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'Clean and safe'?: Swimming ethically in compromised times and polluted places

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A B S T R A C T

In this article we explore emergent and enduring tensions that exist in thinking about outdoor swimming and what these can tell us about the expectations swimmers have for the possibilities in the world today and the world becoming. We will explore and describe encounters that let us see the complexities between the desire for encounters with nature, and the desire to maintain 'clean and safe' swimming experiences. Thinking in dialogue with Clifton Evers (2019, 2021, 2023) work on 'polluted leisure' and Alexis Shotwell's (2016) concerns 'about the evocations of purity and cleanliness' (p.2), we are interested in how swimming spaces create barriers of access to healthy encounters by limiting the vulnerability swimmers feel in relation to various risks. Like Shotwell, we aim to challenge the privilege afforded to some groups of people to 'perceive things how they should be, rather than how they are' (p.7). By exploring the politics of maintaining 'safe and clean' swimming spaces, we aim to engage with how 'Purity politics arise not only in our response to potential physical contamination but are also an issue for our ethical and political situation in the world' (p.6). Maintaining purity, safety and cleanliness for ourselves and our communities of practice is an impossible task, and one that ensures we remain complicit in ongoing social and environmental injustices as well as re-producing social and cultural hierarchies related to nature, wellbeing, place, and health.

1. Introduction: The *healthy nature* of swimming

Alongside a boom in the popularity of outdoor swimming, surfing and other water-based sports and leisure activities, notions of "blue health" have become common in public discourse (e.g. for example, Harper, 2022; Cowie, 2022). Promoted as watery "therapeutic landscapes" (Bell et al., 2018, 2023; Foley, 2011), bluespaces are described as offering people a range immersive, multi-sensory, physical, psychological, and social health and wellbeing benefits (Foley et al., 2019; Wheaton et al., 2020). These benefits are so widely accepted that spending time in bluespaces is now medicalised through 'nature prescription' practices (Bell et al., 2019; Denton and Aranda, 2020), with immersive activities, like surfing and swimming, promoted as particularly beneficial for mental health and social connectedness (e.g. Mental Health Swims).

The growing body of research on relationships between bluespaces, health and wellbeing has paid attention to the quantifiable health benefits (Britton et al., 2020; Gascon et al., 2017; Massey et al., 2022). Understanding measurable benefits is important, but what is often obscured by such metrics are the deep social, cultural, economic, and geographical inequities that shape who can access these spaces and benefits, how these spaces are experienced, and the individual and community decisions about what is 'safe' and 'clean' for people using outdoor bluespaces. However, growing humanities and social sciences scholarship is taking a more critical approach to social, cultural and ecological aspects of human-water health and wellbeing (Foley and Kistemann, 2015; Olive and Wheaton, 2021), including themes of women and community building (Bates et al., 2023; Gould et al., 2021; Watson, 2019), politics of race and exclusion (Phoenix et al., 2021; Shefer et al., 2023), the effects of non-human encounters (Olive, 2015, 2023a), intersections of gender, class and pollution (Evers, 2019, 2023), as well as the romanticised, monotone chromatic evoked by the term 'bluespaces', which ignores the browns, greens, greys, and general murkiness of many bodies of water (Pitt, 2018, see also Evers, 2024).

Drawing on human-environmental health and wellbeing arguments that *think against purity* (Shotwell, 2016) and *think with pollution* (Evers, 2019), we explore an example of our own encounters with not-so clean and safe swimming waters we visited together in Wales, in August 2023. We focus on outdoor swimming cultures and places in the UK to build on Clifton Evers' (2019) 'polluted leisure' agenda that is, concerned with how pollution problematises how we think about and represent leisure, how it is undertaken and organised (including by what and whom),

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where and when it materializes, how it is and can be done (or not), how it is incorporated and improvised with, how it establishes conditions of action, what it contains and enables, what it excludes and includes, and what the outcomes of living with pollution are or might be for leisure' (424).

Engaging with these questions, we also draw on the scholarship of Alexis Shotwell (2016) to consider how the categories of 'clean' and 'safe' are not just quantifiable, material or public health descriptors that aim to minimise encounters with pollution but are instead social and political categories that define and produce the conditions and possibilities of participation in outdoor swimming and other nature-based polluted leisure activities. Evers' and Shotwell's work highlights the politics of Whiteness, colonisation, heteronormativity, and class on cultures of health and wellness. Their critical discussions of health practices as entangled with issues of pollution, toxicity, and hygiene, help us make sense of our experiences and observations of outdoor swimming spaces and practices from our collaborative fieldwork, which provide the empirical material for the following discussion.

We think critically about intersections of outdoor swimming practices and cultures, bluespaces, and human-environmental health and wellbeing by exploring less savoury aspects of outdoor swimming. In particular, we explore the tensions between notions of 'clean and safe' open water swimming spaces and the unavoidability of "impurity" and risk when swimming in outdoor waters. We consider how expectations of outdoor water spaces are presented to swimmers, and how attempts to regulate these spaces frame the people and practices that are produced in and through them. By thinking about swimmers' and outdoor water management groups' expectations of how clean, safe, pure, and hygienic open water swimming can or should be, we attend to 'a wider palette of water experiences' (Pitt, 2018: 161) and consider the im/pure health qualities of bluespaces.

1.1. *Getting dirty in the field*

The ideas in this article emerged from collaborative fieldwork in the UK, when Rebecca was visiting Kate in Cardiff in August 2023. We had planned to visit a series of different Welsh swimming locations; a public lido in the Welsh valleys; a newly renovated reservoir in a wealthy suburb of Cardiff; and the River Taff, which runs through Cardiff city from its headwaters in the mountains to the north. These three sites offered access to different swimming spaces, communities and cultures, and would let us think across them all. The project design and the observations we made while in the field were made possible because of our existing and shared knowledge of the research and cultural swimming fields through our separate projects, and the 'foreshadowed ideas' that we hold about the spaces and cultures, which were gained through our reading and engagement with previous academic work.

We have both been researching swimming cultures for some time. Kate's ethnographic work has an enduring interest in mobilities and place (Moles, 2021), with more recent attention focusing on swimming as a social practice, through social competitive distance swims in the River Dart (Moles, 2021), self-organised swimming practices in an inner-city London pond (Bates and Moles, 2024a), and dipping cultures in various outdoor locations (Bates et al., 2023; 2024b; 2024c). This work has included in-person, participatory fieldwork, as well as geographically distanced methods wrought by pandemic restrictions. These included online relationships with swimming communities who shared images, stories and recordings with the researchers (Bates et al., 2023). Rebecca has been conducting water-based ethnographic research since 2008, including practices of surfing, swimming and sailing. She has focused on swimming since 2019, in particular on ocean swimming (e.g. Olive, 2023a, 2025). Her ethnographic work is in water, but she also applies ethnographic methods to social media platforms in order to understand representations of the swimming and surfing communities and experiences of individual and groups (see Olive and Jennings, In Press).

Our work is part of growing discussions about qualitative, ethnographic, water-based methods, which allow for forms of intimacy and shared experience in the water (e.g. Butler-Eldridge, 2024; Denton et al., 2021; Evers, 2024). As Foley (2015) points out, 'swimming itself, especially when discussed with everyday swimmers, can be banal' (220), but immersion with swimmers in a banal context offers the opportunity to discuss their practice in new, multisensory ways beyond immediate reactions to the swim, allowing attention to be heeded to the mundane interactions and ways of negotiating that experience. In this case, it was us sharing new intimacies in our thinking through conversation and shared experiences of swimming, as well as the inevitable coffees and meals we shared afterwards (Butler-Eldridge, 2024; Gould et al., 2021). We must confess, this work was a lot of fun. Fieldwork is often difficult and lonely, but swimming together was a wonderful collegial opportunity to see how the threads of our separate work weave together, and to explore how each of us engages in fieldwork and in swimming as a practice.

Participatory methods are useful for gaining critical insight into what experiences and cultures feel like, and to develop forms of understanding and language that are shared with the people and communities we are discussing (following Sinha and Back, 2014). Ethnographic methods are common across sport and leisure studies, and we have both been using and writing about these methods for some time (Moles, 2021; Olive, 2023a), including collaborative, lively versions of fieldwork (Bates et al., 2023; Wheaton and Olive, 2023). Collaborating on fieldwork allows for more complex approaches to what we see, how we feel, what we encounter, who we talk to, and the understandings we have of these experiences, observations and relationships, including reflexive consideration of the effects of our subjectivities (Wheaton and Olive, 2023). In our case, we are White women academics in humanities and social sciences Schools, who both research and participate in swimming communities. We are both competent and confident swimmers, comfortable in most water spaces and conditions, which gives us particular access to learning about swimming from the water. We are also familiar with our limitations. For example, during this fieldwork visit, Rebecca declined to join Kate on a 10 km river swim, which Kate had completed before but which was beyond Rebecca's endurance abilities. We also recognise that our relative wealth allows us to access swimming places inaccessible to poorer swimmers. For example, the lido had a £3.50 entry fee, while the reservoir was £10 entry. While the river is free, it comes with other challenges such as the cold temperature, and the danger of a weir that could easily cause someone caught in the whirling water to get into difficulties. Both of us were knowledgeable of such conditions and how to navigate them, as well as avoiding them when that made the most sense.

By researching together in the same times and places, we were able to develop deep, critical discussions about the questions we were exploring, allowing conversations to occur *in situ*, with people in the field and with each other (Butler-Eldridge, 2024). While we were able to swim together in the lido and the river, we were unable to swim in the reservoir due to its closure 'for safety reasons'. It is our non-swimming experience of the reservoir that is the focus of the discussion. While swimming together creates intimacies, the exclusion from swimming we experienced at the reservoir caused us to think critically about different kinds of politics than immersion would have afforded.

The work of analysis was embedded in our engagement with the practice, building collaborative insights and sharing thoughts and themes. In particular we were driven by questions of what swimming in each place was like, who was included and excluded and why, what narratives of health, safety, and risk were in place, and how other swimmers were reacting to swimming there. The lines of inquiry we develop in this paper emerged early on, as our conversations were framed by each space, our journey to it and the experiences within it. In the case of the reservoir, it was the tensions we encountered between the seemingly exciting access to an inner-city, outdoor swimming location, the prohibitive costs of entry, and the closure of the water access to

swimmers due to itch-causing larvae. Our analysis continued over emails and via online calls to co-navigate our experiences and observations. As these conversations continued, we read Alexis Shotwell's book *Against Purity* together, finding ourselves excited at the same lines and paragraphs. Not-swimming and talking and reading and sharing and writing and deleting and laughing and figuring it out together was how we wove this discussion of swimming, water, pollution, place, health, and wellbeing. In this way, the analytical process is iterative and dialogic, emergent and reflexive, and situated in time and place.

1.2. Swimming outdoors as a contaminated practice

No matter the body of water, the practice of outdoor swimming requires encounter, inter-animation, entanglement, absorption, accretion, and vulnerability in relation to water and the conditions, plants, animals that dwell there (Bates et al., 2023; Foley, 2017; Gould et al., 2021; Moles, 2021; Olive, 2023a, 2023b). For outdoor swimmers, non-human encounters with animals, plants and weather are promoted as a key pleasure and health and wellbeing benefit of spending time in blue-spaces and are celebrated as different to experiences of sanitised, chlorinated pools. For example, one of Karen Throsby's (2013) participants describes the swimming pool as a 'dead puddle', 'a poor, utilitarian substitute that is good for fitness but not much else' (17). Immersion in outdoor waters brings us into encounters with environments that we do not control, and in which we experience ourselves as part of diverse ecologies, not separate from them (Olive, 2023b).

Outdoor swimmers often celebrate their unexpected encounters with the natural world in post-swim conversations and on social media (Olive, 2025; Roper, 2018; Testa, 2025). Observing or swimming with animals including seals, dolphins, otters, fish, birds, whales, and jellyfish are regularly described in elaborate detail. The more charismatic and beloved animals act as swim group mascots (e.g. The Stingrays, The Penguins, The Weedy Seadragons), decorate swimwear or swim caps (e.g. the swimwear brand, Botoko), and are central in the narratives of what it feels like to swim. Throsby's (2013) participants described transforming from a 'cranky sea lion' into a 'smiling dolphin', and even in a project about indoor pools, Caudwell's (2020) participants drew images of fish, dolphins and mermaids to evoke the 'imaginative transgender and non-binary possibilities' (7) of swimming.

Relatedly, swimmers describe the multi-sensual pleasures of the "impurities" of outdoor swimming spaces. Multiple women describe the "velvet" feel of the silty water of Hampstead Heath's Kenwood Pond (Moggach, 2019) and Bates et al. (2023) explain how swimmers at one London lake navigate duck poo as an inevitable part of accessing the water. Considerations of the unpleasant effects of "salt tongue" and the abrasive combination of sea water and wetsuits is part of the preparation for longer sea swims and ocean crossings (Throsby, 2016). In Wales, Kate invited Rebecca to come and collect a "Barry Island beard", formed by the suspended material left on swimmers faces as they emerge from the dirty water of the Bristol Channel, and together we navigated muddy feet and public nudity as we changed after swimming together at Keeper's Pond, a body of water high in the Welsh valleys that overlooks a historic slag pile made up of the remnants of the coal mining industry of the area. For our swimming fieldwork we carry first aid kits. Amongst other things, have been left with injuries from storm debris, been chaffed by wetsuits, been stung by jellyfish, have collected floating rubbish and carried it in our swimsuits, been disgusted by the stromwater sources of various fresh and salt water algal blooms, and one of us has spent a few hours following a river swim event being horribly sick in a portaloo.

Swimming wild describes 'a sense of multi-sensory immersion, of escape, of connection to themselves, to ecologies, to something bigger than themselves. And, sometimes … as an act of rebellion and resistance' (Olive, n.d.). It also means accepting the possibilities of risky encounters, which could mean anything from swimming into post-storm debris, a shark bite or jellyfish sting, ear-aches or a more serious sickness from immersion in polluted water (Evers and Phoenix, 2022). It is to knowingly swim in spaces in which we do not control the conditions we will face, the encounters we will have or the effects these might have on us. Outdoor swimming encounters with "nature" involve forms of discomfort very different to those of pools. In pools, we do our best to sanitize the water and experiences by ensuring that foulants including mud, debris, bacteria, sewage, and the resulting grazes, illnesses, itches, stings, and feelings of disgust are not a risk. On the whole, swimmers can anticipate pools will not have sticks or leaves floating in the water or animals crawling on the bottom. For pool users, the removal of water foulants and animals creates a sense of safety, which is further provided by the presence of private changing rooms and watchful lifeguards (Scott, 2009; Ward, 2017). These safety measures are positive things that make swimming accessible for many people and were part of the discourse of public health and wellbeing around swimming that was revitalised in the 1960s and 70s in the UK (for example the 1960 Wolfenden Report on Sport and The Community). But for outdoor swimmers, the discomforts and risks that arise from sharing the water with mud, plants and other critters complicate notions of human-environmental health and wellbeing (Evers, 2023). We cannot swim in natural water without sharing it with other beings and materials, both as a consequence and aspiration of the swimming practice itself.

The complexities in how outdoor water swimming places are experienced as "contaminated" is why we were surprised while reading the website of an outdoor swimming reservoir in Wales, which was promoting its water as 'clean and safe' for swimming. 'Clean and safe' are assertions we would associate with a chlorinated pool, not with an outdoor reservoir that is home to birds, algae, sticks, leaves, rocky bottoms, and other non-human inhabitants. Outdoor swimming is one practice in which being "feral" is celebrated, even if that feral-ness is offset by woollen hats, fleece-lined Gore-Tex coats, waterproof boots, thick socks, and thermoses of hot tea. It is a leisure practice dominated by older, often middle class, white women (Bates et al., 2023; Testa, 2025), so being outdoors in ways that largely reject the gendered and domestic comforts of home is celebrated as an act of personal resilience that also connects swimmers to the natural world that they are systematically and philosophically disconnected from in much of their everyday lives[2] (Costello et al., 2019). Outdoor swimmers must decide to swim wild; they do not end up in an ocean, river, lake, or reservoir without making an effort to do so. This is a practice very different to the regulated and disciplined practice of swimming laps or doing a water aerobics class in a chlorinated pool. Outdoor swimmers embrace discomfort and being unclean, which is a challenge to many narratives linking sport and physical activity leisure practices to various forms of physical, mental and social health and wellness.

At the same time, outdoor swimming has raised the awareness of swimmers about issues of water quality. They are activated to this awareness through their own bodily experiences of the intersections in human-environmental health and wellbeing, and the many risks to human health of polluted water (Butler-Eldridge, 2024). In the UK, protests against sewage overflow in rivers and oceans, and in support of cleaner natural bodies of water, are increasing as swimmers come into encounter with various forms of pollution that stop them swimming or that cause them to become ill (these happen regularly, with the most recent wave in May 2024). The UK-based water quality advocacy group, Surfers Against Sewage, has been embraced by outdoor swimmers, who are now highly visible participants in the organisation's in-person and online actions (see also, Wheaton, 2007). In our separate and ongoing ethnographic research about outdoor swimming we have noticed that the social media accounts of outdoor swimmers and outdoor swimming groups regularly include posts about water quality. Before entering the water, outdoor swimmers check websites or apps run by government agencies or other organisations that report on water quality (e.g. https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/for-community/summer-water-quality/beach-report; https://www.sas.org.uk/water-quality/sewage-pollution-alerts/). Outdoor swimmers navigate microbial, sewage, and chemical

forms of pollution as an always-possible companion in their swimming lives. The environment is not distinctive from the practices or bodies of the swimmers but is 'complexly intertwined in the production of action, social meaning, and subjectivity' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2016, 187, in Eberhardt, 2024, 56).

1.3. Polluted leisure and arguments against purity

In this way, outdoor swimming must be understood in terms of what Clifton Evers (2019, 2021, 2023) identifies as 'polluted leisure', which 'describes the embodied, sensorial, emotional, intellectual, spatial, and technological emergence of pollution — material and social, harmful and nonharmful, actual and perceived — assembling with leisure' (2019, 424). Evers explains how 'Polluted leisure involves attending to how capitalism affects leisure, for example, intentionality, labor, and freedom of choice' and 'refers to how humans disturb ecological equilibriums through material pollution, with this often being an outcome of the effect of capitalism on leisure' (2019, 424). Thinking about polluted leisure in the context of outdoor swimming helps us explore questions of 'how pollution interrupts correlations between blue spaces, sport, and health/well-being' (Evers, 2021, 180).

Such questions are significant. In contemporary, popular wellness cultures, products and practices related to detoxification of individual bodies have proliferated. The interest in "clean" eating, organic food, chemical free beauty products, and hygiene practices like body brushing and tongue scraping, reflects a growing knowledge about the adverse health effects of the petro-chemicals and pharmaceuticals that have become so common in our lives (Eberhardt, 2024). From bottled water to sugar substitutes, to micro-plastics, to GMO food, to skin care products, to manufacturing and production processes, we are aware that there are few, perhaps no, places in our lives that we can escape the carcinogens that characterise our industrialised, polluted world. As Liboiron (2021) reminds us, there is 'no blank slate, no terra nullius, no purity politics' that offer a starting point from which to move forward (Liboiron, 2021, no page). In response, those who can afford the time and costs are making "cleaner", less toxic choices about where they live, what they eat, and what they put on their skin (Crowe, 2021). While these purity practices themselves are an understandable response to the tangible health threats of living with pollution, they also represent a multi-billion-dollar market of new products and services that are benefiting very few.

Arguing against the idea that we can ever purify or detoxify our bodies or our lives, Alexis Shotwell (2016) critiques wellness cultures as dominated by White, individualised, heteronormative, and cis-gendered politics, with Gwyneth Paltrow and Goop the archetypal influencers (e.g. Eberhardt, 2024; Shome, 2023). These politics maintain hierarchical binaries and hide complexities of relationships among humans, as well as among humans and non-humans. Shotwell follows Anna Tsing's (2015) argument that 'Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option' (27, in Shotwell, 2016, 81) to make sense of the complex social, cultural, historical, polluted, toxic, and environmental entanglements that shape the ruins we all live in. While framing her argument around health and wellness obsessions with purification and detoxification of individual bodies, Shotwell (2016) makes clear that 'Purity politics arise not only in our response to potential physical contamination: it is also an issue for our ethical and political situation in the world' (6) that prompts us into 'thinking about complicity and compromise as a starting point for action' (1).

Given outdoor swimming's links to therapeutic landscapes and nature prescriptions, we take these questions of complicity and compromise as key provocations for thinking about the politics and ethics of outdoor swimming, and how these are related to 'practices of purity' which 'can help us understand the symbolic work of social relations that stitch together society' (Shotwell, 2016: 13). These symbolic sets of social relations, entangled within material and cultural practices, are forever shifting and contingent, and by exploring them in a particular time and place can 'tell us something about how people understand the world they live in, and thus how they can imagine the world becoming' (13). This involves thinking about our entanglements, decentring anthropocentric assumptions and practices, and engaging with how our health and wellbeing relationships to conceptions of pollution and purity are contingent, socially determined and symbolically significant.

As such, this approach of thinking against purity raises important questions about our expectations of nature spaces and practices in relation to health and wellbeing. When it comes to blue spaces, Evers and Phoenix (2022) remind us that overestimating 'the positive wellbeing or health enabling dimensions of blue space does not adequately acknowledge how aquatic places are also sites of exclusion and oppression' (4170) including sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, localism, class, colonisation, and industrialisation (see also, Kelly et al., 2023). Indeed, we suggest that the enduring narrative of bluespaces as publicly accessible health and wellbeing resources actively erases and undermines counter narratives of exclusion and oppression. Through what are individualising, neoliberal discourses, the individual not taking advantage of the world of wellbeing available to them is compromised and lacking, which allows these discourses to ignore or erase broader asymmetries of power and privilege.

The implications of these complexities and contradictions means that all open water swimming spaces, whether pools, reservoirs, rivers, lakes, or oceans, are 'against purity' and are polluted in various ways that play out to various effects depending on the combinations of people, places and power. For example, for the men who surf in Evers' research, the water and beaches include industrial, chemical, nuclear, and petroleum-based pollution. The pollution impacts poorer communities in particular, who are unable and/or unwilling to remove themselves from the deindustrialising coastlines they love so dearly in order to make way for stratifying gentrification to take over. In some cases, surfing and swimming water they know is polluted is a way to retain health and wellbeing through continued connections to place. As one participant, Jack, elucidates about the long-term presence of pollution at his surf break:

> We've adapted to it [pollution]. You learn when to surf or not. I've been sick but I keep coming back. Like anywhere, a bit of dedication goes a long way to earning your spot here (Evers, 2019: 433).

The people Evers spoke with remain entangled in the complexities of pollution as an effect of and resistance to the unequal effects of using and cleaning up the coast. In this way, Evers' work draws our attention to the ways nonhuman and material agencies are fused with, and resistant to, socio-economic (capitalist) and subjective (gendered) experiences, relationships, and issues.

1.4. 'Clean and safe'

And so we return to the 'clean and safe' outdoor swimming experiences being promoted by a newly renovated reservoir in Cardiff, which allowed open water swimming, alongside Stand Up Paddleboarding (SUP) and dinghy sailing. Displayed on posters around the reservoir and on their website, the company that owns the site described the waters as clean, and the venue accredited as SAFE (Safe Aquatic Facility Endorsement). The facility has a £10 fee to swim and you need to book a timed slot, within limited times and days. We were checking the website as we tried to book our time to swim and read the descriptions of the open water swimming at the reservoir:

> Our dedicated supervisors provide peace of mind for swimmers of all levels and ensure a secure environment for you to challenge yourself and push your limits. Under their watchful eyes and expert guidance, you can focus on the sheer joy of swimming while leaving your worries behind.
>
> Indulge in the perfect blend of adventure, fitness and serenity as you embark on a supervised open water swimming experience.

> Reconnect with nature, embrace the invigorating sensation of the water and enjoy the unmatched thrill of swimming in the reservoir.

The description of the outdoor swimming experience in a 'secure environment' that also allows the swimmer to 'reconnect with nature' through the 'thrill of swimming in the reservoir' presented a complicated discursive construct. As we kept trying to figure out how to book, we realised that the reservoir was unavailable for open water swimming. In alignment with management's claims of cleanliness and safety, it was not running swimming or SUP sessions due to the possible presence of a worm that has "allegedly" caused swimmers itch in at least one swimmer [3]. It is not surprising that management groups wish to minimise the risks of illness and injury in the leisure spaces and facilities they are responsible for. Yet, while people in regional areas can access coasts and rivers for swimming, including areas patrolled by lifeguards, in urban areas demand for outdoor swimming spaces is complicated by the limited number of 'clean and safe' bodies of water – rivers, lakes, canals – in which folk can swim (Romer-Lee, 2024). And yet the mildness of the issues that had closed the reservoir to swimmers contradict the encounters and risks that "wild" and open water swimmers say they are willing to endure. Indeed, the discussion of the 'naturally occurring microscopic worm' that they thought caused the itch was presented under a section of the website called, 'Swimming with Nature'.

Even though we could not swim, we decided to visit the reservoir anyway and get a feel for the place. We drove up the newly laid smooth tarmac road, past big metal gates and into a cleanly laid out carpark with electric charging ports, that led to a modern looking building sitting next to two reservoir pools. We parked and decided to walk around both reservoir pools, laid out in a figure of eight. They were fairly large – one was about 500 m around and the other about a kilometre in circumference. One was 'left to nature' and hosted different birds on the water and around the edges. The water was murky and filled with algae, bird poo and plants. You could not see the bottom, and the sides of the Victorian-era reservoir walls were covered in different plants and algae. It felt like a body of outdoor water we might encounter in the 'wild', albeit with a newly laid path around it and some interesting industrial remnants reminding us of the former use of this water as a reservoir. We completed the loop around that side and joined the path around the other pool that was used for sailing, SUPs, outdoor swimming and kayaking. There were not so many birds around this area, but there were staff in brightly coloured jackets and buoyancy aids standing by the edge and in boats. There only seemed to be one person in a dingy moving slowly around on the water. A few people were walking on the path, but with signs up warning that no dogs, bikes or scooters were allowed, it was a select few who chose to walk on these highly manicured, gravel paths. The water in this pool was notably different to the other. The clarity of it was striking, you could follow the old Victorian stone steps nearly to the bottom and see the beautiful brick work of the sides. This was in pronounced contrast to that of the murky brown of the other pond, and there were no visible plants or animals in it. There were clearly marked entry points for the swimmers and signs up warning not to go in except for at those locations. The water looked so clean it was pool-like; inviting, but devoid of lifeforms and liveliness.

And yet, as the website explained, it is the life in this water that is both a feature of the reservoir as well as the problem that had caused the swimmer's itch. The microscopic worms that were causing people to itch following swimming were casting this visibly clear water as unclean and unsafe. The act of sharing the water with mites was problematic for at least some swimmers, and thus for management who were promoting the reservoir as a clean and safe swimming experience. After testing the water, the worms were revealed and classified as a problem. As this water showed, if we look closely enough at anything, then the imaginary of cleanliness and safety starts to erode. The imagined purity of this water, even this relatively highly sanitised, tested and cleansed water, cannot be sustained as a part of the natural world. In this case, denoting critters that live in the water as "pollution" is misleading, but the water was classed as problematic and unhealthy as a result of their unwelcomed presence. Not in terms of inland bathing water bacterial standards, or in terms of blue green algal blooms – common problems with pollution encountered in outdoor swimming – but because of the co-presence of a mite, thriving in its natural habitat. The reservoir is not polluted in the sense of having un-safe levels of chemicals, sewage or agricultural run-off dumped into the water. Instead, we're using the term to evoke the tensions in how people navigate "impure" leisure spaces, in which their own health and wellbeing could be at risk. The water is not 'polluted' in the sense of a systematic problem so much as being 'polluted' as a consequence of being a body of water designated for human leisure, which is also inhabited by a multispecies community.

1.5. Co-constituted bodies and bodies of water

Whether in a chemical-loaded pool, a bacteria and duck filled reservoir, or in sewage affected, micro-plastic littered rivers and oceans, the issue we are thinking though is how outdoor swimmers navigate the contradiction of all swimming as *polluted* leisure. And, even more challenging, of all swimming as *polluting* leisure. While the idea of impurity can suggest there is a way that water ever was or can be pure, bodies of water are a co-constitution of many things, beings, and molecules. They are a home and source of life for plants and animals who live, float, swim, rest, birth, and drink there. They are a place to leave things behind – dirt, excrement, rubbish, bodies, ancestors, worries – pathways for mobilities, bridges between landforms, connectors between cultures. They are defined by death as much as life. Open bodies of water are replenished by rainfall and melting glaciers, inhabited by animals who excrete and shed faeces, skin and fur, filtered by plants who clean the water as they litter it with leaves and logs, and swum in by folk who shed microplastics and chemicals in the same water that is washing away their cares. Even pools create 'cleanliness' from bacteria through the addition of large amounts of chlorine, salt and other chemicals.

In the open water contexts we are discussing, issues of im/purity also raise questions about social injustice and stratification. Even in open waters like those of the reservoir that are situated in middle class suburbs, cultures of wellness and of human health and wellbeing are so paramount that even a mild itch can disrupt the wellness practices of many hundreds of other people and critters. But what should be the response to an itch caused by bacteria that is common in reservoir ecologies? In oceans, Rebecca is often chased from the water by 'sea lice' that inflame her skin, jellyfish that sting and scar, or sharks that might be swimming by. These are normal water interactions in open waters and the animals are (mostly) understood as having a right to live in the ocean that is their home (Olive, 2025). The open water context of the human-constructed, decommissioned reservoir is constituted under different conditions. The birds and other animals who live there are a key draw to visit, but there remains an expectation that the water will be safe and clean for swimming, replete with lifeguards and a lack of itchiness.

And so, at the reservoir, the immediate way management acted to protect human bodies form the itchy effects/affects of non-human water bodies was to remove swimmers from the impure, polluted space. The ducks, swans and worms stayed, but the swimmers had to go until the waters could be testes the water and regulations to 'protect' the swimmers could be put in place. Unlike Evers' surfers, inner-city, open water swimmers – like us! – who can afford the time and costs of entry and travel to the reservoir, are confident that even if they are removed from the water for their safety, they will be entitled to return to the water again.

Economic and cultural capital mean that people can avoid toxins and poisons for longer but these practices are temporary and illusory; we cannot be separate from the world that constitutes us. Corporeal exceptionalism cannot be sustained because inter-absorption is the way things are.

> Where do we find normative guidance for orienting ourselves toward meeting the future organisms we are becoming in co-constitution with complex ecological situations that range from pH-altering elements in the rain to the slag heaps of nickel mines to endocrine-disrupting compounds in our waterways?' (Shotwell, 2016, 85).

And yet in terms of the co-constitution of the reservoirs as a swimming place, nothing changes at all. The open water swimmers and the itch-inducing worms are linked, even though they are no longer allowed to be in physical contact. The absence of the swimmers from the water highlighted the existence of the worm, of the possible outcomes of our encounters, of the possible futures in which we might learn to live together. This final point is especially important because as we have seen above, it is the impurities that attract many open water swimmers to this living, natural water space, replete with mud and slime and weed and birds and bacteria and a lack of high-carbon emissions water heating; the circular space, the openness, the absence of lines and edges, the lack of sanitizing chlorine to ensure the water is kept alive. These are spaces of inclusion and conviviality, of necessity and accessibility, and instead of thinking about purity of the reservoir only as an ecology, we are also producing an idea of the purity of how we perceive the water should be, rather than how it is (see Shotwell, 2016, 3).

2. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have been pursuing questions around what ethical spaces for swimming could be, and what an embodied ethics of participation as an outdoor swimmer could and should look like. The only way to protect human bodies from the itchy effects/affects of non-human bodies was to remove human bodies from the impure, polluted spaces, but the quest for clean and safe water puts up economic, physical and ideological boundaries that exclude people from swimming practices. As Puig de La Bellacasa (2017) writes in *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, 'The letting go of the controlling power of causal and binary explanation comes with an immersion in the messy world of concerns' (33). And when we consider the broader ideas of health, place and wellbeing, we must understand that there is no flourishing without it being at the expense of others – ecologically, economically, environmentally, socially. Outdoor swimming exists as an entanglement of interrelated organisms, and the ideal of purity problematises the things we should be embracing (or enduring) as the way things actually are.

Water regulation involves the attempted control of human and non-human behaviour, engagement and encounters. It is not only impossible to achieve the exalted 'safe and clean' status, but the regulation inevitably leads to practices that exclude, distance and restrict. The Cardiff reservoir's website reveals further clean and safe' measures including strict surveillance and controls on time in the water (1 min per degree), enforced full length wetsuit and swim cap wearing, restricted space use (stay within the buoys, stay at least 3 m away from the platoon), and the requirement to have a shower with soap and to dry rigorously with a towel after exiting the water. Social media comments describe the enforcement of 'properly swimming' the whole time and avoiding 'floating and swimbling'. Here, these measures have become even more stringent than those we often find in pools, folding together control and health, regulation and place in ways that visitors describe as 'policing', and that deter many people from returning to the clear waters of the reservoir.

Thinking about purity and pollution – clean and safe spaces and practices – allows us to engage with the complexities, complicities and uncertainty that exist in our contemporary world, and which frame our practices, understandings and values. As Shotwell (2016) shows, when we link classification, healthism and morality, there are always groups (both human and non-human) that are deemed to be morally inferior, undeserving or problematic, and which have qualities that can be used to justify their subjugation, exploitation and marginalisation. Shotwell argues for concomitant existence through an ontology of embodiment and entanglement, and the necessity and complexity of interdependence and co-constitution, and we have thought about what that might mean in practice, ethics and action for outdoor swimming. Rather that these ideas disrupting existing practice, it is a recognition that this is what is already happening and only through acknowledging it can we live against purity, that is 'to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled and homogeneous' (15). By acknowledging we live together in this interconnected, entangled, complex world, in which we are all (unevenly) complicit in relationships of planetary health and harm, we can then work together to craft better futures, in everyday ways, and considering what relational responsibility might look like. We can all swim together in the murky waters.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kate Moles: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Rebecca Olive:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation.

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3. Footnotes

[1] Rebecca has not collected one yet

[2] We also view this narratively critically, recognising the neo-liberal cultural imperatives of self-discipline which operate most acutely on women and their bodies, and through which ideas of self-transformation, improvement and self-discipline are clearly visible. We will pick this up in the following section on wellness.

[3] There was no existing 'off the shelf' test that could be used to detect the cause of the itch and so working with academics from Bangor University (led by Professor Davey Jones), the reservoir management developed one.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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