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**Mountain Bike Trail Building, 'Dirty' Work and a New Terrestrial Politics.**

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# Mountain Bike Trail Building, ‘Dirty’ Work and a New Terrestrial Politics

## Abstract

Dirt is evoked to signify many important facets of mountain bike culture including its emergence, history and everyday forms of practice and affect. These significations are also drawn upon to frame the sport's (sub)cultural and counter-ideological affiliations. In this article we examine how both the practice of mountain biking and, specifically, mountain bike trail building, raises questions over the object and latent function of dirt, hinting at the way that abjection can, under certain circumstances, be a source of intrigue and pleasure. In doing so, we suggest a re-symbolization of our relationship with dirt via a consideration of the terrestrial.

## Keywords

Dirt; Abject; Terrestrial; Mountain Biking; Zizek

## Introduction

Dirt is of unique significance in the culture of mountain biking. As a marker of collective identity, the term features heavily in publications such as Berto's (2008) *The Birth of Dirt* and *Dirt Magazine* (printed version, 1996-2015), as well as appearing regularly in online media content such as the *Dirt Shed Show* (Global Mountain Bike Network) and *Into the Dirt* (Red Bull) – a series of mini-documentaries exploring the idiosyncrasies of dirt in iconic mountain bike locations. In perhaps the most powerful of these images, a series of riders in the Anthill Collective's film *UnReal* (Jones, McCullough and Wittenburg, 2015) wake to a radio report announcing that “dirt is falling from the sky”. After clamoring, frantically to ready their bikes,

the riders are seen carving through the brown, powdered landscape and jubilantly frolicking in the detritus. For added emphasis, each movement is enunciated by the “schralping” of tyres and the muffled thud of bodies and bikes as they make contact with the soft, earthy surfaces of the trail, evincing what Sparkes (2017) might describe as the “collective sensorium” of dirt (p. 13). The presence of dirt in such representations therefore renders a creative aesthetic that both appropriates and exceeds its material essence, in that, in the words of professional mountain biker Cam Mcaul, a mound of dirt can act as a source of ‘infinite amusement and opportunity’ (PinkBike, 2014).

Examples such as these point to the bifold nature of dirt and disgust in everyday life. In common usage, dirt implies a shortcoming of some kind, that is: “there is an implicit reference to an ideal, unblemished normal state and a deviation from that state” (Lagerspitz, 2018, p. 45). The implication is therefore that “dirty objects require cleaning” – inherent in the idea of a dirty joke, or a dirty kitchen. We see this in the way that mountain bikers clean their bikes after muddy rides, and “soiled” kit is washed in order to return it to an idealized form and function. However, in the above examples it is possible to detect a number of practices through which these negative associations with dirt are not only circumvented, but actively celebrated (Lagerspitz, 2018). Dirt is evoked to signify many important facets of mountain bike culture. From its emergence and history, to everyday forms of practice and affect, dirt has served as an integral signifier of its (sub)cultural and counter-ideological affiliations. As such, both the practice and culture of mountain biking raise questions over the object and latent function of dirt, hinting at the way that abjection can, under certain circumstances, be a source of intrigue and pleasure (Campkin, 2007, p. 76).

This fascination with the creative capacities of dirt can be appropriated as a powerful political tool that serves to remind us that dirt is: “The very substance from which we all rise and to which we return” (Bragard, 2018, p. 273). Mountain bikers provide frequent reminders

that “soils are the product of highly complex interactions of many interdependent variables, and the soils themselves are not merely a passive and dependent factor in the environment” (Goudie, 2006, p. 94). When dirt is of poor quality, when it lacks “body” or when it has been exposed to difficult or adverse conditions, it is common for mountain bikers to identify with this in their affective engagement the landscape (see Brown, 2012). This is important, as scholars like Bellacasa (2015, 2019) have suggested, because it helps to rescue the image of dirt from the extraneous connotations that it has been imbued with in modern, industrial societies, replacing these with an attitude of urgency and concern. In this sense, despite their often negative representations by other users of the countryside, the mountain bike community may be better placed than most to renew our relationship with the “Terrestrial” (Latour, 2018, p. 4); that is, an ecological orientation in which soil is not only taken seriously as a political actor, but where the fusion of inhuman and human practice might reveal the fragile, but necessary interdependencies that exist between the two.

In expanding upon this idea, Latour (2018) offers three tenets of a new terrestrial politics. The first is to recognize the materiality of the soil, which includes aspects such as its “heterogeneity, thickness, strata, the attentive care that it requires” (Latour, 2018, p. 92). In doing so, we should also be attentive to the fact that soil cannot be objectified or appropriated in the interests of human production, and that it, like other nonhuman actors has a certain material “vibrancy” (Bennett, 2010). Hence, whilst we can feel attached to a given space or place and the soil upon which we might choose to dwell, we can never exhaust its meaning or truly master its manifold affects; its meaning will always exceed our intentions (Latour, 2005). The second aspect is that the Terrestrial rubs up against the homogenizing and totalizing tendencies of global capitalism. Dirt, to adopt a term from Morton (2017), is always *subscended* by its parts – it is both dependent on global processes, such as global warming, the use of chemical fertilizers by the farming industry and the increased intensity of agricultural

activity, but, at the same time, withdraws from them, allowing room for serendipity and surprise – a key element in the risk factor that is often associated with mountain biking. Finally, recognizing the Terrestrial helps us to negotiate a world without borders. To connect with soil means to recognize what humans (and non-humans) have in common, whilst detaching ourselves from the illusion of totality: “For the Terrestrial is bound to the earth and to the land, but it is also a way of worlding, in that it aligns with no borders, transcends all identities” (Latour, 2018, p. 54).

In this article we explore the possibilities of this new terrestrial orientation via the experiences of mountain bike trail builders. To begin, we first assess what it might mean to develop a relational human-soil ontology (Bellacasca, 2019) – that is what it might mean, both symbolically and materially, to attach ourselves to dirt (Latour, 2018). In doing so, we draw specifically on the work of Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Žižek in order to consider how relations to and with dirt can be framed a consideration of the abject (Kristeva, 1982; Žižek, 2016). Specifically, this discussion will draw attention to the importance of the abject in constituting the subject and how, through a dialectical approach, this can help re-constitute subject-object distinctions (Žižek, 1999, 2006a, 2006b, 2015, 2016). Via empirical data collected from interviews, we then turn our attention to the contingent qualities of dirt, as evidenced in the trail builders' physical and sensuous engagement with the landscape. In attending to these factors of the trail building experience, we hope to heeds calls to consider dirt from the point of view of those who work with it (Wolkowitz, 2007), whilst attempting to address a perceived weakness in Latour's approach regarding his inattentiveness towards the labour process (Malm, 2018; Wark, 2017).

## **Dirt and disgust**

In what is perhaps the most ubiquitous account of dirt in modern societies, Douglas (1966) contends that “there is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder” (p. 2). What makes something dirty, according to Douglas (1966), is less its material qualities per se and more to do with the manner in which it contravenes our most sacred social conventions: it is literally “matter out of place” (p. 36). Thus, an important part of Douglas’ (1966) schema is that wherever dirt exists, there also exists a highly sophisticated and well-developed system for rejecting (and accepting) certain matter. In developing this thesis, Douglas (1966) uses the example of shoes. Shoes are not in themselves dirty but placing them on the dining table makes them so. Similarly, a mountain bike ride is only described as dirty when mud from the landscape makes contact with “clean” bodies, clothes and bikes. This becomes especially pronounced when one reaches the end of a ride and riders must transition from the bike to a car and, subsequently, to the bike’s place of storage (typically a garage within the home), where the bike risks soiling seats, walls and carpets. When conceptualised in this way dirt is relationally understood in its relation to a “master object” (Lagerspitz, 2018) such as bike or a jacket, and the essence of the master object “is in turn tied up with ideas of what it is to lead a life in which it has a place” (p. 50).

One of the most important social conventions, and a key feature of the symbolic order in modern Western societies is the imaginary boundary that has been constructed between nature and culture (Moore, 2015). For many scholars, it is to this feature of modernity and the dialectic between binaries such as human/animal, outside/inside, civilized/primitive and organic/inorganic that we owe much of our angst regarding dirt and contamination. Nussbaum (1999) contends that our preoccupation with cleanliness and sanitation is based on a refusal to accept our embodied animal nature. By the same token, Kolnai (2004) reflects that dirt has an

important relationship with the organic: “dirt is, to an extent, simply the presence, the nonobliteration, of traces of life” (p. 55). For instance, in an analysis of phobias relating to “natural” phenomena such as mice, spiders, snakes and flies, Smith and Davidson (2006) convincingly show how the objects of these phobias are nearly always “natural” things deemed to be inappropriately and uncontrollably present in “cultural” situations. These aberrations might be thought of as threatening:

not because they pose a physical danger, nor because they are associated with the polluting effects of human bodily waste, but because they are indicative of nature itself transgressing the very basis of the symbolic order on which modern society and self-identity are founded (Smith and Davidson, 2006, p. 48).

On this basis, one might expect the level of disgust in any given society to be directly proportional to the disparity in this relation.

As dirt is subject to social norms and conventions, there are variances in the way that these conventions are developed and applied across different times, collectivities and cultures. As Laporte (1993) remarks in his influential “History of Shit”: “that which occupies the site of disgust at one moment in history is not necessary disgusting at the preceding moment or the subsequent one” (p. 46). Furthermore, Douglas (1966) observes that behaviour which in some contexts might be deemed polluting and, therefore, a threat to order, might, under certain conditions also be seen with deference and respect. In one such example, Trudgill (2006) traces two axiomatic assumptions that underlie our attitudes to soil. In some cases, soil is accorded a sense of obduracy, associated with its resistance to our will, and its objective qualities as a natural resource. Elsewhere, as when endowed value by the organic food industry, it is associated with notions of yield and fertility, provision and abundance. This



leads to the conclusion that soil is perceived as a constantly shifting flow resource, whose formation is construed as more rapid, and therefore quicker to replenish than the formation of other elements, such as coal and oil.

The writings of Douglas have no doubt had great influence in the study of dirt and associated notions of purity and impurity, as evidenced in the above research. However, authors have drawn attention to a number of ambiguities in her approach. Dushinsky (2013), for example, criticises Douglas for her obsession with the notion of order, in that dirt is seen to be the byproduct of an anomaly, or that which resists classification and is therefore positioned as an “apt symbol of creative formlessness” (Douglas, 1966, p. 171). She laments:

Even forms of physical dirt, which the anomaly theory treated as synonymous with impurity, are only likely to become coded as impure and bad when, by degrees, they are constructed as depositing all decomposing a phenomenon taken to be underpinned by a homogenous, ordinary and values in essence by actors within a field able to make such claims (Dushinsky, 2013, p. 69)

In this sense, dirt is only ever fully realized when it is subject to an object that it *is not*. Dirt emerges when it is being reclassified or eliminated, thus making it difficult to discern any physical, material or corporeal qualities of dirt whatsoever. We are therefore left with no other option than to return to the ‘tautologous assertion that dirt is dirty’ (Lagerspitz, 2018, p. 89). This problem is further emphasized through Douglas’ (1966) insistence on cleanliness, and a compulsion for order, as a unifying feature of human existence. Indeed in suggesting, somewhat tokenistically, that the difference between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is only “a matter of detail” (Douglas, 1996, p. 45), there is little room for the discursive or subjective attachments/detachments to dirt, and/or ways of assessing those

conditions or identities through which more positive and creative attachments might meaningfully emerge.

### **Dirt as fascination**

In recognizing the above criticisms, Julia Kristeva developed the idea of abjection to suggest that it is not necessarily cleanliness that causes abjection but, rather, that which does not respect borders, rules and identities: “it is the in between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Of note here is the emphasis that Kristeva places on borders, specifically, those that pertain to the boundary between the interiority and the exteriority of the body (Hughes, 2009). For Kristeva (1982), our fear of abject objects, such as feces, blood and vomit, stems less from the possibility that they are radically *different* from us, and has more to do with the idea that they are ontologically and epistemologically *attached* to us – something that can never be completely expelled. The abject is therefore a cause for concern “because it is too close for comfort” (Hughes, 2009, p. 405), but it is also ambiguous, since it is: “not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A something that I do not recognise as a thing” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 11). It is for this reason that Hughes (2009) postulates that the abject is most closely associated with the organic, and privileges the living, moving, pulsing, over the dead matter of the Cartesian world view, since it is these aspects that are difficult to capture, categorize and fix within a particular boundary or spatio-temporal location. The abject is therefore much better placed to account for the subject’s ambivalence towards dirt than Douglas’ (1966), while, at the same time, providing a conceptual platform to examine this ambivalence as a source of fascination and perversion (Kristeva, 1982).

This ambivalence is reflected upon in the work of Paquette and Lacassagne (2013) who draw upon the artist, Jean Marc Dalpe, in order to clarify the ways in which Northern

Ontarian miners, often of French-Canadian descent, are abjected from the Canadian mainstream. Through an analysis of poetic representations of the mining community, they show how the aesthetic image of soiled skin and faces combined with a sensuous representation of the smell of oil and coal that punctuate the worker's everyday; portraying an experience of both physical and cultural entombment. Notwithstanding the oppressive nature of the worker's daily existence, which acts as an important marker of/for their subjugation, the writers also comment on the miner's appropriation of the subterranean: a threshold between under and over ground. This threshold allows the workers, and the artist depicting their experiences, to convey a sense of pride resulting from inhabiting a "deprived subaltern minority group working in the dangers of the subterranean depths" (Paquette and Lacassagne, 2013, p. 257). Thus, the abject aesthetic that emerges from this work operates as a form of resistance, establishing a counter-hegemonic space.

As a useful adjunct to Douglas, we learn that rather than merely perpetuating the current symbolic order, it is through the act of dirt's expulsion, its abjection, that the division between dirty and clean is derived. Nonetheless, like Lagerspitz (2018), we too wonder what purchase this idea might have in explaining those instances where dirt serves as more than mere fascination and, where, contrary to both Douglas (1966), dirt is not excluded from the self but is thoroughly constitutive of it. For example, how might we account for the sharing of "cheesy" semen in Delaney's (cited in Blackshaw, 2017) novel *Mad Men*, or the used condoms and cigarettes that are fetishized in Tracey Emen's exhibition, *My Bed* (1998)? Equally, what might Douglas (1966) and Kristeva (1982) say about those instances where dirt is incorporated alongside everyday social practices, and is not simply rejected but conversed around, joked about and embedded in longstanding rituals and routines, as in the "grotesque" and humiliating exploits of many sporting hazing rituals, or the "dirty" humour that permeates many stand-up comedy performances. Thus, theories of displacement and abjection

encounter a dilemma in identifying form in something that is supposedly form-less. If dirt is just rejected, on what grounds are we supposed to formulate a theory of dirt in the first place? To answer these questions, we will, for the remainder of this paper, employ Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject alongside Žižek's (2015, 2016) dialectical materialism, as useful correctives to the issues outlined above.

### **Dirt as dialectic**

What emerges most clearly from Kristeva's work is the idea that our notion of dirt is based on a complex dialectic between subject and object, whereby impurity is characterized by that which threatens our perceived (and homogenous) sense of self-identity (Duschinsky, 2013). To this extent, Kristeva's notion of "abjection" explores those boundaries that help constitute the self and, more specifically, how these boundaries and the self are disrupted and/or disturbed by the abject (Hook, 2004). In such instances, it is the affects, which follow forms of abjection, that reconstitute the boundaries between the self and other (Hook, 2004). Consequently, when one acts "emotionally", due to some abject form, it is not necessarily the "abject" which they refrain from but, rather, the coherency and the constituency of the subject, which is subsequently disrupted, dislodged and distorted. The abject is the threat that destabilizes the subject's own edifice.

Therefore, as Hook (2006) asserts, we should not refrain, ignore, or even, obfuscate such a threat. Instead, "The direness of this threat must be understood in conjunction with the role abjection plays in the constitution of human subjectivity" (Hook, 2006, p. 219). Here, Hook (2004) extends Kristeva's work in view of Butler's (1993) concern that "Abjection, ... is concerned with a project of self-definition, with the task of ego construction (the substantiation of identity, in other words), a process that, vitally, is taken up and consolidated

at a group level” (Hook, 2004, p. 689). In so doing, Hook (2004) draws attention to how an inside/outside tension is performed in Butler’s (1993) work; a tension that, more widely, proves constitutive of any subject and object distinction: “In understanding abjection we need to prioritise not only the ‘threatening outside’, the contaminating threat of the other which must be kept at bay, but also the role of a ‘loathsome inside’, those elements of the self that must be ejected” (Hook, 2004, p. 689). It is these “elements” that prove constitutive of the subject’s formation.

By way of drawing these concerns together, we can consider how our approach to objective reality, and the myriad of objects that constitute this reality, stems primarily from an anthropocentric position, in which it is the *subject* that approaches the *object* (and here the “object” does not necessarily have to be a material/physical object, but can also be the study of class, ethnicity, etc.). Opposing this, however, is Žižek’s (1999, 2006a) contention that, rather than viewing a *passive object* that is subsequently observed by an *active subject*, it is an *active object* that constructs or, in his terminology, ‘tickles’, the *passive subject*. This is reflected in Žižek’s (2016) reference to Kristeva’s (1982) work, where he considers:

What happens when we stumble upon a decaying human corpse or, a more ordinary case, upon an open wound, shit, vomit, brutally torn-out nails or eyes, even the skin that forms on the surface of warm milk? What we experience in such situations is not just a disgusting object but something much more radical: the disintegration of the very ontological coordinates which enable me to locate an object into external reality ‘out there’ (Žižek, 2016, p. 169).

Here, Žižek (2016) contends that it is the abject object(s) “which undermine[s] the clear distinction between subject and object, between ‘myself’ and reality ‘out there’”, further

highlighting how “the abject is so thoroughly internal to the subject that this very overintimacy makes it external, uncanny, inadmissible” (p. 169).

It is this sense of “overintimacy” – that which reflects the abject object getting “too close” – which underscores our uncanny relation to the abject (Dolar, 1991). In short, the abject is what threatens the self as well as our social relations, ideological formations and a sense of cohesive social meaning (Hook, 2004). Accordingly, it is not that objects withdraw from interpreting subjects but that what is obscured is the subject’s interpretation itself. In other words, it:

is not the excess of objectivity which eludes the subject’s grasp but the excess of the subject itself, that is to say, what eludes the subject is the “blind spot,” the point at which it is itself inscribed into reality (Žižek, 2016, p. 35)

Such a perspective on the subject stands opposed to a Foucauldian reading, which emphasizes how “subjectivity ... arises as the result of the disciplinary application of knowledge-power” (Žižek, 2004, p. 394). On the contrary, subjectivity is “its remainder, that which eludes the grasp of knowledge-power” (Žižek, 2004, p. 394) – it is that excessive “blind spot” within the disciplinary discourse. Accordingly, “what appears as the excess of some transcendent force over ‘normal’ external reality” – an abject object, for example – “is the very place of the direct inscription of my subjectivity into this reality” (Žižek, 2006b, p. 222). While Žižek attributes this sense of excess to Lacan’s *objet petit a*, for present purposes, we can continue to examine how this excess constitutes a form of abjection which provides a certain “orientation” for the subject through objectivizing that which is perceived as abject.

To help elucidate this process, we draw upon Lagerspitz’s (2018) reference to cleaning a kitchen:

Once done, you look with deep satisfaction at the result, breathing in the reassuring scent of detergent. Much of our relation to dirty surfaces is colored by various reactions of attraction and repulsion. Apart from this kind of dance, our notion of dirt would simply be different from what it is. But the dance can also be seen from the opposite perspective, for it is also true that the dance has a kind of unity and order determined by its object, the removal of dirt. Actually existing dirt give the attraction and repulsion their point, for otherwise your movements would be like a pantomime, a game of football without the ball, a christening without the baby. (p. 176)

In this example, Lagerspetz (2018) is not suggesting, as per the work of Dant and Bowles (2007), that dirt has “real” objective qualities, but instead proposes that, while on the one hand, we cannot apprehend what is dirty and clean without considering the forms of practice that contribute to these distinctions; on the other, we cannot understand the significance of these practices without recourse to some perceived *essence* in the “dirtied” object itself. Key here is that, for Lagerspetz (2018), there is always a surplus in this relation – an ‘extra-discursive element’ – that provides the very substance for our practical engagement with the world, which in Žižek’s (2006b) understandings, provides our very inscription into reality.

Consequently, while we often make sense of our engagement with the abject through forms of attraction (here, we conceive such attraction as that which “attracts” us to clean), repulsion and even, in socio-political circumstances, repression and/or expulsion, what we observe in Lagerspetz’s (2018) example is how, on a “formal level of the uncanny” (Dolar, 1991, p. 20), we imbue matter or, in this case, dirt, with a level of agency that is frequently described in “New Materialist” thought (Conty, 2018) and “more-than-human” geography (Whatmore, 2002) as maintaining a potentiality and inventiveness of its own. Moreover, if, as

highlighted in this article's introduction, a recognition of the Terrestrial is what can, according to Latour (2018), help us negotiate a world without borders, conceived here as the border between human and non-human; then, our connection with soil, dirt and, more widely, "nature", requires a re-orientation with those abject boundaries that help constitute the subject's location with/to reality. Indeed, it is our contention that scholarly work on ecology should focus on those "things" that both disrupt our constitutive boundaries, but which also stand outside these boundaries. Here, "The status both of the subject and of 'objective reality' [i.e dirt] is thus put into question" (Dolar, 1991, p. 6).

## **Methods**

The data presented in this paper has been drawn from a larger project exploring the dynamic between mountain bike trail-building, nature, and land-use in the English countryside. Mountain bike trail-builders were chosen as our chief point of focus as we deemed their activities to be a key locus of information regarding the intersections between nature, place, and space (Gibbs and Holloway, 2018). In particular, we chose England as a key geographic location for these activities as it is currently a topical and contentious point of discussion in relation to access laws and public rights of way. Indeed, in comparison to neighboring countries such as Scotland (responsible open access) and Wales (whose government recently engaged in public consultation regarding the possibility of responsible, open access), the use of England's green spaces by mountain bikers and mountain bike trail-builders continues to be vehemently contested, leading to a number of tensions between these and other user groups (see Brown, 2012). In limiting our focus to England, we were also able to ensure that participants expectations about digging, and by extension rights of access, were being invoked in a similar way.



Twenty interviews were conducted in 2018 with various representatives from the trail building community, including, 14 who were involved with a local advocacy group; three who worked on behalf of a contractor or large organisation, such as the Forestry Commission; and, three who worked independently on their own self-built projects, or to informally maintain an existing trail network. Interviews sought to uncover how nature, and latterly dirt, were positioned, interpreted and (re)imagined in relation to a series of everyday practices and identities. Interview questions revolved around their level of commitment; their perceived impact on, and, relationship with, the landscapes in which they work; their own riding/building preferences; and, their level of adherence to English access laws. Despite variances in the motivations of the participants, they all shared a common interest, that is, to make use of organic and/or inorganic materials to construct and maintain a rideable network of trails.

In the first instance, 10 Participants were recruited out of convenience through the existing contacts of the lead researcher, who is an active member of the mountain bike community. Existing participants then acted as gatekeepers, referring four people they thought were of interest. This proved a particularly useful part of the process as it afforded the opportunity to recruit participants who might not otherwise have come forward due to the obliquitous nature of their activities. As more participants were required for the study, a further six were then recruited through the strategic placement of promotional messages on the websites and forums of national advocacy groups. All interviews were recorded using an electronic recording device and transcribed for the purpose of our analysis. Throughout this process we were keen to share our transcripts with the participants, encouraging them, where possible to comment on the 'accuracy' of their accounts and to allow them to (re) consider the contributions they would be making to our project. In doing so, were acknowledging both their ability to affect and their influence within the wider research-assemblage.

Following the interviews, participant transcripts were subject to a thematic analysis, in that our focus was on what is said as opposed to how something is said, to whom, or for what purposes (Riessman, 2008). More specifically, we followed the three stages of thematic analysis outlined in the work of Sparkes and Perez-Samaniego (2011). Firstly, descriptive-analytic comments were made on each of the scripts to highlight aspects of the participant's responses that we would return to at a later stage. This involved rendering an initial thematic impression and categorising different responses concerning reoccurring sentiments and phrases. Special attention was given to the connections across themes in an effort to identify patterns and meanings that emerged both within and between stories told by the participants. Second, we began to move outward from the data to make connections with wider conceptual accounts within the sociology and philosophy of dirt. It was within this phase that the analytic anchors outlined below began to surface and the theoretical orientation of the study began to take shape. Finally, similarities were identified across thematic segments to identify patterns and meanings constructed both within and between the stories told by the participants. In doing so, we were able to tease out the complex and often contradictory relationships with dirt, whilst developing a better understanding of how these nuances in interpretation fed into the participants' trail building experience.

To not undermine our focus on the material and nonhuman aspects of the trail building assemblage, we drew on the analytic utility of Monforte, Perez-Samanieg and Smith's (2018) polyphonic approach to the study of culture, in which narrative and material orders of experience coalesce. Unlike orthodox narrative approaches which consider material environments as a mere backdrop for human interaction, we were keen to decouple the participants from an essential humanist subject and instead locate them within an assemblage of elements that exceeds the intentions of an individual narrator. In this vein, the notion of dialogue, once reserved for those forms of interaction that occur exclusively between people, is here extended to the exchanges between human and nonhuman, since a focus on matter necessitates a position in which agency is

granted to anything which has a capacity to act and affect. The implication of this point of view is that the material is 'an active agent in the construction of discourse and reality' (Kuby, 2017: 880) and that the individual cannot be isolated from the material ↔ discursive embodied entanglements of a given social space. In addition, the relationship between landscape and trail builder is not as one that is static or concrete, but one that is about a 'perpetually becoming-body in a dynamic relationship with its material environment' (Monforte et al, 2018: 3). In what follows, we put this analytic framework to use in exploring the material ↔ semiotic order of dirt, with specific attention to the two themes that emerged through this dialogue, namely: the contingency of dirt within trail building, and the celebration of dirt's 'excess'.

### **Contingent dirtyness in a sanitary society**

For many participants in this study, the joy of getting dirty was directly proportional to the level of civility that they were expected to demonstrate in everyday life. For such individuals, the obfuscation of the nature/culture dualism through digging and other trail building activities was especially pronounced, as it provided a useful opportunity to explore less limited embodied identities than those on offer in the context of work:

I'm a barber for a living, so I work indoors in a fairly easy job, so I thoroughly enjoy being out of the woods with the dog, getting filthy, and depending on where you are and how far you are from civilisation, sometimes the filthier and the wetter I am the more peaceful it is. So, whereas most people are sat inside thinking 'what an awful day' I generally see it as an opportunity (Phil)

Ultimately, I have a paper-pushing job in an office for the most part and it was just a nice counterpoint to that – going out, getting your hands dirty, and doing something fairly physical and manual. ... It's Saturday morning, get out, do some digging. I like my tools so any excuse to get the tools out and make a mess is good fun (Frank)

At first, these comments would appear to resonate with Elias and Dunning's (1986) observations regarding the "quest for excitement" as reflected in the playful, yet purposeful encounters, that sit outside everyday norms and expectations. These quests are conditioned by modern societies which, through the twin process of rationalisation and (relative) pacification, force us to exercise greater control over physical and emotional impulses, and to display greater embarrassment when other citizens display an inability to keep these impulses in check. Key to this process is that societies provide regular opportunities for individuals to express carnal and primordial pleasures via a "controlled decontrolling of their emotions" (Maguire, 1991). Here, writes Thing (2018), we are temporarily permitted to "play symbolically with forbidden feelings ... we can play with hygiene relations – we can throw ourselves in mud and accept blood, sweat and tears" (p. 369).

Accordingly, trail building provides one such opportunity. Far removed from the sanitary setting of Phil's barbershop or the rational and routinised space of Frank's office, trail building is an activity where participants can willfully abandon personal control, find a sense of "peace" and experiment in contexts that stir alternate feelings of doubt, uncertainty, thrill and anxiety (Atkinson, 2011). Moreover, it is clear that both Phil and Frank's classifications of dirt were neither fixed nor associated with a clear demarcation between a conception of the self and what is commonly perceived as abject (being, or, in their cases, getting "dirty" as opposed to "clean"). Instead, their relation to dirt was contingently played with as a constitutive feature of their sense of self. That is, while the interviewees perceived themselves

as getting “dirty”; as an abject object, we see how dirt was negotiated by specific social circumstances, which, through the embodied pleasures of “being dirty”, prescribed an affective relationship with dirt. While this resonates with both Douglas (1966) and Kristeva’s (1982) observations regarding the fascinating and boundary blurring qualities of the abject, it was also clear that such abjection could intimately frame the interviewees’ sense of self. This was echoed in the following remarks, where for Frank, “To get your hands in the dirt makes me realise why my mother loved gardening so much. It’s just being a bit dirty afterwards or being covered in dust; you just feel a bit more human”; and, for Steve, “...it [dirt] gets everywhere, in your eyes, in your nose, in every orifice (*laughs*)”. Indeed, while according to Steve, dirt’s mingled presence (“it gets everywhere ... in every orifice”) was jovially received, as noted by Frank, “being dirty” played a constitutive role in making him “feel a bit more human”. While in both examples, dirt remained external – an abject object – their comments portrayed a negotiated subjectivity from which dirt formed a formative part of, in the case of Frank, being human.

This was continued with John, who talked at length about the joy that he gains from these experiences:

I just love being covered in mud ever since I was a kid. If I’m going out in the middle of winter I don’t want to set off in the rain. If I get my tools out, set off and it rains then I’m o.k. If I’m out there and I get blathered from head to foot, it’s just part of the dig, it’s fun. This is my current Facebook picture (shows picture of mud-covered face) and I’m completely covered in crap! That’s just the way it is. This time of year, we’ll be absolutely blathered all the time. It doesn’t put me off going out; it’s a pain because you have to wash your gear and all the rest of it but that’s just how it is – it’s a big part of who I am.

John's response speaks to recent phenomenological work regarding the lived qualities of "nature" exposure (Allen-Collinson and Leledakis, 2017) and the weather work required to become comfortable with elemental haptics (Allen-Collinson 2018). Indeed, of doubtless importance here are the somatic aspects of being "blathered", "wet" and covered in "crap", which were echoed in other responses alluding to the corporeal pleasures of being "filthy" (Phil), "muddy" (Jason) and "soiled" (Scott), examples that reflect what Bellacasca (2019) refers to as our "affectionate entanglement with soil" (p. 14).

However, to say that this generates a straightforward "nature connection" is to overlook how the normative values typically associated with dirt were contingently negotiated and temporarily reversed. John's reference to childhood is not to be underestimated here. For Kristeva (1982), the most important precursor for abjection occurs during the pre-Oedipal relationship between infant and mother, where the former experience the latter's body as abject. Abjection is therefore initiated when the child begins to separate from the figure of the mother, and more specifically, the mother's breast. Thereafter, subjectivity is experienced as a "provisional, transitory sense of differentiation from the maternal: a fragile, unbecoming and unknowing sense of self" (Arya, 2017, p. 50). At this point, the child begins to create an autonomous identity, conditioning themselves to engage in further acts of abjection (through cleaning and the expulsion of dirt), whilst at the same time fostering, as John's excerpt suggests, a fascination for objects that sit on the boundaries of order and thinkability.

In aligning dirt with his sense of self, we conceive the above expressions as orientations with an "abject identity" (Harradine, 2000); actively celebrating the displacement of matter, whilst foregrounding the vulnerability of a symbolic order based around oppositional meanings such as inside and outside, human and inhuman and the cultural forces that maintain this logic. Indeed, numerous authors have written about the threats that dirt

presents to our anthropocentric bias (Kolnai, 2004; Smith and Davidson, 2006). Where dirt is present, it is said to be the role of culture, and individuals acting within these cultures, to eliminate it. By contrast, both John and Frank's relationship with dirt is one that collapses the nature-culture binary, bringing the human and inhuman within greater proximity via the abject. In a manner similar to the dynamic between mud and obstacle runners (Weedon, 2015), these insights reveal how dirt cannot be unproblematically and uncompromisingly put to work in the interests of human endeavors but, more importantly, that it is difficult to uphold strictly demarcated boundaries inside/self and outside/the other, since the presence of dirt in these scenarios requires us to recognize it as "contested or contingent; it bears that historicity, carries and colludes in it, and forms a sociality in which [... trail builders] ephemerally share" (Weedon, 2015, 448). This raises the possibility that participants such as John are able to temporarily seize that part of the abject that we are never able to fully expel.

This was further emphasized in the various ways in which the trail builders were required to manage and (re)orientate *their* relation to and with dirt. Paul noted how "Dirt can be really good, but it can also be a real pain to deal with and make use of". Clearly, as evident in the following remarks from Andy, such "dealing with" and "making use of" were forms of self-understanding that one learnt to manage and, in a certain way, live with:

When you are getting dirty and grimy on a ride sometimes it's quite fun just because you accept that you are out on your bike and you feel that that creates the traction because the dirt is a moving thing and if your tracks are well built then you can capture that and that's the exhilarating feeling. So, it's about how you manipulate the dirt, it's that whole understanding of it. It's not just getting it on your skin, it's that whole plethora of things that you can do with it to help you to appreciate it.

As previously noted, it is the abject “which is the source of our life-intensity – we draw our energy out of it, but we have to keep it at the right distance” (Žižek, 2016, p. 170), an intensity that was clearly reflected by Paul (“a real pain”) and Andy (“exhilarating feeling”). More importantly, however, notice how, in the following reply, Andy manages his “closeness” to the abject:

I actually read a really interesting study not too long ago about... when dirt comes in contact with our skin it releases a chemical that releases endorphins, and that’s partly why we use mud baths and spas and things. Obviously, it’s much more cleansed dirt, it’s not just dirt that’s been dug from the floor, but also just the whole appreciation of it, that you can mould it, shape it sculpt it.

What we draw attention to here, is the way in which Andy sought to measure his closeness through a symbolic form of “scientific” understanding. Obviously, the scientific validity of his reference to “endorphins” is clearly debatable, yet, a discussion on the relevant validity of such references misses the point. Instead, what we see is a process through which in order to make sense of the vitality that dirt provides, Andy defers to a symbolic form of scientific/chemical understanding that seeks to *understand* dirt’s Real/abject qualities. Here, Žižek (2015) highlights how:

‘objective reality’ (the way we construct it through science) is a Real which cannot be experienced as reality. In its effort to grasp reality ‘independently of me,’ mathematicized science erases ‘me’ from reality, ignoring (not the transcendental way I constitute reality, but) the way I am part of this reality. (p. 924 [italics removed])



Accordingly, while Žižek (2015) argues that “The true question is therefore how I (as the site where reality appears to itself) emerge in ‘objective reality’ (or, more pointedly, how can a universe of meaning arise in the meaningless Real)” (p. 924). In the case of Andy, we observe how such meaning arises from his own, very visceral, relation with the abject:

The sound it [dirt] makes when you push through with your tyres hard into a corner. The contact with your tyre on the dirt. When I’m going out that is one of things I am looking for, because I love that sound. It’s just an appreciation for what it is and what it allows us to do. ... So, we have to use it and appreciate it in that sense.

It is in this sense that “abjection does not step out of the Symbolic but plays with it from within” (Žižek, 2016, p. 170).

### **Reveling in dirt’s excess.**

As the data in the previous section reveals, the symbolic structure that frames the material constitution of dirt and cleanliness is always defined by an excess; something that escapes that structure in ways that its subjects cannot explain (Žižek, 1999). Here, the excess identified in the participants’ interpretation of dirt reveals an incompleteness of the symbolic structure, that is nonetheless constitutive of the lack which inconsistently frames our social life. Throughout the interviews, participants spoke of how this aspect of trail building was manifest in the types of dirt that they encountered in their labour:

The dirt I work with is terrible stuff. It’s very clayey. In winter you can’t dig because it sticks in the ground and sticks to your shoes and your shovel and you get it off. In

summer it's rock hard. So you end up having to put lots of effort in to scrape it away and to take it off a centimeter at a time and keep hacking a bit of... like peel it away basically, and you end up with a pile of dust that you can build up and compact it back down... You go to X (location) and you see the loam they've got up there and you think 'oh god I wish we had something like that that you could make a trail out of'. You dig in and the trails there and you just have to patch it up every now and again. But at X (Location) we have to dig a trail out of clay and then you can't ride it in winter because it's really soggy, and the aim is to get it surfaced with hard core before it gets ruined. And then even when you're putting hard core on it it's not an ideal surface but it's the best thing that we've found to do it with. (Chris)

Here, there is a tension between what Heidegger (1962) describes as the present at hand (presumptions about how the dirt should react) and the ready to hand (experiential feedback) aspects of dirt that are deeply entangled with the physical acts of “digging”, “scraping”, “hacking”, “peeling”, “patching up” and “packing down”. Indeed, the more Chris tries to make sense of the dirt he is working with, the more it exceeds his intentions. There is a “slippage” between the meanings that the participants are trying to attach the dirt and the way that these inscriptions are experienced through practice that is complicated by the vagaries and complexities of the land itself (Brown, 2015). The clay is either too wet, and sticks to his feet and his shovel, or too dry, requiring him to “hack away at it”; peeling back the trail and reworking the dirt into something more manageable. Thus, in Chris' attempts to put dirt to work we see a continually expanding universe of dirt, mediated by the types of labour required to purpose it. In fact, we see this excessive relation with the abject performed in the following examples:

Ultimately, it comes down to whether it's thin dirt, thick dirt, non-sticky dirt, animal dirt, which is actually smelly dirt. And then there are variations of stuff that the council give you which is either gravel or extra stuff that hangs together well. Or if you like rolling hills there is the stuff they build features with and shape stuff with which is basically sand. ... the stuff I use is rarely pure dirt. (Steve)

There are different kinds of dirt that you end up working with. (Christine)

Christine's reference to the different kinds of dirt was nicely summarized in Steve's personal typology. We argue that these examples reveal a dialectical appreciation of reality and, specifically, the reality of dirt. As is clear, there is no single, "pure dirt", but rather, an abject form that maintains a minimal consistency in the interviewees' responses. While such an analysis corresponds with the minimal consistency that is afforded to the *objet petit a* – that which allows the subject to desire, in this case, a desire for the perfect dirt – we wish to draw attention to how, for our interviewees, dirt remained a managed form of abjection.

In fact, this management corresponds with Kristeva's (1982) contention that what is "abject" cannot be known, defined or approached directly, with the abject "possess[ing] no intrinsic objecthood. The abject, instead, is something like the vacancy behind the object, the object's shadow" (Hook, 2004, p. 688). This "shadowy" presence in absence resembles Lacan's notion of the Real: that which both constitutes but also disrupts our being (Žižek, 2018). Here, it "is the irruption of the [R]eal into 'homely,' commonly accepted reality" (Dolar, 1991, p. 6), which disrupts, distorts and undermines our sense of "reality". More importantly, such "irruption" of the Real does not occur from "outside", but, much like Kristeva's (1982) abject, forms a constitutive, yet indirect, role within our everyday,

symbolically formed “reality” (Žižek, 2017). Importantly, we can never approach the Real/abject directly, but instead, are left open to its perturbing effects.

As evident in the previous examples, if we consider that the “abject points towards a domain which is the source of our life-intensity – we draw our energy out of it, but we have to keep it at the right distance” (Žižek, 2016, p. 170); then, we can see how such distance is amiable to our distance with the Real – indeed, a distance that is maintained and managed through our own fantasmatic forms of obfuscation. Much like the Real:

If we exclude [... the abject], we lose our vitality, but if we get too close to it, we are swallowed by the self-destructive vortex of madness – this is why abjection does not step out of the Symbolic but plays with it from within (Žižek, 2016, p. 170)

For example, in comments that may seem to stand contrary to Steve and Christine, notice how, in the following excerpt, Paul believed he had found the “perfect” dirt:

I build up at (location) and there is this deep loam that it really well drained and fluffy, and even when it gets wet it doesn't get boggy. I don't know what it is about the dirt up there because it's the same stuff that we have here, but whatever it is, when we get down to the way it drains, it just stays lovely and fluffy, and even when we go back year on year and look at the same bits, it still has this lovely, drained loam.

Paul's detailed description of how the dirt at a particular location could create a “lovely and fluffy” loam reveals a certain sense of subjective investment and knowledge on what constitutes good dirt. Indeed, while Paul's descriptions may work contrary to Steve and Christine's descriptions of the various types of dirt, we also see how Paul struggles to

definitively ascertain what it is about that dirt that makes it significant: “I don’t know what it is about the dirt up there”. In fact, echoing Paul, Steve noted: “Funnily enough I did a geology degree but that didn’t really help with this!” In contravening ways, Paul’s lack of knowledge and Steve’s failure to use obtained knowledge (Geology degree), speak to the same inability to define dirt’s inherent quality. As an unfathomable X, we see here how Paul’s relation with dirt’s abject quality is set in motion by the remainder of the Real, which, in accordance with the abject, disturbs the perfect definition of what makes a particular dirt perfect.

It is here that Steve, Christine and Paul’s inability to clearly define the exact quality that makes good dirt, is reflected in an excessive range of interpretations that each allude to both dirt and the subjects inherent lack (Žižek, 2015). Indeed, in the same way that if we were to abolish the abject, we would, according to Butler (1993), resign the self to an incoherence; then, to abolish the lack that is intrinsic to dirt (to determine its exact properties), would be to ignore the constitutive obstacle that manages the subjects distance both to and with the abject. This obstacle is reflected in the “blind spot” which eludes Steve, Christine and Paul, yet, is “the point at which [... their subjectivity] is itself inscribed into reality” (Žižek, 2016, p. 35).

## **Conclusion**

Drawing upon the work of both Kristeva (1982) and Žižek (1999, 2006a, 2015, 2016, 2017), this article has examined how, with regards to trail builders’ perceptions of dirt, we can present a re-symbolization of our relationship with dirt via a consideration of the abject. As detailed in the article’s opening sections, such abjection, while providing constitutive of the subject’s sense of self, is, importantly, never completely removed or separated from the subject (Butler, 1993; Hook, 2004; Kristeva, 1982). This re-orientation is most vividly expressed in those accounts, such as John, Phil and Frank, among others, whereby the relation

with the abject is posited through form of negation, from which the builders' experiences with dirt became complicated and, at times, difficult to define. Thus, what is "abject" is both negotiated and re-negotiated through forms of orientation that, in the case of this article's findings, reveal a more complicated relation with dirt as an abject form. Central to these findings was Žižek's (1999, 2006, 2015) dialectical materialism, which offered a reconstitution of the subject-object relation, and which provided a unique pathway to exploring what Latour (2018) refers to as the "Terrestrial": a perspective that seeks to highlight how the fusion of inhuman and human practices can reveal the fragile, interdependent and, most often, strange relation(s) between the human and the non-human, the self and the abject.

To this extent, we hope to have shown how both Kristeva and Žižek's work can, collaboratively, be used to elucidate on how subjects manage their relation to that which is often separated from the subject. Most crucially, given the potential of a looming environmental catastrophe, this dialectical approach to dirt affords an opportunity to grapple with what Elden (2013) has described as a "vertical geopolitics": to examine how the extraction and repurposing of dirt might give an insight into the effects of human activity in our current era, as well as how we might position ourselves within the (stratified) history of other geologic times. Indeed, if we consider our ecological predicament and, more specifically, the fragility that bounds human's existence on earth, then, for us, it is important that this relationship is not framed as an either/or perception that simply distinguishes between humanity's frenzied hubris and nature as an idyllic unperturbed form. Instead:

The debate and controversies over nature and what do with it, in contrast, signal rather our inability to engage in directly political and social argument and strategies about re-arranging the socio-ecological coordinates of life, the production of new

socio-natural configurations, and the arrangements of socio- metabolic organization (i.e. capitalism) that we inhabit. (Swyngedouw, 2015, p. 135).

In view of this article's findings, we believe it is the re-arrangement of our "socio-ecological coordinates of life", as per the work of Latour (2018), which our findings shed light on. Certainly, this is not to suggest that everyone should go-out and get "dirty" – to say so would undoubtedly obfuscate dirt's inherent and necessary complexity, but rather, through an abject lens, we can re-orientate our relationship to and with what we often consider to be *that* which demarcates the human and non-human. Fundamentally, this requires a consideration of the inherent "imbalance" that structures humanity's existence on earth and that this imbalance is constitutive of both the subject and the material.

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