Jo Croft. Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

Treading Water, Hoarding Swims.

In this auto-ethnographic essay I explore my experiences of swimming in the sea near my home in Merseyside during a period last summer when I was diagnosed with a rare and advanced form of cancer. Through the trope of 'treading water', I illuminate borderline forms of interiority and I attempt to trace some unlikely connections between two apparently very different forms of immersion: swimming and hoarding. It may seem perverse to attempt to stitch these terms together, and yet both swimmer and hoarder are associated with states of subjective boundary loss and suspended temporality. According to Jane Bennett, hoarders 'articulate a keen sense of themselves as permeable and aggregate formations that have become integrated into their hoard' (Bennett, 2012, 255). Perhaps most crucially, a vocabulary of *liquid mobilities* is typically used to represent hoarding, and actions such as 'filling up', 'churning', 'spilling', 'leaking' and 'drowning' feature frequently in representations of hoarders' interior worlds (Frost and Steketee, 2011)). Meanwhile, the swimmer is often portrayed as an accumulator of laps, amassing their own archive of liquid traces, moving back and forth without getting anywhere.

Taking the plunge

As we enter the water and begin to swim – whether in the sea, or in a lake, or pond, or river, or even in a swimming pool for that matter - we become open to different ways of apprehending ourselves, not as bounded and self-contained but as porous and open to the world. Many swimmers have written about their peculiarly intense experiences of immersion. James Hamilton-Paterson pictures the swimmer 'imagining the sky weighing down on the sea and the sea holding up the atmosphere, curious about what exactly can be happening at the interface' (Hamilton-Paterson, 1992, 3), while for Leanne Shapton, her return to the water after years of competitive swimming is felt 'as though absentmindedly touching a scar' (Shapton, 2012, 6). What these different accounts share is a heightened sense of permeable interiority, an ebb and flow of feeling between self and environment which somehow shifts our perception of our

material entanglement in the world. We might, like Shapton, become 'smaller' as 'our scale shifts in the open water' (134). Or, like Hamilton-Paterson, we might feel that we are 'lost' in the vastness of the liquid element surrounding us: as we swim, we are nothing more than 'a tiny hole in the water' and 'there is no way the tons of ocean can be held apart and prevented from filling the mould' (4). Yet even as the swimmer contemplates a state of absolute subjective erasure and begins to 'lose(s) himself…in his speculations about boundaries' (Hamilton-Paterson, 4), the forms of mobility afforded by the action of swimming also suggest a more every-day, cyclical realm of affect.

Stroke follows stroke, and tide follows tide.

The swimmer clings to the water's back and forth, her arms and legs forming circles beneath the skin of the sea.

Treading water…

> **…A method of staying afloat in the upright position keeping your head above the surface. Do not try it until you are confident in swimming out of your depth (Henry Marlow, *How to Swim and Dive: A Ladybird Book*: 1971, 40)**

Recently, I've done my fair share of treading water. I am not the kind of swimmer who takes to the water like clockwork. I've never really had the discipline or inclination to mark out the rhythms of each day, or each week, with so many lengths of our local pool. And I recognise Roger Deakin's sense of frustration and confinement when he describes 'doing lengths' in a pool as 'endlessly turning back on myself like a tiger pacing its cage' (Deakin:1999, 1).[1] Gaston Bachelard also disapproved of swimming pools. In *Water and Dreams* he argues that even the name 'la piscine' is 'ridiculous'. For him, the contained space of a public pool can never 'provide the ideal of solitude, so necessary for the psychology of a cosmic challenge.' (Bachelard: 1942, 168).

Then again, if I catch a glimpse of other people swimming in my local pool at West Kirby I usually feel as if I'm somehow missing out – and I never feel like that when I walk past a gym.

Jo Croft. Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

The sight of water, even if it is through the glass walls of the Leisure Centre, seems like an invitation: 'Come on in. The water's lovely.' Or maybe it's more of an injunction. 'You should be in here.'

Mostly, though, I resist the lure of the pool.

Instead I've recently resumed my efforts to swim every day in the sea, just down the road from my house. Each time I head for the shore, it feels as if I'm making a bid for freedom. I find myself following an imperative to 'go down to the sea', a compulsion which seems to go against the grain of the mundane rhythms of work and domestic chores - a little closer, perhaps, to Bachelard's 'cosmic challenge'. Like John Masefield, in 'Sea Fever' (1902), I answer 'the call of the running tide … a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied'. (Masefield: 1902, 59). And yet, for all this sense of impulsiveness, swimming in the sea is also, inevitably, still an activity shaped by constraining routines, especially along this stretch of coast. It's hard to not to be bound by the temporality of tides in a place like Hoylake, the small coastal town where I live and where – against all the Anthropocene odds – the sea is receding, nudged further and further back by silt from the Mersey shipping channels.

In other words, the rise and fall of the water is particularly elusive here. For almost all the day and night, the sand seems to stretch out for miles and miles, and the edge of the water is visible only as a shimmer, a blur – more a marker of the horizon than a space which invites immersion. It feels almost miraculous to enter that brief parenthesis of time and space when the acres of sand disappear and the water returns.

I must wait for the moment when the sea is just right.

And so the *Liverpool Bay Tide Timetable* becomes my slightly off-kilter metronome, replacing the boundaries set by my local pool's opening times ('public swim – 12 to 3pm') with another equally insistent timeframe. The tide's semi-diurnal rhythms tell me what to do: when, where

and how to act. In a way, perhaps, they also tell me what to feel. After all, if my desire to swim (or not to swim) in the sea is modulated by tides and currents, it is also shaped by other forms of oscillation – patterns of feeling involving a kind of affective 'back and forth' – between movement and stasis … states of dissipation, hesitation and ambivalence.

However much I consult the tide-tables and note the height of the water, or the strength of the wind, these fleeting moments when the water rubs out the land always seem to catch me off-guard. Tides surprise us. As the sea rises and falls, so the world is unmade and made again; rendered strange and new. By inviting us to suspend our familiar realities, tides invoke a disorientating sense of permeability – a rupture of the boundary between earth and sea. Tidal memory shapes itself around borderline forms of erasure, rituals of half-forgetting. And, for all their habitual to-ing and fro-ing, tides seem to call a moratorium on our familiar apprehension of the landscape. It is as if each tide demands that we disavow the previous tide in order to recognise its uniqueness as an event: each time we witness its 'incessant coming and going' (Urbain: 1996, 141), we must re-calibrate our feelings about its 'almost the same but not quite' repetitions.

In the spirit of Freud's 'Fort-Da' game, each twinge of loss is inextricably bound to the pleasure of an anticipated return. Yet like Freud's Fort-Da game, the tide's movements are also shadowed by that 'unknown factor' (Freud: 1920, 302) - a possibility of something more traumatic happening, something less reassuringly cyclical. For tides also signal erosion, dissipation, attrition and destruction. And like Freud's game, tides represent a (re-) animation of affect. The ebb and flow of Fort-Da conjures a constellation of pleasure and comfort through repetition. But it is also a form of play, of 'material reverie' (Bachelard: 1942), which draws us into entropy's more melancholic trajectory. Matter - whether in the form of a wave, or a cotton reel on a piece of string - carries feeling with it.

Jo Croft. Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

'We live sticky dreams in a viscous setting' (Bachelard)

In early spring, the night before my first swim of the year, I dreamt that the tide was in – lapping right up against the prom. I was wading, then swimming, through scummy water clogged with crisp packets and plastic dog poo bags, and for some reason, according to the crushing logic of the dream, I was unable to turn back. Instead, before I could reach the shore again, I had to keep swimming out in a wide arc. I swam and swam and eventually I managed to get back to the land. But in this slightly skewed dreamscape, the high tide seemed to wash up directly onto Hoylake's high street. As I walked in my swimming costume past pubs and shops, my neighbours and people I recognised (but barely knew) stopped me and asked me what I was doing. 'Don't ask', I replied.

This dream seems to reveal at least two anxieties about swimming in the sea: firstly, that the sea is full of waste matter – waste we can see and touch, and waste that we can't see but that we know is there all the same; secondly, that the sea puts us at risk of public exposure, transforming the swimmer into a performer on a stage, or an object of curiosity. Somehow, in my dream, a fear of polluted water has become entangled with a fear of being looked at, and it is not hard to see where this idea of the swimmer as abject spectacle comes from. When I swim in the sea, onlookers often ask me 'is the water clean?' or 'is it safe?' Or they just tell me that they wouldn't dare go in, because 'you don't know what's in there'…. the water must be so dirty…'

In *La Mer* (1861) Jules Michelet expresses pity for the 'poor creature taking one of her first baths in the sea'. According to him, 'the wretched and humiliated woman' experiences her entry into the sea as 'a cruel exhibition before a critical world' performed before 'the odious stares of the crowd'. For some, warns Michelet, the traumas of sea bathing can be 'so intense and so distressing', that 'it can involve mortal effects' (Michelet cited in Barthes, 1954, 169-70).

Jo Croft. Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

L'Heure du Bain

Le Havre, Menton, Nice, Trouville, Biarritz, Berck-Plage, Cayeux-Sur-mer, Le Tréport. I have about thirty postcards, posted in France between 1902 and 1936, all with the caption 'L'Heure du Bain'. Each image portrays sea-bathing as an event, enacted for an audience and – by implication – for the camera. Perhaps things just sound better in French, but this phrase seems to capture the enchantment wrought by these paradoxically routine spectacles.

A bit like burlesque.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Jo Croft. Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Bathers enter the water while the crowds look on. At Trouville Deauville, a line of women and young girls grasp 'la corde' as huge breakers engulf them. Among the onlookers at Biarritz, four women sit facing the sea on straight-backed dining room chairs. They are all wearing white dresses and ornate lacy hats. There is an air of distraction about them, as if they are bored spectators at a cricket match. One woman holds a bright yellow parasol and turns towards the camera. At Boulogne-Sur-Mer, the beach is crammed with bathing machines. The image on the postcard is taken from the sea. (Perhaps the camera is on a boat?) A man lolling on the steps of his 'cabine de bains roulante' doffs his hat and waves. To the left a line of women in wet knee-length bathing costumes smile at the camera and try to do the can-can.

Like the images in my burgeoning collection of French seaside postcards, I perform my ritualistic hesitations at the water's edge to celebrate 'L'heure du Bain'. Almost every day, whether the sky is thunderously grey, or impossibly blue, I try to catch the tide before it turns.

Jo Croft. Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

This is my own 'l'heure du Bain' refrain[2] when I swim at Moreton Beach, a few miles along the coast from Hoylake: I leave my clothes on one of the concrete groynes and walk carefully, almost tip-toeing, to the water's edge. I peer down at the tideline, then up at the horizon. Out in the Irish Sea, dozens of wind turbines form a picket line between the sea and the sky. Their sails turn languorously, tilted slightly away from the land. They are rather indifferent sentinels, but it feels like they are watching me.

Behind me, up by the lifeguard's hut, there are usually others watching me too. When I look towards the prom, I often see a dog-walker, or a runner, or someone with a bag of chips, looking back at me, momentarily stalled by the sight of a white-haired woman bobbing up and down in the waves. Maybe they're worried that I'm a kamikaze swimmer, bent on self-destruction; maybe they think I'm a seal. Probably, they're just baffled, wondering why I'm out in the water, when the day is so grey and cold, and the sea so unappetising. No wonder James Joyce called it 'the snotgreen sea. The scrotum-tightening sea' (Joyce: 1922, 5). But if the sun is shining, and the water is glittering, I imagine they might want to plunge in too. 'Come on in, the water's lovely.'

Collecting Waves

In his short 1983 novel, *Mr Palomar*, Italo Calvino describes how Mr Palomar stands on the shore and tries to observe every aspect of a single wave. He does not enter the water. He does not swim. Instead, his mission is 'to *see* a wave … to observe all its simultaneous components without overlooking any of them' (Calvino: 1983, 4). There is something in his microcosmic attempt at 'reading a wave' which is redolent of collecting, not least because it encapsulates the tension between viewing the world through a discourse of repetition and trying to capture a single sensation as absolutely unique, beyond replication. According to Calvino, Palomar is a 'nervous man… in a frenzied and congested world', who 'tries to keep his sensations under control as much as possible'. Perhaps this is why Palomar regards the waves with the eye of a collector. Yet, despite his best efforts to 'see' a single wave – to place it exactly in both space and time – Palomar fails to collect his perfect specimen, and leaves the beach 'even more unsure of everything'.

Jo Croft. Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

The figure of the collector surfaces again and again in Calvino's work, whether under the guise of active reader, or storyteller or traveller. Both in *Mr Palomar* and in his essay 'Collection of Sand', Calvino traces a connection between the accumulation of objects and the formation of literary narratives. Just as the phrase 'reading a wave' in *Mr Palomar* suggests that there is a narrative impetus to Palomar's (failed) acquisition of the wave, so Calvino's essay speculates upon the collector's 'need to transform the flow of one's own existence into a series of objects saved from dispersal, or into a series of written lines abstracted and crystallized from the continuous flux of thought.' (Calvino:1984,7). Citing Didier Maleuvre, Peter Schwenger argues that '…the narrativeness of narrative – the understanding of the movement of narrative – is the ultimate object which impels the collector towards her collecting journey'. But Schwenger also emphasises that collecting 'never concludes in a narrative that fully coheres … for full coherence would mean the loss of narrative itself' (Schwenger: 2006,144). And so Palomar is pictured as a 'being in flux' (c.f. Bachelard: 1942,6), one whose 'gaze will dwell on the movement of the wave that strikes the shore, until it can record aspects not previously perceived'. When 'he has seen everything he wanted to see… he will be able to stop' (Calvino:1983, 4). But this can never happen because Palomar is caught between shore and sea. He is a collector, a hoarder, a reader of waves, who can never quite reach the end of this watery narrative.

'What, if I stop accumulating, will I confront?' (Shapton, 2012, 165)

Jo Croft. Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

Last year, I spent months and months either reading or writing about, or collecting stuff associated with swimming. Yet I never felt like a swimmer, or a writer, or a collector. Instead, as the weeks passed, and the piles of papers and books began to stack up, like accusatory stalagmites around my desk, I started to feel more like a hoarder. And the less I swam, or wrote, the more I felt the urge to add to the heap of 'swimming' things that I was accumulating in a glass-fronted cabinet, which stands by the front door in my house. Gathering in drifts, and pressing against the glass, there seem to be too few logical connections between these objects to warrant the title of 'collection'. Among other things the cabinet contains: a pile of postcards (mostly pictures of Merseyside swimming pools); another pile of postcards (mostly pictures of 'rough seas'); a pair of broken goggles; a single vertebra from a porpoise; a whelk's egg case; a *Know the Game* book about diving; a Ladybird book called *How to Swim and Dive*; three photographs of Alfred Nakache (the French Algerian Olympic swimmer who was sent to Auschwitz in 1943)(Baud:2009); a swimming instruction manual published in France in 1938, with a picture of Alfred Nakache and Jean Taris on the cover; and a postcard of Nakache with Taris. Such an inventory seems at, at first, to suggest that a narrative of sorts is taking shape. But there are a lot more things in the cabinet too: the tail end of a plastic decoy duck; two British Rail guard hats; a doll wearing roller-skates; a parking ticket; a Hello Kitty lunchbox. My cabinet's taxonomic logic is starting to feel much less coherent, more haphazard. If this agglomeration of stuff tells any sort of story, it is one like Palomar's: the story of a hoarder of waves.

Hoarding swims

> Take a deep breath in.
> And hold it.
> You can now
> Breathe normally. [3]

A swim inside a swim inside a swim. Or maybe it's the other way round. This swim today, with me at its centre, radiates outwards. With a particular gesture, as I duck into the wave, I catch the drift of other more distant swims, and for a moment there is nothing that separates me swimming now from me swimming a lifetime ago. Like John Berger, in his 2016 essay about

swimming in a Parisian municipal baths, 'as I swim my first strokes underwater, I have the sensation of having entered another timeframe' (Berger: 2016, 67). It is 1971, and I am jumping off the breakwater in the Isle of Wight. The salt water hits my nostrils. Then, as now, my head is full of the sea.

Two months ago I was diagnosed with cancer. Here in the water, words flow in and out of me. Bostrophredron.[4] Systole and Diastole. Floating on my back, I try out different medical phrases for size. I'm not quite sure if I'm saying them aloud, but in the sea, a hundred metres or so from the shore, no one is listening anyway. Some words are almost impossible to pronounce, or just a bit too easy to confuse with each other: peritoneal, pancreatic, peridontal, perineal, palliative, pseudomyxoma peritonei. Apparently, I have little 'pockets' of cancer 'seeding' across the membranous lining of my pelvis. My peritoneum. I picture droplets or bubbles, dispersed like foam. Or like tiny sea potatoes or those tiny miraculous jellyfish – sea gooseberries – pleuro brachia.

I think about how my body seems to be changing its form, filling up with drifts of jelly. According to the histopathology report, this cancer is a 'high grade mucinous adenocarcinoma', carried not by blood, or by the lymphatic system, but by mucus. So, we're back again to Joyce's 'snotgreen sea', or even, perhaps to Michelet's 'lively foam of the viscous, sticky water' (cited in Barthes:1954, 46). It is strangely comforting to make this association between something so potentially morbid, and that 'mucus of the sea' which Michelet describes as ''the universal element of life!' (Bachelard 1942, on Michelet – 107). In *Foams*, Peter Sloterdijk explores the concept of 'life from scum' – how 'the birth of life can only be explained by the spontaneous formation of foam from the murky ocean'. He pictures a 'foam-born monad…swimming in the water and free in it, yet also separate from it, full of inner and own things' (Sloterdijk: 2016, 50)[5].

My head is full of words. My belly is full of the sea.

Jo Croft. Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

So far this year, not many jellyfish have made their way in-shore, but during last summer's heatwave the water seemed to be brimming with them: the sea at Moreton became almost tepid, and bigger and bigger jellyfish began to swarm, brushing against you while you swam. But my favourites were the sea gooseberries, because you could cup them in your hands and marvel at how they resemble almost solid bubbles, flawlessly transparent yet etched with perfectly symmetrical grooves. They are like the sea's version of snowflakes but, instead of melting on your hand, they just seem to merge back into the water.

My hands are full of the sea.

As I walk back along the foreshore, I pick up yet another whelk's egg case, a sea-scuffed Fanta lid, and a perfect but excruciatingly fragile sea potato. I carry them home and add them to the hoard in my cabinet.

My cabinet is full of the sea.

Coda:

Since I began writing this essay, my relationship to both swimming and hoarding has shifted. While I wait for yet another round of biopsy results, my compulsion to 'catch the tide' before beginning treatment has been become much more insistent, freighted with urgency. Just as the desire to accumulate as many swims in the sea as possible has taken precedence over almost everything else, so my interest in adding to my piles of stuff has receded, shadowed by a melancholic anticipation of what I might be leaving behind for my family and friends to sift through. And yet I can still see uncomfortable continuities between the hoarder who 'churns' or 'treads water', and my own ambivalent identifications as an academic researcher trying to write about swimming. As I write now, my sentences are already accumulating too many digressive sub-clauses, and the towers of books - books about hoarding, books about collecting, and books about swimming - are forming a cluttered tideline on the table. I cling to words. I linger in the shallows. I float in the sea. I tread water.

Jo Croft. Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

If it were possible to magnify the activity surely a buzzing skin of molecules would be revealed? Water molecules and air molecules so intermixed and saturated with atoms in common it would be undecidable which medium they constituted. (Hamilton-Paterson, 1992, 3).

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All Photographs by author. Postcard images (figs. 1-4) are taken from the author's own collection.

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Endnotes:

[1] It is interesting to note that Roger Deakin is portrayed as a hoarder in Robert MacFarlane's *Landmarks* – 'Roger rarely threw anything away' (MacFarlane: 2015, 109). See also Patrick Barkham on Deakin's 'Walnut Tree Farm' – 'he was a hoarder' (Barkham: 2019). Another swimmer who likes to collect, or perhaps to hoard, is Leanne Shapton. She writes about her collection of swimsuits in *Swimming Studies*, and her novel *Important Artifacts and Personal Property From the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry* takes the form of an auctioneer's catalogue, telling a love story through a huge collection of seemingly random objects.

[2] I take this idea of the 'refrain' from Deleuze and Guattari: in *A Thousand Plateaus* they conceive the refrain as 'a territorial assemblage' which 'marks territory' by drawing together action, sensation and material environment (Deleuze and Guattari [1978] 2013, p. 363).

[3] These are the recorded voice commands given by a CT Scanner.

[4] The term 'bostrophedron' is used by Jonathan Hsy, citing Karla Mallette, to link the 'back-and-forth transit of texts' with the sea's ebb and flow. (Hsy: 2015, 182).

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[5] See also Anirudha Dhanawade on jelly's 'wavy, wayward rhythms' as 'emblems of liveliness'. He points out that 'Haeckel believed that the gelatinous substance of cell plasm united all living things.' (Dhanawade: 2017)