

Understanding Blue Spaces: Sport, Bodies, Wellbeing, and the Sea

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jss**Rebecca Olive¹ and Belinda Wheaton²** 

Abstract

This article introduces the special issue (JSSI 45.1 and 45.2) on ‘Understanding Blue Spaces’ which examines relationships between blue spaces, sport, physical activity, and wellbeing. The articles progress conversations across humanities, social sciences and inter-disciplinary areas of research on diverse sporting practices, that span local to trans-national contexts. This collection offers new insights into politics, possibilities, and problems of the role of blue spaces in our wellbeing—individually, socially, and ecologically. In addition to outlining the 10 articles in the SI, which include ocean swimming, surfing, sailing/yachting, and *waka ama* paddling, we contextualize this work, discussing key thematic areas both across these papers, and in the wider interdisciplinary body of work on blue spaces, wellbeing, and sport. Specifically, we outline the role of physical activities and leisure practices in how we access, understand, experience, and develop relationships to seas and oceans, as well as to self, places and communities of human and non-human others. We also discuss the ways in which particular bodies, individuals, and communities (human and more-than-human) are marginalized or excluded, and the need for understanding concepts such as wellbeing, place, and self beyond dominant European traditions. This SI highlights how localised experiences of blue spaces can be, while emphasising the need to recognize diverse cultural, economic, geographic, sociodemographic, and political factors that contribute to a disconnect with, or exclusion from blue spaces, impacting who can use blue spaces, how they can be used, how they can be researched, and how power is reproduced and contested.

Keywords

blue space, wellbeing, coast, surfing, swimming, hydrophilia, place-based, hydrophobia

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While oceans and seas have long been understood as spaces of historic, scientific, and economic significance, there is growing interest in what have been termed as “blue spaces” across a range of humanities and social sciences disciplines. This research recognizes that our relationships to water can shape our identities, sense of belonging and place, and influence our physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing (Brown & Humberstone, 2015; Brown & Peters, 2018; Burdsey, 2016; Foley et al., 2019; Neimanis, 2017; Peters & Anderson, 2016; Steinberg & Peters, 2015). The term blue space is used to refer to waterscapes and their surroundings, which can include saltwater (e.g., oceans, seas, and estuaries) and freshwater (e.g., rivers and lakes), as well as human-made sites such as pools, canals, ponds, dams, and moats (Bell et al., 2015; McDermott, 2012; Pitt, 2018). “Blue space” is used to differentiate from “green space” which describes terrestrial spaces mostly covered in vegetation, including parks, fields, forests, and gardens. In this special issue, we have focused on saltwater, ‘nature’-based blue spaces, which have different material, social, and symbolic qualities to human-made blue spaces such as pools and lakes. Of course, there is blurring between types of saltwater blue spaces—rivers link to seas, lidos are often ocean pools—but oceanic blue spaces have qualities that can be different to the flows of rivers, the calm of lakes, and the functional role of dams.

Reflecting long-standing salutogenic traditions of water as healing, and the seaside and coastlines as lifestyle, leisure and therapeutic destinations (e.g., thalassotherapy), oceanic blue spaces are widely promoted as beneficial for health and wellbeing (e.g., Bell et al., 2015; Foley et al., 2019). This focus on the qualities of water which are “affective, life-enhancing, and health-enabling” has been referred to as the “hydrophilic turn” (Foley et al., 2019, p. 1). When it comes to “sports”—a term we conceptualize broadly to include recreational and less-organized physical cultures and leisure activities—interest in oceanic blue spaces has emerged through diverse recreational, commercial, and governance-directed practices, including (but certainly not limited to) fishing, surf sports, sailing, paddling, ocean and wild swimming, beach-combing, surf rescues, tourism, diving, and walking. Given the significance of sport, recreation, and physical cultures to how we access and experience blue spaces—from everyday routine encounters to tourism—the growing emphasis on the role of blue spaces in the relationship between physical activity and wellbeing is not surprising.

This special issue seeks to contribute an ocean-specific focus in the relationship between blue spaces, sport, physical activity, and wellbeing. Our intention was to bring together conversations that are emerging across multiple disciplinary areas of work on sporting and physical cultural practices in blue spaces, across different local, national, and trans-national contexts. In this introduction we outline the 10 articles that will span two issues of the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, highlighting the themes we see across the contributions. The papers viewed blue spaces from the coastline, close to shore, and from the water itself, and span waters in Asia, Australasia, Europe, North and Central America, and the Pacific. Papers speak from ocean voyaging (Orams and Brown travel through the Java Sea, Banda Sea, Timor Sea, Arafura Sea, Pacific Ocean, and South Andaman Sea) to closer to shoreline encounters in the Southern Ocean, The Pacific, Tasman, North Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean Sea, The English

Channel, and the Norwegian fjords. First, however, to contextualize this work, we outline key thematic areas in the increasingly interdisciplinary body of work on blue spaces, wellbeing, and sport. We highlight the role of sport, physical activities, and leisure in how we access, understand, experience, and develop relationships to seas and oceans, as well as to self, communities, and others, both human and more-than-human. Within this special issue our understanding of oceanic blue spaces, and how we know and experience seas and oceans, recognize them as fluid and interconnected; yet, always emplaced in local/global identity politics.

What is Wellbeing?

Positioning wellbeing here is important, as it has become an important issue in why we should care about blue spaces. For example, a 2017 review of more than 35 quantitative studies claims that interactions with blue spaces can have a positive effect on “perceived well-being” (Gascon et al., 2017, p. 1206). Of course, although a seemingly simple term, “well-being” is a contested concept and experience. In contrast to health—often understood as the absence of disease—wellbeing is a broader, more subjective, multidimensional, and holistic notion that encompasses physical, social, environmental, educational, spiritual, affective, and cognitive dimensions of a life (Liamputtong et al., 2012). Although global conceptualisations of wellbeing tend to emphasize it as a “multi-factorial state linked to a nation’s economic, social, cultural and environmental productivity” (Testoni et al., 2018 cited in Wheaton et al., 2019, p. 84), proliferating efforts to measure citizens’ wellbeing have focused on individuals’ subjective sense of feeling “well” or “good.”

Notwithstanding different conceptualisations, Subjective wellbeing (SWB) recognizes the diverse context and culturally dependent ways of conceptualizing wellbeing, and the importance of prioritizing what people experience (Mansfield et al, 2020). People’s feelings and emotions become “the prime arbiters of value” (Testoni et al., 2018, p. 816).

Yet these framings often retain an individualized, virtuous sense of the maintenance of wellbeing as an aspirational social status symbol of, primarily, the middle classes. In the dominant Western, European model, with its associated ideologies of healthism, productivity, and morality, to maintain wellness is to be a good citizen who minimizes their burden on society/health care (Crawford, 1980). However, there has been a developing sensitivity to the ways culture and place-specific contexts affect health and wellbeing, and thus the cultural and environmental specificity of wellbeing for specific populations. The contributions of diverse—particularly indigenous and first nations—scholars remind us that “public health and medicine are themselves cultural practices that have been influenced heavily by the politics of colonialism” (Bond, 2005, p. 41; see also Fredericks et al., 2015; Panelli & Tipa, 2007). In their research in Aotearoa New Zealand, Panelli and Tipa (2007) illustrate how different contexts affect indigenous Māori health, including links between spiritual, mental, physical, and extended family. Panelli and Tipa suggest that a “place-based” approach to wellbeing enables the linking of culture, current and ancestral

relationships, and environments into understandings of the interconnections between the health of ecosystems and humans. Place-based approaches also promote health leadership by indigenous and first nations people, whose relationships to place run deeper and longer than settler-colonizers.

Relatedly, a growing body of research is exploring experiences of physical activities and cultures in oceans not only through Western notions of place, health, and wellbeing, but through diverse cultural ways of knowing and being (Burdsey, 2016; Hough-Snee & Eastman, 2017; Ingersoll, 2016; Kato, 2007; Lobo, 2014; Nemani, 2016; Rynne, 2016; Thompson, 2014; Wheaton, 2013). This work has challenged notions of oceans as “placeless,” highlighting that how we experience, access, and manage blue spaces is no less specific to place and culture than urban or green spaces, and is linked to, and embedded in history, community, and identity. Understanding wellbeing, place, and self beyond dominant Western, European traditions reflects the diverse, multidimensional, subjective, and often community and place-based experiences of human wellbeing, which are evident in papers in this special issue. It also recognizes the tensions inherent in settler-colonial populations linking relationships to place as essential to health and wellbeing.

The Hydrophilic Turn

While research exploring blue spaces is increasingly multidisciplinary, cultural and health geographers have been central to defining this “hydrophilic turn” (Foley et al., 2019; p. 2). In contrast to the more traditional, pathogenic focus on health risks and problems, this research has had a salutogenic focus, focusing on various factors that support health and wellbeing, while emphasizing the “place-based promotion of health” (Foley et al., 2019; p. 2). As noted by Duff (2011), while we accept that certain places enable health, little is known about how processes of health enablement work. To develop a fuller understanding of what makes watery places health-enabling, blue spaces have been interpreted as “therapeutic landscapes,” with physical, social, and spiritual benefits, that emerge from both individual and community experiences (Gesler & Kearns, 2002). Bell et al.’s (2015) research identifies four overlapping “therapeutic experience” (p. 58) dimensions experienced by their research participants’ local sport and leisure-based coastal interactions in the United Kingdom: symbolic, achieving, immersive, and social. These are developed into an interdisciplinary model of therapeutic blue space experiences at the coast, which aims to show the breadth of different ways encounters take place, all of which are relevant to sport and leisure-based encounters. Similarly, Bryce et al.’s (2016) research identifies the cultural wellbeing benefits of blue spaces as including place-based identity (e.g., spirituality and an ethic of care and responsibility for the environment), experiences (e.g., connection to nature and sense of belonging), and capabilities (e.g., physical and mental health, skills, and knowledge).

Within this therapeutic focus is research exploring wellbeing experiences that incorporate aspects of affect, embodiment, and emotion (Foley, 2017), and of the multiple connections between humans/non-humans in and with water (Foley et al., 2019).

As Booth (2018) reflects, practicing sports and physical cultures “in nature engenders very real relational sensibilities with the nonhuman material world” (p. 10), and allows us multisensory interactions with various elements, plants, animals, and weather systems, as well as sporting equipment and clothing (see also, Evers, 2019). Such experiences emerge as a set of “sensescapes” that are “visual (aesthetic and representational), haptic (touch, immersion, flow), sonic (trickle to roar, attention-restoration), gustatory (fresh/healthy to musty/contaminated) and olfactory (healthy and unhealthy smells)” (Foley et al., 2019, p. 5; see also Bell et al., 2017). This all-encompassing sensory nature of being in the ocean has also been highlighted in the context of research exploring “surf therapy”-based interventions (e.g., Caddick et al., 2015). Such programs are proliferating around the world and have been attracting attention in health policy (Britton et al., 2018). The multisensory nature of being in water, and of doing research in blue spaces, is a theme across several of these articles in this collection (e.g., Britton & Foley, this issue; Evers, this issue; lisahunter & Stoodley, this issue), which explore affective and more-than-human connections, in particular to better understand how water immersion feels and sounds. Foregrounding these questions has led to authors developing multisensory approaches to data collection both as experiences happen (in situ) and on reflection (Brown & Humberstone, 2015; Humberstone & Prince, 2019; lisahunter, 2019).

The pleasures that come from a sense of connection to particular places can also emerge from more unexpected and often fleeting interactions that characterize everyday activities like walking along a beach. Nonetheless, place-based identities, and the associated social aspects of wellbeing, can also produce tensions or conflict. Bell et al. (2015) discuss how during busy holiday seasons, “local” walkers abandoned their preferred places and sought out less-crowded beaches or even woodlands. Such tensions in place-based identities can be prevalent in coastal areas with high number of visitors, as has been explored in terms of “localism” in surfing. Localism is the contradictory and deleterious side of place-connectedness, whereby “locals” develop, and even enforce, a sense of entitlement and authority over access to places, including histories related to colonization and racism (Beaumont & Brown, 2016; Evers, 2008; Olive, 2015, 2019). Blue spaces therefore impact wellbeing in a range of ways, that are not always beneficial.

Hydrophobia and Cultures of Exclusion

Alongside complex cultural politics, an identified limitation within existing blue space research is the lack of consideration of “hydrophobic” as well as hydrophilic dimensions. That is, as well as its capacities to enable human health, water can be, and is, a risky, wounding, and health-endangering entity (Collins & Kearns, 2007; Foley et al., 2019; Pitt, 2018). Water pollution has been shown to be a potential health risk for recreational water users, even on beaches perceived to be clean and pristine (Evers, 2019). Several papers in this special issue take a critical approach to hydrophilia, in some cases challenging the romanticism that is often expressed by ocean lovers. As Wheaton et al. (2017), identify, participants in their research about surfing programs

often held an almost “evangelical” (p. 7) investment in the ability of surfing to heal, help, and teach, while glossing over the practical, economic, and cultural challenges for many participants. Furthermore, blue space and health relationships exist within and can produce, environmental, health, and other inequities and injustices (Bell et al., 2017; Britton et al., 2018; Evers, 2019; Foley et al., 2019). Diverse subjects and bodies access and experience blue spaces in unequal ways, impacting who can use blue spaces, how they can be used, and how power is reproduced and contested. Our research therefore needs to recognize the diverse cultural, economic, geographic, sociodemographic, and political factors that contribute to a disconnect with, or exclusion from various blue spaces. We also need to consider the interconnections between the wellbeing of humans and ecosystems, and the wider implications for equitable policy and practice. These are issues explored by authors in this special issue, who consider the ways in which particular bodies, individuals, and communities (human and more-than-human) are marginalized or excluded through various economic, political, cultural, and historic processes.

Understanding Blue Spaces: Introducing the Articles

As we have seen, much of the blue space and wellbeing research has focused on being *near or by* the sea. In this collection, most authors focus on being *in and on* saltwater, revealing the specificity of being immersed in seas and oceans (e.g., Britton & Foley, this issue; Gould et al., this issue; lisahunter & Stoodley, this issue; Moles, this issue). Engagements span a range of sports and physical cultures including ocean swimming, surfing, sailing/yachting, and *waka ama* paddling. Some papers consider organized activities, including a competitive swimming event (Moles, this issue), an outdoor education program (Broch, this issue), and blue-therapy programs (Brittan and Foley, this issue). However, even these authors engage with everyday or lifestyle-based sporting encounters. The research contexts and participants are quite diverse and include aging and older adult swimmers (Britton & Foley, this issue; Gould et al., this issue), young people with autism in Ireland (Britton & Foley, this issue), Māori women in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Liu, this issue), and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, including minority ethnic communities in Miami (Phoenix et al., this issue) and disadvantaged youth in Norway (Broch, this issue). We have divided these papers into the two issues by mixing the different sporting activities they explore, regions they discuss, and by including both established and emerging blue space and ocean researchers from different disciplines. In the remainder of this introduction, we offer an overview of each paper, while drawing out some of the cross-cutting themes and connections.

We start with cold-water immersion. Outdoor, wild, and cold-water swimming have seen a recent growth in popularity and visibility in places around the world, and it is promoted as a healthy practice for our physical, mental, and social wellbeing (Denton & Aranda, 2019; Foley, 2017; Huttunen et al., 2004; Throsby, 2013). A key focus among the three papers on wild swimming is the experience of cold-water immersion. For devotees, the cold-water rush and the capacity for endurance are a

particular point of pride. *Kate Mole's* paper, *Doing the Dart 10k: Narratives, practices and the presentation of self in outdoor swimming*, is based in the United Kingdom, where the growth in cold water and outdoor swimming activities retains a romantic ideal of democratizing access to nature and physical activity. While celebrating the salutogenic and personal joys of wild, cold-water swimming, Moles examines the cultures and practices that shape experiences of “becoming” an outdoor swimmer, relative to both swimming places and other swimmers. Using ethnographic methods to highlight the hierarchies and identities we bring to nature-spaces, Moles records her first time participating in a long, competitive swim along the River Dart, a southern, English river that travels through Devon into the English Channel. Like several other contributors (e.g., *lisahunter* and *Stoodley*, this issue; *Evers*, this issue), Moles engages with the multiple more-than-human elements that are specific to blue space places and practices—water, rocks, bodies, wetsuits, temperatures—as well as the intimacies of bodies swimming alongside, and getting changed next to, each other; revealed and vulnerable. While highlighting how bodies in water feel different—horizontal, lifted up, immersed—Moles asks what codes wild swimmers enact and comply within the blue space of the river, and how these are different to more ordered swimming spaces like pools?

Following the cold-water theme, *Shane Gould, Fiona McLachlan and Brent McDonald's* article, *Swimming with the Bicheno “coffee club”: The textured world of wild swimming*, is focused on the culture of recreational wild swimming in a small town beside the Southern Ocean, in Tasmania, Australia. Like Moles, Gould et al. highlight the role of sociality among ocean swimmers. The challenging conditions of this remote ocean mean that for this group, daily swims are possible because of a collective practice that creates opportunities for community wellbeing that is more-than-physical health. While academic and mainstream literature regularly notes individual benefits of wild-swimming, there is little critical attention paid to these social aspects. Instead, wild swimming is often presented as “‘journeying’ alone in remote and inaccessible places” (p. 3), which the authors connect to histories of male-dominated English literature from the romantic tradition. For the Bicheno Coffee Club, wild swimming is explicitly framed as “undeniably anti-social” and “swimming away from society” (p. 3); more deviant than romantic. At the same time, swimming remains a way of life and “wayfaring” is offered as an alternative for conceptualizing individual and social wild-swimming practices and health and wellbeing benefits. A memorable example is “rafting,” a practice of touch and proximity through which the swimmers take care of each other in the sometimes-wild ocean, and the point of participation is “humour, joyfulness, and discovery connected to being with others in the (cold) water” (p. 7). In Bicheno, in the Southern Ocean, social relationships are key to the pleasures and possibilities of swimming.

In *Sensing Water: Uncovering health and wellbeing in the sea and surf*, *Easkey Britton and Ronan Foley* discuss projects involving organized groups of Irish sea-swimmers and a surfing therapy program. The authors explore how through water immersion, these diverse recreational ocean users engage with and utilize blue spaces as health-enabling. Despite participants ranging from youth with autism, to older

adults (some above 80 years of age), the authors document some surprising similarities in how these surfing and swimming participants experienced their cold-water immersions in embodied and emotional ways. Consistent with wider accounts of nature engagements their findings suggest that the value of swimming and surfing emerges from both physical activity and a range of impacts on their spiritual and psychological wellbeing. These include a sense of personal growth, relaxation, connectivity, and meaningfulness, as well as how people feel in particular places. The research also explores how to capture the effects/affects of blue spaces for health and wellbeing. In addition to informal and group interviews, they adopted a range of what Britton and Foley call “in situ methodologies” including swim-along, “observant participation,” field diaries and embodiment practices including sensory and body mapping. They suggest that hearing participants’ experiences being recounted “from the water” deepened understandings and provided new knowledge to help understand how specific benefits arose for both individuals and groups within specific blue spaces.

Switching focus to surfing, but staying with in situ methods, *lisahunter and Lyndsey Stooley’s* paper *Blue space, Senses, Wellbeing and Surfing: Prototype Cyborg Theory-Methods* aims to extend research on understanding “experiences, feelings and interactions” (p. 5) beyond the individual’s post blue space encounter reflection (such as interviews). They consider participants’ lived experiences and practices in situ, and from multiple, more-than-human perspectives. Drawing inspiration from methodologies in mobilities research, and Haraway’s (1991) concept of “cyborgs” that advocates a more-than-human assemblage in time/space, they develop a “more-than-human hybrid human-machine-element and time assemblage” (p. 6) theory-methods they call “cyborg.” Their approach incorporates various digital technologies including a beach camera focusing on the surfer and surrounds, and waterproof audiovisual devices attached to the surfboard and/or surfer. Body mapping and audiovisual elicitation post surf also contribute to these in situ experiences of a surfing assemblage. The conscious, and also less-than-conscious, moments are captured and recorded as audio and visual data from multiple perspectives of participant human and camera, incorporating different points-of-view including the waves, the wind, the humans, the energy, the landscape, and creatures. This approach gives detailed insights into the relationships, experiences, feelings, thoughts and movements of surfers, including verbalized thoughts, sounds, and the conscious and subconscious rituals that occur in these blue spaces. This cyborg method come with many challenges, yet they conclude that this approach offers a productive way to understand wellbeing in blue spaces that encompasses multiple material and nonmaterial, human and more-than-human parts to the whole surfing experience.

Clifton Evers contributes to the evolving body of research that offers a cautionary response to the often over-celebratory notion of hydrophilia. Evers’s paper *Polluted Leisure and Blue Spaces: More-than-human concerns in Fukushima* builds on his recent work on “polluted leisure.” While not denying the benefits of multisensory, more-than-human encounters, such as with animals, plants, soundscapes, and water, Evers offers an important complementary perspective, highlighting how “Polluted leisure involves negotiating valuations of risk, health, and wellbeing in blue spaces”

(p. 9). Evers reminds us of the everyday-ness of pollution in our leisure lives, bringing into view the ways that encounters with waste, such as plastic bags, are as common in blue spaces as “positive” experiences, such as encountering birds. That local industries, sewage systems, toxic wastes, oceans, sports, and bodies are interconnected is established (Booth, 2016), but Evers work reminds us that pollution is also tied up in complex identity politics. For example, “Polluted leisure is gendered” (p. 9), produced by industrialized industries dominated by men and experienced through male dominated sports. With his case-study on the shores of the site of a post-tsunami nuclear accident in Fukushima, Japan, Evers draws on multisensory methods—observations, GoPro recordings, audio-recordings, and radiation testing—in conversation with feminist and queer theories to explore how contemporary more-than-human interactions include pollution, toxins, chemicals and radiation. These are an increasingly inescapable part of our decisions about how and when we bring our bodies into blue space relationships, and how we use them. Evers’s work recognizes that as part of blue space ecologies, we thus impact them and are impacted in return; we consume, we produce, we surf, we become.

Cassandra Phoenix, Sarah Bell and Julie Hollenbeck’s article, Segregation and the Sea: Towards a Critical Understanding of Race and Coastal Blue Space in Greater Miami, vividly illustrates how coastal blue spaces continue to reproduce racial inequalities. They present findings from a case study of a predominantly African American community living in Liberty City, Miami (United States), focusing on people who reported limited engagement with their local beaches. Their theoretical framework “takes inspiration” from Critical Race Theory (CRT), Bourdieu’s theory of practice, and approaches that center the racialization of space (e.g., Puwar, 2004). They illustrate how legacies of institutional racism, and the “coding” of Miami’s coastline by race, has successively undermined African American engagement with beach environments. White (wealthy) bodies are designated as being “the natural” occupants of coastal blue spaces, and entering them led to African Americans feeling highly visible and intensely surveilled as bodies “out of place” (Puwar, 2004). Furthermore, generational fears about being in the water, such as drowning or concerns about dangerous sea life, existed among the majority of their participants. These fears were perpetuated by limited opportunities to develop swimming skills and ocean knowledge. The authors illustrate how being in coastal blue spaces can be perceived as an experience that is unavailable, often developed unconsciously. Indeed, for many of the participants, “beachgoing was no longer even talked about, thought about, known about, nor missed” (p. 11). Phoenix et al. bring to the fore the exclusionary politics governing many coastal blue spaces, and the importance of critical engagement with the historical, social, and political settings in which relationships with blue spaces are experienced and produced. As they argue, “these narratives remind us of the need for continued critical engagement with the notion of hydrophilia to lay bare the blue health inequalities and environmental injustices that continue to shape contemporary coastal practices” (p. 7).

Exploring blue space exclusion of disadvantaged migrant youth, Tuva Broch’s paper *Sensing Seascapes: How Affective Atmospheres Guide City Youths’ Encounters*

with the Ocean's Multivocality takes us to the saltwater fjords of Norway. Like many of the contributions in this collection, Broch is interested in how "The healing potential of blue spaces" appear to be "universal" (p. 1). Yet, like Phoenix et al. (this issue), she highlights that research to date has failed to examine the great diversity of ways individuals experience encounters with waters. Drawing on theories of emotion and affect that emerge from psychological perspectives, Broch explores the constitution of human relationships with the sea, including the inequalities that are always part of who can use blue spaces. Her ethnographic research focuses on "Mimo," an outdoor education center in Oslo, Norway, that offers no-cost activities for children and youth in inner-city neighborhoods, who have little opportunity to access such nature spaces. Broch echoes Phoenix et al. when she argues that belonging to, and being in, blue spaces is an affective relationship. She expands on Ahmed's (2007) idea that at the same time as we can feel free in a place we can have our otherness brought into attention and place by other people to argue that "experience never happens on an empty background" (Broch, this issue, p. 7). For these disadvantaged young people, access to the Norwegian fjords is mediated by costs, geography, and their otherness as young people of color. Broch works with the symbolic and material qualities of water, "its composition, its transmutability, reflectivity, fluidity, and transparency" (p. 3) as an example of how human relationships to ocean spaces are always shifting. Highlighting the "multivocality" of blue spaces, Broch reminds us that power is always relational and spatial. Like Phoenix et al. (this issue), Broch illustrates that we can both belong to and be othered by blue spaces.

Paddling through blue spaces: Understanding waka ama as a post-sport through indigenous Māori perspectives by Lucen Liu interrogates the physical culture of *waka ama* [outrigger canoe] by drawing on ethnographic research in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Waka ama* paddling is an important part of indigenous Māori culture, and has seen somewhat of a resurgence in popularity, particularly among women. Māori worldviews embrace different practices and assumptions about what water means, that are fundamentally tied to Māori identity, health, and wellbeing (Jackson et al., 2017; Wheaton et al., 2019). Liu outlines that like other people from the Pacific, Māori have strong attachments to oceanic blue spaces from gathering *kaimoana* [seafood] to *waka*-based transportation on the ocean (and inland lakes and rivers). Through *waka ama* paddling, Māori participants' experience embodied, emotional, and spiritual connections with ancestry, nature, and other people. Liu argues that it is difficult to make sense of *waka ama* practice through Eurocentric concepts, because the categorizations of human and nature, and sport, physical activity, and cultural practice are blurred and destabilized. She turns to the notion of postsport (Pronger, 1998), conceptualizing *waka ama* paddling as a "postsport" and blue spaces as "postsport contexts," through which the multiple dimensions of *waka ama* paddling can be understood. Liu's case study also reveals the value of indigenous knowledges for destabilizing the anthropocentrism privileged by the Western philosophical traditions that have dominated our understanding of human and more than human relations. She illustrates how Māori knowledges and ontologies contribute to understanding the agencies of blue spaces and nature, and of people's physical, spiritual, and genealogical connections with

them. Liu's research contributes to a growing body of work, exploring indigenous perspectives on oceanic blue spaces (discussed further below). She highlights how different worldviews shapes how we know and experience sport, and the ways that it links people to individual, community, cultural, and environmental relationships.

In *Riding waves on the Mexico-United States border: Local surfers, beaches and cross-border processes*, Jesús Estrada Milán and Luis Escala Rabadán explore experiences of oceanic borders—both real and imagined—in surf places on the Pacific Ocean border of Mexico and the United States. Borders, even when they are water itself, can be immovable and impermeable to people, while at the same time being porous to pollution and commerce. In this study, “surfing is a border practice” involving “continuous interaction between individuals who share a common border and sea, but who belong to ‘two different socioeconomic structures’” (p. 5). Thus, in the sense of border crossing, surfing in California and Baja California is a practice of “proximity.” Yet, unlike the proximity in Gould et al.'s work about ocean swimming, the proximity described here highlights difference and inequality as much as it does connection between surfers; that is, proximity does not create a sense of safety among a shared community of practice. For example, “While Mexicans surfers almost never go surfing on the ‘other side’, Americans use the neighboring beaches as a ‘background’ for their leisure practices” (p. 13). Milán and Rabadán's research highlights how surfing communities and experiences can be transnational and place-specific, yet inequalities remain. Milán and Rabadán use their project to extend current ideas of localism and explore “border localism, which arises from the social and cultural relations between surfers from two countries that share the same ocean border” (p. 8). In most surfing places, localism practices are defined clearly in terms of the place—the politics of belonging negotiated through layers of colonization, residency, skill level, gender, violence, and more can be clearly historicized and contextualized (Olive, 2019). In this case, we see the fluidity of blue spaces taking on a new aspect, with histories of culture, colonization, language, and residency playing out in very complex ways.

Finally, *The dream and the reality of blue spaces: The search for freedom in off-shore sailing* by Mark Orams and Mike Brown, reports on a 6,000 nautical mile sailing voyage from Malaysia to Queensland, Australia, undertaken by Orams. Orams recorded and shared his experiences via a journal/blog written aboard the yacht. This auto-ethnographic data was responded to by Brown, also an experienced off-shore cruising sailor, generating a written conversation. A key emergent theme was freedom and escape, how engagement with blue spaces in a sailing context can enact a more autonomous way of living, experienced as therapeutic. This reflects previous research on offshore sailing, which shows participants were inspired by a utopian vision that sought an alternative definition of reality to that espoused in consumerist societies; closeness to nature provided relief from the sense of alienation engendered in modern society, and pursuit of a more desirable lifestyle. Yet, as the authors discuss, the values attached to the sea, as a space of freedom and escape from normality, are historically constructed and contested; with this “escape” comes personal responsibility, fatigue, solitude, and the need for self-sufficiency, adaptability, and resilience. Sailors, they suggest, embody a romanticized view of “nature as pristine and an antidote to the

modern industrialized human-dominated world, whereas wild places are actually creations of our own desires” (p. 12). Living at sea requires adherence to an “alternative” set of obligations; freedom is relative and “freedom at sea” is arguably a construct that may be based more in perception than the reality of lived experiences. Orams and Brown’s article supports existing research and research in this volume in situating freedom as a construct that is always contextual and negotiated and enmeshed in ineq-uitable power relations between nation states, communities, spaces, and individuals.

Further Directions

In this collection, we hoped to progress a conversation across humanities and social sciences disciplinary areas of research on blue spaces, sport, and wellbeing, that spanned local, to trans-national contexts, and diverse practices. This collection offers new insights into politics, possibilities, and problems of the role of blue spaces in our wellbeing—individually, socially, and ecologically. Sport and leisure studies have much to offer broader humanities and social sciences research on bodies, health, and movement practices in water places and spaces.

While these papers offer new empirical, theoretical, and methodological insights there are, of course, gaps and limitations in what these 10 papers can achieve. In particular, while articles engage with diverse contexts and participants to recognize the ongoing impacts of colonization, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and exclusion on how blue spaces are used and experienced, other types of diverse bodies—such as those with physical impairments—also needs continued attention. Furthermore, in this collection, and reflecting the wider body of work, there remains a focus on Eurocentric theories and contexts (exceptions here include Evers, this issue; Liu, this issue; Milán and Rabadán, this issue; Phoenix et al., this issue). This is not a limitation of each paper, so much as a broader critique of our own editorial situatedness as predominantly White, English-speaking scholars. As Evers and Doering (2019) reflected in their introduction to another special issue in this journal, focused on East Asia,

The experience of seeking out and collating submissions for this special issue has revealed to us that a coordinated and collaborative strategy needs to be developed through more inclusive research practices and better resourcing so that Indigenous scholars of East Asia get to lead and advance this discourse. (p. 345)

As we identified earlier, a growing body of research is exploring relationships to oceans through diverse cultural ways of knowing and being including research recognizing or using indigenous knowledge systems (see Gilio-Whitaker, 2017; Ingersoll, 2016; Nemani, 2016; Waiti & Awatere, 2019; Wheaton et al., 2019). This work reveals that across places, cultures, and societies it is not only how blue spaces are used that is contested, but the ontologies themselves, impacting the ways sports as meaningful practice links people to individual, community, cultural, and environmental relationships (see also Liu, this volume). A pertinent example of this

is the work of Kānaka Maoli woman, Karin Ingersoll (2016), who articulates how indigenous “Hawaiian ways of being-in-the-sea transcend the physical world to include the metaphysical, spiritual, and sensational” (p. 16). Kanaka Maoli surfers connect to the sea as “part of their genealogy” (p. 47), which immerses them in very different relationships to the ocean than nonindigenous surfers. Ingersoll outlines a Hawaiian “seascape epistemology,” that “dives into the ocean, splashing alternatives onto the Western-dominant and linear mind-set” (p. 15) while recognizing “that each Oceanic nation has a unique history, culture, language, and geography that should not be universalized” (p. 17; see also Waiti & Awatere, 2019). She reminds settler-colonial scholars that alternative ontologies cannot become embodied by willing it so.

Indigenous knowledges have been at the forefront of research that decentralizes human experiences of blue spaces, articulating the interconnectedness of the wellbeing of humans and ecosystems. This focus on the other-than-human has also gained traction across the social science and humanities: eco-feminisms, posthumanisms, postmaterialisms all engage in discussion and critique of the anthropocene and capitalocene (see, for example, Haraway, 2016; Neimanis, 2017). Research from these perspectives has highlighted that through sport and leisure engagements in blue space environments, people may develop an ethic of care and responsibility for water spaces, contributing to its ongoing management and restoration—to its health and wellbeing (Fletcher and Potts, 2007; Humberstone, 2011; Olive, 2015). However, this is not always the case, and many ocean users maintain polluting leisure practices (Evers, 2019; this issue; Wheaton, 2020). Relatedly, coastal management and tourism studies have also contributed to these debates, particularly emerging critical work emphasizing the politics of access to and authority over blue spaces (Anderson, 2017; Foxwell-Norton, 2017; Osbaldiston, 2018; Stocker & Kennedy, 2009; Ware et al., 2017). For example, exclusion often manifests as “localism” where those positioned as belonging to a place or community are privileged over visitors and tourists.

The complex and often contradictory politics of “local” identities can also reflect broader national or regional relations and tensions. In settler-colonial societies, such as Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and Hawai’i, localism is linked to ongoing practices of activism against colonization and other forms of exclusionary power relations (Olive, 2019; Waiti & Awatere, 2019; Walker, 2011). Importantly, in many cultures, sexism and homophobia continue to shape access to oceans and coasts; belonging can be contingent on conforming to male-dominated and heteronormative ideals. In relation to place-specific nature of women’s experiences, Krista Comer (2010) introduces “girl localism,” which is a form of “feminist critical regionalism” that recognizes that many girls and women who surf use a critical, place-based perspective to understand surfing (p. 17). Surfing reflects a relationship to practice, place, and community that enables and restricts, but this complexity is difficult to articulate. Blue spaces are easy to romanticize but lived experiences of them are rich with the encounters, politics, and relations that are entangled with broader issues of individual, community, environmental, economic, ecological wellbeing. While the focus on experiential, emotional and embodied geographies of place are important to reveal the range of wellbeing

benefits of blue spaces, research also needs to recognize these wider structural contexts within which those geographies are framed and produced.

As a final note, we thank the authors and reviewers for their generosity and genuine critical engagement in this project. The nature of the editorial process that took its own watery path—ebbs and flows, waves and tempests, becalmed periods—is an experience that other editors will be well acquainted with. But as other editors will also know, there is value in editing articles in this way; new dialogues have been established, disciplinary boundaries crossed, and new knowledge has been shared between authors and reviewers.

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