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FROM LAND'S END TO THE OASIS.

Naina Gupta

ABSTRACT

In this piece I trace a constellation of authors who use swimming (or being immersed in water) to record the world around them in a new way. The swim-travelogue appears as a hybrid of travel writing and nature writing showing affiliations with New Nature Writing. However, as this sub-genre is slowly absorbed by women and people of colour moving it away from its more traditional author profile—white and male—rights that were taken for granted are re-questioned leading one to ponder about barriers to nature, water, and swimming. Continuing this dialogue, I add my voice—an immigrant in England from an ex-colony of the British Raj—as I swim along an imagined spiral that connects the world of swimming in England to the world beyond its shores.

THE FROG'S-EYE VIEW

Rachel Carson is a pivotal figure of the twentieth century [...]. By 'pivotal,' I mean that people thought one way before her essential 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, and they thought another way after it.¹

Between 1941 and 1955 biologist Rachel Carson wrote a trilogy about the sea: *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941); *The Sea Around Us* (1951); and *The Edge of the Sea* (1955). These books, along with several letters to government bodies about environmental policies in the 1950s, prepared Carson to create what would become her 'pivotal' work — *Silent Spring* (1962) — that would later come to be considered as the start of the environmental movement. *Under the Sea-Wind* began as an essay that was published in *The Atlanta Monthly* but was originally meant as a brochure for the Fisheries Bureau (today, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Services) where aquatic biologist Carson worked as a writer. Finding the paper too lyrical for the more 'technical' writing expected of a government organisation, Carson's boss recommended that she instead send it to be published in a magazine for general readership. Soon after, Carson left the Bureau to begin in earnest a career as a science writer who, through her writing, 'taught people to look at the sea, and to think about the sea, in fresh ways'.² She demystified science and environmental writing. *Under the Sea-Wind* was novel for its time; it tried to get readers to see the interconnectedness of the world through the eyes of the inhabitants of the seas. We, who have been exposed to the nature documentaries narrated by broadcaster and biologist David Attenborough, would be well versed with this way of looking at the world; however, Carson was one of the early adopters of this view, decades before philosopher Thomas Nagel's famous exploration 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' which in turn underlines journalist Ed Yong's idea of *umwelt* in *An Immense World*. Carson's work of empathy was not without limitations — she gave her animals names

and her work was deeply anthropomorphic — which she was aware of and in her foreword for *Under the Sea-Wind*, she explains that the impulse stemmed from a desire to connect the reader to her subjects.

Naturalist Roger Deakin's work is very different from Carson's but they share a love for water and, in different ways, their work displays the interconnectedness of the world through an exploration of this space. I use the word space rather than material because that was the way that I believed that they saw it. Both Carson and Deakin were keen observers of nature and they believed the best vantage point was through an immersion into the very object of their study. They both desired to see the world from other eyes or viewpoints; as Carson says, 'to sense the world of waters known to the creatures of the sea we must shed our human perceptions of length and breadth and time and place and enter into a universe of all pervading water'.³ However while the main character in Carson's work is the sea, in Deakin's book it is evidently the human being and their experience of the world when seen through the lens of connecting waters. Carson's legacy is immeasurable in forwarding a form of science and environmental writing for general readership; nonetheless, Deakin's work advances a genre of writing that connects environmental issues with social issues and advances a relationship between nature and wellbeing. I contend that Deakin, like Carson, is pivotal, or at the least emerging to be pivotal, in advancing a particular form of environmental writing predicated on swimming.

Deakin's swimming travelogue, *Waterlog* (1999), was inspired by novelist John Cheever's short story 'Swimmer', where the story's protagonist Neddy Merrill sees in his mind, 'with a cartographer's eye, a string of swimming pools, a quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county' beckoning him to swim home across the city.⁴ The story is a cautionary tale about youth and aging; nevertheless, it suggests that

1. Margaret Atwood, 'Introduction', in Rachel Carson, *Under the Sea-Wind* (Canongate Canons, 2021), p. xii.

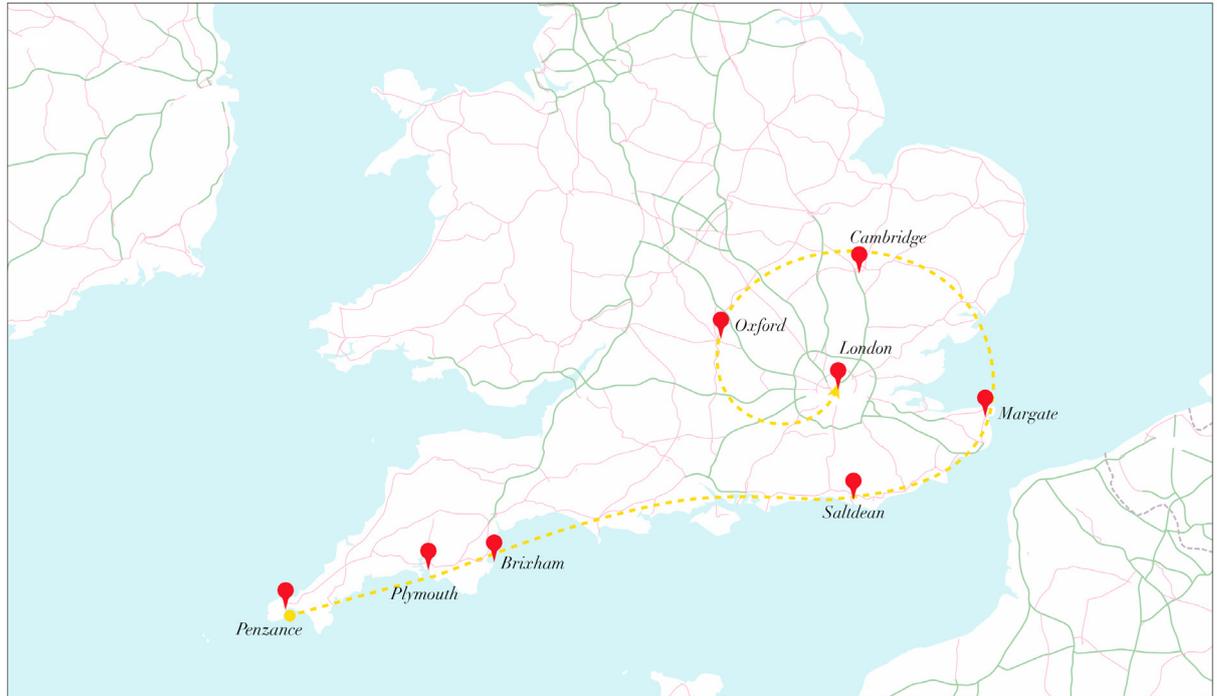
2. *Ibid.*, p. xv.

3. Rachel Carson, 'Undersea' in *The Atlantic*, September 1937, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1937/09/undersea/652922/>> [accessed 8 August 2025].

Figure 1. The Imagined Spiral, Author, 2023

Figure 2. Map of Penzance on the promenade, Author, 2023

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our imagination of the city changes when mapped from the view of its water bodies. Or as Deakin's work appears to question, and I paraphrase, how does the landscape change when viewed from a frog's eye view? By this it could mean that it is questioning how the map of a landscape and its imagination or experience changes when viewed from the point of view of its water bodies. Or, more literally, I believe that he is asking: how does the world change when one is a part of nature or immersed in nature? At another level, this immersion is not purely metaphorical but to the contrary, it is physiological and psychological thereby demanding the relinquishment of any dominant positioning in relation to nature. Swimming is not a position of strength for most humans.

Waterlog is a swimmer's journey through the British Isles, indiscriminately weaving plunges in inland (manmade and natural) bodies of water along with dips along the coast. Deakin is credited with reviving the culture of wild swimming. In *Waterlog* he argued for the right to swim in the rivers, lakes, and ponds in the British countryside, commenting that it was a natural complement to the right to roam:

The right to walk freely along riverbanks or to bathe in rivers, should no more be bought and sold than the right to walk up mountains or to swim in the sea from our beaches.⁵

Furthermore, he advanced a form of nature writing that is intimately connected with swimming and healing. Until the publication of his recent biography, it was little known that Deakin himself was silently caring for an ailing mother while writing *Waterlog*.⁶

NEW NATURE WRITING

Social historian Joe Moran, a writer, lecturer, and professor of English and cultural history, says that 'new nature writing' hit public consciousness in the 2000s further advanced by an issue of *Granta* magazine (102) in 2008.⁷ Deakin, the founders of Common Ground, and writer Robert Macfarlane and others, are early contributors to this form of writing that can loosely be described as nature writing which focuses on the local, the common place, and even the unremarkable. It is predicated on 'touch' and interweaves scientific knowledge with beautiful discursive styles of writing that attempt to reconnect and display the interrelationship between nature and people. Deakin's influence on Macfarlane is well documented but he in many ways could be regarded as the inspiration of another form of nature writing, one that is inextricably linked with swimming. This very niche and specific genre is only now emerging through the collections posited by two different podcasts, one by journalist Joe Minihane, and the other by writer Freya Bromley who have respectively written *Floating: A Return to Waterlog or a Life Regained* (2017) and *The Tidal Year* (2023). Minihane and Bromley used swimming to come to grips with their depression and grief respectively, allowing nature and swimming to be part of their healing. Their books centre around these themes which only serve to cement the relationship between care, the environment, and human wellbeing. Bromley's *The Tidal Year* is in equal parts a swim-travelogue and a scrutiny of her grief with the death of her brother, until she distils the universal from her personal bereavement. Their podcasts host conversations with people who swim and contribute to a swimming culture. A large number are, broadly speaking, environmental scientists. Author Jessica J. Lee has appeared in both podcasts and sheds some new light on the topic of swimming.

Figure 3. The pool and the horizon, Author, 2023

4. John Cheever, 'The Swimmer' in *The New Yorker*, July 10, 1964, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1964/07/18/the-swimmer>> [accessed 8 August 2025].

5. Roger Deakin, *Waterlog* (Penguin, 2014), p. 33.

6. Patrick Barkham, *The Swimmer: The Wild Life of Roger Deakin* (Hamish Hamilton, 2023), p. 242

7. Joe Moran, 'A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing', *Joe Moran's Words: On the Everyday, the Banal and Other Important Matters*, n.d. <<https://joemoran.net/academic-articles/a-cultural-history-of-the-new-nature-writing/>> [accessed 29 January 2024].

Lee is a celebrated British-Canadian-Taiwanese writer who has a PhD in Environmental History and Aesthetics. Her book *Turning* (2017) paints a very different Berlin seen through the lens of swimming journey in its lakes. The title refers to the changing temperature along the depth of a lake as the seasons change, which are felt by the swimming body, thereby displaying the intricacies and intimacies that only can be understood through a full immersion in the subject. In her conversations and her writing, Lee addresses issues of access to nature writing, to public waters, and to swimming. While Deakin's argues that all rivers are public, *In Floating* Lee talks to Minihane about the assumed democracy attributed to natural bodies of water by questioning *WHO* can swim, displaying that swimming itself is fraught with race and class issues.⁸

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Swimming is always a rite of passage, a crossing of boundaries; the line of the shore, the edge of the pool, the surface itself. Breaking the surface, entering this new element, you experience a kind of metamorphosis.⁹

The project departs from the question who can swim; conceptually the project looks at interconnections between artificial/real and near/far and the construction of interiority/exteriority. Journeying along an imagined spiral that begins at Penzance and continues along the Southern coast of England, along the English Channel up to Margate after which it turns into London via Cambridge — the birthplace of modern swimming — the project looks at the politics of swimming in Britain and its ex-colonies. This is an excerpt of a project that is still being formed but the following paragraphs indicate where it is heading.

THE SPIRAL

The spiral begins in Penzance and, though it ends in London, up until Margate it runs along the Southern coast of England, thereby bordering the English Channel for a considerable distance. The channel is fraught with problematic political postures — Brexit is just one of them, the other is the 'small boats problem'.

The Swimmers (2022; directed by Sally El-Hosaini) is a film that tells the story of two Syrian sisters (refugees) who saved the lives of eighteen people as they swam alongside their 'small' boat which broke down while crossing the Aegean Sea. One of the sisters, Sarah Mardini, was arrested when, after her own experience, she started helping refugees arriving at Lesbos. A different coast but the same fear.

Last summer when I went home and told my family about my research, it was then that I realised that my father did not know how to swim. It was the same summer that Indian-British novelist Salman Rushdie was shot, which prompted me to pick up his *Midnight's Children* (1981). I drew a map of India with Rushdie's words about the segregation policies of Breach Candy Club. Until that moment, I had forgotten that when my cousins from London visited Bombay, they would swim at the club; I was not allowed in because I was (and am) an Indian citizen. A quick search on Google Maps displays that the pool is in the shape of an undivided India no longer.

This is a topic that is so rich and, undiscovered and it gives me joy but also unbelievable pain because it made me confront racism and colonialism in a way that I had managed to ignore so far. How could anyone deprive another of a life-saving skill? Moreover, while there seems to be a lot of knowledge of the Jim Crow laws across the Atlantic, Britons were less aware of the colour-bar segregation on their shores. More importantly, they were less willing to talk about it.

8. Minihane, Joe. "Jessica J. Lee". *Floating: Swimming Stories with Joe Minihane*, 24 June 2020. Podcast.00:28:00

Figure 4. Otto Koenigsberger's municipal pool in Bangalore in India (1940); Koenigsberger papers, AA Archives.

9. Deakin, *Waterlog*, p. 233.



The story of the lidos in England also tells us a story of the lack of them in parts of the colonial world. The Empire shares a history of swimming with its colonies. Shared immersion is an intimate act and unleashes prejudices in unexpected ways.

FIELD NOTES: IN PENZANCE

It is an enormous, triangular, seawater swimming pool with multilevel sun decks on the inside shielded by a white wall that protects the pool from the sea wind. Outside there is a pathway that hugs the same white wall, which is partially or wholly submerged during high tide. Early in the morning swimmers

gather on this pathway for a dip in the sea. The lido exerts its presence on the sea; it is both part of the sea and part of the land depending on the tide.

There is a map of the city on the promenade which is slowly discolouring to the patina that I believe is the colour of Penzance — a greenish blue. Dulux colour swatch: A4 (Penzance). Some might even describe it as a saturated sage. This is the colour of the decking around the lido and it is the colour of the water. The patina reflects the dusting of grit that layers the city. Scott Whitby Studio, in their award-winning design (Rebirth Dezeen awards 2022) for the

café and the geothermal pool, used another blue, a blue that my nail polish company calls Cyclades — a reminder of another tense watery region.

On the map the lido appears deceptively large but it isn't; the complex is only a hundred metres long from the apex of the triangle to near the mid-point of the opposite side. The pool dominates the city in the way that it is sited at the end of the promenade and in the imaginary of the city. It was built in 1935 as part of a series of lidos commissioned along the coast; however, unlike some of the others which read as something next to the sea, this lido to the contrary appears as part of the sea. Social historian Ken Worpole observes that it was designed to resemble a seagull landing on water.¹⁰

It is a city of swimmers. On an early morning walk along the promenade, swimmers are seen bobbing about in the freezing channel. The jubilee pool boasts of a geothermal pool that was partially funded by the community of Penzance displaying their love for this magnificent piece of architecture that connects them to the sea.

A TENDRIL

I did not realise that I was one of the few brown people in the pool, or even the only. Recently, I learned that coloured people were more likely to die from drowning compared to a white person. Swimming trauma is generational trauma and it was quite common that if a mother did not swim, her children wouldn't either.

I swam every day after school in a municipal pool near my house in Bangalore. Bangalore is a city of artificial lakes — it does not have a natural water source. Nevertheless there are lidos scattered around the city, close to or abutting these lakes, which are visible by the diving towers that stick out across this horizontal

landscape. These municipal pools have been built after independence, however I would argue (more likely allude to and never fully be able to prove) that they owe their existence to a municipal pool that architect Otto Koenigsberger designed for the city in 1940.

This is the power of architecture a small insignificant project created a lasting impression on a city and its inhabitants. The Koenigsberger pool has been demolished and many of the other municipal pools in the city are closing or being privatised. It is less acceptable to swim in municipal pools in India today — the country that I grew up in, though poorer than it is now, was more equal which is more a reflection of the times we live in.

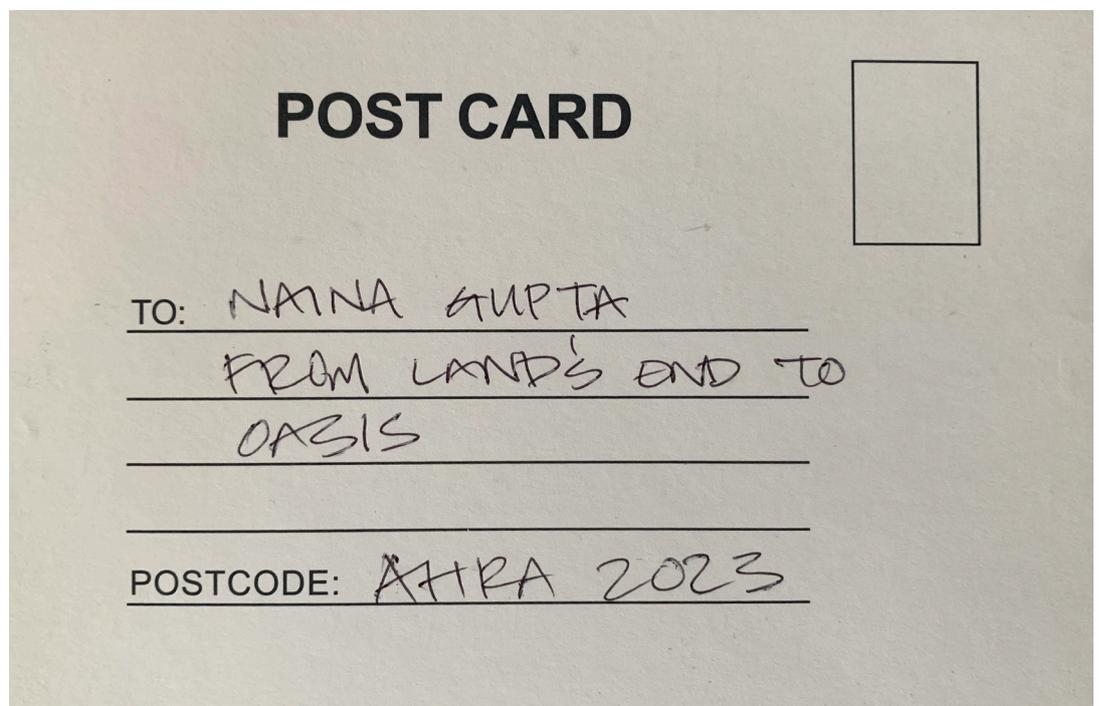
Who is the man in the picture and why is a white man teaching Indian children to swim? Or at least that is the way that I read the image. I know very little about this project but I am convinced that the spiral that I drew in London has a tendril that reaches out to Bangalore.

Note: An abridged version of this paper was published in *AArchitecture*, no. 49 in June 2025.

10. Ken Worpole. *Here Comes the Sun: Architecture and Public Space in Twentieth-Century European Culture*, Reaktion Books (London, 2000), p. 124

RESPONSE TO *FROM*
LAND'S END TO OASIS

by Toby Blackman



I became hooked, drawn in, as my reading reached reference of John Cheever. 'the cheera of the suburbs,' ~~and its~~ ~~as a typical element in~~ ~~work of~~ is referred to in material I'm also reading in my own work in a lyric in ^{in carin at the liquor store} ^{on the National} The reference to Cheever in your writing snapped me out of my own introspection, & I immediately wondered what I might learn from your position, work & study...

The ideas, & concerns worked through, & traversed in your writing are highly compelling & I found myself drawing lines between areas of thought & text...
Study & framing:

Pigmentation - as a phenomena, effect & affect, applied, ~~of~~ inherited or accumulated...
... Kassia St. Clair's The Secret Lives of Colour was brought to mind.

Colour, substrate, surface ✓
between material, surface & pigment,
touch, matter, & vision.

Boundaries, edges, migration
of pigment to surface, suspension &
settlement. Field Notes: In resonance
~~exercises~~ ~~navigates~~ the Ecological registers: ~~f~~
~~the~~ mental, social & environmental
after Fricot with ^{particular} generosity & empathy &

precision. We've taken From Land's End
to the Oasis ~~with~~ an attentive,
authentic, & carefully practising
research writer, & gain much from
your examination & proximity.
Thank you for showing this wonderful
work.
Toby

RESPONSE TO *FROM
LAND'S END TO OASIS*

by Jane Rendell

Dear Naima,
Thank you for sharing with us
your swimming story. From
Land's End to the Oasis is
a journey that made me think
again about who can and
who can't swim. Not only in
relation to the physicality
of swimming as a motion,
but of water as a precious
resource, a support structure,
that can allow us to float
free, but that only a few
have access to. My swimming
writing has so far been a
tracking of a changing
movement out and back,
but now I grasp differently
the privilege of that now,
with thanks, Jane

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Naina Gupta

Naina Gupta's doctoral dissertation narrates an alternative history of internationalism that focuses on the role of social reform in constituting an international sensibility. Further to that she researched swimming pools in different registers. Her books, *Modern Architecture and an International Sensibility: A Curious Cross-Atlantic Constellation*, and *Extraordinary Pools* were published in 2025. She teaches in different universities in England and has more than a decade of international experience in architectural practices around the world.

