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## **The Social World of Outdoor Swimming: Cultural Practices, Shared Meanings and Bodily Encounters**

This paper examines the particular relations and entanglements of practices, bodies and water in the social world of outdoor swimming. Using ethnographic data to describe how the relations, interactions and meaning making unfolds and happens before, during and after a swim, we can consider the ways the social world of outdoor swimming is ordered, the ways in which participants produce and are enrolled into that social order and the sense of belonging and connection that this enables. This paper uses this case to highlight how we need to attune to a sociology of and in water; to consider the ways interactions and meaning making occurs in and around bluespace, in ways that disrupts and expands our understanding of social worlds and life.

### **Introduction**

It's a different feeling arriving today. Yesterday, volunteering, I felt part of a different sphere of action, a different group of people and a different relationship to the river. I looked at it, but from afar: it was there and I was here on land. Today I arrived as a swimmer, and I walked up to tents and other swimmers with a different intent and set of emotions. I felt like I belonged to the groups of congregated swimmers in a way that yesterday I had not. Today, these were my people, and that was the river we were going to swim.

Swimming is an entanglement of cultural practices, situated accounts and bodily encounters, which changes in form and meaning over time and place. It reflects, produces and reproduces socialites, attachments and connections between bodies and water. This paper looks at a particular form and set of practices of swimming: outdoor swimming. Outdoor swimming is growing in popularity in terms of numbers participating and status within different groups of society, gaining significance as a leisure activity, health and well-being endeavour and a social space. It is a varied mix of practices, encompassing a range of activities, definitions and approaches that are contested and debated even within the community of outdoor swimmers. Obviously, outdoor swimming is swimming outdoors and this can include ponds, rivers, lakes, the sea and, often, lidos and tidal pools. What is less obvious are the more specific characteristics of these encounters and the particular cultural and social practices, accounts and bodily encounters that are part of the performance of this form of outdoor swimming and outdoor swimmers' identity.

Using Mauss's (1973) 'techniques of the body' as a point of departure, outdoor swimming is understood as a concrete, observable set of practices that then help us draw out more

abstract inferences about the social and cultural worlds they are produced in and help create. It was swimming which first drew Mauss's attention to bodily techniques as situated, contextual practices: he describes how it was the author of the 1902 entry on swimming in the Encyclopaedia Britannica who 'first revealed to me the historical and ethnographic interest of the question', and 'you can see that it really is a technical education and, as in every technique, there is an apprenticeship in swimming' (1973: 71). People learn to swim, they learn to be bodies in the water, and they do this through particular social, embodied, sensual and cultural processes. These processes cannot be reduced to a background set of mechanisms that keeps the world ticking over. Instead they should be understood as a constellation of actions and events whose relationships and ingredients we must strive to reveal at the level of what actually unfolds and happens (Evers, 2009: 897). Looking at outdoor swimming allows us, then, to consider more broadly issues of people having and being bodies at leisure, processes of being and becoming associated with that and the construction of accounts in which water is positioned as a particular site of interaction and meaning-making. Building on existing research that draws out the particularities of research on and in these spaces (Humberstone, 2015; Olive, 2016; Olive et al, 2016), this paper develops and expands these arguments through a focus on the unfolding specific relations of an outdoor swimming event. This paper uses the case of outdoor swimming to highlight how we need to attune to a sociology of and in water; to consider the ways interactions and meaning making occurs in and around bluespace in ways that disrupts and expands our understanding of social worlds and life.

### **Water, Bluespaces and Swimming**

Watson (2019: 135) describes how, 'water is a substance that has a unique power to evoke passions, attachments and a sense of connection and belonging which enrolls bodies in new socialities, alliances and politics in unpredictable ways'. Indeed, there is a wealth of scholarship that considers the relations in and around bluespaces and the different ways our bodies are enrolled in contingent practices depending on the spatial, social and cultural locations of the water. Brown and Humberstone's (2015) edited collection brings together narratives of the 'felt and lived experiences of being *with* the sea'; drawing us into the different relationships people hold with and in it, and the ways in which 'the sea has shaped their sense of who they are and their relationship to the human and non-human world' (2015:

4). Much geographical work has worked on that relationship, seeking to examine and validate the importance of the human-sea relationship in contemporary life (Anderson and Peters, 2014 for example).

There has been another strand of work that focuses on the salutogenic and therapeutic qualities of bluespaces (Foley, 2010; Foley and Kistemann, 2015), something also found prominently in non-academic accounts of outdoor swimming (for example, Fitzmaurice, 2017). The physical and mental benefits of water are understood to derive from both what people do around it - the exercise, socialising, relaxing - as well as the sensory qualities, such as the effect on the eye of focusing on distant horizons, and the soothing sounds of the sea. The mindfulness of swimming (Wardley, 2017) and the capacity for the practice to allow people to experience the sublime (see Bluegrass, 2019) are part of the health and well-being narrative of the water. Relatedly, the emotional and spiritual relationships with water are lauded, often drawing on historical and cultural significance that extend beyond our personal accounts and into broader relationships between people and place (Sharp, 2002).

Considering the ways in which bodies interact in and around different waters as part of particular leisure practices has also drawn on these ideas. Surfing practice and the positioning of bodies of different social identities (gender, race, sexuality) has been particularly useful in thinking about these relations. For example, Evers (2009) offers a compelling account of the masculinity of men's surfing bodies in his autoethnographic account of surfing at 'The Point'. Here, he considers the ways in which masculinity emerges and becomes within the assemblage of the wave, the body and the social codes of behaviour at that place. This elucidates the relationship between bodies, space, gender and sensual life in ways that allows us to consider the social moment of these spatial encounters and the work that is always being done within and around them.

As Pitt (2018) asserts there are many available associations and connections with water. There are multiple ways people experience the water, and a complexity of interactions between watery places (Pitt, 2018). There are complex and deeply rooted barriers to participation in the water, and a diverse range of ways that people engage with it. Pitt (2018: 162, citing Alberti, 2018) reminds us, 'if waters properties exist through relations, it is not

everywhere always the same'. These processes must also recognise the ways water itself flows through these relations. It is, as Watson (2017: 961) describes, a 'material thing with specific properties' and understanding it as 'a substance with very specific attributes, associations and meanings is the matter of concern'. Relationships with and in the water promote particular bodily interactions, technologies of control and regulation and ways of bringing people together (and keeping people apart). As Wattchow (2015: 137) describes, being in the water 'has embodied, rational, ecological dimensions. It has a basis in geo-physical reality but also relies heavily upon the ideas, beliefs and even assumptions that govern how we see, interpret and act in particular locations.' Our relationships with places – green, blue, brown or any other colour – are socially situated, culturally produced and are neither inherent or inevitable. People must 'learn to love' the water – through the complex processes of socialisation, availability and desire that promote or prevent any activity – and must learn too how to account for this love using the available frameworks and narratives.

Throsby (2015) leads us to consider 'what social and embodied processes are enacted' in the transition to becoming a swimmer?'. This specifically draws our attention to those techniques of the body that are particular within different cultures of swimming. She (2015; 2016) offers a considered and compelling account of how people become marathon swimmers. Drawing on Becker's (1953) seminal chapter on *How to Become a Marijuana Smoker*, she sets out the processes and accumulation of necessary understandings, bodily techniques, narratives and embodied understandings to show how a body comes to appreciate the particular sensory experience of marathon swimming. Her ethnography is informed by her own practice as an accomplished marathon swimmer, with her monograph (2016) opening with her account of completing the Channel Swim between England and France. Marathon swimming is a very particular social world, and while there are many things similar with outdoor swimming, there are also many divergences in cultural practice and bodily technique. There are different ways people learn to become swimmers, and different swimming that would be considered part of that cultural world.

## **Methods**

This paper is informed by data collected as part of ethnography of outdoor swimming in the United Kingdom, and a lifetime of swimming indoors and out. The data presented here are

from one weekend, but the broader insights and understandings have accumulated in years of engagement with this practice, and through on-going work to make sense of it sociologically. The ethnographic fieldwork has involved swimming with people as they swim outside, in ponds, lakes, rivers, seas and lidos, throughout the year. Time was spent with people as they go out, in small groups or individually, and find places to swim, as well as participating in organised events of various kinds (Christmas and New Year 'dips', longer swims in the sea, lakes and rivers), as well as attending training days and conferences on outdoor swimming and water.

The swim that is described in this paper was an organised event by the Outdoor Swimming Society called the Dart 10k. 2019 was its tenth year running, and attendance has risen from 200 to 1600 people, with a swim on the Saturday and the Sunday of the event weekend (Outdoor Swimming Society website) along the Dart River and into the estuary at Dittisham, in Devon, England. It is heralded as the flagship Outdoor Swimming Society (OSS) event and is one of the most popular outdoor swimming events in the UK. The OSS website describes it as: 'a journey, not a race' and that there's 'room for everyone in the river'.

The data presented are from two days of volunteering at the event and one day of swimming. This meant my participation in the event shifted between different spaces; from the banks of the river to immersion in the water, from the sidelines of the 'main' activity to being a fully 'authentic' swimmer (cf. Pavlidis and Olive, 2014). The focus was on the practice of outdoor swimming from my different participant positions, as a social action contextually situated and made meaningful. The position I occupied was one of participant observer. This meant I described the practice 'from within' in order to make sense of it within the context. I shared understandings gained as a member of that social world, developed within and through interactions with my fellow members: we made sense of the activity collectively. The fieldnotes presented here in the first person discuss embodied, sensual and affective experiences of the swim, but crucially these are all situated in broader sociological discussions about what this 'means' within the shared social understandings and how that meaning has been produced, upheld and accepted within the social and cultural rules and rituals of outdoor swimming.

Alongside fieldnotes, data were gathered through talking with other participants and volunteers, from materials on display in the tents and at the start and finish points, and from social media forums where the swim was discussed (both before the event and afterwards). Fieldnotes were recorded as quickly after the encounters as possible, and more reflective pieces were then recorded in a research diary in the evenings and few days afterwards. The analytical focus was on the meanings outdoor swimmers ascribe to their practices, their shared understandings and values and the ways in which behaviour is regulated and controlled. The analysis drew on accounts, social understandings and cultural practices to make sense of the social world being researched and to consider the ways in which social life was ordered through these practices, how our bodies and selves emerge interactionally and situationally in and around the water.

### **Being an outdoor swimmer**

I walked through the crowd and wondered if it was different to any other crowd at a sport or leisure event; how would I know these were outdoor swimmers? There were brands that were repeated, ones I knew and could read as doing some of that work. There were particular bits of kit; goggles, wetsuits, *dryrobes*, that indicated swimming. There was a relaxed feel, but the sun was shining, and we were on a grassy bank of a river: it would have been hard not to be relaxed. The groups of people were of different ages and body shapes, though predominantly white and displaying an abundance of material capital. I stood in line at the registration tent and joined a conversation with the people around me: 'Is this your first time?' I told them it was, but quickly moved on to talk about the other swims I had done. A woman talked about her fear of the distance, and how fast you had to do it, but she was quickly reassured that it wasn't a race – that everyone could go at their own pace, that it was friendly and safe. Someone else talked about a swim I wanted to do; how hard it had been the first year, that 'hardly anyone finished it'. Her ironman bag was at her feet, betraying her as a triathlete and I slightly dismissed her account, she wasn't a 'real' swimmer. The person behind the desk joined in and said that we would all love the Dart swim, that it was 'brilliant' and she had done it five times before. The person registering next to me was swimming *skins* [no wetsuit], in preparation for a Windermere double they were doing. I was pretty impressed by that.

As Scott (2009) describes in relation to pool swimming, each social world has its own set of norms, routines and tacit stocks of background knowledge, shared between participants. These are not fixed or *sui generis*, but rather are negotiated, 'precariously upheld by participants and subject to continual revision' (Scott, 2009: 2). It is possible to see, in the fieldnotes above, how participants actively work to establish, through negotiating a common

definition of the situation, what to do, how to do it, and how to gain acknowledgement and approval of the presentation of self as outdoor swimmer. The particular social world mobilises members as self-regulatory participants in social encounters, enrolled in 'ritually organised systems of social activity' (Goffman, 1955: 342). The interaction in the registration line demonstrates the negotiation of meaning not just about the Dart swim specifically, but outdoor swimming as a cultural practice more generally. The description of it as being a journey is reinforced, removing any competitiveness from the understanding; this exemplifies the work going into the presentation of an outdoor swimmer self-image through the accounting of existing experience and display of understanding about the water (as enjoyable, sometimes dangerous, cold). The social actors worked collaboratively in that interaction to avoid embarrassment, presenting as competent social actors and working to avoid losing face within the flow of the encounter and the social setting by successfully negotiating a common, shared understanding of outdoor swimming and their identity within it. While this negotiated order is processual and an emergent product of the interaction, there are shared understandings and norms which inform our tacit stocks of background knowledge of the practice we can draw on in these settings. Scott (2009) describes how the swimming pool social setting has unspoken rules, routines and rituals that are concerned primarily with the regulation of nudity and personal space, respect for individuals' disciplinary regimes and the desexualisation of encounters. The concerns within outdoor swimming diverge, though getting changed and regulation and bodies are still important, albeit negotiated differently.

Throsby (2016) describes the processes and accumulation of the necessary understandings and techniques to produce the particular relationship with the water as embodied, iterative and non-linear; a series of encounters repeated and reinforced over and over, with various alternative interactions shaping our broader understandings and values along the way. For example, one of many shared concerns between marathon swimming and outdoor swimming, is an appreciation and endurance for the cold. Swimmers must learn to appreciate the sensation and understand their physical and mental capacities for how long they stay in the water, the pain that is 'normal' for such practices and the affects it has on their bodies. Not only must swimmers learn about the embodied affects, but they must learn about how to account for them. Cold water is not treated with fear or as a problem to be avoided; it is part of the practice, and the endurance and understanding of it are badges of honour for the



outdoor swimmer. The ubiquity of winter swim events, of 'ice miles' swims and of the marketing and branding of such practices ('Baltic' jumpers for sale on the Outdoor Swimming Society website, the 'Polar Bear Challenge' people can participate in and gain a medal) show an understanding around cold water that is part of the outdoor swimmer's presentation of self. In the information tent at the Dart 10k, a man was asking about the water temperature, and when he was told it was 15 degrees Celsius, he exhaled loudly and shook his head. One of the volunteers working in the tent said, 'well it's not a bath is it?!'. The man, aware he was not maintaining face, quickly said that he was used to swimming in the sea, and hadn't anticipated the water would be as cold in the river. He continued that it was a temperature he was used to and had swum regularly in. The necessity to engage in repair work around this point demonstrates the importance it holds in the accomplishment of outdoor swimmer 'self', and the work it does in maintaining satisfactory social interaction around that practice. The man's sense of belonging in this social world was threatened in this social interaction; he risked 'losing face', but he understood the rules of the setting sufficiently to be able to align himself again with the particular values and standards of behaviour expected.

Related to the 'appreciation' of the cold water and its associated values and behaviours is the use, or not, of a wetsuit. Wearing a wetsuit in outdoor swimming is common; in the Dart 10k most people had them, though many did not. Within marathon swimming, and for challenges like swimming the English Channel, their absence is mandatory. A wetsuit is not part of rules and rituals of that social world; deemed inauthentic and a problematic addition to the interaction between body and water, practice and outcome. A wetsuit doesn't hold such a singular position in outdoor swimming. As previously described, there are a wide range of swims that fall into the outdoor swim category, and they each have specific norms according to seasonal and participant considerations. A Christmas or New Year's dip with a full wetsuit probably doesn't quite get the point; the shared exhilaration and trepidation of the cold water marks the main *raison d'être* for this particular event. For most outdoor swimming, the attitude is less formally defined than marathon swimming, with events allowing both wetsuit and 'skin' (non-wetsuit) participants, and most water spaces hosting participants neoprene clad and not. Outdoor swimmers account for getting into the water as the key achievement and whatever you need to make that experience the best for you, however that might be seems to be the main message within the community, based on discussion on social forums

and in outdoor swimming training days. As Kate Rew, founder of the OSS, describes on the website: 'while courting discomfort, I also love gear that makes the whole experience more comfortable'. The values presented are not tied to rules regulating how bodies are in the water, but rather the ways in which people account for the experiences they are having.

The reason wetsuits are not as significant in (this account of) outdoor swimming is linked to the motives people give for swimming as part of their outdoor swimming self. Throsby (2016) again offers valuable insights here, describing the problems with telic accounts of marathon participation, and instead considering accounts and narratives of the practice that are more autotelic. In these, the destination is not the primary concern, instead the process and 'the journey' are of prime importance. This is exemplified in outdoor swimming even more than marathon swimming; in outdoor swimming the immersive experience is the main concern in the practice and in the narratives and accounts thereof. Unlike the practice of pool swimming, often notably described as lap or length swimming, or marathon swimming where the swim has a clear start and end point determined prior to the start, in outdoor swimming more generally the concern is not the distance travelled or the time it takes. The process of becoming an outdoor swimmer are thus about the understanding of issues relating to embodied, sensory engagements with the water, endurance and longevity of practice and being able to account for these things in a coherent manner. Here, an 'authentic' outdoor swimming experience is tied into knowing the water, being in it in a sensual, engaged manner and appreciating the relationship between body and water. This was described by one of the Dart participants talking about their own practice as 'actual swimming swimming'; not like the event we were taking part in that was too regulated and removed the onus on the individual to actively plan and understand their encounter in the water. Respect is earned through the embodiment of these values and ideals of outdoor swimming and performing that within the community of the Dart swim reminds every one of their shared values and motives. This is echoed in the account Wattchow (2015) gives of the shift from standing to floating in his first swim of the season and how it ties together autobiography, spiritual and geographical elements: he describes how the seascape 'enfolds' him (2015: 137) and how both he and the water 'implicate each other' (2015: 138) in their mutual construction and meaning making.

The motives people presented for participating in outdoor swimming are not fixed or inherent elements in a person's identity: 'rather than being fixed elements "in" an individual, motives are the terms with which the interpretation of conduct by social actors proceed' (Mills, 1940: 904). An actor's talk about and of motives has the purpose of maintaining and or restoring interaction. As Stevenson (1999) described in relation to master's swimming, these motives can be presented through verbal communication and non-verbal behaviours. You learn to 'tell' an outdoor swimmer identity through the positioning devices you provide, to 'show' a good swimmer identity through your practice and material presentation of self and to 'act' like a good swimmer in and out of the water. These 'vocabularies of motive' keep people in line and on track; behaviour and motives that disrupt shared understandings of practice are talked about as such, and people who do them are positioned outside of the group. For example, at the end of the swim as we were leaving the water, two people were talking about how someone had 'swum over' one of them, hitting their arms and moving into their space aggressively. 'It's bloody triathletes', one complained: *'they just don't get it'*. Through this interaction, it was clear that he 'got it', and the untoward conduct was 'othered' and problematised. The 'identity work' in the interaction afforded the participants the ability to interpret each other's actions as manifestations of particular identities. Using these ideas to present outdoor swimming 'face', the participants in this encounter succeed in claiming legitimate or understandable motives for their acts, they also succeed in maintaining and reinforcing their identities (Stevenson, 1999).

### **Inclusion, Control and Bodies**

The 'changing tent' was on the right of the registration tent, but all around it people were getting changed on the grass. The atmosphere was friendly – people were helping each other pull their wetsuits on and doing the zips. Inside the changing room, people were spaced out a bit more, avoiding each other's eye. I went outside again and found a space of grass. The sun was warm and reflected off the river. I saw someone I knew from home, he lives two streets away, and here we were standing next to a river 100-miles away. I pulled up my swimming togs and waved. The group standing in front of me laughed as one of them turned around to show them the writing on his small speedos: 'budgie smugglers' was written across the bum.

Bodies are on display in swimming: before a swim when people get changed, during a swim more skin is visible than is 'normal' and afterwards when they attempt to get dressed quickly to warm up. This often involves simply stripping off, or using a changing robe, but does not

involve the separation of genders into different spaces or having individual cubicles with curtains to draw and hangers for your clothes. While there are resonances with some of the themes in Scott's (2009) descriptions of changing practices in the swimming pool setting, the practice of getting changed in outdoor swimming is less concerned with civil inattention and the avoidance of visible nudity. In fact, when the wind is blowing or the rain setting in, the huddle of a circle of people getting changed is quite welcomed, particularly after the swim when everyone is working quickly to get warm. Within these practices, bodies are described in ways that are welcoming and which encourage visibility and acceptance rather than as problematic and in need of hiding away. Indeed, it is the rules and rituals outlined in the shared practices and accounts which legitimise the 'intimate anonymity' of the changing practices. As Probyn (2001: 20) describes of the locker room: 'Protected by a welter of codes about how and where to look, nonetheless strangers dress and undress, wash themselves, lathering breasts and bums in close proximity'. Within these social spaces nudity is governed and regulated, and through adherence to the codes it is normalised and unproblematic.

In the many newspaper articles introducing people to swimming outside, the forums where swimmers meet and talk and in face to face encounters, the issue of getting changed comes up again and again. People are concerned with where and how they can change from being full dressed to nearly naked; they are looking for guidance on the 'welter of codes' they should draw on. Concerns are quickly dispelled by members of the community, and ways of 'managing' the moment are suggested. Within these responses there is a common message about outdoor swimming and changing practice: that nakedness is ordinary not unusual and should not be something people are too concerned with. As Ross Edgley, who recently swam around the UK, describes in a '10 unspoken rules about wild swimming' blog:

'Open water swimming and nudity go hand in hand. It's like ice cream and apple pie, you can't have one without the other. People don't necessarily talk about it, but just know if you join a swimming club it's likely you will see far more genitalia than you were perhaps expecting. Be warned: the car park — or a nearby tree — will be your team's new official changing room.' (Edgley, 2018)

At the Dart 10k more people chose to get changed out in the open by the riverbank than in the (mixed gender) changing tent. People did create a personal changing space with the layout of their bags, but there was also a breaching of these boundaries regularly as people

smear Vaseline on each other, as wetsuits were zipped up and shoulders grabbed to steady people balancing on one leg while pulling on swimming costumes. People talked between groups, and it was common to catch another swimmer's eye and smile as you stumbled pulling on a wetsuit, or wriggled around to get it over tummies and hips. The interactions extended beyond the demarcated personal space; a legacy of both the physical environment – there are no benches and changing booths to script us into particular ways of acting – but also the way outdoor swimming is narrated and imagined by the practitioners. As Edgley continues:

'Indoor swimming can be a solitary sport. Not only do you stare at the bottom of a pool for hours but striking up a conversation in the changing room to a complete stranger can be seen as a little odd. Do this outdoors and everything becomes more social. Lifelong friendships are formed as people share everything from food, drinks, towels and (sometimes) body warmth.'

Here we can see (one of) the ways in which ideas of inclusivity are produced in outdoor swimming; not only through descriptions of what outdoor swimmers do, but also through positioning them in contrast to what they do not. The particular bodily relations, accounts of them and practices of outdoor swimming enrol people in understandings of how to behave and how to belong as part of the particular social world. As one participant said about the people she watched retreating into the changing tent at the Dart swim: 'they swim outdoors, but they take their pool changing thing with them'.

The idea that outdoor swimming is different from pool swimming is also celebrated through images displayed by posters around the start and end of the swim. The posters present a parody of the displays that were found in swimming pools in the 1980s and 1990s, outlining the rules of the space, e.g. 'no running', 'no jumping', 'no heavy petting'. In contrast to these rules, the OSS posters encourage such practices with 'humorous' pictures depicting each activity as a welcome part of the outdoor swimming practice, under the invitation 'Will Wild Swimmers Kindly Indulge in...'. Running, skinny dipping, petting (depicted as a seal planting a kiss on the cheek of a swimmer), bombing and picnicking are all welcomed and celebrated as part of what people should do. Alongside these posters, are 'road signs' instructing swimmers to 'Give Way to (picture of a swan)'. The normative understandings of *the body in the pool* and the way it must behave are disrupted, in a move to demarcate the outdoor practice and disrupt the bodily practices and relations associated with pool swimming. In this way, outdoor

swimming defines itself in a knowing reference to the pool, positioning it as different and problematising the rules, rituals and routines that define pool swimming and swimmers. Even the disrupting of the normal anthropocentric hierarchy of relationships between people and animals can be read as part of this (with the kissing seal and right of way swan), and invites us to remember that ‘humans and non-humans are always in it together’ (Muecke 2006:1 in Evers, 2009: 898). Through this work a different set of relations with the material world and the bodies in it are set up, facilitating the potential for different encounters and interactions to be acceptable by members.

The social order of the swimming pool and outdoor swimming in relation to it, and in and of itself offers us a way of thinking about broader social and political patterns of control and regulation in relation to bodies. This has been beautifully described in Landreth’s (2017) *waterbiography*, which brings social history and personal memoir into neat dialogue to highlight the historical traces still discernible in contemporary swimming spaces. She shows how interactions and normative understandings of what swimming is and should be are tied to classed and gendered identities, which can also be extended to sexuality and race, identities that are notably absent in many representations and narratives of outdoor swimming (see Scott, 2018; Acurra, 2019). Underpinning all the particularities around identity is the control of bodies, and the belonging and exclusion of certain bodies in certain places. For example, Landreth’s (2017) work describes the enduring legacies of the regulation of woman’s bodies; what could be on view, where they could enter and egress the water and how they should act once immersed, as described above.

Outdoor swimmers self-consciously act against these regulations and controls, with practitioners working to construct the practice as welcoming, inclusive and not interested in those sorts of control of the body. During the Dart 10k this work is visible; outdoor swimming is presented as non-competitive; a ‘journey, not a race’ – marking inclusivity as its primary goal. Participants receive mugs of hot chocolate at the end rather than a medal, again demarcating the practice in opposition to more competitive or exclusive swimming practices. The hot chocolate also does work around enjoyment, body celebration and the joys of conspicuous calorie consumption post-swim. Waves of swimmers enter the water staggered, based on times supplied by the participants, so that the faster ones catch up with the slower

ones by the end and everyone finishes at similar times. And at the beginning and the end, there are people around who will happily help pull up or peel off wetsuits, smear your neck with Vaseline and chat to you as they do so.

So, crucially, while outdoor swimming is working to produce its own cultural meanings and practices around bodies, it is still embedded in existing power relations, histories and cultures. As Watson (2019: 163) says, ‘the substance of water has a unique power to evoke passions, attachments and a sense of connection and belonging which enrolls bodies in new socialities, alliances and politics in unpredictable ways, but nevertheless in ways which are embedded in prior histories and cultures.’ The practices are positioned in relation to existing understandings, in dialogue with what has gone before, but with an effort to disrupt and question assumptions and accepted understandings.

### **Bodies in Water**

We all filed into the starting pen; the ‘fast’ wave. There were some people who looked like triathletes; tall, broad shouldered, talking about competitions and times, wearing reflective goggles and carrying energy gels. There were people of all shapes and sizes, wetsuits straining around bellies, as well as over shoulders and biceps. We talked to each other while watching the river; did the current look fast? I’d heard it was moderate today. The water quality was good, someone said. We nodded with each piece of information delivered, eyes on the water. I did a few stretches; trying to show that I belonged in this pen, with this group. I was nervous and regretted my self-categorisation as fast. At that moment, I wasn’t sure I even remembered how to swim. My shoulder was sore and 10k was far. I’d looked at the maps a bit but knew they wouldn’t tell me about the river I was going to swim and the route I was going to encounter. My nerves pulled at me, I felt sick. We moved down the slipway, and the cold water hit my feet, my calves, my stomach. The crowd of supporters were loud, the air was warm. I pushed off, moving from vertical to horizontal, my head aching with the cold as it submerged. And then the reassuring quiet; the surprisingly salty taste of the water, the feel of moving through it. My hands pulled and I joined the swimmers; I was in the water now.

Becoming a body in the water changes the relationships you have with other people, with the way you think about yourself and your body. The change from vertical to horizontal marks that shift and alters your perspective on everything. The view on the world is changed, and your ways of interacting with other people is transformed. The concerns important on land dissolve, to be replaced by a different set of preoccupations. Even these seem to ebb away as the swim progresses; replaced with only the concerns of sighting, pulling and breathing. The

body finds a rhythm; stroke, stroke, breathe. Everything is contained and produced in that repeated motion; the bubbles as your hands pull through the water, the sounds as your ear clears the water when you breathe, the changes in light as you move through the water. Your sensory perceptions alter; the taste, the feel, the sights, the sounds are all changed, and distinctive for the water you are in.

Bodies swim differently in the open water. Rather than having the rigidity of lane ropes and lined pool bottoms to guide people along linear trajectories, outdoor swimmers tend to swim into each other a bit, take arcing detours and spend time with their heads out of the water, sighting the next point to aim for. Your stroke changes when you move from a pool to outside; with arms recovering higher over (potentially choppy) water, buoyancy altering with salty water or wetsuited limbs and stroke rates rising or falling depending on tides and currents. Personal space is eroded by the flow of the water, the power of the waves herds bodies together and uneven rocks and pebbles on entry and exit make people stumble into each other. In the fieldnotes above, this connection begins on the river bank, as we stand together looking at the river we are going to swim. Land based concerns - fatigue, muscle pain, competition between others - fade as we become swimmers in the water together.

The ways of interacting with each other changes when we are in the water. Chatting reduces to a few words shouted across waves, or in moments of pause when you scull upright regaining your breath and checking your location. Goggles obscure faces, and with the addition of wetsuits and hats, personal identity is less discernible. Communication shifts from verbal to something else, a different way of *being* together in this watery social world. The water dictates how this interaction is experienced; I have swum in seas so choppy I haven't been able to see anyone else, despite knowing there are 300 other people in the water around me. During this Dart swim, the river was flat and there were people all around. At times it felt busy and crowded with bodies moving together through the splashy water as kick and pull disturbed the surface. At other times it felt open and calm, the other people distant and part of the scenery. During this, there were encounters with other people that were both meaningful and fleeting:

I swam with two other swimmers for about 20 minutes. We swam in a triangle, rather than a line, with one of us dropping behind the other two in rotation. It was also nice



to have some company, to fall in with a group and not have to think about the route. We also fell into a rhythm together; strokes matching each other, moving along together. And then just as I had joined them without planning, we moved apart. I don't know if I went faster or slowed down, but I was on my own again.

The feeling of swimming with people is an important part of outdoor swimming. While there are many who swim alone and enjoy the solitude, the practice is more often a communal one. While swimming with people could be explained as simply down to issues of safety, participants suggested it was something more than that. Outdoor swimming is a shared practice; social and embodying the narratives of inclusivity it presents. Getting changed, entering the water as a group, and then spending time getting warm or having a cup of tea and some food together are as much a part of the shared values of outdoor swimming as the practice of swimming itself. The social life of the swimmer extends into the spaces around the swim as much as in the water, but within the water – at events such as the Dart 10k – meeting people and swimming with them can offer moments of togetherness and belonging that are significant (both in the moment and often extending beyond it). Moments when swimmers encounter each other, sharing understandings, appreciation and immersion in the social world of the water can happen non-verbally and while mobile. Communication occurs through the change in stroke rate, the breathing to the same side, a flick of the hand to say hello. Far from being isolating, the water allows for and produces meaningful connection. Evers (2009: 901) describes it as 'bodies-in-relation', a shared sensual awareness of what is happening that promotes and produces feelings of belonging, connectivity and inter-affective experience. As Kari Furre describes of her friendship with Kate Rew (founders of the OSS):

'I met Kate Rew actually in the water. We have always swum together rather than against each other, and there is great joy and love, timing your movement to another, matching the stroke, adjusting slightly as one or the other speeds up or slows down. It is a non-verbal communication and I am convinced it can lead to deep friendships.'

## **Conclusion**

The sun was beaming through the murk of the river, beams of light that I tried to catch with my hand. The trees were silhouettes, making shapes and throwing shadows onto the water. The bubbles glistened as my hand created them. I swam past a group of slower swimmers and smiled at them, so pleased to be in this moment with them. My arms felt strong and the sun warmed the backs of my feet.

Our sociological instincts to privilege the ways people interact verbally means that there is a potential to relegate swimming to a position of being anti-social and individualistic; defined by a single swimmer suspended in their own watery world. This paper has argued against that position; that far from being a site of individualism defined by a lack of engagement with others, swimming offers a space of particular ways of knowing both the water and ourselves which pulls people and nature together in new connections, socialities and belongings (Watson, 2017, 2019). This paper has engaged with questions on how we understand and research bluespaces through this framing of outdoor swimming as a social, and not just individualistic and anti-social practice. It is a social world based on shared understandings, rules and codes of behaviour that are produced interactionally and in dialogue with other points of reference. By considering moments of interaction within outdoor swimming, and describing the water as a space of entanglement which enacts new forms of being human (Watson, 2019), ways of being a body and being at leisure in this particular bluespace have been shown as they unfold and happen. The materiality of the water and the associations and meanings it holds for people in and around it binds this social world together, and flows through the relations that it facilitates and produces.

Looking at this case of outdoor swimming has allowed the consideration of issues more broadly around bodies, water and the construction of identity through situated, contextual interaction. Outdoor swimming identity is something worked on and produced, and in so doing we produce a sense of belonging and attachment within the shared social space around and in the water. As with all identities this one is contextual and situated, understood by those aware of the social meanings and cultural practices brought together through and in the water. Beyond the social world of outdoor swimming, our presentation of self as an outdoor swimmer and the ways our bodies are positioned and understood are unlikely to be shared, and other meanings will be attached to what we do. As my son wipes the mud off my face in the exert below, the physical remnants of the swim become out of place and my identity as outdoor swimmer gives way to other roles.

I knew the end must be near as the river became the sea close by. I could see a point people were swimming towards and understood that was the end. I started to go faster and passed people. Other people were accelerating too, but the end still seemed far away. The pace of the race changed, we were moving towards a point and not just along a river as the rest of the swim had been. It was exciting and also sad;

the end was near. I saw a big 10k sign and aimed for that. My fingertips caught the bottom, soft and silty. People around me began to walk, but I kept swimming until my knees dragged along the bottom. I tried to stand up and stumbled, the ground slippery and uneven. I lay down again and pulled myself along until there wasn't enough depth. I stood up and heard music; a brass band was playing on the shore and there were lots of people on a causeway cheering. It was noisy and intrusive, I wanted to go under water again. I saw my kids on the shore. I waded up towards them, my body heavy and cumbersome in this new upright state. The simplicity of swimming, the focus and clarity of what to do, already seemed to be a distant memory and I was overwhelmed with the faces, noise and smells. I walked onshore and saw people I knew; my son ran over and I picked him up. 'I don't like this', he said, pointing to my muddy face, the physical traces of the river still with me, now out of place and undesirable.

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