

Introduction

Landing

2 September 2010

Stroke, stroke, breathe. Stroke, stroke, breathe – these rhythmic triplets, the soundtrack of swimming.

I had lost track of how many hours I had been going. I had started at two that morning, jumping into the inky-black night-time water, and swimming into a beautiful dawn and through the day; the light was softening, and the cliffs of the French coast had taken on a red, early-evening tinge. Several hours ago – I wasn't sure how many – my boat pilot had come out of the cabin to tell me that it was time for some hard effort now to push through a stubborn tide. I had picked up my stroke rate, searching for the rhythm I had learned in those early morning sprint sessions in the pool over the winter; my crew had stood on deck, clapping and cheering me on. At every feed, they told me I looked fantastic, that I was flying – a generous and welcome fiction. A stiff wind was blowing against the tide, whipping up white-crested waves head on, and in spite of the effort, I could see from the unchanging view of the shore that I was making painfully slow progress. Pushing, pushing. I was getting tired now, and sore; every part of me felt nauseated and grey with fatigue and worry – after all these hours, after all those months of training, perhaps this wasn't going to be my day after all.

Stroke, stroke, breathe. Stroke, stroke, breathe. Trying to keep up the faster pace.

But then – and I don't remember it happening – something had changed. France had been in sight for hours, but I could see clearly defined trees and houses now; we had finally managed to slip out of the pull of the tide and were plying slowly through calm water towards the rocky base of a steep cliff. For the first time that day, when I stopped to feed, I asked my crew 'how much longer?' With only 'one length of Dover harbour' to go, I knew then that I had made it; this final mile was something I'd done hundreds of times in training. Nauseated by tiredness and a day-long diet of black-currant energy drink, I refused the offered bottle of feed and kept on swimming.

Stroke, stroke, breathe. Stroke, stroke, breathe. In a more buoyant mood now, my anxiety fading, but still too soon to relax.

The boat was no longer next to me, the water too shallow to go any further in to shore. I heard, or perhaps felt, two distinct, percussive 'thunks' as Peter and Sam, my

crew, jumped in to the water behind me to join me for the final swim to the beach. The backs of my hands and neck prickled with a rush of adrenalin at the sound. The water was warmer now, and the darkness of deep water had given way to a lighter, milkier tone. And then I saw stones on the sea floor, and was taken aback by a sudden upwelling of emotion, tears in my eyes. One last push, arms cycling more slowly now, until my fingertips finally grazed the sea floor, and I was pulling myself in using rocks as hand-holds, like climbing a ladder. Then my chest scraped over the rocks, and I lay, half beached, ready for the very last effort of finishing. With the jubilant shouts of Sam and Peter behind me, I raised myself unsteadily to my feet on the rocky surface, and hobbled awkwardly clear of the waterline, cumbersome, heavy and uncoordinated now, shaking, head and stomach reeling from the shift to vertical. I raised my arms to signal to the boat that I was clear, and was rewarded by a long triumphant honk of its horn.

I had landed.

In the early evening of 2 September 2010, I landed on the French shore, just below the lighthouse-topped promontory of Cap Gris Nez, sixteen hours and nine minutes after I stepped in the water at Shakespeare Beach in Dover in the thick darkness of the day's earliest hours. In strictly technical, documentary terms, the honk of the horn marks the stopping of the clock. It is the singular point in time, officially at least, when I became an English Channel swimmer – the 1,153rd person to complete the iconic crossing.

But when I think of finishing my English Channel swim, my thoughts rarely jump to that moment of official becoming. Instead, I think of the 'thunks' of Sam and Peter hitting the water, and the sight of the stones on the sea floor. These two brief, innocuous moments are still viscerally evocative for me, reviving the intoxicating swirl of enormous relief, bewildering exhaustion and excited delight that this oddest of days, where I had literally done nothing but swim, had ended as I had hoped it might. Knowing that I was going to finish, it turns out, is more memorable, more evocative, than actually landing. There was more relief in the resolution of uncertainty than the completion of the task, which is fogged in the less pleasant recollection of the bodily discomfort and disorientation of the transition from sea to land.

But these singular moments of landing tell us very little about the processes of becoming. Moving backwards through my own becoming as a marathon swimmer, the start of the swim is its own transitional moment. The ritualised preparations of long swimming enact the transformation from swimmer to marathon swimmer: the smearing on of thick layers of suncream; blobs of Vaseline daubed into armpits, neck folds and under costume straps and edges, applied by the latex-gloved hand of a friend on the half-lit, rolling boat deck; the lowering of goggles over the eyes and the nervously repetitive repositioning of lenses and straps, seeking out the elusively perfect leak-free settlement on the face; a final swig of energy drink; a good luck hug that leaves behind sticky smears on clothes and faces; the leap into the dark water and a short, head-up swim to shore, chasing the circle of light thrown by the boat's spotlight; and a quick hobble up the stony beach to clear the waterline for the start. And then there is the honk of the horn to signal

the start of the clock; the first of the two honks that day that form the parenthetical boundaries of this curious day of nothing-but-swimming.

And then, sliding further back in time, there is the training – the work of rendering a body able to do something that it would not ordinarily be able to do: the 5 a.m. pool swims before work; lake swims so cold that I shivered for hours afterwards; six-hour sea swims, putting miles in the shoulders and learning how to endure; gym trips; morning stretching; physio visits and painful hours on the massage table to iron out the knots; eating, drinking and sleeping to maintain an embodied self in training. And before this comes the decision, when the idea, suggestion or dare takes root: long hours at the computer greedily consuming information and drawing up plans; inquiries to the boat pilots; the exchange of money and contracts; medical certificates; ‘going public’ on social media; the launch of a training blog. These too are all moments of becoming.

But however far back I reach, this is still too linear a narrative to account for my own becoming as a marathon swimmer. Prior to my English Channel swim, I completed two internationally recognised marathon swims (Round Jersey; Jersey–France) as part of my two-year training plan, and in 2011, I travelled to southern California to swim the Catalina Channel. Then in 2013, I swam around the island of Manhattan, and in 2015, attempted the 8 Bridges Hudson River Swim¹ – six marathon swims² that punctuate an ongoing process of becoming, with discrete cycles of planning and training rising and falling through wave-like cycles of intensity and embodied transformation. And even within those cycles of training, there are the inevitable interruptions – a busy month at work eating into training time; a lingering chest infection from a winter cold; a much-needed holiday; an injured shoulder. The process of becoming, therefore, is inextricable from periods when that work of becoming either stalls or slides necessarily away from its idealised linear trajectory.

Outside of these episodic interruptions, the endless becoming of the marathon swimmer is also inevitably punctuated by much more calculated, prolonged pauses. In the 2011–12 academic year, for example, I took a complete break from the financial, time and physical demands of long swims. In documentary terms and in the knowledge, skills, techniques and confidence that I had acquired over the preceding three years of training, I was still a marathon swimmer. But this restful year also witnessed a process of palpable *unbecoming* as my cultivated long-swim fitness fell away. By the summer of 2012, then, I was a marathon swimmer who couldn’t possibly do a marathon swim. After a restful but somewhat bereft year away from long swimming, in the autumn of 2012, I lined up a roster of exciting swims for 2013, and returned eagerly to training, restoring lost fitness, re-embodiment the finer details of good technique and putting miles back in the shoulders. But the summer of 2013 was a season where I also learned painful new lessons about yet other modes of (un)becoming: the ignominies and frustrations of two aborted swims, and then a swim-stopping injury towards the end of the season. This latter folded me into a new wave of (un)becoming as I engaged in the frustratingly incremental work of rehabilitating my angry shoulder and re-cultivating my swimming fitness. A year later, I was able to return to training,

marking the beginning of another upward cycle leading up to the 8 Bridges swim in June 2015.

These diverse processes and practices of embodied (un)becoming are the first of three key frames for this book, asking: how do you render a body able to swim extraordinary distances? What embodied pedagogies facilitate the production of the marathon swimming body? What are the embodied and social implications, consequences and demands of those processes of transformation?

The second frame for the book is the social world of marathon swimming, the attendant processes of social belonging and boundary negotiation, and the intersecting social and sub-worlds in relation to which that identity work is made meaningful. Social worlds are 'a set of common or joint activities bound together by a network of communications' (Strauss 1984: 123), and are defined not by their relationship to the dominant culture, but by the production of a 'social object' (Crosset and Beal 1997: 81): in this case, marathon swimming. Marathon swimming is a minority practice, but it is also status-bearing, attracting admiration and celebration rather than approbation. The social world of marathon swimming itself is characterised by the rhetorics of distinction, and the boundaries of what 'counts' as marathon swimming are hotly debated and closely policed both in terms of internal coherence and in relation to other intersecting social worlds and sub-worlds. Through these ongoing negotiations and contestations, practitioners of the sport (and related sports) come to define and legitimise themselves and their activities (Unruh 1980; Strauss 1982), maintaining the troubled boundaries of the marathon swimming identity.

Immersion explores the processes through which social world belonging is produced (and contested) among marathon swimmers as well as in relation to its intersecting and sub-worlds. This focus also provides a lens for thinking about the pedagogies through which novices are inducted into the social world and how those boundaries of belonging are policed. This stream of inquiry mitigates against the impulse to conceptualise the endurance sporting body through individualised narratives of triumphant becoming, highlighting instead the inescapably social nature of sporting embodiment. The book asks, therefore: through what norms and values does marathon swimming define itself? How is belonging produced, maintained and contested?

The wider context of neoliberalism provides the third frame for the analysis. Ericson *et al.* describe neoliberalism as 'a prescription for ordering social relations that increasingly pervades contemporary public and private institutions and the lives of individuals' (2000: 532), listing five defining characteristics (532–533): a minimal state, market fundamentalism, an emphasis both on risk management and risk taking, individual responsibility and the conceptualisation of inequality as both inevitable and the consequence of individual choices. With this definition in mind, rather than focusing on the historical or institutional processes that enabled the ascendancy of neoliberalism as an economic doctrine (Harvey 2005), following Vrasti (2013) in her study of volunteer tourism, I'm focusing here on questions of governmentality and the extension of the principles of the market to all aspects of social life (Foucault 2008) – an indirect form

of government that ‘controls individuals not through explicit forms of domination, but through rationalized techniques and devices which orient action to certain socially useful ends – the “conduct of conduct”’ (McNay 1999: 60). Within this framework, the individual is enjoined to become an entrepreneur of the self, managing risk and maximising personal happiness, with social relations redefined not by exchange, but by competition (Lazzarato 2009; McNay 2009; Silk and Andrews 2012).

Sport, according to Miller, is neoliberalism’s ‘most spectacular embodiment, through the dual fetish of competition and control, individualism and government’ (2012: 24; see also, Farred 2012). Prowess in sport is readily attributed to personal investments in human capital – for example, through training and preparation – and the promotion of sport among disadvantaged communities is widely perceived as a means of inculcating those same values of entrepreneurial selfhood among communities suspected of lacking those commitments (Fusco 2006). This reflects both the privileging of competition and entrepreneurial selfhood, both within and outside of sport, as well as its necessary corollary of blame and derogation for those who fail to thrive and achieve distinction (Fusco 2006; Francombe and Silk 2012; Tyler 2013). This is the context through which contemporary marathon swimming is made meaningful, and provides a key frame for the analysis that follows. The book, then, is not a study of neoliberalism, but rather, an analysis of a particular practice – marathon swimming – in the context of neoliberalism as a means of interrogating the sport’s contemporary inflections. This lens enables me to ask: in what ways is good citizenship produced through the sport of marathon swimming? What can marathon swimming tell us about what counts as the ‘good body’ in contemporary society? What exclusions and paradoxes does that produce? How are those values contested and/or sustained?

These three frames give structure to the analysis that follows, facilitating both a close exploration of the specific embodied and social processes of marathon swimming, and a critical discussion of the wider social context within which those processes have come to make sense.

Immersion begins with an ending, because while the book draws heavily on my own experiences as a swimmer, it is not a swimming autobiography, which as a genre is dependent on the outcomes of swims for the arcs and turning points in the narrative.³ There are, therefore, no ‘will she/won’t she’ suspenseful moments in the book, since my focus here is less the long swims themselves and more the mundane processes through which the embodied marathon swimming self is produced, maintained, restored, relinquished and negotiated, and the wider contexts within which those processes take place. Nor is this a ‘how to’ book for aspiring marathon swimmers. There are many people with far more experience and greater expertise than me who are much better placed to write such a book, and nor was this ever the purpose of this research. The book does, however, draw on the experiences of swimmers – both good and bad – that might offer useful snippets to novices and trigger flashes of recognition among older hands of mistakes made and lessons learned.

Neither autobiography nor ‘how to’ book, it is, instead, a study of *immersion*, both in the literal aquatic sense of being a body in water, and in the sense of becoming utterly absorbed in and committed to an activity. It is a story of consuming passion – mine, and that of my fellow swimmers – and the material-social possibilities and risks of that immersion. It is not, therefore, a panegyric to marathon swimming, but rather a critical, embodied exploration of both its intense, unexpected pleasures and the values through which it is constituted; values which, at times, leave me riddled with discomfort at their reliance on a mind–body split, a studied apolitical gloss, and the exclusionary rhetorics of individual self-mastery. However problematic I find this framing, my own immersion in the social world of marathon swimming disallows any innocent critique, forcing me instead to consider my own complicity in those values and their associated practices as inextricable from both the intense, consuming corporeal and social pleasures that immersion offers and the social privileges that facilitate those pleasures. The book, then, is a study of the complex relations of immersion and my own tense relationship with a practice that I find simultaneously troubling and unimaginably pleasurable.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I begin by explaining the sport of marathon swimming, then describe the research upon which this book is based, and in the final section set out the structure and key arguments of the book.

Marathon swimming

Marathon swimming is a minority sport. To take the iconic marathon swim – the English Channel – as an example, according to the Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation (CS&PF) database, by the end of the 2014 swimming season, 1,538 swimmers (1,061 men and 477 women) had completed 2,025 crossings. The top three nations represented among these are the UK (775 swimmers), the US (400 swimmers) and Australia (163 swimmers), highlighting the nature of marathon swimming as a culturally specific practice (CS&PF 2015). But for all its minority status, marathon swimming has also grown significantly in popularity in recent years. Taking the English Channel once again as the example, while there were 8 successful swimmers in 1960, 15 in 1980 and 25 in 2000, the early twenty-first century saw significant rises, reaching 94 in 2010 and rising to 103 in 2012 (Dover.uk.com 2015). These increases reflect both the improvements in training, nutrition and navigation that have contributed to higher success rates, and the rise in popularity of adventure or endurance challenges, particularly as charitable fund-raising endeavours. The growth in popularity also includes significant cross-fertilisation with other endurance sports such as triathlon, and can also be seen as an effect of the massive rise in popularity of open water swimming more generally. In the UK, this latter is evidenced by the growing popularity of wild swimming (Rew 2009), the introduction of specialist periodicals, a boom in mass participation open water swimming events and a proliferation of swimming holiday companies. This provides the wider context for contemporary marathon swimming, which remains a distinctly minority sport but within a thriving open water culture.

The most easily recognised starting point in marathon swimming's history is 25 August 1875, when twenty-seven-year-old merchant naval captain, Matthew Webb, completed the first successful solo crossing of the English Channel, swimming from England to France in twenty-one hours and forty-five minutes. Less than two weeks after his first, unsuccessful, attempt, Webb's successful crossing, which he described in his book, *The Art of Swimming*, as 'the event of my life' ([1876] 1999: 22), rocketed him to fame. Heralded as front-page news, mobbed by crowds, showered with donations and, later, immortalised in A.E. Housman's poem, *A Shropshire Lad*, as well as on matchboxes, in street names, picture books and public statuary (Watson 2000), Webb's achievement gave him heroic status. The swim rendered him a national icon of triumphant masculinity, rebuffing concerns of the era regarding the enfeeblement of the middle classes and the future of the empire (Watson 2000, Ch. 7; see also, Wiltse 2007, Ch. 2). At a celebratory dinner in Dover, he was announced in the introductory address as the man who 'had proved for one thing that the physical condition of Englishmen had not degenerated' (Watson 2000: 158). There is a colonial tone to this declaration, as reflected by Webb himself, who recalled being stationed at 'Port Natal ... on the South Coast of Africa' and having to swim through the surf back to shore after anchoring a boat. He noted: 'I mention this fact, as it has often been remarked that the natives are extraordinary fine performers in the water. In this particular instance, however, not one of them was sufficiently powerful to swim in the surf at the time I mention' ([1876] 1999: 16–17).

There was also considerable national pride that an Englishman had accomplished the feat first. After the crossing, he was presented to the boys studying on his former merchant navy training ship, the *Conway*, as a role model who was 'motivated by the patriotic idea that an Englishman would do more than an American had done' (Watson 2000: 157). This was a clear reference to the American, Paul Boyton, who crossed the English Channel in May 1875 wearing an extravagantly eccentric inflatable rubber suit that was propelled with a double-bladed paddle, and even had an optional sail. Boyton's successful crossing in the suit earned him praise and celebrity, including a telegram from Queen Victoria (an honour denied to Webb) (Watson 2000: 95), and in the public eye the two men were figured as opponents (Watson 2000: 81). As will also be discussed in Chapter 3, this presages the present-day tensions and struggles over definition that characterise contemporary marathon swimming, particularly in relation to the use of wetsuits.

Fifty-one years later, on 6 August 1926, twenty-year-old American competitive swimmer and Olympian, Gertrude Ederle, following an unsuccessful attempt in 1925, successfully swam from France to England in a record-breaking time of fourteen hours and thirty-nine minutes. Only the sixth person ever to swim the Channel, and the first woman to complete the crossing, her record time was broken only three weeks later by German baker, Ernst Vierkoetter, who completed the swim in twelve hours and forty-two minutes. But although several women completed crossings in the years after Ederle's swim, her women's record stood until 1950, when it fell to fellow American, Florence Chadwick. Like Webb, there was a nationalistic fervour to the public celebrations on Ederle's return to the US,

including a ticker tape parade in New York, not least in amazement that a *woman* could achieve such a feat, although this was tempered slightly by the need to understate her German heritage in a nation still healing from the First World War (Mortimer 2008; Dahlberg, 2009; Stout 2009; Bier 2011).

Both Webb and Ederle are touchstones for contemporary marathon swimming, and the English Channel remains metonymic of the wider sport. But it is also a sport about which very little is known outside of its own social world, except perhaps for the familiar images of swimmers slathering on layers of grease and fat (a largely defunct practice) or via coverage of celebrity swims such as the successful 2006 English Channel swim by UK comedian, David Walliams (BBC 2006) – the centrepiece for the annual UK fund-raising extravaganza, Sport Relief. However, any attempt to define marathon swimming is to venture into sticky territory (see Chapter 3), so in these early stages of the book, I offer only the lightest touch definition, focusing on how I am using ‘marathon swimming’ in the framing of the book and its scope.

To summarise crudely, marathon swimming is the practice of *swimming a long way slowly*.

In the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 10 km marathon swim made its debut, broadly mirroring the running marathon in terms of elite completion times and providing an exciting spectacle with swimmers constantly in sight on the multi-lap, rowing lake course, accompanied by thrilling close-up media coverage. While these swims are impressive and not a little intimidating at the elite level for their ferocious pace, these are not the concern of this book. Instead, my interest here is on what might be described as the ultra domain of open water swimming – those swims that can take ten, and even twenty or more, hours to complete, traversing or circumnavigating predominantly naturally occurring stretches of water including channels, straits, lakes or islands (however marked by human intervention). The iconic marathon swim – the English Channel – provides a useful benchmark for the kind of swimming I am focusing on. It is twenty-one miles across at its narrowest point, with water temperatures of approximately 15–18°C (59–64°F) during the swimming season (usually late June–September). Individual swimmers are accompanied throughout by a dedicated support boat that navigates the swim, liaises with other water users, provides safety cover and serves as a platform from which the swimmer’s support crew can provide moral support, sustenance and equipment changes (e.g. fresh goggles or lights for night swimming).

In spite of its iconic status, the English Channel is just one among many in the proliferating roster of global marathon swims that are stored up on swimmers’ ‘bucket lists’ for future adventures, all presenting their own particular challenges in terms of distance, conditions, temperature and wildlife. Therefore, rather than arbitrarily demarcating a minimum definitional distance or time, I conceptualise marathon swimming as relating to swims *on a sufficient scale of distance and/or time for that to be the only thing that you do that day*; in many cases, literally. It is a kind of swimming that requires the capacity to swim at a steady, continuous pace for hours without meaningful rest; it is a distinct mode of being-in-the-water that is fundamentally different from that of the 100 m pool swimmer, or indeed, the

10 km elite racer. However fast or slow that steady pace is, it is this steadiness that I refer to when I talk of swimming a long way *slowly*.

Marathon swimming is not defined by duration alone, but also by the conditions and regulations under which it is conducted, and for the purposes of this book, I'm focusing primarily on what is commonly referred to as 'Channel rules' marathon swimming.⁴ These rules nod nostalgically, although somewhat arbitrarily, to the conditions under which Ederle and Webb swam and the contemporary iteration of Channel rules swimming dictates that swimmers can wear only a regular swimming costume (non-buoyant, non-insulating), single cap and goggles and must swim continuously from shore to shore without purposefully touching either the accompanying boat or another person (for example, for support or assistance with propulsion) throughout. With some contextually specific adaptations,⁵ 'Channel rules' are a widely invoked benchmark, and these demarcate the *style* of swimming primarily addressed in the book, although always in relation to other modes of swimming and the boundary disputes between them.

The final defining feature of marathon swimming for the purposes of this book is its primary location within the amateur domain. A very small number of elite swimmers from the professional open water racing circuit venture into solo marathon swimming from time to time, generally in order to make an attempt at a record. Australian professional swimmer, Trent Grimsey, who broke the English Channel solo record in 2012 in an eye-wateringly fast 6.55, exemplifies this. These swimmers are highly respected within the marathon swimming community and their swimming feats – unimaginable for a plodding swimmer such as myself – are part of the lore of the sport. But my specific interest in this book is in the *amateur* swimmers for whom the sport is a 'serious leisure' activity (Stebbins 2007), and who make up the vast majority of its participants. For these individuals, who encompass a range of capacities, paces and ambitions, swimming is not a source of income or a full-time occupation, but rather a passionately and often intensively pursued activity that is balanced against a raft of other personal and professional commitments in an ongoing process of producing and maintaining the marathon swimming self.

When I refer to 'marathon swimming' throughout *Immersion*, then, this is how I am using the term: *swimming a long way slowly under a particular set of tradition-oriented rules as a committed amateur*.

With this definition in mind, marathon swimming can be seen as occupying an ambiguous position in relation to other sports. The solo nature of marathon swimming, its location within the natural aquatic environment and the primary focus on finishing rather than winning distance it from what Atkinson describes as 'hyper-competitive, hierarchical and patriarchal modernist sport' (2010: 1250). But it also sits uncomfortably within the domain of what have been conceptualised as 'lifestyle' sports (Wheaton 2004c, 2013). Among the defining features of lifestyle sports outlined by Wheaton (2004a: 11–12), marathon swimming shares the emphasis on grass-roots participation over spectating, the importance of commitment and self-actualisation, a predominantly white, middle-class, Western

cohort, a non-aggressive style without body contact (although still embracing risk), and the appropriation of outdoor liminal spaces. However, the sport fails to align cleanly with the relative novelty of lifestyle sports, their ready consumption of new technologies and practices, and the commitment to the adrenaline rush of activities relying upon speed, descent or the risk of catastrophic injury. Indeed, when I described marathon swimming as an 'extreme' sport in an article about my research in the *Guardian* newspaper (Arnot 2010), the readers' comments were awash with protests at my appropriation of the term for a sport like swimming:

Have the academia of the UK become so chair bound that they consider swimming to be an extreme sport? I thought extreme sports were activities where there was a higher level of risk. The reason people undertake extreme sports is for the adrenaline hit. There you go, can I have me [sic] PhD now?

While by no means risk-free, marathon swimming undoubtedly lacks the hedonistic adrenaline buzz and physical risk of those sports most easily categorised as 'extreme', not least because of the extensive safety procedures required for officially ratified swims (Rinehart and Sydnor 2003; Robinson 2008; Willig 2008; Laviolette 2011). Nevertheless, I have continued to describe marathon swimming in this book as an extreme sport, not because of its relationship to physical risk, but rather, because of its commitment to *excess* and to the testing of bodily limits. Consequently, marathon swimming is perhaps best understood as a form of 'edge-work' (Lyng 2005), where the primary risk in the pushing of limits is the failure to complete a swim. Marathon swimming, then, shares the boundary disruptions of other 'post-sport' physical cultures (Atkinson 2010), moving fluidly across the arbitrary boundaries of what 'counts' as sport, and providing novel opportunities for identity formation and self-actualisation.

But these novel opportunities are not open to all, and the marathon swimming social world, while self-defining through earnestly intended narratives of inclusion – of being 'all just swimmers together' – is characterised by a predominantly white, middle-class cohort. Women, too, are in the minority, albeit a significant one; taking the English Channel once again as the exemplar, approximately one-third of all successful swims are completed by women. These demographic trends are not the result of purposeful sexist or racist exclusion, but rather, reflect both the history of swimming and the social and cultural context within which marathon swimming has come to be meaningful.

Historically, both women and non-whites have experienced direct and enforced exclusions from swimming. While public bathing (for men) in open water has been a long-standing part of many Western cultures, and a key site for the demonstration of feats of masculinity (Sprawson 1992),⁶ particularly by the nineteenth century, anxieties about public morality and the exposure of the body led to the increasing regulation and containment of bathing and swimming. In Australia (Light and Rockwell 2005), the US (Wiltse 2007; Bier 2011) and Britain (Horwood 2000; Love 2007a; Parr 2011; Ayriss 2012), the customary nudity of male bathing, and the desire to cover and contain women's bodies, led to increasing demands for regulation and control. This led to the proliferation of bathing enclosures and

floating baths, which facilitated the regulation of behaviour to account for the demands of modesty, as well as providing grills or pilings which would keep out the debris and human waste that filled many of the rivers and shores. However, while these enclosed swimming spaces facilitated segregation in line with Victorian norms of modesty, access was rarely divided equally, with women confined either to less convenient and more limited hours in shared facilities, or much more confined swimming areas where separate pools were built (Horwood 2000: 656; Parr 2011: 95). Furthermore, even in segregated facilities, by the turn of the twentieth century, women were still expected to swim in hazardously cumbersome clothing or to be covered in a bathing gown on leaving the water, especially in cases of competitive races where men might be among the spectators (Horwood 2000: 657).

In spite of these restrictions, swimming was also conceptualised as a highly appropriate activity for women, albeit in constrainingly gendered terms, as explained in the mission statement for the Women's Swimming Association of New York, which was founded in 1917 to support women's competitive amateur swimming:

It develops every part of the body thoroughly and symmetrically; produces supple, graceful, well-rounded muscles; makes for ease of deportment and movement; activates functional organs; clarifies the blood and clears the complexion; strengthens and benefits the entire system so generally that its constant use ensures buoyant good health and marked improvement in appearance. It is also an effective normaliser. Its natural tendency is to establish standard body proportions by eliminating superfluous flesh in the stout and building muscle and tissue in the unduly lean. Lastly, it will correct many physical defects and this has often proved a complete cure for nervous and other complaints. (cited in Bier 2011: 103)

In response to growing convictions about the suitability of swimming for women, in the early twentieth century, women's swimming cultures began to thrive, including an impressive roster of headline-grabbing endurance swims. In July 1915, for example, nineteen-year-old Eileen Lee swam nearly twenty-two miles between Tower Bridge and Richmond to wide acclaim, and then, in August of the same year, she repeated the feat, but this time in the opposite direction (Davies 2015: 148). In New York in the same period, a vibrant women's open water and pool competitive scene existed, wherein Gertrude Ederle made her name before going on to become, in 1926, the first woman to swim the English Channel (Stout 2009; Bier 2011). The increased access to swimming facilities, the growing number of path-breaking role models and changing social mores about acceptable bodily display enabled women to engage increasingly with swimming as a sport and leisure activity without the gender segregation that had previously placed so many limitations on them. However, this access was always within the bounds of the social regulation of gender, and marathon swimming (as with contemporary swimming more broadly), while largely free from active exclusions and regulatory constraints, remains profoundly marked by gender relations both within and outside of swimming. For example, as discussed in Chapter 6, the gendered

distribution of domestic and reproductive labour impacts upon the time and financial resources available to women for leisure and constrains entitlement to self-investment, effectively delimiting women's access to the sport and its pleasures (and to leisure more generally). The conventional narrative, therefore, of progressive liberation from regulatory exclusions towards participatory equality that characterises the history of women's swimming (Horwood 2000; Love 2007a; Parker 2010; Bier 2011; Davies 2015) is a very partial story that obscures the ideologies of gender that continue to frame the experience of immersion explored throughout the book.

The whiteness of swimming reflects even more sharply the ways in which assumptions, expectations and social context constrain access to the sport beyond actively exclusionary regulation. Contemporary swimming is coded as white, and there is a marked paucity of non-white participants in all dimensions of the sport. An enduring history of biological explanations shores up this racialised profile, particularly in relation to the widely held conviction that black people can't swim because of higher levels of bone density than those of white people (Allen and Nickel 1969). These biological accounts mask the pervasive impact of long histories of exclusion and discrimination through which swimming became a white cultural form. Dawson highlights how many West Africans who were subsequently taken to the Americas as slaves came from thriving swimming cultures; indeed, these skills were actively mobilised by slavers in the fishing, salvage and pearl diving industries, especially at a time when most white people were unable to swim (Dawson 2006). Within the racialised frames of slavery and colonialism, however, these skills were accounted for via the 'animal' nature of non-white others, for whom swimming was seen as a 'natural capacity rather than a learned or intelligent practice (Osmond and Phillips 2004; Dawson 2006) – an assumption that is reflected in contemporary convictions of biologised accounts of black athletic superiority (Hoberman 1997).

As swimming boomed in the US in the early decades of the twentieth century, black people were systematically excluded from municipal pools and beaches through the use of regulation, violence and intimidation (Wiltse 2007). Racialised fears of disease and contamination drove these aggressive exclusions, compounded by shifts in gender relations over the same period that led to the wider acceptance of mixed bathing and increasingly body-revealing women's swimwear. Consequently, pools and beaches became increasingly seen as sexually charged public spaces (Horwood 2000), where white women were deemed at risk from the predatory and uncontrolled sexual desire of black men. As Wiltse argues: 'Gender integration, in short, necessitated racial segregation' (2007: 85). These exclusions were compounded by a lack of swimming facilities in black areas and the growing association of swimming with white privilege through the development of private pools and Hollywood depictions of the glamorous pool cultures of the elite (Horwood 2000; Wiltse 2007).

The legacy of this abbreviated history can be seen in the continued whiteness of swimming long after the elimination of actively exclusionary regulation. For example, in the UK, rates of swimming participation are markedly lower among

ethnic minorities, and particularly for women, with participation rates as low as 5 per cent for Pakistani women, as opposed to 17 per cent in the overall female population (Rowe and Champion 2000). Similarly, in the US, the number of black children (aged five–fourteen) dying from drowning is more than three times that of white children of the same age (CDC 2014) – an outcome that is attributed to a range of factors including lack of access and a perceived lack of fit with the sport (Irwin *et al.* 2008). These patterns of swimming ability also map onto class as well as gender, with children in families with less economic and social capital (for example, in the form of higher education) less likely to report themselves able to swim – a trend which is also far more evident among black girls than boys (Irwin *et al.* 2008). The (gendered) whiteness of swimming, then, including marathon swimming, is neither a biological inevitability nor an accident of culture, but rather, the enduring legacy of the racialised practices of exclusion.

I return to these questions of inclusion, access and belonging throughout the book, not to suggest a purposefully racist or sexist social world, but rather, to refuse naturalising or accidental accounts of the demography of marathon swimming, and to disturb comforting narratives of inclusion – that ‘we’re all just swimmers together.’ This approach supports the book’s central arguments: first, that however much a minority social world self-defines through distinction, it remains inextricable from the wider social context within which it is made meaningful; and, second, that the narratives of heroism and individual overcoming that attach so easily to a practice such as marathon swimming risk the erasure of the relations of privilege that make swims both possible and exchangeable as capital. It is in this way that *Immersion* both offers an insight into the relatively unknown practices, pleasures and social world of marathon swimming, and mobilises marathon swimming as a lens through which to consider the wider social context within which it is made meaningful.

Aquatic sociology

At first glance, I am an unlikely marathon swimmer, particularly from the perspective of those outside of the sport. I’m a middle aged woman with a very sedentary job as a university lecturer in sociology and a deeply bookish streak; I spend a lot of time reading in my favourite armchair, heating on, hot drink to hand, cat on lap. My build is also far from what would conventionally be recognised as ‘athletic’. Outside of the briefest periods of unsustainable diet-induced leanness, especially in my twenties, I have always been varying degrees of fat, and now, in my mid-forties, my hair is greying with decisive speed and my body is relinquishing its life-long pronounced pear shape for the thickening waist of the early menopause. I don’t hate my body, or the ageing process; but I am more than aware that a body such as mine – female, fat, middle-aged – is not one to which the label ‘athlete’ or ‘sportswoman’ sticks easily. As a relatively successful marathon swimmer, I am something of an imposter outside of the marathon swimming social world; an ‘athletic intruder’ (Bolin and Granskog 2003) in comparison to the ranks of the youthful, lithe, energetic bearers of national sporting

pride and healthful citizenship whose bodies plastered the UK's billboards during the Olympic summer of 2012.

But I can never remember a time when I couldn't swim. I learned at the loving hands of my grandfather, Harry Cornforth (to whose memory *Immersion* is dedicated), and mum, Pam Throsby. Harry was a water polo player in his youth – tall, broad-shouldered, barrel-chested. Poverty, lack of opportunity and inflexible blue-collar employment on the railways meant that he was never able to fully pursue his sport (including a lost opportunity to trial for the Olympics), but he never breathed a word of his disappointment, and through him I learned to love the water. Even now, I have the strongest memory of his hands around my ankles, my own hands gripping the gulley around the edge of the pool for support as he guided my legs through the frog-leg kick of breaststroke. He taught me to dive by placing two-pence coins between my ankles and knees; if I kept my legs tidily together and broke the surface with the coins in place, I got to keep them. I remember my first unaided width, aged five, in a hotel pool on a family holiday in Mallorca, flapping and flailing with graceless enthusiasm to a joyous victory. Later, when I was a little older, I jumped off the three-metre diving board wearing pyjamas, tennis shoes and a thick sweater, smacking the water and then sinking sharply as the oddly assorted clothing filled with water before releasing me to the surface. A little older still, I joined a swimming club, training hard and competing enthusiastically, albeit with limited success. I loved to swim, and I was safe and happy in the water, but I had neither the aptitude nor the appetite for such fierce competition and I dropped training in my early teens and took up the piano instead. But still, I never entirely abandoned swimming, and the chlorinated smell of a swimming pool, perhaps venting unexpectedly into a city street from a basement health club, has always provoked the desire to swim, triggering the embodied memories and pleasures of swimming. In my early thirties, some tentative ventures into the sport of triathlon opened up the world of open water swimming for the first time, quickly becoming the only part of the events from which I drew any real pleasure (or success); and in 2006, a commercially organised swimming weekend in the UK's Lake District led to my first, cautious non-wetsuit swim – a revelatory moment of sensory pleasure from which I never looked back. In the genesis of this research, then, the swimming came first.

Consequently, I brought a long, although unremarkable, competitive and leisure swimming history with me to my nascent marathon swimming career. However, as a fledgling *marathon* swimmer, I still had a great deal to learn and much bodily work to do when, in October 2008, I put down a £250 deposit with a boat pilot for an August 2010 English Channel swim. This book, and the research project upon which it draws, grew out of that first winter of gradually intensifying training, as I began to reflect upon the process of 'becoming' (or trying to become) in which I was engaged.

The book is what I have termed an (auto)ethnography. Using what Wacquant calls 'observant participation' (2004: 6), and alongside conventional ethnographic observation and interview methods, I deployed my own body 'as a tool of inquiry and a vector of knowledge' (Wacquant 2004: viii; Bunsell 2013). This enabled me

to access sensory and embodied aspects of a protracted apprenticeship that would be inaccessible through interviews and observation alone and at a register that cannot reasonably be expected from research participants – for example, in solicited diaries. The parenthetical separation of the autoethnographic and more conventionally ethnographic aspects of the research signals my intention to produce both a situated, reflexive account of becoming a marathon swimmer, including the social and cultural context within which that process of becoming takes place, and a personally embodied account of that process (Reed-Danahay 1997).⁷

As a method, autoethnography is not without its critics. It is vulnerable to accusations of solipsism, sacrificing its ‘sociological promise’ for self-absorption (Anderson 2006: 385). As Behar observes: ‘The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake’ (1996: 14). Anderson’s ‘analytic autoethnography’ is one response to this dilemma, with ‘analytic’ signalling ‘a broad set of data-transcending practices that are directed toward theoretical development, refinement, and extension’ (2006: 387). This stands in opposition to ‘evocative autoethnography’ (Ellis 2004), which aims to capture and express ‘struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning’ (Ellis and Bochner 2006: 433). In a fictionalised dialogue, which Ellis and Bochner describe as an ‘autopsy’ of Anderson’s analytic autoethnography, Bochner describes Anderson as wanting ‘to take autoethnography, which, as a mode of inquiry, was designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative, and bring it under the control of reason, logic, and analysis.’ He continues: ‘We want to put culture or society into motion; he wants to stop it, freeze the frame, change the context’ (Ellis and Bochner 2006: 433). It is, he suggests, an ‘aloof autoethnography’ (Ellis and Bochner 2006: 433). In trying to negotiate these tensions, my use of autoethnography aligns most closely with Anderson’s analytic autoethnography, blending autoethnographic excerpts with interview and observational data to provide an account and analysis that can transcend the specifics of the data (see also, Larsen 2014). The autoethnographic data here provides insight into those aspects of experience that are otherwise difficult to access (Sparkes 2000; Wacquant 2004; Hockey 2005b; Spinney 2006). But I also hope to capture and mobilise some of the strengths of evocative autoethnography through the presentation of manicured autoethnographic narratives, which aim to articulate what marathon swimming *feels* like outside of a strictly analytical frame.

The formal research documentation of my marathon swimming apprenticeship took the form of a corpus of detailed fieldnotes taken over two and a half years – a process that began in the spring of 2009, and intensified during the period between May 2010 and September 2011. This intensification was the result of a research grant that provided both the material means to travel to training sites both within and outside of the UK and some welcome relief from teaching and administrative commitments. However, although I ceased taking systematic fieldnotes in September 2011, my immersion in the sport continued, and in 2013, I failed to complete two long swims and acquired a significant shoulder injury that opened up a new dimension of the (un)becoming of marathon swimming that

I had serendipitously avoided during the life of the funded project. Consequently, while I didn't return to the routines of meticulous documentation, from 2013–14 I kept focused notes on these novel moments and processes of (un)becoming, adding further texture to my embodied account of the sport.

Even in the most focused and well-resourced periods of research, the reality of the ambition to use my own body as a research tool was, like most fieldwork, one of endless compromise. The nature of swimming, often for hours at a time, meant that it was impossible to take detailed notes during training sessions, and the typing up of fieldnotes post-swim often had to compete with the insistent demands of rest and recovery. One Sunday in June 2010, after a particularly hard weekend of training, my entire notes for that period simply read: 'I'm SO tired'. At other times, preoccupied by post-swim hunger, my notes for the day contained nothing other than detailed descriptions of meals eaten or imagined. In an attempt to maintain productive focus in the face of exhausting training, some days I would start a long training swim with a particular research idea in mind, and only this aspect of the session would be recorded later in my fieldnotes – for example, the sounds of swimming, the 'feel' of the water, responses to water temperature, bodily functions or the strategies I employed to pass the time. But on other days, swimming with my research hat on just added too much of a burden – for example, in the face of a particularly difficult swim when I needed my full concentration to complete the session. This same tension was also experienced by Anderson in his research on skydiving, when he found that the demands of keeping fieldnotes in the plane ride up deprived him of the necessary time to focus and plan for a difficult dive; consequently, he saved in-the-moment note-taking for simpler dives, and recorded the more complicated ones from memory later (Anderson 2006: 380). And sometimes I simply gave myself a research-free swim on a beautiful day – a chance to relish the intoxicating pleasures of swimming. Like Downey in his study of Capoeira, I had to trust that 'participating actively' was more important and elusive than anything that could be recorded passively' (2005: 52), and that reduced material in the form of fieldnotes could be traded for a deepened relationship with the practice itself.⁸

My 'insider' status also provides its own dilemmas, especially in the bringing of a critical lens to bear on a practice to which both my fellow swimmers and I have a deep attachment. This had consequences for my own relationship with the sport, which became more scrutinising and less relaxing (see also, Bunsell 2013), but also for the ethics of representation, particularly in the writing up of the research. Within feminist research, this is a well-worn concern, with research always bringing with it the risk of misrepresentation, offence and the exploitation of research participants (Stacey 1988). Furthermore, in the course of the research, I struggled to negotiate my feminist commitments alongside what Bunsell describes in the context of bodybuilding as the "no-pain no-gain" mantra of the masculine cosmology' of the sport (2013: 806), or to know how, when or whether to intervene in the face of sexist, fat phobic or homophobic rhetorics that I would have actively resisted in other contexts (Throsby and Evans 2013). There is no definitive solution to these tensions, except to endeavour to treat other people's words and

convictions with respect, even in disagreement, and to take responsibility for my own interpretations as interpretations rather than definitive pronouncements.

Regardless of these compromises, I persisted with my efforts at documenting my own process of becoming, and this corpus of autoethnographic material was intertwined with observational notes about the multiple training and competition sites that comprised the settings for this research: my local lakes and swimming pools in the West Midlands and Dover (UK); Jersey (Channel Islands); Cork (Ireland); Gozo (Malta); and San Diego and San Francisco (US). These fieldnotes documented the everyday routines, practices and interactions between and among swimmers, coaches, crews, supporting family members and curious passers-by in swimming environments ranging from domesticated, sheltered lakes to angry, slate-grey seas; from playful splash-about dips to multi-hour hard training; from the thick grey-green sea of Dover harbour to the clear-blue, wildlife-filled waters of La Jolla Cove in San Diego. In addition to uncountable informal conversations and chance passing encounters, I also conducted forty-five interviews with prospective, successful and unsuccessful swimmers (nineteen women and twenty-six men), during which we discussed in depth their swimming biographies, motivations and experiences of marathon swimming. These were mostly face-to-face (with the exception of two conducted via Skype), either in swimmers' homes or, more commonly, at swimming venues or during post-swim meals. The audio-recordings evoke the locations: the barking of sea lions in the background of interviews at La Jolla Cove; the rain hammering on the roof of my campervan during an interview in Dover; the glugging of a drink being poured or the chinking of plates signalling the arrival of food during a post-swim restaurant interview. This dataset of interview transcripts and fieldnotes is the primary resource for *Immersion*, complemented by textual material from blogs, discussion forums and media reports, gathered more serendipitously than systematically over the course of the project.⁹

The participants were recruited opportunistically via discussion forums, websites, training sites and personal contacts and I never aimed for a fully representative sample – not least because the absence of detailed demographic data for those attempting swims makes it impossible to know with any certainty what would constitute 'representative'. However, as already discussed, and like many other lifestyle, extreme and endurance sports, the marathon swimming community is comprised primarily (although by no means exclusively) of white, middle-class professionals (see, for example, Abbas 2004; Wheaton 2004; Hanold 2010; Thorpe 2011), and this was supported in the sample of interviewees, only two of whom were non-white, and the majority of whom had (or in one case was studying for) an undergraduate degree or equivalent professional training. Four interviewees were retired and one was waiting to start a new job; the rest were employed in a range of professional fields including healthcare, the fitness industry, management, finance, advertising, education, IT, engineering, medicine and the creative industries.

This predominantly middle-class demographic reflects the fact that even though marathon swimming, unlike other water-based sports such as windsurfing (Wheaton 2003), requires little initial capital investment (costume, cap, goggles), it is an expensive sport. Escort boat hire and associated registration fees reach

approximately £3,000 for an English Channel swim, and depending on where you live, the everyday work of training quickly becomes expensive as the costs of commuting to training locations and overnight stays mount up. Furthermore, the sport is inherently transnational in nature, demanding the comfort with, expectation of and freedom to engage in extensive travel that marks middle classness (Abbas 2004; Comer 2010; Thorpe 2011).

As a white, middle-class university lecturer, I fit easily into this dominant profile, with the additional privilege of a research grant that gave me both the time and money for a transnational engagement with the marathon swimming world over a relatively condensed time period. This was practically beyond the means of many, especially in economically difficult times, attracting wry comments from both work and swimming colleagues alike about my ‘tough’ working life as what the *Guardian* pleasingly described as an ‘aquatic sociologist’ (Arnot 2010). Palmer and Thompson received a similar response from their participants in their study of alcohol-based sporting sub-cultures, who remarked upon their ‘cushy’ working lives of drinking (Palmer and Thompson 2010: 424). As Palmer and Thompson go on to describe, what appears to be a leisurely research life in fact involved careful impression management and the negotiation of risk, but it is easy to see how others might misunderstand the nature of research into practices commonly



Figure 1 Swimming below the Statue of Liberty during the final stage of the 8 Bridges Hudson River Swim, 2015.

understood as leisure. This is also reflected in the scepticism I encountered regarding the validity of marathon swimming as the subject of sociological inquiry, as in the online reader comment cited earlier. But even though I am now looking forward to being able to swim without the demands of constant documentation and critical appraisal, these years of aquatic sociology have also undoubtedly been an enormous amount of fun, not least because they have led me to swim in exciting locations that I might not otherwise have visited (see Figure 1), and connect with individuals who I would otherwise never have been able to meet in person. The aquatic sociology years have been a privilege and a pleasure.

Immersion

Immersion is a product of those years of aquatic sociology, and this final introductory section sets out the structure of the book and the key arguments with which it engages. The book is divided into two core sections of four chapters each: 'Becoming and belonging' and 'The good body'.

'Becoming and belonging' focuses on the material-social-discursive processes of becoming a marathon swimmer, exploring both the specific embodied work of rendering a body able to swim long distances and the inward- and outward-facing processes through which social world belonging is produced, maintained, resisted and negotiated. The section challenges the prevailing representations of marathon swimming as a site of suffering and overcoming that pitch the swimmer against both the aquatic environment and their own bodily weaknesses. Instead, I offer a more nuanced reading of the social and embodied processes of becoming and belonging, where bodies and environments are not simply acted upon, but also act and change in constant interaction; the experience of becoming a marathon swimmer, I argue, is one that is inextricably emplaced in the social and aquatic environments within which it becomes meaningful. This constitutes a fundamental challenge to the narratives of heroism that attach so easily to extreme sporting endeavours, but which risk the erasure of the social relations and privileged practices that constitute those activities.

Chapter 1 ('Becoming') focuses on the bodily becoming of marathon swimming, with particular focus on the iterative relationship between feeling and doing that constitutes the acquisition of a range of techniques of the body alongside the sensory and material transformations that both facilitate those techniques and are produced by them. I argue that, while embodied work is central to the process of becoming a marathon swimmer, successful becoming is never entirely within the remit of the individual and is contingent on the individual's life experiences, (dis)abilities, situation and social context. This sets the frame for the remainder of the book, for which the relationship between embodied experience and social context is a central theme. Chapter 2 ('Unexpected pleasures') takes the sensory transformations discussed in the previous chapter as its core focus, particularly in the context of the intense and alluring multiple pleasures of marathon swimming. By exploring the socially acquired assemblage of pleasures that work in interaction with suffering and discomfort to constitute marathon swimming, the chapter

disrupts the prevailing representations of the sport primarily as a site of suffering and overcoming. This in turn challenges the dominant rhetorics of mind over matter as the key explanatory frame for marathon swimming, with body and mind emerging through the analysis as inseparable inflections of each other. The move away from suffering as the primary focus highlights the central role of marathon swimming's autotelic pleasures in the formation of a collective sense of belonging and distinction – a source of 'existential capital' (Nettleton 2013) that defies articulation and which only those inside can appreciate.

Looking more closely at the demarcation of distinction within the social world of marathon swimming, Chapter 3 ('Authentic swimming') focuses on the ways in which the boundaries of authentic belonging are policed, negotiated, resisted and maintained. Drawing on online debates around a number of contested swims in 2012 and 2013, the chapter argues that attempts to escape the rationalisations of modernity through marathon swimming lead to increased rationalisation within marathon swimming in an effort to preserve its distinction. The evolving rules that characterise this reactive rationalisation are inevitably arbitrary, but their content is less important in terms of the cultivation and demarcation of belonging than the visible performance of allegiance to a set of values around which those debates circulate. The final chapter in this section, 'Making it count', picks up on these authenticity debates to explore the roles of the objects and artefacts of marathon swimming in the production and performance of both becoming and belonging. The chapter argues that marathon swimming has a 'realness' problem, with the swimmer leaving little material trace of a journey that takes place largely out of sight. Marathon swimming's objects and associated practices help to make long swims 'real' as consumable 'things' that can be compiled, displayed or traded as capital in other contexts. This highlights the ways in which quantification does not simply reveal facts about the swimming body and its movements, but changes the nature and meanings of the activity itself. The analysis shows that, in spite of determined efforts to delimit the potentially polluting impact of technology on marathon swimming, the sport is inescapably caught in a technologised consumerist nexus; it is a tradition-oriented sport, but with a strongly contemporary inflection.

The second half of the book is organised around the theme of 'The good body'. This section widens the analytical frame to think about what constitutes the 'good body' in contemporary society and the ways in which marathon swimming both aligns with and poses challenges to definitions of health and good citizenship, and the normative relationship between the two. This section provides both further context for the ways in which an extreme minority sport such as marathon swimming comes to make sense as a status-bearing embodied practice, and deploys marathon swimming as a critical lens for thinking about the normative demands of 'good' embodiment in contemporary society. The analysis in this section highlights the ways in which bodily failures and successes, both within and outside of sport, rarely speak for themselves, but instead have to be discursively managed in order to be brought into alignment with prevailing norms of embodied citizenship.

Chapter 5 ('Who are you swimming for?') addresses the increasingly normative connection between marathon swimming and charitable fund-raising, and asks

what is at stake in the public identification of ‘swimming for...’. The chapter argues that while ‘swimming for...’ is a sincere and personally meaningful act, it also risks flattening out the differences between different kinds of suffering that are brought into alliance through charitable swimming. This depoliticises social inequalities and ill health in ways that position the sport (and its social world) as above or outside of politics, while simultaneously reconfiguring what counts as politics. This highlights the comfortable alignment between marathon swimming, charitable fund-raising and the cultural logics of neoliberalism, as well as the opaque and shifting limits to the socially prescribed investment in the self. Chapter 6 (‘Gendering swimming’) picks up on the apolitical gloss that characterises charitable swimming, focusing on the tension between narratives of gender neutrality and the implicit and explicit reproduction of gender. The chapter explores the ways in which gender is rendered strategically passive or present in ways that sustain a masculine sporting ideal and mask the structural and cultural constraints that refute the claim that ‘we’re all just swimmers together’. The analysis highlights the importance of conceptualising sporting practice in its wider social and cultural context in order to capture not only specific structures of oppression that limit access to those activities, but also the patterns of oppression that are embedded in everyday life. Nevertheless, the chapter also highlights the contingency of even the most entrenched understandings of the body, creating openings for novel modes of embodiment that directly challenge gendered bodily norms in transformative, albeit highly individualised, ways.

Chapter 7 (‘Heroic fatness’) extends the argument for contextualisation, this time in relation to the tensions within the sport between the valuing of body fat for its insulating properties and the contemporary repudiation of it as the embodiment of failed bodily discipline. I argue that (some) swimmers are able to negotiate this tension through the mobilisation of ‘heroic fatness’, which positions purposeful swimming fat as an undesirable necessity, heroically borne in the interests of swimming. However, not everyone is able to position their body fat as ‘heroic’, revealing the extent to which not all fat is equal either within the marathon swimming social world or in the wider context of a ‘war on obesity’. The chapter highlights the habitual elision of fitness, health and leanness that riddles contemporary health and sports policy, while simultaneously demonstrating the deeply entrenched and intractable nature of those assumptions and their enduring effects on the ways in which we understand, evaluate and treat bodies. The analysis suggests the importance not only of opening up sport, but also of rethinking the nature of sport itself outside of its customary utilitarian frames.

Chapter 8 (‘Failing bodies’) takes up this theme in the context of injury and swim failure, and their intersections with narratives of health, good embodiment and authentic swimming. I argue that pain, injury and swim failure variously serve as markers of progress and ‘exciting significance’; provide social distinction and social world belonging; mark out pedagogic opportunities; and always potentially act as material evidence of a body that has failed, both morally and materially. The chapter demonstrates that marathon swimming’s bodily failures never speak straightforwardly for themselves, but rather have to be contextualised

and accounted for via social world values in order to be rendered forgiveable. As with the case of swimming fat, this highlights the moral nature of 'health' and its symbolic role in determining citizenship, and the uneven affordability of bodily failure. The chapter concludes that the pain and injuries of marathon swimming are ultimately privileged injuries that not only create little deficit in the physical capital already accrued by the marathon swimmer, but also have the potential to increase that capital or facilitate its exchange.

The concluding chapter revisits the key themes of *Immersion*, arguing that marathon swimming is a recreational sporting practice that is intensely meaningful to its participants, constituting a significant and sustained source of identity that literally comes to inhabit the body. However, I argue that the dominant representations of marathon swimming do not always align cleanly with its lived experience, and the chapter explores the disjunctures between representation and lived experience that have emerged in the course of the book. These are not presented as cynical (mis-)representations, but rather, are understood as faithful attempts to make marathon swimming intelligible, both within and outside the marathon swimming social world, using the discursive resources available. I argue that the social world in which marathon swimmers (including myself) become immersed aligns easily with prevailing ideologies, particularly in relation to the celebration of self-efficacy, autonomy and bodily discipline as features of good citizenship, but the repetitive citation of those values, however constrained, also exposes their uncontainability, arbitrariness and contingency. Marathon swimming, then, is always inflected through the norms and values of the wider social and cultural context in which it becomes meaningful, but never entirely determined by them.

In making this claim, though, I do not simply want to go on a hunt for resistance as an attempt to assuage some of my discomfort around my own strategic alliance with values that I resist in other contexts. Instead, following Abu-Lughod (1990), I want to use this observation as a 'diagnostic of power' that allows me to speak not simply about the specific iterations of those relations of power within the social world of marathon swimming, but also to explore what the view from that social world can tell us about those wider social ideologies and power relations. With this goal in mind, the conclusion reflects on the implications of the discussions throughout the book for thinking about what constitutes the 'good body' in contemporary society; how this is inflected through normative discourses of gender, health, citizenship and philanthropy; and how the process of (un)becoming as a marathon swimmer can help us to think both critically and productively about the social, ideological and discursive roles of sport in contemporary society.

Notes

- 1 The 8 Bridges Hudson River Swim is a 120-mile, 7-day stage swim down the Hudson River, beginning in Catskill and finishing in New York Harbour, with each day starting and finishing at a landmark bridge. See www.8bridges.org for further details of the event.
- 2 I attempted all seven stages of the 8 Bridges in 2015, but on Stage 2, I was unable to outpace the difficult conditions and fell short of the finish bridge by 2 miles. Although

I failed to complete all 7 stages, I was delighted to finish 6 out of 7 and still consider this swim a success.

- 3 See, for example, Cleveland (1999), Cox (2006), Humphreys (2013) and Dean (2013).
- 4 In January 2014, under the auspices of the recently formed Marathon Swimmers Federation (MSF), a small collective of swimmers launched a set of rules for marathon swimming that were designed to standardise practice globally and resist the perceived encroachment of non-traditional practices into the sport (MSF 2014). The concerns that led to the development of these rules are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.
- 5 The regulations for the Cook Straits swim in New Zealand allow for a ten-minute 'shark break' following a close sighting, and the Manhattan Island Marathon Swim allows swimmers to be taken from the water during a lightning storm (or other temporarily dangerous conditions) and then to continue the swim once the danger has passed – an occurrence that would signal the end of an English Channel swim.
- 6 For example, the Romantic poet, Byron, engaged in a number of swimming exploits, famously crossing the Hellespont (between Europe and Asia) in 1810 to reproduce the feat of Leander, who, according to myth, swam the crossing to visit his lover, Hero (Parr 2011: 59–60).
- 7 There was also a strategic element to this separation, particularly for the funded life of the project, since it was important that the project's feasibility was not dependent on my ability and capacity to keep training. Injury or health problems could have prevented me from swimming at any point in the process, but the possibility of shifting all of my research attention to the ethnographic element of the project meant that the research could continue regardless of my own ability to swim.
- 8 Since 2009, I have kept a swimming blog (www.thelongswim.blogspot.com) where I engage in the much more informal documentation of my swimming life.
- 9 Through the book, I have used real names in relation to material taken from websites and blogs that are in the public domain and where the author has published their name on those sites. I have used pseudonyms or generic descriptions ('a female UK swimmer') in all other cases.