



SIGNS OF WATER: COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON WATER, RESPONSIBILITY, AND HOPE

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Aquatic Insights from Roger Deakin's *Waterlog*

Michaela Keck

Roger Deakin and British “New Nature Writing”

Roger Deakin (1943–2006) was a British nature writer and environmental activist who published books, articles, and pamphlets; he also wrote, produced, and directed films and TV programs. His interest in nature focused on the intimate as well as intricate interconnections between humans and their nonhuman environment in an increasingly socially regulated and technologically mediated world. Deakin himself not only insisted on the simple pleasures and joys derived from the direct involvement with and experience of nature, he also possessed a wealth of knowledge of ecological processes and their interrelations with human lives, and in particular, of the biodiversity of his local environment. Deakin's witty, poetical literary voice and his profound knowledge of the ecology and regional environment still speak to us in his published writings: *Waterlog* (1999), *Wildwood* (2007), and *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm* (2008).¹ The book titles already underscore Deakin's intimacy with elemental nature—especially water and wood—and his use of the longstanding tradition of Anglo-American nature writing.

Deakin belongs to the older generation of the British new nature writers, a group of authors who rose to prominence in the 2000s, among them

Robert Macfarlane, Mark Cocker, Kathleen Jamie, Richard Mabey, and more recently John Lewis-Stempel, William Atkins, and Helen Macdonald. Despite their greatly varied thematic foci and writing styles, these writers share a concern for the everyday connection with local and regional nature rather than the exotic and faraway and, in so doing, continue “the rich history of British nature writing and environmental thought” (Moran, 2014, p. 50). At the same time, they critically engage with the poetics and politics of earlier nature writers and their often nostalgia-inflected, didactic, at times gloomy appeals for the conservation of a disappearing countryside. Scholars have praised the new nature writers for their “commitment to both scientific, scholarly observation of nature” (Moran, 2014, p. 59) and their awareness of the “now familiar phenomenological predicament” (Hunt, 2009, p. 72) of the constructedness of their nature experiences. As Hunt further notes, these authors manage to convey “the uniqueness of particular encounters in the environment while bringing to bear the full force of cultural context upon a subject” (pp. 72–73). Acutely attuned to the complex interrelations of the ecological-material and ideological-representational realities of nature and culture, these new nature writers shun such currently popular modes of expression as apocalypse, dystopia, and the hyperreal. Indeed, the fact that these British writers eschew the dominant fictional disaster modes of literary representations of the Anthropocene may account for the comparatively little scholarly attention they have received outside of the UK. As I want to suggest, however, there are important lessons to be gleaned from these more soft-spoken writers and their “green flânerie” (Hunt, 2009, p. 71) at a time of ecological crisis and the rise of nationalist and narcissist voices, not least Deakin’s emphasis on the psychoecological well-being and regenerative powers derived from what he calls “wild swimming.” Furthermore, the immersion in the watery element has, for Deakin, a decidedly communal and socially vital character.

In *Waterlog*, Deakin points out the importance of water for human as well as nonhuman life in a globalized world where escalation of commodification, digitalization, and regulation impacts as much on local environments as it alters the general human relationship with nature. He understands water neither as a technologically purified resource nor as a marketable product, but he does not mythicize water as a spiritual force

either. Rather, and as I argue, he considers the element of water to be an active force which is intricately interconnected to other life forces, both human and nonhuman. *Waterlog* is based on Deakin's aquatic journey through all kinds of British waterholes, rivers, coastal areas as well as human-made indoor and outdoor pools from 1996 to 1997. Structured according to the seasonal cycle of a single year, the book testifies to water as a living and life-giving element.

The Art of "Wild Swimming"

Roger Deakin's swimming journey has been instrumental in the current renaissance of "wild swimming" in the UK. Indeed, some call Deakin the "godfather" (Jarvis, 2015, p. 23) or "high priest" (Lowe, 2011, p. 108) of the modern wild swimming movement in Britain. The ecopsychological preoccupation with and passion for water, as Robin Jarvis (2015) reminds us, harks back to the Romantic era when the outdoors became central to the intellectual as well as bodily exploration of the self and the relationship between human and nonhuman nature (pp. 3–4). For poets such as Coleridge, Keats, and Byron, the bodily immersion in the numerous water surface areas of Britain offered them as much sensual pleasure and recreational enjoyment as it provided them with poetic and metaphysical inspiration. Others, such as Shelley and Swinburne, were fascinated by the seductive powers of water and cultivated an erotic, even compulsive relationship with it (Sprawson, 1992/1993, p. 99). As both Jarvis and Sprawson demonstrate, in the British literary tradition swimming is a predominantly masculinist and elitist tradition, although women and the working class were prominent participants in the swimming culture that emerged in the nineteenth century, be it as leisure activity, athletic competition, or popular mass entertainment.² Deakin's swimming experiences, however, distinguish themselves in various ways from those of his predecessors.

In Deakin's swimming feats it is generally the water that possesses the muscle, propelling him onto the beach "like a turtle" (1999, p. 131) and leaving him stranded and vulnerable. His self-deprecatory and humorous comments regarding his preference for the rather "unmanly" breaststroke, combined with his occasional wearing of wetsuit and booties, undermine any virile swimmer's heroics and remain true to his introductory claim: "I am no champion, just a competent swimmer with a fair

amount of stamina. Part of my intention in setting out on the journey was not to perform any spectacular feats ..." (p. 5). Indeed, Deakin's *Waterlog* is no story of phallogentric power and instead acknowledges awkwardness, interruptions, irrational fears, and vulnerability. During his first attempt to cross the Fowey River, he is intercepted by the coastguard. After wallowing in the muddy bottom of the Helford River, he is beset by a nasty, feverish cold. Moreover, he openly admits to his dread "about what could be lurking beneath the [water's] surface" (p. 191), and unashamedly enjoys bathing (as opposed to swimming) in various lidos and sea baths. And at his climactic swim at Hell Gill, he decides to turn back when he reaches "an overhang of rock" which "stretche[s] off into a gloomy void beyond" (p. 230). Even so, the lack of testosterone-driven competitiveness in Deakin's swimming activities must not deceive us into underrating Deakin's physical achievements.³

Notably, Deakin's swimmer's journey draws on a feminine language and imagery that suggest water's receptive, nurturing, and regenerative qualities at the same time as they reveal his interest in understanding how water acts on and relates to him as he immerses himself in the element. While ecofeminists (King, Merchant, Plumwood, Warren) warn that feminine projections onto the environment potentially perpetuate the domination of nature and women (alongside other oppressed groups), Deakin links femininity with the environment in order to show the self always as a self-in-relation (see his chapter 3). In this way, he challenges not only current ways of knowing water and how it relates to human and other life forces, but also underlines the value of water as a life substance rather than as what we have come to know as the—admittedly precious—resource called H₂O.

Part of the motivation for his swimming journey, as Deakin states in the introductory chapter in *Waterlog*, is to explore what D. H. Lawrence in one of his poems has called the mysterious "third thing, that makes water" in addition to its chemical composition: "H₂O, hydrogen two parts, oxygen one" (Deakin, 1999, p. 5). This does not mean that Deakin is searching for some mythical substance beyond any specific material and cultural qualities. Rather, he attempts to experience and thus comprehend the element of water as material-biological as well as immaterial-psychological, and in a secular sense, a spiritual element. Or, as he would put it in *Wildwood*,

his immersion in water relates to the element as it “exists in nature, in our souls, in our culture and in our lives” (2007, p. x).

When introducing his notion of “wild swimming” in *Waterlog*, Deakin (1999) specifically places it in opposition to a “virtual reality” where “more and more places and things are signposted, labelled, and officially ‘interpreted’” (p. 4). He therefore deliberately and hyperbolically opposes the bodily activity of swimming in “natural” water to an increasingly dematerialized and transcorporeal experience of the environment in contemporary computer culture, on the one hand, and western societies constrained by an ever-increasing regulatory frenzy, on the other. As he demonstrates in *Waterlog*, paradoxically—and unless driven by corporate or class interests—the regulatory social intervention in the outdoors is often triggered by environmental and health concerns. However, even though some of the waterscapes into which Deakin immerses himself are also threatened by pollution, toxicity, and overfertilization, demonstrating the characteristically “compromised condition” (Clark, 2014, p. 80) of nature in the Anthropocene, this does not prevent him from stressing the “natural” and “wild” (Deakin, 1999, p. 4) aspects of water. To underscore his point, Deakin consistently links his introductory reflections about swimming to the Thoreauvian notion of the “wild” and “wildness,” as it can be found in Thoreau’s seminal essay “Walking.”²⁴ Here, the nineteenth-century American environmentalist likewise plays off a bodily activity, namely that of walking, against an increasing individual and communal detachment from (non)human nature in the context of the far-reaching socioeconomic and ecological changes brought about by the nineteenth-century industrial and technological revolutions. Structurally, *Waterlog* also echoes Thoreau’s peripatetic essay in that Deakin (1999) departs from and returns to his doorstep—i.e., the moat of Walnut Tree Farm—and in that he frames his “amphibious ramble[s]” (p. 170) with preliminary remarks about his motivation and a final perambulatory coda—here an autumnal swim in the sea.

Deakin (2008/2009) knows, of course, that the British outdoors is “not a wilderness in the American sense” (p. 11). Still, Deakin (1999) defines his “wild swimming”—as Thoreau does his “art of Walking”—as a transgressive and subversive activity that involves “getting off the beaten track and breaking free of the official version of things” (p. 4) in order to explore

exterior nonhuman and inner human nature, a quest that otherwise threatens to be buried under the habitual routines of daily life. Thoreau (1862), for whom walking remained a central daily exercise throughout his life, proclaims his “art of Walking” to be a profoundly sensuous and bodily activity through which humans can still become “part and parcel of nature” and attain “a feeling of absolute freedom and wildness” (p. 71). Similarly, Deakin (1999) declares to leave “behind the land” and “enter the water” in order to be “*in* nature, [become] part and parcel of it” and “regain a sense of what is old and wild in these islands” (pp. 3–4; emphasis in original).

Among scholars, the significance of Thoreau’s nineteenth-century essay has sparked some controversy. While Richard Schneider, for instance, claims that the essay’s rhetoric ought to be rigorously contextualized within the ideology of Manifest Destiny and westward expansion, ecocritics and deep ecologists such as Max Oelschlaeger, Lawrence Buell, or William Cronon insist on the essay’s ecocentric concerns and have linked it to Thoreau’s other writings, in particular his forty-seven volumes of journals. Indeed, and as I have argued elsewhere, when approached from a sociological perspective, Thoreau’s perambulatory exercises in “Walking” highlight the persisting interdependence of human and nonhuman relationships in the face of socio-cultural transformations which foster an ever-growing detachment between humans and their environment (Keck, 2006, pp. 54–60). To quote Norbert Elias (1956), even though the human relationship with the environment in western industrial societies demonstrates “a relatively high degree of detachment” which, in turn, is related to a greater “control of emotions in experiencing nature,” by no means does this “require the extinction of other more involved and emotive forms of approach” (p. 228). Hence, when Deakin draws on Thoreau’s (1862) famous peripatetic dictums that “life consists in wildness” (p. 97) and that “in Wildness is the preservation of the World” (p. 95), he likewise stresses the continued human involvement with nonhuman nature despite the ongoing transformations of social (and biological) processes. However, where Thoreau’s essay “Walking” responds to the changes of the industrial and technological revolutions in the nineteenth century, Deakin’s *Waterlog* reacts to the changes of the digital revolution, the regulatory interventions of neoliberalism, and the anthropogenic hazards of

the twenty-first century, meeting these challenges head-on with wit and a notable portion of pugnacity.

Water's Regenerative Powers

From the outset, Deakin (1999) introduces water as an active, dynamic, and powerful entity that significantly contributes to, molds, and even creates human life. When swimming, he states, humans surrender to “amniotic waters,” which means that they inhabit a prenatal and prelinguistic evolutionary stage that is “both utterly safe and yet terrifying” (p. 3). As Deakin explains, water represents an autonomous yet ambivalent force, which may either lovingly embrace and nurture human life like a maternal “womb” (p. 3), or violently change and destroy it. Deakin here points to the dual meaning that diverse cultures generally attribute to water—as life-giving and life-taking (Strang, 2015, p. 69)—and in so doing, underlines the active powers that water exerts upon human life and culture. “Following water, flowing with it,” as he puts it, promises new perspectives and insights, and brings about a “metamorphosis” (Deakin, p. 1999, p. 3). Although Deakin does not lose sight of the ambiguity of water and its destructive forces throughout the book, he generally emphasizes the regenerative and procreative powers of water that animate matter, life processes, as well as the human imagination.

Western phenomenologists have likewise underscored water's procreative aspects and ascribed feminine properties to the element.⁵ In his study *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, philosopher Ivan Illich (1986) begins his critical historical study of the “stuff” (p. 3) that we call water by also linking it to the womb. As a Platonic motherly dwelling space, Illich explains, the womb signifies space as receptacle rather than space as expanse, and therefore as “space-as-substance” (p. 16). Space-as-substance, he elaborates further, can still be smelt and felt based on “the personal experience of living and dwelling in precategorical ‘founded’ space” (p. 17), that is, space before it is socially constructed and utilized. By now, however, western societies have come to know water mostly in reductive and highly abstract terms. No longer an element that is experienced by the senses or as an element that is itself an autonomous, living force (pp. 75–76), it has become the commodity referred to as H₂O, which is loathed

as a potential health risk and, hence, managed and monitored according to its degree of purity.

Illich's linking of water with the womb as receptive space-as-substance based on a precategorical, personal, and felt experience, is useful for examining Deakin's representations of "wild swimming" and the immersion into water as well. When Deakin interlinks the cultural history of swimming and the changing meanings of water in British culture with his own swimming journey, he also associates his personal experiences with birth and becoming, thus underscoring an immediate, sensory relationship with the watery element so that it indeed becomes space-as-substance experienced with the body and the senses. As he swims through a Welsh river, for instance, the water turns into the womb that delivers him: "I slid, scrambled, waded, swam, plunged and surfed through [the river] until I was delivered into a deep, circling pool" (Deakin, 1999, p. 95). Deakin experiences another birthing process when, "[b]orne down [the] magical uterus" of Hell Gill gorge, "the slippery blue-green wetness and smoothness of everything and [his] near-nakedness, only [make him] more helpless, more like a baby. It was like a dream of being born" (p. 229). In addition, he scents, hears, and feels water: there is, for example, the smell of wet grass and of the bleach of the indoor pools. There are also the sounds of gurgling, gushing, or percolating water. At times water's cold tears painfully through him; at others it provides a pleasant coolness, while the power of the tide and the underwater currents contribute to the felt experience of water. Deakin also observes water's changing colours and movement, from crystal river currents to opaque green stagnant surfaces to the snowy white of the ocean breakers, all of which underline the visual experience.

Admittedly, at times the experience of "wild swimming" is in itself mediated by a black rubber wetsuit. This wetsuit, which "travel[s] about with [him] like [his] shadow," makes "a long swim in cold water bearable, even comfortable" (p. 8). He admits that it deprives him of "experiencing the full force of [the] physical encounter with cold water" (p. 9). However, by comparing his wetsuit to an otter's fur, Deakin also rationalizes that this extra, protective layer allows him to swim in all kinds of waters, temperatures, and seasons. Wetsuit or no wetsuit, what emerges in *Waterlog* is an intensely physical and felt relationship with water, which—like the

womb—is at once receptive and regenerative. At a time when, as new nature writer Robert Macfarlane (2007) notes in *The Wild Places*, there is an unprecedented “disembodiment and dematerialization” in the “felt relationship with the natural world” (p. 203), *Waterlog* relates a deeply sensory and physical encounter with water as Deakin gives substance—body, life, and feeling—to the element. At the same time, “wild swimming” not only brings the swimmer into contact with an element that is substantial and alive, it also shows that the human self in water is always a self-in-relation—to water and a larger web of life. This relational aspect of Deakin’s swimming activities stresses processes of becoming and coming-into-being. Furthermore, it offers illuminating insights into unorthodox ways of thinking about the human self as being in water and/or becoming part of a larger interconnected, dynamic, and living world.

The Relational Aspects of “Wild Swimming”

Deakin’s (2008/2009) sensory relation with and experience of water intimately connects him with the fascinatingly diverse “web of activity” (p. 264) of manifold regional microcosms which, in turn, connect him to the larger macrocosm. As he puts it more radically in one of his journal entries: “The swimmer, dissolving himself in water, immerses himself in the natural world and takes part in its existence” (p. 283). In *Waterlog*, this dissolution and immersion manifests itself twofold. On the one hand, there is the profound connectivity with water as substance as Deakin swims, floats, and is himself swept along by the element. On the other hand, when engulfed in water, he joins a flow of materials, substances, and organisms, be they water, sand, air, algae, fish, or other human beings, alongside which and by which he himself transforms. The significance of the dynamic, relational connectivity inherent in Deakin’s “wild swimming” can be better understood and explored with the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold, who conceptualizes human involvement in the world as a continuous, open-ended process of coming-into-being in a field of interwoven lines and ever-evolving relations, or what he calls the “meshwork.”

The meshwork—a term Ingold (2011) borrows from spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre—is, as he explains, “a tangle of interlaced trails,” not unlike “the vines and creepers of a dense patch of tropical forest, or the tangled root systems” (p. 71), which may be familiar to anyone with

experience digging in the garden. Importantly, in the meshwork “beings grow or ‘issue forth’ along the lines of their relationships” (p. 71). As in a network, each element of the meshwork plays an active part. In contrast to network theory, however, the notion of the meshwork does not distinguish between the elements and their relations. “Things *are* their relations” (p. 70), according to Ingold, meaning that humans—among other things—participate in the currents and flows of the world they inhabit. Although aware of the dramatic impact of anthropogenic activities, Ingold nevertheless emphasizes a particular condition of inhabiting the world, namely of “living *in* the world” (p. 47; emphasis in original) and being “alive to the world” (p. 67), which means being in a continually unfolding relationality with and dynamically responsive to the multiple processes and formations in the environment.

With his considerations of the meshwork, Ingold critically engages with Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of dwelling, James Gibson’s ecological approach to visual perception, Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s rhizomatic connections (amongst other philosophers and scientists), aiming to reanimate “the western tradition of thought” (p. 64). In so doing, he muses that those who are alive to the world “seek not to stamp their will upon the earth but to take flight with the birds, soar with the wind, and converse with the stars” (p. 17)—and, one is tempted to add, as Deakin (1999) writes in *Waterlog*, “flow *with* water” (p. 250; emphasis in original). In fact, Ingold’s notions of the meshwork and being alive to the world illuminate the multiple relations with the environment in Deakin’s experience of “wild swimming,” relations which are at once constitutive and transformative. In Deakin’s swim of Hell Gill, for instance, he joins in a dynamic meshwork of the life forces of water, rocks, and the sky:

with the sheer rock and just a crack of sky above me, I felt at once apprehensive and exhilarated. Water was cupped, juggled, saucered, spooned, decanted, stirred and boiled. It was thrown up in a fine spray so you breathed it in, it splashed in your face, it got in your ears, it stung you with its force, it bounced back off every curving surface, it worked unremittingly to sculpt the yielding limestone into

the forms of its own well-ordered movement. Beneath the apparent chaos, all this sound and fury conformed to the strict laws of fluid dynamics. (p. 229)

Here, swimmer and environment are interrelated in a tangle of flux and movement whose motion and noise are expressed by the accumulated verbs. Gyrating down the gorge, the “fine spray” of the water and Deakin’s face, his ears, and breath intertwine with each other and the sky, the air, and the limestone. As a result, he emerges from this experience transformed into a being that is intimately related and highly responsive to the “wetness and smoothness of everything” (p. 229) and, hence, more vulnerable.

Notably, Ingold (2011) also associates vulnerability with those who respond to the flux of their environment “with care, judgement and sensitivity,” a disposition which, as he claims, is a “source of strength, resilience and wisdom” (p. 75). I want to suggest that it is the responsiveness and relationality of Deakin’s immersion in water that constitute one of the lessons to be learned from *Waterlog*. But to take Hell Gill as the cathartic experience of his “wild swimming” would be to overlook the many other moments of connectedness with fellow swimmers and non-swimmers—plants, animals, people, and their artefacts. There is, for example, Deakin’s swim in the Rhee:

I drifted downriver all through the meadows, by pollard willows in a row down the far bank, overtaken by the occasional punt. Tractors worked the flat fields and lovers walked in the meadows or lay together on the bank. Here and there I met friendly anglers in muddy bays between the rushes. I glided on in the still green water, brushed by the rubbery stems and pads of lilies Moorhens jerked along the mudbanks on luminous green legs, their red bills and jet-black feathers vivid in the evening light. (p. 43)

Moving along with the river’s currents, Deakin participates in, becomes part of, and responds to a field of material, organic, and social relations, in which the processes of plant life relate to human activities and vice versa,

interweaving further with the forces of water, animal life, the light, and even a variety of sounds along his way. Indeed, his swimming makes visible his own movement along the Rhee, his immersion in and connectedness with the currents, the evening light, and the sounds of the water and the tractors.

Ingold (2011) notes that the weather in particular is conspicuously absent in the conceptualizing and theorizing of who or what is alive, while mediating the relationship between humans and their environment. He argues that the meshwork must include not only things, persons, animals, and organisms, but also the substances, media, and phenomena (e.g., the weather, light, and sound) in which humans are immersed and which they perceive. As he asserts, when being in and moving through light and sound (p. 138), humans inhabit what Ingold calls an “open world” (p. 117), that is, a world in which its inhabitants as well as the phenomena they perceive and experience—the sky and the earth, the weather, light, sound, and feeling (p. 129)—are immersed in a tangle of generative relations. It is this immersion in a dynamic, relational meshwork that constitutes Deakin’s (1999) “wild swimming,” whether he joins the flows of the lilies, the rushes, and the seaweed, or whether he “mingle[s] with mullet” (p. 170), salmons, frogs, and eels; whether he communes with gravelly river bottoms, the fine sands of the beaches, or the mud of the Helford River, or whether he swims on misty spring mornings, hazy summer afternoons, or in the rainy dusk of late summer days. In short, as he submerges himself in the flow of water, Deakin always immerses himself in the life processes of a world-in-formation as well.

Made of Water

While Deakin’s emphasis is on water as a force that can be sensed and felt, and as a substance where the self is always experienced in relation to the meshwork, i.e., the manifold forces of a dynamic world-in-formation, his immersion into water also involves his mind, imagination, and subconscious. Thus, the experience of “wild swimming” becomes, to once more borrow an expression by Tim Ingold (2011), “the engagement of a mindful body” (p. 133). As Ingold explains, to be human means to be at once a creature of and beyond the earth: only by rising beyond their human nature, by placing themselves outside the earth, as it were, can humans also

know themselves as beings made of the materials the earth is composed of (pp. 113–114). In *Waterlog*, Deakin replaces the earthy part of being human with the element of water, so that to be human comes to mean being at once a creature of and beyond water. Indeed, I want to propose that it is this very idea of transcending one's own aquatic nature in order to know that one's nature consists of water, which is expressed in Deakin's (1999) perhaps most enigmatic and oxymoronic statement of "dreaming and drowning" (p. 171) in water.

Observing that the human body consists mostly of water and that it moves "with the water around it" (p. 3) when swimming, Deakin first establishes that being human means consisting of water. The material nature of being human, therefore, always points to the aquatic rather than the terrestrial realm, the underwater world rather than dry land. Accordingly, Deakin defines this aquatic human nature through downward movement brought about actively, as well as by the force of water: he feels himself sinking, subsiding, and drowning; he is submerged in, dives, drops, and descends into water. Conversely, he rises beyond his aquatic human nature by daydreaming, thus leaving the "unconscious world of the sea" (p. 14) to enter the subconscious world of the human mind. By switching from an exterior to an inward focus on his thoughts and imagination, he attains an altered state of consciousness, which is defined by an upward movement into a transcendent sphere that invites thought, reverie, and imagination. Like the downward motion into the aquatic terrain, this upward motion is also the result of his agency as well as other forces: he hangs suspended, floats, and drifts; he is borne up by the water and feels himself flying. As he ponders human nature in his daydreams, his thoughts revolve around the evolutionary relatedness of humans to the amphibian species and, not least, to water itself. He finds support for his musings about the aquagenesis of human life in the writings of scientists and anthropologists (Alister Hardy and Elaine Morgan) who argue that humans actually "spent ten million years ... as semi-aquatic waders and swimmers," whereas human "life on dry land is a relatively recent, short-lived affair" (Deakin, 1999, p. 147).⁶ Alternately "dreaming and drowning" in the sense of rising beyond his own amphibious nature to know himself as a creature of water, Deakin re-connects with his own aquatic nature as well as his imagination and, thus, with the evolutionary amphibious history of the human species. In

his actual “wild swimming,” Deakin also connects with people—amphibious and terrestrial.

The Social and Communal Aspects of “Wild Swimming”

There is a decidedly social and communal dimension to Deakin’s *Waterlog*. Rather than seeking out remote water holes, lakes, or rivers, Deakin sets out for places cherished and well known in the history of British swimming. Furthermore, while he enjoys the occasional solitary swim, he also embarks on his “wild swimming” with friends and other amphibiphiles. Even on those occasions when his fellow swimmers do not join in the relational immersion in water, their presence—including their memories and stories—still contributes to a greater understanding of water. To follow the water therefore means to follow people, their stories, and histories as well. This idea, in turn, expands his “wild swimming” to include delving into the Fens with an eel trapper by boat, exploring the Malvern springs and the history of hydrotherapy, and taking dips in various swimming clubs, even in London’s urban outdoor lidos. In this way, water becomes a site of social and communal experience and connectivity as well.

A perhaps characteristic moment of water as a site of social and communal experience and connectivity is when Deakin (1999) meets with “a whole family tribe of river bathers” (p. 110) at Fladbury on the River Avon. Here, he is shown around the mill by the water, is initiated into the art of maneuvering a coracle, swims alongside the family, and converses with them about their “mutual concern for the right to native swimming” (p. 111). Indeed, water here is a veritable “swimmer’s dream” (p. 110), where kindred spirits can come together for their shared passion of “wild swimming.” In moments such as these, Deakin foregrounds the social and communal pleasures of water as well as other people’s stories about it. But he never distinguishes between water as a social and communal site, on the one hand, and the immersion into water as substance and the experience of the meshwork, on the other. As he swims with his fellow “amphibians” in the Avon, he feels the river’s gentle current and the different temperatures of the water layers, and he enjoys sitting “amongst the rippling minnows” (p. 114).

However, the communal water site is threatened not only by the increasingly fluctuating water levels resulting from drainage systems and

the common straightening of the river's natural course, but also by the health and security concerns of the Environmental Agency. In a letter, the Agency warns the family of river swimmers against leptospirosis and Weil's disease, both of which, as it states, result from industrial and agricultural pollution. By the same token, the family is advised not to let its children swim close to the weir unattended or, even better, to go swimming in the local pool rather than the River Avon. Yet as Deakin counters, evidence suggests that these supposed risks are minimal and that, on the contrary, the Agency is actually annihilating the joys, pleasures, and general benefits for health and well-being derived from swimming by grossly exaggerating and distorting scientific data. According to his own findings, the risk of contracting Weil's disease is very small, and it is even smaller for active swimmers than for the average British population.⁷ To him, the official clamor against the supposed health risks that lurk in British rivers and waterholes is part of a larger politics according to which Britain's water surface areas—and by implication society—are under an increasingly regulated regime that feeds public anxieties as well as misinformation, and thus effectively enhances the detachment between society and nature even further.

With this argument, Deakin also comments on social transformations in the relationship between humans and their non-human environment. Citing social policy analyst Ken Worpole, he suggests that since the 1990s society has undergone a "return to the private, the indoor and [a] retreat from collective provision" as can be seen by the "decline of the lidos" (p. 144). While other people are glued to their TV and computer screens, Deakin immerses himself in water as substance and communal site, opposing the increasing online connectivity of British society to his connectivity with water and the meshwork of life.⁸ Likewise, sociologist and psychologist Sherry Turkle (2011), who studies the effects of robotics and connectivity culture on present American society, articulates concerns about people's transforming "sense of being human" (p. 2). She claims that under the new regime of mobile communication technology, people lose their "sense of physical connection" (p. 157) to communal spaces. Turkle also observes a growing other-directedness to "validate" (p. 177) the self, which, as she argues, gives rise to "narcissistic ways of relating to the world" (p. 179) rather than experiencing it directly.⁹

With his observations about increasingly regulated lives, whether through digital screen culture or institutional signposting, Deakin anticipates what the American writer Richard Louv (2005) would call “nature deficit disorder” in his bestselling book *Last Child in the Woods*. Louv uses the term to describe the unprecedented disconnection of contemporary American individuals and society from the environment, brought about by such recent developments as digitalization and biogenetic engineering, as well as the ever-growing administrative and legal apparatus that generates and spreads a culture of fear about natural dangers, which—ironically—derive from anthropogenic impact.¹⁰ Indeed, Deakin finds himself confronted with warning signs throughout *Waterlog*. There are signs that warn of health risks, those that caution against trespass onto private property, and others that alert him to stay on designated paths or prohibit jumping into rivers from bridges for safety reasons. With his “wild swimming,” Deakin takes a stance against this increasingly regulated and regimented state of Britain’s rivers and furthermore insists on his right to access and swim in them. Frequently, upper-class owners and owners with vested corporate interests (often in fishery) deliberately fence in riparian land to keep the public out. Deakin, however, who seems attracted rather than deterred by their warning signs, fiercely protests against such claims to exclusive rights, as the argument at the water meadows of Winchester College demonstrates:

“Excuse me,” came a voice, “does that fence mean anything to you?”

This was unmistakably school talk, and I turned round to confront two figures straight out of Dickens; a short and portly porter with a beard and Alsatian, and a gangling figure on a bike with binoculars, strawberry-pink with ire, the College River Keeper. I introduced myself and enquired the cause of their disquiet. They said the river was the property of the college, and full of trout for the pleasure of the Old Wykehamists who sometimes fish there. It was definitely not for swimming in by *hoi polloi*. (p. 31)

As self-proclaimed “wild swimmer,” Deakin of course sympathizes with the *hoi polloi* and opposes the exclusive rights of members of the British upper class, insisting on the right to swim as analogous to the cherished British right to roam through the country so enthusiastically declared by then Secretary of State for National Heritage, Chris Smith. Although a river belongs to the landowner whenever it runs through private property, there is a grey area regarding the right of access to it, since riversides belong to what has been legally defined as “open country” and, hence, as accessible. Furthermore, Deakin points out that according to the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, riverside “includes the river as well as the banks” (p. 33), which means that in any area that is “open country” there is also the right to swim. Or, as he suggests to the two river keepers: “But surely, ... we should all have access to swim in our rivers just as we should be free to walk in our own countryside” (p. 31).

With his notion of “wild swimming,” which includes the right to access British water surface areas, Deakin remains rooted in the counter-cultural mindset of a left-of centre politics that believes in the anarchic powers of the individual and the community. In fact, his own environmental activism dates back to the 1970s. At first “an influential member” (Hunt, 2009, p. 75) of the Friends of the Earth, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he became one of the co-founders and the “media-strategist” (Moran, 2014, p. 52) of Common Ground, a nonprofit organization for the arts and the environment located in Dorset. *Waterlog* contains the key messages of Deakin’s environmental activism, which is directed above all at the local biosphere and community, an idea that has proven successful until today and which I consider another important lesson to be learned from the book.

Wherever he swims, Deakin carries out the central idea of Common Ground to speak up in creative ways for the distinctiveness, particularity, and heterogeneity of local, commonplace spaces as cultural and natural landscapes. In the organization’s 1993 manifesto entitled “Losing Space,” Sue Clifford and Angela King underline the connectedness between these local, cultural landscapes and the lives and identities of their inhabitants. While acknowledging that “discontinuities” in today’s landscapes no longer allow for a deep relationship with the land, Clifford and King (1983) nevertheless speak of “an invisible web” (p. 8) that connects the

local community with their environment. They therefore promote local distinctiveness based on a responsive, dynamic, detailed yet fractioned way of taking action.¹¹

In the same spirit, Deakin deliberately avoids such spectacular areas as the Lake District, or the most popular tourist places in Wales and Cornwall, instead turning his attention to nearby swimming places, many of which are now forgotten and out of use. In his descriptions, these water places are special, even magical, an example of which is his own moat at Walnut Farm. Entering the moat for a swim in May, for instance, he carefully steps into the water so as not to “disturb the insect, mollusc and amphibian city, already far into the rhythms of its day”:

The submerged jungle of Canadian pond weed was beginning to thicken ... At the end of my first two chilly lengths, a frog leapt off the bank almost straight into my face, and others watched me from the water. That they are far outnumbered now by the toads is due, I think, to predation of their tadpoles by the newts, There is no native creature quite so exotic or splendid as the male great chested newt, They are the jesters of the moat, with their bright orange, spotted bellies and outrageous zigzag crests, I hung submerged, in the mask and snorkel, and watched these pond-dragons coming up for air, then slowly sinking back into the deep water, crests waving like seaweed. (p. 71)

Waterlog abounds with such descriptions of fascinatingly diverse, beautiful, and precious yet always peculiarly local environments. Still, at no point does Deakin trivialize the tremendous powers of water that shape these natural-cultural surroundings and, by implication, the communities residing there, in manifold ways.

Conclusion

There are, then, several lessons to be learned from Deakin’s *Waterlog* with its poetic celebration of “wild swimming.” First, while living in the Anthropocene certainly poses unprecedented challenges for humans regarding their direct involvement with their environment, Deakin reminds

us that there still is a connection to and connectivity with nature, which can be equally enjoyed by serious “wild swimmers” and, less ambitiously, by those who prefer sea bathing or public pools. No matter how, the pleasures derived from the connectivity with water invite us to join the meshwork and to always experience ourselves in relation to other life forces, including substances and media such as water, light, and weather, as well as organisms and plants, animals and humans. As *Waterlog* demonstrates, water is part of the meshwork of life and, hence, a substance that is exhilaratingly alive and far removed from the commodity commonly known as H₂O, or worse, bottled water. Water as part of the meshwork is also a substance that animates life in general, and the human body and imagination in particular. After all, Deakin’s swimming journey suggests that humans are of water at the same time as they transcend it.

From a less philosophical point of view, *Waterlog* teaches us with wit and an appropriate dose of self-deprecatory humour that we do have access to manifold local waterscapes around us, and that in order to experience and appreciate them in their diversity and distinctiveness, we need neither develop a parochial mindset nor resign in the face of the many rules and regulations imposed on us by our safety-conscious and anxiety-ridden societies. Instead, Deakin advocates responsiveness and optimism. On the one hand, he derives his optimism from his “wild swimming” as a deliberate, self-willed, and therefore subversive socio-political activity; on the other hand, his optimism stems from the sensual pleasures generated by his swimming *with* water. Indeed, this very optimism is perhaps the most important lesson to be gleaned from Deakin’s *Waterlog*. Truly contagious, it sustains his transgressive yet receptive way of joining in and—in moments of serendipity—connecting with life on land and in water.

NOTES

- 1 *Wildwood* and *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm* were published posthumously. Like *Waterlog*, *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm* follows the cycle of one year. It consists of selections from the entries of over 130 notebooks and diaries Deakin left behind and which today are archived in the literary collections of the University of East Anglia.
- 2 Jenny Landreth focuses on women in the British history of swimming. She notes that before the emergence of the early twentieth-century “swimming suffragettes” (2017, p. 64) and before women were properly taught how to swim, there still were women who were competent, athletic swimmers throughout the nineteenth century. However, their activities were called sea bathing rather than swimming (p. 36). Jane Austen, herself a passionate sea-bather, is perhaps the best-known British female writer whose late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century novels include sea bathing (Sprawson, 1992/1993, p. 27).
- 3 Deakin’s ecofeminist language and thought are also central to his other writings and even turn up in Robert Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places*. Here, they are an important addition to Macfarlane’s (2007/2008) poetically rendered excursions to places where nature and culture are intricately intertwined. While Macfarlane at times seems to be driven by the desire to prove himself against natural forces in faraway places, Deakin’s fictional presence introduces the appreciation of nearby, often overlooked “wild places,” be they the life-thronged crevices of the grykes at their feet (p. 168) or the holloway network of southern England in which they become enveloped (pp. 213–238). The holloway is a former network of old pathways that, long-forgotten and fallen out of use, has been reconquered by wildlife of all sorts.
- 4 The essay was published posthumously the year of Thoreau’s death in 1862 in the *Atlantic Monthly*. While this final printed version has its origins in lectures from 1850s, Thoreau continued working on it until his death (Knott, 2002, p. 70).
- 5 In *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, French philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard (1999; his original work was published in 1942) notes that water is “profoundly maternal” as it is a substance “that we see everywhere springing up and increasing” like “a continuous birth” (p. 14; emphasis in original).
- 6 While Deakin refers to the works of Hardy (1960) and Morgan (1972), marine biologist Richard Ellis’s *Aquagenesis* (2003) has since further explored the theory and history of the human species evolving from life in the sea.
- 7 Investigating the matter, Deakin (1999) comes to a very different conclusion than the overcautious Environmental Agency: “Dr Robin Philip, an epidemiologist at the University of Bristol, ... found that the risks of contracting Weil’s disease, and of dying from it, were actually lower among [recreational water-users] (including swimmers) than for the total British population. He states: ‘... the chance of dying from Weil’s disease associated with bathing and water sports is about 1:20 million exposed persons (i.e., one case in the UK every four years)’” (p. 113).
- 8 Deakin’s frequent references to the mediation of the outdoors through television in *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm* seem almost quaint by today’s standards of permanent online connectivity. However, his actual concern relates to a larger general social

detachment from the environment, which he equates with isolation and loneliness. While he sees himself connected “to the trees, the house, the meadows, the birds, the insects,” he observes that “so many people are so cut off from all the other things, the trees, etc., . . .” (2008/2009, p. 157).

- 9 Like Louv and Deakin, Turkle also draws on ideas by Henry David Thoreau. Contrary to scholars who “believe that the new connectivity culture provides a digital Walden” (2011, p. 275), Turkle is concerned with the costs of networked lives, among them loneliness, a simplification of what it means to be human, or the growing investment in performing multiple selves.
- 10 As Louv (2005) states, he does not use the term “nature deficit disorder” in a “scientific or clinical sense” (p. 99). Rather he finds it a useful term to explain what he considers an unprecedented disconnection between America’s children today and the environment. This disconnect is one “factor that may aggravate attentional difficulties for many children” (p. 99).
- 11 As Clifford and King (1983) put it metaphorically: “There never has been any need to bulldoze the whole building site or to demand the pronunciation of your ‘h’s” (p. 21).

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