

# “IT IS NOW WITHIN YOUR REACH”: ANNETTE KELLERMAN AND FEMININE AGENCY IN PHYSICAL CULTURE

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Summer, 1907. Boston, Massachusetts had miles of coastline and beaches, filled with swimmers, sunbathers, and sightseers of all ages. Fresh from Chicago where she had been performing aquatic stunts on the vaudeville circuit, Australian Annette Kellerman, one of the newest entertainers at Wonderland Amusement Park on Revere Beach, set out for a swim that she hoped would attract publicity for her new swimming and diving act. Upon her arrival, Kellerman, a professional swimmer whose fame arose from her attempted three crossings of the English Channel, was shocked by the state of dress of the many women on the beach: “How could these women swim with shoes-stockings, bloomers, skirts, overdresses with puffed sleeves, sailor collars, in some cases even tightly fitted corsets?”<sup>1</sup> Kellerman appeared on Revere Beach wearing the bathing costume she usually wore on stage: a modified, Australian man’s swimsuit, with sleeves and stockings sewn onto it to partially cover her limbs for modesty. Despite these nods to decorum, “the minute she put her foot on the beach and revealed her bare legs she elicited immediate ‘ooos’ and ‘ahhs’ and even some shrieks of terror.”<sup>2</sup> Kellerman never made it into the water; a gathering crowd alerted a policeman to the commotion and she was promptly arrested for public indecency.<sup>3</sup> Despite her protests, Kellerman was brought before a judge, where she made an impassioned speech on her own behalf, and argued for the right of all female swimmers to wear less restrictive bathing attire. She told the judge that swimming had helped her recover from a childhood illness, and ar-

gued for the many benefits of health and happiness it could bring to others. Speaking up in defense of her own swimwear, she derided the current swimming fashions for women, denouncing them as unsafe and impractical.<sup>4</sup> Kellerman won him over. The judge ruled that her one-piece suit was legal as long as she covered it with a robe until she was in the water.<sup>5</sup>

The Revere Beach confrontation was a total success for Kellerman. Not only had she been given a platform to espouse her views on swimming, fashion, and women’s athleticism, but she also gained free advertising for her new show at the amusement park, which had in all likelihood supported the publicity stunt. Following the incident, advertisements for her shows depicted Kellerman at the beach with the quote, “When the robe came off the police moved in.”<sup>6</sup> The Revere Beach event was only a single representation of the duality Kellerman faced throughout her lifetime; the warring desires of promoting health, ability, and agency for women, contrasted with the societal ideals of women as gentle “feminine” archetypes.

Annette Kellerman was a woman of many talents. Not only was she one of the finest professional female swimmer of her day, she was also a vaudeville and film star, lecturer, and writer on topics of fashion, health, beauty, and physical culture. Throughout her time in these many roles, she argued vehemently for the agency of women over their own health and bodies, using a variety of mediums to do so.

Historian Susan Cahn argues that in the 1910s and 1920s the female athletic image changed; Kellerman was one of that era’s sporting women who “helped fashion a new ideal of womanhood by modeling an athletic, energetic femininity.”<sup>7</sup> While

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Kellerman pushed for women's agency and responsibility, she was also subject to the changing social motivators of her era, including the rise of consumerism and visual media, particularly the notable rise of advertising. She was, on the one hand, used to promote the benefits of physical activity for beauty, femininity, and comeliness; however, on the other hand she used these same techniques to market herself as well. In appealing to these forces, Kellerman had to negotiate the changing terrain of sport and femininity by assuring consumers that being athletically active would not make a woman too "manly"; rather, it would enhance her inherent femininity, charms, and good looks. Her detractors were threatened by the idea of the "erosion of men's physical supremacy and the loss of distinct male and female preserves."<sup>8</sup>

Educators, promoters, performers, and others, therefore, had to carve out "a separate realm of play in which women could gain the traditional benefits of sport—health, fun, 'sportsmanship', and a cooperative ethos—without fear of sexual harm or the taint of masculinity."<sup>9</sup> Kellerman managed to navigate her way through these obstacles while still promoting women's athletic agency and their inherent right to be strong and beautiful. Although she was influenced by the social forces of her day, she herself was also an influential figure who pushed to rewrite many of the existing narratives about women, health, and physical culture.

#### THE AUSTRALIAN MERMAID

Annette Kellerman was born in 1886 in Darlinghurst, an eastern suburb of Sydney, Australia, to an Australian father and Alsatian-French mother.<sup>10</sup> Both her parents had musical backgrounds; her mother was a concert pianist and her father a violinist. They met when her mother, Alice, was sent by

the French government for piano demonstrations at Australia's International Exhibition.<sup>11</sup> Kellerman, the second of four siblings, was raised in a home that often hosted influential artists, actors, musicians, and writers. This exposure to many of the well-known

entertainers of the day may have influenced Kellerman's desires growing up to become either a famous actress or ballerina, and her later transition to vaudeville and film star.<sup>12</sup>

As Kellerman grew, she suffered from weakness in her legs, which one doctor blamed on allowing her to walk too soon as an infant and another diagnosed bone weakness, claiming she was stricken with "chalk in [her] bones."<sup>13</sup> Scholars have speculated that she may have suffered from either rickets or polio, but she herself never confirmed a diagnosis. She was, however, quite bowlegged and as a child wore iron braces on both of her legs in



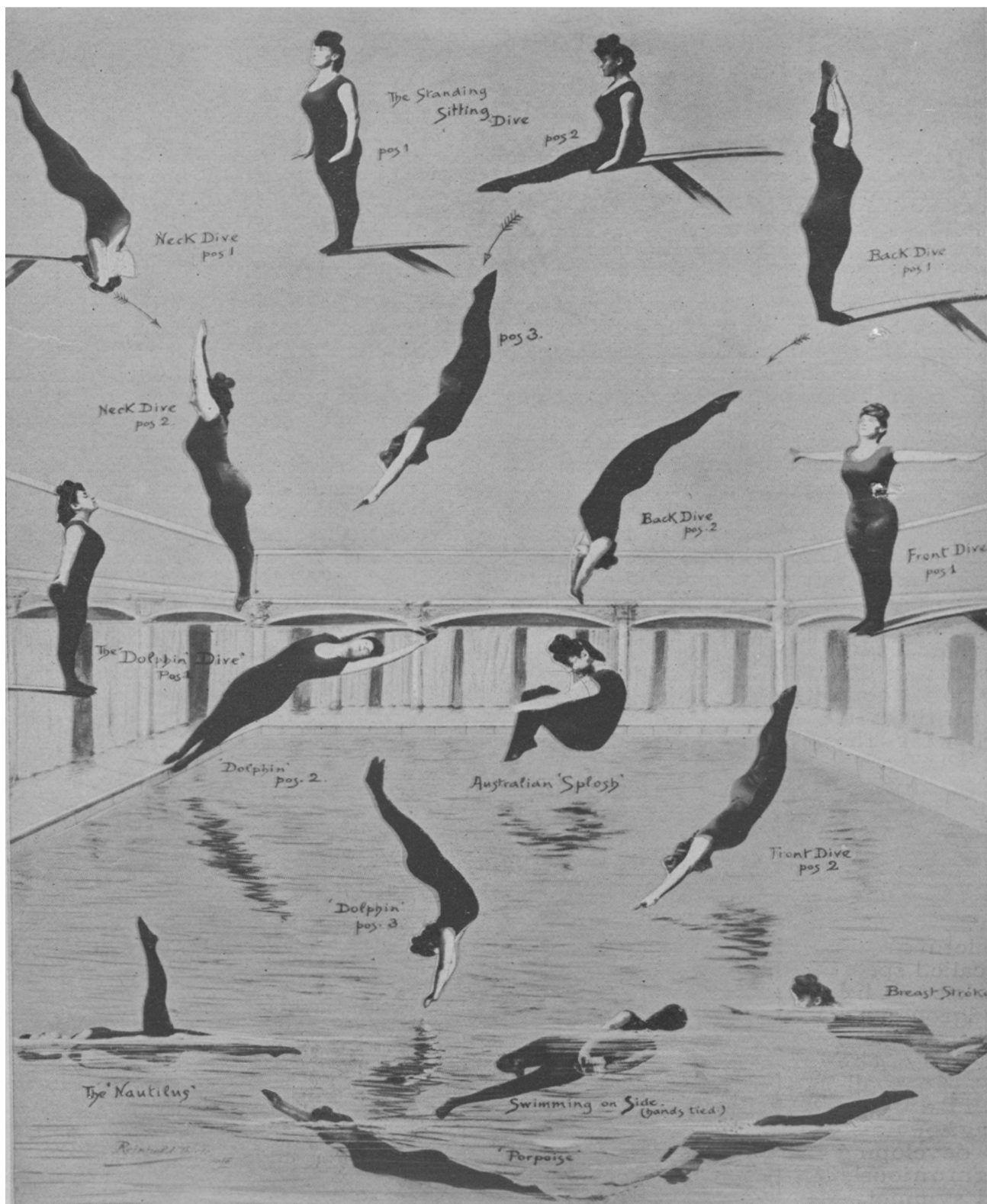
Annette Kellerman was blessed with a classically beautiful face that added to her allure as a performer. Her large, expressive eyes and flawless skin were much admired. (*Physical Culture*, July 1910)

order to walk until the age of seven.<sup>14</sup> She was prescribed a number of strengthening exercises in order to increase movement in her legs, but it wasn't until the braces were removed that a doctor recommended swimming lessons as a continuing treatment option. While Kellerman was initially resistant, she soon grew to love her time in the water and quickly outpaced her siblings, her leg strength and function steadily improving. This was the first example of Kellerman's sport and fitness participation raising feelings of empowerment within her: "Only a cripple can understand the intense joy that I experienced when little by little I found that my legs were growing stronger and taking on the normal shape and the normal powers with which the legs of other youngsters were endowed."<sup>15</sup> She claimed because of her swimming that by the age of thirteen "my legs were practically normal," although she still required supportive shoes and other minor support modifications until the age of eighteen.<sup>16</sup>



Kellerman began competing in swimming races and competitions at the age of fifteen. Her father, her most enthusiastic supporter, coach, and chaperone, was well-known in the local community and began organizing exhibitions in both swimming and diving for young Annette. Undoubtedly,

he used the additional income this provided the family as a main motivation. The highlight of these exhibitions came in a two-show-a-day contract at the Melbourne Exhibition Aquarium in 1902, when she was 16.<sup>17</sup> Over the next two years she continued to swim competitively and set many Australian swim-



Kellerman was one of the first advocates for swimming and diving as a form of exercise for women. This instructional montage appeared in the July 1910 issue of *Physical Culture* in Kellerman's article "How to Master Swimming."

ming records.<sup>18</sup> As she became more well-known and money continued to be a concern for the family, Kellerman and her father decided to travel to England in an effort to gain exposure in a different country with more plentiful opportunities. She wrote, "In Australia swimming is so much a sport for every one...that the very abundance of the sport makes it commonplace."<sup>19</sup> In heading for England, Kellerman and her father hoped to make their mark as a novelty in a place where swimming was not yet a leisure activity for the masses, as it was in Australia. Furthermore, Kellerman's beauty and charm, as well as her proven ability to attract a crowd and headline a show, clearly gave her father the confidence that their fortunes could only improve (both figuratively and literally) by taking their act abroad.

Kellerman arrived in England in early 1905 with little money and even less publicity. In order to increase her visibility, Kellerman and her father decided she should swim down the Thames River. This caught the attention of a reporter from the British newspaper the *Daily Mirror*, who offered to sponsor Kellerman for eight pounds a week during her training if she agreed to attempt to swim the English Channel.<sup>20</sup> On her first attempt to cross the Channel on 24 August 1905, she competed with six men.<sup>21</sup> Although she lasted for "six and three-quarter hours," she battled seasickness and chafing from her swimsuit (her original attempt at a modified version of a men's suit, with extended stockings and added sleeves) and eventually dropped out.<sup>22</sup> None of the other swimmers successfully crossed the Channel either.<sup>23</sup> She would attempt the swim twice more in 1906 but would not succeed either time, facing similar challenges and blaming her lack of strength (though not of endurance). The first woman to successfully accomplish the Channel crossing would be the American swimmer Gertrude Ederle, who com-

pleted the feat in 1926.<sup>24</sup>

Following her attempted Channel crossings, Kellerman continued to swim in distance exhibitions in Europe, travelling to France to swim a portion of the Seine River and to Vienna to swim the Danube.<sup>25</sup> After competing in these long-distance swims, she returned to London and turned her focus to Vaudeville and a new diving act, which she performed in a variety of venues, including the famous Hippodrome Theater.<sup>26</sup> By the age of twenty, her diving stunts had become her currency. She and her father travelled to the United States in 1906 after receiving an invitation to perform at the White City Amusement Park in Chicago.<sup>27</sup> Kellerman became a mainstay of the park, at times performing up to fifty-five shows in a week.<sup>28</sup> At the close of her Chicago run, she journeyed to Boston with a new manager (and, unbeknownst to either of them at the time, her future husband) James R. Sullivan. Her father joined the rest of her family in Paris, where he died a few months later.<sup>29</sup>



Annette Kellerman's decision to wear a full-length, one-piece bathing suit hardly seems scandalous in our modern era. But in 1907 when she appeared on Revere Beach, it caused a great scandal that helped make her an important celebrity. Kellerman would also break new ground in her film career as she was the first actress to appear nude on screen.

Following the excitement of her arrest at the public beach, Kellerman continued her diving performances at the Wonderland Amusement Park in Revere, Massachusetts, enjoying the publicity gained from the incident. Most notably, the commotion brought her to the attention of Benjamin Franklin (B.F.) Keith, a theater owner who was an influential personality in the founding of Vaudeville.<sup>30</sup> Keith began his career as a circus worker but soon moved into production and management, founding a series of theaters in the northeastern United States which helped institute the continuous variety show, in which one act performed after another with no downtime. He eventually owned more than one hundred theaters across the country and became one of the most powerful men in the entertainment industry.<sup>31</sup> Keith prided himself on providing a high level of entertainment, even in a continuously



running setting, recognizing that “both quantity and quality were desired on the part of vaudeville audiences.”<sup>32</sup> Kellerman promised to provide both. After watching one of her performances, Keith signed her to a two-show-a-day contract for \$300 a week (in today’s figures around \$1700), and Kellerman moved to New York and began performing in vaudeville shows on Broadway.<sup>33</sup>

Despite a lawsuit filed against her by Keith (which began when she signed concurrently with another manager), Kellerman’s time on the vaudeville circuit in New York was a rousing success.<sup>34</sup> She attracted large crowds for her diving performance shows and at times made as much as \$3000 a week.<sup>35</sup> Well-known theater manager and writer Robert Grau called her “The Queen of Modern Vaudeville.”<sup>36</sup> Her life proceeded apace until 1912, when Keith proposed drastically lowering Kellerman’s salary.<sup>37</sup> Her refusal led to the end of their partnership and her venture into the rapidly developing film business.

While still touring independently in the vaudeville scene, Kellerman began to appear in some small roles for the Vitagraph Company, both as herself and in fictional parts.<sup>38</sup> The first of these is thought to have been around 1907, however the loss of these early films makes it difficult to pinpoint an exact date for the advent of her film career. After leaving Keith, she proposed an idea for a full-length feature film about mermaids to Captain Leslie T. Peacock, a well-known Hollywood screenwriter.<sup>39</sup> Carl Laemmle at Universal Studios agreed to finance the picture, and her first major film, *Neptune’s Daughter*, was released in 1914. Kellerman had a creative voice on the project and insisted on doing all of her own swimming and diving stunts.<sup>40</sup> The film cost \$35,000 to produce and upon release it made Universal Studios over one million dollars in returns.<sup>41</sup> Kellerman made a name for herself as a major film presence alongside other early actresses like Florence Lawrence (also at Universal) and Mary Pickford. She continued acting in major motion pictures with her fifth and final full-length film, *Venus of the South Seas*, filmed in 1924.<sup>42</sup>

Kellerman continued to perform in theaters and vaudeville venues, as well as participating in the filming of some of her swimming and diving stunts. Following the decline of Vaudeville in the 1930s, Kellerman and husband Sullivan spent more time in Australia and the United States.<sup>43</sup> She performed for charity on occasion, raising over £25,000 for the Australian Red Cross during the course of World War II, for example.<sup>44</sup> She also consulted on the filming of her biography, *Million Dollar Mermaid*, starring Esther Williams. In the early 1950s, Kellerman, a life-

long vegetarian, opened a health food store in Long Beach, California, before retiring with Sullivan to the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia. The pair remained there until Sullivan’s death in 1970 of Asian Flu.<sup>45</sup>

## WOMEN’S AGENCY AND PHYSICAL CULTURE

Popular ideas about womanhood and femininity were undergoing many changes in the 1910s and 1920s. The number of athletic women was on the rise, which challenged the traditional roles allowed to women and men both in the home and in the public domain. As the image of the ideal woman was evolving from the voluptuous to the Gibson Girl to the “natural” girl, active female competitors and athletes “cast suspicion on the femininity of women in sport,” according to historian Susan Cahn, yet their presence “also contributed to the dynamic image of the ‘athletic girl’ who refused to be excluded from a domain of masculine privilege and pleasure.”<sup>46</sup> Physical culturists of the time were taking note. The athletic girl had rewritten the narrative to include previously ‘unwomanly’ features such as strength and muscular development. An article in *Physical Culture* magazine recognized this changing landscape: “Strength should always be an attribute of womanhood; in fact, it is a most important part of real womanhood....it not only makes one a better human being, but a more forceful woman as well.”<sup>47</sup> Not only was the image of the ideal woman evolving, ideas about her personality, interests, and intelligence were changing as well. Cahn explains, “Earlier associations between beauty and female purity, spirituality, and inner character faded before modern notions that linked beauty to the active, ornamented, external body. Where the Victorian female body was frail, pale, fully-covered, and staid, [the new] much worshipped body was tan, lithe, and in constant motion.”<sup>48</sup>

The linkage between health and physical beauty was a popular one at this time, with much of the American public viewing a beautiful figure, face, or other physical aspect as a sign of the health of the inner body. Marion Malcom wrote in an article for *Physical Culture* magazine, “true objective beauty expresses a normal and healthy condition, vitality, and all-around vigor. It is, therefore, largely a matter of cultivation through the same methods that one adopts in building health, strength, and all around bodily energy.”<sup>49</sup> Physical educators of the time also lived this dichotomy, balancing their promotion of women’s health with a desire to “preserve gender differences, and to protect a female sexual sensibil-

ity believed to be more delicate and vulnerable than men's."<sup>50</sup> Adding to this narrative was Dr. Dudley Allen Sargent's article proclaiming Kellerman "The Perfect Woman," and comparing her to strongman Eugen Sandow who was considered the perfect man.<sup>51</sup> Sargent, a physical educator, director of the gymnasium at Harvard University, and the founder of a school for women's education, was seen at the time as an expert on physical education and development, with Kellerman calling him "the leading American Authority on Physical Culture."<sup>52</sup> Among his other notable contributions to the development of physical education programs and the promotion of gymnastics, Sargent was a proponent of anthropometry—the study of physical proportions. He devised a graded series of charts to measure body proportion and symmetry, and as scholar Roberta J. Park explains, "arranged to have sculptor H.H. Kitson fashion nude statues of the 'typical' American male and female student from several thousand measurements he had collected at Harvard and obtained from other colleges."<sup>53</sup> The statues were later displayed at the 1893 World's Fair. With Kellerman's physical frame gaining national notoriety, Sargent turned his attentions to her proportions. After "displaying her perfections," and submitting to measurement, Sargent declared Kellerman "the most perfectly formed beautiful woman I have ever seen," and stated that she "embodies all of the physical qualities that most of us demand in the 'perfect woman.'"<sup>54</sup> He compared her measurements to those of the Venus de Milo, leading many to declare her as setting the physical standard for the body of the ideal woman.<sup>55</sup> While Sargent complimented Kellerman's strength and muscular development, he also made sure to note that she "succeeded in 'getting by'...in regard to comeliness" and that she possessed features which "unite[s] the elements of womanly charm and physical strength."<sup>56</sup> Even the leading physical educators, it appears, could not let an opportunity pass to comment on Kellerman's maintenance of her femininity and beauty while praising her strength and athletic development.

While many scholars have written on Kellerman's roles in fashion, vaudeville, and film, few have looked specifically at her contributions to the field of physical culture, and the message she sent to women about their bodies and inherent abilities. She believed in the idea of "healthful beauty, beauty as a manifestation of health rather than virtue."<sup>57</sup> Kellerman was a popular lecturer as well, giving talks on health, fitness, beauty, and swimwear. In these lectures she would speak directly to women,

addressing them as her partners in physical culture. "These lectures were attended by thousands," Kellerman claimed, "in fact, I do not believe I have ever lectured but that hundreds were turned away from the doors."<sup>58</sup> Articles in popular magazines of the time, such as *Physical Culture*, also gave Kellerman a platform to promote her views on women and their participation in sport and exercise.

In her film and live shows, although Kellerman was able to incorporate certain messages about physical culture, she was limited by the involvement and direction of others. A site where she had complete control over her own message was in her series of mail order courses, which aimed at providing women with exercises and healthy living advice to increase beauty, health, and happiness. To advertise her course, Kellerman released two promotional books, *The Body Beautiful* and *Health, Beauty, Happiness*. Kellerman used these advertising booklets for her mail order course to highlight both desirable and undesirable physical features for women, as well as to publicize her writings, which provided solutions for many general health problems.<sup>59</sup> Contrary to those who believed women should not exercise and viewed them to be "naturally prone to stress and nervous illness," Kellerman promoted exercise as a way for women to treat many of their nervous problems, as well as a whole host of other physical and mental issues.<sup>60</sup>

While the booklets repeatedly mention the health benefits of a regular, directed exercise program, they are in many ways aimed at women concerned with beauty and the state of their outward appearance. One booklet, after all, is titled *The Body Beautiful* and the header of one subsection is "A Beautiful Figure."<sup>61</sup> While Kellerman's focus in her own life was on the athletic feats she could accomplish through control over and improvement of her physical body, her courses are clearly aimed at women who are less concerned with performing physical feats and more concerned with adhering to popular societal standards of beauty. As she states in the conclusion of *The Body Beautiful*, "This booklet was prepared for two reasons; the first being to tell you how and why an intelligent system of living would not only make you a healthy, happy woman, but a perfectly formed one as well."<sup>62</sup> Her references to exercise throughout the books are often deliberately phrased in relation to appearance, at one point saying of herself, "I was growing into the ungainly proportions of a fat woman," and "no one can have pretty features if they are distorted and submerged in fat."<sup>63</sup> Exercise, for the readers of these pamphlets, is in many

ways “the one thing which will enable them to retain their good looks under any and all conditions,” and vitality (which comes from proper exercise) is “necessary not only in rendering the body immune from disease, but is a necessity to a good personal appearance.”<sup>64</sup> Even some of the descriptions of the physical exercises are couched in terms of looks: “a good carriage with grace of movement, almost more than anything else, contributes to beautiful, attractive womanhood,” and developing the bust is foremost described as “to give femininity to the appearance.”<sup>65</sup>

While the contents of *The Body Beautiful* are aimed at women of all ages, so are the references to physical beauty. For older women, Kellerman recommends exercises by saying “The freshness and bloom may be restored at least in part to every woman who has begun to fade,” while “mothers who would see their daughters become...beautiful in face and form, can realize their desires only by having them live properly and by employing intelligent methods of body building.”<sup>66</sup>

This is not to say that the physical benefits of exercise are ignored by Kellerman; on the contrary, much of the pamphlets focus almost exclusively on the health benefits of exercise and diet, as opposed to the beauty benefits. She constantly intertwines the concepts of beauty and health: “When this body-machine is inefficient, it is not beautiful. When it reaches the acme of efficiency as in the case of the superior athlete, it is invariably and inevitably beautiful.”<sup>67</sup> She also incorporates the positive results of exercise directly into her focus on beauty, saying “To look well, one must feel well, and the woman who feels truly well has traversed three-quarters of the distance in attaining beauty.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, while the health benefits may be of secondary concern to the readers of the pamphlet, Kellerman insisted on the two being interrelated. “Health and happiness,” she says, “go hand in hand. Without health, none can be happy, so when all is summed up, health represents

about everything there is in life.”<sup>69</sup> Kellerman clearly views good health as the entryway to all good things in life. She writes, “The very highest standard of human health not only insures the happiness of the individual but it enables her to get the most out of life in a serious way, enables her to accomplish that which would be impossible without the boundless energy that comes with a perfect bodily condition.”<sup>70</sup>

As is often found in Kellerman’s writings, she places the burden of responsibility on the shoulders

of the suffering women: “They [women] are learning, too, that it is an indication of gross negligence on their part to be burdened with these troubles.”<sup>71</sup> She equates a developed body and healthful figure with “self-respect,” saying, “it is as significant of carelessness and slothfulness to be lacking in these respects as it is to go about with one’s gown unfastened.”<sup>72</sup> When discussing health issues, specifically “women’s troubles” (a euphemism for any reproductive or pelvic issue), she says these disorders are “entirely unnecessary, unnatural, and almost inexcusable.”<sup>73</sup> While she places accountability for health and wellness on women, she also uses this to reassure them that change is possible, saying “I make it possible for every woman to keep herself in perfect health. Do not therefore feel your own trouble is hopeless.”<sup>74</sup> Using herself as an example, she claims her own success in attaining the “perfect” body has all been due “solely

to my knowledge of the laws and requirements of health, and to my studies and understanding of all subjects associated with body culture and the building of health and vitality.”<sup>75</sup> Kellerman encourages the women in the course that they themselves are capable of remaking and improving their own bodies; she gives them agency over their physical forms. Returning to her belief in the inherent virtues and strengths of women, her goal in creating these courses is to “help all women to become as perfect in every way, as healthy, as vigorous, as beautiful and as happy as Nature meant them to be.”<sup>76</sup>



Like many celebrities, Kellerman was known for her sense of style. Although of small stature, standing only 5' 3 3/4" tall and weighing 137 pounds, she shows great presence in one of her signature headscarves and fur coat in this photo from Bain News Service taken in April 1912. Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Kellerman's courses could be said to be promoting the same ideas as much of the advertising of the time; for a certain sum one's body could (and should) be reworked to fit certain standards. Vaudeville scholar Andrew L. Erdman referenced Kellerman's courses by saying, "the Kellerman school paradoxically sold women 'Nature' and a return to the natural via a commercial product subscribed to from afar."<sup>77</sup> However, this seems to take a cynical, surface view of the products without actually reading the material to determine the true intent. Within them, along with beauty, Kellerman promotes agency, responsibility, and the myriad benefits of health, while assuring women that they too have a place in the rapidly changing times of the early twentieth century: "It seems self-evident that woman's place in the world is just where she is fitted to be and just where she chooses to be."<sup>78</sup>

### PHYSICAL BEAUTY

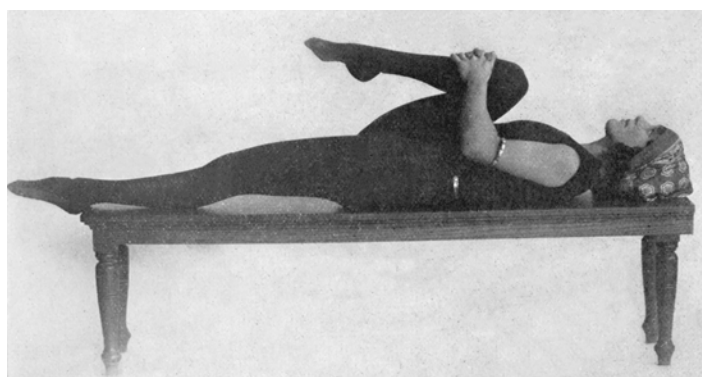
Perhaps nowhere does Kellerman walk the line between health and beauty as finely as she does in her 1918 book *Physical Beauty-How To Keep It*. The first two chapters of the book are a frank discussion on the benefits of possessing and cultivating beauty and health; as the book continues, it devotes chapters to various methods Kellerman endorses to improve both "function and form," including diet, dancing, swimming, posture, and even breathing. The final chapters are divided by body part (legs, arms, shoulders and neck, etc.) and detail and describe various exercises which women can perform in order to strengthen these areas. As in her booklets, in describing these exercises she focuses on both the beauty benefits as well as the health benefits of regular, systemic exercise. She continues to explain the two concepts as inherently interconnected: "Behind this beauty of face and beauty of form is an even more fundamental fact that a woman must be beautiful of body to the very core of her being; she must have health-beauty, vital radiant health that keeps the bloom upon her cheek."<sup>79</sup>

The chapter "The Muscular Corset" showcases her strong anti-corset beliefs for which she was

well known. She states that "physicians and scientists say—and rightly—that corsets have been a prime cause of the majority of woman's ills...corsets have caused endless harm and misery in the world."<sup>80</sup> She believed that discipline regarding health and exercise would allow women to achieve beauty without the aid of cosmetics or beauty devices. Kellerman's definition of the muscular corset involved the muscles around the waist; she believed that strengthening and developing these muscles would give women the strength and appearance that would eliminate the need for corsets. Kellerman considered the development of the muscular corset to have many benefits: "Beauty is its first but not its only reward. The internal organs benefit from the firmer support and greater strength of the region...She is more efficient as an animal, as a human being, and as a woman."<sup>81</sup>

Although the book, as can be assumed from the title, focuses on the beauty benefits of health and wellness, by no means does Kellerman neglect to discuss women's health. She reminds women, "particular bodily defects may worry you more than the general

principles of health, yet to remedy them you need the basis of perfect health, lest you mend one part of your physical machinery only to find it breaking elsewhere. Remember that a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and you must, therefore, cultivate bodily health and beauty in its entirety."<sup>82</sup> This book is also a delightful showcase of Kellerman's natural wit,



Kellerman's ideal proportions helped sell her mail-order training courses and movie tickets. Here she demonstrates a stretch movement in *My Own Methods*, a pamphlet of photographs that correlated with a training manual.

which comes through in much of the writing. When discussing her measurements and comparison to the Venus de Milo, she states, "Now let us consider the Venus—and please do not idealise her with any silly notion of absolute and final perfection. She is only a graven image of one man's ideas of feminine beauty and the fact that that man died two thousand years ago does not make her perfect."<sup>83</sup> She also communicates her disdain for men's patriarchal ideas that prevented many women from participating in exercise and physical activity, mentioning that they have been tainted "with that stupid custom of enslaving woman to physical inactivity that arose out of man's sense of property in woman."<sup>84</sup> In encouraging women to strengthen their abdominal muscles by danc-



ing, she encourages them to “Get up a kicking competition with your best chum or your husband, if you are lucky enough to have one who doesn’t think that the duties of womanhood are so sacred that he would condemn you to make the bricks of humanity without the straw of health.”<sup>85</sup>

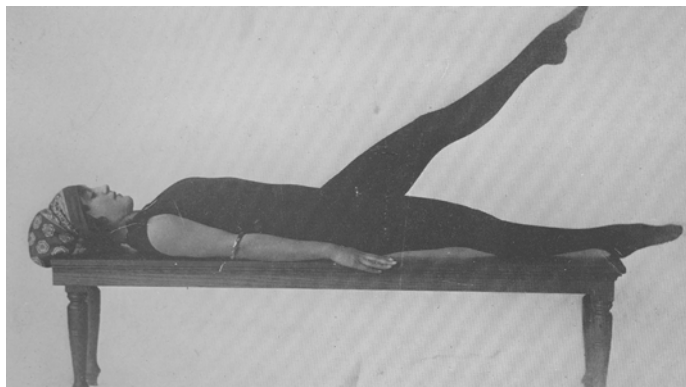
Kellerman’s instructional tome *How to Swim* also appeared in 1918 and contains an abridged biography covering the events of Kellerman’s life up to publication, a discussion of the benefits of swimming, and instructional exercises and explanations teaching the basics of swimming for health. In all of these Kellerman “address[es] myself particularly to the woman reader.”<sup>86</sup> These include dry-land exercises, swimming instructions from beginner to advanced levels, lifesaving techniques, an explanation of water sports and games, and lessons in diving. Kellerman continues to associate beauty directly with health: “Every one knows that sparkling beauty must emanate from a healthy condition of the body. Fresh air, full play for the muscles and complete enjoyment of necessary exercise—all these aid in the establishment of health. And all these are to be found in swimming.”<sup>87</sup> She continues her tradition of encouraging women to participate in physical activity through a discussion of the health and beauty benefits of swimming, and again shows her wit when addressing societal norms she finds frustrating: “the young woman is corseted and gowned and thoroughly imbued with the idea that it is most unlady-like to be possessed of legs or to know how to use them. All of this pseudo-moral restriction discourages physical activity in woman.”<sup>88</sup> Kellerman is able to make her ideas about women’s agency known, acknowledging how women’s participation is affected by social mores and arguing for a different future for these women.

#### THE CIVIL WAR OVER SWIMWEAR

Another area where Kellerman ran against the norm was in her public push for safer (but also considered more revealing) swimming attire for women. Her arrest on the beach in Massachusetts for indecent exposure was not to be the only time she came up against both government and societal reg-

ulations presiding over women’s dress on the beach and in the water. Kellerman penned at least two articles on the subject for *Physical Culture Magazine*: “Prudery as an Obstacle to Swimming” and “What to Wear in the Water.” The topic was also said to be a favorite of hers in lectures and interviews.

In “Prudery,” Kellerman excoriates the “evil minded prudery” which prevents women from safely enjoying the beach and endangers her when swimming.<sup>89</sup> She describes the heavy costumes which weigh down female swimmers in the water, and how these outfits preclude swimmers from safely venturing into open water due to “the handicap of their garments.”<sup>90</sup> She is perplexed and disappointed by these limitations because of the limits it places on women being able to enjoy swimming. She references women’s natural ability as swimmers (which she had done constantly in interviews going back to her youth), but also speaks of the benefits women miss out on when they are prevented from swimming. “Anything which discourages swimming among women, encourages danger to life, to say nothing



Kellerman should probably be regarded as the first celebrity women’s fitness expert. In *My Own Methods*, she demonstrates leg lifts just as Jane Fonda will do decades later.

about the incidental loss to health. Just how many girls and young women have been sacrificed to prudery from this cause, there are no statistics which tell this.”<sup>91</sup> At the same time, while saying “I call on every reader of *Physical Culture* to emphatically protest,” she places the burden of responsibility for changing these standards on women: “Just

why women allow themselves to be harassed and hindered is more than I can understand...A reform is clearly necessary in this respect and it should be inaugurated by the sex that will be chiefly benefitted by it.”<sup>92</sup> Once again, Kellerman believes not only in the power of women to effect change on an issue, but also in the necessity of them doing so.

In “What to Wear,” Kellerman surveys the current trends in women’s bathing fashions and suggests her own ideal modifications, from design to materials used to make swimsuits. She takes on a larger societal view of the problem in her opening, drawing a direct comparison between swimming outfits and social mores: “Not only in matters of swimming but in all forms of activity, women’s natural development is seriously restricted and impaired

by social customs and costumes and all sorts of prudish and Puritanical ideas. The girl child long before she is conscious of her sex is continuously reminded that she is a girl and therefore must not partake in the joys of womanhood."<sup>93</sup> Much of the article is focused on specific swimwear designs that allow women to attend public beaches "without shocking those folks who are always on the alert for shocks."<sup>94</sup> Kellerman's good humor comes through in this piece, but also her frustration with society's restrictions on young women. She also discusses basic safety measures to take while swimming, and the health benefits of being in the water, a familiar theme in most of her interviews and writings.

Her insistence on safe, functional swimwear downplays her opposition to the standards of women's swimwear at the time. Richard Martin and Harold Koda, fashion historians, say swimwear "has served throughout the century to establish and represent standards of beauty and morality."<sup>95</sup> As swimming became increasingly popular, society worried about not only the safety of female swimmers, but their modesty and virtue as well. "No particular fashion aroused more anxiety and strife than did swimwear, nor did any other fashion more concisely signify the widespread cultural dissonance about the display of the female body."<sup>96</sup> In this context, Kellerman's stand on safe (but more revealing) bathing suits for women takes on a greater context. In a culture in which women's safety took a backseat to their perceived modesty, Kellerman's suits enabled women to take control of their own athletic lives while simultaneously granting them agency over their bodies in public spaces. Here on the beaches, as in the other spaces and sites of physical culture, Kellerman was challenging the belief that safe physical activity didn't have to conform to cultural expectations and standards of femininity and womanhood,

but instead, could rework those concepts in a way that gave women more independence and influence. The fact that Kellerman herself had to modify a men's suit for her own swimming competitions is an interesting statement on her own enactment of femininity—to be successful in swimming with and competing against men, she had to take on aspects of their identity, including the tools they used to perform their sport, since a suitable option for women was not available to her at the time.



This photo of Annette Kellerman taken by George Grantham Bain (c. 1915-1920) is indicative of many of her movie roles in which she appeared in body-revealing costumes.

Of course, this strong stance by Kellerman did not accomplish sweeping societal change; many traditional mores still held sway, and the modification of swimwear was often seen as a "decorative" effect, in which women didn't gain any measurable political power but instead conformed (albeit in a different way) to the beauty standards of the day. The rise of swimming acts in vaudeville, as well as beauty contests, is considered by some examples of men taking advantage of the efforts to reform swimwear for their own material benefit.<sup>97</sup> A well-known anecdote tells of Edward Franklin Albee, one of the managers of Kellerman's career, placing mirrors around the outside of her diving tank on the stage, saying to stagehands, "Don't you know that what we are selling here is back-

sides, and that a hundred backsides are better than one?"<sup>98</sup> However, Kellerman's repeated insistence on a more fitted suit for reasons of safety and practicality seems in line with her stance on other issues of women's advocacy.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout her life, but especially in her early career, Kellerman was symbolic of the ongoing tension between sport and femininity, a debate which is not unique to the early 1900s but continues into modern sport. She happily played the role of the early

twentieth century “athletic girl,” described by Susan Cahn as having “exuberant physicality, disregard for Victorian notions of female restraint, and her intrepid incursion into a male cultural domain...captur[ing] the spirit of modern womanhood.”<sup>99</sup> Feminist scholar Lois Banner believed Kellerman “established the precedent of linking beauty with physical ability.”<sup>100</sup> Knowing the popular views on women, beauty, and modernity at the time, it is easy to see how Kellerman in many ways flouted those stereotypical views. Her ideas about education, bodily autonomy, and the inherent physical abilities of women ran counter to many of the main ideas and ideals of the time. She prioritized health and safety of women over societal standards on modesty when speaking about swimsuits; she encouraged women to take control of their own beauty and happiness in her mail-order courses and writings on physical culture; and she provided a stellar example of the athletic ideal in her roles both on stage and on the screen. “Kellerman was not only inventorying techniques of the body, but was ‘constructing’ the modern feminine body as a technique in itself.”<sup>101</sup>

By doing this, she was “endorsing a definition of the female body that emphasized fitness and active pleasure, rather than slenderness and leisure.”<sup>102</sup> There were certainly contradictions inherent in Kellerman’s positions. However, feminism and thoughts on women’s agency in the 1910s and 1920s were complex and ever-changing philosophies. As Mary Beard stated, “women can’t avoid being women whatever they do.”<sup>103</sup> This means women were being acted on and acting within the existing societal framework; they “inhabit the same worlds as men, not in the same way.”<sup>104</sup> Physical educators at the time “struggled to preserve existing class relations and gender differences,” so it was important to all involved to maintain a relationship with femininity within the growing world of women’s athletics.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, “athletic enthusiasts argued that competitive sport would enhance, not sacrifice, womanhood,” Kellerman included.<sup>106</sup> “How can there be anything unfeminine about robust health, and that perfect control in all parts of the body that is required in all out-of-door pastimes? Certainly, one may be athletic and womanly at the same time.”<sup>107</sup> Yet within this setting, and while facing many of these pressures, Kellerman still took a stand on many women’s issues. Kellerman was not the only woman in her area to advocate for women’s agency; physical culturist Maude Odell wrote physical culture articles “in the belief that...I could show women just what they could do for themselves by practicing physical culture.”<sup>108</sup> Kell-

erman and other physical culturists viewed beauty as symbiotic with and dependent on health, and this led them to encourage women to lead healthy lives in order to achieve the beauty they desired.

While in some ways Kellerman endorsed common ideas about women’s beauty and femininity, it is clear from her own physical culture writings that she genuinely viewed women as capable and intelligent, and suggested modifications in clothing, lifestyle, and exercise practices in order to allow women to experience the most that they could out of swimming, physical activity, and life in general. Kellerman was a perfect example of the way, “female athletes captivated an intrigued but ambivalent American public struggling to make sense out of contemporary gender arrangements.”<sup>109</sup> Sport and physical culture in Kellerman’s time “became an important site, symbolic as well as actual, for reflecting on and negotiating contemporary gender relations.”<sup>110</sup> In this area, Kellerman was truly a pioneer, and her message to women that they were valued people with agency for and responsibility to their own health is perhaps her most enduring legacy. As she put it best, “As you stride along with long free swings, throwing away a year with each step, you begin forgetting...for a while you’re not a mother, nor a housekeeper, nor a wife. You’re just you.”<sup>111</sup>

## NOTES

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