

Research Insight Report: Overcoming Blue Inequality. Jayne Carroll, Joe Jackson, and Lynda Pratt

Background to the project

A recent surge in popularity of wild swimming or swimming in natural 'blue spaces', including rivers, lakes, or the sea, has highlighted opportunities to leverage the use of blue spaces as community assets to combat health inequalities.

This project addresses the current lack of integrated information about the mental and physical health benefits of wild swimming alongside the risks related to water quality and safety aspects of specific blue spaces that people use for swimming.

Wild swimming is also referred to as **open water swimming** or **cold water swimming**.

Developing and co-creating content

Work Package 2 of the SWIM Project features scholars in the School of English at the University of Nottingham who are researching cultural history and developing and co-creating content that can enhance engagement with wild swimming and blue spaces. Our objective is to create resources that will promote greater understanding of blue spaces, their cultural significance, the opportunities they provide for recreation and wellbeing, and the challenges to participation in activities like wild swimming. These approaches are informed by governmental public health research and policy, and the data produced by other strands of the SWIM project.

The first research stage has involved the survey and qualitative analysis of primary materials featuring a direct focus on Britain's blue spaces and wild swimming: poetry and fiction, non-fiction prose, correspondence, and place name history. Contemporary narratives of blue space, up to and including wild swimming, give important clues as to the intangible social and health benefits of water-based activities, and of the obstacles and challenges that may impede access to such activities. Examples of works that form the basis of the qualitative analysis and content creation for the contemporary literature component of this strand include Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun* (2015); Anita Sethi's *I Belong Here* (2021); Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *Swims* (2017); Charlotte Jones's *Wild Things* (2016); and the Daunt-published collection *At the Ponds* (2019).

Public Engagement Group activity

An extended version of the sample of composite writing (provided on page 3) produced by the research team was presented to six members of a Public Engagement Group (PEG) on 10th May 2022, with an accompanying request for the PEG to consider:

As part of the Wild Swimming research project, we are thinking of ways that literature might help to encourage and empower people to get involved in outdoor swimming. We would be interested in feedback on this segment, envisioned as part of a longer text that will introduce readers to the benefits of, and current unequal participation rates in, wild swimming, and to examples of writing that bridge the imaginative gap towards participation. It would be very helpful to have any feedback on the material, for example:



Tone



Clarity



Vocabulary



Engagement

A number of productive observations were made via the PEG both on the extract and on the use of creative materials in driving engagement more broadly. Respondents agreed that it was ‘hard to imagine something [being a wild swimmer] without something to help you create that image’ and that literature could play a role in that imagination.

Helpful comments were offered on specific language choices around barriers to participation, such as flagging ‘exclusion’ as having unhelpful implications of purposeful planning, and an expressed preference for language of ‘engagement’.

Respondents noted that there was an absence of the ‘voices’ of wild swimmers in discourses around wild swimming, and that swimming is difficult to imagine as an adult, something that the literary imagination is well-placed to address. In terms of non-engaged groups, the respondents recognised that certain ethno-specific considerations could be taken into account in any materials, including distinct cultural approaches to water safety and swim education, and hair care.

The outcomes from the PEG have informed subsequent qualitative research and composition, and further stakeholder consultations are planned for the next stage of the project.



Overcoming blue inequality: Imagining swimming

Anita Sethi's memoir *I Belong Here* tells a story about resistance to racism through a firm commitment to being 'in place'. Sethi is the victim of a racist attack on a train out of Manchester. Her first response to the crime is to 'bear witness' by reporting it, first to the train operator and then to the police. The longer story of her recovery is of a special resolution to get out into the countryside around the city of her birth and to stake a claim to that geography. Alongside that act of reclamation, *I Belong Here* makes a strong case that walking in the countryside – physical exercise in what we might call 'green space' – is restorative, health-giving, and therapeutic.

One of the noticeable things about *I Belong Here* is how important water is in Sethi's narrative: rivers and canals, lakes and reservoirs, and, of course, the sea. These blue spaces offer her a chance for contemplation and reflection, and they seem to complement, and strengthen, the 'green' benefits of her walking environment. The memory of a childhood trip to the Lake District describes one such experience, and equally she is struck by the power of the River Aire. Like green spaces, blue spaces offer manifold health benefits, both physical and mental. Like the benefits Sethi feels from exerting herself when walking in the countryside, many of the therapeutic benefits of blue spaces are activated by jumping in, by what is often called 'wild swimming'. Despite this, *I Belong Here* is not a swimming narrative. Even as Sethi describes some of those benefits, it never seems possible she will take the next step and be immersed in the water itself!

I Belong Here pays close attention to the way particular environments are seen as exclusionary. Sethi is acutely aware that factors like race and class mean many people cannot imagine benefiting from, enjoying, or feeling ownership of, the English countryside. When it comes to blue spaces, Sethi's intuitions are borne out by the findings of the Environment Agency report *The Social Benefits of Blue Space*. The report finds that people from ethnic minority groups are less likely to access blue spaces than other people, a pattern established consistently in England and in a similar way in Wales over the past decade (pp. 92-93), and are more likely to make use of green spaces than blue spaces, a phenomenon we might call 'blue inequality'. When it comes to wild swimming, those differences are similarly pronounced. *Outdoor Swimmer* magazine's 'Trends in Outdoor Swimming' identifies that ethnic minority groups remain under-represented in outdoor swimming (p. 4, 34). There are many barriers to accessing blue spaces for swimming: travel costs, lack of direct experience, the need for specialist equipment, the dangers associated with open water. However, one of the most difficult barriers to overcome is an imaginative gap: the lack of precedents, examples or representations which means that under-represented groups tend to remain under-represented.

Sethi's *I Belong Here* seeks to address just that lack when it comes to walking the countryside. Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, a poet of colour and academic at Newman University, does something similar in her long poem *Swims*. *Swims* relates twelve wild swims that advocate for environmental consciousness. The poems dwell on the therapeutic benefits of wild swimming. Burnett's poems are a bit more oblique than Sethi's direct and forceful memoir form, but they register the way that swimming is a similar act of reclamation to Sethi's – one which 'lays claim' to those spaces where people of colour are often excluded. *Swims* doesn't just represent swimming in the literary imagination of a poet of colour but foregrounds the mental health benefits of wild swimming and acknowledges the challenges to accessing and enjoying blue spaces.