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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Affective Oceanic Seaswimming and Encounters for Care-Full Environmental Communication

Tamara Shefer^a, Vivienne Bozalek^a and Nike Romano^b

^aWomen's and Gender Studies, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa; ^bDepartment of Applied Design, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Our oceanic swimming practice began as part of the project of doing scholarship differently in contemporary South African post-apartheid contexts. Swimming-writing-reading not only enables different ways of doing inquiry but also prompts new ways of communicating environmental injustices as we face them in/with/through the ocean. We argue the value of this practice, and the writings we generate and share, for a rethinking and reframing of environmental communication through practices of care. "Slow swimming" in the ocean brings one into intimate, affecting encounters with the ocean and its multiplicities. Porous to fluid temporalities, oceanic swimming-writing-reading becomes a hauntological place-space-time-mattering practice of swimming as we become aware of sedimented crimes of slavery and colonization, and confront the ghosts of apartheid and colonial violence. As we meet disasters of present and future, polluted and violated seas, our affective relational watery encounters with more-than-human species sharpen our response-ability to and responsibility for anthropocentric damages to the ocean and planet. We suggest such practices of affective wit(h)nessing, relationality, and care as a productive resource for communicating current environmental challenges that are consequences of certain human hands, as well as our mutual entanglements and response-abilities on planet Earth.

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Introduction

This paper shares an experimental practice of scholarship, an affective, embodied, and relational oceanic practice, directed at alternative knowledge and their dissemination for environmental and social justice. Located in the South African context, the practice of swimming-writing-reading was initiated as part of the larger project of reconceptualising higher education and doing our scholarship differently, and as a challenge to the dominant logics and emphases in academic scholarship, particularly in relation to our local histories and current contexts of social and environmental (in)justice.

At the outset, it is important to flag that South Africa faces particularly violent hydrocolonial (Hofmeyr, 2019, 2022) histories of settler colonization, slavery, and apartheid. These histories and their recalcitrance in the present, bolstered by global (post)colonial, racial patriarchy, are deeply implicated in environmental injustices as well (for example, Fahmy, 2024; Green, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Trisos et al., 2021; van Eeden-Wharton, 2023, 2024). Oceans and littoral spaces, like

CONTACT Tamara Shefer  tshefer@uwc.ac.za

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beaches, are haunted by the ghosts of slavery and the middle passage, the arrival of colonial settlers by the ocean, and more recently, apartheid's racist segregation and forced removals, which denied, and continues to exclude many black South Africans from safe and accessible beaches and oceans. Apartheid policies and practices also interrupted oceanic livelihoods and erased indigenous knowledge in relation to dwelling and living by and with the seas (for example, Francis & McGarry, 2024) and continue to shape current relationships with the ocean, livelihoods, and leisure.

As a response to decolonial imperatives in higher education as well as looming global environmental concerns, we began a practice of collaborative swimming writing. We developed this practice before and during the COVID-19 pandemic as a way of thinking through difficult times/issues and toward unsettling and troubling traditional ways of doing scholarship. We were hoping to reconfigure scholarly practices in response to decolonial challenges in the academy and further afield (see also, Chimakonam, 2017; Shefer, 2021; Shefer et al., 2024a, 2024b; Shefer & Bozalek, 2022). We have come to view our collaborative swimming-writing practice as enabling not only different ways of doing inquiry but also as a way of facing and communicating environmental injustices and dialoguing about them in/with/through the ocean. What we have found is that our wild sea swimming praxis is a powerfully affecting and affective one that has put us in touch with the entangled histories, presents and futures of social and environmental inequalities, injustices and violences.

We are located here in current calls to rethink the discipline of environmental communication. There is a groundswell of scholarship that thinks with materiality, embodiment, relationalities and across species in reconsidering rhetoric and communication (for example, McGreavy et al., 2018; Middleton et al., 2018). We are further inspired by the work of scholars like Phaedra Pezzullo and Robert Cox (Cox, 2007; Pezzullo, 2024; Pezzullo & Cox, 2021) who have proposed a reconceptualization of environmental communication as a "discipline of care," and as a constitutive praxis (Doyle, 2024, p. 28). Our sea swimming and the writings that we share in both public and academic fora are underpinned by a praxis of care, a relational ontology and an appreciation of the vitality of embodied affect toward a provocation for responsibility for and response-ability, that is the capacity to respond, to remaking knowledge and rethinking practices of communication thereof.

We view our practice as one that rethinks "environmental and climate communication as a form of 'care'" which "communicatively shifts the temporal and epistemological perspective to one of active presence, relationality, interconnectedness, responsibility, equality, collectivity, and even hope" (Doyle, 2024, p. 28). We join Na'puti (2024) in calling on communication scholars to also acknowledge the importance of indigenous practices of care as refusal in the face of anthropocentric violence, such as military and nuclear impacts on the ocean by the Global North.

We begin the paper by outlining this practice of affective sea swimming and what it means as an embodied, relational and care-full practice. This practice is then located in a larger critique that has been launched against the university and the global and local material and discursive contexts of humanist, colonial, racist, patriarchal economies of capital. The next section of the paper unpacks the key affordances of these embodied, affective and relational oceanic encounters, through our narratives, which we argue offer alternative forms of scholarship for environmental communication.

Wild seaswimming in the ocean as an affective praxis: collaborative free writing and reading after swimming

As we have shared elsewhere (Bozalek et al., 2024; Shefer et al., 2024b) our swimming-writing practice is an experimental process where we never know in advance what might emerge (St. Pierre, 2018). The practice involves swimming together in oceans or tidal pools, often with goggles, snorkels and cameras.¹ The group of swimmers is a shifting, fluid one. Different groups of sea swimmers, of diverse gender, color, class, and age, and with different locations in the historical and continued inequalities of South Africa and globally, some of whom also have chapters in the recently published volume (Shefer et al., 2024a), have been meeting together over some years to free dive and swim together. At times, our meetings have been formal around events such as

colloquia or workshops; at other times more social and community-orientated. This paper is based on the sea swimming practice of three of us, from this larger group, who are also editors of the aforementioned book. We are three middle-class white older women, and our awareness of our situatedness and privileges of growing up in apartheid South Africa, as well as the ongoing privilege of access, sense of comfort and belonging in the ocean, and on beaches has been key to our practice. We do not take for granted such privileges and have written about some of the complexities of these elsewhere (see Bozalek et al., 2024; Shefer & Bozalek, 2022) as have others from the perspective of Black embodiments as well (for example, Hugo, 2024; Omarjee, 2023; Peers, 2024). Engaging with our diverse privileges, such as the advantages of middle-class access to swimming skills and white apartheid privileges of easy access to safer ocean and water spaces, have also weighed in on our sense of responsibility to make a difference in our scholarship and contributions to knowledge. Since we were working together on the project of reconceptualising higher education and thinking with bodies of water, we would meet, not only for academic work but also to swim and write. Our sea swimming together in the ocean or tidal pools was followed by our collaborative free writing, where we would move to a nearby coffee shop and write synchronously using a shared Google doc on our laptops. Once completed, we read our narratives out loud as a form of dialogue with each other and with others in the ocean, of which we are a part. This kind of dialoguing uses situated knowledge “produced by and for particular interests, in particular circumstances, at particular times” (MacLure, 2013, p. 167), where the context is significant, with its enabling constraints and constraining enablements (Massumi, 2015).

Elizabeth St. Pierre (2018) sees reading and writing as essential ways of engaging in post-qualitative inquiry. For St. Pierre, reading post-structural philosophical texts and writing are forms of inquiry on a different grid of intelligibility to qualitative research methods. Writing too, is seen as a legitimate form of inquiry, which can create conditions for what is yet unthought, to become apparent. Writing is a form of creative experimentation which is not generally recognized in conventional qualitative research as being a methodology as it is not a predictable and systemized way of “collecting data.” It is, therefore, a form of risk-taking as one is never sure what may come from it and how one may be affected by what is written. Writing thus requires openness, is experimental, and is a form of inquiry in its own right (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Rose, 2004; St. Pierre, 2018). Reading one’s writing or that of one’s colleagues or theorists can provoke a change in one’s orientation through what Brian Massumi (2002), following Deleuze and Guattari, refers to as a “shock to thought.”

In our swimming-writing affective encounters, we feel these shocks to thought, where our oceanic wit(h)nessing, collaborative freewriting and reading out loud, provide lures of how to be moved from the many taken-for-granted assumptions of human individualism and exceptionalism (Akomolafe, 2018, 2020). We speak of wit(h)nessing to gesture to a witnessing that is with, not separate from, that being witnessed (Ettinger, 2005). This also connotes affective wit(h)nessing, feeling with, feeling a part of, feeling and knowing that all on the planet are in this together, albeit *differently* (see Neimanis, 2024). Boscacci (2018, p. 346) draws attention to the close entanglement of affect and wit(h)nessing, since when “we wit(h)ness, we risk being affected – a-bodily moved ...” which also may destabilize and transform our knowledge. We endorse Boscacci’s argument of how critical it is, in the current time of anthropocentric violence and extinctions, to wit(h)ness’ and to include such wit(h)nessing in environmental communication efforts. These experiences are animated by a politics of affective attunement, where we touch and are touched by the encounter with the ocean and each other (Snaza, 2019). Our collaborative writing after swimming opens us to the potential for what Brian Massumi (2008, p. 7) refers to as “making vitality affect felt, of making an explicit experience of what otherwise slips behind the flow of action and is only implicitly felt. It is making the imperceptible appear.”

Our affective encounters through “slow swimming” move us and change us and the others we engage with in unforeseeable ways. Swimming in the ocean invites one into intimate encounters with other species, and with the ocean and its multiplicities. For example, if we attune our sensibilities to seeing, hearing and feeling, we become attuned to the ecological devastation resulting from

the impact of human exploitations and extractions from the ocean, and therefore on humans, other species and the planet in general. A vitality of thought is made possible through the embodied and sensate nature of swimming as a “methodology of encounter” where human and more-than-human are inextricably entangled in the ocean (Probyn, 2016). Such forms of engagement thus provide glimpses into immanent and new modes of inhabiting our damaged planet and those in peril in oceanic and littoral zones (Akomolafe, 2018, 2020; Rose, 2017; Tsing et al., 2017).

Since a key part of our project is to challenge the erasure of bodies and affect as well as to overturn the normative sense of what counts as authoritative knowledge in academia, we have found it particularly productive to draw on alternative knowledge produced by poets, artists, story-tellers, activists and other creative engagements in water-centered practices (for example, the poem of Koleka Putuma; see also Burnett, 2017; Francis & McGarry, 2024; Gumbs, 2020; Hamilton Faris, 2019; Hugo, 2024; Khan, 2024; Martin, 2024; Peers, 2024; Samuelson, 2014, 2022; Stuart, 2024; Sultana, 2022; Walcott, 1986). Such engagements, both in the ocean and encountering esthetic knowledge of the sea, move us and open us to knowledge that is felt and then communicated in an embodied and relational way, rather than simply known and shared rationally and cognitively. As Boscacci and Newling suggest in their elaboration of the materiality of effect, which has strong resonances with, in and through watery encounters:

To be moved generates capacities to move: to spark and energise other bodies in a passage of response. Bodies of water and flesh. Bodies of collaborative work in aesthetic-critical practice in multimodal ways and locations. (Boscacci & Newling, 2022, p. 177, our emphasis)

Our oceanic swimming-writing also activates hauntological space time matterings (Barad, 2017) as we confront the hauntings of coloniality and apartheid in the ocean and on beaches (Bozalek et al., 2024; Martin, 2024; Peers, 2024; Shefer, 2021; Shefer et al., 2024b; Shefer & Bozalek, 2022). There is increasing acknowledgement of the sea as a repository of so many violent histories; poet Derek Walcott’s (1986) well-cited, “sea is history”, significantly “refuses the binary of historical land versus ahistorical ocean” as Meg Samuelson (2013, p. 10) puts it. Swimming in particular oceans, alongside particular beaches, is, therefore, a space for encountering and remembering the many human crimes of slavery and colonization sedimented in the ocean (Hofmeyr, 2019; McKittrick, 2006; Sharpe, 2016; Walcott, 2021). It is also a space of attunement to current extractivist activities by corporations such as Shell, in mining watery seaspaces for oil and gas, “through discourses of ‘blue growth’” (Dewan & Nustad, 2024, p. 2; McGarry, 2024) and other ecological damages and disasters so evident in oceans (Green, 2020; Green & Farr, 2023; Na’puti, 2024; Petrik et al., 2017).

The ocean draws us, yet it also holds danger, fear, and unknowability. As we meet the disasters of the present and the future, the polluted and violated seas, our affective relational encounters with the material fluidity of water and more-than-human species is witnessing, and a wit(h)nessing which sharpens our response-ability to and responsibility for anthropocentric damages to the ocean and planet (Boscacci, 2018; Bozalek & Zembylas, 2023; Dewan & Nustad, 2024; Lehman et al., 2021).

In thinking about sea swimming as a wit(h)nessing, we find Deborah Bird Rose’s notion of story-telling as a refusal to turn away from injustices, suffering and violence, powerfully instructive. Refusing to turn away, for Rose, meant remaining “true to the lives within which ours are entangled, whether or not we can accomplish great change” (Rose, 2013, p. 9 in van Dooren & Chrulaw, 2022, p. 10). If we do turn away, it is a form of abandonment and neglect of the hauntology of what has occurred during colonialism and continues to affect the world, where many forms of life are now under threat. Communication scholars are also being called on to address this concern. Tiara Na’puti (2024), for example, calls for a stop to researchers’ acquiescing with legacies of historical and contemporary military violence which are responsible for environmental devastation in the Pacific Ocean.

We have also found that our swimming-writing practice becomes a reparative engagement both for ourselves and arguably in relation to generating an alternative ethics of living on our planet, as a

yearning toward a justice-to-come scholarship, that is ongoing and can never be reached. The storytelling that Rose (2017) engages is generative of an ethical practice of kinship and care. We argue that our practice similarly is “a model of connection and avowal”, words used by van Dooren and Chrulew (p. 10) who comment on the value and ethical importance of Rose’s storytelling. They elaborate on how her narratives are “not simply *about* ethics” but rather are “in themselves ethical acts, efforts to interrupt the relentless momentum of death work to make a space for something else” (van Dooren & Chrulew, 2022, p. 10).

In what follows, we think with some of our narratives, about how our collaborative affective wit (h)nessing while swimming-writing, makes a difference to understanding and communicating the ecological challenges we face. Following on from St. Pierre’s provocative elaboration of post-qualitative research, we suggest that through this affective, embodied practice we “*live* the theories (will not be able *not* to live them) and will, then, live in a different world enabled by a different ethico-onto-epistemology” (2018, p. 604).

Against the tide: enlightenment humanism

We situate our practice within the current upswell of dissatisfaction and dis-ease with the logics of capitalism, humanism, and human exceptionalism that underpin and dominate the academy and elsewhere. Enlightenment humanism and its promises of “development”, “progress” and “civilization” have long been shown up for the slow and brutal violence (Nixon, 2011) through centuries of colonization, further bolstered by global capitalism. Key to colonial logics is the Cartesian dualism between nature and culture – “nature” as a passive backdrop to what is being played out, “nature” as inert, where we as humans are central in creating knowledge. As many feminist, decolonial, and posthumanist scholars have argued, the “wild” has been deployed as the repository for all those humans and more-than-humans, “othered” and subjugated, legitimating genocides, species extinctions, dispossessions, and other violations of the “wild” (Halberstam, 2020; Jickling et al., 2018). From this perspective, the human, or rather particular humans, white, cis-gender male, northern, and so on, are seen as rational, autonomous, independent individuals who have mastery over the world and nature. Notions of human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, the human subject (at least some human subjects) as rational, autonomous and superior, are entangled in such logics and further bolstered by neoliberal capitalist biopolitics and governmentality of bodies and minds (Akomolafe, 2021). Szadkowski and Krzeski (2021, p. 35) remind us of how the notion of the individual has been central to global ideologies of the twenty-first century, and the starting point of “many mainstream theories, most notably rational choice theory.”

These scholars go on to show how even apparent progressive notions of equality, justice and liberation are “tightly coupled with the idea of individual rights and individual freedoms” (Szadkowski & Krzeski, 2021, p. 35). It is precisely this notion of human identity and individual rights, bound up with human exceptionalism, that is implicated in current planetary imbalances and impending disasters of climate change and more (Akomolafe, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022).

Against this backdrop, we explore and offer the alternative embodied, affect-ive/ing practice of wild seaswimming as an affective oceanic encounter, a form of attentiveness and wit(h)nessing which also destabilizes individualist privileged irresponsibility (Tronto, 2013). Our co-affective multisensorial encounters become forms of “passionate immersion” (Rose, 2017, p. G53) as we attune ourselves to a resonant field. Our practice undoes traditional modes of inquiry, turning instead toward research-creation as a practice through which we set out to transform *how* inquiry is done and disseminated within the academy and communicated further afield. Swimming with Manning’s (2020, p. 221) proposition of research creation as a mode of inquiry that is drawn to the more-than, that operates at the edges of inquiry’s linguistic limits, we set out to destabilize traditional academic discourse and production and its associated normative pedagogies and research outputs (Loveless, 2020). Crucially understood as the difference that makes a difference in the creation of new knowledge (Manning, 2020), we set out to do theory that is embodied and

experimental, each encounter manifesting as an indeterminate event arising out of our collaborative practice (Loveless, 2020). Moreover, in opening ourselves to research-creation as an immanent practice that troubles binary distinctions between research/creation, art/science, and scholarly/artistic practice, we recognize how swimming-writing together foregrounds “the creative and ethical work involved in making matter come to matter” (Myers, in Truman et al., 2020, p. 227). Our work is not to be misunderstood as a way of presenting research creatively, rather it is a confirmation that the *how* of research is not separate from the theory or thinking of research and our practice becomes a way of generating embodied knowledge (Springgay & Truman, 2018). Below we document our thinking with and through our swimming and swimming writings in an attempt to flag these spaces of possibility.

Being adrift: an affective sea swimming praxis of disrupting bounded selves

The affective encounters of our swimming writing are predicated on and make space for, the appreciation of a relational ontology, where we come into being through our swimming writing together. In other words, we do not start as essential or stable subjects possessing inherent characteristics or properties, and neither do the elements and creatures we encounter possess coherent essences and established traits. Thus in our swimming-writing practices, we become deeply cognizant of the dynamism and indeterminacy of the world and how determinacy is a passing contingency (Barad, 2007). Being adrift in the sea with its tides and swells provides affective encounters with spacetime-mattering – entities, space, and time exist only through their specific

intra-actions. Barad (2010) describes quantum leaps where an electron jumps from one energy level to another without having been anywhere in between as a “ghostly matter”. The slash in *dis/continuity* indicates that it is neither continuous *nor* discontinuous, nor continuous *and* discontinuous, but that there is no fact of the matter whether it is discontinuous or not – i.e. there is an ontological indeterminacy. This indeterminacy is made more comprehensible through sensory experiences that are encountered with, in and through our seaswims. The waves in the sea are also helpful for the material constitution of Barad’s (2007) superposition of states, where a particle is not just in one place at a given time, but has an ontologically (hauntologically) indeterminate position, and exhibits a material ghostly non/presence in multiple places at the same time (Barad, 2017). In their diffractive movement of coming together, and being co-mingled where one wave is indistinguishable from another, sea waves demonstrate how superposition happens – it is not possible to discern the individual waves when they break together.

Our swimming-writing praxis, therefore, allows “us to notice through the edges we mutually create with each other” (Tsing, 2022, p. 29), thus activating capacious “more-than” individual engagements. Like our dips in the ocean, we slip into the virtual space where the cadence of our words flows through one another within the larger pool of the Google document. We are constantly surprised by how our narratives reverberate with one another, our texts markers of these intra-active co-poetic and co-affective encounters that move us. But we also become aware of how the multiplicity of ways of knowing – of writing and photographing, weave through each other to enable “unexpected forays into each other’s worlds” (Tsing, 2022, p. 26).

One of our concerns when writing about our oceanic encounters is how to be attentive to and resist the taken-for-granted habit of recentering the human and, by implication anthropomorphising other species. We attune instead, to the ontological role that affects offers as a “modulating field of [a] myriad of becomings across human and nonhuman” (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 6). For us, particular focus is paid to how these co-affective encounters might move our “thinking, making, doing, and undoing in research-practice” (Boscacci, 2018, p. 345), to more intimate and transgressive scholarly practices. Infused with trans-corporeal experiences that disrupt human exceptionalism, the traditional figure-ground relationship between humans and the environment that foregrounds the human as a figure set against the background of nature dissolves, highlighting instead how all creatures are enmeshed with “the dynamic, material world, which crosses through

them” (Alaimo, 2018, p. 436). This allows a melting away and an appreciation of Glissant’s arguments about relationality and its possibilities for change and justice. Roulière and Egerer (2022, p. 4) sum up how Glissant’s conceptualization of identity in relation, and never in isolation, suggests that “relation in all its senses – telling, listening, connecting, and the parallel consciousness of self and surroundings – is the key to transforming mentalities and reshaping societies.”

This sense of relationality, such as melting away, is made possible through thinking with, in and through water. Astrida Neimanis (2020, n.p.) well known for her hydrofeminist figuration of bodies of water (Neimanis, 2012, 2013, 2017a, 2017b), similarly argues that.

... understanding our own human bodies – these sacks of blood, guts and bone that are mostly made of water – as bodies of water connected to, coming from, and flowing into other more-than-human bodies of water would place us in a different kind of relation to other bodies of water.

Many of our narratives speak to this kind of melting away and sense of relationality that our swimming-writing practice opens up, as in this example:

Being with, engaging with, attending to the visual beauty, being with, engaging with, attending to the sensate mobility, being with, engaging with, attending to the liquid knowledges of the sea, the planet, the all and the illusion of unitary individual selves slips off in watery ways, melts, floats away. (Tammy, Hermanus, 8 October 2022, early morning, water temperature 16.3°C, sunny)

This melting away and sense of relationality is also deeply entangled with our own affective embodied encounters when swimming. We become aware of ourselves in a body of water that affects us and reminds us that it is affected by us as humans too. In this narrative, Nike shows how her own instability in the ocean, opens up her noticing of multiple entanglements – of coloniality, apartheid, environmental change and crisis – and her implicatedness in this:

The sea was rough and churning ... refusing to settle, disallowing settling. I held on to rocks to stabilise myself but was frightened my skin would graze. The rocks felt like they belonged. The juxtaposition of yearning and settler² was very affecting in that it touched on the yearning for belonging as Tammy also expressed. However the precarity goes way beyond identity and belonging given the dire precarity we find ourselves in. For example just today learning about the prized and exquisite comb jellies as a signal of climate change and environmental crisis ... But back to how the process of swimming-with opened up my knowledge, understanding, becoming. The salty sea water was buoyant, it tumbled me around and held me. There was no risk of being dumped by a wave but I was afraid of being sucked out by the current. Being in the sea reminded me of how we are part of and interconnected with so much more. I tried to imagine what it would have been like to be a boer prisoner at Windmill³ (beach) ... and realised that in terms of my own inheritance my “boer heritage” is not pressing, unlike my pulls towards Europe, Turkey and Greece in particular. Unlike other swims, this one was troubled, unsettling, unresolved, shifting, challenging, disorienting. (Windmill Beach, Simonstown, Monday 4 July 2022, late afternoon, water temperature 14°C, partly cloudy)

In a synchronicity of narrative, a process endemic to our swimming-writing-reading as explored earlier, Viv writes

While swimming, what struck me is that yearning requires relationality. Yearning can’t happen without relationality. I was trying to think of non-human yearning like the stepped leader⁴ and the earth seeking connections with each other, that happens with lightning. (Windmill Beach, Simonstown, Monday 4 July 2022, late afternoon, water temperature 14°C, partly cloudy)

Similarly, as the separation between epistemologies and ontologies is muddled in the waters, we are also alerted to the ethical implications and impacts arising from seemingly mundane practices whose traces we witness (such as the films of sunscreen floating on the surface of the tidal pools and the lost band-aids lodged on sea urchin spikes). The practice of swimming not only wakes up the body to feelings but similarly sharpens and inspires attention and noticing, allowing us “to hover in other ways of being that are, perhaps, less separate from the substances of the world” (Alaimo, in Mentz, 2020, p. 134). Viv shares:

The disorientation, vulnerability, the acute awareness of aching bones in the body only begin to register the cold about fifteen minutes after the swim. All create a sense of aliveness to the world and a heightened

attention to the surrounds, disarming and displacing habitual thoughts and categories and allowing specific thought and affective responses to emerge. (Windmill Beach, Simonstown, Monday 4 July 2022, late afternoon, water temperature 14°C, partly cloudy)

At sea: affective seaswimming for attentiveness, wit(h)nessing, and communicating ecological crises

Swimming in the oceans is a practice of multiple and diverse embodied, affective, attentive, and visual encounters. There is so much to see, feel, and think about. We swim with our goggles and see differently as our reading and our research, diffracted through our affective encounters also powerfully shape what we see.

In *A Book of Waves*, Stefan Helmreich (2023) examines ocean waves as forms of media that carry ecological, geopolitical, and climatological “news” about our planet. In our swimming and visual engagements with and in and next to the sea, we are deeply aware of how the ocean carries “news” about our planet. We suggest this attention through our affective encounters which open up a witnessing and wit(h)nessing of anthropogenic damages and generate possibilities to communicate these to make a difference. We explore wit(h)nessing as an encounter of “being-in-relation” that both decenters human exceptionalism and “disrupt[s] a sense of well-being or certainty, and it may call to action the need for new knowledge” (Kearney, 2023, p. 25). As Richardson and Zolkos (2022, p. 2) write

The open-ended and never-complete process of becoming-witnesses requires a conceptual disidentification of testimony and human agency, whereby witnessing is envisioned not as a property of the human, but, rather, as belonging to a non-anthropocentric and reciprocal affective space of the encounter with the other.

Artist-researcher Adrienne van Eeden-Wharton’s (2020, 2024) work provides a South African example of such affective wit(h)nessing which she shares through her writing and artworks. Her slow and attentive practice of walking local beaches on the west coast of South Africa documents histories of colonial violence against land, people and animals through her haunting photographic images, videos and writing. Her work poignantly articulates the entanglements of colonial violence with current environmental challenges, as she shares a “multitude of waterlogged stories and possibilities for considering past-present-futures in the enduring aftermaths of imperialism, capitalism, extractivism and military-industrial expansion” (van Eeden-Wharton, 2024).

In a related vein, Delphi Carstens (2024, pp. 15–16), thinks with the octopus, an octo-aesthetic figuration as he calls it, argues for “ecological aesthesis” described as “the capacity to notice the world and participate onto-ethically in its diverse processes of worlding and becoming” and which importantly “requires a bewildering ecosophy of situated perspectives, trans-corporeal interconnectedness and environmental recognition.” In line with this call, we suggest that the noticing and attunement that comes with seaswimming may similarly be deployed as a form of ecological aesthesis.

One of the most frequent things that we notice attend to, wit(h)ness in our swimming are the polluting effects of human disposal of waste into the sea. We find ourselves surrounded by the effects of the bizarre practice of human assumption that the ocean is an unlimited repository for our own waste and call out long-term normative practices related to sewage in seaside cities like Cape Town. As Green and Farr note in their critique of the city’s waste management practice of releasing sewage, we act as if the Earth is flat and the excrement will magically be flushed off its edge without consequences to “humans, animals or the life of the ocean” (2023, p. 61).

Nike’s and Viv’s narratives below speak to our affective encounters in/of the ocean and our wit(h)nessing of some of these effects of current sewage spillages in Cape Town seas that are further exacerbated by national energy crises, ultimately shaped by inequalities linked to colonization, global capitalism, and anthropocentric extractivist modes of relating to planetary resources.

Just as the sea has been infiltrated with sewage, so too has my relationship with the sea become contaminated. The load shedding and the sewage spillages dispel the escapist myth of the sea as untainted and safe. Not that it ever was, but my sense of wellbeing has been destabilised as the waters are no longer a safe haven, as they used to be. As I write this I cringe, feel shamed at how shallow I sound. Privilege oozing out of my fragilised skin. If anything it is another marker of a powerful affective reminder that all is not right and that the crisis looms larger, more pressing, more depressing than ever before. I swam at Clifton a few weeks ago ... another unsettling encounter because the waters were saturated with Jelly Fish larvae that caused an allergic reaction ... My skin was inflamed, enflamed with toxicity, my torso still bears the scabs/scars. I guess I am clumsily trying to link the body, the bodies of water, as I try to understand the enormity of the crisis, the sense of impotence and impending doom. Wild fires in the North, floods in the East. (Nike, Folk Cafe, St James, 24 November, 2023, 16.2°C)

... [I] was looking at the ocean on the way here and seeing that the sea was a strange opaque colour. I always think of effluent under these conditions although it might not always be the case. Effluent has worsened under the electricity outages in the country which are euphemistically called “loadshedding”, especially when they last for four or more hours and affect the pumps which deal with pushing the effluent out into the sea. I was shocked to see how 60 million litres of effluent are pumped out each day into the sea at Camps Bay. (Viv, Folk Cafe, St James, 24 November, 2023, 16.2°C)

Legal action is currently underway to revoke a permit that allows the City of Cape Town municipality to pump untreated waste into the ocean. For more than a century, the City municipality has continued to deposit sewerage into the ocean (Overy, 2020, in Green & Farr, 2023). While research shows that sewage outfall is impacting this Marine protected area, affecting both marine invertebrates and plants (Petrik, in McCain, 2023), this work is invisibilized by authorities who refuse to deal with past, and present and future implications for ecological reparation (Akomolafe, 2020; Papadopoulos et al., 2023). In reimagining a broader reparative ecological response to the complexity of the situation in Cape Town, Green and Farr propose “an anthropocenography of a landscape of poverty, wealth, sewage, solid waste, and conservation” as an attempt to address the entangled “flows and movements of toxins and nutrients, of solids, liquids and gas, metabolites and soils and society, between life and non-life” (2023, p. 67).

We would add that such an approach would need to incorporate the affective encounters of hauntological past/present/future. Trombley (2018) uses the notion of “watershed” to refer to the intra-action of spacetime matter in considering how spatial and temporal disjunctures underlie the violent logics of colonialism and extractive exploitation. They argue that this undermining of disjunctive spatiotemporal logics have created problems such as the dumping of pollutants and how they affect the quality of the water in the Chesapeake Bay. Helmrich (2023) calls for *attentive deviance* which requires drawing attention to that which is hidden and insidious, that requires exposing to communicate the urgency of addressing current challenges as these scientists have done. Attentional deviance is necessary here to foreground the past violences and their continued presence in the geopolitical land and seascape of the Cape, and its reliance on cheap and slave labor, recognizing some realities, and not others.

We realize further the importance of attending in this way from our particular locations, our situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) as a practice of spacetime mattering and a politics of wit(h)ness. Haraway asks the question, pertinent to our affective encounters: “How should one be positioned in order to see in this situation of tensions, resonances, transformations, resistances, and complicities?” (Haraway, 1991, p. 195). This ethical and political injunction also flags the importance of our reading and research to communicate the wit(h)nessing stories that matter. Situated knowledge is embodied and located, and requires a rejection of normative authoritative knowledge production, the “God’s eye” or universalized view Haraway called attention to, some decades ago. Situated knowledge opens up responsibility for how and what we see, what we know and become, and what we choose to communicate in the knowledge we make and share. Situated knowledge requires responsibility and response-ability since we are “being called into account” (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). Notably, for Haraway situated knowledge was always bound up with witnessing as Verlie and Neimanis (2023, p. 120) have recently pointed out:

Haraway's modest witness rejects the technoscientific myth of universal and disembodied knowledge that emerged in the West in the seventeenth century. Modest witnessing "is about a kind of immersion in the world [...] where you ask a hard intersection of questions about race, class, gender, sex, with the goal of making a difference in the real, 'material-semiotic' world" (Haraway, *Modest_Witness* 159). The modest witness "stand[s] publicly accountable for, and psychically vulnerable to, one's visions and representations." (155)

It is such public or political accountability and psychical vulnerability that we find so powerfully emergent in oceanic swimming and that defines the notion of affective oceanic encounters (Akomolafe, 2020). In our swimming, we recognize and importantly "feel", in diverse ways, the "news" that the ocean heralds and the knowledge that the ocean holds. As mentioned, many have written about the ocean as an archive of colonization slavery, and apartheid violence in South African contexts, but the ocean is also wit(h)ness as we in turn then are, to the violence of the capitalocene and (some) human disregard for the planet and other species, as articulated in Tammy's narrative.

The ocean is an archive. So much knowledge to impart, if we have the lenses to see. I am swimming in St James, where I have not been for a very long time. The water is not as cold as expected and it is such a treat to see the urchins, the large starfish, the apricot coloured feather worm displaying its beauty on the sea-side wall. It has inspired my choice of colour today, and yet this looks insipid in contrast. I am so engaged and in my own little underworld bubble as I swim in circles about the pool, that I bump into a colleague from UCT, *literally* – I had just seen her on the shore and had a brief chat and now I have caused her angst – she almost leaps out of the water and tells how she is afraid of octopus. I reassure her how wonderful they are and will never attack, not humans. Yet I too always feel that moment of angst when I come across an octopus, the old fears we are schooled in as humans, the other ness and dangers of "wild" animals and wildness. It is this very human angst of course, our very sense of ourselves as other and more precious than other species, set up as possible danger to us, rather than as companion species, different, that is so implicated in the horrible mess we have made on the planet. Some bright objects are caught in the spikes of some urchins. At first I think it is a different creature but of course it is plastic or paper or something that we humans have manufactured. Like custodians of the sea, they are collecting the garbage. (St James, 24 November, 2023, 16.2°C)

But such attentiveness and wit(h)nessing require an active challenge to the binary authoritative humanist logic of normative engagements of looking where surveillance and objectification are endemic. Thus, such active wit(h)nessing requires reciprocal noticing and more-than-human care as Carstens (2024) noted in his elaboration of octo-aesthetics. Reciprocal noticing may disrupt the knee-jerk kinds of noticing that humans are trained to do and that is located in a violent extra-activist, surveillant, and representational logic.

Toward oceanic wit(h)nessing for a justice-to-come: concluding thoughts

In a recently published article, Verlie and Neimanis (2023, p. 117) propose thinking with "breath" as a mode of embodied and relational witnessing of current climate change and the ability to understand the experiences of other beings in a time of environmental disaster. We have proposed oceanic swimming-writing-reading as similar provocation for an affective, embodied watery witnessing and wi(t)hnessing of environmental challenges toward generating responsibility for and responsibility to a justice-to-come. By sharing a few of our embodied post-swimming narratives and reading through current research and thinking, we have attempted to illustrate the possibilities opened up by ocean encounters for subjective and collective change. First, we propose and model this seaswimming-writing-reading embodied affective practice as an alternative pedagogy and research, a form of research-creation that can offer the academy alternative, care-full ways of making knowledge. Secondly, we consider how such encounters, particularly when shared through multi-media space, such as a YouTube video, and other public pedagogical spaces such as exhibitions and academic-popular-activist forums, might generate alternative embodied, affective, multi-species environmental communication.

We also note, however, while arguing the value of affective, embodied encounters with the ocean and other critters, that such approaches are always contested. While we remain convinced that

sharing these embodied narratives is a productive terrain for thinking, we realize, and acknowledge, in the same breath, the slipperiness of such an endeavor. We are always slipping between and up against our human-centered narratives since they so powerfully inhabit us, even while we actively resist them (Akomolafe, 2018, 2020, 2022).

In this respect, it is also evident that at the subjective level, the swimming-writing-reading praxis has been reparative and restorative, particularly in times of global challenge and crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While we have all felt “at sea” (see Neimanis, 2020) at a planetary level, it *has* been a comfort to take to the sea. Swimming-writing-reading together is in itself an affective, relational encounter – the intimacy of the swimming, the intimacy of the writing, the intimacy of reading, the way thoughts travel between bodies – has been inspiring and healing. However, more importantly, the affective encounters of our practice have made space for wider impact, for public communication, through posting a video, through writing articles, that communicate vital information about the current environmental challenges facing the local context of South African ecologies and inter-related global ones.

In sharing this practice, and is also thinking with others who engage with the ocean or beaches through dialogical scholarship, activism and art, we remain convinced of the contributions that can be made to the further iteration of a justice-to-come, as well as reparation and care for continuing traumas, slow violence and troubled histories, such as apartheid and racial capitalism that shape South African shores. Ultimately, we see practices of wit(h)nessing as not only about communicating current toxic situations that are being made by certain human hands, but also about communicating our mutual entanglements and response-abilities on planet earth, perhaps about communicating care and love, care-fully – “to celebrate what has been and might still be, and so to turn toward the living earth: ‘to cherish birth and growth, and to love that which is perilous’ (Rose 2011, 118)” (van Dooren, 2022, p. 97).

Notes

1. We use the term care-full to speak of both a caring practice, underpinned by an ethics of care, and a relational ontology and also as a vigilant practice which is located within an alternative ethical, ontological, and epistemological project. See our film entitled Oceanic Swimming | writing | thinking for justice-to-come scholarship <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMDu1YTKDhw>.
2. On that day, we were writing with the prompts “settler” and “yearning” as part of a workshop where we generated a set of words and concepts that speak to our current challenges in transforming higher education in South Africa. We then used a system of random selection to choose some words that we could swim and think with.
3. We swim regularly at Windmill beach near Simonstown on the southern coast of Cape Town. Windmill beach was the site of a Boer prisoner of war camp during The South African war, also known as the Boer War or the Anglo-Boer War.
4. What we see as a lightning flash is the result of an electric field between the cloud and the ground, a negatively charged channel called a “stepped leader”. These leaders develop downward in quick steps of about 50 meters in length. Stepped leaders tend to branch out as they seek a connection with the positive charge on the ground.

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