

**Swimming in the Deep End: Youths' Social, Material,
and Bodily Senses of Immersion in an English
Competitive Swimming Club**

by
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Ref: 2018-0397-Heath Swimming in the Deep End: Swimming Club
Youths' Embodied Practices, Injury and Sociability in the UK

Dear Sean,

Thank you for your resubmission to the Social Sciences CREC at the University of Brighton.

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There is a very small grammatical change required to the minors' consent form. Please amend the relevant sentence to: "I am aware that my son, daughter, or ward will be required to take part in a tape-recorded interview."

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We wish you all the best with your research and hope that your research study is successful. If the CREC can be of further assistance with your study please contact us again.

Best wishes

Dr Nichola Khan

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Abstract

Swimming in the Deep End is an ethnographic examination of competitive swimming as it is experienced by youth in England. This thesis is about immersion as the material, social, affective, and emotional aspects of participating in a lifeworld. In it I sketch out the theoretical aspects of immersion as practice, process, and method. The practice of immersion is about getting in and experiencing for oneself the bodily aspects of swimming. The set of processes that operate as part of immersion are belonging and becoming, where the social worlds of the athlete are taken in concert with the shared experiences of swimming. Immersion as method is an apprenticeship in the lifeworlds of our interlocutors guided by anthropological sensibilities and precepts. This thesis therefore follows the anthropological tradition of ethnographic immersion, a holistic participation in the lives and activities of our interlocutors which includes in-depth observations, discussions, interviews, readings, and participation in swimming or other embodied activities of those we learn to live alongside. All three theoretical aspects of immersion are entangled and rely on a phenomenological approach to personal and social experience, in this instance, the embodied sensory experiences of youth competitive swimmers. Viewed this way a phenomenological understanding of youths' perceptions of their bodies in particular environments become central to my arguments in this thesis. Immersion helps orient our understandings of the ways youth perceive and experience their worlds through the cultivation of a sensory schema defined by feel and touch and the privileging of haptic sense modalities. It is from this orientation that the shared practice of swimming can be viewed as an intersubjective experience of perception, embodiment, pain, and emotion. Youth share immersive experiences of being-in-the-water through the bodily practices associated with swimming and through shared sensory schema. I argue that immersion is much more than a metaphor for "entering into" all manner of situations and activities. Immersion as presented through the lens of competitive swimming is an active set of sensory perceptions, practices, and experiences in a distinctly different material world, which is key to grasping the processes of becoming and belonging through the socio-cultural meanings and understandings of what it means for youth to be, or rather, become homo natator (the swimming human).

Keywords: immersion; swimming; touch; emotion; pain; the body

Dedication

To the Performance Squad and my friends at Manta Swimming Club.

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As with all academic writing this thesis was also a collective endeavour. Without the support from the swimmers, coaches, parents, officials, and committee members at Manta Swimming Club this project would never have come to fruition. I am grateful for their willingness to put up with my incessant questioning, my hanging out poolside, and occasional disruptions during training sessions. I am especially grateful for their insistence that I get in the water and swim which would end up shaping this entire project.

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Throughout the research and writing of this PhD my wife, Michelle Hagman, has been my anchor. Her endless patience, care, love, and support continually astound me, inspire me, and buoy me up to the surface when I need a breath of fresh air. Throughout this journey, through the late evening swimming training, weekend long writing sessions, multi-day conference attendance, her conviction in my ability to complete the PhD has never wavered. Her patience while listening to me talk about swimming and anthropology for hours can only be described as legendary. I am eternally grateful for her empathic care at the worst and at the best of times. This journey has been both and she has made it wonderful.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

I step onto a pool deck in the South East of England after being absent from these built recreation spaces for over four months as I moved from Canada to the UK. What immediately assails my senses are the heat and humidity of the pool chamber, the acidic chemical tang of chlorine in my nostrils, the sounds of arms, hands, and feet slapping the water, the bright florescent lights reflecting off white tiled surfaces, and the shimmering blue motion of the water as swimmers disturb the flat glassed finish of the surface with their passage. Swimming costume clad bodies of youth swimmers, hair and eyes hidden behind swim hats and mirrored goggles, move up and down the lanes in regular rhythmic fashion conducted by the metred count of the seconds pace clock with its red, green, blue, and black hands visible against the end wall of the pool chamber. The coach yells out “twenty-O-five, nineteen-six,”¹ reading times off their stopwatch as the youth each cruise into the wall under the starting blocks. Heavily breathing the youth cling to the wall. Some of them grimace and suck air through their clenched teeth. Some grab a quick squirt from their water bottle. Others exchange brief glances and briefer words taking what few-seconds they are allotted for rest between set pieces. This is all punctuated by the coaches bellowed encouragements “WOOSH,” “HUUUUP,” “Dig Deep,” “Come on Nathan!” The youth continue the set repetitions ducking under the surface, fully immersed in the social and material medium of competitive swimming, as they push off underwater and start the next set of lengths.

For better or worse I have spent nearly half my life in and around water, especially swimming pools of all shapes and sizes. From what I can recall, I have always been able to swim for I do not remember a time when I could not float, sink, or propel myself in any direction in the water. My earliest memories of swimming are of lying on my back staring up at the line of wooden squares interspersed with lights suspended above the outside “wall” lanes of my local indoor pool. I can recall being desperately tired during this swimming lesson working every muscle in an effort to swim backstroke to the end of the lane, gasping for air, and trying to move quickly enough not to get passed by those in my lane. Neither fast nor technically competent at anything other than breaststroke kick I still managed to acquire the necessary skills to complete all the levels of the local swimming program. As I had no love for the repetitive training required to swim fast, I never considered joining the competitive swimming club at my local pool. I was too busy with baseball, soccer, basketball,

¹ Swim times are generally written as 1:20.05, the numbers before the colon indicating minutes, the numbers after being the seconds, and the numbers after the period denoting tenths and hundredths of a second. I have chosen to write them phonetically as they were spoken by the coach and swimmers throughout most of this thesis.

field hockey, Taekwon-Do, skiing, skateboarding, or riding my bike. Yet I always found my way to water, be it the joy and freedom experienced playing in the glistening clear-blue waters of the outdoor pool in the low-income apartment complex where I grew up, or the lakes, creeks, rivers, and ocean dips on summer camping holidays or weekend excursions around the Greater Vancouver Area, Canada. In my teenage years I trained as and became a lifeguard and swimming instructor, continuing in this profession through my doctorate studies. This work allowed me to share the pleasurable sensuous experiences of immersion while teaching a life and safety skill to people of all ages.

Later in my aquatic career and early into my academic career I undertook my first foray into competitive swimming by joining my local Masters swim club. Over the course of half a season in 2012 I trained with this group which swam at 6am Monday to Friday, ultimately culminating in competing at a regional Masters Meet. From conversations with these adult swimmers aged 35 and older, I became fascinated with the extent immersion was a central aspect to their lives, to their sense of self, identity, and belonging to a sport and a community of swimmers. What is it about immersion in water and competitive swimming that so captivated these individuals in their youth that they continue these forms of immersion? Rather than relying on the nostalgic rememberings of times-gone from Masters swimmers' accounts I thought it best to attempt to understand the enskilled knowledges of immersion from youth themselves. Therefore, for my Masters degree in anthropology I explored notions of community and sociality amongst competitive youth swimmers. I was again astounded by their reported experiences of immersion, the way they described their sense perceptions of swimming, of moving through the water, or just being in the water. This thesis is a direct extension of my previous swimming exploration.

Swimming in the Deep End is an ethnographic examination of competitive swimming as it is experienced by youth in England. This thesis is about immersion as the material, social, affective, and emotional aspects of participating in a lifeworld. "Lifeworlds," the anthropologist Michael Jackson (2017, xi) writes, "are open, complex, and never self-contained." They are "an expression of your physical and mental capacity to bring life into being" and are an "active engagement in creating a life that is *emotionally* satisfying" (2017, xi emphasis in original). In this thesis I attempt to sketch out the theoretical aspects of immersion in youth swimmer's lifeworlds as practice, process, and method. The practice of immersion is about getting in and experiencing for one's self the bodily aspects of swimming. The set of processes that operate as part of immersion are belonging and becoming, where the social worlds of the athlete are taken in concert with the shared experiences of swimming. Immersion as method is an apprenticeship in the lifeworlds of our interlocutors

guided by anthropological sensibilities and precepts. All three theoretical aspects of immersion are entangled and rely on a phenomenological approach to personal experience. Viewed this way a phenomenological understanding of youths' perceptions of their bodies in particular environments (water) are central to my arguments in this thesis. Immersion helps orient our understandings of the ways youth perceive and experience their worlds, that is, through the cultivation of a sensory schema defined by feel and touch and the privileging of haptic sense modalities. It is from this orientation that the shared practice of swimming can be viewed as an intersubjective experience of perception, embodiment, pain, and emotion.

From 2018-2021 I spent three competitive swimming seasons (September-July) immersing myself in competitive swimming at Manta Swimming Club,² living in the community surrounding the pools where the youth swimmers of this club trained and competed.³ This competitive club's focus was pool swimming, what will be simply referred to as swimming throughout the rest of this thesis. Manta SC is located on the South East Coast of England, a region boasting some of the oldest and longest continuously running swimming clubs in the country, with multiple clubs holding centurion designations.⁴ Suffice it to say, there is rich history of competitive swimming in this part of England both in pools and open water. The youth at the club ranged in age from 9 years old (the minimum age to compete in galas) to 21 years old, yet the majority of swimmers I spent time with over the three years of fieldwork were between the ages of 14 to 17. During those three seasons I spent my time with the performance squad, a non-traditional mix of County, Regional, and Nationally ranked swimmers. This eclectic mix spanning the breadth of competitive levels in England was due to the small size of the club and lack of pool space availability in the surrounding geographic area. What it did provide for both my research and for the swimmers was an interesting blurring across the boundaries of age and skill which would have otherwise been sequestered into different squads.

While I may be a proficient swimmer the standard of speed and skill of these youth was far beyond my abilities. That, the minimum speed requirement to be in the performance squad, and the ethical considerations of a 30-year-old tattooed man swimming with a collection of teenagers in a public pool prevented me from swimming with the squad. Instead

² Pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis to preserve the confidentiality of individuals and organizations.

³ My interlocutors anti-climactically referred to the place where they trained simply as "the pool" or by a shortened version of the name of the recreation centre. I follow this convention and refer to their place of training throughout as "the pool."

⁴ For more information on the South East Region's swimming governance see <https://www.southeastswimming.org/>.

of training with the youth I found alternate ways to immerse myself in their lifeworlds, spending time on the pool deck, observing practices and galas, interacting with them during mobilizing before swimming and stretching off after training, and at the occasional social event peppered throughout the season. Similar to other scholars working with children and youth (see Dyck 2012; Grasmuck 2005; Thorne 1993), I shifted the ways in which I conducted participant observation, opting for a more “observing participant” role while on the pool deck. Overtime I did indeed take the bodily and material aspects of immersion seriously by getting in a pool and training with the Masters squad of the club, even going so far as to begin open water swimming in the ocean during the spring and summer months with a few Manta SC coaches and ex-swimmers. This apprenticeship into competitive swimming radically shifted how I came to understand immersion as a holistic concept to describe entering into an activity, into a community, and as the complex interconnectedness of material, social, affective, and emotional aspects of youth swimmers’ lifeworlds.

The questions that guided my inquiry into the lifeworlds of youth swimmers were two-fold: 1) How does the practice of swimming come to affect the complex production and expression of embodiment and the construction of identities of youth competitive swimmers in and out of the water? 2) How do experiences of pain affect their sense of self and knowledge of their bodies? Together they led me to consider how tactile sensory perceptions shape youth’s sense of “feel for the water” and their becoming, belonging, and immersion. Liquid water as a material may not be especially unique on planet Earth, yet the physical practices involved in swimming as a competitive sport shapes human beings in ways that are distinct from our usual everyday experiences of our terrestrial lives. Moving through and with the liquid medium of water for seven or more kilometres per day generates somatic changes in swimmer’s physiology, as does the training of any physical skill. To move in the water requires an attunement of the senses, subsuming the ocular and oral for the tactile, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive. Yet when pain hinders immersion youth swimmers’ bodily experiences of high-performance training combined with the sociality that comes of shared practice stand out as substantial aspects of their lives. This fluid way of approaching the world in a very embodied sense shapes youth’s perceptions of their environs, opening up the blue expanses of the world to be incorporated into their being-in-the-water in tangible, material, social, and affective ways.

A specific aim of this thesis is to further address the gap in research on youth swimming through an anthropological lens. The critical scholarship on child and youth swimming is far from extensive and the research topics far from exhausted. Social science research on swimming has examined body work, bodies, and embodiment (McMahon and

Barker-Ruchti 2017; Throsby 2015; McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020a); touch and surveillance (Lang 2010; 2015; C. Scott 2013; S. Scott 2010; Grahn 2016); safeguarding children in sport contexts (Hartill and Lang 2016; Palmer 2013; Hartill and Lang 2018); social development and participation (Salguero et al. 2003; Light 2010; D. Gould et al. 1982; Vaahtera and Lappalainen 2018); and well-being (Olive and Wheaton 2020; Foley et al. 2019). Current literature on swimming stems from sociological perspectives and comprises auto-ethnographic research with Foucauldian analysis of adult swimmers and their bodies (McMahon and Barker-Ruchti 2017; McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011; A. B. Evans and Allen-Collinson 2016; McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2019), and “sociological phenomenology” analyses of sense experiences amongst nationally ranked high-performance swimmers (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2019; 2021a; 2021b; 2020b; Allen-Collinson, McNarry, and Evans 2021). These sociological perspectives have generated knowledge on the power dynamics latent in competitive sport, evidenced the regulation of female swimming bodies, and highlighted swimmer’s conceptions of self and their bodies in these regulatory environments. They also focus on embodied knowledge acquisition through incorporation and refinement of techniques and skills and swimmers’ self-reporting of sensory experiences of swimming (i.e., the temperature of the water, pain and fatigue). While some of this literature applies a phenomenological epistemology towards understanding competitive swimming practices it ultimately fails to recognize the cultural diversity of swimming contexts and the materiality of immersion, roughly homogenizing “competitive swimmers,” and the “physical culture” of swimming, into a singular category.

Swimming as a category of activity involving submersion in water constitutes a plethora of activities (i.e., dipping, dunking, splashing, training, bathing, floating, tumbling) which people engage in for different purposes. Learn to swim programs teach the basic skills one needs to be comfortable and not drown when in water. Public lengths swimming can be used for exercise, sociality, or the general pleasure of submerging oneself. The same can be said for outdoor swimming in all manner of bodies of water. There are social clubs for adults where having tea and cake after a swim is the norm. Attending public or “open” swims for children, youth, and families are mainly considered social and leisure activities devoted to play and fun. And then there are the more performance-oriented groups and clubs concerned with the sport of swimming, what we might call the codification and institutionalization of aquatic racing games. These clubs tend to focus on the attainment of ever faster results where the prevailing attitude of coaches and swimmers is performance oriented. Here there is an intentional cultivation of skills and techniques which are designed to decrease the drag, or friction, of water on the body and to increase and maintain forward momentum. Developing this enskilled knowledge takes place through an apprenticeship in

the sport where youth swimmers learn and refine precise bodily movements to shave tenths and hundredths of seconds off their personal best times. That is not to say that within these competitive and high-performance spaces there is no sociality nor enjoyment of the activities, rather my purpose in outlining these distinctions is to note that “swimming” is not a singular category but has various and diverse meanings in different contexts. With that said, I focus on youth competitive swimming in this thesis.

There has been a small volume of research conducted in competitive swimming club contexts with children and youth. With disparate topics of focus such as gender (Musto 2014), well-being and injury (Sean Heath 2020a; 2020b) sociality and embodiment (Sean Heath 2017; 2014), participation and social development (Light, Harvey, and Memmert 2013; Light 2010; Moran et al. 2012)), and cognitive and physical development (Cumming and New 2017; Johnson et al. 2008), yet the literature on youth competitive swimming is far from exhaustive. This leaves a sizeable gap in knowledge concerning immersion, becoming, and belonging, part of which this thesis attempts to fill.

Becoming a swimmer clearly involves a considerable amount of time being immersed in water, upwards of 25-hours per week for senior national squads. Indeed, humans seem to have an innate fascination with water, in all its mediums.⁵ Young children do not seem to mind so much that their shoes, socks, trousers, and other bits of clothing – or their parents or siblings for that matter – are getting wet and potentially also dirty, while they are in the act of jumping into a puddle, breaking the surface tension with their feet and displacing globules of water upwards and outwards from their downward strikes. Indeed, the sheer exhilaration of the gleeful screams of a young boy splashing in puddles left over from the winter’s day rain tells me that he is quite enjoying the experience. It is the plea of his mother for him to stay out of the puddle that shocks me out of my reverie while watching this joyful act. This plea to stay dry by a mother taking her children home, after having dried off and changed the children from their swimming lessons, demonstrates how our sensory understandings and contact with water are socially circumscribed, how we are taught the appropriate times, modes, and methods of becoming wet. As David Abram puts it, “as we grow into a particular culture of language, we implicitly begin to structure our sensory contact with the earth around us in a particular manner, paying attention to certain phenomena while ignoring others, differentiating textures, tastes, and tones in accordance with the verbal contrasts contained in the language” (1996, 255).

⁵ Here I will concentrate on water’s liquid form. For a fascinating discussion on ice and snow see Krupnik et al. (2010). For water vapour, see Abram (1996) Chapter 7 – The Forgetting and Remembering of Air.

Being wet, becoming immersed, has socially circumscribed conditions and subtle but profound implications for the socialization of the sensory perceptions of youth swimmers. Youth in Southern England – particularly those enrolled in competitive clubs at young ages – are taught and learn through practice the appropriate times for immersion (i.e., while at the beach of an ocean, a lake, during swimming lessons or at the local pool, on holiday in a hotel pool, etc.). They are taught that the soaking through of clothing during a downpour or rain is a negative sensory experience of being wet, to be avoided, as are puddles and the streams running against the curb of roadways during a rainstorm. Youth are wrapped up in towels after swimming lessons for the short walk, indoors, from poolside to changeroom. Their parents hold their dripping mesh swim bag with fins, goggles, caps, water bottles, kickboard, and pool buoy at arms-length and place them in plastic bags in the boot of their vehicles for the drive home. England is a country famous for its poor weather, the fog, mist, damp, and constant rain drizzle possible nearly any time of year. The English tend to work especially hard to stay dry from this onslaught of precipitation yet flock to the seaside in droves during the summer months to spend the days at the beach, sunbathing, dipping, paddling, and splashing around in the water (Pidd 2021). Becoming immersed then involves a cultural understanding of bodily submersion in the substance of water whether that be in the sea, a lake, river, or pool. On the South Coast of England, the being *in* the liquid substance of water is the sensory condition of wet acceptability.

The German philosopher and cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk (2011; 2014; 2016) has conceived of human beings as having a “profound involvement” (ten Bos 2009, 74) in the way we move between different elements. In the practices of competitive swimming this “profound involvement” is productive to the general theoretical discussion of our relation to water. Focusing my attention on specific ethnographic sites (pools, swimming clubs, South East England) aligns with the analytical traditions and approaches in the anthropology of sport to understand human relationships between environment, medium, and embodied experiences (Carter 2018b; Besnier, Brownell, and Carter 2018). Immersion then, this “being-in,” needs to take account of borders between the two environments of atmosphere (and land) and water. In the following section I sketch together my own epistemology of immersion, centred around youths’ experiences of their immersive swimming practices. I argue that swimming is more than a physical activity or sport which youth participate in. Rather it is a set of immersive sensory perceptions, practices, and experiences in a distinctly different material world, which is key to grasping the processes of becoming and belonging through the socio-cultural meanings and understandings of what it means for youth to be *homo natator* (the swimming human).

1.1. Being-in-the-Water: Perception, Embodiment, Pain, and Emotion

By spending years immersed in youth swimmers' lifeworlds I have developed an appreciation of the attention to bodily senses and embodied practices which are highlighted in the immersive experiences of being-in water. As highly adaptable beings we have developed and have access to an incredible array of technologies, which includes our techniques of the body, practices and training, learned and enskilled movements. Our being-in-the-water relies on the intentional incorporation of these skills, what Tim Ingold (2000) has termed processes of enskilment. These processes of enskilment necessarily require us to pay attention to our senses. My framing of an epistemology of immersion is thus grounded in youth swimmers' perceptions of their tactile and kinaesthetic senses, as highlighted and privileged by their social and cultural education in competitive swimming, through which we may understand their forms of being-in-the-water and further develop our knowledge in what it means to be human, a material entity in relationship with the material world around us.

This material relationship between us and the world, how we sense and perceive our inhabited environments, is repeatedly examined throughout this thesis. Much of my thinking around the framing for the theoretical analyses of immersion in this thesis comes from the work of Merleau-Ponty (2012), especially his philosophical treatise *Phenomenology of Perception*. I find his ontological position, which expands on the phenomenological project of Edmond Husserl (1960) on the integrated nature of our existence as beings-in-the-world, useful for exploring the meanings associated with belonging and becoming for youth swimmers. Following Merleau-Ponty (2012), I argue that the separation between us and the world is a false one. We are not separate from the world nor from the environments we inhabit. Neither are youth swimmers separate from the amphibious environments they inhabit. Our perceptions and the sensations of our body's moving and being are entangled within social and material worlds.

To grasp this point, we need to understand that perception, the ways we interpret sensory information, are embodied processes. For we do not have access to the world around us, nor the world within us (of us) without the medium of the body. Perception is situated in the body. It is not a product of our consciousness, of our mind. Rather, it is the enactment of becoming, of being a moving and acting self in the world. Perception is the "background against which all acts stand out and is thus presupposed by them" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxiv). Considered another way, perception is an "open activity," the "dynamic blend of receptivity and creativity by which every animate organism necessarily orients itself to the world (and orients the world around itself)" (Carter 2018b, 86). This conceptualization

of perception does not objectify the body and extirpate conscious processes of thought from occurring in what we might call the mind (often perceived to be situated in the brain). Instead, “the mind” is a holistic conglomeration of our embodied being with our socially and culturally circumscribed senses animating our perceptions and experiences in the world, through which we come to consider ourselves as agentive human becomings.

If perceptions are embodied processes, then what is the body? The body, as an object, is a set of materials loosely bound together by flesh. Yet the body is also subject, “a form of consciousness” (Romdenh-Romluc 2011, 62) if we understand consciousness as “being toward the thing through the intermediary of the body” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 140). We have a body and thus can consider it a material object, but we are also our body. We possess our body which is manifest in perception and action. Our experiences of our world are thus necessarily embodied, for we both have and are our bodies, and cannot separate the perception of our environment and our experiences from our bodies (B. S. Turner 2006; Merleau-Ponty 2012). In other words, the body is a bio-cultural entity. The seat of consciousness does not lie within our brains alone, rather, consciousness is a wholly embodied phenomena (Merleau-Ponty 2012), for our bodies are not merely physical objects and consciousness is not independent from the body. Consciousness, our very being-in-the-world, is essentially embodied: “Consciousness is bodily and bodies are conscious, there is no great obstacle to explaining how I come to know other selves – they are embodied beings, and thus perceivable elements of the world that I inhabit” (Romdenh-Romluc 2011, 135).

Our understandings of the organic world, of our material environments, all requires the perceptual use of our bodies. Indeed, this paradigm of embodiment, stemming from an anthropology of the body (see Douglas 1973), takes “embodied experience [as] the starting point for analyzing human participation in a cultural world” (Csordas 1993, 135). Both anthropologists (Csordas 1990; 2015; Lock and Farquhar 2007) and sociologists (Crossley 1995; Shilling 2005) begin from the same premise that the body is always-already in a physical and social world. Sociological analyses tend to focus on the power relations and forces shaping what the body is supposed to be and what it can and cannot do (see Newman, Thorpe, and Andrews 2020). Anthropological theorists take a slightly different position in their analysis by directly incorporating the moving, perceiving body into an epistemology of being human (Howes 2005b; Dyck and Archetti 2003). Taking an anthropological perspective allows for the application of a holistic framework of inquiry towards sport and the body (Besnier, Brownell, and Carter 2018; Brownell 1995; Carter 2018b; Klein 1993), for one of anthropology’s main aims is the comprehension of people’s

world views, epistemologies, and ontologies to better understand what it means to be human in all its variety.

Although being and becoming are necessarily embodied, it is still difficult to talk distinctly about the body without it perhaps being read as reified, objectified, as the meat casing of consciousness. This is not the case for my study nor my argument. The body and self are linked, they are one and the same, for our perceptions are necessarily in and of our bodies as is our conscious ability to recognize that as such. Following from Merleau-Ponty (2012), I argue that our perceptual experiences of the world around us constitute a being-in-the-world, defining the body and the self (for they are inseparable) as intertwined with the world. For that is why the phrase is hyphenated, because our being, our embodiment, our movements, and our perceptions are both situated in our bodies and with the world, creating each other. At no point are we presented with the experience of entering the world from oblivion. For youth swimmers, and anyone else who learned to swim before they can remember, they find themselves as beings-in-the-water, already situated in the physical and social world of swimming.

Pain, as a set of sense perceptions, is dealt with as both of the body and of the mind in competitive swimming. Youth's sensory experiences of pain distinctly locate the perception of these sensations as resulting from the movements used to train their bodies to swim fast. Understood this way pain becomes intimately connected to other tactile senses which feature so prominently in competitive swimming. Pain may also arise from the body itself when incorrect technique or overtraining results in injury and pain. Either way, the body "speaks up" and forces itself, through pain, to the conscious forefront of youth's awareness. Put another way, their body "dys-appears" (Leder 1990) from its normal functioning at the horizon of conscious awareness. Yet pain is a negotiated sensory experience in which varying levels, or thresholds, may be enacted concurrently. There is the individual experience of pain and there are the social performances of the body in pain. There is the body which can overcome pain through mental willpower alone and there is the collective suffering through pain which helps generate social bonds. In competitive swimming then, pain, like the body, is enacted in multiple ways (Mol 2002).

Emotion, mood, and feeling are instrumental aspects of being an embodied perceiving subject. As youth are still "becoming" this does not diminish the emotional intensity with which their worlds may be affected by others, be they "human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water" (Stewart 2007, 128). For instance, Western discourse on bodies tends to support the neoliberal ethos of self-improvement and self-actualization (Martschukat 2021), where productivity, performance and achievement

demand youth become ever more (Besnier, Calabrò, and Guinness 2021a). This feeds prevailing mood of anxiety experienced by many youth in England. Yet in competitive swimming spaces the moods cultivated by swimmers at times contrasted this anxiety. The social moods established at Manta SC were serious: Competition and achievement are important, hard-work and dedication to training is crucial. But the general mood was also relaxed, and not without a bit of humour and banter. In cultivating a safe space for youth to become faster swimmers the tactile perceptions of immersion in water can continue to be experienced emotionally as joyful, peaceful, and comforting. Once immersion is comfortable then training the body and the senses can occur in earnest.

Immersion expressed as a theoretical and analytical concept, as well as a practice which is intimately sensual and embodied, is the central thread which runs throughout this thesis. Below I trace out what I mean when I invoke an epistemology of immersion and connect it with other disciplinary projects in anthropology which explore human and water interactions, be that an anthropology of water (Ballesterio 2019) or maritime anthropology (Pauwelussen 2017). In these subfields, *immersion* is prevalent as the physical material relationship between human bodies and water, which can only be understood through tracing the various meanings generated and perpetuated in the social practices and cultural knowledges of those peoples. In this way, my conception of *immersion* shares commonalities with maritime anthropology's notion that "water's materiality becomes substrate for forms of floating, flowing, and immersing" (Ballesterio 2019, 410). While an attention to the senses is not entirely absent from the larger sub-field of inquiry of the anthropology of water, immersion as literal practice and its material and sensual effects on the body are often subsumed by the politics of possession and domination of this essential fluid material (Strang 2015). In any case, water's material properties thus provide the medium for immersion as a process of becoming and belonging. My own understanding of the meanings of immersion, participation, sport, swimming, belonging and becoming for youth competitive swimmers, builds off this tradition of amphibious/aquatic scholarship.

1.2. Water, Water, Everywhere: An Epistemology of Immersion

In no environment do we experience a more profound involvement with the materiality of substance than when immersed in water, be it the chemically managed waters of built pools, the waves of the ocean, the flow of streams and rivers, the floods of wetlands, the thundershowers and torrential rains of plains and deserts, or even in the snow and ice. As Veronica Strang puts it, "the weather *is* water in motion" (2015, 47 emphasis in original). Water circulates, shifts, changes states, and is re-cycled through the mechanical climate-

controlled and filtration systems in indoor and outdoor pools. While the movement between land and water occurs in the built environment of the swimming pool for youth competitive swimmers, they are nonetheless curious to seek their own belonging and becoming in techniques, their bodies, and social relationships in the liquid medium they move in.

Diving, submerging, immersion, these are all expressions of what the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2011) takes as “the medial way of being” of the human animal: “that human beings can become very familiar with the space or environment in which they find themselves” (ten Bos 2009, 77). According to René ten Bos, Sloterdijk considers human beings as “ontological amphibian[s]” (ten Bos 2009, 74), our curiosity propels us to seek changes in the elements we move in, experienced by the individual as a “profound involvement” in our shifting environments. When youth swim they spend much of their time immersed beneath the surface between strokes, turning on the walls, and pushing off underwater. They also spend an inordinate amount of time preparing to swim, be it the ritualistic preparations pre-race (reaching over the pool edge to cup handfuls of water and vigorously splash this on the chest and face), or standing on the edge of the pool waiting for their peers to be the first to enter the water during regular training sessions (breathing deeply, staring at the slightly rippling surface of water between lane ropes knowing well the physiological shock their body experiences every time it hits that cold water). Much of their immersion is an amalgamation of water and atmosphere as all swimming strokes are a combination of movement through both mediums. While young children and infants may initially be terrified of the alien experience of being immersed in water, their early education soon provides them the techniques and confidence to move through, play in, and float on this fluid material (Sigmundsson and Hopkins 2010; Moran et al. 2012).

An early education in immersion extends beyond the materiality of water to incorporate the social environments where training and competition occur. This includes the competitive swimming club and squad, as well as the physical spaces of pools and recreation centres. Youth learn pool and recreation centre rules from coaches, teachers, parents and lifeguards, and they are socialized to the written and unwritten etiquette of lane swimming.⁶ Youth swimmers become familiar with pool spaces and environments wherever they find themselves. This familiarity of immersion for youth swimmers can also be a calming experience. The water in a pool, a medium which is tangibly familiar and yet distinct, can be a safe place which provides feelings of comfort (Sean Heath 2017).

⁶ Despite lane etiquette rules being prominently displayed on pool decks, non-competitive swimmers often fail to follow, let alone read, these rules.

Much scholarship has been devoted to the experiences of immersion in blue spaces, particularly “wild” swimming, in places around the globe (S. Gould, McLachlan, and McDonald 2020; Foley 2015; Throsby 2016; Olive and Wheaton 2020). Many of these accounts, occurring in more natural settings than the built environment of the pool, discuss a (re)connection between people, water, landscapes, and the flora and fauna in these aquatic worlds. Karine Gagné and Mattias Rasmussen (2016) outline this (re)connection to place, landscape, and water as a sub-disciplinary field they call “amphibious anthropology.” For Gagné and Rasmussen, the connection between the flow of water and the relative static properties of land provides a boundary to examine the relationships and ramifications of experiences along these zones. Positioning their analytical focus of an “amphibious anthropology” on landscapes, land and water “become mutually constitutive of place” where meaning and “markers of collective identity” are envisioned within local cosmologies (2016, 135–36). Their amphibious anthropology is more an effort to engage in an understanding of place-making as that relates to water, in, on, and under the landscape where people live, not unlike the “hydrophilia” movement amongst cultural theorists and geographers which incorporates conceptions of therapeutic landscapes in both blue and green spaces (Foley et al. 2019). The “amphibious,” then, in Gagné and Rasmussen’s call for a new anthropological engagement is clearly in the broadest sense of “relating to” both land and water.

Commenting on Sloterdijk’s use of diving experiences in outlining an “amphibious anthropology,” ten Bos relates senses of being-in-the-water to mystical experience. For him, “mysticism is the art of being surrounded or enclosed without fear and desire” (ten Bos 2009, 78). Clearly there are parallels to be drawn to immersion, as presented in competitive swimming, for water physically surrounds the body in immersion and has the capability to enshroud youth, affecting their emotions and psychology (see Chapter 6). This immersion in water “implies that the surrounding medium loses its object status: you are in it rather than in front of it” (ten Bos 2009, 78). We can also say the same for the atmosphere, that we are in it. Generally we do not think of or perceive ourselves as being in an atmosphere, but rather consider ourselves to be terrestrial animals, the medium of our existence being the ground under our feet, rather than the additional verticality which is afforded to flying and aquatic animals (Carter 2018b). In shifting the ways in which we perceive our immersion we become oriented “in and toward the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxiv), more in tune with our senses as we explore our environs.

Swimming is dominated by an immersion in, and focus on, the tactile and kinaesthetic senses. Yet the underpinning ethos of swimming as a sport is to produce high-performance medal winning bodies where behavioural values such as commitment,

dedication, achievement, passion, and goal setting are foregrounded. In other words, refining the senses and becoming skilled are focused, almost exclusively, on generating fast bodies despite the cost to other social or recreational pursuits. René ten Bos provides a cautionary statement to this complete immersion, in the senses, in overindulgence of any kind, noting our immersion must be tempered with an understanding of emergence:

The careful [scuba]diver knows not only about submerging but also about emerging: the human being is the animal that is always gasping for air. The pneumatic aspects of the amphibious creature called a human being are unmistakable: whoever submerges without the ambition to sooner or later emerge will inevitably lose the self. (ten Bos 2009, 78)

Submersion then, in a psychological sense, is where the locus of intentionality is no longer connected to or entirely co-opted by swimming, which can signal a social or identity submersion for youth. Those youth who find themselves inhabiting the unidimensional identity of “swimmer” may lose their sense of self outside of the confines of their sport. This may eventually cause them to burnout and quit what was once a pleasurable activity (Sean Heath 2020a). Sloterdijk’s comments in this regard can be read as a cautionary tale against the extremes of immersion when youths’ agency is severely curtailed by social forces and the institutions aiming to produce competitive athletes.

Bronislaw Malinowski, in his foundational text on Pacific Islanders *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1999), describes Trobriand Islanders as existing in a water world. For the Pacific Islanders, water is not just a natural resource for it “oscillate[s] between nature and culture and can be both substance and symbol” (Gagné and Rasmussen 2016, 137) in Islanders’ everyday interactions and social realities. They therefore do not just inhabit a water world, but rather “a world made out of water” (2016, 137). Thinking about an anthropology that takes account of water as inimical to our existence, and as a substance that will kill you if you cannot get out of it (Tipton et al. 2017), is an important space to consider especially as in many ways we “think with water” both metaphorically and literally. The youth swimmers of the performance squad in Manta SC also inhabited a world made out of water. Due to the centrality of water to their lives emphasizing the sensual and phenomenological engagements within this liquid substance only makes sense.

1.3. Why “Youth” Swimming

“Youth” is one amongst many terms used in a variety of ways to categorize disparate groups through markers such as age and social status. My definition and usage of youth throughout this thesis is rooted in the cultural and historical uses of the term within the context where I conducted my research, the South East Region of England. Ethnographic

evidence collected from the field considers “youth” to be a transitional social category where independence is slowly gained from parents and guardians as biological age-category increases and social determinants of behavioural maturity are considered.

Transition and impermanence are key features of “youth” as a life-stage in both popular and scholarly works. Youth is often associated with “a shift in cognitive development, social roles, institutions, attachments, concerns and stress” (Amit-Talai 1995, 144). When defining where youth lies along the life-stage spectrum, Sue Heath *et al.* (2009) interchangeably use the terms “youth” and “young people,” and consider this as a separate life-stage when placed in comparison to childhood and adulthood. They follow the United Nations’ definition of “youth” as being an age-category between 15-24 biological years. In the UK, the term “youth” is widely used within sporting contexts and academic discourse to loosely denote the biological age range between 12-17 years old. This also corresponds to the groups or squads of swimmers as defined using biological age, the children and youth sectioned into “age-groups” with their peers for training and competition. The final age-group ending at 16 years old with all swimmers 17 and older competing together.

At 18-years-old you are no longer classified as a child or youth in the UK as you have moved into the age-of-majority where you are legally responsible for yourself and your own actions. In other words, you become an adult. This roughly corresponds with the England’s institutional education system classifications: Primary between 5-12 years old; Secondary between 12-16 years old; and College 16-18 years old. “Youth” is also rooted in the structures of competitive swimming in England (see Chapter 3), especially when the distinction between child, youth, and adult is invoked. There is some additional ambiguity for those between the ages of 18-21 where many UK youth are attending university, completing vocation degrees, or apprenticing as to whether they be classified as youth or adult.

Admittedly, I did not often hear the term “youth” used by parents, committee members, coaches, officials, nor swimmers on or off the pool deck, rather I encountered youth being referred to as “the swimmer(s)” or by their names. The youth themselves called each other by name (i.e., Rico, Sally, Olivia) and defined their inclusion by the circumstances of their immersion in club and sport (what squad they swam in, what qualifying times they had obtained). Rather than refer to youth simply as “swimmers”⁷ throughout this thesis I have chosen to follow the convention of other scholarly literature on swimming and young people (Dekerle 2020; Best 2007; Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995) and use the term “youth” as a

⁷ In Chapter 5, I outline how my interlocutors defined the meaning of being and becoming “swimmers” through shared sets of bodily practices.

useful container for denoting a certain age-grade category, roughly 12-21 years of age, the ages of those enrolled in the performance squad at Manta SC. In using youth, youth swimmer, and swimmer somewhat interchangeably through this thesis I situate my interlocutors' complex formations of individual identity against a backdrop of adult controlled and organized high-performance competitive sport. By doing so I attempt to position their immersion in competitive swimming as processes of becoming and belonging, which go well beyond a simple submersion in a unidimensional identity.⁸

1.4. Thesis Structure

The structure of this thesis does not follow the conventional model of introduction, literature review, methodology, data chapters, analysis, discussion, and conclusion. Rather, I have used immersion as a metaphor for the complexities and messy interconnectedness of ethnographic research to present this thesis as anthropological ethnography. In doing so I use immersion as a theoretical concept to encompass the social, material, and phenomenological experiences of becoming a competitive youth swimmer and belonging to a competitive swimming club. Immersion also takes account of the more tenuous connections between club and sport from the local level of practice to the national umbrella of organizing institutions, from what it means to be a swimmer from an individual's perspective, to how that connects with notions of community within the sport. It is from the phenomenological experiences of being-in-the-water where this investigation of immersion begins.

Youth swimmers' senses are circumscribed within particular social parameters in particular cultures. Their perceptions of those senses are then sculpted through the "doing" of the technical activities of swimming (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020a). To be immersed in water's liquid materiality requires a whole different way of moving and being, a shift in the ways in which swimmers perceive their worlds. It is thus from touch and kinaesthesia, from the moving and sensing of the body in its environs from which I begin to build the theoretical concept of immersion. After outlining the methodological choices for this ethnography as well as the historical and contextual background of competitive swimming in England, I attend to how individual youth swimmers learn to sense their watery environments by learning to "feel" the water in Chapter 4. I then discuss how groups of swimmers come to collectively negotiate the boundaries of competitive swimming through reference to the shared practices which constitute "proper swimming" in Chapter 5. Here, the sensing body in

⁸ See Sean Heath (2020a) for a model for wellness strategies that can be used to combat the pitfalls of unidimensional identities within sport.

swimming comes to be understood in terms of its “fitness” as a marker of aesthetics and practical performance. In the remaining three ethnographic chapters I illustrate how sensing is enacted in interactions between individuals and groups of youth swimmers.

Laying out the methodological foundations for an immersion approach to ethnography, I argue in Chapter 2 for a for a “thick participation” (Samudra 2008) approach to ethnographic research grounded in an immersive apprenticeship in the lives and activities of our youth interlocutors. I do this through the phenomenological framework of perception as posited by Merleau-Ponty (2012), which situates people as agentic parts of a holistic “being-in-the-world,” a messy entangled inseparability between ourselves as self, subject, object; others as perceived as another “myself”; and, the material interactable objects and substances of our existence as part of the world. Building off of embodiment paradigms in anthropology (Csordas 1990) for addressing the complexity of meaning in the physical and social practices of swimming, I take a youth centred approach to describing perceptions of the sensory modalities of touch, kinaesthesia, and proprioception, how youth experience practices of being immersed in water, and the quality of waters in which youth train, compete, and inhabit.

Noting the difficulties of full participation in youth swimmers’ lives, due in part to my adulthood, my joining the swimming club’s Masters squad provided an opportunity for a comparative analysis of my own bodily practice and sensory experiences of swimming and those which youth showed, demonstrated, acted, performed, played with, and discussed in their swimming practices. While not an identical phenomenological experience, this physical immersion into the training and activities of swimming is the grounding of a shared practice between the youth and I, a window into the processes of becoming and belonging, their, and my own, lived experiences of being-in-the-water.

Chapter 3 provides a brief history of the competitive sport of swimming, its germination in the UK during the 1800s, as well as the historical contexts for the current demographic of swimmers in England. This contextual history of the sport is essential to understand when exploring the contemporary focus on high performance and specialization of youth at young ages. Here I locate the sport of competitive swimming as being complicit in the neoliberal agenda that focuses on individual merit, winning at all costs, and self improvement, which attempts to produce a particular subjectivity (read as middle-class and white) (Wiltse 2007; Pilgaard et al. 2020). This can be seen in the institutional organization and structuring of the sport in the South East Region by Swim England, and Swim England South East, who both define the local rules and regulations of the sport in line with international institutions such as the Fédération Internationale de Natation (FINA). Using

Manta SC as an example, I outline the club's structure in relation to the sporting systems which seek to produce high performance medal winning athletes through local community clubs, regional development programs, and elite national performance centres.

In Chapter 4 I explore how the privileging of tactile and kinaesthetic senses in competitive swimming shapes youths' immersive practices. Specifically, I focus on how youth learn to "feel" the water. Through repetition, instruction, and in cultivating sensory perceptions of touch they come to develop embodied knowledges of water's affordances for movement. In discussing what immersion in water feels like for the performance squad's youth I flesh out the incorporation of techniques of the body, the skills, knowledge and enskilled movements which youth learn and incorporate into their bodies through their apprenticeship as competitive swimmers. Using the skill of turning at the wall I tie together perceiving the qualities of water with movement of the body. This apparently simple act – of tumble turning or touch turning – which youth have performed thousands of times may suddenly become awkward, difficult, and require full focused awareness on their bodily movements. This may be due to a shift in environment (competing at a new pool) or physical growth spurt. As youth literally measure the pool through a combination of spatial awareness, bodily movements, and tactile perceptions, a process which usually occurs at the horizons of or background of their perceptions, the growth and development of the body can force a re-evaluation of the ways youth perceive their swimming bodies.

Due to the emphasis on "feel" in competitive swimming much of the communication between athletes, and coaches and athletes, is non-verbal. Mimetic forms of learning and communication are highly developed within competitive swimming contexts to the point that athletes and coaches both use gestural communication to emphasise what words would fall short of conveying. This reliance on a gestural form of communication to convey meaning through kinaesthetic senses is an embodied practice which would be entirely lost on those not apprenticed in the sport and versed in the dynamic possibilities of movement in water. Whether youth understand the physics behind their propulsion is irrelevant because these gestures communicate an embodied perception of movement in an intersubjective fashion. Through shared practice of training, drills, techniques, skills, and forms of movement, the subtleties of each youths' style of swimming and their kinaesthetic perceptions of those actions together forms the enskilment of the swimmer, as an individual athlete but also as a member of a community and club.

In chapter 5 I continue discussing the materiality of immersion as it relates to the body. Swimming and the swimming body are defined in this chapter through the words and actions of the Manta SC youth swimmers. Notions of competition, personal achievement,

and winning (even if you are only beating the clock), are starkly apparent in the implicit communications, both verbal and gestural, of their embodied activity. Through exploring what being “fit,” getting “fit,” and what “swimming fit” means I address some of the material aspects of being a body in water, what extended immersion does at the physiological level to youths’ bodies, and what long-term somatic changes in development occur in the repeated immersion in this liquid medium. Youth grow and develop physiologically due to hormones and other growth processes but also through repeated training, choice of swimming stroke and distance of events, and their proclivity for a particular form of immersion and being in the water. The swimming “fit” body can be located within wider discourses of health and fitness found in English society, apparent in Swim England promotional materials, social media posts, advertisements, and other media outlets. Manta SC youth located the swimming body within these broader neoliberal body projects but defined belonging within the swimming community through processes of becoming and the bodily shared practices of training and competition. I argue that it is not only a physical immersion but a social one, in the values apparent in this English swimming club, through which youth come to understand their own changing and shifting bodies.

Chapter 6 focuses on the deeply affective connections between tactility, moods, and emotions. The ethnographic evidence leads me to consider the effects of tactile and emotional entanglements: how feeling, moving, and sensing an immersion in water and the social places of club involvement are entangled in affective webs. Immersion in the social bonds of their swimming squad and club can provide support, ease anxiety, stoke excitement and anticipation. The affects of training and sociality in such close proximity for long durations affects performance, are often as tangible as the materiality of water itself and can be fleeting or pervasive. For both the materiality of water and the sociality of the squad environment provide joy for the youth at Manta SC. This highlights immersion as social and physical senses of belonging, described to me as being “safe,” “comfortable,” and “peaceful” when in the water.

The final ethnographic chapters of this thesis, Chapters 7 and 8, delve into the individual and collective lived experiences of pain and suffering in the endurance sport of competitive swimming. While seemingly a detour from the larger project, pain is in fact an integral and pervasive aspect of the everyday lives of competitive youth swimmers. Pain and suffering are interoceptive senses focused on one’s own body and account for one of the three sensory modalities found in the skin including, pain, temperature, and touch (or tactility) receptors (Rivlin and Gravelle 1984; Linden 2015). Youth swimmers identified a variety of levels of pain along a spectrum, from the soreness of trained muscles to the

niggles, impingements, tweaks and throbs of aching joints and ligaments, to sharp swim-stopping pains. In Chapter 8, I outline how pain was negotiated amongst the performance squad youth and the coaches by identifying the ways in which the variations of pain, soreness, and hurt were discussed and expressed. Socially mediated conventions of how to express and experience pain inform becoming a youth swimmer. Youth are taught, are educated in, “correct” ways to interpret the pain in their bodies, either something that is positive (i.e., muscle soreness or tiredness indicating hard work) or as something negative (i.e., joint pain). Yet persistent popular discourse, including phrases such as “mind over matter” or “pain is in the brain,” seemingly undermine the embodied experiences of pain so essential to informing swimmer’s sense of self and immersion. Youth challenged these Cartesian notions of pain as merely cognitive experiences by locating pain as a bodily sensory experience called forth to the forefront of their awareness from their various training movements and practiced skills.

Chapter 9 examines the social celebration of suffering in competitive swimming as one deeply connected with the neoliberal project of individuality and self-improvement. It is in the communication of the intensities of suffering where pain can become transformed from an individual experience to an intersubjective one, through performative acts, shared stories, joking and banter. Performing the correct expression of pain along the negotiated spectrum was a marker of becoming a swimmer and belonging in the performance squad, which was oriented towards competition and swimming fast. It is especially through joking and banter around the experiences of pain and suffering in training where youth are able to share some of the physical burden through these social exchanges with their squad peers. Joking relationships and banter are thus revealed as central aspects to incorporation into the competitive swimming community.

Chapter 2. Immersive Anthropology: Ethnography as Methodology

The sun is high in the sky, framed below by the shoreline cliffs that compose the western horizon. Sol's rays bear down on us this summer afternoon on the South East Coast of England. The slow rise and fall of the waves of the English Channel lap at the pebble beach a few metres from where I am standing. Clad in my swimming costume briefs, silicone swimming hat, and mirror tinted goggles I think to myself, "Why the hell did I ever think it was a good idea to go for a sea swim with a squad of competitive youth swimmers?" Over a full season's cycle from November 2018 to today's hot July 24th, 2019, evening at 6:45pm I had been spending time on the pool deck, observing training and competitions, sitting and chatting with youth as they mobilized before getting into the water, waiting for their turn to perform on mock-race days, for brief moments between sets and pieces, and stretched off after practice. Invited to join in this outdoor adventure by the youth and the coach at yesterday evening's practice, I assumed my general fitness and swimming skills as a trained lifeguard and swimming instructor would be sufficient to at least keep up with the group, the ethnographer in me not wanting to miss what might be my only opportunity to swim alongside these youth.

The plan is to head out against the longshore current the ebbing tide creates towards the pier and then head back. According to twenty-one-year-old Nancy, this stretch of beach along the swim buoys laid out to the pier is about 1km in total, so a 2km round trip. I imagine the squad might do that a couple of times, their usual practices between 4-7km, but I am firm in thinking that I will be happy just to finish.

I start off swimming well enough, with the pack of the squad just ahead of me. Stroke left arm, stroke right arm breath looking out to sea, stroke right arm, stroke left arm, repeat. This is a sustainable pattern, and I tell myself to focus on technique, keeping my elbow high on recovery and on the stroke, finishing strong past my hip. When my face is in the water all I can see is the grey/brown/green silty water, the occasional palm sized piece of seaweed floating by on the longshore current and brushing by my arm or leg. Looking forward after a few dozen strokes I realize I am losing distance quickly on the pack of the squad. I see our safety dinghy with Thomas' father Jamie in it bobbing along nearby. I start to taste the salt water in my mouth, my lips and mouth starting to feel dry. Stroke, stroke, breath, stroke breath. I tell myself mentally that I only need to complete one lap of this, that it doesn't matter that I am a bit slow and trailing further behind everyone, but that all I have to do is get to the pier and back. Suddenly my breathing timing goes, and I find it hard to get enough

oxygen. I haven't trained my body like the youth into the rhythm of breathing, the cadence of kicks and arm strokes strong enough to propel myself forwards while providing my muscles with enough oxygen to carry me though to the end of the task. I find myself sucking air, feeling out of breath. I start doing breaststroke as I notice that the swim space designation buoy on my right (approximately one every 100m) isn't getting any closer. I can "feel" the longshore current tugging at every centimetre of immersed skin. It has a different quality than the friction, or drag, of static pool water.

I see Arthur up ahead doing some backstroke and I resort to that, starting up at the violet-tinged blue sky to try and catch my breath. I think about rolling my body from side to side like Arthur was telling Yara at yesterday's practice, but I find the list of the waves makes this nigh impossible as my centre axis shifts between the wave crests and troughs. "No wonder they only ever swim freestyle in the sea," I think to myself. I see Ida and Colette not far behind me and I am spurred on a bit to keep going, knowing that Jamie isn't just following me in the safety dinghy as the last person in the pack. Jamie perched on the pontoon side of the dinghy kitted out in sunglasses, grey t-shirt, unshaven face, board shorts, and no shoes, looks smugly casual cruising up along side me one hand on the outboard motor handle. I've made it about half-way to the pier, but it doesn't seem to be getting any closer at this point despite my effort. He says to me, "You alright?" I give him a thumbs up. He continues, "The current's really something, isn't it?" "Yeah, it sucks," I reply.

Colette and Ida have caught up to me at this point and are starting to pass me. I decide that freestyle is the stroke that I should be doing taking a cue from the two girls. Ida pauses just past me and says to Colette "I'm going to try some fly" and starts to do some full butterfly as I transition from breaststroke to freestyle. The girls pull further ahead of me.

I change to breathing on my left-hand side every second stroke, towards the shore. I can see the silhouette of one of the hotels and try to gauge my position and relative movement against its edge. I'm not moving. I've been swallowing small amounts of the salt water inadvertently as I exhale with my mouth open, as I would in a pool, and I feel like retching. I almost pause to throw up, but I know if I stop swimming against the current then I'll just get pushed further back. "It's going to take me FOREVER to reach that pier," I think to myself yet carry on swimming. Staring into the setting sun as the backdrop of the shore hurts my eyes even with my slightly polarized goggles so I switch back to breathing on my right.

I see Jamie in the dinghy zip up to follow Ida and Colette and then drift slowly back to me. As the dinghy approaches closer, I stop swimming. Jamie motions for me to get into the boat, there's no denying that I need it. I climb aboard on my belly in beside Jordan, the

younger sibling of Thomas, who has just come along for the ride. “That rip-tide is vicious,” I tell Jamie. He doesn’t ridicule me for getting into the boat and stopping my swim at about 3/5ths of the way to the pier. Instead, he tells me that it is about a 3 or 4 knot current today (somewhere between 5.5 to 7.4 km/h). I trust his assessment, reminded that Jamie always has a surfboard or paddleboard or kayak on top of the van he drives Thomas to practice in, and he owns this little dinghy.

We motor up beside Ida and Colette and Jamie asks the girls if either of them wants to get in. Colette says she does, that she is freezing despite her shorty wetsuit. “I’ve been cold since I put it on,” she says to me once she is fully in the dinghy and Jamie drives us towards the performance squad who have now turned around from the pier and are heading back towards us. Seeing her oncoming peers Ida turns around to swim back down the coast towards the waiting parents. I see 15-year-old Nick at the front of the pack cruising along at an incredible pace, a galloping rhythm to his freestyle strokes, as he pulls ahead body-lengths in front of his peers. Pencil thin, 11-year-old Robert is also holding his own, keeping pace amongst the older teenagers. I see Arthur’s bulky arms and shoulders in the midst of the pack ploughing along, his strokes seeming a little slower but still strong and steady. Yara, bringing up the rear of the pack of swimmers, stops to chat with Ida before trying a few butterfly strokes, cresting over the rolling swells. The swimmers are speeding through the water, thanks to their trained muscles, skill, and with the extra boost from the longshore current. I almost hop back into the water to swim back to shore with the pack but decide to stick it out in the boat as I still feel like vomiting from ingesting too much salt water. How pathetic it is that I had to get out so early and be “rescued” by the safety boat runs my internal monologue as I watch the youth fly through the water.

We are driven slowly back to the starting point of the swim behind the pack of Manta SC swimmers. With 50m left in the swim Colette and I decide to get out and swim. “Are you sure? I can take you all the way into shore,” Jamie asks. “Yeah,” we simultaneously say and hop into the reflective dark green-olive water. Arthur is already sitting chest deep in the surf bantering many of the swimmers as they make their way to stand on the beach. He jokingly accuses Colette of “taking the boat” to get out swimming the full distance like the rest of her peers. Again, I still feel like vomiting as I make my way to stand and climb out heading for my bag and towel thankful to not be included in this banter and have to come up with a witty retort. The sun is now just starting to fall behind the coastal hills creating a bit of shade along the beach and long shadows making it cold enough for me to rush to put on my fleece sweater post-swim.

Up on the beach Ida's mom asks, "Did you enjoy that?" I say in reply, "Well, give me about five or six more practice sessions next time and it will be. For now, it went alright." An understatement if I've ever uttered one. I rinse out my mouth a few times with my water bottle and drink down the rest. It makes me feel a bit better, but my stomach still isn't enjoying all the salt I exposed it too. I'm hoping some food will make me feel better. Most of us towel off and head for the Chippy (fish and chips shop) a few blocks away. £8.50 for a massive piece of Cod and tray of chips with salt and malt vinegar on it, DELICIOUS! Exactly what I needed to quiet my stomach.

About half of the parents and swimmers opted to head home for dinner rather than join in the take-away beach meal. I follow 15-year-old Dean's lead and sit on one of the pilings for the groins that help prevent beach erosion from the waves and ebbing and flowing tides. None of the older boys, Nathan, Dean, Martin, nor Graham ridicule me for getting into the safety boat partway through the swim as we consume our soggy yellow meals of battered and deep-fried fish and potatoes. I turn to Nathan who is sitting directly in front of me on the pebbles eating his frankfurter and chips but direct my comment to the teenage boys around me saying "Thanks for allowing me to come along on the swim tonight, it was fun." Dean turns and says, "You should come swimming with us at some of our practices." "Yeah!" Nathan emphatically agrees. "Well, you are joining Masters, aren't you?" Dean queries.⁹ "Yeah, I will be joining masters in September. And hopefully, after some training, I can get my chops up and get a County time and Arthur will let me come and swim with you guys on the occasional Saturday." "Yeah, like Warren" Ted says, "That'd be awesome."

⁹ Masters swimming is ostensibly for athletes over the age of 18 (ASA Masters Swimming 2021) and promotes lifelong enjoyment of sport and healthy competition. International competitive age-ranges begins at the age of 25 and increases in category every 5 years (i.e., 25-29, 30-34, etc.) with the events being gender separated (Men's / Women's) (World Masters Games 2021).



Figure 2.1. Summer Sea Swim with the Youth Performance Squad of Manta SC.

Source: Author's Collection. South East Coast, UK 2019. Author third from the right in the back with a red swimming cap and goggles on forehead.

This sea swim episode was the first and nearly the last time, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic stopping all non-professional sport from March 2020- April 2021, I would experience the shared immersion of swimming in the same waters with the youth swimmers in Manta SC's performance squad. From September 2019 to March 2020, I had begun training with the Masters squad of Manta SC with the intention to compete along side the youth at an internal Club Championships gala in February of 2020. This was thwarted by a winter cold I developed as with the rapid spread of the Corona virus at this time I made the decision to stay at home rather than race not wanting to get any of the youth swimmers sick at the meet. The next Club Champs in March 2020 was also cancelled. While the youth were able to get back into the water and train in March of 2021, and I was able to begin training

with the Manta SC Masters squad in May 2021, face-to-face research was still disallowed by the university until the beginning of June 2021. At the time of writing this thesis we are still amid a global pandemic although vaccine rates nationally in the UK, and globally, have allowed sport and most other forms of pre-pandemic life to resume, albeit this is contingent on virus variants of concern spreading and the political will to impose national lockdowns.

The majority of the data for this thesis comes from before the COVID-19 pandemic as I had intended to finish fieldwork in July of 2020. As it would turn out I spent an additional season with the club before “leaving” the field and bringing my data collection to a close as a way to give back to the club and provide some continuity during the unprecedented disruption to youth’s lifeworlds. Now, the importance of accounting for the disruptions that this global event has had on the lives of youth swimmers cannot be understated, but an exploration of the “digitalia of everyday life” (Kaur 2019) is not the purpose of this thesis.¹⁰ With a global moratorium on conducting face-to-face research in the social sciences fieldwork had to swiftly move to the digital sphere. I conducted a few interviews with swimmers and took fieldnotes during the initial six-month lockdown, and additional lockdowns in the UK, where residents were only allowed an hour of activity within five kilometres of their homes, unless they had a private garden to take in outside space. I also participated in weekly Zoom squad meetings and virtual land-based strength and conditioning classes designed for the youth swimmers (reproducing some of the apprenticeship practices I engaged in before lockdowns). There was a concerted attempt by coaches, parents, and club officials to keep youth engaged through digitally mediated forms of sociality with their club and squad mates, which included online quizzes and scavenger hunts, despite the lack of immersion. I have included the digital fieldnotes and interview data I collected over the pandemic elsewhere (see Sean Heath 2020b), and plan to work this into further publications. Still, the extent to which youth pined for immersion and the lengths parents went to install inflatable pools and bungee cords in backyards so that youth could engage in the sensory experiences of material immersion during this time have implicitly informed how I have articulated relational processes of immersion in this thesis.

I recount the one-off sea swim to frame my phenomenological “immersion” approach to ethnographic research. Much of this follows classic ethnographic practices of integration into community life during fieldwork (see Evans-Pritchard 2017; Mead 1943), but it also follows more recent trends of spatial and temporal demarcation of youth’s activities (see Anderson 2008; Dyck 2012; Pascoe 2012). While the vast majority of my fieldwork was

¹⁰ Tom Boellstorff (2008) and Bonnie Nardi (2010) both provide insightful explorations of immersion in digital worlds.

temporally and spatially bound to the pools where training and competitions commenced it was important I attend to the social spaces and thus social immersion of swimming club life. Where I could, inside and outside the confines of the physical space of the pool, I participated in club committee meetings, joined breakfast and dinner outings, virtual engagement events when the club could not swim during the pandemic, and a sea-swim. From attending to the social aspects of competitive swimming I came to understand how the centrality of physically being in the water shapes the very ways they perceive the sensuous experiences of their lifeworlds. To better understand immersion as a process of becoming, (becoming a youth swimmer, becoming an anthropologist) I took the cajoling of swimmers to immerse myself in their training, to swim along with them, seriously. Although it took me over a year in the field to conceive of an immersion approach that would be suitable, both from a phenomenological perspective as well as one that complied with the safeguarding and training standard requirements of the club (and to build my own confidence), I eventually did take the plunge.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the anthropological disciplinary understandings of ethnography as methodology before outlining what I am calling an immersion approach to anthropological research. Far beyond a simple method for collecting research materials, anthropological ethnography is a way of being in the world with our interlocutors. I therefore connect anthropological sensibilities that guided my research concerning the agency of our interlocutors, the power dynamics at play in research and adult organized activities for youth, and the ethical and safeguarding considerations of working with young people to the very precepts that shape ethnographers “being-in” our interlocutors’ lifeworlds. Ethnography involves long-term temporal engagement, emplacement in time, space, and place, and requires a continuous reflexivity on prior knowledge we bring to the field, the shared knowledges of our interlocutors, and the generated knowledges from shared practice. This approach has methodological implications when it comes to immersion in the sporting practices and lifeworlds of our interlocutors through forms of “thick participation” (Samudra 2008), understanding the meanings in those practices, and translating kinaesthetic and embodied experiences into words that convey the bodily enskilled knowledges of youth swimmers. This chapter then concludes with a practical detailing of fieldwork methods used and how I went about analyzing the ethnographic data generated through my emplaced participation in youth swimmers’ lifeworlds.

2.1. Methodological Approach

Methodologically I follow the anthropological tradition of ethnographic investigation (Fabian and Rooij 2008; Dyck and Hognestad 2015), which champions practices of fieldwork that primarily comprise conversations with participants as primary “material” and “object” collection tools. Yet ethnography is more than a set of data collection techniques. As Fabian and Rooij argue, “it entails deep, often prolonged, involvement with people through communicative presence and it calls for radical reflexivity in all stages of research” (2008: 625). For Cerwonka and Malkki, ethnography is “situated, long-term, empirical field research, [which] is simultaneously *a critical theoretical practice, a quotidian ethical practice, and an improvisational practice*” (2007, 164 emphasis in original). Ethnography is theoretical from the start as we enter the field with preconceived notions of what are our “objects” of analysis and knowledge. We analyse the theoretical arguments of numerous scholars in similar fields of study and attempt to integrate that knowledge into our ways of approaching fieldwork. We continuously question the “*categories that structure the inquiry*” (2007, 170 emphasis in original) as we tack back-and-forth between the empirical fieldwork and abstract theory. This is not to say that anthropological ethnography has not been guilty of turning the “experience-rich and -near human subject into a dehumanized object, a caricature of experience” (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996, 170). Rather, it is more due to the messy nature of ethnographic research, as an empirical practice in which anthropologists’ experiences the “messiness and hurly-burly of daily living” (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996, 170), which resists this dehumanizing objectification. It is the day-to-day mundanity of sharing of presence and “going along together” (Ingold 2018) in which anthropological practice is a way of being in the world, where eminently social and temporally situated experiences occur. It is in these moments of prolonged engagement in the field which presents unforeseen challenges where ethnography is improvised.

Prolonged involvement in the field may take on many forms including that of consociate relationships and friendships (Dyck 2000b), observations and interactions from the sidelines (Dyck 2012; Grasmuck 2005), and full participation (Brownell 1995; Carter 2008; Downey 2005). The sustained connections to the spaces, places, and peoples with which anthropologists conduct research defines their practice as necessarily a holistic one. Anthropology can thus be likened to a craft, as a “commitment to learning by doing” (Ingold 2018, 14) where the novice is taught “how to obtain a certain kind of knowledge and what this knowledge might say about something” (Eriksen 2017, 8). In other words, both anthropologist and interlocutors learn to interpret the everyday lived experiences and meaning making practices of each other. Anthropological ethnography is dialectical.

Anthropology as a discipline has championed the use of ethnography as a methodology since Bronislaw Malinowski's (1999) invention of the craft in the early twentieth century. Franz Boas' (1975) work, while still very much a part of the colonial legacy of "salvage ethnography," to record what white-European colonizers perceived as the vanishing cultures of indigenous peoples in North America, was to further refine Malinowski's conceptions of ethnography. Their efforts established ethnography as a longitudinal engagement for conducting research with other peoples and as the final written product of research output. Ethnography is now a common methodological approach when conducting qualitative research (Bryman 2008; Atkinson 2016) and is applied in disciplines from Geography to Health Science, Sociology to Cultural Studies to Journalism. For my purposes, it is the research involving youth and childhood studies (Thorne 1993; Sue Heath et al. 2009; A. Bennett, Cieslik, and Miles 2003), and sport (Hognestad 1997; Lithman 2000; Messner 2009; Thangaraj 2015) which are of significant interest in their varied application of ethnographic techniques derived from anthropology's methodological roots.

The narrative skill of crafting what Geertz (1973b) termed "thick description" into our writings to conjure up the imageries of field sites is all the more difficult when discussing kinaesthetic cultures of children and youth. Often our nostalgic imaginings of what it was like to be a child are, in fact, fictions that do not accurately reflect the complex situations represented in young people's worlds today. Our childhoods are not their childhoods. What anthropologists working with youth attempt to do, then, is craft narratives that show a part of the world through the eyes of their interlocutors collaboratively creating relationships, friendships, knowledges, and shared meanings. Put another way, what anthropology offers to readers and other is "a concrete attentiveness to human agency, to the practices of everyday life" (India and Rosaldo 2008, 7).

Methodologically speaking, producing knowledge in anthropological ethnography involves tacking back and forth between what is known and unknown, what is uncovered and yet to be discovered, working with the knowledge we and our interlocutors have about the world and engaging with the limits of our knowledges (Carter 2018c, 396). It is a process that does not end or begin with the "bounded" fieldsites where we conduct research, but is an ongoing, long-term engagement with the complexities and degrees of knowledge we all have about the world. The methods that anthropologists frequently use - participant observation, interviews, focus groups, film, print media, archives, and audio recordings, to name a few - are some of the ways in which we collect ethnographic material, data, and knowledge. The various methods used in anthropological ethnography may differ, yet all

anthropologists share a reflexive sensibility when exploring human knowledge through fieldwork.

A hallmark of an anthropological reflexivity is the revisiting of research questions, re-reading fieldnotes, and pouring over interview transcripts with new questions and lines of inquiry. Reflecting on my anthropological sensibilities and positionality in the field, I attempted to suspend some of my belief in what I thought I knew about competitive youth swimmers' lifeworlds. Being a partial insider into competitive swimming, having done some coaching, worked as a lifeguard and swimming instructor, and previously conducted research amongst competitive youth swimmers in Canada, I brought with me a fair number of suppositions and assumptions to the field. I undertook a reflexive exercise to document the knowledge I had gained about the swimming world, writing down what I thought I knew about the sensory experiences of immersion; what it "felt like" to be in the water; what the swimming body was, looked like, and how it was enacted; my impressions of sociality amongst the youth in competitive squads and in swimming clubs; and more generally what it meant for youth to become swimmers and belong in competitive swimming. I revisited this document in the first few months of fieldwork to compare my writings and jottings against my earlier knowledge, attempting to identify any suppositions in my initial observations and musings on the competitive swimming lifeworld. This proved to be useful in identifying what knowledge I had brought with me to the field, the knowledge generated in the field, and the similarities, differences, and overlap between them.

Fieldwork has been a quintessential aspect of anthropological ethnography since its inception as a discipline. According to Gupta and Ferguson (1997, 2), "fieldwork thus helps define anthropology as a discipline in both senses of the word, constructing a space of possibilities while at the same time drawing the lines that confine that space." Vered Amit and others (Amit 2000a) have critiqued this statement noting that experience "in the field" – participant observation in a bounded locale for an extended period of time – is blurred by the "transnational contexts in which anthropologists and their ethnographic research subjects now move" (Amit 2000b, 15).¹¹ In this way, the notion of immersion in the "field" can be viewed as a time out of time, or a place out of space in the case of studying virtual worlds (Boellstorff 2008; Nardi 2010). Yet immersion in virtual worlds, or otherwise, is far from a simple science-fiction encapsulated transportation: "One to beam down [to the field], Scotty!" Immersion is as much the social circumstances of the ethnographer in and beyond their present physical locations as it is for our interlocutors. Immersion in fieldwork encompasses

¹¹ See Dyck and Hognestad (2020) for an insightful discussion on the pace of mobilities sought by sporting practitioners and fans alike.

the different types of relationships and interactions we have in our daily lives both in and beyond those experienced in the “field.” We cannot extricate and disconnect ourselves from our lives, just as our interlocutors cannot “disconnect themselves from the world and their pursuits to engage with us or to be abandoned by us” (Amit 2000b, 16). Thus, the field is laboriously constructed, pulled apart, analyzed, contextualized, and embedded in the relationships and connections established with our interlocutors. This construction is shaped by the ethnographers professional, financial, and conceptual opportunities that arise or in which the ethnographer finds themselves (Amit 2000b, 6). What is at the heart of the quintessence that makes ethnographic fieldwork anthropological is the commitment to immersion in whatever shape and form that takes with a particular community and fieldsite(s). The shape and form of my research and this ethnography is a fluid one, defined by immersion.

2.2. The Immersion Approach

My interlocutor’s repeated cajoling to join in practices and insistence that I “get in and swim” to further comprehend their experiences, as exemplified in Nathan and Dean’s brief comments in the ethnographic vignette at the beginning of this chapter, belied an unspoken knowledge that “bodily practices are not merely observable performances of culture, they are inherent to enculturation itself” (Samudra 2020, 51–52). To comprehend and fully take account of youth’s immersion in the competitive sport of swimming requires a social and physical immersion of the researcher in the same waters, into the daily rhythms and trainings which structure youth competitive swimmers’ lives, or as twenty-one-year-old Nancy told me, “You have to get in the water to understand feel.”

Immersion is a condition of belonging and becoming encompassing a feel for the water as it pertains to the physical, social, emotional, and affective dimensions of competitive swimming club participation.¹² “Feel” is thus contingent on immersion. Immersion also includes submersion in clear “blue” pool waters, sensual embodied experiences, techniques and skills developed to move through the water, and the cultural privileging of tactile sense perceptions.

Now, immersion is a commonly used metaphor for “entering into” all manner of experience. Stefan Helmreich (2007) uses the metaphor of immersion to explore how

¹² This could be transposed to other sporting contexts. Examples of other sporting metaphors include being “in” whilst playing cricket or having a “feel for the ice” in speed and figure skating (personal conversations with Ben Hildred and Sarah Jacobs).

anthropology has treated the ideal of fieldwork and ethnographic practice. He critiques the use of immersion as a tool for thinking through and with ethnographic practice, particularly structured space, stating that “immersion has come to suggest being submerged in a space as well as becoming one with it, dissolving into it. Immersion does not immediately open up questions of how boundaries are produced and crossed” (2007, 631). He suggests that immersion has been used as a metaphor for a kind of “fluid osmosis of environment” and culture, which the anthropologist as participant-observer soaks up as part of their emplacement. If this is what has become of the term “immersion” in anthropology it is due to the romantic conflation with poetic writing to distill an imagery of dissolution between reader and ethnography, between anthropologist and the field.¹³ This romanticism of the immersion in our practices has indeed clouded the waters of our ethnographic accounts. To glimpse, or more accurately, to interpret the ways in which our interlocutors see, hear, feel, taste/smell their immersion – and a host of other sensory perceptions – literal immersion in a fluid field becomes both metaphor and practice as we throw ourselves into the deep end.

Anthropologists have long been curious about how bodily engagement in the world expands our understanding of how we cultivate and what constitutes knowledge when emphasizing the physical body, from dance (Aalten 2005; Hammer 2020; Potter 2008; Wulff 1998), sport (Besnier, Brownell, and Carter 2018; Sands and Sands 2010), martial arts (Downey 2005; Samudra 2020), to athleticism and other physical movement practices (Carter 2018b; Downey 2015). Noel Dyck and Eduardo Archetti argue that if we are to better understand the ways in which young people come to know, understand, and use their bodies, researchers must “take account of both the kinaesthetic and social action that takes place within formally organized coaching and instructional regimes” (2003, 9). This is principally what the “immersion approach” to research does in requiring a physical connection to embodied activities. By immersing myself in the everyday kinaesthetic practices and somatic experiences of competitive swimming, by swimming with the Manta SC Masters squad, I was better positioned to comprehend and analyze the formal instructional and training regimes of the club and the bodily practice of swimming fast as recorded in my own body. In this sense, ethnographic research goes well beyond developing rapport with interlocutors to gain access to close observation and the stories of our interlocutors, which for many anthropologists and sociologists has been the primary method

¹³ For a lucid and practical discussion of the tensions experienced in fieldwork see Cerwonka and Malkki (2007).

of data acquisition amongst children and youth. Ethnography, in its fullest holistic form requires taking into account and *acting on* invitations to join in shared embodied practice.¹⁴

This approach I am advocating for is not dissimilar to an apprenticeship model of ethnographic research (Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason 2015; Eriksen 2017, 8; Ingold 2018, 14) in embodied sport and “sport-like” practices (Dyck and Hognestad 2015; Samudra 2020). It may not be possible to train or compete directly alongside youth. For that reason, perhaps, other swimming scholars have opted for a combination of singular present-day experience and their own nostalgic imaginings to parse the embodied experience of youth swimmers (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2019; McMahon, Zehntner, and McGannon 2017). In different circumstances it may be appropriate for a researcher to apprentice in the sport, dance, or embodied activity along with their interlocutors as part of the ethnographic research process (see Downey 2005; Dalidowicz 2015). In the introduction to the edited volume *Search After Method*, Julie Laplante, Ari Gandsman, and Willow Scobie indicate that “beginning as an apprentice anthropologist [...] from a position of not knowing can be a way to become more aware, able to correspond with what is going on” (2020, 9). Apprenticeship denotes a method of learning, re-learning, and modifying and can be “a chance to learn diverse skills and change perceptual habits”, the practitioner accumulating “an array of dispositions, habits, and sensitivities that make up their way of being-in-the-world” (Downey 2005, 154). Implicit in apprenticeship are a set of learning processes that can be described as “discovery or reinvention” not simply transmission or enculturation of embodied knowledges. Ultimately, apprenticeship necessitates “not simply the acquiring of techniques or skills but a whole transformation in strength, flexibility, mobility, perhaps even personality” (Downey 2010a, S22). Arguably then, apprenticeship as an anthropologist and as a practitioner of a particular sport, dance, or movement style, requires reshaping the ways we are as beings-in-the-world.

When I immersed myself in the competitive swimming world the question I most fielded was “Do you swim?”, the assumption being that anyone on the pool deck or around competitive swimmers has some past immersion in the competitive swimming lifeworld. An example of this assumption was when 15-year-old Nick questioned me, “Are you any good?” when I was jokingly picked out of the crowd of performance squad youth to participate in a “fun” relay heat one Saturday morning practice. This assumption extends beyond the confines of the pool as I am continuously asked “Do you swim?” as a rhetorical question

¹⁴ For a critical discussion of how the holistic aspects of ethnography as lived practice have been stripped by other disciplines using ethnography as method see Thomas Carter’s (2018c) *Disciplinary (Per)Mutations of Ethnography*.

when I discuss my research, as though the answer must be yes. And while it may be “yes” now that I swim with a Masters squad my lack of participation in competitive swimming as a youth continually marks me as an outsider. For I am missing that formative phenomenological experience of training, competing, and obtaining “personal best times” as a youth, let alone the somatic and physiological changes swimming training would have wrought in my body.

2.2.1. Participating in New Ways of Becoming

Anthropological fieldwork typically involves varying degrees of participant observation among the people with whom you are conducting research. Despite there being a corpus of new research on outdoor sea swimming which uses “getting wet” as part of their methods (Bates and Moles 2021; Denton, Dannreuther, and Aranda 2021; S. Gould, McLachlan, and McDonald 2020; Olive and Wheaton 2020; Throsby 2016), few scholars researching competitive swimming have conducted participant observation from the pool deck (Sean Heath 2020a; 2017; 2014; McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2019; Musto 2014), fewer still have entered the water and immersed themselves in the training practices and lifeworld of competitive swimming (McMahon, Zehntner, and McGannon 2017).¹⁵ As I did not hold a regional qualifying time or better upon beginning fieldwork I was unable to enroll in the Manta SC performance squad due to my lack of ability. But what of the other factors involved in participation with youth athletes? Character markers such as age, size, access to special relationships with those in authority, and status as an adult in a context where generational divisions mark differences in power and authority (Thorne 1993, 16), perhaps make it unreasonable to play, practice and compete on the fields of play with youth.

In practical terms, engaging as “just another player” in youths’ games and sports is not possible for adult researchers.¹⁶ Despite this fact, there may be ways of conducting research that does not have the researcher directly participating in that sport, but nonetheless, actively being an ongoing participant. For example, observing the activities of youth and having conversations with young people in their places of sport (Anderson 2008). Thus, I initially chose to approach youth’s embodied practices in competitive swimming through an on-deck ethnographic practice (Sean Heath 2017), observing and participating

¹⁵ While McMahon (2017) does not reveal the ages of the swimmers in the elite squad she trained with, we can surmise that they would be in their late teens and early 20s due to the national and international qualifying standards to participate in most high-performance competitive swimming squads. This places McMahon’s athletes in a category or two above the swimmers I worked with at Manta SC.

¹⁶ Later in this chapter I discuss the ethical considerations concerning safeguarding of young people within an immersion approach to working with youth.

from the side-lines. Yet, as the introductory vignette of this chapter indicates, my ethnographic practice shifted to an immersion approach, taking account of the embodied practices, enskilled movements, and the sensory perceptions of my own immersion alongside those of my youth interlocutors.

The immersion approach is my attempt to bring the moving, sensing body to centre stage in ethnographic research. When our interlocutors are attempting to communicate their shared and individual ways of experiencing their lived realities we should attempt to *participate* in their activities, if at all possible. In this regard I follow a long tradition in sport anthropology¹⁷ of describing social life phenomenologically, taking account of the “non-discursive world that often remains in the invisible” (Dalidowicz 2015, 108). As DeWalt and DeWalt argue, “participant observation is an iterative process” (2011, 89–90) that takes into account the shifting and changing set of events and situations one finds oneself in over time. Indeed, however innocuous the cajoling pressure to “join in” may be, looked at another way, we may consider this an invitation to participatory experience. Through this cooperative participation of “joining in” we can produce a deeper understanding of youth’s embodied experiences when critically examining our own assumptions, questions, and analytical categories. Especially if those activities are kinaesthetically demanding embodied experiences of a sport or “sport-like” activity then we are beholden to at least attempt participation in youths’ activities despite our adulthood. If we are to truly learn from children and youth, then we need to listen to what they are saying and actively pursue the knowledge they impart to us that may further open a window into their embodied experiences. We need to start learning how to see, hear, touch, taste, smell, feel, and move in the sensorium of the culture where we pursue our research (Howes 1991; 2019). For competitive swimming this requires a tactile-kinaesthetic immersion in water, the training regiments, galas, and temporality of club swimming life. It requires experiencing the daily rhythms of our interlocutors’ lives, learning the techniques of the body which are vital to the enskilment of knowledge (Ingold 2000).

David Howes (2003; 2005a; 2015) has long critiqued Tim Ingold’s work on the enskilment of knowledge, particularly *The Perception of the Environment* (2000), for basing his phenomenological analysis on an essentializing cultural discourse which takes the senses and the experience of them as grounded in a particular Western paradigm. Yet in later writing Ingold acknowledges that knowledge inheres in “the skills of perception [...] that develop in the course of direct, practical, and sensuous engagements” (Ingold 2013) in

¹⁷ See Dyck (2015) and Besnier et al. (2018) for exhaustive overviews of the anthropology of sport.

particular cultural contexts. In any phenomenological enterprise it is important to recognize that “the researcher is continually at risk of projecting their own (culturally biased) subjective experience onto the culture under study” (Howes 2019, 23). My past experiences in aquatics, what I should perhaps label a lifelong obsession with water, provided me with basic skills of perception with which to move in and feel the water. These lifeguarding and swimming instruction skills share a foundational framework for sensuous engagement with competitive swimming. Thus, while not entirely possible to suspend my own culturally embedded and socialized sense perceptions of the world, I employed new methods of immersion which allowed me to acquire a new “body of habit” (Ram 2015, 36; Merleau-Ponty 2012). In essence, to understand how sensoriums are lived locally required that I developed a “two sensoria” (Howes and Classen 1991), being able to reflect on my own, and attuning myself to a new way of perceiving the world through another culture’s sensorial lens. It is thus that Jaida Kim Samudra (2020, 52) writes that attuning one’s attention to the “unusual sensations of embodied practice” begins with “practicing ‘feeling’ yourself” to understand the “refinement of a sensorial complex.”

Learning the language and bodily techniques of one’s interlocutors requires we locate this knowledge in sensorial embodied experience, within the sensory order of our interlocutors, not just within abstract spoken language.¹⁸ Youth often display a markedly different sensory order to that of adults. This is due to the socialization and educational practices in children and youth’s cultures that privilege certain modes of learning and developing the senses, for example, whether youth are *shown* what to do or are *told* what to do (Howes and Classen 1991). Howes and Classen (1991) remark that Inuit children, for example, are expected to relish in the senses of touch and taste and general indulgence. While in adulthood, hearing and vision are developed as the latter is necessary for hunting and the former for passing on oral traditions. Within competitive swimming contexts developing the senses is focused on tactile and kinaesthetic aspects of movement and feel (see Chapter 4).

There are of course limits to researching shared bodily practices and in the acquisition of new social identities. One of these limits is the language we use to express embodied knowledge. Conducting ethnographic research among White Crane Silat martial art practitioners, Jaida Kim Samudra (2008), outlines her own struggles with communicating bodily knowledge and embodied experience. She notes the great lengths researchers often

¹⁸ I follow Kathryn Geurts definition of *sensory order* (or *sensorium*) as a “pattern of relative importance and differential elaboration for the various senses, through which children learn to perceive and to experience the world and in which pattern they develop their abilities” (2002, 5).

go to “participate deeply” in the activities of others to grasp the relevant ideas about their subject research area. Even if, as Samudra (2008, 668) suggests, experts (i.e., youth swimmers and coaches) of esoteric bodily knowledge are willing to “verbally impart specialist knowledge, their esoteric discourse may seem unintelligible until the researcher has established some experiential foundation for interpretation.”

It is imperative that anthropologists engage in what Samudra (2008) has termed “thick participation” within kinesthetic cultures, so that anthropologists can better understand and grasp enskilled knowledges.

Physical memory, performed repetitively, enacts sociocultural meanings for individuals, including the participating anthropologist. Thick participation is, thus, cultural knowledge recorded first in the anthropologist’s body and only later externalized as visual or textual data for purposes of analysis. (Samudra 2008, 667)

Thick participation is the means from which we derive “thick description” (Geertz 1973b) in ethnography. Tying this in with youth swimmers’ practices, I do not believe it to be entirely necessary that the researcher’s perceptions of an embodied activity and their physical experiences are identical to that of their interlocutors. We should attempt to cultivate a capacity to be of two sensoria, “operating with complete awareness in two perceptual systems or sensory orders simultaneously (the sensory order of one’s own culture and that of the culture studied)” (Howes and Classen 1991, 260). In cultivating this capacity to hold two sensory orders simultaneously in our body we must acquire a new body of habit, in how to move, behave, speak, comport ourselves socially and physically, to be able to “correspond with what is going on” in the social and cultural worlds we find ourselves immersed in.

My use of immersion here is both metaphorical and literal, poetic and methodological, as to apprentice in competitive swimming I had to “acquire fresh layers of orientation” (Ram 2015, 39) into my own body of habit and employ methods which would refashion myself through the processes youth were fashioning themselves. This allowed knowledge of becoming a swimmer to emerge through shared practices and shared orientations. Engaging in this immersion approach of long-term fieldwork experience allowed my own body of habit to “dilute and incorporate new practices, new orientations, and indeed, to some extent, many elements of a new habitus” (Ram 2015, 39).

If we are learning alongside youth, attempting to incorporate the bodily enskilment of their activities into our own corporeal practice, then the test of our somatic knowledge is not the exact replica of youth’s bodily techniques, for “the moving body transmits information

only approximately, as does language” (Samudra 2008, 667). Rather, as Samudra (2008, 677) opines, “one knows one’s somatic schema are appropriate when they work in the physical world.” In other words, we can gauge our communication of symbolic meaning through how sensible people’s replies on it might be. For example, when 16-year-old Sarah asked how to perform a “cross-over” turn¹⁹ I demonstrated this enkilled movement while outside of the water. The coach commenting on the accuracy of this demonstration as well as Sarah’s to attempt to mimic this technique in the water was confirmation that my somatic schema of that technique of the body was indeed sensible. Being able to reproduce and mimic such skills helped established me as a knowledgeable swimmer.

2.3. Precepts of Immersive Ethnography

Precepts of *presence*, the *dialogical* nature of communication, *time*, *space* and *place* all factor into what I mean when I invoke the term “ethnography.” To be clear, I view these precepts as intertwined and interconnected. Presence, for example, constitutes a relationship between place and time, “presence assumes both ‘the present’ and conceptions of locality” (Boellstorff 2008, 116). Without dialogic communication we would have no social construct of time, no meaning to our signs, symbols, verbal utterances, and communicative gestures. Space would be only somewhere we inhabit, and the meanings attached to specific places would be non-existent.

Speaking of presence in virtual worlds, T.L. Taylor argues that presence is the very foundation of immersion, the “grounding of presence not only consists of embodied practice, but of embodied *social* practice” (Taylor 2002, 42 emphasis in original). To be *present* and to have *presence* requires both an affective capacity of attention and a physical being-in a particular space. While space may take on different connotations in virtual worlds the concept of immersion shares the engrossing engagement with sensory experiences so important to my theoretical conception of immersion. The cultural sensorium of swimming, the social values, expectations, norms of relationality and sociality, relationships and rapport building, and the active practices of training and pool swimming are all factors in defining presence.

Dialogic communication is crucial to ethnography as practice. Without dialogue with our interlocutors, researchers would in essence be attempting to emulate being a “fly on the wall,” or entirely invisible, a wholly positivistic stance to collecting data. This type of approach

¹⁹ A “cross-over” is one of the potential transition turns between backstroke and breaststroke when swimming Individual Medley, a combination of all four strokes.

to research attempts to remove the influence and presence of the observing participant from the field to study, a truly “Truman Show” version of horror. The paradoxical method of choice for ethnographers – participant-observation – attests to the need for dialogic communication in anthropological research. While practices of salvage ethnography in the past may not have incorporated an explicit dialogue with the peoples and cultures set out to be studied, negotiating presence in people’s lives and communities requires at least an initial dialogue to attain access. Put simply, anthropology cannot be done without dialogic communication.

2.3.1. Presence and Dialogic Communication

The *presence* of the researcher in the field is perhaps the most distinctive, and problematized, aspect of ethnography. Through long-term engagement the researcher becomes a known entity to the people with whom they seek to conduct research. Beyond just “deep hanging out” (Clifford 1996) trust needs to be developed, earned, sustained, and renewed throughout the course of the research if anthropologists are to interpret the social lives of people in a robust manner (Rabinow 2012; Walsh 2012). In other words, rapport building is an active process, it does not just happen of itself. Creating nontrivial social relations between researcher and interlocutors goes a long way toward showing respect, getting to know people, and building trust (Fabian and Rooij 2008). In essence, trust and rapport are negotiated by being present in people’s lives.

What presence entails varies widely between and amongst cultures and communities. Corwin and Erickson-Davis (2020) have provided an interesting model for anthropologists to follow when studying presence. They define “presence” as “interactionally constituted,” a dynamic interaction between perceiver and environment which takes account of the social histories of individuals and how these shape their interactions with the environment. Presence includes shared contact with others and can be experienced as the ways we achieve skillful access to the world. For Corwin and Erickson-Davis, skillful access to the world demonstrates the interactions of presence to be experiences of communication: “Considering presence/perception as communication helps us shift some of the agential weight from the perceiver to the environment with which the perceiver interacts (whether the perceptual or communicative partners in question be other persons, nonhuman agents, or features of the environment)” (2020, 176). What may seem like a simple straightforward recognition of another person “I am sitting next to Lucy,” “There is George,” is in fact an intersubjective interaction between perceiver and environment. We experience others and our environs sensorially. This sensing of others is couched in our shared and individual past histories of our experiences, our socialized and culturally oriented ways of perceiving, and

the material qualities of these interactions. The presence of someone can be felt as a feeling of recognition, there is an intangible aspect to their being, a palpable sense particular to them, which is more than the sum of shared practices and processes. We experience the sensations of presence in bodily ways by learning to be with one another, through shared practices and through habit.

My presence in swimming club spaces meant learning to be with youth swimmers. It meant attending swim practices (both theirs and my own) regularly, even if that meant riding my bike to and from training through the cold, dark, and wet winter months. It meant sacrificing other social opportunities and committing to being present at training and galas. Presence is also about the commitment to the social fabric of the squad, swimming club, and larger swimming community. Nick, fifteen, provided invaluable insight into my immersion in the social fabric of the club after I asked him what it had been like to have me around on the pool deck for a season with the performance squad.

Oh, no, it's alright. I feel like it's another pers... I feel... like you can understand us better, if that makes sense. And you kind of join in with us, with like jokes and stuff. So, it's like you being part of the squad anyway. So, it is not, it is not like some random stranger who is looking at us and analyzing us at the pool. [...] Yeah, I feel like if you did just come once every month, we wouldn't feel the same. We wouldn't feel as like connected to you and feel comfortable, if that makes sense. If you came once a month you would just be a stranger who comes every month. So, you kind of like, by joining in, you made us feel more comfortable and then we feel more relaxed. And we kind of just like notice, don't really notice that you are analyzing us or stuff like that. [...] Umm, it's more of a, we see you as another swimmer. Well not as a swimmer, but kind of like a swimmer, as I would a swimmer.

It was this response from Nick that galvanized how I perceived my presence in the field. In recognizing youth as agentive individuals, not just kids to be taught, monitored, and developed into athletes, my presence consisted of more than the sum of my character markers. Through being present I was not just a stranger, not just another swimmer, but *Sean the swimmer*, with an intangible presence in the lives of the performance squad youths.

The rapport building and integration into the competitive swimming lifeworld required I also engage in processes of becoming and belonging, even as I was exploring these processes of immersion for youth swimmers. This dedication and commitment to fieldwork, to developing an ongoing dialogue with our interlocutors where we both are creating knowledge and learning from one another, is essential to ethnography (M. Jackson 1996b). The dialectic tacking back-and-forth between the knowledges that we as researchers bring into the field and our interlocutors knowledges presents opportunities to create knowledge

together. It is for this reason that the knowledge with which Western intellectuals “make sense of life” (M. Jackson 1996a, 4) must be put in *dialogue with* others. It is precisely our “social gumption and social skills” (M. Jackson 1996a, 8) that help develop those relationships with our interlocutors to allow for this close dialogue. This movement between theory and social facts, what Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) have called the “hermeneutics of ethnography,” reshapes our theoretical understandings and ideas and how we look at, comprehend, and analyse empirical data. Ethnography, then, is an interpretive process that “involves a continuous movement between explanations (theories) about the object or process at issue and the parts that force adjustment or reaffirm the researcher’s initial ‘guessing’” (2007, 19). It is this hermeneutic ethnographic process that “builds theory – in fits and starts – from the ‘tacking’ between the theoretical (whole) and the ethnographic detail (part)” (2007, 19).

Both improvisational and interpretive, ethnography offers a flexibility to refine and re-refine our initial research questions into a comprehensive synthesis between “practical and social imperatives,” and “scholastic rules and abstract understanding” (M. Jackson 1996a, 4). The practical imperative driving my ethnographic research with youth swimmers was to contribute to the abatement of pain and injury amongst competitive youth swimmers. The social imperatives were to build rapport with youth swimmers and provide a form of social reciprocity for them allowing me into their community. In approaching this qualitative research through anthropological ethnography, I attempted to prioritize the lived knowledge of my interlocutors by engaging in everyday dialogue with the youth and by incorporating the practices of competitive swimming training as part of the ethnographic research project. This opened up space for dialogic communication about the sensory and embodied experiences of what it feels like to become a swimmer. Their responses then informed the direction of my academic reading or shifted the dialogue to other pressing concerns for these youth (like what they were going to eat for breakfast following morning practice, how fast they were hoping to swim at the upcoming competition, or what they planned to do with their friends on their Saturday afternoon and Sunday day off). In prioritizing dialogic communication and shared knowledge creation ethnography moves beyond the Hippocratic Oath of “do no harm” towards doing good in the world (Borofsky 2019).

My presence in the club thus opened up the opportunity to join the Swimming Committee for the South East Region from 2020-2022, where I was able to contribute to doing some good in the world of swimming. This committee is responsible for the oversight of running competitive swimming activities (such as County Championship Swimming Meets and County Youth Squad training camps) and was made up of coaches and club committee

members from across the South East. Through volunteering my time to sit on this committee I was able to feed up the questions and concerns that arose from my discussions with youth on the pool deck. In this way I attempted to do more than repeat the slogan “It’s for the kids” (see Messner 2009; Dyck 2012) and to actively contribute to doing good in the swimming world.

2.3.2. Time and historicity

Time, is “typically long, often meandering, inescapably social, and temporally situated” (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007, 177) and is another of the precepts of ethnography. Ethnography, in many ways, shares the tri-partite conception of immersion as process, practice, and a literal and symbolic being-in. Considering ethnography as process immediately conjures thoughts of duration or time. This requires the ethnographer to pay critical attention to the fact that there are always multiple temporalities at play simultaneously in any given field and context. Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) direct our attention to the fact that it is not only the present which ethnography as a process needs to attend to but that different experiences, perceptions, and conventions of time may be operating in any one given space. Attending to time, the ethnographer needs to be aware of the different temporalities of daily life for themselves and their interlocutors.

The definition of temporalities here is that of time, of being worldly, and a location within the world. In other words, time is temporal, a social condition, and spatial. The pensioners who occasionally attend Masters practices and vigorously voice their opinions at the Annual General Meetings of Manta SC, the volunteer committee members, the parents of young swimmers (those who have never swum or have their own past history as competitive swimmers), and the youth swimmers themselves all experience different temporalities in their daily lives, club lives, and while swimming. Temporalities of swimming club actors shift with the passage of time and the ever-changing circumstances of being immersed in the world. The theoretical arguments for immersion as process which this thesis lays out attests to the temporal shifts in my own questions, assumptions, and practices of ethnographic research. With the passage of time swimmers may quit the sport or pause their training (see Sean Heath 2020a; 2020b). They may attain new qualifying times for Regional or National competitions, and subsequently move into more focused and rigorous training groups where competitive high-performance ideals dominate (see Chapter 3). These are informed by the history of the club and the history of competitive swimming within the UK (Love 2003), the present demographic of members and swimmers (Rowe and Champion

2000; Sport England 2019), and a potential future of growth, glory, and national medal winners produced through this club environment.

This goes back to my earlier statement that the time in the field is not a removed moment from the regular flow of worldly on-goings. As in other pursuits of daily living, the expectation in anthropological fieldwork is that relationships will form and the “familiarity between researcher and subject are envisioned as a fundamental medium of investigation” (Amit 2000b, 2). While this is somewhat artificially forced and sped up in ethnographic fieldwork due to the limited amount of time researchers have in the field, it is still the case that these relationships blur the boundaries between friends, neighbours, advisors, and research subjects. Whether we spend a year of fieldwork living in a small village, interviewing, laboring, participating in local affairs, and investigating (Rapport 2000), or conduct short duration multi-sited investigations over the course of a few years (Mol 2021), or spend multiple-years living in a small city, participating in local swimming club affairs, interviewing, swimming, and immersed in the social and bodily practices of swim club life, ultimately, the strength of ethnography lies in this malleability. The leeway ethnographers have in adjusting and adapting flexibly to circumstances as they arise is a strength of this form of fieldwork in both time, space, and place.

2.3.3. Space and Place

Space has historically been conceived of in geographical terms. Within anthropology, space tends to relate to the “field” where anthropologists would go “overseas” to conduct their fieldwork: Brazil for Greg Downey (2005), Cuba for Thomas Carter (2008), Cornwall, UK, for Patrick Laviolette (2011). Around the turn of the twenty-first century anthropologists were already questioning the disciplines long standing tradition of traveling abroad to conduct fieldwork and were conducting fieldwork close to or at “home” (see Amit 2000b). Virginia Caputo argues that “retaining a spatialized understanding of the field imposes limitations and biases that are unproductive in contemporary anthropological research contexts” (Caputo 2000, 29). Her argument is directed at the debate over what constitutes a “legitimate” fieldsite and questions about proximity of fieldwork close to “home.” Imposing an artificial delineation of a specialized understanding of where the ethnographic field can be located removes the possibility of even exploring the meanings of space and place. For if the field needs a cartographic location this artificially limits the exploration of what it means to be human in physical space and in such virtual spaces as Second Life (Boellstorff 2008) or World of Warcraft (Nardi 2010). In these virtual worlds the ethnographer can be both at home in the physical and virtual sense while in the virtual field.

In this regard, Noel Dyck (2000a, 36) clearly outlines how in anthropology the “field” has come to stand for the “unknown, unfamiliar, unusual and challenging,” while “home” can be conversely understood as that which is “known, familiar, routine and more or less comfortable.” He makes this distinction not to create a further rift between “us” at home and “them” in the field but to draw anthropologists’ attention to the activities and relationships in the field:

[A]nthropologists, wherever they work, would do well to distinguish between activities and relationships of which they have a substantial understanding and those which they know primarily in terms of a reading knowledge. This tends to make “home” far less a matter of birthplace or nationality than of continuing personal engagement in certain types of social aggregations, activities and relationships. (Dyck 2000, 48b)

Dyck (2000a, 35) notes that the arguments for conducting research at home have been well made in the past decade and that anthropologists in the proceeding decades will do more work in contexts of “home,” either publishing and engaging in anthropological circles or interdisciplinary publications, conferences, etc. that are more amenable to ethnographic research of the “other” at “home”. He suggests that ethnographic research conducted at “home fields” (2000a, 42) can demonstrate the intellectual and practical contributions anthropological research can have for our own communities and societies.

In many cases the field may become a “home away from home” as many anthropologists still spend a year or more living in the field among their interlocutors. “Home,” like the field (Amit 2000b), is a constructed place defined by our bodily, material, and social connections. The phrase “home is where the heart is” captures part of the material, bodily, and affective experience of home as an “embodied space” where the body “conceived as a moving spatial field makes its own place in the world” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, 6). In her book *Key Concepts in Ethnography*, Karen O’Reilly notes that it is the “delicate balancing act of empathy and distance that is such an essential component of the participant observer oxymoron” (2009, 89). Anthropologists necessarily engage with an ongoing reflection and questioning of their own experiences, for the ethnographic project, and for their own sense of self. We are thus forewarned about the end of fieldwork yet still must balance feelings of attachment to people and places, with the knowledge of our eventual extrication from those people, places, and spaces.

Despite my previous research amongst youth competitive swimmers in the Lower Mainland of Vancouver, Canada (Sean Heath 2017), my degree of belonging in the physical and social spaces and places at Manta SC took time. Much of this had to do with the foreignness for youth and coaches of having an anthropologist hanging around on the pool

deck during their training sessions and competitions, as well as the foreignness of my Canadian accent and the differences in swimming jargon I was familiar with. Overtime the space of the pool has become closer to “home” due to the activities and relationships I have cultivated. The pool and competitive swimming squads are also places that I, as researcher, am involved in crafting. Constructing the field and home is a negotiated interrelation between club members, parents, coaches, the youth swimmers, and myself, which culminated in the privilege to designate my “home” club as Manta SC during the time of my prolonged engagement within the community.

Place directs our attention to the close relationships between “the physical, social, and cultural conditions of life,” (Olwig and Gulløv 2003, 1). When directing our attention to the lives of children and youth we need to remember that place is often constructed by adults (playgrounds, waterparks, schools, etc.) and then allocated to children. With many of my interlocutors being under the age of majority (18-years-old) they are largely still seen as developing and not entirely independent agents unable to construct the spaces and places of competitive sport. Yet place may also refer to “informal, potentially ‘subversive’ places created by children as they engage in various kinds of intra- and inter-generational relationships” (2003, 2). In this way, the pool and competitive swimming club become places that adults have created and established for youth. At the same time, those youth take ownership of that place and create it for themselves. They form their own small cliques, intra-groups between squads, and have formed inter-generational relationships with me, the other parents, and the coaches. It is in this education where anthropologists Karen Fog Olwig and Eva Gullov see youths’ places as becoming a “matter of their relative status in the generational order of socio-cultural transmission” (2003, 2). Youth are thus incorporated into society through education and care by their seniors (both in age and knowledge). As children become youth, youth become age-of-majority-adults, their places, both physical and relative generational positions, shift and change as they are taught the values, physical skills, and other socio-cultural subtleties with which they will need to survive, perhaps to thrive.

It is not only the ethnographer who constructs place, field, and home. The youth at Manta SC actively constructed and delineated the boundaries of their spaces and places within the club. They can trace their own personal histories in their competitive swimming journey, so often defined by a connection to clubs and spaces of competition. A prolonged presence in the lives of these youth – the ethnographic fieldwork – and in dialogic communication with them I was able to co-construct my own place within the competitive swimming community at Manta SC, on the pool deck, and eventually in the water. This

shaped how I came to understand immersion, in water, in competitive swimming, and in ethnography.

2.4. Methodological Sensibilities

2.4.1. Young people's Social Agency

Three tenets form the core of my methodological sensibilities towards research with children and youth: 1) that of young people's social agency; 2) the power dynamics between and amongst youth and adults; and 3) critical reflexive engagement of my own conduct and self in the field along with the questions I ask of youth and which youth ask of themselves. The first stems from the established idea that young people have designs on their participation, or lack thereof, in sport (Messner 2009; Sean Heath 2017; Anderson 2008; Light, Harvey, and Memmert 2013), and are also "competent social actors," (Thorne 1993, 12) with hopes and dreams of becoming professional athletes (Dyck 2012). The second arises from Enright and O'Sullivan's conviction that "young people have unique perspectives on learned life" (2012: 121), and the third, then, requires that we, as researchers and adults, listen to youths' voices and include their "unique perspectives" into the discourse on their lives and the anthropology of sport. I further outline the first two tenets below as this entire thesis is ostensibly a critical reflexive engagement with youth swimmer's perspectives on becoming and belonging. Throughout this thesis I continuously reflect on my own individual identity and the identities of my interlocutors, noting how each of us has shaped the research process and the meanings implicated in immersion – as practices, processes, and literal submersion – what I refer to as being-in-the-water.

There has been an epistemological shift in the scholarly study of children and youth in recent decades (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Montgomery 2009; Thorne 1993), something that began with notions of "becoming" explored and questioned in the 1930s (see Mead 1943; 1962). Sociologists and anthropologists studying sport have recently argued for scholarly inquiry which understands that youth are active participants - as fans and athletes – in sport (Messner and Musto 2016). In many of the same ways that adults can be thought of as "humans becoming" (Bogardus 2014) – in a constant state of learning, adapting, and change – youth are also in processes of becoming. This position takes children and youth as active participants creating the experiences and the environment around them, something that is often overlooked by adults when they are designing sports programs and considering long-term athlete development. The global production of the neoliberal capitalist commodity of sport that competitive swimming is embedded in, what Carter (2018a) has termed New

Economic Order sport (NEOsport), attempts to render children as invisible and inert. NEOsport thus constructs children as objects acted upon but not as subjects that enact or act. My ethnographic approach views youth as central actors in the construction of their lives and experiences. I thus believe youth should be the first to be asked “What do we (ethnographers) need to know?” about their lived experiences as the youth are the experts on their own lives and social worlds.

When it comes to the actual implementation of youth’s agency in their sporting activities, more often than not, adult’s obscure their iron-fisted control of the organization and implementation of sport with the claim that their actions are indeed “all for the kids” (Messner 2009; Dyck 2012). This contradiction between the claim that adult organized youth sport is “for the kids” and the total lack of formal governance positions available for youth to speak to power in their clubs was made apparent to me while reading through the Swim England Wavepower (Swim England 2020c) safeguarding and child welfare code of conduct for clubs under its remit. In the code of conduct for children, which they are supposed to sign with a parent or guardian upon becoming a member of a Swim England affiliated swimming club, states under the sub-heading of “behaviour” that children are expected to “get involved in club decisions, [because] it’s your club too” (Swim England 2020c, 61). It is all well and good for Swim England to place participation in club decisions in the safeguarding and code of conduct documents. It certainly covers the “virtue signalling” aspect of their organizational guidance where “all swimmers” have the chance to participate in the organization, management, and direction of their club. In practice though it is a continuation of the “it’s all for the kids” rhetoric.

At Manta SC, there were no youth present in attendance at the club’s 2019 Annual General Meeting (the only AGM held during the research period due to the global COVID-19 pandemic), nor did any youth hold a position on any of the organizational committees helping to run the club. As nearly every day involves training for youth swimmers, it was inevitable that the AGM fall on a training day. But by expecting the coaches and swimmers to be at practice and to train during the AGM it necessarily excluded them from participation as full members of their club to make decisions on the future of their swimming, essentially denying youth their agency in affecting change.

While “getting involved in club decisions” may be written into the code of conduct contract for youth swimmers, placing the burden of engagement entirely on the outspokenness of youth is neither fair nor equitable. Yes, it is youths’ club too, arguably more so than it is for the adults who administer, officiate, and coach, but we cannot leave it up to youth to strike up the courage to question, criticize and deliver constructive feedback to

those in hierarchical positions of power over them. We, as adults in those multi-dimensional hierarchical positions of power need to construct scaffolding, build structures, and embed commensurate positions for youth to engage on an equal level and in equitable ways with us. If we place youth around those committee tables as equals (say as youth or squad representatives) and recognize their social agency in determining the outcomes of their lives and sport I am convinced clubs will benefit and adults will be surprised by the intelligence, resourcefulness, and ingenuity young people can bring to their club.

2.4.2. Power dynamics

Asking people to “give it to us straight” may not be the best path of inquiry when engaging in social science research. People will present themselves in a variety of different ways to different people (Goffman 1990), including showing their “best face” or perhaps telling others what they think they want to hear, which all has to do with the social, historical, and cultural contexts and experiences in which these relationships take place. For example, a youth swimmer may have to listen to their parents while at home, their parents being the “authority” in their hierarchical power/knowledge/age/size position. Yet on the pool deck, the directions of a parent helping conduct the training session may go unheeded. When youth are swimming, they are the skilled and knowledgeable ones, the pool is *their* space. These dynamic and ever shifting interactions between people are why ethnographers spend lengthy periods of time not only recording what people *say*, but observing what people *do*. For communication goes far beyond the written and spoken word alone.

If we are to do social science research which actively accounts for the power dynamics between adults and youth, between researcher and subject, then we as ethnographers need to account for the constraints in our own positionality. Ethnographic research with children and youth tends to bracket out spaces and places, with both interlocutors and ethnographer able to “go home” at the end of the day, go “out” with their friends, go to school, or elsewhere. Our young research participants have the luxury of rapidly changing their geographical place as we often can (except perhaps for the few hours they are at the pool training). We also participate in *their* lives, *their* activities, and negotiate this on *their* terms (with a framework of those terms as set out in informed consent forms). This is why much of the research with children and youth has been conducted from the sidelines (Dyck 2012; Anderson 2008; Grasmuck 2005) with varying forms and degrees of participant observation (Christensen and James 2008; Pascoe 2012). It was therefore imperative to my research with youth that I keep in mind the hierarchies of power, age, and position on an on-going basis, not just when I initially negotiated access to their worlds.

To mitigate the hierarchies present (my physical location on the pool deck and that of the swimmers in the water; the age gap between myself and the youth; the knowledge position as university educated researcher; access to the coach; the potential to be equated as a coach; my previous experience as a swimming coach and instructor) I cultivated a role as a curious and keenly interested researcher of youths' practices and experiences, meaning that I comported myself and positioned myself in ways the other swimmers did while on the pool deck.²⁰ I milled around with them behind the diving blocks during relay practices, sat amongst them while they waited and chatted during mock race sessions, and spoke with the youth as they stretched before and after practice. I participated in the land training sessions (body-weight strength and conditioning exercises), which involved short running sprints, crunches, push-ups, and holding plank positions to strengthen core muscles to name a few of the exercises. I volunteered my knowledge of stretching positions when youth asked how to stretch particularly troublesome and sore muscles groups, all under the watchful eye of the coach. I also helped with the occasional timing if asked by swimmers or the coach, or lane counting for test sets. I specifically chose not to take on coaching responsibilities that would place me in hierarchical relationships over the youth (see McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2019), instead I chose to stick to activities swimmers also did, for example the occasional time keeping or lane counting. I was very forthright with coaches and parents about my intentions not to get involved in coaching duties. Thankfully the coaches valued research – although mostly for a competitive and performance advantage – further cementing my independence from “normal” adult duties on the pool deck. The few times I was asked to help with timing Arthur would always premise his queries with, “as long as it doesn't interfere with your research.” As such, I was afforded a privileged position within the power hierarchies at play in swimming spaces, but this did not preclude me from receiving banter from coaches and swimmers alike. My positionality was thus predicated on the leeway I had as a “researcher” and sculpted in the field through my interactions with swimmers and coaches. This form of immersive participation provided me the flexibility to speak with youth on their terms in their spaces.

2.4.3. Ethical Considerations

I had set out initially to work with several swimming clubs in the South East Region of England to learn from and observe youth who experienced injury and those who were still in

²⁰ For a detailed discussion of the ways in which adults may claim the the “free-lancing privilege of an adult observer” when conducting research with children, see Barrie Thorne's (1993, 14) *Gender Play*. While unable to exactly be “just another kid” in the classroom, her ethnography is an exemplar of how to navigate those power hierarchies while recognizing the lived experiences of children and youth, their own agency in their lives, their hopes, dreams, and the everyday mundanity of public education.

the processes of recovery from injury. Unfortunately, the competitive swimming world turned out to be more closed to outsiders that I had expected. Many factors influenced the lack of engagement from swimming club committees and head coaches. Not a competitive swimmer myself, nor enrolled as a member in any of the local clubs, I was an unknown person seeking to conduct research amongst the youth swimmers. Operating in what Catherine Palmer (2013) has termed a “risk society” where overly strict measures of safeguarding, while necessary, often curtail the agency of youth, prevented my gaining access to the gatekeepers of clubs well before I ever got the chance to speak with any of the youth. Additionally, much of the research in competitive swimming tends to germinate from sport science fields, particularly biomechanics and sport exercise. Therefore, my conception of long-term ethnographic investigation may not have been fully understood or as easily comprehended as a paper survey for coaches to administer and youth to complete. Only one club, that I refer to as Manta Swimming Club, was willing to allow my presence on the pool deck, to observe and participate in the activities of their performance squad.²¹

When it comes to adult run and controlled activities for youth the structure of relationships and spaces bears similarities between the institutional education settings of the classroom and on sporting fields of play. Unsurprisingly the language used when characterizing these spaces and places of children and youth in research ethics guidance documents (Cross-School Research Ethics Committee 2018) foregrounds access and permission to those institutions over the informed consent of youth themselves (Olwig and Gulløv 2003). When conducting research in the field, anthropologists have a duty to obtain informed consent from their research participants. In most ethnographic research the principle of prior written consent is often not practical, can hinder conversation with interlocutors, and is not entirely necessary when forms of verbal consent can be obtained. The American Anthropological Association’s stance on informed consent, while a bit outdated, is as follows:

Anthropologists have an obligation to ensure that research participants have freely granted consent, and must avoid conducting research in circumstances in which consent may not be truly voluntary or informed. In the event that the research changes in ways that will directly affect the participants, anthropologists must revisit and renegotiate consent. The informed consent process is necessarily dynamic, continuous and reflexive. Informed consent does not necessarily imply or require a particular written or signed form. It is the quality of the consent, not its format, which is relevant. (American Anthropological Association 2012)

²¹ This research project obtained full ethical approval from the University of Brighton’s Social Science College Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 2018-0397).

In any space when conducting research with youth participants it is important to be aware of the power hierarchies and dynamics of perceived consent given by those located as gatekeepers and in positions of authority. While these adults may have given their assent for the researcher to work within a particular institution and with the youth enrolled there, I argue that it is imperative researchers take young people as active social agents in their own lives, seeking informed consent directly from youth as one possible way to mitigate the power dynamics and hierarchies in these spaces. The ability to sign a consent form for oneself due to chronological age should not be the sole deciding factor in seeking informed consent from our interlocutors.

To gain the informed consent of the youth swimmers for this project required working with a layering of gatekeepers: 1) DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) - criminal record checks; 2) Head Coaches; 3) Club Committee Members; 4) Squad coaches; 5) Parents; and 6) Youth. As I pointed out in the introduction, what is defined as “youth” is a contested category with “no simple correspondence between chronological, developmental and ‘sport’ age” (Brackenridge 2008, 41). I sought written consent from all parties involved, beginning with the head coach and committee members who provided me with a letter of assent for the ethics application. I asked parents and youth to co-sign when the youth were younger than sixteen and sought consent directly from those sixteen years or older, both verbally and written. This followed the research ethics guidance as laid out by the Cross-School Research Ethics Committee (2018) at the University of Brighton. During processes of renegotiating and revisiting consent I did this verbally rather than through written means, although confirmation of consent was noted in my fieldnotes. Those individuals who did not express consent and were not interested in participating in the research have been left out of all notes and data.

Within UK society, and in many Western industrial states, policy protections for children in sports have been put into place following public scandals of abuse stemming from cases in the 1980s and 90s, with recent scandals of sexual abuse coming to light in 2020 and 2021 (BBC 2021; CBC 2020). It is of the utmost importance that activities for children and youth are safe so that they may play and enjoy sport. In place policy protections help ameliorate future potential abuses. For instance, Swim England has updated safeguarding policies for clubs under its jurisdiction in their “Wavepower: Child Safeguarding Policies and Procedures Manual” (Swim England 2020b), co-produced along with the Child Protection and Sport Unit (CPSU) and National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), to require safeguarding officers be mandatory positions in every Swim England affiliated club. I also sought and obtained an individual DBS check, a Canadian Criminal

Record check, and an “Enhanced” DBS check²² required by all coaches, volunteers, and committee members working with the club. These are the minimal legal requirements to participate in the youth sporting sphere in the UK, which “sits within the wider discourse of risk avoidance; of putting in place policies and practices that can prevent the sexual, physical and emotional abuse of children by others in positions of authority and power” (Palmer 2013, 93). While these policies are essential they have shifted the behaviour of coaches towards being overly cautious towards younger swimmers, in particular in respect of “not touching swimmers to assist in skill acquisition” (Howells and Grogan 2012, 112), which may have repercussions for youths’ sensory development of “feel” (see Chapter 5). During my time with Manta SC, I did not observe and was not aware of any incidents of abuse and followed Swim England and club guidelines on the pool deck when interacting with youth.

While it may be reassuring to clubs and parents that DBS checks are in place, the conduct and disposition of volunteers and coaches on the pool deck is of more concern to adults who are in these positions of authority within swimming clubs. I established myself as a semi-permanent fixture on the pool deck, attending upwards of five practices per week along with weekend and evening galas and social events. Therefore, my presence and interactions with youth swimmers, parents, coaches, and officials helped build rapport over time. As I view youth as competent social actors in their own right, building rapport with them and providing an informed understanding of my research project was of utmost concern. Yet parents are not absent from their children’s swimming lives and several parents were always present, observing training sessions from the viewing gallery bleachers. Without the support of parents, it would not have been possible to conduct the research let alone immerse myself in the daily lived rhythms of youth competitive swimming. I spent much time speaking with parents after the swimming sessions as they waited for their children to shower, change, and finish chatting with their peers. This ended up being a fruitful way of introducing myself and my research to them. Overtime, as I became incorporated into the competitive swimming community and Manta SC “family,” these inquisitive introductory moments came to be filled with discussions of impending gala travel, holiday excursions, and the mundane and everyday experiences of their separate work and family lives.

²² In the UK there are varying degrees of Disclosure and Barring Services checks that can be undertaken on individuals. A cursory level DBS check to look for any criminal history can be applied for by any individual, but only for and about themselves. This is called a “basic disclosure.” The “enhanced” check can only be applied for by organizations on behalf of an employee or volunteer. This enhanced check shows any additional information held by local authorities relevant to the role for which the DBS check is being requested. In my case, the club designated my role as “volunteer” working with children under the age of eighteen.

2.5. Methods

2.5.1. Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes were the main research material gathering tool I employed over the course of my three seasons with the performance squad at Manta SC. Fieldnotes comprise multiple levels of observation, both of what is occurring in the field, what thoughts, questions, and lines of inquiry this brings to mind, and what we then include in our fieldnotes. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011: 81) term this state of awareness during fieldwork “being on’.” When we are “on” we hold observations in the back of our minds, make mental notes for later, and have the occasional jottings on paper or digital reminders about “key components of observed scenes, events, or interactions” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 31). Thus, fieldnotes provide a record of events as they happen, not perfectly, for fieldnotes rely on the memory of the ethnographer, but as best as can be “thickly” described.

While in the field I either made mental jottings or jottings in a small notebook. This notebook had a ubiquitous presence during the research as I would either have it in my pocket or be furiously making jottings in it for later elaboration. I would be asked what I was writing down in it, bantered when I left it at home, and the coach would jokingly speculate I was writing down his terrible jokes, which rarely made the youth laugh. Yes, it set me apart to some extent. But it also became another common material object poolside, like coach Arthur’s stopwatches. As fifteen-year-old Nick so aptly put it, “We kind of just don't notice that you are there, making notes.”

I aspire to a high level of detail in my fieldnotes and expanded on these field jottings once training was over, preferably immediately after practice once I had arrived home. Jottings would include hastily scribbled verbatim quotes, descriptions of physical spaces and contexts (training or competition), the interactions between people and who those people are, and any nonverbal communication that I observed. These were elaborated on, expanded, explained, and recorded in my fleshed out fieldnotes. It took several months before I was well versed enough in the English usage of swimming jargon before I was able to include this vocabulary and language in my fieldnotes seamlessly but only after creating a legend of terminology (see Figure 2.2.).

	England	Canada
		- flip turn
	tumble turn	- swim meet
	competition	- freestyle
	frontcrawl	- backstroke
	backstroke	
	AA	- backstroke
	BSC	- Underwater Turn
	Underwater Turn	- Water bottle
	Drink Bottle or Bottle	- Activation
	Mobilization	- Suicide turn
	Canadian Roll	- front crawl
	FC	- submerged verticle kick board
	Tombstone	flutter kick
	FORM	- Best stroke that <u>just</u> FREE
	REVISION	- Homework
	Flippers	- Fins
	hat	- "swim cap"/towel/baseball cap
	swim costume	- swim suit
	Skins	- (no equivalent)
	1st/2nd/3rd place medal	winner
	Pads	- hand paddles
	FAST	- All out / 100% effort

Figure 2.2. Swimming Jargon Legend

Source: Author's Collection. 2022. A legend for the differences in terminology used in swimming between English and Canadian contexts.

Once fieldnotes had been written down I recorded any thoughts, impressions, questions for follow up, who may be able to answer those questions, and concerns that I had about the research. Some of this ended up within the fieldnotes themselves and other observations were recorded in fieldwork diaries and a methodology logbook (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011: 168-170). Having various sets of fieldnotes proved to be valuable for organizational purposes easing the recall of information and when re-reading fieldnotes for analysis after the fieldwork was complete.

2.5.2. Interviews

Over the course of the research project, I audio recorded twenty open-ended formal interviews with youth swimmers. In addition, I had countless informal conversations and discussions with coaches, parents, and swimmers during the course of the research project,

many of which I recorded after the fact in fieldnotes as audio recording them was not possible, desirable, or appropriate in the moment. These ethnographic interviews (Bernard 2006; J. Skinner 2013; Spradley 1979), both formal and informal, combine conversation with a detailed set of questions one wishes to explore, which allows for much play in the direction, the responses, and the questions that may be asked over one or more encounters. The greatest advantage of the ethnographic interview is that they are based on establish relationships through fieldwork prior to conducting the interview.

The ethnographic interview is more than a one-off event where the only social relation between interviewer and interviewee is the interview process itself. It is the relationships between ethnographer and interlocutor that informs and feeds the interview (the questions, contexts, and direction) and allows for greater depth of information to be compiled. The ethnographic context allows for a certain spontaneity where a casual conversation may grow into a deeper discussion and end up shifting toward a more recognized “interview.” This approach allows anthropologists flexibility in constructing their theoretical framework in dialogue with their interlocutors once in the field, focusing on what matters and is most meaningful to their interlocutors. In this way, ethnography becomes synonymous with methodology, for the methods of data collection are inseparable from the precepts of ethnographic research and the sensibilities the anthropologist brings with them to the field.

Using open-ended questioning in formal interview settings, as opposed to structured or semi-structured interviews, was more conventional for my purposes. This questioning format would often mimic the everyday conversations I had with youth on the pool deck and was important to consider as youth may lack experience with formal interviews.²³ In addition, obtaining responses from youth swimmers that do not follow from what they may think we (as adults and researchers) want to hear is another reason to use a more conversational style while interviewing. Fluidity between topics is a natural part of conversation and when applied to an interview can allow for the exploration of topics and lines of inquiry from multiple angles rather than the belligerent “Question-A, Question-B, Question-C” march of structured approaches.

An ethnographic approach to interview questioning also allows for a question guideline to be developed in the early stages of the investigation and then reworked throughout the research process. This interplay between the interpretation of data,

²³ This may not be the case for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) students applying to college to study for and write their A-level certificate tests, which will allow them entry into University in the UK system. Those applying to colleges are required to do entry interviews.

conceptual and theoretical work, and the tightening of specificity of the research question(s) is essential to qualitative and ethnographic research approaches (Bryman 2008). While the movement between data collection, interpretation, and analysis can seem nebulous, anthropological ethnography allows for the generation of research material (i.e., “data”) and theory to coincide, providing space for what matters most to the participants in the research to guide theory and analysis. Otherwise, without the reworking of our research questions and conceptual frameworks we would end up attempting to answer questions which may be of little value to, or worse, are meaningless to our interlocutors. Developing and reworking a guideline for questions for each interlocutor therefore integrates the research process within the everyday investigations of the anthropologist in the field.

2.6. Analysis

As stated above, a fairly large portion of the ethnographic material presented in this thesis came either from fieldnotes or interviews. In the analysis of this data I followed Emerson, Fetz, and Shaw’s (2011) steps for analysis of fieldnotes (these processes can of course be applied to all forms of textual data). It begins with the ethnographer doing a close reading of fieldnotes as a whole data set; proceeds to open coding of the data by going line-by-line through fieldnotes categorizing and identifying themes, ideas, and issues the material suggests; then the ethnographer moves on to the writing of memos which clarify the thoughts and ideas produced through this coding practice. This is not a linear process, rather, it is a cyclical process that requires delving back into fieldnotes and data to refine and re-refine ideas and themes: “From reading comes coding and written memos that direct and redirect attention to issues and possibilities that require further reading of the same or additional fieldnotes” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 173).

Beginning from the position that my assumptions, interests, and theoretical commitments would influence every aspect of the ethnographic process I explicitly chose to engage in the reflexive interplay between theory and data as they were both developing. Theory was constantly informing my ongoing analysis and how I came to perceive immersion and the processes of becoming and belonging in youth swimmer’s lifeworlds. What I was reading at the time inevitably shaped how I wrote up the fieldwork data. Rather than there being a singular moment of extrication from the field where I switched from immersive data collection to data analysis, I employed an active close reading of fieldnotes as the ethnographic research unfolded. I systematically read through fieldnotes and interview transcripts and open coded the data, identifying general themes, ideas, and issues while still in the field. I then subjected this textual data to a focused coding which involves a

process of interpretation where the refining and discarding of previously imagined themes and an elaboration on questions and comments would provide the categories and ideas which formed the major topics of this ethnography (Emerson et al. 2011: 188). During the rereading of fieldnotes and other ethnographic data any insights into connections between the materials were written up as code memos.

Code memos are tied to phenomena, categories, and topics generated in the coding and rereading of data (Gobo 2008; Strauss and Corbin 1990). I used these memos to write about the discussions and interactions taking place in the fieldnotes, as well as the core processes of immersion I was beginning to identify. These memos helped me to connect seemingly disparate topics within the data. Once I had developed a clearer sense of the themes I wanted to pursue, my memos took on a more focused character, becoming integrative memos which would generate the initial threads of the themes which wind their way through this ethnography.

Nvivo software was used to organize the ethnographic research materials, which included fieldnotes, memos, interview transcripts, photographs, news clippings, policy documents, and email correspondence. The software allowed me to easily identify recurring themes, ideas, thoughts, and descriptions of events and practices. The links and connections made between codes and memos were used to identify relevant quotes, situations, conversations, observations, and experiences that would deepen the analysis of the themes generated through shared practice and dialogue between myself and my interlocutors.

As part of the “dialectic interplay” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 198) between production and analysis of interview data I sent interview transcripts to the youth swimmers so that they had the opportunity to clarify or elaborate on points in our discussions. None of the youth ended up sending me back an edited draft of these transcripts. However, they subtly elaborated on points made or continued lines of discussion we had spoken about in interviews or while we were “hanging out” together on at the pool. Additionally, I asked several of the youth at Manta SC to read preliminary drafts of published materials or conference abstracts. Again, I did not receive any written or verbal feedback explicitly about these pieces from the youth. Even though the youth in the performance squad did not edit these pieces in writing they were still open to receiving this material. While I cannot be certain that any of this written material was read by the youth, they would continue to check-in on how my research and the thesis was progressing nearly on a weekly basis. In these ways they provided a running commentary on the themes and ideas I developed out of the ethnographic research for this thesis.

2.7. Conclusion

Ethnography is more than a collection of methods for anthropologists. Ethnography is a way of learning to live with others. In this sense, it is necessarily a holistic practice where anthropologists immerse themselves into the rhythms of people's lives, however smooth or choppy the waters of their existence may be. Immersive anthropology can be understood as a set of precepts and sensibilities with which the ethnographer approaches the lifeworlds of others. This includes the duration and extent of time spent in the field building relationships with interlocutors through dialogue and shared practice. Recognizing our privileged position as researchers, anthropologists must navigate the social circumstances we and our interlocutors find ourselves in during the course of fieldwork, including the ethical considerations and implications of our presence in our interlocutor's lives. It is the tacking back-and-forth between our theoretical knowledge that we bring to the field and the practical knowledge of our interlocutors, when combined, which shapes and re-shapes research processes often raising new questions while providing deeper insights into what it is to be human.

To better grasp the embodied knowledges of Manta SC's performance squad youth I immersed myself in their swimming practices. I engaged in "thick participation" by apprenticing in competitive swimming with the Manta SC Masters swimming squad along side attending the daily training session of the performance squad. Thus, my body was a main tool in the research process as I developed the skills to perceive the water as swimmers do. This required that I cultivate my tactile senses through the sensory engagement of swimming training, refashioning the way I sensed being-in-the-world through swimming's sensorium which privileges touch above other senses. This subsequently generated shared meaning through shared experience even though we were swimming at different times and in different pools. Attending to the sensory aspects of swimming brings to the fore from the horizons of perception the "invisible domain of our daily experiences" (Dalidowicz 2015, 107) when immersed in water. These can then be examined and analyzed with the daily experiences, verbal knowledge, and observed interactions with and among our research participants. Immersion as method, then, is at the core of my ethnographic examination of youth swimmer's phenomenological experiences of becoming and belonging.

Chapter 3. Context and History of Competitive Swimming Clubs in the UK

Swimming has a long and storied history in the UK. This includes the bathing in rivers, lakes, lochs, and the sea, as well as swimming being as a pleasurable leisure pursuit, a form of exercise, and then sport. Being the nation that arguably invented competitive swimming as a sport, it is surprising the lack of swimming ability amongst the population. Presently only 65% of children and youth between the ages of 5-16 in England reported that they can swim at least 25 metres (Sport England 2019). Historically, it took a royal mandate in 1879 before British Royal Navy sailors were required to know how to swim, and countless drowning deaths off coastal British water before swimming became a widespread and common practice amongst the populations in the UK. Yet the legacy of this island nation's obsession with swimming is inimically tied to its colonial history. There is not enough space here to recount that history,²⁴ instead I have focused on the rise of swimming as a sport, chronicling the formation of competitive clubs and the slow implementation through schools of swimming as a survival skill in the general population.

Despite the perceived need to be able to swim as a life skill those enrolled in competitive swimming tend to come from particular social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. Structural, social, and economic barriers to training and competing in swimming have tended to reproduce the white middle-class demographic of competitors seen today from the earliest days of the codification of swimming as a sport. There are also significant barriers to participation for those with disabilities. Role models such as Alice Dearing, British Swimming Open Water Olympian and founder of the Black Swimming Association, and Ellie Simmonds, British Para-Swimmer and multi-medal winning Olympian, are working to shift the demographic of competitive swimming through their advocacy and promotion of swimming as a sport for all.

Below I outline the structures of competitive swimming within England, including the governing bodies and institutions which link together to form pathways between grassroots clubs through to the national and Olympic teams. This is important to take account of as competitive swimming operates within specific performance and development models which seek to produce medal winning bodies without much consideration for anything other than high-performance competition. Additionally, I outline the organizational structure and squad

²⁴ For a detailed examination of the colonial legacy of swimming see Wiltse (2007) and Dawson (2018).

composition at Manta SC, and how this club fits within the National and Regional programs, institutions, and pathways of competitive swimming in England.

3.1. A Brief History of UK Competitive Swimming

English people's connection with immersion and swimming can be traced back to the eighteenth century, if not earlier, and owes its rise to a conflation of aristocratic elites attending bathing houses and spa towns, and working class people's sea-bathing rituals (Tarvis 1997). There was a veritable English fervour for sea-bathing and attending sea-side resorts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Walton 1997, 43). From the sheer numbers of bathers and leisure swimmers playing, diving, dunking, and racing amongst the waves and currents of English waterways it is perhaps not too surprising that small groups began to form societies for this fledgling sport-like leisure activity. This was also a time where the codification of rules in games became popular. While the origins of sport (as opposed to games) during the 19th century began in England (Eichberg 1998), their export to the European continent and out to the then British colonies soon followed, making sport a vehicle for the promotion of "muscular Christianity" and other processes of colonialism (Laviolette 2011, 36).

The first swimming society was formed by a group of graduate men from Eton College in 1828 (Sprawson 1993). The first swimming club, Maidstone SC, was formed in 1844, and the oldest swimming club in England continuously running since 1860 is Brighton SC.²⁵ Swim England – formerly the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) – is the governing body of swimming in the UK along with British Swimming, the national high-performance competitive institution. While Swim England trace their historical formation back to 1869 (Swim England 2017), this is slightly inaccurate. This date is the founding of the Associated Metropolitan Swimming Clubs (AMSC), then renamed the London Swimming Association (LSC) in the same year. The Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) was formed in 1886 and was a conglomeration of the re-re-named LSC (the Swimming Association of Great Britain as of 1873) and the Amateur Swimming Union (formed in 1884). What this demonstrates is the complex, often competing, narratives in the social production of history. In this case, Swim England is reporting their historical formation as the *first* and *only* governing body of swimming in the world in the 19th century.

²⁵ See Table 1 for a cursory chronology of competitive swimming in the UK. For a detailed chronology of swimming as a recreational, sporting, and leisure pursuit see Love (2003, 316).

As swimming became more popular as a leisure pastime in the eighteenth-century the theoretical approaches to movement through the water assumed a brute strength approach: “swimming did not consist in merely being able to loll, play about, and slip between two waves in a feeling of dynamic communion with the liquid element. Swimming then was a total effort, a fight against being engulfed, and a display of energy” (Corbin 1994, 76). Indeed, Parker (2010) notes that pedestrian endurance events of the time were described as “brutal exhibitions.” Maintaining one’s self on the surface was paramount.²⁶ In fact, staying on the surface is one of the slower ways to move through the water, but eighteenth-century swimming was “dictated by an incessant fear of drowning heightened by the firm belief that man [*sic*] could neither float nor swim naturally” (Corbin 1994, 76). This was despite the evidence of indigenous peoples remarkable swimming skills (Dawson 2018) and humanities long history of living around, in, and on water. But it does not advance the arguments of this thesis to engage in historical reductionism. Despite the basic need for an island nation’s inhabitants to be able to swim to save lives,²⁷ this fear of drowning and humanities’ inability to float/swim naturally, it wouldn’t be until 1994 where the English government mandated a swim-to-survive program (Swim England 2018c) for all primary school children.²⁸

In England, seaside resorts, river-based swimming pools, and military swim baths were constructed in conjunction with outdoor recreation movements and popular concerns about bodily health of the citizen and nation. Over the past 150 years the English seaside, along with its resorts and bathing areas, have been represented and consumed as “white spaces” to the exclusion and domination of others (Burdsey 2016, 112). Daniel Burdsey poignantly writes, “the leisure spaces of the beach are not exempt from processes of spatial control and territorialization. As politicized spaces and contested terrains, they can become exclusionary zones in which certain forms of identity, ideology, and practice are protected against outsiders” (p. 133). This politicization of space and exclusionary zones only continued when indoor bathing and swimming facilities were built in England. As swimming became institutionalized and codified as a sport, as distinct from the leisure pursuit of bathing and splashing around for enjoyment, these exclusionary practices have become part of the social imagination of who can be a swimmer.

²⁶ The philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk, argues that this seductive immersion also creates an existential threat to the self for those who have “lost the ambition to emerge” (ten Bos 2009, 78).

²⁷ See Claire Parker (2010) for a discussion of the utilitarian purposes of swimming and its “appropriateness” as a sport for women.

²⁸ Primary school usually runs between the ages of 5 to 11 years old.

Karen Throsby (2016) traces the shift during the 19th and 20th centuries, from outdoor bathing to outdoor enclosures to indoor pools, as part of the regulation and control of bodies, particularly the nude female figure. Women and non-whites have always experienced exclusion from swimming and bathing spaces, she argues, with segregated bathing areas being designated for women and blacks (see also Wiltse 2007). She notes that in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, outdoor enclosures in rivers, lakes, and bays were built for nude male bathers while new swimming/bathing costumes were designed for women, both of which “facilitated the regulation of behaviour to account for the demands of modesty” (2016, 11). These large costumes women were forced to wear, covered them from neck to wrist to ankle and were so cumbersome that swimming was nearly impossible, a further impediment to integration and another subtle measure of control over female bodies.

Henning Eichberg also argues that the shift in desirability between indoor²⁹ and outdoor swimming in the 19th and 20th centuries was tied to “the image of the socially desirable body” (1998, 56) in conjunction with environmental, health, and hygiene concerns. Pale white skin was no longer in vogue as a marker of social and economic class privilege. Rather, “bronzed” skin and a muscular and lean “sporty” appearance becomes the marker of social prestige in this era. This “bronzed” sporting body is still seen as socially desirable within swimming today as is exemplified in the travel to warm and sunny locations squads take for training camps at outdoor pools. A few of the performance squad youth even suggested organizing such a swimming camp in 2020 where they would travel to Spain or Portugal for 10 days. The female swimmers specifically brought up the idea of wearing training bikinis during such an away training camp so that they would not end up with one-piece training suit tan lines. While this training trip was scrapped due to the travel bans during the COVID-19 pandemic, the practice of going away for training camps is common in England for those clubs and squads that can afford such an excursion.

A cursory glance at the history of competitive swimming in England shows that swimming has been a practice indulged in by a vast array of social groups and classes (Love 2007). According to the historian Christopher Love, “swimming was enjoyed by diverse elements of society, and came to reflect English society at large, with all of the cultural prejudices, preconceptions, contradictions, and ideals of that culture” (2003, 12) during the period spanning the 1800s to the early 1900s (see Table 1). From bathing rituals and notions of cleanliness to muscular exhibitions during the transition from leisure pursuit to sport

²⁹ Eichberg’s comments that “modern swimming facilities (water slides, irregular shapes) emphasize fun and bodily experiences rather than training or competition and here commercial as well as alternative building practices are trying to make ‘new waves’” (1998, 146 emphasis in original).

swimming has shifted to become more codified, institutionalized, and governed like so much of modern sport.

Table 1 Chronology of Moments of Interest in British Competitive Swimming*

1700s (All dates C.E.)	The rise of Aristocratic Elites attending bathing houses and spa towns, spa towns often containing natural hot springs.
1800s-1900s	Explosion of sea-side resort towns throughout Britain and Western Europe. Mass construction of river-based swimming pools, military swim baths, and lidos (outdoor pools).
1828	First Swimming society formed at Eton. First Public bath opens in Liverpool.
1844	First swimming club formed, Maidstone SC.
1860	Oldest continuously running swim club formed, Brighton SC.
1869	Formation of London Swimming Association.
1886	Formation of the Amateur Swimming Association.
1875	First recorded cross-channel swim by Captain Matthew Webb.
1878	Press of the time named 7 female professional swimmers compared to 61 male professional swimmers.
1899	Female competitors included in ASA events with mixed gender spectators.
1912	Female competitors in swimming officially sanctioned on the world stage at the Stockholm Olympic Games.
1920s	Decline in popularity of “Wild Swimming” and orientation towards indoor swimming spurs on the popularity of swimming as a sport.
1960	First recognized Paralympic Games held in Rome.
1980	Paul Marshall, first and only black swimmer to compete at an Olympic Games for Great Britain

* Adapted from Christopher Love’s (2003, 316) detailed chronology of swimming as a recreational, sporting, and leisure pursuit.

3.2. Who is Swimming?

According to the Swim England’s (2018b) “Active Lives” survey for May 2017-18 there were approximately 14,233,000 people aged 16 or older in the UK who swam in the last twelve months. That means that nearly thirty-two percent of people surveyed got in the water for at minimum one dip, splash, dunk, paddle, swim, or training session in that time period. When it comes to swimming with a competitive club, Swim England (2019) reported a total of 1045 affiliated clubs with a combined club membership of 188,499. Within the South East Region where the research for this project was conducted there are 189 clubs and approximately

38,000 total members (Swim England South East 2017).³⁰ This club membership is inclusive of all age levels and skills and does not distinguish between Masters, age-group, or professional members making the exact number of competitive youth swimmers hard to identify. Surprisingly, I could not find the statistics for participation in competitive swimming for youth under the age of sixteen in Swim England's public records. The only information specifically regarding children and youth participation that I was able to find indicates that 1.2 million children are in the learn to swim program (Swim England 2018b), which gives us no indication of the numbers of youth enrolled in competitive swimming clubs.

The fact that competitive swimming tends to be disproportionately populated by middle income earning and wealthy families and is predominantly white (DeLuca 2013), with only 668 out of 73,000 competitive swimmers identifying as black or mixed race (Byrnes 2020), continues to perpetuate the structural inequalities which demarcate competitive swimming clubs as predominantly “white spaces” (Burdsey 2016; Wiltse 2007). In the history of the institution “British Swimming” there have only been two black swimmers to compete for Great Britain on the international stage: Paul Marshall who competed in the 1980 Olympics and Alice Dearing who has competed in two World Championships and the Olympics for British Swimming since 2015. Those youth swimmers who do not grow up within middle-class households may have a divergent experience of how learning to swim affects their lives. Refugees, asylum seekers, climate refugees, those afflicted by illness or experiencing poverty are rarely represented within competitive swimming clubs (of notable exception are IOC Refugee Team athletes).³¹

There are many factors which contribute to youth's participation or lack-thereof in sport including social, structural, individual and cultural factors (Cooky 2009; Cooky and Rauscher 2016; Dyck 2012; Sport England 2019). This is especially true for girls, black, Asian, and other minority ethnic youth, as well as those who come from families with lower incomes, who all suffer higher rates of inactivity (Sport England 2019, 7–12). Although British Swimming does not publicize date of birth information of its athletes I was still able to ascertain that of the 53 swimmers announced for the 2020/2021 World Class Program for

³⁰ These number had reduced to 181 clubs with a total of 35,249 members by 2021 (Conversation with Sussex County ASA Chair, Brian DeVal 2021). The sector had seen a reduction in swim club member numbers over the past few years, but the COVID-19 global health pandemic exacerbated the decline.

³¹ Daniel H. Lende provides a compelling overview of the “poverty poisons the brain” discourses where he argues that the essentializing rhetoric of this position “hides both actual poverty and the political economy of inequality” (2012, 184). Using a neuroanthropological approach, Lende demonstrates that poverty can literally be embodied, in behaviour, through development, and in biology. This more nuanced approach highlights the interconnections between how society and culture shape individuals, socially, behaviourally, and biologically.

British Swimming 21 out of the 53 were classified as female swimmers³² (British Swimming 2020a). This roughly equates to those in the British Swimming National squad, which has a gender split of 12 females to 16 males as of October 2020.

Embedded in the ethos of competitive swimming is a neoliberal discourse which upholds ideals of individual attainment and of perseverance against all odds (see Chapter 8), which disregards the historical structuring of the sport. Looking at the data for swimming coaches in the UK, men are three times more likely to hold roles where the job titles fall under the category of “senior,” “head,” or “performance” coach. A cursory glance at the British Swimming website in 2020 shows that of the lead coaching staff, only one of eight coaches is female, and all are white (British Swimming 2020c). If we compare that against the population statistics for England as a whole we ought to expect at least one of those coaches to be black, Asian, or another of Britain’s ethnic minorities (Office for National Statistics 2018). As Swim England statistics above show, the reported numbers of ethnic minority individuals swimming competitively are vastly disproportionate when measured against the entire English population.

There are societal and structural factors which have facilitated this lack of diversity within the swimming world broadly and in the English context in particular. Looking at the distribution of clubs in England we can see that some of the most deprived neighbourhoods still are host to a swimming club registered with Swim England.³³ Despite there being swimming clubs peppered across the UK the qualifying times of more urban areas and deprived regions are lower than more affluent suburban regions. For example, while there are swimming clubs in deprived neighbourhoods and boroughs in England there are discrepancies between regions in the required qualifying times to attend competitions. London, for example, had qualifying times (QT) for Female 50m free and 200m free of 29.20 seconds and 2:18.00, and Male QTs for the same events as 25.50 seconds and 2:08.22 for long course (50 metre pool pool) (Swim England London 2020). The South East Region, where Manta SC swim, had QTs of 28.70 and 2:13.00 for Females and 25.30 and 2:03.00 for Men in the 50m and 200m Freestyle Long Course events (Swim England South East 2019). Coaches at Manta SC suggested that this difference in QTs may be to boost

³² Gender categories for competition in competitive swimming follow the binary distinction of either male or female.

³³ With the closure of recreation centres and pools in the UK as a direct result of the COVID pandemic, there stands to be at least twenty-percent fewer pools operating in the latter half of 2020 and beyond. This will surely have adverse effects on smaller clubs and those clubs in deprived neighborhoods as many may have to cease operating.

attendance with a focus towards wider participation by athletes, rather than having a blanket set of QT across the country set to encourage only striving for faster times.³⁴

While British Swimming National competitions are held in populated urban areas such as London, Sheffield, Plymouth, and Edinburgh, the National training centres are located in the suburban university towns of Bath and Loughborough, both of which also contain local age-group and university swimming clubs. This strategic placement of the national training centres is due to the heavily funded sports science departments located at those universities. Even Swim England has located their headquarters on the Loughborough University campus. The locations of these performance centres in relatively sparsely populated areas are just one part of the structural barriers which reinforces the largely white, upper-middle class, demographic of competitive swimming participants, at all level of the sport.

There is hope for making the sport of swimming more accessible to a diverse array of people (Pilgaard et al. 2020). The newly formed Black Swimming Association's (Black Swimming Association 2020) partnership with Swim England, which aims to increase swimming participation and encourage water safety among black and minority ethnic communities in the UK, is an encouraging sign for what has become a global shift in the social, structural, and institutional barriers which pervade in the competitive swimming community (Pilgaard et al. 2020). The two films directed by Ed Accura (2020; 2021), *A Film Called Blacks Can't Swim*, and *Blacks Can't Swim The Sequel*, have shed light on the fears, prejudice, stereotypes, social and structural barriers black people face when confronted with learning to swim. With Alice Dearing, currently the only black swimmer on Team Great Britain (GB), while also being the first black woman and second black swimmer to compete for Great Britain at an Olympic games, black youth now have a contemporary role model advocating for their inclusion in the sport.

Now that I have outlined some of the historical background of swimming in the UK, I move on to defining the structures and cycles of contemporary competitive swimming, looking at the relationships between national governing bodies – Swim England and British Swimming – and the clubs and squads where youth swim.

³⁴ As I argue in Chapter 8, the striving for faster times and the C-G-S (centimeters-grams-seconds) attitude of modern sport to continually push the envelope of human capabilities and speed does not necessarily produce more enjoyment of swimming. But this C-G-S attitude certainly increases physical suffering.

3.3. Structures of Competitive Swimming in England

Manta SC is a small to middling sized club on the South Coast of England and had around 150 members, give or take a few, for the 2018-2021 seasons. It shares a centurion designation of being established and continually running for over one hundred years along with several other clubs in the area. While the club may have a long and storied history growth and maintenance of active membership is never guaranteed. For example, the Masters squad was relatively small comprising only a dozen or so members in 2019. By the 2021/2022 season membership had doubled. Like many clubs who rely on a combination of public and private pool space, the size of the club and its growth were constrained by the pool time they were able to negotiate with the pool operators. Some of the larger clubs in the South East Region boasted numbers over one-thousand active members across their numerous squads and swim lesson programs, while some of the smallest clubs contained only a few dozen members.

Manta SC was designated as a not-for-profit entity and run mostly by a cadre of volunteers and seven part-time coaches.³⁵ Coaches tend to be the only paid positions within competitive club structures. Those clubs with larger memberships can afford to pay the salaries for full-time coaching positions while those smaller in size may need to resort to part-time or volunteer coaches. Most competitive swimming clubs in England are classified as not-for-profit entities and as such follow the guidelines for club structure, constitutions and rules, and bureaucracy mandated by Swim England (Swim England 2020d). All clubs need to have a Chairperson, Secretary, and Finance officer on the membership elected committee. There also needs to be a Welfare officer who oversees safeguarding procedures, statutes, and complaints within the club. Outside of these positions there is relative freedom to include other various roles and responsibilities within the club structure (e.g., equipment manager, website administrator, technical official coordinator, fundraising coordinator). At Manta SC, the volunteers were parents, siblings, family members, swimmers, and me the ethnographer. All have some history with the club, having swam themselves in the past, presently swim or coach, or have children enrolled as swimmers. The volunteer hours these people dedicate to the club, and most other grassroots sporting organizations, make competitive swimming possible (Dyck 2012). Those roles which the organization did not require to be a legally registered entity – fundraising, gala technicians, technical officials and

³⁵ Of the seven paid coaches at Manta SC between 2018-2021, two of the coaches are women and all coaches were white.

judges, competition organization and swim-a-thons – tended to be filled on an ad-hoc basis, with the elected members appointing additional volunteers when necessary.

Each club will have their own internal politics, hierarchies, and power structures, yet they all are registered and affiliated with Swim England so as to allow the club to host internal and external competitions, and for their swimmers to compete in sanctioned galas at other clubs.³⁶ All the positions required to host a swim meet (other than the coaches) are volunteer positions. Due to the number of officials this requires to run a sanctioned meet the number of volunteer hours dedicated to this sport is rather astounding. For example, take the small army that it requires to run even an invitational meet at a swimming club with four or more clubs participating. The officiating and logistical labour to host a meet requires at least three officials for every lane (18 total if at a 6 lane pool), start and turn judges and manual time recorder; minimum two starting officials; usually two or more running the technological timing systems; multiple additional volunteers packing snacks and lunches and then running that food and water to officials poolside; volunteer parents helping in Team Manager positions to coral and organize swimmers in their club and make sure they do not miss their races; and the marshalling volunteers getting the heats for each event organized in a timely and efficient manner. All these volunteers who have given their evening, afternoon, day, or weekend worth of time for this one event. Of course, the types of galas that clubs host or attend depends on the numbers of competitive swimmers in the club, the ages of those children and youth (and senior swimmers), the skill and speed of those athletes, and the numbers of adult swimmers.³⁷ Even with a smaller inhouse gala where the numbers of volunteers may be fewer, the outlined positions above are all still in play.

3.3.1. Manta SC Squad Structure

The youth swimmers who feature in this thesis were all in what I have termed the “performance squad” of Manta SC.³⁸ This was the top squad, comprising of the fastest youth swimmers in the club, and was coached by both Arthur (head coach) and Warren (assistant coach). The performance squad had swimmers as young as 12 and as old as 21-years.

³⁶ “Gala” is the emic term for swimming competition in the South East of the UK. Throughout this thesis I use “gala,” “swim meet,” and “competition” interchangeably.

³⁷ Senior swimmers here referring to high-performance competitive athletes who hold nationally ranked times and are often the age of majority (18yo) or older, not retirees or those able to claim old-age pensions.

³⁸ There is no standardization of competitive swimming squad labels within England. As such, a club’s squad names are the collective whim of its committee members. This makes identifying a particular club through the names of its squads quite easy. It is for this reason that I have chosen to use pseudonyms for the squads in Manta SC, so as to protect the confidentiality of my interlocutors.

Thus, there were ostensibly two groups within the squad, split along age lines as much as qualifying time results, a junior and senior group. They follow different training programs targeting different competitions throughout the swim calendar and attend training between four to seven practices per week, this later condition depending mostly on biological age. There was a junior squad below this group which consisted of younger swimmers and those who had not yet attained sufficient time qualifications to move up into the top squad. Those in the performance squad all had multiple county times, with several also holding regional qualifying times, and a few swimmers who had attained national qualifying times and swam at British Championship competitions. As the club was only middling in size, they did not yet have enough swimmers at the national level to create a squad of only Senior National swimmers, so they swam at the same time as the regional swimmers. This did not impact the cycles of competition during the 11-month competitive seasons – September through July, with a few weeks break in August and perhaps a week off over the Christmas holidays – as the coaches developed bespoke training plans for their County, Regional, and National swimmers respectively.

Swimming squads in England are organized by a mix of both age-group and achievement level criteria depending on numbers of swimmers, their speed, club size, and available coaches. In this regard Manta SC is no different than many of its neighboring rival clubs as they had a handful of what I am calling “skills” squads. These skills squads are designed as stepping-stone groups where technical skills are developed in line with Swim England’s “competitive swimming” swim lesson stage qualifications (Levels 8-10). Above these skills squads was a more focused “developmental squad” as an additional transition into competitive swimming. This developmental squad gives children and youth a taste for competitive training regimes while also giving them a chance to race at club hosted in-house galas. Below the skills groups were the learn to swim lessons which many clubs ran as a way to generate income and as a feeder into their skills programs. In short, the shape of the club regarding participant numbers from youngest and least skilled to oldest and most skilled squads resembled an obelisk rather than the pyramid-shape so often found among sport clubs.

The numbers of swimmers in the performance squad fluctuated over the course of the research project. At times the group had as low as fourteen swimmers registered, although rarely did they get the full complement out to every practice. The highest number of swimmers in the squad was twenty-four, right before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, with an even split of boys and girls. There was only one black youth who trialed with the performance squad during the 2018-2019 season. He left swimming during the pandemic as

did several other teenage swimmers enrolled in the club (see Sean Heath 2020b). The other swimmers in the performance squad were white. Additionally, there was a paucity of female swimmers sixteen years or older in the performance squad during the first season (2018/2019) of my time with the club with only three girls old enough to attend college or university. In the last season of my research (2020/2021) there were five female swimmers over the age of sixteen, all who had aged up into this designation. With youth heading off to university, gaining speed and skill and attaining higher ranking regional qualification times, or deciding to do something different with their lives, there was a continuous flow of youth in and out of the squad. This makes it sound like the numbers of swimmers in each squad was in constant flux, far from it. Only a few swimmers each year would “move up” or leave from the junior and performance squads, and this would usually occur at the beginning of the season or after the Christmas break in January, the “half-way” marker in the competitive swimming calendrical season. While research has shown there is a decline in participation in physical activity during adolescence despite the touted physical and psychological benefits of physical activity participation (Dumith et al. 2011; Fraser-Thomas, Falcão, and Wolman 2015; D. Gould et al. 1982), it is the singular focus on the highest levels of performance and competition within swimming which, to some extent, undermines the sustainability in the sport with few options for youth to do anything but continue to get faster as they grow older.

3.3.2. Performance and Development Models

The structures of competitive swimming in the UK focus on elite performance, generating winning results, and producing performance outcomes. In this regard, the practice of swimming is can be viewed as any other modern sport³⁹ with its sets of rules, rituals, records and governing institutions (Guttmann 1978). Because of the future oriented focus of achievement, the Long Term Athlete Development model (LTAD) of coaching for performance athletes is still the standard, although the language and name of the model has shifted slightly in the past decade for both Swim England and British Swimming. The model British Swimming developed and launched in 2018, titled the “Optimal Athlete Development Framework” (OADF), focuses on developing athletes to compete at the World Championships and Olympic Games (British Swimming 2018). This framework structures their sport-science based training philosophy. Subsequently they have adapted the LTAD model’s criteria where specific “periods of accelerated adaptation” (Lloyd and Oliver 2012, 62) were seen as key moments to train youths’ specific skills. While the OADF model may

³⁹ For an exhaustive recounting of what modern sport entails through an anthropological lens see Besnier et al. (2018). For an anthropological critique of sport in the modern neoliberal age see Besnier et al. (2021a).

not treat these windows of development as gospel anymore, there is still a modeled trajectory youth are expected to progress along in terms of their physical capacities and technical skill acquisition. Lloyd and Oliver's (2012) "youth physical development model" is one such model that resembles what British Swimming and Swim England are attempting to achieve with their World Class Pathway (Podium and Podium Potential Programs) and Talent Pathway (Swim England Talent 2019b; 2019a), both of which are underpinned by the OADF. The Talent Pathway, led by Swim England, seeks to develop swimmers through from the ages of twelve through to twenty-two where they can compete for and train with the Swim England Performance Squad, which has a total of 20 spots; while the World Class Pathway, led by British Swimming, aims to develop athletes fifteen years and older for their Podium Programs ("Podium Potential" and "Podium") with totals of 30 and 24 spots respectively. While the coaching performance strategies have shifted focus – become more streamline – the legacy of producing high performance athletes at any cost persists. The structure of County, Regional, National, and International competitions in swimming does not leave room within developmental pathways for anything but a constant upward striving for ever increased performance at specified ages.

The OADF model may still have the word "development" in its title, but the main purpose of the Swim England and British Swimming pathway programs is to produce medal winning athletes. These programs have teams of coaches, physicians, physiotherapists, nutritionists, psychologists, sleep therapists, councillors, and the best physiology testing and training facilities that their monetary budgets can provide.⁴⁰ Thus, they are able to provide the best services to a small handful of athletes which allows for this developmental model to flourish. Without the significant resources that British Swimming and the Performance Pathway of Swim England are able to invest, community clubs throughout England do not stand much of a chance in being able to implement the OADF developmental framework to its fullest extent. This means that in the pursuit of glory, of speed, of medals and podium positions, most swimmers and coaches do not receive the support to make this a sustainable model for competitive swimming. Without the additional host of staff to monitor and help develop youth swimmers' skills and abilities corners may be cut, injuries and niggles go undiagnosed or unseen. For example, Jackie (thirty-four), one of the Masters swimmers I trained with at Manta SC, related to me after one Monday evening practice in

⁴⁰ A prime example of this is the "renting" of specially designed 15m jacuzzi-style flume pools sent to a few of the most promising and medal winning athletes on BS's payroll so that they could continue their training in the water, albeit highly altered using bungee cables and the flume (see Lord 2020; McCormick 2020). This occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK where all but essential services were closed by government decree, thus these privileged swimmers only missed approximately 5 weeks of pool time.

October 2019 that at the age of sixteen she began seeing a physiotherapist on a regular basis for persistent shoulder pain and discomfort. She was a 200-metre butterfly specialist swimmer at that young age. Just over a year later she was forced to retire from competition and left the sport, continuing to experience shoulder discomfort decades after her high-performance training days ended. This may be one isolated instance but stories of pain, niggles, and trips to the physiotherapist were commonplace amongst the swimmers at Manta SC, both youth and Masters. These stories point to a disconnect between the often-touted health benefits of swimming as a “lifetime” physical activity, the longitudinal development models which undergird competitive swimming, and the hyper-competitive podium and medal winning oriented ethos embedded in competitive swimming and other modern sports.

Age-Group Competitive Classifications

Age group classifications begin at the age of 10 or 11 years old, where children and youth can be divided up as to their birth year and pitted against each other in competition for ribbons, medals, trophies and glory. Michael Atkinson (2008, 176) defines “age group athletes” as those who pay for their race fees, are registered in a common age and gender classification, and are not professional athletes. All but the fact that youth’s parents must pay their training and race entry fees accurately defines the state of competitive swimming for youth in England. The age classifications at County and Regional Championship competitions in England are organized by biological age by the 31st of December of the year of competition and are repeated as such in event programs: 11/12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17/over. Nationally ranked competitions have only open events, meaning any aged swimmer may attempt to get a consideration time or a qualifying time for the National galas.⁴¹ While a 17-year-old having to race against someone in their mid-twenties or older seems unfair, and it probably is, there are exceptional young swimmers who defy age classifications and generate outstanding performances early in their careers.⁴² Gender separated competition is normalized within the competitive swimming world after the age of 11 years old, where puberty is expected to cause a significant difference in performances between girls and boys.⁴³ There has been a subtle shift in position at the higher levels of swimming competition

⁴¹ British Champs also holds finals for those 17-year-olds as a “transition” category from age-group to open classification.

⁴² These early superstars are often early leavers of the sport, having peaked early and then are unable to maintain that performance level and continue to exceed it over time. They burn-out mentally and physically from the rigours of high-performance swim training regimes, or their bodies are plagued by injury and other physiological problems, which may be caused by the additional stresses placed on these young athletes during their development in an effort to extract maximum performance, for power, speed, and records.

⁴³ For an interesting discussion of the ways in which girls and boys speak about and enact gender in a community swimming club in the United States see Musto (2014).

when it comes to separating genders with the International Swimming League and the Olympics introducing mixed gender relay events in recent years (S. Evans 2021). From my experiences working with clubs in Canada and the UK it is common for locally geographic interclub invitational galas and intraclub galas to feature mixed gender relay events both up and down the age ladder. But this integration at the higher levels of the sport is certainly the exception, not the rule, only occurring in the 4x100m mixed freestyle and Medley relay events.

Understanding what it means to be a youth swimmer in the South East of England requires us to consider the institutions which structure the lives of young people. These systems set boundaries and borders around what it means to be a youth, how one should act as a youth, and when one is expected to perform – both in the sense of competitive performance and social performance – the category of child, youth, or adult. Swim England and British Swimming, as governing institutions for competitive swimming, set limits on youth and seek to fit all young people into neat institutional boxes, often on the basis of age, class, gender, sex, and ethnicity. Social conventions, government and private institutions, law and policy, all factor into the life phases and transitions for young people. Turning seventeen years old is one of those important calendrical markers which has a host of implications for competitive youth swimmers' lives. Once a swimmer has reached the age of seventeen and are entered into the "open" category at competitions they are no longer ranked by their age *and* speed but by their speed alone. Thus, 17-year-olds find themselves competing against others who may have considerably more time training and experience at the higher levels of competitions. Those fast enough and fortunate enough may be incorporated into the Swim England and British Swimming pathways programs where the logic of "optimization" supersedes the long-term developmental growth of the swimmer up to this point. Skills are refined. Strength, power, and speed are increased into a swimmer's mid- to late-twenties, after which retirement from the sport usually occurs if the swimmer has managed to remain healthy and injury free.⁴⁴

If one is to lag behind in ability, there are few squads, let alone clubs, who are focused on continued development of County and Regional swimmers past their early teenage years. Those wishing to continue to swim but are, for a myriad of reasons, unable to attain national qualifying times are often directed to Masters swimming squads or to the inter-collegiate swimming teams if they attend university. Unlike Canada or the US where the

⁴⁴ Of the 80 swimmers named on the Swim Canada website for the National Team as of September 2020, only five athletes were 30 years or older (Swim Canada 2020). British Swimming only provides date of birth information for two out of its 28 athletes, both female, and both of whom are 21 years of age as of the year 2020 (British Swimming 2020b).

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and other university sport programs operate as high-performance training and competition outlets beyond grassroots clubs, there are only the six performance centres in the UK which have substantial competitive swimming programs that meet the national level accreditation for Swim England and British Swimming. As most inter-collegiate sports in the UK are run and operated by students adhering to the British Universities and College Sport (BUCS) governing body, there are vast disparities between the funding and support university swim teams receive. Thus, there is little hope for those athletes who do not attend one of these performance centre affiliated universities or national training centres to race and train at a high level. As with many competitive sports, the higher echelons of performance need to be reached by one's late teenage years or you become relegated to amateur status and directed to swim Masters.⁴⁵

3.4. Conclusion

As with many organized and codified competitive sports which have their origins in the UK, swimming as a competitive discipline garners little attention in comparison to the “big two” (football and cricket) in popular media and scholarly discourse. Swimming has historically been treated mostly as a leisure pursuit within England. Notions of “cleanliness” in Victorian times propelled the building of indoor and outdoor pools across the UK. These new venues then hosted displays of energetic muscularity in early competitive swimming demonstrations where swimming was considered a fight for survival against the water. This fight for survival would be extended to royal mandates for the requirement of the ability to swim for naval officers in the 19th century with mandatory swim to survive education implemented in primary education programs in the 20th century. Only in the later half of the 19th century do we begin to find the formation of swimming clubs in the UK with nearly a hundred-year gap before women were allowed to compete on the world stage in the Olympics.

The distinction between the competitive club world and swimming as a leisure and survival skill still exists in the UK with Swim England, Swim Ireland, Swim Ulster, Scottish Swimming, and Swim Wales being the governing bodies and institutions responsible for swim-to-survive programs, swimming lessons as practical skills for the general population, and for certifying competitive swim clubs in their respective national boundaries. British Swimming is the de-facto conglomerate of these respective nations for high-performance swimming, diving, synchro, and water-polo for the entirety of the UK on the world stage and acts as the intermediary intranational governing body along with FINA the international

⁴⁵ Being relegated to Masters swimming was generally an indication of one's “washed out” status as a competitive swimmer.

governing body of swimming. The complicated nature of the political and cultural distinctions between the nations which make up the UK makes it difficult to navigate the various pathway programs hosted by England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. Due to the peculiarities of the way in which swimming is organized, this has meant that swimmers from the UK generally compete as GB rather than their nation of origin, the Commonwealth Games being an exception.

Manta Swimming Club exists within these complex social and institutional contexts. Not being a large club with multiple national squads nor existing as a small club of a dozen swimmers, Manta SC in many ways was representative of the hundreds of other middle-sized clubs which make up the bulk of competitive swimming in the UK. With a mix of paid coaching staff and the volunteered labour of ex-swimmers and parents, Manta SC has managed to continuously train swimmers and compete as a club for over one hundred years. The youth at Manta SC did not seem to pay too much attention to this designation nor the exploits of past swimmers throughout British Swimming history. Rather, they were concerned with who were the fastest swimmers on the international circuit *now*, when their own next competition was, and how they could improve their body's form and technique to swim fast. Thus, what the youth at Manta SC took away from the complicated systems and models of development designed to produce medal winning bodies was that the progression in speed and qualifying times ran from County, to Regional, to National, to International, with each championship competition providing opportunities to obtain qualifying times for the next level.

Chapter 4. Learning to Feel

What is most striking after spending nearly three full seasons with Manta SC's performance squad is their privileging of haptic modalities, be they tactile, proprioceptive or interoceptive perception. The tactile sense "encompasses the entire body, inside and out" (Le Breton 2017, 95). It involves the epidermis, the skin, and its contact with the materials in the world around us. By taking the view that the human condition is first and foremost embodied, David Le Breton (2017, 95) situates "sensory experience [as] first and foremost tactile experience" for we "feel the surrounding world at every bodily surface and in every instant." For youth, this tactile contact between their own flesh and the flesh of the world is most often exemplified by their immersion in water, the whole of their skin in intimate contact with the liquid medium through which they move. It also involves the slapping and rubbing of their own body parts; high fives, hugs, shoves, and other contact with peers; and the mimicry of coaches on-deck symbolic gesturing of techniques which are then meant to be felt in the water. When youth swim they do not observe their body moving through the water, they do not watch their leg kicks beat up and down, they do not look to see their arms raise out of the water following the path from "finish" to "entry,"⁴⁶ rather they sense this movement.

We perceive the world through our senses which are accorded different priorities in various cultural contexts. Our sensory perceptions are socially constructed through practices of education from infancy (Geurts 2002), and grounded in "a cultural orientation that allows some degree of individual variation" (Le Breton 2017, 3). Euro-American cultural traditions tend to fetishize ocular perception above all other sense perceptions (Geurts 2002; Le Breton 2017). The ways in which youth swimmers' sense and experience the world does not follow this ocular fetishization for their perceptions of their selves, their bodies. Rather, their perceptions are bound in the engagement between fluid materialities of water and the plasticity of their own bodies. Their worlds are amphibious ones that privilege senses of touch, where "different forms of contact and tactile stimulation" (Le Breton 2017, 108) are experienced and acquired through the skin. Put another way, their worlds are felt first before they are seen, heard, tasted, or smelled.

⁴⁶ Finish and catch are both technical terms in swimming used to denote particular parts of a swimmer's stroke and thus arm positions. The basic parts of any swimming arm stroke are the entry (except for breaststroke), catch, anchor, pull or drive, finish, and recovery. The finish, in front crawl swimming, is where the hand has brushed past the hip and the arm is then in full extension after completing the propulsion phase, and the entry is where the arm(s) re-submerge in the water after the recovery above the water.

This chapter is about feel. To feel has a host of intertwined and entangled relational meanings in English which incorporate emotions (I feel happy/sad/frustrated/confused), tactile sensations (this rock feels smooth), states of being (I feel burnt out; I'm feeling confident), and it is used to speak from experience (I feel as though...; I feel like...). To that end, I argue that it is through interrogating the swimming concept "feel of the water," as both an emic and etic term in competitive swimming, that we can grasp (an apt tactile metaphor) what it means for youth to become swimmers. The tactile and kinaesthetic aspects of "feel" and how swimmers come to perceive their interactions with water are only one aspect to youths' experiences of immersion. Feel for the water is a multivariant concept when applied to swimming. It can be loosely defined as a set of bodily capacities. These capacities include the tactile sensing of water, bodily movement (Sean Heath forthcoming) and various techniques and skills comprising enskilled knowledge (Downey 2010b; Carter 2018b; Ingold 2011), prized and cultivated by swimmers, elite or otherwise; and the affective elements of emotion and sociality. Feel also encompasses the social and temporal dimensions to participating in competitive swimming: training with a squad in a club, going to galas and competitions, attending the odd social event, special training camps, the daily and yearly grind of an 11-month-season.⁴⁷ It is their way of being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty 2012), of experiencing their *being* through a sensorium that privileges touch, kinaesthesia and proprioceptive capabilities in and of the body. For this sense of feel is not something which is necessarily singularly trained and inculcated into the body through the techniques and drills youth learn and are taught throughout their careers. Rather, it is the accumulation of lifelong immersion in water, as a swimmer.

I make the argument for tactility as a central sensory aspect of youths' learning, becoming, and belonging (Classen 2005b; Howes 2019; Le Breton 2017; Pink 2015). I do so by exploring the sensory perceptions of bodily engagement in immersive swimming practices through three techniques: Sculling, Spotting the Wall, and Turning. Sculling, the movement of hands and forearms back and forth in the water at speed to propel one forward, is a key technique of the body (Mauss 1973) taught to and improved on by swimmers throughout their development. It is in sculling where youth begin to negotiate their own perceptions of water's feel, along their hands and forearms, in concert with their coach's comprehension of feel and the physics of moving through water. Spotting the wall and turning both demonstrate youths' kinaesthetic perceptions of their bodily movements as they prepare for and execute a turn or a finish. Youth encode the spatial dimensions of the pool in their bodily movements and use their tactile senses to perceive distance and speed, executing complex

⁴⁷ See Chapters 5 & 6 for a further discussion of the social aspects of immersion in competitive swimming.

series of enskilled movements just to turn around and keep swimming. By focusing on sensory perceptions of touch I tease out how youth swimmers learn to feel the water, how they develop techniques to swim fast, how they sense their environments, and how they can, or may be forced to, recall these sensations and techniques, which had been performed unconsciously, to the forefront of perception.

4.1. Embodied Perception

A swimmer's breaststroke, it's almost like a photo page in your passport.

(Warren, Performance Squad Assistant Coach)

In this section I “flesh out” what I mean by “embodied perception” and the “specific sense[s] in which we have access to the world around us” (Ram 2015, 31). Following Thomas Csordas, one of the leading anthropological theorists on embodiment and phenomenology, we can define an intellectual topology of embodiment as an “an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world” (1994b, 12). This, of course, is made possible by the nature of our bodies as “biological, material entities.” Indeed, we both have and are bodies (B. S. Turner 2006, 219) that are active “materials-in-motion” (Ingold 2011, 16). We inhabit our material living body as a physical form. This material body is also the medium with which we perceive the world. It is the “profusion of sensory experience” where “human flesh and flesh of the world combine in a seamless fabric, an ever-present sensory continuity” (Le Breton 2017, 1). To be embodied then is to be “a living being capable of moving and acting in the world” (Downey 2015, 118). Thus, our knowledge and capabilities to move and act in the world are necessarily embodied.

For example, swimmers’ movements in the water embody an understanding of the skills and techniques needed to move through the water in specialized ways. Those enskilled movements, the accumulation of sensory experiences of techniques of the body, convey certain embodied meanings to the onlooker, one of grace and effortlessness as swimmers cruise through the water at astounding speeds. As the above quote from Warren suggests, a swimmer’s movements also convey something of their identity as a particular kind of swimmer and are suggestive of the “society in which [they] are living” (Eichberg 1998, 163). Swimmers’ own “gangly looseness suggests that they are not even exerting themselves” (Downey 2005, 118), especially if juxtaposed to the thrashing lay-swimmer attempting to move quickly through the water. Swimmers themselves sense the exertion of their body through their movements in the water. The water is not the “background decor”

(Le Breton 2017, 3) of their actions, rather it is the centre of their reality. Their immersion in an aquatic environment is defined by their perception of it.

There is no “line in the sand” demarcating the subjective and objective aspects of reality, no clear distinction between mind and body, what is interior and what is of the world. Both are “articulated by attitudes toward experience” (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 89) of moods, emotions, thoughts, feelings, images, judgements, as aspects of experience and properties of physical objects, all of which are informed by a social actor’s historical and cultural conditions. Reality is thus experienced through the body for we do not have access to the world around us, nor the world within us (of us) without the medium of the body (Merleau-Ponty 2012). While on the level of perception “we have no objects, we are simply in the world” (Csordas 1990, 9), we experience the world first and foremost through touch. Le Breton writes, “contact with an object is a reminder of the exteriority of things and others, of the continually shifting boundary that provides individuals with a sense of their own existence, of a difference that both confronts them with the world and immerses them within it” (2017, 99-100). The skin’s surface provides a point of contact between the interior and exterior, the public and private, the objective and subjective, and is a “site of material meaning” that is “saturated with the unconscious and culture” (2017, 97).

The collapse or synthesis of the objective and subjective in an anthropological phenomenology takes our perceptions of ourselves as subjects, not objects, and recognizes that our interactions with physical objects (including other people in the world) entails a profound intersubjectivity. This is true for others, whom we perceive as another “myself” (Csordas 1990, 37). Desjarlais and Throop recognize this intersubjectivity as essential to the philosophical project of phenomenology when they write that “others are recognized as experiencing beings who orient to and abide by the same sharable world as we do, that the bodies of others, which are objects and subjects for us, are often the zero point of their experiential fields and vice versa” (2011, 91). Recognition of intersubjectivity is necessary in the constitution of social life.

In this recognition of intersubjectivity we need to include the world as an active subject in a model of perception and being-in-the-world. Corwin and Erickson-Davis argue for an interactive theory of perception which conceives of perception as the “product of a direct, dynamic interaction of a perceiver-environment system” (Corwin and Erickson-Davis 2020, 174). This theory identifies the world as arising through sensory and perceptual experiences of the reciprocal relationship “between subject and his or her human and ecological environment” (Le Breton 2017, 13). Our interactions within the environment are thus intersubjective in that the environment houses the information about itself, it is not

contained principally in our consciousness. Therefore, the world is experienced in such incredible fidelity because the world is rich and continuously available for our exploration. The perceiving subject interacts in a dynamic process with the world as they move through and with it, thus “the act of perceiving [...] is one of active exploration” (Corwin and Erickson-Davis 2020, 174). The body’s perceived boundaries, particularly the skin provides a limit around the self “to recover a sense of presence” otherwise our sense of self would “dissolve into space like water flowing into water” (Le Breton 2017, 96). By foregrounding the body and its engagement as being-in-the-world in ethnographic analyses our embodied experiences and perceptions can be further understood as being a “temporally/historically informed sensory presence and engagement” (Csordas 1994, 10). Meaning and symbolism cannot be divorced from our fleshy existence because the body has a biological history, yet it is also a cultural phenomenon and must be understood and grappled with as such (Csordas 1994, 4). It is clear then that our presence in the world, our existence as beings-in-the-world, requires this fleshy biological material body. That is why to be embodied, the ways in which the constituent parts of our perception, experience, and engagement as humans, both subjectively and intersubjectively, in particular environments constitutes a being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty 2012), hyphenated because of the interconnectedness of “being” and “the world”. They are inseparably intertwined.

4.2. What Does “Feel for the Water” Feel Like?

Very near the end of practice while Nancy is back sitting on the shallow end bleachers, the swimmers doing their warm down, I ask her “If I was looking for ‘feel for the water’ what would I focus my attention on in practice?” Nancy asks me what I mean, if I mean for myself or from the swimmer in the pool? I reply that that is I guess partly what I am trying to figure out, whether I can pay attention to or perceive some part of “feel” from sitting out and watching the practice. Nancy tells me that “I don’t think you can see feel. It needs to be felt. Like, what does the wind in your hair feel like?” she asks. I brush my hands through my long hair framing either side of my head to simulate a wind blowing motion. Nancy immediately counters that this is a description of what the wind is doing, not of my perception of how it feels. “Maybe if you are looking at distance per stroke, holding still water” she tells me, that is maybe a place where I could “see” what I am trying to describe as “feel.” She recommends and tells me that I need to get in myself to understand feel. I ask if you need to be a county level swimmer or higher to have feel? She thinks that you don’t have to be a highly accomplished and technical competitive swimmer to have “feel for the water.” “I can’t really describe what you do need [to do] or when you have it,” Nancy says, reiterating that I have to get in and “feel” for myself.

For Nancy and other swimmers, the tactile sensation of feeling the water on their skin usually only occupies intentional focus on specific sites of their epidermis, the palms of the hands and forearms for instance, during drill sessions. Generally, the millions of tactile sense

receptors (Linden 2015) registering the pressure of water coating skin and the agitation of minute hair follicles as swimmers move through the water are not the immediate conscious focus of swimmer attention but occupy the “outer” zones of perception. As David Howes notes, “a person may be immersed in tactile sensations, enveloped by the wind or by heat, yet at the same time register minute, local perceptions” (2005b, 28). We may feel the wind in our hair and by focusing our attention to the movement of hair follicles to the foreground of our field of perception describe the interplay of motion between hair and wind. But to know in an intersubjective and sensual way what the wind in your hair *feels* like, or what feel for the water is, requires committing oneself to bodily and sensory engagement (i.e., growing one’s hair or immersing one’s body in water and the competitive swimming lifeworld). The ability to feel the water, in this regard, lies in youth’s body of habit, the collected formation of skills, forms, orientations, and capacities they continuously refine in the present.

This “body of habit” is the combined pre-familiarities as they reside in our body, especially in relation to movement. Anthropologists have used both Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) concept of this “body of habit” as well as Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of “habitus” as ways to account for the technical accumulation of skill in the body (see Wacquant 2004; Hopkinson 2015). Yet Bourdieu’s human body (with the habitus that works subconsciously) is devoid of flesh and blood, being positioned as a “structuring structure” which forces our hand in the way we live our lives, move, have small habits, and behavioural quirks. By incorporating theory from psychology and observations from neuroscience (discussed later in this chapter) we can imbue bodily habits, the habitus, with a fleshiness in and off the world (Downey 2010a).

What I am invoking when I discuss a body of habit, then, are the collected formation of skills, forms, orientations, and “carefully cultivated bodily capabilities” (Downey 2015, 115), which allow us to “pick out’ certain things as significant and to filter out others” (Ram 2015, 36). This can be from the very simple (floating in the water) through to highly complex skills (backstroke to breaststroke “bucket” turn). Youth swimmers, or young athletes of any sport for that matter, may have considerable technical and athletic capacity through years of immersion in training and competitive club environments (Sean Heath 2017). Yet like any novice or apprentice they are still learning the skills of their trade through the bodily repetitions of actions, instruction from coaches and peers, and feedback from their own bodies and other’s observations (Sean Heath 2014). Youth learn new habits, superimposing them on others in “fresh layers of orientation” (Ram 2015, 39). They can literally re-shape their physiology and neurology by adopting new ways of sensing the world (as can the anthropologist). In this way swimming is, as Downey writes, “constantly cultivating all human

tissue, conditioning our neurological systems and sculpting our skeletons, even if this is through neglect or sedentariness. Our ways of life shape our bodies” (Downey 2010b, 318). Youth become equipped with a certain body of habit and “continue to interpret the world through that embodied history” (Ram 2015, 39). Thus, the body of habit is activity situated to the present, from one moment to the next, as each experience of ours is different.

Our being-in-the-world, indeed, our individual and intersubjective experiences with and of other subjects are circumscribed in what has been termed our “field of perception.” We focus our intentions in specific ways and do not take in all sensory information in our environment equally. A field of perception is defined by the limits of our focused attention, composing that which we consciously focus upon and the “‘outer’ zone of perception” that fades towards an “horizon” of what is sensed (Ram 2015, 35). Without this relationship between focus, periphery, and limit horizon “there would be none of the richness that defines a ‘field’ of perception” (2015, 35). In other words, that which we focus upon and the surrounding background materials, items, people, and landscapes, forms a field of perception. This requires an intentionality on the part of the perceiving subject. By intentionality I refer to the “outward-directed quality of our existence” (Ram 2015, 33), our being “in and toward the world” with reference to our focused attention. We may be able to see that there is a horizon, standing on a beach looking out into the ocean for instance, but are unable to pinpoint the exact details of the waves, their cresting and breaking, nor the flotsam and jetsam at the edges of our perceptions. But our field of perception is also malleable in that we can shift it to explicitly focus on the crests of the waves and hear the lap against the shore, or again shift our focus to the rush of the sand and water between our toes and around our feet as we stand ankle deep in the surf. A field of perception is thus the integrated amalgamation of our senses in concert with the boundaries and limits of our intentionality. Indeed, the senses “work together to make the world coherent and habitable” (Le Breton 2017, 18).

In much of the competitive swimming literature the variations of tactile perceptions sensed when immersed in water are reduced to the concept of “feel” as being defined as a mechanical formula for interaction with water (Sweetenham and Atkinson 2003; Taormina 2014). Any cursory internet search of “feel for the water” will pull up countless social media pages, magazines, blogs, and vlogs full of advice on how to improve your feel, to make you faster and more efficient in the water. High performance sport is wedded to sport-physiology through the production of ever faster, stronger bodies. These bodies are often reduced to

bio-mechanical objects, tools for accomplishing sport-particular tasks.⁴⁸ This bio-mechanical form of feel, as defined by sport-physiologists is the amount of traction hands and forearms are able to gain and sustain, and the force applied through increasing pressure and acceleration of arm strokes through the water to move the body forward. “Feel” is therefore an etic term within competitive swimming used to describe the perceptual experience of tactile sensations in bio-mechanical terms, the physical “catch,” “anchor,” and traction points where the shift between moving water and moving one’s body through water occurs.

The scientific and popular literature focused on “feel” often does not recognize the individual variations in sensory perceptions and social experiences which help generate this emerging feel as haptic sensation and cultural concept.⁴⁹ This is where swimmer’s perceptions of their liquid medium divert from common assumptions as to water’s viscosity, and where feel, then, becomes an emic term. For swimmers learn to feel the water by moving through and with it, “holding” it, “anchoring” in it, and feeling its edges, allowing for that forward propulsion and aiding in balance. This is also where traction changes from a mechanical formula to a perceptual experience of touch (sculling), movement, and spatial awareness (spotting the wall and turning). Youth swimmers’ perceptions of haptic sensations, which are often considered as significantly less important in wider English society, are informed by their embodied immersive practices, instruction, observation, and mimesis of techniques of the body. We can think of this learning to feel in multiple entangled ways: 1) as skill acquisition or the capacity for an individual to mimic and demonstrate new movements and techniques with little instruction, as if it were “natural”; 2) this knack is spoken of as a feel for the water by coaches, meaning that the child or youth in question has an understanding – although they may not be able to articulate this understanding with verbal language – of the ways in which they may use their bodies on the water, gain purchase or traction on the liquid medium, to move forward; or 3) as an accumulation of many play episodes (Henricks 2015), which has informed the child or youth’s understanding of the qualities of water.⁵⁰

As Nancy clearly notes in the above quote there is more to “feel” than mechanical kinetics of the human body. When asking “What does the wind in your hair feel like?” Nancy

⁴⁸ For a detailed discussion of the swimming body see Chapter 5. For an early critique of a singular consideration of the body as merely mechanical and physical, sociological or psychological, see Mauss (1973).

⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that the British tend to score quite low when compared to other nations in the amount of social touch which occurs between people in public settings (Linden 2015, 31, 215).

⁵⁰ Attention to the distinction between “play swimming” and “proper swimming” is covered in Chapter 5.

is signalling to the diffuse and specific senses of touch and the necessity to bring this to the fore and focus of our perception. And yet, she cannot describe a specific moment when you do have feel or even how to get it. You might be able to see the effects of feel in a drill such as distance per stroke when swimmers are holding “still” water, Nancy suggests. But it is something which is inarticulable in conventional language. Feel for the water is a *feeling*. In other words, it is a synesthesia of sensory perceptions of touch, movement, emotion, and spatial awareness. It is something lived, learned, explored, and experimented.

4.2.1. Is Water Wet? Perceiving How Water Feels

“The water is cloudy today” says Ida, fourteen, as the youth and I idly pass the time chatting and sitting on a bench poolside as they wait for their heat to be called during this mock race practice. My untrained eyes can’t quite pick out this opacity from the pool deck. “Really?” I ask, gazing intently at the shimmering surface and the outline of the blue and white tiles on the bottom of the pool as they shift and deform. Yara, also fourteen, adds in that she thought the water looked green last night. Ida replies that she found it really hard to concentrate on her swimming yesterday because of the colour of the water. Further intrigued, I wonder aloud asking “How did it feel last night and today?” “Slimy,” Ida says. “Yeah, slimy,” Yara concurs. I ask if this sliminess is changing how the water is feeling today while they are swimming. Yvette, thirteen, adds into the conversation saying, “It’s heavier.” Yara and Ida get up to head over to the blocks for their heat, so I probe Yvette a little more to explain this “slimy” and “cloudy” water. She tells me that it started off nice when they first got this training pool. “Then it went slimy. Well, not slimy, slippery” she says. Standing up she motions with her hands moving them from the outside of her legs to the inside and downwards, I think, trying to communicate the feel of the water sliding over her body and legs or the feeling of moving through the water, a kind of sloughing off or over motion.

Perception of water quality is a central aspect to how youth experience their being-in-the-water and directly informs how they must adjust their enskilled movements on a given race or training day to adjust to these subtle factors. It is the water’s material qualities which make it heavy to move through, heavy to displace, yet slimy and slippery when it is sliding off the body that is not immersed. Water clings to the body, to limbs, hands, and feet. We can imagine the different tactile experiences of viscosity of glue, honey, slime, or clear running water, how slimy, slippery, sticky, or slick they are against the body, how cloying and arduous these substances would be to move through. And yet, like the properties of water, haptic sensations are not static experiences but are ever shifting and transforming perceptions of the entanglements of body and liquid medium.

Another significant quality of water is its wetness. Luci Attala (2020, 25) notes how water makes things wet, “but being wet is not one of its capabilities, although it is part of the experience that one has when touching water. In other words, we get wet when we feel water, but being a liquid is not about being able to wet things. In the case of water, it just happens to do so.” To talk about the quality of “wetness” of water may seem straightforward, like noting that the sky is blue, sugar tastes sweet, and petroleum jelly acts as a lubricant. But the complex sensory perceptions of touch which these youth have cultivated may present them with two socially mediated experiences of the wetness of water.

This became apparent when I asked Ida, Yvette, and Yara whether water was indeed wet?

Yara: Well, yeah! Of course, it is. When you get out you are wet.

SH: But what about when you are in the water?

Ida: Yeah, you just don’t notice it when you are in [the water].

Yvette: It’s like sweat. You don’t notice that you are sweating in the water.

In the above exchange there are multiple principles concerning submersion, immersion, and “wetness” being addressed simultaneously. One principle is that getting wet or being wet is an experience that can be denoted by the lack of submersion. Another is that although submerged you are “wet,” youth perceive the sensations of immersion differently. Instead of being wet during immersion, the water is perceived as an elastic, enshrouding, pressure on the body. In a way, the water clothes the body creating a uniform envelopment around the body.

For youth swimmers the enveloping/enshrouding sensations of immersion – that tactile change of the pressure surrounding the body’s skin – usually only occurs for the brief moments when entering the water. Once fully immersed for a few moments and with some initial movement the tactile perception of fluid envelopment soon becomes as normalized to their perceptions as wearing a shirt, that is, they are not consciously aware of every minute area where the water is touching their skin.⁵¹ These sensations – be they tactile or temperature modalities – recede to the horizon of perception (Merleau-Ponty 2012), able to be recalled and brought forth to the swimmer’s awareness but not impeding the sensory on-goings of experience by overloading their attention with normalized stimuli. Once youth remove themselves from immersion, get out of the pool, water no longer entirely clothes the

⁵¹ This is also true for temperature sense modalities (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2021a), and particularly apparent in the daily deck-side performances of some of the older swimmers as they prepared to get into the “cold” 27-degrees Celsius pool water.

body. Instead, the leftover layer clings to the body and begins to evaporate and slide off. It is the physical act of movement between atmosphere and immersion that creates the perceived experience of “wetness,” for wetness is the relational space between being “dry” and being covered in a layer of water (i.e., immersed). The lack of uniformity to the water’s enveloping presence against their bodies brings a different sensation of touch to the horizon of perception, one that experiences water as wet. This would be true even when caught outside in the rain with no rain jacket or umbrella. These droplets and rivulets of water do not afford the swimmers with the capacity to “catch” the water or “anchor” their arms for forward propulsion. Thus, immersion changes the sensory perception of feel and helps form the swimmer’s sensorium.

Perceiving the water as heavy could be an indication of inefficient technique, or of fatigue. Youth are also taught that their passage through water requires a reduction in drag, the friction of water as it clings to the body’s moving surface. Any body part outside of the hydrodynamic shadow of the body (streamlined position) will decrease their speed. As such, swimming is a sport concerned with an “economy of effort” (Sean Heath 2014), of completing a number of metres in the pool with as little energy expenditure as possible that does not contribute to going fast. The perceptual sensations of drag, or the heaviness of the water, can be modified when wearing a silicone swim cap, racing in a competition “skins” suit, or shaving parts of the body. Particularly shaving the forearms and hands can increase tactile perceptions by focusing intention and the field of perception on those freshly shaved areas.⁵² Highlighting youth swimmers’ perception of the sensory qualities of water provides us a window into the ways in which their material engagement with water leaves a residue on the body, on the person, and vice versa. Water and human bodies shape themselves and the things they find themselves in relation with (Attala 2020, 44), they mould each other.

In examining sense perceptions through a cultural lens that takes account of the “feel” of water as a synesthesia of tactile sensations (touch, kinaesthesia, proprioception, interception, movements, and spatial awareness) within the competitive swimming lifeworld we can explore situations of swimming that “may help reimagine *being* as a transformative engagement of semipermeable bodies with a topologically intricate world” (Mol 2021, 30). In other words, we can begin to comprehend how sensuous immersive interactions come to affect the becomings of these young people.

⁵² Shaving arms and legs was common amongst both male and female swimmers in the performance squad the day before a competition. Male swimmers would also shave their torso. This is done in an effort to reduce drag, to make them faster in the water.

4.3. Becoming Skilled at Feeling

After the initial 4x200m main set piece of the Monday evening Masters practice at Manta SC, I get a thirty second break before starting on the 4x100m piece. My first 100m I add in a better leg cadence, kicking faster, actually using my legs for propulsion rather than just the deadweight they usually are. This raises my hips and ankles up to the surface. I also shorten my arm stroke, trying not to overreach and “gallop,” to increase my stroke rate (how many strokes you can do in a given period of time). This puts me right on top of the water. I feel like a speed boat cruising on the surface, buoying myself up higher out of the water. These 100’s are on a faster pace than I can comfortably hold, with little rest between repetitions. I know I have less rest and have to swim fast but as soon as I hit the wall at the end of the first 100, I immediately know I won’t be able to reproduce that speed. “No way I am going to be able to hold that,” I say to myself aloud as I watch my 10 seconds rest rapidly eaten away by the pace clock at the other end of the pool. I later write in my fieldnotes *“How to get that flying/sitting on top of the water feeling more often?”*

Watching the performance squad youth work their way through a series of breakouts from the wall the next morning Warren tells me that “With any new technique you feel your way around it. Initially you will mostly feel strange, wrong, off when you are learning a new technique. But after a while you feel your way through it.” The best swimmers can self-correct their technique as they have developed such an understanding of their own body. “Swimming by yourself can help you with this,” Warren tells me. With the coach on the deck, you have someone to watch you. Swimmers might be less inclined to think about their own technique letting the coach observe their movements and to tell them what their bodies are doing or not doing. Yet, when swimming by oneself, as Warren often does, he *has* to be hyper aware of his own techniques and how his body is moving in and interacting with the water, his awareness focused on his bodily sensations and his swimming.

Swimming shapes the body through the conscious acquisition of skills and techniques learned and refined to move one through the viscosity of water. In refining my freestyle arm technique by shortening my stroke, I did feel off. My sense of where to catch the water and anchor my arms disappeared as I focused my awareness on the speed of my arm rotation. It seems self evident that repeating the skills of kicking faster and more regularly and shortening my arm stroke will lead to that sensation of flying along the surface of the water. And yet, the skill needed to “fly” along the surface and the cultivation or learning of that skill seem disjointed. By thinking too hard about cultivating a set of skills their implementation seems to slip further away. Thus, at times, “in [swimming] movement, the

relations between my decision and my body are magical ones” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 97), outside of my conscious grasp.

Tim Ingold (2000, 375) outlines what he sees as the five dimensions of skill for the synthesis of different disciplinary perspectives on human experience and the nature of being in and of the world: 1) The use of the body is principal in skill acquisition; 2) Skill is a culmination of a “total field of relations” between “organism-person” and environment; 3) Skill involves care, dexterity and judgement with objects; 4) The development of skill occurs in contexts where novices are allotted specific opportunities for perception and action; and 5) Regular controlled movements of the act itself generates the form of skill. Considered another way, *skill* is our ability to do something, to carry out a particular task well. To be doing a task skillfully includes *being* “willful and responsive, creative and adaptive, infused by desire and attuned to circumstances” (Mol 2021, 88). Perception, then, is a “possible event” occurring as part of a “complex socio-material practice” (Mol 2021, 58). Feeling the water is not a natural effect of the encounter between human and water. It may happen or it may not. In routine situations the “sensorial characteristics” of waters as an object which affords the subject possibilities for enskilment may go unnoticed. Put another way, perceiving or sensing requires active engagement. It is in this attentive awareness where enskilment can occur: *Enskilment* being “the patient transformation of the novice, the change of his or her muscles, attention patterns, motor control, neurological systems, emotional reactions, interactive patterns, and top-down self-management techniques” (Downey 2010a, S36). These ways of attending to and with our bodies are “neither arbitrary nor biologically determined, but are culturally constituted” (Csordas 1993, 140), which is a further elaboration of Mauss’ (1973) discussion decades earlier, about the acquisition of techniques of the body. This culturally constituted acquisition of techniques includes “the culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others” (Csordas 1993, 138). It is through the processes of enskilment that one’s embodied activity becomes habituated through repetitive practice.

In the example above where I focused on my stroke rate, I was attempting to acquire the skill of moving my arms faster while swimming freestyle. The technique to do so is the shortening of the stroke with less forward reach and a quicker and earlier catch and beginning of the arm pulling phase of the stroke. Like wading through a river, or walking in knee-deep snow, immersion in water requires different bodily techniques to move with and through the water. Yet, developing this new skill, ostensibly re-learning my freestyle arm technique, is a hard thing to change.

In the skills of swimming there have been huge changes in the ways in which strokes have been modified to produce maximum efficiency in the water in the past century, even in the past few decades. These habits among swimmers can be seen on an individual level and at a nation level, for “each society has its own special habits” (Mauss 1973, 71-72) and each society has its own traditions.⁵³ Indeed, Mauss argued that “there is no technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition” (75). For example, underwater dolphin kicks off starts and turns wasn’t done in competitive swimming until Jessie Vassallo began to play around with the technique in 1976, culminating in a significant change to swimming techniques during the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games (*How the “Dolphin Kick” Changed Swimming Forever* 2018). Ingold (2000, 387) has likened this innovation of skills and techniques to a “guided reinvention,” where successive generations contribute to “the specific conditions of development under which successors, growing up in a social world, acquire their own embodied skills and dispositions.” In short, swimmers and coaches innovate techniques and approaches to the various swimming lengths and disciplines using non-imitative sets of drills and training exercises. Swimming underwater (i.e., streamline dolphin kick) in a fashion that was acceptable and within the parameters of the sport of swimming evolved from the experimentation of a few athletes and coaches before being developed further by successive generations of swimmers to now be a staple of the sport. This is an important point for perception in swimming contexts because it demonstrates that, like in Annemarie Mol’s examples of eating, “*doing* is not necessarily centred in an embodied individual. It may well be distributed over a stretched-out, historically dispersed, socio-material collective” (Mol 2021, 93).⁵⁴

While we may not all be as amphibious as competitive swimmers, immersing ourselves for hours on a daily basis, millions of people 16-years⁵⁵ and older in England choose to recreate in these bodies of water, although this number has been steadily declining since at least 2016 according to Sport England Active Lives Survey statistics (Sport England 2018a; 2020).⁵⁶ What we can intuit from this data, and the mandatory swim-to-

⁵³ For a detailed examination of Olympic level competitive swimmers mundane habits see Daniel F. Chambliss’ (1989) *The Mundanity of Excellence*.

⁵⁴ For an excellent account of the historically dispersed *doing* of swimming styles in the African diaspora and Atlantic slave trade see Kevin Dawson’s (2018) *Undercurrents of Power*.

⁵⁵ Sixteen-years-old is the chronological age at which youth are considered “adults” for Sport England’s statistical purposes.

⁵⁶ The same trend in reduced participation in swimming has been noted in the Children and Young Peoples survey data for the same time period (Sport England 2019; 2018b). What is also apparent in the survey data is that as children and youth grow older their participation in swimming wanes from nearly 60% actively swimming between the ages of 5-7 years old, to only 14% between the ages of 11-16 years old (Sport England 2019, 15–17).

survive swimming lessons provided in elementary schools, is that many English children and youth get an early education into the bodily techniques of swimming and immersion. Fewer continue in swimming to further develop their “feel for the water,” privileging their tactile senses, broadening their bodily awareness, and crafting embodied identities as swimmers.

Another water specific technique in swimming that has become a staple of the sport and incorporated into “learn to swim” lesson programs on a national level in England is sculling, the movement of the hands and forearms to propel oneself through the water.⁵⁷ The skill of performing a “head first sculling action for 5 metres in a flat position on the back” (Swim England 2018a) is introduced early on in the education of swimmers as a developmental stepping stone in building arm strokes and for learning to feel the water as affording catch and anchor points. The technique involved in sculling requires the hand and forearm to do an in-sweep and out-sweep with the palms at about a forty-degree angle. The palm and forearm should always “feel” the pressure of the water as a solid as though it were sliding up against an angled block in a “VVV” type fashion. Depending on your body position, and on where your hands are, sculling depends on whether it is mostly your palms or also your forearms doing the work of “push-sliding” against the water. Both Arthur and Warren explicitly mentioned the importance of sculling to me and incorporated this skill into their swim sets. Becoming skilled at swimming must incorporate developing good sculling technique, at least within the performance squad.

The enskilment of feel was invoked by Arthur when he decided the squad needed to do some “feel work” after being off for a few weeks over the Christmas holidays. What Arthur means by feel, he tells me after I inquire, is that feel is not about just swimming and pulling water with the hands but also with the forearms. That is why he is getting them to do this gradual set of drills: sculling, then fist freestyle, then open finger freestyle, so that the swimmers get the tactile sense of pulling the water with not just the hand but with the forearm as well. Unlike the rock climber who once a hold is found the fingers and thumb clamp down (Dutkiewicz 2015; Lewis 2000) the swimmer initially catches the water with their hand. The swimmer slides their arm and moves their body forwards on this small hold to then anchor with hand and forearm on an expanded hold they generate through their bodily movements and sense perceptions of their liquid environment. Having to swim with closed fists or splayed fingers denies the swimmer the tactile perception of those catch holds and makes the water feel vacuous, lacking in viscous solidity. It also slows the speed of the

⁵⁷ See Swim England’s (2018a) “Learn to Swim Awards” for stages 1-7 for a comprehensive overview of the skills required to complete each level (<https://www.swimming.org/learntoswim/swim-england-learn-to-swim-awards-1-7/>).

swimmer linking movement perception and spatial awareness with the tactile sensations of water on hands and forearms. Sculling then, as a technique or skill, is meant to improve swimmer's sensitivities to their tactile perceptions so that they may learn to "feel the water" better.

During this set of sculling "feel work" which Arthur decided the youth needed that day, the swimmers' experiment with a variety of body, arm, and hand positions. Everything from synchro-style feet first sculling with arms stretched out above their heads to "mid-point" scull is attempted. Erin and Nick both practice a "mid-point" scull where your arms would be at shoulder level were you lying flat in the water, yet they have modified their body positions to resemble being seated as they scull through the water. I see Erin and Yara both flip their body position 180 degrees, doing a half tumble turn in slow motion and exaggerating the straight legs coming over the top of the water (like a large whale fluke cresting in the air before slapping down in the water). Walking the width of the pool in the shallow end towards lane 6 I see Yara place her feet on the wall in a chair position while her head and arms are still floating at the surface. She then exhales and submerges the rest of her body in the water, sculling furiously to sink her back to the bottom of the pool, still in this chair shape. The youth play with the different scull movements, motions, and bodily positions afforded by their buoyancy, physicality, and feel.

Rather than view the process of learning as a dichotomy between "mindful swimming" or "switched-off swimming" (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020a), as a "self-oriented project of perpetual improvement-focused embodied labor that is accomplished reflexively and iteratively" (Throsby 2016, 28), or as a "reifying mind-body dualism" between "embodied knowledge and constant, objectifying self-critique" as seen in boxing (Hopkinson 2015, 196), I view learning enskilled movements and ways of perceiving the self in the world as a dialectic between unconscious nature of enskilled movement and something consciously worked upon. This is the very process which I describe above when the performance squad youth were practicing their sculling. They know how and where to catch the water and anchor forearms during the different strokes and may be more adept at a particular stroke than others. But in refining their sense of feel and exploring ways to move while sculling they bring various techniques, skills, and senses to the fore of perception and then move them to the background, oscillating between a focused awareness and an embodied swimming.

At Manta SC, youth develop and incorporate new practices, new orientations, and new skills in their immersive becoming. They are doing more than "simply acquiring techniques of the body: they are also tuning their perceptions and actions, thereby creating a

culturally and neurologically distinctive way of being. [...] Put another way, biology may be shaped in part by the types of cultural preferences manifested in athletic practices” (Dyck 2015, 301). Every swimmer has a singular historical and biological experience with water, from their earliest years being bathed and washed, to parent-and-tot classes at the local swimming pool, or weekend and summer holidays spent lake- or beach-side playing in the water and developing a “feel for the water”. Each unique experience with water will subsequently shape conditions of change, sculpting the senses and perception of one’s environs, and leading to a deepening of embodied knowledge. This evolution of developmental systems of techniques, training through repetitions of sets of drills, thousands of kilometres swum, and millions of shoulder rotations completed, and the skills and capacities to swim fast coincides with the habits of a lifetime of, playing in, diving under, swimming through, and being-in-the-water.

In the following sections I use the examples of turning at the wall and spotting the wall to highlight how youth’s sense of feel can be thrown from the background of perception to the fore of their conscious attention, as something that needs to be worked on and refined. Spotting the wall is also used to discuss the layering of learning to feel, becoming skilled, and incorporating spatial awareness into their enskilled knowledges.

4.3.1. Turning and Spotting the Wall

The training required to progress to ever faster times requires a considerable amount of effort, both physically and mentally. Maintaining a high kick cadence, pushing the limits of breath holding off turns with fast dolphin kicks for maximum distance underwater, accelerating hand and arm through the finish of a stroke and relaxing those muscles during recovery, rolling the body to the correct angle in freestyle and backstroke, these are just some of the hundreds of minor adjustments to techniques swimmers might be considering or asked to focus on during a given practice. Learning a new technique is especially taxing cognitive work, requiring intense concentration in correctly implementing techniques to improve one’s performance. Fortunately, many of these known techniques are able to be accomplished habitually by swimmers as they have practiced them thousands of times, which allows swimmers to “switch off” and “just swim,” relying on what McNarry et al. (2020a, 13) call “highly technical pre-reflective bodily know-how.” Thankfully, some of youths’ effortful embodied practices may take place in this flow state, famously coined by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008) to describe an “optimal experience” where people lose their sense of time, of themselves, in an effortless state of concentration. Many activities can active this flow state, from painting, to running, playing an instrument, and even

writing. Youth swimmers may experience flow in the various intensities of training from the short bursts of high intensity speed training to the longer endurance sets where the kilometers are paced by the tempoed rhythms of the body. And yet, a shift in the environment, a growth spurt, or an injury can pull youth out of this “flow,” out of immersion where they are suddenly confronted with what they had though previously incorporated into their enskilled knowledge.

Even a seasoned competitor like Nancy takes the time at a competition to feel the water. She makes perceptual adjustments are made when swimming in new locations, exploring the full range of her tactile and kinaesthetic sense perceptions, in preparation for her races.

I can get in on a race day and panic cause the water feels different. [...] So, if I get in and I feel that the water is slipping, I can't really explain it any more than that, so I'll do an arm pull and I'll feel like I've got nothing to push against. So, it almost feels like you are pushing a moving object rather than you are pushing a stationary object. Then you don't get the power from it. I describe it as slipping. So, like, the water is slipping from me, and I'm like "oh no!", like I don't feel good or like it's...the water feels...I say the water feels slippy which is so stupid, cause water is water [Nancy laughs heartily]. If I get in on a race day and I'm like, "Oh no, the water is slipping," I will spend probably longer warming up. 'Cause I just want to alter my hand position maybe, or my arm position in the water, and just try and almost like boost me internally. Like my self-confidence. So that I know I can get in and be powerful.

Perception of water quality is a central aspect to how youth experience their being-in-the-water. Swimmers perceive the water as affording fast movement, where and how to catch the water and anchor forearms to move expertly and efficiently, to fly through the water in an undulating cadence. Perceiving the water as slimy or one's limbs as slipping affects perception, opens or closes affordances and capacities one has to swim fast, directly informing how they must adjust their enskilled movements on a given race or training day to adjust to these subtle factors. Equally, the emotional capacity to be confident in one's skills, training, senses, and abilities is affected by perception of waters' quality. Thus, feel here is intertwined between tactile and emotional senses. Nancy needs a boost to her self-confidence to feel more powerful when she finds herself disjointed from immersion. In adjusting her tactile sensory perception of competition water, she re-centres her emotional state. When the various factors of immersion are disjointed the tacit knowledge of bodily movements are suddenly thrown into conscious relief. Sensory perceptions of touch must then be worked upon to move them back into the unconscious realm of enskilled knowledge.

Yvette, thirteen, had recently gone through a significant growth spurt of several inches making her the tallest girl in the squad at the time. After watching her miss a few

turns in practice, which resulted in her noticeably lifting her head up to “peek” at how close to the wall she was before she turned, I asked her how she “spotted” the wall in a turn.

Yvette: When you do a turn, like I had it set down, like I knew exactly when I was doing my turn. And when I turned, I was either really close to the wall. So, I had to figure that one out. And then I grew a bit more, and then I had to figure it out. And then I've just kind of given up. So then, like, I'm trying to figure out now where it is.

SH: So, every time you grow you sort of have to re-learn how far away from the wall you need to be?

Yvette: Yeah, 'cause I don't know how long I am, if you know what I mean. I take a long time to adjust, to see how many strokes I need to do into the wall. But I'm starting to not do [counting of] strokes, just like figure it out in my head, like when I need to go [start the tumble turn]. And it is working.

The perception of the distance to the wall, how fast one's body is moving through the water, the speed and timing of stroke rate and arm position, and the shape of one's own body, are all factored into youths' calculations as they cruise into the wall to turn or to finish. Through senses of touch, movement, and spatial awareness they develop the measure of time and distance using the movement of their own bodies as speedometers. Yvette's ability to measure distance and time with her body has shifted due to her physiological growth spurt as she moves into puberty. In essence, her immersion has been disjointed by her own growing body, which can have subtle ripple effects on her emotional immersion (see Chapter 6) in the activities of swimming and immersion in various sensations of pain (see Chapter 7). She is having to recalibrate and adjust to a new sense of feel, albeit slowly, of how to time her turns and finishes. Put another way, Yvette is forced into new ways of “*inhabit[ing]* space and time” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 140 emphasis in original), fitting her sense perception into a new bodily form.

Learning to feel the water takes time, innovation, and experimentation on the part of the novice and for those already skilled in swimming fast as the above examples of Yvette and Nancy attest. Senses of touch must be cultivated in shaping the sensorium of the swimmer. Part of this is the mundane but purposeful hours of instruction and immersion in water, while another part is playing with how one's body moves in the water, feels the water.

Turning on the wall at speed is a combination of techniques with slight variations in all four of the strokes (fly, back, breast, free). These techniques also incorporate other senses, including sight to spot the wall and sound to judge depth after a breakout, albeit as subtle cues informing youths' senses of movement and speed. Breaststroke and butterfly are nearly identical in their technical enactment of turning as the enskilled movements for

breathing techniques allows youths to see the wall ahead of them at the surface of the water. In freestyle and backstroke, the head position is such that you are looking directly at the bottom of the pool or ceiling respectively, unable to see the impending wall. The visual cues indicating one's distance to the wall when swimming these latter two strokes come from coloured lane rope markers at ten and fifteen metres, the change in colour patterns in the first and last five metres of the lane rope, the backstroke flags, and the black line down the centre of each lane ending in a "T" 1.6 metres from the wall. One's perception of these distance markers shifts slightly if you are swimming at your home facility or away at a gala, or in a twenty-five or fifty metre pool, despite the fact that the built environment and infrastructure of pools tends to be relatively standardized.⁵⁸ The visual cues listed above are just some of the sensory data perceived while swimming a single length. Yet most of this sensory experience occurs subconsciously at the horizons of perception, incorporated as it were into the spatial awareness and enskilled movements of swimmers.

During several of the practices I attended with the Masters squad of Manta SC I missed planting my feet on the wall during the odd freestyle tumble. Somersaulting too early, my feet failed to meet the expected resistance of the wall when they kicked out in what should have been a squat push-off under the water. Instead, I ineffectively pushed them through the water with no change in my direction of motion, legs flailing uselessly, pushing with no purchase. I had to furiously dolphin kick in streamline to the surface just to counteract my momentum which was still taking me towards the wall I meant to push off from. This accidental miss when performed intentionally is what is called a "dead turn" in swimming jargon, as you are "dead" in the water, not moving. More accurately, you are moving slightly in the wrong direction towards the wall you meant to push off from as that was the direction of your momentum before you summersaulted. These dead turns were employed by the performance squad coaches as a training technique only a few times in my presence. They require a high intensity energy output to accelerate back up to swimming pace.⁵⁹ This unusual acceleration phase feels as though you are, metaphorically, spinning your tires like a drag race car on the starting line, before traction *on* and the hydrodynamics of movement *in* water seem to take effect, allowing you to move forward once again. I missed the wall in my tumble turns as the new pool environment, although standardized, had

⁵⁸ Due to the codification of rules and measures for competition most training pools built in the past 70 years tend to conform to the standards of measure for competition (i.e., they are 25 or 50m long, unless you are in the US where they still have 25-yard pools). Leisure pools, water parks, and wave pools and other privately built "personal pools" are, of course, built for different purposes.

⁵⁹ On energy, Mol (2021, 40) comments that "energy is a material, all right, but it is not a thing a person may look at, hold in their hands or brush up against. Instead, energy engenders processes; it allows for action." In this instance, the action of changing my direction of movement.

subtle differences presented to my senses (the texture of the wall tiles, the colours of the lane ropes, the depth of the pool, the sounds of others swimming beside me, swimming counter-clockwise in the lane). I had developed a feel for this skill prior to swimming with the Masters squad but became disjointed from my sense of feel (spatial awareness and timing) in this new physical and social environment and had to consciously work on incorporating the space into my sense of feel. I had to learn to feel the water in this new environment to be able to accurately spot the wall for a tumble turn.

Learning to spot the wall and to turn requires that swimmers develop their tactile senses to know how their movements feel without necessarily seeing how their movements look. Knowing one's body well enough to produce certain actions (e.g., spotting the wall and turning) and having a visual image of the physical self at the forefront of one's thoughts are often incommensurable. It is through repeated practice that swimmers learn to tune their sensory perceptions during the embodied act of swimming to incorporate the minutia of tactile sensations into their repertoire of enskilled movements. Indeed, sight and feel are incorporated into the *feeling* of swimming. Thus, doing an action that one has mastered may not require the visual image of the body performing that action. Downey notes that capoeira practitioners "know well how a movement feels and how to do it without knowing how it looks" (2005, 43). As swimmers do not have mirrors lining the pools where they swim, they are reliant on the sensory perceptions – primarily tactile – of their bodies, not on visual reflections for knowing movements. If there were mirrors lining the floor and walls of the pool, swimmers could then *look* to position their bodies and then *feel* how this new position of movement when executing "correct" movement.

Mirrors are not widely employed by swimming clubs but are occasionally used for younger swimmers to see their body positions in the water, ultimately with the intent of having those young swimmers learn the feel of those different body positions. Leo Hopkinson discusses the use of mirrors amongst amateur boxers in Canada and the UK. He argues that the boxer learns to objectify their body using a mirror by identifying with the coach's gaze, verbal instruction, and physical manipulation of limbs. The sensing body and perception of selfhood in Hopkinson's boxer is articulated through these intersubjective engagements with their mirror image, the coach, and other boxers. In Hopkinson's words, "novices learn a dualistic appreciation of self by objectifying their body in individual parts, while beginning to engage with the sport as embodied, sensory subjects" (2015, 180). The role and function of the mirror, in various sporting contexts, is a "cultivated engagement, generated intersubjectively, and that informs a specific appreciation of self" (2015, 188). These sensing, sensory bodies work in concert to confirm one's own and the others sensory

perceptions. My question is this: How is this intersubjective engagement to be articulated when no physical contact is involved between coach and coached? How must one learn to objectify themselves without their mirror image, with only their sensory perceptions from their embodied perspective?

For swimmers, there is no association confirmed by an intersubjective experience of tactile perception between coach and swimmer. Very rarely, if ever, do competitive swimming coaches touch swimmers.⁶⁰ Instead of through touch, sight, or sound it is through time, performance, shape, self-report, and *feel* with which coaches and swimmers must articulate and confirm the other's sensory perceptions (more on mimetic communication and learning in the next section). Rather than disarticulating the embodied subject (the swimmer) into individual units (hands, arms, legs) the emergent dualism of Hopkinson's boxer incorporates both perspectives simultaneously into a corporeal schema of mind-body. Boxers learn intersubjectively, with their mirror image and along with coaches, how to get to "know their bodies at the disposal of their minds" (Hopkinson 2015, 187). They learn to objectify themselves. Their movements become *that* right jab, or *those* hips. For swimmers' it is the *I* which articulates *myself* when directing awareness towards a way of enskilled movement. When *I* focus my attention on *my* hand when I perform a feet-first scull, the relationship between the material of the water and *me* is one with no distinct boundaries or disarticulated objects. Swimmers' do not need to see their opponents while racing and barely see their own hands and forearms as they swim but they are aware through visual, auditory, and proprioceptive cues of their spatial environments. If there are no mirrors, then I must *feel* my body using a sensory plethora of cues: the strain of my muscles, the stretching of tendons, the flexibility or lack thereof of my joints and ligaments in different directions, the sound of my feet breaking the surface as I kick. I *do* use sight to help with the subtle correction of my own body, but only for those parts of my body that I can easily view within my limited field of vision while swimming. This privileging of tactile senses over vision makes the use of a mirror in swimming contexts less applicable than for Hopkinson's shadowboxing pugilists. In swimming I must *feel* the water in my interaction to accomplish propulsion. I transform *myself* to perceive the water in a way that affords this forward propulsion. This, in turn, transforms the water from a viscous fluid to an extension of *me* which affords me various capacities of movement.⁶¹

⁶⁰ For a discussion of physical contact between coach and swimmer see Scott (2013) and Lang (2015).

⁶¹ Much of my thinking in this section is indebted to Annemarie Mol's (2021) discussion in *Eating in Theory* on *being* and *doing*. There she offers a model of *being* through practices of eating that have

With eyes trained either on the bottom of the pool, or ceiling, the only vision swimmers have of their body is their arms and hands as they recover over the water, catch the water, anchor in, and pull through past their field of vision. They need not look where they swim, for even the youngest of the performance squad (12-years-old) learn through enskilment the measure of the distance between the backstroke flags and the wall. As Yvette put it, “Yeah, you just feel it. Especially in this [my home training] pool, ‘cause we have been swimming here quite a long time now. Like I know when to do it. But then other pools I have to count [arm strokes] because I haven't swum a lot there before.” Each set requires hundreds of turns in a twenty-five-metre pool. Due to the complexity of movements required to swim, repeated ad-nauseum (Bourdieu 1977; Wacquant 2004), many of these skills are performed without conscious attention being focused on where the wall is or how many strokes need to be finished before a tumble turn is initiated. Otherwise, swimming would be too mentally exhausting if the minutia of each technique and skill was executed with focused attention. From the tens of thousands of lengths (and subsequent turns) competitive youth swimmers do each year, through the mundanity of those repeated techniques, they incorporate the dimensions of the pool into their embodied practice, getting to know intuitively how many strokes it takes before turning into the wall at the different speeds they swim.

Being able to “spot” the wall also includes the use of various senses but is dominated by tactile perceptions of movement. Youth swimmers measure that space between themselves and the wall with the movement of their bodies through proprioceptors and interoceptors in the skin, joints, muscles, and organs, the lift of one’s body in the water, and the tactile sensations of water’s friction on their skin. While asking her to walk me through a breaststroke race during an interview 14-year-old Ida described “spotting the wall” at the finish of a race.

Ida: When you get to halfway, when you can see the wall, you need to like judge how many strokes you need to do. ‘Cause you don't want to come into the wall like that [elbows tucked into her sides, at the end phase of the breaststroke pull, just beginning the recovery section of the arm stroke, so that the arms are bunched up close into the body beginning to thrust forwards but with the palms facing the imagined direction of motion]. Or you don't want to have to glide too far.

the world move through us, rather than our usual perspective of moving through the world. She additionally offers a model of *doing* which considers actions and notions of the self as spread out through time and space “beyond the skin lining of a single body” (2021, 94). Extending this to swimming I make a conceptual leap by combining these notions of worldly movement to consider moving *with* water. For we both move through water while water moves through us.

- SH: You don't want to have your arms bent?
- Ida: So you have to try and spot how many strokes you need to do. And if you need to speed it up a bit so you can get it right, perfect. It needs to be like [she has both arms outstretched, shoulder distance apart, fingers pointed upwards and wrists flexed backwards]
- SH: the full extension, touching the wall?
- Ida: Yeah.

In considering how many strokes it takes to “come into the wall,” Ida uses her sense of feel to judge the way she is moving through the water on a given swim. Considering breaststroke to be her number one stroke and having swam thousands upon thousands of meters of it, she perceives through feel how efficient her strokes are, how much water she is holding with each pull, the distance she went underwater on the dive or push-off, and the distance left into the wall from around the five-meter mark. She does not list off these aspects of perception but rather demonstrates her enskilled knowledge through bodily gestures.

Ida has developed a spatial awareness of the pool, despite the fact that she cannot see herself swim, cannot watch her limbs enter and exit the water, and cannot observe her leg action as the coach does standing on the pool deck. Swimmers only ever get to “see” themselves through the mediation of technology by observing recordings of their swimming strokes above and below the water. They must instead perceive their body’s movements through senses other than sight. Swimmers must “feel” their way through swimming strokes and drills, perceiving the minute shifts and changes to their body’s trajectory as they pitch and roll, reach, catch, and pull the water.

4.4. Learning through Watching and Doing

I can't describe what that feel is, but it happens.

(Warren, Performance Squad Assistant Coach)

Earlier in this chapter I made the argument that articulating the sensory perceptions of *feeling* in “feel for the water” is nigh impossible to do merely in words. Sometimes, when words fail, it is better to communicate through other means. Coaches, who were also once competitive swimmers, have enskilled knowledge of water’s transforming affordances. They also know, to varying extents, the bio-mechanical physiology of the “swimming body” and how humans “ought” to move to facilitate the quest for an economy of efficiency while swimming. This knowledge they must communicate to youth in ways they can comprehend, knowing full well while swimming you cannot see much of your body (at least in real time). Coaches become reliant on the socially cultivated sensory perceptions of touch which youth

are “supposed” to have developed by the time they reach the performance squad. In the quote from Warren above he plainly states he is unable to describe in words “what that feel is” when discussing the transition from ungraspable liquid to catchable water. But he has the enskilled knowledge and cultivated tactile perceptions to be able to *feel* it, to know when *feel* “happens.”

For youth swimmers, and even for coaches (this is true of professional athletes in other contexts as well), the vocabulary to describe a particular bodily action may escape them. They literally cannot find the words to describe what technical correction or adjustment they wish another swimmer to mimic, or they may not have been introduced to the verbal vocabulary in the first instance. When words failed, swimmers and coaches communicated through gestures, employing mimesis to learn by watching and doing. Youths are more acutely aware of the incompleteness of their knowledge because they are told constantly that they do not yet know enough, they are still learning. In other words, their knowledge of themselves and their practices is incomplete, and they know it. Describing these visual kinaesthetic acts verbally may also require painstakingly long and descriptive language to convey what could be accomplished in a simple bodily movement. Swimmers can describe, without words, the movements and motions required to accomplish an arm pull, stroke, to change body position, scull, or even to help correct stroke cadence. They may know well how to perform a particular technique and would often demonstrate a movement or technique to their peers while standing on the pool deck, using an embodied form of communication.

Youth swimmers, in many ways, drew on their mimetic abilities to interpret the enskilled movements of their coaches. Coaches would express and perform gestures of techniques while standing on the pool deck that aimed at teaching and training the bodies of younger swimmers.

During the warmup swim Arthur stops Ida at the shallow end wall while she is doing freestyle by grabbing her kickboard, dropping it in the water so it taps the top of her head as she flips and then her feet land on in as she tumbles over to place her feet over the water and onto the wall. Arthur, looming over the bulkhead, doesn't say anything as Ida pops up out of the water to stand in the shallow end and look up at him with mirrored goggles. He mimes a freestyle arm entry with hands “entering” the water and crossing over the midline of his body, so that each hand ends up in line with the opposite shoulder before initiating an anchor and pull. Still bent over at the waist, Arthur then waggles his finger side-to-side and shakes his head in a “No” gesture. He then repeats this freestyle arm stroke, this time pointing his elbow high towards the ceiling to produce a triangle peak with his arm. He then rotates his whole torso so that the bent arm extends forward with pointed hand slipping through the “surface” tension of the imagined water about a foot in front of his head. This time having his arms

extend out in front of each of the respective side shoulders, not crossing that body midline. "Got it?" Arthur asks. "Yeah," Ida says before ducking back under the water to continue the warmup. I continue to watch her swim over the next few hundred metres and notice she has corrected the crossover of her arms past the midline of her body while swimming freestyle.

These "fish out of water" gestures, that may at times resemble interpretive dance moves,⁶² were reproduced by swimmers and coaches alike using their arms and bodies on the pool deck. The above conversation between Arthur and Ida took only four words. These words were only used to confirm that the mimesis of swimming techniques was communicated through bodily gestures and interpreted correctly. Mimesis can be understood as the learning and communication of bodily movements and sensory capacities, occurring through verbal, visual and gestural means. These forms of mimetic embodiment are deeply physiologically and neurologically rooted (Downey 2010a) but also consist of diverse "styles" of embodiment, "as the ways in which humans are bodily 'thrown' into the lived world also varies, by physiology, habit, and training" (Downey 2015, 120). Following this we can say that the enskilled knowledge that swimmers learn is never identical to the embodied skills of their coaches and trainers (Downey 2005; Wacquant 2004). This is because the learning process in any physical activity is a discovery, interpretation, or reinvention which offers us "opportunities to perceive things and develop skills; it does not inject an unvarying body of tacit knowledge in the student" (Downey 2005, 49). Using her mimetic abilities, Ida demonstrates her understanding and interpretation of Arthur's gestures by performing the "correct" technique.

Humans have remarkable mimetic abilities due, in part, to how representations of kinaesthetic and motor abilities (our perceptions of others' actions and imagined actions) overlap in similar neural pathways and systems in our brains (Kiverstein and Miller 2015; Schwenkreis et al. 2007). According to Downey (2010a, S28), "we may perceive others' actions as meaningful by converting them into first-person simulations, with significant consequences for intersubjective relations among people. [...] In other words, motor perception is inherently, neuroarchitecturally, intersubjective." While speaking specifically about the mimesis that occurs in learning the Afro-Brazilian art form capoeira, we can see how Downey's point more broadly speaks to the mimesis found in all human movement. Indeed, this perception of movement may not even need to be converted consciously by the observer to generate a cognitive representation.

⁶² See Dutkiewicz (2015) for a vivid ethnographic description of rock-climber's interpretive dance like forms of bodily gestures meant to reproduce the route and hand/fooholds of a particular climb.

Studies looking at mirror motor neurons suggest that the same areas of the brain are active while we observe directed action, particularly when we interact with objects in the world (Caramazza et al. 2014). This is true for when we learn a new action as our understanding is mediated by those same motor neurons that control our movements. In other words, the action is re-enacted in our brains as we learn it without moving our bodies but using similar and overlapping parts of our brains (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2010). What this means for the study of competitive swimming is that the neuroarchitectural pathways of learning through mimesis, and the tuning of sensory perceptions of movement, are more than just visual forms of “gestural vocabularies” (Safina 2020, 79). This imitative learning through training and perception of specific actions will conjure up the kinaesthetic sensations of those movements in many cases (Berthoz 2002): The neurological activity of the imitator “swimming through the motions,” as it were, before the bodily training commences. This imitative learning, of embodiment and semiotics, thus combines in the expression and perception of senses of touch and movement, of feeling, intersubjectively between coach and swimmer (Downey 2010a). Feeling the water, then, may be felt by the gestural demonstrator (coach) and imitator (swimmer) alike.

If words are, as Carl Safina describes them, “at best a loose cargo net of labels that we throw over our wild and woolly perceptions” (2020, 81), then it is in the subtle, or overt, gestures and enskilled movements where learning and communication may best be observed. Swimmers used these gestures to comment, critique, and reply to both verbal and gestural language. Ida’s description in the previous section of the action of touching the wall, how not to come into the wall short, and how to correctly “finish” in breaststroke at the finish to “get it right, perfect,” involved her enactment of this technique. Dispensing of descriptive words for spotting the wall using her tactile senses, instead Ida relied mostly on gestures to communicate a huge amount of information. She extended her arms at the end of a breaststroke pull to reach forward to touch an imagined wall, demonstrating her enskilled knowledge. Here, she is relating a whole cultural convention of how to go about performing certain swimming techniques correctly while relying on my mimetic abilities and her own education, experience, and bodily knowledge of nearly a decade of swimming instruction to demonstrate how to spot the wall and turn while swimming breaststroke.

Even swim coaches (and anthropologists) may need to do an action, feel a specific movement, and use that to think with, before demonstrating that movement to their swimmers. While writing fieldnotes on youths’ enskilled knowledge and communicative gestures I had to go through the motions of different catch points, anchor positions, and arm strokes. Standing up from the desk where I was writing I mimicked the motions of sculling,

remembering, feeling, and imagining the sensations of water on my hands and forearms, my body “knowing” how to do these techniques in the water, but when removed from immersion the lack of haptic feedback and tactility of my environs seems alien. I even find myself needing to look in a mirror to describe the exact placement and rotation of shoulder and elbow in freestyle catch having an awareness of the feeling of these bodily movements but at a loss of the vocabulary to verbally describe them without seeing the motions. Even in writing this passage I am unable to escape the embodied aspect of these sets of movements.

The layering of human’s neuroarchitecture of visual perception and tactile senses of movement, and imagined or extrapolated actions, provides us with mimetic capacities to learn and communicate embodied knowledge. Meaning is conveyed via the demonstrated physical movements these youths use to describe feel, which is predicated on years of shared experience in competitive swimming. Through repetitive training and imitation, youth swimmers come to translate the external stimulus of another’s movements through their own sensorium. Rather than water having a dulling effect on swimmers’ senses, mimetic learning and communication heighten the perception of certain senses while in the water – touch, buoyancy, kinaesthesia, and movement.

Why mimetic learning and communication of enskilled knowledge matters for my discussion of learning to and becoming skilled at feeling is simply that the senses of touch these swimmers cultivate in learning to “feel the water” is an intersubjective experience of perception. It is a shared and interactive experience between swimmer, water, and coach where materialities and processed are enacted in multiple ways and yet converge. The sum of what “feel for the water” feels like is more than its parts. Feel for the water therefore mirrors immersion as a holistic experience of a lifeworld.

4.5. Conclusion

Touch is arguably the most immediate sense with which we experience the world, for even light and sound reach our body as waves of light and air and are perceived through these tactile interactions. Youth perceive their immersion in water first and foremost through their sense of touch as the water “envelops the skin and reminds individuals of their bodily depth, of the satisfying sense of their boundaries” (Le Breton 2017, 118). Once in, children love the water and never want to get out (Le Breton 2017). It is the same with the performance squad swimmers. Tactile senses are privileged and heightened as youth train and cultivate a feel for the water during their apprenticeship in competitive swimming. They perceive the various qualities of waters they swim in, whether that water is slimy or like moving through treacle.

The sense of touch for these swimmers then is also intimately tied to bodily experiences of movement. What the ethnographic examples above and the literature presented points to is an embodied experience inalienable from the perception of that individual. Senses of touch, haptic movement, and affective experiences are inseparable parts of learning to feel immersion. In this sense, the concept of “feel” can be understood as an opening into the world.

Feeling immersion and learning to feel are initially experienced through the skin, what Le Breton has referred to as “a matrix of the other senses” that comprises a “vast geography that nourishes other sensory domains” (2017, 95). From learning to grasp these tactile sensations where water can be perceived as more than a liquid and it can be interacted with it, in part, as a solid (for example, you cannot “anchor” your forearm in a liquid as a ship’s anchor is cemented on the sea floor), to demonstrating speed and distance as enskilled knowledge, to learning to translate and feel gestural communication through mimetic abilities, the senses of touch pervades all aspects of immersion and being-in-the-water. The body’s techniques which involve touching and movement “plays a central role in the possibilities of learning, metamorphosis, and adaptation” (Le Breton 2017, 102-103). From a performance-oriented understanding of the physics and mechanics of swimming “feel” specifically refers to the ways in which an athlete moves in, through, and with, the water. In a technical sense, it is the swimmer’s haptic sensation of applying force to water in such a way that the hand and forearm “anchor” in place, propelling the body forwards with an arm stroke. Feel is thus a technical term used by coaches and swimmers to describe and communicate specific ways of interacting with water. But “feel for the water” is more than the sum of the mechanical aspects of tactile perceptions of traction and mechanical movements. It pervades all aspects of a swimmer’s experience in swim club. From their social worlds to their emotional states, from the physical movement and technical knowledge to understanding their own growing bodies, the mental and physical rigors of club swimming on a daily and weekly basis, and the perceptual experiences of being-in-the-water. These are all part of learning to “feel” immersion.

This chapter contributes to larger theoretical discussions within the social sciences on the nature of embodiment, sensing, and perception by arguing that the physical practices of moving in, through, and with water generates a distinctly fluid intersubjectivity where water’s properties have agentic qualities that dramatically effect youths being-in-the-world. Swimming is not an autonomic bodily process once the techniques to feel and move in the water become enskilled knowledge. Swimmers do not just “do” swimming unconsciously without focused awareness on their activity. They may, at times, swim in ways which

resemble a “switched off” mode of attention (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020a), allowing their enskilled knowledge to operate at the horizons of perception. But this is not a “on-off” switch between “mindful swimming” and mind/less swimming. Youth swimmers actively focus their awareness on sensations, skills, and techniques, to work on and refine them. They also can have those same sensations “thrown” into conscious relief, as Nancy experienced at competitions in unfamiliar pools and as I experienced learning to tumble turn in a new space. This dialectic movement between pulling objects, experiences, habits, skills, and techniques to the fore of perception and letting them fade to the horizon, and the throwing of sensations to the fore of perception – which tear swimmers from immersion momentarily – sheds light on the active processes in immersion, of becoming and belonging. It is to immersion in the social practices of the enacted swimming body which I now turn.

Chapter 5. Swimming as a Bodily Shared Practice

Becoming a competitive swimmer and belonging in this community requires sets of shared bodily practices amongst youth, coaches and parents to cultivate a sense of social immersion. While both the physical act of swimming (i.e., dipping, dunking, paddling, bathing) and swimming as a sport both require physical immersion in water, they come to encompass two distinct spheres of being for youth. Immersion in the competitive sport of swimming includes an understanding of the difference between “proper swimming” and “play swimming.” Proper swimming includes the rules and regulations of competition, performing correct technique while swimming lengths, and training with one’s squad while swimming sets under the direction of a qualified coach. Play swimming can be understood as the freeform enjoyment of submersion with no rules governing correct techniques for movement. Both are fun, both require skill, but the former is defined by an adherence to the institutional systems of swimming including its governance, rule sets, developmental models, training sessions, social and historical connection between an individual and a club. In a sense, swimming with a competitive club is a defining characteristic of identifying swimming as a sport and of one’s identity as a swimmer. While the youth at Manta SC do engage in the “fun” leisure experiences of playing in the water, for them, swimming is irrevocably an immersive practice inclusive of a shared club training environment, the pursuit of qualifying times for galas, and striving for ever faster personal best times. To grasp an emic understanding of what swimming is and what it means to be a swimmer requires much more than an intellectual accounting of the contexts, rules, and institutional structures which shape competitive swimming for youth. Grasping this emic understanding requires a physical bodily immersion in competitive swimming and the material medium of water. It requires that one “get in,” train the body, develop skills and techniques, demonstrate enskilled knowledge, and ultimately, to learn to “feel the water.” In other words, the processes of becoming and belonging in youth competitive swimming can be gleaned through phenomenological experience of bodily immersion.

In this chapter I discuss the importance of examining the material body in competitive swimming. I argue that it is through the phenomenological experiences of immersion of the material body that youth at Manta SC begin to identify what swimming means for them. I do this by describing the various ways they spoke about and engaged in shared practices of immersion. Following Michel Serres’ argument that, “human intelligence can be distinguished [...] by the body, alone” (Serres 2011, 12), we need to account for the body as both a social object and subject in all its fleshy material manifestations (Attala and Steel 2019a; Csordas 1994a). Particularly in ethnographic examinations of sporting practices the

material body (of the ethnographer and their interlocutors) is a necessity for participation. It is by examining the various ways the body, both as material entity and form of consciousness is presented in and perceives the swimming world, how the swimming body becomes and belongs in these amphibious environments, that a holistic understanding of immersion can be realized. For these reasons I have made the distinction between an objectified neoliberal vision of the ideal body and the body as subject. Both visions of the swimming body involve ongoing processes that develop, shape, and change the body's form. Becoming a swimmers through shared practice therefore involves cultivating swimming "fit"ness.

5.1. "Do You Swim?" Swimming as Shared Practice

Becoming a swimmer is a conglomerate of various forms of immersion. Being a swimmer is a shared practice, a set of mutual and individual goals, a passion, and an everyday activity leading to shared understanding. Becoming a swimmer also requires commitment, dedication, focused attention on learning and incorporating proper techniques of the body and ways of moving in and through the water. Swimming is a sport, a structured set of institutionalized practices, rules, forms of competition, ways of measuring, categorizing, and recording results to which youth must subject themselves to in their becoming swimmers. A shorthand for identification as a swimmer is the ability to name the club(s) where you trained and have memorized your best swim times for the different strokes and events competed in sanctioned swimming meets. In other words, becoming a swimmer for these youth is immersion into the competitive sport of swimming.

When I immersed myself in the competitive swimming world, the questions I fielded shifted from "Can you swim?" or "How do you swim?" to "Do you swim?", the assumption being that anyone on the pool deck or around competitive swimmers has, at some point in the past, experience of immersion in the competitive swimming lifeworld. 15-year-old Nick's questioning me "Are you any good?" when I was jokingly picked out of the crowd of performance squad youth to participate in a "fun" relay heat is an example of this assumption. I am continuously asked "Do you swim?" as a rhetorical question when I discuss my research with anyone, especially youth swimmers, as though the answer must be yes. And while it may be "yes" now that I swim regularly with a Masters squad my lack of participation in competitive swimming as a youth, my lack of knowledge of my own personal best swimming times, continually marks me as an outsider for I am missing that formative phenomenological experience of immersion.

Early in the ethnographic research for this thesis I had the idea to ask youth “What a non-practitioner ought to know about swimming?” This was not done with the intention of expecting youth to outright reveal to me their most important conceptions about the sport. Rather, I was curious to begin piecing together youths’ various understandings of what it meant to become a swimmer and to belong in the competitive swimming world. I would later identify these processes of becoming and belonging as “immersion,” the material, social, affective, and emotional aspects of entering a lifeworld. Youth inevitably responded to this direct questioning by recounting stories of their non-swimming friends’ lack of knowledge about their craft.

Eileen, fifteen at the time and relatively new to the performance squad at Manta SC having joined from a neighboring club, noted that there was a “lack of understanding” from her non-swimming peers about the “passion” and “commitment” she shared with her closest friends who also swam competitively. It was this shared practice of “doing the same thing” which generated an understanding of this amphibious lifeworld.

I think it is 'cause we all have our own goals, and we are all helping each other to try to get them. We are all motivated to try to do that. And I think that us training together makes us closer and it is really nice to have people around you who are going through the same thing, who are trying to get the same thing, so that you can relate to them. And both training to try and achieve something [...] 'cause at school, no one has really ever understood why I am so into swimming and why I really like going to training. [...] With me, my closest friends are at swimming or outside of school. I think they [the people at school] all kind of thought I was a bit weird for having a passion for something that I do every single day. Yeah, my friends at swimming have always been my closest friends. Even at my last club I am still really close with lots of people there, 'cause I have been with them for so long. And even at Manta, everyone is so friendly. And I think it is because everyone understands each other. And everyone, we are all doing the same thing and we all have our goals, and everyone just understands. We all get each other.

Eileen and her swim club peers are immersed in the shared bodily practices of competitive swimming. They are not swimming purely for the sensory pleasures of submersion in water. Unlike her school peers who may go to a pool for fun, to splash around, youth swimmers like Eileen have a set of goals when it comes to attending training. These may be individual goals, but they are all “going through the same thing,” with the collective assemblage of swimmers working towards achieving and attaining them. This complicates the simple categorization of competitive swimming as an individual sport. While it may be that most races are swum individually, for individual times, there are also group relay events as well as overall club points to be awarded at larger swim meets. Classificatory structures of sport

aside, the youth which whom Eileen swims are all “doing the same thing” and striving to achieve their goals.

The motivation to show up to practice, to train and to compete, is both intrinsic to the activity itself and extrinsic to Eileen’s own goals. Elsewhere I have noted that youth swimmers need a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors to help keep their continued participation in the sport fun and enjoyable (Sean Heath 2020a, 238–39). For Eileen, the intrinsic motivation is the passion which she has for the sport, something she does “every single day.” By “trying to get the same thing” Eileen sees this shared striving as an opportunity to “relate to them,” her swimming peers, through the shared embodied practices of competitive swimming. These every day shared practices in training for her and her peers “makes us closer,” in a way she is unable to do with her non-swimming peers for these bodily shared practices are the foundations of the close friendships Eileen has developed with her fellow swimmers at multiple clubs. Through daily shared practice of immersion comes shared understanding, as Eileen says, “[w]e all get each other.”

When asking 17-year-old Erin “what a non-practitioner ought to know about competitive swimming?” she recounted her frustration of non-swimming school peers repeatedly asking her if she had won, or medaled, after returning from a weekend long gala.

Erin: It's not about that [winning]. I mean it is, like if I win, like yeah, I won, I'm happy. But I don't care about that. I'm more like, if I PB'd [achieved a personal best time]. 'Cause they don't understand it. Ah, it really annoys me when non-swimmers go, "What? 30 seconds to do two lengths. Oh, that's easy!" Okay, go on then, you show me, cause I don't think you could do that. [she says this in a sassy tone, a sort of challenging intonation and disbelief in her facial expression]. But yeah no, that sort of stuff really annoys me. I don't really talk to anyone that is not a swimmer about swimming.

SH: Fair enough. I think it would be hard to engage someone who is not a swimmer.

Erin: Yeah, and they don't understand the commitment either. Do you know what I mean? Like how much commitment you put into it. They are like, "Oh, it's not that bad, is it?"

Erin is frustrated by the lack of understanding her non-swimming school peers displayed as to the physical effort that is required to swim a 50m freestyle sprint in 30 seconds.⁶³ Cracking the thirty-second barrier was a huge feat for these youth when swimming either

⁶³ For reference, my own best time when I was at my “fittest” at the peak of my few months training with Manta SC Masters squad was 42 seconds from a dive start.

freestyle or backstroke and any personal best (PB) that got them closer to this goal was celebrated.

Erin's second comment is about commitment. Not any commitment, but commitment in the context of competitive swimming. It is not just sticking with commitment but an active striving, immersive commitment to becoming a swimmer. Swimming requires this kind of commitment. It requires a dedication to show up to early morning practices before school and swim late into the evening after the scholastic day is over. It requires spending weekends on pool decks at swimming galas. In this regard, I take Erin's rhetorical use of the idiom "you know what I mean" as recognition that I am unlike her non-swimming peers. My consistent presence on the pool deck, my own swimming training with the club, and my inquisitiveness in actively attempting to understand the meanings of this shared practice for youth swimmers demonstrated to some extent that I am "in the know," that I can grasp what commitment means in swimming through my active bodily participation. In other words, I committed myself to immersion in the competitive swimming lifeworld.

The commitment to show up and train the body with others generates presence of those others in youth's lives. Intersubjective relationships in the shared practices of competitive swimming are predicated on commitment and shared understanding. Corwin and Erickson-Davis call these intersubjective relationships "learned ways of being" for they are the practices that "shape how we experience each other" (2020, 175). Erin experiences her swimming peers. She can see what they are wearing and how they move, feel the waves and wake generated by their passage in the water, and hear them speak. Yet her peers are more than the sum of these sensory perceptions. Rather, they have a presence which is the product of the interaction between "perceiver-environment" and "perceiver-perceiver" (Corwin and Erickson-Davis 2020). This dynamic interaction is our learning how to be with and experience each other over time, through repeated practices and learned habits. We may be sea swim buddy, academic colleague, teenage swimmer, researcher, et cetera, to each other. Arguably then, Erin and her swimming peers experience each others presence as "another myself" (Merleau-Ponty 2012) – not as objectified material bodies – through their senses in the bodily shared practices of immersion.

5.1.1. Proper Swimming and Play Swimming

Yvette, thirteen, made the distinction to me between "proper swimming" and "play swimming" while we were chatting about the upcoming summer holidays after a Saturday morning practice.

SH: Do you go swimming on your holidays?

Yvette: Umm, not proper swimming, like play-swimming. But occasionally my friends do races with me.

SH: What do you mean by proper swimming?

Yvette: Like swim-swimming. Like "sets" swimming. Sometimes they [my friends] challenge me to a swimming race. So then, yeah, I just beat them. [...] And sometimes [my friends will say,] "Oh, you do one hundred [metres] and I do three lengths." I was like, "No. You asked for a swimming race, so we have to do it properly."

Play swimming, according to Yvette, is something that you do on holiday, something that you do "but not really," as in, you may be in the water, moving around, jumping off diving boards, splashing friends, experiencing the joys and sensations of immersion in water, yet you are not immersed in swimming, in training. You may be using those same enskilled movements developed through repeated practice to move through the water, but you do so in ways which escape the boundaries of the mechanically structured confines of competitive swimming training. Proper swimming, then, for Yvette, translates as "sets swimming," a structured and delineated set of regimented actions to be completed in a particular order, for the purpose of producing bodies who swim fast. When it comes to the delineation of what swimming is, once formal competition is introduced, Yvette insists that her friends "do it properly," swimming that is, as a competitive activity while following the strict rules of the sport as laid out by FINA (2014) and Swim England (2021).

From a coaching perspective, play is not seen as a productive method for inculcating the habits and techniques of competitive swimming onto youth. Instead, the sport-science model, and late-modernity's functionalists, would have elite swimmers prescribe to the "c-g-s, or centimetres-grams-seconds, and points" (Eichberg 1998, 150) approach to sport that demands a mechanical efficiency, a set of movements repeated with clinical precision to reduce drag and increase speed. Take, for example, the swim sets for the performance squad, which often involved times for set pieces based on individual's PBs and heart rates (see Figure 5.1). While there may be experimentation of enskilled movements, there is not much room for improvisation and play in this model, let alone where swimmers can explore and develop movement skills within the confines of a training session, or beyond those early years in swimming lessons. Indeed, racing, training, swimming sets, what Yvette calls "doing it properly," all requires timing and recording.

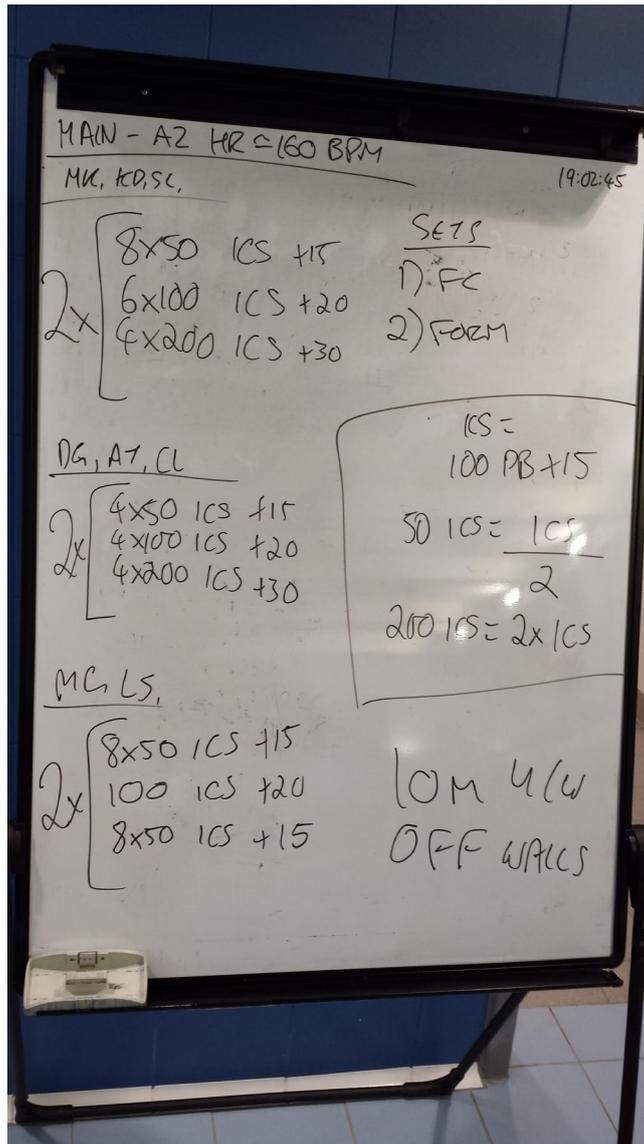


Figure 5.1. Individual Critical Speed (ICS) Main Set for the Performance Squad
 Source: Author's Collection, 2019.

In many ways swimming can be characterized as “quintessential” to the valuation of modern sport as best exemplified by feats of speed, time- and record-keeping, and linear motion.⁶⁴ Competitive swimming is firmly entrenched with the ethos of modern elite sports which find themselves ever in the arms race to go harder, be better, move faster, and to be stronger, or as the modern Olympic motto states “Citius – Altius – Fortius” (IOC 2020) – faster, higher, stronger. As an outcome of this ethos of modern sport we have the incessant professionalization and the drive for earlier specialization for young children. Indeed, many games and much play have become increasingly formalized and institutionalized under the

⁶⁴ Allen Guttmann's (1978) monograph *From Ritual to Record* lists seven key requirements which define the parameters of what may be called modern sport. For a critique of this narrowly defined position and a call for a broader categorization and study of sport and sport-like activities see Dyck and Hognestad (2015).

banner of “sport.” Winning has taken precedent over the pleasures and enjoyment inherent in the bodily movements of so many sports and sport-like activities. Thus, Johan Huizinga (1950) was right to believe that the play-element in Western Civilization has been on the decline since the eighteenth century, threatened “by the drive for efficiency and the routinization of experience it brought” (Malaby 2009, 210). Indeed, in most competitive sports training, there is an ongoing search for efficiency, which is unidirectional towards athletes becoming bigger, faster, and stronger. In this view, assembling the machine of the body is an “acquisition of an efficiency” (Mauss 1973, 77) to reduce and eliminate any excess that does not contribute to becoming faster and stronger. While most competitive swimmers over the age of twelve know their PBs and can tell you at which competition they attained those times, the youth at Manta SC identified their sport as more than an attainment of records, speeds, and personal best times.⁶⁵

Playing may teach similar skills (e.g., holding the breath and somersaults) to a mechanistic approach which treats the body as a machine to be tuned, yet it is in play where improvisation of already refined skills is attempted. Play has the potential to help swimmers develop a better feel for the water, to learn and perfect new skills, not to mention the untrammelled enjoyment of experiencing the sensual pleasures of immersion. In this sense I am not advocating for a materialist view of play as nonwork, which was successfully challenged by Brian Sutton-Smith (2001; 1981) and Clifford Geertz (1973a). Rather, I am more inclined to follow Thomas Malaby (2009, 206) who views play as a disposition. In his account, play becomes “an attitude characterized by a readiness to improvise in the face of an ever-changing world that admits of no transcendently ordered account.” Play, then, is a “*mode of [human] cultural experience* – a way of engaging in the world whatever one is doing” (2009, 208 emphasizes in original), marked by contingency, a willingness to improvise, and “a disposition that makes the actor an agent in social processes” allowing for “unintended consequences of action” (2009, 211). Theorized in this way engaging in play-episodes as a mode of cultural experience happens in and through our body where we both experience our agentic actions in the world and their consequences through our senses.

For Yvette, this cultural experience is one contextualized by rules which define how swimmers can move through the water in the “proper” fashion and race equivalent distances

⁶⁵ Even “retired” competitive swimmers can tell you their PB times. While sitting in a café after a weekend morning sea swim with two ex-coaches and the current Masters coach of Manta SC, all of them in their 50s, they rattled off their best times and accomplishments at nationals or international competitions to the thousandth of a second while reminiscing about their past achievements in the sport. I am still astonished they can remember those times over thirty years after obtaining them.

without a competitive handicap.⁶⁶ Yet play and play-episodes still occur in competitive swimming where youth explore bodily movement in water, either in the moments between sets or small amounts of downtime during instruction from the coach. An ethnographic example will suffice in explaining my point.

I move down behind the competition starting blocks in the deeper end of the pool as the swimmers are working through the kilometre warm-up swim this early 6:30am Saturday morning practice. I look over to where Arthur, the thirty-year-old coach, is standing, one leg propped up on the bulkhead, leaning on that bent knee, watching the younger swimmers in the squad from behind the 2nd of six blocks. In lane four, Ida and Yara, both fourteen, are hanging on to the pool ledge just under the diving block presumably having completed the first 700m section of the warm-up. Ida has one hand on the little lip at the surface of the water and one foot on the underwater ledge that sits there for swimmers to stand on here in the deep end. She floats her hand at the surface with splayed fingers looking intently at it while Arthur explains to her and Yara that they still have 200m choice swim and 100m choice kick to complete. Ida is playing with the surface tension of the water and buoyancy of her hand by pressing it down with enough weight where the water just doesn't cover over top of her fingers, her whole attention seemingly focused on this task. She then slowly and deliberately sinks one finger at a time until her whole hand is submerged as Yara confirms to Arthur that she heard what they are to do next in the warmup. Ida casually moves her goggles from her forehead back to her eyes, ducks under the water, and pushes off the wall to begin the last part of the warmup, only about five meters behind Yara.

This excerpt from my fieldnotes may seem like a mundane set of actions by a young "bored" swimmer not paying attention to their coach's instruction. On the contrary, I find this exploration of buoyancy and surface tension to be a prime example of play as a mode of human experience in which tactile senses are explored. While swimmers are not explicitly instructed on the physics of surface tension, or how to calculate their buoyancy in water, they nevertheless learn these qualities of water as embodied knowledge through repeated bodily practice. Individually experienced and perceived sensations of buoyancy and proprioception (one's sense of their body and body's position in space) invariably contribute to the accumulated social knowledge of swimmers' sensoria. Indeed, if being a liquid is about movement then being a swimmer necessitates the sensory perceptions, both internal and external, of the body's movement.

⁶⁶ For an intriguing discussion on how youth shape competitive games through the use of handicapping see Dyck (2012), Chapter 8.

Due to the intense focus on tactile senses in the competitive swimming cultural world at an early age (i.e., in learn-to-swim lessons and improver groups) youth are expected to have an embodied knowledge of aquatic movement. But this knowledge is, in part, cultivated through sensory exploration in play and play-episodes; refining senses of movement and touch to feel the catch better in backstroke or the distance one's legs move vertically in dolphin kick. Without having moments of exploration in which to play, the rigours of "doing it properly" have the potential to become all that one knows of swimming.

To be a swimmer, in the emic sense in which these youth use the term, requires a threshold beyond "play swimming," but continues to include this vital element. This becoming requires more than a rudimentary ability to move through the water without drowning. To "be (or become) a competent swimmer" (Throsby 2016, 24) is to be part of a squad in a club, to receive training by a certified coach, to have competed in a licenced gala or competition and to know one's personal best times. Becoming a swimmer denotes a certain level of competency as well as a background in competitive swimming with a competitive club. It is also about having a passion for and commitment to the shared practice of "proper swimming." Processes of becoming and belonging in competitive swimming are ultimately about participation in shared practices of the competitive swimming world. These are necessarily bodily experiences of immersion which shape the physical body and how youth come to view the swimming body.

5.2. Swimming Bodies

Walking up to the blocks for the final 50m sprint Nick and Nathan stand just behind block six and face off a metre apart. Nathan poses off against Nick, tightening his hands into fists, squeezing his shoulder blades together, and flexing his arms at ninety-degree angles, which has the effect of exaggerating his chest muscles, making his torso seem larger. Nick reciprocates against this "flex" of muscles and intimidation with a near expressionless yet serious stare straight back at Nathan. Nathan is the first to crack a smile and starts laughing at this ludicrous exchange, conceding the lane, and moving over to block five. From my seated position on the bench parallel to the starting blocks I also laugh and raise my voice to say across the pool that Nick has Nathan beat in height and in width.

Up on the blocks Nathan continues the performance, standing with cap and black mirrored goggles on now, chest puffed out a bit more than is natural for his sculpted muscular frame and stares directly at Nick. Nick is not phased by this posturing. Instead, he imitates Nathan striking the same pose, body shape, form, and facial expression. A few seconds later they are both smiling, body postures back to the gangly looseness so

characteristic of relaxed elite swimmers. Calling from the other side of the pool coach Arthur yells at the next heat, “Get ready!” Both youths turn to face the water and crouch down, grabbing the edge of the block for the start. Their bodies tense in preparation to race. “GO!” shouts Arthur. Nick and Nathan dive into the water to swim butterfly and breaststroke respectively.

Next on her way up to the blocks is Nancy. She joins in this muscle flexing performance by “strutting” with her arms held out away from her sides resembling a caricature walk of a musclebound weightlifter arm muscles too big and taught to relax. She exaggerates this strutting motion while rotating her torso unnecessarily over to the starting blocks. She stands behind the third block “taking” Daniel’s lane – where he had swum not ten minutes earlier. Nancy puffs out her chest and shrugs her shoulders in challenge. She slaps her right shoulder and the outside of her left leg, repeating this a few times in a mock leg/arm slapping routine, all the while staring at Daniel still sitting on the bench. “What are you doing?” Daniel asks, a smug grin on his face. “Why are you heading up to the blocks so early? The lactate sets are always ten minutes apart and it hasn’t been ten minutes yet.”

All this posturing is just that, Nathan knows he will not beat Nick during their race despite them both being extremely fast at their respective number one strokes. Butterfly is just faster than breaststroke if both swimmers have similar levels of skill. Nancy, while a butterfly specialist like wise does not stand much chance beating Daniel when he is swimming freestyle. Nancy engages in this social act by imitating world class swimmers who engage in this ritualistic muscle slapping and flexing as part intimidation, part superstition. According to Daniel, this posturing also operates as psychological warfare, part of an attempt to intimidate opponents on the blocks beside them.

In this overtly gendered display there is a “cultural creativity” at play (Archetti 2003) where the youth are playing with bodily forms of athleticism through performing these gestures typically associated with masculinity. These performances might thus be read as creative critiques of “hegemonic masculinity” (Messner 2009), a form of masculinity which is distinctly anti-feminine and suborns other forms of masculinity. We can see clearly see this form of masculinity presented in advertising campaigns for all manner of sportswear, energy drinks, cologne, and even sports themselves. Youth are well aware of the dominant and competing discourses concerning the presentation and enactment of sex and gender within competitive sport and wider society (Porter, Morrow, and Reel 2013), although they may not be experts at articulating these distinctions in academic parlance. This performance, then, is the communication of embodied knowledge about the presentation of bodies within swimming through a form of physical comedy. In Chapter 8 I discuss humor as an essential

component of English culture taking particular note of the joking relationships and banter which occurred at the pool. Suffice it to say here that youth's social and experiential knowledge of how to perform "the swimmer" up on the starting blocks and after races (see Figure 5.2) is communicated through this joking performance.



Figure 5.2. "Flexing" in Victory

Source: Author's Collection. 2021. James (right) performing a victory "flex" after beating Hanno (left) in a 25m breaststroke race during practice.

5.2.1. Neoliberal Body Projects

The swimming body has been described as a "slim-to-win" model (McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011, 39) containing "muscularity but in moderation" (Howells and Grogan 2012). Scottish female swimmers identify the swimming body as "comprising broad shoulders, large arms, particularly in respect of bicep definition, powerful thighs and increased muscularity" (2012, 104). This was in relation to their understanding of a successful swimming body as one which depends on "power, strength, and speed." Yet the "thin ideal" of the "youthful slim body" continues to dominate as a "personal and social asset" throughout contemporary Western industrialized society (B. S. Turner 2006, 23). Western conceptions of sport and bodies are intimately tied to neoliberal projects of self-

governmentality and self re-creation (Atkinson 2008; Besnier, Calabrò, and Guinness 2021b). These neoliberal projects have created totalizing body-project systems where transnational corporations and nation states are equally concerned with selling you a healthy body as a moral obligation (Adams 2020). Indeed, the slim body image as commodified neoliberal beauty is packaged into a consumer product by the fashion, leisure, and sporting industries and sold to us as the ideal of what our body should look like: “[W]e slim in order to look good in order to be attractive to others” (B. S. Turner 2006, 23).

The body, as a symbol for neoliberal modernity, is best depicted by the bodybuilding aesthetic (Klein 1993) and the now more popular endurance athlete (e.g., triathlete or marathon runner) reproduced in magazines, commercials, on store mannequins, and in health club promotional materials. Sculpted bodies and body building (going to the gym for fitness) has become the new religion of late-capitalist neoliberal modernity, where supplicants pray to the weight scale gods, flagellate themselves on treadmills and spin bikes, and consume the ambrosia of protein powdered drinks all in the name of “fitness.” Body building was a sort of precursor to this mass migration of people to fitness gyms across the Western world, for it showed the hard work, discipline, and control which could be achieved and thus sculpt the “perfect” physique.⁶⁷ The impossibly sculpted body of the body builder is perhaps best critiqued as an assemblage of “bits of random flesh” or “like separate pieces of meat slapped together in a random manner” (Alter 1992, 57). For even adolescent swimmers have been shown to dislike the body building aesthetic believing that it had been “distorted in an obsessive, unnatural manner and epitomised masculinity” (Howells and Grogan 2012, 106).

In the leisure sport of triathlon the thin, fit triathlon body becomes a symbolic representation of dedication, control, discipline, cultural and economic investment into one’s health (Atkinson 2008, 176).⁶⁸ It is this sculpted body, this “body-image” which so emphatically represents the ideals of the current neoliberal socio-political climate in Western nations today. The slim body, in Turner’s words, is a “specific feature of calculating hedonism as the ethic of late capitalism” (2006, 192). Rather than resembling the majority of youth swimmers in England – or more generally people in other Western capitalist

⁶⁷ The film *Pumping Iron* (Butler and Fiore 1977), starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, is often cited as a galvanizing artifact in helping to popularize bodybuilding in “the age of fitness” (see Martschukat 2021).

⁶⁸ This representation is tied to a middle-class ethic of self-improvement through regimented exercise, which can be seen in many Western industrialized societies, and has become a way in which the new middle class distinguished itself from wealthy leisure pursuits or otherwise.

democracies – this neoliberal aesthetic influences but does not dominate the shape and appearance of swimmers.

Youth swimmers do not passively absorb and assimilate these body image discourses into their own conceptual frameworks for understanding their own bodies and embodied self. While social constructions of body image directly affects the mental health and well-being (see Chapter 8) of young athletes (Gard 2016; S. Scott 2010; McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011), youth construct rather than passively absorb gendered body ideals in swimming contexts (Porter, Morrow, and Reel 2013), and use a variety of linguistic repertoires to do so (Grahn 2016; Musto 2014). Girls and boys use a variety of language, drawing on popular cultural references as well as socio-cultural ideals to construct body images (Grahn 2016). Karin Grahn points to the two types of ideas youth swimmers use to discuss bodies: functional and aesthetic. The functional body is defined as the purpose sculpted swimming body for females and males which consisted of being lean, tall, muscular, often including broad shoulders or a “V” shaped torso. The aesthetic body is considered as a “top model” for girls which was supposed to be tall and slim but not show large visible muscles; and the “beef-ideal” for boys, an overly muscular body with pronounced muscles (e.g., the bodybuilder). Grahn suggests that girls and boys use the functional body to both accept, normalize, and incorporate an athletic body, or build this into their language for describing bodies.

This commoditized body image of the male swimmer physique of Caeleb Dressel and Adam Peaty – tall, broad shouldered, the torso in an inverted triangle shape tapering towards a thin waist, powerful thighs and quadriceps – as the ideal for swimming (McMahon and Barker-Ruchti 2017) distorts our view of the variety inherent in swimmers bodies. This distorted ideal presented by swim wear and equipment companies such as Arena, Speedo, TYR, or Finis, relegates the likes of Ellie Simmonds or Alice Dearing from much of the dominant discourses of body representations. This lack of representation by FINA and Olympic sponsoring swimming brands paints a very narrow picture of what the swimming body can be (often read as white and male). Still, defining the swimming body as lean, tall, muscular, with broad shoulders and a “V” shaped torso, begins to broaden the scope of who can be included as a swimmer. As with the above ethnographic vignette Nancy uses her “functional body” to critique the gender boundaries between popular body ideals of the swimmer and her peers’ actual physical forms. Still, this functional/athletic body definition ostracizes many in the swimming community, including youth whose developing bodies are in constant processes of becoming.

There is no natural swimming body in the sense that biology and physiology, which are the classificatory systems we use to organize and systematize human experience of the physical body, are features of culture (Turner 2006, 230). These classificatory systems are developed in specific contexts with socio-historical roots (i.e., the triathlon body of neoliberal capitalism, the “V” shaped body of contemporary competitive swimmers, the bulging muscles of bodybuilders). Therefore, becoming a swimmer is a set of active processes, in particular places, at specific times, which inevitably includes the repeated immersion in water and conscious efforts of training the techniques of the body to swim fast. Unlike bodybuilders, youth swimmers do not “do” swimming to shape the body. Youth swimmers shape their bodies by the doing. Therefore, body shape for swimmers is an effect, not a goal.

5.2.2. Somatic Changes and the Materialities of Water Bodies

Body shape for swimmers comes about through physiological acclimation, or somatic changes, to the environment and the rigours of being-in the water. These include adapting to physical, mechanical, and chemical demands placed on them through series of assembled actions. I use the term somatic here not to draw an artificially boundary between the mind and the body. Rather I find it a productive term to discuss biological changes (physical and cellular) to materialities of the body. This is in no way meant to contradict my earlier arguments, and arguments later in this thesis, that take consciousness as seated directly in our perceptions and the moving body. The “mind” and consciousness are never removed from the equation. Thinking of the body as a tool or technical means of accomplishing specified tasks (Ingold 2011; Marchand 2010) still situates the “I” as accomplishing these tasks. Our actions are always already embodied. Our bodies as “technical object[s]” (Mauss 1973, 75) aside, my aim here is to consider the physiological aspects, the physical changes to organisms, and emphasize the “body-as-matter” (Attala and Steel 2019b), the fleshy material of the body interacting with the material of the world (not to be confused with material studies (Miller and Woodward 2011; Miller 2012)) and how these material relationships produce and constrain life, moving towards “the appreciation of the co-generative aspects of relationships (or ‘being’ together)” (Attala 2020, 3).

Somatic changes, according to Gregory Bateson (2000, 351), are the responses of the organism to external stimuli in the environment and can diminish mostly or entirely if external conditions are changed. Somatic changes to our physiology occur from the simplest

of repetitive tasks. Even sitting at a desk for eight hours a day changes one's physiology.⁶⁹ Our bodies have what Bateson (2000, 351) calls a "somatic flexibility" to adjust to its environmental circumstances. Swimming is intriguing in this respect as it occurs in an environment that most humans do not inhabit daily. Not a day goes by when these youth do not experience some form of immersion in water, from the two-hour training sessions in the mornings and evenings six days per week, or on their day off taking a shower or bath. There is an intimate mingling between bodies and water where human-water entanglements shape both substance, material, body, and being. When discussing swimming and swimmer's bodies, then, we cannot separate their material entanglements with the liquid medium in which they spend such a significant portion of their lives.

Water exists in various states and has special properties, "qualities," under Earth's gravity, atmospheric conditions, and pressures at sea level. Composed of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom (H₂O) this simple inorganic substance "presents as an extraordinary maverick material with remarkable capabilities" (Attala 2020, 29). Water can be liquid, solid, gas, and be both solvent and form solutions, which all make it an astounding substance to study. And yet, the materiality of water, like the human body, is "always a historically and culturally specific matter" (Ballesterro 2019, 415).

The quality and type of water in municipal and private pools throughout the UK are governed by the guidance and advice of the Health and Safety in Swimming Pools (Health and Safety Executive 2018) as well as the "Code of Practice" for the treatment of swimming pool water (PWTAG 2019), both which locate "pool water" as a balance of material elements, including the introduction of chemicals and filtration devices to monitor its material specifications. Pool water therefore tends to be standardized due to the chemistry balance between chlorine, pH levels, and temperature of this solution.⁷⁰ This may seem like it would provide a standardized set of sensuous experiences for youth. But in fact, youth reported that each pool has its own smell, taste, look, feel, is fast, slow, cold, or hot. Additionally, the tangible material qualities of water give it a resistance of six-hundred times that of air and make it one of the best forms of aerobic exercise (Nichols 2014, 109). Youth regularly

⁶⁹ Sedentary sitting-based forms of work have directly impacted the rise of the fitness industry. Yoga and Tai Chi have been incorporated into the modernizing project of healthy, fit, leisure lifestyle projects (Jain 2020), refashioned into what Atkinson (2008) describes as a symbolic representation of one's investment into the ideal neoliberal body.

⁷⁰ Swim club pools also tend to comply with FINA international standards for competitive lengths pools in their Facility Rules (Fédération Internationale de Natation 2017): 25metre (short-course) and 50metre (long-course of "Olympic Size") lane length; lane width between 2-2.5metres; average water temperature between 27-28°C (degrees Celsius); air temperature of 30°C; pH of water (acid or basic) between 7.3-7.7; and chlorine levels between 0.5 to 1.5 parts per million. For reference, average drinking water in England is between 6.3-6.6 on the pH scale.

experience the pressure of an additional atmosphere on their bodies as they dive in from a race start, push off each wall after a turn, or practice underwater work (most often involving dolphin kick). They feel the water's *pressure*, and its *resistance* against their body's movement through and in it.

While youth will not spontaneously grow gills in response to spending thousands upon thousands of hours in the water, other genotypic and somatic changes have been observed in multiple human populations who live in and on the water. Subsistence on the aquatic environment of the ocean, as is the case with Trobriand Island indigenous peoples (Malinowski 1999) or the Badjao of the Philippines (*Sea Gypsies Losing Out: The Sea-Faring Badjao of the Philippines Are Under Threat* 1994), has brought about cultural (Pauwelussen 2017) as well as physiological adaptation (Ilardo et al. 2018). Badjao people's have been shown to exhibit much larger spleens than the average human, as well as superior underwater vision (Gislén et al. 2003; *How Moken Children See With Amazing Clarity Underwater: Inside the Human Body* 2011). Their lives are dominated by physical and cultural immersion in aquatic environments as they live on water and freediving underwater. Korean and Japanese women sea divers are another example of populations who have been physiologically and culturally shaped by water and who shape their aquatic environs (Hurford et al. 1990; J.-Y. Lee, Park, and Kim 2017; Martinez 2004). For these subsistence freediving fishers, the physiological changes are products of duration and depth of immersion, how deep below the surface they travel and how long they spend submerged at depth. Yet becoming a *funado* freediver (Martinez 2004) requires amassing knowledge and skill that comes from a lifelong apprenticeship in immersion.

While English youth may not have the same physiological genotypic changes to their bodies as the Badjao, "they are also tuning their perceptions and actions, thereby creating a culturally and neurologically distinctive way of being. [...] Put another way, biology may be shaped in part by the types of cultural preferences manifested in athletic practices" (Dyck 2015, 301). For example, we see regular increases of growth of alveoli in the lungs and widening of chests for increased lung capacity in swimmers (Armour, Donnelly, and Bye 1993). For swimmers, then, their somatic adaptations are a direct consequence of the techniques, drills, training regimes, and styles of movement (the four strokes) designed to draw out the body's capacity for power and speed.

5.3. Becoming "Swimming Fit"

Few of the youth I spoke with expressed the explicit desire to be or cultivate a swimming body type, or to replicate a specific body image, within swimming. That is, the youth at

Manta SC were not attempting to cultivate the “swimmer’s body” in the same way that male body builders seek to sculpt their physical form (Klein 1993). They were not trying to emulate Katie Ledecky’s or Adam Peaty’s physiques or concerned about the “type” of body that training would help sculpt. Rather, the youth were focused on training their preferred strokes and the speeds at which they could race. As I stated above, the somatic changes which occurred to the bodies of youth swimmers are results of their doing the activities of swimming. In this regard, the youth were aware of, and internalized discourses of being “swimming fit,” which, like in all endurance sports, highlighted the high levels of aerobic capacity needed to swim fast (i.e., their ability to swim at X pace for Y amount of time with Z number of seconds break between repetitions).

Being “fit” has multiple meanings in the UK, from being sexy, “fuckable,” to having a lean and muscular body. “Fit” is used to denote one’s health status, including underlying medical conditions, and to indicate whether a participant in swimming has communicated understanding through signing a liability waiver and risk form indicating that they are then “fit” to participate. There is also the “fit” of physical fitness, as stated by Swim England, which would be a gauge of a swimmer’s aerobic, or endurance, ability/capacity:

Clubs should ensure that athletes are ‘fit’ for training and have the pre-requisite level of fitness for the activities that are planned. [...] If in any doubt, then the volume and intensity should initially be low to enable participants to gradually build up fitness whilst minimizing injury risk. (Swim England 2020, 23)

These connotations of the “fit” body circulated amongst coaches, parents, and swimmers informed youth’s conceptions of what being fit means. Thus, being “swimming fit” incorporates health discourses of being physically and medically capable of sustaining high-intensity aerobic activity, a recognition that the physical rigours of training will sculpt the body, and that the neoliberal aesthetic of the athletic, lean, and muscular body, is broadly perceived as attractive. And yet, when youth spoke about swimming fitness their concerns were mostly directed towards the doing of their sport and their capacities to train and compete.

Youth at Manta SC were aware of the physicality of their sport and the requirements of consistent regimented often difficult training in the pursuit of being as “fit” as possible when it came time to race. Although training cycles are geared to make swimmers fit for racing there are general requirements of fitness that need to be achieved to swim with the performance squad (a minimum bar of entry) with the additional caveat that one maintains that level of ability. For Dean, fifteen, these fitness requirements are directly connected to performance in the pool: “Like, if I swim well then I will like think I am fitter than if I don't swim

well. It's really weird. It's a bit odd, but just, yeah, that's it." By swimming "well" Dean's perceptions of his own bodily capabilities are heightened, whereas if he does not swim well, he believes his fitness to be diminished. His understanding of fitness is contingent on the daily sensations of training to race, but it is the experience of the race itself which has the greater impact on his perception of his cultivated bodily capacities, his fitness.

12-year-old Thomas was concerned about staying "fit," after suffering a broken wrist and being unable to attend training. "I wasn't really doing much. Kind of just playing on my PlayStation a lot of the time. I went on a lot of walks to try and keep myself fit." Thomas' recovery time was to coincide with his cast coming off a few weeks before the County Championships. He therefore wanted to maintain a level of physical activity which would allow him to swim fast at the Championships. But he also connected his fitness to more mundane activities such as "being able to go to school and be able to play like running games and stuff, and football." Thomas therefore incorporates the enskilment of swimming as specific bodily capacities to swim fast with a general bodily capacity to be a moving, active youth.

Nancy believed swimming was one of the better sports for keeping oneself physically active: "It [swimming] is really good, it keeps you really fit. Definitely in terms of fitness it is one of the best ones." Defining "fitness" as "being able to transfer skills into other sports and being able to compete in those," Nancy connected the aerobic capacity she gained from swimming to other physical pursuits which included endurance components (i.e., Park Run or playing football). For her, and other swimmers who had experienced time out of the pool due to illness or injury, the idea of maintaining a form of fitness was important. Believing in this transferability of skills, Emma, sixteen, took up running, Thomas went out for walks, and Dean went to the gym as alternate activities to keep them fit for their return to the pool while they were injured or ill and unable to swim.

Fitness for the performance squad youth was something hard earned and easily lost. Emma linked her time out of the pool due to injury with a loss of tactile perception and aerobic fitness: "The type of fitness that you have you can lose it so quickly. Even if you are off for two weeks you come back and it is harder, you can tell it is different." Despite attending training to swim kick sets with the squad due to her shoulder injury, she still felt she was "losing my fitness." Fourteen-year-old Andrea defined fitness as "being active everyday" and when an undiagnosed heart condition forced her out of the pool for a few months she told me that she struggled to get that fitness back.

I mean I'm quite an active healthy person too. So, I do a lot of sports at school. I do a lot here [at swimming training] obviously. I do quite a lot on my own. Like, but not being able to do any [swimming], it makes you feel, I don't know, it makes you feel really kind of like lazy. And, I don't know, It's a weird feeling. It took me a few months to get my fitness back and I probably still haven't got it fully back yet.

Being in the water and training daily was a part of Andrea's conception of herself as an "active healthy person." Not being able to train, not being immersed in the water and squad environment, which is such a significant aspect of her lifeworld, made her feel "lazy" and by extension, unfit. Her comment that this "weird feeling" of "not being able to do any [swimming]" when removed from the active processes of becoming a youth swimmer hints at the depth of embodied knowledge about the sensory experiences in immersion, she has accumulated in her swimming practices (see Chapter 5).

Bringing a watery metaphor to the experience of fitness, coach Arthur explained that the focus in training at the end of the season before the summer break would comprise "technique stuff" and then some "hard fitness" to get the performance squad swimmers as fit as possible: "Otherwise, they'll be soggy, and then soggy after the break. And we can't have that." This image of a water saturated sponge is an apt metaphor for the ways youth experience the return to the pool after an extended break over the holidays or from injury. Their bodies retain the sense of feel for their sport as they are able to "train the body and have confidence in it, for it remembers everything" (Serres 2011, 13). And yet, they still become desensitized to their aquatic medium as they lose that repeated regularity of rhythmic strokes, kicks, and breaths over the weeks spent out of the pool. The youth at Manta SC retained the enskilled knowledge and sensory perceptions of fitness, the capacity to swim fast, to endure the thousands of kilometres of aerobic training swum every season, which are all part of the mundanity required to become a swimmer.

5.4. Conclusion

Immersion, as both practices of belonging and becoming for youth swimmers, requires an accounting of materialities of the physical environment of pools and the water, and the materiality of youth's own bodies, if we are to grasp the enskilment of embodied knowledge of youth swimmers. There is an implicit "being in" when observing, conversing about, and participating in swimming, which is more than a labeled identity of "swimmer" but is rather a phenomenologically experienced reality of immersion. Youth describe swimming as a shared bodily practice which requires a commitment to immersion, in the water, in the club where one trains, and adherence to the rules of competition. It is through bodily experiences of meaningful relationships in context, in particular environments, where becoming a swimmer

can be understood as sharing being-in-the-water with others. Swimming as shared practice is the recognition of other bodies participating in the rigours of aerobic training, early morning practices, all weekend competitions, and thousands of kilometres swum per year. It is the commitment and dedication to training the body to swim fast. It also includes a sense of belonging which comes from an intersubjective relation to others working collectively towards individual goals. These are emotional endeavours as much as they are physical. Asking, “Do you swim?” is about which club you swim with, where, for how long, and what your PB times are, not about whether you will drown if submerged in water. In the swimming lifeworld, all participants share this passion for being-in-the-water.

Water, the medium of youth’s aquatic practices, is unlike other environments as it is an alien element whose presence we seek out and immerse ourselves in, despite it being a requisite for life as we know it. Bodily shared practices of swimming, including time spent immersed and the physical resistances and strains required to move through the water, generate feedback in the body, creating somatic changes. Youth are already physiologically changing, growing, and developing simultaneously with the somatic changes generated through the doing of this practice. The physical requirements needed to be in the performance squad of Manta SC help generate the idea of the “swimming fit” body. This is a body of extreme aerobic capacity, hydrodynamic, yet without one ideal form, for the various stroke disciplines and distances shape bodies differently, and youth all have different bodies. Still, youth must contend with neoliberal body-projects manifest in late-capitalist consumerism which defines the sculpted athletic body as representing a particular moral obligation to one’s health and as an ethic of self-responsibility and self-reliability.

In the processes of becoming a swimmer and having their bodies sculpted by the doing of swimming youth cultivate shared senses of presence where they “all get each other” as they are “doing the same thing,” “trying to get the same thing,” which, for the youth “makes us closer.” The examples throughout this chapter have been focused on the physical practices of immersion involved in competitive swimming. It is to the emotional and affective dimensions of immersion entangled as they are in tactile sensory perception of being-in and moving through water to which I now turn.

Chapter 6. The Affectivity of Immersion

Sitting in between the gender split cliques, Nick, Nathan, Dean, and James on my right and Nancy, Yara, and Lara to my left, I prepare to watch the two-hour racing practice and chat with the swimmers as they rest between their heats (the set being 50, 100, 200, 100, 50 today). After the all-out sprint of the first 50m butterfly heat, Nancy makes her way back from the blocks to her kit, grabbing her towel and wrapping it around her shoulders before sitting down beside me on the bench. “I just can’t be bothered today,” she says to me while keeping her gaze directed on the pool where her peers are already swimming in the next heat. “I don’t have it in me. Physically I’m fine. I just don’t have it mentally to try today.” “Sometimes days are like that,” I respond. I think to myself that this is uncharacteristic of Nancy as she generally expects herself and teammates to be giving one hundred percent of their focus and commitment to training. She doesn’t respond to me, and we continue to watch the rest of the heats for this round in silence.

“Heat one!” coach Arthur calls out a few minutes later and Nancy heads up to the blocks for her next race, this time swimming a 100m piece. “Take your marks. Go!” yells Arthur. The six youth fly off the blocks hitting the water in streamline dives, only breaking the surface after ten to fifteen metres of underwater dolphin kick to power through the first strokes of butterfly. Nick and Hanno are tied for first coming into the final turn with Nancy trailing far behind. Usually, Nancy would only be a stroke behind these muscular teenage boys. As she is finishing the last 25m of this race she is slowly cruising into the wall, swimming at a pace resembling the swim-down at the end of training, the tempo of her arm rotations slow and relaxed as is her kick cadence. Arthur times the youth on his stopwatches, using this as a measure against swimmer’s previous personal best times and the qualifying times for County, Regional, and National swim meets. He does not berate her for this slow performance this morning. But she berates herself about it when she sits down again beside me repeating, “I really don’t have it in me today.”

Arthur stalks up and down the length of the pool past the row of seated swimmers who chat, drink water, wrap themselves up in towels and try to keep warm as they wait the ten minutes between their race heats. On one of his passes Arthur asks Nancy how she is doing. For the third time, repeating it like a mantra, Nancy says “I don’t have it in me today.” Arthur attempts to encourage her saying, “You’ll be alright. Dig deep!” adding a clenched-fist arm-flex for added emphasis, a symbolic gesture of strength. Nancy responds back to him beginning to choke back tears, “Please don’t talk to me like that right now.” Arthur takes a step back, the smile on his face disappearing in an instant. “Okay,” he says before walking

off down toward the starting blocks. Nancy is visibly upset, hugging her knees into her chest, and burying her head between them. After a minute, Arthur comes back down the length of the pool before calling up the first heat in the next wave of races. Rarely instigating any physical contact with the youth athletes, Arthur puts a hand on Nancy's shoulder saying a few soft words of encouragement while taking more of a supportive and comforting manner, a change of tone from his usual joking banter. She nods and heads up to the blocks with the rest of the heat. For the next three races and the rest of practice she increases her speed, swimming closer to her full race pace. Her race times, which Arthur records on a heat sheet and the swimmers are allowed to check at the end of training, are significantly closer to her PB than the first two races she swam on this day.

Being emotionally fraught, strung out, having a difficult day affects youths' moods and performances. Swimming for youth then also contains a distinctly affective aspect, their sensory perceptions and experiences of immersion as effected by their emotions as the physical stimulus of the water. For Nancy, being unable to perform at her best, unable to mentally "dig deep" and put in fast times during an early weekend morning lactate set in the middle of a competitive cycle, despite her feeling in good physical condition, was emotionally taxing. She is struggling against expectations of performance (her own and her coach's) and the mental strain of always having to do better. This affects her emotional capacity to rally, bounce back, and swim fast despite the positive emotional encouragement from her coach. The focus of her intense training regime during this season is in the hope of making the qualifying times for the Winter National Championships running in December, only a few months away at the time I recorded the above fieldnotes. She has a goal in mind and wants to hit it. Her perceptions of her physical capacity to train is within her usual standards, yet cognition and emotion are irreducible aspects of the intimate embodied nature of being, affecting the capabilities of mind/body. This is to say that the emotions youth report experiencing while swimming and immersed are co-constitutive of their experiences along with the movement practices themselves: "cognition is embodied, you think with your body, not only with your brain" (Kahneman 2011, 51).

If as Seigworth and Gregg (2010, 3) argue "thought is itself a body," then we can conclude that cognition and affect are inseparable. Taking their definition of affect as a "gradient of bodily capacity" that arises in the "in-between-ness" of an act and capabilities of acting, affect is thus the "force or forces of encounter" that raise and fall with each interaction and encounter in the world. In this way, affect is "integral to a body's perpetual *becoming*" (p. 3, emphasis in original). The body's capacity to act and to become resides not only in that body but is "always aided and abetted by [...] the field or context of its force-relations" (p. 3).

Seigworth and Gregg's conceptualization of affect shares similarities with phenomenological views on experience and perception in that the background in perception, or the forces of encounter in affect theory, effects the ways we are immersed in and toward the world although we may be unaware of them as they sit at the horizons of our capacities and perceptions. Both perception and affect occur through the body's capacities and are interpreted in culturally specific ways depending on social, cultural, and environmental settings.

The qualities of affect present in its theorization tend to hold an ephemerality or what Gregg and Seigworth (2010) have described in the title of their edited volume as *An Inventory of Shimmers*. It is this lack of concreteness, this disappearing and appearing quality, only catching our attention long enough to recognize that it is there with no way of pinning down these affective forces which makes working with affect theory as an analytical framework difficult for describing the phenomenological experiences of youth. Without becoming mired down in the proliferation of affect theories, which are as varied as the subject material they attend to (Gibbs 2010; Stewart 2007), I find it more useful for my purposes to conceive of affect here simply as complex emotional patterns, or moods felt in and expressed through the body. For emotions and moods are concepts which the performance squad youth were familiar with and which they used to discuss their lived experiences as swimmers. Moods are akin to the potential seen in the theoretical use of affect as the "body's *capacity* to affect and be affected" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2 emphasis in original). Mood is the background emotional force which suffuses and curtails our capacities to act and steers us to act in certain ways, all the while being affected in a feedback process from the ways we move, how we feel, and of our becoming as youth, athletes, swimmers, humans. Put another way, mood is both a facilitator and inhibitor of becoming, shaping, and informing the process.

In this chapter I argue that youth's tactile senses are intricately intertwined with their emotions and moods. These, in turn, effect the ways in which they perceive their physical immersion in water. Throughout this chapter I use a variety of examples of immersion and immersive practices to sketch the moods and emotions of youth swimmers. First, I outline how the built environment of the competitive lengths swimming pool affords a particular kind of mood, one in which performance, training, competition, and racing are always a background force where the youths' senses of movement and perceptions of tactility form a bi-directional generation of force. Second, I build off the argument I began in chapter 4 that the skin and touch are central to our interactions in the world, and argue that due to the privileging of touch as the dominant sense in swimming (if senses were to be arranged in a

hierarchical order), the tactility of sensuous immersion feeds an emotional necessity that provides for the well-being of the youth of the Manta SC performance squad. Third, I outline the background moods of emotional force competitive youth swimmers are affected by in their lives and training spaces. Many youths find the sensations of immersion to be a peaceful and calming emotional experience, noting how lying on the bottom and blowing bubbles, or even the sensory shift accompanied with immersion in water provides a shift in mood, from one often characterized by anxiety in the rush of modernity, to a mood of relaxation, calmness, and tranquility. Lastly, I discuss how youths' perceptions of the tangibility and resistance of movement in water, the push and pull, suffuses senses of kinaesthesia and proprioception of enskilled movements with an affective intensity of emotional joy and pleasure in being, becoming, and belonging in competitive swimming.

6.1. Tactility and Mood

In years of continuous exposure to the sensations of immersion in the act of becoming, youth develop specific ways of perceiving their worlds and relating to their amphibious environments, to the places and spaces where they train. As with Nancy above, we can see how external factors clearly have an impact on emotional immersion. Immersion for many of the youth in the performance squad helped make them feel “calm,” “less stressed,” they “loved” being in the water. Physical movement practices youth employ to submerge, float, spin, flip, “fly,” sit, wiggle, splash, cruise, push, and pull the water and shape their bodies (as noted in Chapter 4) allows for a near infinite variation of bodily and sensual entanglement. Life-long processes of immersion in competitive swimming where youth cultivate enskilled knowledge that gives them a mastery over the liquid medium – the material, social, affective, and emotional aspects of being-in-the-water – provides the background for emotional entanglements, whether that is through swimming lessons, rigorous competitive training sessions, or other play episodes in leisure pools, water parks, at the beach or in lakes and rivers.

Pool waters are generally perceived as being still and unmoving except for the minute circulation through the filtration systems which are as standardized as the water's quality and the pool dimensions. This lack of shifting pool water means that youth's perceptions of bodily movement can be focused on tactile sensations of the subtle yawing and pitching of their body's motion, emerging internally in the contracting of muscles, rotating of joints, and stretching of flesh. Here, water's apparent “inertness” takes on qualities of meaning once interacted with (Strang 2004). Interactions with water and its qualities, our

fears and love of immersion, all have their histories which influences the ways in which we conceive of bodies of water (Neimanis 2017).

Watching the smooth and regular rhythm of arms strokes and kicks of the youth as they cruise up and down the pool during the kilometer of warmup meterage, I become mesmerized. I catch myself staring at the swimmers as they are doing freestyle, their hands and arms knifing through the surface of the water palms flat or slightly out turned. Their hand and arm entry does not create much, if any, splash, and little to no bubbles of captured air cling to their hands. Their catch, anchor, and pull are entirely water despite the bubbles that the act of flutter kicking produces. Their hands and arms “slip through” the surface tension of the water in a practiced way which they can accomplish at speed if they so choose. Transfixed by the repeated sequence of actions and experiencing a calming tranquility, I take in the sensory stimulus from the pool deck, the sound of the rhythmic tempoed splash of feet and ankles breaking the surface, the snap and splash of a tumble turn as legs flip over the surface to hit the wall at ninety-degree angles, and the “lap-lap” of water into the drainage gutters. This “workout” scene repeats itself ad nauseum in swimming pools across the world, wherever competitive clubs train. My own body responds to the tranquil scene of the youth cruising up and down the pool by relaxing. I lose track of time and space and am transfixed by the apparent ease of motion while observing arms recovering over the surface of the water. This will not be the first nor the last time I am transfixed by such a scene.

What happens underwater is much more dynamic. For it is underwater where effortful engagement of muscles and tendons, and the rotation and flexion of joints, occurs in a continuous struggle to maximize forward momentum and streamlined positions while reducing drag. It is this dialectic between relaxation and engagement and the flow between the two states of action where the mood of practice lies and blankets the space like a fresh snowfall bringing anticipation, dread, or peaceful tranquility depending on the emotional state of each youth. Being immersed, in emotion and in water, is the state where many of the performance squad found a sense of comfort and wonder.

Immersive sensations of being in water, the qualities of that water which youth perceive, and the affordances immersion provides, opens the possibility for multiple layering of affective engagement with swimming. While the casual observer may sense a mood of drudgery in the mundanity of early morning and evening practices six days per week, or of fearful anticipation at jumping into a pool of cold water, the practitioner is immersed in these affective entanglements. Early morning weekend practices were often when mock races and lactate sets would be scheduled. This differently organized space afforded youth the chance to chat for longer than the usual few minutes before and after practice as they would only be

in the water and swimming for minutes at a time during the duration of these two-hour training sessions. It was in these mundane “mock race” practices that I found the space to converse with youth and youth with each other. In a way, mock race sets were pale comparisons of the social spaces generated at County Championships and other inter-club galas. Only through friendly intra-squad rivalries and a bit of boasting banter were forms of competition space reproduced. The youth were aware that external factors, such as those experienced by Nancy, may impact their emotional immersion. Here, at the pool, they gauged the emotions of their peers, whether and what form of support, encouragement, or joking banter might be best received by their friends to help each other through the training sessions and make the displeasures of physical suffering socially enjoyable (for more on physical suffering see Chapter 7).

Without the depth of tactile sensations which youth swimmers learn to perceive as part of their movement through water, and the entangled experiences of touching and being touched by water (Ingersoll 2016; Straughan 2012), emotionally immersive experiences lose some of the affective capacity. It is the privileging of tactility in swimmers’ experiences of immersion which suffuses the background of their moods and their being in the world. Being in the water and the social spaces of the squad did provide swimmers some emotional comfort. Therefore, exploring the tactile senses is key to grasping the affective generation of emotions and moods in competitive swimming.

6.1.1. The Touch of Emotion

My ethnographic exploration of competitive youth swimmers’ cultural sensorium of touch mainly notes the personal subjective experience of their interactions with a different form of body, a body of water. Despite a lack of intersubjective touch during the practices of swimming there were still many moments of intersubjective touch between youth as they tugged, splashed, dunked, high-fived, shoved, adjusted, and played in the water in the in-between moments of training, or while sitting poolside awaiting their next chance to race. As Le Breton (2017, 124) writes, “the prohibition or intensification of touch is a fact of culture.” Therefore, we cannot account for swimmers’ individual sensory experiences without comprehending the wider contexts of touch as an intersubjective experience between toucher and touched in England (Paterson 2007; Jourard 1966; Dutton, Johnson, and Hickson 2017).

As touch is so central to our experiences, to our becoming, I would argue that the tactility of sensuous immersion feeds an emotional necessity that provides for the well-being of the youth in the performance squad. In Western societies the pleasures of touch tend to

be discounted due, in part, to the hegemony of vision (Le Breton 2017, 25-30). Hugging, handshakes, and other physical touch greeting are becoming increasingly rare (Tuan 2005; Linden 2015). Their scarcity has only increased by the physical distancing measures put in place during the global COVID-19 pandemic (which is still ongoing at the time of this writing).

Invoking Ashley Montagu's (2018) ethnographic work *Touching*, Yi-Fu Tuan (2005) makes the case for an increased sensitivity to tactile experience due to the skin's central importance as sensory organ and sensory system in individual interactions with the world around us as well as the intimate social connections physical touch affords. While Tuan speaks of the pleasures of immersion in a warm bath, I believe that some of the same principles apply to experiences of immersion in competitive swimming.

That pleasure [of touch] diminishes little with age. Initially it may seem to be a wholly inner-directed physical sensation, registered first at the skin surface and then quickly suffusing the whole body. We lower ourselves into a hot bath and register pure sensual delight from the temperature and feel of the water; later, drying off with a towel, we feel pleasure in the stimulated skin. But the mind often takes a part, too, appraising the water's qualities, appreciating the sensations of trunk and limbs soaking in the hot water and, later, the towel's fluffy, enveloping warmth. (Tuan 2005, 74)

Through the skin our sensitive sensory perceptions of touch are a delicate instrument for exploring the world. Training inevitably increases the sensitivity to tactile sensations, so just as professional "cloth feelers" are able to discern the minute differences in textiles (Milne and Milne 1962 cited in Tuan 2005, 76), youth appraise the water's qualities they swim in. This appraisal never exists in a vacuum. Rather it is intimately connected with the previous socialized experiences of immersion in relation to their own personal sensory perceptions. It is not only the quality of contact with the water but with the other that is assessed, for "feeling" "relates both to tactile perception and the sphere of emotions" (Le Breton 2017, 119). It is "intimately bound [...] to elemental moods and emotions," writes Tuan (2005, 78). Tactile perception, then, cannot be removed from "mood" (Ram 2015), the emotional background of our intentions and everyday interactions toward the world.

6.2. Moods: Anxiety and Tranquility

Mood is a complex force which pervades the background of our everyday interactions with the self and with others (Ram 2015). Moods are affective forces that tug at and steer our capacities to act in particular ways towards individual and collective ends. Moods are social, intersubjective, and defined by the fabric of our everyday existences in particular cultural milieu. They are also individual and can be shifted, transcended, transferred, and resisted. Moods are affected in an ongoing feedback process through our perceptions, senses, and

interactions in the world, from the ways we move, to how we feel emotionally and sensually, and of our becoming.

When I asked Martin about mental and physical recovery time allotted to him and his peers in their weekly training regime, he noted the distinction between himself as a youth still going to school full-time and paid professional swimmers.

Martin: It is hard with school. Like people like Nathan who do mornings, and evenings, and school, like it is not really recovery, is it? Well, I guess it depends on what sort of day you have isn't it. 'Cause like a pro swimming twice a day can just sleep in the day in between their sessions and that. But I don't know, you are just sort of rushed around at school and everything's like stressful. And then you are swimming again.

SH: Is swimming then like almost a break from school? Rather than the other way around?

Martin: Yeah. It does sort of make you much less stressed. Like I feel so much more chilled out after swimming. Like if you go in and you are stressed about something and then by the end, it is out of your head and you are just, you feel more calm. Which is nice.

Martin reveals that a mood which pervades much of his reality as a teenager, a student, and competitive swimmer is one of stress or anxiety. Everything is rushed from school to swimming, to eating, to traveling between activities, to sleeping, only to do it all over the next day for 11-months out of the year. In the market driven neoliberal capitalist economy of the United Kingdom life is generally a full-on sprint. School is increasingly designed as the training ground to mirror the competitive rush, speed, and demand our consumerist, instant gratification, "like-button" societies, are becoming. Sports are certainly not immune from this anxiousness of the "now."

Daniel was of similar mind to Martin (above) when it came to the anxious mood which pervades teenager's lives.

Daniel: Well, I like swimming 'cause it is an enjoyable sport. It is just fun, I guess. I come here and it is not so serious, but it is serious, if that makes sense. Like everyone is just laid back, but they also want to do well. Yeah, so it is not so much pressure on you.

SH: Yeah, no one is sitting on the side of the pool yelling at you.

Daniel: Yeah, exactly. I feel relaxed. And it is just when you swim you can just let go of everything. Like say you had a bad day you can just swim, and it will be fine. 'Cause you'll forget about it.

SH: Is it that you are just so focused on your swimming?

Daniel: Yeah, you just lose focus, and you are relaxed in the water. So, you just feel better, I guess.

The education environment for English youth pairs the ability to cope with the rushed stressfulness of secondary, college, and university work to one's prospects later in life. Unlike the seriousness he experiences outside of swimming, Daniel finds the immersive environment of his competitive swimming squad at the pool to be "laid back" where there is "not so much pressure on you." And yet there is a serious mood to their training where swimmers and coaches "want to do well." Being immersed and going through the enskilled movements of swimming, practicing the developed techniques and skills used to swim fast, helped Nick "feel relaxed," to "lose focus" and "just swim" while at the pool. While my question may have been about an intentional focused awareness on swimming motions, Daniel responded with how physical immersion in water afforded an emotional immersion in the "not so serious" mood, which helped him to "feel better" and become relaxed. Not unlike diving underwater and letting yourself drift (Straughan 2012), the tactile and kinaesthetic sensations of immersion and movement in and through water provided an affective bodily capacity to shift the prevailing mood to where "you just feel better."

As it is with sensoria, moods are socially determined. According to Mulhall, "[t]he socialness of moods also implies that an individual's social world fixes the range of moods into which she can be thrown" (1996, 79). The whole swimming community, including swimmers, parents, coaches, and officials, are participants in defining and fixing the moods. Upcoming Countys, Regionals, Nationals, Sussex and Arena League races were all causes of anticipation, excitement, and elation, with only a tinge of fear and anxiety over not performing at one's best. While the temporalities immediately proceeding races could be host to moods varying from indifference to elation, disappointment to euthymia, the underlying mood leading up to significant competitions was usually anticipation rather than dread. There is a hopefulness that youth will swim their best, get a new personal best time, win a medal, or podium spot. Parents do get anxious for their children to do well, and swimmers sometimes fear their performances will be poor. Mood's flow and ebb like currents in the water and one's mood often, as Martin noted, "depends on what sort of day you have."

In discussing the phenomenon of moods as disclosing the character of our existence to the world, Stephen Mulhall (1996) argues that moods are experienced as "given," something into which we are thrown rather than actively seek out, change and shape. "They constitute a further and fundamental condition of human existence," writes Mulhall (1996, 76). Still, we can alter or overcome our mood and "establish ourselves in a new one," sometimes through great effort and sometimes through the mundane repetitions of physical

activity, such as running or swimming lengths. Indeed, the rhythmic nature of swimming and deep breathing, not unlike in yoga, helps trigger a relaxation response or what has been termed the “feel good” effects of swimming, or alternatively the “runner’s high” (see Nichols 2014).

Not all training sessions were relaxed and not all squads, coaches, and clubs operate in the same way or have the same moods and atmosphere. A few of the youth who had transferred to Manta SC from other clubs told me stories where fear, disappointment, drudgery, boredom, and anger were the dominant emotions and moods of training at their previous club. Generally, the mood at most Manta SC performance squad training sessions was decidedly different from this. The coaches – Arthur and Warren – both contributed to a casual atmosphere where almost any comment, query, or action was an occasion for social banter, which lightened the mood and brought an air of humor and fun to the regimented seriousness and discipline of their competitive swimming training regimes. Fun is the foundation from which mood needs to be built on in this and other competitive sporting activities for youth (M. Lee, Whitehead, and Balchin 2013). Although youth like winning, racing, and going fast, if the prevailing mood was perceived as predominantly negative (depression, anxiety, stress), it would be no fun and they would not come to practice and the enjoyment of the activity might be replaced by burnout and eventual withdrawal from the sport (Sean Heath 2020a). Having an affective space in which to play around in from time to time, to socialize with their friends, or to banter their peers during mock races afforded the youth with capacities to have fun even with the rigours and intensity of competitive swimming training, and perhaps to forget about – if only for a moment – the anxiety inducing pressures of their otherwise hyper-connected, hyper-speed lives.

The mood of training sessions is visible in the actions of the youth for they both perceive this space as relaxing and enact a relaxing posture, attitude, and movement style. As Daniel notes above, engagement in the active cultivation of becoming is serious in that swimmers want each other to do well. Still, youth also have fun along the way. Even though training may be serious, difficult, and strenuous Nick did not feel depleted nor frustrated after hard sets.

Umm, no I feel like achieved. I feel better about myself after I have swum. Especially after a hard set, like once you have finished it, you just feel, umm, not refreshed but kind of refreshed if that makes sense. Ahh, it's hard to explain. [Nick sighs heavily in exasperation at the difficulty of trying to communicate a very embodied sensation using the limited vocabulary of aural language].

This “affective intentionality” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 396), the emotion or mood of swimming, is entangled with Nancy’s insistence in the Chapter 4 that comprehending “feel” requires immersion, for tactile sense perceptions are to be experienced and felt in the water. Indeed, feelings “infuse the content of one’s perceptions and are not separable from its content” (Romdenh-Romluc 2011, 176) as either the object or subject of those feelings. Immersion is to be lived and arises through the intersubjective interaction between people and bodies of water. In the examples throughout this chapter, the anxieties of being in a performance-oriented sport, of always having to do better, or the joys of immersion and moods of relaxation, the sense of calmness, and tranquility, are present in the motor capacity of swimmers and arise in the interaction of body/mind/environs through movement.

6.2.1. Moving and feeling

Immersion is the background medium for youths’ swimming practice, they spend countless hours moving through water developing a deep emotional memory, often pleasurable, connected through the engagement of their tactile senses. Theo’s excitement as we walked away from the pool after a morning practice was palpable at my mention of the resistance water causes:

Yeah, ahh [Theo visibly gets excited, and nods his head emphatically], I remember when I was younger, like you used to feel like you were flying! It is basically the next best thing to flying. I don’t know... And umm, I don’t know, it is just like... when you... I used to like sprint against my friends and stuff, and you just feel really cool going as hard as you can in the water. ‘Cause obviously it is more dense than air. It just feels like there is more to the struggle against as you try to beat your friends and stuff.

We sense the restricted ways our body can be and the affordances of our body and our environment. In water, it is drag caused by the density of water that generates tactile resistance to our movements. This “novel” experience of resistance Theo recalls from when he was younger has stuck with him, clinging to his memory as water clings to the surface of his body. This watery environment affords Theo the immersive pleasures of tactile resistance, which are inexorably entangled with his early emotional experiences of “flying” through the water.

All environments provide various affordances to those living and inhabiting them (Ingold 2000). Bodies are part of our environs, the interplay between the world around us and our internal and external perceptions as well as sensory engagement within the world (Carter 2018b). Affordance also entails emotions, which shape the “background mood[s] of involvement” (Ram 2015, 44). As social sentient beings we care about the affordances which our environments provide us and we become anxious if those affordances are reduced,

curtailed, limited, or revoked. Unfettered movement in three dimensions (i.e., up-down, left-right, forward-back) which the human body can perform in water is one such affordance. Another is the ability to float due to the buoyancy of water counteracting the incessant pull of gravity. Yet another affordance is the shared practice of competitive swimming, of belonging to a swim squad, and having social and emotional support from peers and coaches. The body and emotions are therefore indispensable to our conscious attention and whatever occupies the foreground of our perceptions. For youth swimmers the water and a relaxed mood are “indispensable in the same way the ground we walk on is necessary for human beings: we never have to think about the ground or what it affords except when it poses a problem for us” (Ram 2015, 36).⁷¹

Yara, fourteen, is one of the few youths in the performance squad who often chose to swim butterfly in the set pieces which allowed a choice of stroke. She considers it her “number one” stroke, the swimming style in which she is most proficient.

“Most people are like ‘Ahh yeah, why do you do fly? It's like, It's really really hard.’ Like, it's not. It's not hard. Like I love fly. I find it really relaxing.” “Really?” I exclaimed, incredulous to her admission that she finds butterfly relaxing as butterfly is considered both the most spectacular of the strokes and the most difficult by non-swimmers and swimmers alike. “Yeah! I don't know why everyone is like so tired when they do it. Obviously when I do it, like obviously I'm tired. But it is a stroke that I enjoy. Like I like all the strokes. But butterfly kind of gets me in the mood.”

Yara's body, sculpted by her intentional focus on the techniques required to swim fast, by the millions of arm strokes and the tens of thousands of kilometers swum over the seasons, provides her the physical affordances to help generate this background mood. It was especially in racing environments, at galas or in practice, where Yara most felt most “in the mood” while swimming fly. The kinaesthetic undulation of butterfly under and over the surface of the water is a complimentary part of the sensory aspect of swimming which links bodily movement with emotion and mood.

Like his peers, it was the liquid medium of swimming which grasped seventeen-year-old David's attention. “I've always just loved water sports really. Like, I think it is just something about being in the water, it is just so different to normal, like, it is so much different to any other sport. It is just really unique. And, yeah, you can feel just so much more power in the water, and you can feel all your muscles working and yeah, yeah, I like that.” Daniel had a breadth of experience in various sporting environments, from the grass rugby

⁷¹ For a discussion of the problems which may arise that curtail such affordances, due to pain, see Chapter 7.

pitch to the asphalt tennis court, from the wood laminated basketball court to the cricket pitch. These atmosphere-based sports all provide certain affordances in the dynamics of enskilled movement which are different from the liquid medium of water. For Daniel, swimming is an amalgamation of whole bodily movements that incorporate his trained tactile impressions of motion in water with the interpretation of proprioceptive and interoceptive sensory inputs of his body's motion through space which helps generate the feeling of power. Emotion suffuses his embodied practice through the unique combination of movement and resistance, the water itself providing that resistance rather than, say, another person on the rugby pitch. This ultimately affects his immersion and emotional appraisal of enjoyment.

Emma, sixteen, also found the physical resistance of water to be a significant factor in the tactile pleasures she experienced while swimming.

I think I just, I think I have always loved the water. I have always loved just being in it, even if it is just mucking about. But I feel as though it is like, it sounds weird, but it is not just you. I feel as though you are working both ways. But it's not [pausing to think], running is hard and I did a lot of track and field when I was younger. I was a sprinter, yeah, it was good. But I feel like when you are in the pool, when you have got that resistance, it is pushing you harder. And I like that. I like the sense of being, of having to really push it and pull. I love the pull through the water. There is nothing like that. When you achieve and you pull through the water and you like smack the water [she gestures a "winning" water smacking move akin to a fist pump/punch] and you are the last one there. Nothing beats that. Especially in competing. It's the best.

Emma notes that while running is hard, feeling the feedback of resistance in the water makes swimming harder.⁷² I take this hardness of which Emma speaks to be the distinctions between how she experiences her kinaesthetic sensorium in these two acts. Running and sprinting engages the sensations of our own body, we feel how we run more from an internal sense of the contractions and extensions of muscles, the solidity of the ground as balls of our feet strike down to propel us forward. The struggle and the hardness of the act is against and with one's own body. In swimming, especially in competition for Emma, that additional resistance which water provides over the entire surface area of her body engages the multiplicity of tactile sensors in skin and muscles. These suffuse her enskilled movements with an affective intensity of emotion both joy and pleasure of being-in immersion. Indeed, Emma evokes an affective presence in her description of being-in-the-water. Feeling as though "it is not just you" and that "you are working both ways," that you are working to push yourself forward while the water is working to pull you back, to slow your progress, to claw

⁷² For a discussion of the resistances of running surfaces and running at altitude see Crawley (2021) and Carter (2018b).

and grasp at every part of your body immersed in its liquidity, demonstrates an intimate understanding of her watery environment as affording tactile and emotive capacities. Like taking the position of lead in a ballroom dance pair, Emma's pushing and pulling of her partner, the water, is met with resistance. This resistance is not solid but fluid and will yield in particular ways to her enskilled movements guiding her body and the water through an intricate dance of motion and emotion.

When Theo, seventeen, told me that "swimming is basically the next best thing to flying," I could "feel" his vivid descriptions of the sensations of immersive movement through the vibrating intensity of his bodily posture, his vocal intonation, and through facial expressions. He reminded me of the pleasures of swimming with fins, the additional forward propulsion they afford to lift me up on top of the water as though I were a speedboat skipping along the surface. While the analogy between flying and swimming is not perfect, the materiality of air can provide lift with enough speed or with the natural circulation and flows of air in the atmosphere (i.e., updrafts). As swimmers move faster through the water they tend to "sit up" in the water, holding a position which is more "on top" of the water than submerged beneath it. In this way swimmers also gain "lift" in addition to the buoyancy of their bodies. In swimming front crawl with fins, I can feel the "lift" of the water pressure under my torso and under my outstretched arms as I reach forward to grab armfuls of water with what seems like less effort in the pull of my shoulder and lateralis muscles. I can recall the resistance each leg kick causes in the contractions and stretching of my quadriceps and hamstring muscles. When I breath to the side there is a distinct wake generated from the crest of my head which I can see expanding in a wedge to either side of my face creating a dip below the surface and a pocket of air.

Anna Gibbs conceives of language as a form of experience which is synchronous and serial, as well as parallel-processed. The informational compression, which occurs in any form of communication, condenses "affective, sensory, and so-called cognitive forms of knowledge" (Gibbs 2010, 200), near instantaneously. In his communicating the feel of flying through the water, Theo evokes the "motoric, perceptual, and cognitive skills as well as complex emotional patterns" (Gibbs 2010, 200) that comprise our shared swimming body of habit. In this way, it can be said that Theo and I are engaging in mimetic communication, an "entirely holistic, analogue mode of communication" (p. 199). Here, our socialization into competitive swimming, the cultivation of enskilled knowledge of swimming movements, and the moods and emotions which suffuse these experiences encodes a new referent, the knowledge that swimming is indeed the next best thing to flying. Perhaps swimming and flying are commensurate after all, at least for those of us without wings.

6.3. Safe, Comfortable, and Peaceful: Joys of Immersion

“I tried a lot of other sports,” Eileen told me as we sat on the recreation centre lobby couches waiting for the coach to arrive for a weekday evening training session. “But I think being in the water, it is quite comforting in a way. Because it is something that I like doing and I don't mind getting my hair wet. I don't mind it. I really like it! I think a lot of people worry about going in the water and I don't worry about it. It is kind of a safe place. I don't think about it as dangerous, or it is going to harm me. It is kind of a comfortable place. I like it.” Eileen succinctly sums up very human experiences and emotional reactions to water. Either you like being in the water or you fear the water. You enjoy the sensations of water dripping off your body or you find it a nuisance to dry off the water clinging to you in small droplets. You find comfort in the enshrouding tactile sensations of submersion or experience unease, panic, or fear. Feelings of unease in aquatic spaces is a form of emotional learning (Kahneman 2011, 237–38), as are feelings of comfort in immersion. Fear and safety are learned from personal experience or communicated in images and words.

Certainly, swimming in a pool does not present the same risks and dangers as open water swimming (Knechtle et al. 2020; Tipton et al. 2017), or freediving for seaweed and urchins (Martinez 2004). This is due to the ways in which swimming is arranged. Coaches and lifeguards have lifesaving rescue training and are present overseeing each session, adults have been Disclosure and Barring Service checked before being allowed to work with children and youth, and rescue equipment and safety infrastructure is in place at the pools where training occurs. One's own skill and who you are swimming with are all necessary details accounted for which help generate and sustain a mood of confidence, certainty, and safety. From this comfortable mood, then, youth can further explore the sensory pleasures of being-in-the-water through submersion and play.

At the end of weekend morning practices, while many of the performance squad youth would climb out of the pool, pack away their gear, and begin stretching off and chatting, I would occasionally see Nathan, Martin, Nancy, and/or Nick lying on the bottom of the “deep end” of the pool gyrating, lying still, or attempting to blow bubble rings out of their mouths. It was after observing one of these moments of play when I asked Nathan what it was like to be immersed in water. Recalling a recent vacation to Ibiza with his family, Nathan described to me what it felt like to be fully submerged.

Nathan: It's quite peaceful actually. 'Cause you can't hear any, you can't hear much. So, it's really, it's like mad. Like, on holiday, we went to Ibiza recently and in the villa, they had like a speaker on the outside and then a pool.

SH: Underwater?

Nathan: No, they had like the speakers, like outside the kitchen, and then the pool was like literally right next to the kitchen. So, what I would do is I would like put the speakers on mad loud and then I would go underwater and just lay on the bottom and you can like just about hear the music. It is so, it is literally the coolest thing.

Nathan's enjoyment of swimming is his being-in water and the sensory differences immersive practices afford. For Nathan, this has been a life-long affair: "I've always loved being in the water. Yeah, I went, my mom told me when I was a kid, when they were teaching me, they used to put me in, and I used to swim straight to the bottom. And I used to stay at the bottom like, as much as I can. And I used to like, just like go under all the time." Even after a decade of competitive swimming training, and countless hours swimming in pools, Nathan still takes the time to play and experience the affective bodily sensations of immersion lying on the bottom of the pool and blowing bubble rings.

Nearly a year later after the above conversation with Nathan, I am milling about amongst the age-group cliques formed amongst the performance squad swimmers as they get ready to start mobilizing, warming up joints and muscles in preparation for this winter evening swim. Nathan is absent from practice this evening but his peers Daniel, James, Nick, and Lara are commenting on Nathan's doughnut ring bubbling blowing prowess he was demonstrating last night. James is particularly animated describing how Nathan blew "One huge ring with all his air. It was so large I could have swum straight through it like a trained dolphin! I don't know how he does it. Mine are either good or they end up shit. I have no consistency." The five of us standing in a rough circle chuckle at James' self deprecation. Daniel also concedes that he can only sometimes make the rings but usually they contain extra bubbles, while Nathan can seemingly do them small or large with machine-like precision. "Lots of practice," I suggest to the group as I am reminded of Nathan's affinity for deep submersion.

A few days later I had scheduled a virtual conversation with Daniel between his college classes in the afternoon as this is when he had time to chat, having to work on the weekends after swim practices. With the youth's bubble-blowing comparison fresh in my mind I wanted to inquire further as to the sensations Daniel perceived while being submerged underwater and immersed in competitive swimming.

Well yeah, it is really quiet and peaceful. Especially during warm downs when like I would just like dive down underwater, and you kind of just let yourself drift. It is almost like being in space really. Like that is how I imagine it. Yeah, it is a weird feeling, cause obviously different mediums

and densities, different to air. So, like you only really get those sensations in the water.

Although he had never been to space nor in an airplane diving from height to simulate weightlessness, Daniel conjures up the visual image of an astronaut floating untethered in space, the drifting motions caused not by the substance of their immersion, but by their own movements.

Immersion for swimmers is unlike that of deep-sea divers or of astronauts in space, hermetically sealed away in life support suits, rather, swimmers exist in spaces of “vital materiality” (J. Bennett 2010). While they may be confined to the spatial dimensions of the “concrete box” of the pool (Throsby 2016), it is possible to draw parallels between scuba divers and swimmers’ embodied experiences of immersion if we focus our attention on kinaesthetic perceptions of youth and how their sensations of tactility arise through affective experiences of swimming. The tactile materiality of being submerged, the pressure of the water on the skin, the spatial dimensions and ability to move underwater which buoyancy perception and bodily orientation allow for, are all intertwined in how divers’ tactile sensations help orient themselves in this aquatic environment. “[F]or divers, the knowledge and skill required to maintain bodily position within the fluid materiality of the water that envelops them is both tacit and actively reflected upon” (Straughan 2012, 21). This is also true for youth swimmers who employed a variety of enskilled movements to languidly move through the water. Swimmers additionally commented on the affective responses to tactile stimuli elicited by immersion. And while youth did not refer to the increased pressure being at greater depths has upon their bodies, nor were they reliant on a host of specialized equipment to enact their immersion – the pools where they trained never more than two-metres deep – they most certainly were able to perceive an increased squeezing enshrouding on their bodies, like that of a weighted blanket, what Daniel refers to as a “weird feeling” of “different mediums and densities.” Perceiving his submersion in water as quiet and peaceful Daniel is evoking a synesthesia of the emotive, tactile, and auditory sensations he experiences during immersion.

Eileen also noted the difference in auditory perception while swimming:

When I swim, sometimes I think about what it sounds like. And it sounds weird cause you can hear everyone else around. It was kind of a weird feeling when you are swimming down and they are taking the lane ropes out, it's quiet, seeing the water go still and no one in there.

Sound and touch are transformed in water. The background echoing din of a pool chamber from the pool deck during training becomes the sound of one’s exhalations, the feeling of bubbles rolling up past cheeks and ears, the beat of your kicks, the feel of the surface

tension on your forearm and elbow as your freestyle arm slips into the water. You can also hear your teammates creating an underwater cacophony with their own movements and exhalations. The underwater soundscape changes and quiets as practice winds down especially if your squad is the last group to use the pool during a late-evening practice. I have also experienced the quietness of being the last one in the pool at the end of a late evening training session. It is an eerie shock to pause in the middle of a length and hear no other movement in the water as you peer around and clearly see through the water noting only the tiles on walls and pool bottom.

It is not surprising that young people comment on the aurality of immersion. The materiality of the water and its acoustic properties provide a directionless thickness to the sound quality we perceive (Straughan 2012; Nestor 2015). Water dulls, amplifies, and transforms sound. We hear as much through our bodies as through our ear when in the water, our skeleton and chest cavity acting as a resonator for the vibrations traveling through water. We sense vibrations and movements in a synaesthetic way when immersed for “the entire human body becomes a drum upon which the rhythms of life [...] reverberate” (Carter 2018b, 49). The water, then, adds a unique tactile quality to the soundscapes of youth swimmer’s experiences of immersion. Muffling the cacophonous din of modern technological society, the water transforms youth’s sensory perceptions of sound and touch, intermingling the two in a synaesthetic melody, the background mood to immersion.

6.4. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have continued to build on the affective and emotional aspects of immersion as process and as theory. I have argued that the touch of liquid water which surrounds the body, and the complex interplay of sensory perceptions of movement and tactility, provides a particular set of capacities which affect and are affected by the moods and emotions arising from this entanglement. As affective forces, moods constrained, enabled, and suffused youths’ abilities to act. These moods shifted and transformed through the cycles of the swimming season, through competition, training, and even during seasonal breaks.

Youths’ mastery of aquatic techniques afforded them a shift in the emotional background of their intentions and everyday interactions in the water. For these adept practitioners of the art of swimming fast immersion provides comfort and a bolstering to youth’s senses of well-being. Swimming up and down the lengths, the regularity of rhythmic repetition of skills and techniques, those enskilled movements which youth have incorporated into their “body of habit” (Merleau-Ponty 2012) and the sensory perceptions of

immersion are, in some ways, an escape from the stresses, anxiety, and the headlong rush of productivity and efficiency that social, educational, and economic institutional structures demand. For these English youth live in a hyper-connected world where forms of travel, communication, and information flows move ever faster and faster. Even the requirements to participate in their sport, the constant drive to better one's performance, with qualifying times becoming quicker every year, every age-group category contribute and subject youth to a prevailing mood of anxiety (Tetreault et al. 2021; Gislason, Kennedy, and Witham 2021).

Tactile perceptions are entangled with the emotive qualities of youths' worlds. They sense the resistance of water, perceive their movement in and through this liquid medium in ways affected by their emotional states and moods. These, in turn, affect their bodies which surge, spill, slip, rub, and splash in intersubjective relations with others. Youth find joy and pleasure in the social atmosphere of competing and training alongside their friends, of the collective effort to swim faster. The physical and social spaces of the pool also help contribute to positive moods and emotions of safety, comfort, and relaxation. We even find reference to the capacities which water affords in the expression, "relax and go with the flow," an aquatic metaphor that hints at how the tactile engagement of being in the water can transport one physically and emotionally. Considering youths' being-in-the-water through the lens of immersion reveals those affective sensations – of touch, sound, emotion, sociality, belonging – combine to shape the background mood of their lifeworlds and infuse their becoming competitive swimmers as a joyful set of processes. This is unlike the loss of self Sloterdijk posited in an immersion of the senses (ten Bos 2009). Instead, we see a generation of the self as a complex entanglement of forces, perceptions, senses, and materials. It is to the removal *from* the flow of immersion through senses of pain to which I now turn.

Chapter 7. Negotiating Pain

Pain is a culturally slippery experience. It resists easy classification as a category, being variously interpreted and expressed according to gender, class, culture, and context. Yet pain is a human universal (Classen 2005a), an experience that “simply cannot be avoided, an experience that sets limits to the meanings given by cultural beliefs, discourses, or practices” (Kleinman et al. 1992, 7). The medicalization of the body in Western traditions has stripped away the socially mediated conventions and experiences of pain, meaning that biomedical discourse has in effect reduced people’s experiences of their pain to an isolating and individual rhetoric. Pain is one of many ways we perceive the embodied self and our interactions in the world. Experiences of pain inform how we know and use our bodies (Aalten 2005). Culturally mediated experience of pain can have lasting effects on bodies, perception, and notions of the self. In this chapter I explore youth swimmer’s sensory perceptions of pain as they relate to the embodied experience of swimming. I outline how swimmers learn to conceptualize pain and negotiate the meanings associated with various manifestations of pain.

A continuum of pleasure/pain is a theoretically productive way to approach how youth swimmers both come to make sense of and feel their bodies through enskilled knowledges. This continuum is socially mediated, given values in the ways pain is sensed as beneficial, negative, and consequential, or as something to be overcome. It is in pain where the body makes itself appear from the background of perception where it had previously been silent (Leder 1990), and forces itself to the foreground of conscious awareness. Although youth experience the pains of muscle soreness and fatigue of intense training these are understood as a signs of a future increased capacity for movement (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020b). This is apparent when youth discuss the aches and pains of muscle soreness and the production of lactic acid, which causes discomfort and fatigue, especially during high intensity training sets.⁷³ Youth swimmers are taught and learn to silence their bodies from speaking up, to disregard these pain responses, to diminish their spectrums of pain, in a mode of “bodily absence,” which allows them to continue training and push the limits of their bodies.

⁷³ Sustained exercise causes the release and buildup of lactic acid in the muscles faster than it can be broken down. Generally, production of lactic acid is accepted as a physiological response to protect from over exertion and injury. The breakdown of lactic acid occurs through either oxidization processes or conversion into glucose. For a technical example of how lactate buildup communicates fatigue and soreness to the brain see (Ishii and Nishida 2013).

In this chapter I argue that youth swimmers' socially mediated experiences of pain are both individuated and social. Pain is perceived as being in and of their bodies while also being a shared experience between peers and the group. Yet the terminology for describing and articulating the varieties of pain is vast (pain, hurt, strain, ache, fatigue, sore, numb, suffering, discomfort, to name a few) with individual swimmer's thresholds of pain varying widely.⁷⁴ Wittgenstein (1953) noted how certain words within normal speech seem to have a "family resemblance" without necessarily having one general term to classify them. Following Wittgenstein, Needham (1975) has suggested that classification of social facts into polythetic categories (i.e., pain, hurt, soreness, niggle) does not preclude the risk of leaving out "some feature that is regarded indigenously as essential to the relationship" (363), but rather, the definition of any polythetic class, its boundaries, are difficult to draw, leaving open the possibility of borderline cases. I bring this up to suggest that we can productively group or class the terms for "pain" in this chapter, locating them along a continuum, with the understanding that senses of pain and pleasure "do often overlap, or else approach each other so closely that it is impossible to tell where one stops and the other starts" (Classen 2005a, 109).

7.1. "A Nice Way to Wake Up in the Morning": A Typology of Pain

Monday at 6:30am on a cold and dark January morning, frost on car windshields and the temperature outside hovering around -1 degrees Celsius, eleven of the squad show up for what turns out to be a kick set. After following the club for only a few months I have yet to get used to these early morning sessions. This early morning one-and-a-half-hour kick set practice before youth head to school is punctuated by repetitions of kicking and small amounts of aerobic swimming. I watch the swimmers do their alternating 50m or 25m fly kick repetitions and the 200's of free, back, and breaststroke kick, and am mesmerized by how tranquil it is to stand poolside, to listen, watch, and feel the rhythms of training. While this A2⁷⁵ set is not particularly intense, the youth are expected to swim continuously except for the 10-20 seconds rest they get between the 50's and 200's.

⁷⁴ A threshold of pain as I conceive it is youth swimmer's ability to experience a range of intensities of pain before they are unable to silence their body's incessant speaking up, and then confess their pain to others. Or otherwise, must cease to move due to the all-encompassing sensations of pain overwhelming their perceptions.

⁷⁵ Adapted from Sweetenham and Atkinson's (2003) energy systems, British Swimming has classified seven training states within five "training zones". Zone 1) A1 and A2 training states, "Aerobic Low Intensity" and "Aerobic Maintenance" accordingly, where heart rates (HR) would not exceed 50 beats

Upon completion of this set, the youth climb out of the pool and begin placing their goggles and hats in their kit bags. We stand around chatting in animated tones as they stretch off by holding a shoulder stretch with their opposite arms or leaning into the wall as leverage. Emma, sixteen, says to no one in particular, "I really enjoyed that set. And I never thought I would be saying that about kick!" Her closest friend in the club Haley, a sixteen-year-old girl who has the muscular physique of an Olympic gymnast replies, "It's nice to have an A2 in the morning. It's enough to wake you up but you aren't dead the rest of the day. You aren't like 'Ahh, I can't lift my legs!'"

Pain for the performance squad youth is physical. It is something felt when doing intense sprinting sets, felt in a broken wrist, felt when sunburnt skin is immersed in cold chlorinated pool water, felt when shoulder tissue becomes inflamed. Hurt and hurting are the words that the youth most often used to describe the pain of muscle fatigue, of the aches and soreness that comes with the regimented temporalities of practices and competitions. Pain does not always involve injury, for injury is only one potential perception of being hurt. Hurt was used in such a way as to invoke the active tense in the sensory experiences of being immersed in pain. Considering the various intensities of hurt in swimming we can roughly map the types of training sets along a typology of pain, as the intensities of certain sets induce different sensations of pain. One form of hurt in this typology is the soreness that comes from an early morning A2 set (a workout based on maintaining one's heart rate at 160 beats per minute). A second form is the soreness of an A3 set (180BPM heart rate) in the evening. As the intensity and speed of swimming increases so too does pain move along the spectrum. A third form that "hurts" are the VO2 Max sets. A fourth form of hurt and pain can be experienced from lactate sets and competition. A fifth form of pain – the pain of sore shoulders, or sore knees – blurs the border from positive pain, or as something that "hurts," to negative pain (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020b), which can be a sign of overtraining or incorrect technique. Finally, there is the pain from catastrophic physical injury, usually a break in a bone, a tear in a muscle or tendon. All these pains linger to different degrees, some fading over time, other cropping up at seemingly random intervals. Yet all are experienced in the body, perceived through a sensory entanglement of pain and tactility.

The pain of a two-hour A3 set (180bpm heart rate) is worthy of celebration. Manta SC youth would congratulate each other with clasped hands and high-fives on completing the

below maximum (bbm), approximately 160 beats per minute (bpm) for the youth at Manta SC; Zone 2) AT, or A3, "Aerobic Threshold" with a HR of 180bpm; Zone 3) VO2 or "Aerobic Overload" with a HR of between 5 to 20 beats below maximum; Zone 4) "LP," Lactate Production and "LT," Lactate Tolerance where HR are between 0-and-10bbm; and, Zone 5) "Speed" or basic speed where swimmers are sprinting with long periods of rest (Peyrebrune 2005).

meterage of these sets while sticking to the times their coach has set out for them. Yet, at times, the pain experienced in similar lactate sets prevents swimmers this display of camaraderie as they may be unable to even wiggle their fingers.

When Nancy gets out of the pool after swimming a 200m fly race, all out, she sits down on the bench immediately beside me. "Ahhh, my hands!" she exclaims. She looks down at her hands and tries desperately to move her fingers, to open and close them into fists, but is only able to get a small amount of movement out of them. She begins laughing and says, "I can't move my fingers. My arms, the lactate! I'm half laughing and half crying."

Nancy, here, has reached a threshold where the intensity of pain has become all-encompassing. She is immersed in pain. She is caught somewhere between the comedy of her inability to move her hands and the agony she is experiencing from the fatigue and buildup of lactic acid in her muscles. As she attempts to flex her fingers though the pain, she knows that this experience will help her muscles acclimate to the production of lactate, but she is unable to silence her body's incessant speaking up, needing to confess her pain to others.

The extent to which these youth suffer the pain of muscle fatigue depends largely on what style of swimming they prefer (i.e., which is their No.1 stroke, their fastest and most competed stroke).

"It has less to do with the age thing but rather the distinction between types of swimmers. The all-round IM and distance swimmers need to be in the pool more, while sprinters, well..." [Warren nods his chin over at the sprinter Erin who is standing in the shallow end chatting rather than warming up leaving her actions to apparently confirm how much pool time sprinters need]. Nancy, switching stretches to cross her arm in front of her chest and placing her other hand on her triceps to 'push' her other arm for a deeper stretch, pipes in saying that for two-hundred and four-hundred I.M., "When you get up to the blocks you need to know you are fit." Warren quantifies this by saying, "Yes, anyone can do a fifty-metre sprint." "Yeah, it's only thirty seconds of pain, you know you can do okay for that race," Nancy replies. "Well under thirty [seconds]" Warren says, "And you are sore afterwards for longer. After I do the four hundred I.M. I feel it afterward for longer every year I do it" [He breaks into a big smile and laughs]. Nancy replies to this saying, "In between the breast and free I am surprised I don't pee myself I'm so exhausted!" She chuckles to herself. "I really have to dig in for that last hundred metres."

Warren and Nancy are both indicating that there are multiple types of swimmers, types of swimmers' bodies, ways that "the swimmer" is both enacted and performed. Yet for all these "body-multiples" (Mol 2002), Nancy and Warren point towards a definition of pain as physical, the hurt of sore muscles, the fatigue of racing and pushing one's self and body to the limit of performance. They also connect this to being "fit" (see Chapter 4) as one of the affordances to be able to cope with various intensities and qualities of pain, and the

difficulties of maintaining this as one gets older. As Warren has gotten older his muscle soreness extends for longer after racing, indicating that it is a part of the competitive aspect of the sport. This proprioceptive sensation of soreness, of having to “dig in” because of the pain of lactic acid build up and muscle fatigue during a race sets Nancy and Warren apart as “senior” swimmers with slightly different physiology to the younger youth in the squad. The fact that they both swim 400IM races and are both butterfly swimmers is a commonality of identity that they share as middling distance fly-swimmers. In this way, they share an intersubjective understanding of qualities and intensities of pain that sprinters, and their younger peers, do not comprehend.

7.2. “Pain is in the Brain”: Pain is in the Body

As youth gain experience in the pool, learn new techniques, their bodies grow, change shape and composition due to the repetitive strain of endurance training, including the hours upon hours spent immersed in water developing streamline habits. The pain and the effort involved in the embodied techniques of those skills shape youths’ identities and, in turn, inform the socio-cultural meanings of pain.

Socially mediated conventions of how to express and experience pain are important in becoming a youth swimmer. As youth are in a developmental phase in their swimming careers, as well as in their physical growth, they interpret and experience their pain differently depending on the context and meaning ascribed to that pain. Much in the same way that marathon swimmers learn to feel their bodies in new ways, “training, then, doesn’t simply raise the threshold at which swimming becomes too unpleasant or painful to continue, but changes the very sensations through which swimming is experienced and calibrated” (Throsby 2016, 42). Indeed, pain is temporal, not just individual or context based. Therefore, to learn to be a competitive youth swimmer is to learn to feel differently. Thinking about the development of youth, this is important because it points to the ways in which youth swimmers come to know, understand, interpret, and shape their very embodied perceptions, sculpting their sensory order.

Cultural meanings which are embodied in sensory orders and in people’s perceptions of the world around them (in this instance the sensations of pain youth experience in training and competition) are learned at an early age, or can be learned, for example, by curious ethnographers who take on Masters swim training. “In other words, a cultural group’s sensory order reflects aspects of the world that are so precious to it that [...] they are the things that children growing up in this culture developmentally come to carry in their very bodies” (Geurts 2002, 231). Rather than pain and suffering being considered inherently

negative, youth swimmers are taught to conceive of pain as inescapable, necessary, heroic, and as “barriers that need to be crossed” (Aalten 2005, 68). This creates spaces in training and in competition where the ways in which youth express pain are socially circumscribed (Smith 2019, 123).

On the second round through the three-part set that Nancy has set herself she switches to using a pool-buoy and hand paddles instead of swimming 100m repetitions of full stroke. Arthur, the coach, notices this and says to her as she takes her fifteen-second break on the wall between repetitions, “What’s going on? You alright? You’ve switched to pull.” While awkwardly adjusting her goggles using only thumbs and forefingers, as her hands are strapped into the paddles, she replies, “Yeah.” Smiling she continues, “My leg is feeling a little numb. Like you know when you’ve been sitting crossed legged for a really long time and your leg kind of falls asleep, well it feels kind of like that, mostly when I move it back and forth in the hip is when it begins to flare up [she points to her hip with her right finger while having her left arm on the side of her hip as she moves her leg forward and back in the water as if doing a flutter kick with that one leg]. Adapt and overcome!” Nancy finishes with a big smile showing her teeth and in a chipper sort of positive/peppy attitude, before ducking under the water at the wall and pushing off, continuing the set piece that she is on.

Nancy is “adapting” and “overcoming” her own pain thresholds while actively suppressing the sensations of pain she is experiencing. The perceptions of thresholds of pain for each youth swimmer is established through their embodied experiences of training. Multiple daily practices at various intensities (e.g., A2, A3, Lactate, Test Sets, Basic Speed) and the regimented grind of their training and competition schedule can make for sore muscles from one practice to the next (exemplified in the 7-9pm Friday evening practice and 6:30-8:30am Saturday morning practice occurring every week, unless there was a gala on the weekend). She is making a conscious effort to force an absence of presence onto the sensations of her body, to make it disappear: a bodily absence.

In *The Absent Body*, Leder (1990) calls our attention to the background perception of our bodies. Specifically, he notes that our everyday experience of our body tends to be one of absence, where we are not consciously aware of, or rather, do not actively perceive, the minute sensations in our body while sitting in a chair, taking a walk, or reaching for a glass of water. When the body makes itself known, pushing itself to the forefront of conscious attention due to injury, pain, hurt, soreness, fatigue, or illness is what Leder terms the “disappearance” of the body. “A region of the body that may have previously given forth little in the way of sensory stimuli suddenly speaks up. [...] Even body regions that are ordinarily perceptible still present a heightened call when in pain” (Leder 1990, 71). The normalized

invisibility of the body in our perceptions of daily embodied experience is such that Cartesian conceptions of a separate body-mind structure seem almost natural. This is despite our ability to call the body to the forefront of our awareness from the horizons of perception. Hence why cultural expressions such as “no pain, no gain” and “pain is in the brain” go unchallenged, for they seem to be the natural course of things.

When pain flares up for youth swimmers, when the body actively asserts its existence, these are moments where the culturally constituted ways of attending to and with their bodies comes to the foreground (Csordas 1993). Youth are taught or have learned to actively suppress when their bodies are “speaking up.” They disappear their body’s dys-appearance. Similar to professional dancer’s experiences of pain, “when the body ‘speaks up,’ it is habitually silenced into a mode of bodily absence to allow the dancer [or swimmer] to continue working” (Aalten 2005, 64). While Aalten’s research is with professional ballet dancers, I believe that her observation that the body can be and is “habitually silenced” applies to competitive youth swimmers. From a young age, youth swimmers are taught to embody a disappearance, a habitual silencing, of their pain. Senses which would otherwise communicate to a non-athlete to ease off from particularly strenuous physical activity are shifted. An example of this forced absence of the body came in the form of a phrase often repeated by coach Arthur when directing swimmers through high-intensity sets and land training: “Pain is in the brain.”

Once a week on Tuesday evenings I participated in what the performance squad youth called “land-training,” which mostly refers to body-weight strength and conditioning exercises but also encompasses weight and exercise machine work. Taking over half of the large gymnasium floor space in the hall attached to the swimming pool complex, the performance squad and I jogged, squatted, planked, and did countless numbers of press-ups and sit-ups on large exercise mats we pulled out from the storage cupboards. Forty-five minutes through one of these hour-long sessions 16-year-olds Daniel and Hanno have just completed their two minutes at the side-plank station and moved on to doing sit-ups and planks. They complain in a joking manner to Nick and Dean, both fifteen, in the stations beside them about the discomforts of pain and fatigue as they strain their muscles in these exercises. “Remember, ‘pain is in the brain,’” Daniel jokes, attempting to imitate Arthur’s voice. Hanno responds in between rhythmic sit-ups, “Oh sure ... just get stabbed ... No problem ... ‘pain is in the brain.’” Dean, beginning to shake in a one-armed side-plank, continues mocking their coach’s motto by suggesting one could get over a heart attack with pure mental willpower. From where I am straight-armed backwards planking, I say over to Daniel, “Physiologically speaking, it is impossible that pain is only in the brain.” Daniel nods

a few times in agreement and replies, "Tell that to Arthur." Finally making my way over to the plank station I notice a placard with the picture of a young woman in exercise clothes holding a plank position, one of many placards which the coach has printed for the various exercises the swimmers are supposed to be doing at each dryland station. This one has the phrase "Remember: 'Pain is in the Brain'" printed just below the picture.

Speaking in a physiological sense, muscle ache is indeed a form of injury. Muscle fibers become torn through the repeated strain of contracting and relaxing when we engage in strenuous exercise and repeated motions. It only becomes a swim stopping injury when too many muscle fibers are torn at once. This indeed conforms to Howe's (2004a) definition of pain as involving or signalling tissue damage. The difference between pain and "aches" in muscles for swimmers is that pain, as understood from a physical damage to the body or injury standpoint, is a negative sensory perception, whereas the aches of muscles are interpreted as part of being an athlete, not welcomed but a necessity and a proprioceptive sensation which informs the swimmers they are training hard.

Additional comments such as "You can ignore it [the pain]. Just don't think about it," and "Swim through the pain" are part of the socio-cultural instruction which these youth receive from their coaches and peers.⁷⁶ Competitive swimming's cultural sensory order is highlighted in the ability to prioritize mental mastery over the body's pain sensations, forcing pain to fade into the background of one's perceptions. This "mental mastery" over pain ultimately contributes to their understandings of what types of pain and hurt are acceptable. Youth swimmers do not have the same "disappearance from awareness of the body" (Aalten 2005, 67) that most people experience. While training, youth may focus their attention on their bodies as they attempt to incorporate and refine specific techniques. On the other hand, the swimmer's training "creates an absence of the body" (2005, 67). The repetition of enskilled movements in training eventually culminates in a state where swimmers can do them unconsciously allowing for an absence of the body as they "go through the motions" of swimming lengths. Arguably then, the performance squad swimmers demonstrated bodily awareness and understandings of techniques of the body which those in the Western world might consider the purview of professional athletes.

Often the youth found themselves at a loss for words to describe the ways they were feeling or experiencing a particular sensuous stimulation, kinaesthetic movement, or perception of their feel for the water. Instead, they used bodily gestures in place of verbal

⁷⁶ This connects to wider discourses within professional sport about pushing through pain for the sake of performance, results, and is exemplified in the popularized fitness motto of "no pain, no gain".

communication (see Chapter 5, section 5.4.2). Schepher-Hughes and Lock argue that pain and illness are forms of communication, “the language of the organs – through which nature, society, and culture speak simultaneously” (1987, 31). This language of pain speaks loudest in the embodied movements, techniques, and expressions with which youth swimmers have learnt to experience the world.

To my question of whether Yara would attend practices or not if injured, and if so, perhaps sit on the side or help out in some way she responded with the following:

Yara: I used to say every single time when my shoulder was hurting, like every time, I say to myself “I’m not going to complain anymore because I can’t do anything about it.” So then, even now when I swim it hurts but I don’t say anything about it, because I can deal with it. But it hurts. And it still hurts. Like it hurts here [She takes her left hand and places her index and middle finger on the front of her right shoulder in the space between the muscles of her shoulder and pectoral muscle. Where one can feel the bones of the shoulder joint] and here [pointing to the back top of the shoulder joint area where another set of ligaments and muscles connects into the rotator cuff].

SH: Kind of the top of the collar bone?

Yara: Yeah. And then this bit [again, she points to the front of her right shoulder in the area of the joint connection] hurts the most. It hurts like SO bad! Right here.

SH: Mostly the jarring motions? Like hitting the wall and pushing off it during fly turns?

Yara: The fly as well. It comes around like here [sweeping both arms out to the side, thumbs down moving them from out by her sides at a 45-degree angle to moving them forward and up towards her head]. Like even if I do that now it hurts.

The language of pain here is the culmination of acceptable bodily movements, socially acceptable ways to express pain, and the cultural ways youth swimmers come to understand their senses of pain. For Yara and the other performance squad youth at Manta SC, pain is a sense to be overcome, to be forced into the background of their perceptions. But rather than judging the distinction between pain and its absence, swimmers’ senses are attuned to “which qualities and degrees of pain and suffering will facilitate progress in the sport” (Throsby 2016, 49; see also McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020b). Pain can also be something to revel in, to be conquered, a “celebrated aspect of athletes’ involvement within sport” (Smith 2019, 122–23), once the action of training and racing is done.

7.3. Pain Tolerance

Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.

(Murakami 2007, vii)

On running, Murakami (2007) notes that it is not how much *pain* the runner can endure, but how much *suffering*. I would argue that this is also true for swimmers. There is no escaping pain when training as a high-performance competitive athlete. But pain is only one of the many sensory modalities (including, for example, touch, sight, sound, taste, smell, balance, and interoception) shared by all humans. Yet like the other sensory modalities pain's meanings are differentiated by culture. Problematically, conventions of what it means to be in pain, and what is good or bad pain, have been socially contested for millennia (Besnier, Brownell, and Carter 2018, 75–76). Indeed, the effects of pain are socio-culturally mediated experiences which are necessarily embodied in their enactment. For example, similar to dancer's reported tolerances to pain (Wulff 1998; Aalten 2005), competitive swimmers' pain endurance tends to be high (V. Scott and Gijsbers 1981; Kuppens et al. 2019). Pain tolerance is of course variable and often correlates to the volume and intensity of training: the more volume and intensity during a training period (such as "Hell Week" leading up to the taper before County and Regional Championships) the greater threshold for pain tolerance. This complex dialectic between continuous complaining about pain and swimmer's ability to tolerate high levels of pain can only be understood within the context of this high performance competitive sport.⁷⁷ The individual and social are irrevocably intertwined here in expressions of suffering and pain tolerance.

Senses of pain are entangled with the tactile senses. Individual swimmers experience their bodies through their tactile senses, including proprioception, interception, and kinaesthetic movement, as I noted in Chapter 4, and they often communicate enskilled knowledge through socially accepted bodily movements. With embodied enactments of pain also comes verbal utterances (i.e., rubbing down one's legs while saying how much they hurt). Experiencing an ongoing niggle, or injury which "speaks up" and increases sensations of pain during training becomes a question of how to communicate this to teammates and coaches without seeming like you are avoiding training. For Yara, this proved to be difficult as she suffered a persistent shoulder injury with accompanying sensations of pain during the

⁷⁷ Coping strategies to manage the body's high consistent physical suffering in competitive swimming are discussed in Chapter 8.

2018-2019 season. Her frequent stops during high intensity training sessions prompted her fly training partner Nick to accuse her of “lying” about the pain, that she was “just faking it.”

Nick, having taken his goggles off to chat with me for a bit, puts his hand beside his mouth, and says in a whisper meant to be overheard by Yara, that “She’s lying. Make her do it [the 100’s of freestyle]. She just faking it,” Nick says to me bobbing up in the water and speaking over Yara. With their coach Arthur on the other end of the pool working with another swimmer Yara, ignoring Nick’s comments, directs her questing for advice to me [I am the only other adult club member on the pool deck at the time to direct questions too], “What should I do? Do I modify the 100’s or just skip them?” I suggest she either swim breaststroke or freestyle or backstroke instead of fly, this being what Arthur had told her previously when her shoulders were hurting. “Basically, do the one that doesn’t hurt,” I tell her.

Over the months of this shoulder injury rehabilitation, including multiple physiotherapy sessions, Yara would have to stop during sets where her shoulder would hurt, get out of the water, and stretch the offending muscles and ligaments that surrounded her shoulder joint. This gave me the opportunity to speak with her and build rapport with her, something which I did not often get to do outside of Saturday lactate practices. I was able to discuss the various exercises and stretches she did for her rehabilitation. While I am no medical expert, nor was the coach,⁷⁸ the youth in the performance squad would occasionally ask my opinion on swimming matters. Being a senior “non-swimming-swimmer” in the space, with past and current experience of stretching for swimming, and dealing with minor shoulder niggles from my own swimming with the club’s Masters squad. This gave me some credibility as an active knowledgeable practitioner. Aware of my own knowledge limitations I would often default to asking the other swimmers or the coach for information or clarification. In this instance, this was the best attempt at good advice that I could give in the moment recognizing that her experience of her body was vastly different from my own sensory perceptions of bodily movement in swimming and the pain of shoulder injury.

While her training partner Nick may have been being a bit facetious in his reaction towards Yara’s shoulder pain, this overlooking of pain or silencing of the body is part of the social fabric of competitive sport and English culture. The English saying, “stiff upper lip,” exemplifies the cultural attitude towards pain and suffering in competitive swimming. This cliché’s meaning is variable, but generally it is uttered when loss, strife, and general adversity occurs and is intended to be encouragement to maintain a sense of poise, as if nothing were the matter or had changed. Have a “stiff upper lip” is to maintain an emotional façade. The meanings of physical pain and suffering of endurance athleticism resides in

⁷⁸ Arthur is qualified as a Senior Swimming Coach, the UK’s highest level of coaching accreditation for swimming. He also holds a Strength and Conditioning coaching certificate.

hiding discomfort and “carrying on” as though the struggle were as mundane and everyday as drinking water, brushing one’s teeth, or walking downstairs.⁷⁹ “Keep calm and carry on” is another cultural cliché which was initially printed as a World War II poster by the British government to help raise morale of the British people.⁸⁰ Both clichés persist in colloquial use today and hint at the disjuncture between the body as seat of perception, affective embodied experiences, and socialized behaviour.

While it is certainly context and coach dependant, broadly speaking the competitive culture of high-performance sport tends to praise and reward sentiments of perseverance at all costs, including suffering through pain and injury. Indeed, the story of the athlete who has fallen from a top competitive position only to climb their way back from devastating injury (in the medicalized sports system this is often followed by surgery) is a popular narrative for all forms of media to report on and circulate. One such example comes from football, where Christine Sinclair, striker for the Canadian women’s team, continued to play with a broken nose during the 2011 FIFA World Cup. A more recent example from the swimming world includes the retiring of Missy Franklin, American and former World Recorder holder in the 200m backstroke, at the age of twenty-three, due to ongoing shoulder pain stemming from “severe chronic tendonitis of both the rotator cuff and the bicep tendon” (Franklin 2018), even after having surgery on both left and right shoulders. This is the social environment in which competitive sport currently resides.

It is clear from these few examples that pain has indeed become a normalized part of sport, even something to be celebrated (Howe 2004b; Mayer et al. 2018). The social relationships and networks that are a part of every sport setting which promulgate a normalization of pain and injury, what sociologists have come to refer to as a “culture of risk” (Nixon 1992), suggests that athletes know well that they are expected to have experienced pain and injury as a potential consequence of their participation in sport, that it is just “part of the game.” These same athletes are expected to learn the appropriate “experiences” in short order and the appropriate ways to express those experiences of pain and suffering. A central problem with this analysis is that it unnecessarily reduces pain, injury, and suffering in sport

⁷⁹ If one is a bilateral amputee or wheelchair bound these tasks are potentially neigh impossible obstacles. But this is also some of the language that would be employed in essentializing, ableist, and discriminatory discourse in the British socio-cultural context to “just get on with it,” regardless of the obstacles, be they physical, economic, or social. Not surprisingly this also ties in neatly with neoliberal values of self actualization and accountability (Dunk 2002).

⁸⁰ This war-time attitude has continued today with war-time terminology present in political discourse from the 2008 financial crisis to the 2019 COVID global health pandemic. This rhetoric is of course connected to British Imperialism and finds its visual likeness in the stoic, white, wealthy land-owning male citizen willing to “carry on” despite adversity. This is a deeply embedded trope within British society as well as one circulated in Commonwealth nations such as Canada.

to a cost-benefit analysis of the risks involved in participation. In the next chapter I speak of neoliberalism as “an ideology of governance that shapes subjectivities,” (Ganti 2014, 89) in both the broad sense of governance of states and the more personal governance of the self (i.e., self-governmentality). Here I wish to speak about another of neoliberalism’s polysemic meanings as “a structural or ideological force that has a tremendous impact on people’s lives, life-chances, social relations, and ways of inhabiting the world” (2014, 94), where, as an ideology, market driven forces are deemed an ethic in itself seen as overriding all previous ethical beliefs. The ideological force of neoliberalism normalizes pain for profit.⁸¹

As I just noted, normalizing pain, injury, and risk as inevitable aspects of sport has consequences. Now, getting out of bed in the morning has risk attached to it but scholars do not debate the “culture of risk” involved in crossing a street corner. Certain professions, even within swimming, have different “risks” involved (Beck 1992; Giddens 1999; Throsby 2016; Lyng 2005). The sea swimmer, the triathlete, the pool swimmer, the long-distance racer, the sprinter, the leisure centre paddler – all these forms of “the swimmer” involve an element of risk. Within Nixon’s risk framework, then, the normalization and denial of pain becomes an everyday occurrence in sporting clubs. While there is an element of discomfort and pain in muscle fatigue in all rigorous physical activity humans engage in, the production of lactic acid and the fatigue we experience in our muscles through repeated exercise is part of our physiology. The pain of muscle fatigue can be read as a sign of growth and is the outcome sport scientists and coaches seek to stimulate in their athletes in an effort to make them, in the words of the Olympic motto, “Faster – Higher – Stronger” (International Olympic Committee 2020). But the pathological denial of pain as an affective bodily force that limits the capacities of the sporting body inevitably leads to injury, burnout, and forced early retirement, as was the case with Missy Franklin.

Examined on a social level the generation of meaning in how groups perceive tolerable pain and suffering helps define status within groups and who has “the stuff” to be a champion. While outlining the rules for what Kate Fox calls weather-speak amongst the English, she notes that “moaning rituals,” have an important social purpose, that is “they

⁸¹ The late-capitalist neoliberal economic context of the early twenty-first century in much of the “Minority World,” in which sport is embedded (Besnier, Calabrò, and Guinness 2021b), promotes winning, records, and individualism (Guttmann 1978). Here I follow Carter’s (2018a) usage of “Minority” and “Majority World” to refer to the minority of those in Western Nations who control much of the world’s economic wealth, power, and security, and the majority of other nations and peoples around the globe, respectively. This has been abetted by the growth of the global sports media complex where economic incentives to perform have only increased since the 1990s (Boyle and Haynes 2009), highlighting and incentivizing the production of athletes to win medals on the international level at all costs.

provide further opportunities for friendly agreement” and “involve displays of shared opinions (as well as wit and humour and generate a sense of solidarity against a common enemy – both valuable aids in social bonding” (Fox 2004, 31). The “common enemy” in competitive swimming contexts is the grueling swimming set and the coach for thinking it up in competitive swimming contexts. And while a shoulder injury or niggle may be painful to swim through, not to mention potentially further damaging, the chance to complain about the experiencing of “carrying on” in the face of adversity despite the pain, affords them the chance to claim to have “the stuff.”

Nancy, relating her relationship to her chosen “best stroke” – butterfly – said the following in response to my query as to what makes a good fly swimmer:

Well, I had a coach who used to say to me, “Nancy, fly swimmers are not good fly swimmers. They are the people who say, ‘I don’t quit when everybody else does.’” Like he used to just say that to me ‘cause I used to be like, “I’m tired. I can’t do it,” and that is what he would say to me. So, I don’t necessarily, I think there is a massive part of that to fly ‘cause it is so much harder than the other strokes. You’ve just got to be the one who says, “This hurts but I’m going to do it.” And to be honest, that in itself is what makes a good fly swimmer, I think. And there’s some kids here who are definitely going down that path, who are like, “This is going to hurt. But watch me!” And I think that is a really good attitude to have.

Nancy’s comment that “it is a really good attitude to have” evidences the normalization and internalization of painful suffering expected of/by competitive swimmers. She understands and has accepted that some strokes, techniques, and distances cause pain and has incorporated this into her understandings of what it means and takes to be a fast and “good fly swimmer.”

Knowing that a 200m butterfly race is your best race, as Nick told me in an interview when I asked him about his favourite event, does not make up for the fact that “it is not a nice race,” being “eight lengths of the hardest stroke, supposedly.” Many of the performance squad youth at Manta SC with whom I spoke had stories of experiencing pain and injury. They concurrently had various coping and management strategies for niggles and other physical problems. They accepted physical pain as “an inevitable aspect of the profession” (Aalten 2005, 62–63) while being able to exercise some control over it. The two things all the swimmers seemed to agree upon was that swimming longer distances – 1500m, 800m, or 400m – and swimming butterfly were what caused the most pain and suffering. For some, this pain and suffering was closer to the “negative pain” side of the spectrum of pain I identified earlier in this chapter. For others, like Nick and Nancy, the dial ebbed closer to the positive side of the pain spectrum.

The performance squad youth were all striving to become faster swimmers, continually changing, refining already learned skills and techniques for moving and being-in-the-world, as well as the capacity to learn new ways of being, sensing, and experiencing our own bodies and the world. Most swimmers aimed to attain better PBs and qualifying times for County, Regional, and National races. If pain is a necessary aspect of high-performance sport, then these youth risked sliding along the spectrum of pain towards injury in becoming faster. This way of becoming through socially mediated sense of pain can be advantageous to youth swimmers' careers depending on their perceptions of the various intensities and qualities of pain experienced through training. Pain can afford sociality in the shared bonding rituals of complaining about pain and enacting pained bodily movements. But pain can also end swimming careers if pain slides too far along the spectrum of pain from positive experiences of pain to negative swim stopping injuries.

7.4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have described how the performance squad youth at Manta SC come to perceive pain along a spectrum. This spectrum of pain spans from the everyday perceptions of sore muscles due to the maintenance of aerobic fitness training (roughly A2 training sets) all the way to catastrophic swim-stopping injuries. Most pain is perceived as being beneficial to youths' career, offering them future affordances in speed, power, and fitness. This is socially mediated by cultural values, both in English society and in high performance sport, which extolls ever greater performance, of going high, being faster, and becoming stronger. Pain and suffering therefore become celebrated aspects of sport as can be seen when youth swimmer's high-five and congratulate each other after intense aerobic sets. When it comes to especially gruelling training sets (i.e., lactate, test sets, VO2Max) or on race days, the youth are able to silence their body's speaking up. They focus their awareness away from their perceptions of pain forcing those pain sensations towards the background or the horizon of their perception. While youth swimmers may have a high physical and perceptual threshold for pain, perceiving the sensations of pain in their bodies as soreness from hard work, they still complain about the nigh perpetual sensations of soreness their bodies communicate.

In the practice of silencing the body's sensory perceptions pain is reduced to a cognitive state to be overcome. This social valuation of perception that places the mind and the body as separate entities reproduces the Cartesian fallacy of a divided mind and body. Popular social tropes repeated by coaches such as "pain is in the brain" may serve as mnemonic devices for youth to focus their perceptions pain through a particular sensory

order, one that espouses a mind over matter philosophy of the senses. Through repeated silencing of the body in pain, the meanings of how swimmers perceive tolerable pain and suffering is structured to fit within the competitive swimming sensory order. By “swimming through the pain” youth are expected to develop a mastery over their body’s senses of pain. This is not to say that youth do not experience pain as intense or severe, nor to discount their embodied knowledge of pain. Arguably, swimming through the pain acknowledges the very embodied nature of becoming a swimmer and an entangled generation of sensations between swimmer and the water. Perceptions of the moving body codify sensations as pain physically, emotionally, and cognitively through swimming’s sensory order. For youth swimmers are aware of the dichotomy between their enskilled knowledge of pain and the Cartesian separation of mind-body touted by their coaches. Senses of pain are embodied forms of knowledge enacted through enskilled movements in ways that manage their perceptions of shared and individual suffering.

Chapter 8. Enacting Pain and Suffering

“Only a team when you are getting punished.” The coaches laugh when I say it, and they agree. I say it ‘cause if someone messes up enough times, we are all going to have to have to do a punishment set. Even if it is just one or two people.

(Hannah, sixteen)

The pain of a hard training session with one’s peers swimming along with you is a shared experience of physical suffering which is something manageable, to push through, and revel in upon completion. Whereas the pain of injury, of incorrect technique, and suffering in silence, can be an isolating experience for the individual swimmer. Pain and suffering are “the common stuff of experience” (Kleinman 1997, 316). Swimming squads can be socially supportive environments where teammates will support or even encourage the disclosure (sometimes telling another swimmer or the coach themselves) of pain or other niggling sensations from their bodies which they do not regularly experience and perceive as “normal.” Youth swimmers experience “normal” pain sensations as those pertaining to muscle soreness and fatigue: they may feel exhausted after a hard set which makes even simple bodily acts feel laborious. The degrees and extent of soreness and pain in swimming exists upon a socially and culturally mediated spectrum as noted in the previous chapter. In this chapter I will explore how youth manage their pain, the emotional affect of injury on the self, and how physical suffering helps create bonds of sociality amongst competitive youth swimmers. For as Hannah points out at the opening epigraph of this chapter, suffering through a “punishment set” can bring squad mates together.

Now, suffering comes in many forms. It is important to make the distinction at the outset that I am speaking about the pain of physical suffering in athletic pursuits, not the “unchosen, inescapable suffering” (Throsby 2016, 11) of the sick, the poverty stricken, or those living in or escaping from war-torn states and climate disasters. Self-imposed physical suffering is a particular kind of suffering, a “voluntary, temporary, status-bearing suffering” (Throsby 2016, 11; see also Atkinson 2008) which most high-performance athletes accept as part of their craft. The voluntariness of physical suffering in competitive swimming is often considered to be inescapable and necessary, and particular acts and intensities of suffering can be viewed as endowing practitioners with increased social status. For example, winning a skins race at club championships, swimming over a dozen kilometres at a charity swim-a-thon, or swimming multiple events in a single day at a competition and making every final of those events.

The suffering and pain youth swimmers endure is used to deepen the social bonds between peers and to develop qualities in youth swimmers. These qualities revolve around relationships between pain, suffering and the value of “hard work” and dedication. Putting in the work or “topping up the meterage,” as coach Arthur would say, is designed to teach the youth that pain is a necessary ingredient to success and that their bodily perceptions of pain are barriers to be overcome or to be transformed in the contexts of their sport. Suffering and its acceptance are part of the hard work of swimming fast. Swimming fast is difficult, often gruelling with long training sessions. This apprenticeship in pain and suffering teaches swimmers that reaching qualifying times set out by local, national, and international swimming institutions are designed to entice the production of elite medal winning athletes, of which not all who are enrolled in these programs have the requisite capacities to embody.

In this chapter I argue that youth swimmers manage the physical suffering of their intense training regimes through social relationships. Being immersed in the physical and social spaces of competitive swimming, youth learn socially acceptable ways in which to perform the bodily sensations of pain they are experiencing in an intersubjective way which communicates shared meanings of suffering in swimming. Along with their coach, the youth engage in banter and establish joking relationships in which they can laugh at their own and other’s physical suffering. Banter and jokes are used as one way in which to mark out the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable in performances and experiences of pain and suffering within the swimming squad. Joking relationships are also a way to mark the extent of sociality between and amongst members of the swimming squad. The rigours of physical training, the emotional and affective experiences of becoming and belonging, are expressed in the ways youth swimmers’ sense, discuss, act out, and perform pain and suffering. In other words, swimmers’ immersion is enacted through performances of pain and suffering.

8.1. Celebrating Suffering

During a hard A3 practice on a dark and cold Monday evening in December there is no chatting between teammates.⁸² Even those swimming parallel together in the same lane do not speak. Every fifteen second break between the 100m repetitions is taken up by a quick drink of water and heavy breathing with the swimmers watching the pace clock so they know when to push off and go again. Timed out, this whole set piece will take fifty-two minutes,

⁸² A3 is shorthand for a training zone titled “Aerobic Threshold” in British Swimming coaching manuals and requires the youth to attain a heart rate of 180 beats per minute during activity.

with no more than a thirty second break after the all-out 200m choice kick at the end of the first round of the set before it repeats.

Five one-hundreds into the second half of the set Haley, fifteen, stops at the wall, “Nope, nu-uhn. I’m waiting on this,” she says to whoever may be listening. “Come on, Haley. Don’t drop off. You can do this. Catch up to Nick on the freestyle. Let’s go. Woosh!” encourages coach Arthur as he paces around the pool deck, stopwatch in hand. I look two lanes over and see Andrea, fourteen, forehead resting on her crossed arms hanging on the edge of the pool. She has missed the pace time and her lane mate, Ida, has already pushed off the wall to continue the set. Arthur shouts encouragement at her, “Come on Andrea! Pain is in the brain. You can ignore it. Just don’t think about it!” but she barely responds. Lifting her head off her forearms and turning around to face the other end of the pool I get a glimpse of her facial expression, a cross between a painful grimace and empty exhaustion. Her expression is unchanging even as she ducks underwater and follows Ida into the hundreds of IM portion of the set.

After completing the warm-down at the end of the session Haley and Nick both pull off goggles and swim hats and place them with the rest of their equipment spread out on the edge of the pool. Haley reaches over the lane rope, holding up her hand for a high-five from Nick. The resounding “CRACK” echoes around the pool chamber as wet palm hits wet palm. “I feel good,” Haley says, “Like really accomplished. When I was doing the last half of that set in the 100IMs whenever I went to pull it was like “Mmm!” Haley screws up her face in a mock grimace as she simulates a freestyle anchor and drive position, attempting to communicate the discomfort she was experiencing using her fatigued arm muscles. “After that paddle set this morning,” she continues, “I can really feel it in here,” running her left hand up and down the top of her right forearm.

Moments like this, of congratulations, “kudos,” high-fives and handclasps abound at the end of A3 and V02 Max sets.⁸³ It is these explicit practices more than any other which highlighted the affective congratulatory air and emotional celebration of shared suffering. Yet the sharing of suffering also took the form of complaining, grumbling, and performing socially mediated expressions of pain. To have a celebration of shared suffering the phenomenological experience of training, of the perceptions of pain and fatigue, needs to be comparable. Although youth cannot physically feel the suffering of their peers it is this knowledge of sharing a physical bodily practice, learning to feel together, and trusting one’s

⁸³ V02 Max, “maximum oxygen uptake,” or “aerobic overload” are high intensity sprinting sets with long rests between pieces where athletes push their heart rate to just below maximum.

peers are completing the set and working to the same heart rate level which, for sixteen-year-old Emma, undergirds the sociality of suffering in competitive swimming.

I think when you are all doing the sets together and you are all, it is like everyone is doing the same thing relatively. I mean, some are off different times, but it is basically the same thing. You kind of share that, "Oh my gosh, that was really hard!" or "Oh my gosh, that wasn't too bad. But I bet we are going to have a harder one later." I think it just builds that kind of, like, team when you are, like, "We are going through it together." So, if *you* can do it, *I* can do it. And if we, like, encourage each other we kind of bounce off of each other and I think that is a massive part of it. And I think it just makes it that much more special.

Echoing Hannah's words above, it is through shared suffering and knowledge of "going through it together" that builds the social cohesiveness of the team. This comradery between youth swimmers is more than a shared experience, their immersion is a dynamic sociality generated through their embodied practices. Collective suffering cements relationships between squad mates through the recognition that they are "going through it together," encouraging each other and pushing their physical boundaries.

Pain and suffering are social experiences, examples of which can be gleaned from other endurance sporting practices such as triathlon (Atkinson 2008) and endurance running (Crawley 2021). Triathlon, while a different endeavour to competitive swimming, does share aerobic swim training and thus provides an interesting comparison for the social experience of suffering. Michael Atkinson (2008) notes how triathletes literally teach each other how to appreciate the sport during the embodied experiences of training out on a bike ride, a long run, or a pool session. They learn the experience of "intense sport-related suffering" and subsequently, how to "frame the suffering as personally exciting" (2008, 172). Suffering and pain for these triathletes becomes an accomplishment, something to relish in, a badge that you literally wear in your body (let alone the one you may display around your neck at the end of a race and hang up on a wall at home). This reveals some of the discomfort that triathletes are able to afford in the pursuit of becoming.

This conspicuous display of suffering is used to gain favour with one's peers and helps create shared narratives of overcoming significant odds, in other words, gaining in-group status. Suffering in training as well as in races where one "leaves it all on the field" and pushes one's physical boundaries through pain and suffering to complete a race is part of how one becomes a better athlete. This is neatly framed within neoliberal notions of personal responsibility, individual sacrifice, and self-accountability, which are used to decontextualize pain and suffering as personal challenges within wider society rather than as more systemic social issues. Encouragements not to "drop off," that you can "ignore pain" by

“not thinking about it,” aligns with these notions of personal responsibility and self-accountability. For if your race times are slow at competitions this is due to your taking a break during a hard set rather than completing every repetition, or so the logic goes. And yet, there is an acknowledgement by Arthur that the pursuit of becoming is not entirely individuated but shared when he encourages Andrea to “catch up” to Nick during the set.

In the neoliberal market driven sports industry for the budding amateur athlete, using one’s economic capital is necessary to access suffering and pain which can then be used as social capital for these participants to create desirable identities. Club fees must be paid, competition gala race fees and travel costs pile up, and swimming kit, while relatively minimal, is expensive to purchase with new racing costumes needed every year at minimum. Most of the youth swimmers in the performance squad did not have the economic capital to engage in “kitting” themselves out in the latest gear, as only a few held part- or full-time jobs. Their parents then were often pressured into purchasing at least the occasional swim hat, new pair of goggles, kickboard, or set of fins. These expenditures on “kit” are not inexpensive. For example, specifically designed racing costumes last no more than a dozen races before they stretch out and the material begins to break down, and can range in price from £98-312 for men, and £138-385 for women. In part, the consumption of new technology, be it swimming kit, gym membership, heartrate monitor, or smart watch, lends itself to neoliberal notions of self-governmentality where the bodies of these young swimmers are seen to be sculpted in the same way as the self, as the subjects which neoliberal policies aim to create of us (see also Chapter 5). Pain thus defines a marker of identity.

Considered phenomenologically, both swimmer’s and triathlete’s perceptions of the experiences of suffering become intertwined with the socio-cultural meanings of suffering in competitive sporting discourse. They learn new ways to suffer and how to use that suffering to build personal narratives which aligns with collective narratives within their respective sports. Yet, this neoliberal self-improvement narrative which suffuses much of the discourse surrounding sport and disciplined subjectivities (Dyck 2008) within swimming (S. Scott 2010; Lang 2015; McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011) does not take into account the shared experiences of pain and suffering and how these are continuously being performed and negotiated amongst youth. For example, knowing that you and your peers are “going through it together” takes on a different shade of meaning when we consider the biological structure of how we make sense of our perceptions both of our own kinaesthetic sensations and those communicative gestures of pain and suffering exhibited by our peers. Our own smile or furrowed brow in response to another’s sufficiently provides our body feedback to

activate psychological and neurological aspects of emotion, joy, or compassion. For it is very difficult not to involuntarily smile when another person smiles at us or to feel empathy for someone whose pain and discomfort are clearly expressed on their face. Anna Gibbs (2010, 186) has called these “corporeal based forms of imitation” which are “both voluntary and involuntary.” This “contagion” present in forms of mimesis is the “bioneurological means by which particular affects are transmitted from body to body” (Gibbs 2010, 191; see also Lende and Downey 2020). Therefore, it can be argued that the shared performances of celebrating pain and suffering are deeply rooted in youths’ embodied experience of swimming.

The grumbling about A3 sets, the collective dread at facing the ramping up of training intensity in preparation for Winter Countys and Regionals, the exaggerated bodily expressions to communicate the pain and discomfort of sore joints and muscles after a hard set, and the moaning, complaining, groaning, and rubbing of limbs in between training races are all examples of the performativity of suffering which youth swimmers learn to embody. These corporeal actions are not explicitly taught to the youth, rather they pick them up from observing their peers, from the ways in which the older and more experienced swimmers use their bodies: they are imitated. Imitation or mimesis does not occur unconsciously but ebbs and flows from conscious attention to unconscious background and becomes automatized as can be observed in the training of many bodily forms (Downey 2010a). This is not a mimesis “without theory” where habits of corporeal schemes are transmitted from practice to practice without conscious attention or discursive examination, what Downey has referred to as the passing of “subconscious cognitive structures” (2010a, S27). Rather, when novice swimmers imitate new styles of moving, they must confront previously “unconscious patterning, unexamined inhibition, and corporeal reservations that are only apparent when challenged by new kinaesthetics” (2010a, S27). The aches and pains of sore muscles and the nearly continuous suffering of fatigue are embodied experiences which can be at the immediate forefront of consciousness or receded into the horizons of perception. Suffering is a background throb of the body communicating a visceral somatic reality and the expression of this reality through imitated socially acceptable forms.

8.2. Banter and Joking around Suffering

“You’ve got to teach them early that banter is a part of swimming. Sometimes the banter is the only thing that keeps you going in a session.”

(Arthur, Manta SC Performance Coach)

The dynamic relationship between the performance of suffering and pain and the sociality of being a part of a swimming club is not just a dramaturgical act where these social actors

show various faces and play parts to one another to curry favour or present the appropriate persona (Goffman 1990). The chance to complain and moan about the pain they experience, and the predictable regime of swim training is a chance for youth to exert their agency, even if it is within the confines of “appropriate” expressions. The banter which Arthur speaks of in the quote above works as a heuristic device to normalize pain and suffering but it is also a negotiation of the extent that suffering should be dwelled upon.

Youth banter each other with calls of “pacing” or “cheating” in early morning lactate sets when they ought to be attempting to sprint the entire race distances. The subsequent denials, however genuine or contrived they may be, are part of their active avoidance of suffering by not swimming “all out.” Nick may not have been attempting to pace a 100m fly race this Saturday morning against Martin, but the increase in stroke rate and “come from behind” win against Martin in the back end 50m stretch of the race certainly looks suspicious for anyone in the squad as we all know each other’s top-end speed. Hence, the justifiable “You paced that!” from Martin to Nick as soon as he lifts his head from the water after finishing the race. “I didn’t pace it,” Nick responds with a large grin when I banter him by saying “Good pacing” as he and Martin walk back to the bench to sit down and rest until the other heats have cycled through. “I saw Martin [after the 50m turn] and said [to myself] ‘I’m going to beat him.’ I didn’t think I had any left,” Nick adds as he towels off his legs and torso. Perhaps he was reserving his energy for the longer 200m fly race ten minutes later that morning. Either way, he wasn’t going “all out” until he caught a glimpse of Martin out of the corner of his eye and chose to race him to the finish rather than retain his energy. The collective reprimanding and banter associated with the sensations of suffering, or attempts to avoid suffering, during lactate production sets obscures the underlying competitive ethos of high-performance sport, where, perhaps, it is okay to “pace” these races occasionally if one is unable to physically, or emotionally, push the boundaries of the body and does not want to experience the full sensuous intensities of pain and suffering. Unless, that is, one subscribes to a notion that pushing the physical, emotion, and psychological limits of athletes is the only way to make a champion, but this notion is far outdated and has been debunked by research (Larson et al. 2019; Sean Heath 2020a). Banter may also be interpreted as a subtle jab at one’s ability. The above pacing viewed as Nick almost allowing Martin to win or Nick’s inability to conform to the rules of the lactate set, either way not creating a fair competition.

The performance squad youth actively watch their peers perform during races and race sets as only six out of the entire squad may be racing at a given time, there only being six lanes at their 25m training pool. Like Nick and Martin above, the youth comment on and critique each other’s performances, regulating their peer’s behaviour and their own through

their social commentary and enactment of the suffering swimmer's body. Michel Foucault's (1977) notion of governmentality is useful at this point to frame accusations of pacing during these lactate sets. By governmentality I mean the self-disciplining of youths' own behaviour due in large part to repeated practices and surveillance by peers and coaches (Lang 2010). If swimmers do not look tired or in some form of physical pain after a few rounds of lactate races (i.e., they are not accurately performing the appropriate persona of a hard-working high-performance swimmer) then accusations of pacing circulate between the observing swimmers and coaches on deck, eventually making their way to the ears of the guilty culprit. It is difficult to "fake" maximum effort performance when the coach has access to a stopwatch and is actively recording times. Any letting up or easing off maximum effort is easily visible in the sudden increase of a few seconds in these timed sets. Presumably, if the youth wished to game the system, they could moderate their behaviour to avoid suffering, yet still perform the fatigued and suffering swimmer out of the water. Although I did not see any evidence of this, the youth were aware that this practice would eventually result in their race times plateauing. The only "punishment" for getting caught pacing to avoid suffering was to be subject to banter for said "pacing," or to be jokingly labelled as a "cheater" (breaking the coach's lactate set rules which state you must swim at max effort right out of the gates of every race regardless of its length).⁸⁴ Either way, both swimmers and coaches used playful banter to define the boundaries of socially acceptable performances of suffering.

Banter amongst the youth and coach is a particular type of joking relationship, one which emphasizes friendly or playful teasing. Following Keith Basso's (1979) observations of language play amongst the Western Apache, we may begin with the assumption that joking is a form of play. If acts of play are modelled on acts which are defined as "not play," or work, then the meanings which these acts communicate must also be understood against the backdrop of this "not play." "Acts of joking convey messages that are not conveyed when the acts they are patterned after are performed unjokingly, and for this reason jokes are not intended to be taken literally, 'seriously,' or at face value" (1979, 37). Given the example above of "pacing" the coach could easily look at their time sheet and reprimand the offending pacer for not swimming at maximum capacity immediately from the start. There is an underlying assumption that swimmers "know better" and are actively breaking the rules by pacing. Banter in this instance is modelled on the social disciplining of bodies. If the joking act is misinterpreted, then it instantly ceases to be funny. The social consequences of this

⁸⁴ There is a long history of "punishment" for perceived idleness in the UK, which can be traced back to shifting notions of hospitality and the idleness of vagrancy following the Black Death (1346-1353). A direct parliamentary act against this perceived idleness was signed into law as the 1494 "Vagabonds and Beggars Act".

may be disruptive as when Thomas, twelve, misinterpreted Nancy's joking accusation that he did not count correctly (on purpose) had skipped out on lengths in the warmup. Thomas got upset at her comment, perceiving it as a legitimate accusation of his self-disciplined integrity as a hard working and honest swimmer. Thomas wouldn't speak to Nancy for a week after this incident.

It is important to recognize the value which is placed on humour and its central importance in nearly all social interactions in English cultural contexts. "Most English conversations," notes Kate Fox, "will involve at least some degree of banter, teasing, irony, understatement, humorous self-deprecation, mockery or just silliness. Humour is our 'default mode'" (2004, 61). In this way humour, or the joking banter on the pool deck, is nothing special but rather the background of much of English social interaction. It is an expected part of any social performance and communicates that, despite the extraordinary physical hardships, youths are suffering through during practices, their social interactions are still within the "ordinary" unwritten rules of English humour and social interaction.

Joking relationships are considered to be in many ways the opposite of contractual relationships (Radcliffe-Brown 1952; 1940), which carries within it the dichotomy between affective relationships and relationships based on strict formality (M. Jackson 2017). Yet the key to understanding these relationships, notes Jackson, is that "they merge both affective and formal frames of reference, and their strategic function is to manage this ambiguity by laughing it off" (2017, 138-139). The joking relationship between coach-swimmer and swimmer-swimmer exists in this context merging age, experience, skill, knowledge, and positional hierarchies of power. Simultaneously a coach may be a friend as well as an authority figure, another swimmer may be a rival but also a loved sibling. The best coaches are mentors first, purposefully merging the affective and formal frames of reference in their relationships to swimmers.

Swimmers incorporate banter into their everyday communications with peers which bridges the gap between individual's lived experiences, "imagining oneself as another" (p. 139) to make light of difficult situations and ease tension and suffering.

The lactate set for the older swimmers today is 50m swim, 3x100m (as 50m kick, 50m swim), 50m swim, choice stroke as usual. At the end of the last 100m piece I see Hanno and Nancy duck under the lane ropes and swim to the side of the pool. They both rest in the water, against the sidewall, on either side of the built-in stairs near the 5-metre flag post. Their arms supporting their weight, Nancy leaning them straight out, Hanno crossing his arms one forearm on top of the other. Dumping their weight into their arms Nancy "kicks" in this vertical position, resembling more a vibrating back and forth than correct flutter kick technique. I can't see Hanno's legs

from where I sit but his facial expressions with hat and goggles still on, communicates volumes, what I interpret as profound levels of suffering. I can see he is breathing heavily and every few breaths he grimaces as though the act of breathing is exacerbating the discomfort he is experiencing. Just lying there on the edge of the zero-depth overflow edge both Hanno and Nancy continue to grimace as they such in air. "Out the water," Arthur says standing on the side of the pool towering over them. "I can't. I can't move," Nancy replies whimpering and laughing simultaneously both because of the comedy of her answer and the fact that she can barely move a muscle. Between heavy inhales Hanno says in reply to Nancy, "I'm in so much pain." "Come on then, out you get. Quit cheating," Arthur admonishes the pair. "Cheater, Cheater!" Daniel accuses as he and Nick walk between Arthur and the two in the water, heading back to the side bench after having pulled themselves out of the pool (being in the same heat). Daniel is the only one that doesn't look like he is gasping for breath, a wry smile on his face, his white skin barely flushed. Nancy, normally able to easily arm press her way out of the water so that her feet land on the deck can barely lift her hips high enough to sit her bum on the edge which is flush with the water's surface. She just manages this complaining to the coach that she can barely move her arms before shuffling more than walking the five metres over to where her towel and water bottle are waiting for her. Daniel, Hanno, and Nancy all sit down while Nick continues to stand a while longer. "Cheater! Cheater!" Nancy chants, joking and repeating the line Daniel had used for her and Hanno. Nick quickly sits down, all four of them laughing.

Paradoxically perhaps, by allowing these small complaints and provocations to creep into everyday discussions between teammates and coaches, this gives the youth a limited freedom to stay focused within the limits or "structures" of competitive swimming club performance. Discussing the set and their training through "banter" both exerts their agency and simultaneously gives them the freedom to function within the limits of the squad.

As Victor Turner argues, "man [sic] is a self-performing animal – his [sic] performances are, in a way, *reflexive*, in performing he [sic] reveals himself to himself [sic]" (V. Turner 1987, 81 emphasis in original). In these performances, the youth swimmer "may come to know himself [sic] better through acting or enactment" (1987, 81). Here it is the enactment of the suffering body. Youth come to know themselves better and the social limits of suffering performances "through observing and/or participating in performances" presented by other swimmers. Reflexivity is thus both singular and plural in the act of performance. Swimmers come to know the social and bodily limits of their ability to tolerate and manage the pain and suffering.

8.3. Managing Suffering

I feel like sometimes it is really hard to manage it [the pain]. I feel like sometimes I've just got to keep going. If I stop, I know I won't start again 'cause it is that painful. And I feel as though I always think to myself, "It is mind over matter." Umm, from a really young age my Dad has always said, "However hard you think, if you are pushing yourself to the maximum, you

can always push yourself at least twenty-five percent harder.” And I feel like that really stuck with me. Even if it hurts you've still got to keep pushing it and keep going as hard as you can. And I feel as though that is good and during a session that can be helpful.

(Emma, sixteen)

Now, the youth at Manta SC are not being paid for their swimming, they are not at a national training centre and none of them were on the Swim England nor British Swimming “Talent” programs. Yet the training regimes for youth competitive swimmers across the UK rivals that of other high-performance professional athletes, and these youth are still required to go to school, get an education, and encouraged to do well in their studies, not to mention the host of additional extra-curricular activities youth can be expected to engage in. The rewards or incentives for these youth to suffer through the pain of training are the opportunities to obtain podium winning times at County, Regional, and National and international events (however low the likelihood of competing at the Olympics or other international tournament may be), to win medals and trophies, and to swim a personal best time. The latter ties in neatly to neoliberal values of hard work, personal growth, self-actualization, accountability, and suffering (Dunk 2002; Ganti 2014).

Emma (above) acknowledges that swimmers must “accept the body’s suffering as an inevitable part of their profession” (Aalten 2005, 64). Even though training may sometime hurt, swimmers must push beyond what they perceive as their maximum threshold of suffering. A “mind over matter” attitude becomes helpful for Emma during those especially difficult endurance sessions. Unlike Emma’s direct comments on pain and bodily suffering, Nancy indirectly acknowledges the suffering experienced in training the body and learning the techniques required to swim fast. By training well, by immersing herself in suffering, she is able to experience a “buzz” from racing.

Nancy: I guess like the buzz, like you just get a buzz from swimming. Especially the racing. Like I think nobody loves training, but you train so you race well. Because then when you race well the feeling you get is worth it. And I suppose if you are not doing that, [then] you are definitely missing that.

SH: Okay. So that buzz is not just after or post-race it is also built into the training?

Nancy: It is kind of like an internal like pride. Because even if you haven't raced well, you know that you have done better than, I had this coach [...] who used to say, “Just by being here you are better than ninety-eight percent of the population of the UK.” It's really sad but it's so true. So, I think sometimes you just need to remind yourself even just by being at some competitions you've done really well.

The reward for suffering through the rigorous regime of training does not need to be a medal or place on a podium. The act of sculpting the body and acceptance of the inevitable soreness of fatigued muscles as part of one's daily lived experience provides an emotionally uplifting feeling, which reaffirms Nancy's competitive swimmer identity.

Swimming involves a certain amount of hurt but whether one suffers while training, according to the coaches at Manta SC, is a mental attitude of "mind over matter." Swimmers must actively disappear the body from conscious attention. The disappearance of pain, if only for a few moments, can be achieved through heightened states of getting "pumped up" for racing, which was a strategy fourteen-year-old Yara used to suppress the pain in her shoulders before competing in butterfly races. This focused attention has some parallels with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's "flow state" where a person becomes wholly absorbed in a physical activity to the point that they lose connection to a sense of time and spatial bearing, feeling as though their body were doing the activity slightly removed from the consciousness of their actions (S. A. Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi 1999). Focusing one's attention through the rhythmic movements and breathing involved in swimming also shares some of the meditative properties of engaging in hatha yoga practice (Nichols 2014, 110). Swimmer's attitudes towards pain and suffering needs to be understood within this context. Erin, sixteen-years-old, an accomplished backstroke and freestyler who had competed at British National Championships remarked of her racing: "And then when I am racing nothing goes through my head at all. I am just, getting one end to the other. That's it. Like, go!" Being a sprinter, Erin's races are already temporally constricted. She has no time to think about anything but going fast, this includes the pain of pushing her body to its physical limits. Yara's shoulder pain, while vibrantly apparent before getting in the water, fades for the moments she is rhythmically flying through the water. To be a champion, to have a chance of swimming at Regional and National competitions, there are levels of hurt one will need to push through and to swim with. In other words, "if you want to be good, you have to suffer" (Aalten 2005, 63). When viewed this way, the ability to push beyond one's pain boundaries and immerse oneself in suffering becomes a celebrated mastery of the sensuous experiences of one's own body.

There is another side to this story, one where the socialization into a "sporting culture," which accepts pain and suffering as inevitable and as something to overcome, can be detrimental to the body and the self: Where pain management becomes more than one individual can bear. Emma, reflecting on one of her pain management techniques, admitted that her attitude of continuing to push through the boundaries of pain was not always helpful for her long-term goals of continued performance within competitive swimming.

But I think also, that is kind of my setback a little bit. 'Cause sometimes I don't know when to call it a day, I don't know when to stop. And I keep pushing, and pushing, and pushing, and pushing until, eventually, it gets so bad that I've just like, "Okay, I can't push anymore." And I feel like that is one way to, that's one way to manage it.

Testing limits and pushing boundaries is something we as a species continually strive toward due, in part, to our insatiable curiosity. Yet repeatedly pushing oneself to the breaking point, both emotionally and physically, is detrimental to body and soul and, while rather rare, was something I observed in swimmers' practices. While none of the coaches that I worked with actively condoned such detrimental practices the ethos of high-performance sport and the production of professional athletes, which has so thoroughly entrenched itself into children and youth sport, is continually pushing for higher achievement goals, faster world records, and stronger bodies.⁸⁵ Swimming so hard that they feel like vomiting or breaking down and crying was uncommon but did occur.⁸⁶ This may seem like a justification for abuse in sport. It is not. Professional and high-performance sport would not freely admit to the justification for abuse today (although perhaps they would say that is the price of winning gold medals). I certainly do not think that this extent of pushing the body to these levels of suffering and pain are productive, nor are they justifiable, particularly when talking about young athletes. Problematically it is seemingly more acceptable to push the body through physical exertion and pain to the point of vomiting in the socio-cultural milieu of high-performance sport than it would be to manage and express suffering through emotional means. This of course leads me to question the necessity of such practices of pushing the body to physical breaking points in the pursuit of athletic glory. Physical activity and sport should be safe and fun, above all else (Sean Heath 2020a), and children and youth athletes back this claim up as they too express that fun is the majority reason for their participation (Whitehead, Telfer, and Lambert 2013; M. Lee 2004).

⁸⁵ The attraction for middle-class parents and youth of athletic scholarships offered by American universities, and the social status with which clubs, families, and individuals can claim for obtaining a full or partial scholarship to "go South," are enormous. This is despite the cautionary tales told by media and other of athletes who committed themselves solely to the pursuit of an athletic career (see Dyck 2012, 168–73; Falls 2017).

⁸⁶ The coaches at Manta SC were both considerate and cared deeply about their swimmers, taking on a mentoring role. I heard stories from swimmers who had transferred clubs about other coaches who would yell at, demean, and berate their athletes, in the process "breaking them" emotionally and physically (i.e., demanding that a swimmer race while injured). I do not believe this abusive coaching style to be the norm within competitive swimming in England. Unfortunately, I can only guess at the training conditions and behaviours of coaches outside of Manta SC.

Emma used another technique to manage her pain and suffering which is arguably a healthier attitude to adopt, one which takes the well-being of the individual into account and treats the swimmer as a person, not just training the body as a machine.

Emma: And I think sometimes it is just doing the set as much as I can. Even if I have to slow down, even if I am still continuing. If I know that I am still swimming that is one way to deal with it. At least I'm getting in the lengths, and I feel like at least I am trying to keep my fitness up.

SH: Right, and you are still doing the practice with your other teammates.

Emma: Exactly. And I'm THERE, and I feel like that helps. When you are there with everyone, even if you know you are not performing to your best, at least you have got that atmosphere and you are there with everyone. And I feel like having them telling you "You can do it!" and then it is okay, even if you are not going fast. That makes that bit that much more manageable.

SH: Right, so that social support is really key.

Emma: Yeah definite. Yeah, it is really important to make sure that you give support. And I feel like giving support helps me. 'Cause when I see other people struggling and I am giving them support and then I'm like, "I feel your pain, I know," and we like go through it together, I feel like that helps. That helps me.

Coaches were happy enough to see swimmers train with the caveat that they only do as much as they are able post-injury or illness. Still, re-training after being off injured is difficult for young athletes and is fraught with the anxieties of rapid de-training and a loss of general fitness while not swimming. Being "fit" was equated with a capacity for peak performance both in training and when it came to race days. Here, even Emma reproduces the discourse which contributes to the juggernaut of fitness maintenance in her effort to try and keep her fitness up by still "getting in the lengths." Despite reproducing the discourse of fitness, swimmers also acknowledged that it was not possible to reach peak performance on every training day. Swimmers would encourage their squad mates by empathizing with the pain and suffering they were experiencing to create an atmosphere of social support. Expressing oneself as the "suffering swimmer" may be as much about the sensual experience of pain and its communication in somatic form as it is about creating a collective sense of group cohesion. The performance of suffering, the pains of training, becomes an embodied way of seeking support. And the giving of emotional support can come in embodied as well as verbal form and be cathartic for giver and receiver, as Emma suggests.

Despite all the grimacing and complaining during and after practices all the swimmers I spoke with accepted the suffering in their craft and revelled in the after-effects of

that physical activity, what Nancy referred to above as “the buzz.”. While discussing the differences between racing in a 25m or 50m pool Erin exclaimed that the suffering experienced in long course racing was much worse:

Oh, it hurts like a bitch! Backstroke long-course is like the worst. It hurts SO MUCH! But it is like a good hurt, cause then you know that you've tried hard. And then you just kind of kick harder just to know like then you can finish quicker.

Nick felt similarly about completing hard sets. He did not enjoy the in-the-moment sensory experiences but could accept the suffering as a sign of accomplishment.

I feel like achieved. I feel better about myself after I have swum. Especially after a hard set, like once you have finished it, you just feel, umm not refreshed but kind of refreshed, if that makes sense.

This achievement of overcoming the shared suffering of swim training was part of the language youth swimmers used to define their belonging in the performance squad, in the club, and as affirmative identification with being a competitive swimmer. Even just being there in the space and continuing to swim signalled their social belonging.

For fourteen-year-old Andrea, these painful sets, particularly when she is unable to perform them to her highest standard and is struggling through them, can be viewed as “paying off” in the long term.

Especially like sometimes I think to myself during sets, you know “I’m just going to get out and go home. I don't want to do this.” Like, “I’m going to quit swimming.” But at the end of it you are just like, “Ugh, thank god that is over.” And you know, hope for a better set next time. And you just think, just because of a few bad sets it's not really worth giving up, you have to just, like, that's what training is. And you do get, it does pay off when you swim, umm, competitively.

Training is the necessary evil required to achieve the “buzz” one gets from racing. The physiological effects of training the body are revealed in the brief moments when one gets up on the blocks and races. To put this in capitalist ideological terms that that are an ingrained part of the competitive swimming ethos, physical capital that it “banked” during hard endurance sets, or when the meterage is “topped up” during aerobic sets designed to generate a baseline of physical fitness then gets “cashed in.” Or perhaps a better metaphor would be that one sees a return on their investment. The more physical capital one can amass the greater social capital one can receive by winning medals, trophies, and attaining podium positions at local and regional swimming competitions, to then display the spoils of achievement conspicuously in living room cabinets or adorn bedroom walls.

The seemingly disparate values/performances of suffering which I have discussed above work together to create the expressions and meanings of suffering in a sort of mutual constitution. By this I mean that the values of self-actualization and hard work are internalized by the youth and reproduced in their training regimes and individual practices. Their performances of suffering work within/against these values and are at once an exercise of agency within the structures of high-performance athleticism and ways to express their sensuous bodily experiences of pain and suffering in socially acceptable ways, which communicate a shared meaning and facilitate social bonding between the youth swimmers.

8.4. Conclusion

Pain and suffering are daily realities for youth swimmers. Yet they are not passive recipients of regimes of aerobic training which seek to sculpt “fit” bodies capable of tens of thousands of metres in the pool and millions of shoulder rotations per year. They actively negotiate what are socially acceptable levels of pain tolerance on any given day while working to tailor the social value of the “hard working” athlete into an embodied experience that is physically and emotionally sustainable. In other words, to produce a socially acceptable “swimmer.”

Despite knowing well that pushing the limits of the body has consequences, all the youth in Manta SC’s performance squad were willing to cross those boundaries at times, training through injury, overtraining to get back to previous levels of fitness, or attempting to increase their fitness threshold. The perception of one’s own pain and physical suffering were twofold in meaning: 1) pain and suffering as progress; and 2) pain and suffering as detrimental to physical and emotional health.

In this chapter I have argued that the performance of pain and suffering is a necessary part of the socialization of youth swimmers. As communicative gestures these performances tell fellow swimmers the extent to which one is pushing bodily limits in the never ceasing quest to swim fast. They are a way in which youth may exercise their agency within the confines of the structures of acceptable performances. Grimaces, complaints of soreness and pain in muscles, and performances of suffering were all strategies the youth at Manta SC employed in an effort to tolerate and manage the pains of training: Hanno complaining saying “I’m in so much pain” while slumped down on the pool sidewall after a particularly long lactate set of races; Erin’s exclamation that “it hurts like a bitch” to swim long-course races; Nick and Nathan’s limb shaking performances to work off the build-up of lactate in muscles; James’ exclamation that he can “feel the lactate eating my bones”; and Martin’s admission after a kick set that “my legs are dead.”

Performances of pain and suffering demonstrated youths' conformity to a competitive swimming ethic establishing their social belonging as swimmers. Even when swimmers were unable to "swim through the pain" and sustain high-intensity swimming speeds over multiple set pieces banter was used by youths to diminish their non-conformity to the high-performance competitive swimming ethic and maintain their immersion. This joking manner changed accusations of "pacing" or "cheating" from criticism to a recognition of the individual and daily limits of possible physical and emotional exertion. Banter also operated as a subtle opportunity to bring swimmers back into the fold, where suffering is supposed to be experienced as progress. Those youth who were not conforming were thus given a chance to redeem their immediate and future performances and not risk a more serious discussion with the coach for not having trained to the level of expectation for the squad.

Lactate sets and other high-intensity training sessions are transformative. The pain and discomfort of training that youth endure together, celebrate, and complain about, transforms their relationships with their bodies and each other. In this way, pain and suffering and their performance to peers and coaches becomes central to the social construction and confirmation of identity of what it means to be a competitive youth swimmer. Exercising their agency, the older swimmers would occasionally decide not to swim at maximum capacity for a given set of repetitions. Usually, at least one of them would then get publicly bantered for pacing. After engaging in banter with the coach, the speed, or at least the effort with which the youth swam their next set piece, would increase so as not to incur the ire of the coach. Thus, they conformed to the high-performance ethos of the squad, but they did so partly on their terms and within the negotiated relationships between swimmers and coaches. In this way their performances and joking relationships, best exemplified by the banter heaped between peers and coach, helped develop a sense of comradery, to further cement the social bonds painstakingly built out of every hour of training and every metre of suffering in the water.

Chapter 9. Conclusions

Yvette, now 16 and one of the senior girls in the performance squad, James and Nathan are the only squad members to show up for this early Monday morning practice in 2021. Walking onto the pool deck Yvette asks me what I'm doing here today. I tell her I'm here to swim with them. "REALLY!?" she says in high pitched shrieking excitement, her eyes widening and an ear-to-ear grin on her face. "No way!" says Nathan, as we all throw our gear on the edge of the pool deck. I ask Yvette if I can share a lane with her today as Nathan and James will want their own and there are four swimmers from the junior squad here today taking up the other three lanes. Unfortunately, the main set is all kick, so asking to share a lane with the fastest kicker in the club turns out not to have been the best choice in hindsight. Part of the strategy for the elite swimmers in the morning is to cheat on metres. Indeed, this is a general strategy which I am often complicit in as I only ever get short periods of time in which to chat with the youth while standing on the pool deck. This morning we all take a longer time getting in the pool, reducing our overall training time. Once in the water they attempt to engage assistant coach Warren in conversation and chat to each other, they fiddle with goggles, take sips of water from their bottles, and use any other minor excuse *not* to complete the entire warmup meterage.

During the 800m warmup I struggle to catch my breath. Not because I am unfit, for I have been training in the pool regularly for months and swimming in the sea, but because I am nervous. Swimming my usual warmup pace, I swim with the Masters squad would be too slow to keep pace, but in attempting to keep pace I run the risk of stopping early and being unable to finish the meterage. Either way, I am a bit embarrassed. The training pool of the performance squad is so familiar to me yet the perspective and sensory experience of being in the water feels alien. The pool seems too shallow and the water overly clear. From the side of the pool the lanes look bigger but from the water they feel smaller than the ones at the recreation centre where the Masters squad trains. The end walls for turning are slippery to the touch rather than presenting a gripping sensation like sandpaper, the studded texture has accumulated slime-algae which has made the walls slimy, making turns difficult. I worry about the gaze of Warren watching me and critique my unrefined technique from the side of the pool as he observes practice making sure we all do the work. At what I think is halfway through the warmup, as I have lost count of the metres I have swum, I ask Yvette how much she has left to do. She returns my question with a blank, almost stunned, stare (it is 6:40am in the morning on a weekday after all). She replies that she has done at least the 200m drill portion of the 800m warmup. With Nathan and James both chatting with Warren, and the seconds and minutes ticking by, the junior squad youngsters go ahead and start on the main

set written on the whiteboard. Slowly, us four “senior” swimmers grab our kickboards knowing we have not finished the warmup but hoping Warren will overlook this and we can begin the main set.

The main set Warren has written on the whiteboard for us is entirely composed of kicking drills, the first portion being 4x25m front crawl kick on thirty second intervals. James asks Warren if he can wear fins. “No” comes Warren’s derisive laughter for what should be an easy kick set for the seventeen-year-old James. I quietly put my fins on knowing I will not make those times without them. James notices saying, “Hey, Sean’s wearing fins.” “I’m going to need them seeing as I’m so slow,” I reply. Warren retorts with “Well you had better make the times!” “Not fair, you’ve got an advantage,” James grins. “No, I’ve got two. One on each foot,” I say laughing at my own joke. But the fins do not give me any advantage. Despite my slow pace during the warm-up and my clear deviance in wearing fins, Yvette does not seem to mind and encourages me by saying, “See, you made it with five to spare, so let’s go on thirty,” just before pushing off on the first 25m kick repetition. I can barely maintain the thirty-second pace per 25m. After only a few repetitions James notices how slow I am going. Yvette is easily beating me, which was to be expected, cruising into the wall at a comfortable twenty-seconds per 25m, while I barely make it in twenty-five with fins. “Oh, Sean, you actually do need the fins,” James comments seeing my slow progress. “At least you aren’t the slowest kicker in the squad anymore,” I joke to James while passing him in the opposite direction. A running joke in the squad, perpetuated by James and Arthur, is that James is the slowest kicker in the squad. Now they have experiential proof that I am in fact the slowest kicker by a large margin. “Sorry for being so slow,” I then say to Yvette as she passes me, again. “Come on Sean, you’re doing great!” she replies grinning from ear to ear.

I had initially begun my research with the performance squad thinking I would never join them in the pool. My skill level never reached close to that of the Manta SC performance squad youth and the small amount of training I did with the Masters squad was unequal to the task of getting me fit enough and fast enough to swim the distances and on the times of the performances squad. Not only was I too slow to keep pace with the set times but I lacked a competitive swimming background and the enskilled knowledge required to swim fast. I also did not have the physiological (somatic and epigenetic) adaptations to moving through water at speed which these youth had developed through their repeated practice. Humoring me and allowing me to join practices, taking up lane space, and forcing the youth to swim around me would normally be an untenable situation. With so few swimmers showing up for morning training either every swimmer got their own lane, or two swimmers would “split” a lane in half, presenting me with a chance to swim with the squad. This simple act of sharing

space, of participating in shared practice, was the culmination of my immersion into competitive swimming and into the lifeworlds of the Manta SC performance squad swimmers.

After three seasons immersed in the lifeworld of competitive swimming between 2018-2021, the early mornings, late evenings, weekend long competitions, post-competition social breakfasts, hundreds of hours in the water and even more time on the pool deck with the performance squad, I still feel far from proficient in that amphibious environment. To become a competitive swimmer, in the way that the performance squad at Manta SC defined it, is much more than not-drowning. It is a holistic engagement in the material, social, emotional, and affective aspects of swimming. It requires that one dive into the midst of the competitive swimming lifeworld. The youth implicitly understood this, and they were not shy of cajoling me to “get in” the water and swim, or checking up on my progress with the Masters squad.

Approaching these physical practices as an amateur was a difficult task even with some background of athleticism. Apprenticing in competitive swimming allowed me to capture some of the meanings and experiences of youth proficient in the social and cultural fabric of the embodied activities of swimming. I make no claims that I was “just another swimmer” with the performance squad for I had a privileged position standing on the side of the pool, observing practices and training sessions without having to do the hard physical work of swimming. What opportunities for shared practice amongst the youth that I could reasonably engage in I took, immersing myself in land training, within the Masters squad, and joining in a sea swim and a few performance squad morning practices. The importance of these few moments was not lost on me and have subtly but profoundly informed my understanding of immersion in others lives.

This thesis is an experiment in immersion. I have used immersion in the metaphorical sense of *entering into* an activity or community as when I immersed myself in the daily rhythms and practices of Manta Swimming Club’s Performance Squad. I have used it in the literal sense of submerging myself in pool water to train and learn how to feel the water. And I have used immersion as a productive concept with which to think through practices and processes of becoming and belonging. In this way, immersion as theory has been good to think with. Throughout this thesis I have presented immersion in the competitive swimming lifeworld through a phenomenological lens, particularly highlighting embodiment, perception, emotion, and pain. This has included the embodiment of enskilled knowledge; sense perceptions of touch and the ways in which privileging tactility and kinaesthesia shapes youths’ senses of touch; emotion and how the simple act of being-in and moving-through the

water affords affective experiences of tranquility and joy; and pain, and how pain and suffering become disjointed from bodily experience while also being incorporated as markers of progress and shared sociality through shared bodily experience. Moments of inclusive banter, cajoling, and participation in the training regimes of swimmers have been presented throughout this thesis. Moreover, I have attempted to present youth swimmer's own practices, enskilled movements, their cultural sensorium, and their embodied knowledges through their words and actions to show what becoming and belonging entails in the lifeworlds of competitive swimmers.

While the experiences of youths and adults cannot be said to be equivalent, a shared practice proved fertile ground for exploring the similarities and differences of the embodied experiences of swimming. For it was in becoming a swimmer and shaping my belonging in this lifeworld where I trained my body and my senses, experiencing the aches and pains of fatigued muscles, the joys of flying through the water, and feeling the bodily sensation's immersion affords. Through immersive participating in the different yet comparable practices of swim training with the Masters squad at Manta SC I have been able to share a snapshot of the lifeworlds of competitive swimmers. To grasp and "feel" the water required that I shift my perceptions of water as a fluid substance and instead perceive its affordances where one can catch, anchor, push against, pull, streamline through, and ride on top of the water. In cultivating this new form of perception, I reshaped my senses to privilege tactility of the water and of my bodily movements. This new cultural sensorium of swimming highlighted how the entanglements of material substances of water and the human body come to encode enskilled knowledge through sensory experiences of movement, tactility, friction, and kinaesthesia. To become a swimmer involves being-in-the-water, a recognition of the dynamic and subtle relationships between perceiving subjects and environment, an holistic accounting of "entering into the life process and going along with it" (Ingold 2018, 120).

In this thesis I have articulated the intimate embodied entanglements that humans have with water, principally our being-in, our immersion in, water. To grow up with embodied experiences of immersion shapes body, mind, and environs. In the learning processes of enskilment involved in swimming youth reshape their cultural sensorium from an Euro-Western one dominated by vision and hearing, to a sensorium that privileges tactile modes of sensing being-in-the-world. Their socialized perception of bodies of water likewise shifts from an emphasis on danger and death to affordances for play and recreation. Youths' bodies change due to the repetitive rigours of swimming so as to afford them greater capacity to swim. And while English youths lifeworlds may be less aquatic than those of the

Moken or Bajau peoples, their material, social, and affective immersion into competitive swimming, their becoming swimmers and belonging to a club, marks them as *homo natator*.

9.1. Becoming a Swimmer

Becoming and belonging are never static process. They are constantly being shaped, negotiated, and reinforced through the social and bodily practices involved in competitive sport (Thangaraj 2015). Thus, youth swimmers' bodily interactions with water, their tactile and kinaesthetic sense perceptions, are a crucial point of interrogation for comprehending their swimming practices and their embodied identities as swimmers. The sensory aspects of swimming are crucial in processes of becoming for youth swimmers. Immersion is, in many cases, a lifelong and normative experience for these youth.

Thinking back to his early childhood experiences of swimming Theo, eighteen, was enamoured at the sensory differences of immersion:

I always used to turn on my back and look up. You know when you are underwater and you are looking at the surface of the water, underwater it looks really weird. I just used to always think, "Ah, this is so cool."

The "world" outside of the water appears as though it were on the other side of a shimmering portal. You can see your body mirrored when you are just below the surface but you can also see beyond the boundary of water and feel the pressures of buoyancy and surface tension the water exerts on your body. Here, the world outside of immersion is constrained by gravity and two-dimensional movement along the ground. Sensory hierarchies are therefore differently ordered to that of immersion where swimmers can feel catch and anchor points in any direction. Youth learn to attune their sensory perceptions in the cultural sensorium of swimming which privileges tactility as the most formative and informative sensory experience in learning to become a swimmer. The water literally shapes the senses where being-in-water becomes incorporated into the enskilled knowledge and embodied perceptions of youth swimmers. However, the feedback loop of body-shaping-water and water-shaping-body does not necessarily translate into an expanded knowledge of bodily awareness but rather is focused, like swimming training, on honing specific perceptions and senses in the production of the swimmer.

Becoming skilled at feeling requires swimmers learn to incorporate the sensory perceptions of tactility into their bodily practices. This requires learning to read the gestural communication of coaches and other swimmers in one's own body, translating a seen movement into a felt action. Due to the tactile nature of swimming and the ways in which the

somatic and neurological links occur in humans, the communication through kinetic means is both simpler, faster, and potentially more accurate for youth than verbal communication. This is not to say that swimmers will not need to have their arms or hands physically manipulated to grasp the subtleties of specific swimming movements on occasion. However, many swimmers can extrapolate enskilled knowledge from briefly demonstrated gestural communication and then execute those specific movements in the water. Each body being different, swimmers adjusted their reproduction of these translated movements according to the feedback of their own body's senses of touch and motion.

The minute details of haptic feedback of arm and hand positions, of the flow, grip, or catch of water are learnt through repetition. Enskilment of bodily knowledge requires focused attention on movements and a de-focusing of attention. Swimmers allow their focused awareness to reside elsewhere and allow their highly attuned body of habit to move them through the water. Yet when their body grows, when they are presented with a new environment, or when they have spent significant time out of the water, swimmers must readjust their sensory perceptions, focusing awareness on habitual movements and sensations. For example, Nancy had to explore where her hands are "slipping" on the water and subtly adjust their catch and stroke accordingly before racing in a new pool and Ida had to re-learn the timing of her stroke rate, spatial awareness, and measure of distance after a growth spurt. Learning to feel, then, is a continuous process of becoming where sensory perceptions of tactility are being refined and re-refined depending on circumstance and situation.

Youth sculpted their bodies through the training of techniques and skills and the refinement of enskilled movements to individual bodies and swim styles. The somatic changes wrought in youths' material growing, shifting, and developing bodies through being-in-the-water is a distinct amphibious bodily form, the swimming body. Rather than being an intentional end-in-itself, the swimming body is a means of becoming a competitive swimmer and is formed in the process of becoming "swimming fit." Youth considered their swim training as affording them greater overall bodily capabilities, due to the volume of training and the dedication and commitment to a rigorous schedule, something which their non-swimming peers struggled to understand. This general bodily fitness from swimming made them fit, in the sense that their bodies would be considered physically appealing (i.e., sexy, muscular, lean), and in the sense that they would continuously become stronger and faster swimmers. As such "fitness" is embroiled as a product of broader discourses on what constitutes a healthy, fit body within England. Youth swimmers critically consume these "fitness" discourses discussing what they eat, and how they plan to begin/continue weight-

lifting routines. They discussed top national and international swimmers noting who are the fastest and “fittest” swimmers in the world. Youth also enacted the “swimming fit” body as we saw Nathan, Nick, and Nancy do in Chapter 5 by “flexing” at each other and slapping their muscles in mock imitation of professional swimmers. In these ways the performance squad youth socially navigated and performed a collectively negotiated “fit”ness of their bodies and of themselves signalling their becoming stronger and faster, as well as their belonging in the squad. In the performance and negotiation of the “fit” swimming body competitive swimming reveals itself to be a shared bodily practice.

Youth swimmer’s sense of feel is as much affected by the perceived tactile qualities of the waters in which they swim as they are affected by how they are emotionally feeling. The mundane happenings in training and competitions, of floating and experimenting with water and body, are what Kathleen Stewart (2007) has referred to as “ordinary affects.” These capacities to shift, shape, move, and feel affect the background moods of positivity, excitement, anxiety, that give shape to the emotions youth feel when in the water swimming. Joy, comfort, safety, frustration, deflation, are all emotions youth reported through their words. But it was in their embodied actions where emotions are most visibly “written” in gestures, movements, postures, and performances. The stress Martin felt outside of competitive swimming could be dissipated through immersion in swimming, whereby the end of a training session the stress is “out of your head” and you “feel more calm.” Swimming let Daniel “just lose focus” on external stresses and anxieties and allowed him to be “relaxed in the water.” Even standing outside the water and observing the languid movements of warm-up and swim-down lengths afforded me feelings of relaxation and calmness. The performance squad swimmers took their training seriously, but they did so in a way that fostered a supportive environment which facilitated a relaxed and jovial mood in the pursuit of becoming. Immersion, to be in the water, to swim, to socialize, to sense, affected youths’ well-being, bolstering positive tactile and emotional feelings for individuals and the group.

Being in pain would perhaps seems antithetical to feelings of well-being however, pain was a regular sensation experienced in the pursuit of becoming a competitive swimmer. The performance squad swimmers were often in some form of discomfort or another from their six-day-per-week strenuous physical training sessions. From the ache of sore muscles to the fatigue of muscles soaked in lactic acid, from the pain of an impingement in a sore shoulder or knee joint to the crippling, swim stopping pain of injury, swimmers are aware of and sense a wide spectrum of pain in their bodies. In learning to differentiate the sensations of pain along this spectrum, of knowing when shoulder discomfort may signal the beginnings

of an injury for example, swimmers demonstrated their growing knowledge of their own bodies and what constituted acceptable pain.

9.2. Belonging as a Swimmer

Belonging as a competitive swimmer within the squad, club, and wider swimming community required performing a certain form of subjectivity, a subjectivity embroiled with the self-making project of neoliberalism. The youth enrolled in the performance squad of Manta SC ranged in age from 12-21 years. This life stage comes with structural arrangements including education, the inculcation of values for adult life, and expectations of the sort of subjects they are expected to be within society. Being a youth in England requires mandatory general education and physical programs in school through to the age of sixteen. Therefore, youth are in training in one form of education or another to be a particular kind of subject, one which incorporates into their self a particular set of values: dedication, focus, hard work, perseverance, winning. It is through this lens then that youth defined what it means to be a competitive swimmer.

“Proper” swimming was one way in which Ida distinguished her competitive training activities from her non-swimming peers “play” in water. Proper swimming incorporates a shared practice under strict regulations within the confines of sanctioned clubs where one has a membership, swims lengths and sets, and trains under the watchful gaze of a certified coach. It involves being part of club with multiple squads of varying skillsets and speeds, each with their own minimum qualifying time standards. It involves swimming with similar aged peers, who often go to different schools, and come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Yet they are all able to claim a history in competitive swimming by naming their club(s), their personal best times in multiple events and distances, and voice their preference for competing in a particular stroke (butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, freestyle) and distance (50m, 100m, 200m, 400m, 800m, 1500m).

Group identification and social cohesion amongst swimmers was further bolstered in sensations of pain, its enactment, and negotiated meanings. Pain and suffering are celebrated aspects of endurance sports generally and within swimming specifically. The ability to endure suffering builds character, makes one stronger, more resilient, which feed into the sculpting of a particular kind of hard-working character who will not complain but “keep calm and carry on,” presenting a certain English demureness to the physical and mental extremes of being a competitive swimmer and belonging in the sport. In many ways this celebration of suffering is tied to the performance of neoliberal subjectivities within competitive sporting spaces.

Pain and suffering are not only felt individually but are experienced and expressed socially amongst competitive youth swimmers. Especially prevalent are the performances of suffering demonstrated during gruelling sets, lactate tolerance practices, or in racing Fly, IM, and longer distance events. Swimmers in Manta SC would perform their suffering in the shaking out of body parts, the slapping of thighs and arms, or the playful attempts to actively workout lactate by walking around the pool deck when they are meant to be sitting in place adapting to the suffering.

One of the ways in which English swimmers discuss, or rather, attempt to take the physical pain of suffering and transform it was to joke about their experiences and the physical sensations. Banter was used to normalize experiences of pain, to negotiate its meaning, and to what extent pain could be dwelled upon. Arthur may have perpetuated the myth that pain youth experienced was only a neurological phenomenon, that they could overcome it through willpower. However, the swimmers intimately understood that pain was manifest as an individual and social experience in their bodies, as Hanno, Daniel, and Dean made clear when joking about Arthur's "mind-over-matter" mantra of pain. The performance squad swimmers used banter as a way to diminish the pain and suffering or at least take their mind off of it for a time as seeing one's peers suffer from the intensities of training, and joking about it, was often hilarious for these youth. And when banter was not enough to "push past the pain" swimmers often relied on the social support of their peers to help them manage levels along the spectrum of pain. Engaging in banter was ultimately a sign of belonging in the performance squad. Thus, being able to "dish it out" and "take it" in these reciprocal joking relationships ensured their belonging in the group.

Swimming happens *in* a substance, and the removal from that substance for any significant period disconnects swimmers from the unique sensuous experiences of immersion which they have incorporated into their bodies and identities. Occasionally pain manifests into injury which then forces swimmers out of the water and out of the social spaces where they have invested significant time and energy. Removal from the medium of their daily movements can have consequences for the well-being of swimmers (Sean Heath 2020b). The fear of missing out on the social aspects of swimming, the continued aerobic fitness maintenance required to make minuscule improvements to speed, as well as the individual nature of the sport, make for an environment where swimmers do not wish to be absent from immersion. Many swimmers return to the water, to their competitive squads, after short absences. Yet youths' agency in participating in competitive swimming is curtailed by the boundaries which structure competitive swimming as a sport: qualifying times, rigorous training regimes, training and competing rules laid out by national and international

governing bodies, adult control, social, economic, and temporal requirements. There are no recreational leagues, no “B” teams of swimmers. If you do not obtain qualifying times, you do not get to participate, let alone compete. Thus, participation is contingent on the physical capacity to swim fast.

As the ethnographic vignette at the beginning of this chapter lays out, youth were willing to bend some of these rules to allow my participation in their physical practices. It was important for them that I share in the sensory experiences of immersion, the rigours of swimming training, and to swim along with them in their spaces. Each individual experiences their environs in subtly different ways, but in competitive swimming the sharing of the bodily pleasures, pains, suffering, and senses of touch water affords is central to the processes of becoming and belonging for youth swimmers. As anyone who learned to swim before a time their memory can recall, they find themselves as beings-in-the-water, already situated in the physical world of swimming. But the attention to cultivating a sensorium which privileges touch is what distinguishes swimmers from those who can merely swim.

Rather than imposing a multi-dimensional handicap on the other swimmers to allow for my participation (see also Dyck 2012, 184–95; Thangaraj 2015, 27–67), I had to accommodate my speed and skill to their level of ability by donning fins and shortening the numbers of repetitions in order to “keep up” with the pace of the set. Competitiveness may have been structured on speed alone at competitions, but within the performance squad competitiveness was artificially constructed to account for multiple age-groups swimming together. I may have had an “excuse” for being slow (a lack of opportunity to train, no background as a competitive swimmer, the limited time for ethnographic research) but the youth in the performance squad had no such luxury. And while their coach Arthur was adamant that he would rather see them happily enjoying another sport than carrying on swimming with no passion for immersion this was a difficult choice for youth. The social and the physical aspects of this sporting practice are the background of daily existence for youth swimmers. In many respects they know no other structure to their lives many having been competitive swimmers since they were six years old. Their becoming and belonging as youth, swimmers, members of a club, and community, are entangled in the sensory, material, social and emotional aspects of immersion. Those youth who were unable to improve their times in their later teenage years, or who were unable to keep up with the rigorous demands of training six days a week, and upwards of twenty-five hours, might end up leaving the sport until their adult years, joining the Masters squad of the club. They also might pursue other careers in aquatics as lifeguards or swimming instructors as did Yara and

Laylah after the disruption caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdowns.

Perhaps the competitive swimming landscape can be transformed so that many more clubs begin to see the value in retaining swimmers who enjoy the sport but do not wish to, or are unable to, fund their continued becoming along a path toward nationally ranked athlete.⁸⁷ By developing leisure squads within clubs, offering chances to race alongside similar speed peers, gives youth the agency in defining their participation in a sport they enjoy, maintaining the connections to their peers in other squads and close ties to their swimming club. To this end Swim England began a cycle of virtual competitions in-lieu of the in-person galas, canceled due to the global pandemic, that occurred during the 2020/2021 swimming season titled *Level X Racing* (Swim England 2020a). This allowed swimmers the chance to compete in events they normally do not enter. It also afforded swimmers chances to race each other's times without having the additional costs of travel, overnight stays, parking, food, kit, and other expenses usually associated with attending galas at other clubs' facilities. This "Level X" virtual leader board competition-style racing series has the potential to make swimming more equitable for swimmers and their families funding their athletic pursuits. Although, as the swimmers in the performance squad at Manta SC were quick to admit, the excitement from the "quotidian disjunctures" (Amit 2015) of attending galas and training camps, of racing in a lane beside a swimmer from another club, or seeing the other club's squads out in force on the pool deck breeds a different phenomenological experience of immersion, one that was equally a part of the shared practices of becoming and belonging in competitive swimming.

9.3. Next Steps

At the outset of this thesis (chapter 2) I highlighted recognizing young people's social agency as being an essential part of my anthropological sensibilities. The last few chapters of this thesis explore how social agency may be enacted in competitive swimming contexts when negotiating meanings of pain perception. Taking a more critical tone here than I did previously we might consider certain forms of "resistance" (such as joking banter or the occasional "pacing") in "negotiating" pain as being accepted within competitive squads because they do not upset the embedded power relations. Instead, they may be considered as outlets built into the very fabric of high-performance swimming where banter about

⁸⁷ By funding I mean the whole range of resource deployment parents and family members invest into youth sport. See Dyck (2012) for an insightful explication of the investment which goes into youth sport.

sensations of pain is used to conform youth's behaviours to an "accepted" (adult decided) norm. The model of youth swimming is entirely geared towards hyper-specialization and high-performance output despite the insistence of coaching models that emphasize "fun" in the earliest stages of training and development (e.g., Swim Canada's "FUN"amentals Level 1 coaching award). Taking a critical stance on sport, we might consider the sacrificing of bodies at the base of the participation pyramid as a feature of sport to generate the few at the pinnacle who will win medals and stand on podiums. Rather than learning to train, training to train, and training to compete alone, how can we incorporate fun into high-performance coaching models, and weave play into the fabric of high-performance sport? A next step in this regard would be to analyze the power relations embedded in the national governing bodies of swimming and how this effects youth advisory panels perceived and actual agency in shaping change within these organizations. This could provide interesting insight into "best practice" for safeguarding the wellbeing of youth athletes through meaningful participation in the governance of their clubs and their sport.

Expanding on the immersion approach outside of the confines of the pool, and potentially the physical activity of swimming, will require a thorough examination of "sensory ecologies" (Carter et al. forthcoming), which locate the sensing and moving body within material and immaterial environments (Sean Heath forthcoming). Through an exploration of the cultural specificities of sense experiences and a "politics of the senses" (Laplantine 2020; see also Howes and Classen 2014, 65–92), we may be better able to examine processes of knowledge-making "*between* people and *with* the world" (Marchand 2010, S3 emphasis in original) in emplaced settings. This includes how the senses and perception affect and are affected by bodily movement in environments, socialization and learning processes, and the somatic shaping of bodies through practice. In this regard immersion can be expanded to include *being-in* the landscapes and waterscapes in natural or built environments, the relational social and philosophical perspectives of that immersion, and the entangled processes of becoming and belonging.

To be human we need water. To be in water without drowning and experiencing a dissolution of the self, we need to swim. Everyone can learn to swim, given time, training, and patience. In learning to swim we shape and are shaped by the very water we need. In this process some people learn to swim, and others become swimmers, attuning their sensory perceptions to their movement in water. There is a dialectic relationship in this movement that runs between humans and water where swimming becomes imbued with meaning beyond survival. For it is in play and an exploration of our emplaced environments where we become immersed, where our being in the water becomes being-in-the-water, a

holistic entanglement of in the material, social, and affective aspects of our lifeworlds, of mind, body, and environs.

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