Sea You There! An Autoethnographic Study of Open-water Swimming in Cape Town

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Abstract: Through an autoethnography of open-water swimming in the oceans of Cape Town, I investigate the symbolic value that the water holds for a niche group of swimmers. Open-water swimming has become a phenomenon worldwide, but it takes on a particular flavor in Cape Town. Through this embodied practice, I interrogate how a small group of swimmers build community in search of solitude, individual therapy, and meaning. While I reflect on my embodied experiences of being in the water, my presence in the water opens up unique opportunities to engage with others in search of the shared symbolic value placed on water. In doing so, I argue that the practice of open-water swimming becomes an enabling place, promising escape from everyday life. Open water swimming also becomes a ritualized activity, with the water taking on significant symbolic meaning and a unique experience where swimmers share a sense of escapism, awe, and a shared sense of belonging.

Keywords: open-water swimming, symbolism, embodiment, ritual, Cape Town

Introduction

My alarm goes off in the early hours of a cold Cape Town winter morning after a restless night of sleep, where my subconscious reminds me of what the next day would entail—a 7km open water swim from Robben Island to Big Bay. A message from the boat pilot indicates that the conditions are ideal for a fast crossing as the swell and westerly wind have subsided. I get my swimsuit and wetsuit ready, gulp coffee, and eat some porridge—much-needed sustenance for the day's activity.

I meet my fellow swimmers at the Oceana Boat Club, and the excitement and nervous energy are palpable as we ready our swimming feeds, zip up wetsuits, and do final mental preparations before boarding the boat for the 20-minute ride to Robben Island—the starting point. Banter and chatter subside as the boat engines start and the petrol fumes evaporate in the air. I am on the boat with four seasoned open-water swimmers. Jane is attempting her 10th Robben Island crossing and quips, "How grateful am I to be able to do this? It is an addiction."[1] Sam, her training partner, chirps: "This is a crazy addiction, but I would rather be here than part of the four million Cape Townians rushing to work and school at this moment." As we arrive at the drop-off point, there is deadly silence, only the lingering noise of the boat engines and the sounds of a flock of seagulls trekking over the Island. We jump off the boat into the deep blue Atlantic and swim through the kelp toward the starting point on the Island—a rock formation

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that symbolizes the start of the physical and emotional quest for the next two to three hours of total immersion and a sense of freedom. Setting off, we leave the land behind and meet the sun coming up over the blue horizon (Figure 1). Symbolically, it is a physical separation from the land and everything it represents - structure, rules, regulation, stress - into a vast open space of the unknown- a realm that represents fluidity, freedom, opportunity, and fear.

Through an autoethnographic account, I show how open water swimming becomes an enabling place that promotes a form of escapism from their everyday life for many swimmers.[2] As swimming is a practice that requires full use and submersion of the body, I explore the embodied aspects of open-water swimming and link this bodied practice to the symbolic value of water. The experience of the body is central to the meaning of swimming for many open-water swimmers. I also consider how open water swimming has become part of a ritualized activity where swimmers experience a sense of awe, which leads to a sense of belonging. There is a growing global body of literature on the social significance of oceans and swimming.[3] Through an autoethnographic lens, I provide a South African perspective on the meaning of this activity.

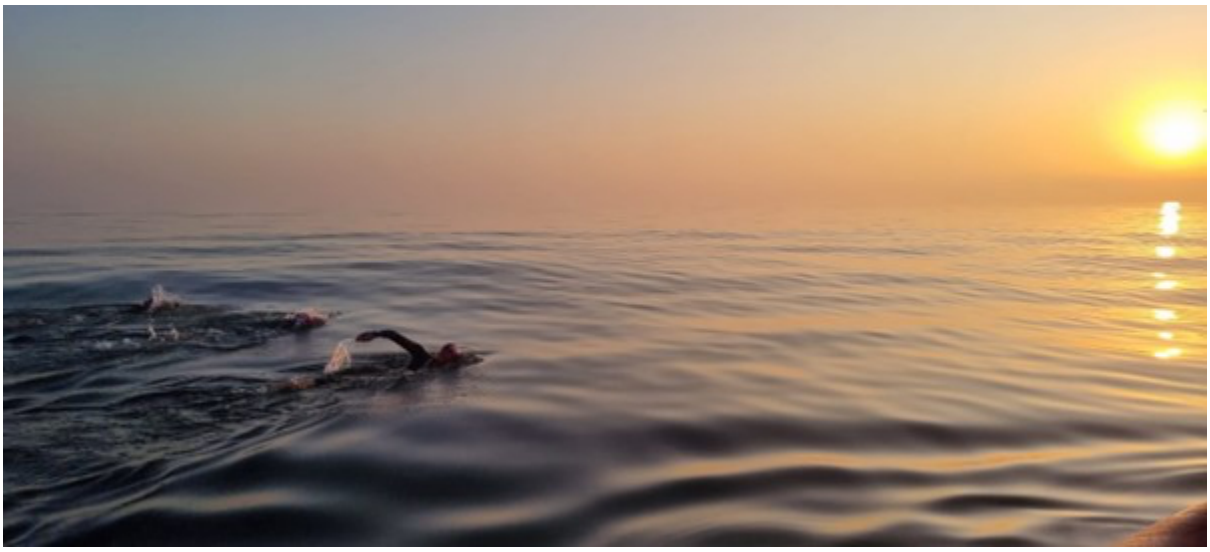

Figure 1. Swimmers set off from Robben Island with the sun rising over the horizon (Photograph taken by BigBay Events).

There has been a noteworthy increase in the popularity of open-water swimming practices in and around Cape Town. Various swimmers, ranging from "bobbers" to social and elite swimmers, frequent the aquatic landscape that hugs the Cape Peninsula coast.[4] Some have suggested that this trend is in response to strict lockdown regulations enforced by the South African Health authorities to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, where people developed a need to escape the confines of their home environments. The global pandemic has increased people's desire to escape from the city and seek nature for health-enhancing activities like open-water swimming. The Cape Long Distance Swimming Association (CLDSA) is the custodian of open-water swimming in the Western Cape. Recent statistics show that their membership increased threefold over the 2021/2022 season.[5] Open-water swimming appeals to a tiny fragment of society—all the participants of this study come from a middle to upper-class

background. Although swimming in the ocean is free, the initial investment in buying a wetsuit, paying membership fees at a swimming club, and fees to enter organized events can become expensive. Many swimmers are drawn to the sport to immerse themselves in nature and for fitness purposes. Not all swimmers come from a competitive swimming background, which makes the activity inclusive for all levels of swimmers. My positionality—hailing from a middle class white background, being able-bodied and having been a competitive swimmer—influenced my access to the field and the opportunities I had to partake in several open-water swimming events.

The popularity of open-water swimming is attributed to a focus on personal health and well-being and a growing desire to reconnect with nature.[6] Nature-based research has seen a shift in focus with growing interest in hydrophilic and hydrophobic elements that have value for human health and well-being.[7] A growing interdisciplinary body of literature probes the benefits provided by water environments or 'blue space.'[8] Although there is ambiguity in defining the term blue space, the explanation of the concept emphasizes the health-enabling qualities "where water is the centre of a range of environments with identifiable potential for the promotion of human well-being."[9] Blue space as understood in this article, refers to bodies of water in the ocean around the Cape Peninsula. The literature points to the psychological and physiological benefits of swimming in blue spaces.[10]

Although several studies have focused on the value of blue spaces and open-water swimming from a psychological and healthy geographical perspective, I take a different approach by exploring symbolism, embodiment, and ritual as markers of open-water swimming experiences.[11] This research builds on recent hydrofeminist scholarship that focuses on the political and scholarly possibilities that leisure activities hold in Southern Africa.[12] A hydrofeminist approach to understanding water is based on philosophical underpinnings that view the ocean as 'politically haunted spaces' and its association with colonization and apartheid. In addition to this, the ocean and its creatures become a means to address environmental challenges and considering the oceanic activities as a catalyst for social change and justice.[13] Although this narrative on oceans is useful for philosophical arguments, the emphasis of this research is on the micro-level interpretation based on individual embodied experience of openwater swimming and the symbolic and ritualistic meaning that the activity holds for myself and participants of this study. These experiences are of course framed in historically and socially significant spaces around the Cape Peninsula.

There is a growing interest in using oceans as a means to think through writing processes and academic endeavors.[14] This article makes a contribution to the limited academic knowledge about the global phenomenon of open-water swimming by drawing attention to a nature-based, aquatic sporting lifestyle in South Africa. The article therefore adds (southern) Africa as a site of study within the context of the recent social and psychological work on sport, leisure and blue humanities focusing on open-water swimming.[15] By drawing on the scholarship on open-water swimming from the global North, attentive to nature-based sport and leisure and alternative approaches to wellbeing, and reflecting on that scholarship within this South African case study, the article opens up an approach that may enable further wet ethnographies in (southern) African coastal regions and, by extension, in other areas of the global South.

The autoethnographic component is based on my participation in open-water swimming events, several Robben Island Crossings arranged by BigBay Events, and training with a swim club in Cape Town for 18 months—a period that spanned both the summer and winter open-water swimming season.The experience of having been a competitive swimmer and researching the field where other bodies and my own are immersed in water allows for an 'insider' perspective on how embodied experiences are shaped by water and vice versa. The importance of using the body as a tool as a vector of knowledge when researching sports is alluded to.[16] Similarly, there is an emphasis on using the body as an instrument in research as we create knowledge about ourselves and our identities which influences research relationships in the field.[17] There is value in autoethnographic research by suggesting that this method moves away from a focus on doing research and enables researchers to story lives as research.[18] Furthermore, "qualitative research (or any research) can no longer maintain a distance, so-called objective, self-serving stance, and no longer can researchers take advantage of vulnerable others without accounting for their own identities, experiences, social capital, intentions and formative assumptions."[19] This reflexivity is crucial for a methodological approach when studying open-water swimming—an immersive and personal activity.

To get to know nature-based sports, researchers should engage in the activity. An "autoethnography may provide methodologies for understanding and analysing connections between personal embodied nature-based experiences, culture and nature."[20] The rationale for choosing this research approach is that through the lived experience of my bodily practices in swimming and the sharing of these experiences with the participants of this study, I was able to establish rapport—an essential requirement for the collection of trustworthy empirical evidence. Some scholars have used novel research methods to engage with the study of open-water swimming. The swim-along method i.e. engaging in conversation with swimmers whilst immersed in seawater is one such method to study activities that take place in water.[21] It can be argued that "the embodied approach of research has the capacity to capture collective experiences of, in this case, the material world of water."[22]

Although the swim-along method is useful, I conducted interviews on land as I felt the structure of an interview could assist in extrapolating themes related to symbolism, embodiment, and ritual. The research field was fluid as I immersed myself in water through the research process. The field took on different conceptual spaces, from road trips to swimming events to conversations in the ocean, on the boat, and social events. Detailed fieldnotes were kept of my experiences of training sessions, swimming events, and open-water swimming-related social events. In addition to the autoethnographic component, interviews were conducted with ten open-water swimmers. Convenience sampling was used and interviews took place after swim training at a local coffee shop. Interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis was used to extrapolate the main themes which related to symbolism, embodiment, ritual, and awe.

Nature of Open-water Swimming as a Sport

Open-water swimming (referred to as wild swimming in the UK) is an activity that is practiced in both the sea and dams (reservoirs). The focus of this article is on the experiences for a group of swimmers who belong to a swimming club in Cape Town, train regularly, and have entered

open-water swimming events in the Cape Peninsula. The distances range from 1.6km – 10km swims, mostly at sea. There are specific swimming rules governed by the CLDSA where swimmers need to register their swims and official swims need to be arranged with an experienced boat pilot. The rules of the swimming culture influence both access to formal events and training opportunities. The sporting code of open-water swimming is therefore an institutionalized practice, as swim routes are often predetermined (for safety reasons) and official times are only recognized if registered with the CLDSA. These formal rules are in place to ensure water safety and to record swimming performances.

Symbolism of Enabling Spaces: Water

The symbolic meaning that people hold of water is multifaceted. Water is associated with life, ritual, healing, cleanliness, and sometimes fear. The "water is always more than itself; its force and material presence constantly frame people's efforts to address the fundamental question of what it means to live life collectively in a world that is always more than human."[23] The notion of transcending into a realm where one's humanness is suspended was a prominent theme when swimmers spoke about the symbolic value of swimming in the ocean. Sandra, a swimmer who is actively involved in the promotion of swimming events in and around Cape Town, explained the symbolism of water in the following way:

> To be in water is to be completely immersed in the unknown and yet feel completely familiar with the environment. The swim route or location may be different, but the water is always welcoming. Being suspended in a body of water where one has no control gives me a sense of surrender and release. I associate water with a space where I can let go and drift…a sensation that I often struggle to experience on land. Open-water swimming allows me to suspend my responsibility as a human as I no longer have to do, act or think rationally when submerged in this medium. When I am in the water I can just be.[24]

A sense of separation from everyday life and the corporeal world is one of the main reasons why open-water swimming has become a popular hobby.[25] It seems that open-water swimming not only allowed participants of this study to transcend their humanness, but the water also offered them a sense of escape from the demands of everyday life. This notion of being away refers to "a break from one's daily routines, activities and demands that cause fatigue."[26] Sam (described above in the opening vignette) is a mother of three and holds a very demanding job in the corporate sector. During our weekday training swims on the Atlantic Seaboard she often arrives in haste, explaining that she has just dropped one of her kids off at soccer training and then rushed back to the office for a meeting. As she takes a deep breath to have her wetsuit zipped up, she says, "Tuck me into my escape zone." After our swim on the day, Sam explained that open-water swimming enables her to escape her identity. She does not identify as a mother, worker in a stressful corporate environment, or wife when she swims. She put it eloquently:

> The water does not know who I am or expect anything from me. I need to explain, plan, think, and perform when I am on land. When I am in the water, all I think of is taking one stroke at a time as I gaze at the natural beauty of mountains surrounding me. It really offers me a complete break from who I am and what I

> need to do. My family refers to the water as my therapist and they can tell if I haven't been to 'therapy' for a while.[27]

The mental health benefits of open-water swimming have been well-documented and many of the participants of this study swam to deal with loss or trauma and to promote their mental health.[28] Elize explained what swimming means to her in the following way: "Swimming allows me to escape and clear my head. I deal with all the demons that keep me down or make me depressed. When you are spending three hours in the water it provides you with much time to think and talk to yourself." Jane also explained how swimming has become part of her therapy to deal with anxiety:

> Swimming is much cheaper than therapy! You are pushed outside of your comfort zone and it is in the time of stillness and being alone where you get a chance to engage with yourself and test your limits. I suffer from anxiety, but ironically when I find myself in the ocean, I have no fear. The water clears the cobwebs, and you get to meet people who may have similar struggles to you. If I do not swim, I get very irritable and need to swim to stay sane![29]

Besides the obvious physical advantage of exercise, the notion of escapism and the positive association the water holds for mental health benefits was prominent among swimmers. The natural environments that promote psychological well-being are referred to as "therapeutic landscapes."[30] These landscapes account for how "environmental, individual and societal factors…come together in the healing process in both traditional and non-traditional landscapes."[31]

It would however be naïve to argue that open-water swimming offers an exclusive space where swimmers only feel enabled. The ocean also represents danger, cold, unpredictability, and fear. This is especially the case when encountering other species such as sharks, jellyfish, and seals or being threatened by pollution in the ocean. It was on my third Robben Island crossing where I encountered the reality of our polluted oceans. There had been a massive storm the day before our scheduled crossing and the the rivers that feed the Atlantic ocean had clensed their bellies. About 3km into the swim our boat skipper sped away. I got the biggest fright, and my immediate thought was that there is a shark nearby and he was trying to distract it. My heart started racing and the vulnerability of my presence in what quickly felt like foreign territory was real. To my relief the skipper shouted "follow the line"—a seapath that he had made in the wake of his boat. As we swam through this narrow channel of clear water I realized we were surrounded by pollution that had swept into the ocean as a result of the storm. Everything from nappies, mattresses, sanitary pads, plastic bags and bottles floated around us and I put my head down and started kicking and swimming as fast as I could hoping that I could get out of this waste for a fresh breath of air. As we cleared the section I could not help thinking of my immersion with waste which challenged the assumption of the ocean as a clean, unscathed, enabling environment.

Several scholars have noted that the affective practices associated with blue spaces needs to be problematized and offer a critique on viewing recreational ocean based activities as spaces that exclusively promote well-being.[32] Although beyond the scope of this article, the fear and risk associated with taking part in open-water swimming opens up debates on the potential of open-water swimming to address broader societal issues regarding

environmentalism and social justice. Research shows that open-water swimming does not necessarily promote social justice because a personal experience of a nature-based sport does not necessarily change a person's worldview and can be a space of limitations, grief, and sadness.[33] The "murkiness" of the ocean offers opportunities for future research to consider the ocean as a space that represents deterioration and destruction.[34]

Embodiment: How the Body Feels

Open-water swimming requires the total immersion of the body in a vast natural body of water. The act of swimming uses major parts of the body and requires significant coordination and effort. Only by prolonged swimming does the body adapt to swimming as a spontaneous act. The ethnographic study of age-group swimmers eloquently describes this: "The experience of swimming becomes more comfortable when significant time is spent in water, training the body and mind. To be buoyant and move in liquid, in a way, becomes a normalised experience or sensation that has the effect of inducing more than sensations of cold, warmth, anxiety, or fear in people."[35] Open water swimmers in the Cape Town region have normalized the idea of cold and the significant amount of time it takes to acclimatize the body to cold. The average annual temperature in the Atlantic is 10.4C and there is an unspoken rule within the swimming community that 'real' open-water swimmers do not wear wetsuits. Those who swim without wetsuits (colloquially referred to as 'skins') are considered the pioneers of open-water swimming in Cape Town.

There is constant banter between those who wear wetsuits and those who do not. Only as recently as 2021 did the CLDSA officially recognize swimmers who crossed Robben Island in wetsuits. Despite this comfort, I swim with a wetsuit and often find myself hesitantly walking towards the shore's edge, knowing that the icy Atlantic Ocean would sweep over my toes. I gingerly step into the ocean, taking small steps, deep breaths, and shallow dive to immerse my entire body in the water. The first couple of strokes, your heart pumps faster, and you question the rationale behind this activity, but then the deeper you go, and as your body acclimatizes, you experience a sense of solitude and awe.

The wetsuit technology and the choice to swim without it is perhaps a useful entry point into understanding the embodied experience of swimming. Several swimmers referred to their bodies as being free, unrestricted, and one with the water. Although wetsuits provide some barrier between one's skin and the water, there seems to be a discourse where swimmers who swim in only 'skins' feel closer, uninhibited, and immersed within the water—almost as if there is little distinction between their bodies and the liquid mass that surrounds them. Similar findings indicate that open-water swimmers experience a sense of being part of nature.[36] The notion of feel and the tactile experience of not being inhibited by the constriction of the wetsuit around the body was evident when participants spoke of how they experienced their bodies in the water. Jane elaborated on her decision to swim without a wetsuit:

> I started swimming with a wetsuit because I am not a strong swimmer and the wetsuit helped with my buoyancy. As my fitness improved, I felt that the wetsuit is restrictive. I want the feeling of being fully immersed in the water. When you swim skins, you are one with this huge body of water. Yes of course you feel the cold more, but I would sacrifice that to be one with the water.[37]

For Jane, her body mimics the water flow, and she perceives her body as not necessarily in the water but with the water. This distinction is essential as it relates to the earlier point that open-water swimming enables swimmers to suspend their humanness. On land, their bodies are exposed to the forces of gravity, where movements such as walking, sitting and sleeping are the norm. In the water, they do not perceive their bodies as a mass to carry but rather as a form that is integrated and one with the water. This leads to a discussion on how bodies are used differently in sports.

There is a distinct contrast in how bodies are used in elite and nature-based sports. Elite sport drives bodies to excel and remain disciplined, focusing on being in prime condition to perform. Nature-based sport, on the other hand, reinforces the values of participation. Many participants in this study engaged in open-water swimming for reasons other than to compete. The primary motive for Kay, an open-water swimmer who took up swimming at the age of 62 and considers herself a novice, elaborated on this idea and stated:

> The main reason I started swimming in the ocean was to get close to nature and experience a complete sense of freedom. The open-water swimming community in Cape Town is very welcoming and inclusive. You sometimes swim with a person who has done a couple of Robben Island crossings or a person who has just started. In fact, many of the more experienced swimmers respect the newbies more as they have admiration for how much time we spend in the water. You can have the fast swimmers complete a Robben Island crossing in two hours and those who finish have so much respect for those who take three to four hours for the swim. There is a culture among open-water swimmers that is fixated on experience and participation rather than times and achievements.[38]

This observation implies how the embodied experience of swimming is framed, as the focus is not on conditioning the body to outlast or compete against others. For many open-water swimmers, the body is a vehicle of solace and opportunity.

Research on the body, injury, and sport forms part of a limited body of ethnographic work focused on the body within the cultural world of sport.[39] The body can be conceptualized as an engine with a mortal quality.[40] "The body in the context of sports medicine is an object that can be controlled and manipulated, and thus may be understood as a complex mechanical machine."[41] Research on retired professional sportsmen found that athletes' bodies become the focus of the self in an instrumental way.[42] Messner argues that "it's not simply that an athlete's body becomes the focus of the self, but that the athlete is often encouraged to see his body as an instrument…Physical and or emotional pain is experienced as a nuisance to be ignored or done away with."[43] Furthermore, "the ultimate extension of instrumental rationality is the alienation from one's own body—the tendency to treat one's body as a tool, a machine to be utilised (and used up) in the pursuit of particular ends."[44]

Although the literature conceptualizes the body as a machine with mortal qualities and one where emotion and pain should be ignored to succeed, the participant narratives in this study seemed to view their bodies as essential tools that should be listened to and shaped as one with nature. This aligns with the observation that "swimming in the ocean as an embodied, emotional, and experiential immersive encounter, shaped by the fluid nature of the blue space in which it occurs."[45] Central to this idea is the notion that the body moves with and is

immersed physically and emotionally in the water. The embodied experience of swimming considers the body as malleable and shaped by the water instead of disciplined and enforced by the ocean. The body is, therefore not a machine in the pursuit of particular ends, but a body that takes the ocean in and leaves a bit of itself behind.[46] One of the participants of this study, Jessica, explained this idea eloquently:

> Swimming in the ocean is a full bodily experience. Of course, our bodies need to be conditioned to swim, but when I swim my body takes the ocean in and leaves a bit of itself behind. My body in the water and the water on my body is emotionally healing. I have cried several times while swimming and the tears that become one with the ocean are symbolic of a small droplet of hurt in this vast open space of opportunity.[47]

There is a limitless capacity of water to absorb metaphors. The reference here alludes to the idea that the ocean is a healing space where Jessica's body is not only immersed in water, but through her tears, she symbolically becomes part of the ocean—a vast space representing healing opportunity. This experience aligns with research showing that open-water swimming is a health-enabling space with therapeutic potential for promoting well-being.[48] Moreover, the act of swimming for Jessica represents the potential to use her body for physical exercise, and the embodied emotional experience of releasing a teardrop in the ocean is of significant symbolic value. The idea is neatly summarized by stating, "in seeing swimming in the ocean as an act of suture, the connection can be temporary and lasting, always leaving behind a small scar or mark on the body-memory."[49]

Rituals and Seeking a Sense of Awe and Belonging.

The act of swimming is a ritual that can be monotonous—repeating the same movement over and over, stroke for stroke. Training in both the pool and the ocean has an element of repetition and rhythm. Most open-water swimmers swim freestyle to cover long distances, and the cyclic nature of the stroke creates a rhythm that contributes to the experience of the swimming ritual. However, swimmers employ personal rituals, believing this will lead to a safe, successful swim. There is no correlation between rituals fuelled by superstition for athletes and performance.[50] However, these rituals contribute to belief in the swimming experience and are often associated with the material culture associated with the sport. Sandy—an experienced open-water swimmer—explains that she is fixated on eating the same breakfast before a Robben Island Crossing and always swims in the same swimsuit:

> I have certain rituals before a big swim that put me at ease. I must have 250g of porridge and am pedantic about the swimsuit I swim in. It is strange because somehow, I feel that the swimsuit, I swim in is a reminder of the past swims I have completed successfully. The swimsuit is old, but when I swim in it, I feel confident and able.[51]

The artefact, i.e., Sandy's swimsuit, is linked to her swimming ritual and belief that she can complete a swim. The meaning she ascribes to the swimsuit relates to her swimming history.

An anthropologist provides some insight in understanding the relationship between meaning and artefacts.[52] Social worlds are as much constituted by materiality as the other way around.[53] In other words, things we use in everyday life shape our social world, but our

social world also shapes our understanding of things. It is suggested that "we are not emperors represented by clothes, because if we remove the clothes, there isn't an inner core. The clothes were not superficial; they were what made us what we think we are."[54] We can use this analogy to understand Sandy's belief in her specific swimsuit. In her world, the swimsuit is not functional but an extension of who she thinks she is when she wears it. In her case, it adds to her confidence and belief to complete the swim successfully. Therefore, the social world of swimming underpins her understanding of the swimsuit and has significant symbolic meaning.

Several swimmers explained how the vastness of the ocean and their swimming experience left them in awe. "Awe involves positively valenced feelings of wonder and amazement."[55] Awe has two conceptual features: vastness and accommodation. They define vastness as "anything that is experienced as being much larger than the self" and "accommodation refers to the process of adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience."[56] Open-water swimming allows one to be immersed and placed in bodies of water surrounded by vast and overwhelming landscapes. Jane elaborated on this sense of vastness:

> When you swim in these remote places, and you look around you realise how small you are in relation to the mountains and water. You can't see beyond the horizon, you can't see the land, you can't see the sand at the bottom of the ocean. You feel overwhelmed by nature's presence and you this little speck in the ocean. This sense of awe is unreal and makes me go back to swim time after time.[57]

Research shows that people who experience a sense of awe are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour and generosity.

> Awe produces specific cognitive and behavioural tendencies that enable individuals to fold into collaborative social groups and engage in collective action. Action within collectives, including collaboration, cooperation, and coaction, requires a diminished emphasis on the self and its interests and a shift to attending to the larger entities one is a part of (e.g., small groups, social collectives, and humanity).[58]

Suppose open-water swimming is experiential and an enabler of a sense of awe. In that case, one can see how collaborative social action based on generosity and a diminished emphasis on the self plays out for swimmers of this study. Some open-water swimmers intentionally use their swimming feats to raise funds for pressing social issues. Their experience of awe is not inward-looking but leads to prosocial behaviour and philanthropic endeavours. Examples include marathon swimmer Howard Warrington, who has completed 200 Robben Island crossings and often uses his swims to raise funds for an animal welfare society. Warrington has raised over R120,000 for the Cape Hope SPCA—
an animal welfare organization. "Madswimmer" is a non-profit organisation that uses open-water swimming events to generate funds for children's charities. Their slogan is "we do big swims to raise funds for small people" and they arrange events in awe-inspiring settings, such as full moon swims and island destinations.[59] Eliza regularly takes part in events that intend to raise money for charity and explained her reasoning in the following way:

> When you swim you realise your own life struggles are insignificant. This is in relation to the big body of water around you and the struggles that other people

> may be experiencing. When I swim, I bear in mind that there is a bigger cause for my participation. Yes, I have my own battles, but when you swim for a greater cause it gives you that extra energy when the going gets tough on a long swim. You realise it is not about you but for a more important cause.[60]

The collective social action is inspired through a shared sense of belonging and experience of awe. This contributes to collective social action through philanthropic initiatives. The ethnographic account of marathon swimming considers the reasons for swimming. in understanding the motivation for swimming, "the act of swimming for… is a readily intelligible and sincerely intended means of constructing the good body/self, but this simultaneously flattens out different forms of suffering and depoliticises social inequalities and poor health."[61]

Open-water swimming is a space where many participants feel a shared sense of belonging and community. A study on open-water swimming in Scotland showed the social benefits of this activity, and participants of the study felt supported and welcome in the open-water swimming community.[62] The transformative nature of swimming for the mind, body, and identity.[63] Swimming contributes to a sense of belonging to nature, place, and others.

A similar theme emerged in this research: the shared interest in swimming in the ocean and experiencing a sense of awe created strong in-group cohesion.[64] Many swimmers are part of groups regularly meeting for informal swims and have group names contributing to this shared sense of belonging. One such group is the "Flamingals"—a group of women who swim almost daily in the Atlantic Ocean. Other groups refer to themselves as the "Moxy Tribe," "Adventure Group" or "Hot Chocolate Club." These informal swimming arrangements have social significance that is not driven by competition or time. A shared experience of the benefits of open-water swimming drives the sense of belonging. Sandra elaborated on this aspect in the following way:

> The friends I have made through swimming and the experiences we have shared together is so special. We get the opportunity to go travel to great destinations, swim together and socialise thereafter. We are all there for the same reason. To get our swimming high! We really have a strong sense of care and belonging as a group of swimming friends. There is no judgement, no competition just a great sense of support and encouragement. This is especially needed when the water is cold, and you are struggling.[65]

The importance of socialization in promoting a sense of belonging is that "members learn to adopt the values and perspectives of the group, taking on new roles and modifying others, and thus establishing valuable new identifications with the politics and symbols of the group)."[66]

Certain symbols reconfirm a sense of belonging for many swimmers. One of these is the swimsuit or swimming cap one wears. Sandra, for example, consciously decided to buy similar swimsuits to the group of ladies she frequently swims with. This form of identification creates a strong sense of in-group affiliation and promotes a strong sense of belonging. A study on the meaning of open-water swimming for adults in Ireland also found that meaningful connections were formed through the social activity of open-water swimming.[67] Although swimming is an individual activity, there seems to be a strong sense of camaraderie and social belonging among swimmers.

Given the marked increase in open-water swimming participation globally, this autoethnographic piece explains why this phenomenon has gained popularity in the Cape Town region. Open-water swimming has significant symbolic value and contributes to perceived mental health benefits for many open-water swimmers. These benefits relate to water's meaning as an enabling space where bodies escape the demands of everyday life. In the water, swimmers feel free and at one with nature and suspend their sense of humanness by engaging in an activity that embodies synergy between them and the therapeutic landscape of water. In addition, open-water swimming enables swimmers to experience a sense of awe, promoting prosocial behaviour and a desire to contribute to philanthropic endeavours external to their personal desires. This culminates in a shared sense of belonging and friendships are forged. As research on alternative forms of wellness and nature-based activities continue, open-water swimming sheds light on the symbolic, embodied, and ritualized elements that give meaning to those who partake. These findings have implications for health and well-being practitioners, scholars who study oceans as social spaces of meaning making, and potentially the tourism sector which could promote open-water swimming as an activity in Cape Town.

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Notes

[1] Psuedonymns are used for all participants in the study
[2] Duff 2011.
[3] Peters and Brown 2017; Peters et al. 2022; Moles 2021; Parr 2011; Olive and Wheaton 2021; Bates and Moles 2022.
[4] *Bobbers* is a colloquial term referring to a group of people who *bob*—stand still in ocean waters—usually in the early mornings. The benefit of cold-water immersion is that it gives them an invigorating start to the day. This activity is different from open water swimming, where movement takes place in the form of a stroke over a distance.
[5] CLDSA 2022.
[6] McDougall et al. 2022.
[7] Britton and Foley 2021; Foley et al. 2019.
[8] Britton et al. 2020; Korpella et al. 2008; Wheeler et al. 2015; Foley 2017; Foley and Kistemann 2015.
[9] Foley and Kistemann 2015, p. 157.
[10] Massey et al. 2020; Britton et al 2021; Denton 2018.
[11] Denton 2018; Bell et al. 2015; Smolander et al. 2004; Foley and Kistemann 2015; Foley 2017, 2018; McNamara et al. 2020.
[12] Shefer et al. 2024.
[13] Shefer et al. 2024.
[14] Thompson and Graaff 2023; Shefer, 2021. Stevens, 2023.
[15] Overbury et al. 2023.
[16] Wacquant 2004.
[17] Wainwright et al. 2017, p. 284.
[18] Ellis et al. 2015.
[19] Ellis et al. 2015, p. 7.
[20] Humberstone 2011, p. 495.

[21] Denton et al. 2021.
[22] Denton 2021, p. 6.
[23] Ballestero 2019, p. 405.
[24] Interview with author, 14 June 2023, Cape Town.
[25] McDougall et al. 2022.
[26] McDougall et al. 2022, p. 9.
[27] Interview with author, 16 July 2023, Cape Town.
[28] Van Tulleken et al. 2018; Overbury 2022; White et al. 2021; Murray and Fox 2021.
[29] Interview with author, 18 July 2023, Cape Town.
[30] Gesler 1992.
[31] Gesler 1992, p. 735.
[32] Olive 2023; Overbury et al. 2023; Evers, 2019; Evers 2023; Evers and Phoenix 2023.
[33] Olive 2022.
[34] Evers 2019.
[35] Heath 2014, p. 35.
[36] Murray and Fox 2021; Denton and Aranda 2020.
[37] Interview with author, 22 July 2023, Cape Town.
[38] Interview with author, 2 August 2023, Cape Town.
[39] Howe 2001, 2003, 2008, 2011.
[40] Hoberman 1992.
[41] Howe 2003, p. 55.
[42] Messner 1992.
[43] Messner 1992, p. 62.
[44] Messner 1992, p. 62.
[45] Foley 2022, p. 298.
[46] Messner 1992.
[47] Interview with author, 12 August 2023, Cape Town.
[48] Denton 2018; Foley 2017; Massey et al. 2020; Olive et al. 2021; Foley 2022; Roviello et al. 2022.
[49] Foley 2022, p. 299.
[50] Bleak and Frederick 1998.
[51] Interview with author, 13 August 2023, Cape Town.
[52] Miller 1998, 2010.
[53] Miller 1998, p. 3.
[54] Miller 2010, p. 13
[55] Piff et al. 2015, p. 884.
[56] Keltner and Haidt 2003, p. 303.
[57] Interview with author, 22 September 2023, Cape Town.
[58] Piff et al. 2015, p. 883.
[59] Madswimmer 2022.
[60] Interview with author, 25 September 2023, Cape Town.
[61] Throsby 2016, p. 102.

[62] McDougall et al. 2022.
[63] Denton 2018.
[64] Lucrezi et. al. 2022.
[65] Interview with author, 1 October 2023, Cape Town.
[66] Donnelly and Young 1988, p. 225.
[67] Murray and Fox 2021.