The Blue Un/Commons: Tracing new directions in research on outdoor swimming, health and place.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the value of swimming and (blue) outdoor swimming places to aid and support health and wellbeing has become of increasing interest (Denton and Aranda, 2020). The health and wellbeing benefits of both swimming and blue spaces have been identified in relation to a broad range of physical, mental and social markers and across a range of subjects from sports science to environmental psychology to cultural geographies (Barrable et al., 2023; Foley et al., 2019; Knechtle et al., 2020; Massey et al., 2020; Moles, 2021; Swim England, 2017). In addition, the importance of swimming places, whether coastal, lacustrine, fluvial or built/artificial, is equally evident in those swim-benefit narratives, operating across a range of material settings and within multiple place-based communities (Bates & Moles, 2023; Olive, 2023a). Following this expanding body of work, we take the established health and wellbeing benefits of swimming as a starting point for this special issue (Britton et al., 2020; Grundlingh, 2024; Kelly, 2021; Overbury et al., 2023). Our aim is to extend existing discussions about swimming, blue spaces, health and wellbeing, and to develop an agenda for new research directions that deepen those positive connections, while at the same time critically challenge implicit assumptions in an increasingly multi-disciplinary recent literature on swimming and swimming communities (Olive & Wheaton, 2021). In particular, we have found that some of the perceptions and narratives around swimming, health and wellbeing have incorporated both evangelical and commodifiable elements. These romanticize and pathologize swimming, especially cold-water swimming, as both a panacea and a product, without consideration of wider elements of subjectivity, diversity, access, and risk, as well as the complexity of the relational spaces within which swimming occurs and of the relational bodies (from young to old) who swim. While valuable in terms of raising awareness of its health and wellbeing benefits, the re-branding of outdoor swimming as 'wild' and the growth of an accompanying mini-industry can also be critiqued around its commodified, performative and class dimensions, as well as its lack of attention to complex politics of place (Coslett, 2020; Foley, 2017; Olive, 2023b). Exploring such elements will help to frame important new, critical directions in the increasingly popular body of swimming research, and push researchers beyond the celebratory approaches they so often take. Swimming is wonderful – we think so too - but there are many issues that deserve more critical attention.

This special issue of six articles and a substantive introduction draws from our collective experiences as adherents of swimming as a powerful, lifelong health and wellbeing practice and

welcoming a growing recognition of swimming as a joyful and beneficial aspect of everyday lives in diverse blue spaces. We also acknowledge a debt to a wider blue space literature – including recent edited texts and prominent articles published in *Health & Place* – but also more popular swimming accounts and (auto)biographies by swimmers themselves (Deakin, 1999; Foley and Kistemann, 2015; Foley et. al, 2019; Horrocks, 2021; Roper, 2018; Tsui, 2020). Emergent from that wider literature, the themes underpinning this special issue draw from theoretical and applied writing on: commons and communing; access and ownership; safety, pollution and water quality; multispecies encounters; as well as the deeper affective and embodied elements within both individual and collective experiences of an everyday healthy blue space practice (e.g. Christie and Elliott, 2023; Costello, et al., 2019; Evers, 2019, 2021; Gould et al., 2021; Olive, 2023a, 2023b; Throsby, 2013, 2016; Testa, 2025). Important new methodological approaches, from the technical to the creative, have also been applied to swimming studies, that uncover valuable immersive, and 'being-in/with-the-water' perspectives on the benefits of swimming (e.g. Bates and Moles, 2023; Denton, et al., 2021; Evers, 2015; Foley, 2023). Finally, the special issue is informed by critical dimensions of feminist, anticolonial, environmental, posthuman, and inclusionary research wherein multiple narratives are uncovered to open up a deeper mapping of swimming spaces and practices drawing from different cultures, spaces and engagements (e.g. Black Swimming Association, 2023; Ingersoll, 2018; Open Minds Active, 2025; Stronach et al., 2019). This special issue is the result of our multiple conversations about these themes in research about outdoor swimming, our enthusiasm with and critiques of the lines of inquiry and critical theoretical work we see emerging. The special issue reflects how the existing work has been productive, and the kinds of critical and careful research we hope to see emerging in the field.

SPECIAL ISSUE THEMES AND PAPERS

The intent of the special issue is to locate and develop the existing literature and to specifically focus, through the papers, on a set of themes that critically extend research on outdoor swimming, health and place. We reached out to established and early career authors from a range of humanities and social science disciplines, whose work we knew through conferences, seminars, and their previous writing, and appreciate their enthusiasm for contributing. We were also able to hold an online event in 2023, where authors were able to present their article ideas with each other. For a arrange of reasons, not all of the articles we initially invited are in the final collection, but all of the presenters have shaped our thinking about swimming, and the issues that are important to think about in current political, social and environmental contexts.

We have identified four key themes around which the final articles coalesce: Access; Risk; (Un)Common Spaces & Practices; and More-Than-Human Swimming. Access is a clear issue that all of the articles engage with in some way and is a pressing topic when we think about swimming, health and place. When we consider swimming as a health and wellbeing-enabling practice and swimming spaces as, ideally, free or affordable public health-promoting settings, then there are clear connections with established medical and health geography, sociology, and cultural studies discussions on accessibility and utilisation. Where, how, who and when people can or cannot access swimming spaces, varies across the globe and deserves deeper attention when seen in the admittedly contested terms of swimming assets/services (e.g. Caudwell, 2020; Hammond et al., 2019; Pitt, 2019). A more recently emergent idea is that for all that swimming is embraced as a health practice, its emplacement in often unpredictable, risky and polluted waters, or as poorly managed pools also leads to aspects of risk management that are often as much structural and societal as they are personal (e.g. Evers and Phoenix, 2023; Oliver et al., 2023; Pitt, 2018). The idea of the ocean or inland waters as a 'blue commons' is attractive, but in reality these waters are always contested and relational to aspects of public/private ownership and a significant felt/affective dimension (e.g. Burdsey, 2016; Evers, 2024; Moreton-Robinson & Nicoll, 2006; Wheaton et al., 2020). Finally, whether in oceans, rivers, reservoirs, dams, canals, or pools, all swimming takes place in more-than-human waters that have their own vibrant and multispecies agencies, forms and relational outcomes, a collaboration both shaped by and shaping human immersions and interactions (e.g. Olive, 2023a, 2023b, 2025; Testa, 2025). Collectively, these themes reflect the multi-disciplinary nature of this special issue, which is led from the swimming community/spaces outwards, offering 'rippling-out' and 'bodies-up' insights and knowledges that inform theoretical work, but that are also of value to health and care policy as well as blue place-making, informed by perspectives from different jurisdictions.

The individual papers that make up the work in these articles emerge from different settings and contexts in terms of focus, methodological approach, participants, contexts, and findings. Taylor Butler-Eldridge's work with Windermere in the UK, follows a year in the swimming life of the lake using a deeply immersive methodological approach, while Kate Moles and Rebecca Olive consider differential access to an urban reservoir in Wales to consider expectations of water purity and multispecies commoning. Hannah Denton and colleagues work through an RCT approach and its protocols and initial findings in Brighton, UK, to deepen both methodological and clinical findings on the value of outdoor swimming to mental health, while Eva McGrath and Jill Shawe look to women's experiences of swimming and pregnancy to provide an important lifecourse and life change perspective. From a study of women's swimming practices in Goa, India, Maya Costa-Pinto's work provides valuable insights into cultural and gendered dimensions of swimming (or

more precisely, bathing) as both a wellbeing and social practice. Finally, Belinda Wheaton and Lucen Liu discuss how Chinese migrants understand swimming and blue spaces in Aotearoa/NZ in terms of identity and belonging, adding an additional cultural dimension in terms of how swimming groups and communities are perceived and understood in the context of settler-colonial relations.

The themes are discussed more fully below, but we also recognise that they are quite fluid and interconnected. Each of the individual papers touch on all of the themes, even while having a particular focus. Seeing these themes emerge is significant in how it also reflects growing political and community-led swim developments such as Future Lidos (UK) and the multi-national Swimmable Cities movement.

THEME 1: ACCESS

In its widest definitions, issues of access seem to matter in a range of ways especially to swimming spaces, and to swimming as a socialising health/wellbeing practice. When it comes to swimming as a practice, there are links to older models of accessibility to health services (Pechansky & Thomas, 1981), which are especially relevant when one sees both swimming (as a physical ability/skill) and swimming spaces and places as identifiably blue health and wellbeing assets (Carlucci et al., 2022; WHO, 2023). In terms of access to both swimming practices and spaces, geographical proximity helps and travel/distance is a deterrent to access in a very real sense, while the value of being by the coast is evident in both housing, health and wellbeing terms (Coleman et al., 2015; Dempsey et al., 2018; White et al, 2020). So too do more aspatial elements of accessibility, such as availability, choice, suitability and the capacity of different spaces to allow in multiple users, both legally and illegally (Bell et al., 2017; Deakin, 1999). Access to public blue spaces is both a material and affective process that touches on important dimensions of ownership and inclusion. Access is linked to ownership/authority and is an important affective element that shapes feelings of inclusion and exclusion, especially when we consider the latter as a process that blocks affective/emotional connection to place and feelings of belonging. Feeling welcome and free and having a deeper sense of autonomy and control are essential salutogenic components of health and wellbeing (Antonovsky, 1996). Indeed, feeling excluded and not being in control are central drivers of poor mental health across multiple spaces (Boyd et al, 2025). As is clear in the wider literature on health service access, not being able to access healthcare (in all its different forms) is a global source of anxiety and stress, often expressed at population and system levels. During the recent pandemic, swimmers, and other water users, experienced a

sometimes prolonged, unexpected and unprecedented loss of access to blue spaces (Wheaton et al., 2021). But for diverse ocean users (people of colour, people with disabilities, parents), and at different points in life (illness, injury, ageing), access to swimming spaces and practices as a health and wellbeing support can also be interrupted in ways that affect its everyday value to build resilience and provide a therapeutic accretion across multiple life-courses (Foley, 2023). At the same time, the pandemic also revived interest in neglected spaces like lidos and outdoor pools and emphasised how access is also shaped by available blue infrastructures that are free, available and as safe as possible (Wood, 2023). This links to the growing 'right to roam' movement, which includes active acts of trespass to advocate for more public access to land and waterways; as noted by Beer (2022), only 2% of UK rivers have legal public access. Who has the authority to access places and spaces is legal and political but is also cultural and framed in terms of localism. Finally, access to outdoor swimming spaces across the world can often mean a payment of some form, from low cost to expensive and the maintenance of outdoor pools, lidos and even beaches, does require investment. But equally these are also assets that are the first to be defunded in times of crisis, with wealth providing ongoing access to those same assets in private settings (Carlucci et al., 2022).

At the heart of all the papers' discussions of access are aspects of *permission/allowance*, that are societal, communal, environmental and personal, but that all have, to a greater or lesser degree, a power dimension (Duff, 2023). As Eldrige-Butler demonstrates in Windermere, access is a delicate act of negotiation within an assemblage of owners and users, public/private agencies, wider economic players, local geographic and climatological conditions and the needs/desires of disparate groups of swimmers who live near or visit its shores. Similar concerns around how access is managed in hybrid public/private pools in South Wales is also a core aspect of Moles and Olive's take on a relational access to swimming space. Here a traditional dimension of accessibility, namely affordability, also flags up a wider issue for all swimming spaces and places, around whether access can ever be truly free and if not, who gets to decide how and how much? In cultural terms access can also be shaped by different cultures of permission/allowance and in the case of both Wheaton and Liu's research with Chinese Migrants in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Costs-Pinto's work with Indian women in Goa, those negotiations of permission and allowance are often a re-negotiation of belonging for typically excluded groups, immigrants and women. Interestingly, both point to a sort of developmental value in terms of identify/belonging, as well as health and wellbeing, to those groups allowing themselves to swim in public spaces, on their own terms, overcoming existing surveillance and prohibitions. Finally, access to swimming as a health-enabling practice is also discussed in two UK-based papers, each discussing different groups. McGrath and Shawe, discuss how women access and use swimming while pregnant, a

practice historically considered dangerous but which, their work attests, is also a necessary permission and allowance, especially in the final stages, to be able to access respite, self-care and a shared journey. In Denton et al., their more structured approach considers how access works in terms of both users and non-users, but also how, through engaging with a swimming programme, people dealing with mental health issues, develop resilience and self-knowledge to manage self-care, and are provided with a means of access that allows them to better manage their conditions.

THEME 2: RISK

Secondly, swimming is a practice carried out by a wide range of swimmers of variable abilities, subjectivities and material realities, in ocean, sea, lake and river waters that are variable, complex and unpredictable. As a result, risk needs to be considered more fully in terms of those relational immersions between bodies and waters. For all that we might like full and open access to clean, still and safe water at all times, the simple (geographical) truth is, you can't swim anywhere or anytime you want; cliffs, tides, waves, weather, pollutants all shape that risk; echoed in Philip Hoare's comment that, 'the sea is never your friend' (Hoare, 2024). And yet, post-pandemic, the popularity of swimming has been considerably enhanced, reflecting how, for many participants, the benefits of swimming will always outweigh the risks, or that at the very least, those risks are considered. Swimming also takes place in what might be termed the 'unpromising blue;' fast-flowing rivers, lakes, creeks, canals, reservoirs, dams, pools, and quarries, where risk might be hard to assess (Oliver et al., 2023). There are also other necessary, if darker, narratives linked to swimming and risk, especially in relation to drowning and the choice of water as a space for self-harm and suicide (Christie and Elliott, 2023). At times, the vastness and perceived emptiness of large bodies of water, are a draw in relation to suicidal ideation, such that for younger people especially, rivers and lakes, can be perceived as an unsafe space associated with loss, self-harm, grief and oblivion (Lengen, 2015). Anecdotal conversations with swimming communities around the world note that while drownings are associated with risky practices in risky waters, they are, in many cases, unreported heart attacks (Yao et al., 2024). Drowning risk also reflects limitations in swimming knowledge, often evident in minority cultures, where risk and access intersect in unproductive ways (Wiltse, 2014). The links between outdoor swimming waters and environmental health, linked to risky waters, is also an important strand in research on both swimming and surfing (Evers and Phoenix, 2022; Houghton et al., 2024), where the blue is as often (for northern latitude swimmers especially), a sort of polluted grey or murky-green. But such waters are also associated with enhanced ecological awareness and pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours and knowing more on how environmental risk works through swimming bodies, spaces and practices is an important dimension (Olive, 2022a). This is most

evident in relation to the global threat of climate change and how currently safe and welcoming bodies of water may assume newer riskier and excluding identities in the near future, which threaten that health asset perspective. A final key risk is located in the multispecies and elemental encounters that are such a huge part of outdoor swimming. For example, ocean swimmers can find themselves alongside dolphins, turtles, birds and fish, but also risk being bitten by sharks, stung by jellyfish, tumbled by waves, or being caught against rocks, or even be struck by boats or surfboards during sudden weather events.

In the individual papers, such personal, societal, environmental and cultural dimensions of risk are discussed in different ways. As Wheaton & Liu and Costa-Pinto respectively attest, in both Chinese and Indian cultures (but in many other global cultures too), the sea has traditionally been understood as a risky space, which has historically restricted its use. But as swimmers immerse themselves, risk becomes understood through experience and knowledge, while at the same time an appreciation for the water's own potential for risk, becomes better understood. This applies too for McGrath and Shawe's work on the sea as a risky space for pregnant bodies, where the embodied experience of risk shifts in time and tune with the pregnancy. That more durational understanding of risk is scaled up in Butler-Eldridge's Windermere study, that recognises a risk emergent across the year in place, including the risk of poor health outcomes as contingent on the condition, depth and environmental health of the lake itself. Moles and Olive also contrast the managed space of an outdoor private pool in an urban space, with the more open and free setting of a public natural pool higher up the Welsh Valleys. Here risk-management shifts between private and public, and from averse to embracing, to show how risk shifts with aspects of autonomy, but also perhaps in terms of a complex balancing out of risk-benefit in place. That aspect is also part of Denton et. al.'s paper working with an arguably high-risk swimming cohort, but with a more adventurous ethic. While we are most definitely not arguing that the higher the risk, the better the health and wellbeing benefits, we are perhaps advocating, within the risk-management of swimming and swimming-spaces, for a recognition of the dignity of risk (Perske, 1972).

THEME 3: (UN)COMMON SPACES AND PRACTICES

While we are not the originators of the term (Nicholls, 2014; Standing, 2023) we consider the idea of a 'blue commons', a useful starting point in uncovering, for both swimming spaces and practices, the importance of their collective, open and shared nature. There are evident overlaps with the previous two themes here, around access and risk, especially around ownership and choice, but there are additional dimensions of commoning, also ripe for fuller critical inspection.

Different swimming communities often emerge in informal and unmanaged ways in common blue spaces, but the spaces themselves and the people who use them mention interesting associations and assumptions. As Cooke, Landau-Wood and Rickards (2020) write, 'there is nothing inherently just or equitable about commons' (p171). We have heard it said, for example, that despite it taking place, in many Western countries, in free, public spaces, outdoor swimming still has 'middle-class' associations. This may in part be due to a creeping gentrification of swimming cultures and places, shaped by social media, consumer practices, and the gentrification and rising costs of living around sites close to 'healthy' blue spaces. The contrast between the single swimmer using a supermarket bag as a waterproof carry-all and a boisterous group of 'dry-robers' taking up space and performatively documenting every swim for Instagram is a deliberate caricature (Moles, 2021). Yet, it does open up an interesting space for discussion about what are often considered to be common spaces, geographically and in terms of health and wellbeing. Just as often, swimming groups, communities and "tribes" know each other only by their first name and can range from mine worker to nurse to teacher to artist to CEO, each of whom lose their usual markers of identity when changing into swimming costumes and entering the shared common space of the water (Costello et al., 2019). Such blue common spaces should be, but are often not, multicultural and multi-embodied and for all the surface bonhomie, may have visibly contested occupations. How fully available common swimming spaces are to bodies of different ability, age, size, gender, sexuality and colour are also important ongoing narratives, that links to who is welcomed and included, or not (Wiltse, 2014). It also leaves space for the solo/lone swimmer, who might prefer that mode, but often does so within the 'everyday wash' of others in those shared blue spaces. This extends to critical understandings of belonging and not-belonging to a commons and how one goes about accessing that commonality as a material, social or affective good (Duff and Hill, 2022). Swimmers do not own the blue commons alone either; it is a space shared with other blue space communities and practices and these different blue communities might not always be in tune with one another. One group's commons are uncommon to others (swimmers and fishers being one regularly cited example) such that the commons are always relational, negotiated and contingent (Butler-Eldridge, 2024).

For Butler-Eldridge, the blue commons of Windermere reflects those contested dimensions, especially in terms of recognising the multiple communities that share the lake. From that paper, the sheer popularity of the lake brings up how care of the commons is relational to both ecological and human pressures, that require swimmers to think about the sustainability of their own practice. For Moles and Olive, the blurred nature of a seeming commons is also clear, though at a much finer geographical scale, in their exploration of different private and public swimming pools. Here the commons are contingent on who gets to swim in each place and certainly feels as

if the more private and commercial pool is more un-common in its formation. In Wheaton and Liu's study of Chinese swimmers in Aotearoa/New Zealand, learning to swim and becoming part of the wider community, is in itself and act of commoning, so that swimming becomes part of a deeper assembling of identity and belonging too. In a complete geographic contrast, the wide Indian Ocean waters are used as a form of social commoning by the women of Goa entwined with additional religious and embodied sensitivities, but also how Indian beaches become spaces-in-common. That bodies-in-commons aspect is also part of how gender and identity are worked out in place in the paper by McGrath and Shawe, but also creatively explores embodied water as connector between self and place. For Denton and colleagues, the commons of the sea also becomes a resource for testing out how it shapes mental health for both users and non-users alike, while also becoming a methodological space for clinical work outside of the uncommon space of the lab.

THEME 4: WATER AS MORE-THAN-HUMAN COLLABORATOR

A final core element and theme in the practice of swimming outdoors, the very essence of the blue un/commons, is the more-than-human water itself. As a simultaneously common and uncommon space, the water has its own life and forms of mobility and is interesting to consider in three ways. First, its own mood and nature, in turn shaped by weather, tides, swell, flow, or coastal topography, is central to allowing people to swim (or not). Some coasts, lakes and rivers collaborate better than others, at least as far as swimming is concerned. The water itself has its own autonomous 'invite-abilities' that can shape whether you are welcome to enter or safer to stay on land, something that links with ethics of place, access, water literacies, safety, and climate change. That applies also to seasonality in a wider sense; equally relational around rainfall, climate change, temperature, stillness/wildness (nice to consider wild swimming in this sense), always mobile and very much a negotiated commons too. Second, the knowledge and relationships people have with and about water are cultural and contextual. For example, the 'ocean literacy' so cherished by the United Nations UNESCO agency (https://oceanliteracy.unesco.org/) is a singular approach to understanding oceans. Human understanding and respect for oceans and other bodies of water is essential to developing shared immersive values, even if they emerge from different cultural starting points (Throsby, 2016; Foley, 2017). Equally there are many other ecologies and inhabitants of water who also occupy our shared blue space and with whom relations also need to be negotiated and these can be both risky and mutually positive at different times (Olive, 2023). Finally, just as the water enables us, we need to think more closely around how we enable water and recognise the ecological responsibilities humans have in meaningfully collaborating with and allying to the sea. If we

recognise water as having equal agency, then we are never neutral in our immersions. At all scales, micro-plastics and other discarded human detritus that harm the water require a fuller awareness of what we, as humans, leave behind. Just as the water can leave a positive trace on us, so we too need to reflect on the traces we leave behind in the more-than-human blue (Olive, 2022b). It is also the case that in cultural terms, the depth of our understanding of shared care, identity and collaborative relations with water, is also central to forms of reclamation of swimming spaces, such as making historically polluted rivers swimmable, as is happening in London, New York, Melbourne and elsewhere (Wainwright, 2024).

For Costa-Pinto, the more-than-human collaboration of sea-bathing has Indigenous and spiritual connections to the healing properties of the water and sustained time spent in the sea to deepen that engagement. The paper also documents the effects of pollution and tourism on those same waters and this is also a key theme of Butler-Eldridge's sustained study of Windermere, where sustained immersions mark swimmers out as sentinels of the water quality as well as providers of a sensory engagement with lake levels and depth, such that the swimmer-as-sensor provides a collaborative reading of the lake's condition too. Such embodied connections and a deep recognition of the bodies own fluids connecting into bigger waters, also inform McGrath and Shawe's creative exploration of the collaborative potential of swimming to support and hold pregnancy in a healthy way. For Denton and colleagues, the more-than-human collaboration reflects the sea-water of the south coast of England as an active and collaborative treatment space; even reflection an older trace of the sea-water cure in those same waters. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, Wheaton and Liu tease out a blurring of cultures of water and reflects the uncertainty of relations with those more-than-human spaces for new migrant bodies and communities. Finally, Moles and Olive recognise (as do some of the other papers), a sort of assumed ownership of water, that does not always recognise the agency of the water itself, that given pollution and overuse, might even, from the more-than-human perspective, even produce an uncooperative collaboration?

NEW DIRECTIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

This is a relatively short special issue to cover a huge and expanding topic. As such we both recognise its limitations in being only a snapshot of a growing multi-disciplinary field but also considered a number of areas where we see potential for future work, equally recognising that there will be agendas and themes yet to emerge. These include potential research on swimming bodies, spaces, histories, cultures & knowledges, as well as new methodologies and a focus on swimming across the lifecourse.

As an evident theme across almost all the papers, different *swimming bodies* are essential elements in the story; as sensory informants, as reflectors of difference and of polyvocal and polysemic empathies, within which diversity is a core element (McLachlan, 2012; Throsby, 2016). Embodied identities and emotions are also core to the vulnerability created by environments in which outdoor swimming occurs. Taking our clothes off and exposing ourselves to the shared gaze of others is, for some, a challenge and reflects much wider writing on sexist, homophobic, racist, able-ist, size-ist, and other contested narratives (Bates & Moles, 2022). Part of the value of the blue un/commons is that it has the potential to be a space for all bodies and bodily capacities, shapes, and sizes; but quite often may not be (Throsby, 2016). For us, research on those different bodies and how they engage – or not - with the water, has huge potential. Philip Hoare identifies the sea as a queer space (Hoare, 2024), and a liminality of practice and identity, opens up intriguing possibilities, especially on coasts (Shields, 1991). Beyond some research on histories and trans bodies (e.g. Caudwell, 2020; Fisher, 2019; McLachlan, 2012), there is limited writing on swimming, health and wellbeing from across gender identities and the LGBTQI+ community, though such spaces are prominent in wider creative writing from those communities (O'Neill, 2001; Townsend, 2024). In addition, it would be impossible to ignore societal norms and expectations around the swimming body-by-the-water, especially those on appearance, size, exposure and capacity, that straddle everything from gender and race to disability studies (e.g. Enright et al., 2021). While Throsby (2016) has written compellingly on body positivity and the enhanced capacities for long-distance swimming for larger bodies, there is huge potential on a range of additional health and wellbeing research on swimming and embodiment, from dangerous exposures to the sun, to performance and presentation and gendered expectations of how that body should look, through to other research on disability, emphasising that, in the act of swimming, the dis/abled land body, becomes an en/abled sea-body (Foley, 2017). Looking at how bodies of difference swim, and how this shapes and is shaped by physical and mental health capacities will be an important future research topic (Britton and Foley, 2021; Hammond et al., 2019).

One last point to make about swimming bodies is about swimming, men, masculinities and health. At the 2023 'Refresh: outdoor Swimming Forum' that was led by Taylor Butler-Eldridge, women made up the majority of presenters, attendees and topic areas, with one presentation focusing on the need for more research about men's health. Given swimming is one of the few recreational sport activities where women dominate participation and representation of the activity, it is not surprising that women are researching women. However, we note that when the group met to discuss 'future directions,' only two men attended and so they remained unaccounted for. We

agree that talking about men's health and wellbeing is of vital importance at this time when loneliness and high suicide rates are a key issue for men. We hope to see more work on men's outdoor swimming into the future.

There are as many different *swimming spaces* as there are swimmers, each with their own relational geographies and narrative depths. The amount of time we spend in the water is variable by proximity, temperature, bodily capabilities, cultural norms, and mood, and these differ globally. There is a developing literature around how different levels of exposure to blue spaces affect health and wellbeing, both physiologically and mentally. This is especially the case with cold water swimming, but there has also been consideration of the specific physiological impact of wearing a dryrobe in cold climates (Harper, 2022; Pound et al., 2024; Read, 2024). But good comparative work, between cold and warm water swimming, and in different climates and cultures, feels like it has potential. Within wider human geography writing, there is an increasing interest in aspects of infrastructures, maintenance and repair, as material supports for swimming health and wellbeing. How do good swimming infrastructures support and enable swimming for all and how is this shaped by maintenance and repair, from the good ladder or hoist, to the clearing of storm damage, to informal community care, as well as wider aspects of destruction, vandalism, and the other side of maintenance, neglect. Across the globe, wonderful natural pools – from the Sutro Baths in San Francisco to the string of ocean pools carved into the rocks and cliffs along the New South Wales coast (Larkin, 2025; McDermott, 2009) – were underused or had been abandoned. However, a new recognition of their value, especially in relation to urban health and wellbeing is being recognised (Romer-Lee, 2023; Wilder, 2019; Wood, 2023). Finally, given that 'sea view' are two of the most expensive words in the English language, aspects of ownership, privatization, commodification, and the wider selling of blue space for health will also shape equality of access, while at the same time putting additional pressures on high quality water resources and shared availability across communities. One key area, central to all future research, is the current and future impact of climate change on swimming spaces, where the available swimming waters either disappear completely or become too risky to swim in for a whole variety of reasons from excessive flow, heat, wave height or ecological changes to the composition of the water (Orr et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2024).

Who swims, why and where, varies across the globe, and suggests a need to focus on specific *swimming cultures and knowledges*. As noted in several of the papers, how swimming and water are perceived in different cultures, shapes how swimming knowledges are developed. Some important research on the lack of swimming cultures and knowledge among African-American's and how this accounts for disproportionate levels of drowning, is deeply embedded in cultural

histories of exclusion and racism, alongside examples like the Burqini Ban in France and the apartheid blue spaces of South Africa (Khamis, 2010; McGarry & Droomer, 2025; Phoenix et al., 2021; Wiltse, 2014). Swim education is also very differentially embedded in different parts of the world; well-embedded in the global north, almost non-existent in the global south (Bolton and Martin, 2013). But knowing how to swim is an important life skill and an significant gateway to a salutogenic practice. Questions of 'knowledges' also link to important questions around how learning about swimming and water literacies are central to how a healthy blue commons is made (Brown, 2025). For many working-class communities, especially in inner-city or deprived areas, there is limited exposure to a swimming culture, deepening a suggestion that swimming can be perceived as a middle-class pursuit; something that might also make us reflect on who is privileged in swimming research (Pilgaard et al., 2017). Our collective opinion is that this is not true, but strong swimming cultures protect and maintain that watery commons, and support better levels of place care, equality of access that also chimes with the idea of *blue spatial justice* (Movik, 2024). The inclusion of swimming within health-promotion policy and re-emphasising access to swimming facilities as a public health good, would be an interesting area to uncover some of the power-dynamics of swimming. To understand more fully what makes a swimmer, it becomes equally important to consider non-swimmers_and the reasons for that choice or preference as well, linked specifically to who people can't (lack of knowledge) or won't (fear, trauma, memory, identity) swim. We might consider if there are times not to swim to allow space for more-than-human needs like animal migrations or risky maritime encounters (Gibbs, 2021), or to pay respect to ongoing colonial politics of place (Olive, 2023b).

How new *swimming-specific research methods* develop is an exciting prospect, recognising that researching from the water presents very different challenges and opportunities to researching on land; relevant also to wider blue space studies (Boyd et al., 2025). To deepen our understandings of how swimming shapes health and wellbeing will require a continuum of methods, from digital measurement to creative story-telling, that encompasses citizen science, narratives and visualisations (Barrable, 2023). Digital technologies using smart-phones, action cameras, virtual reality and waterproof bodily sensors are opening up direct measurement of physiological functions and the experience of swimming, directly from the water (Evers, 2015; Guo, 2016), though much of this work is still in development as more 'within-swim' measurement becomes possible. Writing on the swim-along interview also augments measurement with a more sensory in-aqua qualitative dimensions, with aspect of noticing, explanation, testimony and emotion/affect a growing part of the knowledge generated and expanding geo-narrative methods that specifically document health and wellbeing (Butler-Eldridge, 2024; Denton and Aranda, 2020). A deeper mapping might be associated with other account that capture Indigenous and

cultural-specific knowledge on swimming and swimming spaces, as several of the papers in this issue do (Costa-Pinto, 2024; Wheaton and Liu, 2024). Using culturally-appropriate methods and a respectful storying-in-place will provide nuanced insights into emplaced knowledges and relationalities, including community and environmental dimensions of health and wellbeing (Evers, 2024; Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll, 2006; Stronach, et al., 2019). The wider potential of creative methods, including representations of swimming from art, film, literature and music, would also chime well with public interest and develop other ways of knowing (Bates and Moles, 2023; Daws, 2024, Nyad, 2023). With so many researcher-swimmers as participants in their own projects, developing reflexive methods and honestly discussing researcher experiences, including how swimming acts as a holding space for researcher and wider mental health, may also be a feature of such work that informs ethics proposals (Boocock. 2024; Butler-Eldridge, 2024).

The complex nuanced and contested ways in which swimming emerges across different points and stages of the *lifecourse,* from early childhood to advanced old age, and across key life events, might also tell us much; especially in relation to physical, mental, social, and spiritual health and wellbeing (Wiles, 2023). This would also extend the range of work on relational geographies (and assemblages) of health and wellbeing, and how these are always connected across time and space (DeVerteuil et al., 2020; Foley, 2023). There is also developing interest in lifecourse medicine as well, with an as yet untapped potential for practice- and place-specific studies. Knowing how swimming maintains health and wellbeing as we age, can add much in terms of robust scientific evidence, while more qualitative work can consider the under-appreciated value of joy, playfulness and socialisation (Phoenix and Orr, 2014) that equally explains why swimming touches us so deeply and in so many different ways. Swimming is an inter-generational practice in shared spaces that connect different age-groups. We would argue that a real passion for swimming provides, by extension, a form of positive health promotion and preventative health activity across social demographics. As the motto of the UK-based group, Mental Health Swims reminds us, the important thing for inclusion and connection is 'Dips not distance.' Thinking this way requires thinking about possible futures and so we also acknowledge the intent of all the authors and us as editors, in advocating for and promoting outdoor swimming as a practice that might be made more accessible, less risky and able to promote shared care between humans, the water and its multispecies residents. We cannot improve human health without healthy water ecologies. This means that caring for water is a practice of care for self and communities. This might be a radical idea for those of us in Western contexts, but First Nations people have been reminding us of this for many generations. Future research at local and global levels should carry on this approach to ensure swimming continues as a wellbeing practice in a shared blue

commons. From what we can see, swimming is not just good for people but can be a practice of planetary health and wellbeing.

We are inspired by the work in this special issue and thank *Health and Place* for their support in bringing it to publication. The work here builds on established knowledges, methodologies, and theoretical approaches that we have outlined in this introduction, and which we hope do justice to this strong body of work. While swimming research is called a 'growing area' or described as 'limited' we hope we have made clear that there is much to learn from this body of work that draws on qualitative and quantitative methods from fields including geography, sociology, cultural studies, sport and leisure studies, health studies, gender studies, architecture, and more. We are excited to see how this work continues to be taken up, to expand, and to embrace new directions.

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