

# Bodily Spectacle: Fashioning the Modern Bathing Suit

**Keywords:** fashion / body / performance / swimsuit

## **Abstract**

*Annette Kellerman, an Australian long distance swimmer, diver, vaudeville performer and silent movie star was arrested for indecency preparing to swim along the coastline at Revere Beach, Boston in 1907. She was a controversial and innovative individual who expressed her independence and self-possession through bodily spectacle in daring swimsuits styled on the existing one-piece swimsuit design for men. There were initially no modifications made to the original, masculine design; no structuring to the contours of a woman's body, in particular the breast area, and it would not be until the 1930s that designers would feminise the swimsuit, and new technology would assist the development of textiles that would enhance its fit and performance. Kellerman's innovation was revealing the female body, which had been concealed beneath layers of clothes and corsets for centuries in the public arena. Her performances centred on her body, and were tailored to her water skills in the form of diving and swimming demonstrations that filtered her natural form through associations with sporting activities, neutralising any suggestion of indecency. She was a modern woman adoptive, adaptive and shaped for speed. A daring and bold performer, she influenced the evolution of the modern bathing suit fashioning a new bodily ideal for the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

*This paper will explore how Kellerman was positioned to contribute a fresh and inventive approach to the design and stylistic development of the swimsuit through her ability to redefine and construct a modern look that other women could imitate, at a time when the ground rules for fashion were changing. Through the combination of her body, performative skills and the bathing suits she wore, she was an integrated package heralding a cult for physical fitness, healthy leisure pursuits and personal achievement for all; a democratic modernity that many could identify with across diverse socio-cultural groups.*

## **Introduction**

Annette Kellerman was an Australian long distance swimmer, diver, vaudeville performer and silent movie star in the early 1900s who expressed her independence and self-possession through bodily spectacle in daring swimsuits styled on the existing one-piece swimsuit design for men. Kellerman's innovation was revealing the female body, which had been concealed beneath layers of clothes and corsets for centuries in the public arena. Her performances centred on her body, and were tailored to her water skills in the form of diving and swimming demonstrations that filtered her natural form through associations with sporting activities, neutralising any suggestion of indecency. She was a modern woman adoptive, adaptive and shaped for speed. A daring and bold performer, she influenced the evolution of the modern bathing suit fashioning a new bodily ideal for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper will explore how Kellerman was positioned to contribute a fresh and inventive approach to the design and stylistic development of the swimsuit through her ability to redefine and construct a modern look that other women could imitate, at a time when the ground rules for fashion were changing.

## **Remodelling the Female Body**

Kellerman started swimming lessons when she was seven years old in 1891. John Hartley reports that, 'She began to break records in her midteens', and 'it was her swimming prowess that opened up the possibility of a career as a professional swimmer'.<sup>1</sup> She had many nicknames including the 'Diving Venus' and her extraordinary swimming and diving feats, including being the first woman to attempt to swim the English Channel in 1905, challenged traditional notions of gender difference, promoting athleticism, sport and the one-piece bathing suit as liberating and suitably fashionable for a modern woman.

It was a period when the ideal feminine beauty was in a transitional period with Victorian and Edwardian women aspiring to achieve womanly curves of full proportions, a plumpness that was achieved through a hearty appetite and then sculpted into shape with body contouring corsets. Fashion theorist and historian, Valerie Steele, in a study of ideals of feminine beauty at this time refers to Baroness Staffe and her book, *The Lady's Dressing-Room* from 1892 that describes an unacceptable female figure as: 'An angular form and a want of flesh that displays the skeleton under the skin are considered a disgrace in a woman'. By the early 1900s this was changing with an interest in health and the pursuit of active sports. Steele comments that the 'ideal modern beauty' was more an image than the reality.<sup>2</sup> The body cannot change radically to embrace a new aesthetic instantaneously; it would take time to modify those shapely curves into

a more muscular and lean frame through diet and exercise. In previous centuries women could rely on their undergarments to mould their bodies to the accepted form and to conceal their imperfections; however the more body revealing fashions that would emerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be less forgiving and required the body itself to provide the necessary structural silhouette.

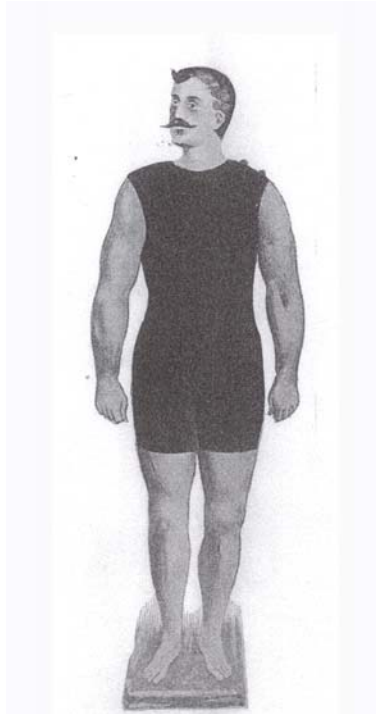
With the changing patterns in bodily beauty came a scientific interest in the female form, and in 1908 Harvard professor, Dr Dudley Sargent, conducted the first research project into physical fitness in women, measuring over 10,000 participants using the measurements of the Venus de Milo as a guideline for ideal bodily proportions. He declared that Kellerman most closely resembled this mythical beauty naming her the 'Perfect Woman'. Kellerman had the advantage of early exposure to physical culture in Australia and was exceptionally fit. Always ahead of her time she rejected the corset in the early 1900s, was adamant that lacing, padding and squeezing the body into a desired shape was immoral and a form of 'enslavement and degradation'; a woman should aspire to 'genuine physical beauty, and unlock their potential to enjoy life.'<sup>3</sup> Kellerman was a source of encouragement to women to shape and tone their bodies with the intention that they could be revealed with confidence in either clothing or a pared down swimsuit without the aid of corsets.

### **Sporting Fashion**

The swimsuit Kellerman wore for swimming and diving was a man's one-piece swimming costume and according to dress historian Anne Hollander, 'there was nothing modern about modern women's clothes until the female imitation of the modern male scheme'.<sup>4</sup> Kellerman's priority was a functional garment to perform death defying dives and long distance races in, and a men's streamlined swimsuit was the natural choice. The adoption by women of masculine clothing for sports especially horse riding was not new and dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The costume women wore for this sport was masculinised only for the upper torso and was worn with a voluminous skirt compelling riders to ride side saddle. Costume historian, James Laver suggests it would have been more practical 'to masculinize the nether limbs,' an idea that was inconceivable for women prior to the reform movement in the mid to late 1800s.<sup>5</sup> A woman who did transgress the restrictive clothing expected of women horse riders was Marie Antoinette, Louis XVI's wife, who in 1770, according to French literature and cultural historian, Caroline Weber, donned slim breeches and rejected side saddle riding as a form of 'sartorial rebellion' and an assertion of individuality. For Marie Antoinette as a foreign royal struggling for

acceptance and political leverage in a court where factions vied for the king's favour and endeavoured to undermine her position; it was a means to establishing a strong public image associated with sporting prowess that correlated to royal authority.<sup>6</sup> Unlike her chief adversary, Madame du Barry, the mistress of Louis XV, a glamorous femme fatale, with a penchant for opulent gowns and exotic jewels; Marie Antoinette initially chose participation in a sport and masculine attire to construct and invent a self-image that set her apart from her competitors.

Horse riding and associated sports such as fox hunting and polo continued to be practised by elite and wealthy social groups and it was not until the late 1800s and early 1900s that sports were democratised and available to the broader community. Arguably the most democratic of all was swimming. It required little more than an enthusiasm for the water, access to a beach or public swimming baths, and a humble woollen costume; adapted underwear for men and a bathing dress and bloomers for women. The latter was cumbersome and restricted movement in the water with some versions including corsets, stockings, and shoes that could weigh up to 30 pounds when wet, resulting in a split between recreational bathing and swimming as a form of exercise or competitive sport, with women adopting a men's bathing suit style for the latter. Kellerman belonged to the group who wore a functional swimsuit and a performance for British royalty exposed an elitist resistance to what was deemed an immodest costume. Although similar performances for commoners had been received with enthusiasm she had no choice but to alter her swimsuit by attaching stockings to protect their noble sensibilities; the body was covered but it would still have shown all her curves. Marie Antoinette, a royal, who chose to engage in a sport wearing male attire was tolerated because of her social position; Kellerman over 130 years later in a men's swimsuit, charmed audiences of all classes paving the way for a new hierarchical social structure celebrating individuals with unique creative talents and skills.



David Jones & Co. Catalog C.1906

**Figure 1a.** Typical style of swimsuit for men and women who engaged in swimming for exercise or as a competitive sport as opposed to bathing <sup>7</sup>



**Figure 1b.** An early form of bathing costume illustrating it is essentially an adapted form of daywear unsuited to swimming <sup>8</sup>

## Open-air Girls



**Figure 2.** Open-Air Girls 1975 and 1759

'The manner in which women's clothes have been adapted not simply to sport but to the open-air is suggested by the colour plates'.<sup>9</sup>

Quentin Bell provides an intriguing and tantalising window into the development of outdoor fashion for women in the form of the colour plates in his historical and theoretical study of fashion. Bell suggests that the adaptation of women's clothing to sport and the open-air reflects the evolution of a new 'theatre of fashionable operations' which triggered the development of a specific style of clothing design.<sup>10</sup> These images describe very different periods in history, Open-air girl, 1759, is distinctly European and aristocratic. Her clothing is opulent, decorative and although she may have moved to a garden setting is not particularly suited to outdoor pursuits. It is a portrait of Madame de Pompadour by François Boucher, mistress to Louis XV and a woman who influenced court fashion through her unique and 'extraordinary taste'. She was not of noble birth and it was her beauty and stylish fashion sense that helped her ensnare the king and guaranteed her an elevated position at the court of Versailles.<sup>11</sup> Pale and delicate, encased in elaborate and voluminous gowns it is difficult to imagine her engaging in anything more strenuous than collecting flowers from the gardens of the palace when outdoors. No aristocrat was exempt from the formality and rigid etiquette of French court fashion and the king's mistresses were an exception with Weber suggesting that these women displayed their

‘unrivalled influence on the crown by spending a king’s ransom on gowns and jewels’ and that ‘dress functioned as a compelling and efficient vehicle of communicating political power’.<sup>12</sup> Madame de Pompadour, whose lower middle class origins were not exposed in Boucher’s portrait, was beautiful and glamorous and represented a new direction in fashion airing ideas and styles that did not originate with her rival bluebloods. Her beauty and style ennobled her and she used them to reinvent herself as arbiter of taste influencing what was fashionable.



**Figure 3.** Jerry Hall, Jamaica, 1975 photographed by Norman Parkinson<sup>13</sup>

Open-air girl, 1975 shows the progress in the ‘theatre of fashionable operations’ in 200 years. Her location by the sea broadens the traditional European fashionscape to include geographic locations that can be associated with, for example, a western outpost; Australia. She is modern and global; communicating a contemporary ideal of physical beauty in a garment for the modern world; the swimsuit. Jerry Hall was born into a poor, working class Texan family, and at 6 feet tall, leggy with waist length blonde hair she was ideal fashion model material in the 1970s. When Hall was 16 years old she left for Paris and a stellar modelling career, working with the best fashion photographers, including Parkinson, and for major European fashion houses. She is globally renowned both as a supermodel and for her celebrity marriage to Rolling Stones legend, Mick Jagger. In this image, Hall, wearing a bikini with high gold evening shoes and a velvety robe, is holding a telephone, (where does it plug in - her leg?), supports Bell’s assertion that clothes had been adapted to the open-air as much as to sport. The bikini is not a swimsuit

suited to competitive swimming, diving or rough surf at the beach and worn in this manner with bedroom and evening style accessories describes a glamour associated with leisure and privilege. Madame de Pompadour and Jerry Hall, NOCD (Not Our Class Dear) women are stylish and beautiful but not sporty; their clothes were designed for form not function and their renown has been interwoven by their connection to powerful men; royalty in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the king of France; and royalty in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a rock star.

To understand the evolution of the swimsuit and draw it in to how it connects the body to the central concepts of fashion, performance and sport leads to analysis of a woman whose celebrity was not anchored to refined beauty, glamorous leisure or men, but initially to a career as a sportswoman. Unlike open-air girls' Madame de Pompadour and Jerry Hall, Kellerman was actively glamorous. With a body shaped and fashioned by sport she was able to produce an exciting and exotic theatre of 'fashionable operations'; leading the way for a generation of open-air girls in the 1920s and 30s. Philosopher, Gilles Lipovetsky suggests that 'Sports lent dignity to the natural body; they allowed it to be displayed more directly', freeing it from the constraints of 'excessive armature and trappings of dress'.<sup>14</sup> In particular swimming required a garment that's primary function was practical, and according to sportswear historian, Patricia Campbell Warner, the bathing costume 'forced thinking—and clothing—in new directions'.<sup>15</sup> Kellerman understood that freeing the body from the corset was problematic as women would have to rely on their abdominal muscles to create a muscular corset and 'a firmness and shapeliness' in keeping with 'the most superior forms of human bodies'.<sup>16</sup> Her ability to popularise sporty pursuits through her performances, and communicate potential methods for achieving results at public lectures, paved the way for fashioning the body and the swimsuit 15 years before 'haute couture plunged into the sportswear sector' in the early 1920s.<sup>17</sup> She encouraged women to focus on self-development; to engage in sport, dance, swimming and daily home exercise programs, and was an ideal role model. An article in *Women of All Lands* from 1938, describes the modern open-air girl who emerged after a short revolution in the 1920s when ugly bathing costumes were deposed in favour of 'the modern swimming suit moulded to the form and giving free access to air and sun'.<sup>18</sup> Women were now situated to engage in serious sporting activities that had once been consigned to the privileged few; and Kellerman had been integral in naturalising the notion of a sporty modern woman.



## Taking the Body Public

Kellerman's career in London progressed from publicity swims along the English coastline to an attempt to swim the English Channel, a feat she would never accomplish, in addition to diving demonstrations at indoor pools all over London. Emily Gibson and Barbara Firth, Kellerman's biographers report that diving was new to England and a novelty for audiences who were captivated by Kellerman's skill as a diver and incredulous at how she 'could fly through the air so gracefully'.<sup>19</sup> She was a fearless and spectacular diver and figure 4 shows a purity of form and style in her diving technique; a disciplined body that could transcend human boundaries. Isabel Crombie exploring the development of the body culture movement in the 1930s suggests Leni Riefenstahl's use of divers for her film *Olympia*, represents 'the transcendent presence of an elite athlete', describing their bodies as 'supra natural, the modern-day gods and goddesses of a classical Greek lineage who draw their power and harmony from the universal forces of nature'.<sup>20</sup> As the 'Diving Venus', Kellerman's body soaring through the air was captured and documented often in the form of full-page photographs by the *Daily Mirror*, with perhaps less mythic symbolism than Riefenstahl. In 1905, her image graced the front page of the *Daily Mirror* for eight consecutive weeks becoming 'the first female athlete to benefit from this kind of publicity',<sup>21</sup> an accessible goddess who represented an active glamour.



**Figure 4.** Kellerman Diving: A disciplined body in flight<sup>22</sup>

Kellerman was a natural self-promoter and used the press coverage she received to secure a contract at the London Hippodrome which provided variety style entertainment including an aquatic act. The stage was built in the form of a circus ring that could be raised and lowered by hydraulic pistons to reveal a large water tank of a similar size in its place. The roof slid open so divers could leap into the tank from heights of approximately 60 feet, to where the audience was seated on three sides.<sup>23</sup> The acts were aimed at families and in particular women; 'clean' entertainment as opposed to the burlesque and music hall tradition which primarily catered to a male audience. Kellerman's act during this period was essentially a series of dives and a demonstration of swimming strokes with her athletic body packaged in a one-piece bathing suit, creating an enticing form of bodily spectacle. It appealed to women and children who found her natural, unaffected Australian-ness charming and to men the Coo-ee girl's charms did not go unnoticed.



**Figure 5.** New York Hippodrome Publicity Poster with Kellerman Wire Walking<sup>24</sup>

As Kellerman's star rose, America and the vaudeville circuit beckoned. Vaudeville in the early 1900s was a popular and early form of mass urban entertainment that included a variety of acts to cater to audiences with diverse tastes, and they 'had to be simple, cheap, and easy to

understand and designed to delight men because they represented the majority of the audience'.<sup>25</sup> Erdman claims that vaudeville contributed to the development of American popular culture by knitting together diverse groups to create 'a modern audience of national proportions'.<sup>26</sup> These audiences 'were not passive observers' and could make or break an act, thus contributing as active participants in what fare they were offered by the booking managers.<sup>27</sup> Kellerman's act was a headliner and was a huge success brokered by regular editorial in newspapers and magazines, ensuring her image remained in the public eye. According to the *Philadelphia North American*, her main appeal was her bathing suit-clad body'.<sup>28</sup> There is no doubt that the bathing-suit angle was a huge drawcard for audiences and represented novelty and spectacle, however Kellerman had more to offer and as Kenrick notes; headliners 'had tons of personality and extraordinary stamina' as they often had to perform five shows a day.<sup>29</sup> She was a skilled performer who engaged and enchanted the audience entertaining with a varied and challenging routine; she was 'vaudeville's first aquatic glamour girl'.<sup>30</sup> There were a number of female vaudevillians who wore skimpy costumes or bathing suits and although this was part of Kellerman's allure, her act genuinely required this style of clothing thereby providing her with an opportunity to legitimise it as socially acceptable outside its usual theatre setting.

### **Fashioning the Body**

Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell's of the relationship between fashion and theatre in the late 1800s and early 1900s reveals an alternative source of inspiration to the Parisian ateliers in the form of West End theatre actresses and their stage wardrobes. They suggest that the stage costume was 'not merely reflecting but anticipating and creating fashion'.<sup>31</sup> Christopher Breward supports this notion in his analysis of four London actresses who performed at the Strand's Gaiety Theatre; Kitty Lord, Constance Collier, Marie Tempest and Mary Moore. Through events such as the Ascot Races and promotional posters and picture postcards, these actresses represented a form of 'accessible glamour' that influenced both theatre-goers and the more general public.<sup>32</sup> It was a new 'theatre of fashionable operations' where actresses were created and groomed for stardom and celebrity. The women most influenced were 'the shopgirls, milliners, dressmakers, typists, stenographers ...',<sup>33</sup> who as art historian Lynda Nead argues were 'not simply a list of female types', but working women in modern jobs with disposable incomes to spend on leisure activities like the theatre. Another form of leisure consumption available were tabloid newspapers and magazines where images of actresses created a 'transitional medium between the stage through which fashion and celebrity were

apotheosised'.<sup>34</sup> Actresses worked hard to invent a public image that cast them in a flattering light, manufacturing a persona which 'was part and parcel of who they were or who they had become'.<sup>35</sup> How they dressed was integral to fashioning the notion that they were beautiful and glamorous.

The costumes Kellerman wore for her performances could not be worn to the races or to afternoon tea, but they could be worn for a picnic at the beach or lake and unlike the West End actresses, her public image was centred on her being a wholesome, unaffected beauty; an outdoor girl. While Erdman suggests that her skills 'were eclipsed by her appearance',<sup>36</sup> I contend that Kellerman's skills, her body and the bathing suits she wore were an integrated package heralding the cult of physical fitness, healthy leisure pursuits and personal achievement for all; a democratic modernity that shopgirls, telephonists and milliners could identify with. Kellerman in a one-piece bathing suit created a powerful image which generated a kind of glamour Wilson describes as 'daring departures from the conventionally well-dressed with an aura of defiance' (Wilson, E., 2007, 98).

### **Bodily Spectacle**

Kellerman's adoption of a man's one-piece bathing suit represents the birth of the modern swimsuit for women. There were initially no modifications made to the original, masculine design; no structuring to the contours of a woman's body, in particular the breast area. It would not be until the 1930s that designers would feminise the swimsuit, enhancing its fit and performance using new textile technology. Her innovation was revealing the female body, which had been concealed for centuries beneath layers of clothes and corsets, in the public arena. She was not a typical 'Bathing Beauty' of the early 1900s, imaged in postcards for illicit viewing by seedy men. She proved that women 'had equally functional legs and feet,' and 'active motion'.<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 6.** Siren Postcard circa 1900<sup>38</sup>



**Figure 7.** Champion Lady Diver Annette Kellerman<sup>39</sup>

Comparing figure 6 and 7, Kellerman looks into the distance, stabilised by a sturdy rock, in an unflattering, basic one-piece bathing suit; unadorned, uncorseted and barefooted. In contrast the Siren enticingly peeps at the viewer through raised arms framing her face and décolletage,

in a bathing costume festooned with flowers and bows; drawing the eye to strategic parts of her figure. She has accessorised with hat, stockings, shoes looks more suited to the boudoir than the painterly seascape background. Kellerman is looking to a future where women engage in active sports and recreational pursuits; modern women who will follow her lead. Her bathing suit may not have been decorative, however her aquatic displays favoured the viewer with 'her costume wet and clinging, affecting 'the bald heads [in the audience]' that 'grew pink with emotion',<sup>40</sup> and unlike the postcard Siren, Kellerman could be watched with your wife and children in tow. She naturalised social acceptance of revealing the body and in the process she fashioned a democratised style of clothing, initially in a shared bathing suit design for men and women.

## **Conclusion**

The themes explored in this paper illustrate how Kellerman was a modern woman, engaging in participation sites including; vaudeville, sport and publishing which led to an early form of celebrity status that allowed her to move beyond the traditional roles of women. Her achievements in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century suggest she was an aspirational, individualistic woman navigating her way through industries that were known for their exploitation of women, and in the process carving a niche as an expert on women's health, beauty and physical fitness. She avoided a 'cheesecake' – siren persona and was lauded as the 'Perfect Woman'. According to Wilson, characteristics associated with feminism relate to the notion of women having the ability to make independent choices and although we are 'socially determined .... We consistently search for the crevices in culture that open us moments of freedom'.<sup>41</sup> It suggests Kellerman is a 'fit' with feminism although her importance to the movement has not been acknowledged to date. She contributed directly to fashion as an inventive individual patterning new swimsuit styles for women; to sport by showing a woman could take on the challenge of long distance swims and high dives and compete against men and win; and to women as a role model encouraging self-motivation and self-development. Travelling with her was the swimsuit, a garment that allowed the wearer to move between land and water. Often dismissed or overlooked as a fashion garment, it is however newsworthy, garnering regular, well-positioned editorial due to its intimate and revealing association with the body.

Kellerman was a maverick intent on fashioning a career on a global scale which resulted in the acceptance and popularisation of the one-piece bathing suit and its inclusion in the fashion system.

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### **Endnotes**

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- <sup>5</sup> Laver, J. et al, 1994, 9
- <sup>6</sup> Weber, C., 2006, 81-84
- <sup>7</sup> David Jones Catalogue 1906
- <sup>8</sup> Wells, L., 1982, 98
- <sup>9</sup> Bell, Q., 1976, 166
- <sup>10</sup> Bell, Q., 1976, 165-6
- <sup>11</sup> Batterberry, M. and A. Batterberry, 1977, 161-2
- <sup>12</sup> Weber, C., 2006, 5
- <sup>13</sup> Norman Parkinson
- <sup>14</sup> Lipovetsky, G., 1994, 62
- <sup>15</sup> Warner, P. C., 2006, 61
- <sup>16</sup> Kellerman, A., 1918, 164
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- <sup>20</sup> Crombie, I. and National Gallery of Victoria., 2004, 81
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- <sup>25</sup> Fields, A., 2006, 1
- <sup>26</sup> Erdman, A. L., 2004, 51
- <sup>27</sup> Kenrick, J., 2003
- <sup>28</sup> Erdman, A. L., 2004, 93
- <sup>29</sup> Kenrick, J., 2003
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- <sup>31</sup> Kaplan, J. H. and S. Stowell, 1994, 8-9
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- <sup>33</sup> Breward, C., 2005, 117
- <sup>34</sup> Nead, L., 2005, 123
- <sup>35</sup> Tapert, A., 1998, 13
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- <sup>41</sup> Wilson, E., 2003, 244