Bobbing in the park: wild swimming, conviviality and belonging

Charlotte Bates and Kate Moles
Cardiff University

Abstract

With swimming pools and lidos closed during the pandemic, the number of people dipping their toes in rivers, lakes and seas and swimming wild has swelled. In this paper, we reflect on the ways in which swimmers living in cities have found ways of immersing themselves, and how they have forged new friendships and communities in the water. Drawing on conversations with swimmers at a lake in an urban park and focusing on small and embodied everyday social interactions, from flashes of nudity to recognition between strangers, we explore how the opening – and temporary closures – of the lake have sparked convivial moments and how swimming reconfigures urban public space. Within this paper we engage with ideas of belonging and becoming. We think about absence and exclusion flowing alongside belonging and conviviality, and reflect on what that means for our understandings of leisure spaces, urban publics and bodies. We suggest that the power of wild swimming to restore, refresh and bring people together can also revive our ideas about the place of water and wilderness in cities, while also drawing attention to enduring and pervasive inequalities.

Introduction

With swimming pools and lidos closed during the pandemic, the number of people dipping their toes in rivers, lakes and seas and swimming wild has swelled. According to a recent report published by Outdoor Swimmer the numbers of people finding their place in the water are expected to continue growing by between 10 and 20% each year, and the fastest growing demographic is women. As Ella Foote writes, 'You can visibly see the increase in swimmers on riverbanks, beaches and at open water venues' (Outdoor Swimmer, 2022: 48). The Outdoor Swimming Society also reports growth in its social media following and in the memberships of social media-based outdoor swim groups around the UK, reflecting growing interest in swimming outdoors. Together, these swimmers are reviving a long history of healing waters and the sea cure (Denton and Aranda, 2019), and changing the ways we relate to contemporary waters and each other. In this paper we draw on existing work about embodied leisure practices in and around coastal blue spaces (Wheaton et al., 2020), while challenging ways of conceptualising blue space and wellbeing. We reflect on the ways in which swimmers living in cities have found ways of immersing themselves, and how they have forged vital connections in and around the water. At the same time, we recognise that romantic descriptions of wild swimming often conceal more troubled and troubling undercurrents, which we bring to the surface.

We begin by drawing on current writings that illuminate how green spaces (Neal et al., 2015; Rishbeth et al., 2019) and leisure practices (Jackson, 2020) support practices of conviviality, sociability and belonging in cities. Emma Jackson's ethnography of a bowling league illuminates how 'practices of belonging and becoming' are dynamic, embodied and unfinished, made material through repetition, located in place through spatial ties, and experienced relationally rather than in isolation. As she writes, 'the practice of bowling both

embeds people in place and a social group – as such it is a practice of belonging – but also acts back on the body as a set of embodied competencies are learned and practised – thus it is also a process of becoming' (2020: 521). Like bowling, swimming is a practice of belonging that works back on the body of the swimmer, shaping a sense of identity and shaping the body – the bowler's larger right bicep is equivalent to the swimmer's developed shoulders, although in the case of bobbing it might better be described as a more invisible tolerance and even delight in cold water – bodily acclimatisation to low temperatures acquired through repeated practice. Becoming a swimmer is a process that alters bodies in visible and less visible ways, and it is a practice that re-orientates social and spatial ties, through the search for water to swim in and the support and friendship offered by other swimmers in and around the water.

Within the world of bowling there are different leagues and levels – often denoted by the ownership of bowling balls and shoes as much as by the bowler's embodied skill. As Jackson writes, 'For more casual bowlers, a trip to the bowling alley may be a fun Saturday night... For the league bowlers, bowling is a sport' (2020: 527). Similarly, within the swimming world swimming can be informal or formal, a leisure practice or a sport. For example, there is no dispute that marathon swimming and organised events are sports, but when people dip and bob the practice becomes more informal and the rules, regulations and expectations less clear. Swimmers can invest in expensive kit, or they can make-do with the basics. They can be identified in the water by their swimming stroke, the line they take, the duration of their swim. These different ways of being in the water create different tribes, gathering families together under one roof and helping people come together through shared passions, while also sowing the seeds of division (Lay, 2022).

Using Jackson's work and the example of the bowling league as a springboard into the water, we describe the practices of belonging and becoming that shape swimmers and swimming communities at the lake, while questioning the absences and exclusions that flow alongside and against the tide of belonging. Borrowing from Sara Ahmed (2004) we explore the lake as a dis/comfort zone, and think about which bodies are able to comfortably 'sink' into its waters while staying afloat. These questions are important, because unlike super-diverse parks and other urban greenspaces (Neal et al., 2015; Rishbeth et al., 2019) the communities that exist in and around the water appear at first glance homogeneous – female, white, middle-class. The lake itself, situated in an urban park and a multicultural, working-class neighbourhood, is a watery paradox, reflective of the swimming communities across the UK that have sprung up in the last few years as the popularity of wild swimming has swelled, but resisting the multicultural conviviality that defines other forms of urban leisure practices and spaces, making the lake both a celebrated and a contested space. Attending to this paradox, we consider the significance of new female spaces of belonging while acknowledging the lines of exclusion that exist at the lake's edge and raising questions about diversity, access to water and the racialisation of blue spaces (Wheaton et al., 2020).

In this paper we explore stories of swimming at the lake, showing how urban bodies of water are 'liquid public space' (Buser et al., 2019: 13) that plays significant roles in people's everyday lives and the life of the multicultural city. We highlight what Sophie Watson (2019) describes as the democratizing potential of water, as well as some of the fraught dilemmas that surround it, through close attention to the history of the lake and to stories from the

water. We also think through the effects of lockdown on people's relationships with water, showing how temporary restrictions and access to informal leisure spaces can redefine leisure practices and reshape the way we think about community.

Stories from the water

The stories in this paper are based on our immersive and multisensory ethnography of wild swimming in the UK – a year and more of forming friendships, sharing thoughts, notes, and images (drawn and painted, made with disposable waterproof cameras, mobile phone cameras and GoPros), keeping in touch and sometimes 'swimming-along' (Denton, Dannreuther and Aranda, 2021) with participants through the changing seasons. We worked closely with a group of 30 women aged between 20 and 80 living around the UK, and met many more (including some male swimmers) during the course of the project. While much of the research has unfolded remotely during the pandemic, we have tried to hold onto the immersive focus of the project and adapt our *in-situ* methods (Bates and Moles, 2021; Shareck et al., 2021) to hear and tell stories from the water. As Ash Watson and Deborah Lupton (2022) write, 'agile methods' can offer novel methodological insights in a pandemic world, and sensory, affective and relational elements can be researched from a distance. In this project, working creatively and remotely enabled us to stretch our ethnography across a wider geographical area and reach more participants. When we could not travel, we posted cameras to our swimmers, and asked them to send us images from the water. Images were made with mobile phone cameras, disposable waterproof cameras, and GoPros – versatile and waterproof action cameras. Working with different devices and technologies, we were able to give the women cameras that they felt comfortable using and through which they could make still and moving images while swimming. The restrictions we have faced as ethnographers have resonated with those faced by our swimmers – lockdowns have inevitably led to temporary closures of public pools and open water venues, and we have all been frustrated by our lack of access to water and inability to swim. Like all swimmers, we have travelled to water when we could, and the project has taken us to wild coasts, hidden pools and into the city of London to the lake, where we have met and talked with old and new swimmers, and been inducted into the water. Our conversations and exchanges have been as swimmers, supported by a shared love of the water through which we could develop relationships, and as ethnographers, through which we could develop a critical sociological perspective. While we both easily fit into the swimming community, our experiences and capabilities in the water are very different, allowing us to relate to swimmers who are taking their first winter dip and those that are training for 10k swim events (Moles, 2021). Each story we tell draws on the accounts that have been shared with us to portray a convivial scene, and each scene explores the practices of belonging and becoming that have shaped the lake, our swimmers, and the swimming community.

Opening

Wild swimming evokes images of nature and wilderness and it is easy to associate the practice with remote locations, sapphire blue seas, secret waterfalls, and cold clear pools, but the realities are often different. Wild swimming takes place in less obvious places, especially when travel is limited and accessibility is key. For people living in landlocked cities, the seas and oceans that are most commonly associated with wild swimming and that feature in work

on blue space and wellbeing are out of reach most of the time. But urban wild swimming is increasingly on the rise, and 'All over the world, people are rediscovering the rivers, harbours and canals in their own cities as spaces for leisure and socialising' (Buser et al., 2019: 9). Practices that are common across European cities are being revived in the UK, and lidos and open water venues are being restored and opened across the country. One such venue is the lake that is the focus of this paper.

While London holds the celebrated ponds at Hampstead Heath, the iconic Serpentine, and several famous open-air lidos, our attention is drawn away from these spectacular bodies of water to a lesser-known and more mundane lake, situated in a large urban green space in South London. This leafy and suburban part of the city is becoming increasingly diverse. More affluent people are moving into the area, bringing with them the risk of gentrification and exacerbating social divisions between established black and white working class residents and richer newcomers (Back 2020, 13).

The park includes a wide range of facilities, including a café, playground, ball court, football pitches, and tennis court. These informal sport and leisure spaces are used by the surrounding community, and make the park a lively multicultural place. Swimming in the manmade lake has little of the uncultivated romanticism of wild swimming and none of the comfort of indoor pools. Surrounded by a metal fence, overlooked by dog-walkers and passers-by, and managed by a water sports company, it has its own rules and code of conduct. Swimmers must have a pre-booked ticket and wear a tow-float to enter, there are no changing facilities, the lake is cold, and the muddy edges are steep and slippery. But for many swimmers, the lake provides the possibility of cold water immersion, a connection with nature and a unique community:

> You may have heard or seen some of the responses by local people to the lake, with some calling it the 'fake lake' and mocking the idea that it could be considered a 'wild swimming spot'. When I am in the water it certainly feels pretty wild, with birds in and around us, insects making it their home and the lush vegetation changing all the time. I like to imagine I am not in fact in the middle of an urban area, but somewhere more remote... until I hear sirens or the chatter of dog walkers. (Swimmer)

The history of the lake tells an interesting story about swimming, belonging and public space that includes different voices, complex negotiations and re-imaginings, which we have threaded together from conversations with participants, online news articles, and visits to the park and lake. The park's official history positions it as a healthy space, a space to quell uprising amongst frustrated urbanites and to promote calmness through the capacity to connect to nature, to exercise and to be released from the shackles of suburbia. However, embedded in this discourse are also narratives of inclusion and exclusion. The park land was originally bought in the 1920's by the London County Council to increase access to green space for people living in nearby estates, but was later privatised, becoming a golf course for many years. Physical and social restrictions and barriers kept locals away until recently, when the park was redeveloped and reopened to the public. Alongside the renovation of the gardens the lake, which had once been a central feature of the park, was restored and brought into use for swimming. This was a contemporary addition of blue space to the park's

original purpose of offering the neighbouring housing estates green space for them to partake in leisure activities, decompress from work and gather to relax.

These new public spaces were quickly filled with music, outdoor cooking, and when the lake opened, a special type of 'unruly conviviality' (Gilroy, 2004). Balmy weather, open access and a party atmosphere marked the opening weekend in 2019. With no regulations in place, it was a 'joyous chaos', as one swimmer described the day to us. The lake was open to the public for the first time, and its waters incited celebration. Black girls swam in the lake in their clothes, white boys jumped, dangerously, from the poles on the jetty, and people mixed alongside each other in the water. It was joyous, raucous, dangerous, confrontational, chaotic, happy, and alive. Locals were able to come and go as they wanted, accessing the water freely.

However, people soon raised fears about safety, the lack of regulation, the disorder and the chaos. The response to the moral panic was to temporarily close the lake. When it reopened a few weeks later, it was a very different space. Now, there were fences and CCTV around the water. There were lifeguards, and restricted numbers allowed to enter the enclosure at any time. There was a booking system that required internet access, a debit or credit card and registration details. Under 16s had to be accompanied by an adult. While swimming in the lake was still an informal leisure practice, suddenly, you needed the correct cultural and economic capital to access the water. There was an increase in information and infrastructure to allow the public to swim 'safely'. Regulations controlled access, privileging certain bodies and granting the right to swim to only particular groups, at particular times. There is a long history of concerns about safety and decency in relation to swimming, which had led to swimming bans in different places and at different times (Sonnette, 2019). In this case, safety concerns constructed a particular kind of swimming, dictating the type of person who was allowed to be a swimmer and the ways they could swim in order to fit into regulations and access the water 'safely'.

For a while, people continued to find ways of getting in the water, slipping under the fences early in the morning before the staff arrived, or asking strangers to chaperone them. Through informal community ties and 'connective interdependencies' (Neal et al., 2019), locals continued to enjoy the lake. Small acts of resistance opened up spaces of shared meaning and connectivity with the water and between the swimmers. For a short while, people managed to breach the restrictions and opened up a diverse community in the water. But by the end of the summer it had become harder to gain entry, and eventually the working-class boys from the local estates who had ducked and dived their way into the water stopped swimming. As the water temperature dropped, compulsory cold water induction training was introduced, a new safety requirement for anyone who wanted to keep swimming through the year that reinforced the perceived risk of cold water, though with a good humour and awareness of the far from wild waters the swimmers would encounter at the lake. While recognising the visible and invisible lines of exclusion that now exist at the water's edge, in the following stories we explore how the opening of the lake allowed a new space of belonging for women to emerge. The history of the park continues as a space of health and inclusion, belonging and exclusion, as we trace the ways the swimmers make community in and around the edges of the lake.

The contemporary park still feels like the grounds of a stately home, with pathways lined with mature trees, strings of bulbs hanging between the boughs and colourful signs to indicate activities and areas, such as the parkrun or playground. There are kitchen gardens next to the main house and courtyard, where a café sells a range of coffees, cakes and pizza. The lake is nestled down the hill from the main house, just about visible from the path that runs from the carpark. There are currently two fences, one stopping at waist height, and the other, temporary and high. A third fence is being erected, shorter but more forbidding. When you walk through the gate you are approached quickly, your name ticked off a list corresponding to the time you booked. Two lifeguards stand on the bank, identifiable by the red lifesaving floats they are holding. A jetty sticks out into the water, with the pink tow floats you can borrow hanging from it. There are rubber mats to help you walk down the steep bank and enter the water. The skyline is filled with tall trees, and ducks swim alongside you in the water. People walk around the fence, on the path that follows the edge of the lake, reminding you that the lake is situated within a busy urban park.

Stripping

Wild swimming introduces a proximity to nakedness that is not found in many other social and spatial spheres in the same way. It is not found as ubiquitously at the indoor swimming pool or the lido, where nearly-naked bodies are regulated, socialized and civilized (Scott, 2010), squeezed into changing cubicles or segregated changing rooms before emerging at the pool, still nearly-naked, in the appropriate attire. In wild swimming, there are no rooms and no segregated demarcation between changing and swimming, apart from the edge of the water itself, and even that boundary is often blurred. The lack of clear zones disrupts expectations around where and how people get changed, and there are no material markers to shape interactions. Without pegs to hang towels on, and benches to lean against, swimmers outside must carve out their own practices around getting changed and being naked in public. As one swimmer told us:

> Not having changing rooms, you just have to strip down, in front of people you don't know, in front of dog-walkers, in front of the whole park. You're exposed. But no one cares. (Swimmer)

Stripping down in a busy urban park, normal expectations about bodies and nudity, along with ideas of comfort, decorum and decency, are temporarily suspended. Getting changed quickly and efficiently becomes the priority, leaving clothes in the correct order to easily redress. Nakedness becomes essential and accepted, and the negative emotions we often associate with nudity, from shame to embarrassment (Górnicka, 2016), are washed away by the desire and necessity to get into the water, and to get warm afterwards. People talk to each other as they undress, swimmers huddle together in groups, using each other's shoulders to balance as they pull off socks and haul on wetsuits. Passers-by even stop to chat about the temperature of the water, seemingly oblivious to the near-naked, chilled bodies of the swimmers.

At the lake, all of this happens on a raised astroturf changing platform that has no clear demarcation as a changing area, except the people using it as such. People bring chairs and sit on it, but mostly it is used for the strange act of getting unchanged in a public park. The

size of the platform means that people are closer together than if they were in the 'wild'. Not everyone gets changed here, though it is a good way to avoid the mud and duck excrement on the grass. Some swimmers wear changing robes, and have strategies to get dressed that avoid the cold and the public gaze, but there is also an acceptance of the act of getting naked and recovered and a careful enrolment of swimmers in this act. Small smiles are exchanged and conversations wrap their arms around everyone there. Conversations that invite everyone, in various ways, to join in: the temperature of the water, how cold it will feel, when to wear a wetsuit, how long is a nice amount of time to stay in. And the responses are welcoming and inclusive: it's cold, but that's the fun, wear what you like to be comfortable, and stay as long as your body allows. For people who can access this space, and who can find comfort from these practices and ways of becoming, the lake offers a space of belonging. As one swimmer wrote:

> On the bank, we sipped tea, struggled back into wet clothes and chatted to some fellow swimmers. The smile and the buzz that accompanied this sense of achievement carried me through the day, knowing that even ten minutes in the water can lift me out a dark morning. (Swimmer)

The change of expectations around bodies and what they look like is significant. There are watermarks left from the swim, water scum on your face, bodies are blotchy pink and white, flesh is squeezed and pulled as you get changed. Bodies are more visible in different ways, and people attend to them in distinctive ways – watching for coldness setting in, checking lips, fingers and toes to see if they have gone white or blue, looking to see where wetsuits have rubbed. Supported by the community of swimmers, these new norms are learned and embodied, part of the ongoing work of becoming an outdoor swimmer and comfortably sharing the water and the spaces around it. Shared changing spaces, on the banks of the lake, can be liberating and remove gendered segregations that are problematic for many people. The acceptance of exposure and of other bodies contributes to an appreciation of all bodies, but especially challenges enduring societal expectations around female bodies and how and where they belong. In the water, bodies that are 'overlooked or problematised' (Throsby, 2013: 17) can be celebrated because of their strengths and their vulnerabilities. Outdoor swimming is open to alternative narratives about what a good body is, widening it to include strong, acclimatised, insulated bodies, bodies that orientate towards water together and which support others to do the same.

Bobbing


Two women walking into the lake. Image credit: swimmer.

At the swimming pool, the edges are hard, the bottom is visible, and the water is divided. Slow, medium or fast lane. You have to assess where you fit in, and if you get it wrong, there is huffing and puffing and splashing and conflict. There is a discipline, a uniformity and an isolation to pool swimming in the repetition and rhythm of lengths. Clocks are prominent on the walls, and results are measured in quantitative ways, by the distance you go, the time you spend in the water, the stroke counts of the lengths, as you move up and down in a regulated way. Bodies are kept apart, physically and metaphorically, by the rules and materiality of the place, 'the ordered, measured, monitored world, concretised in 'the swimming pool' which demands metaphorical straightness' (Gould et al., 2020: 10). Susie Scott (2009) describes the resources swimmers draw on to avoid interacting with each other, the architecture and spatial layout of the pool that is designed to regulate the flow of 'body vehicles' so that order is maintained. She describes the respect for personal space, including the territories of the self that are important to retain boundaries and avoid interactions. This respect of personal space is linked to a respect for the disciplinary regimes of the swimming pool, and produces and maintains a desexualised body that is not open to physical interactions. Exercise is the official focus of attention, talk is kept to a minimum, and 'All of this, paradoxically, helps maintain the illusion that each individual exists in isolation and is not part of a group of people interacting' (Scott, 2009: 129).

As Les Back (in press) writes, anyone who has been thrown out of a swimming pool will recognise the power of Scott's analysis. Her perspective resonates strongly with outdoor swimmers, who often decry pools as dead spaces, full of chemicals and lacking the romance, release and community of outdoor swimming (Griffiths, 2017). As Rebecca Olive (in press) describes, pool swimming is 'Chlorinated, sanitised, regulated, bounded'. Similarly, the

swimmers we spoke with described pool swimming as 'antisocial swimming', and were acutely aware of the gendered dynamics of the lanes:

> It's the dynamics in the lanes as well. You've got people huffing and puffing around you. The gender dynamic too – you never see men in the slow lane, even if they're going at the same pace as you. (Swimmer)

Another swimmer added:

> There's a sense that you're in the way, because of the lanes. The uniformity of it. I think I choose the right lane, but the people around me haven't! You've got to get out of the way a lot more when you're in a swimming pool. I find I'm much more self-conscious, and comparing myself more. At the lake you're not measuring yourself in that way, and no one else is either. It feels a lot freer. (Swimmer)

While pools are regulated and orderly when people swim in lanes, it is important to acknowledge that at other times these spaces are filled with children and young people behaving in a decidedly disorderly manner, breaching space and silence with noise and splashing. At these times, to describe pools as dead spaces ignores the joy and happiness they can bring, and describes only one story of that place. Our experiences of any water are shaped by the people we share them with, which can change depending not just on where you swim but also when – as one swimmer recognised:

> My experience of the lido – it's beautiful, the kids, family friendly, but when I went with a friend it was the 'neoprene gang', competitive, it felt quite masculine. It was there that I felt like I needed to fit in. I felt like an imposter. The lake is a more female space, it doesn't matter, wear what you want. (Swimmer)

In the lake, and in outdoor swimming more generally, the illusions of the pool are not maintained, or even desired. Sharing the water with other swimmers is one of the most commonly discussed ways in which people feel a sense of shared space and belonging. In fact, it is this sharing or being together in the water that is almost more significant than the act of swimming. At the lake, there are multiple ways of being in the water. Some of the nicest swims do not involve full immersion at all. A shared moment between women walking in the water highlights how becoming and belonging is shared within and between the water:

> One of my nicest swims was when I didn't swim. The lake had been shut and I had un-acclimatised. There was a woman walking in the water, waist deep, and I joined her. We just walked up and down in the water for 10 minutes. It doesn't have to be a fully immersive experience. (Swimmer)

At the lake, community is developed by a profound sense of being together and the sociality of 'being with' (Neal et al., 2019). The rigid demands of the pool are not reproduced here, and instead bodies can move as they want, fluid and free to experience the water in diverse and inclusive ways. Once you have swum in the lake and become an outdoor swimmer, it can be hard to return to the pool:

> I guess now I don't have any intention of swimming indoors again. Does that make me a swimming snob? I'm not sure. But I do know when my kids return from swimming lessons at the local pool that I hate them smelling of chlorine. (Swimmer)

For this swimmer the question of returning to a pool was significant, and led to her first winter of swimming outdoors. The ways people share the space changes with the seasons and the weather, and the mix of people who arrive on a sunny day is very different to those who persevere through the winter months. As the temperature drops, the numbers of people swimming at the lake drop too. Wild swimmers often talk about 'dipping' and 'swimming', and in the winter, the amount of time you can spend in the water naturally decreases. A few minutes in the water represents a great achievement when the water drops below 10 degrees. The lake never really gets forbidding in the way that the sea can, though ice and rain can change the experience quite tangibly. But if you are willing to take the plunge, the water is there for you.

There are still regulations, rules and established norms about who can enter the water in the first place. Not all bodies feel welcome at the lake, and not all ways of movement are embraced, as the opening highlighted. While some people find comfort in the pool and others find it in the lake, there are some bodies that are still not able to sink into either water comfortably. The idea that the lake removes restrictions and introduces a wildness to the social regulations of swimming is a romantic story, and not one without the nuance and complications we have introduced, but there is still something to it. In the accounts of our participants, there is a real sense of belonging engendered through becoming swimmers. Spaces that remove the bodily expectations and controls of more formalised leisure spaces can offer release from some of the expectations encountered. There are many stories to tell of exclusion and bodies that are not welcomed into these waters, but there is also a recognition among swimmers of the ways in which the lake can become more inclusive, as one swimmer wrote to us:

> I think my choice of language might also be influenced by the different people and the different ways in which these people use the lake. Our community is wide and varied and, especially in warmer weather, is starting to reflect the community around the park more. I think maybe that using the term 'wild swimming' might put off some people and we should be open to letting people define it for themselves. I'm all for inclusivity and making people feel comfortable about using the space in a way that suits them. (Swimmer)

We have told the story of a community and a shared set of interests and practices between a group of women, but there are also lone swimmers who shun these groups to pursue solitary enjoyment of the water and nature. Within the swimming community, there are lines between those who wear wetsuits and those who swim in 'skins', with no neoprene. Within the water itself there are breaststrokers who keep their heads above water, and those who swim front crawl, with an underwater view of the lake, as well as a range of ways of moving in between. These produce very different swimming experiences and bodies, changing relationships with the water and with other swimmers. Almost another tribe altogether are the triathletes who swim outdoors but in notably different ways. They bring clock timing and distance watching to the water. Their lines are straight, and they work to make them so.

Moving like pods, their front crawl is determined and their purpose singular – to get faster, stronger and move with greater efficiency through the water. Perhaps because of the type of water it is, or where it is situated, there are not many triathletes at the lake. The water is gentle, and the ways the trees dip across the skyline makes you want to float on your back and look at the sky, so you cannot swim too fast even if you wanted to. And so the water helps shape the swimming practice and community found at the lake, as we describe next.

Communing

Ducks and fence. Image credit: swimmer.

Dryrobes (oversized, fleece lined robes to be worn after being in the water) have become synonymous with a new wave of swimmers. They represent a level of comfort, but also a sizeable economic commitment, costing £160 – they are inclusive in terms of the work that they do to help swimmers get changed and keep warm in the outdoors, while also excluding those who do not want swimming to be comfortable and those who cannot afford to buy into the tribe. They are seen by some to represent a particular form of swimming capital, the 'new money' of outdoor swimming, and there have been instances where they have been used to identify the 'type' of swimmer not welcome at particular spots (Carroll, 2020). But they also allow strangers to share moments of recognition, to identify each other as belonging to the same community, as one swimmer told us:

> We can spot each other. I saw a woman in the park wearing a dryrobe, and I thought she must be an open water swimmer! I gave her a little smile. (Swimmer)

We note here that, 'feeling a sense of connection does not necessarily require interaction' (Rishbeth at al., 2019: 129), but is rather a fleeting though meaningful encounter that does

the work of reinforcing the identity of the swimmer as a declarative of belonging to a community. This 'embodied mutuality' (Neal et al., 2019) is part of the ongoing process of becoming a community that alters people in visible and less visible ways, reorienting social and spatial practices through the support and friendship offered by swimmers in and around the water. Swimming offers a chance for companionship and communing, which can often be found by 'doing alongside' rather than extended conversations (Rishbeth et al., 2019: 129).

Sharing the water, and being brought together by it, can mean as much as a conversation that continues throughout a swim or back on dry land or as little as a shared smile when you see someone in a dryrobe. Communing happens in the water and at its edge, in fleeting moments and informal and serendipitous encounters, from asking a stranger for help with a wetsuit zip to discussing the temperature of the water, or sharing a hot flask of tea and piece of cake after a swim. It can mean watching over lone swimmers, and a shared understanding of what informal and serendipitous care looks like in the outdoors. It can also mean helping other swimmers get in the water by offering to watch over a baby, or a dog. Being in the water together offers moments of shared joy, trepidation and bravery. Smiles are exchanged as people move into the water, and often other swimmers offer encouragement, or friendly taunts, to entice reluctant swimmers in. Similarly, Watson describes the Hampstead Heath Ladies' Pond:

> ...the water itself as a fluid and inclusive substance allows women to swim together around the pond chatting as they go, to relax holding on to one of the life saving rings, to laugh as women stand on the edge hesitating before throwing themselves into the cold water, teasing each other for their hesitation. This is more than a public space of mutual coexistence, rather, water constitutes the bodies within it as intermingled and connected. (Watson, 2019: 970)

Watson writes of water's capacity to enrol people in new social connections, and open water swimming shows us that these connections stretch from causal points of contact to deeply felt bonds. The swimming community is both a community of strangers and a community of close friends, informal in its loose organisation but bound by shared values and ways of being. David Studdert (2016) describes these kinds of connections as 'communal being-ness', and while we note the tensions, exclusions and boundaries within this space, the openness of communing as a term compliments the fluidity and flux of the swimming community. Away from the lake, online community groups offering support and motivation to return:

> On Tuesday evening there was lots of chat in the group about the weather forecast (90% chance of rain), with questions about how to keep your belongings dry, how to get dressed really quickly, whether people were actually feeling 'brave' enough to venture out. (Swimmer)

Communing also extends beyond social connections between people. Swimmers commune with each other and with the water, and the materialities and ecologies of open waters are significant. Our swimmers describe how the water brings them together, how it holds them and offers them a 'cold hug'. The affect the cold water has on our bodies is powerful, with cold fingers and toes, blue lips and states of euphoria all potential reactions to the cold. The water in the lake is soft and gentle, none of the 'zinginess of the sea', as one swimmer

described. The light streams through the brown surface, and you cannot see the bottom though it is sandy and soft when you touch it with your feet. The lake is alive with plants and fish, open to the air and elements, with all the feelings that produces. The water itself is animated by the wind, weather, and the life in it. Ducks and geese share this space, their excrement and feathers scattered across the surrounding grass and their dipping and diving as you swim together in the water:

> I was about to step into the water and I noticed the lovely bird footprints in the sand/silt. Recently we have been swimming alongside goslings, ducklings, dab chicks and, of course, the adult parents. It's been quite magical. (Swimmer)

These aspects of swimming outside are not always welcome. In summer duck mites infest the water and swimmers describe how their skin is left bitten and itchy after leaving the lake, and the cold water induction for the lake warns against drinking too much of the water, as the birds 'fill the water with things you don't want in your mouth'. But the birds, reeds, surrounding trees, and in autumn the leaves floating on the surface of the water all offer a feeling of communing with nature that cannot be found by swimming in a pool, and which reveal the 'plurality, hybridity and multiplicity' (Studdert, 2016: 623) of communing.

Closing

The closing of indoor swimming pools has opened new possibilities for many swimmers, who have searched for different waters to immerse themselves in and found new ways of being and belonging. But the lake is not a simple story in which a new space of belonging and inclusion has opened up within the city. Temporary closures, to keep the lake 'safe' from both misdemeanour and the pandemic, have drawn lines of exclusion around the water and resulted in some people being 'locked-out' of leisure spaces. These discourses of risk have made wider divisions within the neighbourhood and the city visible, showing the politics of belonging and the limits of conviviality. London is a city of fences and security cameras, and their presence at the water's edge exacerbates social divisions and dissolves much of the romanticism of wild swimming. But the lines have also helped to bind people together in particular ways, drawing swimmers together through their feelings for the lake, from the sadness and frustration they have felt when the lake has closed and they have been unable to swim, to the comfort that comes from being in the water and belonging in that space.

The stories we have told reveal the possibilities of wild swimming and the joys of conviviality, while also laying bare the divisions and exclusions, showing that the lake is part of a community that both binds and holds people in positive and negative ways. As Tuva Beyer Broch (2021) writes, we can both belong to and be othered by blue spaces. These stories exclude alternative narratives, of those who are not welcomed into, or feel comfortable and safe at the lake, and of the different tribes that exist within the world of outdoor swimming. While media representations and popular culture make it easy to believe that wild swimming is a homogenous group of middle-aged white women, there are a variety of ways in which people can, and always have, swum outside.

Beyond the immediate physiological dangers of cold water, the lake shows us that water can alter our perspective and our ways of understanding risk. Feeling safe in the water is not

simply about following the instruction of cold water induction or acclimatising to dropping temperatures. It is about being and becoming a swimmer, and with that comes new ways of being (nearly-naked) in public space, different ways of swimming, and alternative possibilities for communing with other people, with the water and with the life it supports. At a time when women in cities are being told to cover up in order to stay safe, the lake is a radical space in which we can think and feel differently about our bodies and our rights to the city. And, as swimming communities all around the UK grow, wild swimming is challenging and shifting perceptions about women in the outdoors.

Our hope is that while the lake has been unable to deliver on its original promise of open, unregulated and convivial swimming for all, the stories we have told show the power of water to restore, refresh and bring people together and can also revive our ideas about the place of water and wilderness in cities. We hope that the wild swimming community will continue to grow and expand, both in numbers and in more inclusive ways, and that more opportunities to swim outdoors in clean and safe waters will spring up. As Stéphanie Sonnette describes, 'Swimming, a simple and convivial form of fun that costs nothing, prohibited in many cities by hygiene and safety regulations, is becoming an act of resistance. There are various motivations for this: returning to nature, liberating human bodies from the rules and practices of an excessively monitored world, reappropriating an increasingly privatised urban space, or simply fulfilling the desire for a healthy, social, refreshing and athletic activity' (2019: 19).

Drawing on Les Back's hopeful scholarship, we have tried to 'portray and document an inventory of those moments of repair that suture damage, where hate gives way to love, convivial coexistence bridges divisions and exclusions, and where "islands of hope" emerge from within the midst of despair' (2020: 16). As a submerged 'island of hope', the lake offers a meeting place within an increasingly divided social landscape and supports new ways of being and belonging, suggesting that water can help us to connect to ourselves, each other and the world, and inspiring us to question and understand what we are connected to, what we can give and what we owe (Neimanis, 2022: np).

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Ethics

This project received University ethical approval: SREC/3258.

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