

Wild Sea Swimming as a Slow Intimacy: Towards Reconfiguring Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

Our oceanic swimming-writing-reading together practice coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and subsequent lockdown in South Africa. Awash with vulnerability, precarity, and isolation, oceanic swimming-writing-reading became one of the few ways in which we, as three academics from different higher education institutions, found respite in a practice of care for ourselves and others. Curious as to whether swimming and free writing could materialise alternative creative scholarly practices, we began to meet regularly to swim, write, read and think together with theoretical perspectives that subscribe to a feminist relational ontology. This article turns to visual and written narratives generated during this period and building on them, considers health and wellbeing at both subjective and planetary levels. Our global southern location articulates with these themes in very particular ways – access, risk and embodiment in relation to seas, beaches and littoral zones. South Africa remains haunted by the continuing geopolitical effects of its slave, colonial, apartheid, and neoliberal past and current contexts of global capitalism that seep into encounters with the ocean. Our swimming-writing-thinking is a reminder of our relationalities with and response-abilities for the hydrocommons as the measure of human, other species and the planet's capacity to survive and flourish.

Keywords: oceanic swimming, ethics of care, relationality, slow intimacy, health and well-being, hydrofeminism, decolonising higher education

INTRODUCTION

Our oceanic swimming-writing-thinking together emerged out of our watery engagements with reconceptualising higher education in the context of South African post-apartheid challenges and within the larger project of justice and decolonial scholarship globally (Shefer, Bozalek and Romano, 2024; Romano, Bozalek and Shefer, 2023). Deeply aware of how normative practices in the neoliberal capitalist, masculinist academy repeat colonial, patriarchal and humanist logics, we have been working with imaginative, creative, embodied, processual, relational and affective practices to question and re-think conventional ways of doing academia. In this article, we share some of our narratives and images from this project which foreground the Slow¹ intimacies that we have been involved with, in and through our oceanic hydrofeminist² (Neimanis, 2012, 2013, 2017a, 2017b) swimming-thinking-writing together. Encrusted with ocean bacteria, shivering with cold, and awash with images of luminescent underwater spaces, our writings and images speak of the poignant intimacies of 'taking a thought to water'³. We appreciate our visceral affective engagements with marine creatures, plants and rocks, of delighting in their exquisite colours and forms. Our narratives speak to our awe of a methodology of encounter (Probyn, 2016),

¹ *Slow* is written with a capital letter as it does not connote doing things slowly in terms of time but rather is concerned with the depth and quality of engagement as is proposed by the Slow movement (see Bozalek, 2017, 2021).

² Hydrofeminism is a concept created by Astrida Neimanis to convey a form of 'aqueous body-writing' (Neimanis, 2012: 112) with water deployed as a feminist figuration that allows for a re-imagining of human entanglements with all species and the planet and the acknowledgment of a hydrocommons that we are all responsible for and response-able to.

³ 'Taking a thought to water' is similar to Hannah Arendt's idea that to think with an enlarged mentality is to cultivate the ability to take one's imagination visiting – as cited in Donna Haraway's (2016: 126) *Staying with the Trouble*.

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Figure 1. ⁵African kelp sea forest. Screenshot from [Oceanic Swimming | writing | thinking for justice-to-come scholarship](#). © Nike Romano, Vivienne Bozalek and Tamara Shefer

an intimate encounter, where we feel our shared vitalities and entanglements as poignantly as the kelp that winds around us and that offers a moment of stability in wild seas.

Through our embodied sensibilities, porous to fluid temporalities, we confront, in affective ways, the hauntings of apartheid and colonial violences so saturated in the oceans and beaches. We also share our intimate and troubling engagements and complicities with these place-space-time-matterings that we encounter in meeting the oceanic narratives and our own situatedness. We consider how this past of violence by and through sea and beaches bleeds into the present (and future). So too, we meet the disasters of human impact on environment, polluted and violated seas. Our embodied relational encounters with water and more-than-human species sharpens our response-ability⁴ to (our ability to respond) and our responsibility for (accountability) the anthropocentric damages to the ocean and planet.

Since much of our early work with oceanic swimming happened over the years spanning the start of the COVID-19 virus, we also swam with the precarities of pandemic times, while also taking some succour from our swimings together in those times of isolation. The intimacy of our shared vulnerabilities in the ocean, (and elsewhere) and our care-full⁶ attention to each other while swimming keeps us afloat in the sea and perhaps also in other spaces of precarity, like the toxic university.

In this article we trace cross-cutting currents of Slow intimacy that shape and emerge from our swimming-thinking-writing together, including the intimacies of: ‘taking a thought to water’; confrontations with other species and oceanic materialities; engagements and complicities with colonial, anthropocentric ghosts of past, present, future; and human relationalities, care and response-ability. We see Slow intimacy as not only about a deep and affecting/affective engagement with and recognition of the other, but further as a care-full, care-ing appreciation and acknowledgement at an embodied and affective level of our entanglements and therefore response-ability to and responsibility for others, including other species and the planet itself.

PRACTICES OF OCEANIC SWIMMING-WRITING-THINKING

We are three academics from different higher education institutions whose collaborative oceanic swimming-writing-thinking process emerged out of our engagements with reconceptualising higher education in the context of South African post-apartheid challenges and within the larger project of justice and decolonial scholarship globally. As participants of three research projects⁷, we embraced experimental, alternative practices to question

⁴ For more on the difference between response-ability (ability to respond) and responsibility (accountability for) see Bozalek and Zembylas (2023).

⁵ Romano, Bozalek and Shefer (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMDu1YTKDhw&t=1425s>). (Accessed 18 December 2023).

⁶ In line with Shefer, Zembylas and Bozalek (2023: 23-24), we use the term care-full ‘to speak of both a caring practice for the author and their work, but also as a vigilant practice which is located within an alternative ethical, ontological and epistemological project’. The use of full also refers to a generosity and capaciousness of such practices.

⁷ The three projects include: NRF (South African National Research Fund) funded project (2020-2022) *Reconfiguring Higher Education: Doing Academia Differently* (Grant No. 120845) based at the University of the Western Cape; SASUF (South Africa Sweden University Forum (grant (2019-2022) (Re)configuring scholarship in higher education at Stockholm University and University of the Western Cape); and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funded project (2018-2022), *New imaginaries for an intersectional critical humanities project on gender and sexual justice* (Grant number G-31700714) at University of the Western Cape.

and re-think conventional ways of doing academia. In order to develop alternative practices to those who are normative and taken-for-granted in academia, we began to meet on a regular basis to swim, write, read and think together with theoretical and methodological perspectives that subscribe to a feminist relational ontology.

Vanessa Daws, a visual artist and open water swimmer, based in Dublin, describes her art with swimming as ‘research, process and live event’ in watery spaces (Daws, n. d.; <http://www.cratespace.co.uk/listening-waters>). Our point of departure for our swimming-writing-thinking has resonances with the way in which Daws describes her starting point for her art projects – ‘[c]hance encounter, swimming, journey, conversation, cups of tea and shivering’ (Mentz, 2020: 135; <https://dadonline.uk/updates/sea-swimming-project>). She calls this process ‘psychoswimography’ which refers to ‘a watery drifting and re-imagining of place’ (Mentz, 2020: 135) which she built from Psychogeography, which focuses instead on terrestrial drifting. Like our project, Daws uses experimental practices of walking, swimming, reading, writing to explore alternative embodied pedagogies. The narratives that we draw on in this article are based on and contribute to such embodied pedagogies and scholarly practices.

We meet at various tidal pools, as well as beaches along the False Bay Coast and Walker Bay, in the Western Cape, South Africa. We usually swim with goggles and snorkels and some of us wear free-diving equipment like fins and weights. Our sessions begin with a swim before moving to a nearby coffee shop where we free-write together on a shared google document, allowing the words to flow until our thoughts run dry. We start by selecting a text colour that resonates with the particular experience in the water. We also share photographs taken during the swim on the Google Doc. Some days we write with prompts, whereas on others our writings draw from our experiences in the water. When finished, we read our narratives to each other, all reading on the same Google Doc and examine the photographs which were uploaded.

Swimming in the ocean and then engaging in collaborative free-writing directly afterwards provides us with a different imaginative space (as Hannah Arendt puts it, ‘an enlarged mentality’, cited in Haraway, 2016: 126) to contemplate various issues that matter to us. Melody Jue (2020: 3) regards the ocean as a dynamic milieu for those humans and sea creatures moving through it – as she puts it: ‘the ocean is a material and imaginative space for the conditions of perception that we have taken for granted’. This wild milieu enables us to test ‘our most habitual concepts and categories’ (Jue, 2020: xii), it is ‘a kind of anti-environment to the desk, repositioning critics in the ocean in order to prompt them to rethink the efficacy of their most habitual concepts and vocabularies’ (Jue, 2020: 7). The narratives we dip into in this article take such familiar concepts to oceanic waters through swimming, providing fresh insights into issues of concern.

Since a key part of this venture is to challenge the erasure of bodies and affect, as well as to overturn the imaginary of what counts as authoritative knowledge, we have found it particularly productive to draw on poets, artists, activists and other creative engagements in water-centred practices such as Elizabeth-Jane Burnett’s poetry (Burnett, 2017, 2021; <https://www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk/index.php/2021/04/of-sea/>), amongst others (for example Bailey-Charteris, 2020; Boon *et al.*, 2018; Gumbs, 2020; Hessler, 2018; Hamilton Faris, 2019; Probyn, 2023). There is also a growing body of queer literature that argues the value of thinking with ocean and ocean critters, both human figurations like mermaids and more-than-human species, for disrupting binary gender and other binaries (see Braidwood, 2023 for an overview of such works, including, Armfield, 2022; Imbler, 2022; Mohulatsi, 2023).

Mindful of Vinciane Despret’s concern that observers practice an attuned ‘virtue of politeness’ when visiting hosts (2016: 19), swimming-writing-reading has become a careful practice in which we find ourselves lured by wonder, curiosity and surprise (Barad, 2014). In our practice, we use snorkelling equipment to better engage a ‘methodology of encounter’ as Elspeth Probyn (2016: 82) calls it, as we observe and think with other species, as well as experience the affective and tactile experience of being in/with the sea and its shifting moods. Fins, masks and snorkels are prostheses that become part of our bodies, not experienced as separate, as Karen Barad (2007) notes in their description of a white cane for a non-sighted person or a wheelchair for someone who cannot walk without an apparatus (Pratt *et al.*, 2020). Nike describes the dependence on the snorkel as a life-line, as it allows her to temporarily feel ‘acutely *part of or one with* the environment’. However, they can also be experienced as separate rather than being a seamless part of the swimming body:

During the swim I was very aware of the encumbrances I had on me – the huge gawky fins which I am adjusting to as they require a new type of movement from the legs. I couldn’t find my sea socks so swam without them and noticed they are slightly big for my feet. This was a dilemma in the shop where I bought them as the one size was too small and the other too big. The man assisting me advised to go with the too big and to wear sea socks with them. Then my belt which is very heavy to carry and which fell off me this time. Fortunately the tide was low so it was quite easy to retrieve and quite a mission to rebelt in the sea where one can’t stand. The third encumbrance was the camera which was tied around my wrist but worthwhile having, to be able to share the strange world of colours on that rock. (Viv)

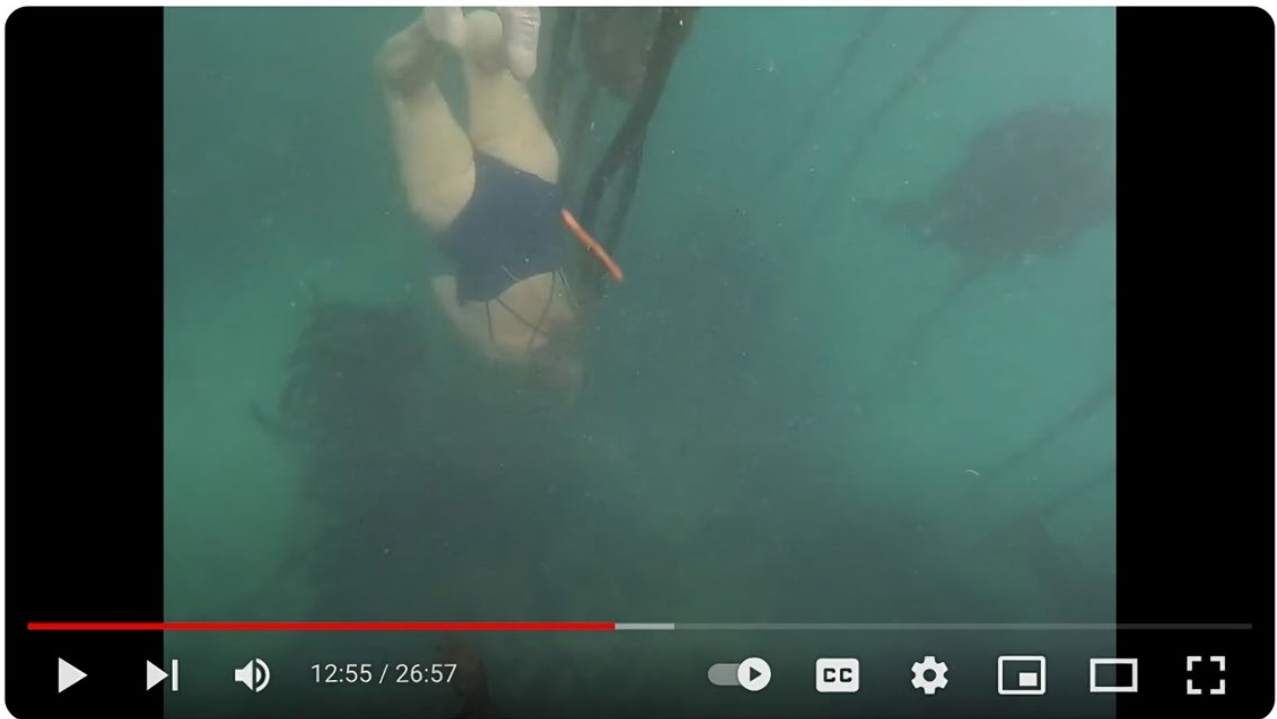


Figure 2. Viv diving. Screenshot from video [Oceanic Swimming | writing | thinking for justice-to-come scholarship](#). © Nike Romano, Vivienne Bozalek and Tamara Shefer

Some of us have found it inspiring to engage in underwater photography, which we share on virtual fora. Sometimes we take photos to study the sea critters' detailed forms and structures more closely and understand this life better by identifying and reading about them later. As Viv writes:

I was surprised to read in the Slow intimacy conference call for papers that intimacy can mean showing what you know to others. I have felt so enthusiastic about seaswimming and sharing our embodied collective thinking-with our oceanic experience afterwards. The photos and videos I take of the multiple sea creatures I have come to love and the shimmering colours in and of the ocean are partly motivated by my desire to share these through social media with those who do not have access to this world of psychedelic oceanic colours.

Tamara, on the other hand, expresses an ambivalence about photographing the sea creatures. While she feels excited by what she and others see, she also expresses concern that these 'capturings' may be repeating the logics of that which we recoil against:

Are we playing another human game of representation and mining the deeps for our own gain, performance for others and in pursuit of the individualised project of the wild swimmer?

Building community extends beyond sharing images as we read together and separately and share resources, including both those that are critical, feminist and decolonial works on the oceans and swimming and those related to the place-space-time in which we are swimming.

The iterative process has developed slowly, over time. As Donna Haraway (2016) notes, Vinciane Despret's 'visiting' is both a material and imaginative process for which she trains with her whole being. Our narratives also refer to such material and imaginative processes of explicit and implicit intimacies and relationalities, revealing the subtle complexities that surface through these watery encounters.

THE INTIMACY OF 'TAKING A THOUGHT TO WATER'

As mentioned, we began the practice of swimming-writing as part of the project of reconceptualising higher education and doing our scholarship differently. In diverse ways the practice of swimming in the ocean and writing has opened up alternative ways of making knowledge for us. In this respect, as we have argued elsewhere,

[w]e propose swimming as a way of refusing everyday practices of the academy that assume or insist on disembodied, disaffect/ive/ed, speeded-up, instrumentalist, consumerist, extractive scholarship, ignoring and erasing relationality and response-ability. (see Shefer and Bozalek, 2022)

Since all of us had experienced swimming as a space for clarity in our own academic work, we were deeply aware of the way in which cultivating the art of swimming-writing practice enriched our curiosity and our thinking. As Bonnie Tsui (2020: 7) argues about swimming:

To find rhythm in the water is to discover a new way of being in the world, through flow. This is about our human relationship to water and *how immersion can open our imaginations* (our emphasis).

Thoughts we took to water were opened up and expanded for us, often in unexpected ways, in and through the water.

We see what we do as Slow Swimming, as deepening, attending, engaging and changing us and others we engage with in unforeseeable ways. Similarly, Vanessa Daws talks about feeling intimacy with the ocean through the practice of swimming and the unexpected gains it offers:

Swimming is an activity that connects humans directly to water. A swimmer is ‘in’ this substance of immense power and unknown, swimming is a lived in, embodied experience. Swimming allows us through acclimatization and adaptation *to surprise ourselves and go beyond our expectations* (Daws in Metz, 2020: 135). (our emphasis)

Tamara writes about how such Slow Swimming also opens up a sense of other knowledges and our relationalities on the planet:

We swim slow because there is so much to see and then we swim faster because we are cold. It is all Slow. Being with, engaging with, attending to the visual beauty, being with, engaging with, attending to the sensate mobility, being with, engaging with, attending to the liquid knowledges of the sea, the planet, the all and the illusion of unitary individual selves slips off in watery ways, melts, floats away.

But it is through the intimate sense of our bodies in water that greater and different attention and thinking is enabled. Viv emphasises the vitality of thought that is made possible through the embodied and sensate nature of swimming:

The disorientation, vulnerability, the acute awareness of aching bones in the body only begin to register the cold about fifteen minutes after the swim. All create a sense of aliveness to the world and a heightened attention to the surrounds, disarming and displacing habitual thoughts and categories and allowing specific thought and affective responses to emerge.

Stacy Alaimo wrote this about an oceanic swim at a conference entitled ‘On the Beach: Precariousness, Risk, Forms of Life, Affinity, and Play at the Edge of the World’, held in Santa Barbara, USA in October 2014:

It felt like an experiment with becoming a medium for art. To be ourselves in the interchange with the ocean, to be aesthetically overcome by the blues and greens of the water. I won’t say the event ‘elevated’ swimming to an art, because elevation would place us above the practice and what is most beautiful to me is to think of how swimming—the immersion of the human in water—releases us from transcendent perspectives, unmoors us as terrestrial creatures, allows us to hover in other ways of being that are, perhaps, less separate from the substances of the world. (Alaimo in Mentz, 2020: 134)

Sea swimming is not dependent on oral or written language⁸; instead, it gives one a sense of unmediated access to the material world, moving with and through it. As Viv elaborates:

This practice of swimming is a Slow process in that it is enduring – it has been happening every day for a few years now and it is one of relaxed but intense attentiveness and pleasure in seeing and feeling through immersion and buoyancy of salty water.

For Nike, Slow Swimming requires slow careful attention which opens up a range of intimacies as well as careful reading of scholarly work:

⁸ Although as Sally Munt, chief editor of this journal points out in reviewing this article ‘There is lots of language in swimming – gesture, exclamation, body comportment, cultural differences in swimming styles etc.’

Our swimblings/writing together have been attentive and careful, bringing us into a close intimacy both in the water and out. Reading Barad this week who talks about desire as a being pulled towards ... drawn towards ... I was aware of this in the pool being pulled towards some creatures, colours, textures, shimmers. Intimacy is shared, between us writing together, between us and the water and the forms of life in the water, between us around the table in the coffee shop ... leaning towards the warmth of the fire.

Slow swimming also opens up our awareness of the temporal regimes that the academy has imposed on us and its damaging and reductive neoliberal emphasis on fast and superficial outputs, which is clearly exposed as a form of constraint, as Tamara writes:

Different temporalities and space, our usual clock time suspended, we are surprised when so many minutes have passed. And we surface questioning the regulated lives we take as normal. And somewhere in the moments between rocks and kelp and freer liquid spaces of magnificent blues and greens, I feel myself moving between my spaces of entrapment and freedom. They unfold before me and threaten this beautiful capacious freedom I glide in.

This resonates powerfully with Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's poem, 'Grasmere':

A difficult swim. A snatched one, a clipped one, from a timetable too regulated. A timetable takes something from you that is hard to recover. It believes you can be reduced to a model of yourself that is flat, made from paper or plastic, or that an online version of you can be downloaded. It believes it can work with an outline of you, with all the guts emptied out, all the mess, all human circuitry.

And so to swim is to explode column width of day's databases, expand with joy in the margins, find and replace total with ethic with heart ... (Burnett, 2017: 39-40)

AN INTIMATE 'METHODOLOGY OF ENCOUNTER'

We have been inspired by Elspeth Probyn's (2016) work on swimming as a 'methodology of encounter', mentioned earlier, in which she foregrounds entanglements of human and non-human in the oceans while researching the politics of the fish industry. Swimming in the ocean brings one into intimate encounters with other species, with flora such as kelp, and with the ocean and its multiplicities. Our relationalities with other species and the living and non-living, are exposed and appreciated. While Probyn argues the political value of encounter, Burnett (2019), in her poetic narratives, also appreciates 'swimming as encounter of surprise and fascination, which facilitates 'a sense of unity' across species' (Shefer and Bozalek, 2022: 38).

In our writings after swimming, we share the poignancy of affecting/ive engagements with underwater creatures and plants, of delighting in their exquisite colours and forms. Viv writes:

Visceral immersion fueled by a desire for contact and being held in the element of salty water and the ability to dwell intimately with the wild milieu underneath the sea, using goggles, has opened up an intimacy with an unknown new world to me. I have been aesthetically overcome by surprising encounters with creatures and life hitherto unknown to me as they had not shown themselves to me.

As Donna Haraway (2016) notes, visiting in the form of swimming can be seen as a subject-object making dance,

holding open the possibility that surprises are in store, that something interesting is about to happen, but only if one cultivates the virtue of letting those one visits intra-actively shape what occurs. They are not who/what we expected to visit, and we are not who/what were anticipated either (127).

In other words, there are no pre-existing scripts and all are coming into being through encounter with the other, in dynamic and indeterminate actions of attunement. Yet we also shared some concerns about the possibilities of human surveillance of more-than-human species in such swimming encounters:

The images of the octopus we spotted and watched moving onto the rock and then magically disappearing, at sunset swim last night, merges into the incredible images of this morning sunrise swim as we find and watch two, Viv and Nike, another two after I had to leave due to cold. I am astounded by the rapid changes of colour, the strange dance of tentacles and fish – who are the fish to the octopus: a potential meal or an enemy predator or simply a playmate? Being so close, observing so closely, I have moments of concern that I am abusing the octopus' privacy, harassing them, stalking them?



Figure 3. Octopus pursuing cormorant. Screenshot from [Oceanic Swimming | writing | thinking for justice-to-come scholarship](#). © Nike Romano, Vivienne Bozalek and Tamara Shefer

Unlike on *terra firma* where she occasionally experiences a sense of connection ‘in nature’, Nike expressed feelings of interconnectedness with-in water that she describes as an ‘immersive experience that pushes up against my body, into the orifices of my body’:

Watching the fish, so close to my feet, I tried to imagine what we have in common ... life ... matter ... we are made up of the same elements in different configurations ... we are alive. Different forms of life, I wonder whether humans will develop more empathy (feels like the wrong word) ‘connection’ feels better with other species now? How would we respond?

Tamara also reflects on these intimate watery encounters and the capabilities they make possible:

The slow intimacies of engaging with lives of species unknown to those on the surface. Watching the tendrils entangling and disentangling, the kelp weaving in and out, the flows of tide pulling and pushing, an endless spiraling in and out of energies and matters. We confront the sea creatures, the sea energies and for precious moments can feel our interwovenness, the blurring of the boundaries, a floating in space and time, and a part of. Before we move apart and back into bounded selves and minds.

For Viv too, swimming extends her ‘relationship with water, sand, rocks, anemones, seastars’ as she learns to ‘avoid the prickles and negotiate my way through and around creatures in the water’. Engagement with particular oceanic creatures open up alternative imaginaries of how to engage with others and a questioning of human normativities:

I am grey⁹ today after the octopus I was observing for so long. Grey makes one more imperceptible on the page – an octopus move. Although grey is misleading as the four octopuses we saw were all such different colours and shapes becoming-with anything it moved towards or what flowed into its path. At one time it was green and indistinguishable from the kelp which wrapped around its body, then the colour of sand with its tentacles reaching-reaching one and then two towards a sandy-coloured fish. Fish-octopus intra-action coming and going reaching and darting away. As humans we always try and make sense or interpret – what is happening here? How will we ever be sure whether the octopus was hunting the fish, playing with the fish or engaging in some sort of mutual communication. I got a really good view of how the tentacles work separately stretching and curling and also saw the one octopus moving its head as if it was eating something. I wonder what they make of these big hulkish humans

⁹ As mentioned earlier, when we write after swimming, we choose a font colour that differentiates our narrative and speaks to our affective sensibility at the time.



Figure 4. Camps Bay beach with apartheid fence. Screenshot from [Oceanic Swimming | writing | thinking for justice-to-come scholarship](#). © Nike Romano, Vivienne Bozalek and Tamara Shefer

circling them like sharks. Whether it is just a mild irritation or when the humans come too close whether they are seen as a threat, Here am I trying to interpret or anthropomorphise the feelings of the octopus just after castigating that type of behaviour. But we humans are full of contradictions swaying this way and that, justifying our moves along the way.

INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS WITH HAUNTINGS OF THE PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

Our oceanic swimming has also been a project of witnessing past, present and future hauntings. Swimming in particular oceans, launching from particular beaches, has made us aware of the many human crimes of slavery and colonisation sedimented in the ocean. Porous to fluid temporalities, we confront the hauntings of apartheid and colonial violences so saturated in the oceans and beaches. As Tamara writes:

In the oceans, the slow intimacy of confronting the ruins of other oceanic passings, so many lives lost, lost on ocean voyages or lost in slavery or lost in violent confrontation or lost in resisting or lost in trying to make a difference.

Karen Eva Carr comments on how, since colonial times, the ability to swim is largely linked to social identity and power. In other words, swimming is dependent on one's race, income and education (2022: 7). Nike reflects on how these effects are felt in South Africa where beaches were racially segregated from as early as 1888 (Carr, 2022: 320); when thinking about how apartheid shaped experiences with, and in relation to, swimming and access to beach spaces. She writes:

Swimming is a life skill that white South African children learned at school, the beaches were spaces of privileged open access. I grew up in Camps Bay, a little seaside village back then, a white suburb on the Atlantic Ocean that is now a trendy tourist spot in Cape Town. I remember the fences that were erected overnight ... whites only beaches ... markers of apartheid violences, of structural enforcement of segregation. Back then the only people of colour were the ice cream vendors trudging up and down in the baking sun, trying to entice parents to buy. There are remnants of those fences now, eroded, salty bones, weathered rusty fragments, ghosts. What do we do with these irrevocable damages, these haunting violences that continue to wash up with the tides sometimes high, sometimes low?

We often write about our intimate and troubling engagements with these place-space-time matterings that we encounter in meeting the oceanic narratives and our own situatedness, and how this past of violence by, and through, sea and beaches shapes the present (and future). Tamara writes:



Figure 5. Jewish refugee voyages to the South. Screenshot from [Oceanic Swimming | writing | thinking for justice-to-come scholarship](#). © Nike Romano, Vivienne Bozalek and Tamara Shefer

When Viv and I wrote the paper on swimming, there was a line that Viv wrote about us ‘as settlers’ and my body and heart rebelled and resisted... ‘no, this is not me’. My defensive narrative spills out of me: I am only second generation and I am Jewish, just emerged from a holocaust that wiped out any of my family who were not safely in another land than Europe. I carry around the sharp image of my great grandmother and great aunt, the latter only about 16 years old, standing briefly breathing hard, with sobs of fear, around a mass grave, before being shot into it. Me, a settler? No, I am of refugee stock, my grandmother came out on a boat between the two wars. And yet Jews became white in many parts of the world and perpetrate the unresolved violences on others and share in the fruits of colonial exploitation and bolster an entire nation-state founded on violence. And yes, I need to face the shivering after emerging from the cold sea, the discomfiting and uncomfortable bodily quivers that are the result of the threshold encounter, facing myself as SETTLER. A pedagogy of discomfort. Daily I succumb to the powerful urge to swim out into the wideness/wildness of freedom, also of death, and return to life and discomfort of my comfort and privilege.

Our hauntological project transgresses human temporalities and we think also with present and future ghosts. Reckoning with the devastating effects of global warming on the oceans is a feminist mode of ethical and political engagement that exposes us to an ‘empathetic, rather than safely ensconced’ act of ‘dwelling in the dissolve ... [as we] ... connect with vulnerable creaturely life and with the inhuman, unfathomable expanses of the seas’ (Alaimo, 2015: 168). We meet the disasters of present and the future, the polluted and violated seas, and our embodied relational encounters with water and more-than-human species sharpens our response-ability to and responsibility for the anthropocentric damages to the ocean and planet. Tamara reflects on discomfiting confrontations with how humans have damaged the planet when she realises that ‘a shiny reflection of sun that catches my eye, [is] not a mother of pearl but a sweet wrapper. Just a small gesture to far greater damages. The Slow intimacies of sea and ocean play, an optics for alternative visions of how to live with others’. Similarly, Viv expresses her distress about the sewage leaks resulting from chronic loadshedding when she asks, ‘what is happening to the sea and how humans think they can get rid of their debris and shit into the sea and it will just disappear without consequences’.

THE INTIMACY OF OCEANIC SWIMMING FOR HUMAN PRECARITIES, RELATIONALITIES AND CARE

The affective tonality¹⁰ of oceanic swimming with its undulating surges, currents and tides has multilayered affordances of watery embodiment both immediate and lasting, particularly in cold waters. Watery immersions dissolve the separation of body and water, as Nike explains ‘the space between my body and the water melts away and the water becomes the matrix (as in binder or glue) of connection. Or is the water the body of which my body becomes a part?’ Tamara expands on this in her observation that when in the sea, ‘we cannot *not* be embodied, we

¹⁰ Affective tonality is something we find ourselves in, rather than finding in ourselves. It’s an embracing atmosphere that is also at the very heart of what happens because it qualifies the overall feel. Affective tonality is what we normally call a ‘mood’ (Massumi, 2008: 21).

are in our body, floating, moving and vibrantly sensate, both deeply aware of our self in the sea, yet also melting, seeping into the surrounds, both a body and an entanglement’.

Shapton similarly elaborates on the intimacy of the body in oceanic waters and how it opens up a relational ontology: ‘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’ (Shapton in Mentz, 2020: 129).

When we swim in the ocean, we are also deeply aware of our vulnerability to the tides, our physical limitations such as the capacity to deal with cold, and other possible dangers to survival. The ocean is compelling to us, yet also a terrain of fear and unknowability. As Mentz so succinctly writes:

Poised on the sea’s edge, we balance between kinship with and alienation from the watery part of the world. Ocean insinuates its salty fingers into that division and wedges meaning out of both the longing that draws us to the great waters and the fear that drives us away. (Mentz, 2020: 4)

Relationality and care thus become vital when swimming in oceans. We find ourselves always aware of each other, even as we are captivated by what we are seeing and feeling, always keeping an eye out for the other. In this way, swimming together also brings to the surface our shared vulnerabilities, larger than our subjective ones, and our responsibility for and response-ability to each other and all others. As Nike writes:

Even though I free-write together with others ... this particular assemblage ... does something profound, primary? I think this is because we are vulnerable together, curious together, we have fun together, we share thoughts, photos, observations, we stay together which leads to cooking, eating, reading, walking etc ... like the sea, the practice spills, flows, ebbs and flows. What about time? Intimacy takes time but is not dependent on time.

The cold temperatures take their toll on Tamara, but the pull of the ocean is more powerful than her discomfort and the fear of her vulnerability to hypothermia. This very experience of vulnerability seems to deepen the sense of shared vulnerabilities and melt away the prescribed separations between self and others. After a particularly icy swim that ‘haunted’ her for days as it took her so long to get warm afterwards, she thinks about the precarity of embodiment that,

like a deep swirling energy that is both irresistible and yet dangerously close to bringing loss of self. The pull of life, the magnetic call to atrophy. The desire to be and the wish not to be. Or is it really the desire to be more fully a part of, of the all, embraced in the everything, beyond the ugly divides and violences, beyond the individualised and lonely self.

This intimacy with our shared vulnerabilities and response-abilities to each other was particularly heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our narratives are permeated with the precarious experience of the pandemic when our swimming together became a balm for the extraordinariness of isolation and the entrapment in home, city, nation-state. Tamara found comfort in the way ‘the swimming and the writing dissolves the alienation, accesses a moment of freedom and community, if only for a stolen moment’.

Whereas for Nike the sea became ‘a refuge, another world that was virus free’ and a space where she could make sense of the virus, her mind drifting back to the fish ‘... so aligned with each other, so in sync. I am not sure why this image is so pressing for me ... what can we learn from the fish? Maybe it is because they were moving as one but were distinctly separate, some kind of social distancing seemed to be in operation ... they kept their distance but moved in sync’.

These sentiments are echoed by Viv who felt that while every day with COVID-19 became ‘more and more surreal’, she was ‘grateful for very small things like us being able to get together in this group ... I cannot believe the pace of what is happening around the world and it is very difficult to keep calm’.

Through our experiences of precarity in the ocean, we also became aware of how swimming helps us to think about our relations in the university and in scholarly spaces differently, both exposing the challenges while opening up spaces of refuge. Viv writes about how swimming shows up the toxicity of normative academic practices, offering alternative imaginaries of how we can do justice scholarship differently,

Swimming everyday (more than I did when I was going into work at the university) and being away from those tedious toxic rule-obsessed meetings, I feel more and more impatient with things that I was coerced to do but should feel liberated from but don’t always. I thought I also want to do less of what I don’t want to do. I want to swim and do the academia I love – finding new ways to think and be in the world.

Similarly, Tamara writes:

I am at a low ebb, my waters of energy receded like the tides, my flesh feels peeled back and the vulnerable bones exposed. There is no deck to go below to hide this vulnerability in a nurturing space. This time exposes both the miraculous parts of what we have here, but also the deeply veined ugliness. The university and people with power there are increasingly revealed to me in all their pettiness, their clawing desire for power, their hungry need to assert their control and self-aggrandisement, their lack of care and efforts, all cloaked in a politically correct language ...

And yet, as the narrative below reveals, swimming may 'settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places' (Haraway, 2016: 1), offering a space of refuge and care:

I feel suddenly energised and grateful for the wonderful care we have created in pockets of spaces like this, in and out of the university and the momentary utopias that speak to different ways of being and doing and making. (Tamara)

CONCLUDING AND CONTINUING EDDIES OF THOUGHTS

Through this practice, we have come to understand intimacy differently but also to understand the value of Slow intimacies for making justice knowledge. The Slow intimacies of oceanic swimming-thinking-writing is one way of practicing a Slow scholarship as we have tried to share here, both with our theoretical arguments and our personal free-writing narratives. We have explored these multi-layered realms of intimacy, with each other and other humans, with more-than-human species and the planet, with our haunted pasts, presents and futures, with our shared vulnerabilities and with knowledge-making and thinking differently towards alternative imaginaries of living. We have tried to show how these entangled intimacies open up a deep sense of our relationalities and therefore our responsibility *for* making and our response-ability *to* make a difference. We also argue that such embodied, relational practices of intimacy with other humans, other species, the planet, temporalities and ghosts, is a *justice-to-come* scholarship, in that it is ongoing and will never be reached. And so we swim on...

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