

# River Swimming Through Uncertainty

Pandemic Immersions in a Therapeutic Chalkscape

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## Abstract

In this Field Note, I share my experiences of an immersive period of ethnography undertaken with river swimmers in and along the River Beane and River Lea in the county town of Hertford, South-East England, from July 2020 until January 2021. As well as my personal experiences of being a swimmer, I include insights and observations from those I swam alongside to reflect on the feeling of wellbeing that river swimming instills in those dipping, swimming, and 'dwelling' in their local rivers. I use these insights to expand the notion of therapeutic landscapes, noting not only their temporality during a pandemic period of uncertainty and disconnection but also their minerality. I explore how therapeutic connections and closer relations between humans, non-humans and rivers, all watered by the same chalk aquifer, might be framed through the connective substance of chalk.

## Keywords

River, Swimming, Pandemic, Uncertainty, Immersion, Minerality.

## Introduction

This Field Note provides an insight into immersive ethnography conducted with river swimmers in and along the River Beane in the county town of Hertford, South-East England from July 2020 until January 2021. We congregated on mornings where frost nipped at our toes, on afternoons where sunshine warmed our backs, against dusty pink skies, clinging mist, and (em)bracing winds. As we hurried to undress, we anticipated the moment we had all been waiting for: cold water colliding, rippling, and swirling against our skin. The raging noise of pandemic uncertainty was suddenly quietened, stilled, if only for the length of a dipping, or those few minutes when we launched ourselves against the current. Here, as a collective of local residents, we 'dwelled' (Ingold 2011).

This emplaced sense of being led us to experience the River Beane in a way that expands existing scholarship on therapeutic landscapes (Gesler 1992; Williams 1999; Foley and Kistemann 2015; Völker and Kistemann 2013; Foley 2015). Our swims were not just therapeutic because they took place in a beautiful waterscape, made meaningful through personal sentimental histories, built up over a lifetime spent in proximity to this river. As intimate moments specific to the time of the pandemic they coincided with, swims also had therapeutic import far beyond this. Swimming in the River Beane allowed people to connect to one another in ways that were proximal and visceral, acting as a tonic to isolation. It offered opportunities to move and be moved, fuelling hope that other things in life would, at some undefined point, move again too. Engaging the River Beane as a therapeutic landscape that does not just exist 'out there' but is enacted by swimmers to meet particular needs in space and *in time* (Covid-time), allowed a process of what Ronan Foley calls 'accretion' to occur (Foley 2017; Foley 2015). Swim by swim, individuals built up layers of wellbeing, just like the river-based debris remained as a fine film on the skin after a swim. This protective coating or 'laquer' (Foley 2017) allowed my interlocutors and myself to cope with a period of extreme uncertainty. It is to an ethnography of this therapeutic landscape and immersions therein that I now turn.

## Arriving at the River Beane

The River Beane is a chalk stream that winds its way from the hills of North Hertfordshire towards the River Lea in East Hertfordshire, where the two rivers converge at the picturesque public space of Hartham Common. The Common sits only ten or so minutes by foot from the county town centre of Hertford. Yet here one is met by a myriad of sprawling rivers, open green fields, and marshland that stretches some five kilometres to the next town of Ware. The River Beane runs along the back of Hartham Common, acting as a boundary between the public land

on its nearside and the private land adjacent to its far side. A public footpath runs along the private land next to the Beane, up a steep grassy hill which leads to the oldest church in Hertford, St Leonards Church. The view from this hill over the Common is breathtaking, and with each season tells a different story. Looking down towards the water in summer, long straw-coloured grasses sway in broad gentle waves against the more static backdrop of a seemingly parched river. The occasional head of a swimmer appears and disappears, as they dry themselves in the sun, obscured only by the will of wind and grass. In the winter, the tall grasses rescind and a deep green fuzz meets shades of brownish blue. The undulating grassland becomes a soft spongy bog in places, blurring the boundary between river and land.

These seasonal changes punctuate the river in the foreground but also pepper the periphery, allowing you to feel as if you are part of one intricate bar of a wider score. At the bottom of this hill, around three or four metres from the public footpath, is a non-authorized but locally mandated entry point to the River Beane for swimmers known even on Google Maps now as 'the beach'. It is here that I met a handful of swimmers in July 2020 who, unbeknownst to me at the time, would become interlocutors and dear companions for the next seven months.



*Figure 1.* Private land of 'the beach' in the foreground, the hill up to Bengo and St Leonard's Church to the right. Image by the author, 2021.

Like many people, the pandemic fundamentally altered the rhythms and routines of my daily life and my ability to work, which for me meant conducting fieldwork. Previously, I had been exploring more-than-human relations on the River Beane as part of my research. I had focused my efforts on its upper reaches, where increasingly barren stretches and the absence of flagship chalkstream species had led local river restoration groups and wildlife charities to deem the River Beane a dead river. Engaging the anthropology of uncertainty, I was beginning to explore how the dead river was being enacted by these groups, while at the same time being refuted by the local water company. I noted how debates over the river's status as living or dead fitted within a wider politics of disconnection and environmental uncertainty. While uncertainty was an analytic of intrigue for me, I never imagined it derailing my research in such a way until March of 2020.

## **Things that halt and things that move**

As my ethnography came to an abrupt halt I mourned the loss of fruitful fieldsites. The local Environment Agency and water company offices were closed to most staff and all visitors. Monitoring water levels and marvelling at invertebrates wriggling on plastic spoons with local river restoration groups and wildlife charities was postponed indefinitely. I grew increasingly anxious, unsure of when, or if, my research would continue. I kept a small semblance of hope alive by walking the stretches of the River Beane I could reach on foot from my home every day. It was comforting to feel some kind of continuity in the face of so much disruption. It was on these daily walks that I grew aware of the increasing number of river swimmers 'dipping' at the beach of the River Beane at Hartham Common and swimming around to a ladder which had been put in place at the confluence point of the River Beane and River Lea. While these swimmers appeared to keenly observe social distancing rules of keeping two metres apart, there was a clear sociability to their activity. Pre-pandemic, the Common had hummed with activity, with families picnicking and teenagers playing football using jumpers as goal posts. Now during the pandemic, while full of walkers, runners, and cyclists, it had become a more sensorially quiet space. It was this that made the swimmers so noticeable to me as I walked past on my dog walks: their shrieks of joy as their chests touched the icy water at the beginning of a swim, their titters of conversation which were carried by the water and reverberated through the trees that swayed, to my mind, approvingly on the river bank. Above all, their laughter caught my attention as they tried to work a particularly clingy wetsuit sock over an ankle, using hands rendered useless by the cold. I had exchanged pleasantries with swimmers, stopping to observe them many times on my walks for some time. As the pandemic raged on, I decided that it might be time to take my fieldwork in a new direction. It was time to immerse myself and join them.



*Figure 2.* Swimmers in a variety of different apparel readying to swim as the water temperature drops in November. Image taken on the author's phone, 2020.

Ethnographer-cum-marathon swimmer Karen Throsby (2013) has noted that the visceral, embodied modes of knowing and feeling that so attract people to open water swimming, are impossible to access without taking part in the activity yourself. This sentiment was shared with me by the swimmers I had talked to on my dog walks. Every swimmer I met, while happy to share with me how electric, connected and alive the immersion made them feel, was also adamant—‘you must try it yourself’.

Joining swimmers in the River Beane at this pandemic juncture brought back memories of my childhood. The town of Hertford, which ended up being central to my field research, also happens to be the town in which I grew up. As a teenager, on warm summer days I would sometimes swim in the River Beane on Hartham Common with my friends. Thus my immersions in the Beane were a form of returning, of ‘dwelling’ in a landscape that had a personal history. Swimmers told me about river swimming as an experience of deep connection with their local environment, its waters, its non-humans, and how this connection was helping them to survive a period of unrivalled uncertainty and hardship. I was able to share this sense of connection, to *feel*, and not just observe it, since like many of them I had an emotional history of connection to this place (Foley 2015; Game and

Metcalfe 2011) and a shared experience of temporal inertia wrought by the pandemic lockdowns.

I met Mazzo at the beach at the bottom of St Leonard's Church on a Wednesday afternoon for my first experience of immersive ethnography. I had perched on an old compacted mole hill in the long grass, taking in the river to my right and beginning to wonder about its temperature and how long I might be expected to swim for. I snapped out of my thoughts as I saw Mazzo walking through the grass from an adjacent footpath. Mazzo doddered along the path, waving at me emphatically as he went. Exuding a warmth that cut through my worries, Mazzo discarded his T-shirt and told me gleefully that he was ready to go. I quickly threw my clothes into a bag and followed his lead as he headed towards the higher bank of the beach. Here we crouched, sliding our feet forwards so our bums could come to rest on the edge of the bank. As our legs extended outwards our feet pierced the film of the water's surface, disappearing below the water line, suddenly contorted by the gentle flow of the current. The water was colder than I expected and I felt a wave of goosebumps shiver up my body. Mazzo wasted no time hoisting himself down from the bank. As soon as he was waist deep in the water he lowered his chest below the surface and swam out sideways, puffing out air loudly as he moved towards the centre of the channel. I lingered with the water at waist height, adjusting to the cold and observed Mazzo, who now heading slightly upriver bellowed to me, 'Isn't this wonderful!' Not wanting to be left behind, I lowered my arms into the water and pushed hard off the bottom away from the bank and into Mazzo's slipstream.

It was only as I came to swim beside Mazzo, although I took care to maintain as much distance as the narrow channel allowed, that I noticed neither of us were swimming what might be understood as a proper swimming stroke. Mazzo swam on his side using his right arm as a kind of propeller-cum-rudder as his left arm gently stroked the water. I was swimming doggy paddle, watching my arms as they stretched out in front of me and feeling a slight warming as they came closer to the water's surface. The sun, just like our feet when we sat on the bank, could be felt under the water but in an entirely different way to how it felt on the land, as something present but somehow removed and otherworldly. I realised too that while we had progressed upriver with ease in the first ten or so metres, we were now swimming against a strong section of current and were thus, in a sense, going nowhere. It appeared that we were not trying to get anywhere but to be just here, moving with or being moved by the water, tuning into it as it held us in a fluid embrace. Mazzo pointed out a coot's nest to me on our right-hand side, a kind of pontoon made of sticks and twigs where a coot sat, unperturbed by our presence. A dog peered over the bank to our left, inquiring with its eyes as to what we were doing in the water, letting out one concerned bark and then running back out of

view. When Mazzo told me it was time, we used our arms to propel us 180 degrees and now facing downstream and barely swimming but just floating, we let the current carry us back to the expansive pool of the beach. The feeling of being gently pushed downstream after swimming against the current was one of sheer delight. We swam towards the riverbank until it was shallow enough to stand, and pressing into the mix of gravel and mud we reached out of the water, grabbing hold of strands of grass on the bank above and pulling ourselves first onto hands and knees and then gradually to stand, dripping with water as the sun warmed our backs and we sought our towels from inside our bags. Mazzo dried his torso, threw on his T-shirt and told me he was ready to leave. I told him not to wait for me, slightly relieved given my fumbling cold hands to be left to dress in peace. Mazzo, in what was certainly more of a statement than a question said, ‘We will see you again then?’ I nodded enthusiastically. I was more intrigued than ever and as I found myself cantering across the common heading for home, realised it was the calmest I had felt since the beginning of the pandemic.



*Figure 3.* Lizzer, the author, and Mazzo entering at the beach for a swim with encouragement from dogs Phoebe and Marnie. Image by Sian Bucher, 2020, reproduced with permission.

Over the months that followed, I connected with more swimmers and in turn connected more deeply with the River Beane. As I came to know the river in a more intimate way, I learned from my own and others’ experiences how to move with it, bringing it into being as a therapeutic landscape as part of our communal

emplacement *in time*. This time was multifaceted: it meant covid-time, it meant the time of day, and time as marked out by the season. We learned *in time* which sections of the river were deepest, where you could stretch out in all directions, point your feet vertically and feel only water trying to squeeze between minute gaps in your toes. We learned to slow down as we approached the narrow meander before the broadwater, allowing our knees to be gently beached in the gravels, wading for a few metres before feeling the channel deepen again. We learned how long to stay immersed, to move with the fluctuating temperature of different seasons. We learned more about those and that which we shared the space with: ducks that swam at eyeline unperturbed by our presence, swans to admire from a distance as they proudly paraded their cygnets, and lily pads like vast green dinner plates to slalom around.



*Figure 3.* Author swimming in the broadwater, navigating around the winter remains of lily pads. Image by Jack Mitchell, 2020, reproduced with permission.

Months of river immersion affected my perspective on earlier fieldwork, leading me to better understand the enactments of the dead river in a more affective and sensorial way. In this way, I revisited my prior observations, such as that of a local river activist walking through the barren stretch of river in a black suit, which I had



interpreted as part of a performative protest, a political statement. I could now see his walking through the empty river channel as a mourning of the river too. More than just a political statement, his marching was also deeply personal. It not only lamented the loss of water, but also the loss of a relationship between himself and the river. As I rejoined volunteer river monitors after the lockdown was lifted, the invertebrates they counted using spoons took on a new meaning beyond a simple ‘number narrative’ (Brooks 2017) of species and river death. These intimate moments themselves seemed to have therapeutic qualities. Through these more-than-human relations, river monitors brought hopeful ‘scapes’ into being in empirical, ontological ways (Law and Lien 2012). They kept the possibility of future-health for the River Beane open and alive. Thus, I began to consider therapeutic landscapes and their potential more widely. These were not just present landscapes created through immersions *in*, but hopeful future landscapes created through practices *of*.

## **Tuning in to the mineral—so what of chalk?**

This tuning in also led me to reexamine a mineral aspect of the River Beane in my research—its status as a chalk stream. Early in my fieldwork, I did not quite know what to make of chalk. What was its relevance? Was chalk vibrant matter (Bennett 2010) or was it just white dusty stuff, a talcum powder of little interest? My immersions, the instilled sense of being with the river, allowed me to appreciate chalk in a more visceral therapeutic sense. I thought about chalk as embodied in the water of the River Beane, given that such waters emerge from a chalk aquifer. I thought about chalk as embodied in the non-humans and humans living in and alongside the river, as a substance that washes across and permeates their skin, moving inside them, imbued in the water they ingest. Finally, I thought about chalk as embodied by those river restoration groups and wildlife charities working to connect across species and spatial divides in more equitable ways for the future. River swimming led me to realise the accretive hopeful potential of chalk. Thus, I came to consider not only temporality or temporal inertia to be of importance for therapeutic landscapes, but also the importance of the mineral that connects all bodies relating in and along a river like the River Beane. I came to see both the political and hopeful potential embodied, in a sense reminiscent of Fennel’s work on flint (Fennell 2016), that here on the River Beane, we are chalk.



*Figure 5.* The ladder: the confluence point of the River Beane and the River Lea where swimmers exit from the ‘swim around’ at a set of stairs placed by canoeists/swimmers during the pandemic to help river swimmers enter and exit the water safely. Image by the author, 2020.

In this Field Note I have expanded upon the notion of therapeutic landscapes, the analytical framework for examining processes of health and wellbeing creation ‘in place’ (most often in places demarcated as ‘nature’) (Gesler 1992). Increasingly used to explore the emergence of health in more ambiguous settings (Collins 2007; Williams 2007) and in blue as well as green space (Foley 2015), I have furthered attended to the temporal nature of such landscapes that extends not only backwards to places of memory and sentiment, but perhaps ever-more importantly expands outwards in the temporal uncertainty of the present; of covid-time and inertia.

By immersing in rivers at this particular temporal juncture, swimmers bring such landscapes into being as therapeutic. These therapeutic landscapes offer physical and mental respite not only through movement, as embodied ‘accretions’ that in time contribute to a ‘laquer’ (Foley 2017) of wellness, but also through the fuelling of hope. Hope that the rest of life will continue to move again. Hope that connection rather than isolation will be the order of the day. Hope of surviving an unimaginably uncertain time, one doggy paddle at a time. Further to this, I have demonstrated that therapeutic landscapes can involve practices of intimate more-than-human connection. These practices are hopeful and expand therapeutic landscapes into the future—imagining a time of better health for those connected in and through a

shared blue space. This embodied therapeutic potential springs forth from below ground and permeates, even where river water fails to circulate. Through a mineral connection between people and places that are chalk-based, the River Beane emerges as a therapeutic chalkscape.

## Authorship statement

This article is the sole work of the author.

## Ethics statement

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Ethics committee at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM). All swimming interlocutors gave consent to take part in this research and to have their insights and photographs included in research outputs.

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