

Sensing Water: Uncovering Health and Well-Being in the Sea and Surf

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Abstract

This article considers how different recreational users engage with and utilize blue spaces as health-enabling. Informed by empirical and participatory fieldwork with surfing and sea swimming groups, we explore embodied and emotional experiences while researching directly within blue space. Given a focus on health and well-being, we identify different dimensions of how surfers and swimmers narrate those experiences while directly immersed in water during a sport/recreational activity. Such questions resonate with geographical thinking around phenomenology, active relational geographies, embodiment, emotion, and sport and leisure practice. We use a broad health promotion or enabling spaces approach to capture different emotional and embodied accounts of immersions in blue space, recognizing that this capture is emergent in and from place.

Keywords

blue space, surf therapy, sea swimming, embodiment, Ireland

Introduction

This article considers the ways in which different recreational users engage with and utilize blue spaces as health-enabling (Duff, 2011). Informed by empirical

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and participatory fieldwork with surfing and sea swimming groups, we compare and contrast embodied and emotional experiences encountered while researching directly within blue space that support human health and flourishing. Within that overall focus on uncovering health and well-being for surfers and swimmers, the ultimate aim is to explore different dimensions of how this is narrated by people who are directly immersed in water during a leisure sport/recreational activity (Wheaton et al., 2017). Such questions resonate with recent and older geographical thinking around phenomenology, relational geographies, embodiment, emotion, and sport and leisure practice (Andrews, 2016; Fullagar, 2019). In addition, we use a broad health promotion or enabling spaces approach to capture different emotional and embodied accounts of immersions in blue space, equally recognizing how this capture is emergent in and from place (Bell, Foley, et al., 2018).

In developing the topic, we explore this both from our own experiences as researchers and from other reflections from the edge of land and sea (Ryan, 2012). As Andrews (2016) suggests, how we capture a sense of what he terms “movement-space” in relation to sports geographies has equal resonance in how people recount their health and well-being within similar places and spaces (Bell, Leyshon, et al., 2018). We also align with a view of health and well-being that is focused partially on illness, but more fully on an enabling view of well-being, that incorporates elements of both subjective and psychological well-being (Caddick et al., 2015). Our research documents this by drawing on different aspects of embodiment and emotion, to research how swimmers and surfers describe those dimensions in their encounters with the sea (Bell, Foley, et al., 2018). The encounters emphasize how blue space both informs and produces knowledge that is fluid, dynamic, and influenced by temporal cycles of change, for example, diurnal, seasonal, lunar/tidal, climatic, and life-course. This in turn emphasizes how place shapes the parallel fluid and cyclical social practices of surfing, swimming, and being in the sea (Bell, Foley, et al., 2018) to better understand the swell and calm of our own health and well-being. In particular, it is the specifically immersive nature of surfing and swimming that we focus on to see how blue space influences, shapes, and produces that well-being and how best to capture the articulation of those experiences (Anderson & Peters, 2014; Britton, 2018; Brown & Humberstone, 2015; Brown & Peters, 2018; Evers, 2015; Foley, 2015; Strandvad, 2018; Straughan, 2012; Throsby, 2013, 2015). Ultimately, what we propose is the idea of bodies as active subjects sensing place or, more broadly, as intimate sensors that have specifically affective capacities and potentials that in turn enable both physical and emotional health (Atkinson, 2019; Britton, 2019; Brown, 2019).

Literature Review

There is growing interest in how “blue space” or water environments operate as a therapeutic medium and how immersion in water influences our sense of

well-being and self-connection. As part of a wider “blue turn” in human geography, specific blue practices like surfing and swimming have emerged as important topics of research (Britton, 2019; Evers, 2015; Foley, Kearns, et al., 2019; Wheaton et al., 2017). Within wider writing on the sea, coasts, and the oceans and more specific research on health at the coast, surfing and swimming differ in having quite specifically immersive components (Anderson & Peters, 2014; Brown & Humberstone, 2015). However, there has been limited focus on how exactly that immersion works and the different elements within that immersion that shape our health and well-being. We also argue that an exploration of immersion is linked to theoretical arguments that shift from a static “being” to a more mobile and contingent “doing-in-the-world” perspective (Andrews, 2016; Andrews et al., 2014). Given that both activities require immersion in water, we also emphasize the role of the sea as shaping that immersion through its own very powerful non-human agency, to create an explicit “becoming” environment. Both swimming and surfing take place in coastal and tidal waters that are complex, unpredictable, and that contain perspectives and orientations to the world that are both vertical and horizontal, or in the tumble of a wave or a dive, both at the same time (Britton, 2018). In such settings, the capturing of the experience of place is constantly changing; we are also in a sense captives of place, giving over a certain embodied grounding to floating free and being at the mercy of mobile, more-than-human environments, currents, and flows (Andrews, 2016; Duff, 2011). Our research is interested in how bodies and feelings mediate and inform practice; how evaluations make sense of why such immersions matter; and how and why material dimensions of place shape specific and immediate immersive encounters (Britton, 2019). This shift to a form of in situ relational thinking is emerging in the literature, which is made possible by recent technological advances that open up access to record in-the-moment feelings and actions (Bell et al., 2017; Evers, 2015; lisahunter, 2018).

There is an increasing scholarship about surfing, in particular, that represents it as a watery, sensory, and relational experience (Anderson, 2013; Britton, 2018, 2019; Evers, 2015; lisahunter, 2018; Olive, 2015; Wheaton, 2013). Furthermore, there is growing interest in how surfing can be used as a therapeutic and transformative medium and practice (Britton, 2018; Caddick et al., 2015; Wheaton et al., 2017). A systematic review identified surfing as the most frequently studied blue space therapeutic intervention in the literature (Britton, Kindermann, et al., 2018). Some identified health benefits were linked to the challenging nature of surfing: different coasts, winds, currents, and seasons requiring constant adaptation. Although the mechanisms of how surf therapy contributes to well-being are not yet fully understood, the literature does suggest that learning to surf in a group context can help enhance a sense of belonging and identity through shared experiences in the surf (Godfrey et al., 2015; Hignett et al., 2017). In addition and central to any discussion of health and well-being is the

importance of immersion in producing a sense of “respite” from everyday and acquired anxieties and disabilities (Marshall et al., 2019; Wheaton et al., 2017). Caddick et al. (2015) document this specifically with a group of former combatants dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), who are engaged in surfing programs. In addition, Wheaton et al.’s (2017) review identified strongly positive developmental and health/well-being aspects of surfing programs associated with the capacity-building potential of lifestyle sports that can challenge more instrumental and structured sports programs. Yet, they and others note that such surfing sites and experiences are also contested (Lazarow & Olive, 2017). For example, a separate U.K. study of youths with social behavioral problems noted the social norms that can persist around watersports and surfing with youth from lower income backgrounds feeling socially and culturally excluded (Hignett et al., 2017). Although limited, studies are emerging that go beyond the action of surfing and point to the particular nature or quality of our interactions with water and waves (Iisahunter, 2018). The establishment of the International Surf Therapy Organization (ISTO) in 2017 was largely in response to a growing demand for evidence-based interventions in the sea to better understand the health-promoting mechanisms and qualities of surfing, providing further evidence for the therapeutic potential of the sea.

Similarly, research on swimming, especially linked to a wider relational health, is still under-developed. Much of the research has grounding in sport and leisure geographies, with a focus on physiology and psychology, including articles on performance, endurance, and specific bodily changes when exposed to cold water (Dugué & Leppänen, 2010). Within a recent systematic review of therapeutic blue space interventions, swimming was all but absent, suggesting a mismatch between its established popularity and current research approaches (Britton, Kindermann, et al., 2018). A second strand has a more environmental health component (equally relevant to surfers), around water quality and health risks associated with exposure to polluted waters, indoor and outdoor, for leisure users (Foley, 2015; Leonard et al., 2018; Ward, 2017, 2017) and has used oral history research with Irish coastal swimmers to uncover the different ways older swimmers use sea swimming as a lifelong resource to manage physical and mental health. In the United Kingdom, recent research has explored specific trends such as “wild swimming” and informal swimming communities to propose renewed attention to the role of blue nature to health and well-being (Atkinson, 2019; Denton, 2018). As Atkinson (2019, p. 193) notes, we need to pay attention to immersion in water as a medium not given for human life but one where our senses become heightened. This is reflected in other research that, while not directly focused on swimming, explores more embodied and kinaesthetic understandings of how well-being emerges from everyday sport and leisure practices (Iisahunter, 2018; Spinney, 2015; Wheaton et al., 2017). Both Spinney and Iisahunter talk explicitly about the immediately sensed and in-the-moment experience of cycling and surfing, respectively, that helps make

sense, through the senses, of a physically active well-being practice in place, something also emerging slowly in swimming research (Denton, 2018; Foley, 2017).

The article also mines other broad strands of health and well-being literature. First, a strong experimental evidence base for the value of natural spaces is found in health promotion and environmental psychology work on attention restoration, stress reduction, and nature connection (Frumkin, 2003; Hartig, 2003; Hartig et al., 2014; Korpela et al., 2008; White et al., 2010). Typically working in controlled environments using measurable instruments, the research identifies numeric evidence for the value of being present and active in natural blue spaces, especially in relation to leisure practices (Bell et al., 2017; Gidlow et al., 2016; Korpela et al., 2014). Harri (2018) identifies nature and social disconnect as two of seven “lost connections” in society today; any initiatives that promote an increased and autonomous use of the sea as a health-enabling resource should be encouraged. Two of the surfing/swimming programs evaluated in this article also draw on some instrumental approaches though these will be reported elsewhere as part of the findings of the NEAR-Health project (Britton et al., 2020; NEAR-Health, 2020).

As a second strand, health/medical geographers are increasingly exploring aspects of flow, therapeutic accretion, and affect/emotion, central to recent work on therapeutic landscapes (Bell et al., 2018). Parallel work explores specific links between health and blue space, with an explicit focus on “health at the coast” (Kearns & Collins, 2012; Wheeler et al., 2012). A recent Irish study identified proximity to, and a view of the sea, as being associated with reduced depression scores in older adults (Dempsey et al., 2018). As Wheaton et al. (2017) note, the idea of respite also links strongly to the idea of ebb/flow, both in relation to the varying well-being states that force us to seek respite and also the specific role of respite as time out/away from everyday stresses and strains. In addition, there is a cyclical component common to the settings for much of this blue space work, containing both human (aches and pains, chronic conditions, rehabilitation) and non-human (tide, wave, wind, sand) elements. Overall, the literature suggests the need to develop sensory narratives for blue space research that investigates the coming together of bodies, emotions, and blue space practices in the fluid environment of the sea. Linked to this, critical self-reflections and accounts on experiences and experiments with various approaches, tools and technologies, including in situ methodologies like geo-narratives or swim-alongs, are increasingly used (Bell et al., 2017; Denton, 2018). These are very directly linked to the immediacy of bodies and minds in place and how these in turn capture, and perhaps equally importantly, store health and well-being within specific blue settings.

How health and well-being outcomes emerge in blue space are, in our research, framed around a number of sub-themes that emerge from the literature. We understand health as multidimensional. Health and well-being in the

context of this article are framed by how swimmers and surfers perceive feeling healthy, being well, and experiencing a sense of well-being. The themes around well-being that emerged in this study largely focus on emotional well-being, how people feel in place, as well as a sense of personal growth and meaningfulness (Pritchard et al., 2019). A relational understanding of well-being is also emphasized (White et al., 2010) which acknowledges the influence of our relationship with place on our well-being. That said, physical aspects of health and wellness (e.g., recovery from injury, increased immunity) also emerge in how people describe their experiences of immersion. In considering sensing bodies, surfing and swimming are shared practices that tease out wellness benefits through a very direct engagement in blue space that additionally consider relationships between risk and safety. In relation to sensing emotions, specifically narrated benefits for mental health emerge through both individual and communal practices that have additional intergenerational components. Finally, in considering the places in which swimming and surfing are practiced, different material and more-than-human dimensions directly shape relational health and well-being outcomes.

Method and Settings

We present comparative empirical sensory, ethnographic, and embodied accounts (Pink, 2015) drawn from specific research projects both authors have carried out with surfers (E.B.) and swimmers (E.B., R.F.). This research included attuned work with a range of different user groups and individuals, including old and young people with disabilities and impairments, to uncover unique yet also typical accounts and representations. In this article, our approach combined in situ ethnographic participation with in-depth narrative interviews with a mix of participants including swimmers, surfers, parents, and instructors.

In situ methodologies included swim-along, informal and group interviews, observant participation, field diaries, and embodiment practices including sensory and body mapping with participants. Go-along or swim/surf-along interviews were used to allow for closer insights and for experiences to be described and contextualized in participant's own words as sensations arose in place. Bell refers to this style of interviewing as "emplaced interviews" (Bell, Hollenbeck, et al., 2019, p. 5). We use the term "observant participation" (Smith, 2019, p. 5) in contrast to participant observation as both authors immersed themselves in place over time, actively engaging in swimming and surfing activities. As Smith (2019) points out, methodological approaches where researchers are both observer and participant are not without issues. However, they allowed for sensitivity and valuable insights into how participants sense place, especially haptic elements (Bell et al., 2018; Bell, Leyshon, & Phoenix, 2019; Smith, 2019), as well as helping to build rapport and a temporal understanding of place effects.

In choosing to use such methodologies, we argue that these are effective approaches to uncover differential accounts around how people feel in place or build up to and wind down from a swim or surf; how the acts of immersion relate to other parts of their lives; as well as inform and shape their health and well-being. These are also linked to bodies, minds, and technologies in place and how these are directly involved in capturing health and well-being within specific blue settings; working around haptic elements, senses, body parts, different tools and technologies (e.g., wetsuits, surfboards, and swim buoys), and more elusive and slippery experiences and felt responses. In-depth inductive analyses applied multiple lenses—relational, temporal, sensory, and spatial—to situate participants' immersive experiences in diverse settings and contexts (e.g., material, emotional, social, and environmental). In the process themes emerged that suggest that being in water requires us to consider how a sensory response through our bodies and emotions and within specific place materialities, including the more-than-human, can provide a useful foundation for health and well-being (DeLyser et al., 2010).

From a methodological learning perspective, although engaging with the sea cannot be easily or neatly captured (lisahunter, 2018), the active and in situ nature of the project was helpful in critically considering how immersive the work could really be. The study incorporated methods attuned to context across place, time, and social practice (lisahunter & emerald, 2016). It also used a narrative approach with an emphasis on sensory/embodied experiences backed up by field observation. It highlighted the importance of the role of reflexivity within methodological choices and “how much of the rich texture of life is omitted from the static measurement of wellbeing” (Smith, 2019, p. 10). It has also been the case that such “insider” research styles are already prevalent in surfing and swimming work (Britton, 2019; Evers, 2015; lisahunter, 2018; Wheaton et al., 2017). The longitudinal aspect of the surf program showed up the value of field notes. Learning what did and did not work in uncontrollable near-oceanic locations was an important element of geographical work and provided useful evidence to better understand how aspects of waves and weather shaped how blue space data could be or was gathered, within which flexible contingent and work-around responses proved both necessary and educationally useful.

Blue Space Settings and Participants

Sea swimming.

Open water swimming is in an invigorating experience and creates an amazingly positive link between exercise and emotion. (Ebb and Flow webpage, 2018)

The empirical material used in the paper on sea swimming was drawn from two sources. One of the authors (Foley) has been researching swimming histories

and contemporary practices at a range of sea swimming spots around the Irish coast. Locations included the 40 Foot in Dublin, the Guillemene, Tramore (Co. Waterford) and the Pollock Holes in Kilkee (Co. Clare), and a fourth site used by the other author (Britton), for her research with swimmers at Blackrock, Salthill (Co. Galway). All of the locations have established histories as seaside resorts and as liminal locations for holidays and a break from everyday life. Almost all have developed “swimming infrastructures,” such as ladders, changing shelters, and diving boards that in some cases are unchanged for several centuries. These locations attract informal groups of swimmers who swim regularly together as supportive communities, as well as those who may be trying it for the first time. In the case of Foley’s work, he interviewed and carried out observer participation with regular and experienced swimming communities across the first three named sites, with a cohort of 25 older swimmers (average age, 64 with a range from early 30s to late 80s) between 2014 and 2017. The questions were semi-structured and open-ended and explored swimming beginnings, lifelong practices, preferences, who they swam with, and any reported health and well-being outcomes:

Swimmers may feel confident in the swimming pool yet nervous and fearful at the thoughts of swimming in a large expanse of water. (Swim Buddies website, 2018)

The Swim Buddies’ Ebb and Flow (referred to as “Flow”) open water swimming program takes place at Blackrock in Salthill. Unlike the swim groups in Foley’s work, this was a more formal practice aimed at adults who wanted to transition from indoor pool swimming to the sea. These organized open water sessions were seasonal from May to September, with a swim “term” running for 6 weeks. Swim sessions lasted approximately 1 hr with 40 participants in the regular weekly sessions and an additional 10 to 15 drop-ins throughout the season. The average age of participants was 44, ranging from 28 to over 60 years of age. Although the program was formally organized and seasonal, it acted as an important “gateway” for many by providing mentoring and an opportunity for those who were new to open water sea swimming to connect with a community of swimmers. It was observed that many of the swimmers who joined Flow created or joined informal groups to continue swimming year-round. These sessions at Blackrock were also frequented by many other regular and visiting swimmers coming and going. Britton participated in sea swim sessions throughout the summers of 2017 and 2018, actively observing group dynamics, recording field notes, and carrying out informal, group, and swim-along interviews. This research was carried out alongside Britton’s work with a national research project on nature connection called NEAR-Health (NEAR-Health, 2019). Each sea swim session included safety crew supervision and lead swimming coaches in the water to guide and instruct. The Flow team focused on what they called “The Swimmer’s Journey” and integrated elements of mindfulness

training and breathing exercises to prepare swimmers for the open water. Participants were assigned to one of three groups depending on their ability (beginner, intermediate, experienced); each swimming out to buoys that were spread out at different distances in the water. The aim was to help people understand the properties of water and the sea and provide them with personalized practical tools to feel comfortable in the sea through a mindful approach.

Surf therapy. Liquid therapy (LT) is a non-profit organization tapping into the sea and surfing to tackle mental health issues, and the surrounding stigma, by providing surf therapy programs for young people with disabilities. The 2-hr surf lessons with 12 youths with mild Autism Spectrum Disorder including Asperger's syndrome (aged 8–17) took place at Rosstown beach in County Donegal every week for 8 weeks from July to August 2017 with a follow-up session in July 2018. At each session, participants were invited to share their goals before entering the surf for an hour. LT's surf lessons differed from typical mainstream lessons in that they provided a one-to-one ratio with a volunteer instructor for every participant in the group, allowing the experience to be adapted for each child and their goals, rather than groups with only one instructor. LT believes that the personal inter-relationship between the ocean, the surfboard, and the instructor are important for the overall experience. XX attended the surf sessions every other week observing, informally interviewing parents and volunteers, carrying out semi-structured interviews with practitioners, facilitating body-mapping exercises at periodic intervals with the surfers throughout the study period and, on occasion, actively participating in surf lessons.

As XX's work was part of a larger project on nature connection, the semi-structured and open-ended questions with the swim and surf groups explored values and motivations in relation to health and nature (including the sea), social practices, and any self-reported health and well-being outcomes. In addition, parents, volunteers, and instructors were also asked questions in relation to their health and well-being experiences as well as any changes observed in the participants. The mechanisms (including the qualities of the program, setting, etc.) that enabled some of these outcomes to be realized were also explored.

Findings: Immersion as a Route to Wellness

This section reports on the empirical findings to explore the relational processes and place connections that drove how both the authors and participants experienced their immersion in natural blue space. From the accounts, a sense of place emerged that was fluid and dynamic, influenced by biosocial cycles of change that shaped different senses of self and well-being, or "being-ness." What emerged were both the slow cyclical movement of the seasons and the sudden effect of rain, the change in wind direction or speed, or the reappearance of the sun from behind a cloud. Preference for place was influenced by these

more-than-human relationships, especially so in the decision-making and choice of blue space encounter for surfers and swimmers (Bell et al., 2018). Despite this, there has been a surprising lack of inclusion of natural ephemera, weather conditions, or elemental states in blue space studies (Bell, Leyshon, & Phoenix, 2019b; Britton, Kindermann, et al., 2018; lisahunter, 2018). This is just one example, a background hum if you like, of the immersive thinking that shaped our work. The remainder of this section is organized around three broad themes, reflecting the literature and methodologies that were central to our explorations of immersion and sensing bodies.

Embodiment was central to that articulation, representative of a set of feeling bodies captured by place. Those sensing bodies reflected aspects of breath, touch, and the very physical requirements of movement required in surfing and swimming and provided accounts of relational selves captured in place and through the developing “know-how” of practical and tacit knowledge and skills (Brown, 2019). They also reflected the equally real and physical dimensions of safety and risk, with key aspects of the work aligned with promoting and enabling safe and healthy blue space practice. A second section focuses on sensing emotions and how feeling, emotions, and mental health were identified as a direct and sometime indirect benefit of immersive practice. These ranged from an emphasis on recovery and respite but also other aspects of strengthening and enhanced self-esteem. A final section on sensing place materialities focused on the material and more than human dimensions of surfing/swimming place to provide an account of how place capture occurred, but equally how immersion was made possible through the social environment, technologies, and supportive others. Such place materialities, including the weather effects/affects noted above, were important features of repeat engagements within both the programmatic and open parts of the research. While there are very individual accounts of the health and well-being benefits, direct and oblique, we would argue that there are considerable and surprising commonalities arising out of those accounts. The value of swimming and surfing emerges from both physical activity and mental relaxation consistent with wider green/blue space accounts of nature engagements (Bell et al., 2017). Hearing these recounted “from the water” did, however, deepen those understandings and provide some new knowledge on exactly how specific benefits arose for both individuals and groups within specific blue spaces.

Sensing Bodies

In considering how the sensing body accesses health and well-being through immersion, there were a number of accounts that emerged in these in-between spaces that talked about letting go of control and allowing the self to be captured by the water. For the Flow swimmers, the crossing over from land into sea meant replacing a sometimes indoor man-made water body with an open water

body; swimmers spoke of how immersion in the sea could help give them a new perspective:

I just recently returned to swimming in the sea. I haven't swam in it since I was a child. I preferred the security and containment of the pool, until now. I used to swim competitively when I was younger. I still swim in the pool a bit but it's just for the exercise, it's boring. The sea is different. It makes you feel different. (Swimmer, female, 2017)

This ability to “let go” can be challenging for some:

The people that have control issues are probably the ones that struggle the most in the sea. The ability to let go is so abhorrent to them, I think, but once they overcome that it's huge, it's very visible in them. (Swim instructor, female, 2018)

The notion of being “elsewhere” or removed from the everyday world was persistent for surfing too, moving not only from a terrestrial place to a watery place but also moving from the “head” and into the body:

It allows the kids a bit of respite from their own heads and everything else that goes on in the rest of the world. When you're out there all you're focusing on is what's going on, you don't think about anything else. (Surf instructor, female, 2018)

For the older swimmers, that sense of letting go was also important with one swimmer aware of a sense of being reminded that the water is more in control than you are noting,

it's very difficult to explain...it's just like you...I listen to my body...that's rather nice. (Swimmer, 40 Foot)

The importance of an embodied sensory experience was observed with frequent comments from swimmers noticing changes in temperature and light or seabed habitats changing from sandy to rocky to seaweed, or changes in color or texture of surface of the water as they swam further out. Particular qualities of water, especially the power/energy of waves, the feeling of waves breaking over the body, or the sensation of water pressure on the skin/body, were commented on. The importance of these specific qualities of water and waves was especially apparent for one child with Asperger's syndrome who experienced anxiety. During a surf session, she commented on how the smack of the waves on the beach sounded like thunder. Although thunder scared her, waves excited her. She had poor vision without her glasses in the surf and explained how she “sees” the world through sound, “like a bat.” She compared her sensory experience of the world and her ability to “read” her environment to that of a bat, “I can feel

it in my body.” Surfing for her was a deeply psychosomatic experience allowing her to feel and interpret sounds in her body. During a body-mapping exercise on the beach, which used body sensations to describe feelings (Fullagar, 2019), the young surfers shared the meaning of what they had drawn on their body map (Britton, in press). Butterflies drawn in the sand on the belly represented both excitement and nervousness. Some described tension in necks, shoulders, or arms with zig-zag lines or crosses. Wavy lines illustrated tingling sensations in the body; others described cold hands or feet. These psychosomatic and bodily changes were noted by surf instructors:

You see them before they go in the water and then you see them in the water how different they are. It [surfing] allows them to be a different person in the water than they are on land. [. . .] He was just standing there like this (arms crossed), super scared and then we went into the water and it was just a completely different world. He was completely relaxed and having fun, just pure fun. (Surf volunteer, female, 2018)

The importance of a multisensory experience was also evident in mediating diverse relationships with the more-than-human world with some of the children enjoying the sensation of speed being on the surfboard and experiencing the air rushing by them or putting their hands in the water as they rode a wave.

Another embodied dimension that emerged across the sea swimming projects was the increased and necessary sensory attunement to breath and breathing, something that was central in the immersive act and which will be illustrated in later quotes. A central component of land-based mindfulness practice, the respondents identified this element as being enhanced in the water, where good breathing practices were both essential and learnt through the program. The instinct to challenge and stretch the body, enabled specifically by the program design of Ebb & Flow, was equally observable in the (auto)ethnographic work too, as was a sense of a specifically emplaced new-found bodily confidence.

Interesting narratives also emerged from oral histories around the role of swimming as a maintainer of health (“a regular shower of wellness”), a restorer of health (“getting back to health”), and sometimes also as a reducer of health (through colds or accidents). The act of stress reduction was mental and physical; applicable to mood and emotion, but also to the literal physical pressures on the body. Both of the quotes below attest to the power of blue space to enable swimmers in those different ways:

The only time I don’t limp is when I’m in the water. (Swimmer, male, 40 Foot)

If you miss the swim, you’re miserable, you feel there’s something not right . . . and you’re moaning and moaning but I feel now as if I could walk up the mountain, no problem, because of the swim. (Swimmer, male, 40 Foot)

Embodiments were diverse and mediated by level of skill, regularity of immersion, and familiarity with place. The rhythms of waves, swim stroke, and the interaction (assemblage) of place, activity, and body contribute to a, “feeling of taking part in, or belonging to, something productive, caring and larger than the individual” (Smith, 2019, p. 9). For example at Blackrock, experienced swimmers swam further out along swim buoys whereas intermediate and novice swimmers stayed in shallower water for their initial sessions, focusing on body movement, breath, and technique before moving into open water. For some, moving beyond their comfort zone and overcoming fears boosted confidence for the rest of the day, as one novice male swimmer commented, “you get to know and feel yourself differently.” This feeling was echoed by a more experienced female swimmer, “You can face the day, whatever is going to be thrown at you, after a swim.” This was often further bolstered by a sense of social support, shared experience, and connection to the more-than-human, for example, having someone to swim with or the feeling of “being in a pod of dolphins” (novice swimmer, female, 2017). Bell, Leyshon, and Phoenix (2019, p. 5) refer to this as a “weather imprint” or feel-good factor after immersion.

More recent work on coastal swimming picks up on that quite personalized effect, linked to how individuals negotiate the swimming spaces and their own practices as well (Denton, 2018). It is precisely the embodied and immersive feeling of being in the water that helps people, and while talked about lightly, it was an important and different dimension, especially when set against wider research on the mental health value of coastal proximity and sea-view, that takes people away—positively—from everyday stresses and strains and provides meaningful respite.

Sensing Emotions

Throsby (2013) argues that experiences mediate sensations and that regular immersion alters how these experiences feel over time. The sea takes on different meanings depending on life-stage; as Foley (2018) emphasizes, our bodies and bodily relations with places change over time. A swimmer described her changing “felt” relationship with sea swimming over the course of her life, highlighting the loss of sensory perception that can come from time spent out of the water and the “shock” re-entry into that world can bring. This shock can equally present an opportunity for a deeper reconnection:

I went back to swimming because it was very intense at home caring for parents with dementia and rheumatoid arthritis, and it sometimes becomes too much. [...] I swam a lot and when I had my daughter, I took a break from it. I stopped for years. This time last year my friend rang me and asked if I wanted to go for a swim. It was April, so it was still very cold. I got an awful shock to my system and I started to panic. I started shaking on the beach and I thought, ‘I can’t let this beat

me.’ So the next day I went back in and built it up. Two months later, I was doing the prom[enade] swims. I’ve swam nearly every day since. (Home-carer, female, Salthill, 2017)

The above quote illustrates how feeling “comfortable” in a setting is not a permanent state and that our relationship with place is in flux throughout the life-course (Foley, 2018). Emotions and feelings of anxiety and being overwhelmed were not uncommon among “new” or even more experienced swimmers, especially when experiencing a sudden sensory stimulation, body sensation, or new movements in an unpredictable and ever-changing fluid environment of the sea.

Given everyday and sustained pressures of work, family, and other life events, respondents identified the coast as always having been a place of escape and temporary respite, a place to improve concentration and revive minds (Wheeler et al., 2012). This applies also to people, young and old, who often struggle in everyday life with mental health problems and as a space to get away from oneself and indeed others, an element identified in the accounts:

Well I do know quite a few people who swim at the 40 Foot who have sort of mental illness . . . depressions really and quite a few of those people say they find swimming really beneficial. They often come down and swim and come out and don’t really engage or talk to other people and some of the others say; oh they’re unfriendly or a bit odd. But I think that’s fine. I do talk to one person I know and they say they just like to go into the water and it’s like a little rest or a treatment for them. (Swimmer, female. 40 Foot)

For all swimmers and surfers, there was also a well-developed sense of how to balance aspects of risk and safety in the water. In most cases, the narratives had a specific health and well-being component in considering how to turn a potentially risky practice into an enabling one, often by emphasizing the interrelationship between body-mind-place, for example, Flow’s philosophy and embodied and mindful learning approach, “Relax, let go, flow.” The instructors described flow as not letting environmental conditions dictate your emotional state. Instead, it was about bringing awareness of the environment into your body by focusing on the feeling of each movement, not distance or speed. The emphasis was on staying present and aware of the body in response to conditions, swell, current by using breath, relaxing and releasing tension, or simply put, meeting the water where you are at:

It’s getting them to change their mindset, to understand that you’re dealing with the ocean and it’s forever changing and your emotions are forever changing and you have to deal with those things first. It’s not even about swimming. (Swim instructor, 2018)

Creating a safe environment and listening to each other's experiences were key factors in fostering an (health) enabling environment:

Speaking to the person first of all, understanding their fears and limits, really helps before we ever get into the water. We do a lot of breath work on land and in the sea and again that calms. We keep them in a safe environment until they feel more comfortable. (Swim instructor, 2018)

It was evident that immersion in water informed and shaped one's sense of connection through bodily sensations, which could change building up to, during, and after immersion; such as physical appearance and how swimmers held themselves before they entered the water and how their energy might light up after a swim:

If you want an indicator for how this works—I was feeling shit at 6am when I got up and hadn't swam in weeks because I had an infection. Now look at me, I'm buzzing! (Swimmer, male, 2017)

Preparing for immersion often required developing an awareness of place through direct contact/embodiment practices, such as breathing exercises or observing the sea conditions (tide, wind, size of waves) from the beach before swimming or surfing. General group mood at the start was often one of mixed feelings, with a sense of excitement and nervousness, or even fear and anxiety, though the preparatory exercises were also important mechanisms to create an enabling environment and produce a potentially transformative experience:

It's one of the things we always say, every swim is different. You have to learn to be versatile and adapt. [...] and not to panic when they get into the water. That's why it's really important to breathe beforehand. And to give them that information about what the environment is doing, the tide is moving this way, the wind direction is coming from here, what is the visibility like so they are prepared. They're aware of their environment and what's happening. (Founder, swim instructor, 2018)

However, not all experiences were "positive" or safe. Despite best intentions to create an inclusive and enabling environment, barriers to participation and adverse effects were also evident in a systematic review of therapeutic blue space interventions (Britton, Kindermann, et al., 2018), highlighting the complexity of these experiences. In this study, some struggled to overcome their fears and expressed frustration when unable to relax out of their depth. Feelings of tiredness "all-over" were reported by some surfers in a body-mapping exercise after surfing, although this was usually combined with a more positive desire to go back into the sea, "My body feels all floppy, but happy" (surfer, 11, female, 2018). However, one boy felt disappointed that he did not meet his expectations

that day and felt low saying, “that’s just how it goes.” A further barrier identified by surf instructors and volunteers was expectation, “It’s expectation. The expectation doesn’t come from us, it doesn’t come from the ocean, or the child, it comes from society” (LT founder, surf instructor, 2018). This can be compounded in a society where access to media depicting popular culture and homogenized version of surfing is widespread (Olive, 2015). An LT volunteer explained how, “They can see it on TV and they don’t see people falling off their surfboards. [. . .] They say, ‘no, I want to do what they do on Home and Away.’”

Discussions about immersive experiences emphasized a holistic and multi-dimensional understanding of health and well-being with participants describing a mix of physical, emotional, and social outcomes. Examples of physical benefits included how immersion gave a “boost of energy,” improved a knee injury or circulation, or reduced the likelihood of falling ill. Interestingly, on no occasion did anyone state “getting fit” as a reason for doing it. Emotional support came from the more-than-human world with feelings of “being closer to nature,” feeling relaxed or calm, and how being in the sea, “clears my head.” Social aspects included connecting with like-minded people and a sense of camaraderie. Although there were common threads and universal experiences, as Dunkley states, “There are a plurality of ways of being well in the world” (Dunkley, 2018, p. 10). We were struck by the mix of emotions and motivations expressed as well as the openness to be vulnerable and express these feelings, the good and the bad, and to share fears. It was suggested in many comments that immersion was a coping mechanism for mental health:

It’s not about the speed or distance for me, it’s about just letting it all flow. To get rid of the stress. And it works. I could pay a 100 euro a week and I wouldn’t get the same benefit from a psychologist. And I know that. (Swimmer, female, 2017)

Pitt suggests that physical distance from our everyday lives and routines can “reinforce mental distance from stresses and offer therapeutic place experiences” (Pitt, 2014, p. 88). Furthermore, this ability to go beyond the habitual and discover different ways of being and acting can create openness to other possibilities (Atkinson & Scott, 2015, p. 78). Similarly, Straughan noted with diving, “water is an antidote or antithesis of terrestrial living” (Straughan, 2012, p. 24). This is illustrated by a swimmer describing the stress-relieving qualities of being immersed:

Just grabbing your gear bag and going out for a swim and sometimes having a bit of a cry, whatever. When you come back in you’re better. The stress is gone. (Swimmer, female, 2017)

Similar to visually impaired participants in the outdoors (Bell, Leyshon, & Phoenix, 2019), water encounters provided a container and lens to communicate

challenging life experiences. This literal perspective shift afforded by the ability to float on ones back and look upward at the sky, while feeling weightless, can allow for a greater sense of embodiment and letting go, as one swimmer described:

A very close friend of mine got sick . . . I would go out and lie on my back and look up at the sky and just release the tension. (Swimmer, female, 2017)

Sensing Place Materialities

Beyond the discussion of sensing bodies and the identified physical and mental benefits felt by those bodies, swimming and surfing took place within a set of materialities and material encounters that also shaped health and well-being. Those encounters also engaged with and used a number of more-than-human components, including natural and specific built environments as well as associated technologies/objects. The latter incorporated wetsuits, surfboards, swim buoys, and so on that mediated and informed practice. Such technological supports helped participants develop the skills, resources, and confidence to adapt to a new place or enable longer immersions.

The wetsuit is often a source of ridicule among “hard-core” swimmers who swim year-round in swimsuits or “skins.” However, wetsuits increase duration in the water and provide additional warmth and support for those who need it, particularly those with health-related issues linked to greater risk in cold water, for example, diabetes, low blood pressure, and poor circulation. During the Flow swim sessions, everyone wore wetsuits, though at the end of the session a few participants would take off their wetsuits and return to the sea to “cool down” and better feel the sea on their skin. Wetsuits also mediated experiences of surfing for differently abled bodies. For some participants, especially those with autism, feeling the pressure of the wetsuit on their bodies can be a positive sensation. For others, getting in and out of one can be a major obstacle, in particular for those who are wheelchair-bound or for children who are non-verbal and first-time wearers. Nevertheless, thicker wetsuits have enabled LT to run surf sessions later into the year in colder water and for the participants to spend longer in the water before getting cold.

The surfboard also plays a key role in shaping and informing experiences of place and practice, acting as the medium through which the surfer experiences the wave. Although for some, it is not necessary to experience the benefits of immersion:

We notice that with a lot of kids. That they’ll hop off the surfboards and completely immerse themselves in the water. Lie down and just want to be in it. (Surf instructor, female, 2018)

For LT practitioners, the surfboard is a versatile tool that can enable one-to-one connection between surfer and instructor and a sense of autonomy/skill as the child rides the wave by herself to the shore. The usefulness of the “tool” depends on the context and whether the environment is an enabling one or not:

I think it would be very different in a group capacity (not with one-to-one volunteers), it could be a negative. If you just handed them the board and left them to themselves. It's that personal relationship between the ocean the surfboard and the instructor that matters. (LT founder, male, 2018)

In a study of physical and leisure activities at coastal sites in Ireland, lack of facilities/infrastructure was cited as one of the key barriers to participation (Williams & Ryan, 2004). At swim sites, material infrastructure greatly mediated the experience of place and “place capture,” for example, steps and a ramp into the sea, diving boards, showers, and sheltered changing areas. The installation of summer swim buoys along the coast at Blackrock has been recognized internationally for its impact in attracting and encouraging greater numbers of people to swim in the sea, thereby promoting the health-enabling benefits of immersion in blue space. Although the swim buoys might help encourage participation, paying attention to and commenting on other life in the water, rather than focusing on the next distance marker was a regular occurrence during swim sessions. These interactions with the more-than-human greatly influenced how people became captured by place.

Anderson (2013) argues that waves or swells are the movement of energy given a material shape and form. Learning to read the patterns of waves and swells is an essential part of navigating the Swimmer/Surfer's Journey. Some swimmers expressed a preference for “wavyness,” the feeling of the body being lifted and swayed and the slap of wavelets against the face, while others showed a preference for still, calm surface that allowed their bodies to cut smoothly through the water in a streamlined way. Similarly, for surfers, the relationship with waves is constantly evolving as the surfers progressed from the “white-water zone” of broken, foamy waves in shallower waters to beyond the breakers and experiencing the sensation of “dropping into” a “green wave” before the wave's peak fully curls over and breaks. Each level of immersion offers different bodily sensations. The tides also influenced preferences for particular settings often dictating the time swimmers and surfers preferred to go into the sea. For example, some swimmers preferred higher tides that allowed an immediate sense of immersion when stepping off a pier. For the surfers, a lower tide meant more beach space was available where some of the children could take breaks playing in the sand between catching waves. As a form of body-mindfulness (Britton, 2019), Flow instructors encouraged novice sea swimmers to notice the change in the current pulling the body along on the way out and pushing against the body on the way back. On returning to surfing for the first time since last year, one of

the young surfers licked his lips and commented how he had missed the saltiness of the sea.

Discussion

The research exemplified how the idea of an immersive place capture worked in multiple ways; not always fixed or exclusive, but through explicit moments of connection with self, others, and the non-human. In addition, the centrality of being in-the-body in-place was productive of a very specific type of well-being and empowerment. Such moments of connections were important to people who would have felt otherwise disconnected, yet both the swimming and surfing programs equally acted as forms of informal support, operating at both individual and communal levels. Similar to Throsby (2013, p. 15), for many sea swimmers immersion was an, “opportunity to have a sense of identity detached from others.” While immersed in the water, they were no longer identified by their life circumstances: bereaved, divorced, unemployed, or a stay-at-home parent whose children had left home. While the shared identity of the group and separation from everyday life created a sense of belonging and being at these sites of immersion, it should be noted that the separation between terrestrial and aquatic experiences of place is porous/permeable with “spillover effects” evident in other aspects of life (Britton, 2019):

It also strips away . . . when you take away the clothes that they wear and the jobs that they have, they’re all there together in that shared experience so it doesn’t really matter what you do or where you come from, you still have to face that [fear] and you face that together. (Founder & swim instructor, 2018)

This coming together does not happen in a vacuum. The structure of the swim and surf programs allowed for the creation of a place of shared experience, in a safe setting “It does strip all that [fear] away. We just created a safe environment for you to be able to do that” (Swim instructor, 2018). Stronger bonds formed as a result and it was as much about community-building and camaraderie as it was nature connection and being healthy.

As another key dimension of place capture associated with surfing/swimming at the coast, the idea of transformation was important. In letting the surfer/swimmer be captured into the literal control of the sea, they had to employ their own capacities, physical and mental; it became essential to transform to survive and enjoy the experience. It has not been surprising to see long-distance swimming emerge as a new sport in which the stretching of human endurance and the transformative capacities of the body are regularly tested out. Swimming and surfing emerged from the research as transformative practices, especially in relation to bodies without full capacities, both physical and mental. A mother whose son was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome and is struggling to find support in

the education and health care system explained how, “Surfing is where he feels most himself.”

Equally, while the projects emphasized positive dimensions of sea swimming and surfing, inherent all through was a sense of other more contested and negative outcomes, described by Conradson (2005) as “differential imbrications” in generally therapeutic settings. As Throsby (2015, p. 159) notes, “The sea is commonly represented as a place of risk and danger.” Similarly, we rarely experience the sea through ourselves alone and there are other material elements, beachside signs, notice boards, and media representations that remind us about risky behaviors and safety-first practices in the water. These tap more fully into discussion around behaviors at the beach, wherein Walton and Shaw (2017) in a study of Australian beach behaviors recognize a tension in what people should and want to do, reflecting how psychotherapeutic geographies and different dimensions of control, shape that encounter, including more-than-human encounters with dangerous swells, jagged rocks and risky marine life (Gibbs & Warren, 2015). Developing thinking around control and freedom, in particular the need to behave responsibly and the dignity of risk, points to some interesting future debates. Those learned aspects of water connection can move through generations, and Britton (2019, p. 99) refers to this intergenerational water connection as “blue heritage.” However, the same is true for negative experiences and several parents of children participating in the surf therapy program commented that they did not like the sea. One mother linked her inability to swim to a negative experience in her childhood but she didn’t want her son to have her fear so during her pregnancy, she went to the swimming pool and he’s always loved the water. In this way, there is a relational immersion that is always shaped by individualized responses and experiences, often negative, but which some of the shared programs we describe here help to mitigate and overcome.

In extending the impact of being captured in and by the water, this seemed to be a significant and valuable outcome of the immersion leading to an improved “ethic of care around water” and recognition of the interconnection between a healthy environment and human health (Bell et al., 2018; Wyles et al., 2017). Practitioners and participants linked increased awareness of the environment with their level of immersion, “with sea swimming, we have a lot more people aware of the environment because you’re actually in it.” Immersion influenced perspective, emphasizing a visible and literal embodied and emotional entanglement with the ocean environment, explicitly mediated through this watery world (Britton, 2019). Such interconnections were difficult to ignore when one’s swimsuit becomes full of plastic, “We were on a swim trek in Greece last year and we saw more plastic than fish. It was in our togs, everywhere” (Swimmer, female, 2017). With the growing popularity of blue space activities such as sea swimming and surfing, and the recent trend in warmer summers, more visitors are drawn to the coast for their leisure and recreation. This influx of visitors, many

with a less developed sense of place care, causes tensions with resident groups who have an attachment to place through immersion:

The people that use it all the time are really good, and then they get pissed off. You can't deny someone, it's free space but how do you control it so that people pick up their own rubbish? (Swim instructor, 2018)

Exclusionary forces are also at play at coastal spaces with many feminist scholars writing about "processes of othering" and the role of socio-political narratives shaping beach use, access, norms, for example, whiteness, fatness, mobilities, ethnicities, and class (Britton, Olive, & Wheaton, 2018; Phoenix & Orr, 2014; Throsby & Evans, 2013; Wheaton, 2013). Although the swim program was aimed at adults, there were noticeably less youths (under 18 years) swimming at popular local swim sites throughout the study period, in particular teenage girls. One young swimmer in her 20s who grew up with the sea on her doorstep and swam her whole life recognized that proximity alone is not enough to get immersed, with many of her friends who also lived next to the sea never going into it. One swim participant and mother noted that there was more social pressure on girls regarding body image:

With kids now, I think there's a lot of body consciousness. On sunny days when my daughter went swimming, you didn't see a fat kid in a bikini.

Swim groups were predominantly White, able-bodied. With greater awareness of diverse barriers and needs, changes are happening. Flow swim practitioners have noted the need to create a more inclusive space and promote diversity and are working on a number of initiatives with local organizations to provide better wheelchair access and engage with the local Direct Provision center housing asylum seekers (Southern Star, 2018). For older participants in the informal sea swimming study, there was a greater acceptance and reduced self-consciousness around different bodies, though even here, some female participants did note occasional moments of discomfort, especially given the complex gendered history of the former "men-only" places in which they swam.

Summary

This paper has documented and developed the idea of positive health and well-being immersions in blue space, as seen through a series of empirical interventions with different groups of Irish swimmers and surfers. The research additionally explored how best to capture the effects/affects of blue place/space for health and well-being. These are contested spaces with contested and variable outcomes though in general the benefits seemed clear and tallied with wider research findings on their value as spaces of enhanced physical activity, stress

reduction, attention-restoration and transformation (Britton, 2018). Drawing together different sensory accounts from similar settings by different users and practitioners did lead us to what we felt was a deeper and sometimes surprising understanding of a shared space. It allowed us to account for and capture, in all its complexity and experiential nuance, how swimming and surfing places, in a perversely mobile way, could “affix” a therapeutic salve to sometimes exhausted and wounded bodies. A specifically sensory focus identified that sometimes being captured meant being in effect, enraptured, in the “flow” moment that allowed surfers/swimmers to forget other worries and stresses and reconnect to their own bodies and selves. In a risk-averse society, Phoenix and Orr’s (2014) work on joy/pleasure suggests it would be useful to see place capture as an exploration of “place rapture” and the potential value of meaningfully evaluating spaces of joy and their everyday importance. At the heart of the voices of the swimmers and surfers, these positive aspects mattered. A parallel outcome, linked to both physical and a mental well-being benefits, identified that surfers and swimmers both valued the sometimes challenging developmental and enskilment aspects of the work that gave them additional self-esteem and confidence that in turn allowed them uncover hidden and unknown strengths within themselves (Denton, 2018). In addition, those skills provide a situated resilience in the water: several parents commented on their own fear of water and the desire to transmit a sense of “non-fear” to their children.

A surprising and unexpected finding was the differential ways in which an enhanced place care emerged from surfers and swimmers experiences and actions; immersion produced very different insights than simply viewing or floating and also produced a more holistic understanding of what health and well-being meant to the respondents (Merchant, 2016). There is also a useful link here around the term “bond” and the idea of therapeutic accretion, a deeply restorative connection to place that gradually builds-up through encounters over the course of a lifetime (Foley, 2017). While Foley’s work emphasized lifelong connections to place, it was striking how quickly bonds and friendships formed across all the groups, both young and old and how that bond became a form of glue that held things together and hinted at a capacity to strengthen over time. While one might correctly argue that there were also contested cleansing/shedding aspect as well in those accounts (Adams, 2017), one might counter by suggesting the analogy of a seed pearl, regularly cleansed but with a rich and valuable core accreting steadily underneath. This was especially evident in the surf therapy program, in how quickly body knowledge came back a year later for some of the kids. From a mental health perspective, the value of surfing and swimming over a lifetime brought with it both a material and immaterial/imaginative accretion that shaped an affective response. That interplay of memory and identity (family, friends, community) and repeated body-memory of surfing/swimming as resilient health practice tap into a salutogenic vision of how

resources build over time and become encrusted in/on the body. Accretions can of course be knocked off or chipped away, but the concept is utilized to suggest a strengthened bond through the subtle overlay of affective and experiential practices and memories, enabled in particular types of places.

Equally, a deeper understanding of the endangered and vulnerable nature of the water was specifically identified through immersion within it—a form of immersive blue attunement in which being in water forces a deeper form of listening that blocks out disabling noise (Pink, 2015; Spinney, 2015). While the research illustrated the value and importance of capturing multisensory experiences of place and multiple uses of blue space sites, in theoretical terms this suggests a relational approach to how we value blue space that, via a wider coastal eco-sensibility, adds an environmental shared care component into that assemblage (Duff, 2014). Our findings emphasize a multidimensional view of health, with participants experiencing positive changes to sense of self, health, and well-being that triggered affective and embodied capacity-building. They also recognized the connective and therapeutic properties of the water environments in which they experienced a sense that echoed the name of a Sydney-based mental health swimming group called appropriately, “head above water” (Nunn, 2019). There remain limits to what each initiative/immersive experience can offer but their roles as productive encounters within blue space and the benefits they produce in terms of the maintenance and management of health and well-being are clearly expressed by both participants and coaches alike. For open-water swimming in particular, and to a slightly lesser extent, surfers, access to an open and free resource emphasize their potential as a public health resource that in turn provides “situated resilience” (Atkinson, 2019). Yet what remains central to all are the complex but nuanced experiences of “place capture/rapture” wherein there is a space for embodied difference and emotional diversity, within which all can productively immerse themselves.

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