Leanne Shapton’s 2012 book titled “Swimming Studies” provides an autobiographical overview of her career as a competitive swimmer. Beginning at the age of 12, Leanne devoted her childhood and adolescence to competing with a number of internationally recognized club swimming teams. Over a short period of time, she became remarkably fast and eventually went on to become a top-10 finisher at both national level meets and Olympic Trials in both breaststroke events. However, unlike many of the other swimmers who reach this level of competitiveness in the sport, Leanne was motivated by something other than dreams of first place finishes and Olympic medals. Shapton explains that she devoted so much of her time and energy to swimming simply because she “liked knowing my discipline would be recognized, respected, that I might not be able to say the right things or fit in, but I could do something well” (6). As she explains during her book, her ultimate goal was never to become famous for her endeavors in the pool. Instead, Shapton raced hard and trained even harder for almost a decade so that she could feel confident about at least one aspect of her life.

Even though Shapton grew up in Canada, through “Swimming Studies” she reveals that American culture had an immensely important impact on her career as a competitive swimmer. Throughout her book, Shapton carefully and deliberately mentions the name of any American product that she either used or encountered during her career. Shapton fueled herself with American food products before races and
practices, was outfitted in clothing and gear from American sporting companies, relied on American automobiles for transportation both to and from practices and meets, and depended on American corporations for sponsorships (her high school club team was the Etobicoke Pepsi Swim Club). At times, Shapton’s appreciation for American products can even be obsessive:

The shorts have a little polo horse embroidered on one leg. I recognize the horse and its simple threaded colors. It’s the horse from the shirts that teammates and classmates wore in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades…‘you have no idea how much that little horse meant to me,’ I tell James, tracing the threads on his cuff, ‘how many hours and weeks and months I spent thinking about that horse, wanting it’… (48).

To readers who do not, or did not swim competitively, the continued mentioning of these products may initially appear to be extraneous and unnecessary bits of information. For readers who have swum competitively though, the mentioning of these products allows one to compare the everyday details of their own career to those of Shapton’s. In a sport that is so repetitive and cyclical, recalling which instant Quaker Oatmeal flavor you had at 4:45 a.m. before morning practice (as Shapton often does during her book) may be the only detail that sets one day apart from the next.

Shapton provides readers with hundreds of small vignettes that juxtapose the recent events in her life to events that occurred during her career as a competitive swimmer. At times, the placement of these vignettes can be a bit confusing because they do not appear in chronological order. Therefore, in order to make sense of these vignettes and “Swimming Studies” as a whole, readers must pay careful attention to both how and
why the “scars” of Shapton’s swimming career have an impact on her everyday life. For readers who do not have a deep and appreciative understanding of the life of a competitive swimmer, this may be difficult and the book may fall flat. On the other hand, for competitive swimmers and other athletes “Swimming Studies” is a quick and easy read that will truly hit home.

Shapton has lived in New York City with her husband James for a number of years, working as the art director for the *New York Times* and *Saturday Night Magazine* op-ed pages, as well as a columnist for the *New York Times Style Magazine* and *Elle*. As a result, she has an affinity for design, which complements her writing style perfectly. Shapton includes countless illustrations, paintings and photographs of swimmers and swimwear, adding another layer of detail to “Swimming Studies” that really helps readers to see competitive swimming through Shapton’s lenses. Shapton is therefore able to both eloquently and artistically communicate the sights, sounds, and emotions associated with swimming competitively. For this reason, I would highly recommend that other athletes, and especially swimmers, read “Swimming Studies.” I would also recommend “Swimming Studies” to those who are interested in the globalization of American products and the impact that these products have had on the lives of those growing up in other countries.