto’s beaches at the turn-of-the-twentieth century is a welcome addition to a growing field of scholarly beach history that, by virtue of its intertwined categories of nature, the body, and the environment, literally lays bare the conflicted experience of modernity’s shifting social mores amid the burgeoning effects of urban growth. Barbour, in effect, tells an urban history through the political and cultural geography of the body with great sensitivity to class dynamics, the new visual culture of modernity, and the meaning of place. By integrating the history of the beach directly into that of Toronto’s economic and structural development, Barbour highlights three major cultural changes of particular interest to both environmental historians and body scholars: 1) the shifting understanding of nature as Toronto confronted modernity and made male nudity a tactic for restoring idyl to the newly industrial; 2) the visibility and sexual politics of a new culture of display; and 3) how an evolving urban and cultural geography led to the reform, regulation, and control of the body. As Barbour puts it, the chapters focus on “a series of contact points between the bathing body and Toronto’s physical environment. In each of these physical spaces we are also going to see how an intervention into the physical or social environment helps drive change within that space or makes the social expectations around bathing visible” (18).

Undressed Toronto begins with a startling description of the “bathing boy,” a locally celebrated image of naïve youth and wholesome masculinity that elided connotations of eroticism and homosexuality. Instead, the “bathing boy” was heralded in early twentieth-century newspapers as an example of healthy athleticism and appropriate gender-segregated outdoor fun. Rather than hide nude male bathing (swimming) from the public eye, Toronto celebrated it at the same time that the city “was caught between staring at its youthful urchins and averting its eyes to ensure their purity” (4). Barbour categorizes the phenomenon of young men frolicking in outdoor swimming holes as “vernacular bathing,” a type of unregulated and fetishized working-class physical recreation. The bathing boy served as a pastoral symbol of a pre-modern era for nostalgic Torontonians anxious about the industrialization of their city. What is also fascinating about Barbour’s account of the symbolic claiming of illicit nudity as a badge of local pride is the implication of the body as a site for negotiation between nature and city; the working-class and the middle-class; and the past and the future. As a liminal, unstable site culturally and politically, the nude male body carried the weight of a rapidly growing urban society. By placing the bathing boy in an idyllic context—even while swimming at an urban industrial beach—Toronto could embrace an anti-modernist past while obscuring the erotic implications of modern bodies in new and exciting spaces. As the story unfolds, this cultural paradox would play out in the struggle between heightened corporeal visibility and local corporeal governability.

Early to mid-nineteenth century officials in Toronto grappled with what would become, in the United States in the 1970s, the thin line between “nude” and “lewd.” In
nineteenth-century lingo, this was the ambiguity between “morality” and “nuisance.” While our contemporary version of this issue rests primarily on the intent of the nude person, in Victorian-era Toronto the concern was where the nudity took place. Barbour’s research reveals that Toronto’s police were not especially interested in arresting or ticketing nude bathers until the issue of “appropriate” space became more pressing to local officials. The shift began as Toronto developed its waterfront, and accompanying esplanade, as a “space of order” (38). As the waterfront became less of a strictly industrial corridor and more of a bourgeois shopping and strolling venue, nude bathing increasingly attracted more scrutiny as an affront to middle-class refinement. This was not a clean or even transition. Indeed, the process of moving nude bathers out of the waterfront took decades and Barbour implies that as the city modernized, most Torontonians, middle-class or not, were well used to the sight of naked bodies on beaches and in the lakes and rivers. This implies that many residents were reluctant to let their bathing boys go. When Toronto’s class divisions became starker—and increasingly marked by urban geography—visible nude bathing on the eastern side of the waterfront “pushed the city to step in more aggressively to police the presence of naked bodies and push bathing out by the 1880s. On the western side, the thicket of railyards allowed the practice of bathing, fed by the adjacent working-class neighborhood, to continue” (48). At the same time, city officials, stymied by their inability to simply move bathers out of the way, introduced new regulations such as banning swimming during the day and, as Barbour delightfully puts it, “new technology for managing bathers who presented themselves in public”—the bathing suit (61).

By forcing public bathers to cover up from neck to knee, regulating agencies moved their attention from the spaces in which bodies appeared to the bodies themselves. Moreover, the bathing suit opened up the modern phenomenon of mixed-gender bathing which, in turn, invited more scrutiny and eroded the “bathing boy” trope as these were clothed adults navigating the rules of gender and sexuality in a public leisure space. The idyllic watering hole of naked youthful innocence would have to be obscured, but not without a struggle. In the summer of 1897, the drowning of a 10-year-old boy elicited the attention of a local paper, the Star, which pitched the tragedy as the result of over-policing. Barbour writes that the paper’s “defense of vernacular bathing laid bare the human geography of the waterfront and targeted a morality that shamed public male nudity and a middle class that insisted upon looking” (67). Implied here is that the performative urban bathing of the middle class trumped the natural nude bathing of the working class, upending a previously acceptable social order of mixed access to the beach. Meanwhile, there was a shift in the visual framing of bathing—Torontonians were no longer supposed to look at nudity and were encouraged, instead, to see the clothed bathing body as a fashionable status object. If the bathing suit imposed a moral visuality on Toronto’s beach bodies, the introduction of commercial beachside bathhouses “imposed a new moral architecture on the waterfront, one that was capable of overwriting the male-dominated vernacular bathing system and establishing a space where men and women could bathe together. But to make the system work, Toronto’s unruly bodies and physical environment would need to conform to a new set of rules and
expectations” (72). Here, Barbour does a marvelous job of drawing connections between regulated bodies and regulated spaces and the difficulty of controlling either one. Indeed, women in bathing suits were meant to be looked at but women were not supposed to be trying to attract the male gaze or enjoy it too much. Men were meant to look but presumably only at women and not in a lascivious way. Barbour’s description of the Wiman Baths beautifully demonstrates how difficult—but also modern—the efforts were to regulate looking. One way was to incorporate the new concept of physical fitness and its concomitant activity, purposive exercise, into the bathing experience. Bodies were thus no longer engaged in leisure but were engaged in work, striving to achieve moral reformers’ goals of hygiene and health. The body could thus be something sublime, not sexual; something productive, not pleasure-seeking. These protocols would never actually work the way moral reformers intended, but they certainly offer insight into how unruly nineteenth-century bodies were pressed into becoming modern twentieth-century urban subjects.

Barbour concludes that “in the end the vernacular bathing space needed to be cast aside so that men and women could bathe together and so that bathing spaces could be integrated into a commercial entertainment system…..However, Toronto was not done with nude bathing” (217). Here, we are introduced to Hanlan’s Point, a historical nude beach and, since 2002, one of the only legal clothing-optional beaches in Canada. Mirroring the history of nude beaches in the United States, particularly in California (Black’s Beach in La Jolla, for example), Hanlan’s Point emerged a “secret” spot for nude bathing and gay cruising before World War II and became a politicized space in the 1970s as nudists and gay rights activists claimed the space (or “freed it”) for naked recreation. These groups shared different interests, however, with social nudists wanting the beach for wholesome family fun while gay men sought a sexually liberated space free from police oversight. The body, again, proved difficult to regulate and the beach a delicate environment forced to bear the weight of being a metropolitan playground while simultaneously carrying the cultural expectation that it remain a natural space. It is this irreconcilable conflict between sustaining the natural while developing the city that has made beaches so prized but also fraught as they are irrevocably tied to the bodies that occupy them.
“...used to bathe there myself when I was a boy, I have an idea of the place,” the otherwise stern Toronto police magistrate George Taylor Dennison III said from the bench sometime in the 1880s while letting offenders of the city’s by-law prohibiting nude swimming off with a warning or small fine.

Almost a century and a half later, I experienced the same glow of recollection while reading Dale Barbour’s well-researched, densely argued, and marvelously illustrated social and environmental history of lake and river swimming in rapidly industrializing Toronto. It felt like Barbour was writing about the major compass points in my life. Although I was born in 1943, after the endpoint of his frame, Lake Ontario and the Don and Humber Rivers have always been sites of physical, political, romantic, and scholarly activity for me. In my formative years, I walked and played along Lake Ontario almost every day and swam naked there and in the Don, savoring the stories of the older boys and men in my neighborhood who had hung out and swum there during the depression. I’ve run, cycled, canoed, kayaked, and made out along their shores. I’ve always felt something joyous in those spaces. Although I gained some distance from those experiences when engaging in my own generation’s political battles about lakefront and riparian developments and delving into the same newspaper and Toronto Harbour Commission archives Barbour probed, I’m open to the charge that Peter Pan memories cloud my judgement.

Barbour’s subject is the transformation of unregulated “vernacular” spaces, where boys and men swam in the nude, unwatched and unrestrained, into the “beach”—intentionally constructed, supervised sites where males and females of all ages could sunbathe and swim together if appropriately clothed. He also examines the contributing transformation of the bathing costume into the swimsuit, and the steadily evolving conventions about how to use and display the body. The end point of the “beach” in his account was the Sunnyside bathing pavilion and swimming tank constructed on the city’s west shoreline, protected from the open lake by lifeguards and a concrete breakwater. Those facilities and the adjacent amusement park came to set the standard for leisure swimming and summer recreation.

Barbour argues that the creation of the “beach” was deliberately driven by propriety-focused municipal regulation and policing, egged on by middle-class reformers and newspaper editorialists who sought to civilize the rough and ready working-class. The advocates were aided by capitalist developers, who wanted more culturally attractive public space alongside their riverside housing estates, and the burgeoning fashion industry, which ran full-page advertisements and department store displays to grow a consumer market for swimming gear. The swimsuit quickly became an article of envied adornment and pushed the boundaries of how much skin could be shown on the beach. Other influences and pressures, such as industrial development which made the Don too polluted and inaccessible for swimming and increasingly closed off the inner-city harbour; the expansion of the rail and road corridor along the
lake; and the society-wide internalization of constraints upon the public display of nudity were just as powerful. There are 68 well-chosen photographs, maps, and illustrations. My only regret is that the maps could not have been enlarged to enable readers to see the detail.

One of Barbour’s most powerful arguments is that the romance of “vernacular” nude swimming was deeply gendered. The absence/exclusion of girls and women from the publicly celebrated “swimming holes” along the Don denied them the opportunity for the affirming, embodied pleasure of moving through water without clothing. In some institutions, that power dynamic has long been understood. In the early 1970s, one of the most frequently voiced arguments against the integration of the University of Toronto’s Hart House, with the best pool in the city, was that men would no longer be able to swim in the nude. Women won that fight at U of T, and in an earlier generation, their first-wave feminist sisters fought creatively for their own opportunities for sport and physical activity, and even snuck into Hart House to swim naked on their own. Barbour cites women who wrote to the newspapers in support of women’s swimming, but I wondered whether some women held their own secret naked swims, and the extent to which the entire first-wave feminist movement in Toronto pushed for the gender inclusion that characterized the “beach.”

Barbour readily identifies the proponents of the “beach” and their arguments but gives us very little information about others who resisted. As one who experienced the waterfront a generation later, it never felt that the march to the “beach” was as complete as in Barbour’s telling. Perhaps it’s because I grew up in the east end, at the other end of the waterfront from Sunnyside, beyond the reach of the boardwalk where there were still wide swaths of rough or industrial shore, but even in the conservative 1950s nude swimming, swimsuits that revealed far more than my school’s dress codes would permit, and well-attended all-night bonfires with middle- and working-class partiers of both sexes were regular occurrences. While the moralists raged, people constructed their own meanings and experiences. Where there were lifeguards, they were symbols of admiration, the ideal male body and often subjects of desire, not morality police. When the waves were up and there could be dangerous undertows along the unprotected sections of the shore, they provided much appreciated safety.

One of Barbour’s early reflections is that such was the attraction of water during the hot and humid days of summer that people swam where they could, even if surrounded by industrial activity, and remembered it idyllically. He could have extended that insight over his entire history, because in my experience, it strongly persists. Virtually the entire 55-kilometer Toronto shoreline has now been reconstructed with landfill, concrete armoring, and stabilizing, even if only to hold back the endless erosion. Yet many of us invest those spaces with “nature” and relish the opportunities they provide. The defining case is Tommy Thompson Park, aka the Leslie Street Spit, a five-kilometer promontory along the eastern shore that was created with landfill from subway and high-rise excavations in an unsuccessful attempt to build an outer harbour. It’s full of concrete and rebar, but left to its own
self-development, it has been populated by birds, plants, and wildlife. It's now experienced by those who go there to hike, birdwatch, picnic (and skinny dip) as a new urban wilderness.

Toronto's waterfront has been an historical, often contested site of not only recreational swimming but of sports. Rowing, paddling, and sailing clubs hugged the Don, the Humber and the western and eastern beaches, while sports fields and facilities were built nearby. In the interwar years, Sunnyside boasted a stadium where famous women athletes played softball to record crowds. Since the late nineteenth century, regattas and swim races were held in front of the beaches every summer, and during the 1920s, professional swimmers raced every year at the Canadian National Exhibition just east of Sunnyside. By the early twentieth century, these events, the male and female stars they elevated, and the costumes and uniforms they wore, enjoyed extensive coverage in the mass media, arguably presenting the dominant images of physical activity along the waterfront. To what extent did they affect the evolving behaviours, dress, and gendered conduct along the "beach"?

Another surprising contextual omission were the struggles for affordable public recreation. One of the reasons for the pressures for accessible swimming during the summer was that Toronto has always been notoriously cheap in providing opportunities, building swimming pools, and teaching children to swim. Throughout the period Barbour studied, these struggles were intense as both middle-class reformers and the organized working class pushed the municipal and provincial government for better facilities and programs. Immigrant and workers’ clubs integrated girls and women far more extensively than their British-Canadian counterparts. I wish he had included these efforts in his analysis because they no doubt affected the decisions and investments in the "beach" as well.

Overall, Undressing Toronto is an important contribution and I enjoyed it immensely. It’s not only a well-told history of public bathing but of Toronto’s waterfront.
Dale Barbour’s book is aptly titled. Undressed Toronto undoubtedly attracts the eye of those browsing in bookstores or in library stacks, while managing to capture the historian’s core theme. This is a book, it is clear, that focuses on debates over what it meant to be dressed and undressed in a major Canadian city. The subtitle, From the Swimming Hole to Sunnyside, How a City Learned to Love the Beach, 1850-1935, appropriately narrows the parameters – this is about how people thought about swimming and dress in particular places in Toronto, in a particular time frame. Better yet, the subtitle promises that this book will do what the general public expects of at least some of its historians – that we will write books that tell us something about how we came to be the way we are. Of course, some churlish outsiders might not immediately connect the major Canadian city of Toronto with swimming or the love of beaches. But that, too, is surely the point. The subtitle announces this book as uncovering a story that is both unexpected and intriguing. And the book lives up to this promise.

As one would expect in a book that promises to take the reader from one place and time to another, and to tell us how something came to be, this is a story of transformation. What makes it unexpected is the way in which it upends our likely expectation: if we think about the history of swimming dress codes at all, we probably expect a story that begins with heavily-clothed Victorian bathers, and ends with twentieth-century bathers wearing what Victorians might have considered underwear, at best. Contrary to that expectation, Barbour begins with a nineteenth century in which men frolicked in the water in the nude. These men and boys relied on embodied, local knowledge to find, define and use informal bathing spaces, taking personal responsibility for their safety and healthfulness. As the nineteenth century progressed, many of these bathers came from Toronto’s male working class, and where and how they made space either defied or evaded city by-laws. Where Barbour concludes is with the “beach”, epitomized in Toronto by Sunnyside. The beach was a public recreation space, clearly delineated by the local state, where men and women could socialize in a setting that was managed so that they would be safe, from both a physical and middle-class moral standpoint. Securing a safe physical space was a civic responsibility; spaces were identified and monitored by civic planning and medical experts and safety ensured through lifeguards, equipment and the proper shaping of the environment. Securing a safe moral space also was a civic responsibility, defined by moral reformers and enforced through legal and social regulation of dress and comportment. On the matter of dress, at the turn of the twentieth century, this ideally meant all teenage and adult bathers would wear neck-to-knee swimming costumes, although this would be modified within a generation. At the least, however, bathers were expected to swim where they were told by experts it was safe to do so, and to swim wearing at least something more than their birthday suit.

Barbour is at his best in complicating what could be treated as a simple “from-to” story. One way of telling this story would be to show how middle-class reformers...
succeeded in creating morally- and physically-regulated beaches, imposing their vision of appropriate moral behaviour on all Torontonians, particularly the working class. Another way of telling the story is to reframe the story slightly, focusing on working-class resistance to those same middle-class moral reformers. Barbour’s account is more intriguing; he is as interested -- perhaps even more interested -- in the persistence of “vernacular bathing”. He shows that efforts to create the ideal beach and swimming experience were made difficult by geography. The city was framed by Lake Ontario as well as two riverines, creating many nooks and crannies that could be used as “swimming holes”. It wasn’t that difficult to find informal spaces where working-class bathers could evade regulation. And, adding a further twist, Barbour contends that enforcement efforts were often half-hearted. Many middle-class males, those who might be expected to make and enforce the law, were less than enthusiastic supporters of the bathing reformers. Concerned that the modern city was making men soft, they viewed vernacular bathing not as morally dangerous but as an authentic, masculine experience in an inauthentic and increasingly feminized world, a harmless rite of passage engaged in by boys.

Still, in spite of this persistence, Barbour insists on presenting vernacular bathing and the beach as competing systems, one in which vernacular bathing eventually would be “cast aside” (217). Nude bathing would re-emerge in the twentieth century, but Barbour argues it does so within the beach system, offering a contained space that is the exception that proves the rule – only here are beachgoers permitted NOT to wear a bathing suit. This, then, seems to get to the bottom line for Barbour: the transformation is about whether swimming devoid of clothing is accepted or at least tolerated, or seen as an exception and contained to very particular places.

Perhaps I was wrong, and the subtitle ought to have been How Toronto Learned to Love and Wear Bathing Suits. But is that all “vernacular bathing” amounted to – men and boys swimming nude in daylight hours? If so, what do we make of the fact that Barbour tells us that “nude” does not always mean devoid of clothing. Sometimes, he tells us, it might simply mean that men and boys were wearing “the ubiquitous but still illegal bathing trunks” (12). I suspect that one of the reasons Barbour mentions this is because of his sources; it is sometimes difficult to know whether observers are discussing swimmers devoid of clothing, or simply not wearing what to the observer was insufficiently modest and/or legally-defined swimwear. Clearly in some instances it is the former. But not always.

Why mention this? Part of the unexpected nature of Barbour’s argument is that he upends the story about swimwear, a story that has been followed by more than one scholar. Douglas Booth, for example, describes the story of the twentieth century beach in Australia as one of gradual “undressing” between 1900 and the 1970s, as bathing suits covered less and less of the body of Australian surfers and beachgoers. Barbour agree that by the 1930s, “bathing suits were getting smaller, people were already exposing more skin, and society no longer had a problem with it” (196). If we make clothing the measure of this transformation, it seems to me, male swimwear on the beach of the 1930s may have more closely resembled that of some vernacular
bathers, only now it had become more acceptable even to middle-class moralists, and, as Barbour indicates, ever more difficult to regulate. True, it was no longer possible or acceptable to swim at formal beaches fully undressed, but that, it seems to me, is to tell only a part of the story.

How proper swimwear is defined is also an interesting story about identity and the body, one that perhaps could have been given a little more attention. Indeed, even the formal beach, for all of its legal and social regulation, seems to have been a place, and continued to be a place, where some men -- and women -- felt free enough to challenge dress codes. Men slyly rolled down their tops, eventually shedding them altogether. Women who wanted to swim searched for a bathing costume that was more functional than some of the suits designed for modesty. Both men and women, but especially women, ended up in suits that exposed more and more of their naked skin to the public gaze. While the search for functional swimwear did not end; it did get somewhat sidetracked by the promotion of sensual and eroticized swimwear.

Did nude swimming “re-emerge” in the late twentieth century, as Barbour contends, or did it develop in the same way that at least some swimwear appears to have, by men and women challenging inherited dress codes? In his epilogue, Barbour notes the way in which advocates of nude beaches increasingly focus on moral arguments, arguing for a beach free of sex and sexuality. It may be possible to think about advocates for nude beaches as reacting not only to the sexualized nude beaches that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, which to some extent is how Barbour frames it, but also to the evolution of swimwear during the twentieth century, for they made the argument that no bathing suit was less erotic than a skimpy one.

Do I think Barbour needs to have told some of the story of swimwear? Perhaps not entirely, but it does raise a question about whether he makes the transformation to the beach more dramatic on this issue that it may actually have been, and more central to the contested nature of the beach. It also raises questions about whether he emphasizes the beach as a place of regulation at the expense of thinking of it also as a liberating and contested space. His own account of Sunnyside, for example, is of an ongoing contest over what constituted appropriate behaviour and comportment at the beach, and it was not just over what one was wearing.

There are other stories to tell about the beach, both during and beyond the period that is Barbour’s focus. Barbour tells some of them in a book that is more sophisticated and complex than I have undoubtedly made it out to be. Perhaps I was thrown by the title – Undressed Toronto – after all.
On June 22, 1911, two young men drowned in Toronto’s Don River. At the peak of a heat wave—the temperature that afternoon was 33 degrees (91°F)—Cristo Tonny and Vasil Poleff were in a group of Macedonian men cooling off in the river, located a few blocks from the working-class neighbourhood where they lived. Poleff, apparently dazed from a dive into shallow water, dragged Tonny with him below the surface. Help came from other swimmers and a local doctor, but too late to revive either of the men.

It was a familiar tragedy of the industrial city. As Dale Barbour relates in Undressed Toronto, drownings were a regular feature of Toronto summers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the population flocked to unofficial bathing spots on the Don and Humber Rivers and along the Lake Ontario waterfront. Tonny and Poleff’s deaths were a small item in the day’s news, reported on the ninth page of an edition of the Globe that was dominated by the Coronation Day celebrations of the city’s British majority. In Barbour’s reading, however, their story takes on new significance. Not only does it provide a rare glimpse of the largely male and working-class culture of the swimming hole, but it helps to connect that world with wider discussions of how to manage water and bathing bodies in a growing city.

Those questions were far from settled in the period covered by Undressed Toronto, which encompasses Toronto’s transformation from a small colonial lakeport to a modern urban centre. Debates that began in the Victorian era—over how to make swimming safe, what level of nudity was acceptable, or how to keep the water clean—continued well into the twentieth century, reflecting evolving ideas about the body, risk, and public behaviour. Those small changes were tied up in a larger shift that runs through the study: bathing’s transition from a male privilege to a mass leisure activity available to the urban population at large. Newspapers, elected officials, citizen groups, and swimmers themselves all participated in this process, although Barbour makes it clear that by the late nineteenth century, urban reformers and an increasingly interventionist municipal administration were the main proponents of change. He also argues that the modernization of bathing culture was uneven and contested. While public beaches drew the crowds, boys and young men like Tonny and Poleff continued to bathe nude in swimming holes into the 1920s, protected by their seclusion and by associations with nature and virile masculinity. However, this was increasingly an exception to the new norm of the beach.

Dale Barbour’s study makes an important contribution to our understanding of how people navigated the urban environment in one North American city. His goal of “get[ting] beyond the fixation of looking at bathing simply as a moral issue” (10) is particularly welcome. While we have a good sense of how bathing bodies fit into efforts to order the city and reform urban society, we know less about how the population interacted with local waterways day-to-day, and what kind of places emerged from those interactions. Asking those basic questions allows the author to
centre the specificity of the city’s landscapes and experiences of the people that used them. For example, in Chapter 4, he uses a careful reading of newspapers, photographs, and memoirs to highlight the local knowledge and “reciprocal safety system” (122) that swimmers in the Don used to manage the risks of swift currents and a shifting riverbed (and which failed to save Cristo Tonny and Vasil Poleff’s lives in 1911). Later, in Chapter 6, he explores the social dynamics of Depression-era Sunnyside Beach, where distinctions of class and ethnicity were made visible even as they were transgressed. Free bathers were separated from paying customers by a clapboard fence (which they often ignored); Jewish Torontonians, the city’s largest ethnic minority, encountered overt anti-Semitism but nonetheless made a place for themselves among the crowds on the boulevard each summer.

One result of this approach is that while urban and moral reformers feature as significant actors in Undressed Toronto, the book constantly shows us the limits of their influence over the city’s landscape and the behaviour of its population. This offers a counterpoint to scholarly and popular representations of the period, which tend to portray Toronto as the Canadian headquarters of the social purity and urban Progressive movements, and the city whose public life was most in thrall to muscular middle-class Protestantism. My first questions for the author follow from this observation. Does the study of bathing create an opportunity for rethinking the limits (spatial, fiscal, etc.) of the reformist moment and the persistent image of “Toronto the Good”? How do we reconcile the Toronto we encounter in his book—where shorelines and rivers were “awash in naked bodies” (213) and beaches were lively, often disorderly public spaces—with the city where parks closed on Sundays and civil society seemed bent on founding a new moral order?

My second set of questions focus on bathing spaces as urban public spaces. From that angle, Undressed Toronto seems to me to offer two ways of reading the transformation of bathing culture. The first is a story of a private activity coming under public control: bringing people to the beach. By the early twentieth century, this was widely understood as the best way to contain and manage bathing bodies that were largely unregulated at the swimming hole. Lifeguards and seawalls reduced the number of injuries and drownings; showers and a chlorinated pool controlled for hygiene; written and unwritten codes of dress and behaviour regulated social mixing. Alongside that story is one of creating public accessibility: bringing the beach to the people. Barbour shows how controlled environments like Sunnyside opened up bathing to a wider cross-section of the urban population than the boys’ world of the swimming hole ever could. They also created the conditions for an urban sociability that cut across lines of gender, class, and ethnicity. Can the author tell us more about how this dynamic of control and accessibility played out on Toronto’s beaches? Were there tensions between the two? Did the growing presence of private business interests at the beach—bathing facilities, vendors, and by the 1920s commercial entertainment—complicate this process, or call into question bathing’s status as a public good? How did the beach compare in these respects to the public spaces like the municipal park or the street?
These are big questions, and I will leave it to the author to decide which of them he is most interested in tackling. One of the pleasures of Dale Barbour’s book is that it invites this kind of big thinking. *Undressed Toronto* gives new meaning to neglected stories like the drownings of the 1911 heat wave, while revealing the swimming hole and the beach to be rich sites for exploring people’s changing relationships to the urban environment.
Response by Dale Barbour, University of Manitoba and Brandon University

It has been a pleasure to read the responses from Sarah Schrank, Bruce Kidd, Ken Cruikshank, and Daniel Ross to *Undressed Toronto*. I appreciate their expertise, their whole-hearted and generous engagement with my work, and I appreciate Kara Schlichting’s labour in organizing this round table. It’s been a fantastic opportunity to return to my work and see it with new eyes.

I want to begin with a comment from Ken Cruikshank, where he notes that typically we look at issues like bathing in the nineteenth century as a battle between middle-class reformers trying to remake the urban landscape in their image and working-class bathers trying to hang onto cultural spaces of their own but that my account, “is as interested—perhaps even more interested—in the persistence of “vernacular bathing.” As I read the comment, I thought Ken, you have found me out.

The truth is that I am more interested in what I call the undressed Toronto of the nineteenth century than I am in the suited-up version that would define the twentieth century.

The title *Undressed Toronto* wasn’t meant to simply refer to men and boys skinny dipping in the nineteenth century but rather to stand in as a metaphor for the city itself. The Toronto I found in the nineteenth century was surprisingly undressed. The rules to manage the people within it were only just being written, the moral expectations of how people should behave within an urban environment only just thickening, the environment itself was only just industrializing, and even as it did, the process was messy and uncoordinated. Bird’s-eye view maps of Toronto in the nineteenth century were desperate to imagine a coherent industrial environment, but the people I found carving out recreational spaces along lake Ontario and along the rivers suggested something different to me. And the ambivalence of the city’s police and its leaders to police the recreational swimming holes and marginal spaces with the urban environment suggested to me how Toronto desperately didn’t want to get dressed.

I coined the term “vernacular bathing” to describe bathing in the nineteenth century because I was seeing something beyond simply nude bathing. (Indeed, as Cruikshank suggests, sometimes the bathers were not “officially” nude but instead wearing trunks, sold in stores since the nineteenth century, but not legally acceptable on the beach until the 1930s.) “Vernacular” was intended to capture the local language that bathers adopted to manage themselves and provide their own security in a city that lacked police, lifeguards, or clearly defined bathing environments. There needed to be an embodied language of the swimming hole to help manage an unpredictable environment; people shared warnings, stories of people who had drowned, looked out for each other, and attempted to rescue each other in times of danger or called in passersby for help.
The beach, in contrast, I portrayed as a formal space: particularly in Toronto where much of the city’s waterfront has been shaped by human intervention. The beach is a space of cultural expectations and regulations that were layered on the shoreline and on the bodies using it. Toronto’s beaches are expected to behave in a certain fashion, offer a gentle slope into the water, because they’ve been built to perform that way. We expect rules of behaviour and dress when at the beach. The beach is a liminal space weighted with expectations, even if we’re choosing to bend them.

But as Kidd and Cruikshank are suggesting, I created a binary that didn’t need to exist. Many of my vernacular bathers were never quite so nude as the complaints about their appearance might suggest and people at the beach, in the late nineteenth century and today, were and are never quite so clothed as cultural expectations demand. Even at the beach today—even at a pool today—we’re never able to cast aside the embodied relationship with the environment that I argued was fundamental to vernacular bathing. You still need to learn the language of the beach, its currents, depressions, elevations, and dangers. People still turn to each other for help, rather than assuming a lifeguard will come racing to the rescue. And, certainly, in Toronto people stroll beyond the boundaries of defined civic beaches and find bathing spaces of their own. I don’t think it hurts my argument to acknowledge the messiness of the past and the limits of controls today.

Sarah Schrank asked how Toronto worked to preserve a “state of nature” during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. I think that’s a great question and it dovetails to points that Daniel Ross and Bruce Kidd raised as well. It’s tempting to argue that there were many efforts to maintain a state of nature during this period. This was the high tide of park building across North America, with cities making a conscious effort to protect and build “nature” within their boundaries by reforesting parks, building parkways, and, yes, building beaches. And yet I don’t think buildings parks is the same thing as “preserving” a state of nature.

We could look at the scouting movement which takes off across North America and similar efforts, such as the Fresh Air Fund in Toronto, which were created to immerse children in nature. We could look at how urban canoeing allowed couples to promenade in nature. I think all of these examples capture how reformers and city builders imagined that nature could restore people and counter the physical and moral impacts of industrialization.

But I also think Toronto’s fascination with the bathing boy and the tenacious effort to enable or allow nude bathing in the city even as efforts to commercialize the beach were emerging suggests the distinct opportunity for preserving a state of nature that reformers imagined bathing provided. The city’s leaders and moral reformers, with a nod to Daniel Ross’s first question, saw bathing through a profoundly gendered lens. By blending nudity in the imagined pristine element of a swimming hole, bathing allowed young male bodies to exist within a state of nature in a way that other activities couldn’t match. It was the ability of vernacular bathing to preserve masculinity and male privilege that kept reformers at bay. Reformers were driven to
change and reshape the urban environment at the beginning of the twentieth century but they were also ambivalent about the industrial and the regulated world they were helping to create. I think the blend of modernism, anti-modernism, and this fixation with threatened masculinity in the reform movement are a more potent mix than we often admit.

Bruce Kidd calls for a better integration of pools into this story and I agree that could have been a critical addition because the pool becomes one of the primary spaces where nude male bathing, and this male privilege of being able to exist within a state of nature, is preserved well into the twentieth century. As I note in my work, some of Toronto’s first pools were built as floating baths along the waterfront in an effort to allow boys to continue to bath nude within them without having to worry about prying eyes. And as Kidd notes spaces like the University of Toronto’s Hart House, and we could add YMCA pools to the list, preserved the privilege of male nude bathing well into the twentieth century.

We’ll end at Hanlan’s Point. As Schrank notes, Hanlan’s Point re-emerged on Toronto Island as a queer nude bathing and cruising space in the latter half of the twentieth century. Toronto Island is a park, but in the twentieth century its western end was stripped of cottages and an airport was added to the island; the losses and addition created an ideal marginal space for gay men to cruise and people to skinny dip as a new culture of nude bathing emerged after the 1950s. Even when policing ramped up on the 1970s and 1980s it wasn’t enough to drive the new crowd of nude bathers out and Toronto finally recognized Hanlan’s as a legal clothing-optional beach in 2002. Since then Hanlan’s Point has balanced roles as a space for social nudism, counterculture hedonism, and gay cruising while, on busy summer days, resting under the watchful eye of a team lifeguards. But Hanlan’s Point has been in the news this year as Toronto works on a Master Plan for the island. Early drafts of the Master Plan called for “formalizing” an unofficial event space near Hanlan’s Point by adding permanent power connections and creating an natural amphitheatre for hosting events. The proposal raised concerns from Hanlan’s Point supporters who worried encouraging events near the beach would draw more people, surveillance, and a stronger police presence and thereby disrupt the fragile balance of uses at the site. The city, hearing the concerns, has announced it will drop plans for an enhanced festival site. But the flare up suggests how Hanlan’s Point’s, despite being a legal clothing-optional beach,

2. Kevin Hurren, “Facelift or face slap? Here’s what’s happening to one of Canada’s queerest beaches: When a “festival space” is proposed for Hanlan’s Point, patrons of the neighbouring beach organize,” Xtra*, February 24, 2023 2:00 pm EDT, https://xtramagazine.com/culture/hanlans-point-beach-proposed-festival-space-246272 accessed on Feb. 26, 2023.
remains a creature of the margin and its success depends on the city’s ability to continue to consciously keep it unmanaged.
About the Contributors

Ken Cruikshank is a Professor of History at McMaster University. He co-authored, with Nancy B. Bouchier, the award-winning *The People and the Bay: A Social and Environmental History of Hamilton Harbour*, which among any other topics, includes consideration of recreational swimming and the creation of beaches in an industrial port located not too far away from Toronto. He is currently completing a manuscript, *Giant’s Rib: Planning, Protection and Property in the Niagara Escarpment Landscape, 1955-1990*, a political history of the "quiet revolution in land use control" in Ontario, Canada.

Dale Barbour is a sessional instructor at the University of Manitoba and Brandon University with a research interest in recreational spaces, urban environments, and riparian environments. He is the author of *Winnipeg Beach: Leisure and Courtship in a Resort Town, 1900-1967* (2011) and *Undressed Toronto: From the Swimming Hole to Sunnyside, how a city learned to love the Beach, 1850-1935* (2021). He held the University of Winnipeg’s Riley Postdoctoral Fellowship in 2021.

Bruce Kidd is the Ombudsperson and a Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto. He teaches and writes about the history and political economy of Canadian and Olympic sport. He has authored or edited 13 books and hundreds of articles, papers, lectures, plays and film and radio scripts. *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (University of Toronto Press 1996), which recaptures the efforts of sport leaders in Canada in the period between the First and Second World War, won the Book Prize of the North American Society for Sport History in 1997. His most recent book (co-written with Simon Darnell and Russell Field) is *The History and Politics of Sport for Development* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019). His memoir, *A runner’s journey*, was published by University of Toronto Press in 2021. He has been dean of kinesiology and physical education, principal of the University of Toronto Scarborough, warden of Hart House, and director of Canadian Studies, all at U of T. He competed in the 1964 Olympics in athletics and is an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Daniel Ross is a professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal, where he teaches and researches the history of cities, urban culture, and local politics. His book *The Heart of Toronto* (UBC Press, 2022) explores how one North American city reimagined, debated, and rebuilt its downtown from the 1950s through the 1970s.

Kara Murphy Schlichting is Associate Professor of History at Queens College, City University of New York. Her work in late-19th and 20th-century American history sits at the intersection of urban and environmental history. She is the author of *New York Recentered: Building the Metropolis from the Shore* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Sarah Schrank, PhD, is Professor of History and Director of Graduate Studies for the College of Liberal Arts at California State University, Long Beach. She is the author of
Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles (2009); Free and Natural: Nudity and the American Cult of the Body (2019); and co-editor of Healing Spaces, Modern Architecture, and the Body (2017). Professor Schrank has held research fellowships from the Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University, the Haynes Foundation, the Wolfsonian, and the Huntington Library and was recently awarded the CSULB Outstanding Professor Award, 2021-2022.

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