

**Diffractional swimming:  
Learning through a Robben Island crossing**

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**Abstract**

This is an experimental piece following 30 years of implementation work in sexual and reproductive justice. In 2021, I started my PhD and wild water swimming. While separate initiatives, my time in the sea enabled deep, slow, focused diffractional process in which my thoughts, connections, obstacles, engagements, relationships, memories, and writing flowed with the human embodiment of ocean watery swimming. After my proposal was finalised, I ventured further, wanting to spend time swimming distances. I joined a group training to do a Robben Island crossing. This paper documents the slow journey of my mind and body in regular practice and process. I remember some who have passed on known and unknown as Robben Island evokes ideas of individual and collective struggle. On the day of the crossing, it was clear then cloudy and rough. I was left with mist and turbulence and yet, I came to shore and my PhD continues.

**Keywords:** diffractional thinking, ocean, reproductive justice, sexual and reproductive health and rights, wild swimming

**Introduction**

I have never been a good swimmer, but I have always loved being in the water, being held, and contained, floating, and moving my body with ease through water. During COVID, I started walking when we could and relished the freedom as lockdowns were revised. As seasons changed, I noticed the seasons of my aging and moving into menopause, the colder waters were not a barrier but a balm. I started to swim, I met communities of swimmers, and I felt challenged



to swim more and in the open sea. When I was younger I would look out to Robben Island<sup>1</sup> where apartheid era political prisoners were isolated and incarcerated when driving over Philip Kgosana drive, then called De Waal drive. Political censorship enabled a lack of knowledge, which meant I did not know much about the political prisoners.

In March 2021, I met with my PhD supervisor and began to develop my proposal. The focus of my research was to uncover some my experiences of sexual and reproductive health policy and programming in relation to the population policy, the adolescent sexual and reproductive health framework strategy, and policies concerning fertility control including the contraception clinical guidelines, the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act, and the Clinical Guidelines on Abortion. I worked on developing my proposal for a policy analysis exploring the process of population control to the construction of sexual and reproductive health post-apartheid, 1994-2021.

I swam through thinking and refining the questions I wanted to ask in my proposal. Ideas crystallised and paragraphs linked in my mind as I reached forward one stroke after the next. My PhD has been linked to my swimming journey. As Tsui (2020) describes that the water has been seductive despite its dangers, I have come back to it again and again. I come back to the water and to the pages of writing, slowly. The call of swimming has been like answering the call of a siren with many other swimmers seeking, 'to understand ourselves, that lost, quiet state of just being – no technology, no beeps – dating back to our watery beings' (Tsui, 2020: 7).

I would travel around the Cape Town peninsula to different swimming spots. As the distances I could swim increased, so did the time I had in the water for thought and reflection. I got stung by jellyfish, developed rashes, and travelled through painful apartheid spatial planning areas going to places I usually avoid on the Atlantic side with sea views close to the city - prime property previously reserved for white persons. The sea remains inaccessible to most South Africans and has a glare of inequality. The democratic promise of housing for all persons is increasingly a distant unfulfilled hope. This journeying took me out of my comfort zones. It took time to negotiate and arrange my crossing, and finally the day dawned.

This paper outlines my entangled swimming and research journey. It tracks the magnet that the water has become in my learning journey over different parts of my PhD. In the wild, the water can be calm and turbulent, cool and colder, clear and cloudy. All of these were experienced as I swam from Robben Island to Blouberg beach. This paper is an experimental piece making sense of my PhD academic journey through thoughts, entanglements, memories, writing, and the oceanic watery human embodiment in swimming. The experience of the moving ocean has enabled a deeper understanding and practice of reflective thinking that I have come to appreciate as diffractive engagement as I am thinking through the embodied, affective, and intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> Robben Island was used at various times between the 17th century and the 20th century as a prison, a hospital for marginalized groups (people with mental illnesses or leprosy), and a military base. It is located 12 kilometers off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa. For decades, it was home to a maximum-security prison where political prisoners were incarcerated during apartheid. Nelson Mandela — the first black president of South Africa, elected in 1994 — served 18 of his 27 years of imprisonment on Robben Island.

moments that are happening while swimming. Usually reflection is singular, separate, and individual, the fluid movement of the ocean and prisms of light reflecting in concert with the earth, sun and water have brought into focus the concept of diffraction (Haraway, 2000; Barad, 2007; Bozalek & Murriss, 2021; Mitchell, 2017). This swimming and thinking praxis of diffraction has enabled a flowing movement of thought waves spreading around obstacles through my body and mind.

### **Swimming my PhD**

I did not look back whilst swimming and now I am coasting towards writing up my PhD, as Tsui relates 'immersion opens our imaginations' (2020: 6) and has enabled a discipline of persisting with swimming and writing. The joining of the swimming programme linked with taking bigger steps in concretising my methodology and refining the framing of my literature review. The content of my PhD concerns the apartheid strategy of population engineering, population control through the explicit mechanisms of fertility control in family planning programmes, and limitation of abortion access. I am using Carol Bacchi's policy framing of how problems are represented to be and constructed (Bacchi, 2016) and feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2008) as my methodology. Six months before my Robben Island crossing, I had a hysterectomy that pushed me into menopause. I was curiously aware of my personal experience of my sexual and reproductive health and my determination to swim towards healing.

I have been immersed in the ocean of sexual and reproductive health policy for the past 30 years working towards transforming population engineering of apartheid. The South African national family planning programme established in 1974 aimed at providing 'clinical, counselling and information services nationally', 'subsidized, and free to all races' and the 'Population Development Programme' formed in 1984, aimed to lower black fertility levels (Chimera-Dan, 1993: 33). The expansion of family planning expenditure comprising a 'tiny amount' in the 1950s increased to 'comprise roughly one-quarter of all government spending on health in the late 80s' (Norling, 2018: 366).

Work in sexual and reproductive health and rights has been a journey, swimming from the confinement of coercive racist and patriarchal family planning to a shore of options in fertility control. In reviewing the construction of sexual and reproductive health and rights, it has been a misty quagmire of turbulent waters as I sought to fathom this experience. My diffractional swimming deepened my academic practice in being immersed in bodies of fluid thoughts, problems, and contestations.

In the course of my swim, I decided to have conversations with different people. They enabled me to continue during my challenging crossing. The waters changed and mist descended halfway through the crossing, the greyness of the sea, sky and the unknown stayed with me. I dwelt on those incarcerated on the island for our freedoms. Asimbonanga, the Johnny Cleggs song ran through my head, 'we have not seen him', referencing Nelson Mandela, perhaps the most famous of political prisoners on Robben Island. Apartheid censorship was experienced as a mist of not seeing. What must it have been like to look out in this impossible mist and have

one's movement curtailed? What does it mean not to see, for things to be so cloudy and unclear? As I glided through the ocean I thought about our cherished freedoms and my ability to swim and move. I gathered certainty and strength from these legacies as I moved into a focused zone, alive, one breath after the next, one stroke after the next, and I reached the shore.

This has all been new to me and unprecedented emerging from COVID, leaving full time employment, and becoming a PhD student. It fitted with the times of change and anxiety of living through a plague with a world in turmoil. In doing so I have been able to immerse myself into bodies of new ideas and theorising that have deepened my thinking, fostering new connections and relationships. It has been a delight to learn and embrace theoretical framings that have made sense of my visceral journal that has accompanied my academic process. Wild swimming methodologies (Shefer & Bozalek, 2022) have been central to enabling my conscious process of thought and analysis. This has generated diffractive thoughts about the complex and contested tides of sexual and reproductive justice in South Africa with population control submerged almost as an iceberg on the horizon. Across the ocean, the United States of America has been subjected to diminishing reproductive rights as legal provisions are contested. The legal fallout reverberates in South Africa with the US being the largest source of public and private funds for sexual and reproductive health. In neocolonial processes, private foundations have filled government capacity in reproductive health in South Africa funding international NGOs where they bring with them their donor conditions and cultural contestations (Stevens, 2021).

The practice of swimming most days has been a powerful, embodied, and visceral experience of being in a flowing stream of productivity that has also served to steady my wellbeing. The ocean has served as a metaphor for my contested work that can be viewed as turbulent, stormy, and entangled in tides or floods seldom neutral. These swimming ideas echo Fullagar and Bozalek (2021) who theorise evolving academic practices and ways of being and becoming. While walking alongside the ocean each morning as we were able to when lockdowns lifted during COVID, I took pictures on my phone so I could savour the azure colours and remember the ozone freshness of the coastal path. I sent these to a friend, reaching out in our isolation. They would ask, viewing the inviting waters vicariously from another city, whether I was swimming; I was not. I then started swimming in the mornings, not sure how to manage a change of clothes and how to store my goods safely on the beach whilst in the water. I observed how others were doing this and, before long, I had joined the regulars whom I met on the beach. In the water, I swam ten widths of St James pool in False Bay, getting used to the changing temperatures and differing conditions of tides and visibility. People asked my name and about myself and I eased into a welcoming community of morning swimmers with offerings of sourdough bread, lemons from trees, sharing of books and spreads of birthday cakes. As autumn came, I explored the Cape Long Distance Swimming Association website and found a group swimming in Simonstown on Sundays and joined them as they swam out into the harbour. My first open water swim was exhilarating as I followed a group of swimmers into the grey blue towards a buoy. It was deep and I found myself struggling to find the rhythm of my breathing. The swimmers stopped every now and then and checked in on one another. The inclusivity and

care of the group was remarkable as people of varying abilities were part of the pod; one woman who welcomed me was large and a cancer survivor with one of her legs amputated. Each Sunday as the conditions were WhatsApped, I felt the pull of desire to swim together with the nervous anxiety of going into the deep. The swims were about an hour long and I found myself immersed in the experience of my body and mind processing the conditions of the water and, in doing so, thinking about my PhD work. While taking a breath of water I would notice the choppiness and at the same time reflect on how the problems of population or reproduction have been constructed over time. The swirling choppiness embodied the enduring construction of population control, the public obsession with teenage pregnancies without concern for the dominant structural tides of fossil fuels and limited implementation of comprehensive sexuality education or provision of a wide range of contraception options.

When lockdowns were lifted my family went away to Simonstown where I had been swimming for a weekend and a longer swim, of 3.5km, was advertised from Roman Rock Light house to Simonstown Long Beach. The organisers welcomed me, even though the furthest I had ever swum before was about a mile. They reassured me that I could jump in and out the boat if I wanted and explained that the conditions would be calm and sunny even though it was mid-winter in July. I entered the sea that morning and soon felt completely out of my depth when I came into contact with a squishy jellyfish, but it seemed my fellow swimmers were not bothered. I tried to find my rhythm and was soon left with the last boat escorting swimmers on the swim. The sun was on my back and the water was between 13 and 14 degrees; it was calm and clear, I had to just keep swimming one stroke after the next and soon I was in a comfortable and contemplative zone. I felt comforted by the couple and their dog on the boat who kept an encouraging eye on me. I was the last to finish, got to the shore, and had to swim back to the boat to take me back to the harbour. I was exhilarated; it was a wonderful swim.

### **Diffractional meaning**

During this time, I began to think more deeply about relationality, those who I was in a relationship with and connected to. People and networks old and new, complex and easy, those with the water and those not with water. These ideas stayed with me as I drifted with Nxumalo and Murriss's (2021) ideas of connectedness and relationality, reviewing and noticing. I was conscious of the sea as a vehicle for violence, our history of slavery and colonialism, how it evokes tears, remembering and mourning as well as revealing a disturbing wake (Sharpe, 2016). Ships traversing the seas with slaves shackled have been sites of violence including sexual and obstetric violence. Those who died were tossed overboard, while those who could not endure the crossing, jumped into the ocean (DeLoughrey, 2010).

During 2021, I came to meet cousins for the first time, whom I had been separated from during apartheid, and learnt about my maternal family who were mixed race<sup>2</sup>. COVID had allowed for some introspection and two of my second cousins matched DNA in Canada and Australia across the oceans. My DNA revealed my ancestors had come on boats as slaves. The starting point of my thesis has been the population policy which turned out to be so connected with myself, and I spent many kilometers swimming thinking deeply of my great grandparents whose relationship would have been declared immoral under apartheid. In August, I swam the Simonstown mile; I was in the last batch of swimmers and the conditions changed from calm to choppy during the swim and I thought of my great grandmother and who she might have been. Her courtship with my great grandfather took place in the Karoo where he rode a donkey cart between Hanover and Richmond to visit her. What was it like being a white woman married to a black man in a country where apartheid was yet to be born, but fertile in experiences of colonialisation? She bore many children with my grandmother being the eldest and died when she was just over 50 years. Focusing on her helped me as I swallowed salt water and struggled through rough waters around the buoys in the Simonstown harbour.

The musings flowed and spread as waves diffracting about obstacles as I followed the movement mixed with currents through the medium of water. Thoughts percolated and circled as I returned to the water most days with time for focused thought undistracted as my head was immersed in the water, seeing only shades of blue or green. I began to crave the cold water and what it offered my body and mind. Somehow, I was transported back to my childhood and visits to my grandmother looking out to Robben Island thinking but not knowing much about political prisoners, I just knew they were there, and I looked out to them through the seasons, calm and stormy, hot, and cold days.

As my PhD became real with my proposal finalised, I felt a new season in my life emerging. In January 2022, I started a 12-week programme that my partner gave me for a Christmas present enabling me to swim the 7km plus Robben Island crossing. At 55, I would never be able to run a half marathon, my longest had been a 10km trail run which had made my legs and knees ache with age. In October 2021, as mentioned, I had a hysterectomy, losing my individual reproductive capacity. Yet, I reflected on the ocean as an earthly womb, giving vitality, holding, and containing as I moved into my menopause. With my PhD proposal accepted, this translated into a new phase of midlife reflection; I felt ready for a challenge.

It felt foreign, driving through the obscenely wealthy Atlantic suburbs down to Camps Bay and getting into the school of swimmers. I realised I was uniquely slow; this would be hard. The next weeks were spent meeting on Mondays and Wednesday evenings, swimming for about an

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<sup>2</sup> 'Between 1950 and 1991, apartheid's Population Registration Act classified every South African as belonging to one of at least seven "races" and accordingly granted or denied them citizenship rights on a sliding scale from "White" (full rights) to "Bantu" (with the fewest). The classification was subjective, and families were split apart when paler or darker skinned children or parents - or those with curlier hair, or different features - were placed in separate categories'. See [https://sthp.saha.org.za/memorial/race\\_classification\\_board.htm](https://sthp.saha.org.za/memorial/race_classification_board.htm) (Accessed: July 2023).

hour at Clifton. My mind was blown each time I experienced something new or different. Some days the swell would be a washing machine, another we would swim from 4<sup>th</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> beach, another it would be through oodles of jellyfish. One day I remember the enormous swell of several metres and being floated up and down, then turning and watching the powerful waves crash into the granite boulders. Within the group, I was generally the last and slowest swimmer, yet I never felt alone. Over the weekends we built up longer swims and eventually completed our final long swim of 6 km at Simonstown and were told we had 'peaked'. The feeling in my mind and body after swimming was exhilarating and it felt as if this practice was sustaining me as I moved from my laptop and PhD focus to the water in a process of slow scholarship (Bozalek, 2022). Even though I was slow, I was moving forwards most of the time, sometimes pulled aside with a current. With each stroke, my arm would go deep, circling in tandem with a suggested word written, entangled idea or engaged thought held or lost.

Being in the water, I noticed myself being moved by waves and currents, seeing and being immersed in these forces, patterns, rumples of water and light through the water. I then learned about diffraction (Haraway, 2000; Barad, 2007; Bozalek & Murriss, 2021; Mitchell, 2017) and identified with my body and mind moving as a physical phenomenon. The waves showed different light, sounds and patterns of water with the superimposed or overlapping movements edging towards the shore whilst I swam along the coast. A boulder would be in the way and cause a huge crashing obstruction amplifying showering water into the sky and I would marvel at the power of this movement and change in direction of the wave. Patterns of difference from the usual waves rolling onto the shore would emerge and my body would be caught in the motions of the waves. From this I focused on the contested and complex areas of sexual and reproductive health and the literature review that I was developing and noticed the waves, patterns, bumpiness of currents, and changes in direction over time. I questioned whether we had swum away from population control, the problematic waves remained on the surface with new discourses disguising old pools and patterns of fertility control. New channels opened with no single thread, or wave happening in isolation, there were always different energies or forces engaging with each other. It was whilst my body was pulling itself through water, training to be able to swim distances, that these theoretical and analytical understandings came into focus. These thoughts enabled the refining of the ideas that emerged in my literature review, development of fieldwork instruments and ethical process. The flow of water enabled creativity but was also not inevitable.

The next steps in planning my Robben Island crossing were not predictable. I waited for the go ahead, negotiating with the skipper, waiting for the right day with calm swell and reasonable temperature. I had improved my swimming time to about 25 minutes a kilometer and the crossing would take over three hours. That meant that I needed to be in a temperature that was not too cold. Towards the end of April, the temperatures were about 12 degrees Celsius; I was hoping for about 14. There suddenly seemed like a large group of swimmers waiting to swim, some had come from out of town, it was tense waiting. One swimmer had a heart attack and had

to be resuscitated the weekend before we were due to swim. It took a lot to negotiate and arrange and eventually about a month later the morning of my swim beckoned.

As it was May my skipper arranged to meet after nine as the sun rose later and would warm the water. I had my bag ready weeks before, much like my delivery bags for hospital when having my babies. One for the boat, one for the shore. I mixed my warm drinks and feeds and drove to my mother's house and left my car, meeting my calm cyclist cousin who I had asked to second me on the boat. We got to Green Point early and had coffee before meeting up with a fellow swimmer who had done the crossing three weeks earlier and had trained with me over the past 12 weeks.

We next met our skipper and observer and soon we were on the boat having a briefing and then riding out to Table Bay. It was a beautiful sunny calm day and after about 25 minutes we were at the Island. A strange crop of government looking houses and a jetty came into view. I smothered shoulders and arms in Vaseline to prevent chaffing, donned my hat and goggles; I was ready. Much like my PhD process, I had registered, prepared a proposal, completed a literature review, and completed the ethics process; I had been doing the work.

I eased myself off into the ocean; it was about 13.9 degrees Celsius on the boat temperature gauge. I had to swim about 50 meters to the Island through a channel of kelp. I was warned of the swell that could potentially move me to the jetty and directed my stroke towards the shore of Robben Island. I eased myself to the rocks on the Island carefully as the terrain was uneven, I was ready, I turned around, my observer blew the horn, and I could start.

I started, one stroke after the next. Do not look back, today I only wanted to move forward. The ocean opened as my concentration and reflections began. I noticed how I had given myself time during this midlife time to think, explore, and feel. The meditative motions of one stroke after the next enables a rhythm of my body and stills my mind. Over the past, while I was conscious of the space and time in the water enabling me to think through some of the analytical challenges in my PhD, I know I have over three hours to recall or think more about any of these issues. My body is aligned, and my core muscles have trained for this, my mind is clear and focused. I moved forward.

As I emerged from the kelp bed and got deeper, I tried to find a rhythm. The first bit is about breathing, and I sought to relax into a pattern. I had planned to think about someone for each half hour of my swim. I would be stopped for regular feeds and planned to switch over to the next person to think with. The first session of thinking and focus was to be an hour. I spent time thinking of Carol Thomas, who died of Sarcoidosis three months after a lung transplant. Carol longed to breathe; I breathed in a rhythm, usually 4 strokes and a breath. A legend, one of the first black gynaecologists in South Africa who led by example, organising and supporting Reproductive justice. I chatted in my head with Carol about things going on, breathing, and taking one stroke after the next. As I thought about breathing, I acknowledged that at times it has been difficult to breathe. In the training swims, I would have my breath taken away at times getting used to new currents or tides or temperatures. At the same time recovering from being an NGO director in the contested arena of Sexual and Reproductive Justice in South Africa, with leadership



responsibilities including fund raising, I realised that I had not been breathing easily and the opportunity to swim had enabled me to recover a breathing rhythm. As Gumb describes, 'breathing in unbreathable circumstances is what we do every day' and suggests that breathing is collective and beyond species with the ocean also breathing and breathing into the sky (2020: 2). I took one breath at a time, slowly finding a rhythm to inhale, then blow bubbles out through my nose in the water between strokes.

I eased into the process of appreciating relationality (Thayer-Bacon, 2003), knowing that the knowledge that I had and the awareness that I was constructing through the process of my PhD was due to the relationships I have with others, much like the concept of Ubuntu, I am a person because of other people. However, the relationships are also grounded in our environment with the forces of the ocean, waters, and the universe. Here I am not a spectator but an active participant knowing and connecting with knowers over time, leaving a wake behind me of my movements affecting the world before me.

I passed some jellyfish; deep below, the ocean was dark blue. At one stage, a jellyfish was a plastic bag which I caught and stuck into my costume and then handed over to those on the boat. I then wondered if I was going to spend time collecting plastic and how polluted the ocean might be over the next seven kilometers. I initially swam on the left side of the boat and then made my way to the right as Table Mountain came into clearer view. Ahead of me was a huge boat and to the right the Mountain, one stroke after the next. The mountain was magnificent, each time I breathed to the right I saw the peaks, Lions head, the Table, Devils Peak, and I was reminded of my walks over the mountain. My view changed from the green, grey mountain to the grey blue as I moved forward in the form of meditation.

It seemed a while but eventually I had my first feed of a warm sports drink, this meant I had been swimming for an hour. I did not look back nor did I ask how far we were, I handed my bottle back – I was not allowed to touch the boat – and I started again. My father had passed away some five years previously and I moved on to think about him. He had worked at sea as a fitter and turner, and I wondered about his time at sea looking into the deep blue. He would have enjoyed being on the boat and I imagined him watching over me. I was getting closer to being aligned with Devils Peak as I glided on and the large boat in the distance grew closer. The skipper called out to me to come closer to the boat, it seemed like we had hit a current and I was guided in. Suddenly a creature came up in front of me – it was a seal. It was quite inquisitive and circled me, but I did not allow myself to feel scared. I said hello, put my head back into the water and continued, it went about me and the boat for a while and I tried to give off friendly vibes.

My eldest child introduced me to the concept of echolocation when he was interested in whales and discovered how the sound waves would bounce off underwater objects as a means of communication. I was reminded of this by Gumb,

I had to focus not on what I could see and discern, but instead on where I was in relation, how the sound bouncing off me in relationship to the structures and environments that surround me in a constantly shifting relationship to you, wherever you are now. (2020: 6)

I felt this as I swam, as my thoughts refined ideas of the construction of policy.

Soon it was time for my next feed, we stopped, and I had a squeazy sweet potato and chocolate gloopy mix. My boat people said I was doing well; I did not look back. I continued, the water was turning from blue to grey now, the water was changing from calm to choppy. My training at Clifton proved helpful having swum in different conditions with wind, currents, and chop, one stroke after the next. My view of the mountain was clouded over as the mist descended. I was now behind the boat just to the left; the boat people were putting on their jackets, it must have been getting colder. I could not see the large boat now. Everything was moving, the boat was going up and down, the sea was becoming lumpy, and I was moving slowly.

My next feed came up and I did not feel like I could take anything, I felt nauseous and turned about and vomited. I had some anti-nausea tablets and started to swim again. This time I remembered my friend Katherine who had died of breast cancer a few years ago. I took courage from her remembering her desperate nausea when on chemotherapy and her will to live taken from her. My nausea did not dissipate but I was able to continue. It felt like morning sickness, you vomit and continue with what you must do. I was not cold, I was alive and breathing; I could continue to swim even if the nausea was present. This felt extraordinary, I was in a meditative zone with my body moving forwards.

I continued, one stroke after the next. I was watching for my fellow swimmer to get ready to jump in – we had planned that she would jump in 2km from the shore. As I was getting to two thirds of my journey, I believed that this was going to be the tough part and her swimming alongside me was encouraging. The sea was diffracting in grey mist, dynamic and entangling water eddies with my body in the middle of this. It was difficult to see anything besides the boat guiding me, I continued. The sea became grey and the sky darker. I stopped and was offered some water, but instead I vomited. I was feeding the fish. I thought of my body on the journey of my PhD writing up the construction of my work in sexual and reproductive health over the past thirty years. This body of work has been so turbulent and my physical being has endured some of the body politic, whilst calm in some spaces it has been most often rough, misty and has made me ill at times. These thoughts stayed with me as I continued to move forward noticing my body being part of churning movements in the sea echoing conceptual framings of diffraction, Barad (2007) and Haraway (2000) of breaking apart in different directions and patterns of interaction, interference, reinforcement, and difference.

I let each stroke take me forward. I looked up at the sky hoping to see something still and not moving to focus on. Sea gulls winged across the sky and moved through the grey clouds and in the mist. I thought about the questions in my PhD about reformed policy not leading to implementation and legal rights not informing justice and asked questions. What does it mean not to see, for things to be so cloudy and unclear? My thinking drifted to our cherished post-apartheid democratic freedoms and my ability to swim and move. I thought about families leaving behind the possibility of visiting the island and the trips visitors must have made. My mind moved to a time as a student when Helen Joseph had come down to visit Mandela and had been

barred from visiting him. Helen Joseph was an anti-apartheid activist and banned person during the period of the State of Emergency under apartheid and Mandela had arbitrary visitation rights. As a student leader of an organisation where she was a patron, I had had tea with her and listened to her frustration and anger at not being able to go to the island. I gathered certainty and strength from these legacies as I moved hyper focused, alive, one breath after the next, one stroke after the next.

I noticed the salt water on my lips, my arms reaching forward one stroke after the next. As I place my arm in the water refracting swirls of bubbles circle as I extend it down and back. My body has adjusted to the cold, the layer of skin between the water and my core feels like it is working to heat my body and is being used. I am comfortable and now that I am breathing almost in meditation my thoughts are free. The water feels silky but has greyed from a teal blue.

My swim partner jumps in, we have 2 km to go. I turn around, vomit, turn around, and continue. My fear that the skipper is going to 'pull' me out of the water and tell me I am ill and cannot continue makes me turn over and continue swimming, trying to look strong. Our skipper tells us to come in a bit, we have gone off course as he must have seen the rocks off Big Bay. I am feeling relieved, I can do another 2 km, I just put one arm up and over the next. I do feel tired though. My swim partner encourages me, and we go forward. It is completely grey; I cannot see anything, the water is choppy, and the swell has picked up. I continue.

Next, I see my cousin getting ready to come in, that is brilliant, it means we have 500 m to go. I turn away from everybody, vomit, turn around, and swim. He has my float and flippers on and says he will swim ahead to shore. I ask them where the rocks are, I cannot see anything.

We continue and feel the swell rise up and down. This enables our bodies to move up and down with the waves as we swim towards the shore. We go through the mist. The waves are crashing now, and I put my feet down and feel the sand below me. I swim a little more and then can stand. We did it, I did it. I raise my hand so my skipper and observer can see me. My swim partner holds me and guides me out of the water; my partner is running into the sea to me, he has my towel and a hot water bottle in hand. We walk to the shore; my mother is also there and looks at me excited and happy. She hugs me and says something congratulatory. My friend Farah is dancing around me, saying it is cold. Another friend, Karen, comes and says, 'wow oh my gosh, this is incredible'.

I feel grateful to be ashore, something deep inside me is moved. When I say we did it, I did not feel alone but supported by those before me and about me.

I get into my towel robe; my swim partner instructs me to get out of my swimsuit. It has been about 3.5 hours she says. The water had chilled to 11 degrees at the end and her 2 km ended up being about 2.8 km she reads from her watch. We had been swept off course. I swam over 8 km. All I want to do is sit and be still, the nausea and moving waters are still about me. I dress, put on layers, a hat and socks and snuggle a hot water bottle. My partner had gotten us hot chocolate to warm and to recover from the saltiness. I want nothing. We got to the car and headed home. My body is shaking a little as I adjust to the temperature with a characteristic 'after drop'. I ask to stop in the parking lot and have my last vomit. I put my seat down a little, the

heater is on and find our way back home. I take anti-nausea meds, shower, and get into bed. Later the nausea dissipates, and I have some tea and an apple.


That evening my newly acquainted cousin and her husband called me; he had missed me on the beach having come to welcome me. He talks and I listen as he suggests I have done a great thing for my family as he tells me historical stories of the island having been a political prisoner himself. Given my heritage he recalls and names our ancestors, in particular Autshumao<sup>3</sup> who had escaped from the island.

### Concluding thoughts

Alongside the ocean, my mind and body have moved through different waters over seasons. This time has fueled time for diffractive thinking. At times my thought has been puzzled, unclear and troubled and I have drawn on Shefer and Bozalek who describe, 'staying with the trouble by swimming in troubled waters and troubling our waters as we swim' and suggest that this 'holds possibilities for alternative scholarships for justice-to-come' (2022: 43). In swimming I have been able to think through questions, reflect on analyses, entanglements past and present, refine my thought processes and contemplate reproductive justice.

I sleep well knowing in the morning I will write and continue my PhD process, asking more questions, noting ideas, holding thoughts, linking entanglements, and reviewing themes and patterns. In a few days' time I will go again to the water to be in this space of diffraction that this medium has become a space of learning.

### Author Biography

Marion Stevens has a background as a midwife, in medical anthropology, and in public and development management. She is a PhD candidate, SARChI Chair in Gender Politics, Department of Political Science, Stellenbosch University, and a Sol Plaatje Canon Collins Scholar. She is the outgoing founding director of the SRJC and sits on the Gender Advisory Panel of the WHO. 

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<sup>3</sup> Autshumao (Herry the strandloper) <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/autshumao-herry-strandloper> (Accessed March 2023)

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