

# BODIES OF WATER

WRITING THE CULTURAL GEOGRAPHIES OF INDOOR LANE SWIMMING

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## DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Miranda Ward, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is clearly stated.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the convergence of bodies, materialities and practices of the indoor swimming pool, focusing particularly on the habits and experiences of regular lane swimmers in the UK.

Swimming is one of the UK's most popular sports in terms of participation, and yet relatively little work in academic geography has addressed the practice of lane swimming or sought to situate the swimming pool as a site through which the embodied experience of place may be explored. Seeking to redress this omission, the thesis is based on research focused ethnographically on pools in and around one city in the south of England, combining semi-structured interviews with regular lane swimmers, observations of swimming practices, and auto-ethnographic participation. Textually, the thesis advances a geographical tradition of place writing in which the author/geographer is bodily present in an environment and writes about it from a first-person perspective, extending such work from its more traditionally masculine subjectivities, and indeed largely terrestrial and outdoor realms, through a focus on the confined space of the pool and the repetitious, habitual, rhythmic act of swimming laps in a lane.

Compositionally, the thesis is divided into two main sections. The first section sets up the main theoretical and empirical impulses of the study, positioning them in relation to literatures on place, body, and health, as well as on writing as a methodology for geographical research. A contextual history of swimming and the pool is also offered. The second section is structured as a series of five essays on the pool and its swimming bodies. In the first, the pool is presented as a contained space; the second suggests swimming as a form of correspondence between body and water; the third examines the swimming costume and its relation to identity and ideas of intimacy and anonymity; the fourth focuses on ways in which the swimming body is re-created through habitual encounter with the pool, emphasising the fluidity of both body and place; and the fifth and final essay dwells on the potential for the repetition and rhythm of lap swimming to produce a sense of stability. A concluding chapter returns to the wider themes of how place, writing and the body interrelate in these cultural geographies of indoor lane swimming.



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*Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever.*

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*



# INTRODUCTION

## *Getting in*

Autumn 2012. It's eight in the morning, the air almost winter-cold. I can see my breath as I lock my bike up, my fingers are encased in gloves, my cheeks flushed. Behind me is a line of trees, nearly naked, a few coils of red and gold flapping in a faint breeze; beyond the trees is a floodplain, a marshy patch of land onto which the Thames sometimes overflows its banks. Before me is the pool: The Pool. My morning pilgrimage.

This is the beginning.

I've just started a PhD. I feel wildly out of my depth. I'm assured that most people do, or that some people do, anyhow. That it gets easier. Or, perhaps more accurately, that you can learn to live with the heavy, oppressive feeling of being an imposter, if you just keep going. What I think right now is: I'm reading too many things at once, but I will never be able to read enough. My head is full, bursting, but I will never be able to create any order out of the chaos.

The pool is part of a larger sports complex. There's also a gym here, a weight room, a rowing tank, a basketball court, a dojo, a café. I ignore these things, go inside, turn immediately left, and swipe my membership card at the gate that marks the entrance to the pool area. A blast of hot, moist air hits me as I walk down the corridor to the changing room. Inside it smells of shampoo and mildew, of deodorant and chlorine, a rank odour in any other context, somehow comforting here.

I strip down in the clammy warmth, listening to the hum of morning chatter, women who know each other only through being here at the same time each morning sharing stories about their everyday lives, concerns about the world. I pull on my swimsuit, my cap. Everything is tight and stretchy: no heavy coat to hide

behind, loose jeans, long scarf. There are signs posted asking swimmers to shower before getting into the pool, so I stand under a hot stream of water for a while, splashing my face, stretching my arms. After the sharp cold of the morning it's tempting to linger here for longer, but I'm not here just to shower.

I started swimming regularly a few years ago, after a running injury. For a while it was just another form of exercise; I liked to stay active, but I could take it or leave it, really. Earlier this year, though, something shifted. Swimming started to feel like something I did not to stay fit but to stay human. I was finishing the manuscript of my first book, a long, lonely process slowed by doubt and fuelled by desperation to be done, and at the edge of my mind was always a sense of panic: *what next?* I was broke and tired but full of restless energy, too, and it was during this time that the pool became a refuge. For months it was the only place I regularly went, walking on dark, chilly evenings with music blaring in my ears.

It was really a place I went to be someone else – or rather, to be myself stripped down, without any markers of anxiety or uncertainty. To be myself the swimmer, not fast and flashy but still dedicated, someone who put in the hours, knew the place well, smiled hello at lifeguards and fellow swimmers. I was also making improvements, getting faster, smoother. There were tangible measures of this, and tangible things I could do to facilitate further improvement. Whereas with other things in my life – with writing for example, with *what next?* – well, how do you measure progress?

I liked the encounters with other bodies and other people, too. I admired the sleekness of the accomplished athletes as much as the unhurriedness of the slower swimmers. It seemed to me that this place was healthy, even if my dependence on it was not entirely, and that it was important to have somewhere like that to go. Things are different now but in a way I have never quite recovered from that particular sense of enchantment, which is why it matters so much still. Not just for the physical benefits, but because it's a place I can find that sense of deep-down comfort, that necessary re-grounding; like being a ship righted, a scale balanced.

I pull open the door that leads out to the pool. As indoor pools go, it's fairly light, with a large window along the length of one wall, and six smaller square windows running along the upper edge of the opposite wall. Red, white and blue backstroke flags hang at both ends of the pool. There are six lanes: two double-width slow

lanes, two medium lanes, two fast lanes, delineated by bright plastic lane lines. On a quiet morning the water is still like glass, and you can see right to the bottom, the painted black lines that run the length of the pool, the grid of the tiles. Today it's busy, the surface of the water churned up, people crowding at the shallow end to rest, sip water, check their watches.

I choose a lane – my favourite lane, the medium lane furthest from the window – and wait for an appropriate moment to slide in. I try not to make too big a splash as I drop. The water here reaches to just below my chest, and compared to the shower it's ice-cold, though I know this is an illusion, and as I start swimming it will seem to warm, until it's as if my body is simply part of it. I dip my goggles in the water, clearing away steam, and then press them down hard around my eyes, trying to create a seal. A swimmer arrives at the wall next to me and turns, heading back up the lane. She's doing a slow, steady front crawl, breathing every third stroke. I wait for her to make some progress, so that I won't be sitting on her heels, but also so that I can postpone the moment of departure. When she's swum about fifteen metres I take a deep breath in. I'm still not really ready for immersion, not ready for exertion, would maybe rather be under the shower again, or tucking in to toast and coffee, or in bed still, asleep.

But I drop below the surface of the water anyhow and push off from the wall, gliding for a few metres before taking my first stroke.

*Overview, focus and contributions*

This thesis explores the convergence of bodies, materialities and practices at the indoor swimming pool, focusing particularly on the habits and experiences of regular lane swimmers in and around one city in the UK. It takes as its central premise the idea that an indoor swimming pool is a meaningful place to which people may become attached through routine, repeated interaction – and that, moreover, interesting insights may be found in the seemingly banal, repetitive, restrictive practice of swimming laps within a lane.

Its title, “Bodies of Water: Writing the Cultural Geographies of Indoor Lane Swimming”, gives some indication of its primary concerns and aims. From cultural geography it takes its key theoretical and thematic drivers, particularly where the discipline has engaged with issues of place and embodiment. Indoor lane swim-

ming is its subject of study, adding to emergent work on various practices of exercise and environmental encounter. And, following recent work within cultural geography which demonstrates an “increased willingness to engage in creative writing practices”, writing becomes a way of linking these thematic drivers with the subject itself, an embodied approach both to doing and presenting the research<sup>1</sup>.

In choosing the indoor pool as a site for research, I have deliberately sought to highlight a relatively mundane place, one whose significance may, at first, be easy to overlook. The geographical relevance of, say, an account of wild swimming in Britain’s lakes and rivers would be perhaps more obvious. Similarly, climbing mountains or walking well-worn paths or circumnavigating major cities are all ways of engaging bodily with place, and rich veins of literature have been produced that deal with the sites of these engagements. But what about the places we move through seemingly without thinking – the boring places, the everyday places? They are in their own way just as important as the mountain, the big city, the ancient byway, especially since we’re in them so often, since they’re all around us all the time: geography, as Denis Cosgrove put it, “is everywhere”<sup>2</sup>, or, as Cresswell elaborates, the discipline “sticks close to the banal everydayness of life”<sup>3</sup>.

Thus the seemingly small and contained world of the pool is enlarged and examined here, approached from a certain understanding of place. This understanding is informed by humanistic ideas about place as an important part of the human condition, “an idea, concept, and way of being-in-the-world”<sup>4</sup>, as well as thinking which positions place not as simply a fixed point, an inert location, but as something always in process, something fluid: place, as Patricia Price puts it, understood as, a “processual, polyvocal, always-becoming entity”<sup>5</sup>. Significantly, too, the watery environment of the pool moves the focus of the thesis beyond the materiality of *landscape* into a more fluid, less grounded realm<sup>6</sup>.

1. Cresswell 2015: 56

2. Cosgrove 1989: 119

3. Cresswell 2013a: 2

4. Cresswell 2015: 35

5. Price 2004: 1; see chapter four, “Writing Place”, for further comments on this.

6. Following, for example, recent work on “wet ontologies” (Steinberg and Peters 2015) which challenges the traditionally terrestrial focus of much geographical research to date. As Anderson and Peters note, “[t]he discipline has been a de facto terrestrial study”, but “[o]ur world is a water world” (Anderson and Peters 2014: 3), and we must “start thinking from the water” (Anderson and Peters 2014: 4). Representative of this interest was, for instance, a series of sessions on “Wet Geographies” at the 2015 RGS-IBG annual international conference, including an exhibition and film screenings, and papers dealing with a wide range of watery foci. While



While indoor swimming pools may have a range of uses, it is on lane swimming in particular that the thesis focuses, and this choice of practice is significant<sup>7</sup>. Lane swimming, defined broadly, involves swimming up and down the length of the pool within the confines of a marked lane. A trip from one end of the pool to the other constitutes a length, while a round trip is a lap; thus the practice is also referred to as swimming laps<sup>8</sup>. In some contexts each lane has an assigned speed (e.g. slow, medium, or fast) and a suggested direction of travel (e.g. clockwise or counter-clockwise) in order to minimise collisions or disagreements amongst swimmers. Some pools provide lanes only at specific times, while others may be primarily used for this purpose. As a form of exercise, lane swimming may attract swimmers of varying abilities, speeds, and intentions, but its fundamental tenet is to stay within the lines, to go up and down. One municipal pool near where I live glibly identifies their lane swimming sessions as being “for those who like to keep to the straight and narrow”. In this way, it can be conceived as a particularly tedious, predictable activity – its very nature is repetitious, confined. It is on these characteristics, however, that the thesis lingers, seeking to understand and uncover the distinct embodied experiences and meanings produced by and in this seemingly enclosed and limiting context.

The timeliness of such a study is twofold. It sits, first, within an emerging body of work in geography that considers forms of everyday exercise and sport as they relate to ideas about embodiment and sense of place; such work suggests that the lived experience of exercise is worth consideration in terms of an interplay between environment, practice and body<sup>9</sup>. However, relatively little work in academic geography has yet addressed the specific practice of lane swimming or sought to situate the swimming pool as a site through which the embodied experience of place may be explored. This omission needs redress not only because both practice and place are useful focal points for geographical thinking, but also because they

this work has an oceanic bent, it nevertheless has interesting implications for exploring “watery senses of place” (McEwan, Jones and Robertson 2014: 330) more generally.

7. These pools may also be utilised by, for example, children (e.g. for parties or lessons), water polo or synchronised swimming clubs, aqua aerobics participants, and for so-called “general swim” sessions, whereby only a portion of the pool, if any at all, is dedicated to lanes, with the rest left open.
8. I use the terms more or less interchangeably here, though strictly speaking swimming laps is something one does in the context of lane swimming – that is, you could say “swimming laps in a lane” but not the other way round. In the essays particularly the phrase “lap swimming” is used to highlight the repetitive nature of the practice – there and back, up and down.
9. Examples include a series of sessions on geographies of everyday sport at the 2015 RGS-IBG annual international conference, which featured papers on rowing, swimming, running, cycling, surfing, and other exercise practices, and a forthcoming special issue of *Health & Place* on exercise and environment (e.g. Ward 2016).

have wider societal relevance. According to Sport England’s most recent Active People Survey, swimming is England’s most popular sport in terms of participation – over 2.5 million adults went swimming at least once a week in 2015/16<sup>10</sup> – and the potential health benefits of engaging in regular exercise such as swimming are widely acknowledged<sup>11</sup>. There are, however, other less encouraging statistics that suggest a particular and more pressing relevance: that in spite of it being England’s most popular sport, participation in swimming is declining<sup>12</sup>; that in 2014, 45% of primary school pupils in England were unable to swim 25 metres unaided<sup>13</sup>; that in recent years “public swimming facilities in England have generally suffered from underfunding and need constant maintenance and repair, placing many under threat of closure”<sup>14</sup>. Thus there is an opportunity here not only to fill a hole in existing geographical literature about everyday sporting practices and exercise environments but also, more broadly, to, as Foley puts it, uncover “narratives and responses from the water”<sup>15</sup>. If participation in swimming is declining, if many schoolchildren are still unable to swim, if public swimming facilities are suffering from underfunding, then let us look to the pools themselves and the people who use them to discover what draws them to the practice, and what they draw from it in return. It is partly from these narratives and responses that a compelling and personal argument for the importance of both the practice of swimming and the spaces in which it takes place can be made.

Second, in seeking to explore and articulate the links between body, place, and practice in the context of lane swimming, I have taken inspiration from cultural geographers working within a genre of “re-invigorated place-writing” in which authors “use a number of creative strategies to present the place to the reader as an entanglement of diverse elements and strands”<sup>16</sup>. I am particularly interested here in borrowing techniques from writing in which the author is physically present in an environment and writes about it from an embodied, first-person perspective; the thesis seeks to extend such work from its more traditionally masculine subjectivities, and indeed largely terrestrial and outdoor realms, through a focus on the

10. Sport England 2016

11. See chapter three, “Exercise, Body, and Place”, for more on this.

12. Sport England 2016

13. ASA 2014

14. Sport England 2013

15. Foley 2015: 219 (emphasis mine)

16. Cresswell 2015: 57; see also Ward 2014

confined space of the pool and the repetitious, habitual, rhythmic act of swimming laps in a lane<sup>17</sup>.

To this end, then, the second section of the thesis comprises five essays which approach the themes of the thesis in an exploratory manner. Typically conceived “as a mode of trying out ideas, of exploration rather than persuasion, of reflection rather than conviction”<sup>18</sup>, the essay is often characterised through contrast with “conventionalized and systematized forms of writing, such as rhetorical, scholarly, or journalistic discourse”<sup>19</sup>. It is described as a more open, fluid, or hybrid way of writing – indeed, it is “not a genre” but “a site: ‘almost literature’ and ‘almost philosophy’”<sup>20</sup>. The literary scholar G. Douglas Atkins writes of the essay as “‘embodied truth,’ the intersection of experience and meaning, idea and form (or body)”<sup>21</sup>, echoing Montaigne: “I [...] cannot see beyond what I have learned from experience”; “I speak my meaning in disjointed parts”<sup>22</sup>. Thus, particularly given this thesis’s interest in the embodied experience of place, the form has been deliberately employed here.

#### *The research in practice*

Methodologically the thesis combines elements of ethnography, autoethnography, and more overtly “creative” writing practices, drawing on my own relationship to swimming as well as the experiences of others as uncovered through observation and interviews. Crang and Cook write of “a deliberate entanglement of reading, doing and writing” that characterises certain forms of ethnographic research, and there is a sense in which this entanglement neatly describes the methodology utilised here<sup>23</sup>. Empirically, however, the thesis draws upon on research undertaken over the course of a year, centred on lane swimming in 25-metre-long indoor pools<sup>24</sup>

17. Especially since such forms of writing can, I argue, be particularly useful for grappling with ideas about place-in-process and the body’s relationship to this conception of place. See chapter four, “Writing Place”, for further discussion.

18. Klaus 2012: xvi

19. Klaus 2012: xv

20. Atkins 2009: 2

21. Atkins 2005: 5

22. Montaigne 2003: 1004

23. Crang and Cook 2007: 151

24. 25 metres being one of two lengths approved by swimming’s international governing body, Fédération internationale de natation (FINA), for competition, and recommended by England’s national governing body for swimming, the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA 2009); the other length is 50 metres (what we commonly think of as being “Olympic-sized”), but pools of this size are less common – in 2009 there were only 19 in England, out of what the ASA estimated to be 4,891 publicly accessible pools across the country (ASA 2009).

in and around one city in southern England. This research comprised three main elements: a series of twenty hour-long semi-structured interviews with regular swimmers<sup>25</sup>, observation of swimming practices in several local indoor pools (both municipal and private), and autoethnographic participation.

Interviewees were adults of varying ages between their twenties and their sixties who swam laps at an indoor pool regularly at the time of interview<sup>26</sup>. Their reasons for doing so varied, and included maintaining general health or fitness, training for an event such as a long-distance open water swim or a triathlon, or more explicit therapeutic purposes. Thus, while it is difficult to make definitive distinctions between categories, I sought to capture the experiences of a relatively broad range of swimmers. I did not, however, solicit the input of elite or university-level athletes, nor competitive Masters swimmers; I sought to interview a cross-section of the kinds of people who might be present at a pool at any given time, and I wanted to capture the impressions and experiences of swimmers who, while devoted to their practice for one reason or another, were not primarily concerned with competitive (indoor) swimming<sup>27</sup>.

Participants were recruited via a mixture of methods, including using personal contacts and word of mouth, flyers posted in local pools, calls for participation posted online, and emails to local swimming instructors and clubs. These methods had varying degrees of success, with personal contacts/word of mouth being the most effective. I therefore had some prior knowledge of some of the participants, and there were also some relationships between participants – one, for instance, had taken lessons from another, and some were friends or knew each other through training together. Following a process of informed consent, participants were emailed some basic information about the project and what they could expect from the interview prior to meeting, and provided with a printed information sheet to keep before being asked to sign a consent form. Conversations with participants were conducted in person in locations convenient to the interviewee, such as cafés, parks, and office spaces. Thematically the conversations were guided by a series of general prompts about the swimmer’s motivations, history, habits, and observa-

25. See Appendix I for a brief description of each interviewee.

26. “Regularly” was defined for the purpose of the project as at least once a week on average.

27. Some participants were, however, amateur triathletes; others had been previously involved with Masters swim clubs or similar training groups, and some had taken part in timed open water swimming events. The point is that I didn’t set out to study currently competitive club or elite-level swimmers who trained together and raced in the pool.

tions at the pool but allowed to develop organically. In order to allow me to focus on discussion rather than note taking, all conversations were recorded (with participant consent) and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

In addition to these interviews, I maintained a practice of recording fieldnotes, acting as a participant-observer<sup>28</sup> while at the pool and writing down thoughts and observations immediately after my swims. Where these observations involved other swimmers, they were made covertly, without expressly seeking permission from those being observed; this was so as not to influence or hinder people's behaviour while they performed routine physical tasks<sup>29</sup>. However, there was no point during the research when I sought to intentionally deceive anyone: some swimmers at the pools I visited knew that I was a researcher whose project concerned swimming, and I was happy to divulge this information if it came up in casual conversation. The point here is that while I was "doing" research at the pool, I was also trying to maintain my own regular practice (itself part of the subject of study), and so attempting not to delineate too harshly between the twin roles of swimmer/researcher.

This is a concern particularly associated with autoethnographic approaches; as Reed-Danahay puts it, "One of the main characteristics of an autoethnographic perspective is that the autoethnographer is a boundary-crosser, and the role can be characterized as that of a dual identity"<sup>30</sup>. Thus "[o]ne of the central characteristics of personal narrative autoethnography is its committed reflexivity, its struggle to produce knowledge and representations that self-consciously recognize the place of the researcher-self in the production of that knowledge"<sup>31</sup>. While it can be difficult to neatly categorise autoethnographic work<sup>32</sup>, particularly since a blurring

28. Or, perhaps, an "observant participant" (Dewsbury 2010: 327, in reference to "the flipping over of 'participant observation' to 'observant participation'" made by Thrift (2000)).

29. E.g. Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 210

30. Reed-Danahay 1997: 3

31. Butz 2010: 146

32. Indeed, even a definition of autoethnography can be tricky to pin down. Reed-Danahay suggests that the term itself can be interpreted in two (interrelated) ways, "referring either to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest" (Reed-Danahay 1997: 2); broadly speaking, then, it may be described as "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9). Butz suggests that it is not a methodology at all, nor even a set of methods, but "an epistemological orientation to the relationships among experience, knowledge, and representation that has a variety of methodological implications" (Butz 2010: 139); thus, with Kathryn Besio, he advocates for an "autoethnographic sensibility" which recognizes that "clear-cut distinctions among researchers, research subjects and the objects of research are illusory, and that what we call the research field occupies a space between these overlapping categories" (Butz and Besio 2009: 1664). Such a sensibility is certainly at work in this thesis.

of boundaries is emblematic of much research and writing that may be considered autoethnographic<sup>33</sup>, Butz's characterisation of "personal narrative autoethnography", a phrase which describes researchers taking on "the dual identities of academic and personal selves to tell autobiographical stories about some aspect of their experience in daily life"<sup>34</sup>, is particularly relevant to the methodological approach used here<sup>35</sup>. As geographers become increasingly interested in "the embodied and affective experience and constitution of place", Butz and Besio suggest, "[p]ersonal experience narrative with its fine-grained focus on the researcher-self, and its method of blurring the distinctions among emotion, experience, representation and performance, may be a good way to develop these themes"<sup>36</sup>.

Thus I drew deliberately on my years of experience as a regular (non-competitive) lap swimmer, as well as on active reflections on my own practice, throughout the period of research<sup>37</sup>. As part of the process of recording fieldnotes, I kept a record of my practice and made regular reflections on my own history of and relationship to swimming and to the pool(s) that I frequent<sup>38</sup>; a number of these writings have been incorporated, directly or indirectly, into the thesis<sup>39</sup>. In the words of sociolo-

33. See e.g. Ellis 2004 and Ellis and Bochner 2000 on different forms of autoethnographic writing.

34. Ellis and Bochner 2000: 740

35. It is certainly, however, not the only autoethnographic approach from which this thesis takes inspiration.

Butz, for instance, distinguishes between five main types of autoethnography, including work done by "academics who reflect on their relations with research participants or the social context of their field work as a way to gain greater understanding of the social worlds they study or the epistemological characteristics of insights they take away from the field"; work done by "academics who study their own life circumstances intensely in order to illuminate a larger social or cultural phenomenon, and who often use experimental forms of personal narrative writing as a way to incorporate affect and emotion into their representations"; and work done by "insider' and 'complete-member' academic researchers who study a group or social circumstance of which they are a part, use their insiderness as a methodological and analytical resource, and may or may not understand themselves explicitly as subjects of their own research" (2010: 138-139). Elements of each of these types can be seen in this study.

36. Butz and Besio 2009: 1666

37. It is worth noting, too, that this was my primary motivation for commencing such a study: that, in other words, it is not a coincidence that I am a regular lap swimmer doing work about lap swimmers. As Crang and Cook write, "our choices of research topic are often (always?) personal" (2007: 170), but this is not always overtly acknowledged; autoethnographic research, however, tends to encourage a confrontation with and indeed utilisation of this fact (see e.g. Ellis 2004, Ellis and Bochner 2000).

38. I swam four times per week on average during this period, generally for between 30-60 minutes. Based on records the total distance I swam during this period was 319,400 metres (roughly 198 miles), spread out across a total of 194 recorded swims – an average of 1,646 metres per swim. Swims were conducted primarily on weekdays, and the majority occurred at a private gym/pool near my house (this is the pool described in the opening of this chapter). However, I also made regular visits to two of the city's indoor municipal pools and, as a member of a local triathlon club, swam at several other pools (primarily owned by private schools) in and around the city.

39. I also maintained, throughout the research period, a research blog (originally at <http://bodieswater.tumblr.com/> but subsequently relocated to <http://www.mirandaward.co.uk/bodieswater/>). This was useful as a resource towards which to point research participants who wanted to access further information about the

gist Susie Scott, writing about her own work on lane swimming, this can be framed broadly as a study “in which the researcher is visible as a member of the setting and uses her own experiences as a springboard for theorizing wider social phenomena”<sup>40</sup>. Similarly, Nick Crossley writes of his research on a circuit training class as “an attempt to reflect upon my own embodied involvement in the class – later cross-checked against other observational data”; chiming with my own approach, he adds: “It is one of the interesting features of body techniques that one can use one’s own in/abilities and capacity to learn, in a manner free of the problems of introspection, to open them up and explore them”<sup>41</sup>.

While in some ways it can be framed, in (auto)ethnographic terms, as “insider research”<sup>42</sup>, such work negotiates blurry boundaries between “outsider” and “insider”. As Scott writes: “Being both a genuine swimmer and a covert observer, I moved between the positions of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider,’ which afforded me some unique advantages”<sup>43</sup>. This is relevant both in terms of being able to access and navigate the environment being studied whilst maintaining a position as researcher, but also, more specifically, in terms of speaking to participants about physical habits or impressions. Both Scott and Crossley are referencing studies of specific exercise or sporting practices, raising interesting questions about how “practices in which understanding is bodily” can be most effectively discussed with those who engage in those practices<sup>44</sup>. To this end, having some shared understanding of the practice can be useful. In interviews, for instance, I was again able to act as researcher but also as fellow swimmer, with a framework for understand-

project, but it also served as a repository for early thoughts and more analytic gatherings of research materials; in this way writing the posts was perhaps akin to writing “analytic memos” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 150; see also Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011: 123) – a sort of “thinking aloud” whereby “emergent ideas are identified” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 151). Indeed, some of the essays in the thesis sprang directly from entries on the blog, which speaks too to the idea of writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005), discussed in chapter four, “Writing Place”.

40. Scott 2009: 126; see also Scott 2010 and Crossley 2004 and 2006. Scott makes reference here to Anderson 2006 on “analytic autoethnography”, which he sets up in contrast to the “evocative autoethnography” produced and promoted by e.g. Ellis, whereby “the mode of storytelling [...] fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature [...] the narrative text refuses to abstract and explain” (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 744). This project as a whole incorporates elements from both approaches, though in terms of the way the research is written it is more clearly in sympathy with evocative autoethnography’s experimental impulses.

41. Crossley 2004: 44

42. See e.g. Butz and Besio, whereby practitioners of such research are described as “academic researchers who study a group or social circumstance they are part of, and use their insiderness as a methodological and interpretive tool” (2009: 1169); see also Butz 2010.

43. Scott 2009: 126

44. Bourdieu 1990: 166. For more on the specific challenges and opportunities of speaking with research participants about their embodied practice, see Hitchings and Latham 2016 on talking to runners.

ing the kinds of details that participants shared, no matter how seemingly trite or specific<sup>45</sup>. As Foley has recently pointed out, “swimming itself, especially when discussed with everyday swimmers, can be banal”, but conversation with swimmers in a research context allows them to consider their experience in a different light, since they may not have had the opportunity to discuss their practice in such a way before<sup>46</sup>.

Such interaction works both ways, however: thus, for instance, at one point in the thesis I show how speaking with a research participant led me to consider an element of my own swimming practice anew. This is important to note particularly in terms of issues around reflexivity and autoethnography, which are inextricably intertwined. As Butz and Besio write, “autoethnography is the representational outcome – the performance, in a sense – of a process of *critical reflexivity*”<sup>47</sup>, where reflexivity “is self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher”<sup>48</sup>. To some extent this involves openly signaling one’s fallibility as a researcher, which in this case means acknowledging that, while my “insider” status was helpful in terms of conversing with swimmers and allowing me to observe the pool environment relatively fluently, it also makes me susceptible to some of the very processes and influences that I’m writing about<sup>49</sup>. It also means asking critical questions of such an “I”-centred approach; as Reed-Danahay writes, “Who speaks and on behalf of whom are vital questions to ask of all ethnographic and autobiographical writing”<sup>50</sup>. Such questions are doubly relevant here, as the essays in the second part of the thesis, in particular, are written from the perspective of a first person narrator, incorporating autoethnographic

45. This is particularly relevant because I specifically sought to explore the repetition and the mundanity of lane swimming – so not only was I speaking to people about a bodily practice, but also about very boring elements of the experience of swimming: asking participants, for instance, to talk me through how they prepare to get in the water and begin their swim. That said, I don’t wish to imply that simply because I’m a swimmer I’m automatically imbued with some unique ability to understand what other swimmers say about their own experience: in conversing with people there is always opportunity for misunderstanding.

46. Foley 2015: 220

47. Butz and Besio 2009: 1662

48. England 1994: 82

49. Also relevant here is Rossing and Scott’s recent examination of “the effects of doing fieldwork on a physical activity that one loves” (Rossing and Scott 2016: 1), in which the authors explore the negative impact that conducting embodied research on exercise practices close to their hearts (aerobics and lane swimming, respectively) has had on their relationship to these practices. Rossing and Scott suggest in particular that such work may not only take the “fun” out of a favourite activity, but may also pose a risk to any part of the researcher’s identity which is wrapped up in that activity. While I’m happy to report that at no stage during the research process did I find my relationship with swimming souring, I do agree with Rossing and Scott that “[r]eflexivity is crucial” when undertaking “this kind of immersive, activity-based research” (Rossing and Scott 2016: 13).

50. Reed-Danahay 1997: 3



materials and reflections as well as rhetorical and compositional techniques associated with more “creative” ways of writing place. A critical consideration of this approach will be outlined in the fourth chapter, “Writing Place”.

*Outline of the thesis*

Compositionally, the thesis is divided into two main sections: *Impulses* and *Essays*. The former sets up the main theoretical and empirical impulses of the thesis, positioning it in relation to concerns with the pool, the body, exercise, place and writing. The latter section weaves together the impulses in a series of more fluid essays which deliberately play with style and form, intertwining the empirical work referenced above, various other voices and texts, and my own first-person narration.

In the first of the three impulse chapters, “The Swimming Pool”, a contextual history of the pool is offered, suggesting a number of themes which originate in this history but recur in various forms throughout the thesis – themes around swimming for health and wellness, discipline and the “geometricisation” of the pool environment, and the sensuality (and Romantic connotations) of swimming. In the second of these chapters, “Exercise, Body and Place”, the thesis is situated in the context of broader issues and debates within geography around exercise, health, and the body. In part, the discussion shows how the indoor pool, and the practice of lane swimming, intersect interrelated streams of existing work on exercise environments, therapeutic landscapes, critiques of the “new” public health, and the “geometricisation” of modern sporting landscapes. More broadly, the chapter places the thesis in the context of geographical work on the relationship between body and place, highlighting ideas about the body as messy, processual and co-constitutive of place that are central to later chapters. The third chapter in this section, “Writing Place”, examines and justifies the written style taken in the essays that follow it, first by situating them within existing and emerging approaches to writing geography, and then by suggesting ways in which this approach may be particularly useful for exploring the thematic concerns raised by the thesis as a whole.

The second section of the thesis comprises five chapters on the pool and its swimming bodies. These chapters are written in a more freeform essayistic style, layered with personal narrative, ethnographic material, and other texts which inform or drive the thematic considerations of each. In the first essay, “(Un)contained”, the pool is presented as a contained space, highly regulated, geometric, insulated.

However, ways in which the pool does *not* contain are also explored, with rumination about blurred boundaries, the difficulty of distinguishing between “inside” and “outside”, and the meaning of matter out of place in such a seemingly controlled context. Various swimmers’ mental journeys and states are also traced, suggesting that the enclosed nature of the pool does not necessarily serve to stifle.

The second essay, “Correspondence”, posits the question “what is it to swim?”, ultimately suggesting swimming as a form of correspondence between body and water. To this end the various meanings and symbolisms of water are explored, especially in relation to ideas around immersion, cleansing, and memory, and how water relates to the senses. Parallels are drawn, too, between the physicality of swimming and the physicality of other forms of communication – drawing, writing. Lane swimming is set up here both in contrast and comparison to other forms of “wild” swimming or bathing. The third essay, “Costume”, examines the swimming costume and its relation to identity and ideas of intimacy and anonymity. A brief history of the swimsuit is offered to suggest the ways in which it both hides and reveals. Goggles are conceptualised as a mask, as a way of seeing and a way of obscuring. The suggestion that we have multiple social bodies is explored in relation to the liminal space of the changing room, as well as to environments beyond the pool.

The fourth essay, “Re-creation”, focuses on ways in which the swimming body is re-created through habitual encounter with the pool: made ostensibly to work and look “better” through repeated engagement. Ideas of change and of progress are highlighted, but the essay also delves into ideas of absence, regression, of what happens to the swimming body when it can’t swim, of decay and lack of control. Body and place here are presented as in flux, both separately and in relation to each other. The fifth and final essay, “Rhythm”, dwells on the repetition and rhythm of lane swimming, suggesting that while these elements may produce change they may also yield a sense of stability in the face of inevitable *instability*. Ideas of inscription, path-making and “muscular consciousness” are borrowed from more typically terrestrial contexts and explored in relation to the watery world of the pool. How, the essay asks, does knowledge of the pool settle into the body – and, too, how does the body carry this knowledge?

Finally, the epilogue returns to the wider themes of how place, writing and the

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body interrelate in these cultural geographies of indoor lane swimming, pulling out two main threads: the first about the physicality of writing and of swimming, the second about finding a language for repetitive, habituated practices and places.



# IMPULSES



## THE SWIMMING POOL

What is it about the swimming pool?

As an architectural object, it's a striking visual presence, distinct and evocative (think, for instance, of David Hockney's pools). It has what Thomas A P van Leeuwen, in his history of the private swimming pool, calls "ceaseless power to inspire interpretation, analysis, fantasy, or just straightforward narration". In cinema it may sit at the centre of a story, as in François Ozon's *Swimming Pool* (2003), or act as a setting for some smaller-scale drama. In *The Graduate* (1967), Dustin Hoffman enters a pool in a diving suit; we see the surface disappear from his perspective as he sinks to the bottom and comes to rest in the deep end. At the end of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) we see a character adrift take an unexpected and prolonged plunge, fully clothed, into a pool; he too sinks to the bottom, gazes around, perhaps hoping for some alternative perspective, seeking clarity in the opacity of the water, which distorts but also, in its immediate physicality, clarifies: one cannot stay submerged forever. This idea of some different, or distorted, world under water is certainly present in Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), when Bill Murray slides into the pool in his Tokyo hotel and glides through the water, past the bouncing, fleshy trunks of women doing an aqua aerobics class, the beats of the music muffled but not quite disguised. In literature too the pool appears: in *The Great Gatsby*, of course, as the site of Jay Gatsby's death, or in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming Pool Library* as a site for cruising. In John Cheever's short story "The Swimmer", Neddy Merrill sees a string of swimming pools as an opportunity, a means of transport. "Is there nothing," as the author Geoff Nicholson asks, "that a pool can't signify?"<sup>2</sup>

1. van Leeuwen 1999: 4

2. Nicholson 2012

Many of the pools referenced above are private pools, built in backyards and gardens, but they share certain fundamentals of form and purpose with the pools we find today in gyms and leisure centres. Pools have their critics, of course, but they make such good metaphors, such good objects for study, precisely because of their enclosed, geometric form; they have the capacity to contain multitudes, to reflect back to us what we are, what we want to see, what we don't want to become, to seem both oppressive and liberating at the same time. "The pool," as van Leeuwen writes, "is the architectural outcome of man's desire to become one with the element of water, privately and free of danger"<sup>3</sup>.

It is, ultimately, impossible to separate the form of the pool from its intended function, so any history of the pool is linked inextricably to the history of human swimming itself. And while, as Ian Gordon and Simon Inglis write in their overview of Britain's historic swimming pools, "the desire and ability to build an artificially enclosed body of water under cover, large enough and deep enough to cater specifically for swimming, is a more recent phenomenon", advanced particularly in the nineteenth century, there are flashes of this impulse to domesticate water throughout the much longer history of swimming<sup>4</sup>.

The following is therefore a very brief overview of the emergence of swimming as a practice and the development of the swimming pool as a site for it. Geographically, the narrative maintains a focus on the UK, in line with the rest of the thesis, whilst acknowledging important influences and developments elsewhere, particularly in continental Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where military discipline influenced both the shape and use of modern swimming pools. Three primary themes emerge from an historical consideration of why and where people have swum: health, discipline and pleasure. These themes, moreover, are still in evidence at local pools around the world today: think of the triathlete or the club swimmer in one lane drilling, repeating; the elderly man with the stiff out-of-water walk easing himself into the shallow end of the slow lane and becoming suddenly fluid; the moments of joy or peace reported by swimmers for whom the act of moving up and down the pool forms some essential part of their daily routine. The long tradition of immersion for therapeutic, hygienic, or fitness purposes therefore forms one thread of this history; the disciplined, formalised nature of

3. van Leeuwen 1999: 2

4. Gordon and Inglis 2009: 19



military training and competition forms a second; while the sensuous approach to water taken, for example, by British Romantic poets such as Byron suggest a third thread centred on physicality, on seeking meaning and metaphor in the water.

### *Origins*

Humans have been swimming for a very long time. In classical Greece swimming was “deeply embedded in the culture”<sup>5</sup> and “[t]he Egyptians, as recorded in the Book of Exodus, were in the habit of bathing in the Nile”<sup>6</sup>. In Japan swimming competitions took place as early as 36 BC, during the reign of the emperor Sugi, and swimming became part of the Samurai code, transforming it into a military skill as well as a form of ritual: for the Samurai, Charles Sprawson writes in his history of swimming, “swimming was a ceremonial exercise, a form of art like firing arrows, or calligraphy, and in pageants performed in the presence of warlords they displayed their self-command in their slow and stately strokes across the surfaces of lakes”<sup>7</sup>. Japan’s island geography encouraged this active engagement with water: “[s]urrounded by the sea and living on islands inundated with rivers, lakes and swamps,” as Sprawson writes, “the Japanese over the years formulated different styles of swimming suitable for the varying conditions, the vagaries of the depths and currents of their waters”<sup>8</sup>.

Britain, too, is surrounded by the sea and crisscrossed by rivers, and though it would not rise to prominence as a swimming nation until the nineteenth century<sup>9</sup>, its people have long maintained a relationship with water, which “from the earliest days [...] was of symbolic as well as functional importance” to them<sup>10</sup>. Early understandings of the act of immersion were steeped in mythology and superstition, folklore and legend. The Celts, for instance, “invested water with the power to bestow, or take away, life, health and energy”, and “[a] number of water-deities were associated with rivers, lakes, pools and wells” while “[s]ome rivers and pools were linked with beings that would protect you from harm and help you achieve your

5. Sherr 2012: 16

6. Sinclair and Henry 1893: 2

7. Sprawson 2013: 287

8. Sprawson 2013: 286

9. During which century “the English were acknowledged as the best swimmers in the world” (Sprawson 2013: 19); they were, as Lenček and Bosker explain, “ideally situated to promote swimming. Add to their geographical predisposition a keenness for classical culture with its idealization of aquatic diversions, and a seemingly whimsical pleasure took on the shape of a national destiny” (1998: 176).

10. Parr 2011: 11

heart's desire"<sup>11</sup>. Attitudes towards water were influenced, too, by invaders and settlers, and later enthusiasm for swimming amongst the British has, as Sprawson puts it, "been attributed to a mixture of Nordic and Roman strains in their character"<sup>12</sup>.

When the Romans came, they brought with them two distinct ways of being in water. On the one hand, swimming was a military skill. The Romans established a swimming school near the Campus Martius in the river Tiber, aimed, as recorded by the historian Vegetius, at enabling soldiers to cross rivers and avoid death by drowning during their military exploits<sup>13</sup>. Caesar is said to have had skill as a swimmer and to have displayed particular heroism in the water during the battle of Alexandria in 48-47 BC; "the first recorded episode of swimming in British history," recounted by Plutarch more than a century after Caesar's death, occurs during Caesar's expeditions in Britain in 55 and 54 BC, when a Roman soldier, separated from his comrades, was able to rejoin them by employing his ability to swim<sup>14</sup>. And when the Roman conquest began in earnest in AD 43, "swimming featured in the campaigns", evidence of which is provided by Tacitus, who recounts various instances of Roman swimming prowess, such as a surprise attack mounted on the Britons in Kent, made possible because the Roman soldiers were able to swim across the Medway undetected<sup>15</sup>.

During the long settlement that followed their invasion, however, the Romans also introduced one of the most important elements of their culture to Britain: bathing. Not only did this practice demonstrate a "use of water for health and enjoyment", its infrastructure also constituted an early example of the domestication and containment of water that characterises the modern swimming pool<sup>16</sup>. As Susie Parr recounts in her social history of swimming in Britain, "elaborate baths, comprising series of heated rooms and cold plunge pools, were built in most British towns, in military barracks and in the many grand villas erected in the countryside"<sup>17</sup>. Some pools large enough for proper swimming were also built, remains of which have been found in Bath, Buxton, and Well in Yorkshire; as Nicholas Orme writes, trac-

11. Parr 2011: 24

12. Sprawson 2013: 45

13. See van Leeuwen 1999, Parr 2011

14. Orme 1983: 1-2

15. Orme 1983: 2, Parr 2011: 13

16. Sprawson 2013: 46

17. Parr 2011: 13

ing the history of British Swimming from 55 BC to AD 1719, “The Romans can thus be credited with establishing the first artificial pools in Britain for swimming”<sup>18</sup>. These baths and pools acted as “vital centers of social discourse” as well as “playgrounds of debauchery”<sup>19</sup>, especially in the waning years of the Empire, when “the Baths became more luxurious than ever. The more degenerate the emperor, the more sumptuous tended to be his Baths”<sup>20</sup>.

With the collapse of Roman civilization in Britain, in the fifth century AD, new invaders arrived, with their own connections to water. “As far as the history of swimming is concerned,” writes Orme, “the conquest of Britain by the Anglo-Saxons merely replaced one people who swam by another,”<sup>21</sup> and indeed references to swimming occur in the famous Anglo Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, composed in the seventh century. Although “[t]he swimming in *Beowulf* is certainly not presented realistically [...] [t]he swimmer is a superman, capable of exploits far beyond those of normal human ability”, the use of swimming in the poem “implies that swimming was both familiar to the poem’s English listeners and respected by them”<sup>22</sup>. The invasion of the Vikings in the north in 793 brought further contact with a people accustomed to interacting with the water around them, and “evidence of the practice of swimming during this period can be found in lengthy sagas and epic poems” according to which “competitive swimming was commonly practiced” in Norse society<sup>23</sup>; these sagas, as Sprawson puts it, “reveal a society in which swimming was a common accomplishment”<sup>24</sup>.

In contrast, the Norman conquest of 1066 marks the beginning of a period of relative disinterest in swimming across Britain. As Nicholas Orme points out, “the Normans were the first conquerors of the island in historic times to whom, we can fairly say, the skill [of swimming] was not very important”<sup>25</sup>. Post-Conquest developments in the Catholic Church may also have contributed to the decline in swimming’s status as a desirable skill<sup>26</sup>. Medieval religious writings present what Orme characterises as a generally “gloomy” view of swimming, as an act associated with

18. Orme 1983: 3

19. Sherr 2012: 106

20. Sprawson 2013: 46

21. Orme 1983: 10

22. Orme 1983: 11-12

23. Parr 2011: 14

24. Sprawson 2013: 45

25. Orme 1983: 22

26. Orme 1983: 22

danger<sup>27</sup>, and as Sprawson writes, “[t]he church filled the sea with fantastic and imaginary monsters”; “[v]arious miracles depicted men at the mercy of the sea or rivers, powerless to save themselves until they appealed to Christ for assistance”<sup>28</sup>. Swimming did resurface briefly in the knightly literature of the Middle Ages, particularly with the translation of Vegetius’ writing into English in the fifteenth century, which “was taken up by the medieval aristocracy as a handbook relevant to their own methods of training knights and waging war” and included a section on the importance of swimming<sup>29</sup>. But “in practice the status of swimming was not very high among the medieval aristocracy who supplied the characters and the readership of knightly stories,” and the narrative literature of the period primarily reflects a society in which swimming was not seen as the heroic gesture it had been in earlier times<sup>30</sup>.

### *The art of swimming*

An interest in swimming was reawakened in the sixteenth century, when it began to be “advocated as a useful, albeit, neglected skill,” and a body of literature devoted to the endeavour started to emerge<sup>31</sup>. In 1531 Thomas Elyot referenced swimming as an important skill for a gentleman to possess in *The Boke Named the Governour*<sup>32</sup>. Nicolaus Wynman’s *Colymbetes: Sive de Arte Natandi Dialogus et Festivus et Jucundus Lectu*, published in 1538, “identified the breaststroke as ‘the scientific stroke’ which had to be mastered by all sea enthusiasts”<sup>33</sup>. This was followed in 1587 by Sir Everad Digby’s *De Arte Natandi*, arguably the most influential of the sixteenth century swimming texts. Originally written in Latin, it was translated into English by Christopher Middleton in 1595 and formed the basis for a number of subsequent volumes, including William Percey’s *The Compleat Swimmer* (1658)<sup>34</sup>.

27. Orme 1983: 23-24

28. Sprawson 2013: 68

29. Orme 1983: 27

30. Orme 1983: 33

31. Parr 2011: 17. There were, it should be noted, also more sinister sides to the relationship with water and its power during this time, as glimpsed in the method employed during the British witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whereby “[p]eople – usually women – thought to be witches were often tried by being thrown into water, an ordeal called swimming” (Parr 2011: 27).

32. Lenček and Bosker 174; see also Sherr 2012

33. Lenček and Bosker 174. The breaststroke would continue to dominate as “the master stroke of Western Europe” for nearly four hundred years; as Lenček and Bosker write, “It provided good stability, especially in fresh water, and the head-held-high position seemed well suited for keeping the breathing apparatus clear in the turbulent sea or river waters of the north” (Lenček and Bosker 174).

34. Pithily subtitled “The art of swimming demonstrating the rules and practice thereof in an exact, plain and easie method: necessary to be known and practiced by all who studie or desire their own preservation”.

and Melchisedech Thevenot's French version of *The Art of Swimming* (published in 1696 and subsequently translated back into English). Although Digby's Latin original was likely aimed at, and accessible only to, an elite, educated audience (Digby himself was a scholar at Cambridge), *The Art of Swimming* was, in the case of Middleton's version, remarkable for "its democratic spirit", akin in sentiment to later Victorian texts that sought to enable "ordinary people to swim"<sup>35</sup>. It also signaled the beginning of a turn towards technique; as Parr writes: "With this work, swimming terminology begins to concern technique rather than strength. Interestingly, although Middleton uses the verbs: 'strike' 'beat' and 'thrust' when describing the motion of swimming, the word 'stroke' as a noun is not used. This early language for swimming methods foreshadows the extensively technical terminology that was to emerge in the nineteenth century"<sup>36</sup>.

In line with "the new educational spirit of the Enlightenment"<sup>37</sup>, swimming became an object of scientific study in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and the idea of swimming and bathing as specifically healthful practices began to (re)-emerge at this time, partially as a result of such study<sup>38</sup>. In 1697, for instance, Sir John Floyer published a text advocating cold water bathing, *An Enquiry into the Right Use and Abuses of the Hot, Cold and Temperate Baths in England* – "the first in depth account of the medical and curative effects of immersion"<sup>39</sup>, which "provides abundant evidence that application of, or immersion in, cold water from wells, springs, pools and rivers played an important part in the folk medicine of his time"<sup>40</sup>.

Sea bathing in particular captivated the British imagination, pioneered in places like Scarborough, where Dr. Robert Wittie first had the idea that "immersion in sea water could promote health and well-being", suggesting daily five-minute dips for men and two minutes three times a week for women, invalids and children<sup>41</sup>. Aided

35. Parr 2011: 18

36. Parr 2011: 18

37. van Leeuwen 1999: 19

38. In Roman times, of course "bathing for health and cleanliness was widespread" (Love 2008: 126). As Christopher Love writes, "With the departure of the Romans, however, the link between baths, swimming and at least a general concept of cleanliness lapsed for many centuries. Not until the eighteenth century, with the rise of a spa culture and seaside resorts, was a connection between bathing and health re-established. From the mid-eighteenth century to the present there has been an explicit link between water and health" (2008: 126).

39. Parr 2011: 21

40. Parr 2011: 37

41. Parr 2011: 36

by the participation of the royalty (George III favoured Weymouth; the Prince Regent patronised Brighton), sea bathing became a popular pursuit in the eighteenth century, first among “the nobility, the rich and the fashionable”<sup>42</sup> and the wealthier middle classes, and later, in the nineteenth century, the lower middle and working classes<sup>43</sup>. This period also saw the development of the bathing machine – “a device that offered bathers both protection from the elements and a bit of modesty as they prepared for their dip” and which persisted in various forms into the early twentieth century<sup>44</sup>.

### *Enclosure*

Cold water bathing was not only a seaside phenomenon, however, and early signs of the impulse to contain water for the purpose of immersion can be seen around this time. In 1743, for instance, the jeweller William Kemp converted a spring-fed pond in North London into “London’s first outdoor public swimming bath”<sup>45</sup>. This is what Christopher Love describes in his history of British swimming between 1800-1918 as “[t]he first verifiable swimming pool in England about which records still survive”<sup>46</sup>. It stood at 170 feet long, 108 feet wide, and 3-5 feet deep, with built-up sides, a bottom coated in gravel, and “marble-clad dressing rooms”<sup>47</sup>.

In continental Europe, meanwhile, “floating baths”, *bains flottants* or *Flussbader*, were making their debut in Paris (1761), Frankfurt (1774), and Vienna (1781). Such constructions were in some ways an ancestor of the modern pool, but they were

42. Parr 2011: 41

43. Parr notes that, as the advent of rail travel made it faster, easier and cheaper to get to the seaside, and legislation increased leisure time for the working classes, “bathing was at the heart of what was essentially a class-based conflict” (2011: 67) by the mid-nineteenth century, at which time “the British seaside was an arena where upper, middle and lower classes [...] found themselves sharing the same space and competing for the same facilities” (2011: 78). This resulted in tensions around decency, “as the lower class bathers [...] could not afford to hire bathing machines or bathing drawers” (Parr 2011: 80), and the introduction of various rules and restrictions: “Some places tried to price out working class bathers by increasing the cost of bathing machines [...] Some tried to legislate against nude bathing, some authorities started to ban mixed bathing” (Parr 2011: 81). By the end of the century, however, restrictions on mixed bathing were beginning to be relaxed, while “The lower classes were reconfigured as valued and valuable contributors to resort economy” (Parr 2011: 86). Ultimately, writes Parr, “all kinds of boundaries were breached by bathing” – including gender as well as class-based boundaries, as “One of the by-products of the bathing phenomenon was the chance for strollers on the shore to contemplate male and female bathers in various states of undress, or even totally naked” (Parr 2011: 43-44). For further discussion of the relationship between class, gender and bathing in nineteenth-century Britain see also Love 2008.

44. Parr 2011: 38

45. Parr 2011: 44

46. Love 2008: 2

47. Parr 2011: 44

primitive and restrictive versions, “cramped, rickety affairs” that, much like the bathing machines so popular on the British coast, mainly facilitated a quick dip rather than a prolonged or vigorous swim<sup>48</sup>. The Ferro baths in Vienna, for example, consisted of two rows of changing cabins “girded together on a floating platform. Access to the river was through a hole in each cabin, where a generously permeable wooden barrel was hung. The bather was just to sit there exposed to the cold and dark water of the river; if he could hardly be expected to derive any enjoyment from it, he might safely experience beneficial medicinal effects”<sup>49</sup>.

The floating baths were, however, a direct precursor to the “floating pools” that emerged at the close of the eighteenth century, and which took a form more obviously similar to the modern pool. The first such pool was created in the Seine by swimming instructor Barthélémy Turquin, who established a swimming school in the river in 1785 “in order to amplify the beneficial effects of cold water, to add to the armamentarium of cold-water therapies”; the floating pool that accompanied the school was installed in 1796<sup>50</sup>. Turquin’s son-in-law, Deligny, subsequently built a barge in the Seine “measuring 106 by 30 meters, which was not freely floating but partly supported on wooden pilings” and which attracted an elite clientele of officers and aristocrats keen to improve their swimming skills, including Charles X, king of France from 1824 to 1830, and his successor Louis Philippe<sup>51</sup>.

Gradually, these floating pools began to give way to fixed pools, both indoor and open-air. The Dianabad in Vienna opened in 1842, “as an addition to the already existing bathing establishment of 1804; at 36 by 12 meters, it was the largest covered swimming pool of the time”<sup>52</sup>. The first indoor municipal swimming pool in England, meanwhile, the St George’s Baths, was opened in 1828 in Liverpool, supplied with water from the River Mersey<sup>53</sup>. A desire to improve public health and hygiene, prompted by the close proximity in which people in Britain’s industrial centres lived, as well as a growing understanding of the link between lack of sanitation and

48. Lenček and Bosker 1998: 175

49. van Leeuwen 1999: 20

50. Lenček and Bosker 1998: 176

51. van Leeuwen 1999: 21-22. Les Bains Deligny were maintained in some form or another until 1993, when the pool sank “under mysterious circumstances” (Cohen 1993). See also Terret 2004 for a history of “educative pools” in France.

52. van Leeuwen 1999: 44. van Leeuwen also comments here on the nebulous terminology used to describe these structures: “in the available literature there reigns persistent confusion as to the distinction between ‘bathing establishment’ or ‘bathhouse’ and ‘swimming bath’ or ‘swimming pool’” (van Leeuwen 1999: 44).

53. Love 2008: 4

disease and concern over “[e]pidemics of flu, typhus, diphtheria and scarlet fever,” led eventually to a proliferation of such pools in Britain<sup>54</sup>. As Love writes, “The early nineteenth century was of course the era of growing concern about filth and its social and personal consequences. The simple accumulation of rubbish and dirt in the expanding cities of Britain, along with the pollution of local water systems, set cleanliness and clean water in stark relief. To bathe, wash or swim in clean water was an obvious antidote to contact with the dirt of contemporary urban life”<sup>55</sup>.

Thus the Baths and Wash Houses Act was passed in 1846 in order to provide the urban population with facilities for bathing and washing clothes – facilities to which they generally lacked any other access<sup>56</sup>. Although at this point the Act was concerned primarily with sanitation, and the facilities promoted were not specifically imagined as sites for swimming, its passage nevertheless marked an important shift in Britain towards “municipal involvement in swimming provision”<sup>57</sup>. The St. George’s Baths in Liverpool was a very early example of this, but otherwise pools and baths in Britain had, up until this point, tended to be privately financed. Now accessible and, crucially, affordable places for bathing were popping up everywhere<sup>58</sup>. These were not yet places built particularly “with serious swimmers in mind”, but they often included large “plunge baths” designed to allow large numbers of people to wash at the same time<sup>59</sup>. And in 1878 a set of amendments to the act finally and formally “set out in law the ability of local authorities to construct or purchase covered (i.e. indoor) swimming baths”<sup>60</sup>. “A wave of public building followed the 1878 amendment. Pools sprang up all over the UK,” Parr reports: “By 1880, 83 were in existence. By 1900, 206 pools had been built and by 1912 there were 600”<sup>61</sup>.

54. Parr 2011: 92

55. Love 2008: 127

56. The Act, it’s worth noting, was a permissive rather than mandatory piece of legislation, so it was not automatically put into effect, but rather adopted by local municipal authorities who decided to do so.

57. Love 2008: 53

58. Love writes: “these facilities were to be supported by contributions from the local rates, and had a maximum charge set for the various services they provided. For the period immediately following 1846, the only charge of concern to swimmers as the ½ d (halfpenny) maximum charge for use of ‘open bathing places’” (Love 2008: 54).

59. Love 2008: 57

60. Love 2008: 57-58

61. Parr 2011: 93. For all that the construction of these pools had been sparked by concerns about cleanliness, it’s perhaps worth noting that the water contained within pools at this time was, by modern standards, not particularly clean. As Love puts it, “For almost the entire period between 1800 and 1918 there was no concern about, or conception of, filtering the water used in swimming pools. Whatever water was present at a natural swimming site, or which came out of the well or water main supplying a man-made site, was used to fill the pool.



*“Swimming sense”*

However, attitudes towards swimming at this time were not only informed by this slow, steady domestication and enclosure of open water. There were other currents of cultural influence at play, particularly amongst the Romantic artists and poets. In Britain, the Romantic interest in the natural world was “transforming contemporary attitudes to the landscape and to rivers, lake and sea”, and the participation of British Romantics facilitated a new understanding of what immersion in and movement through water could *mean* for the body<sup>62</sup>. In their cultural history of the beach, Lenček and Bosker suggest, echoing Sprawson<sup>63</sup>, that it was in fact “the Romantics who actually invented swimming in the postclassical era”, elevating it to an art, a passion, and ushering in the era of swimming dominance in Britain<sup>64</sup>.

Up until this point, swimming and bathing had largely been purposeful activities, practiced for military success or pursuit of health; now a new layer of meaning was being added. It was, Lenček and Bosker write, “the access that swimming afforded to the psychological or, more broadly, the spiritual dimension that drew Romantics to this sport. Aquatic immersion gave them an unprecedented way of experiencing the body. Suspended in water, they imagined themselves released from the tyranny of gravity, hovering high above the earth, carried along by waves and currents”<sup>65</sup>. This attentiveness to the spiritual, psychological, and physical effects of being in water manifested in different ways. Shelley was drawn powerfully (and ultimately fatally) to water, but couldn’t actually swim, whereas Byron, his friend, was a “spontaneous, competitive, flamboyant, and daring” swimmer, famous for his prowess in the water and his almost mythical feats of endurance and athleticism<sup>66</sup>. In 1810, for instance, he crossed the Hellespont, “re-enacting the feat

Compared to a modern swimming pool, a swimming pool in the 1870s or 1880s would have looked incredibly dirty, even immediately after being filled and before any swimmers entered the water. This is not to say that those operating pools at the time were not concerned about the cleanliness of their swimming pools; rather it seems to have been accepted as the natural order of things” (2008: 133). He notes too that while the popular practice at the time of dumping out the pool water and re-filling it, and subsequent systems of filtration, did demonstrate an attempt to deal with the visible dirt, “that was only one level of cleanliness. As we now know, but the late Victorians and Edwardians were only starting to understand, much ill-health and disease was and is brought about by bacterial infection, especially by bacteria thriving in water. In England it was only after the First World War, in 1920, that the threat of micro-organism infection of swimming-pool water began to be addressed, with the installation of a water chlorination plant in the Victoria Baths, Manchester. It was claimed at the time that Manchester was the first British city to test out a chlorination system for a swimming pool and the first British city to utilize chlorinated water in general” (Love 2008: 136).

62. Parr 2011: 48

63. “The passion for bathing really began with the Romantic generation,” he writes (2013: 134).

64. Lenček and Bosker 1998: 104

65. Lenček and Bosker 1998: 104

achieved by the mythical Leander for the love of Hero”<sup>67</sup>, and swimming was in many ways as much a part of his identity as poetry; a plinth on the shore of the Bay of Spezia (where Shelley drowned) is dedicated to “Lord Byron, Noted English Swimmer and Poet”.

In some ways, Byron’s feats recall the heroism of the swimmers of Roman times, or those depicted in Norse mythology, but swimming was not only “a means of demonstrating his power and superiority”<sup>68</sup>. “The great object of life is Sensation – to feel that we exist,” Byron wrote in an 1813 letter to Annabella Milbanke, his future wife<sup>69</sup>, and swimming was a means to sensation, perhaps especially to Byron, who despite his athleticism in water was hobbled by a contracted Achilles tendon. “Only in swimming,” Sprawson writes, “could he experience complete freedom of movement, the principle to which he devoted his life”<sup>70</sup>. Even the language of the Romantic poets suggests a fascination with swimming and its evocative, sensuous power. The word “swim,” Sprawson points out, recurs in lines of verse: “On reading Chapman’s *Homer*, Keats felt ‘like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken’. The arena ‘swims’ around Byron’s dying gladiator, and in ‘The Lime Tree Bower my Prison’ Coleridge ‘stood, silent with swimming sense’. The word suggests a state of suspension, a trance-like condition”<sup>71</sup>.

It was of course an appreciation of the natural world, and an interest in bodily engagement with that world, that drove these poets into the water and infused their language with “swimming sense”. Indeed, “most of the swimming done in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was wild swimming *a la naturelle*, in rivers, ponds, lakes, canals, whatever was available”, and the Romantic inclination towards seas, rivers and lakes may seem somewhat detached from the emergence of purpose-built baths and pools that in the same era<sup>72</sup>. But in the Romantic engagement with water we can see the emergence of an important element of the practice of swimming, one that persists even in today’s pools: an element of enjoyment, pleasure, deeper meaning – as Parr puts it, swimming “was becoming imbued with emotional and metaphorical significance”<sup>73</sup>.

66. Parr 2011: 58

67. Parr 2011: 59

68. Parr 2011: 60

69. Marchand 1982: 66

70. Sprawson 2013: 104

71. Sprawson 2013: 134

72. van Leeuwen 1999: 58

“Organisational zeal”

It is perhaps indicative of the versatility of swimming, the multiplicity of motivations and desires that continue to compel people into the water, that around the same time that Byron was crossing the Hellespont and swimming the canals of Venice<sup>74</sup>, a move towards a more regimented, contained way of swimming was being initiated, sparked by a focus on military development in continental Europe. In early nineteenth century France, for instance, “[t]he popularity of swimming was considerably enhanced by the circumstance that France was involved in building the largest army ever raised, an army in perpetual need of swimmers, swimming instructors, and teaching establishments”<sup>75</sup>. In Prussia, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, the “father of gymnastics”, responded to military defeat with a push for purposeful physical exercise, establishing his *Turnverein* (a gymnastics association) in 1811. In this context “swimming was rediscovered not only as an excellent method of physical exercise but as a means of keeping the army maneuverable at all times, as it had been in the time of Vegetius”<sup>76</sup>. In Vienna, not far from the Ferro baths, the Kaiserliche und Königliche Militärschwimmschule was founded in 1813: “The pool consisted of four platforms resting on a pair of five linked pontoons that left an elongated rectangle of Danube water in their midst”<sup>77</sup>. Such pools subsequently spread across northern Europe, lending a distinctly geometric<sup>78</sup>, regimented flavour to the practice of swimming, with “swimming instruction in enclosed rectangular spaces following the choreographies of military drill”: up and down, up and down<sup>79</sup>. “It was precisely at this moment,” writes van Leeuwen, “that swimming was restructured according to the rules of the exercise field: marching in straight lines and turning in sharp angles. Prussian frustration over military reverses still reverberates in the swimming pools of today; the swimmer is restricted to straight laps, and turns are executed with the same crispness as the about-faces of the marching drill. Accordingly the ground plan of the swimming pool has been fixed as the standard 1:2 rectangle, with no other use possible than as an aquatic parade ground”<sup>80</sup>.

73. Parr 2011: 48

74. “One night,” Sprawson writes, “he was observed leaving a palace on the Grand Canal, but instead of entering his own gondola he threw himself into the water, dressed as he was, and swam to his lodging” (2013: 108).

75. van Leeuwen 1999: 21

76. van Leeuwen 1999: 27

77. van Leeuwen 1999: 29

78. For further references on the geometricisation of sporting spaces and bodies, see chapter three, “Exercise, Body and Place”, and chapter five, “(Un)contained”.

79. van Leeuwen 1999: 9

80. van Leeuwen 1999: 38

If the influence of military discipline was not quite so strong in Britain, where pools had been built largely in response to public health concerns, there was still a drive to formalise the practice of swimming during this period<sup>81</sup>. As pools began to proliferate, so too did swimming clubs and associations which bound the sport to rules, regulations and conventions<sup>82</sup>. Sport was generally increasing in popularity (with public interest in swimming, for instance, particularly aroused by Matthew Webb's successful traverse of the English Channel in 1875), and the Victorians applied their "organisational zeal" to "what had been loosely structured sporting practices, largely determined by variable local traditions", imposing order on these practices<sup>83</sup>. Eventually, Parr writes, "Every aspect of swimming became regulated: who could swim, where and when; who could compete; who could join which clubs; what swimmers should wear and which strokes they should use; how life saving and swimming should be taught; and so on"<sup>84</sup>.

This process of formalisation occurred partly in response to an influx of participation, particularly as more people took to the water and the need to keep them safe increased<sup>85</sup>. Drowning, as Susie Parr puts it, was "lodged in the Victorian psyche"<sup>86</sup>; in 1878, for example, the year the Baths and Washhouses Act was amended to include provisions for swimming pools, "a shocking 3,569 accidental and 369 suicidal drownings were recorded by the Royal Humane Society"<sup>87</sup>. But it was also a response to a strong competitive urge. A race held in the Serpentine in 1837 by the

81. Although there was some military interest; in 1868, for instance, "the Army introduced, for the first time, regulations related to swimming, gymnastics and other physical exercise. Exactly why these regulations were introduced at this time is not clear, although a concern for the prevention of drowning among the troops is evident. Foremost, however, in the regulations is the statement 'The art of swimming is to be taught as a military duty at all stations where facilities for it exist. During the proper season regular bathing parades are to be formed for the purpose of instruction in swimming. The skilled swimmers in each troop or company are to be ascertained, and so distributed that there may be a sufficient number in each squad to teach the rest'" (Love 2008: 9)

82. Among them the Philolotic and Psychrolotic societies at Eton (active 1828-1857), the National Swimming Society (founded 1836 or 1837), the British Swimming Society (founded 1841, though Love notes that stories referencing the BSS "may simply be inaccurate references to the National Swimming Society" (Love 2008: 4)), and the Amateur Swimming Association (established 1886), which continues to serve as the English national governing body for swimming. There were also large numbers of local clubs formed in the 1850s and 1860s "dedicated to promoting public interest in the art of swimming through putting on galas, races and displays" (Parr 2011: 98).

83. Parr 2011: 91

84. Parr 2011: 92

85. Safe – as well, in an age of general prudishness, as decent: the Amateur Swimming Association, for instance, imposed strict dress codes in the late 1800s for both male and female competitors, created largely "to preserve decency" (Parr 2011: 95).

86. Parr 2011: 83

87. Parr 2011: 83. In contrast, the National Water Safety Forum reported 338 accidental and natural causes-suspected drownings across the UK in 2014 (National Water Safety Forum 2014).

National Swimming Society is one of the earliest examples of organised competition in Western Europe<sup>88</sup>. Initially races were held in open water, but the desire to test the limits of performance led to increasing use of swimming pools for galas and competitions: here weather and other variable conditions would not interfere with the athletes' efforts.

*A turn toward technique*

The invention of the stopwatch in 1855, "first used for timing swim meets in 1869," further fuelled and enabled this desire to understand, scientifically, how to swim faster<sup>89</sup>. The emphasis on speed, on competition and improvement, led the Victorians to turn "their attention to technique, minutely analyzing the various different strokes in order to improve efficiency and enhance the teaching of swimming"<sup>90</sup>. Breaststroke, identified back in the sixteenth century by Nicolaus Wynman as "the scientific stroke", had long been the predominant swimming stroke in Western Europe, but as speed became imperative, experimentation led to innovation. The lure of glory – and of prize money – inspired Victorian-era swimmers to develop new ways of moving their bodies through water. Thus, for instance, emerged the English overarm sidestroke, an improvement on the underarm sidestroke and a precursor to the crawl, and the Trudgen, a relatively fast but visually inelegant stroke named after John Trudgen, who had learned it, he said, from natives in South America, and who introduced it to Britain in the 1870s.

It was the introduction of the front crawl, however, "a radically faster stroke"<sup>91</sup>, that "would finally allow swimmers to enter previously uncharted aquatic-speed zones"<sup>92</sup>. The exact origins of the crawl are hazy, but an early form of it was documented by the artist George Catlin during his travels in the American west in the 1830s. Observing members of the Mandan tribe, he wrote:

"The mode of swimming amongst the Mandans, as well as amongst most of the other tribes, is quite different from that practiced in those parts of the civilized world, which I have had the pleasure yet to visit. The Indian, instead of parting his hands simultaneously under the chin, and making the stroke out-

88. Love 2008: 4

89. Lenček and Bosker 1998: 181

90. Parr 2011: 99

91. Schmidt 2012: 9

92. Lenček and Bosker 1998: 182

ward, in a horizontal direction, causing thereby a serious strain upon the chest, throws his body alternately upon the left and the right side, raising one arm entirely above the water and reaching as far forward as he can, to dip it, whilst his whole weight and force are spent upon the one that is passing under him, and like a paddle propelling him along; whilst this arm is making a half circle, and is being raised out of the water behind him, the opposite arm is describing a similar arch in the air over his head, to be dipped in the water as far as he can reach before him, with the hand turned under, forming a sort of bucket, to act most effectively as it passes in its turn underneath him.

By this bold and powerful mode of swimming, which may want the grace that many would wish to see, I am quite sure, from the experience I have had, that much of the fatigue and strain upon the breast and spine are avoided, and that a man will preserve his strength and his breath much longer in this alternate and rolling motion, than he can in the usual mode of swimming, in the polished world”<sup>93</sup>.

Britain was introduced to this technique firsthand in 1844, when a group of Ojibwa Indians were brought to London to compete in a race. While it attracted interest, this style of swimming was ultimately “dismissed as barbaric and splashy compared to the more genteel action of the breaststroke”<sup>94</sup>. It was not until much later that the crawl would come into its own, when Australian swimmer Dick Cavill adapted the Trudgen, combining the overarm motion with techniques allegedly picked up from the South Sea Islands, perhaps by Cavill’s brother<sup>95</sup>, or as a result of the influence of swimmer and Solomon Islander Alick Wickham, who moved to Sydney in the late nineteenth century<sup>96</sup>. With further refinement and adaptation, the crawl became the speed stroke of choice by the turn of the century. “It revolutionises everything,” wrote Frank Sachs in his 1912 guide to swimming<sup>97</sup>. As Lenček and Bosker put it: “If, in the nineteenth century, the breaststroke had captivated the imagination of poets, writers, and artists, the crawl would attract scientists and engineers in the twentieth century, all working to apply principles from their disciplines to refining and accelerating human aquatic mobility”<sup>98</sup>.

93. Catlin 1844: 97

94. Schmidt 2012: 9

95. Lenček and Bosker 1998: 182-183

96. Schmidt 2012: 9; Osmond and Phillips 2004

97. Sachs 1923: 145

98. Lenček and Bosker 1998: 183

It was in this era, therefore, that teaching and practicing of technique became a “serious business”, whereby each stroke was “carefully studied and analysed and the correct techniques instilled through comprehensive swimming drills that took place both in the water and out of it”<sup>99</sup>. Thus we see the emergence of a disciplined, performance-based swimming practice, beyond a military scope, which required learning. As such a practice, swimming was promoted relatively democratically; it was “the most universal of all physical exercises,” as Archibald Sinclair and William Henry declared in their contribution to the *Badminton Library of Sports and Pastimes*, a series of sporting books for which they wrote the volume on swimming: “As a pastime it has its votaries in every country; and that skill in the exercise is of superlative importance need not be dwelt upon, seeing that ability to swim may enable a man to save his life or the lives of others”<sup>100</sup>.

Sinclair and Henry also recommended that swimming should be part of the national education<sup>101</sup>. Swimming had been taught in British public schools for some time in purpose-built bodies of water; the so-called Duck Puddle at Harrow, for instance, where Byron had swum as a schoolboy, was one of the first such sites, created by “digging out a pool and diverting Thames water into it”<sup>102</sup>. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Clarendon Schools pioneered a more disciplined approach to swimming for schoolchildren, as they “established swimming drills and tests, mounted competitions and inter-school swimming matches and started to build their own indoor pools”; these practices were later adopted by state schools, who unlike the public schools tended to lack their own facilities and utilised municipal pools instead<sup>103</sup>.

By 1910, “the government was committed to the teaching of swimming to children and young people across Britain. Swimming became part of the curriculum for boys and, somewhat later, for girls”<sup>104</sup>. Swimming, in other words, was being integrated into society – no longer a novelty, a heroic pursuit, but an everyday skill, the acquisition and maintenance of which was supported by a wide range of advocates, institutions and attitudes.

99. Parr 2011: 103

100. Sinclair and Henry 1893: 1

101. Sinclair and Henry 1893: 30

102. Parr 2011: 104

103. Parr 2011: 105

104. Parr 2011: 105

*“The cult of the body”*

In the twentieth century, a reinvigorated emphasis on the relationship between swimming and health began to blossom, as “[o]ut of the darkness and miasma of the nineteenth-century European city came a dream of health, sunlight and the body reformed”<sup>105</sup>. During the First World War, a number of pools in Britain had been closed down, “being too expensive to heat and maintain”, while swimming clubs suspended activities “because their members were in the trenches”<sup>106</sup>. The editor of the dedicated periodical *The Swimming Magazine*, William Henry, had nevertheless optimistically continued publishing the magazine; recognising that the practice could have both physical and emotional benefits, he made a case that “local authorities should re-open pools and actively promote swimming, using well-established teaching methods in order to improve the health, welfare and morale of troops, to protect against illness and epidemics, and to advance the health of the nation generally”<sup>107</sup>. Indeed, in the April 1917 issue of the magazine, “he had expounded his theory that the act of closing the pools would lead to the ‘moral hydrophobia’ of the nation, encouraging a disinclination to bathe and contaminating the whole being, oral and physical, reducing the populace to a *lower scale of animal existence*”, presaging the emergence of a moral dimension around wellness that would be firmly established in the next two decades<sup>108</sup>.

During the 1920s, “the cult of the body became pronounced”<sup>109</sup>, particularly in Germany, where Hans Surén, a former instructor at the German Army School for Physical Exercise (he would also become a Nazi in 1933<sup>110</sup>) published his influential volume *Man and Sunlight* in 1924. An English edition of the book, which celebrated the healthful benefits of exposure to sunshine as well promoting nudity, was published in 1927 and proved popular<sup>111</sup>. Attitudes to water and swimming were reconfigured by these discourses of air and sun<sup>112</sup>. Sunbathing began to replace sea-

105. Worpole 2000: 14

106. Parr 2011: 114

107. Parr 2011: 115

108. Parr 2011: 115

109. Worpole 2000: 43

110. Toepfer 1997: 33

111. For a geographical exploration of the relationship between naturism and the senses in Britain during this time, with particular reference to Surén’s book, see Morris 2009.

112. In Britain, for example, a 1921 film produced by the National Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis, *Air and Sun*, argued “for a return to natural life, useful work and bronzed skin”: “By direct contact with Air and Sunlight, the skin which clothing has made tender like a hothouse plant, recovers its natural functions” (Worpole 2000: 45).



bathing as the predominant seaside pastime, and more generally, it was becoming increasingly common to exercise and display one's body publicly. The establishment of commercial holiday camps in the 1930s (Billy Butlin famously opened his first at Skegness in 1936), and particularly "the ubiquitous presence of the swimming-pool as a focus of activity at each holiday camp", made it "more acceptable that men and women would spend more and more time dressing in swimming clothes or shorts, with the men frequently topless even when wearing long trousers. The holiday camps democratized the body in an institutional setting, as the beach had democratized it decades earlier in a state of nature"<sup>113</sup>. Women's swimwear trends from this time exemplify this shifting acceptance of exposure: "As a tan became linked with concepts of health, beauty, youth and wealth, women's costumes shrank so that eventually the greatest expanse of skin could be exposed to the sun"<sup>114</sup>. These smaller, tighter costumes also indicated women's increasing engagement in "vigorous swimming"<sup>115</sup>.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of the devotion to sun, fresh air, and exercise in this period was the lido, or open-air swimming pool. As Ken Worpole writes in his history of architecture and public space in twentieth-century Europe:

"The 1930s saw a proliferation of open-air lidos in the UK, many of them developed as part of public works programmes to create work for the unemployed. Out of the 48 open-air swimming pools constructed, 35 were built in London, of which only 11 were still in use in 1998. Many conformed to a standard size recommended by the Amateur Swimming Association, 165 feet long, and between 55 and 90 feet wide. All had shallow and deep ends, the deepest of which could be as much as 15 feet, where there were diving boards. The basic design was a sunken pool with changing-rooms and refreshment facilities, enclosed within a brick compound high enough to keep out intruders or free-riders, but also acting as a sun-trap and wind-break"<sup>116</sup>.

Lidos "provided the perfect setting for the fitness mania that prevailed in the late 1930s in Britain and on the continent", offering facilities for swimming and sun-bathing, often in a stylish package<sup>117</sup>. This so-called "fitness mania" was advanced

113. Worpole 2000: 47

114. Parr 2011: 121

115. Parr 2011: 123. In 1926, for instance, the first woman to swim the English Channel, Gertrude Ederle, beat the male record by two hours.

116. Worpole 2000: 113

in Britain by the Physical Training and Recreation Act of 1937, “which undertook to provide facilities that would improve the health of the nation through exercise and recreation. Grants were offered to local authorities for the construction of gymnasia, playing fields, swimming baths and camping sites”<sup>118</sup>. That same year, the National Fitness Council was established “to instigate a National Fitness Campaign, emphasizing the promotion of a ‘mass physical culture’”<sup>119</sup>. Lidos, seaside resorts, and other places for sunning and swimming thrived throughout the thirties, in large part because of this culture of fitness.

The culture was couched largely in terms of health and (national) wellbeing, but its underlying suggestion of an “ideal” body (“generally assumed to be white”<sup>120</sup>), and its more nationalistic tinges, had sinister undertones<sup>121</sup>. As Worpole puts it, “There is no doubt that the concern with the perfectibility of the body was often interwoven with a concern for the new ‘science’ of eugenics, and that every image of the body reformed was ambiguously also an image of racial superiority and even physical triumphalism”; and moreover even “illness itself came to be seen as decadent and morally culpable”<sup>122</sup>. The obsession with health that characterized the interwar period was, in other words, not necessarily entirely healthy, but it does provide some insight into the cultural trends and issues that have contributed to modern approaches to the pool. Interestingly, for example, David Matless identifies “four key dimensions of the open-air body” during this time: “discipline, exposure, healthy regularity and choreography”<sup>123</sup>. While there were undoubtedly also more hedonistic and Hellenistic impulses at work amongst the sun-worshippers and out-

117. Parr 2011: 125

118. Parr 2011: 125

119. Worpole 2000: 47

120. Worpole 2000: 14

121. In an introduction to the 67th edition of *Man and Sunlight*, for instance, “Surén felt obliged to reassure his readers that he was thoroughly German [...] after his surname had been questioned as being insufficiently Germanic” (Worpole 2000: 44) while in Britain “issues of health, leisure and open-air culture” were often set “within the context of citizenship” (Worpole 2000: 43). These examples are not necessarily indicative of any particular politics on their own, but against the backdrop of what we now know to be the lead-up to the Second World War they become complicated. “The seemingly unproblematic espousal of bodily perfection within early twentieth-century white European culture was of course put into question by the rise of Fascism,” Worpole writes. “It has subsequently become difficult to explore this particular strand of European history and culture, notably the alliance between modernity and bodily perfection, as in retrospect it appears so suspect and malign, as well as having gone so disastrously wrong. Yet at the time, these concerns about health and fitness, and the social policies that arose out of it, were thought to be progressive and enlightened” (Worpole 2000: 14-15).

122. Worpole 2000: 14

123. Matless 1998: 86

door exercise enthusiasts of Europe in the twenties and thirties<sup>124</sup>, elements of each of these dimensions are reflected in modern lane swimming practice.

Moreover, while the emphasis on the relationship between the “open-air body” and health during this time was clear, other developments, particularly around competition, presaged a move indoors. While the move towards holding competitions in pools, as opposed to open water, had begun in the nineteenth century, with the burgeoning interest in speed and technique – because “[n]atural water courses possess too many vagaries of nature, too many random variables” – it was in the twentieth century that this trend towards order was fully embraced<sup>125</sup>. Lane dividers, for instance, were used for the first time during the 1924 Paris Olympics, and, as Bale writes, “In most cities of the western world, swimming clubs and indoor pools had grown rapidly in number by the mid twentieth century. In so doing a shift had not only occurred from the festive and demonstrative to the sportised forms of swimming but also from natural waterscapes to the rectangular and regular 25 metre or 50 metre pools as required by the competitive forms of swimming”<sup>126</sup>.

#### *The modern swimming landscape*

By the 1960s, attitudes towards swimming in Britain more generally were beginning to shift. “Having been represented as healthy, pleasurable and sexy it was starting to be seen as an unpleasant, almost punitive experience,” Parr writes<sup>127</sup>. Concerns about cleanliness and contamination of water grew, and the allure of the seaside resort, long viewed as a site for healthful endeavour, began to wane. Holiday camps went into decline and resorts began to deteriorate, losing out to foreign competition<sup>128</sup>. Significantly, too, in 1960, the Wolfenden Report on *Sport and the Community* “stressed the need for more and better facilities for indoor sport”<sup>129</sup>, recommending to local councils “that any new bathing pools should be built indoors, as part of all-in-one sport and leisure centres”<sup>130</sup>. The Report emphasised particularly

124. See Worpole 2000: 46

125. Bale 1994: 59

126. Bale 1994: 33

127. Parr 2011: 137-138

128. Parr 2011: 138

129. Perrin 1980: 6

130. Parr 2011: 134. Parr’s book is particularly focused on the merits of wild swimming; thus she writes of this period that “from the mid 1960s, new municipal pools started to cut swimmers off from the elements and from their local and traditional outdoor swimming places, which slowly became forgotten and neglected” (Parr

the importance of building indoor facilities: “the facts of the British climate,” the authors of the report state, “call for indoor heated baths, with the necessary equipment for ensuring the purity of water”<sup>131</sup>.

In the 1970s “the emphasis placed on provision for leisure [...] increased noticeably in the face of strong ‘sport for all’ policies pursued by successive governments”<sup>132</sup>. As new indoor municipal facilities were built, further alienation from the tradition of open water swimming occurred as a result of increasing concerns about pollution<sup>133</sup>. Broader health and safety concerns in this period, as well as financial factors, also had an impact on attitudes towards where and when it was appropriate to swim<sup>134</sup>. The Wolfenden Report, and a later 1968 Sports Council report on *Planning for Sport*, had for instance already deemed lidos “bad value for money”, blaming “the UK’s unreliable climate for their erratic, and largely seasonal, operation and use”, and many were closed in the eighties and nineties<sup>135</sup>. In the sixties and seventies local authorities and schools built hundreds of new indoor pools across England; more recently “England has seen a growth of commercial pools to the point that, in numerical terms, they are now almost equal to the numbers of Local Authority pools”<sup>136</sup>. However, provision of pools is not entirely straightforward, as a number of older council pools are now “close to the end of their economic lifespan” and “Local Authorities are often faced with difficult decisions to close pools despite strong local opposition”<sup>137</sup>.

2011: 134); it is the intention of this thesis as a whole to show, by contrast, that these kinds of pools, isolated as they may be from the elements, are nevertheless vital and important sites for swimming.

131. Wolfenden 1960: 36

132. Perrin 1980: 1

133. When Britain joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, for instance, it “became subject to environmental standards set out in directives from Brussels”, which revealed that its waters were in bad shape (Parr 2011: 140). By 1980, “the UK was registered as having no inland bathing places and only 27 coastal bathing places that met the required standards” (Parr 2011: 140); by comparison, France was recorded as having 1,362 inland and 1,498 coastal sites suitable for bathing that year. As Parr writes, “Britain’s coastal waters were effectively a health hazard, the exact opposite of their original status in the 18th century” (Parr 2011: 141).

134. Legislation like the Health and Safety at Work Act of 1974, for instance, “made staff and landowners responsible for the safety of visitors to their premises, including open water swimming places as well as pools and lidos” (Parr 2011: 143).

135. Worpole 2000: 125; though, as Worpole also writes, “The arguments against lidos and other outdoor forms of provision in the UK seem today to derive from the new leisure managerialism. In this scheme of things, indoor leisure facilities are regarded as intrinsically more modern because they are part of the commercial leisure industry – and therefore more amenable to professionalization, economic control, and even privatization” (Worpole 2000: 125). See also Parr 2011: 143.

136. Sport England 2013. However, the report also stipulates that these commercial pools “tend to be small in size and have shallower water, being aimed primarily at the fitness/aerobic/recreation market” and “tend to offer a reduced programme of activities and have restrictive pricing”.

137. Sport England 2013

Interest in swimming itself, however, has not waned in this time. England's national governing body for swimming, the Amateur Swimming Association, reported that in 2015 it had 1,095 clubs, with 200,932 members nationally; it also reported 3,667 facilities with pools in England and 44 new pools built in 2014/15<sup>138</sup>. Sport England's 2015/16 Active People Survey, meanwhile, showed swimming to be England's most popular sport in terms of participation<sup>139</sup>. And while open water swimming has experienced a resurgence in recent years, with clubs and groups such as the Outdoor Swimming Society forming to encourage British swimmers to "get back to the joy of swimming under an open sky"<sup>140</sup>, pools continue to form an undeniable and important part of many swimmers' landscapes.

This chapter has shown that these pools are more complex environments than they may appear, layered with history and meaning. As we've seen, an emphasis first on military training and drilling and then on competition, technique, improvement, led to the development of geometric pools, with water stilled, contained, ultimately "sterilised"<sup>141</sup>, so that the swimming body could train and perform under controlled conditions. But the pool, and the act of swimming, is tied to more general issues of intimacy, physicality and power. It is part of a medical history, a military history, a history of human performance and spectacle. It is shaped by interwoven histories of health, discipline and pleasure that speak to the dual nature of water, its life-giving and life-taking properties, the pleasures and dangers of being immersed<sup>142</sup>. The history of swimming, is, in a way, a history of both human control and vulnerability, which is to say, an impossible history, a history that touches all histories, an ongoing history that highlights again and again both strength and fallibility in equal measure.

It may seem overwrought to suggest, as van Leeuwen does, that swimming in a pool is "a complex and curious activity, one that oscillates between joy and fear,

138. ASA 2015

139. Sport England 2016

140. Outdoor Swimming Society 2008

141. "After being boxed in and separated from its original state," van Leeuwen writes, "water loses its healthy composition, becoming stagnant. In order to restore its fitness for swimming it has to be submitted to various treatments of increasing alienation: artificial coloring, chlorination, and disinfectants" (van Leeuwen 1999: 46). He cites, for example, a 1986 Institute of Swimming Pool Engineers Handbook, authored by John Dawes, who asserts: "The pool ideal is a sterile environment. Swimming pool water must be better than the water we drink and remain so. It has to be clearer than drinking water, and still contain a palatable disinfectant" (Dawes 1986: 229). ("Dawes did not foresee," van Leeuwen adds, "that rigorous chemical purification may lead to new, often dangerous if not lethal toxicity" (van Leeuwen 1999: 46)).

142. See e.g. Illich: "Water is deep and shallow, life-giving and murderous" (1986: 27).

between domination and submission”<sup>143</sup>, or, as the philosopher Damon Young does, that “even the local pool can suggest danger, by highlighting the continual effort required simply to keep our head above water. Swimming, whether in salt water or chlorine, evokes the sublime by revealing just how vulnerable we are”<sup>144</sup> – statements which take a Romantic notion of the sublime out of its natural habitat and overlay it onto a seemingly bizarre, restricted landscape. But viewed as the sum of all its parts, as part of a wider narrative about the human relationship to water, the pool can become just such a site for deeper contemplation and sensation.

143. van Leeuwen 1999: 2

144. Young 2014: 131

## EXERCISE, BODY AND PLACE

In the previous chapter we saw how the act of swimming has long been entangled with medical and therapeutic concerns, and, more specifically, how the history of the swimming pool in Britain can be linked specifically to issues of public health<sup>1</sup>. With its focus on lane swimming, this thesis takes a direct interest in an exercise practice – one with which many swimmers engage with the aim of improving or maintaining their health<sup>2</sup>. I therefore turn now to set out more directly how this thesis has been shaped by a concern for exercise cultures and their relations to health, body and place.

The narrative progresses through two main interests. First, I situate my writings on the pool within the context of recent developments in health geography which have extended the remit of the sub-discipline beyond the strictly medical and into the realm of everyday environments and practices. I focus in particular on how this development has connected cultural geographic thought around place and landscape to debates over health and its geographies. I also highlight critiques of the

1. Love 2008. To recap, its emergence as a public facility can be traced back to the Baths and Washhouses Act of 1846, passed in response to growing concern over sanitation amongst Britain's urban population. The provision of swimming pools in the UK was further linked to issues around public health and policy intervention in the 1960s and 1970s, with growing concern over the cleanliness of Britain's coastal and inland waters (Parr 2011), combined with policy recommendations such as those of the Wolfenden Report on Sport and the Community (Wolfenden 1960) leading to an emphasis on the creation of indoor facilities.
2. The links between exercise and health are well rehearsed. As Herrick notes, "Regular physical activity is linked to a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, some cancers, and type 2 diabetes, and also has marked psychological benefits" (Herrick 2009: 2349). Vigorous aerobic exercise has been shown to significantly reduce mortality (Arem et al 2015, Gebel et al 2015, Laukkanen et al 2011). Where swimming specifically is concerned, one study has even suggested that swimming might produce superior effects compared to other popular forms of exercise (Chase et al 2008) while another suggests that swimmers may generally possess "enhanced physiological functional capacity, greater 'wellness', greater non-swimming activity and enhanced vitality" than non-swimmers (Stager and Johnston 2004: 14). The broader therapeutic potential of the aquatic environment has also been explored (see Becker 2009 for a review; also Becker and Cole 2011, Foley and Kistemann 2015, Parr 2011, Völker and Kistemann 2011, 2013, White et al 2010). Here, immersion in water is understood to perform a range of rehabilitative functions, "from the treatment of acute injuries through health maintenance in the face of chronic diseases" (Becker 2009: 859).

“new” public health and the “geometricisation” of modern sporting spaces and bodies, in order to demonstrate why the indoor swimming pool, and the practice of lane swimming, is a particularly interesting case study in this context of a renewed focus on the healthful potential of everyday places. Finally, I also situate the thesis within recent geographical work on exercise and its environments, where a tendency towards examination of outdoor settings, which this thesis challenges, is in evidence. In its second half, the chapter turns more directly towards an underlying theme implicated in these discussions around exercise and health: the relationship between body and place. Here I consider the role of “bodies as a way of understanding the relationship between people and place”<sup>3</sup>, focusing particularly on the complexities of defining and researching the body and ending with a discussion of the role that non-representational theories may play, both methodologically and conceptually, in helping to work through these complexities.

*Health, place and the therapeutic landscape*

In a seminal article published in 1993, the geographer Robin Kearns called for “a re-placed”<sup>4</sup>, “post-medical”<sup>5</sup> geography of health that “would consider the dynamic relationship between health and place”<sup>6</sup>, and “nudge the collective focus of medical geography towards a cultural/humanistic standpoint”<sup>7</sup>. This “post-medical” challenge sought to “shift the subdiscipline [of health geography] from a concern with disease and disease services towards a focus on health and wellness”<sup>8</sup>. Subsequent debates framed this provocation as either going too far<sup>9</sup>, or not far enough, with Dorn and Laws, for instance, noting “Kearns’ lack of engagement with the literature on the body”<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, Kearns’ intervention was indicative of broader

3. Longhurst 2001: 12

4. Kearns 1993: 145

5. Kearns 1993: 140

6. Kearns 1993: 145

7. Kearns and Moon 2002: 608

8. Kearns and Moon 2002: 608

9. E.g. Mayer and Meade 1994, who sought to “identify a continuing relevance for medical geography’s disease ecology tradition” (Kearns and Moon 2002: 608).

10. Kearns and Moon 2002: 608; see Dorn and Laws 1994. Dorn and Laws’s call for “a more bodily medical geography” (Parr 2002: 243) urged geographers to develop an “understanding of the body in both its material and representational forms” (Dorn and Laws 1994: 107), echoing some of the wider debates about (dis)embodiment going on within geography at the time (as discussed in more detail later in this chapter), and has subsequently been taken up. Parr, for example, notes Hall’s call for “a strengthened geography of health and impairment” that takes into account “a complex interaction of biological and social processes centred in the body” (Hall 2000: 28) and comments more generally: “in recent times some of the most interesting work in this area is that which has sought to engage with and to understand the experienced materiality of the body: thus challenging medical geography to consider the messy body as a spatiality” (Parr 2002: 243).



shifts: opening up the sub-discipline's foci; acknowledging that "places matter"<sup>11</sup> in relation to health, healthcare, and health policy; and understanding that place is "an operational 'living' construct which 'matters' as opposed to being a passive 'container' in which things are simply recorded"<sup>12</sup>.

This shift towards a more place-oriented health geography has also corresponded to a changing emphasis within the sub-discipline away from illness and disease and towards broader ideas of wellbeing, whereby "health is considered as *more than just the absence of disease* and is reckoned to be intimately and recursively linked to places and landscapes"<sup>13</sup>. It has, in turn, broadened the scope of health geography beyond studies of specifically medical sites, issues and practices<sup>14</sup>. Thus, for instance, health and fitness cultures and regimes<sup>15</sup>, sites of spiritual experience<sup>16</sup>, and holistic or alternative therapies and lifestyles<sup>17</sup> have all entered "the panoply of research themes within the sub-discipline"<sup>18</sup>. The interest in everyday mental and physical health has also had conceptual implications, with cultural geographic ideas of place and landscape coming to the fore. As Kearns and Collins write, "Within this emerging research stream, the long-established geographical concern for landscape has taken on new emphases and meanings. Researchers have moved on from the medical-geographical understanding of landscape as a physical barrier to health service provision and utilization to consider the complex layerings of history, social structure, symbolism, nature, and built environment that converge at particular sites, and may enhance or corrode human wellbeing"<sup>19</sup>.

One particular way in which this conceptual confluence has manifested is in the idea of the "therapeutic landscape," a term developed by Wilbert Gesler in the early 1990s. Gesler's work on sites such as Epidaurous in Greece<sup>20</sup>, Lourdes, France<sup>21</sup>

11. Kearns and Collins 2010: 17; this assertion echoes the editorial by Moon launching the new journal *Health and Place*, which highlighted the journal's interest in studies where "place matters" (Moon 1995: 1).

12. Kearns and Moon 2002: 609

13. Parr 2002: 241, emphasis mine.

14. It should be noted that this is not necessarily about dispensing with the (bio)medical altogether but involves opening out new possibilities to consider the relationship between health and geography more broadly understood. As Parr puts it, "this distinction [between medical and health geography] perhaps implies (more than intended) a stark retreat from things medical" (2002: 241); Parr, for one, makes an argument that geographers not "'do away with' the medical" but continue to engage with it "in a more critical capacity than has been the case previously within the subdiscipline" (2002: 241).

15. E.g. Andrews, Sudwell and Sparkes 2005; McCormack 1999

16. E.g. Gesler 1993, 1996

17. E.g. Wiles and Rosenberg 2001; Williams 1998

18. Kearns and Collins 2010: 20-21; see also Parr 2002: 241.

19. Kearns and Collins 2010: 19-20

20. Gesler 1993

and the Roman Baths in Bath, England<sup>22</sup> “provided the template from which further applications emerged”<sup>23</sup>. Gesler suggested the therapeutic landscape as “a geographic metaphor for aiding in the understanding of how the healing process works itself out in places (or situations, locales, settings, milieus)”<sup>24</sup>, and early applications of the concept tended to focus specifically on “landscapes or places known for their therapeutic qualities, and therefore of interest to those experiencing ill-health of some kind,” evolving to also include “places recognized as having health-enhancing effects”<sup>25</sup>. The therapeutic landscape concept has not been immune from criticism. Arguments have been made that it fails to recognise socially differentiated relations to landscapes, overlooking the fact that “what may be healing for one individual or group may not be for another”<sup>26</sup>, and indeed that it may be possible for a place to simultaneously hurt and heal<sup>27</sup>. A further, related strand of critique has suggested that the tendency to focus on obvious or extraordinary sites, those “celebrated for their reputed healing qualities”, ignores the fact that “healing can take place in everyday, ordinary places,” whether at work, at home, or within one’s community<sup>28</sup>. Thus, while she cautions against making the therapeutic landscape concept “an ‘all use’ framework”, Williams suggests “ordinary, everyday landscapes and the activities within them, together with the highly variant experiences of such places which may be simultaneously restorative and risky” are an area ripe for exploration<sup>29</sup>.

An exemplary response is Conradson’s examination of landscape, care and the relational self, where he argues that “a therapeutic landscape experience is best approached as a relational outcome, as something that emerges through a complex set of transactions between a person and their broader socio-environmental setting”<sup>30</sup>. Of specific relevance to this study, Foley applies a therapeutic landscapes framework to his study of open water swimming in Ireland. He follows Conradson’s suggestion that “place is experienced differently by different people and it is necessary to be mindful of differential therapeutic outcomes at all times,” and

21. Gesler 1996

22. Gesler 1998

23. Williams 2007: 2

24. Gesler 1992: 743

25. Williams 2010: 208

26. Williams 2007: 2

27. Wakefield and McMullan 2005

28. Williams 2010: 217; see also Williams 2007: 2 and Gastaldo et al 2004.

29. Williams 2010: 219

30. Conradson 2005: 338

points out that “this is especially the case with swimming, simultaneously capable of being joyful, open and healing, yet risky, terrifying and unhealthy”<sup>31</sup>. Thus, we might also frame the indoor pool as a potentially therapeutic landscape, experienced in differing ways by different people, and forged as a relational outcome in diverse ways, ranging from the feelings of immersion in water to the senses of stability that a regular routine of pool swimming may provide.

*“New” public health and landscapes of modern sport*

As a site for exercise, the swimming pool also presents itself as a particularly interesting case study in light of critiques of the “new” public health that emerged concurrently with the shift towards a “post-medical” health geography<sup>32</sup>. Such critiques suggest that the move towards an emphasis on “the social and political dimensions of population health”<sup>33</sup>, and on “prevention rather than cure”<sup>34</sup>, is associated with potentially problematic forms of regulation and social control, and with the emergence of “a disciplinary power that provides guidelines relating to how people should understand, regulate and experience their bodies”<sup>35</sup>. This problematisation is exemplified by Colls and Evans’ work around obesity, which illustrates how health policy may place blame and responsibility on individuals in potentially detrimental ways<sup>36</sup>. The indoor pool would seem to be a place where both architectural and social structures reinforce these potentially problematic forms of regulation, from the imposition of rules in the pool itself, achieved via lane lines or signage, to the ways in which, as Evans, Allen-Collinson and Williams put it, “‘order’ and ‘civility’ are maintained through the mutual scrutiny of near-naked bodies”<sup>37</sup>.

31. Foley 2015: 218. While Foley is writing specifically about open water swimming here, the sentiment is translatable to the pool environment, which – even if it does not hold the same obvious dangers as, say, a cold, roiling sea – may certainly provoke varying responses from swimmers, including, for example, disgust or boredom as well as pleasure or relaxation.

32. See Brown and Duncan 2002 for an overview. This approach is based on “developments in our understanding of the ways in which individual lifestyles, living conditions, and social processes in the wider community, and health outcomes are interconnected” (Curtis, Riva and Rosenberg 2010: 329), and, on a practical level, has reinforced policy messages about lifestyle and exercise as well as individual responsibility. Although the emphasis here is on critique, this focus has also been framed in a positive light, as indicative of “a more positive and holistic view of health [...] consonant with the socio-ecological model, and with a positive orientation that can support policy formulated ideas such as empowerment, community action, and capacity building” (Kearns and Collins 2010: 19).

33. Curtis, Riva and Rosenberg 2010: 329

34. Brown and Duncan 2002: 363

35. Brown and Duncan 2002: 365

36. Colls and Evans 2009

37. Evans, Allen-Collinson and Williams 2016: 6; see also Scott 2010.

Moreover, as outlined in the previous chapter, the history of the swimming pool itself is partly a history of a broader impulse to contain and control, which seems to underpin and partially explain its regulatory emphases. John Bale, tracing the “sportification” of movement cultures including swimming, running, kicking, hitting, fighting, twisting and turning, suggests that a characteristic of modern sporting practices is their “rule-bound, ordered, enclosed and predictably segmented” spaces<sup>38</sup>. He suggests, too, that this process of sportification was wrapped up in the “industrialisation, rationalism and modernity” characteristic of eighteenth and nineteenth century England – a period during which “activity after activity became rule-bound and governed by a male-dominated bureaucratic organisation which meticulously maintained records and results”<sup>39</sup>. Bale points out that this development continues to influence the landscapes of modern sport, including the swimming pool. “The rigid geometry of its [the pool’s] rectangular shape,” he writes, “reflects the essential opposition to nature and serves to encourage achievement-oriented swimming (up and down a regulation length pool in straight lines) rather than more frolicsome water movements which invariably get in the way of serious, sportised swimming” – in other words, the structure of the pool imposes itself on the swimmer<sup>40</sup>.

The indoor lane swimmer’s pool is in this way a particularly clear example of “the ‘geometricisation’ of the body – the subjecting of the body to rigid temporal and spatial disciplines designed to oust ambiguity, play, wilfulness, humour from the sporting body culture of modernity” identified by the sociologist and historian Henning Eichberg<sup>41</sup>. It is true that there is an element of discipline in most regular exercise practices, but the configuration of the pool and the nature of lap swimming practice in particular makes this discipline especially evident. The up-and-down routine, the lane lines: the pool in this context is a setting “dominated by the *straight line*, it is *panoptical*”, as Eichberg writes, this last point made even more apparent by the omnipresent lifeguards, on the lookout for any impending disaster or transgression<sup>42</sup>.

Enhancing wider critiques of “new” public health that problematise “new forms

38. Bale 1994: 2

39. Bale 1994: 7. See also chapter two, “The Swimming Pool”, for more on this, particularly as it relates to swimming.

40. Bale 1994: 59

41. Bale and Philo 1998: 13

42. Eichberg 1998: 151

of governance, regulation and social control,”<sup>43</sup> then, the indoor pool emerges as a particularly interesting and self-contained site for a study of the exercise experience. One intention of the thesis is to show how swimming laps in an indoor pool may be an experience which is both meaningful and variable for participants, in spite – or perhaps because – of the elements of enclosure, repetition and geometrisation characteristic of the practice.

*Outdoor and indoor exercise environments*

In particular, the thesis plays variously with ideas about containment and enclosure, asking questions not only about where the pool begins and ends, where its “borders” might be, but also about its essential boundedness. The pool is presented here in part as a place with clear, fixed boundaries (the walls and roof that enclose the building that houses the pool; the walls of the pool itself, which contain the water necessary for swimming) but also a place which transcends those physical or superficial boundaries – and a place, too, where such boundaries are regularly transgressed or even inverted. For one thing, swimmers’ experiences of the pool complicate its apparently ordered and contained nature: the mind wanders, the pool-place expands and contracts to fit certain habits and routines and histories, swimming becomes “an institution, transporting us immediately into another world”<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, the indoor/outdoor dichotomy rings somewhat false at times, the precise distinction between inside and outside becoming hazy as the outside seeps in and the inside seeps out.

It is, then, worth lingering on the enclosure of the indoor pool environment, particularly in the context of an emergent geographical literature around the exercise experience that takes seriously the lived experience of exercise in terms of an interplay between environment, practice, and the human body<sup>45</sup>. Recent work in this vein has focused on a variety of endeavours, including running or jogging<sup>46</sup>, cycling<sup>47</sup>, walking<sup>48</sup> and surfing<sup>49</sup>. But while these forms of exercise can happen

43. Brown and Duncan 2002: 364

44. Scott 2009: 126

45. Exemplified, for instance, by a recent special issue in *Health & Place* on exercise and environment, as well as moves towards a revitalised sports geography (e.g. Andrews 2016), as discussed in the introduction.

46. E.g. Cook, Shaw and Simpson 2015, Howe and Morris 2009, Latham 2015, Lorimer 2012a, Qviström 2013, to name a few.

47. E.g. Spinney 2006, 2009

48. E.g. Doughty 2013. In terms of how it’s been addressed, walking is in some ways the most complex of the activities listed above. As Wylie notes, citing Rebecca Solnit’s *Wanderlust*: “It takes an entire volume [...] to summarize the major philosophical, aesthetic and ethical currents historically associated with the activity of

in various kinds of environments, some both indoors and outdoors (runners, for example, may run inside on treadmills, while cyclists may do spinning classes or turbo sessions<sup>50</sup>), much of this body of literature continues to focus on exercise occurring outdoors.

To this end, some studies have looked more explicitly at how indoor and outdoor exercise environments are experienced in comparative perspective. Butryn and Masucci's examination of cyborg athletes' experiences in more technologised indoor settings versus outdoor "wilderness" environments, for instance, revealed a tendency amongst those athletes surveyed to experience "the indoor world, in part, as deficient in relation to their sporting experiences outdoors in the 'real world' on their 'real' equipment"<sup>51</sup>. Indoor activities were viewed as "less meaningful" or "somehow essentially dissimilar"<sup>52</sup> to their outdoor equivalents. Eden and Barratt's comparison of angling ponds and indoor climbing walls, meanwhile, suggests that "the indoors-outdoors dualism is more complicated than the simple distinction of having a roof or not"<sup>53</sup> since both ponds and climbing walls "provide similar indoor norms by reducing unpredictability, increasing convenience and comfort and providing entertainment safely"<sup>54</sup>. In Hitchings and Latham's study of indoor versus outdoor running, these issues around control and predictability also surface, with indoor running respondents explaining their tendency towards the treadmill, for instance, in terms of concerns around "personal control and predictable experience"<sup>55</sup>.

While the research drawn on here is not a comparative study of indoor versus outdoor swimming, the thesis does pick up on threads developed in the work outlined above, examining both the relative security and order of the indoor swimming pool environment as well as its porousness, seeking to push beyond perceptions that exercise indoors is necessarily "less meaningful". In this way it follows existing

walking" (Wylie 2005: 235), and there is plenty of relevant geographical literature inspired by walking which does not necessarily address it specifically as an exercise practice but to which the body and the senses are of central importance, e.g. Edensor 2000, Wylie 2002, 2005.

49. E.g. Anderson 2012, 2013, 2014, Evers 2006, 2009

50. And in any case many other environments for exercise are often found indoors: gyms, yoga studios, climbing walls, basketball courts, squash courts, to name a few...

51. Butryn and Masucci 2009: 301

52. Butryn and Masucci 2009: 300

53. Eden and Barratt 2010: 492

54. Eden and Barratt 2010: 492

55. Hitchings and Latham 2016: 510

work on dedicated indoor exercise spaces such as the gym<sup>56</sup>, but transposes this focus to a watery environment.

The pool, it's important to note, is not an entirely neglected subject within scholarship about swimming as an everyday exercise practice. There have been recent studies that address, for instance, women's embodied experiences of the swimming pool environment<sup>57</sup>, the performative regulation of the swimmer's body<sup>58</sup>, and the swimming pool as a negotiated order<sup>59</sup>. Wider cultural trends in the UK, however, have tended to foreground the possibilities of open water swimming, evidenced in contemporary literature produced outside the academy<sup>60</sup> as well as in the emergence of clubs and groups such as the Outdoor Swimming Society. There is in fact evidence to suggest that regular swimmers have tended to swim more often indoors than out in recent years; amongst adults surveyed in Great Britain for the 2002 General Household Survey, for instance, indoor swimming was more common than outdoor swimming, with 12% of all respondents reporting swimming indoors at least once in the last four weeks, as opposed to 2.8% who reported swimming outdoors<sup>61</sup>. However, certain factors, including improved water quality in Britain's open waters<sup>62</sup> as well as what Robert Macfarlane, in a patron statement for the Outdoor Swimming Society, describes as "a desire for what might be termed 'reconnection'" that's emerged in recent years, "A yearning to recover a sense of how the natural world smells, tastes and sounds", may explain the current interest in open water or "wild" swimming<sup>63</sup>.

This interest is echoed in certain recent studies around swimming that take the relationship between an exercising body and its environment as a central theme. Throsby's insightful examination of marathon swimming, for instance, focuses largely on the pleasures of being a body in open water, since it is here that the sport itself primarily takes place, though training may happen in pools. Indeed, Throsby cites one research participant for whom the pool is a "dead puddle", "a poor, utilitarian substitute that is good for fitness, but not much else"<sup>64</sup>. Foley, meanwhile,

56. E.g. Johnston 1998; Andrews, Sudwell and Sparkes 2005

57. Evans and Allen-Collinson 2016, Evans, Allen-Collinson, and Williams 2016

58. Scott 2010

59. Scott 2009

60. Alvarez 2013, Deakin 2000, Parr 2011 Sprawson 2013

61. Office of National Statistics 2002

62. Parr 2011

63. Macfarlane 2008

64. Throsby 2013: 17; see also Throsby 2015

has written recently about “the act of swimming as an emplaced and performed therapeutic encounter”<sup>65</sup>, calling for the application of non-representational theories (NRT) to blue space settings. His study points to possibilities for the use of NRT to explore the bodily experience of swimming and the affective potential of swimming spaces, but the scope of the study is limited to a selection of outdoor swimming sites in Ireland and, as he acknowledges, “It cannot be ignored that most contemporary swimming takes place in indoor and private pools”<sup>66</sup>. Foley notes that “[d]iscussions with indoor swimmers, beyond the scope of this work, might identify a completely opposite set of responses, where comfort, safety, reliability and calmness were preferred to the discomfort, risky unpredictability and wildness of the sea”<sup>67</sup>. This thesis is a complementary endeavour to Foley’s, directed at better understanding enclosed, indoors exercise environments in general, and the indoor pool specifically.

#### *Geography and the body*

Foley’s paper, and the theoretical approach he applies, makes explicit the importance of the body itself in exercise, and, significantly, raises some issues about how best to research the exercising body and its relationship to place. These are issues central to the thesis in a number of ways.

Within geography, a disciplinary interest in the body is now well established, but it’s a relatively recent turn, particularly where the “actual materiality and fluidity of the body itself” is concerned<sup>68</sup>. As Robyn Longhurst puts it, traditionally “the body has acted as geography’s Other”<sup>69</sup>: within the discipline, she suggests, bodies have historically “functioned as a lesser category to the mind and that which has long been associated with it – public space, rationality and objectivity”<sup>70</sup>. The rise of humanistic perspectives in geography in the 1970s “made bodies far more visible in geography, highlighting the need to consider embodied subjectivities for understanding place”<sup>71</sup>. The work of, for example, Tuan<sup>72</sup>, Seamon<sup>73</sup>, Rowles<sup>74</sup>, Buttner<sup>75</sup>

65. Foley 2015: 218

66. Foley 2015: 218

67. Foley 2015: 223

68. Longhurst 2001: 23

69. Longhurst 1995: 99

70. Longhurst 2001: 13

71. Longhurst 2001: 15

72. Tuan 1974, 1977

73. Seamon 1979

74. Rowles 1978



and others brought the body into play/place by emphasising “the ways in which places were perceived by people”<sup>76</sup>, and suggested a phenomenological approach that took the body as central to the experience of place. But while this emphasis, particularly where it lingered on the sensory, the rhythmic or the experiential, implied a close relationship between place and body, it was only later that the body began to emerge as a multilayered subject of geographical study in its own right, and that, moreover, the *mess* and *flesh* of specific bodies, the insecurity of their boundaries and the resulting complexity of “the intersection of embodiment and spatiality”<sup>77</sup>, began to be acknowledged and explored in depth<sup>78</sup>. The “growing concern with the bodily”<sup>79</sup> that developed within geography in the 1990s<sup>80</sup> has continued and evolved<sup>81</sup>, and, over the last few decades, “the discipline of geography has become more ‘embodied’” so that “what was once a topic on the extremities of the discipline is now very much part of its conceptual and methodological core”<sup>82</sup>.

On some level this interest, and the resulting intertwining of body and place, seems profoundly obvious. The body is a deeply geographical thing, not least because it is possible to conceptualise the body itself *as* a place, with its own spatialities and rhythms (“The first and foremost of locations in reality is one’s own embodiment,”

75. Buttner 1976

76. Longhurst 2001: 15

77. Rose 1995: 546

78. See Longhurst 2001

79. Rose 1995: 545

80. See e.g. Callard 1998, Teather 1999, Longhurst 1994, 1997, Nast and Pile 1998, Simonsen 2000. The broader potential cultural roots of this interest are interesting to consider here, particularly given this thesis’s focus on exercising bodies specifically. As Elizabeth Grosz writes, “1980s culture exploded around a celebration of the body (-beautiful): the gym (or at least talk about it), body piercing, dance culture and safe sex” (Grosz 1995: 1). This fascination, under the guise of being “a celebration of the body and its pleasures”, revealed as well “a profound, if unacknowledged and undiscussed, hatred and resentment of the body” (1995: 1). Grosz points out that “The preferred body was one under control, pliable, amenable to the subject’s will: the fit and healthy body, the tight body, the street-smart body [...] A body more amenable, malleable, and more subordinate to mind or will than ever before” (Grosz 1995: 1-2) – an idea explored in somewhat more depth later, in “Re-creation”, and one seemingly at odds with the material realities of having, or being, a body, which is, as Robyn Longhurst writes, a “fluid, volatile, messy, leaky” thing (Longhurst 2001: 23) whose boundaries are not themselves fixed. “[I]t is only very recently,” Grosz wrote in the mid-1990s, “that philosophical and feminist theory have developed terms complicated enough to do justice to the rich (and aporetically cultural and individual) complexity of bodies” (Grosz 1995: 2).

81. This has happened alongside developments in other disciplines, with a move towards the body in the 1980s and 1990s visible within, for instance, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, “[f]eminist theory, literary criticism, history, comparative religion, philosophy, sociology, and psychology” (Csordas 1994: 1, see also Longhurst 1997: 488). Across these disciplines, various approaches to the body have been identified (Longhurst 1997, Pile and Thrift 1995), including phenomenological approaches, psychoanalytic approaches (Pile 1996), and approaches to the body as “a site of cultural consumption, a surface to be written on” (Pile and Thrift 1995: 7).

82. McCormack 2008: 1822-1823

as Rosi Braidotti writes<sup>83</sup>). Moreover, this place influences our relationship to all others – as Malcolm McCullough observes, “Place begins with embodiment. Body is place, and it shapes our perceptions”<sup>84</sup>. The relationship between bodies and places is therefore co-constitutive: bodies are “always in a state of becoming with places”<sup>85</sup>. “Bodies and places,” as Nast and Pile write, “are woven together through intricate webs of social and spatial relations that are made by, and make, embodied subjects”<sup>86</sup>. Indeed, the body is our connection to the world: in relation to places, it is often our first point of contact, the point from which we form our understandings and perceptions. “Geographical experience,” as Rodaway writes, “is fundamentally mediated by the human body, it begins and ends with the body”<sup>87</sup>. This is a phenomenological attitude, whereby “the crux of matters of place is the role of perception”<sup>88</sup>. The use of phenomenology in geographical thinking, as Steve Pile summarises, “provided a people-centred form of knowledge based in human awareness, experience and understanding. More than this, people were not merely passively situated in their environments; they were also active in the creation of meanings, which were bounded in time and space”<sup>89</sup>. Thus, as Edward Casey puts it: “*lived bodies belong to places and help to constitute them*”, just as “*places belong to lived bodies and depend on them*”<sup>90</sup>. Casey goes on:

“If it is true that ‘the body is our general medium for having a world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 146), it ensues that the body is the specific medium for experiencing a place-world. The lived body is the material condition of possibility for the place-world while being itself a member of that same world. It is basic to place and part of place. Just as there are no places without the bodies that sustain and vivify them, so there are no lived bodies without the places they inhabit and traverse [...] Bodies and place are connatural terms. They interanimate each other”<sup>91</sup>.

It is difficult, then, to write about a place such as the pool without considering its multiple, diverse, individual bodies and the co-constitutive relationship between

83. Braidotti 1994: 161

84. McCullough 2007: 385

85. Longhurst 2001: 5

86. Nast and Pile 1998: 4

87. Rodaway 1994: 31

88. Casey 1996: 17

89. Pile 1996: 50

90. Casey 1996: 24, emphasis in original

91. Casey 1996: 24

them; even more so as a researcher who is also a regular swimmer, since my own body immediately informs certain of my perceptions about the pool. As Glenda Laws puts it: “Geographers need to attend to both the conceptualisation and material construction of bodies because *our bodies make a difference to our experience of places*”<sup>92</sup>.

This thesis is therefore “about” the body on a number of levels. Most obviously, it takes as its central focus a place – the indoor swimming pool – specifically designed and oriented around (exercising) bodies; thus the relationship between those bodies and the pool is immediately implicated as being important, since the pool would not be what it is without the regular engagements of its swimming bodies, and nor, I argue, would those bodies be what they are without their regular interactions with the pool. Moreover, the specific swimming bodies present at the pool are, while being quite diverse, often in states of relative undress, often exerting themselves, often, in other words, *being* bodies in a way that highlights both their appearance and their functionality. There are issues, then, of bodily presentation, performance<sup>93</sup>, and identity at stake at the pool.

Methodologically, the thesis also addresses the role of the body in understanding place: firstly through seeking to talk to swimmers about their experiences of the pool, which often involves discussions of physicality, tactility, and bodily awareness; and secondly in openly involving and considering the body of the researcher. On this last point more will be said in the next chapter, but it’s important to note here that the thesis utilises this positionality partly to acknowledge, even if sometimes obliquely, the “fleshiness” of the body – treating it in other words as a “fluid, volatile, messy” thing whose boundaries are mutable<sup>94</sup>, rather than a “theoretical, discursive, fleshless” entity<sup>95</sup>.

### *Bodily boundaries*

There is, then, an inherent complexity in thinking through and writing about any particular body-place relationship. Indeed, the body is not only fluid and volatile on a specific, individual level – ageing, excreting, gaining and losing fitness and

92. Laws 1997: 49, emphasis in original

93. Both social and physical.

94. Longhurst 2001: 23

95. Longhurst 2001: 1

abilities – but also in the many ways it holds meanings; it is used in a seemingly “bewildering variety”<sup>96</sup> of ways, as outlined by Rom Harré:

“We use our bodies for grounding personal identity in ourselves and recognizing it in others. We use our bodies as points of reference in relating to other material things. We use our bodies for the assignment of all sorts of roles, tasks, duties and statuses. We use our bodies for practical action. We use our bodies for the expression of moral judgments. We use the condition of our bodies for legitimating a withdrawal from the demands of everyday life. We use our bodies for reproducing the human species. We use our bodies for artwork, as surfaces for decoration and as raw material for sculpture. We use human bodies for the management of the people so embodied. We use our own bodies and those of others to command the cosmos. We use our bodies as message boards, and their parts as succinct codes. We use our bodies for fun, for amusement and for pastimes”<sup>97</sup>.

Moreover, it is not only that we “use” our bodies in so many capacities, but that the body has so many potential meanings. As Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather puts it:

“The body is our vehicle for traversing space and for responding to the world’s sensory stimuli; it is the location of our psyche, with its drives both creative and destructive; it is the tool we hone in order to communicate, to love and to hate; it offers a ‘surface’, inscribed by us and read by others; it is a sexed organism that matures, may well become diseased or maimed, and eventually dies; it is a social being on which institutions leave their imprint and by which they in their turn are modified; and which is variously endowed with attributes inherent and acquired (wealth, power and so on). The sort of body that we have prescribes the particular map that we use to navigate our life worlds”<sup>98</sup>.

The complexity of considering something called “the body” lies at least in part, then, in the fact that it is difficult to define precisely and neatly, since “bodies are ‘real’ (have a weighty materiality), while at the same time, they are socially constructed (are enmeshed in discourses)”<sup>99</sup>. In other words, there is on the one hand the human body as organism, the fleshy, material “reality” of the body – its blood

96. Pile and Thrift 1995: 6

97. Harré 1991: 256-257

98. Teather 1999: 12

99. Longhurst 2011: 5

and bones, guts and skin – the “concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, muscles, and skeletal structure”<sup>100</sup>. And then, on the other hand, there is also the meaning(s) ascribed to/inscribed on this organism; indeed, these materials, as Grosz goes on, “are given a unity, cohesiveness, and organization only through their psychical and social inscription as the surface and raw materials of an integrated and cohesive totality”<sup>101</sup>. The body, then, is not *only* “brute materiality” or “entirely culturally inscribed,”<sup>102</sup> but both.

So again issues around boundaries come up: where does a body, for instance, begin and end? Where is its inside, its outside? If bodies are indeed “always in a state of becoming with places”, then how much of a body is in place, and how much of a place is in a body? In the introduction to *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, Robyn Longhurst sets out several motifs around which the book revolves, one of which is fluidity: “the leaks, flows and filtrations that occur across both disciplinary boundaries and people’s bodily boundaries”<sup>103</sup>. The aims and impulses of this thesis are, where the body is concerned, in sympathy with this motif. Longhurst writes too of a politics of fluidity/solidity and irrationality/rationality in relation to bodily boundaries, particularly regarding for instance the perceived “insecure (leaking, seeping) bodily boundaries” of women versus the perceived “secure (autonomous) bodily boundaries – bodies that are ‘in control’” of men<sup>104</sup>, which forms an important backdrop element to the essays in the thesis. Through a discussion of swimming bodies from multiple angles, and indeed an examination of the ways in which the pool specifically highlights a leakiness and fluidity inherent to all bodies, it touches on these ideas and seeks to bring them closer to the surface of a study of an everyday exercise practice.

*Non-representational theories, embodiment and the senses*

The challenges of actually researching and addressing the fluid, messy body, then, must be considered. To this end, I will look towards the development of non-representational theories within geography, which, distilled simplistically, seek “to highlight various understandings that emphasize the practical, active and embodied character of the world”<sup>105</sup>. The methodological implications of this will be dis-

100. Grosz 1992: 243

101. Grosz 1992: 243

102. Rose 1995: 546

103. Longhurst 2001: 1

104. Longhurst 2001: 2

cussed in greater detail in the next chapter<sup>106</sup>, but here I want to briefly situate the thesis alongside work which, in particular, takes elements of a non-representational approach to get at the details of embodied experience in place, particularly in the context of exercise practices.

Originating in the work of Nigel Thrift in the 1990s<sup>107</sup>, non-representational theories (often abbreviated as NRT) have by now been widely developed, applied and critiqued within geography<sup>108</sup>. Thrift used dance in particular as a “stamping ground”<sup>109</sup> via which to think through NRT, and embodied practices have continued to form an important focus of NRT-driven work. As Foley writes, NRT “are especially interested in the role of the body and its affective responses in, to and from place”<sup>110</sup>, and so are well-suited to studies which take the body and its relationship to place as a driving impulse. As Thrift outlines, however, “bodies and things are not easily separated terms,”<sup>111</sup> and bodies have an “unparalleled ability to co-evolve with things, taking them in and adding them to different parts of the biological body”<sup>112</sup>. NRT, then, attend particularly to the material and affective relations between body and world, broadening the scope of studies beyond human subjectivity into a relationship between matter and affects. To this end, NRT often concern themselves with “mundane everyday practices that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites”<sup>113</sup>; as Foley puts it, “[a]s a linked set of ideas drawn from wider cultural theory, NRT, with their concerns with pre-cognitive processes, embodiment and affect, explores the often inef-fable everyday aspects of living in place”<sup>114</sup>. Thus, for instance, in outlining the foci of what he prefers to call “more-than-representational” geographies, Lorimer writes of how, “At first, the phenomena in question may seem remarkable only by their apparent *insignificance*. The focus falls on how life takes shape and gains

105. Cloke, Crang and Goodwin 2014: 933

106. In particular, for instance, “recent geographical experimentations with format, narrative and modes of address [...] inspired by non-representational manifestos” (Wylie 2005: 235).

107. E.g. Thrift 1996, 1997

108. See Lorimer 2005, 2008b and Anderson and Harrison 2010. Following Anderson and Harrison, my use of the plural here – theories – rather than the singular “non-representational theory” reflects the diversity of ways in which the concept has been understood and applied; as Andrews, Chen and Myers put it, “non-representational theory is not strictly a theory in itself, rather it is a number of ways of understanding the active world and doing research on it” (Andrews, Chen and Myers 2014: 211).

109. Thrift 2007: 14

110. Foley 2015: 619

111. Thrift 1996: 13

112. Thrift 2007: 10

113. Thrift 1997: 126-127

114. Foley 2015: 618

expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions”<sup>115</sup>.

It is the potential of NRT to “emphasize the poetic qualities of bodily practice” and attend “to the materiality of the body, by valuing intuition, sensation and feeling”<sup>116</sup> that most interests me here, particularly in the context of recent work which suggests NRT be applied specifically to studies of exercise or sporting practices. Following developments in health geography that have established an interest in place and other cultural geographic concepts, Andrews, Chen and Myers have proposed, for instance, that NRT be brought to bear on geographies of wellbeing, in order to help “explore the concept [of wellbeing] at a far more immediate level, and explain the processes through which wellbeing emerges in everyday situations and environments”<sup>117</sup>. Even more recently, Andrews has suggested an application of NRT to the field of sports geography<sup>118</sup>, arguing that “a better engagement with, and showing of, the physicality, energy and feeling of sport might be achieved through employing non-representational theory, itself involving an emphasis on exposing the immediate and moving in life, including the less-than-fully conscious practices, performances and sensations involved”<sup>119</sup>.

Swimming, while still relatively under-examined in this context, is a particularly interesting practice via which to explore some of these ideas. In particular, as Foley points out, immersion<sup>120</sup>, which is a crucial element of swimming, “draws on phenomenological concerns, updated within NRT, with person-place interactions and the specific relations between bodies, practices and multi-sensual environments where surround-sounds, touch, and proprioception have explicitly embodied dimensions”<sup>121</sup>. Thus a study of swimming becomes, potentially, an opportunity to explore the importance of the senses, and the idea of place being made and experienced sensually, in an exercise-specific context. To this end the (watery) environment of the pool becomes significant. As Gordon and Inglis note, “[s]wimming

115. Lorimer 2005: 84

116. Rogers 2014: 778

117. Andrews, Chen and Myers 2014: 211

118. Andrews also makes the case here more generally for a revitalised sports geography, including, for instance, “broader engagement with amateur, leisure, lifestyle and fitness” (Andrews 2016: 4).

119. Andrews 2016: 1

120. For recent studies that take into account the relationship between immersion and the senses see for example Throsby 2013 on marathon swimming and Straughan 2012 on diving as an embodied experience.

121. Foley 2015: 618

pools are supremely tactile locations,” and this tactility colours swimmers’ experience and perception of the pool<sup>122</sup>. At the pool, Gordon and Inglis write:

“We touch, we grab, we brush against a range of surfaces with our bare feet and hands. We hear sounds, muffled and echoing, soft and hard. We detect odours, natural and man-made. The quality of the light changes at each turn. Space and water, intimacy and anonymity we share with complete strangers; at once both part of a communal experience, yet locked within our own private worlds. And because each and every one of our senses is so powerfully assailed – whether we swim with vigour or simply splash for fun – our reactions to the qualities and faults of the building are that much more intensely felt. As a result, to swim in an indoor pool is, in effect, to subconsciously test and to value the building at every level; its design, its services, its upkeep, its very functionality”<sup>123</sup>.

In conversation, the swimmers I interviewed spoke about their sensory experience: the smells (chlorine, for instance, so characteristic of the controlled indoor swimming pool environment and evocative of memories), the feel of the water on their skin, the feel, perhaps more abstractly, of their bodies in relation to water, or of the water in relation to their bodies. Even what they saw, or didn’t see, was important – perhaps particularly so because of the repetitive nature of swimming laps, the limited field of vision underwater, the exposure of being relatively under-dressed in public. A challenge for the thesis then becomes, as Stephanie Merchant puts it when writing about researching the “submarine sensorium” of diving, “[g]etting at this kind of sensuous, sometimes ‘pre-reflective’ and ‘pre-objective’ detail [...], studying aspects of life that seem almost insignificant; the fleeting encounters, immanent sensations, practical skills and sensuous dispositions”<sup>124</sup>. In the next chapter, I turn to this challenge directly, arguing that the written approach of the essays in the thesis offer one response.

122. Gordon and Inglis 2009: 15

123. Gordon and Inglis 2009: 16

124. Merchant 2011: 54



## WRITING PLACE

The next section of the thesis unfolds as a set of essays, each one layered with ethnographic material including interviews and fieldnotes, personal (embodied) reflection, and the thoughts and words of other writers and theorists. In taking this approach, I have sought to situate the thesis within a relatively recent wave of what could be called “creative-critical” place-writing” by academic geographers. Such work uses creative approaches to writing, both structurally and linguistically, to explore and advance themes relating to space, place and the body. To some extent this is an evidently contemporary trend in geography<sup>2</sup>, but it is also rooted in a longer disciplinary practice of writing (about) place<sup>3</sup>. There is the tradition of regional geography, for instance, so central to the discipline’s history, which posed important questions of description<sup>4</sup>. Extending beyond the academy, there is psychogeography<sup>5</sup> and “deep topography”<sup>6</sup>; indeed, there is an increasingly rich selection of popular place writing that deals with distinctly geographical themes<sup>7</sup>. In

1. Hawkins 2013: 56

2. See, for instance, the recent set of papers in *Cultural Geographies* (e.g. Cook et al. 2014; Cresswell 2014; DeLysyer and Hawkins 2014; Dewsbury 2014; Kitchin 2014) that specifically addresses the process, practice, and product of writing creatively.

3. It should be noted that whilst commentators have identified a trend towards cultural geography “becoming involved in creative arts practice, rather than simply adopting a position of external commentary and critique” (Crang 2010: 196), geography has a long history of engaging with artistic or creative practices (Dwyer and Davies 2010: 91). The recent interest in and adoption of so-called creative or “creative-critical” writing practices within academic geography referred to here (see Ward 2014 for an overview) is thus part of a more general “re-turn’ towards creative practices” within the discipline (Hawkins 2013: 56; see also Marston and de Leeuw 2013). Exemplary is a themed issue of the *Geographical Review* in April 2013 that featured, alongside more expository work, poetry (Cresswell 2013b; Rosnau 2013; Wigmore 2013), a comic strip (Wilson and Jacot 2013), an excerpt from a novel-in-progress (Eisele 2013), a short story (Christensen 2013), and other forms and analyses of creative expression, including the visual and auditory.

4. For examples and revisitings of this, see Darby 1962; Hart 1982; Sayer 1989; and Haggett 2012.

5. See Coverley 2006 for an overview; Self 2007; Sinclair 1997, 2009.

6. For a recent example, see Papadimitriou 2012.

7. Examples here are too many to list but, to give a sense of the range of styles utilised and environments and themes addressed, include: Richard Mabey’s (1994) “pursuit of the wild,” Bruce Chatwin’s (1998) examination of Aboriginal song in Australia, Roger Deakin’s (2000) account of swimming through Britain, Rebecca Solnit’s (2014) history of walking, W.G. Sebald’s (2002; see also Wylie 2007) meandering pilgrimage, James

such work, the writing of/about/in place is partly a form of exploration: the language of the author becomes a tool for doing geography, just as geography is a tool, or at least an inspiration, for doing writing.

The substantive essays in the thesis take inspiration from this interest in place writing. In crafting them I have been guided by two broad aims. First, to continue and expand upon the tradition of place writing within geography, as well as more general literary trends towards geographical thinking. I'm particularly interested here in borrowing techniques and focal points from larger-scale place narratives and transposing them to a smaller-scale, more mundane practice and place – swimming laps in an indoor pool. In this way I'm seeking to utilise but also challenge certain modes of writing place, especially those which privilege particular environments and perspectives. The second aim is to introduce how writing place can be a way to engage methodologically with two ideas central to the thesis: a conceptualisation of place as fluid, processual, and multiple, and, as discussed in the previous chapter, the co-constitutive relationship between body and place<sup>8</sup>. The rest of this chapter will therefore outline the written approach taken by the essays in the thesis, situating them in a particular genre of writing and offering some examples of what this genre, loosely defined, looks like. In then exploring its development in relation to the themes of place-in-process and body in place, the approach's strengths and potential weaknesses will also be outlined.

### *Cultural geography and creative writing*

Writing is many things to the cultural geographer: a practice and a product, a tool

Attlee's (2007) voyage up an Oxford road, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts' (2011) ode to overlooked landscapes, Laing's (2011) traverse of the River Ouse from source to sea or (2016) meditation on loneliness in the city, and Robert Macfarlane's (2012) "journey on foot" along ancient British pathways or (2015) exploration of the relationship between language and landscape.

8. For the purpose of this chapter, I'm particularly focused on engaging with these two ideas, each of which underpins the thesis more broadly. In terms of geographical concerns which lend themselves well to exploration via the kind of creative-critical writing described in the chapter, however, it should be noted that there are a number of other thematics that could be highlighted, including the importance of storytelling and narrative to place (Cameron 2012, MacDonald 2013), the more-than-human geographies of place (Cameron 1997), and the spectral atmospheres of place and material remains (Cameron 2011, McCormack 2010). Efforts dealing with memory or biography in relation to place, too, form a substantial body of critical-creative work – examples here include Matless' accounts of six Broadland sites, which "form part of an investigation into regional landscape and enact a particular mode of enquiry in writing" (Matless 2010: 72); Pearson (2006) on performance, place, and memory; and Jones' exploration of memory, emotion, self, and landscape, in which he asks: "Can we go back to the past terrains and past encounters which are mapped inside us and which colour our present in ways we cannot easily feel or say? One way of trying to do this is to turn to 'other' forms of writing, to devote our efforts to description and narrative rather than the treadmill of theory, evidence and analysis" (Jones 2005: 206).

for communication, a way of thinking, a research method<sup>9</sup>. It is an inextricable part of the process of doing and sharing research – from fieldnotes, annotations and emails to papers and books. To the extent that all writing is “creative,” applying the label “creative writing” to only some writing has dangers – “as though,” as Tim Cresswell puts it, “it were possible to write without being creative”<sup>10</sup>. Still, there has historically been a distinction between traditional academic prose and genres of writing more typically labelled as “creative,” including poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction (under which category might appear, for instance, essays, travelogues, memoirs, but also more experimental or hybrid prose<sup>11</sup>). This distinction is now, in certain areas of cultural-geographical scholarship, starting to become blurred. As Hayden Lorimer puts it: “Geographical writers are forcing thought about the possibilities for, and styles of, narration, and diverse means for expressing the poetics of place. [...] Various creative writing enterprises – I think here of essays, photo-essays, travelogues, prose-poetry, ethnographic and site-specific portraits, storytelling, life-writing and memory work – demonstrates a growing willingness to experiment with the character and form of writing, and a preparedness to consider style as a pressing issue rather than a supplementary concern”<sup>12</sup>.

While there is no one overarching description of what this looks like in practice, these forms of writing are often characterised by personal modes of authority, working through the relations between places, words, and author in distinctive styles<sup>13</sup>. This is, as Lorimer notes above, partly about experimentation, about exploring the possibilities for “expressing the poetics of place”. Some examples make this exploratory agenda more overt than others. In an account of a walk along the South West Coast Path, for instance, John Wylie sets his paper up as a kind of structural experiment, through which he hopes “to explore and exemplify the possibilities of deploying a fragmentary and narrational rather than thematic or schematic structure”<sup>14</sup>. Wylie confines the narrative to the events of a single day but

9. DeLyser 2010: 341

10. Cresswell 2014: 142

11. To further complicate things, these different genres of so-called “creative writing” often bleed into each other, borrow from each other, inform each other, and otherwise interact.

12. Lorimer 2008a: 2

13. In outlining this idea here, I deal almost exclusively with works of non-fiction prose, largely because this is the form that I myself follow in the thesis. This is by no means to say that novels, short stories, poems, or more hybrid forms of writing produced by geographers and scholars couldn’t (or don’t) do similar work. I also draw mainly from examples of individually-authored encounters with place; again, this is not the only model, but it is the form the essays in the thesis take. Given this, some of the limits and challenges of the first person in this context are discussed in more depth later in the chapter.

14. Wylie 2005: 235

allows his mind to wander and for theory and geographical knowledge to seep in, thus expanding the reach of the text beyond the geographical and temporal confines of its narrative thrust. The result of this experiment may have drawn criticism for being “overtly self-centred and introspective”<sup>15</sup>, but it hints at an important issue, namely, the tension between scholarship and creativity: how best to marry exploratory forms of writing and narrative experimentation with scholarly ideas rooted in a long tradition?

Certainly, the positionality of the researcher is an important facet of any piece of creative-critical writing. Indeed, some such writing manifests structurally in a kind of deliberate and direct splitting of voices: the “scholar” on the one hand and the “writer” on the other, appearing side-by-side in the same piece of writing. Emily Orley, for example, describes “a cross-disciplinary method of encountering place” which “offers a way of negotiating the distinct roles of critic and practitioner by juxtaposing creative modes of writing alongside more traditional academic forms”<sup>16</sup>. She takes inspiration from Jane Rendell’s notion of “site-writing”<sup>17</sup>, which “explores the position of the author, not only in relation to theoretical ideas, art objects, and architectural spaces but also to the site of writing itself”<sup>18</sup>. Orley outlines her methodology – a two-step process involving first “a self-reflexive awareness of ourselves in place” followed by “a processing of our engagement with place”<sup>19</sup>. She then offers an example of that first, less conventional step, in the form of a short, intimate description of a museum, written in the second person. Orley’s two-step process is similar to the compositional process which Caitlin DeSilvey describes using in a paper on the material histories of a Montana homestead: “[t]he essay shuttles between close description – writing through the grain of things – and critical reflection – drawing back to tease out the significance of this work”<sup>20</sup>. In both instances, the author juxtaposes analytical or contextual writing with more immediate or personal writing, calling to mind Rendell’s musing: “I have been wondering how it is possible to be in two places at once, to hold alternative possibilities together, specifically creative and critical modes of writing, combining the

15. Blacksell 2005: 518

16. Orley 2009: 159

17. See e.g. Rendell 2010.

18. Rendell 2007: 179

19. Orley 2009: 160

20. DeSilvey 2007: 404

analytic with the associative, intellectual inquiry with storytelling, remembering with imagining”<sup>21</sup>.

The “academic” and “creative” voices need not, of course, be in such direct opposition, as we will see in various examples that follow. But in identifying “creative modes of writing” and setting them apart from more traditional critical-scholarly modes of writing, something is being said about what characterises each of these modes and what, moreover, a more hybrid form of writing might look like. To some extent, this is an issue of style. Cultural geographers positing creative texts often, for instance, employ a lively engagement with language, adopting a more playful or poetic tone than might ordinarily be found in scholarly work<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, the importance of language for both writing and creating place is a crucial issue more generally here, since the current interest in the poetics and politics of place writing echoes and builds on earlier periods of reflection, both within the discipline of geography and beyond, on this constructive power of language. Explorations of the writing of culture and the “fictions” of ethnography<sup>23</sup>, debates on representation, place, landscape, and issues of geographical description<sup>24</sup>, and the parallel post-modern turn towards issues of style and authority<sup>25</sup> all inform contemporary interests in place writing, particularly where creative use of language is concerned.

These concerns with written style respond in part to the insight that the language used specifically about or in a place is part of that place. Tuan urges that “speech

21. Rendell 2007: 179

22. Take, for example, Caitlin DeSilvey’s description of the interior walls of a Montana shack: “Headlines inked alarm across the walls” (DeSilvey 2007: 405). Or consider Lorimer’s writing on encountering topography through running, which is full of puns – “to run the full gamut of emotions” (Lorimer 2012a: 83); when writing about slopes – “The gradient helps this happen, of course, as though disinclined to let attentions wander” (Lorimer 2012a: 84). This wordplay layers the text with double meaning, as the landscape itself is layered with running-memories.

23. E.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986, who opened up debates within (and beyond) anthropology about ethnographic representation, subjectivity, and reflexivity. Also relevant here is more recent work which has addressed the complexity of writing qualitative research, since “qualitative work carries its meanings in its entire text” (Richardson and St Pierre 2005: 960). Thus, for example, Laurel Richardson has made an argument for “CAP [creative analytical processes] ethnographies”, whereby “the writing process and the writing product” are displayed as “deeply intertwined”: “the product cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production, or the method of knowing” (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005: 962). She and Elizabeth St. Pierre have also argued the merits of “writing as a method of inquiry” more generally, where writing is “a seductive and tangled method of discovery” (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005: 967). St. Pierre recounts, for instance, a study where she “used writing as a method of data analysis by using writing to think; that is, I wrote my way into particular spaces I could not have occupied by sorting data with a computer program or by analytic induction” – thus, while writing, she has the realisation: “I doubt I could have thought such a thought by thinking alone” (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005: 970).

24. Barnes and Duncan 1992

25. Olsson 1991

and the written word be considered integral to the construction of place, and therefore integral to the geographer's understanding of place"<sup>26</sup>. More recently, Macfarlane has noted that "language does not just record experience stenographically, it produces it. Language's structures and colours are inseparable from the feelings we create in relation to situations, to others and to places. Language carries a formative as well as an informative impulse"<sup>27</sup>. This works on different levels: for instance, we could look at language more holistically, considering the body of writing about a certain city, which "does not only record or reflect the fact of the city. It plays a role in producing the city for a reading public"<sup>28</sup> – but equally, we might consider smaller-scale, more intimate "formative" moments of language use: "It may need only a few kind words among friends to change an ordinary kitchen into a bright and happy place"<sup>29</sup>. In either case, the way we write about place is ripe with meaning and power, and that power works as a force both for understanding place and for creating it.

It isn't just word choice that's significant here, however. Equally important to the kinds of creative-critical writings that have inspired this thesis is an experimentation with, or at least an acknowledgement of the potential uses of, form and structure. Form is itself a kind of expression, an idea implicated in a number of early experiments and explorations<sup>30</sup>. Scholars have long understood the power of structure to influence meaning, particularly where it might disrupt conventions, as with Pred's Benjamin-inspired use of montage<sup>31</sup>:

"Through assembling (choice) bits  
and (otherwise neglected or discarded) scraps, through the cut-and-paste reconstruction of montage, one may attempt to bring alive,  
to open the text to multiple ways of knowing,  
and multiple sets of meaning,  
to allow differently situated voices to be heard,  
to speak to (or past) each other  
as well as to the contexts from which they emerge and to which they contribute"<sup>32</sup>.

26. Tuan 1991: 694

27. Macfarlane 2010: 118

28. Donald 1999: 127

29. Tuan 1991: 686

30. See for example Olsson 1980; Reichert 1987, 1988

31. See Benjamin 1999

32. Pred 1995: 25

This speaks to another seam of opportunity opened up by a “creative” approach to writing place. By allowing the author to leave room for the reader’s own ideas – to show rather than tell – the possibilities of the text are expanded<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, by considering the spatiality of the text itself – viewing it, as Saunders<sup>34</sup> and Hones<sup>35</sup> do, as a “spatial event” – we can see how the active relationship between writer, text, place, and reader comes into play in creative-critical geographical writing<sup>36</sup>. This web-like relationship between author, reader, and text certainly exists outside the realm of creative or creative-critical writing, but a freer form may allow that relationship to deepen and develop in different directions, contributing to an understanding of geographic authority as part of a flow of ideas and experiences and becoming “a way of writing that [...] shares authority with its audience and yet remains understandable”<sup>37</sup>. Describing a closeness between poetry and essay<sup>38</sup>, whereby poetry “is not bound by the rules of journalism, but it is essentially non-fiction. Poetry is a philosophical and descriptive foray into the world”, the writer Rebecca Solnit identifies a “permission that I want to give myself sometimes, to make associative leaps, to ask the reader to work a little, to evoke as well as define” – and so, she concludes, “I feel close to poets in a way, for that permission, that freedom, those explorations of what language can do”<sup>39</sup>.

33. Readers, in other words, have the opportunity “to bring thoughts of their own to the experience that reinforce the possibility that each reading [...] will become an individual journey” (Barnes 2013: 171) – particularly since they largely control the experience of reading, being able to choose what to read, where to read it, and how much to read at any one time without direct input from the author.

34. Saunders 2013

35. Hones 2008

36. What this looks like from a practical standpoint is more difficult to say, especially since part of the point here is that readers can develop private relationships with texts – relationships which may be, but need not necessarily be, rooted in the intentions of the author. But writing creatively about place does give both author and reader certain opportunities and freedoms. There are stylistic ways of inviting the reader into the text, for instance – Orley (2009) uses the second person to engage the reader, as does de Leeuw at times (de Leeuw 2004), while in a paper which functions both as an elegant portrait of New England and an attempt to “write theory differently” (Stewart 2013: 284), Stewart begins with “we”: “Let’s say we’re in a small town north of Boston”... (Stewart 2013: 275). Indeed, reading Stewart’s piece, I’m flung back into my own past – remembering time spent in the part of the world Stewart is writing about, memories that have nothing whatsoever to do with her own recounted recollections but which hover over the text anyhow. As the piece slides from prose into a poetic list, with entries like “A delicate soft palate,” “A disorientation” (Stewart 2013: 283), it seems as if the space on the page between phrases is an invitation, a structural manifestation of the idea that “the spaces and gaps of the page [...] bring into play our own experiences as readers” (DeLyser and Hawkins 2014: 133). Thus the text is potentially augmented by reading – not only because the reader brings his or her own past to a text, but also because writers are themselves readers, “drawn into the worlds formed by other writers” (DeLyser and Hawkins 2014: 133).

37. Cosgrove and Domosh 1993: 36

38. A relationship noted in passing, too, by Lukács, some hundred years earlier, who wrote of poetry as a “sister” to the essay form (Lukács 1974: 13).

39. Solnit quoted in Elkin 2013: unpaginated

It's no coincidence that the form of creative-critical writing employed in this thesis is the essay, which as Solnit puts it, may "evoke as well as define", but which maintains a clear relationship, too, to more formal academic modes of writing; it is both the freedom and the rigour of such an approach that, in the hands of a writer as deft as Solnit, gives it its power<sup>40</sup>. In suggesting, too, that the reader may also need to work, to make leaps with the writer, Solnit seems to be echoing Benjamin, who writes of literary montage: "I needn't say anything. Merely show"<sup>41</sup>. In this way, the act of reading becomes itself a sort of process of layering; the original document is added to by the reader's own experiences, impressions, and knowledge, mimicking the processual, collaborative, "polyvocal" nature of place, as will be discussed in the next section<sup>42</sup>.

*Engaging with place-in-process*

In the introduction to her book *Dry Place: landscapes of belonging and exclusion*, the geographer Patricia Price writes of place as "a processual, polyvocal, always-becoming entity"<sup>43</sup>. Published in 2004, Price's text echoes the earlier words of geographers and theorists who sought to unsettle the idea that place is a fixed thing, simply a location, a frozen, "inert, experienced scene" for human activity<sup>44</sup>. "In our everyday lives," Edward Relph pointed out, "places are not experienced as independent, clearly defined entities that can be described simply in terms of their location or appearance. Rather they are sensed in a chiaroscuro of setting, landscape, ritual, routine, other people, personal experiences, care and concern for home, and in the context of other places"<sup>45</sup>. Pred argued "for a notion of place that emphasizes change and process"<sup>46</sup>, a notion of place as "what takes place ceaselessly, what con-

40. Adorno, for instance, writes (not entirely uncritically) of the essay as a form that works somewhere between "science" and "art": it "does not let its domain be prescribed for it. Instead of accomplishing something scientifically or creating something artistically, its efforts reflect the leisure of a childlike person who has no qualms about taking his inspiration from what others have done before him [...] Luck and play are essential to it" (Adorno 1991: 4). To a certain extent, given the hybridity characteristic of much of the writing discussed in this chapter, the choice of the label "essays" to describe the following five chapters may seem somewhat arbitrary, and perhaps somewhere out there, waiting to be coined, is a more perfect piece of terminology. However, it is particularly in this territory between evocation and definition, where luck and play are essential but so too is "what others have done before", that I wish to situate the next section of the thesis.

41. Benjamin 1999: 460

42. As Hones writes: "This view of text relates well to an understanding of place as something relational, unfinished, and dynamic, internally various and the product of interconnected human and non-human histories" (Hones 2008: 1310).

43. Price 2004: 1

44. Pred 1984: 279

45. Relph 1976: 29

46. Cresswell 2015: 65



tributes to a history in a specific context through the creation and utilization of a physical setting”<sup>47</sup>. Massey saw that “places are processes, too”<sup>48</sup>, and that “If it is now recognized that people have multiple identities then the same point can be made in relation to places”<sup>49</sup>. Likewise, Doel’s post-structuralist tenets led to him writing of place as “an event: it is verbal, rather than nounal, a becoming rather than a being”: place, he states, “is nothing if it is not *in process*”<sup>50</sup>.

These notions of place come from different impulses and take various empirical forms, but what they have in common is a framing of place not as simply a fixed point, an inert location, but as something always in process, something “never complete, finished, or bounded”<sup>51</sup>. This can be understood literally, geologically, as well as philosophically – indeed, as the journalist John McPhee poetically puts it in the opening of his profile of the Basin and Range Province in the United States:

“The poles of the earth have wandered. The equator has apparently moved. The continents, perched on their plates, are thought to have been carried so very far and to be going in so many directions that it seems to be an act of almost pure hubris to assert that some landmark of our world is fixed at 73 degrees 57 minutes and 53 seconds west longitude and 40 degrees 51 minutes and 14 seconds north latitude – a temporary description, at any rate, as if for a boat on the sea. Nevertheless, these coordinates will, for what is generally described as the foreseeable future, bring you with absolute precision to the west apron of the George Washington Bridge”<sup>52</sup>.

Thus even what we think of as the most fixed points on the grandest scale of place are, in fact, always-becoming, although they may give the illusion of permanence and solidity, especially in comparison with the more obviously shifting rhythms and patterns of human life. This is a point Massey alights on when describing the “immigrant rocks” of Skiddaw, a mountain in the lake district, which are “just passing through here, like my sister and me only rather more slowly, and changing all the while”<sup>53</sup>. Skiddaw, Massey writes, looms impressively over the town of

47. Pred 1984: 279

48. Massey 1991: 29

49. Massey 1991: 28

50. Doel 1999: 7

51. Cresswell 2015: 68

52. McPhee 1981: 3

53. Massey 2005: 137

Keswick, seeming to be “immovable, timeless”<sup>54</sup> – and yet it has not always existed in its current form, it too has undergone a process of evolution, “has been (and still is) constantly changing”<sup>55</sup>. One particular way in which creative-critical place writing has been deployed by geographers and others, then, is to engage with this fundamental instability, particularly where environmental issues are at work<sup>56</sup>. On a smaller scale, however, the process of continual evolution described by Massey may happen at a much faster pace, and the forces of flux are often cultural. We’re highly attuned to it in our own cities and neighbourhoods, for instance: a favourite coffee shop closing, a new block of flats built on an empty lot, a tree falling in a park. At the swimming pool, such ideas may manifest on an even more minute or everyday scale: in the cracks appearing in tiles, a new clock hung on the wall, a subtle change in the uniform of the lifeguards. It’s not the poles of the earth wandering, mountains moving, rocks migrating, but, as the essays that follow attempt to demonstrate, it’s still possible to perceive the processual nature of place at the indoor pool.

The other important and related aspect to this understanding of place is its framing as multiple and polyvocal. Much as some work on material culture and identity has suggested that “[t]here is no true inner self” hiding beneath the surface of a person, masked by clothing or other supposedly superficial markers<sup>57</sup>, places, as Massey puts it, “do not have single, unique ‘identities’”: their layers cannot be peeled away to reveal some singular true nature<sup>58</sup>. In her seminal essay on “a global sense of place,” Massey situates her ideas in Kilburn, tracing a few of the links between this little corner of London and the rest of the world, to show that, “while Kilburn may

54. Massey 2005: 131

55. Massey 2005: 133

56. Thus, for instance, “‘new nature writing’ reworks a centuries-old literary tradition of natural description and natural history publishing. [...] the signature feature of this narrative-driven genre is a deeply personalized quality of expression, articulating anxieties about irreversible local change, nowadays in a context of resource depletion, habitat destruction, biodiversity loss and atmospheric warming on a global scale” (Daniels and Lorimer 2012: 4). A clear example can also be seen in Caitlin DeSilvey’s (2012) “anticipatory history” of the harbour at Mullion Cove on Cornwall’s Lizard Peninsula. A substantial section of the paper is given over to “an experimental narration” which includes a series of reverse-chronological glimpses of the harbour’s history, punctuated at regular intervals with DeSilvey’s own contemporary, first-person accounts of the place, snippets of memories from visits she’s made to the place (DeSilvey 2012: 31). The harbour has been maintained by the National Trust since 1945 but, at least partly as a result of rising sea levels, will at some point in the future have to be decommissioned and deconstructed; thus DeSilvey’s experimentation with form is “designed to reveal that the harbour’s apparent stability hides a precarious history, and to draw out patterns and themes that are obscured by more conventional tellings” (DeSilvey 2012: 36).

57. Miller 2010: 13

58. Massey 1991: 29

have a character of its own, it is absolutely not a seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place which everyone shares”<sup>59</sup>. Writing about the territory around the US-Mexico border, meanwhile, Price emphasises how “narratives about people’s places in places continuously materialize the entity we call place”<sup>60</sup>, identifying a “simultaneity of stories” out of which “place constantly, problematically materializes”<sup>61</sup>. In fact it is problematic even to define the area about which she writes, since “the boundaries and meaningful physical features of the land in question depend to a great extent on whose vision is prioritized [...] Rather than trying to evade the difficult task of defining for the reader the precise geographic boundaries of the place in question, then, I am instead suggesting that such boundaries do not exist *because a stable sort of place itself does not exist*”<sup>62</sup>.

The writer or geographer seeking to address this understanding of place therefore faces the challenge of representing something multifarious, slippery – something, moreover, without clearly defined boundaries. This is a fundamental issue to any discussion of place: where is this place – where does it begin and end, where are its borders? The tradition of regional geography emphasises an historical preoccupation with the drawing of a boundary around a place, which “precisely distinguishes between an inside and an outside”<sup>63</sup>, but a relational approach to place problematises this demand for precise delineation, for “places,” Massey suggests, “do not have boundaries in the sense of divisions which frame simple enclosures”<sup>64</sup>, but rather are “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings”<sup>65</sup>. Price’s book addresses this overtly, in both a geopolitical and more philosophical context, since it is about the area surrounding the USA/Mexico border. She is concerned throughout with the difficulty of defining this area, and concludes with a chapter of her own poetry, positioning her experiences and creative expressions as part of the very “layered, sifting reality”<sup>66</sup> the book seeks to address: further layers in a text about layers. Again the intention of the essays in the thesis is, in part, to situate such ideas in a smaller-scale, everyday place; thus, as discussed in the previous chapter, an emphasis particularly on the *indoor* pool, and indeed

59. Massey 1991: 28

60. Price 2004: 4

61. Price 2004: 1-2

62. Price 2004: 7

63. Massey 1991: 28

64. Massey 1991: 29

65. Massey 1991: 28

66. Price 2004: xiii

the ways in which this distinction between indoor and outdoor may be challenged, ways in which the pool itself becomes difficult to define at times.

There's a sense, then, in which a narrator speaking from personal experience, directly to her readers, is an elegant mirror for the simultaneous multiplicity and individuality of place. She both represents and records a place's multiple personalities, the way it looks different to different people on different days, the variety of individual relationships both within and with the place itself. The encounter the author has with a place becomes representative of other encounters precisely because it's so intensely personal or distinct – as Emily Orley writes: “To simply record our individual encounter with it [a place] at any one time [...] is one way to respect its fluid and contested nature”<sup>67</sup>.

To place oneself into a narrative, however, is a fraught act and raises some important questions about subjectivity and authorship, about the politics and privilege inherent in electing oneself the writer of a place, especially in a scholarly context. Price, reflecting on her decision to include her own creative writing in a book which is not overtly about her, identifies a series of potentially troubling questions: “Admittedly, by including my own creative writing I am focusing explicitly on my own voice and experiences. Does this mean that the book is more about me than the people and places that I write about? Is such a distinction between author and subject even a possibility? Should I be able to claim the right to tell my own stories alongside those of others?”<sup>68</sup>.

These questions need to be asked, although, or perhaps precisely because, they're difficult to answer. There are a number of risks to writing place “creatively,” especially in an academic context: risk of alienating readers, risk of slipping into self-indulgence or irrelevance, risk of doing “creativity for creativity's sake”. Even if we acknowledge the limits of a biased writer, the question of how to make individual accounts of place inclusive, or at least not detrimentally exclusive, remains. If I am writing a version of my encounter(s) with a place, what happens to your version of that encounter or that place, or his, or hers? What if I misremember, or mislead, or mischaracterise? There's nothing to preclude the inclusion of other voices and other stories in creative-critical place writing, of course, and some writing deliberately tries to get at more plural engagements with place through experimentation

67. Orley 2009: 164

68. Price 2004: xxv

with forms of co-authorship<sup>69</sup>. Even so, these voices and stories reach the reader through the writer(s), and we're left with questions that transcend a discussion of creative-critical geographical writing but still need be asked of it: "Whose stories are told, from whose perspective, in whose voice?"<sup>70</sup>. In the essays that follow, the inclusion of other voices (interviewees, other writers and researchers) is meant to offset the onesidedness of the "I" somewhat, but the personal narrative is undeniably dominant in places, so this question becomes especially important to bear in mind, and the essays should, in this context, not be read as an attempt to present an objective version of the pool. However, the emphasis on a physical practice, as will be discussed in the next section, also suggests the potential strengths of writing as an embodied "I", particularly in the context of a place such as the pool, where bodily knowledge and sensation become essential aspects of how the environment is experienced.

*Engaging with embodiment and place*

Creative-critical place writing, especially when mediated by an author who is present in both the location being written about and the text itself, is a method perhaps particularly well-suited to an exploration of the relationship between body and place. Literature about and inspired by walking, in both urban and rural settings, is perhaps the most obvious and prevalent example of this<sup>71</sup>. Indeed, in relation to geographical research "about the senses, through the senses, and for the senses," Vannini argues that, "The slow rhythms of walking [...] allow for ethnographies that are sensitive to spatial details and to the rhythmic pauses, stops, and re-starts of sensuous observation and reflection"<sup>72</sup>. Other forms of (often quite athletic) physical interaction with place have also been written about: Lorimer<sup>73</sup>, for example, "relies on a poetic essay memoir to describe the sensory work of run-

69. Lorimer and Wylie, for instance, get at a "singular-plural" (Lorimer and Wylie 2010: 7) bodily experience of being in place through a co-authored paper in which they are "mostly apart, then briefly together [...] [t]wo bodies, together and apart, irreducible to either an 'I' or a 'we'" (Lorimer and Wylie 2010: 6–7). This particular experiment evokes an experience of place that is both shared and highly individual; the act of co-authorship here does not make the engagement with place any less "deep," but rather opens out different avenues for exploration, or at least suggests different ways of exploring.

70. Price 2004: xiii, echoing issues that have been long discussed in regard to ethnographic writing – see Crang 1992.

71. See, for instance, Lorimer and Wylie 2010; Wylie 2002, 2005; walking is also frequently utilised in popular place-based literature, e.g. Laing 2011, Macfarlane 2012, Sinclair 2002, Solnit 2014.

72. Vannini 2015a: 322. Swimming, therefore, will hopefully be a welcome addition to this body of literature – especially since, as I argue in "Rhythm", the final essay of the thesis, it bears some resemblance to walking in its rhythmicity.

73. Lorimer 2012a

ning as an exploration of differently textured terrains and trails”<sup>74</sup> in “Surfaces and Slopes”; outside of an academic context, geographically-oriented work on swimming and cycling has also been produced<sup>75</sup>. These kinds of physical encounters with place produce potentially rich material for exploring the relationship between a body and its surroundings, “the poetics of embodied living”<sup>76</sup> – and who better to explore this kind of physical, ground-level participation than the participant herself?

The challenge here lies partly in how to translate embodied experience into a shareable, widely understandable form; how, in phenomenological terms, to express what the body knows, to “represent perception in language”<sup>77</sup>. As indicated in the previous chapter, this is a concern that’s been raised and explored in recent years by a number of geographers, particularly via the framework(s) offered by non-representational theories, which have been applied to studies of a number of embodied practices, including diving<sup>78</sup>, open water swimming<sup>79</sup>, surfing<sup>80</sup>, and sport more generally<sup>81</sup>. Indeed, as Vannini summarises, outlining the characteristics of a “constantly evolving non-representational ethnographic style”<sup>82</sup>: “The corporeality of non-representational work most often comes through in ethnographies focused on body-centered activities that require the performance of skill, temporal sensitivity (e.g. rhythm), and kinesthetic awareness (e.g. choreographed movement)”<sup>83</sup>.

Such work often promotes a degree of methodological experimentation: “the point of departure,” as Vannini puts it, “must be a fight against methodological timidity”<sup>84</sup>. This is particularly the case when it comes to how such research is written.

74. Vannini 2015a: 322

75. E.g. Deakin’s (2000) account of swimming across Britain, and Day’s (2015) “cyclogeography” inspired by his time as a bicycle courier in London. Meanwhile, in *The Wild Places* (2007), Macfarlane “participates in these places by swimming, climbing, skulking under hedges, walking by day and night, in sunshine and snow” (Jamie 2008), suggesting a wide range of ways to be actively in place.

76. Vannini 2015a: 319

77. Macfarlane 2015a: 75

78. Merchant 2011

79. Foley 2015

80. Anderson 2014

81. Andrews 2016

82. Vannini 2015a: 317. See also Vannini 2015b and Dewsbury 2010 for an overview of non-representational methodologies more generally.

83. Vannini 2015a: 322

84. Vannini 2015a: 319; here Vannini is referencing Latham, who writes that “[e]mbracing a move towards practice and performance requires a radical openness in our methods, our ways of thinking, and our ways of writing”, including a willingness “to engage with traditions of thinking and writing and presenting that until recently

As Jon Anderson puts it, addressing “the potential of the written word to evoke emotional engagement with place” in relation to surfing: “sometimes we research not to find out about things we don’t know, but rather to find out ways of putting into words things we do”<sup>85</sup>. To some extent this is an issue of vocabulary, but certain examples also illustrate how different modes of writing may open up avenues for exploration. Describing Lorimer’s essay on running and topography<sup>86</sup>, for instance, Vannini writes of how, “Lorimer speaks *through* the feet, as it were, allowing thick carnal description to take precedence over any sort of theorizing, lengthy introductions, and detached conclusions”<sup>87</sup>. A creative-critical approach, then, allows for the possibility of writing such embodied experience from a ground-level (or, for that matter, pool-level) perspective: writing through the body in order to put into words the things it knows.

Because the subject of this study is lane swimming, I have emphasised examples here which focus on similarly “athletic” endeavours. However, such physical encounters with place – running, walking, cycling, swimming, surfing, climbing – are not always possible for everyone, or are differently possible for different people, and this kind of writing has been critiqued for tending towards a particular kind of (able-bodied) masculinism, whereby certain points of view, certain ways of being in place, indeed even certain kinds of places, are privileged. “The gendering of this field, and the concomitant valorization of certain practices and perceptions, such as those of the poet, explorer or fieldworker, is an inheritance which contemporary writers [...] must necessarily engage with and work within,” warns Wylie<sup>88</sup>, while Jamie takes a more cynical track when reviewing Macfarlane: “What’s that coming over the hill? A white, middle-class Englishman! A Lone Enraptured Male! From Cambridge! Here to boldly go, ‘discovering’, then quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with his civilised lyrical words”<sup>89</sup>. Such criticisms are valid, particularly when considered within the context of an approach to writing place that, as has been identified in the previous section, is by nature potentially exclusionary.

have been only loosely connected to human geography – a recognition that the humanities and arts have perhaps as much to tell us as other branches of the social sciences” (Latham 2003: 1904).

85. Anderson 2014: 27

86. Lorimer 2012a

87. Vannini 2015a: 322, emphasis mine.

88. Wylie 2005: 237

89. Jamie 2008

There are, however, some quite early examples of embodied place writing by women which challenge the idea that this is a necessarily masculine realm. Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain*, first published in 1977 but written decades earlier, is a richly physical account of her forays into the Cairngorm mountains which takes the body as paramount to interpreting the landscape. The account is full of sensual description, as Shepherd feels, sees, smells her way through the mountains, sometimes lying down on the ground for closer contact: "under me the central core of fire from which was thrust this grumbling grinding mass of plutonic rock"<sup>90</sup>. "The hands have an infinity of pleasure in them", she writes<sup>91</sup>; "the body may be said to think"<sup>92</sup>. While its subject is much broader in scope, Jacquetta Hawkes' *A Land*, itself an experimentation of form, both geological history and self-portrait<sup>93</sup>, fusing scientific and poetic approaches, is a similarly elegant example, in which "mineral memories and body memories are unlocked in tandem"<sup>94</sup>. Like Shepherd, Hawkes puts her body in deliberate contact with the ground in order to write about it, opening the book by lying on the grass in her back garden: "this hard ground presses my flesh against my bones and makes me agreeably conscious of my body"<sup>95</sup>.

Notably, these are both quite "earthly" accounts, concerned with the materialities of landscape and geology, and much embodied place writing has tended to share this terrestrial focus<sup>96</sup>. The watery nature of the pool, then, is significant – for water, encountered as "an ungraspable space that is continually being reproduced by mobile molecules", existing "in continual interchange"<sup>97</sup>, may produce or contribute to quite a different sensory experience of place. Thus the thesis attempts to expand on a useful but in some ways relatively under-explored genre of creative-critical place writing, challenging the rugged-masculine archetype by taking ways of writing place more usually associated with outdoor (and often land-based) pursuits and settings and applying them to the relatively confined, banal (watery) environment of the indoor swimming pool. And while the "I" who narrates the essays is singular, white, and able-bodied, the point is partly to show how such an

90. Shepherd 2011: 105

91. Shepherd 2011: 102

92. Shepherd 2011: 105

93. Lorimer 2012b: 90

94. Lorimer 2012b: 87

95. Hawkes 1959: 11

96. Laing 2011 is perhaps a notable almost-exception here, for while a significant portion of the book sees her walking on land, her primary concern is the river whose course she is following, and indeed sometimes with the particularities of immersion in it, which lends the text an altogether more watery feel.

97. Steinberg and Peters 2015: 252



approach might be applied to an exploration of the importance and meaning of everyday spaces, places, and practices more broadly.

In other words, as the essays in this thesis attempt to demonstrate, this does not need to be about a particular kind of body performing in a particular way in a particular kind of place (the lone enraptured male, walking or running through rugged landscapes...). The beauty of creative-critical place writing is that it can be a way of exploring the embodied experience of being in place even, or perhaps especially, if this experience does not involve solitary trekking or other valorised pursuits: even if it involves being stationary, being with others, being female, being disabled, being uncomfortable, being out of place. As Longhurst points out, there is “no one body – *the* body is a masculinist illusion. There are only bodies in the plural”<sup>98</sup>. And while there may be an especially noticeable tradition of using writing as a tool to explore the active (male) body in place, thinking of the body as a “recording machine” in the field<sup>99</sup>, “something through which research is [...] done”<sup>100</sup>, allows us to consider the potential of writing to engage with as many kinds of bodies as there are scholars and writers, as they perform various duties and activities in various places.

98. Longhurst 1995: 98

99. Dewsbury 2010: 327

100. Crang 2005: 232



# ESSAYS



## (UN)CONTAINED

A haunt | An abstraction of distance | A box of right angles | A crossing of boundaries | Thinking of nothing | From live to blank | Floater | “The ‘inside’, which is simultaneously ‘outside’” | “The container both kindles and quenches” | A bruise

“‘Open’ and ‘enclosed’ are spatial categories meaningful to many people. Agoraphobia and claustrophobia describe pathological states, but open and enclosed spaces can also stimulate topophilic feelings. Open space signifies freedom, the promise of adventure, light, the public realm, formal and unchanging beauty; enclosed space signifies the cozy security of the womb, privacy, darkness, biologic life.”

– Yi-Fu Tuan<sup>1</sup>

i.

Most mornings, I wake up and get on my bike and roll down the hill to my local pool, where I swim for an hour or so. I’ve been going to this pool for five or six years now. I know the rules, the opening hours, the best times to go for a quiet, peaceful swim, and I know the other regulars—both by sight and through the conversations that I overhear. It’s a haunt, in the relatively innocuous, eighteenth-century sense of the word: a place I frequent<sup>2</sup>.

Last summer, however, at the urging of a few enthusiasts I’d met in my local triathlon club, I started swimming occasionally at a lake just outside the city. I thought it would be a nice change of scenery, and that, as someone who maybe spends too much time in the same environment going through the same repetitive motions, liberating myself from the rigidity of lane lines would be good for me. People kept saying that the sense of freedom, the beauty of the setting, the freshness of the air, would enchant me.

Swimming in a pool doesn’t even compare, they said. You won’t want to go back.

The truth is, swimming in the lake has only reinforced my devotion to the pool. I did like the thrill of feeling the early morning cold water on my skin, and it was nice to stand around afterwards in a heavy sweater and a warm hat, eating a bacon sandwich and chatting to people as they clambered out onto the bank, but I didn’t much enjoy *being* in the lake: it was dull. The darkness and opacity of the water is isolating; even with fresh goggles, it’s impossible to see anything except the occasional sinister suggestion of a shape (maybe a fish, or a shadow, or another swimmer, or completely imaginary...) Once you’re out there, you’re on your own, with only the throbbing cold in your ears to keep you alert and drive you forward. Every

1. Tuan 1974: 27-28

2. Steven Connor (no date): “Well into the eighteenth century, a ‘haunt’ could be simply a place to which one had frequent recourse, or, as we say, ‘frequented’”.

stroke brings you a little closer to a bacon sandwich, a warm hat, but all in all it's a lonely experience.

People sometimes say to me that it must be boring to swim laps in an indoor pool, especially compared to, say, running or riding a bike or climbing a mountain. What is there to look at, except the tiles on the floor and the black line and, occasionally during backstroke, the ceiling? And I guess I used to think that, while I don't necessarily find tiles and ceilings boring, this was essentially correct: the visual environment of the pool is limited. We don't swim laps to look at things (although looking is an integral part of the overall experience of being at the pool – we look when we pause for breath at the wall, when we stand trying to decide which lane to get into, when we see a particularly competent or showy swimmer, or a body we admire).

But now that I've spent some time in the green-black lake, where all I could see was nothing at all, punctuated by the flash of trees as I turned my head to breathe, or the glint of a red buoy in the distance when I sighted, I'm keenly aware of just how much there is to notice at the pool, even underwater, even when you're just going up and down, up and down. The variety of perspectives on human life is mesmerizing. My own hands; the movements of other swimmers, their bodies threading the water in other lanes, legs and torsos stretching or resting at the shallow end; cracks and scratches and stains on the floor; things floating ominously below me—an old plaster, a ball of snot, an errant hair. Everything is telling a story. The pool is a locus of mundane human activity, a catalogue of the repetitions, the minute variations, the discipline and disorder of everyday life.

True, it's not a stunning mountain vista, but it's just as stirring, in its own way.

ii.

FROM FIELDNOTES, TUESDAY 20TH AUGUST 2014

*Went to the lake on Monday. It's been cold here lately, prematurely Autumnal, and I don't really know what I was thinking, what any of us was thinking, as we jogged from the car park to the edge of the water wearing nothing but flimsy swimsuits and silicone caps. I did two laps around the one-kilometre course and towards the end of the second lap I became aware of an unfamiliar numbness in my fingers and my toes: not something I'm accustomed to noticing when swimming, except in the ocean at home in the winter, and I tend not to stay in so long then. I thought: I'll never again take for granted the steady, soothing 28°C of the*

*pool. Though of course I will, I already have, this morning, standing at the edge of the water, resenting having to get in, anticipating the initial shock.*

*While I was in the cold lake on my cold second lap, I got a phrase lodged in my head, related to swimming in pools: “an abstraction of distance”. It ran over and over in my mind for three or four hundred metres, as I entered the home stretch and made the long straight journey towards the shore. When you’re in the pool, distance is abstracted, divided, always measured or calculated in some way. You do your 8x200m main set, or your 4x25m kicking, or whatever, and maybe it all adds up to a kilometre, two, three, but the distance is piecemeal. You feel it in the burn of your muscles, and have no real sense of it as a whole. Whereas a one-kilometre loop around the lake, especially when it’s cold and your skin is exposed, really feels like one kilometre. Or feels differently like one kilometre, because distance in the lake is unbroken.*

*I guess I mention all this because I’ve found the lake a useful point of comparison. In many ways my physical actions there are the same as my physical actions at the pool: I undress, I get in the water, I move my arms and legs (and since I don’t wear a wetsuit there’s little difference in the way my body feels in the water), I get out, I get dressed again, I say hi to people I recognise, my ears are full of water and my hair is wet. So it’s interesting to see how the environment of the pool makes these actions different, or differently meaningful. How differently I feel time, and distance, for instance. How reliant I am when I swim on the distractions of the pool; I find it difficult to quiet my mind in the lake, and I hadn’t realised until recently how much I depend on the visual stimulation of the pool to keep me mentally occupied at just the right level, somewhere between distraction and obsession.*

iii.

On the face of it, swimming laps in an indoor pool is an activity conducted within a regulated system of rules and conventions (lane etiquette, dress codes, constant surveillance by lifeguards and CCTV cameras) designed to protect participants while preserving order. It’s about discipline and repetition: the lap swimmer achieves progress 25 metres at a time, striving for mechanical efficiency in a controlled environment. Indeed, the particular structure of the pool seems indicative of “the increasing tendency for sports to be subjected to a geometric-enclosing impulse” identified and critiqued by the sociologist and historian Henning Eichberg, whereby “the peculiarities of the natural environment become smoothed out in the uniform geometries of the gymnasium, running track, sports hall and sta-



dium”<sup>3</sup>. Following this logic, Eichberg writes, “The ideal form of sports space as a three-dimensional architecture is the *container*, a box of right angles”<sup>4</sup>.

The pool is just such a box of right angles, with the peculiarities of any natural water environment smoothed out by containment, chlorination, temperature control, the imposition of rules and guidelines. As the sports geographer John Bale writes, “The rigid geometry of its rectangular shape reflects the essential opposition to nature”<sup>5</sup>.

The pool I visit most frequently, for example, is 25 metres long and divided into six lanes, with each lane assigned a specific speed (slow, medium, fast) and direction of travel (clockwise or counter-clockwise). Two lifeguards stand watch, sometimes seated in their elevated chairs, sometimes pacing the perimeter of the pool. Signs indicate how swimmers should behave: no use of phones; no photography; no diving; no outside shoes beyond this point; no non-swimmers beyond this point; please shower before entering the pool. There is a shallow end and a deep end, with ladders for entry at both ends. There are clocks and pace clocks hung on the wall at both ends, for visibility wherever you are. The water is kept at a steady temperature – 28 degrees Celsius – and if, for any reason, that temperature changes, even by half a degree, apologetic signs are printed and posted to warn swimmers that something is different. There is one window, along the west-facing wall, which affords a view of the outside world (people walking past, trees swaying, clouds gathering) whilst reinforcing the enclosure of the pool: even in snowstorm or gale, the swimmers are insulated, their activity unaffected.

To swim laps in this environment is an ostensibly tame endeavour – and yet there’s a kind of wildness contained within the rigid structure of the pool<sup>6</sup>. In the ordered,

3. Bale and Philo 1998: 12

4. Eichberg 1998: 151

5. Bale 1994: 59

6. While the wildness of which I write here is somewhat abstract or small-scale, “Wildness (as opposed to wilderness),” as William Cronon has written, “can be found anywhere; in the seemingly tame fields and woodlots of Massachusetts, in the cracks of a Manhattan sidewalk, even in the cells of our own bodies” (Cronon 1995: 89). Indeed, the “treatment of the wild as a pristine exterior, the touchstone of an original nature” (Whatmore 2002: 9) is partly what Sarah Whatmore contests in her book *Hybrid Geographies*: “Rather than an exterior world of original nature,” she writes, “I start with the premise that animals (and plants) designated wild have been, and continue to be, routinely caught up within multiple networks of human social life” (2002: 9). The point here is to highlight that the pool and the lake, for instance, are very different bodies of water, but not only because one is “natural” and the other “man-made”, since such a distinction is difficult to make anyhow. Perhaps a parallel could be drawn to other spaces for sporting endeavour: modern football pitches, for example, many of which, as Russell Hitchings puts it, “are now so well managed

controlled setting, the nearly-naked form of the swimmer, moving through water (elemental, even if mixed with a dash of chemicals), brushing up against other bodies, evokes something that can't be contained or disciplined, something animal or visceral. "When you swim," suggests the author and environmentalist Roger Deakin, "you feel your body for what it mostly is—water—and it begins to move with the water around it. No wonder we feel such sympathy for beached whales; we are beached at birth ourselves. To swim is to experience how it was before you were born"<sup>7</sup>.

Deakin was writing primarily about wild swimming, outdoors and in nature, but his sentiments are no less relevant in the more confined environment of the pool. After all, even there, in the bleached-and-chlorinated, climate-controlled habitat of the lap swimmer, nature creeps in: mould in the tile grout, mud tracked onto changing room floors, a spider scuttling along a wall. One morning I was startled to discover a cricket resting on a disused communal kickboard; on another morning I saw a woman emerge from the water with a nosebleed, bright red dripping onto the tiles, a shock of violent colour in the blue-and-white world – "nature," as Yi Fu Tuan writes, "not as an external environment but as our own body"<sup>8</sup>.

The pool is, in some sense, a battlefield, where material aspects clash and compete with each other and confuse our understanding of where the external environment begins and the internal one ends. Chlorine and use eventually wear down even the most technologically superior swimsuit fabrics. Dampness and humidity grow mould in the grouting of showers that exist specifically to wash swimmers clean. Hair struggles against confinement in caps, and can often be found clinging to tiles, floating in lanes, balled up in drains. Dirt adheres to communal floats, so that when you take a pull buoy you can see the marks left by previous users, highlighting the intimacy of this particular object, which spends most of its days being gripped between bare legs and pulled up and down the pool. Plasters slip away from wounds and drift into the paths of other swimmers, no longer protective but menacing.

by their ground staff that they almost look computer generated" but are, when it comes down to it, still "dependent on the properties and behaviour of grass" (Hitchings 2014: 169-170).

7. Deakin 2000: 3

8. Tuan 1998: 81

FROM FIELDNOTES, TUESDAY 20TH AUGUST 2014

*I've been thinking a lot lately about where the pool begins and ends. It feels like a swim has very fuzzy edges; that when you wake up to go to the pool with that intention, when you put together your kit, go through the routine – that's an integral part of the experience and of the place. And a good metaphor for this, or exemplar of it, is how you stay in your own world for awhile after a swim. How your ears are still full of water and your nose is dripping and sometimes I find when I go to a pub or a café shortly after being at the pool, I find it difficult to feel like I'm fully in the pub-or-café-world for awhile. Conversation is difficult, ordering is difficult, because I have water in my ears and I can't hear properly and I speak too softly because I can't hear my own voice well enough to moderate volume appropriately, my hair is wet so I feel out of place, and I'm still half-there, moving and thinking at a different pace, not quite able to be fully present yet.*

\*

There is order, but it is imperfect; there is discipline, control, predictability, but also a kind of porousness, a leakiness, that complicates the experience of being at the pool. If we think of the pool as a container, we see it as something that we can be inside or outside of. It has a bottom, sides; the point of swimming laps, after all, is that at a certain point – after 25 metres, or sometimes 50, in an Olympic-sized pool – you reach a wall, and you must turn back on yourself to keep going.

The boundaries of the pool as an idea are not always architecturally or physically evident, however; it's clear on one level that once you cross the threshold of the building, you're at the pool, but sometimes the experience actually seems to begin or end elsewhere. Sometimes I'm "at the pool," in a sense, from the moment I decide to go for a swim: my house becomes part of the pool-place as I enact tiny rituals, taking my nearly-dry swimsuit from where it hangs on the bannister and putting it in my striped bag, swapping an unwieldy ring I wear everywhere else for a waterproof watch I wear nowhere else. My route is pretty fixed; there are a finite number of ways to arrive at the pool, and I almost always take the shortest one, about 15 minutes on foot, eight on a bike. Those minutes, too, are part of the pool. On these mornings, as soon as I wake, I am already there, in a way, and it's only a matter of transporting my body to the place my mind has automatically gone.

So the boundaries of the pool are mutable, and highly individualised. They're also variable, on that individual level, from day to day. Sometimes, yes: when I'm on autopilot, going through habitual motions I often fail to register, rolling along the same old streets on my creaky bicycle, the pool seems to be a chunk of time that begins when I first wake up and ends only after I've come home and hung up my wet things to dry and put my slippers on and washed last night's dishes while I wait for the kettle to boil and made a pot of coffee and sat down at my desk and opened a document and started typing.

At other times, particularly when I am jostled out of my routine, I'm not really in the pool mindset until I find myself in the changing room, or at the water's edge. Until I plunge in, and suddenly:

I'm there.

But where?

As blurry as the dividing line between "pool" and "not-pool" may be, the water itself marks a definite frontier. Roger Deakin puts it this way: "Swimming is a rite of passage, a crossing of boundaries: the line of the shore, the bank of the river, the edge of the pool, the surface itself. When you enter the water, something like metamorphosis happens. Leaving behind the land, you go through the looking-glass surface and enter a new world"<sup>9</sup>.

This idea of another world, a world the swimmer goes to as much in her own mind as with her body, surfaces regularly in writing about swimming. Echoing and expanding on his friend Deakin's description, Robert Macfarlane writes: "To enter water is, of course, to cross a border. You pass the lake's edge, the sea's shore, the river's brink – and in so doing, you arrive at a different realm, in which you are differently minded because differently bodied"<sup>10</sup>. In *The Haunts of the Black Masseuse*, his famous study of swimming, Charles Sprawson writes that the swimmer is "immersed...in a continuous dream of a world under water"<sup>11</sup>. In a paper on the rules and rituals of the swimming pool, the sociologist Susie Scott writes: "The intoxicating smell of chlorine, babble of children's voices and visual spectacle of azure blue combine as an assault on the senses, yet communicate an atmosphere of

9. Deakin 2000: 3-4

10. Macfarlane 2015a: 104

11. Sprawson 2013: 17

calm. These are the familiar signifiers of swimming as an institution, transporting us immediately into another world”<sup>12</sup>. Meanwhile the sociologist Karen Throsby writes of immersion as an “affectively transformative experience”: it is a way, she suggests, for swimmers to “find a quiet, contemplative space” where they can “consider a particular problem, or empty their heads and detach from the intrusive demands of everyday life”<sup>13</sup>.

v.

*What do you think about when you swim?*

It’s not always an easy question to answer. I ask it of regular lap swimmers, speaking to them about their habits and observations, and often they have to stop and think: what is it, exactly, that I think about when I swim?

Something? Nothing? Everything?

Katherine, training for a traverse of 18km long Lake Windermere, regularly spends two or three hours in the pool at a time. In her answer, she speaks about the “mindfulness” of swimming laps, describing a soothing state achieved through repetitive action:

“I count the lengths, that’s the most important thing. I suppose I also think about the feel of the water and whether there are any particular niggles – like my right shoulder sometimes hurts, so I might be trying to think about whether that’s going to be a problem or not. Sometimes my mind wanders and I start thinking about work. I quite often sort problems out in my head while I’m swimming, use it as a chance to think things through. Mostly I find it quite soothing – just the going up, and the down, and the counting – I suppose it’s quite a mindful activity”<sup>14</sup>.

Geoff, an amateur triathlete in his fifties who took up swimming a few years ago as part of his training, speaks similarly of “emptying his mind” when he swims, detailing an almost meditative process which makes it easier for him to breathe:

“When I swim I sometimes think about complex issues at work, though never personal ones. So maybe a problem I’m trying to solve. But more often than not, I try

12. Scott 2009: 126

13. Throsby 2013: 14-15

14. Katherine, interview, July 2014

to think about nothing. Because I find I don't breathe particularly well – I need a lot of oxygen, I run out very quickly, I get tired. So I have to concentrate quite hard on making sure that I'm breathing properly. And I find if I relax, I'll breathe better. So if you empty your mind completely, and think of nothing – I tend to find that it helps"<sup>15</sup>.

*If I relax, I'll breathe better. So if you empty your mind completely, and think of nothing...*

The sociologist Andrew Metcalfe, writing about nothing, draws a connection between precisely these things: between what he calls “the spatiality and ontology of breathing” and the idea of nothing, the way “we cannot identify or identify with nothing, and yet we participate in it”<sup>16</sup>. “This respiratory structure,” he writes, “is the basis of inspiration, which is knowledge at once new and immemorial, whose source is at once internal and external”<sup>17</sup>. As an example, Metcalfe cites the German psychiatrist Johannes Heinrich Schultz's work on autogenic training, a form of relaxation therapy. “The respiratory rhythm can acquire such a degree of *interior* manifestation that one can say: ‘I am all breathing,’” Schultz writes. This is accompanied by a translator's note: “This translation is but a feeble approximation of the German expression ‘*Es atmet mich,*’ literally ‘It breathes me.’ In other words, the world comes to breathe within me; I participate in the good breathing of the world; I am plunged into a breathing world. Everything breathes in the world”<sup>18</sup>.

What is it, then, to think of nothing while swimming laps? “When doing nothing,” Metcalfe writes, “things happen through us without being done by us, or perhaps by anyone; self is suspended or annihilated; there is often an intense feeling of aliveness that is not experienced as a manifestation of the self, the subject, the agent, the ego, the will or the consciousness. These experiences range from habit, absent-mindedness and reverie to concentration, enthusiasm and rapture”<sup>19</sup>. In the context of the pool it's abundantly clear that the swimmer is *doing something* – arms and legs thrashing and splashing, heart beating, body moving up and down the lane – but this something nevertheless has the potential to convey a sense of nothingness, as with the meditative focus on breath. The swimmer is at once contained in their own world – the world of self, of thought, of bodily awareness – and trans-

15. Geoff, interview, June 2014

16. Metcalfe 2001: 248

17. Metcalfe 2001: 249

18. Quoted in Bachelard 1971: 178-179

19. Metcalfe 2001: 256

ported elsewhere, nowhere, everywhere: as if to swim laps were a form of everyday escapism, in the vein of Tuan, who asks, “But what if the ‘place’ one wishes to escape from is one’s own body? Can one take flight from one’s own corporeal wrapping? The very idea is science fictional. Yet we do it often – imaginatively, as in daydreaming, or when we become wholly absorbed in some other person, object, or event”<sup>20</sup>. What the pool does is provide a vessel for such an escape, if we want it.

“I can’t even count when I swim,” Julie, an experienced swimmer and professional coach, tells me. “I instantly switch off – there’s just an empty space. There’s nothing happening. I might be able to focus on something for about two lengths, and then it’s gone, I’m in my own little world. Often I’ll swim more than I need to for that set, or I’ll stop thinking ‘oh, well I must have swum at least that far by now’, because I can’t even think to count. Or even to check my Garmin when that’s counting for me! It’s like I’m meditating”<sup>21</sup>.

This idea of the empty space, the place the mind travels to during a swim, is echoed by Anthony, who’s recently got back into swimming, having done it with a club as a child but given it up as a teenager. He describes an oscillation between what he calls the different “phases” of a swim, sometimes highly aware of his surroundings, his body and breath, while at other times finding something powerful in nothing:

“When you first get in, it’s almost a bit frantic, a bit chaotic – you’re getting in, you’re getting used to the water, and you’re breathing, and it feels clumsy at the start. And then I seem to go through a series of phases. The phase I think is really helpful is when I’m really thinking about what I’m doing in terms of concentrating on the way that I’m swimming, and my stroke, and my breathing. But then there’s this other place I sometimes find myself in, which is just: complete, really. Really peaceful, like nothingness. It’s like I’m just swimming, and there’s nothing, and I can just – . You know, it’s hard to explain it”<sup>22</sup>.

*vi.*

The pool, then, is a place where, one way or another, the swimmer’s attention is occupied, either by nothing in particular, or by something in particular. And it is not just the architecture and design of the pool – which physically constrains the

20. Tuan 1998: 31

21. Julie, interview, June 2014

22. Anthony, interview, June 2014

swimmer whilst allowing the mind to drift both into and away from the body – but also the habitual, repetitive nature of lap swimming itself, the discipline of it, which contributes to this occupation.

“Having our attention occupied,” writes J.D. Dewsbury, “or at least a part of it, is precisely that mode of being that we call habit [...] it is as if over time and through habit our mind’s attention moves from *live*, alert and attentive to the task at hand, to *blank*, on auto-pilot and effectively indifferent to the task’s requirements”<sup>23</sup>. Dewsbury’s paper is threaded through with what he calls “ethnographic snapshots” of military training exercises at the British Army Ministry of Defence site at Mynydd Epynt, Wales: “From live to blank, from live minds to blank minds, from individual to pack mentality,” he concludes, “In no way do I mean this in a pejorative sense: I am impressed by the training towards the choreography of soldiers as a unit fit for action, and action full of an already thought practical intelligence which bridges the half second delay of contemplation”<sup>24</sup>.

The history of swimming, Dewsbury’s snapshots remind me, is itself partly military. Around 400 A.D. the historian Vegetius recorded that Roman soldiers were taught swimming as part of their training, in part so that they would be able to negotiate rivers even if no bridge was available<sup>25</sup>. Thus, as Thomas van Leeuwen recounts, “The institutionalization of military swimming in Rome led to the creation of the first swimming school in history” in the Tiber<sup>26</sup>. Later, “When swimming was reinvented in eighteenth-century Europe,” van Leeuwen adds, it “was generally taught along military lines: one lap up, one down, in crisp and disciplined movements. These patterns of instruction dictated the architecture of the early public swimming pools, which were all straight lines and right angles”<sup>27</sup>.

There are echoes of those military origins in the modern pool, far though it may be from the river the ancient Romans faced, forced to swim or perish. In the uniform of cap, goggles, suit, in the marchlike procession of swimmers up and down a lane,

23. Dewsbury 2015: 30. Dewsbury is writing, in part, about ideas of habit set out in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Ravaisson: “[A]t its most simplistic,” he writes, “habit can be understood as an action that develops out of a simple sequence of cue (some material stimuli), routine (patterned response out of a movement and/or action to stimuli) and reward (a positive sensation either of material nourishment or sense of acquired skill or grace in movement)” (Dewsbury 2015: 33). See “Re-creation” for a further discussion of these ideas.

24. Dewsbury 2015: 43-44

25. See van Leeuwen 1999, Parr 2011

26. van Leeuwen 1999: 17

27. van Leeuwen 1999: 52. This military lineage is discussed in more depth in chapter two, “The Swimming Pool”.



all in a line, is a whiff of soldierly order and precision. Lap swimmers who want to improve their stroke even perform drills; in the 6/3/6 drill, for instance, swimmers count six beats of the kick on one side, take three arm strokes, count six beats of the kick on their other side, take three arm strokes, and so on.

Dewsbury: “Therefore, as the habit is acquired, the necessity to think directly upon the requirements necessary for the action to take place dissipates. The notion of a habit drill then captures precisely how in the process of repeating these habit loops of cue, routine, reward, a habitual action emerges wired into our bodies for future enactment, enabling the body to do the thinking for us in ways which see any sense of intentional, thoughtful thinking recede”<sup>28</sup>.

vii.

FROM FIELDNOTES, THURSDAY 17TH JULY 2014

*General weariness this morning. Swim a bit of a struggle. Pool very quiet – had the lane to myself most of the time. New goggles still crystal-clear and I had a new view of the floor of the pool – I could see the mould and grime in the grouting of the tiles in the deep end, and also the dancing pools of light, the other swimmers, a plaster that drifted in from the fast lane to my right as I headed back to the shallow end and then was suspended beneath me, floating serenely, as I passed over it on the next lap.*

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While the habit and repetition of swimming laps indoors can lead to a sense of mindfulness (or indeed mindlessness), taking the swimmer inside his or herself but also into the “empty space”, or the “world under water”, the very same things can also serve to heighten awareness of the swimming environment.

In other words: when your environment is effectively reduced to 25 metres of tiled floor, it’s perhaps easier, or more necessary, to hone in on details that in other environments might go unnoticed. The repetitive nature of the activity means there’s not a lot of variation, at least visually, in the environment; regular swimmers may even prefer to use the same lane whenever possible, so that their view is of the exact same tiles day in, day out – intense familiarity with, some might argue, an intensely dull set of surroundings. In this way the pool may act as a blank backdrop

28. Dewsbury 2015: 33

against which the swimmer's own private thoughts happen, but awareness of subtle changes or intrusions may also be heightened: a variation in water temperature of half a degree centigrade felt keenly, a new chip in the tiles on the edge of the pool registered.

Indeed, sometimes it takes something unpleasant, something *out of place*, to draw the swimmer out of herself, back into the wider context of the pool. The solipsism or essential self-centredness of swimming prevails even in the relatively (and, as in the case of clubs or informal groupings of friends, overtly) social environment of the pool – because “once you're actually swimming, you can't chat to people,” as Shelley, a triathlete in her twenties, puts it<sup>29</sup>. The act of swimming laps requires a swimmer to reside at times almost wholly in herself, in her head and body; “[t]he swimmer's solitary training, the long hours spent semi-submerged induce a lonely meditative state of mind<sup>30</sup>,” as Sprawson writes. You might swim for an hour and never speak to another soul, though you'll stand shoulder-to-bare-shoulder with various resting strangers at the wall, breathing hard, sniffing, splashing water on your face. To encounter an uncomfortable element, a disagreeable or jarring aspect of the pool, is therefore in some way to be made aware of where you are, of the pool as a *shared* space, or as a place in its own right, materially composed, made not just of the intangibles of memory and individual experience but of bricks, mortar, indisputable *stuff*.

There's a passage in the artist and ex-competitive swimmer Leanne Shapton's book about swimming that has always stuck with me. Recounting a long practice during her club swimming days, Shapton describes first her mind wandering off, a reverie: “In the middle of practice, mind numb with the endless counting of lengths, arms and legs bored with strain...I imagine what my mother might be doing: She pulls into the Country Style at the corner of the Queensway and Dixie Road to buy a coffee...” But then, a few paragraphs later: “My thoughts are interrupted by a floater: Pale. Opaque. A perfectly detailed chunk of phlegm, suspended a foot below the surface. It looms in my path like something from *Jaws 3-D*. Seeing it makes me gag, and I wave at it, trying to push it into another lane”<sup>31</sup>.

The intrusion of someone else's bodily excretion pulls Shapton back into the pre-

29. Shelley, interview, June 2014

30. Sprawson 2013: 17

31. Shapton 2012: 40

sent moment, the physical reality. Pool water, chemically purified, kept contained, seems on the surface to be untouched by what's outside – but indoor pools are places where “outside” forces are both carefully controlled and always-present, evident in the cracks; the outside spills in (mud tracked on changing room floors; the cricket or the spider) and what's inside leaks out, too (the bright red of a nosebleed; the floater, pale, opaque). In this way the composition of the pool is always different, always changing; for, as Dewsbury puts it, “the living inhabits a place and [...] the materiality of place, our ecology, inhabits the living”<sup>32</sup>.

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FROM FIELDNOTES, FRIDAY 28TH MARCH 2014

*In the pool, for a while, near the shallow end wall, was a floating ball of snot. I passed over it a few times, keeping a suspicious eye out. Thinking too much about it made me uncomfortable but I felt I needed to be vigilant. Eventually it disappeared, unwittingly picked up on someone's skin or flushed into another lane by backwash and movement of water. I always think of the water as so clean, so “pure”, untouched by the outside – but we bring the outside to it, and also the inside; we take in what we experience outside and excrete from the inside.*

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Shapton's example is notable in part for being disgusting, but it's also notable for being unremarkable. Not long after re-reading her passage I have a similar experience myself, and I am reminded again of the porousness of the pool's boundaries. The ostensibly ordered, controlled systems in place at the pool suggest a sterile or isolated environment, but it is not so. It is, in fact, a “dirty” place, in the sense outlined by the anthropologist Mary Douglas: dirt, Douglas has famously defined, is “matter out of place”<sup>33</sup>. Such an understanding, Douglas explains, “implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements”<sup>34</sup>.

What we perceive as “dirty”, moreover, is contextual – shoes, for example:

32. Dewsbury 2012: 77

33. Douglas 1966: 35

34. Douglas 1966: 35

“are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications”<sup>35</sup>.

Thus I am startled to see a drop of blood on the tiles, a ball of snot in the lane: such things are, it seems, out of place, and, as Tim Cresswell writes, “The metaphorical use of dirt [...] relies for its effect on an unsaid and normally unquestioned structure of ‘proper places’ which (silently) demands appropriate behavior”<sup>36</sup>.

Something about excretion, though – even something as mild as a ball of snot – produces a particularly visceral reaction. It’s its out of placeness, to some extent, but there’s something more, too, which the ostensible clarity of the water and the relatively exposed nature of the pool’s swimming bodies makes apparent: bodily refuse, Douglas suggests, is “a symbol of danger and power”<sup>37</sup>. “Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat,” Douglas writes<sup>38</sup> – or as Cresswell puts it:

“Bodily secretions are a particular type of dirt. Most cultures have some kind of pollution rituals involving bodily cleanliness. The orifices of the body connect the inside to the outside and the stuff that goes into them or comes out of them is subject to the strictest taboos as such substances transgress the inside/outside ordering of the world. Metaphorical references to such substances invariably imply threats to order”<sup>39</sup>.

In my own notes, I find multiple references to bodies that leak, to the discomfort this provokes. In one my own disgust is so intense I’m tempted to get out of the pool:

*About halfway through my swim, a girl, smaller and faster than me, with enormous shoul-*

35. Douglas 1966: 35-36

36. Cresswell 1997: 334

37. Douglass 1966: 120

38. Douglas 1966: 121

39. Cresswell 1997: 341

*der muscles, got in my lane. We got along fine for a while; I paused to let her by occasionally, she seemed happy enough in my presence. But then at one point we were both standing at the wall resting, this tiny girl and I, and she started blowing her nose – noisily, wetly – into her hand, and then swirling her hand in the water to get the gunk off. It was fiercely disgusting and I actually contemplated getting out. What a thing to do – what an intrusion, an expression of something, an ostentatious excretion. And yet she seemed so familiar with this environment: clearly athletic, apparently a regular swimmer. At one point, breaststroking down the lane, thinking about it actually made me retch in the water. But then it was fine, and I swam for a while with the thought that after all people’s noses are probably leaking into the pool all the time and I just don’t notice it<sup>40</sup>.*

In another instance, a swimmer seems to transgress two different boundaries at the same time: in the way she lets her nose run as well as in the way she takes up space in the lane, straying into what I perceive to be my territory:

*At one point a woman in my lane was swimming right down the centre. The first time I nearly collided with her I thought I’d imagined it, or strayed too far over myself, but I watched her when I was resting, and saw she was smack dab in the centre of the lane. And then when she paused to take a rest, breathing hard, she did something quite disgusting: she blew her nose. I could see snot dripping down her face. She kept doing it and the lane felt too small, too full, even though there were only three of us in it<sup>41</sup>.*

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There are two related things at play here. First there’s the intrusion of someone else’s bodily fluid, which suggests an intermingling not just of bodies but of their basest elements, highlighting the impossibility of keeping things wholly “in” or “out”. Snot traversing the boundaries of one body underlines the idea that any body – of person, of water – is not so much whole, to borrow Metcalfe’s play on words, as holey<sup>42</sup>. Too, it calls us back to the animal, visceral nature of the body “in all its corporeal grossness”, which, “no matter how comely in its own way [...] can still be an embarrassment, a reminder that our reach toward some more elevated status called ‘human’ or ‘spiritual’ is tenuous – hostage to the sewer odor of flatulence”<sup>43</sup>.

40. Fieldnotes, Monday 8th June 2015

41. Fieldnotes, Thursday 31st July 2014

42. See Metcalfe 2001

43. Tuan 1998: 32

The second thing that the floater – small and benign as it ultimately is – reminds us of is the potential for transgression at the pool. In this way it is an affront not only because it is ugly, not only because it is gross, not even only because it is suggestive of basic biological truths, but because it reminds us of all that cannot be disciplined. It is indicative of all the ways in which bodies, both internally and socially, may tend towards disobedience.

viii.

The cricket, the mould, the blood, the pale, opaque floater hovering just below the surface of the water: reminders of a world outside the pool, or a world that's inseparable from the pool.

What does the pool contain, then? Everything, nothing: for the pool is part of the swimmer, and the swimmer is part of the pool – “there would be no border distinguishing his ‘inside’ from the wave ‘outside,’” as Andrew Metcalfe and Ann Game put it, describing a man entering the water at Bondi Beach: “He would feel the wave’s speed, its height, its depth, and its break on the ‘inside,’ which is simultaneously ‘outside’”<sup>44</sup>. Of a runner they interviewed for their work, they write, “Likewise, when Katrina runs in the dark, she ‘knows where to duck [her] head’ without conscious thought because the cliff is not an It but is instead part of her, as she is part of it”<sup>45</sup>. I remember what Roger Deakin wrote at the beginning of his book, and it seems to take on new meaning: “When you swim, you feel your body for what it mostly is – water – and it begins to move with the water around it”<sup>46</sup>.

Deleuze writes: “An animal, a thing, is never separable from its relations with the world. The interior is only a selected exterior, and the exterior, a projected interior”<sup>47</sup>.

*“In other words, the world comes to breathe within me”...*

There is, as Metcalfe and Game put it, “not always a subject of an activity and not always an object. Alvin and Delphine [research participants] *are* running<sup>48</sup>”; the swimmer, similarly, might say, I *am* swimming, I *am* breathing. Or indeed: I am in the pool; it is in me. What it means to be in the pool is not only to be bodily present,

44. Metcalfe and Game 2014: 304

45. Metcalfe and Game 2014: 305

46. Deakin 2000: 3

47. Deleuze 1988: 125

48. Metcalfe and Game 2014: 303

or mindful, but also to seep into it – to shed our skin and sweat there, to become literally a part of that in which we immerse ourselves, as well as to be reminded that our bodies are made of the same stuff as the pool anyhow. Thus we are in it, it is in us – but certain encounters (with matter “out of place”, with the disciplining structure, both social and physical, of the container) remind us of its solidity, its place-ness, preventing us from being carried too far away in reverie, lost completely.

ix.

In this sense, the pool is both physical and experiential; it’s a building, a concrete location, but also a state of mind – an hour, an abstraction, a physical action. Its attraction lies in the way it balances all this, the way it becomes a place where the swimmer can find or chase a state of being which is neither fully one thing or the other; in water and air, floating but submerged. Indeed, the swimmer is simultaneously released from and bound by their own limitations, floating and breathing but also constantly fighting the body’s inclination to sink. The mouth must be twisted or held out of the water in order to breathe, the body must be positioned and moved in a particular way in order to stay afloat, the lungs and muscles and mind must all be trained to operate in an environment that feels both natural – “how it was before you were born” – and terrifyingly, dangerously alien. When we swim, writes the philosopher Damon Young:

“Breathing is hampered [...] water compresses the chest, making it more difficult to inhale [...] blood pools in the lungs, leaving less room for oxygen...in a matter of minutes we suffer what researchers call “inspiratory fatigue” [...] our muscles become weaker or slower, and have more trouble co-ordinating. And when swimming, we are also using more muscle groups [...] Stomach, chest, upper and lower back, shoulders, biceps and triceps, and the upper and lower legs, including the feet: all working in a co-ordinated and continuous way to keep the swimmer from stopping and sinking. Put simply, even the local pool can suggest danger, by highlighting the continual effort required simply to keep our head above water. Swimming, whether in salt water or chlorine, evokes the sublime by revealing just how vulnerable we are”<sup>49</sup>.

Or, as Deakin puts it, “the lifeguards at the pool or the beach remind you of the thin line between waving and drowning”<sup>50</sup>. I have felt this fine line suddenly

49. Young 2014: 131

50. Deakin 2000: 3

recalled: as when, for instance, I roll my head to breathe at the precise moment that a wave or splash sent from a swimmer in another lane bowls towards me and instead of a lungful of much-needed air I inhale more water, feel the chlorine going down my throat, come up coughing and spluttering. There is no protection from this moment of human helplessness; I have seen it happen to even the most experienced swimmers, for whom years of repetitive training and a bone-deep knowledge of the pool itself can still not isolate them completely from their environment nor mask their inherent vulnerability.

Still, as van Leeuwen writes, “The pool is the architectural outcome of man’s desire to become one with the element of water, privately and free of danger”<sup>51</sup>. Though there may be moments of discomfort or uneasiness, the lap swimmer’s body can’t be displaced or sent drifting by a current, an errant wave: it is ostensibly – as far as any body ever can be – safe, while the mind is free, to an extent, to wander inwards, towards reverie or “nothingness”, as well as outwards: towards the pool itself, towards little details, quirks, uncomfortable or unusual elements. I always think of the narrator of Alan Hollinghurst’s novel *The Swimming Pool Library*, doing his laps: “My mind would count its daily fifty lengths as automatically as a photocopier; and at the same time it would wander”<sup>52</sup>.

I think, too, of what the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes in his seminal work *Space and Place*, articulating not only a (contested) distinction between two common geographical terms, but also a dual human desire for both fixity and fluidity: “Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other”<sup>53</sup>. There’s a fundamental struggle implied here – a tension, as Robert Macfarlane identifies, writing about the poet Edward Thomas, “between what... Thomas called the desire to ‘go on and on over the earth’ and the desire ‘to settle for ever in one place’”<sup>54</sup>. The tension can never be fully resolved, and so, as Tuan goes on: “The ideas ‘space’ and ‘place’ require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa”<sup>55</sup>.

51. van Leeuwen 1999: 2

52. Hollinghurst 1998: 12

53. Tuan 1977: 3

54. Macfarlane 2015a: 115. Perhaps it’s no coincidence that Macfarlane is invoking Thomas here in reference to Roger Deakin; the passage is partly a rumination on the life and early death of Deakin, who, “by both dwelling well and travelling wisely,” Macfarlane suggests, “resolved in some measure the tension” described by Thomas.

55. Tuan 1977: 6



The pool acts as both a metaphor for the tension between these two desires, and as a site where it regularly and variously plays out: lap swimming, in other words, is an embodied experience of suspension between the twin states of freedom and security. This is evident partly in the physical experience of swimming at the pool – the way the swimmer “delivers himself with controlled abandonment to the forces of gravity”<sup>56</sup> – but also in the mental experience: the way the swimmer’s mind both drifts and centres as she engages in an act learned and practiced through habit and repetition. As van Leeuwen puts it:

“While the pool allows, even invites, intellectual wanderings, at the same time it prevents the wanderer from losing his way... The container encloses but also retains, holds together, and keeps from spilling. While stirring the imagination, it also prevents it from rambling; the container both kindles and quenches”<sup>57</sup>.

x.

Last year I noticed that I often had a tender, pale bluish bruise on my left hand. I didn’t know what had caused it; I chalked it up to clumsiness. And then one day, while swimming, I had a moment of understanding:

I prefer to swim counter-clockwise, and when I swim in lanes that go clockwise, I sometimes smack my left hand on the lane lines, as if I can’t quite gauge distance on my left side. The bruise was a mark of where I was hitting the plastic lane lines: a mark of my accidental attempted transgression, my running up against a barrier and being unable to cross.

So I am disciplined by the pool; when I am not disciplined enough on my own it intervenes, as it were, reminds me to pay more careful attention to my form, to the positioning of my body in place, to increase my spatial and self-awareness – to temper my wandering thoughts, not let them wander so far that my body is tempted to follow them out into the ether. Preventing the wanderer from losing his way.

56. van Leeuwen 1992: 2

57. van Leeuwen 1999: 7



## CORRESPONDENCE

To the river | Bathing | Dreaming | *Nostalgie de la boue* | A shifting mirror | A spirituality | Childhood memories | Chlorine I | Chlorine II | Drawing connections | “How the water feels his body” | Silk and sludge | Response | Communion

## i.

Wales, May 2014. Here I am, missing the pool, the act of doing my daily lengths, even though I've been looking forward to this break for months. I brought my suit and my cap and my goggles with me, as I always do, but we're in a cottage in rainy Powys and the likelihood of a swim is slim: it's more of a glass-of-wine-by-the-fire kind of holiday. Still, the kit takes up almost no space in a rucksack heavy with waterproof jackets and boots and books, and it's an old habit, inherited from my dad, carried over from California: *always pack your swimsuit*.

I've also packed Olivia Laing's *To the River*, in which Laing follows the River Ouse in Sussex from its source to where it flows into the English Channel. It's not a book about swimming, but it is very waterlogged. Laing is preoccupied throughout with Virginia Woolf, who ended her life in the water, and Laing herself often bathes in the river on her journey, floating, wallowing: "I trod water in the wide pool by the rushes, leaning my head back till the silt soaked into my scalp," she writes at one point, having found a suitable spot and "plopped in"<sup>1</sup>.

As I read I start to wonder what it is exactly that constitutes a swim. What is the act itself, the verb? By definition it connotes motion, action: "*to move through water...*" – and so it has always seemed to me that submersion is not necessarily the same thing as swimming. There's obviously shared territory here, however, and wild-swimming types, I notice, often seem to blur the boundaries completely, so that a quick dip, a float, in any conceivable body of water, is as much a form of swimming as some rigid, lengthy session in a pool<sup>2</sup>.

I can see why, on one hand: fundamentally, "plopping in", letting the silty river soak into her scalp, puts Laing in contact with water, just as my up-and-down-the-lanes routine puts me in contact with water; in this sense it's as simple as that, it's about touch, immersion, communication or communion with the water itself. On the other hand, it feels like a very different endeavour – almost as if they're two dis-

1. Laing 2011: 112

2. Consider Robert Macfarlane in *The Wild Places*, for instance, a book in which he roams the British Isles and frequently participates in the places he visits not only by walking, climbing, sleeping in landscapes but also by submerging himself in various bodies of water, from Strathnaver, in the north of Scotland, where "[a]s the day's light lessened, I walked back down to the river's mouth, and in the shallow waters of the estuary, where the salt and the fresh wove with one another, and the river lost itself gently into the increased space of the ocean, I swam briefly" (2007: 126) to Dorset, where he and Roger Deakin "swam straight away, backstroking out for a hundred yards or so, and then treading the blue water" (2007: 235).

inctive species of activity, one centred on immersion in not only a body of water but that body's wider environment (trees, wind, sun, a grassy bank), the other, the pool swim, more self-oriented, centred on immersion in the swimmer's own body (arms, legs, lungs).

I know the pool is not to everyone's taste. Some people, many people, prefer the waves and the weeds. "For some outdoor swimmers," writes Ronan Foley in a study of therapeutic blue space in Ireland, "swimming in a pool was preferable to not swimming at all, though others identified such spaces as uninteresting. In part this was to do with the artificial and non-natural nature of such spaces, characterized by chlorine and an oppressive atmosphere. For others it was precisely because of the 'straight-line' predictability of the encounter and the more open possibilities of the sea"<sup>3</sup>. Karen Throsby, meanwhile, writing about marathon swimming, cites one research participant for whom the pool is a "dead puddle", "a poor, utilitarian substitute that is good for fitness, but not much else"<sup>4</sup>.

And yet the banality of the pool seems to force some reckoning with the activity of swimming itself, since the surroundings are purpose-built. I've found lately that I derive an inferior sense of satisfaction from wild submersion, as if it's holier on the surface, but also wholly on the surface. When I'm weary, when I'm stuck, when I'm hungover and fuzzy-headed, a plunge in the sea, the sting of cold water on skin, will do wonders – but I always feel a little like I've cheated, like I haven't got a real swim in, like I don't quite deserve the reward. Perhaps because it feels less like work. Perhaps because in the relative safety and predictability, in the almost religious routine – the daily pilgrimage to the pool, the devout repetitions of lengths – is a depth of meaning all its own that gets lost in the silt or salt of a wilder body of water.

ii.

In thinking this through I'm reminded of Roger Deakin, who in the abstract captures so well what I find compelling about swimming as a subject of study, and yet whose recorded swims are often a world away from my own familiar efforts at the pool, as when, in the River Test, he happily glides, "downstream, brushed by fronds of water crowfoot that gave cover to trout," immersed in the landscape he observes and in this case actually propelled by the water itself.

3. Foley 2015: 223

4. Throsby 2013: 17

Instinctively I want to say something about this which sets it in conflict with the act of swimming laps in a pool, something about the carefree almost-laziness of it, the audacity of it, perhaps – but when it comes down to it I find only this: that there is an historically implicit masculinity in this particular genre of swim<sup>6</sup>. In Charles Sprawson’s *Haunts of the Black Masseur*, I remember reading of the poet Rupert Brooke that, “When working at the Bodleian he would get up in his country cottage long before dawn and bathe as he walked down to Oxford in the streams among the Cumner hills”<sup>7</sup>. I was working at the Bodleian myself when I first came across this passage and it brought home to me the fact that some of my love for the pool is actually more about fear than any positive force. At the pool I feel secure enough to work, to exercise my body; at the edge of rivers I hesitate, ask, “is it allowed? Is it safe?” I worry over questions of permission (Deakin, by contrast, resolves when confronted with the accusation of trespassing “to stand up for my rights as a free swimmer”, launching himself merrily into exactly the kind of heated conversation I would run from<sup>8</sup>). I worry over reports read and only half-recalled about poor water quality. I worry over what will happen to my possessions if I leave them unattended on a bank or a shore. Whereas I notice that the men – and they are mainly men – in Sprawson’s romantic account of the history of swimming are always striding through landscapes, and, when the urge takes them, confidently stripping down, getting wet, communing with nature: “bathing,” which sounds so innocuous, so domestic, but which seems to take on a spiritual, even divine, importance. To *bathe* in this context is not a trite act, not a sedentary, solitary soak in bubbles on a cold winter day with the radio in the background and a cup of tea balanced on the edge of the tub; it’s a forceful, defiant, physical act – wild, transcendent, a way of staking a claim on the landscape, inserting oneself into it<sup>9</sup>.

5. Deakin 2000: 19

6. Laing’s account, of course, cannot be cast as masculinist; nor for that matter, can Iris Murdoch’s descriptions of wild swimming, referenced later. However, writing about wild swimming often sits within a wider body of work, discussed in “Writing Place”, which has been criticized for its one-sidedness, and certainly a great many of the “heroes” of swimming that Charles Sprawson identifies, from Byron to Brooke to Johnny Weissmuller (famous for playing Tarzan in the 1930s and 40s), are men.

7. Sprawson 2013: 187

8. Deakin 2000: 31

9. Macfarlane, for instance, writing about a swimming spot he discovers (and utilises) in a river that fills Loch Coruisk, is reminded of his father, “who had always swum outside: in waterfall holes, in rapids under stone bridges, in sea coves. During my childhood, whenever we drove from our home in the Midlands up to the Highlands, which we did most summers, he would stop the car at the same bay on Loch Lomond’s western shore, and plunge into the water for a few minutes, regardless of the weather. Then – smiling, damp, restored – he would get back in and drive on north.” (2007: 58-59). I can’t help but think of Bachelard here, too, writing in 1941: “The woman at her bath, such as poets describe or suggest her or painters depict her, is not to be

In some ways this insertion is perhaps closer in spirit to the earliest renditions of pools, such as the floating baths of the early eighteenth century, which “were but part of river life”, simple appendages to natural bodies of water, than the modern pool itself is – often urban, set within a larger building, isolated from the surrounding environment by walls, water chlorinated and temperature controlled<sup>10</sup>. Claudia Kidwell, in her history of women’s bathing and swimming costumes in the United States, defines bathing as “the act of immersing all or part of the body in water for cleansing, therapeutic, recreational, or religious purposes, and swimming as the self-propulsion of the body through water”<sup>11</sup>. I have often, and perhaps ironically, thought of swimming laps as the “purest” form of swimming – just the body and the water, intimate in isolation – but it occurs to me now that it may not be so simple. There is no one true way of being in the water, no hierarchy of settings for a swim, and perhaps any distinction is not, in itself, very useful, since the substance central to both activities – water – is so slippery, so fluid. When you strip away surroundings – the trees, the tiles, the grassy bank, the leisure centre walls – what you’re left with is an encounter between a body and a body of water; a communication between the two, a poetic or rhythmic connection.

There is, Bachelard wrote, “a continuity between the speech of water and the speech of man [...] human language has a *liquid quality*, a flow in its overall effect, water in its consonants”<sup>12</sup>. The writer Iris Murdoch once described river swimming as “very poetical [...] much more so than a swimming pool, which is just a machine for exercising in”<sup>13</sup>.

Why should the pool, as a site for swimming, be any less poetical than the river?

iii.

I have a recurring dream about swimming, in which I am doing my daily laps when I realise that I can breathe underwater. The laps become less laboured as I adjust

found in our countryside. Bathing is no longer anything but a sport. And as a sport, it is the opposite of feminine timidity” (1983: 33).

10. van Leeuwen 1999: 20. See chapter two, “The Swimming Pool”, for more on this strand of the pool’s history.

11. Kidwell 1968: 5. Christine Schmidt, tracing the history of swimwear in Australia, writes similarly of “a split between recreational bathing and swimming as a form of exercise and competitive sport” which occurred in the 1800s, alongside the development of segregated swimming baths in Sydney, which “provided women with the opportunity to pursue their interest in aquatic sports with relative freedom from conventional constraints” (Schmidt 2012: 10).

12. Bachelard 1983: 15

13. Murdoch 1993

my stroke to reconcile with this discovery; no need to turn my head to the air, no need to control the natural rhythm of breath, to succumb to the momentary panic of feeling your lungs depleted.

The dream is just a dream, of course: it can never be possible to breathe underwater, which is a fundamentally inhospitable, if alluring, environment<sup>14</sup>. To be in a human body is to have that restriction imposed on you from the start. To be a swimmer, of any sort, is to variously and voluntarily engage with this uneasy relationship between body and water. To push the limits of it, to play with it. To find something in it that simultaneously satisfies and fuels a desire.

And yet particularly in literature, dreams and swimming seem intertwined – perhaps because the dream is a convenient metaphor for the familiar-yet-foreign sensation of swimming, an act which feels basic but must be learned. “I started to dream ever more exclusively of water,” Deakin writes at the beginning of *Waterlog*, recounting the origins of his obsession with making a journey across Britain by swimming: “swimming and dreaming were becoming indistinguishable”<sup>15</sup>. Deakin’s inspiration for his own journey was John Cheever’s short story “The Swimmer”, an American classic which itself is shot through with a dreamlike feeling. It begins straightforwardly enough, with Neddy Merrill at the edge of a friend’s pool, lounging and swimming on “one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around saying, ‘I *drank* too much last night’”<sup>16</sup>. From his vantage point by the pool, it occurs to Merrill that “by taking a dogleg to the southwest he could reach his home by water [...] He seemed to see, with a cartographer’s eye, that string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county. He had made a discovery, a contribution to modern geography; he would name the stream Lucinda after his wife”<sup>17</sup>. So he resolves to make the eight-mile journey home via a series of pools, and sets off swimming. As the story wears on, however, time seems to expand and slip, as in a dream, and a familiar setting – suburban America – becomes increasingly eerie.

Sprawson, meanwhile, makes an explicit reference to the otherworldly, dreamlike qualities of swimming, suggesting that, “much of a swimmer’s training takes place

14. Although it is possible to simulate the ability to breathe underwater through, for example, scuba diving – see e.g. Straughan for an exploration of “the aquatic world as, for some divers, a therapeutic landscape” (2012: 19).

15. Deakin 2000: 3

16. Cheever 2009: 726

17. Cheever 2009: 727



inside his head, immersed as he is in a continuous dream of a world under water”<sup>18</sup>. Even Laing’s book seems to imply some connection between water and dream in the way it cleaves both to the Ouse and to the life of Virginia Woolf, whose own writing is dreamy, like a watercolour painting or an impressionist’s rendition of a landscape.

The dream, the impressionist’s strokes: maybe there is no perfect shared language for the immersive, physical, individualised experience of a swim, but such comparisons allow for a shared sense-vocabulary – a vocabulary which is felt, and can be understood intuitively if imperfectly. We all know what it feels like to dream, though we dream differently; we swim differently, but we all know, provided we have learned how to stay afloat, what it feels like to swim.

At one point, idly pursuing a train of thought down an internet rabbit hole, I encounter an entry on Wikipedia that claims that the word “to swim” comes from, amongst other sources, the Proto-Germanic *swimmaną*: “to swoon, lose consciousness, swim”. I can find no other evidence that this is true, but it continues to stick with me, long after I’ve attempted to abandon it as a serious idea that I can incorporate into my research. It seems to have emotional if not historical veracity. To swim, to swoon, to lose consciousness: not necessarily in the sense of blacking out, but in some other, more fluid way. To lose consciousness of one way of being, of time and the body as felt on land, but then to (re)gain a new, or different, consciousness: of the body as felt in water; the body’s history in water; the expansion and slippage of time. The unknown known, just at the outside edge of perception or understanding. An almost-memory, perhaps: “To be embraced and sustained by the light green water was less a pleasure, it seemed, than the resumption of a natural condition,” Cheever writes, as his hero briefly considers embarking on his swim home sans trunks<sup>19</sup>.

Writing about the characteristics of the English swimmer in history, Charles Sprawson points out that, “[t]he passion for bathing really began with the Romantic generation, and ‘swim’ was a word that particularly appealed to its poets. It recurs as the key word in various well-known lines. On reading Chapman’s *Homer*, Keats felt ‘like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken’. The arena ‘swims’ around Byron’s dying gladiator, and in ‘The Lime Tree Bower

18. Sprawson 2013: 17

19. Cheever 2009: 727

my Prison' Coleridge 'stood, silent with swimming sense'. The word suggests a state of suspension, a trance-like condition. There is the strange adverb 'swimmingly' that implies unimpeded progress. Like Narcissus many of the swimmers suffered from a form of autism, a self-encapsulation in an isolated world, a morbid self-admiration, an absorption in fantasy"<sup>20</sup>.

iv.

In her book, Laing muses about the authors Iris Murdoch and John Bayley, married for over 40 years, who maintained a dedication to swimming ("their early dates had been swimming expeditions in the river," writes A.N. Wilson in his biography of Murdoch<sup>21</sup>) even as Murdoch succumbed to Alzheimer's in the late 1990s. "I am not in the athletic sense a keen swimmer, but I am a devoted one," Murdoch opened her review of Sprawson's *Haunts of the Black Masseur*, "On hot days in the Oxford summer my husband and I usually manage to slip into the Thames a mile or two above Oxford"<sup>22</sup>. Her fiction, meanwhile, was also suffused with swimming references. "I suppose you could see the love of swimming as part of this desire to retreat or be immersed, to enter that pre-literate continuous world," writes Laing of Murdoch and Bayley; Martin Amis, she remembers, "once wrote that the couple suffered collectively from *nostalgie de la boue*, literally the desire to return to the sticky mud of one's origins, the ooze and squalor of infancy"<sup>23</sup>.

Charles Sprawson makes the connection between swimming and "the ooze and squalor of infancy" even more confidently: "It is generally accepted," he writes, "that in the area of the unconscious, water in any form and immersion in it suggests

20. Sprawson 2013: 134

21. Wilson 2004: 172

22. Murdoch 1993. Murdoch also establishes herself here as firmly on the side of the open water swimmers, not the pool swimmers; describing the quality of these summer river swims in Oxford, she writes: "The art is to draw no attention to oneself but to cruise quietly by the reeds like a water rat: seeing and unseen from that angle, one can hear the sedge warblers' mysterious little melodies, and sometimes a cuckoo flies cuckooing over our heads, or a kingfisher flashes past. Very poetical. And how much more so than a swimming pool, which is just a machine for exercising in. I fancy," she adds, "Mr. Sprawson would agree with me" (Murdoch 1993). Sprawson, for his part, admiringly called her "one of the last of the English river swimmers," in whose work one can sense the presence of the "classical spirit" which, Sprawson argues, "remains the most romantic and significant characteristic of English swimming". In Murdoch's books, he writes, "she translates her own memories into the lyrical experiences of those characters in her novels who swim to 'faint faraway light' in canals that tunnel through mountains or caves by the sea, across the surfaces of rivers or down through mysterious lakes, who long to get to the sea, and when they reach it, go down to it at midnight and dip their hands in as a form of ritual" (2013: 191).

23. Laing 2011: 107

a hidden desire for a return to the security and irresponsibility of the womb and its amniotic waters<sup>24</sup>”.

Sprawson is referring at least in part, of course, to Freud, for whom water held symbolic psychological meaning; in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, for instance, he suggests that “a large number of dreams, which are frequently full of anxiety, and often have for content... staying long in the water, are based upon fantasies concerning the intra-uterine life, the sojourn in the mother’s womb, and the act of birth”<sup>25</sup>. Thomas van Leeuwen, describing an experiment in which the French gynecologist and obstetrician Michel Odent “discovered... that human infants were able to move freely in water for the first few months of their lives, only to lose that ability immediately afterward,” suggests “a speculative theory that in newborn infants a genetic memory is activated by which the aquatic episode of mankind is reenacted. The unconscious hydrophilia of the baby could be seen as a residual ‘marker,’ a rudimentary gene that has been with us for the last five million years... It is entirely possible, however,” he adds, “that hydrophilic-genetic memory is activated in the fetal period, during which the infant is kept in a state of hydraulically controlled weightlessness in the amniotic water of the womb”<sup>26</sup>. Thus, van Leeuwen writes, into the joy of swimming may be read some regressive comfort: the diver entering the water, he suggests, “becomes swimmer the moment he loses his postnatal anxiety and returns to the womb, where he regains his original state of intense well-being”<sup>27</sup>.

In *On Water*, the author Thomas Farber summarises the idea thus, implying a certain ubiquity: “‘Water represents the unconscious,’ says the psychologist at the party. The surface the boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness. Water in this view thus a form of seductive regression, representing the purely instinctive”<sup>28</sup>. Here he is echoing the historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade, who wrote that, “immersion in water signifies regression to the preformal, reincorporation into the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence”<sup>29</sup>. Farber tells the story of the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi, a colleague of Freud’s. Ferenczi “postulated that the wish to return to the womb and its amniotic fluids symbolizes a wish

24. Sprawson 2013: 143

25. Freud 1997: 262

26. van Leeuwen 1998: 15

27. van Leeuwen 1998: 16

28. Farber 1994: 5

29. Eliade 1987:130

to return to the sea itself”, taking the symbolism further into evolutionary, and not just gestational or amniotic, depths<sup>30</sup>. “What,” Ferenczi posited, “if the entire intrauterine existence of the higher mammals were only a replica of the type of existence [of] that aboriginal piscine period, and birth itself, nothing but a recapitulation on the part of the individual of the great catastrophe which at the time of the recession of the ocean forced so many animals... to adapt themselves to a land existence, above all to renounce gill-breathing and provide themselves with organs for the respiration of air?”<sup>31</sup>

If this is too tenuous or fraught a claim to resolve wholly one way or another, there are nevertheless swimmers in this world for whom it is not inconceivable that the act of swimming is pleasurable because it recalls some earlier existence. Stephanie, for instance, from France, retired, in her sixties, has a theory about her devotion to the pool. “I love the feeling of the water,” she tells me. “I feel really good in water, very light. I find it extremely relaxing. And when I come out, I feel younger. I feel it gives me energy. And – I wonder: I mean it is only my feeling, but I was born with a caesarian section, and my daughter was as well – I just wonder whether you get out of the fluid, and you have this – it gives you, it makes you really peaceful to go back into fluid. Maybe that’s why I like swimming. My sister is not like me, and she was not born by caesarian section. But of course that’s really a very small sample of people!”<sup>32</sup>

(Her daughter, she tells me, the one born by caesarian, is also a keen swimmer, even more devoted than she herself is – “she gave me some tips recently!” she laughs.)

v.

Certainly water, as both idea and element, is powerfully and variously evocative: of the womb, maybe, but also of other equally intangible and haunting things. As Ivan Illich puts it, “water has a nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors”(and, he goes on, “as a vehicle for metaphors, water is a shifting mirror. What it says reflects the fashions of the age”)<sup>33</sup>. It may be variously perceived as holy, as healing<sup>34</sup>, or as powerful in some other not quite explicable way, as when, about midway

30. Farber 1994: 109

31. Ferenczi 1989: 45

32. Stephanie, interview, August 2014

33. Illich 1986: 24-25

34. “Human associations with water as physical healer are deeply embedded at a global level,” writes Ronan Foley in his study of therapeutic landscapes in Ireland, “In particular these associations are expressed through and

through *Waterlog*, Roger Deakin sets out to discover some of Cornwall's remaining holy wells. "The more I travelled and swam," he writes, "the clearer it was becoming that, as I had suspected all along, our relationship to water is a great deal more mystical than most of us admit"<sup>35</sup>.

Writing about water, sensory experience, and the generation of meaning, the anthropologist Veronica Strang points out that "hydrolatry – water worship of one sort or another – occurs in every cultural and temporal context, and [...] even in the most secular cosmologies, water is presented as the fundamental source of life"<sup>36</sup>. Strang also points out that water's "nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors" springs at least partly from its own multiplicity of forms: "Water's diversity is, in some respects, a key to its meanings. Here is an object that is endlessly transmutable, moving readily from one shape to another: from ice to stream, from vapour to rain, from fluid to steam. It has an equally broad range of scales of existence: from droplet to ocean, trickle to flood, cup to lake," she writes<sup>37</sup>. In myth and in religion, water is often meaningful, but its meaning varies. Eliade gives a partial list: "In initiation rituals," he writes, "water confers a 'new birth', in magic rituals it heals, and in funeral rites it assures rebirth after death. Because it incorporates in itself all potentiality, water becomes a symbol of life ('living water'). Rich in seeds, it fertilizes earth, animals and women. It contains in itself all possibilities, it is supremely fluid, it sustains the development of all things, and is therefore either compared or even directly assimilated with the moon"<sup>38</sup>.

Water is also, of course, a crucial ingredient for baptism, in part because of the "immemorial and oecumenical symbolism of immersion in water as an instrument of purification and regeneration" which was "adopted by Christianity and given still richer religious meaning. St. John's baptism was directed not to healing the infirmities of the flesh, but the redemption of the soul, the forgiveness of sin"<sup>39</sup>. Thus, Eliade writes, "In Christianity, Baptism becomes the chief instrument of

in geographical places, with springs, pools, rivers, lakes and the sea all associated with health-giving powers and constituting what may be termed therapeutic landscapes. [...] Water's ability to act as a metaphor for life, and by extension, health, is endless" (Foley 2010: 1). Perhaps it's no coincidence that one morning, in the midst of working on this chapter, I overhear a woman in the changing room at the pool remark to another: "I just find the water very therapeutic".

35. Deakin 2000: 156

36. Strang 2005: 105

37. Strang 2005: 98

38. Eliade 1996: 189

39. Eliade 1996: 196

spiritual regeneration [...] Man dies symbolically with immersion, and is reborn, purified, renewed; just as Christ rose from the tomb”<sup>40</sup>. Such renewal stems, Eliade suggests, from water’s capacity to “disintegrate, abolish forms, ‘wash away sins’<sup>41</sup>”: “In water everything is ‘dissolved’ [...] everything that has happened ceases to exist [...] Water purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past, and restores – even if only for a moment – the integrity of the dawn of things”<sup>42</sup>.

These ideas of erasure, of purification, renewal (“Ablution. Washing. Purifying. Cleaning. Cleansing. [...] Rinsing, laundering, bathing, douching,” as Thomas Farber puts it<sup>43</sup>) are complicated by further layers of meaning. The functions are not necessarily the same; Ivan Illich, writing about what he calls “the dual nature of water”, suggests that one way in which this dual nature reveals itself is in “water’s ability to purify as well as to clean. Water communicates its purity by touching or waking the substance of a thing and it cleans by washing dirt from its surface [...] My theme,” he goes on, “is the power of water to clean, to detach what sticks to people, to their clothes or their streets. The power water has to penetrate body and soul and communicate to them its own freshness, clarity, and purity is another theme with an altogether different history”<sup>44</sup>.

Illich’s book is partly a consideration of the changing civic uses of water; his focus in this regard is on what Farber calls “[m]an’s hunger to master water”, “[m]an’s ever-increasing domination of water: cisterns, wells, fountains, water wheels, norias, water screws, aqueducts, irrigation ditches, channels, drains, canals, sewers, dams, pipes, taps, hydrants water towers, swimming pools, showers baths, sinks”, and the ways in which such domination has stifled the spiritual or symbolic power of water<sup>45</sup>. “In the imagination of the twentieth century, water lost both its power to communicate by touch its deep-seated purity and its mystical power to wash off spiritual blemish,” Illich concludes. “Water throughout history has been perceived as the stuff which radiates purity. H<sub>2</sub>O is the new stuff, on whose purification human survival now depends. H<sub>2</sub>O and water have become opposites: H<sub>2</sub>O is a social creation of modern times, a resource that is scarce and that calls for techni-

40. Eliade 1996: 196

41. Eliade 1987: 131

42. Eliade 1996: 194-195

43. Farber 1994: 21

44. Illich 1986: page 27

45. Farber 1994: 22

cal management. It is an observed fluid that has lost the ability to mirror the water of dreams. The city child has no opportunities to come in touch with living water. Water can no more be observed; it can only be imagined, by reflecting on an occasional drop or a humble puddle”<sup>46</sup>.

vi.

What, then, of the pool? Is it really still possible to claim a link here to water’s mystical or mythical properties, to perceive or participate in its ongoing history, woven in with humans’ own history? Or is immersion in pool water somehow sterile, separate? Man’s hunger to master water, man’s ever-increasing domination of water, manifests at the pool in various ways, after all: in the containment of the water, in the regulation of its temperature, in its adulteration with purifying agents such as chlorine. In a way the pool is the ultimate symbol of this hunger, this domination: unlike many of the systems of water treatment and purification that Illich references, the sewers and faucets and toilets and drinking fountains, it is an invention surplus to survival in the modern world – and, more than that, an invention of and for the ego, an expression of wealth, a status symbol, a site of vain endeavour (calling to mind the myth of Narcissus, perhaps, which, Sprawson writes, suggests the “seductive effects of water”<sup>47</sup> – *a shifting mirror...*).

But its power as a symbol – in art, literature, the imagination – derives at least in part from its relationship to water itself. The pool is irrevocably linked to water and its metaphors and meanings. Swimming laps is not a form of baptism, not even as similar to the act as certain kinds of wild immersion may be<sup>48</sup> – but it is still a form of immersion: “[o]ne of the most compelling sensory experiences of water,” as Strang puts it<sup>49</sup>. As Thomas Farber writes: “Though Ivan Illich may be right, though humans have transformed water into a chemical detergent [...] still it is held to possess spiritual powers”<sup>50</sup>.

Reading this reminds me of Mary, an amateur triathlete and an employee of the Church of England, who religiously swims the same distance – 2,000 metres –

46. Illich 1986: 75-76

47. Sprawson 2013: 82

48. Robert Macfarlane, in *Cumbria one cold March morning*: “I took off my clothes and waded into the water. [...] Dipping down, I sat in the water up to my neck, huffing to myself with the cold. The current pushed gently at my back” (Macfarlane 2007: 207).

49. Strang 2005: 100

50. Farber 1994: 23

whenever she goes to the pool. When I ask her what she thinks about for the duration of those 2,000 metres, she says that sometimes she's working out solutions to problems while she's swimming laps, but "other times, I just pray. I think there is a spirituality about water. I'm coming from a Christian perspective, but I know other people, Christian and non-Christian, that would say there's definitely a spirituality to water. And of course the whole symbolism of baptism... there's definitely something spiritual about it"<sup>51</sup>.

## vii.

*Water communicates its purity by touching or waking the substance of a thing...*

Whether you believe that immersion signifies the fulfillment of some pre-natal fantasy, or that it has some healing power, or that there is something innately spiritual about it, there is a strong sense that water can convey a message, and that, in fact, to swim may be to embark upon a journey not just up and down the pool, or across the lake, but along the watery lines of that message. As Laing writes of her own experience of "moving through water": "There have been times when, sunk in a river or a chalky sea, I have felt the past rise up upon me like a wave. The water has loosened something; has dissolved what once was dry; weighted as if with lead, it filters now through my own veins. The present is obliterated, but what the eye sees, what the ear hears, is not possible to share"<sup>52</sup>. There are times, in other words, when to swim is to reach or be carried back – or out: out of time, out of body – times when the focus on body and water is expansive rather than self-centred.

This reaching out or back is not always so dramatic as the *nostalgie de la boue*, the (unconscious) desire for a return to amniotic waters, the perception of a wider environmental past. Sometimes the past that the water has loosened is a more recent and palpable one: a childhood memory, a moment or feeling from the swimmer's bank of retrievable recollections. The connection between water and childhood, as opposed to some more unknowable pre-childhood existence, is simpler to grasp. When I ask people about the origins of their relationship with swimming they often recall that they learned as children, even if they didn't develop a regular swimming practice until later in life. Sometimes this memory lacks any detail at all; it's known but hidden from view: "I think I learned at school... yes, I must have,"

51. Mary, interview, July 2014

52. Laing 2011: 113



my interviewee Daisy tells me<sup>53</sup>. Anthony tells me his cousin drowned as an infant, so it was imperative to his parents – one of whom can't swim herself, “is frightened of water, hates it” – that their children have lessons from an early age<sup>54</sup>. Katherine also recounts that her parents thought it was important to learn to swim; her father, she says, didn't learn until he was in his thirties, at which point he found it quite difficult – “so I think he wanted to be sure that didn't happen to me”<sup>55</sup>.

Hearing these stories, I read parallels into my own. My father was a swimmer in high school, recalls long hard practices after school, 10,000 metres up and down the pool. My mother, on the other hand, doesn't know how to swim: she never learned and then eventually, she says, it just felt like it was too late. But it was not too late for me; I have early memories of being taken out into the ocean by my father, held afloat by him as the waves rolled under us. I had swimming lessons, too, which my mother ferried me to, anxious and eager in equal measure to see me develop a fluency in the water. My memories of these lessons are physical, not technical: the chlorine stinging my eyes, the pervasiveness of the water, the way it always found its way up my nose, the feeling of alarm tinged with thrill at finding myself in the deep end, the discomfort of too-tight goggles. I remember being particularly afraid of an instructor called Char, who had a booming, husky voice that conveyed disappointment or disapproval even if it was only saying “Good morning!” She wore a clear plastic visor and had rough, saggy brown skin from too many years of sunbathing, too many years of pacing the deck, barking at frightened children, compelling them into the water, willing them to adopt better, more fluid form.

I must have absorbed some of her instruction, but even so I didn't swim much when I was a child, though I was very often in the water, splashing around, boogie boarding, playing games with friends. I had no urge, nor did I receive any encouragement, to join a swim team or formalise the relationship in any other such way. Swimming, as far as I was concerned, was synonymous with play. It was the thing I did for fun when friends had birthday parties; it was sitting in the hot sun until I couldn't bear it and then leaping joyfully into the cold water, practicing dives, feeling the disorienting whirl as, after a particularly flamboyant swan-dive, my body flipped underwater, and I opened my eyes in a cave of bubbles, and I didn't know which way was up or down (“to swoon, to lose consciousness...”).

53. Daisy, interview, August 2014

54. Anthony, interview, June 2014

55. Katherine, interview, July 2014

## viii.

Observing lap swimmers, it is not immediately obvious that they treat the pool particularly as a place of playfulness, even if they once did. Watch them go up and down, up and down; watch them scowl at each other when one interferes, even inadvertently, with the planned trajectory of another, or when some environmental factor – water temperature, air temperature – deviates from the norm. Watch them sweat, wheeze, stretch, spit, check the clock, haul themselves inelegantly from the water and onto the deck, where their full adult weight becomes again apparent to them. Watch them follow predictable paths and flows: they have learned the structure of this space through movement and practice, they know and mostly adhere to its rules. And yet even so, swimming may be an expansive or evocative experience: even at the pool, to swim can arouse the memory of some childish playfulness, or, further back, some “pre-literate world”. And it’s not only association or metaphor that causes this reaching back and out, but also the sensory experience of being in the water: what it looks like, what it feels like, what it smells like.

In *Topophilia*, the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan explores the relationship between the senses and the perception of the environment. “Perception is an activity,” he writes, “a reaching out to the world”<sup>56</sup>. Odour, for instance, “has the power to evoke vivid, emotionally-charged memories of past events and scenes”<sup>57</sup>. Tuan suggests several reasons for this:

“[T]he power of an odor to cast us into the past may be related to the fact that the cortex with its vast memory store evolved from the part of the brain originally concerned with smell. For another, as children, not only were our noses more sensitive but they were closer to the earth, to flower beds, tall grass, and the damp soil that give off odors. In adulthood, a chance encounter with the fragrance of a haystack may jolt our memory back nostalgically to the past. A further point is that seeing is selective and reflects experience. When we return to the scene of our childhood, not only the landscape has changed but the way we see it. We cannot recapture fully the essential feel of a visual world belonging to our past without the help of a sensory experience that has not changed, for instance, the strong odor of decaying seaweed”<sup>58</sup>.

56. Tuan 1974: 12

57. Tuan 1974: 10

When I read this I'm put immediately in mind of chlorine, that complicating factor in the pool's watery composition. Chlorine is representative of our desire to purify the water, and yet our inability to do so completely, not only because it cannot prevent certain intrusions (a ball of snot, a plaster, a hair, a piece of paper) but also because it is itself an intrusion, a pollutant as well as a purifying agent. It can assault the senses, aggravate them; I met a swimmer recently who has had to give up swimming in pools entirely after developing an allergy to chlorine. And yet it can also evoke memories and feelings far beyond any immediate discomfort: it carries such a distinctive smell, in fact, that a whiff of it may, to borrow Tuan's phrasing, call to mind an entire complex of sensations<sup>59</sup>.

All of which makes me think of something else Mary, who believes in the spirituality of water, talks about when we meet. Contrasting her excited reaction to the smell of chlorine as a child to the physical discomfort it causes her now, she says:

"I like my pool because there's less chlorine. I think some of the pools, they're over-chlorinated. You come out and your eyes are watering, and your nose...and I know that can be a barrier to swimming for a lot of people. [...] I used to get excited by the smell of it as a kid, because it meant, yay! Swimming pool! We get to go swimming! As I've got older, and it's started to affect my sinuses more, I'm not so keen"<sup>60</sup>.

Such an observation highlights the complexity of chlorine when mixed with water. It both contrasts with and complements something that Hank, a relatively recent arrival in the city, says. He speaks about identifying a soothing sense of familiarity at his new pool, rooted in childhood and evoked largely by the smell of chlorine: "The changing rooms of these pools always tend to be the same. [...] And there's that certain smell to them as well – and when you're getting changed in there, it makes you feel like you're a kid. [...] And that makes it very comfortable"<sup>61</sup>.

"Smell in geographical experience," writes Paul Rodaway, "is complex, including both immediate encounter with the environment and a kind of virtual encounter with places in the imagination when odour memories are excited by current place experiences. Olfaction seems to offer a time-space geography, both at the level

58. Tuan 1974: 10

59. "A whiff of sage," he writes, "may call to mind an entire complex of sensations: the image of great rolling plains covered with grass and specked by clumps of sagebrush, the brightness of the sun, the heat, the bumpiness of the road" (Tuan 1974: 10).

60. Mary, interview, July 2014

61. Hank, interview, July 2014

of current durations of odours in space and in the lingering of odours in memories”<sup>62</sup>; moreover “Olfactory experience is [...] always a relationship, chemical or mechanical, between that which (gives off) smells and the individual who smells (or sniffs)”<sup>63</sup>.

## ix.

Sometimes, a few hours after my morning swim, I’ll rest my chin in my hands, or rub my hands across my face if I am feeling weary or unsure about how to begin a task, and I will catch a whiff of something. It’s chlorine, but it’s chlorine mixed with, marked by, time; chlorine diluted by a few hours since my last immersion, diluted by the smell of the hand soap in the bathroom, the shampoo I used in my hair after my swim, the garlic I sliced at lunch. An imprecise mixture, an inconsistent potency, but the thing that’s consistent is the *tone* of the chlorine, which is muted and therefore somehow more evocative than if it was fresh – it is the fragility and fadedness of memory manifest in a smell.

It reminds me, first and most viscerally, of the pleasure of a swim, what it feels like to be in water, the comfort of the environment; if I happen to be somewhere strange or uncomfortable (a dentist’s waiting room, a cramped bus) the smell is soothing, a reminder of a familiar place, a familiar state. At the same time it reminds me of my childhood, and not always only of the happy carefree hours spent lolling around cold turquoise pools on hot, bright California summer days, with dry-as-bone hillsides in the background: it reminds me too of Char’s gravelly disapproving voice, those lessons during which I grew aware of myself, during which I was afraid, not of drowning, not of the deep end, but of my own bodily limitations. It reminds me of the discomfort of finding myself in an environment in which breath could not be drawn at will but had to be planned and executed precisely, an environment in which the effort I put in did not seem to match the results I got, the speed I attained. I swallowed water, came up spluttering, clung to the side of the pool and yearned to be back on land. In the car, on the way home, I would be heavy and hungry and sleepy. Sunburn, the sting of chlorine in my eyes, the feel of it at the back of my throat. This was the taste of failure, or so I thought.

I put my hands to my face: I smell pleasures, anxieties. Then, too, there is the glad-

62. Rodaway 1994: 67

63. Rodaway 1994: 71

ness of having a history at all, of having an ongoing relationship with water, of both knowing it – even though it cannot be fully known – and feeling, in a strange sense, that it knows me – even though this is impossible.

Sprawson, quoting Paul Valéry:

“my sole pastime, my only sport, was the purest of all: swimming. It seems to me that I discover and recognise myself when I return to this universal element. My body becomes the direct instrument of my mind, the author of its ideas. To plunge into water, to move one’s whole body, from head to toe, in its wild and graceful beauty, to twist about in its pure depths, this is for me a delight only comparable to love”<sup>64</sup>.

x.

The body as instrument; the body as author.

“When I was twelve,” writes the artist and ex-competitive swimmer Leanne Shapton in *Swimming Studies*, “a coach remarked I had a ‘feel’ for the water. After basking in the attention for a moment, I understood exactly what he meant. I still do. It’s a knowledge of watery space, being able to sense exactly where my body is and what it’s affecting, an animal empathy for contact with an element – the springing shudder a cat makes when you touch its back. When I’m dry I bump into things, stub toes, miss stairs. I prefer the horizontal, feet up, legs folded over armrests, head propped sideways on my elbow. I don’t understand how to really draw until a teacher says, ‘Imagine you are running your hand over the surface of what you are drawing’”<sup>65</sup>.

“Here,” writes Paul Rodaway in *Sensuous Geographies*, “geography is understood as earth (geo-) drawing (-graphie), that is, a description of the earth and human experience of it, considering issues of orientation, spatial relationship and the character of places. ‘Sensuous geography’ therefore refers to a study of the geographical understanding which arises out of the stimulation of, or apprehension by, the senses. This is both an individual and a social geography, a physical and a cultural geography”<sup>66</sup>.

64. Sprawson 2013: 101

65. Shapton 2012: 210

66. Rodaway 1994: 3

Shapton: “I loved drills best, when I could feel the water in centimeters and so understood how tiny adjustments and angles added up and propelled my body more efficiently. We’d move slowly up and down the pool, sculling with only our hands and wrists, or swim backstroke pointing to the ceiling with one hand and pausing for the other hand to catch up. I liked the idea of bodies as hydrodynamic, the eddies and ripples, the repetition, the needlepoints of swimming”<sup>67</sup>.

Rodaway: “Touch literally concerns contact between person and world. It is participation, passive and active, and not mere juxtaposition. The haptic system gives us the ability to discriminate key characteristics of the environment and our place as a separate entity in that environment or world, but it is not just a physical relationship, it is also an emotional bond between ourselves and our world. Touch is a kind of communication between person and world, a corporeal situation rather than a cognitive positioning. The gentle touch is always more effective than mere words. Touch is direct and intimate, and perhaps the most truthful sense”<sup>68</sup>.

Shapton: “In water, most of the communication is physical. I like being so close to strangers’ bodies, seeing their clumsiness and vulnerability”<sup>69</sup>.

*xi.*

Julie, a swimmer and a coach, tells me about some of the things she’s observed in her years of teaching:

“People’s bodies do behave differently in the water, I’ve noticed. Some types of swimmers – generally quite fit strong men – will try and fight the water. Like this guy I was working with yesterday... it was an amazing penny-drop moment for him. He’s like, ‘I’m not fighting the water anymore! I’m feeling the water!’

And then you’ve got other types who are – I describe it as like, they’re afraid to hurt the water. When you see them swim, there’s no power, there’s no oomph – it’s just very gentle. So if you can get them to start feeling the water, it really helps them. One woman that I’ve been coaching turned round and said, ‘I’m swimming! I’m actually swimming!’ I was like, yeah, you are! You’re actually

67. Shapton 2012: 9

68. Rodaway 1994: 42. On touch, and haptic geographies more generally, see also Dixon and Straughan 2010, Paterson 2005, 2007, 2009, and Straughn 2012.

69. Shapton 2012: 296

swimming. Whereas before she felt she was doing some kind of fake swimming, until she actually started feeling the water with her body.

I think I saw a quote from Ian Thorpe, where he knows as soon as he gets in the water how he's swimming. He'll feel it, from his fingertips all the way through his arm. He knows whether he's gonna do a PB that day or not, just by the feel of the first few seconds in the water. And I think in the same quote, he said something about not just how he feels it, but how the water feels his body as well. Something about the path that the water takes under his body and over his skin"<sup>70</sup>.

xii.

FROM FIELDNOTES, TUESDAY 22ND JULY 2014

*A few times, for a few lengths, I feel really good, and the water feels different around me, I am moving through it differently, I can feel a different kind of interaction happening – impossible to describe except to say that I can feel the water and myself being faster in it. But at other times it is more of a struggle.*

FROM FIELDNOTES, FRIDAY 25TH APRIL 2014

*H. joined my lane after I'd had it to myself for awhile; at one point we were both resting at the wall and she said, "the water feels like treacle today!" It did for me too. Treacle is a good description – like to get through it at all requires great effort. That's the thing with the consistency or feel of the water – it sometimes seems to fight you the whole way, while other times it seems to give way, to even actively propel you.*

\*

When it's good it's great. To know the water as friend, not foe; to feel your way through it, to work with it, to carve something beautiful – *a swim!* – out of it: this is what makes any drudgery, any discomfort, worth it. But water is multifarious, relative: on some days silk, others sludge. To swim in open water makes this harder to see, because of course in an ocean or a river which is in constant movement the water's character is constantly, visibly, changing, but in a pool, where the water is

70. Julie, interview, July 2014

carefully regulated, purified, kept at a consistent temperature, it becomes suddenly clear how much of a body's perception of water has to do with the relationship between body and water and environment on any given day; how much, in other words, it is unfixed, fluid, affected. ("A being dedicated to water is a being in flux," Bachelard wrote<sup>71</sup>).

Even, or perhaps especially, the most fluent swimmers rely upon an understanding that this relationship is variable. In the opening to his autobiography, the Olympic swimmer Ian Thorpe describes a process of feeling his way through the water, feeling the water's way around him:

"When I first dive into the pool I try to work out how the water wants to hold me. If I let it the water will naturally guide me into a position: a place for my body to settle, resting with my head down almost meditating. Then I begin to initiate movement: lifting myself, pushing with my chest and engaging my muscles. That's the basis of the way anyone should swim, although it's not the way we learn because we are not taught to connect so immediately with the water.

As I begin to swim I allow myself to feel where the water is moving around me, how it flows off my body, I listen for any erratic movement which means I'm not relating to the water and I have to modify my stroke, change it until I feel the water moving smoothly past me. I can do this at low speed or very high speed.

It's really rewarding because I receive constant feedback without stopping. I don't need someone to tell me that my stroke looks great or that it looks terrible because I have an inner sense of the water and the environment is already communicating with me"<sup>72</sup>.

*xiii.*

*I have an inner sense of the water and the environment is already communicating with me: the body as instrument, the body as author. The body corresponding with and through the water.*

71. Bachelard 1983: 6

72. Thorpe and Wainright 2012: xi-xii



“Correspondence,” writes Tim Ingold, “is neither given nor achieved, but always in the making [...] Wherever you find them, humans are humaning. That is to say, they are corresponding – as letter writers do, scribing their thoughts and feelings, waiting for answers”<sup>73</sup>.

“To correspond with the world,” Ingold has written elsewhere, “in short, is not to describe it, or to represent it, but to *answer to it* [...] it is to mix the movements of one’s own sentient awareness with the flows and currents of animate life<sup>74</sup>” – thus, for example, “the potter’s feeling flows in and out in a correspondence with the clay, the herdsman’s in correspondence with the airborne rope, the [kite] flyer’s running with the wind, and the cellist’s bowing with musical sound”<sup>75</sup>.

Ingold invokes the biologist Jakob von Uexküll, who argued that “‘were the sun not eye-like, it could not shine in any sky’. His point was that the sky, and the sun as a celestial light that illuminates the sky, could exist only in the phenomenal world – what he called the *Umwelt* – of creatures with eyes. In just the same way, the bee corresponds with the pollen-bearing flower, and the spider with the fly. The lives of creatures, von Uexküll suggests, proceed contrapuntally, each taking into itself something of the characteristics of the other so as to be able to respond to it”<sup>76</sup>.

The body is composed partially of water, and bodies and water respond to each other in various ways: the water accommodating or nourishing the body, the body energised or enervated or in some other way affected by the water. “The most obvious reality about water,” writes Veronica Strang, “is that it is as essential to the human body as it is to all living organisms, large and small. In a very immediate sense, therefore, humans share an experience of water as the substance that is most vital to their continued existence”<sup>77</sup>.

To swim, then, is a form of correspondence – between body and world, self and environment, body and body. The water, felt, touched, touching, facilitates this correspondence, charging it with meaning. The physicality of it is crucial, urgent. I think of Shapton drawing (“imagine you are running your hand over the surface...”), of Rodaway describing a sensuous geography which is both “a physical

73. Ingold 2014: 389-390

74. Ingold 2013: 108

75. Ingold 2013: 108

76. Ingold 2013: 107

77. Strang 2005: 99

and a cultural geography”, of the etymology of the word geography itself – earth (geo-), drawing (-graphie). Of Ingold’s letter writers, scribing their thoughts, waiting for answers.

And I’m reminded of the discipline of lap swimmers, the “‘straight-line’ predictability”<sup>78</sup> of their encounter with water, which recalls the ruled paper of my schooldays, the margins, the spaces, the lines. Perhaps the pool is a page, and the swimmer a geographer in the old, literal sense of the word, a writer of place, each lap a new line in an ongoing and thickening text.

xiv.

*What is it to swim?*

That question, always nagging at the edge of my mind. If I wade out in a river, hip-deep, and dip briefly below the surface: is that to swim? *No. Yes. No. Yes.* It’s too easy to get bogged down in all this, to be carried away on a current. “Water,” writes Laing, “is sly; make no bones about it. It slips in anywhere, though the doors might be barred against it, and is most equitable, favouring neither sewers nor churches”<sup>79</sup>. So it slips into my consciousness, too. What I miss, sitting in that cottage in Wales, watching the rain dribble down the steamy windowpane and the blurred figures of two cyclists climbing the hill behind the house, is largely my routine, and the routine is largely a product of the pool itself. I miss the familiarity of my route to the pool, the blow of hot air as the doors open, the comfort of overhearing changing room conversations about gardening and kids growing up and holidays in Cornwall, the physical challenge, the upkeep of fitness, the constant comparison of myself to myself – *last week I swam that distance faster; but then again, last year I swam it slower.*

But there’s also that element of swimming which is less to do with the pool environment specifically and more to do with whatever it is that also makes a quick dip in a frigid, shallow stream a fulfilling experience – I miss that, too.

So to swim, perhaps, is to enter a certain state of mind, to take yourself to a certain place, or be taken there – to be both freed and contained by the water itself. The pool, the pond, give us different structures and symbolisms, but really they are both

78. Foley 2015: 223

79. Laing 2011: 148

sites for the entering of this state of mind – portals, gateways (“Thus the miniscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world,” Bachelard wrote<sup>80</sup>). The pool, in all its banal, humdrum, (sub)urban glory, can be just as much a thrilling site for the exploration of the human relationship to water as a river, a cove; indeed, to those who perceive it, in contrast to the wilderness of an ocean or a lake, as a site of “comfort, safety, reliability and calmness” the pool may be the only place where this communion with water can take place<sup>81</sup>.

The one thing it’s not possible to do, wherever you are, is to separate swimming from water. The swimmer is almost completely invisible until she’s actually swimming: maybe she’s wearing a swimming costume underneath street clothes, or carrying a towel in her rucksack as she hikes through Sussex, but how would you know?

80. Bachelard 1994: 153

81. Foley 2015: 223



## COSTUME

Orange County | Goggles | Fogging and leaking | “Becoming a swimmer” | Performance | A flicker of recognition | Familiar caps | Intimate apparel | Second skin | “To show and to hide” | Different bodies | An onion | Transition zone | The mask

*i.*

A couple of winters ago I needed a new pair of goggles while I was in California, so I stopped by a shop in Orange County, and I got to chatting with the woman behind the counter. She asked if she could help, and I said, maybe rather ambitiously, that I was searching for the perfect goggles. She asked me where I swam – outdoors, indoors? It was a summer-hot day, no clouds, no wind, with the sun pressing down hard, and outside, in the glare, everyone's eyes were hidden under dark glasses. But I said indoors, in England, where it's dark and rainy much of the time, so she handed me a pair of orange-tinted Speedos and promised they'd brighten up the pool. And she was right. They completely changed the tenor of my early-morning winter swims. Now I have to order them specially from the US, but it's worth it for the way the pool seems to glow when viewed through those lenses: it becomes a different place, more spacious, more full of possibility, even though nothing about it has changed; the lane lines are just as rigid, the walls as impermeable, the light artificial.

*ii.*

To swim laps requires an almost intuitive awareness of one's surroundings, because those surroundings are as much a threat as they are a safe and insular container. You must be always aware of the limits of the pool, the head-knocking walls and knuckle-bruising lane lines, always aware of the other swimmers and their thrashing limbs, always aware of where you are in relation to all other components of the pool, so that you can avoid collision or transgression.

At their most basic, goggles are a means of achieving this awareness. While certain senses and physical knowledges are heightened or honed by being in water – the muscle-memory of a practiced stroke, for instance – others are hampered: sounds are muffled, vision in the churned, chlorinated water is distorted.

Goggles, then, are a form of protection: from chemicals, from collision with lane lines, walls, or other bodies, and from prying eyes. Faces are hidden behind plastic shields, eye contact becomes virtually impossible, and even the direction of a gaze is indiscernible, lending a form of privacy both to those who might view and those who might be viewed. Put another way, goggles are a form of augmentation, both for the body and for the environment itself: clarifying vision underwater, making

the body's actions in the pool more, or differently, possible, turning a gloomy winter-dark setting into a space that glows faintly but determinedly.

While goggles are a way of seeing, though, they also obscure. They may be a form of armour, but it's fallible armour. They fog, they leak, they let the outside in. These processes of fogging and leaking are part of the natural lifecycle of a pair of goggles, but they're also a broader part of the pool ecology, a part of the highly individualised world of a swimmer.

iii.

There's a symbolism to it, too. I notice, for instance, that before the last lap of any swim, I like to make sure my goggles are unfogged, dipping them in the water to cleanse them before I set off, so that I always have a sense of clarity at the end of a swim.

Recording notes about my daily swims, I find myself routinely, regularly preoccupied by the particular clarity or fogginess of my goggles, not only because this impacts the overall experience of a swim but also because it contributes, over time, to some deeper understanding of the pool environment:

*My goggles get hopelessly fogged now; during the warm up it felt a bit like swimming through a heavily-misted lake at morning, as if the fog was clinging to the water and I could only almost discern shapes ahead of me, like the swimmer in front of me, who disappeared entirely from view if she was more than five or ten metres ahead. Truly one's own world<sup>1</sup>.*

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*New goggles, fresh from America, so clear! A bit tight, as they always are before they form to your face, but so nice to see through the water with such clarity. It won't last, so I have to enjoy it while I can. Enjoyed the patterns of light on the floor of the pool, and noticing things – cracks in the tiles, things floating around, the bodies of swimmers several lanes to my right – that I wouldn't otherwise have seen. Certainly a contrast to the fuzzy world of last week!<sup>2</sup>*

\*

*My goggles are exceptionally foggy, and I found myself remembering how I used to hate it*

1. Fieldnotes, Tuesday 10th June 2014

2. Fieldnotes, Wednesday 16th July 2014

when they reached this stage in their lifecycle, but how now I can sort of feel my way around. You just start to know your body in this space, in relation to other bodies. Almost intuitively. It doesn't matter so much if you can't see a few metres in front of your face – you learn to gauge what's going on in other ways, by remembering where other swimmers are and what their speed is and knowing your course so well that even if you closed your eyes you still wouldn't veer from your path. But I do have a bottle of goggle anti-fogging spray in my bag that someone got me for Christmas and I really should use it because there's also something really special about that crystal-clear view of the pool, the way it opens up, seems to widen, to deepen<sup>3</sup>.

## iv.

When I first started swimming regularly I bought the cheapest pair of goggles I could find – £5, clear, with blue plastic frames. They leaked so much that at the end of every length I would have to stop and empty them out. Then I bought a pair that didn't fit my face properly: they were enormous, made my head feel pin-sized, swallowed my eyes and half of my cheeks. I kept experimenting, and for a while, even when they were clearly of no use to me, I had an attachment to my old abandoned goggles; I never threw them away, and they gathered dust in a drawer, an increasingly large collection of cast-offs. Eventually some pragmatic urge took hold of me and I tossed them, but I understood as I did that I had been in some small way collecting artefacts, charting my progress as a swimmer, from tentative, un-savvy beginner to someone who had a strong preference, who bought the same pair over and over again. When I found my pair, with the orange lenses, I no longer needed the museum of discarded goggles as a record; my allegiance, my habit, was evidence enough of my journey.

Finding the right pair of goggles is a highly personalised quest, primarily about comfort, intimately linked to the shape and size of the face. "I spent years seeking the perfect pair of goggles," writes Lynn Sherr in *Swim: Why We Love the Water*. "Some leaked. Some made me feel penned in. They all hurt and left deep rings around my eyes. I thought I'd figured it out with a comfy brand that rested gently on foam, but they only fit erratically. I have finally found true goggle contentment with a slightly larger style from Aqua Sphere that allows me a more panoramic view and doesn't leave me looking like a raccoon"<sup>4</sup>. But there's also something about it

3. Fieldnotes, Thursday 12th February 2015

4. Sherr 2012: 146



which is much more for the benefit of others: goggles as status symbol, perhaps. Flipping through Leanne Shapton's *Swimming Studies*, I come across this passage:

“By 1988, when I was swimming seriously, minimal Swedish goggles had arrived in southern Ontario. These were molded plastic eyepieces that fit securely into the eye socket, without any rubber or foam lining the rims. [...] There was a coach who sold Swedish goggles poolside at Ontario meets for \$12. I bought two, a red pair and a brown pair that came, unassembled, in narrow ziplock bags. [...] These goggles marked a step up in my swimming career, from okay to good. It was the beginning of my loyalty to equipment, to rituals and patterns. These goggles are a Masonic handshake. Even now, if I see other swimmers using them, I know they know”<sup>5</sup>.

It reminds me of my own practice, my devotion to the orange-lensed American goggles with their American optimism (almost literally rose-tinted glasses) – the “rituals and patterns”. It reminds me, too, of a conversation with Alice, who's been swimming devotedly since 2011, when she took part in an organised open water swim with a friend. Prior to this, she tells me, she didn't consider herself athletic at all – she was “someone who just *hated* sport as a child, I never did *any*... I took up cycling in my early 20s as a way of getting around the place – that was the first time I'd ever done anything exercisey, and that was just for commuting”<sup>6</sup>. She talks about the identity she's developed through swimming in relation to what she wears and uses in the water:

“I'm fairly low-gadget, I usually just swim with my watch, and then my goggles and hat. I'll find it impossible to swim without goggles and a hat. Even when I'm just going for a – you know, whatever, not really swimming. And that's a real shift to ‘becoming a swimmer!’, as opposed to being someone who swims sometimes. [...] That's been a profound change in my life over the last three or four years. It's been the biggest thing that came out of swimming. People I've met recently think of me as sporty. Which is just hilarious!”<sup>7</sup>

“I know they know,” Shapton writes: everything we wear at the pool is saying something to someone, but also saying something to ourselves. *I am a serious swimmer*, I

5. Shapton 2012: 247-248

6. Alice, interview, July 2014

7. Alice, interview, July 2014

sometimes imagine my own get-up is telling me, even though in the grand scheme of serious I'm not even on the scale. Still, I choose not just my goggles but also my costumes not only according to how they fit and how they feel but also according to how I think they will be perceived by others.

When I first started swimming regularly I would watch the fast-lane swimmers, the girls particularly, and admire the ease with which they wore their suits: loud, ugly patterns, thin straps, open backs, high-cut legs. It was like a uniform, a costume in both senses, and I wanted to wear it too.

v.

Of course it is a costume, as the pool is a stage, a setting for the act of swimming. The *act*: a word which connotes the theatrical, the practice, the performance, the rituals, superstitions, repetitions. Swimming laps, maybe, is like learning lines.

Perhaps it's not coincidence that development and promotion of the swimsuit as a garment, and indeed swimming as an activity, has been linked to swimmers who were also performers in other arenas. Examples include the Australian swimmer, diver, vaudeville star and silent-movie actress Annette Kellerman, whose trademark (and revolutionary) one-piece swimsuit helped popularise the style in the early 1900s; starlet/swimmer Esther Williams, who starred in the 1952 film of Kellerman's life, *Million Dollar Mermaid*; and Johnny Weissmuller, known not only for his prowess as an Olympic swimmer but also as a Hollywood actor, famously taking on the role of Tarzan in 1932. These figures had the charisma and the platform to set and spread trends; as Christine Schmidt puts it in her history of the swimsuit: "Swimmers and performers closely tied to entertainment, leisure and sport – at the beach, in the pool and theatre – together with early swimwear producers (underwear and stocking manufacturers), drove early design innovations in swimsuits"<sup>8</sup>.

The very use of the term costume implies a kind of performance on the part of the wearer, whomever he or she might be. In the context of the pool, then, the costume is a further kind of mask, like goggles: an armour against embarrassment in a place where the body is on public display<sup>9</sup>. Perhaps it's counterintuitive to feel that wear-

8. Schmidt 2012: 72

9. Evans, Allen-Collinson and Williams point out that, "In aquatic activities, the art of distribution of bodies within and around a swimming pool creates a gendered context in which 'order' and 'civility' are maintained through the mutual scrutiny of near-naked bodies presented in asexual, socially constructed 'just a swimmer' roles. This social configuration is fragile, however, and vulnerable to challenge, disruption or threat and is

ing practically nothing – a tight suit cut high at the leg, a silicone cap that hugs the head close, goggles that press rings around the eyes – is a protection, a way of preserving anonymity, but it's how I feel: no one can see me when I swim, at least not the way they can see me elsewhere. Some people are self-conscious about squeezing into swimwear, flattening their hair and ears, showing skin usually reserved only for lovers or doctors, but in a sense this act also squeezes and flattens the self.

In costume, then, the swimmer becomes simply a swimmer; there are no particular clues to other identities. Leaning against the wall, stretching before her daily swim, she observes, even brushes shoulders with, people that she may encounter in other contexts. But how would she know?

*vi.*

About a year after our interview, I see Alice on a bus. There's no reason I shouldn't: we live in the same city, in the same part of town, but it's a jarring encounter because it's out of context. We were both members of the same triathlon club for a time, but I let my membership lapse, and we haven't seen each other since. Even when we were seeing each other regularly it was mostly in the changing rooms or the lanes – quick hellos, stripping down, suiting up, standing at the edge of the pool, pausing at the wall for a breather. Now I wave as I pass her on the bus, and she looks up, mildly confused, politely receptive, and then, at the last moment, there's a flicker of recognition.

It reminds me that when we first spoke, she'd told me she liked swimming with other people, so she'd joined the triathlon club the previous year even though she had no plans to compete in a triathlon.

"I find it very motivating when I'm in the pool to be doing it together with other people," she'd said. "The funny thing about swimming is that you actually don't know anyone very well. Like, we never see each other out of context. Really we just do a bit of small talk in the changing rooms, and then we get in the pool, and then there's a little bit of banter between sets, or commenting on what's coming next or whatever, and then apart from that we're in our own heads swimming. So it's this weird sort of social, isolated thing going on. And also the fact that you just spend

maintained only through participants' adherence to reflexive body techniques and tacit disciplinary rules" (Evans, Allen-Collinson and Williams 2016: 6).

a lot of time without very many clothes on. People that you don't know very well. And then sometimes when you see them in public with their clothes on you don't even recognise them"<sup>10</sup>.

vii.

The costume means various things to various people. It means something to the wearer, of course. Take the swimming hat: to wear a hat is an act of personal preference and convenience, but also of respect to others, especially if a pool doesn't mandate that all swimmers do. It sleekens your form, but it also indicates a desire to contain, to prevent an intrusion of hair. Or it can be a status symbol, a way of bolstering confidence by marking oneself out as competent, even competitive. Some people address this explicitly, saying they're aware that other swimmers might read something into a hat, or that they sometimes make a conscious choice to wear a hat they think will be interpreted in a certain way.

The triathletes I speak with seem particularly aware of this, interested in establishing their ability or level of seriousness, or assessing others, based partly on dress. Katherine, who identifies primarily as a swimmer, rather than a triathlete, but who completed a half Ironman last year, puts a poignant spin on this awareness. Earlier this year, she'd broken her wrist in a bike accident and had been forced to spend five weeks out of the water – the longest such period of time, she says, for ten years:

“Sometimes people talk to you if you're wearing a hat from a particular race and they want to know about it. I did a half Ironman last year, and everyone sees the Ironman-branded hat, wants to know what Ironman I did, and I have to say, ‘well, it was only a half, and I'm not really a triathlete!’ I think hats sometimes create a bit of a chance to have a chat to people. I'm always quite interested in what other people have got on their hats, I'll always look and see if I can identify it. And actually, after my broken wrist, I wore my half Ironman hat, and it just made me want to cry, cause I thought, how did I manage to do a half-Ironman, and here I am with this pathetic wrist that's only come out of plaster three hours ago?”<sup>11</sup>

Katherine's friend Shelley says she approaches the selection of a swimming hat

10. Alice, interview, July 2014

11. Katherine, interview, July 2014

with a desire to show off but also to match it to her swimsuit: “I have loads of hats, and I get a hat every time I do a race. So yeah, sometimes I think about matching it to my swimsuit. [...] Unfortunately my most impressive race was the one I just did, and it was a plain hat. Although it was blue, which matches my cool blue peacock swimsuit, which I didn’t really have a hat to match with before, so that’s okay!”<sup>12</sup>

Geoff, meanwhile, outlines his agenda, tracing its origin to something he once read. “I’ll usually wear my best swimming hat,” he says. “My best one at the moment is one that I gained from doing a 5k swim last summer, so I usually wear that one. I read that in a book – *Can’t Swim, Can’t Run, Can’t Ride*, by Andy Holgate. One of the things in his book is that depending on the stature of your swimming hat, it changes how much people get out of your way. You know: a triathlon hat’s worth so many points, but having a swimming club hat is worth even more because that indicates that you actually enjoy doing it and you’re not just swimming cause you had to for a triathlon!”<sup>13</sup>

This awareness of image, of perception, extends beyond just the hat, which is after all potentially a very explicit marker if branded with race distances or distinctive logos – Shelley, for instance, like Alice, also speaks to me about her growing identity as a “swimmer” in terms of costume more generally, referencing the fact that Katherine, a more experienced swimmer, has an array of brightly-coloured, matching hats and suits, and suggesting that this has inspired her own attitude towards dress at the pool:

“I always bought like, the cheapest whatever,” she says. “I never wanted to spend money on swimming stuff. And then I met Katherine, and I really wanted to get a cool swimsuit. And this year I got another two – they’re all the same brand, Funkita, which I really like. And actually quite a few people have commented on them, so that’s quite nice!”<sup>14</sup>

As Alice hints at (“sometimes when you see them in public with their clothes on you don’t even recognise them”), costume and habit are often the most reliable ways of knowing other regular swimmers at a pool. Trawling through my own field-notes I’m struck by how infrequently I refer to fellow swimmers by any kind of

12. Shelley, interview, June 2014

13. Geoff, interview, June 2014

14. Shelley, interview, June 2014

conventional physical characteristic – height, for instance, or weight, hair colour, ethnicity, facial features. Instead I refer mostly to costumes or habits. There’s “pink cap girl”, who swims at the same time I do most mornings and always wears a vibrant pink cap with a subdued navy suit; “lessons lady”, who I used to see taking lessons with an instructor on Wednesday evenings; “superslow lady”, who has a distinctive front crawl that looks deceptively elegant but moves her along at a snail’s pace; “peacock lady”, who wears a bright, peacock-patterned suit – all characters who appear and reappear and who I know primarily through what they wear, the particular rhythm of a stroke or a particular pattern of behaviour.

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FROM FIELDNOTES, TUESDAY 22ND APRIL 2014

*Busy today...I chose the medium lane closest to the window, as there were only two swimmers in it to start. As time wore on, the occupants of the lane shuffled a little, some people leaving, some people coming in, and I ended up sharing it with all familiar faces (faces? Maybe “familiar caps” or “familiar suits” would be more appropriate – I don’t really know what their faces look like!): Lessons Lady, Union Jack-Cap Girl, and Bright Cap/Slow Stroke.*

\*

Once I’m surprised to find myself in conversation with a lifeguard who recognises me and knows that I’m not swimming at my usual time – “I *thought* it was you!” he says – until I remember that I wear exactly the same cap, suit, and goggles every single day. He probably has no idea what I look like when I’m just cycling along my street with wet hair, on the way to the bakery and then home to sit at my laptop for hours, but in my ugly-purple-swirl suit, which I bought to emulate those fast-lane swimmers I saw when I first started coming here, I am a distinctive, identifiable regular. It’s a feeling that stays with me for a while after the exchange, though it was such a small, casual encounter: a feeling of belonging, of having a place here.

viii.

The costume, then, can be a badge, a way of signalling an identity to oneself as well as to other swimmers. But it’s also a practical object, with a specific purpose, and in this sense it anonymises as well as identifies. The costume in the context of lap swimming is different to the costume a swimmer might wear to the beach on holi-

day, as Daisy, a librarian, points out. “I’ve got a couple of costumes,” she says, “and just as they wear out I get something else, but I don’t get anything super trendy, or really expensive, cause I think, it’s just gonna wear out. And I don’t feel that there’s that much posing that goes on in the swimming pool, do you know what I mean? Because people tend to just get in. It’s not like the beach, you know, so it’s not like – hey, I’ve got things hanging out! So I’m just comfortable with something functional”<sup>15</sup>.

But underneath it all is still the vulnerability of being naked, or nearly-naked, amongst strangers. Without the costume, the mask, would the task be impossible? As the sociologist Susie Scott has written, “the swimming costume desexualizes the naked body by defining it as an instrument of the will, to be utilized alongside goggles, flippers, floats and other impersonal objects. This is a triumph of mind over body, a hallmark of disciplinary power. The aforementioned items of paraphernalia also discursively constitute the swimmer’s body as a tool of exercise: they are not only functional but dramaturgical props [...] or pieces of identity equipment: ‘I am just a swimmer’, they convey, ‘no more and no less’”<sup>16</sup>.

The context of swimming laps may make it easier to ignore, but the fact remains that the costumes on which participants rely bear an uncanny resemblance to the items of clothing that usually go unseen, underneath. Indeed, a number of companies credited with pioneering manufacture of the modern swimsuit began by producing underwear and “intimate apparel” – including Speedo, which was founded in 1928 but which has earlier origins as MacRae Hosiery, established by Alexander MacRae in 1914. The design of swimming costumes, the fashion historian Jennifer Craik writes, “has had close connections with underwear because of their shared proximity to the body. The difference is that swimwear takes underwear into the public arena”<sup>17</sup>. Or, as Patricia Marx glibly puts it in a *New Yorker* article on shopping for swimsuits, “Bathing suits – let’s not kid ourselves – are underwear, but worse. For, unlike underwear, they do not work behind the scenes. Bathing suits are the whole show”<sup>18</sup>. Marx is writing about swimsuits in a different context – for fashion, leisure, (dis)play – but what she writes is not untrue of costumes worn for lap swimming. They, too, do not work behind the scenes; they too are the “whole

15. Daisy, interview, August 2014

16. Scott 2010: 154

17. Craik 1993: 133

18. Marx 2009: unpaginated

show”, at least where clothing is concerned (the body itself, and particularly its ability to perform, is also part of the show).

ix.

The idea of effectively being in your underwear in public is the stuff of nightmares – yet at the pool people voluntarily do this on a daily basis. Whether or not there’s much “posing”, as Daisy puts it, the fact remains that to wear a swimming costume is to wear not much at all. Indeed, the evolution of the swimming costume has been a sort of continuous paring down, “from murderous Victorian crinolines to barely-there wisps of fabric,” as Sarah Kennedy puts it in her history of women’s swimwear<sup>19</sup> – a “transition from clothed to unclothed”<sup>20</sup>. The swimming costume was essentially a Victorian invention; Kennedy describes how, in the late 1770s, young women “sport[ed] white muslin shifts to bathe in, which became fetchingly transparent when wet. [...] There was no notion of the bathing costume until well into the middle of the nineteenth century, when the sensible Victorians came along and ended all the fun”<sup>21</sup>. As Christine Schmidt writes, “With the advent of swimming as a popular pastime and the introduction of mixed bathing, there was social pressure to adopt clothing for the sake of modesty”<sup>22</sup>. Thus was born the costume, initially a bulky, relatively impractical garment, as Schmidt describes:

“The standard costume for men was a heavy one-piece design that covered the arms and torso, and thighs, while the typical women’s costume consisted of a yoked dress that was pleated, long-sleeved, and belted. Drawers that extended to the ankle were attached to the dress to ensure that the body was not exposed. These garments were generally made in wool or cotton and were cumbersome – restricting movement in the water”<sup>23</sup>.

Fashions aside, the development of the swimsuit has been a process of functional refinement; that it has become a garment which in some forms seems to mimic nakedness, a sort of second skin, is at least partly because in order to successfully swim, the swimmer must not be impeded by what they’re wearing. The Victorian costumes for women were not only impractical for athletic swimming (a point

19. Kennedy 2007: 6

20. Schmidt 2012: 6

21. Kennedy 2007: 18

22. Schmidt 2012: 7

23. Schmidt 2012: 7



raised, for instance, by the British swimmer Agnes Beckwith, who swam the six miles from London Bridge to Greenwich in 1875 and fought, with the support of the Amateur Swimming Association, for the right to wear lighter weight costumes) but bulky to the point of danger: “The actual act of swimming was almost impossible for women in those days,” Kennedy recounts. “The cumbersome outfits they were obliged to wear for modesty’s sake were heavy and restricted movement. Instead of abandoning swimming to the men, they fearlessly waded into the water dressed, as some nineteenth-century diarists remarked, in more clothes than they would wear on dry land. The modesty and decency laws of the day cost them dear and women were known to drown in the simple act of trying to take a swim”<sup>24</sup>.

By the mid-1900s, sportswear brands such as Speedo and Arena had pared down the competition suit for both men and women to such an extent that it bore in some ways more resemblance to skin itself than to the original, heavy, baggy bathing costume. “The goal with a racer’s swimsuit is for it to fit as closely to the body as possible, eliminating drag and maximizing speed,” as Kennedy puts it<sup>25</sup>. Names such as Powerskin (a range of performance-enhancing swimwear developed by Arena in 2000) and Fastskin (developed by Speedo in the same year, and made of fabric that mimicked “the unusual characteristics of sharkskin” in order to decrease drag) reinforce this sense of closeness between skin and suit<sup>26</sup>.

In this way the evolution of the swimsuit has been not only about a reduction (of fabric, drag, interference) but about an enhancement or augmentation of performance: not only imitating nakedness but improving on it. By the 1960s Speedo and other brands were positioning their costumes as “performance-enhancing”<sup>27</sup>, and by the 1976 Montreal Olympics, where Speedo was the official swimwear licensee, Speedo’s suits could allegedly “shave seconds off of race times due to their briefer styling and lightweight textiles; additionally, swimmers wore suits two sizes smaller than their actual size” for maximum effect<sup>28</sup>. Speedo was, as Schmidt puts it, “paving the way for performance swimwear where the body and swimsuit are one”<sup>29</sup>. In 2008, they launched the controversial LZR Racer, a bodysuit “so tight it has been likened to a corset, with panels to stabilize the abdominal core to min-

24. Kennedy 2007: 15

25. Kennedy 2007: 226

26. Craik 2005: 169

27. Schmidt 2012: 59

28. Schmidt 2012: 59

29. Schmidt 2012: 61

imize fatigue during the race and give the swimmer a better body position in the water”<sup>30</sup>. In some ways this new suit, so advanced, called to mind its earliest predecessors, for, as Schmidt writes, “bodysuits such as the LZR Racer once again entrap the body”<sup>31</sup>.

In other words, wearing practically nothing – even if a highly-engineered, technical version of practically nothing – can, rather than free, also restrict, although this form of restriction produces markedly different results than the restriction of voluminous Victorian costumes, with the LZR Racer allegedly contributing to a number of new world records. Indeed, in January 2010, swimming’s international governing body, FINA (Fédération Internationale de Natation), ruled that the full-body LZR suit provided buoyancy, so therefore could give swimmers who wore it an unfair advantage over those who didn’t, and banned the suits from competition<sup>32</sup>.

x.

The costumes worn by regular lap swimmers are, of course, not so extreme, but brands like Speedo continue to put resources into researching and developing technologically-advanced swimwear, and not only for competition. “We’ve poured more than seven decades of swimwear expertise into developing our durable Speedo Endurance fabric technologies, designed to help you get the most out of your swimwear, whether you’re racing or relaxing in the pool,” Speedo boasts on their website<sup>33</sup>. As Schmidt writes: “For sportswear brands, products are marketed and available to elite athletes and the average sportsperson with the latter increasingly sourcing garments created for performance and fit”<sup>34</sup>.

By and large, the garments produced for “the average sportsperson” hug the figure closely, exposing great swathes of skin. So Schmidt is able to describe the development of the swimming costume as a “transition from clothed to unclothed”, as if the goal has been for the swimming costume to become so sleek as to be almost not there – but that *almost* is important. To be clothed at the pool is better than to be unclothed, for the sake both of athletic performance and social performance;

30. Schmidt 2012: 60

31. Schmidt 2012: 63

32. Schmidt 2012: 61

33. See <http://www.speedo.co.uk/technology/endurance-plus>

34. Schmidt 2012: 63

the costumes worn by regular lap swimmers may vary greatly in style, but what they have in common is a lineage that touches on issues of privacy, modesty, and appropriateness, as well as performance, technology, and enhancement. As the cultural historian Christopher Breward puts it, “The tendency of swimwear to accentuate the lines of the body when wet has also ensured that the swimsuit made the swiftest entry into the hedonistic and erotic registers of twentieth-century fashion, while also retraining a strong association with the Platonic foundations of the idea of sport as a higher spiritual and physical endeavour”<sup>35</sup>.

The great paradox of the modern swimming costume, then, is that it both restricts and frees, hides and reveals. In an article on ways in which men and women “have used the clothes they wear simultaneously to show and to hide their bodies”<sup>36</sup>, the literary scholar John Harvey points out that clothes of all kinds may conceal, but that “they also may emphasize what they conceal”<sup>37</sup>. Discussing ways “in which dress may speak nakedness”<sup>38</sup> he cites, for example, the empire line dresses popular in the early 19th century, which were sometimes made of fabric so sheer that “much that was hidden was also on show...to some contemporaries it appeared that the entire naked body of the wearer was simultaneously veiled and flaunted”<sup>39</sup>.

If certain kinds of dress speak nakedness, then the swimming costume practically screams it. Schmidt, discussing representations of the swimming costume in fashion photography, suggests that it has been provocative in part because “the swimsuit, unlike other items of clothing, does not have the ability to elaborately reveal or conceal the body” – for however well it may function as a mask, a shield against embarrassment, even a performance-enhancing piece of technology, the swimsuit is still a garment which frames and exhibits the body<sup>40</sup>. “The contemporary swimsuit,” fashion historian Jennifer Craik writes, “has social and practical attributes: to cling to the body, and reduce drag from the water. In aesthetic terms, modern swimsuits highlight bodily features associated with the display of fit and healthy bodies. Current codes of modesty are acknowledged by covering genitalia, yet simultaneously drawing attention to them by the cut and line of swimsuits”<sup>41</sup>. At

35. Breward 2008: 33

36. Harvey 2007: 65

37. Harvey 2007: 66

38. Harvey 2007: 70

39. Harvey 2007: 68

40. Schmidt 2012: 18

41. Craik 1993: 133

the pool, then, the swimming costume becomes something which both personalises and anonymises, something which, by being so tight, so revealing, highlights and foregrounds the body whilst also, by being so practical, so mundane, hides it in plain sight, amongst all the other bodies.

*xi.*

“Contemporary discussion of ‘the body’”, suggests John Harvey, “often has the effect of suspending the Body alone in space – naked, anonymous, isolated”<sup>42</sup>. The pool is certainly not only about the body in its naked isolation, but also about the clothed body in social space. In this social space, the potential for embarrassment and exposure lies not only in the literal exposure of the body via the swimming costume, but also in the nature of the environment at large: an environment which, like the costume, provides both a means of display and bodily encounter, as well as a way of enveloping and protecting. At the pool, there’s an etiquette at play which, should a swimmer adhere to it, theoretically counters the frankness and intimacy of skin, bodies, public exertion. As Susie Scott writes, “swimming pool etiquette creates a negotiated order, based upon three sets of norms: respect for personal space, respect for disciplinary regimes and the desexualization of encounters”<sup>43</sup>.

Indeed, the anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued that we all have two bodies: a physical body and a social body. The social body, she writes, “constrains the way the physical body is perceived”<sup>44</sup>. Harvey, referencing Douglas, expands upon this idea, suggesting that we have more than two bodies, perhaps even several different social bodies, which correspond to different social contexts (the “beach body”, say, the “bedroom body”, the “smart body”). “One function of dress,” he goes on, “is precisely to conjure for us different bodies that ‘suit’ different occasions occurring in different worlds”<sup>45</sup>. As an example he contrasts formal dressing with the more relaxed conventions of beach dressing, “where both men and women feel at ease showing off much of their bodies. This perhaps means that the body that is shown or hidden in smart clothes is not the same body that is shown openly for all to see in beachwear”<sup>46</sup>.

42. Harvey 2007: 66

43. Scott 2010: 149

44. Douglas 2003: 65

45. Harvey 2007: 81

46. Harvey 2007: 81

To talk about the swimming body as clothed – which, in spite of the swimming costume’s revealing form, it generally is in the pool – is therefore to acknowledge that, as Joanne Entwistle puts it, “the dressed body is always situated within a particular context, which often sets constraints as to what is and what is not appropriate to wear”<sup>47</sup>. Moreover, Entwistle suggests, “the body and dress operate dialectically: dress works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning, while the body is a dynamic field that gives life and fullness to dress”<sup>48</sup>. Or, as Jennifer Craik puts it, “Fashion is often thought of as a kind of mask disguising the ‘true’ nature of the body or person. It is seen as a superficial gloss. Yet [...] we can regard the ways in which we clothe the body as an active process or technical means for constructing and presenting a bodily self”<sup>49</sup>.

## xii.

“We imagine that there is a real or true self which lies deep within us,” the anthropologist Daniel Miller writes. “On the surface is found the clothing which may represent us and may reveal a truth about ourselves, but it may also lie. It is as though if we peeled off the outer layers we would finally get to the real self within”<sup>50</sup>. And yet, Miller concludes, such a self does not exist: instead “we are all onions. If you keep peeling off our layers you would find – absolutely nothing left”<sup>51</sup>.

There is no essential identity, Miller suggests, being revealed or concealed by our choice of dress; peeling back the layers – metaphorically or literally – does not bring us any closer to an underlying true self.

## xiii.

There is, as it happens one place within the pool environment in which layers of dress are regularly peeled off, in which the body is allowed, even encouraged, to be naked: the changing room, which acts as both a practical and symbolic transition zone. As Susie Scott puts it, “The process of (un-)dressing [...] is a ritualistic way of managing the transition into and out of the swimming role, drawing a mental boundary around other parts of the self”<sup>52</sup>.

47. Entwistle 2000: 328

48. Entwistle 2000: 327

49. Craik 1993: 1

50. Miller 2010: 13

51. Miller 2010: 13

52. Scott 2010: 154

The curious mix of intimacy and anonymity that characterises elements of the experience of swimming laps is evident in abundance in the changing room. Here, without the cloudy goggles, the hair-flattening hat, there are more notable physical or cultural characteristics which betray the swimmer's "outside" identity, and fewer markers of their "swimmer-self". Snatches of conversation or other little clues recall a world beyond the pool – someone dressed in a suit after an early-morning swim is likely going to work next; two young undergraduates discussing their upcoming exams offer a flash of insight into other aspects of their lives – but you can't know much about any of this for sure.

The changing room, then, is a space "betwixt and between two social worlds" where, by "shedding their street clothes", swimmers "symbolically discard their occupational, familial and other identities, and present themselves simply as bodies, with a mechanical function"<sup>53</sup>. But, of course, it's not so simple: swimming bodies are not, in Harvey's terms "alone in space – naked, anonymous, isolated"<sup>54</sup>. They are not *just* bodies, with a mechanical function, even though in a sense this is the role being played by the lap swimmer, going up and down, up and down. It is not so easy to discard other selves for the sake of the "pool body". Certain elements and motivations from one self bleed into another, and, after all, even with the mask or the costume on, you may be recognised, or recognise. Sometimes these different selves, these different bodies – the swimmer-self, the outside-world-self – overlap, or one world seems to intrude on another:

*At one point, using the kickboard, I spied something odd, something you see only very occasionally and which always registers as off-kilter, belonging in another universe: two people kissing, in the medium lane over by the window. It was Pink Cap and, I presume, a boyfriend; he was naked from the waist up, of course, and she was in her usual blue costume. As they shared their quick embrace I could almost feel the clamminess of the close wet skin, the cold rubbery surface. I don't mind it, but I was interested in how strange it felt to witness – if I passed people doing that on the street, or saw it in the pub, I wouldn't even register it<sup>55</sup>.*

Slowly, too, the people you see in the liminal space of the changing room, or the protected space of the pool, become recognisable outside of those contexts in spite

53. Scott 2010: 154

54. Harvey 2007: 66

55. Fieldnotes, Thursday 24th April 2014

of the costume and the mask. Habit renders anonymity impossible; repeated action builds memory and recognition into the mind and the muscles; sometimes when I am walking down my street now I really do see someone that I know from the pool – a distinctive face, a body shape, a coat I’ve seen hanging on a changing room hook (it’s like a kind of detective work, matching that coat to that body to that swimmer). Sooner or later the pool as a place is bound to overspill its boundaries.

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FROM FIELDNOTES, SUNDAY 14TH DECEMBER 2014

*A sunny, windy Sunday. Saw K., the poet, emerging from the pool as I pulled up on my bike, and getting on her Pashley – we have a mutual friend and I once had a very awkward drink with them both and ever since I have been unsure about whether or not she’s forgotten me or is just blanking me to be kind, to allow us to forget the discomfort of the encounter. Later in the evening I saw Pink Cap and her American friend at the bar in my local pub (their local pub too, perhaps). I had this sudden sense of these people potentially being all around me and not knowing because they’re not costumed, or, as with K. the poet, people from all aspects of my life having access to the pool-space which I think of as being so separate from everywhere else, and yet which is woven in to all the rest of my everyday life.*

xiv.

In an article on the fashion of wearing masks in seventeenth and eighteenth century England, the scholar Christoph Heyl traces the history of a desire for privacy. As, amongst urban middle classes in London, it “became ‘normal’ to live as a stranger among strangers, to accept and to respect the anonymity of others, a demand for privacy first became a mass phenomenon,” he writes<sup>56</sup>. Since “one of the basic functions of a mask is to conceal or at least to obscure a person’s identity, to turn its wearer, at least notionally, into a stranger”, the mask began to make symbolic sense<sup>57</sup>. Heyl gives the example of the black “vizard mask” popular amongst well-off women in London in the first half of the seventeenth century. The vizard mask was worn in winter – partly “to protect the delicate skin of the face from the cold,” Heyl writes, but, “apart from this primary purpose these masks were also a form of disguise”<sup>58</sup>. The disguise, however, was more notional than literal: “it was

56. Heyl 2001: 124

57. Heyl 2001: 122

58. Heyl 2001: 127

still fairly easy to recognize the wearer of such a mask which, after all, just covered the upper half of the face. But then even this must have been more than sufficient to introduce the *idea* of anonymity and therefore to modify the behaviour of the wearer [...] These masks offered new possibilities of playing with anonymity, and they probably gave a sense of protection, a sense of almost being invisible”<sup>59</sup>.

Reading Heyl, I’m reminded of the goggles which form such an essential part of my own experience of being at the pool. If the goggles are a mask, they do in some way produce a sense of almost being invisible, even if it’s a false sense: everyone at the pool is complicit in a kind of communal delusion of anonymity (akin, perhaps, to the “incognito ritual” Heyl describes, a sort of virtual form of disguise whereby “If you made it understood that you were incognito, people could of course still recognize you, but they were nevertheless expected to behave towards you as if you were completely disguised”<sup>60</sup>). And perhaps this sense of invisibility counters the sense of being exposed produced by wearing the swimming costume, which on the one hand disguises what Scott calls our “occupational, familial and other identities”, shrouds genitalia, protects modesty, but which, on the other hand, also calls attention to the body by seeking to so closely emulate its curves and expose its skin, by being a garment constructed so deliberately for *use* by the body.

I am under no illusion that my goggles, small and transparent as they are, obscure my identity, or that, in my swimming costume, I will not one morning be recognised by somebody from a completely other facet of my life, somebody alongside whom in any other context I would perhaps feel uncomfortable standing nearly naked. Nor am I under the illusion that there is not an element of looking, being looked at, at the pool, even when one is essentially doing work, rigidly adhering to etiquette, going through rituals and routines. But what is evident is that the pool is a setting for a certain style of dress, which facilitates a certain way of being-in-body: a stage for a role.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Heyl writes, masks grew bigger, to cover the entire face, and were worn in all seasons – but they were not worn indiscriminately: “The use of such masks was governed by informal rules: they were only worn in special places such as London parks and theatres”<sup>61</sup>. Their use in the-

59. Heyl 2001: 127

60. Heyl 2001: 128

61. Heyl 2001: 128



atres was particularly interesting, for, “while the players were acting on the stage, members of the audience could don a mask and thus assume an alternative persona, too, escaping from the role they played in everyday life”<sup>62</sup>.

And so I arrive again at the idea of the “costume”, the Victorian advent, which signals a sort of multiplicity of self, and suggests the dual states of intimacy and anonymity, sociality and isolation, hiding and revealing. The pool is, of course, the very stuff of everyday life for the regular lap swimmer: the mask here does not so much provide an escape from the role he or she plays in everyday life but *to* that role. And yet it too may provide a setting for, if not an alternative persona, not exactly a perfect escape, a foregrounding of a certain role, a brief, imperfect, but perfectly achievable sense of clarity.

62. Heyl 2001: 134



8

## RE-CREATION

A hiatus | Absence | “The geography closest in” | Better | “For fun? For fitness?” |  
Improvement | Stasis | The broken clock | A wild place | “A collection of numbers”  
| Denial | Control | The old habit | Up and down

*“The body is both mobile and channeled, both fluid and fixed, into places.”*

– Heidi Nast and Steve Pile<sup>1</sup>

i.

Every visit to the pool is different but in a sense every visit is the same.

I arrive and undress and pull on my tight suit and tight cap and walk to the shower and stand under it and stretch out my arms, touch my toes; I go to the edge of the pool, I jump into the shallow end, I push off from the wall, I flip at the other end. I swim up and down and up and down. I do this for years, every weekday when I can. Sometimes the routine is interrupted, for work, illness, travel, because the pool is shut, because I’m just too tired, too lazy, too tempted by some other amusement, but I try not to let too much time elapse between swims because – because I love to swim, but also, I think, because I’m worried about what might happen if I stop.

And then, in the autumn of 2014 – in the midst of research, fieldwork, writing, a close study of the habits and habitat of the lap swimmer – comes a pause: a doctor-ordered hiatus from swimming. For two months I don’t visit a pool once; not a long time in the grand scheme of things, but in the context of the pool’s minutiae, the banal, everyday nature of my relationship with it, it feels prolonged. It is disproportionately difficult to be away, hard to reconcile that to avoid the environment around which my entire exercise regime was based can, temporarily at least, actually be the best thing for my own health.

At first it’s a basic physical struggle. I do not sleep as well, eat as well, during this time of not swimming, as I adjust to a more sedentary existence, or a differently active existence, at least. I take to walking – long, slow strolls at the very edge of dusk, through parks and quiet suburban neighbourhoods that smell of woodsmoke and exhaust fumes – which satisfies a fundamental restlessness but opens up a different, gentler way of being physically in place, which in turn opens up a new set of anxieties. I feel my muscles going slack, and I am as uncomfortable with the idea of what will happen to my body if I can’t swim as with the reality of it.

My body, after all, is accustomed to its regular and particular exercise, and its

1. Nast and Pile 1998: 3

appearance as well as its abilities reflect that. In the months before the hiatus I'd been swimming more than usual, training a few nights a week with a club, as well as preparing to run a half marathon, all of which had contributed to a slightly sleeker, more muscular version of my usual self, and I am reluctant to so haplessly un-do what I've done to my body. I've done it both gradually, almost imperceptibly over the last few years, and also more aggressively, deliberately, in the last few months. I've been building something, but it turns out that whatever I've been building is more fluid than I'd imagined, and it slips out of my grasp, or I slip away from it.

My discomfort, my fear, is partly a form of vanity. I like the way my body looks: disciplined, in control. I know that it will start to look subtly different with each day or week that passes without a swim. It will become markedly undisciplined: a product, an outward reminder, of the irrationality of illness or injury, the things we can't control. "Appearance," I read, "symbolizes inner discipline and invites moral evaluation in such terms"<sup>2</sup>. Or, as Susan Bordo puts it, "the firm, developed body has become a symbol of correct *attitude*; it means that one 'cares' about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to 'shape your life'"<sup>3</sup>.

ii.

To maintain some link with the pool I keep up a regular practice of writing field-notes, even though I am not in the field: notes about absence, about what I am missing, about the things that are being both subtracted from and added to my world. "This is the longest I've gone without a swim in years," I write at one point, "and the thing I miss partly is the comfort of it, the grounded-ness I feel after even a frustrating morning swim, and partly the physical sensation. But it's the physical implications, too: I miss what it *does* to my body, both in terms of how it feels and how it looks. My shoulders are weakening, subtly, and even if no one else can see it, *I* can. I know."

After I write this I remember something my interviewee Alice had said to me that summer. It was a baking-hot, blue-sky day, and we sat outside in a park near the river, listening to the shouts of children at play, talking about swimming:

2. Howson 2004: 98

3. Bordo 2003: 195

“I really like what swimming does to my body,” she’d said. “It’s transformed how I feel about it, and also what it looks like<sup>4</sup>. And that’s really powerful when you grow up, especially as a young woman, feeling constantly dissatisfied with your body. My body was always irritatingly dissatisfying. You know, it was a bit overweight, and it was this annoying pear shape, and I was never going to be one of those svelte people that didn’t have hips or whatever, and it took exercise for me to learn to love it”<sup>5</sup>.

iii.

Geographers write about what the poet Adrienne Rich called “the geography closest in – the body” (“Here at least I know I exist,” she wrote<sup>6</sup>), about the inseparability of the body from our experience of place: we sense places, are bodily present in them, see them, hear them, smell them, move within them<sup>7</sup>. “Geographical experience,” as Paul Rodaway puts it, “is fundamentally mediated by the human body, it begins and ends with the body”<sup>8</sup>.

*Here at least I know I exist* – and I also know the outside world through my body first. I know my pool through my body: through the feel of the water on my skin, the smells – chlorine, a faint and inexplicable whiff of sewage – that settle in my nose, the years of habitual movement through the place which have left traces in memory and muscle. When I swim I know the distance that I’ve done because I’ve counted laps in my head, but I also know it more intuitively, if less precisely, from the tiredness in my muscles, the way my body feels. The body reflects this knowledge: in the way it works, the way it looks, the way it operates in space. “The body,” as Tim Edensor writes, “is the means through which we experience and feel the world [...] bodies are not only written upon but also write their own meanings and feelings upon a space in a process of continual remaking”<sup>9</sup>.

This continual remaking is mutual: both space and body are in flux, in relation to each other and as separate entities. And the body itself is a place, the first place, the place we must make peace with – and like any other place, it is fluid: it changes from

4. As Throsby has put it: “the process of becoming a swimming body not only involves the anticipated changes in performance and body composition, but also changes the way that the body feels” (2013: 13).

5. Alice, interview, July 2014

6. Rich 1986: 212

7. See chapter three, “Exercise, Body and Place”, for more on this

8. Rodaway 1994: 31

9. Edensor 2000: 100

moment to moment, year to year, gets older, bigger, smaller, more and less capable of performing certain tasks. Geographical conceptualisations of place as something fluid, becoming, “not a given but something immanent, forever forming, and in progress”<sup>10</sup> are as apt to describe a city, a mountain range, a street or a swimming pool, as they are a body: “a processual, polyvocal, always-becoming entity”<sup>11</sup>, something with “multiple identities”<sup>12</sup>; something which is, in fact, “nothing if it is not *in process*”<sup>13</sup>.

This seems obvious in a way – that the body, capable of transformation on multiple levels, is not a fixed entity, and that in its always-becomingness it will never achieve some ultimate, true version of itself. But the interruption to my own routine underlines the point, exaggerates my understanding of the extent to which my own body is in process, just as the pool itself, as a place, is in process.

iv.

Habitual lap swimmers visit the pool for all kinds of reasons: to train for an event or a goal, to lose weight, to gain muscle, because other forms of physical activity hurt, because friends or family have encouraged them, because they enjoy it<sup>14</sup>. But they are all, in their own way, engaging in exercise. And the exercised body, the story goes, both works better<sup>15</sup> and *looks* better<sup>16</sup> than the idle body. These two things work in tandem, whether or not we intend them to. Where one exercises to influence physical appearance, a side effect might be that “one not only ‘looks good’ but also ‘feels great,’” as the sociologist Alexandra Howson writes, but one

10. Anderson 2012: 574

11. Price 2004: 1

12. Massey 1991: 28

13. Doel 1999: 7

14. Sometimes, too, the reasons are manifold, and tied in with less tangible motivations. For instance: “The swimming’s to help me lose weight, which has been quite successful. I’ve lost 10 kilos in the last three months. ... [But] the end goal is just feeling quite good. It’s like with yoga. I feel – I don’t know, there’s something about it, there’s a balance to the exercise. You know, it’s not body sculpturing, if you know what I mean. It’s sort of like, everything gets a bit of a workout. It’s just to make things slightly stronger” (Daisy, interview, August 2014).

15. A correlation between exercise and health is, broadly speaking, fairly well established; see “Health, Exercise and Place” for more on this.

16. “Look better” is of course subjective, but certain ideals are acknowledged as particularly pervasive in the West, and “the imagery created and circulated in consumer culture places a premium on images of youth, beauty and health and fitness” (Howson 2004: 113); this also has gendered implications, whereby, for instance, “the slender body – a body that takes up less physical space – has been internalized as the current Western ideal” (Howson 2004: 113); or as Bordo puts it: “It has been amply documented that women in our culture are more tyrannized by the contemporary slenderness ideal than men are, as they typically have been by beauty ideals in general” (2003: 204).

might equally maintain one's body for the sake of health, and in this case “[t]he underlying body image informing this mode of maintenance is that of the body as a resource that can be preserved through vigilance. Here, the pursuit of healthy regimes produces cosmetic side effects such that people not only ‘feel great’ but also ‘look good’”<sup>17</sup>.

As exercise, then, swimming may be a method of body maintenance, but it is also potentially a method for change, a way of shaping or moulding: in this way it highlights the fluidity of the body-as-place, by implying that some progression can be made through the repeated action of the exercise. It is *re-creational*, in the sense outlined by the sports geographer John Bale. Bale, following the German scholar Henning Eichberg, sets out a “trialectic” of different kinds of body cultures in an attempt to outline the nature and definition of sport<sup>18</sup>. Using running as an example, he suggests three distinct, but overlapping, categories: at one extreme is playful, spontaneous running, as you might see amongst children outdoors; at the other is the “serious business” of elite competitive running: this is “top-class, achievement-oriented sport”<sup>19</sup>, which is “constituted on the basis of production: producing results, measuring, comparing and raising standards”<sup>20</sup>. Somewhere in between is “welfare running”, for fitness or wellness: the kind of running (or indeed swimming) that so many adults engage in, “a social-hygienic ‘sport for all’”<sup>21</sup>. In this case, Bale writes, “running is used as a form of re-creation. The body is re-created so that it works better”<sup>22</sup>.

17. Howson 2004: 98

18. See e.g. Eichberg 1998; as Bale and Philo write, “Eichberg applies his notion of a ‘trialectic’ in his desire to avoid the use of simple dualisms (e.g. sport/leisure) and to avoid a vulgar interpretation of ‘sport’. This ‘trialectic’ [...] amounts to an ‘ideal type’ for providing new and critical insights on body culture” (1998: 4)

19. Bale 2003: 2-3. Ideas of health, fitness, and wellness are not referenced un-critically here – “The aim,” Bale writes, “is to achieve good health – but health with what purpose in mind? To look good, to be able to work longer hours, to save the state money in medical provision, to keep people off the streets and out of trouble?” (2003: 8) There’s an element of self-responsibility attached to such re-creation, whereby for example, as the sociologist Mike Featherstone describes, “health educationalists assert that individuals who conserve their bodies through dietary care and exercise will enjoy greater health and live longer” so that “individuals assume increasing self-responsibility for their health, body shape and appearance” (Featherstone 1982: 25). For Featherstone it is consumer culture which has determined this purpose: “Consumer culture,” he writes, “latches onto the prevalent self-preservationist conception of the body, which encourages the individual to adopt instrumental strategies to combat deterioration and decay” (1982: 18). This is also relevant in the context of critiques of certain forms of regulation and social control associated with the “new” public health, discussed in “Health, Exercise and Place”.

20. Eichberg 1998: 122

21. Eichberg 1998: 123. Here Eichberg also points out that “There are also relations existing between the straight line of this social hygienic view and the straight line of hygienic sports space: clean and clear to survey, panoptical; the order of the gymnasium, of the fitness centre and of the school”, which calls to mind the architecture and structure of the swimming pool.



The idea, then, is this: that through exercise, in whatever form it takes, the body is made somehow “better” – both in terms of its physical health and appearance, but also in terms of its own ability to complete the actions and movements required for exercise. For the exerciser, after a few weeks or months or years of repeating the same actions, those actions become easier, more intuitive, maybe even more mechanical – “The exercise world,” as the author and critic Mark Greif writes in his essay “Against Exercise”, a critique of exercise culture, “expresses a will, on the part of each and every individual, to discover and regulate the machine-like processes in his own body”<sup>23</sup>. The body adapts to new or increased knowledge, even for those who are not, ostensibly, trying to train themselves. The recreational swimmer becomes a *re-creational* swimmer: the body changed, changing, even if subtly, slowly. And so after a week, a month, a year of practice, say, bilateral breathing whilst doing front crawl becomes instinctive; it is no longer necessary to think about a tumble turn; swimming 1,000 metres, once a difficult feat, is comfortable, maybe even too comfortable, so that a new challenge must be sought.

Another way to look at this is to consider it the result of the steadiness of habit: “Prolonged or repeated movement becomes gradually easier, quicker and more assured. [...] Effort diminishes according to the continuity and repetition of movement”<sup>24</sup>. It’s the slowness of embodied change – “the subtle, unconscious drift of

22. Bale 2003: 8

23. Greif 2004: unpaginated

24. Ravaissou 2008: 49. Habit is a concept that lends itself well to illuminating certain aspects the relationship between the body and place. The recent translation of Félix Ravaissou’s *Of Habit* (2008) has sparked particular interest in an understanding of habit not, as it has tended to be understood in the vein of Descartes and Kant, as “[p]ure mechanism, routine process, devitalization of sense [...] the disease of repetition that threatens the freshness of thought” (Malabou 2008: vii), but as something more dynamic. Habit, in this understanding, is not a negative but a productive force, not antithetical to change but in fact a driver as well as an outcome of it – it is “at first an effect, a way of being that results from change, but it gradually becomes a cause of change itself, as it initiates and maintains repetition” (Malabou 2008: ix). Habit is not, in other words, merely “empty repetition” (Dewsbury and Bissell 2015: 27), though repetition, as will be seen in the next chapter, is key to its influence. In geography, this understanding of habit has been employed to problematise “some of the very foundational arguments upon which dualist thinking operates” (Dewsbury and Bissell 2015: 22), particularly where the body is concerned (e.g. Dewsbury and Bissell 2015, Dewsbury 2015, Lea, Cadman and Philo 2015, Latham 2015). As Bissell writes: “Habit is an indispensable trope for considering the constitution of bodies, cleaving open crucial political questions concerning the forces that fold matter and thought”; it is indispensable, he writes, “since the modulations of repetition and difference, obduracy and transformation, that comprise habit invites us to question some of the stubborn dualisms that have often splintered organic from non-organic life; voluntary from involuntary agencies; freedom from determinacy; inside from outside; and activity from passivity” (Bissell 2012: unpaginated). Of particular relevance to this chapter, the transformative potential of habit, the way it can for instance “sculpt a particularly refined body” (Bissell 2012: unpaginated), has been highlighted, with specific reference to repetitive practices: “Practices repeated over and over sculpt bodily capacities for action in particular ways such that those practices become increasingly perfected and refined” (Bissell 2012: unpaginated). Indeed, through repetition, even “bafflingly complicated and physically demanding practices can transform in style from clumsy to graceful, demonstrating the cen-

transformation,” as J.D. Dewsbury puts it<sup>25</sup>: “the gradual and surreptitious move from novice to expert, from rooted effort to effortless grace, as any similar encounter between body and matter gets repeated”<sup>26</sup>.

For the swimmer, as with the runner or any other serial exerciser, this happens in two senses: the first invisible, under the surface and the skin, as muscles are trained and the body strings together the individual motions required to move through water into a reliable stroke – even if an imperfect one, slow or uneven, but pitched particularly to the body performing the actions – that can be employed regularly without having to concentrate on each aspect. The second is visible, as with practice, a swimmer might get fitter, stronger, building up muscle or stamina, losing weight. Thus the swimmer’s body is made, and un-made, by its relation to the pool: by the rhythm of encounters with water, lanes, lengths. As Dewsbury and David Bissell put it:

“Don’t places emerge *in habit*, through the repetition of practices and performances, itineraries and routines? Each rendition is accretive, building on the last and oriented to the next. Each rendition similar to the former but with new acquisitions introduced each time, however minute or imperceptible. Habit is then a way of appreciating that a sense of place is emergent and developmental, rather than static or authentic. Through repeated inhabitation, our sense of place can change in profound ways”<sup>27</sup>.

v.

One morning, at the pool, I am resting at the wall when a man in the next lane over, the fast lane, asks me if I’m training for something or if I just swim “for fun? for fitness?”

He’s in his early forties, at a guess, in decent shape, wearing a lime green cap, dark goggles. Instinctively I tell him I do it for fitness, although I’m not sure “fitness” is quite the right word – it feels too small somehow, too rigid or sterile: is that all it is, fitness? I think of Mark Greif, writing that “[m]odern exercise makes you acknowledge the machine operating inside yourself”<sup>28</sup>. I think that part of me does want

trality of habit to refine bodily capacities for action” (Bissell 2011: 2654) – glimpsed, for instance, in the practiced, seemingly instinctual actions of a musician or an athlete.

25. Dewsbury 2015: 42

26. Dewsbury 2015: 35

27. Dewsbury and Bissell 2015: 23

my stroke to operate mechanically, both in the sense of being consistent, perfect, and also effortless, thoughtless; but also that I find the act of swimming deeply and compellingly human. I value and strain against each individual moment in the pool, where in one instant I can feel as fast and fluid as a dolphin, an Olympian, an imagined ideal, and in the next almost unbearably heavy, out of touch with my self and my setting. This variability frustrates but also comforts me: a reminder on some almost laughably, imperceptibly small-scale level of being human, being fallible.

“I mean,” I go on, caught in a funny breathless moment, wanting a rest and also to push on simultaneously, ears half-full of water and eyes bleary, “It’s just a nice way to start the morning.”

The guy in the green cap nods vigorously; he seems almost relieved, as if we have shared some secret understanding. “I know,” he says. “I have to get my swim in so I can actually concentrate on work.”

We stand and chat for a few minutes. I tell him, by way of elaboration, that even though I’m not training, I sometimes feel competitive with myself; he says yes, he feels the same, he often sets little goals for himself: can I swim my usual distance in a shorter period of time? Can I keep up with that faster person for a length?

The whole exchange lasts only a minute or two. At a natural break in conversation, I push off the wall for my last few laps, and we progress up and back down the length of the pool in parallel. As I swim I think about that response: that I’m not training for anything. It’s true, on the surface: I’m not training for a race or an event of any kind; I have no particular goals. Still, my practice as a swimmer does feel like a form of training. But for what? For myself, I conclude: for my own satisfaction, for moments of validation, for the thrill of a particularly speedy length, an incremental improvement in the time it takes me to swim 400 metres, for a body that works better in water. Swimming for *re-creation*, I think, not for the first time. I think of those blurry distinctions Bale draws between “achievement-oriented sport” and “sport as recreation”. For the Olympian, Bale writes, in contrast to the re-creational athlete, “the aim is either to win or to improve one’s performance, i.e. to achieve a personal

record, something that places an emphasis on speed”<sup>29</sup>. I think of something else Alice told me, about swimming speed and ability:

“I think there’s a real divide between people who did club swimming as a kid, and people who came to it as an adult,” she’d said. “The club swimmers have just got this fundamental muscle memory technique, and I think for those of us who started later – we’ll never have that. And I’m fine about that, it’s just a different thing. I don’t swim to be fast, thank God, but I do find myself being quite hard on myself. And I am a bit competitive, not with individual people, but just about this sense of not being able to keep up. I spend a lot of the time worrying about not keeping up. Which is a miserable way to spend your time swimming! But I think there’s always this sense with swimming that if your technique was better then you could be faster, cause it’s just a technique thing. And because you can’t see what you’re doing, you have no idea how awful your technique is – you know, in your head you’re like a fish – and you’re thinking, *why am I such a slow fish?*”<sup>30</sup>

Swimming alongside the man in the green cap, irrationally pleased that he’s taken some interest in the way or the reason why I swim, vainly considering that it must be because I look competent, maybe even natural, effortless, like Alice’s club swimmers with their fundamental muscle memory, I become acutely aware of the ways in which the distinction between re(-)creational swimming and achievement-oriented swimming is blurred. For me, a so-called “fitness swimmer”, the goal is to get my mornings off to the right kind of start, as well as to build and maintain a certain (“healthy”) kind of body, with certain capabilities, a certain appearance. But I must acknowledge, if only to myself – though this is not entirely unrelated to those other aims – that it is also, and often equally, to incrementally improve my efficiency, speed, and overall ability: to achieve a personal record of some kind, even. I have no interest in competing, but I can’t shake the sense that I am, in another way, in constant competition with myself: always seeking to beat a past self, to improve, to move forward.

*vi.*

This cannot be a process of ceaseless improvement or movement towards an ultimate end goal, however. I know this. Try as we might, we can never reach the

29. Bale 2003: 8

30. Alice, interview, July 2014

mechanical ideal; “expert” is not a perfect state; true effortless is always on the horizon<sup>31</sup>. Every day is different and everyone, even the elite athlete, has a peak, beyond which no progress can be made. The novelist Haruki Murakami, writing about long-distance running, an activity to which he is devoted, puts it this way: “I am no longer able to improve my time. [...] At a certain age everybody reaches their physical peak”<sup>32</sup>. In his fifties, facing the prospect of another marathon, he writes:

“I don’t care about the time I run. I can try all I want, but I doubt I’ll ever be able to run the way I used to. I’m ready to accept that. It’s not one of your happier realities, but that’s what happens when you get older. Just as I have my own role to play, so does time. And time does its job much more faithfully, much more accurately, than I ever do. Ever since time began (when was that, I wonder?), it’s been moving ever forward without a moment’s rest. And one of the privileges given to those who’ve avoided dying young is the blessed right to grow old. The honor of physical decline is waiting, and you have to get used to that reality”<sup>33</sup>.

Certainly I find that the more I improve as a swimmer, the smaller the improvements get. When I first started swimming regularly, I made progress in leaps and bounds: one day swimming 50 metres continuously was unthinkable, and a few weeks later it was second nature. Now my improvements are on a much more minute scale, if they come at all. Most months are the same; my speed fluctuates, but only slightly, based not on fundamental ability but on mood, whim, intangible or uncontrollable environmental circumstances. In time, I’ll reach a point beyond which I can never get any better, if I only measure my ability by speed; later, perhaps, I’ll reach a point beyond which frailty, the fact of age, hinders my movement so much that even my fluency or form cannot be improved, begins in fact to deteriorate: the honour of physical decline.

And yet, as for Murakami with his running, for the habitual swimmer the swim is not only a means to self-improvement – or even where it is, the way that improve-

31. This image of the body-as-machine is characteristic of a dualistic, Cartesian understanding of body and mind as separate, which “forms the basis of Western epistemology” (Howson 2004: 3) and which prevailed in geography until the 1960s (Teather 1999: 8). Glimpsed in everyday phrases such as “running like clockwork,” writes Howson, “[T]he machine metaphor assumes not only that the body can be repaired and its ‘parts’ replaced as in any other machine but also that it can be standardized and regulated through diet, hygiene and exercise regimes” (2004: 7-8).

32. Murakami 2009: 11

33. Murakami 2009: 121

ment gets measured shifts. I always think of my grandmother, 90 years old this year, who has been a regular swimmer for much of her life. When she was my age she swam five or six times a week; now it's once a week, twice sometimes – and yet, she wrote to me not long ago, “I've made a little progress on my stroke – some days it feels great!”

vii.

It doesn't matter what form progress takes; it's possible to achieve even after 50 or 60 years of swimming, even on the other side of the peak, even if it's invisible, internal, more about a feeling than anything else. On the other hand there's frustration in stasis, in feeling stuck-in-place. Discussing this idea of making progress, Geoff, who started swimming laps relatively recently, confesses:

“I do have a goal: I would dearly love to be able to swim 400 metres in under eight minutes in a swimming pool. And I can't. I'm about 8:30 at the moment, 8:20 if I'm really lucky. I just cannot do it. And nobody seems to be able to explain to me why I can't go faster. If you look at a lot of the girls – they're tiny little things. And they go quicker than I go. It's not just a power thing, cause they look like they have no muscle on them. I have friends that do 400 metres in six minutes. I think, why can't I do that?”<sup>34</sup>

*Why can't I do that?* This is the question that confronts any body in water who cares to think of it, any body at all, in fact. What separates me from the Olympian? What separates me from the person in the next lane over, the faster lane? What separates me from the version of myself I would like to become? It's not necessarily an obsession, just an undercurrent, as triathlete Anita describes: “Just this morning, I was swimming along thinking about what to have for tea, I was thinking about what I was going to do today, I was thinking about random things – and somebody swam past me, and I was like, *well, why are they swimming faster than me, why can't I swim that fast?*”<sup>35</sup>

Sometimes the reason is obvious, or seems obvious: what separates me from the Olympian is many, many hours of training, six inches or even a foot of height, other important physiological or psychological traits. But sometimes at the pool I'll

34. Geoff, interview, June 2014

35. Anita, interview, June 2014

see a woman of comparable height, weight, and age to me, swimming much faster and more skilfully than I do, and I wonder: *why can't I do that with my comparable body?* And part of me believes, in these moments of envy, that perhaps I can, at least in theory: I'm faster and stronger than I was a year ago, after all; I'm making progress, and maybe someday I will wake up to discover that I am the ultimate version of myself, as fast and lithe as the fastest and lithest bodies in the pool.

Another part of me, though, understands that while repetition is key to re-creation, there are other factors at play: the inevitable march of time, yes, the body's natural fluctuations, strengthening and weakening, but also variations amongst individuals. The similarly sized and shaped woman in the other lane may seem comparable to me, but she has her own intellectual and emotional life, her own physiology. Her relationship to swimming is not the same as mine. She has a longer history with it, perhaps, a different mentality, a more pressing motivation, a deeper understanding of her own limbs and lungs. These invisible factors render her able to put on a spurt of speed that is, has always been, may always be, impossible for me: because there is only so much control we can exercise over ourselves, and only so much comparison it's possible to draw. In the end it's a lonely business, being in a body. To have a body, and to live in it, is to constantly be made aware of exactly how much control we have and simultaneously how much control we don't have: how the body requires active ownership and management but is liable to disobey, decay, betray in spite of our attempts to master it.

*viii.*

At times the pool itself seems to be speaking, reminding us that no one and no thing is immune to pressures and processes beyond control, that while you may be changed through repeated encounter with the water you are never wholly in charge of that change, that you will go on changing beyond the imaginary point towards which you are working. The pool, too, is in flux, after all: not a mute, stable backdrop against which the small dramas of bodily re-creation take place but an actively shifting environment. It varies from one moment to the next – as, say, a swimmer enters the pool, adding to its numbers and subtly changing the dynamics of a lane – as well as more broadly: as, through time, certain elements begin to show signs of wear and tear.

I used to swim occasionally at a pool a few miles down the road from my house –

when my regular pool was shut, when I happened to be that end of town, when I wanted a change of scenery. It was slated for closure in December 2014, but rumours of the closure had been going around since I first arrived in England, in 2008, and I suppose, for awhile, that I didn't really believe it would close. Gradually, however, it became visibly evident that it was a dying pool. As Alice put it, about six months before it shut:

"I go there sometimes because it's closest to my house, but it's so depressing. It's funny the level of grime you will put up with when you go swimming. There's this thing, isn't there, about your capacity to self-pollute and then be polluted by others. So, you know, your own grime is kind of fine, but other people's grime is not fine. And I'm not very fussy about that, but that pool, late in the day, tips it over the edge, and it's just – it's really horrid. There's that sense of gingerly tiptoeing around and just trying not to look at things floating in the water. Plasters. Yeah, it's – ugh. But that's also a reflection of how they're letting it run into the ground, and the whole closure plan – and I find that really sad, actually. So the fact that the clock broke last year – the clock broke, and then they just didn't replace it. I just found it sad. Nobody was loving it. I think it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. They want to close it, so they're making it really unpleasant to swim there, and then people don't go. And then they have to close it"<sup>36</sup>.

Another regular swimmer there, Howard, had very similar impressions of the pool – down to the plasters, the broken clock<sup>37</sup>:

"The other problem about it of course is that the council are trying to flog it off. So they've abandoned most maintenance. About a month or so ago, the one remaining lane clock broke. And the one up at the deep end has been dead for over a year. That's the downside to the place – the lockers are all knackered, and sometimes the bottom of the pool's got – you find the odd plaster or something, and occasionally you get long hairs. Cause there isn't a swim hat rule. So sometimes you swim into a big raft of hairs. Which is a bit horrid!"<sup>38</sup>

36. Alice, interview, July 2014

37. The broken clock in this case seems particularly poetic, given how cognizant the lap swimmer often is of time: When is the pool open? What time of day is optimum for a swim? How much time do I have for a swim today? How much time does it take to swim 100 metres, 400, 1500? Has my time improved? Am I slower or faster than the person in the next lane over?

38. Howard, interview, June 2014



In these descriptions it isn't just the decrepitude of the pool itself that's highlighted, but also, almost implicitly, the juxtaposition of the active swimming body with forms or manifestations of degradation or decay: it's a stark encounter with the effects of time, in other words, which, given that time is also acting on the swimming body, serves both to highlight its current vitality but also perhaps to underscore the inevitability of its eventual decline (even within the context of an hour's swim: by the time you finish you're wearier than when you started, your muscles feel different).

Meanwhile the specific material elements encountered and endured – grime, plasters, floating rafts of hair – are signs of human liveliness, human leakiness, human weakness. The messiness is distasteful, at least in part, because it belongs to someone else, but it is also distasteful because it indicates the fallibility of the body and the world in which the body operates<sup>39</sup>. The very pollutants we object to may well issue from our own selves. They are certainly things we recognise and understand, which is perhaps what reviles us most: that we see elements of ourselves literally floating around the pool, we see our own potential undoing (even if it's someone else's plaster, someone else's hair) as we strive to make ourselves into robust or thriving bodies<sup>40</sup>. When it comes down to it, there are “unwelcome reminders of the inevitable decay and defeat that are in store, even for the most vigilant of individuals” everywhere, and in this sense the pool is a cool leveller, in which relative strength, vitality, speed, efficiency, matter little<sup>41</sup>. As one writer puts it, imagining the perspective of a community swimming pool: “even if you swim faster than everyone else; you're still swallowing the same water”<sup>42</sup>.

ix.

I remember reading a line from Kathleen Jamie's review of Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places*, in which Jamie explores the idea of “wildness” – that it is not a word which applies only to mountains and remote landscapes, but also to smaller-scale, more mundane places – indeed to the body itself. “To give birth is to be in a wild

39. Julia Kristeva, writing on bodily secretions: “Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse etc) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death” (1982: 71). See also “(Un)contained” for a further discussion of matter out of place.

40. Calling to mind Eichberg: “The body, it appears, does not stop at the surface of the skin. It reaches into the space surrounding it” (1986: 112).

41. Featherstone 1982: 26

42. Caless 2014: unpaginated

place,” she writes, “so is to struggle with pneumonia. If you can look down a gryke, you can look down a microscope, and marvel at the wildness of the processes of our own bodies, the wildness of disease”.

When I read this I felt a fleeting, keen sense of understanding, sharp and sweet at the same time: the truth of the matter is that whether you swim laps religiously or walk aimlessly or crisscross the city on a single-speed bike or avoid exercise altogether, the body is itself a wild thing – “And in the end,” as Jamie writes, “we won’t have to go out and find the wild, because the wild will come for us”<sup>43</sup>.

x.

It’s possible to see exercise as a way of living in denial of the lack of control we ultimately have over our bodies, as if we could, through the discipline of regular exertion, effectively “combat deterioration and decay”, prevent or delay the wild that’s coming for us<sup>44</sup>. “In exercise one gets a sense of one’s body as a collection of numbers representing capabilities,” writes Mark Greif, pointing out that, significantly, the other place where numbers hold this kind of importance in relation to the body is at the doctor’s office or the hospital: “There is a certain seamlessness between all the places where exercise is done and the sites where people are tested for illnesses, undergo repairs, and die,” he suggests. Height, weight, blood pressure, body fat, cholesterol levels, blood test results, scans: marks and measurements which correlate, in some way, to health, ultimately to survival. “How do we acquire the courage to exist as a set of numbers?” Greif asks. “Turning to the gym or the track you gain the anxious freedom to count yourself. What a relief it can be. Here are numbers you can change. You make the exercises into trials you perform upon matter within reach, the exterior armor of your fat and muscle. You are assured these numbers...will correspond to how long you have to live. With willpower and sufficient discipline, that is, the straitening of yourself to a rule, you will be changed”<sup>45</sup>.

xi.

Discipline in this context is a tricky word. On the one hand it implies an admirable trait. We admire, for example, the discipline of elite athletes, their devotion to their sports and their bodies: the nobility of the Olympian in pursuit of a faster time,

43. Jamie 2008: unpaginated

44. Featherstone 1982: 18

45. Greif 2004: unpaginated

a gold medal. On the other hand, discipline is sometimes more about deprivation than dedication: a further form of denial. The lap swimmer, for example, denies herself regularly, and in various ways. She denies herself oxygen. She denies herself rest, even when sometimes rest is needed or desired. She denies herself, particularly in the case of the swimmer training for an Ironman triathlon, or a crossing of Lake Windermere, time spent doing something or being somewhere else. As the feminist author Roxane Gay puts it, in an essay about weight loss:

“Part of disciplining the body is denial. We want but we dare not have. To lose weight or maintain our ideal bodies, we deny ourselves certain foods. We deny ourselves rest by working out. We deny ourselves peace of mind by remaining ever vigilant over our bodies. We withhold from ourselves until we achieve a goal and then we withhold from ourselves to maintain that goal”<sup>46</sup>.

Perhaps one form of denial may supplant another, as when a swimmer who once dieted starts swimming more and regulating her food intake differently: “That became quite a big thing for me,” Alice mentions at one point, talking about her habits and routines: “Because I was starting to do exercise in a way that I never had before, my body took quite a long time to adjust to that. I realised quite early on that I had to eat quite a lot after swimming... I think women’s attitudes to eating and food, having to legitimise every mouthful, you know, being good and not eating cake – there’s something liberating about just, finally, for the first time in my life, eating pretty much whatever I want. And of course linked to that is the fact that I don’t put on weight because I’m swimming regularly”<sup>47</sup>.

Such attitudes are tied closely and particularly to the experience of being a female body, since, as the sociologist Karen Throsby writes, “it is women who are the primary targets and consumers of the weight-loss industry, for whom the practices of close self-surveillance, guilt and obsession are a normalized aspect of femininity”<sup>48</sup>. There is a strong link here to the pressures and ideals of consumer culture<sup>49</sup> – as Howson puts it, “consumer culture encourages people to discipline their bodies not only in pursuit of appearance, but also in the name of health. This relationship

46. Gay 2014: unpaginated

47. Alice, interview, July 2014

48. Throsby 2015: 779

49. Though, as Featherstone notes, “Body maintenance cannot of course be claimed as a novel creation of consumer culture. In traditional societies, religious communities such as monasteries demanded ascetic routines with an emphasis upon exercise and dietary control” (1982: 24).

between body maintenance, appearance and health has particular consequences for women”<sup>50</sup>, or Featherstone: “Women are of course most clearly trapped in the narcissistic, self-surveillance world of images, for apart from being accorded the major responsibility in organising the purchase and consumption of commodities their bodies are used symbolically in advertisements”<sup>51</sup>. Thus, “While most of us engage in ‘body work’ of one sort or another, such as exercise or ‘watching what we eat’, women are encouraged to discipline their bodies in ways that have the potential to restrict and confine their social and political participation” – ways which have historically included everything from foot-binding to corsets and cosmetic surgery<sup>52</sup>.

Alice’s complex outlook on the relationship between swimming and food – that on the one hand swimming “allows” her to eat whatever she wants, but on the other hand this is because the exercise she does ensures that eating in this way doesn’t cause her to gain weight – is indicative of the way such attitudes and pressures may work. In a sense, then, exercise here represents some impossible state, of strength but acquiescence, of striving towards the right size, the right shape, which is dictated partly by cultural ideals and representations but enforced internally, through willpower and discipline. This implies, too, the potential to be alienated from our own bodies, to feel out of place in the one place we can’t leave: a kind of deep geographical dissonance.

*xii.*

It’s true that exercise feeds, to some extent, on a kind of dissonance between body and mind: it is vanity, it is cultural pressure, it is fear that drives me to swim – if I don’t, I worry, I’ll be the wrong shape, the wrong size, the wrong me. But it is also a method of assertion, a way of being physically present, a way of channeling that urge to deny or discipline in a productive, constructive way<sup>53</sup>. And it is, per-

50. Howson 2004: 104

51. Featherstone 1982: 22

52. Howson 2004: 104. See also Bordo 2003: 162.

53. This is, interestingly, not entirely unlike an argument that Bordo makes about anorexia in *Unbearable Weight*, that it can be viewed both as a capitulation to a consumer ideal as well as a form of protest, for on the one hand, as Howson summarises, “The pursuit of slenderness, by making the body smaller, appears to conform to idealizations of contemporary feminine appearance. [...] However, the anorexic body also denies those cultural stereotypes associated with contemporary femininity, such as weakness, precisely because the pursuit of slenderness requires obedience and self-discipline. Though diet and exercise regimes need to be seen as practices that train the body in ‘docility’, they are contradictory in that they are experienced as empowering practices that enable women to feel they have control over their own bodies and lives” (Howson 2004: 114).

haps most crucially, about control. Waking up early, cycling to the pool on weekday mornings, stripping to my swimsuit and plunging in and plowing up and down: in the ordered setting of the pool, control on a small scale becomes, or seems, possible, even while I'm constantly reminded of my own limits, of my own powerlessness. For years I go to the pool most weekday mornings, as if it's an appointment, and then one day, because of a fault in my own body that I could not have foreseen or prevented, this ritual becomes impossible for a time, and even though it's a short time, I'm brought suddenly into an awareness of how much I rely upon precisely the regularity, the discipline of the swim in a pool, to temper a sense of helplessness.

In his book *Cyclogeography*, the author and scholar Jon Day explores the relationship between cycling, body, and place through a reflection on his time as a bicycle courier in London. The physicality of that work contrasts sharply with the essential sedentariness of the deskbound office worker, the writer, the academic: "For me couriership felt like one of the few ways left in the city to work with my body," Day writes. "Increasingly," he goes on, "the lives of our bodies have become disciplined, made to conform to the stranglehold of nine-to-five existence. [...] physical exertion is nowadays often isolated from everyday being. Mostly, the needs of our bodies are allowed to announce themselves only at prearranged times: during the regularly scheduled run or gym appointment"<sup>54</sup>. I'm reminded of Bale, writing about "welfare running", and how, "It need not be confined in time and space but it often is, for example, in time slots on the school timetable for physical education and with the stopwatch being used to record performance in the interest of fitness"<sup>55</sup>.

Addressing the needs of our bodies only at regularly scheduled times and in specific places, is, Day suggests, both a symptom and a cause of some distancing between self, body, and world, as a sense of "being-in-the-world has been replaced with the feeling that we experience reality only through and within a variety of

Bordo draws a connection to compulsive or extreme forms of exercise, too – "Consider," for example, "the increasing popularity of triathlon events such as the Iron Man [sic], whose central purpose appears to be to allow people to find out how far they can push their bodies - through long-distance swimming, cycling, and running- before they collapse" (2003: 150). "Our contemporary body-fetishism," she writes, "expresses more than a fantasy of self-mastery in an increasingly unmanageable culture [...] It also reflects our alliance with culture against all reminders of the inevitable decay and death of the body" (Bordo 2003: 153).

54. Day 2015: 44-45

55. Bale 2003: 8. This is reminiscent again of "the 'geometricisation' of the body – the subjecting of the body to rigid temporal and spatial disciplines designed to oust ambiguity, play, wilfulness, humour from the sporting body culture of modernity" described by Eichberg (Bale and Philo 1998: 13) and discussed in more depth in "(Un)contained" and "Health, Exercise and Place".

tightly controlled spaces: cars, cubicles, and offices”<sup>56</sup>. Greif, likewise, with his “straitening” of self to a rule, suggests that the spaces in which we exercise may be disciplining bodies to conform to the detriment of some larger sense of self. But there is, too, the possibility that these spaces – the confinement and regularity of them, the discipline they require – may also put us in touch with our bodies, and with place, in other ways. Is not the regularly scheduled run, the gym appointment, the daily swim, a way of pushing back against a fundamental, disquieting lack of control we all share?

xiii.

FROM FIELDNOTES, SUNDAY 7TH DECEMBER 2014

*Second swim after the two month break. A better swim today than on Friday, felt more like the old habit. I still felt tired and out of shape but I also felt my form returning. It feels good to do hard work, even if my definition of hard work has shifted. In a way it's gratifying to have proof that I really was fitter before. I'm now quite out of breath after just a lap or two. I think it's easy to lose sight of that, to forget, to ignore progress, or change, because it happens so slowly or imperceptibly.*

*I've been thinking a lot, too, about this idea of recreation/re-creation: about how my body was actually re-created by lack of exercise over the last few months. And now I'm swimming again for recreation, and trying to let it be recreation in the conventional sense (a relaxing activity, done for pleasure, for distraction), for as long as I can, because to enjoy it was always the main purpose for me, and I sometimes lose sight of that too. The one thing I am trying to take from the experience of missing this from my life is that it's a thing to be appreciated, not abused – and yet that while I do enjoy it I also enjoy other things. In a sense I was able to separate my identity a little from it: it's nice to think that if instead of an evening swim I want to go for a walk and have a beer, or instead of getting up early I want an extra hour in bed, that's a thing I can do. Discipline is all well and good but only so long as I control the discipline, rather than being perpetually disciplined by my own practice.*

xiv.

For two months I obey my doctor's orders: I don't swim. I take walks instead, I wait, I let myself soften and slow. I'm reminded that lack of an activity can re-create the

56. Day 2015: 45

body just as well as engaging in the activity; that in fact re-creation is not always a process of building but sometimes a process of taking away. As a swimmer you have a lot to lose, as to gain: fat, muscle, fitness, speed, a knowledge “in our hands”<sup>57</sup> that may be ingrained but which requires an active practice to maintain.

And when I return to the pool, I find it too has changed. There are new stains on the walls, different posters taped to the doors, lifeguards I’ve never seen before patrolling the perimeter, a subtle shift in the makeup of the changing rooms – new faces present, familiar faces absent. The locker I always used to choose is out of order, so I choose a new one, which over time I will come to regard as *mine*, even though now the key – stamped “137”, not “135” – feels foreign at first. In the shower, where the mould has changed its pattern, I resume my usual motions. I let the hot water run down my back, stretch my underused arms, reach for, but do not quite manage to touch, my toes. I feel conscious of the thin straps of my old suit cutting into my back in new places, of a stiffness in my shoulders, a slight anxiety.

At the edge of the pool I hesitate for a long time, carefully considering which lane to enter: how much speed have I lost, where do I now belong, is that woman swimming along there slower or faster than me? I have no sense of the order of things. But when eventually I can delay no longer, I get in and push off and speed suddenly and briefly seems to matter very little: for a moment submersion in this familiar water is overwhelmingly about immediate sensation. True, I am not as fit, not as efficient as I have been in the past and might – but might not – be in the future, but I still know how to swim. The first length is strange; I feel dizzy for a moment, though not unpleasantly so – I’m reminded of the pleasurable disorientation that always followed a plunge from the diving board as a child, not knowing which way was up but trusting myself to surface anyhow. For an instant I feel the water in my habituated body, with its muscle memory (even though some muscles have diminished), which needs no introduction to this place – and I also feel it anew, in my own new, re-created body. It is 25 metres of thrill – and then I reach the wall and flip and it feels like it always feels, more or less: sometimes great, and sometimes a great struggle.

And then it’s back to the old routine, up and down, up and down.

57. Merleau-Ponty 2012: 145





## RHYTHM

Lap after lap | Again and again | A tiger pacing a cage | Variations on a theme | The linear and the cyclical | The hands on the clock | Rituals | “What are you waiting for?” | A swimmer’s journal | “A durable sense of self” | Inscription | Paths and tracks | Mirror and window | Refrain

## i.

Swimming laps is a repetitive activity. Lengths repeated become laps. Laps repeated – lap after lap after lap – become, eventually, a swim. The shape of a swim is one of lines, of back and forth, of sequence and pattern.

lap      after      lap      after

lap

lap      after      lap      after

Sometimes I hate it, I really do. Sometimes I don't want to do it. Sometimes I am bored, or uncomfortable, or a line from a particularly irritating pop song gets stuck in my head and runs on a loop while, with great physical and emotional effort, I haul my body along, and I think, *but I don't have to do this, I could get out*. And usually, even so, I don't get out.

Sometimes the repetition is itself a song, and I am part of it, and everything is humming.

Sometimes – often – I am just apathetic, doing it because it's a thing that I do. Lap after lap after lap. Sometimes it really is just that: a pattern of words on a page.

## ii.

True: sometimes a swim is specifically designed to be repetitive. Sometimes the repetition is the point. Here's a session that a coach once wrote down for me, after I'd had a few lessons with her; in many cases a set of actions is repeated, twice, four times, and even rest is prescribed:

200 warm up

50 kick with board

50 pull with buoy

x2

4 x 50 sprints RI 30

## BODIES OF WATER

1 x 400 timed

One arm pulls with float

-50 L

-50 R

x4 no rest

4 x 50 pull

Think about the catch on drop/push back

2 x 100 breathing every 5 strokes – big fast breath in, long slow breath out

1 x 400 timed

1 x 100 easy cool down

At other times the goal may simply be to be in the water for a certain amount of time, to relax or recuperate or get the heart rate going without heeding a particular plan from one length to the next, to slide fluidly between strokes, pay no notice to the clock ticking seconds away. You might even enter the water from one end of the pool and exit from the other, failing to close the loop of the final lap.

But while the structure of any given swim in a pool may vary, its fundamental component is still, is always, repetition. The arms, the legs, repeat essentially the same actions over and over again. As on land, breath is taken in and released repeatedly, though here, with the body navigating the surface of the water, the importance of the repetitious nature of breathing is brought to the fore, especially if the rhythm is interrupted, if the mouth and nose stay submerged for too long: there's nothing like being deprived of air for even a fraction of a second longer than you'd like to make you realise how much you rely on your own particular rhythm of breathing.

In this way – through repeated action, breath drawn and released at regular intervals, in coordination with the stroke itself – the length of the pool is traversed, the body's trajectory retraced again and again.

In her history of walking, *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit writes about the poet William Wordsworth, for whom, she says, “walking was a mode not of traveling but of being”<sup>1</sup>. Wordsworth was a prolific walker who, Thomas De Quincey once calculated, “must have traversed a distance of 175,000 to 180,000 English miles” in his lifetime, in all kinds of conditions<sup>2</sup>. Solnit excerpts a letter written by Dorothy Wordsworth to a friend, outlining her brother’s habits when weather prevented a prolonged ramble:

“In wet weather he takes out an umbrella; chuses the most sheltered spot, and there walks backwards and forwards and though the length of his walk be sometimes a quarter or half a mile, he is as fast bound within the chosen limits as if by prison walls. He generally composes his verses out of doors and while he is so engaged he seldom knows how the time slips by or hardly whether it is rain or fair”<sup>3</sup>.

The image of the prison walls<sup>4</sup> is, by connotation, oppressive – but here there is also something generative, creative, in the monotony of the described repetition, something almost paradoxically freeing: walking was, after all, Wordsworth’s “means of composition,” as Solnit puts it, and “[h]is steps seem to have beat out a steady rhythm for the poetry, like the metronome of a composer” – even when the distance covered was broken into short backwards-and-forwards bursts<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, Solnit relates that Wordsworth often composed his poetry whilst pacing up and down a path in the garden first at Dove Cottage, a “terrace about twelve paces long”, and subsequently on the terrace of the home he moved into in 1813<sup>6</sup>.

The productive nature of repetitive action – walking, pacing – is clear enough in this case. But even in less apparent cases, repetition can be seen as a process of

1. Solnit 2014: 104

2. De Quincey 1863: 139

3. Solnit 2014: 114

4. Deakin’s account of swimming through Britain begins with a similar metaphor, that of the cage. Breast-stroking up and down the length of the moat at his house in Suffolk whilst a summer downpour pocks the water around him, he resolves to embark on a journey that will see him immersed in various bodies of water, most of them outside and in nature – streams, rivers, lakes, ponds. “I wanted to follow the rain on its wanderings about our land to rejoin the sea,” he writes, “to break out of the frustration of a lifetime doing lengths, of endlessly turning back on myself like a tiger pacing its cage” (2000: 1).

5. Solnit 2014: 113-114

6. Solnit 2014: 114

making, building: as with the swimmer, say, building up muscle, building up familiarity with place and process, building a perceptual knowledge, building a practice, a habit. In such cases we don't repeat to forget, but to learn or to (re)make, not to lose, but to gain.

Repetition can also be a way in to a certain kind of consciousness. On the subject of Wordsworth's "pacing back and forth", Solnit quotes Seamus Heaney, who writes that "the up and down walking does not forward a journey but habituates the body to a kind of dreamy rhythm"<sup>7</sup>. The same could be said of swimming laps: that it does not forward a journey, but that it does habituate the body to "a kind of dreamy rhythm". Stroke stroke stroke stroke flip stroke stroke stroke stroke flip stroke stroke stroke stroke flip. All the while, before you, around you, is the same floor, the same wall, the same ceiling – and if you swim 800 metres, or 1500 metres, or 5000 metres, it doesn't matter: you only ever see more of the same landscape; you never see beyond, never crest the hill or pass over the horizon, never veer into new territory<sup>8</sup>.

A tiger pacing a cage, a poet on his terrace – and yet there is freedom, or opportunity, in the act, for the mind to stray away from and return to the immediate experience.

*iv.*

Partly this is about that word that both Heaney and Solnit use: rhythm, which

7. Heaney 1980: 66. Heaney writes here explicitly about the links between the rhythm of Wordsworth's poetry and the rhythm of walking: "We might say, in fact, that Wordsworth at his best, no less than at his worst, is a pedestrian poet. As his poetic feet repeat his footfalls, the earth seems to be a treadmill he turns; the big diurnal roll is sensed through the poetic beat and the world moves like a waterwheel under the fall of his voice" (1980: 68).

8. Landscape may seem a strange word to invoke here, given its connection with the visual in geography (Cosgrove 2008; Della Dora 2011), its framing as "a way of seeing the external world" (Cosgrove 1985: 46, emphasis in original). Indeed, it may be more tempting to conceptualise the pool as an "anti-landscape", in the sense described e.g. by Della Dora, who writes about caves, for instance, as "spaces in which intuition overrules rationality", for "as opposed to the 360-degree cartographic view we are offered from the top of a mountain, we cannot see beyond the walls of a cave" (2011: 762). Whilst Della Dora is writing in a specifically religious/historical context, there are elements of this description of an anti-landscape which ring true in the contemporary pool, too, where one's vision, as a swimmer, is often limited by the walls of the pool, where navigation of the space is achieved partly through tactile bodily engagement and knowledge – as Della Dora writes in one example, "The space of the cave can only be navigated through close tactile contact with the rock" (2011: 776). Nevertheless, there are various places in this chapter which make use of the term "landscape", sometimes to indirectly challenge it (e.g. via Ness's (2008) critique of privileging the visual experience of danced gesture), but sometimes also to deliberately try to apply certain ways of thinking or writing about landscape to the pool, e.g. in a later discussion of Ingold (2000) and Macfarlane (2013) on paths.

denotes a kind of vitality, a musicality, a liveliness. “Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm,” writes Henri Lefebvre in *Rhythmanalysis*, his posthumously published book on biological and social rhythms and the relationship between space, time, and the everyday<sup>9</sup>. Repetition (“of movements, gestures, action, situations, differences<sup>10</sup>”) is a key ingredient of Lefebvre’s rhythm: “No rhythm without repetition in time and in space, without *reprises*, without returns,” he writes<sup>11</sup>. And yet there is no perfect, mechanical repetition in any human effort: as Lefebvre puts it, “there is no identical absolute repetition, indefinitely. Whence the relation between repetition and difference. When it concerns the everyday rites, ceremonies, fêtes, rules and laws, there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive: difference”<sup>12</sup>.

In swimming, the arms and legs repeat the same fundamental movements, but there will be subtle variations in each physical action, as there are in the environment in which these actions are taking place<sup>13</sup>. The sociologist Karen Throsby, writing about marathon swimmers, describes the “sensorially transformative” process of training, “evidenced, for example, in the acquisition of good swimming technique, whereby the stroke is broken down into its constitutive parts – body position, hand entry, the catch, the pull, recovery, breathing, rotation, kick – and each movement and position is embodied through multiple repetitions before being re-incorporated into the full stroke. Awkward at first, explicit bodily awareness eventually recedes as the student comes to ‘feel’ the correct movement [...] However, the skill that has been acquired is not one of endlessly perfect repetition, but rather, incorporates the ability to constantly adjust those movements [...] No single stroke, then, is ever the same”<sup>14</sup>. In this way swimming is a rhythmic,

9. Lefebvre 2013: 25

10. Lefebvre 2013: 25

11. Lefebvre 2013: 16

12. Lefebvre 2013: 16

13. Swimming strokes can be broken down into component parts, often linked by a particular rhythm. In front crawl, for instance, as the coach and exercise physiologist Ernest Maglischo describes, “one stroke cycle consists of a right and left armstroke and a varying number of kicks,” with each armstroke comprising five phases: “(1) the entry and stretch, (2) the downsweep, (3) the catch, (4) the insweep, and (5) the upsweep and recovery. Where the relationship between armstrokes and leg kicks are concerned, swimmers use a variety of rhythms. The six-beat rhythm is most common. In it they execute six complete leg beats during each stroke cycle” (Maglischo 2003: 95). Maglischo is writing specifically for and about competitive swimmers, but even for more casual swimmers the stroke is nevertheless a rhythmic series of linked movements.

14. Throsby 2013: 13. Here she references Greg Downey, in his book about learning Capoeira, who writes of the process of learning certain movements that while students of Capoeira repeat techniques over and over again to achieve fluency, “[b]ecause conditions change, accomplishing what appears to be a similar movement

rather than a metronomic, endeavour, to use Tim Ingold's terminology – describing the recurrent movements of operating a handsaw, he writes: “It is precisely because no two strokes are identical that the back-and-forth movement of the handsaw, unlike the spinning of the rotary cutter, is rhythmic rather than metronomic”<sup>15</sup>.

Ingold is concerned in this example with “correct[ing] the widespread misapprehension that the training of the body through repetitive exercise [...] leads to a progressive loss of conscious awareness or concentration in the task”<sup>16</sup>. In other words, while repeated movement can make an action easier or more fluent (as, through habit, “[e]ffort diminishes according to the continuity and repetition of movement”) it does not necessarily erase awareness of the action, the actor, or the setting<sup>17</sup>. Repetition, then, is not mindless, or at least mindlessness is not the set outcome of repetitive action: “the skilled handling of tools,” for instance, as Ingold writes, “is anything but automatic, but is rather rhythmically responsive to ever-changing environmental conditions”<sup>18</sup> – or, as Ravaissou puts it, writing about habit: “although movement, as it becomes a habit, leaves the sphere of will and reflection, it does not leave that of intelligence. It does not become the mechanical effect of an external impulse, but rather the effect of an inclination that follows from the will”<sup>19</sup>.

This is important because it suggests, or at least reinforces, the idea that repetitive action (whether the skilled handling of a saw or the swimming of laps) may be creative, constructive, at least, or especially, when it is rhythmic: that in the refrain of

requires constant self-monitoring and ongoing readjustment rather than flawless repetition” (Downey 2005: 26). Throsby also references Drew Leder (1990) on acquiring skill; interestingly, Leder uses the example of learning to swim to illustrate his points about the process of mastering a new skill: “As I try to swim, I consciously monitor my own movements, making sure I am kicking and breathing correctly [...] Yet the successful acquisition of a new ability coincides with a phenomenological effacement of all this. The thematization of rules of examples, of my own embodiment, falls away once I truly know how to swim. I no longer need to think about cupping my hands or the right style of breathing. This now comes without conscious effort, allowing my focus to be directed elsewhere” (1990: 30-31). As Downey demonstrates, however, this mastery does not make for a perfectly reproducible set of actions, but rather the ability to, through self-monitoring and adjustment, perform the skill in a setting which is itself in flux – this is similar to the point Ingold makes about the skilled handling of tools being “rhythmically responsive to ever-changing environmental conditions” (2011: 61).

15. Ingold 2011: 60

16. Ingold 2011: 60-61

17. Ravaissou 2008: 49

18. Ingold 2011: 61

19. Ravaissou 2008: 55

*lap after lap after lap* is an order and predictability, but also, simultaneously, a space for thought, for being.

v.

Repetition is, according to Lefebvre, crucial to rhythm, but so too are “interferences of linear processes and cyclical processes”<sup>20</sup>. The linear, he writes, “consists of journeys to and fro: it combines with the cyclical, the movements of long intervals. The cyclical is social organisation manifesting itself. The linear is the daily grind, the routine”<sup>21</sup>.

To and fro: length after length, lap after lap, up and down the pool, the daily grind. But the habitual lap swim is not only rhythmic on a physical, individual level. It is also rhythmic on the level of everyday life, in the sense that “everyday life is constituted out of a multitude of habits, schedules and routines that lend to it an ontological predictability and security”, that every visit to the pool slots in to the cyclical rhythm of a day or a week or a year<sup>22</sup>. Departure from home at dawn, say, on a winter morning; a journey along streets crisscrossed by other commuters, all in the midst of their own mornings; arrival at the pool just as light is starting to bleed into the sky (the timing of which moment of course changes throughout the year, to mark an even grander rhythm at play); a swim and a shower before work.

In other words, the pool is not an isolated environment, though it may sometimes take on qualities of the cage, the cave, for its inhabitants. It has spatial and temporal context. It fits, it must fit, into everyday life: people swim when they have the time, when the pool is open – before work, in between engagements, after other obligations. Often this engenders a kind of regularity: if, like I did for some time, you start work every morning at 9am, then perhaps you’ll swim before work, at 7; so you set your alarm for the same time every day, and you start to know, after awhile, the exact timings of each aspect of the ritual, how you must be out of the pool no later than 8:05 in order to allow enough time to shower and dry your hair and get home and have breakfast and leave the house on your bicycle by 8:40 in order to make it to work on time. Even if your practice is more haphazard – dependent on other external factors, like an irregular work schedule or varying family

20. Lefebvre 2013: 25

21. Lefebvre 2013: 40

22. Edensor 2010: 8



obligations, or kept deliberately casual – there is in essence still something regular about it. Habitual lap swimming is a routine activity by nature, however you go about it.

As a place, then, the pool forms the backdrop a constantly shifting concurrence of individual routines and repetitions. At any given moment, everyone at a pool is in the same place, but they are all also in different places in their days, their routines, and they all have different individual enactments of routine, too<sup>23</sup>. And the repeated ritual of *going for a swim*, not to mention each individual aspect of it, varies not just swimmer to swimmer but day to day: the pool begins to blend in to everyday life as a whole, is part of its rhythms and fluxes, and part of grander rhythms and fluxes, too. One swimmer, for example, Hank, captures a sense of both how much he regulates his own experience at the pool through repetition of routine and how much of the experience is also out of his control:

“The thing with the pool is obviously you’re tied to their times. So often I’ll look at the timetable, but then you always look to see if it’s a club night as well, cause that’ll limit the lanes that are available – so no matter how many times I look at it, I’ll always look at it again, just to think *well, okay, if I went at half eight, by the time I get there it’s gonna be, you know, this time...* But yeah, I’m a creature of habit really, so I tend to do the same thing. So I’ll always cycle up there. And from then on you never quite know what you’re gonna get. You have to go through the door from the changing room to see what the pool’s like, who’s in the pool, how crowded it is. So it tends to be the same sort of thing, you know – down to picking the same locker, and always looking at the same lane, I tend to do those sort of things”<sup>24</sup>.

vi.

“The cyclical,” writes Lefebvre, “originates in the cosmic, in nature: days, nights, seasons, the waves and tides of the sea, monthly cycles, etc. The linear would come rather from social practice, therefore from human activity: the monotony of actions and movements, imposed structures. Great cyclical rhythms last for a period and restart: dawn, always new, often superb, inaugurates the return of the

23. Take, for example, the nurse who works night shifts, who often swims at the same time I do in the morning: she’s at the end of her day, about to go home and wind down, whereas I’m just at the start, gearing up.

24. Hank, interview, July 2014

everyday. The antagonistic unity of relations between the cyclical and the linear sometimes gives rise to compromises, sometimes to disturbances. The circular course of the hands on (traditional) clock-faces and watches is accompanied by a linear tick-tock. And it is their relation that enables or rather constitutes the measure of time (which is to say, rhythms)<sup>25</sup>.

The circular course of the hands on the clock – how evident this is at the pool: the pace clocks, one at each end, marked in five second intervals, with their single hands sweeping ceaselessly round, to mark individual progress by; the normal clocks, reminding us of our place in the day, while the “linear tick-tock” beats steadily against the linear backdrop of the lanes. Thus the rhythms of the pool and the act of swimming laps are both highly personal and highly social: everyone enacting their own repetitions, their own routines, going up and down – but weaving around each other, through each other’s lives, too, interfering sometimes, or enriching, like a dance<sup>26</sup>:

*An evening swim, for a change – mixing up the routine. It certainly felt strange. I got to the pool about 6pm; I used to swim at this time a lot, and yet it didn’t feel familiar at all. I thought of the regulars I used to see at that hour, like the Chinese student I used to chat with sometimes, who was really interested in technique, improving his stroke – and how it’s all strangers now, or they’re all strangers to me, even if some of them are the same people – they’ve changed their caps and their costumes and made changes to their strokes and so all of the markers I used to have are gone. But also it’s tied to the rhythms of this city – it can be a transient place, with the students, and a year or two seems to make such a difference to the makeup of it. Anyhow it was packed when I got in, but it settled down eventually and the crowds thinned and it turned into a good swim. I’d forgotten how it feels different at different times of day, and I got to thinking about the different contexts you bring with you to the pool at different times of day – how this evening I carried aspects of the day with me (having been in town, all summer-hectic, having had a meeting, done work, etc.), whereas*

25. Lefebvre 2013: 18

26. See Seamon (1980) on “body ballets” and “place ballets”, for instance – the body ballet involves the acquisition or incorporation of bodily actions or skills; “through training and practice, basic movements of body-subject fuse together into wider bodily patterns” (Seamon 1980: 158), while the place ballet “is a fusion of many time-space routines and body-ballets in terms of place [...] Familiarity arising out of routine is one ingredient of place-ballet” (Seamon 1980: 159). As Edensor puts it, “The ongoing mapping of space through repetitive, collective choreographies of congregation, interaction, rest and relaxation produce situated rhythms through which time and space are stitched together [...] The accumulation of repetitive events also becomes sedimented as individuals, through familiar bodily routines in local space, for instance, walk on tarmac pavements, patches of grass and wood and absorb these surfaces” (2010: 8-9).

*in the morning you have the remnants of last night's dreams and your plans and anxieties for the day ahead swirling around your mind*<sup>27</sup>.

vii.

It's not only the act of regularly swimming itself which takes on the importance of routine; there are also smaller-scale rituals, in the act of getting ready to go to the pool, in dressing and undressing, in getting into the water, or specific habits and superstitions, like choosing the same locker, the same lane, preferring to swim clockwise or counter-clockwise – that structure the experience of being at the pool.

Talking to swimmers, one gets a sense of the mundanity of these kinds of rituals, as well as how specific they may be, as people identify their own habits and routes through the pool. Often the routines seem to echo each other, with little areas of overlap or shared rituals, though the way they're put together always includes individual adaptations; it's as if swimmers standing by the side of the pool, for instance, about to get in, take the same basic components of a song and create their own variations, with unique rhythms and melodies.

\*

"I will, before I get in the water, stand by the side – this is ridiculous – stand by the side of the pool and put my swimming hat on, then get in the water, then lick my goggles, then put them on, then take them off, then shake them in the water, then put them back on, and then start swimming"<sup>28</sup>.

"I'll always get in, and then dunk my goggles, spit in them, splish it around, dunk them again, and then put them on. Every time. And if I'm wearing a hat, I'll always put them underneath the hat"<sup>29</sup>.

"I put my goggles on top of the float, then I put my hat on – I always do that on the poolside, rather than in the changing room. Then I do my arm warm-up; I do a dry land warm-up for about five minutes first. Then I put my goggles on, and depending on how I'm feeling I might procrastinate a little bit more and warm up my ankles or something. And then I'll get in"<sup>30</sup>.

27. Fieldnotes, Thursday 12th June 2014

28. Anita, interview, June 2014

29. Justin, interview, June 2014

“I always put my hat and goggles on my head, but not over my eyes, then jump into the water, I never use the steps – I jump in feet first, and then put my goggles on my face and just go. There’s no splashing, there’s no spitting in goggles, it’s just, goggles on, swim. Sometimes you see people just standing on the poolside, just taking in the environment for five minutes. I’m like, what are you waiting for? Just get in!”<sup>31</sup>

“I’ve usually put my cap on by that time, and I pop my goggles on. I don’t tend to wet them anymore – I used to, but it doesn’t really make any difference if you wet them or not I don’t think. When I get in the pool, I just swim straight away, because I find it’s cold, and then I’m comfortable after about thirty seconds. And I know different people do different things. I met somebody the other day that I knew, she was saying, *oh, you go, you go, I have to acclimatise myself first!* And you know, I was thinking, *this is how I acclimatise myself! I move*”<sup>32</sup>.

## viii.

Even that which appears stable, of course, is still liable to change. For many years this is how I got into the pool:

*I stand for a few moments in front of the lane I intend to enter, observing, making sure it’s the correct choice. If it is, I place my kickboard and pull buoy down, pull buoy on top of kickboard, then my locker key and water bottle on top of the kickboard too, so everything mine is consolidated, and I move aside anything on the wall that’s impeding my entrance, and I climb up and then drop down – I try to minimise splashing, and I almost always wait until there’s no one else at the wall – and then I bounce up and down for a minute, breathing out, still holding my goggles. I dip the goggles. I splash water on my face. I put my goggles on, wrap the long ends of the straps in a swirly way under the bands so that they’re tucked away, push my goggles to my forehead, assess the situation, and, when it’s time to go, put the goggles back on, press to seal them, and push off. There are subtle variations but nearly always it’s nearly the same*<sup>33</sup>.

I’d never given it much consideration, except to consciously observe and record it as part of the process of keeping fieldnotes – it was fixed, ingrained. An interview

30. Katherine, interview, July 2014

31. Julie, interview, June 2014

32. Daisy, interview, August 2014

33. Fieldnotes, Monday 16th June 2014

with a research participant, Julie, however, made me see it anew, and indirectly sparked a change. “Sometimes you see people just standing on the poolside, just taking in the environment for five minutes,” she’d said. “I’m like, what are you waiting for? Just get in!”<sup>34</sup>

This was me, I realised as she spoke. I’d never thought about it in these terms before – but what *was* I waiting for? I had the thought and then it vanished as quickly as it had come, but a week after my chat with Julie, I found myself at the pool, standing there, staring down the lane:

*When I got to the side of the pool I chose the medium lane closest to the window, because there was only one other woman in it, and then I stood there, on the edge, watching the woman go up and down. I stretched, to give the appearance of doing something, but really I was just enjoying the moment before – or, rather, both enjoying and not-enjoying it, anticipation making me anxious. After a bit I decided to do something I hardly ever do – almost never do, can’t remember the last time I did – which was to put my goggles on before I got into the pool. Why not, I thought. Eliminate, or rather reduce, the moment of discomfort after sliding into the cold water, when I’m faffing with my goggles and thinking about submersion. So I put them on and waited for the lady in the lane to get almost to the other end, and then I dropped in and pushed off the wall immediately and swam 200 metres, and that reduced period of anxious, cold anticipation was good, I wonder why I don’t do that more often. But in a sense it’s only talking to research participants that’s made me more aware of my own habits<sup>35</sup>.*

And that was it, in a way – not even a month later the new routine had started to become solidified, even as the fluidity of other aspects of the pool environment were asserting themselves:

*I am unsettled by the pool at this time of year. It’s hot and empty, the city abandoned by its usual throngs. Today the pool was busier than yesterday, but still comparatively quiet. All the really regular regulars are still there, of course – the year-round regulars, and I guess I’m one of them – but all the other sort-of-regulars have disappeared. Some of them will no doubt be back in the autumn, picking up old routines, back from travels or summers spent elsewhere, but a great many of them will never be seen again, at least not here, not in that lane that they used to fill so regularly: they’ll vanish, be replaced by someone else. In*

34. Julie, interview, June 2014

35. Fieldnotes, Tuesday 1st July 2014

*the interim, it's hushed and cool in the changing rooms. I have tracked in mud from outside. My bicycle is tangled in spider's webs, which I wipe away every morning but which reform overnight. A few times, for a few lengths, I feel really good, and the water feels different around me, I am moving through it differently, I can feel a different kind of interaction happening – impossible to describe in any detail except to say that I can feel the water and myself being faster in it. But other times it is more of a struggle. My goggles are getting foggier and foggier. I forgot to spit on them in the shower before getting into the pool, so maybe that had an impact, but I've long suspected it makes no difference, it's just superstition, reassurance.*

*I like my new routine though of not dallying in the water after getting in: goggles on before I jump in, jump in, go. Seems more committed. I don't notice the cold so much, or the shock of the water, the change in environment: from dry land to water<sup>36</sup>.*

## ix.

In thinking through the routines of being a regular swimmer I'm reminded of the poet and critic Al Alvarez's *Pondlife*. Subtitled "a swimmer's journal", the book chronicles both Alvarez's devotion to the ponds at Hampstead Heath, where, for most of his life, he has swum almost daily, and his physical decline over the course of seven years, as he approaches 80.

As a swimmer, Alvarez is as dedicated as they come. He swims year round, almost obsessively, even when the water ices over – on one January morning, he records the temperature of the water as 33 degrees Fahrenheit: "The whole pond is thinly iced over, except for a twenty-five-yard square patch to the left of the jetty...The water is very cold but...I go all the way to the barrier along the edge of ice...Then I turn onto my back and return more slowly"<sup>37</sup>. The rhythmicity of Alvarez's swims is palpable not only in their regularity but also in the way this regularity prompts familiarity and sociability – the chats with lifeguards and fellow regulars, the observations about the place and its processes of change Alvarez is able, through repeated encounter, to make.

And while it's a record of habit, the book is also a record of constant change, of the unavoidable interruptions and shifts to routine that the process of

36. Fieldnotes, Tuesday 22nd July 2014

37. Alvarez 2013: 88-89

ageing forces, as with each page Alvarez gets a little older, sometimes by minute increments and sometimes seemingly suddenly, as when a flu or a fall lays him up and he rails against the impotence, “the frustration of old age, the constant humiliation of it, the blind rage it generates”<sup>38</sup>. In rhythm is repetition, yes, but also, as Lefebvre writes, “birth, growth, peak, then decline and end”, and here we see decline set against the steadiness of routine. Alvarez gets older, weaker<sup>39</sup>. He gets ill. He falls. He has a stroke. “I seem to be going downhill fast,” he writes<sup>40</sup>. “I am falling apart”<sup>41</sup>. “It gets worse”<sup>42</sup>. Later: “there is no recovery this far down the road”<sup>43</sup>. But also: “I’m still swimming, of course”<sup>44</sup>, and, even later, when things have got even worse – “my arms were so arthritic that I could no longer get my clothes on or off or button my trousers or wipe my own armpits. Still, I went on swimming three times a week”<sup>45</sup>.

Early in the book, Alvarez recounts an August trip to the family’s house in Italy. He mentions that, there being no open water to swim in nearby, “we go to the pool most days and, as pools go, it’s a gem”<sup>46</sup>. But, “[a]s for the swimming: the water is blood temperature and smells of chemicals. We do our laps, dry off in the sun, then hurry back to Paradiso. It’s good exercise, better than none at all, but there’s not much pleasure in it”<sup>47</sup>.

I bristled a little when I first read this: as if it were somehow an injury to the notion of the importance of the pool. Then I softened. Alvarez writes about his visits to the Hampstead ponds with love, a poet’s touch, taking time even in darkest January, floating along the ice on his back, to revel in the cold, to notice contrails or cormorants. But his comparatively cursory account of swimming laps, even in a gem of a pool, is not an affront to the pool itself, or to pool devotees. It’s a testament to the extent to which the places to which we habitually give ourselves become part of us.

38. Alvarez 2013: 228

39. Lefebvre 2013: 25

40. Alvarez 2013: 214

41. Alvarez 2013: 217

42. Alvarez 2013: 218

43. Alvarez 2013: 239

44. Alvarez 2013: 239

45. Alvarez 2013: 272

46. Alvarez 2013: 43

47. Alvarez 2013: 44

“Rhythms are essentially dynamic,” writes Tim Edensor in his introduction to *Geographies of Rhythm*: “part of the multiplicity of flows that emanate from, pass through, and centre upon place...Despite this fluidity and dynamism, however, and the always immanent potential for disruption and destruction, many rhythms offer a consistency to place and landscape over time... For regardless of the ongoing becoming of life and place, regular routine and slower processes of change mesh with the relative brevity of the human lifespan to provide some sense of stability”<sup>48</sup>.

In other words, rhythm encompasses both the fundamental stability and structure of place, and its fluidity, its in-flux-ness. It captures some tension or interaction between the two, too: as Edensor puts it, “the everyday is a site for the enfolding of multiple rhythms, and though the immanence of experience is usually anchored by habit and routine apprehension, there is always a tension between the dynamic and vital, and the regular and reiterative”<sup>49</sup>.

Thus, while they show the vitality of the body, of place, by producing difference<sup>50</sup>, the rhythms of the pool also impose or facilitate or indicate order, structure, stability – the “predictability and security” referenced by Edensor in relation to the “multitude of habits, schedules and routines” that make up everyday life<sup>51</sup>.

This structure and stability implies a solidity that contrasts smoothly, reassuringly, with the fluid nature of the pool and indeed of the swimming body itself. “Habit,” as Dewsbury has written, “presents a logic of *apprehending a durable sense of self* which is spatial and situated [...] we come to recognize from experience and through habit our more consistent sense of being”<sup>52</sup>. So while the pool exemplifies the processual nature of place through the dynamism of the multiple, individual and collective rhythms and repetitions that run through it via its swimming bodies, the act of swimming laps also becomes a way of “apprehending a durable sense

48. Edensor 2010: 3

49. Edensor 2010: 10

50. Writing about recreational practice on Bondi Beach in Australia, Andrew Metcalfe and Ann Game hit upon a similar point: “[R]itual repetition,” they write, “far from reinforcing a sense of sameness, allows for a sense of surprise and difference [...] The logic here is not simply that years of practice have given people a greater ability to distinguish qualities of this day by comparison with other days; it is also that practice, by bringing them into the present, allows them to meet the incomparability of this day” (Metcalfe and Game 2014: 303).

51. Edensor 2010: 8

52. Dewsbury 2015: 32



of self” – and of apprehending a sense of greater durability, durability of place or world – in this fluid environment. *Still, I went on swimming three times a week*, as Al Alvarez writes: even as the body crumbles.

xi.

The heartbeat, the steady intake and release of breath: rhythm begins and ends with the body<sup>53</sup>. “The body consists of a bundle of rhythms, different but in tune,” Lefebvre writes<sup>54</sup>. Thus Lefebvre’s imagined “rhythmanalyst”, attentive to the world and its rhythms, “listens – and first to his body; he learns rhythm from it, in order consequently to appreciate external rhythms. His body serves him as a metronome”<sup>55</sup>; he “calls on all his senses. He draws on his breathing, the circulation of his blood, the beatings of his heart and the delivery of his speech as landmarks...He thinks with his body, not in the abstract, but in lived temporality”<sup>56</sup>. This hints at the idea of the body as instrument, indeed as recording device and record rolled into one – the way “[o]ur bodies archive experience,” as Dewsbury puts it<sup>57</sup>.

If the body is a record, however, it also has a role in the act of its own recording. What I mean is: habitual movement marks people, often in quite deep ways, through repetition. The body is shaped by habit: thus the daily drudgery is in some way productive, even when it feels like just going through the motions, just doing what you always do. Even, indeed, when the body is in decline.

Earlier I wrote of the swimming body being *built* by the act of repetition – building up muscle, knowledge, familiarity<sup>58</sup>. But there’s a way in which, too, the swimming body is being chiseled away. We may see this literally: in the loss of fat, say, which is one of the very reasons why a swimmer may take up the practice in the first place. But it happens on a more metaphorical level, too, for there’s a way in which the swimming body is *inscribed* through its repetitive actions in the pool – lap after

53. As the dance theorist Irmgard Bartenieff wrote, “One’s whole organism is organized into rhythmic patterns. Heart beat, breath, intestinal rhythms are only examples of the most vital functions” (Bartenieff 1980: 71). She goes on to cite, for example, a study of newborn babies conducted by the psychoanalyst Judith Kestenberg, who observed a difference in the essential rhythms of the actions of drinking and biting, whereby “sucking produces a wave-like rhythm and biting an angular rhythm” (Bartenieff 1980: 71).

54. Lefebvre 2013: 30

55. Lefebvre 2013: 29

56. Lefebvre 2013: 31

57. Dewsbury 2012: 76

58. See also “Re-creation”

lap after lap, week after week after week, year after year after year<sup>59</sup>. You could say, in other words, that the pool is being writ onto the swimming body, slowly, almost imperceptibly, with each kick of the leg or arc of the arm.

Inscription is a term which connotes “chiseling, engraving, incising, carving, shaving, etching, or some other form of cutting into,” as the anthropologist Sally Ann Ness puts it, and interpreted literally, it implies a permanence, a lastingness: “To inscribe is not simply to mark but to mark in a *durable* way. [...] It preserves its meaning by sinking deeply into an unchanging place”<sup>60</sup>. Ness, exploring the extent to which the metaphor of inscription can, in fact, be taken literally, applies it to dance, first seeking “gestures that penetrate beneath a dancer’s skin to fix enduring marks into their hardest, most durable connective tissues” and then exploring the idea that such dance gestures “mold, carve, and otherwise impress their way into ligaments, muscles, and even bones, so as to bring about a transformation that is (ideally) not a weakening of the functional structures but a rendering of them as meaningful”<sup>61</sup>.

To illustrate, Ness describes a particular movement within modern dance, which “entails a hollowing out of the abdominal cavity and curving of the spine in the thoracic, lumbar, and sacral areas. The contractions of the abdominal muscles are generally coordinated with an exhalation of the breath”<sup>62</sup>. Dancers for whom this movement is relevant, Ness goes on, “may practice literally hundreds of repetitions of this movement term on a daily basis [...] After years of embodying this

59. “Inscribed” is a word with some weight – see for example Clifford (1990), Connerton (1989), Geertz (1973), Ingold (2000, 2007), Ness and Noland (2008), Noland (2009). In anthropology, for instance, it is often linked to the (physical) act of writing, which can be understood “in its original sense as a practice of inscription” (Ingold 2007: 3). Methodologically it is also linked to ethnographic writing and fieldnotes (e.g. Geertz – “The ethnographer ‘inscribes’ social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted” (1973: 19) and Clifford, who characterises inscription as the act of “‘making a mental note,’” whereby “the flow of action and discourse has been interrupted, turned to writing” (1990: 51)). More broadly, too, it has tended to denote a kind of fixity or permanence, particularly where writing (as opposed, for instance, to oral communication) is concerned – as the anthropologist Paul Connerton writes in *How Societies Remember*, “The impact of writing depends upon the fact that any account which is transmitted by means of inscriptions is unalterably fixed, the process of its composition being definitively closed” (Connerton 1989: 75). Of particular importance to this thesis as a whole, such understandings emphasise the physicality of writing, as when Connerton declares that “writing, the most obvious example of inscription, has an irreducible bodily component (1989: 76)”, or when Ingold points out that “For the regular practice of writing, like that of any other skill, leaves an indelible anatomical impression, whether in the visible form of the scholar’s rounded shoulders or in the normally invisible architecture of the brain” (2000: 403).

60. Ness 2008: 3-4

61. Ness 2008: 6

62. Ness 2008: 11

movement term, their skeletal-musculature gradually comes to bear its ‘mark.’ [...] A danced term or a simple series of terms is embodied habitually and ‘inscribed’ into a dancer’s body once the body’s connective tissues themselves bear the evidence of that practice”<sup>63</sup>.

Ness is interested too in the word “in”, the prefix of *inscription* – “it is a place-seeking, not a place-being, ‘in.’ Inscriptive gestures can be thought of as gestures that write something into a place”<sup>64</sup> – not the in of “inside”, she says, but “into”. This interest reminds me of a moment about halfway through the documentary *Ballet 422*, which chronicles the creation of the New York City Ballet’s 422nd original piece. In the scene, choreographer Justin Peck is directing a female dancer, correcting a movement. There are a few minutes of practice – he does the movement alongside her, illustrating and directing with a combination of words and gestures – “bring the arms in and then around that way – no, bring them here, down, up through – no, here, bring the arms in, now open the elbows, then up – okay, close”. Then they run through the sequence of movements that this particular isolated movement belongs to, but the dancer has still not got it right, and she peels off from her partner.

“It’s just not in my body, yet,” she says, shrugging<sup>65</sup>. Her voice is soft and her breath heavy, and her words have been subtitled, so that there they are, written across the bottom of the screen, as she turns away: *It’s just not in my body, yet*.

xii.

“Paths are the habits of a landscape,” writes Robert Macfarlane in *The Old Ways*<sup>66</sup>. Walking again: *The Old Ways* is subtitled “a journey on foot”, and in the book both “path” and “landscape” have on one level very literal meanings, as Macfarlane follows roads, tracks, and other ancient through Britain and beyond on foot. But the words have a more metaphorical significance, too, and the book deals more broadly with ideas about the significance of place and imagination, and the physicality of being in place. Indeed, Macfarlane also writes, “paths run through

63. Ness 2008: 11-12. This is akin to a description that Grosz – in a chapter on “The Body as Inscriptive Surface” – gives of bodybuilding, whereby, “The body builder [...] is involved in actively reinscribing the body’s skeletal frame through the inscription of muscles (the calculated tearing and rebuilding of selected muscle according to the exercise chosen) and of posture and internal organs” (1994: 143).

64. Ness 2008: 1

65. Barr, Farrell, and Lipis 2014

66. Macfarlane 2013: 17

people as surely as they run through places” – in other words, people, animals, time itself, may mark places, but so too may those places mark what moves within or through them<sup>67</sup>.

Walking is a convenient medium here, as through such a physical encounter with place, what Bachelard refers to in *The Poetics of Space* as a “muscular consciousness” is formed:

“And what a dynamic, handsome object is a path! How precise the familiar hill paths remain for our muscular consciousness! A poet has expressed all this dynamism in one single line:

*O, mes chemins et leur cadence*

Jean Caubère, *Déserts*

(Oh, my roads and their cadence.)”<sup>68</sup>

*Oh, my roads and their cadence...*we’ve arrived again at rhythm, too, in a way. There is certainly something rhythmic about Macfarlane’s accounts of various journeys, which incorporate not only corporeal encounters but also literary and historical ghosts, expanding the context of the landscape by reaching into not just the past but also into imagination; as he writes towards the beginning of the book:

“I have long been fascinated by how people understand themselves using landscape, by the topographies of self we carry within us and by the maps we make with which to navigate these interior terrains. We think in metaphors drawn from place and sometimes those metaphors do not only adorn our thought, but actively produce it. Landscape, to borrow George Eliot’s phrase, can ‘enlarge the imagined range for self to move in’”<sup>69</sup>.

In his blurring of the distinction between “interior terrains”, “topographies of self”, and the exterior terrains and topographies that he walks through, Macfarlane seems to echo Tim Ingold’s writing in *The Perception of the Environment* on the temporality of landscape – a chapter in which he is particularly interested in rhythm. Writing about the idea of landscape as purely a “cultural or symbolic construction,” set in opposition to nature as “physical reality,” Ingold refuses “the

67. Macfarlane 2013: 26

68. Bachelard 1994: 11

69. Macfarlane 2013: 26

division between inner and outer worlds – respectively of the mind and matter, meaning and substance – upon which such distinction rests. The landscape, I hold, is not a picture in the imagination, surveyed by the mind’s eye; nor however is it an alien and formless substrate awaiting the imposition of human order”<sup>70</sup>. Thus, Ingold writes, again presaging Macfarlane’s interest in the co-constitution of people and place, of people and path, “through living in it, the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are a part of it”<sup>71</sup>. Ingold invokes Bachelard, too, writing that “we experience the contours of the landscape by moving through it, so that it enters – as Bachelard would say – into our ‘muscular consciousness’”<sup>72</sup>.

To illustrate his ideas about the temporality of the landscape, Ingold uses Bruegel’s *The Harvesters*, painted in 1565. The painting depicts an August harvest, and Ingold invites the reader in to it, to consider various of its components, including the hills and the valley, the paths and tracks, the tree, the corn, the church, and the people. Of the paths and tracks in the painting, he writes:

“Taken together, these paths and tracks ‘impose a habitual pattern on the movement of people’ (Jackson 1989: 146). And yet they also arise out of that movement, for every path or track shows up as the accumulated imprint of countless journeys that people have made [...] as they have gone about their everyday business. Thus the same movement is embodied, on the side of the people, in their ‘muscular consciousness’, and on the side of the landscape, in its network of paths and tracks”<sup>73</sup>.

There are, of course, no paths and tracks across a pool, at least not in the sense that Ingold and Macfarlane, and indeed Bachelard, mean<sup>74</sup>. The flow of swimmers up and down the lanes, day in, day out, does not show up as an “accumulated imprint” – water, by its very nature, displaces to accommodate bodies, and when those bodies leave they leave no visible mark of having been there, though they may of course leave behind sweat, fragments of skin, other traces<sup>75</sup>. This may make

70. Ingold 2000: 191

71. Ingold 2000: 191

72. Ingold 2000: 203

73. Ingold 2000: 204

74. It’s worth noting that with their earthier focus, these accounts also seem to ignore the materialities of concrete, tarmac, and other surfaces onto which impressions are harder to make, for the opposite reason that they are in the pool.

75. Water is, as Thomas Farber writes, “formless but never loses its identity, is incompressible but offers no resistance to a change of shape” (1994: 14).

the inscriptive potential of the pool harder to observe. Run your hand through a trough of water and for a moment you'll see ripples, a ghost of the movement – and then the surface will be still again, the water evidently unchanged.

Ness comes up against a similarly ethereal problem when attempting to apply the idea of inscription to her dancers, for “[d]ance’s gestures are typically seen to move out of the dancer’s body onto thin air. They impress themselves onto nothing at all – other than, in some cases, and by no means all, the gaze of a spectator. This view seems to preclude anything but a poetic understanding of dance as gestural inscription. Air is a most inappropriate medium for inscription, entirely insubstantial and immaterial”<sup>76</sup>. Ness rejects this reading, however, which, she says, “privileges a visual experience of danced gesturing”. Instead she suggests that, “if we are going to look for the *inward* moving tendencies of danced gesturing, we might do best to look at the mark they leave not upon the space surrounding their actions or the eyes watching them but *upon the bodies that are their medium*”<sup>77</sup>.

Following this thinking, then, the repetitive, rhythmic, habitual movement through place is the way in which a place, such as the pool, comes to inscribe its *inhabitants*. The body is both the thing inscribed, and also the instrument for inscription; thus the landscape of the pool is known, produced, through muscular consciousness. True, a hand running across water leaves no visible long-term trace; a body following familiar lines up and down the pool does not, in time, create any physical record of its movements other than on the body itself. But are the lanes themselves not paths, imposing “a habitual pattern on the movement of people”? Is it not possible to understand the pool itself, as a whole, as a path, or a series of paths, invisible, interlacing, inscribed through habitual movement on and by individual swimmers?

Ingold, notably, directly rejects the idea that it is a process of inscription at work in the examples he outlines: “I regard embodiment as a movement of *incorporation* rather than inscription, not a transcribing of form onto material but a movement wherein forms themselves are generated,” he writes<sup>78</sup>; elsewhere he underlines the

76. Ness 2008: 5

77. Ness 2008: 6

78. Ingold 2000: 193. Here he also references Paul Connerton, who makes a distinction between what he calls “incorporating practice” and “inscribing practice” – the former exemplified by “a smile or a handshake or words spoken in the presence of someone we address”, messages, in other words, “that a sender or senders impart by means of their own current bodily activity,” the latter exemplified by “print, encyclopedias, indexes,

point: “Human beings do not, in their movements, inscribe their life histories upon the surface of nature as do writers upon the page; rather, these histories are woven, along with the life-cycles of plants and animals, into the texture of the surface itself”<sup>79</sup>.

But what the pool suggests is that inscription can perhaps be understood as an active, ongoing process<sup>80</sup>. The sense of permanence attached to the term is particularly useful when thinking through how habit and repetition can foster a sense of stability amidst the flux and flow of place and of life. But equally we must acknowledge that inscription here is a metaphor, and that the landscape, the body, are not able to permanently mark each other in any pure way because neither is ever complete, or completely stable, at all, let alone in their relationship. “[T]he landscape,” as Ingold writes, “is never complete: neither ‘built’ nor ‘unbuilt’, it is perpetually under construction”<sup>81</sup> – “what appear to us as the fixed forms of the landscape, passive and unchanging unless acted upon from outside, are themselves in motion, albeit on a scale immeasurably slower and more majestic than that on which our own activities are conducted”<sup>82</sup>. In the interaction between landscape and body, then, is an ongoing process of inscription, a continual carving out or chiseling into life, memory, habit, future. There is, in other words, constancy in the constant change, and change in the changing constant: that is to say, we’re talking really about change via stability, and stability via change.

photographs, sound tapes, computers,” which “all require that we do something that traps and holds information, long after the human organism has stopped informing” (Connerton 1989: 72-73). Incorporation, interestingly, is also a term that Leder alights on when writing about skill acquisition, which “is accomplished via a process I will term incorporation. From the Latin *corpus*, or ‘body,’ the etymology of this word literally means to ‘bring within a body.’ A skill is finally and fully learned when something that once was extrinsic, grasped only through explicit rules or examples, now comes to pervade my own corporeality. My arms know how to swim, my mouth can at last speak the language. [...] A skill has been incorporated into my bodily ‘I can.’” (1990: 31). Perhaps incorporation, understood in this way, would be a more broadly useful term to describe the process outlined in this chapter, but there are nevertheless certain meanings and associations of “inscription” as a term which prove useful here, particularly given the watery materiality of the pool, against which backdrop ideas of impression, path-making or line-drawing, seem to contrast dramatically. In any case, as Connerton points out, there is not always a clear delineation between the two terms: “A hesitancy is bound to arise as soon as these distinctions have been made. For it is certainly the case that many practices of inscription contain an element of incorporation, and it may indeed be that no type of inscription is at all conceivable without such an irreducible incorporating aspect” (1989: 76).

79. Ingold 2000: 198-199

80. Ness, for example, asserts the permanence associated with inscription and yet, she writes, “inscription does not work by simply placing its symbolism in a fixed location. Instead, it transforms and creates a different kind of place for its writing through its own distinctive actions” (2008: 4).

81. Ingold 2000: 199

82. Ingold 2000: 201

Dewsbury: “Landscape can change the body encountering it, which is to say that the body never leaves the field of a landscape the same as it enters it”<sup>83</sup>.

xiii.

Goleta, California, Christmas Eve. I’ve driven 45 minutes to have a swim, not in the glittering Pacific, which opens out along the 101, spilling over the edge of the horizon as I speed south, but in a pool, 25 metres long, divided into four narrow lanes. It’s 80 degrees out, a heat wave, a drought. The hills are already bleached gold, a sign of profound thirst, presaging summer wildfires.

When I arrive there’s only one other swimmer plowing up and down, and as I approach I recognise the stroke of my 87-year-old grandmother, on one of her thrice-weekly swims. We share the pool for a while, until she gets out, and I have it all to myself, and I do a few lengths of backstroke, gazing upwards, letting my mind wander.

When I go back to England we’ll write to each other, as we do every month or so, about conditions at our respective pools.

“Today the sky was full of interesting clouds and birds, the water was warm and the pool was empty except for one other swimmer, and I still remembered how to swim,” she’ll say.

“The temperature here is just above freezing and all the trees are bare. It’s actually very appealing to swim in the winter, when it’s too cold and dark to stay outside for very long,” I’ll say.

Pools are reliably dull, at least at first glance. Everything is contained, controlled, regulated. Step into a pool in London or Los Angeles or wherever, and you’ll soon get the hang of things, settle into a rhythm. Maybe you’ll count lengths, or focus on a slight twinge in your shoulder, or sing little snippets of song to yourself as you swim. Maybe a single word or phrase, uttered by a companion the night before, will get lodged in your head, rolling through your mind: *cremant du jura*, *cremant du jura*, *cremant du jura*. A plaster floats by. A hint of mould in the grouting of the tiles. Sunken elastic hairbands make rings on the bottom of the pool.

83. Dewsbury 2015: 36



BODIES OF WATER

The pool is both blank canvas and painting, mirror and window. It is freedom, it is security<sup>84</sup>. It is cage or cave, but also an expansive, expressive environment, living partly in the imagination. It's a place that leaves a mark on you: the distinctive stroke of my grandmother, acquired after decades of practice. And yet the thing about water is that it's impossible to leave a record of your own journey through it. How many hours, days, have I spent forging and re-forging the same path, up and down, in the very same lane?

The water opens up to my body and swallows it, embraces it, but it doesn't remember it: once the body's left so too are all traces of its movement, the splashes and bubbles, eddies and swirls. The memory is in muscles, in heart.

*xiv.*

lap      after      lap      after

lap

lap      after      lap      after

84. E.g. Tuan 1977: 3; see also "Un(contained)".



## EPILOGUE – THREADS

*“In the old way of saying it, tales were spun; they were threads that tied things together and from them the fabric of the world was woven.”*

– Rebecca Solnit<sup>1</sup>

Threads make and unmake. They form patterns, repetitions. Sometimes a thread is a lifeline, a link between here and there, this and that, running just below the surface, keeping everything together.

There are still some threads to pick up here, in closing.

In her book *The Faraway Nearby*, the author Rebecca Solnit recounts a summer spent in Iceland, during which, seeking respite from the relentless light of the season, she visits a labyrinth at the National Gallery. “The end of the journey through the labyrinth is not at the center, as is commonly supposed”, she writes, “but back at the threshold again: the beginning is also the real end”<sup>2</sup>. Remembering the myth, she adds: “Ariadne gives Theseus a spool of red thread to help him escape the Labyrinth in Crete [...]. You unspool the thread on the journey to the center. Then you rewind to escape”<sup>3</sup>.

The beginning is also the real end.

The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, in one of his Dear Colleague letters, writes: “I’ve never much appreciated the idea of a round trip [...] I can’t abide jogging because it obviously takes me right back to where I started”<sup>4</sup>. Someone sends me a link to the letter. “Guessing he wouldn’t care for lane swimming, either!” I respond, aware not only that I’ve regularly invoked Tuan in a thesis about lane swimming, but also that

1. Solnit 2013: 241

2. Solnit 2013: 188

3. Solnit 2013: 188

4. Tuan 1987: unpaginated

he was my starting point, in a way, my springboard: the first geographer I ever read whose words sent me on a journey of my own.

But how else, in the end, to think of the pool, of swimming laps, except in these terms? A pool is not a labyrinth, to be sure, but a lap is a journey there and back, a round trip nonetheless, and a swim, in a sense, is an unspooling and then rewinding of the thread of an hour, a half hour. It takes you right back to where you started. If your goal is to go somewhere, it's a futile endeavour, though it has other merits. (Of jogging, Tuan adds: "True, it has a goal – health, but if health is something merely to be maintained – a hygienic measure like brushing my teeth – then the practice may be necessary, but it doesn't make me sing".)

The round trip implies in some way a circuit; something with rounded edges, perhaps. But the round trip of the lap is all right angles, there and back, up and down, straight lines. This idea of the line surfaces again and again. We "inhabit a world that consists in the first place, not of things but of lines", Tim Ingold writes. "After all, what is a thing, or indeed a person, if not a tying together of the lines?"<sup>5</sup> It's certainly hard to get away from the idea of the line when thinking or writing about lane swimming, since the lanes are themselves lines, drawn across the surface of the pool, dividing it into straight, neat sections, punctuating the water. The lines described or implied here are not as limiting as they might at first seem, however; there is "movement and growth"<sup>6</sup>, tying together, knotting, trailing, an essential open-endedness. The line as a "conduit, a boundary, an exacting/course of thought", as the poet Matt Donovan writes. "Surface engraved with a narrow stroke, path/imagined between two points"<sup>7</sup>. In the final essay of this thesis, "Rhythm", a swim is presented, for instance, as a pattern of words on a page – lap after lap after lap. The body is an instrument for inscription, though also the thing inscribed; swimming laps is a form of drawing lines, though they may be invisible. In "Costume", swimming laps is suggested as a form of learning lines: the actor on the stage, repeating a phrase until it sticks. In "Correspondence" the "straight-line' predictability"<sup>8</sup> of lane swimming recalls ruled paper, each lap a new line in a text, the swimmer a writer of place.

5. Ingold 2007: 5

6. Ingold 2007: 2

7. Donovan 2007: 14

8. Foley 2015: 223

*The physicality of writing*

“To write is to carve a new path through the terrain of the imagination, or to point out new features on a familiar route.”

– Rebecca Solnit<sup>9</sup>

Here, then, is the beginning, or the end, of the first of two loose threads picked up in this epilogue: the swimmer as writer, the writer as swimmer, the shared physicality and mundanity of these endeavours.

Writing is at the heart of this thesis: writing as a method of inquiry, as a product of geographical research, as a way of thinking through body and place in the context of physical exercise and engagement. What’s gone largely unsaid, though, is that to write is itself a physical, and not just an intellectual, act, and that in this way it mirrors the act of swimming, so that the two practices may speak fluently to each other about discipline, repetition, futility, reward.

Writers often talk – sometimes a little preciously – about their “craft”, and about the individual, entirely necessary and highly variable, components of this craft – a particular chair or time of day, a certain soundtrack, a nap, a drink, a cat, an open window<sup>10</sup>. Sometimes these things are spoken about in the same tone of reverence that something sacred or otherworldly might be, as if there’s an element of *witchcraft* to writing. I think of the novelist Roxana Robinson, presenting her writing routine as fragile, not entirely within her control: “In the morning, I don’t talk to anyone, nor do I think about certain things”, she writes. “I don’t read the paper or listen to the news. One glance at the headlines, the apprehension of the dire straits of the world, and it would all be over. The membrane will be pierced; it will shrivel and turn to damp shreds. [...] On a good day, I’m caught up by something larger than myself, held in the light by some celestial movement”<sup>11</sup>.

The idea of the muse, “something larger than myself”, imbues writing with a kind of ethereality, as if it is merely a process of absorbing or channeling some intangible inspiration. But while ritual may well be important, while some circumstances may seem to facilitate progress while others hinder it, while, indeed, it may not always

9. Solnit 2014: 72

10. There is a similarity here to swimmers talking about the more ritualistic aspects of their practice – licking their goggles, preferring to swim one direction or the other, choosing the same locker.

11. Robinson 2013: unpaginated

be possible to identify why this morning everything came so easily while this afternoon was just fog and frustration, writing is not a disembodied act. Words are not disembodied. *These* words are not disembodied: I am here, a body, writing them; I type at some speed, fingers hitting the keyboard with more force than strictly necessary; my nose itches and I reach up to scratch it; I become aware that I'm slumping, of a stiffness in my back.

For authors, for academics, for anyone, a polished, published piece of writing is “not just a product of research, but is also a physical trace of an embodied act and process, that of writing”<sup>12</sup>. The body writes – early in the morning, jolted awake by a cup of instant coffee, as in Robinson's case, or in late afternoon shadows, hunched over a laptop, tapping out the rough draft of what will become, with many more hours of work, a chapter of a thesis. As Catherine Brace and Adeline Johns-Putra have suggested: “in the performance and practice of writing, we glimpse a fusion of thought, action, body and text”, and in the case of place writing perhaps particularly, this fusion creates space for engagement about not just the place being written about, but the place of the author, and the relationship between the two<sup>13</sup>. To write is to engage, physically, with words, with self, with place – the place where the writing happens, the place where the writing is set, and also, perhaps, another place: a kind of made-up or imagined place which exists somewhere in between, and which is layered with other experiences and ideas.

In an academic context, then, “writings through the body, and the writing of bodies into research” reinforce this idea that writing is not just a product or a tool, but an embodied form of labour<sup>14</sup>. As Dydia DeLyser and Harriet Hawkins put it, “in the ‘work’ of writing, the page becomes a personally invested space, a site to be both revered and feared, one of daily practice and struggle”<sup>15</sup>. In this way it has some natural sympathies with the “labour” of swimming, the work done in the pool, the daily practice and struggle there: the pool, like the page, can become a site to be “both revered and feared”, even if on a small-scale level. Some days the water works with you, some days you seem to be working against it, in spite of it.

“Whenever I begin a large project, and when, as a swimmer, I contemplate a prac-

12. DeLyser 2010: 343

13. Brace and Johns-Putra 2010: 403

14. Hawkins 2013: 63

15. DeLyser and Hawkins 2014: 2

tice, a mental image appears: a grayish Sisyphean mound I need to ignore in order to begin to climb”, the artist and swimmer Leanne Shapton writes. “Artistic discipline and athletic discipline are kissing cousins”, she suggests: “they require the same thing, an unspecial practice: tedious and pitch-black invisible, private as guts”<sup>16</sup>. Shapton quotes the artist Leon Kossoff, interviewed in his eighties: “Every day I start, I think, *Today I might teach myself to draw...* It doesn’t make any difference how long you do it, it’s always starting again, one’s always got to start again”<sup>17</sup>.

Swimming has become integrally linked to writing for me in recent years – because I have been writing about swimming, of course, but also because in order to write at all I have found it necessary to swim regularly, to move my arms and my legs, to fall into a comfortable, repetitive habit that lends some solid structure to otherwise shapeless days. I see some similarity, too, between the apparent futility of swimming laps and the apparent futility of writing words: that frustration of the round trip, all the work put in and to get where? Even when you feel you’ve made a breakthrough, there’s still someone next to you who’s faster, more efficient, more elegant; there’s still someone else whose words you admire much more than your own. “After a hundred lengths I might be healthier. After a hundred pages, a hundred sketchbooks, when will it feel right?” Shapton writes<sup>18</sup>. So you ignore the Sisyphean mound and approach the task as iterative, piecemeal. You repeat actions until, put together, they add up to something; one length a hundred times becomes 2500 metres; a hundred pages become ten chapters, one whole.

Of course neither swimming nor writing is actually futile, though neither action is guaranteed to bring any result other than the immediate result, which is, at best, a kind of satisfaction (sometimes muted, sometimes tinged with dissatisfaction). In the third essay of this thesis, “Correspondence”, swimming laps is suggested as a form of correspondence between body and water, body and world, an ongoing exploration. So, too, may writing be a kind of wider correspondence: a way, through asking questions, of better understanding oneself and one’s world – indicative of the “‘conversation’ rather than progressive and cumulative advance of knowledge” characteristic of the humanities as an approach to knowledge<sup>19</sup>.

16. Shapton 2012: 226

17. Shapton 2012: 227

18. Shapton 2012: 226

19. Cosgrove 2011: xxii

“Saying what places make of us”

“We are adept, if occasionally embarrassed, at saying what we make of places – but we are far less good at saying what places make of us. For some time now it has seemed to me that the two questions we should ask of any strong landscape are these: firstly, what do I know when I am in this place that I can know nowhere else? And then, vainly, what does this place know of me that I cannot know of myself?”

– Robert Macfarlane<sup>20</sup>

In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton uses the example of writing to demonstrate the way in which actions may be incorporated into the body: “Everyone who can write proficiently”, he states, “knows how to form each letter so well and knows so well each word they are about to write that they have ceased to be conscious of this knowledge or to notice these particular acts of volition”<sup>21</sup>.

In a way, the thesis is about just this: about attending to details that are not only sometimes overlooked but actually unconsciously absorbed, or rather details, habits, ways of being-in-place, that we have simply ceased to think about because they are so everyday, so habitual – both temporally and physically. This has been a quest, then, to write a place, to write *through* a place, to feel the tedium and, too, the power of repetitive practice and suggest a shared physicality between swimming and writing. But it is also a quest to find a *way* of writing, and thinking, that place: a way of remembering movements that have been habituated<sup>22</sup>, a way of calling into more public being not only Macfarlane’s “strong landscapes” but also places closer

20. Macfarlane 2013: 27

21. Connerton 1989: 77. This calls to mind, too, Drew Leder on acquiring skill, mentioned in “Re-creation”: “once I truly know how to swim”, he writes, “I no longer need to think about cupping my hands or the right style of breathing. This now comes without conscious effort” (Leder 1990: 31). It’s worth noting that Connerton is referring specifically to handwriting here: “when we learn to write”, he adds, “the physical movements we make have no meaning of their own but are contingently required to form the shapes that are themselves merely arbitrarily related to meaning. This contingency of the hand movements involved is well displayed by the use of the typewriter, where the registration of the same signs requires different bodily movements” (Connerton 1989: 77). Ingold too distinguishes, and somewhat more sharply, between ways of writing; the “mechanical processes” of typing and printing “bypass the work of the hand” so that “the intimate link between the manual gesture and the inscriptive trace is broken”. Thus “the writer of today”, he suggests, “conveys feeling by his choice of words, not by the expressiveness of his lines” (2007: 3). As described in the previous section, however, the physicality of writing extends beyond just the muscularity of holding and moving a pen, and the point here is about embodied knowledge(s) more broadly.

22. “Habit is the comfort of recognition that permits the body to inhabit, communicate, and make its way in the world relatively easily”, writes Bissell (2011: 2653). Aspects of habit are also, as Carlisle writes, “connected more to forgetfulness than to recollection: it is precisely those habitual actions of our daily routine that we do not remember performing” (Carlisle 2006: 26). This suggests that some of the relevance of a thesis such as this lies in the acknowledgement or recollection of such habitual actions.



to home, smaller in scale, which may nonetheless be formative, which may, as he puts it, make something of us.

Thus the pool as a site for research: itself an “everyday” place, mundane, not necessarily beautiful or otherwise unusually stimulating, but visited regularly by people to whom it means various things. At the pool these swimmers enact context-specific motions, both in terms of readying themselves for a swim and swimming itself, that are incorporated or absorbed, often “thoughtlessly” performed. The challenge, then, is not only in revealing these motions to be relevant, but in revealing them at all: hence ruminations on floating balls of snot, questions about what people wear at the pool, how they get into the water, what they think about as they go up and down, up and down.

Ultimately these details of life, I argue, are important to call attention to precisely because they make up such routine, sometimes overlooked aspects of our days. It’s the moments-in-between, the places-in-between – not only the sites of great events, sorrows, joys, challenges, achievements – which actually make up the majority of the ordinary human lifespan. It’s like, as Robert Macfarlane puts it, gazing into fissure in a limestone pavement and seeing “a jungle [...] as beautiful and complex, perhaps more so, than any glen or bay or peak. Miniature, yes, but fabulously wild”: isolating and enlarging small worlds, brief moments, individual movements or bits of bodily knowledge, and pulling from them some fizz of excitement, importance, meaning, metaphor<sup>23</sup>.

The importance of noticing and recording, then, is vital. Last year I attended a lecture by Macfarlane, in which he suggested that “when places go undescribed they become hard to protect”<sup>24</sup>. He was speaking of grander landscapes, of course, addressing a broader, contested politics of place and of naming – but it struck me then, and strikes me now, that there is no reason this cannot also be relevant to the pool, or, for that matter, the local pub, the yoga studio, the dentist’s waiting room, the kitchen, or even the “favorite armchair” that is held at one extreme end of Tuan’s scale of place<sup>25</sup>. When Macfarlane spoke of “discrimination against landscapes that seem to lack internal variation” – tundra, flatlands, moors – I thought

23. Macfarlane 2007: 168

24. Macfarlane 2015b

25. Tuan 1977: 149. Place, as he writes, “exists at different scales. At one extreme a favorite armchair is a place, at the other extreme the whole earth”.

immediately of my usual pool, with its repetitive tiled floor, its lane lines, its geometric nature: a landscape of modern sport, by Bale’s definition<sup>26</sup>, in which “the peculiarities of the natural environment [have] become smoothed out”<sup>27</sup>.

I thought too of the tendency towards literature about wild swimming, outdoors, in nature: Deakin “break[ing] out of the frustration of doing lengths, of endlessly turning back on myself” by “follow[ing] the rain on its meanderings about our land to rejoin the sea”<sup>28</sup>, or Susie Parr, in her history of swimming: “I do not slog up and down in straight lines, urging myself to go faster. I prefer to be in the open, gazing at the landscape, twisting, turning and freely switching direction as I relish my buoyancy and my temporary transformation into a water creature”<sup>29</sup>. I am not, after all, immune to the appeal of such writing, or such swimming: how easy to be charmed by the song of birds, the sunlight shafting through trees or rain falling on already wet skin. How shallow and pale the pool may seem in comparison. But how important to mark its significance nonetheless. I’m reminded of Rebecca Solnit: “Part of my own endeavor as a writer has been to find ways to value what is elusive and overlooked, to describe nuances and shades of meaning”<sup>30</sup>.

Towards the end of Macfarlane’s talk, Andrew Tomlinson, guiding the discussion, told a story about a visit to the moorlands of the Outer Hebrides, seemingly a repetitive environment. “This landscape is more interesting than you think”, he was assured by locals. Perhaps the ultimate goal of this thesis, then, has been simply to say the same thing about the pool: that it is more interesting than you think. That it has a nuanced language of its own, spoken *through* the body, and the way it relates to other bodies, to the environment, and to its own self. That there’s value, sometimes, in turning back on yourself.

### *Getting out*

Autumn again, wind pressing against the windows, leaves turning and dropping, though inside it’s still and warm.

26. Bale 1994. “[T]he geographical ‘sameness’ of sports space is encouraged by its synthetic and technological character”, Bale writes (1994: 2); elsewhere he points out, in reference specifically to swimming, that “Natural water courses possess too many vagaries of nature, too many random variables” to be suitable for international competition (1994: 59).

27. Bale and Philo 1998: 12

28. Deakin 2000: 1

29. Parr 2011: 186

30. Solnit 2015: unpaginated

One more lap. I pause to rest a moment, to catch my breath and clear my clouded goggles before pushing off. The pool is emptying, but there are five minutes still before the whistle will sound, signalling the end of the morning session. I have the lane all to myself. I could swim right down the middle if I wanted, no one to avoid, no one to tell me off. But I don't. I pretend I'm an Olympian, a fish, grace underwater, until I have to surface for air, and then I crawl up and back down the lane at my usual pace, with the usual mixture of ease and exertion. I feel alternately light and lithe, then unwieldy, unsuited for this element. When I reach the wall again I heave myself out, stumble, suddenly heavy again, pulling at the straps of my suit, one of which is twisted.

They're renovating the sports complex. All is chaos, though orchestrated, planned chaos: a drill sounding somewhere, builders in high-vis jackets wandering the hallways, plastic sheeting laid down on floors to catch dust and plaster and drips from new leaks in the ceiling. They've relocated the entrance and the bike racks. They've erected temporary walls. They've sent an apologetic email round warning us that they're turning off the heating in the pool for a week, that they're moving the ladies' changing room, that the pool will be shut over the weekend for essential maintenance. *Sorry for any inconvenience, we appreciate your patience.*

Everything's the same but different, different but the same.

In the changing room the women are chatting about the conditions. One of them says she saw bloodworms in the showers recently. Another showed up at her usual time and the pool was shut, no warning, no apology, nothing. I stand under hot water, steam rising. I stretch my back. Don't you think, one woman says, it's quieter than usual for this time of year?

Someone else says, *on cold mornings it's always such a struggle to get out of bed and get myself to the pool, but I'm always glad I did.*

There's mud on the changing room floor, baby powder, puddles of water where people have stood dripping. I dress quickly, to stay warm. A heavy coat, a knit hat over wet hair. I gather my things together.

When someone asks what my research is about I always say "swimming pools" as shorthand, and what I like is that so many people have an immediate response to the idea of the pool: they're thrown back to childhood, or reminded of a passage in

a novel they love, or they hate pools, or they can't swim, or they get vertigo when they can see the bottom at the deep end, or they used to swim for a club and chlorine gives them a competitive chill, or their local pool is so *dirty*, or, or, or. Possibilities keep opening out: *maybe this isn't really related to your research, but...* and it always is, in a way.

This is an ending of sorts. Soon I'll submit my thesis. Soon I'll head out to California for a month, and when I return this place will be changed – if not the pool itself, then the area around it, the compound of buildings of which it is part. It will be the same place but re-situated somehow, seen in a different light.

Earlier this year I had an operation, and as the anaesthetist prepped me for theatre she asked me about my PhD. Pools, I said. Swimming. Et cetera, et cetera. As I talked about it, lying back on the bed under a hospital blanket, it seemed an absurd thing to be writing about, but as I drifted off into a thick drugged sleep, I found myself imagining the rhythmic movements of a swimmer going up and down a lane, and when I woke I was sure I had dreamed the perfect way to structure my thesis – an intense sense of clarity that lasted half a second and which I have never been able to recapture. The point is: I'm still swimming. Nothing is the same, everything is the same.

Into the morning, then. Because of the building work, they've reconfigured the entrance to the pool; to get out now, you have to walk past the basketball court, past the gym and the weight room, past the climbing wall, past the dojo (now decommissioned, full of construction materials). Outside clouds are sweeping across the sky, buses rumbling down the road, an ordinary weekday kicking into full swing. The air still carries its morning chill, and I put my gloves on like an automaton, watch the puff of my breath as I exhale, but I'm warmer than I was when I arrived.

My ears are full of water, so that as I unlock my bicycle I feel myself to be both present, fumbling with my key, and elsewhere, still immersed.

## APPENDIX I: LIST OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

A brief biography of each interviewee is given below. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity. Ages given are from the time of interview; interviews were conducted between June and September 2014.

### Alice

35 years old. Swims three times a week when she can, though she works at a university in another city so this can be difficult sometimes. Alice first learned to swim as a child; she enjoyed it but never joined a club or got into it competitively. In 2011, however, a friend asked if she would do the Great North Swim (an organised open water swim in Lake Windermere) with her. Alice agreed and ended up loving it. “So I guess I kind of got into swimming through the open water thing,” she says, “but then I discovered lap swimming – I’d never really done it properly before, but I wanted to learn how to swim crawl, so that was my next mission”. Alice also joined a local triathlon club last year to get some ongoing swim coaching, though with no competitive aims and no particular interest in triathlon itself.

### Anita

42 years old. Swims three or four times a week. Anita learned to swim as a child. She says: “I had swimming lessons up to about the age of eight or nine, and then I didn’t swim again until about three years ago,” when, at the urging of friends, she decided to do a triathlon. “I kept saying, ‘I can’t swim!’, cause I hadn’t swum since I was about eight – and even then we’re talking like granny breaststroke, head above the water. So I decided I was gonna have swimming lessons, and I was gonna learn how to swim properly”. She’s recently started earning a coaching qualification, which has given her a different perspective on her own swimming practice – “It’s certainly helped me, looking at all the good technique and faults with other people, to correct my own swimming!”

Anthony

35 years old. Swims two or three times a week. At the urging of his parents, Anthony learned to swim as a child. Swimming then “became a really big thing” for him; he joined a club and swam competitively (“I even swam for Ireland once – I mean, when I was like 12!”). He says: “I was in the pool all the time, at least every day, sometimes twice a day and all that sort of stuff”. But when he was about 15, “there was talk of trying to go for something big, like the Commonwealths or something, and I just thought – I really can’t be arsed. I’m so sick of this, going up and down, up and down, up and down, and I chucked it in”. He got into other sports, but “spent the last nine years being too sedentary”, until last year, when he resolved to get active again. He also enjoys open water swimming and recently completed his first triathlon.

Cassandra

52 years old. Swims two or three times a week. Cassandra learned to swim at primary school, and has been swimming regularly for a number of years. She suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome, so finds “there aren’t many types of exercise that are accessible to me, but swimming is one of them”. She says she has to be very careful about how she organises her trips to the pool, because she has collapsed after swimming in the past; she’s therefore chosen her pool and arranged her routine in such a way that minimises driving time and reduces the likelihood that she’ll crash out until after she gets home. About her motivation to swim, she says, “because I’m 52 now, and getting older, it’s important to me to maintain the fitness I’ve got, and that’s where swimming’s quite crucial”.

Howard

54 years old. Swims between three and five times a week. Howard learned to swim as a kid, though only dabbled in it until recently. He’s also a very keen runner, and feels his swimming speed doesn’t match his athletic potential, especially compared to his running speed, so has been seeking out advice on technique. “I still have very good oxygen capacity, but my swimming relative to that is terribly slow. So it’s all about how to improve technique,” he says. “There’s one guy at the pool, he’s a coach but also one of the lifeguards, and he’s been helping, coaching me a bit, and I

was helping him with his running. And the point was, he said: you don't go harder, you go more efficient. Which is what I know from running, too".

### Daisy

57 years old. Swims four times a week. Daisy has a military background, but now works as a librarian at a local school. She swims after work, and also cycles and does yoga; she took up these activities about four or five years ago, when she stopped running – "I loved running, but it didn't love me very much. So I thought I'd call it a day". Daisy learned to swim at school and joined a swimming club when she was about thirteen, but it was "more social than training," and she never competed. She likes to swim with other people, so often goes to the pool with a friend or colleague, so they can have a coffee and a chat after.

### Emilia

41 years old. Swims laps twice a week, and also takes her kids swimming at least once a week. She taught herself to swim when she was 25 – "I used to go to Brixton pool, and watch other people swimming, and copy what they were doing". Ever since then she's been swimming for exercise as regularly as possible. She usually swims on weekdays after work. "Even if I'm really tired I force myself to go," she says, "because it makes me feel so refreshed afterwards".

### Flora

50 years old. Swims three or four times a week. Flora's been swimming for about 20 years. She finds it quite a therapeutic activity. She has an autistic son and said that when he was little swimming helped her deal with the stress of caring for him. "I do use it a lot to focus my mind," she says. "I think if I hadn't got my swimming, I could be in some real trouble sometimes! It's probably saved the NHS some money". She also appreciates the social element of visiting the pool, and after her swim will spend time chatting with friends in the changing room – mostly people that she doesn't know from any other context but has developed a relationship with over the years through spending time at the pool.

### Geoff

52 years old. Swims twice a week. Geoff is an amateur triathlete. He used to enjoy

swimming as a kid but didn't swim regularly until he got into triathlon three years ago. He says that when he was younger, he had a lot of "on your feet physical type jobs, so I kept trim that way", but that, "later in life I've gone more into the technical side of things at work, and I spend my whole day sat on my bum. As you get older, you get more comfortable with home, and your kids get older, and your weight just starts to go up". So, he says, he started trying to get in shape a few years ago, starting with running around the block at home and gradually building up fitness. "The running came along, and at the same time I started swimming again. Because it was another thing to get fit – I dropped a huge amount of weight off!" He had some private lessons to improve technique, and then joined a triathlon club to get some ongoing coaching for his swimming, which led him to start competing.

### Greg

44 years old. Swims two or three times a week. Greg is an amateur triathlete and used to be a very competitive rower. He learned to swim at school but hardly swam at all until taking up triathlon in 2006. "That's when I taught myself to swim properly and to start doing lengths for the first time," he says. He swims primarily for training purposes, often with fellow members of the triathlon club of which he is a member.

### Hank

32 years old. Swims two or three times a week. Hank says that as an environment, the pool invokes quite a lot of memories of childhood – he learned to swim at school, in a Victorian-era swimming pool. He works at a local bank, but also as a personal trainer, and is very enthusiastic about the fitness benefits of swimming. About going to the pool, he says that "half the battle is getting there, cause once you're there, it's just such a brilliant form of exercise. It gets the cardio going, and you can feel a real difference when you get out of the pool, but without any of the pain that you get from something like running".

### Jason

55 years old. Swims two or three times a week. Jason is Cassandra's partner; they swim together, although he likes to do more lengths than she does and is actively trying to increase his usual distance. Like Cassandra, he swims to stay fit and active; he suffers from chronic back pain and finds swimming a relatively accessible form



of exercise. He has a theory about swimming being similar to being in the womb: “I think that’s why people feel relaxed when they’re in pools – because they subconsciously go back to that very early point in their life”.

### Julie

28 years old. Swims four times a week. Julie is a swimming instructor, with a small business devoted to teaching and coaching. Her mum used to take her swimming when she was a kid, and she had lessons at school and joined a swimming club. “I swam probably four or five times a week throughout my childhood, until I was about 12 or 13, when I got black line syndrome – I’d just had enough of swimming up and down swimming pools,” she says. She focused instead on running for a while. “And then I fell back in love with swimming when I was at uni, and I started doing a swimming teacher qualification, and then I was coaching regularly, initially once or twice a week and then it was like, 20 times a week or 30 times a week once I had my own business doing it!” She’s got quite a competitive streak and likes being the fastest person in the pool, though also finds swimming a very meditative activity.

### Justin

30 years old. Swims three times a week. Justin is Julie’s partner, also a swimming coach. He is a triathlete, in training for an Ironman. He’s been swimming – “just as in messing around in water” – since he was very young, but didn’t take it up with any seriousness “until about four years ago, when I had to actually learn to swim properly in order to do a qualification to be a beach lifeguard. And then that’s taken me into triathlon, which has now taken me into coaching swimming as well”.

### Katherine

27 years old. Swims five times a week. Katherine is currently training to swim the length of Lake Windermere. She learned to swim as a kid and was quite a keen swimmer for a while, but stopped at university. She didn’t get really get into it seriously until she met her husband, who’s a triathlete – she wasn’t interested in cycling or running, but felt swimming was something they could share. “I feel like the turning point was in 2009, when I did the Great North Swim for the first time. My motivation for that wasn’t really swimming, it was to raise money for charity. But obviously in order to do a big swim like that you’ve got to do a lot of training in

the pool over the winter, so that was the point when I started swimming every day before work. And I've been doing that for five years now".

### Lucy

65 years old. Swims between three and five times a week. Lucy swims to stay healthy and active. She remembers being taught to swim in the sea by her dad when she was about three years old, and always enjoyed being in the water. But then, she says, "I went to college, and then I was a teacher, and I just had no time. So for 38 years, I did zero exercise, zero anything apart from, you know, a holiday swim now and then. But I always promised myself, as I approached retirement: right, I am going to go to the gym, and I am going to swim, as many mornings a week as I can manage. And I've done that for eight years now".

### Mary

45 years old. Swims two or three times a week. Mary started swimming as a kid: "I've always liked being in water, so I always enjoyed swimming". She had lessons in primary school, "and I was told I had the potential to be good," but her school didn't have facilities for regular swimming and she wasn't able to pursue it competitively. She's always swum to keep fit, however. She now swims in a pool but also particularly enjoys open water swimming at a nearby lake during the summer months.

### Matthew

41 years old. Generally swims about once a week at the moment because he's so busy, though says he'd like it to be more like two or three. Matthew works full time and is also a coach with a local triathlon club, coaching both swimming and running sessions. He says he finds it hard to turn his coaching brain off sometimes, even when he's swimming – "underwater, you can see people's swim strokes, and sometimes I'll notice people's technique, and if I hear them talking to somebody else about it I tend to go 'oh, have you tried this?' And I end up losing 20 minutes just trying to give them some drills to do!"

### Shelley

27 years old. Swims two or three times a week. Shelley learned to swim as a child – she was afraid of putting her face in the water, though, so didn't learn to do front

crawl until she was older, and even now says she finds elements of being in the water uncomfortable; she doesn't like seeing drains, for instance. She started to get more into swimming towards the end of her undergraduate degree – “it was the thing that I would be doing to keep fit. Towards the end of my degree, building up to finishing, I swam what I thought was quite a lot. I remember doing like 60, 70, 80, lengths, and I remember one time I did 90 lengths, and I thought this was, like, amazing!” She took up triathlon a few years ago, and mainly swims as part of her training now.

### Stephanie

64 years old. Swims twice a week to stay active. Stephanie learned to swim as a child in France: “France was not awash with swimming pools when I was young,” she says, but she was lucky to live in a village that had one. “We went there, and I loved the water immediately,” she says. She swam on and off for awhile, and took her own kids to the pool when they were children (one of them, her daughter, is also a devoted swimmer), but didn't start going to the pool regularly herself until two years ago: “I made it like a job for myself, to actually keep healthy”.

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