



**The Will to Overcome:  
Experiments in Mud Running, Modernism and More than Human Kinetics**

by

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## Abstract

Mud running is an expression of physical culture that champions the naturality of functional fitness, the primacy and playfulness of ‘premodern’ life, labour and leisure, and the capacity of all-comers to *overcome* mud-laden obstacle courses. The ambition of this dissertation is to bring posthumanist theory into contact with mud running and its humanistic ethic of ‘overcoming obstacles,’ and in doing so to extend knowledge of the prevailing history, theoretical premises and embodied experiences of physical culture. Emerging from an array of research practices, from fieldwork to textual analyses, each of my studies critically addresses the understandings of nature, body, self and society that prevail in mud running. In the first study, I pursue the ontological inheritance that makes it possible to invoke humankind as being outside of nature; at a critical distance from mud, dirt, and soil. This genealogical approach suggests mud running to be a recuperation of nineteenth century forms of physical culture which also encouraged getting somehow ‘back-to-nature,’ as well as identifying mud running *and* physical culture as expressions of their modernist, colonial heritage. The second study recasts the ‘camaraderie’ for which mud running is renowned as an outcome of material, corporeal and symbolic enactments in which a whole host of actors, human and otherwise, make dramatic and subtle contributions. Contra the modernist notion of humans overcoming natural or technological obstacles, this analysis recasts the conventional hero figure, the super-human athlete, to afford due attention to the often unsung ensemble of intra- and supra-human materialities with which these athletes share an ecology. The third study draws from affect theory to evoke mud running as a sensoria in which runners are not simply overcoming obstacles, but are themselves overcome by affective registers and responses. I describe how atavistic nostalgia, military-hero mimesis, as well as compassion and inspiration emerge from encounters with obstacle courses. At stake in these studies are not only questions surrounding the remarkable rise of events such as Tough Mudder and Spartan Race in recent years or their physical cultural heritage, but their shared claims as to what it means, and what it takes to be human.

## Preface

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The majority of these pages were written and edited in coffee shops, and so a special acknowledgement must go to Vancouver's baristas, beans and coffee lovers: Thank you for making the writing of struggle richer, the struggles of writing smoother, and pressing me to make my thesis intelligible on many rainy mornings.

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.

(Foucault, 1984a, 50)

## **Mud, Mess, and Method: A Prelude**

*Simple clear descriptions don't work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent. The very attempt to be clear simply increases the mess.*

- John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*

How to reassemble messy beginnings and becomings? What to make of geneses and encounters that do not harmonize but nevertheless touch one another in consequential ways? For John Law (2004), these are questions that social science has often proved ill-equipped to address. His claim is that prognoses of the world bequeathed by social scientific theories and methods rarely do justice to complexity and change; worse still, the quest for clarity too often only affords the illusion of wholeness or coherence and so 'simply increases the mess.' "Methods," in these approaches, are often "a form of hygiene:" if you "eat your epistemological greens" and "wash your hands after mixing with the real world," then "your data will be clean" and "the product you produce will be pure" (Law, 2007, 595). But the emergent picture of the world will be misleadingly neat and sterile when purifying methods are used to extract from and represent it. Law maintains the importance of avoiding frameworks that would 'distort into clarity' scenes that are "vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct" (2), constantly in flux, or lacking in any discernible pattern at all. Instead, he writes of and towards approaches that are as inventive, versatile, and chameleonic as the worlds they are attempting to remake.

These words have come back to me through the course of this project, each time offering recourse and respite from the demands of fashioning the stories and chapters

together. They have offered a sense of reassurance that the task of representation is not to sever loose ends, or to sterilize the vibrance of social life for analytical clarity, but to find ways to give mess form, colour and texture. And in this study of mud-laden obstacle courses as popular practice and burgeoning industry, mess was perhaps always to be expected.

Mud emerges as a sticky subject in this study due to its role as elemental co-star in an *en vogue* form of physical culture. Obstacle racing, known also by my chosen moniker ‘mud running,’ is a practice and an industry that trades on the material-symbolic currency of mud and ‘purified’ conceptions of nature. Participants in leading mud runs such as Tough Mudder and Spartan Race are invited to haul each other over walls, shuffle through streams, traverse balance beams, hurdle over burning haystacks, crawl under barbed wire, and submerge in icy receptacles, all the while wading through the eponymous soil. And as we will see, that soil plays many parts: as impediment to progress, elemental companion, evocative substance, and much besides.

Through this project mud, like dirt, “slips easily between concept, matter, experience and metaphor” (Campkin and Cox, 2008, 1). On occasion it acts as an organizing principle for the study, sticking chapters and contentions together, as well as helping those in the mud running industry convey particular understandings of (human) nature, society, and our premodern past. At other times mud is disorganizing and disobedient, smearing boundaries between traditional and modern, culture and nature, oppositional object and romanticized subject. Perhaps most significantly, and in line with Law’s sentiments, mud has oftentimes taken on a pedagogical role in the design and writing of this project: a material-symbolic reminder that a clean methodology and neat

conceptual economy need not – perhaps should not – be the gold standard for social science.

In the spirit of embracing messiness, here are some of the most prominent diagnoses of mud running's contemporary popularity, gleaned from industry, academic, and media sources, and informed by my own endeavours as runner-researcher:

*\*Mud running is a hedonistic indulgence for those who wouldn't otherwise get their hands dirty. It's at best a trivial, inconsequential form of leisure; at worst, 'the new country club' and 'social status symbol' for white-collar workers in post-industrial societies. But in both cases it is removed from reality and plays a merely responsive, cultural function.*

*\*Mud running represents a response to increasingly atomized neoliberal and post-industrial societies through a return to the sociality of physical culture as a form of play, 'functional' movement and exercise, and authentic connections to nature.*

*\*Mud running's emphasis on overcoming obstacles both literal and metaphorically transposed into the course can be read as subverting inhibitive norms concerning the limits of the active body, and so in a certain sense may be 'enabling through subversion.' Aesthetic standards as to what bodies should look like and do are among the objects for overcoming, as found in movements such as 'Fitspiration.'*

*\*Mud running's popularity evidences a backlash to a 'crisis of masculinity' that responds indignantly to the gains of civil rights and other post-war social movements. It is a practice through which one can defiantly prove and perform*

*one's masculinity in ways that somehow 'call back' to traditional times, roles, and values, the passing of which are mourned by those who implicitly or expressly resent and resist the perceived diminishing of white, male privilege.*

*\*Mud running is an expression and critique of modernism – an embodied practice that resists the contours of culture and technology by willing us to get 'back to nature.' In this sense mud running is a response to a pervading and long-lamented disenchantment with modern life, before a perceived weakening of our bodies and minds was effected by industrialization.*

*\*Mud running is a product of our geopolitical times insofar as post-9/11 Anglo-American military action has heightened a culture of militarization in the regions where mud running is most popular: North America, the UK, and Australasia. Obstacle courses are a chance to 'play soldier' for citizens who, in an age of post-conscription armed forces, can partake in the labor of military training without directly encountering or needing to contemplate its violent ends.*

*\*Mud running's emphasis on fun, claims to inclusivity, and functional modes of fitness are discourses through which individuals and families are compelled to respond to morally-inflected biopolitical imperatives geared towards a fitter, healthier, and more productive citizenry. At this historical conjuncture it can be seen as somewhat indebted to the so-called 'obesity epidemic' and other discourses and movements that proselytize the health of individual, the nation, and the species.*

The temptation, perhaps the tendency, is to pursue a taxonomy whereby one or two of these explanations is made to trump the others. Perhaps veracity lies in the lifestyles and

experiences of mud runners, or in the political-economic conditions in which obstacle courses have become commercially prosperous and culturally prominent. Perhaps there is a myth about mud running, or about the worlds in which mud runs take place which demands debunking above all other tasks. Perhaps there is a cause that mud running is aiding, abetting or inhibiting that demands further scrutiny. Or perhaps all of these diagnoses contain kernels of truth and explanatory power, in which case, where to begin, what to include, and how to proceed?<sup>1</sup>

*Muddy Trails and Travails: A Diffractive Approach to Research*

In the making of these chapters I pursued mud running across websites and forums, fields and forests, magazines and coffee tables. I gleaned as much from the comments sections of news articles and blog posts as I did from the outwardly visceral moments of wading through mud. I spoke with friends, strangers and acquaintances, occasionally under the conditions of an interview, but oftentimes in passing, on gym mats, online comment threads or busses.

Through the process I became wary of what Donna Haraway (1989) called ‘the primacy of vision,’ a privileged optic synonymous with Victorian-era anthropology that sees proximity and epistemology as existing in a positive, causal relationship. In other words, that being immersed in the ‘doing’ of these events would lead to primary and

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<sup>1</sup> For accounts of mud running that chose different paths from my own, you can read Brett Stewart’s *Ultimate Obstacle Race Training Guide* (2012), Joe De Sena and Andy Weinberg’s *You’ll Know at the Finish Line: A Spartan Guide to the Sport of Obstacle Racing* (2012), Melissa Rodriguez’s *Obstacle Race World: The State of the Mud Run Business* (2014), Ella Anne Kociuba’s *All Things Ella: Give me Mud, Give me Scars* (2014), Lamb and Hillman’s *Whiner’s Go Home: Tough Mudder, Conspicuous Consumption and Rhetorical Proof of ‘Fitness’* in *Communication and Sport* journal (2015), and many blogs, newspaper articles and magazine features since around 2009. These publications appear throughout my study as source material, but they also offer accounts of mud running that serve and inform alternative interests.

privileged knowledge, perhaps even to the essence of the practice.<sup>2</sup> This is a contentious point not only in intellectual worlds concerned with matters of epistemology, methodology and objectivity, but in the worlds of so-called ‘extreme’ or ‘alternative’ sports - both monikers that have been affixed to mud running - where ‘Doing it’ and ‘Being there’ carry a great deal of authenticating currency (cf. Wheaton, 2004). Active proximity, in mud runs and kindred practices is what confers authority and authenticity. The inverse also holds true: *not* being there and being actively involved means not only missing out on the action, but is antithetical to the ascetic principles of the practice heralded by many mud running aficionados. Contemplation, caution, negativity, and excuses made at a distance are all subordinated to the rugged practicality of getting your hands dirty; all just more obstacles to overcome.<sup>3</sup>

My reservations with this premise were less a framework or set of principles that guided my research, and more an aleatory outcome of the process of doing it. My first steps in undertaking the research that informs the following chapters were to register and train for the inaugural Tough Mudder event at Whistler, British Columbia in 2012. I have

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<sup>2</sup> This problem has been termed more generally as the *metaphysics of presence*. Successive philosophers and scientists, including the afore-cited Law and Haraway, but also Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler and Karen Barad, have critiqued this metaphysical assumption for its tidy packaging of what makes itself known to the subject as present. The simple problem with the metaphysics of presence is, as John Law deftly explains, that there is always an absence implied by presence; something that, in the language of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “flows or flees ... that escapes the overcoding machine” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 216, 226; see also Bennett, 2001). Nothing, then, can be accessed totally or represented entirely, and problems arise “when we *imagine or pretend* that everything can be made present and known by the all-knowing subject, the all-seeing eye, or the all-representing database” (Law, 2007, 600, original emphasis). While these debates are often said to have been most prominent in the 1980s and 1990s in terms of epistemology and the politics of representation, they are now being taken up in relation to matter itself, in terms of what is revealed to us by bodies of all kinds (Barad, 2003, 2007). Barad has coined the term onto-epistemology to convey the inseparability of the world and our knowledge of it, of physics and metaphysics: The entanglement of knowing-in-being.

<sup>3</sup> It is this anti-intellectualism, this privileging of being over becoming and the heroism of physical activity as an ‘imperative,’ (Andrews, 2008; Segel, 1998) that identifies mud running as a form of physical culture, enfolded in its modernist, colonial heritage (see Vertinsky, forthcoming).

since participated in Tough Mudder events in three countries – Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom - as well as rival events such as the Spartan Race and smaller runs such as Mud, Sweat and Tears and Dirty Dash. In doing so I gleaned a sense of the sociality and community – or in mud running parlance the ‘camaraderie’ – generated with and through obstacle courses. After and in-between participating in several events in 2012 and 2013, injury and capital restraints took me away from the trails and travails of mud running and invited reflection on what I’d been doing – what my methods had been and what insights could continue to inform the study. But I was never ‘outside’ of the practice – memberships to forums, Facebook groups, magazines, google alerts and the omnipresence of a dissertation deadline saw to that.

It was through this recursive pattern of running, reading, writing and recovering that I came to study mud running these past three years, not on its own terms, as it were, but by querying the assumptions that inform the categories upon which the prevailing understandings of the practice are founded. And in the chapters to follow, it is often these categories – modernity, overcoming, (human) nature, and the affective dimensions of mud running (including but also exceeding the notion of endurance or ‘suffering’ as sport) - that take centre stage.

So mine is not an ethnography, certainly not in the anthropological sense where immersion in a site – and the privileged vantage of seeing – have long been *de rigueur*. But it has always involved watching, doing, asking about and participating in the focal practices. So what has it been?

I have come to see this project as a kind of *diffuse immersion*, whereby I glean knowledges about mud running through all sorts of research practices and subject these to

a ‘diffractive’ analysis; that is, to experiment with them, read them through one another, let them simmer and stew in bodies of theory and research, and write and write again to see what happens. Diffraction is a process in which waves of light or particles produce variable interference patterns after passing through slits, obstacles or openings (Barad, 2007). As a method of inquiry, diffraction is described by feminist, physicist and philosopher Karen Barad as follows, first by way of negation:

I don’t see my approach as one of synthesis. Rather than synthesizing different perspectives, I like to get in there and do diffraction experiments—that is, get my hands dirty and experiment with different differences, trying to get a feel for how differences are produced and how they matter. Reading insights through one another diffractively is about experimenting with different patterns of relationality, opening things up, turning them over and over again, to see how the patterns shift. This is not about solving paradoxes or synthesizing different points of view from the outside, as it were, but rather about the material intra-implication of putting “oneself ” at risk, troubling “oneself,” one’s ideas, one’s dreams, all the different ways of touching and being in touch, and sensing the differences and entanglements from within (interview with Adam Kleinmann, Mousse Magazine, 2012, 77).

The most obvious sense in which this project has put me ‘at risk’ is physical, and I could fill these pages with stories of aching joints and ailing health that would resonate with the extant scholarly literature on pain and injury in sport (see Young, 2007). I hesitate, though, to trade in the currency of risk and pain on which so many self-styled ‘extreme’ and ‘alternative’ forms of sport and physical culture are marketed.<sup>4</sup> In chapters four and

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<sup>4</sup> Belinda Wheaton (2004, 2010; with Thorpe, 2013) and Robert Rinehart (2008) are among those to have advanced persuasive critiques of the ‘extreme’ moniker as a conceptually empty category, certainly since

five, I speak directly to how mud running both foregrounds and exceeds its chosen emphasis on suffering as its foremost affective register. Suffice it to say for now that like Barad, I have sought to get my hands dirty without acceding to the temptations of idealism, the naiveties of empiricism (not ‘the empirical’ or empiricism itself – a vital distinction), or fantasies of a world of essences that are clearest when closest.<sup>5</sup>

In interview with Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012), Barad further elaborates Donna Haraway’s descriptions of diffraction as a method. Instead of critique as a destructive or dismissive practice, Barad favors an inventive, experimental mode of critical inquiry. That is, in her words:

a method of diffractively reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition that there intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement. Diffractive readings bring inventive provocations; they are good to think with. They are respectful, detailed, ethical engagements (in Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, 50).

Despite my above declaration, Haraway (1997) has described diffraction as a *kind* of ethnographic sensibility or attitude, one that “can be adopted within any kind of inquiry, including textual and discourse analysis and otherwise eclectic approaches” (191). “Not

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its uptake by ESPN as a promotional tool, and perhaps always, given that the practices to which it is affixed often bear histories that reach far beyond their ‘risky’ post-war incarnations. Mud running events such as Tough Mudder are often designated ‘extreme,’ but my reluctance to embrace this prefix and preference instead for ‘physical culture’ is due to a similar historical and theoretical sensibility.

<sup>5</sup> These are the hallmarks of Donna Haraway’s version of materialism; an ethical commitment to writing, research and an orientation to the world that are mundane and tactile, not idealist or abstract. In a resonant passage for my project, Haraway declares herself “a creature of the mud not the sky” (2008, 4). Being a ‘creature of the mud’ is ‘becoming-with’ all of the substances which make up her biology and with which we all share an ecology. This materialism is by certain definitions (though not necessarily her own) a ‘posthumanist’ ontology: a kind of ecological choreography whereby history has no teleological engine or phallic master calling the shots; only a multiplicity of knottings. I build on these words, and posthumanism at large, in my introduction and experiment with some of its possibilities throughout the project.

limited to a specific discipline,” she continues:

an ethnographic attitude is a mode of practical and theoretical attention, a way of remaining mindful and accountable. Such a method is not about “taking sides” in a predetermined way. But it is about risks, purposes, and hopes - one’s own and others’ - embedded in knowledge projects (ibid).

The spirit of diffractive analysis is not (or certainly not only) to reflect on or to insert oneself into a scene or text, but to create stories that are a doing, an undoing, and a remaking of particular worlds. This knowledge project is no different.

So immersion *is* important, and has been for this study, but not as a means of simply getting closer to whatever mud running ‘is,’ or either affirming or debunking preconceptions about its history or popularity. My chapters echo this sensibility in seeking “not to reject things out of hand, to put the old out to pasture, but to renew ideas by turning them over and inside out, reading them deconstructively for aporias, and re-reading them through other ideas, queering their received meanings” (Barad, in Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, 80). Diffraction, then, is a guiding sensibility as well as an instrument of analysis.

One final note on mud, mess, and method: there is an interesting tension between my method and my object of my study. Mud running is materially and discursively structured by a linear, progressive and surmountable technology - the obstacle course - that is historically infused with an ethic of asceticism, of overcoming at all costs and ‘getting it done’ without perturbation. Diffraction, by contrast, is a kind of embedded, reiterative reflection: an experimental philosophy through which I have taken currents of mud running – historical, cultural, material, economic, affective - and read their

assumptions through given accounts, introducing and experimenting with different frames to open up ideas and possibilities. So like mud running, my method is immersive, often corporeally and always strenuously, but the aim is not to reach a triumphant resolution at the finish line or to temper the cacophony of aporias and competing claims with overarching or inspirational words of wisdom. *It is to open up possibilities for experimenting with overcoming as something other or more than an expression of human will-power, or of singular endeavour.* Perturbation, then, is an ally, not an obstacle.<sup>6</sup> One of the most ambitious and poetic expressions of this spirit of generative critique and experimental metaphysics comes from Michel Foucault, not as prognosis but as an imagining:

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring a work, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes - all the better. Criticism that hands down sentences send me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms. (1997, 323)

In this spirit of imagining, our journey begins in a scene that is virtual: an advertising campaign in which the Spartan Race mud run is rendered in its purest athletic, ascetic form...

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<sup>6</sup> Perturbation is relevant here in a dual sense: "Perturbation is Deleuze's word for disturbances in the atmosphere that constitute situations whose shape can only be forged by continuous reaction and transversal movement, releasing subjects from the normativity of intuition and making them available for alternative ordinaries" (Berlant, 2011, 6).

## Introduction

### *‘Be More Human’*

Soiled water ripples and foams, broken by the forehead of a woman adorning a ‘Reebok Spartan Race’ bandana. Her face and shoulders emerge from the water smeared with mud and, after deep exhalation, she regains momentum, focuses and continues her wade. Dangling ropes, a signature challenge in Spartan Race obstacle courses, sway to and fro as our heroine disappears from view, and the camera pans out over her shoulder to reveal other runners in her wake. Also clad in running gear and caked in soil, they stumble into the same soggy ditch from which she is about to make her ascent. As this scene unfolds a question in bold white text overlays the screen - “How far will you dig ... to find yourself?” - before Reebok’s campaign slogan fades into view: “Be more human.”



*Figure 1 – Screenshots of Reebok’s Be More Human Advertising Campaign. Image*

*Retrieved on 19 November, 2015, from*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5PFM2O\\_2I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5PFM2O_2I). *Reproduced with Permission.*

‘Being more human’ and ‘digging deep to find yourself’ are twinned and telling themes in the subject of my study. To unpack them further, let’s trace Reebok’s campaign through its virtual manifestations, from its North American television debut in August 2014 as described above to Reebok’s Youtube page. There we find an inclusive address, made out to “all the athletes out there who spend their days bloody, muddy, and sore, not for bright lights or money, but to simply be the best version of themselves.” “This,” concludes the official description, “is for you.” An accompaniment to another advert drawn from the campaign reads: “Kids love to play in the dirt. Some adults do too, and the more power to them. These are the athletes who don’t hesitate to sprint straight through the mud, who don’t hesitate to get drenched in rain, all for the sake of improving themselves. So how often do you let your inner child out?” What to make of this curious conflation of dirt, childhood play, and ascetic self-improvement through athletic endeavour?

Reebok’s ‘test’ on the campaign website, which they admit to being “a bold and absurd objective,” is to “quantify your human-ness.” The metric is of the perfectible body, itself a longstanding barometer and signifier of the moral self – ‘the best you can be.’ The absurdity of such a test is not the point; rather, its existence in this campaign signposts the contemporary currency of being “more human,” of actualizing a certain state of humanity through embodied practice.

Further clues as to what it might mean to Be More Human are given at the loading screen for this website, where visitors are fleetingly greeted by the outline of an unmistakable figure (see Figure 2). Leonardo Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, that famed image of human geometrical symmetry and perfectibility painted in late fifteenth-century

Europe, flashes across the screen. Da Vinci's design, the "Man of Perfect Proportions," has over five centuries "come to mean Renaissance humanism; to mean modernity; to mean the generative tie of art, science, technology, genius, progress, and money" (Haraway, 2008, 7). 'He' conveys a dream of human singularity and transcendence that would evoke and inspire for posterity the scientific revolution, the comprehension of nature, including the nature of the human body, and a geometrical understanding of a world that could, in all its wonderment, be known.

The Vitruvian Man is among the most popular emblems for marketers of all ventures, from engineering to the arts, and Reebok's invocation might appear as among the most speculative, even tenuous, of these representations. Yet, and however clichéd as a marketing tool, Reebok's depiction of renaissance humanism's great poster boy is more than a trivial expression. In the Vitruvian Man we find not only a quintessentially modern expression of the human body in its idealized form, but also an expression of the human capacity to master that form, to unlock its secrets and give them form in art and science. His image articulates a kind of human essence and transcendence to Reebok's desired brand of innate athleticism. And, in the mud running events the campaign depicts and endorses, and that are the focus of this study, human nature itself becomes an *aspiration* – something that is at once essential to us all and must be reclaimed through ascetic, athletic endeavour.



*Figure 2 – Reebok’s Depiction of the Vitruvian Man. Image Retrieved on 19 November, 2015, from <http://fitness.reebok.ca/be-more-human/#/home>. Reproduced with Permission.*

The claim borne of and informing this study is that *mud running harbours and animates particular ideas and ideals as to what it means, and what it takes to be human*. This might read as a lofty proclamation, one that operates at some distance from the earthy practice to which it is addressed. Opening with Reebok’s “Be More Human” campaign is intended to illustrate, on the contrary, how this contention operates at the juncture of physical culture as it is practiced *and* the history and scholarly study of these practices. ‘Being more human’ is an interpellation, or bringing-into-being of the human as a project to be worked on, ascetically; an expression of the post-puritanical belief that the embodied self can be renewed, reborn, and redeemed through human intervention, in the form of intensive exercise. Indeed NBC’s advertisements of the

Spartan Race conclude with this precise message, put to those huddled at the start-line of an event: “Today is the day of your Renewal, Today is the Day of your Rebirth.” And the drive to do this, to ‘find yourself’ through such heroic endeavours as overcoming obstacles and toiling through mud in a Spartan Race or some other mud run, is what establishes these events as expressions of both physical culture and the modernist movements in which they are implicated.

For those who identify with mud running and its claims and premises, what better way to stride towards a benevolent nature that lies dormant within us than by running through mud; that primordial substance that evokes childhood memories of playful abandon, romanticizes all natures, and features in evolutionary and many other origin stories as both of us *and* apart from us? But if we are skeptical, or at least curious about the understandings of nature, agency, and ‘the human’ to which mud running lays claim, then how to open up these categories in a study not only of the practice but of the histories, ideals and assumptions upon which it is founded?

### ***Mud Running and (Post)Humanism***

Mud running is an embodied practice and thriving industry that champions the unbridled capacity of all-comers to *overcome* mud-laden obstacle courses. The growth of a mud running industry follows a recent and relatively straightforward history, beginning with the launch of the Warrior Dash in 2009 and the Spartan Race and Tough Mudder in 2010. These were by no means the first commercial iterations of the mud running genre. For example, in Scott Keneally’s (2012) exposé in *Outside Magazine*, entitled *Playing Dirty*, he framed Tough Mudder’s commercial success as a cut-throat capitalist heist at

the expense of the UK's longer standing 'Tough Guy' mud run, as well as detailing the enmity between event founders within the industry. Notwithstanding their differences, each of these events share in comprising predetermined obstacle courses over, under, and through which paying participants travail, traipse, and traverse through mud. The mud running industry, much like the obstacle courses on which it trades, charts a linear, progressive path of popularity and economic prosperity that in 2015 shows no signs of curtailment. Over four million registrants, up from just 200,000 in 2010, have contributed to a revenue total for the industry estimated at almost \$362m (Rodriguez, 2014). *Outside Magazine* (Beresini, 2014) have described it as the "fastest-growing sport in the United States," and there are currently several world championships, run by respective companies and organizations, competing for participants, sponsors, and media coverage.

While these developments lend themselves to an array of cultural and economic explanations for mud running's recent rise, those at the forefront of industry developments suggest that the practice rekindles a far deeper, more fundamentally human history. According to Spartan Race co-founder Joe De Sena, the contemporary appeal of obstacle racing is due to its entwinement, and reconciliation, with an essential human nature. It is, he asserted, a profoundly "HUMAN sport, very accessible, and the movements are what we have done for 1 million years on earth. It's authentic. We are a race, we are athletic in nature. At the end of the day that appeals in a big way to our consumers — so much so they share it" (quoted in Rodriguez, 2014, p. 17). These movements – running, jumping, climbing, and crawling through dirt and over obstacles – are said to constitute mud running's 'natural' authenticity which, in De Sena's account, explains and produces its 'cultural' popularity. The corollary is that mud running not only

appeals to an ‘authentically athletic human nature’ but is an exercise in somehow revisiting that nature, as embodied in the mythologized primordality of mud. Running through mud thereby becomes the source for not only regressing to a premodern past, but reinventing the self through an ascetic commitment to overcoming obstacles encountered within and beyond the course.

It was in part these claims to enacting and reviving fundamental human movements and essences that made mud running a compelling and timely phenomena to study. This was especially the case given my 2011 enrolment for doctoral study in a School of Kinesiology, a field devoted to the art and science of human movement and movement practices. As part of this programme, I took courses on the historical and cultural significance of sports, exercise and embodied practices. At the same I ventured beyond the borders of the School to departments of human geography, science and technology studies, and communications, and became interested in posthumanism, a body of theory and research that sits in a *productive tension* with mud running’s claims about the primacy of human movement, agency, and the power of the will to overcome challenges perceived in nature and society.

### *Posthumanisms*

Posthumanism is a varied and complex school of theory and research practices, too much so for me to label my study a ‘posthumanist’ endeavour, at least without qualification. First, there is the implication - as in all of the ‘posts’ - that we are now ‘after humanism’ or ‘post-mankind,’ as found in Fukayama’s (2002) foreboding account of *Our Posthuman Future*. There he warns us that “[t]he posthuman world...could be one

in which any notion of “shared humanity” is lost, because we have mixed human genes with those of so many other species that we no longer have a clear idea of what a human being is” (cited in Castree, 2003, 7).<sup>7</sup> In a certain sense, Fukayama affirms the essence of humanism in proclaiming that some pure notion of humanity that existed hitherto has been contaminated by science and technology.<sup>8</sup> However, as Cary Wolfe (2009) puts it in response to Fukayama and other transhumanists, posthumanism “isn’t posthuman at all - in the sense of being “after” our embodiment has been transcended - but is only *posthumanist*, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself” (xv, original emphasis).

I am inclined to agree with Wolfe, yet it bears emphasis that he has not escaped critique for his own rendition of posthumanism, and in particular the Euro-centrism implied by his assimilation of all ontologies hitherto into the domain of humanism. As Juanita Sundberg (2013) notes, Wolfe “is silent about the fact that Enlightenment humanist dogmas represent a particular, indeed provincial body of thought on the question of the human. Thus, he does not mention that such dogmas originated in European societies involved in colonization, were globalized in and through colonial practices, and are currently given life in white supremacist settler societies” (6). Posthumanisms that do not at least acknowledge indigenous and a-modern ontologies that have always competed with humanism’s Western script, long before the ‘posthumanist turn’ in the social sciences and humanities, risk reinscribing the performative contradictions of modernity and its tendencies towards separating (or ‘purifying’) people

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<sup>7</sup> The pernicious corollary to such assertions has too often been that some people are less than human or somehow ‘closer to nature’ than others, and the question of what it means to be human has itself served as an exclusionary technique for colonial and patriarchal interests (Anderson, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> See Ted Butryn (2003) and Andy Miah and Simon Eassom (2002) for scholarship on sport and technology that draws from this genre of posthumanism.

and non-human animals, culture and nature, ‘us’ from the others, present and past (Latour, 1993).

The general point is that differences abound among renditions of posthumanism, and that these differences matter politically insofar as they materialize who and what counts in intellectual and socio-natural lifeworlds. Knowledge projects that engage with posthumanism inherit an ethics of care, as well as a theoretical toolkit, for vast imbrolios of things, bodies, forces, histories and geographies, making the richness and complexity of what might count as ‘posthuman’ a daunting prospect. This complexity is compounded by the tendency among many of those to whose work the term is attributed *rejecting* the label and its associations. One renowned example of this is Michel Foucault who, in *The Order of Things* (1973), described Man as an invention borne of the late eighteenth century, an “effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge” that dislodged humans from their embeddness in technological, lingual, biological and environmental ecologies (422). While this is often cited as a keystone development for posthumanist theory, Foucault was often at pains to ensure that his life and work would not be confined to particular identities and trajectories, including these sorts of theoretical monikers. In one of his late essays Foucault wrote that “[h]umanism serves to color and to justify the conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to take recourse” (1984a, 44). Might something similar be said about posthumanism: that if it is conceived as a bounded body of knowledge that identifies a work or a life, then it will place demands on us, rendering posthumanists the objects of their own endeavours and, in an ironic twist, limiting expression of the human condition? This is the irreconcilable bind of

reassembling a “critical ontology of who we are” (Foucault, 1984a, 50), and why it is important for posthumanisms to be open to histories that are not foreclosing.

Another example is Donna Haraway, whose writing on primates, mice, cyborgs, and most recently on dogs in *When Species Meet* (2008), has illustrated the lively entanglements of nature, culture and technology in reiterative choreographies of difference. Despite frequently being hailed by the posthumanist moniker, Haraway has insisted that she “never wanted to be posthuman, or posthumanist, any more than I wanted to be postfeminist,” not least because “urgent work still remains to be done in reference to those who must inhabit the troubled categories of woman and human, properly pluralized, reformulated, and brought into constitutive intersection with other asymmetrical differences” (2008, 17). Haraway eschews the fixity of these categories by elaborating instead a notion of ‘becoming-with’ lively critters, from bacteria to barking companions. Becoming-with is an ethics of ‘becoming-worldly’ that does not fix us within ourselves and our relations but opens us up to the immanence of life in its precarity, multiplicity and dependency (see also Butler, 2004).

I do not claim or aim to be faithful to any one version of posthumanism in what follows, not least because the posthumanisms with which I find favor are intended to be inventive and generative, not theories to be applied to this or that phenomena. To be sure, my chapters will fall foul of some of the critiques of posthumanism made from various quarters, sympathetic and otherwise. I do not fully engage, for example, with indigenous ontologies and the non-Western canon, nor the strands of animal studies that draw from and inform posthumanist theory and philosophy, nor with environmentalist perspectives that cite climate change and environmental degradation more broadly as anthropogenic. I

have nonetheless taken from the basic premises and sensibilities of posthumanism that share in questioning and reworking the assumed boundaries and capacities of ‘the human,’ in an effort to opening up mud running’s own brand of triumphant humanism to alternative ontologies. To this end I propose that posthumanism is to humanism what postmodernism is to modernism: not an epochal rupture or obituary but a recuperative analytic that brings its forebearer into view with sharper critical focus.

### *Humanisms*

Part of what first caught my imagination in mud running was that it did *not* embody a ‘civilized’ or civilizing humanism, proclaiming the primacy of consciousness, rationality or the mind as markers of uniqueness or superiority. These are the traits often associated with Enlightenment thought, which denote an ascendant movement away from divinity and superstition, towards a rational, civilized, ‘fully human’ state. Humanism, a collection of diverse and amorphous schools of thought, either states or implies that sociality and agency are the preserve of humankind, and that human beings have unique boundaries and capacities that distinguish ‘us’ from all the other things in the world. Humanisms also tend to stress the primacy of human needs, desires and capacities above other, competing considerations, and the title ‘humanist’ has long been held as a virtuous perspective for these reasons.<sup>9</sup> It is important to remember that there have been many humanisms, and many schools of thought - from Christianity to Marxism to existentialism – that have adhered themselves to humanist themes (Foucault, 1984a). We must therefore be dissuaded from the notion that humanism takes an historically universal

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<sup>9</sup> As a case in point, in his manifesto for reform of the field of kinesiology Alan Ingham (1997) referred to those who study human movement with tools bequeathed from the social sciences and humanities – among whom he counted himself - as ‘humanistic intellectuals.’

form, just as the form of Man and of human nature that humanisms denote should not be taken as universal. It seems more prudent, as Foucault suggested, to ask what inspires particular inflections of humanism to be recuperated and become popular, and even prevalent, in particular historical moments.

Mud running appears to openly oppose some of the traits endemic to humanism. Events such as the Spartan Race and Tough Mudder foreground brawn over brain, practice over language, being over becoming (Segel, 1998; Vertinsky, forthcoming). Tough Mudder even has a ‘pledge,’ in effect a code of conduct, that adorns the back of the t-shirts given out at the finish lines of its events. That pledge infantilizes negativity and excuses (“I do not whine, kids whine”) and glorifies collective struggle (“camaraderie”) as opposed to timed, individual performances (rationality and records). Ascetism and physical mastery trump contemplation and endeavours of consciousness, and those who are not ‘doing’ or express skepticism are an unwanted source of negativity. As I will highlight shortly, mud running shares this “modernist anti-intellectualism” (Segel, 1998, 5) with antecedent forms of physical culture hailing from nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe and North America, in which rationalism and its conventions were challenged and “offset by a new emphasis on the education and training of the body” (3). What is relevant for now is that mud running’s unwavering endorsement of the capacity for improvement – of self, body and society - through sport, health and exercise practices, identifies it not only as a recuperated form of physical culture but also as inheriting from these practices a belief in the power of human beings – through the imperative of physical exertion and the will to overcome obstacles – to

manifest their own destinies.<sup>10</sup> This Promethean premise marks out mud running *and* its nineteenth century lineage as humanist.

Through exposure to posthumanisms, humanisms, and kindred perspectives through the course of my studies, I became curious as to how mud running – a triumphantly humanistic practice that champions the benevolent, resolute and all-conquering capacity of human beings to overcome obstacles – might respond to being folded into ‘posthuman’ or more-than-human (Whatmore, 2006) bodies of knowledge and research practices. Put another way, if mud running expresses particular ideas and ideals about what it means, and what it takes to be human, then what might emerge from experiments that bring it into contact with a different ontological heritage from that which it endorses? Precisely because posthumanism promises to critically elaborate and reconfigure understandings of nature, the human, and agency, I see it as an apposite theoretical touchstone for a study of mud running.

### ***The Renaissance of Physical Culture***

The ambition of this project, then, is to bring particular versions of posthumanism into contact with mud running, and in doing so to diverge from and extend knowledge of the prevailing history, theoretical premises and embodied experiences of mud running and/as physical culture. In the chapters to follow I have drawn heavily from three approaches that can be gathered under the broad and amorphous banner of

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<sup>10</sup> This is not, of course, an innocent turn of phrase. Manifest destiny was a racist movement in the United States around the turn of the twentieth century that fated the settlement of white Americans from coast to coast and justified imperialism abroad. The term signals here the political nature of the imperative to bring about a destined, perfectible body (see Dutton, 1995; Segel, 1998), and foreshadows my discussion in the conclusion about what has been described as the ‘physical cultural studies imperative’ in the twenty-first century (Andrews, 2008).

‘posthumanism:’ genealogy, actor-network theory (in concert with ‘new’ materialist philosophy), and affect theory. Each chapter is its own engagement with the notion of ‘overcoming obstacles’ as an expression of human nature, will-power and endeavour, and can be read without reference to the others. But taken together there is an argument at play about what I call the *renaissance of physical culture*, a series of movements and movement practices which have, as their modernist heritage betrays, always been about overcoming.

By invoking the *renaissance* of physical culture I mean to signal not so much an epoch or event as *an attitude, or orientation, to history, nature and society* (cf. Foucault, 1984a). The history of physical culture is usually told as the nineteenth and early twentieth century proliferation of embodied movement practices and attendant philosophies, generally beginning with the German Turnverein (or Turner) Movement, and follows their diffusion via a host of physical educators, health and fitness reformers, actors, religious proselytizers, military men, and other ‘crusaders for fitness’ (to use James Whorton’s 1982 phrase) across Europe to North America. The nationalism and associated cultural politics of these movements, and their foregrounding of the body as symbol of virility and resource for military preparedness, has been documented extensively.<sup>11</sup> Histories of the ‘fitness boom’ in post-war (especially post-1970s) North America such as those offered by Jennifer Smith Maguire (2008) and Shelley McKenzie (2013) are grounded in these developments. A similar history could be plotted for the rise of mud running, albeit one that also incorporates the growth of so-called ‘extreme,’

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<sup>11</sup> For examples that span bodybuilding as physical culture to the role of the body in US empire, see: Alter, 2004; Budd, 1977; Chapman and Vertinsky, 2011; Dutton, 1995; Segel, 1998; Whorton, 1982.

‘alternative’ or ‘lifestyle’ (Wheaton, 2004) sports, such as snowboarding, spanning roughly the same time-frame (cf. Ray, 2009; Thorpe, 2011).

In a sense, then, physical cultural practices never went away. So how it is possible to speak of their renaissance? By renaissance, I mean to invoke not only a rebirth of sorts but the transformative intellectual and artistic movement of fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe. The renaissance is mostly historicized as the birth of the modern age, the rebirth of European civilization a thousand years and more after the fall of Greece and Rome, and as signaling the expanse of that revived civilization out into the New World. But unlike the modernity borne of the Enlightenment, which shares with capitalism a logic of incessant innovation and renewal characterized by Foucault (1984a, 40) – reading Baudelaire - as “the will to heroize the present,” the renaissance names “a future largely conceived in terms of the past” (Kumar, 2005, 97). The renaissance heralded the promise of a future not as a triumphant advance, as the optimists of the Enlightenment would later envisage, but as an awakening to the wisdom of the ancients. As Krishan Kumar (2005) put it, “the ‘rebirth’ of the renaissance was precisely that – a recovery of earlier forms, thoughts and practices of the classical world” (97). The renaissance looked back to the ancients and adjudged the intervening Medieval era (or Dark Ages) to have neglected the lessons of earlier Western civilizations, especially Greek philosophy and society. Thus the dawn of a new age in fifteenth century Europe was not in awe of its own wisdom and achievements, but in those of the Golden Age of antiquity.

It is my contention that physical culture, and mud running as one of its foremost twenty-first century expressions, features a similarly ambiguous, recuperative orientation to history and progress. In Chapter One, I show how mud running aficionados, especially

event founders, identify in modern life a decay and decadence that must be remedied through a *return* to our paleolithic past and supposedly natural movements, compartments and ideals; that is, a return to functional instead of specialized fitness. Instead of celebrating and facilitating a strident leap forwards, mud running displays a regressive tendency, *reaching back* to days of yore before human movement, labor and leisure supposedly became specialized through industrialism, distanced from nature by urbanization and sedated by technology. The realization of human powers of achievement are thus not to be found in continuity with the present, which is deemed to be contaminated by a variety of ills such as sedentary living, but by going ‘back to the future’ and rekindling a latent human nature. Indeed the obstacle courses found in mud running are perhaps the perfect material-metaphors for the ambiguity or tension designated by the notion of the renaissance: between the progressiveness and linearity of the course as a means of ‘overcoming obstacles,’ and this regressive tendency to glorify and rekindle the ancient past, embodied in the mythologized primordality of mud.

The renaissance of physical culture, then, denotes the recuperation of nineteenth century physical cultural movements and movement practices that share in a selective critique of modernity, lamenting especially the enervating effects of modern life, labour, and leisure, *as well as* the continuity of that regressive attitude to nature and its modern, colonial heritage. It is an orientation to history, nature and society that spans mud running and physical culture broadly conceived, and ties both to deeper temporalities than their prevail historicities recognize.

Chapter Two is an interlude that pivots on a posthumanist premise: that the divisions between nature and society, between the ancients and the moderns, that inform

the history and philosophy of physical culture as discussed in Chapter One, are not truths to be taken as given but instead form the edifice of the ‘modern constitution’ (Latour, 1993). In other words, modernity does not simply designate the division of fetish from fact, and of ‘us’ from unenlightened Others present and past, such that we should either celebrate or lament our transcendence of the past. Instead, it is this will and proficiency to separate or ‘purify’ the world into categories of nature or culture, science and politics, and so forth, that makes a subject modern. The task befalling us, for Latour, is to cast aside this purifying lens and reassemble our understandings of the world in all its cultural-natural-technological complexity.<sup>12</sup>

Modernity, in Bruno Latour’s provocative account, might therefore be best conceived as “a weaver of morphisms” (Latour, 1993, 137): An “inconsistent and paradoxical combination of claims about nature and culture” that “passes itself off as the clean, enlightened alternative to a messy primitive cosmology” (Bennett, 2001, 97). With Latour as a guide, this chapter reads through theorizations of sport and physical culture for which modernity is a conceptual touchstone, and identifies a separation – a quintessentially modern dualism – in their treatment of nature. Some feel that these practices encourage the *conquering* (and division) of bodily and environmental natures; others see opportunities in ‘alternative,’ anti-modern and even post-modern practices – such as surfing – for *communing-with* nature. I suggest that it is not the differences between these perspectives that should concern us, but their shared belief in the efficacy

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<sup>12</sup> This desire to make known a truth that has become hidden ties Latour and his contemporaries to the logic of the Enlightenment (something he himself recognizes in concluding his 1993 book *We Have Never Been Modern*). It also affirms that the “critical ontology of who we are” that Foucault envisaged is not, and could never be separate from the premise and promise of the Enlightenment – and that Enlightenment itself is not only different from humanism, but in a most fundamental sense opposed to its hubristic claims (Foucault, 1984a, 50).

of modernity and its subjects to have carved the world up into categories – nature/culture, humans/nonhumans - and to have thus inherited the heroic task of either mastering or vanquishing nature, or rekindling spiritual ties that the ancients and ‘non-moderns’ held with earth, land and the cosmos. The point is that neither of these stances affords nature its ontological dues, and that doing so requires an appreciation of the irreducible complexity and complicity of nature in all of social life – including sports and physical culture.

The contribution foreshadowed by this interlude comes in Chapter Three, in which I draw from fieldwork conducted while running in Tough Mudder events. Specifically, I revisit my experiences and recollections of Tough Mudder at Whistler, British Columbia and fold these into actor-network theory, ‘new’ materialist philosophy, and related ‘posthumanist’ theories and research practices such as object-oriented ontology. My method is akin to what Bruno Latour (2005) calls ‘reassembling the social’ – in this case the distinctive sense of camaraderie for which Tough Mudder is renowned - as an extended multiplicity of ‘actors.’ Continuing with the themes of modernity, nature, and overcoming, the chapter poses the following research questions: What if Tough Mudder’s obstacles were more than a series of tractable objects that are simply clambered and overcome by triumphant runners, individual or collective? What if the material, corporeal, and symbolic ‘camaraderie’ for which the event is renowned was a more profoundly shared endeavour, one in which a whole host of objects, affects, and competencies, human and otherwise, make dramatic and subtle contributions? And what is at stake in reincorporating these intra- and supra-human materialities as active players in physical cultural practices?

Chapter Four, a second interlude, retains this focus on reconfiguring human agency and corporeal sovereignty by considering how pain and suffering emerge as the foremost affective registers in mud running and other forms of endurance sport. Reading scholarly and media sources, I suggest that the terms of this debate are often *ideological* insofar as they imply that suffering is either inauthentic within mud running and sporting sites comparative to hardships ongoing elsewhere, or, that the suffering experienced through endurance practices is meaningful precisely because of the disenchantment of life – a waning of affect – outside of these embodied practices. The problem is one of seemingly durable boundaries, between sport ‘in here’ and a world of in/authentic affects ‘out there.’ Mud running emerges along rather simplistic axes of in/authentic feelings, principally physical pain.

Rather than cathedrals of inauthentic pain, or sanctuaries from a disenchanting world, in chapter five, I posit mud running events as sensoria in which suffering is not the foremost, less still the exclusive affective register. Through theories of affect, which share the posthumanist sensibility that humans are not the source but the effect of vibrant ecologies, including the stuff of our own bodies, I describe how atavistic nostalgia, military-hero mimesis and a relentlessly optimistic sense of inspiration emerge from encounters within mud running events to kindle particular moods, intensities and atmospheres. The aim is to work through the experience of mud running events not as a series of personal motivations, structural determinations, or heroic deeds and endeavours, but as immanent forces that arise in encounters between bodies, substances, histories, memories, and biographies. Bodies, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) famously wrote, are forces defined by their capacity both to affect and to be affected. This approach, and the

chapter writ large, emphasize the important sense in which overcoming, even when this is the literal and metaphorical *raison d'être* of the activity as in mud running, also connotes *being overcome*.

In the concluding chapter I relocate the contributions of this study in relation to conversations and research trajectories that would extend its theoretical, empirical and political horizons. I do this by revisiting key concepts and contentions, highlighting their significance and signposting ways in which they might be developed further. I speculate that posthumanism might tell us more about the body in motion precisely because of its refusal to accept the body's stasis, its autonomy and boundedness, and contemplate the possibilities for a more than human kinetics.

# 1. Overcivilization and its Discontents

## *Introduction*

[T]he human animal is meant to run, jump, climb, hike, get dirty, and live in the wild. All people share these innate skills, and every human animal is capable of experiencing the thrill of unleashing long-dormant instincts ... Kids who aren't yet brainwashed by electronic media go outside to play, explore, and get dirty ... When was the last time you went through the mud instead of around it, were overcome with exhilaration at your own power, or felt giddy just by being alive? Obstacle racing will provide that thrill.

(De Sena and Weinberg, 2012, 13)

Drawn from an e-book designed to establish the nascent sport of mud running, or obstacle racing, the foregoing passage features two health and fitness reformists-come-entrepreneurs positing an elemental affinity between people and mud: one that they claim has been severed by the onset of modernity and civilization. For Joe De Sena and Andy Weinberg, co-founders of the Spartan Race event series and unerring advocates for ascetic living, going 'through the mud instead of around it' is a response to the separation of humans and (our) nature, the specialization of labour and leisure, and a "post-modern Western culture" (2012, 41) that has made our time on earth somehow too easy. Modern life, they tell us, has become divorced from its natural roots, and trawling through mud-laden obstacle courses in the name of fun, fitness, and much besides, is suggested to enact a *reconciliation* with a latent, premodern human condition. Mud running, they claim, promises the chance to fleetingly return to a premodern paradise lost and rekindle its

sensations: to frolic in dirt with friends and family and experience movements – a sense of bodily freedom - that daily life no longer affords.

If this story sounds familiar, that's likely because it echoes an enduring response to modernity, one borne of beginnings that exceed the twenty-first century birth of the mud running industry. The narrative of getting somehow 'back to nature' – rekindling a mythic, ancient past to remedy the perceived ills of a tumultuous and enervating present – has enchanted generations caught up in the roiling maelstrom of modern life. Who, when disenchanted with the world, has not been taken in by romantic tales of the stability, playfulness and simplicity of bygone times? Who has not longed to be released from “the cold skeletal hands of rational orders, just as completely as from the banality of everyday routine?” (Weber, 1981, 347; see also Bennett, 2001)? This disenchantment with the world is not unique to mud running or to sports and physical culture, but embodied practices are prime sites for expressions of the tendency to yearn for halcyon days of tradition, community, and freedom of movement.

It is through this narrative that mud running lays claim to a history that reaches far 'further back' than the relatively recent advent of its leading events, to ancient, premodern and distinctively human beginnings. By way of further example, here is Tough Mudder course designer Nolan Kombol explaining the popularity of these mud running events:

These days, everything we do is easier. We drive instead of walk; we take the escalator instead of the stairs; we wheel our luggage instead of carrying it. Gone is that time, such as back in the caveman days, where we used our bodies to do everything. Tough Mudder gets us back to that innate experience of getting out

doors, pushing ourselves to the limit, getting muddy, and having fun with friends.  
(interview with Magan, Tahoe Quarterly, 2012)

As in De Sena and Weinberg's account, disenchantment with modern society is the seductive tale, natural authenticity the antidote. Tough Mudder is suggested to enact a kind of socio-historical regression in its participants, to a mythical age when primal urges were apparently unfettered by contouring culture and sedating technology, and where kinesthetic freedoms to play and socialize abounded. But this suggestion also invites some difficult questions. *Through what ontological inheritance is it possible to invoke 'the human animal' as being outside of nature; at a critical distance from mud, dirt, and soil? If going 'through the mud instead of around it' in these events is a response to the separation of nature (mud) and people (runners), then when and under what conditions was this primordial affinity pried asunder such that their reconnection is desirable, let alone achievable through embodied practice? And what historiography is assembled to locate mud running as a twenty-first century enterprise that can aid in reanimating our ancient, premodern, and distinctively human beginnings?*

This chapter joins in attempts to write a history of mud running, a task currently lead by industry aficionados such as Joe De Sena. Whereas De Sena and his cohort offer a history that is teleological, albeit with a regressive twist that proposes an ascetic, athletic corrective to put humankind back on its destined path, I offer one that is genealogical. Genealogy is an historical method that "places within a process of development everything considered immortal in man" (Foucault, 1984b, 87). I draw from genealogy to trace the *attitude* towards nature, including human nature, found in mud running as it has manifested in other Western, modern embodied practices. Through this

approach, I suggest mud running to be not only or simply a re-emergent practice and growing industry with ancient or evolutionary beginnings, but a quintessentially modern expression of physical culture with some renowned and revealing historical precedents. This is not to dismiss research in anthropology and evolutionary biology that explores questions of our athletic ancestry, such as Bramble and Lieberman's (2004) study of *Endurance running and the Evolution of Homo*. But to accept mud running as simply an expression of our realignment with human biological destiny, hunter-gather dexterity, or primordial mud and earth, as is purported by many event founders, would risk neglecting some of its most controversial and consequential roots and routes. Put another way, while hominids may well have arisen "from the primordial mud and ooze through an epic struggle for survival that spanned the eons" (Koch, 2009, 31), it is the relatively recent advent of modern, Western thought that declared the crucial incision between humans and nature, people and their habitats, runners and mud.

This chapter thereby identifies mud running as at least as much a recuperation of nineteenth-century physical cultural movements and movement practices concerning asceticism and nature, social Darwinist doctrines proclaiming innate human athleticism, and fears about the enervating effects of urbanization and white-collar work, as it is a rekindling of ancient, premodern comportments or virtues. As we will see, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain and North America, 'outdoor' sport, health, and exercise practices were heralded as antidotes to the perceived 'overcivilization' of young, middle-class boys, whose bodies and minds were deemed to be weakened by the ostensibly more cerebral labor and leisure of industrial capitalist society. A host of revitalizing projects, from playgrounds and parks to camping sites,

along with the founding of enduring (and expressly virile) institutions such as the Boy Scouts and the Young Man's Christian Association, were fostered during this era (Vertinsky, forthcoming). In the same vein as its nineteenth century forerunners, mud running can be seen as a kindred vision and practice for physical and social reform; one in which the heroic, corporeal act of 'overcoming' obstacles and toiling through dirt is both an *expression and a critique* of the perceived ills of modern life.

The most authoritative account of mud running's history is currently conferred by health and fitness reformists-come-entrepreneurs, and Spartan Race co-founders, De Sena and Andy Weinberg. I begin with De Sena's autobiography, *Spartan Up!*, and his aforementioned *You'll Know at the Finish Line*, two books that are at least in part manifestos designed to historicize and credentialize obstacle racing as a professional sport, as well as to realize the "Spartan Race vision" to "establish, own, and defend the #1 position in obstacle racing" (De Sena & Weinberg, 2012, p. 42). I then assess the structure of their given history, and offer some notes on what distinguishes genealogy as a method to diverge from that prevailing historicity. The ensuing analysis historicizes mud running's 'will to overcome' mud and nature as entangled with nineteenth-century physical cultural movements, and their political and ecological enfoldings, and in doing positions the history of physical culture as itself bearing a less clear, ordered and coherent history than is commonly outlined.

First, let's begin with De Sena's autobiography, *Spartan Up!*, and the scenes chosen by him and Weinberg to cast the ancient and contemporary geneses of the Spartan Race.

## ***Spartan Up! A Reformer's Vision of Ascetic Excellence***

Pittsfield, Vermont: A small northeastern town with a population of little over 500 people, just a few hours drive from New York City and the Canadian border. If New York City's Central Park was built to "heal the overwrought or decadent city dweller with a prophylactic dose of nature" (Haraway, 1989, p. 26; but see Gandy, 2003), then Vermont might be thought of as a haven or hinterland for those who fetishize after a more 'authentic' and encompassing antidote to metropolitan life. "Vermont," as noted by Elizabeth Dugger (2000) in her adventure guide to the region, "is credited as the most rural state in the country," one where you'll likely come across "as many maple sugar makers as lawyers" (p. 2). Much of Vermont's appeal for residents and visitors alike is as a place of escape; somewhere 'to feel alive' among the mountainous terrain and its many opportunities for athletic pursuits, be it skiing, snowshoeing, hiking, trail running, or cycling. In the spirit of adventure tourism, Dugger lauded Vermont as a place that "has always inspired independence, which may be why so many people feel that coming here is coming home to themselves at last" (p. 2). That independence is borne of sixteenth century colonial struggles to which the French name Vermont (green mountain) and Pittsfield, like its eponym in nearby Massachusetts, are indebted.<sup>13</sup>

Pittsfield's rolling peaks have been home to Spartan Race co-founder Joe De Sena since the early 2000s, where he and his family run a farm, a bed and breakfast, a general store, and since 2009, the Spartan Race headquarters. De Sena's 2014 book, *Spartan Up! A Take No Prisoner's Guide to Overcoming Obstacles and Achieving Peak Performance in Life*, is part biography, part proselytizing account of an ascetic lifestyle, part doctrine

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<sup>13</sup> Both of the latter are so named after the 1st Earl of Chatham, William Pitt, whose reign as British Prime Minister preceded the chartering of Vermont's Pittsfield in 1781, before the drafting and ratification of the US constitution.

on the efficacy of an indomitable work ethic for success in all domains of life. It's a transformational tale of shifting and self-made fortunes that recounts De Sena's own triumphant journey: From the self-proclaimed "spoilt brat" growing up in Queens, New York, whose entrepreneurial father was "focused 100% on business and making money" (De Sena, 2014, p. 26), to a financial and personal low point following the Wall Street crash in the 1980s and his parent's divorce, to his eventual admission to Cornell University and the subsequent parlaying of "a pool-business into a job on Wall Street, a job on Wall Street into a small fortune and a small fortune into a 400-acre spread in the Green Mountains" (Brick, 2009).

*Spartan Up!* is full of fables and recollections that champion willpower over circumstances, most of which are either drawn from De Sena's own experiences or vicariously indebted to him by grateful adherents. His accomplishments in extreme, endurance, and adventure sports (including an oft-cited week in which he completed the Vermont 100, the Lake Placid Ironman, and the Badwater Ultra marathon) are presented as precedents against which all other hardships are to be measured and overcome. The book's prologue, exemplary of this, opens with De Sena about to embark on the six-day Ukatak endurance race in Quebec, Canada, "in the dead of winter, the absolute coldest time of the year" (2014, p. xiii). Perilous conditions unravel thereafter: the "blast of the Arctic wind" put him and his team members at risk of death from hypothermia overnight (p. xvi); ropes needed for descending icy surfaces snapped; having the wrong skis and wax for their sixty-mile cross country ski left the crew mired in snow that swallowed them waist high "like quicksand" (ibid); but they persevered through grit and "primal" (p. xiv) instincts, and lived to pen the story.

De Sena heralded this experience as epiphanic: It taught him that challenging oneself to “accomplish more than you know you can is never stupid – it helps you know what you are capable of” (p. xix), even if, like him, you are “an average guy in an extraordinary situation” who “lived in New York City and had a desk job” (xvii). This story, pivotal to and emblematic of his given biography, serves to attest for the necessity and virtue of suffering at nature’s behest in pursuit of one’s goals.

Not satiated by these daring feats of endurance, in 2004 De Sena co-founded with Andy Weinberg the Spartan Race’s more esoteric predecessor and contemporary, the ominously titled Death Race. The Death Race is an untimed, unstructured event set on the grounds of De Sena’s home in Vermont, designed “to either break competitors or inspire them” (De Sena, 2014, p. 10). All sorts of grueling and gruesome tales surround the Death Race, and its cultural currency in endurance sport circles is high-especially for the small fraction of participants who keep going for upwards of 70 hours and make it through to the end. With the help of groups of volunteers, De Sena and Weinberg instruct and oversee Death Race participants not only running, but “diving for pennies, eating onions, extracting stumps from the ground, carrying kayaks and tires for an ultradistance, lifting rocks for six hours, completing three thousand burpees – anything to try to make people quit” (De Sena, 2014, p. 11).<sup>14</sup>

De Sena’s justification for all this, his motto and mantra, is that “you need to suffer” (2014, p. 18) to appreciate and to excel in life, and that in suffering lies a reconciliation, a realignment, with human destiny. This is where his athletic philosophy and that underpinning the Death Race-becomes most conspicuously entwined with a

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<sup>14</sup> Further details about the Death Race, including its recent expansion, can be found at the morbidly intriguing [youmaydie.com](http://youmaydie.com).

broader historical, anthropological, socio-cultural, and political-economic diagnosis. In his words, “I believe that confronting these insane obstacles is the best way to rewire a human brain after years or even decades of coddling, predictability and excuses ... [by] ... encouraging people to get in touch with a more primal survival instinct or mechanism” (De Sena, 2014, pp. 11-12). De Sena’s critique of modernity and modern life is that it has realized part of its promise; that “our post-modern Western culture” (De Sena & Weinberg, 2012, p. 49) and its specialized divisions of labor have made life simpler and easier, to the detriment of the physical and psychological functionality and dexterity deemed necessary for happiness and prosperity. Transformation of bodies and selves that have fallen prey to modern conveniences follows an ascetic encounter with nature. ‘To feel alive’ is the promise and the premise of the Death Race, suffering the corporeal conduit, and nature the eternal bearer of redemption from a life contaminated by modern ills.

Just as Dugger promised in her travel guide, then, Vermont’s ‘sublime’ appeal in the Death Race is its reinvigorating naturality, where pristine peaks are held to inhere and bestow a healing quality rendered necessary by the tumult of civilization. De Sena’s short migration from New York to Vermont embodies, in these idealized terms, the regressive journey he believes all of us should be making, from city to wilderness, in order to return to a destined path, a primal mode of being, through physical abstinence, exertion, and endurance. ‘Coming home to yourself at last,’ as Dugger put it, is not so much a discovery as a renewal or revival of self, made possible-or rather made meaningful-by exertion in the wild, but is akin to Michel Foucault’s (1984) understanding of modernity

as an ‘attitude’ towards producing the self in which, as we will see, physical culture has long been implicated.<sup>15</sup>

The Death Race was and remains a niche event, limited in its appeal to those with the desire, and various resources and forms of capital, needed to commit to sixty or more consecutive hours of solicited endurance. Despite De Sena’s insistence that “anybody could finish this race, but failure always comes when there’s a lack of commitment” (quoted in Brick, 2009), he also recognized that something more widely accessible was needed in order to bring his philosophy to “the masses” (De Sena, 2014, p. 10). The proposed corrective would need to depart from the specialized demands of activities such as running or cycling in favor of an all-round ‘functional excellence.’ It would need to retain from its precursor an ethic based on personal will power, maximal effort towards overcoming obstacles within and out of the course, and sacrificial suffering in pursuit of a stronger, more dexterous, and so more ‘successful’ body and mind. But it would need to do so on a sufficiently large scale in order to realize their vision of widespread physical and social reform. Obstacle racing is the sport, and the Spartan Race is the iteration that De Sena - leader among the self-proclaimed ‘Founding Few’ - has been championing since 2009.

### ***Invoking Sparta: History, Biography and Entangled Origins***

Through the Spartan Race, De Sena has sought to craft an event and promote a sport in his own self-image, his own ruggedly authentic (auto-)biography, as well as that of ancient Sparta’s virile and resolute citizen-soldiery. “[T]he Spartans,” De Sena stated

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<sup>15</sup> Reading Baudelaire, Foucault (1984) proposed that “Modern man [sic]” is “not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not “liberate man in his own being”; it compels him to face the task of producing himself” (p. 42).

in recalling the process of naming his events, “seemed to personify everything we stood for and everything we conspired against. They were strong, brave, resourceful citizens with no tolerance for bullshit. They were known far and wide for their ability to defeat much larger populations and military forces through force of will” (De Sena, 2014, pp. 23-24). As well as a marketing strategy, likely influenced by the success of Zack Snyder’s 2007 movie *300*, this invocation of ancient Sparta presents us with an anchoring point for the history and ethos of obstacle racing. Yet perhaps more tellingly, it also betrays and endorses a distinctively Western rendition of history that begins with the ancients of Greek civilization, moves through sequential stages of societal and athletic development (e.g., the renaissance; the reformation; the Enlightenment; industrialism), and finds in the present a state of decadence-of ‘overcivilization’-borne of the perceived successes and excesses of modernity and modern life.

Hence, across De Sena’s accounts, we can trace both a teleological history of the development of obstacle racing *and* a nostalgic critique of that history for its apparently degenerative consequences. The former is illustrated in De Sena and Weinberg’s (2012) ‘Timeline of Multisport Events’ which follows a single, ascendant path, beginning in 708 BCE with the ancient pentathlon at Olympia and thereafter incorporating, for instance, the scattered beginnings of triathlons up until the event’s debut in the Sydney Games in 2000, and the development of marathons and ultra-marathons. Other events featured are notable for either sharing with the Spartan Race a functional (holistic) as opposed to specified fitness ethos and apparatus, or for having been professionalized or gained Olympic status in the past century. Despite internal rivalries (see Keneally, 2012), they also acknowledge the founding of other mud running events, namely Warrior Dash

(2009) and Tough Mudder (2010), at the culmination of a history spanning two and a half millennia. Rather than wait decades, let alone centuries to shift from ritual to record (cf. Guttman, 1978), De Sena, Weinberg, and the rest of the Spartan Race's 'Founding Few' are fast-tracking themselves into the annals of sporting history by association. And by drawing a teleological line of ascent that begins with the virility and tenacity of ancient Spartan lore, recruits the historical landmarks of 'multi-sport' and professionalized athletic events, and culminates in the twenty-first century advent of an obstacle racing industry, they are at once mythologizing and credentializing the nascent sport of obstacle racing, and strategically endorsing a whig history of Western (athletic) development.

The latter, critical view of 'modern' society informs the regressive impulse in mud running. It claims that the divisions and specialization of labor that have accompanied and contoured the development of civilization, and of work and play, have detrimentally distanced us hominids from our hunter-gatherer ancestry. Thus civilization, despite its promise of progress, has resulted in 'overcivilization.'

The temptation might be to point this out as a contradiction or fault-line, or to trace how these theses work together in dialectic cadence. In the remainder of this chapter, however, I want not to critique De Sena's philosophy or entwined history of obstacle racing so much as to rework and extend it, and to thereby historicize mud running as part of a lineage that is not acknowledged by my subject. Indeed we do not need to hearken back over two millennia to ancient Sparta for analogous athletic philosophies and broader movements towards health, fitness, and social reform. In fact the Spartan Race, as with mud running more broadly, bears a closer resemblance to reform movements and associated movement practices and ecological upheavals

heralding from late nineteenth-century Britain and North America than to those of its antiquitous eponym. What's more, and as we will see, De Sena is not the first self-proclaimed adventurer, reformist, or entrepreneur to uphold the afore-discussed ideals or to narrate a journey of transcendence and purification through embodied practice, and mud running is not the first physical cultural expression of natural sensibilities that harbors moral and biopolitical undertones.

A note, before these claims are explored further, on the genealogical method and its aptness for my task.

### ***Genealogy and the Pursuit of Lost Origins***

Michel Foucault's genealogical method, elaborated in conversation with Frederick Nietzsche, is apposite for those who want to trace origins without necessarily acceding to a sequential version of history. In one of his late essays on enlightenment, humanism and modernity, Foucault (1984a) suggested that:

rather than seeking to distinguish the 'modern era' from the 'premodern' or 'postmodern,' I think it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of 'countermodernity.'" (39)

The challenge laid down here is to "to replace the emphasis on a continuous version of history, one that becomes a story of inevitable progress, with an emphasis on the discontinuity of historical events" (Alessandrini, 2009, 70). The given historicity of mud running betrays precisely this emphasis on continuity, even in its regressive claims. That is to say, both the progressive account of the development of sports and athletics through

which we modern subjects inherit mud running, and the regressive critique of modern society, are two sides of the same coin. Both embrace a misleadingly simple historical continuity, though the latter insists that something must be recovered from the past to put us back on our rightful path. Hence, in De Sena's history, we find a perfect expression of Foucault's above-cited assertion that modern and anti-modern attitudes ('countermodernities') are often borne coterminously and nourish one another.

Taking cue from Nietzsche, who on occasion shared Foucault's skepticism with the pursuit of lost origins or essences and met its metaphysical claims with a mocking laughter, Foucault is pursuing a means of reading and writing history that does not ascend from a single source, seek to piece together a pre-existing puzzle, or cohere along a single, linear path. He came to define genealogy as:

a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history" (Foucault, 1980, 117).

Nietzsche, as Foucault recounts, challenged the historical pursuit of origins "because it is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities" and "because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession" (Foucault, 1984b, 48). Their shared conviction is that if the genealogist "listens to history" then they will find no "timeless and essential secret," for the only truth excavated from the reassembly of past events is "the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in piecemeal fashion from alien forms" (ibid). A genealogical analysis can

show the aleatory emergence of what have since become truths about the past and thus the present; truths so ubiquitous that they silently color the lenses of history, and in turn our understandings of ourselves and our inheritance. But genealogy can also show that the happenstance of history betrays certain continuities that thread through and together otherwise chance or haphazard encounters.

At its most effective – and genealogy is for Foucault “an effective history” (1984b, 87) concerned with outcomes and relations rather than causes and essences – genealogical analyses offer a jarring glimpse of our present from seemingly obscure and obscured vantage points seldom occupied in the prevailing historicity. Through this genealogical sensibility I locate mud running’s history *not* in the halcyon days of our paleolithic or ancient Spartan past, nor in its 21<sup>st</sup> Century expanse as practice and industry, but in the diffuse emergence of physical culture in nineteenth century Europe and North America. On the one hand, I am disrupting the origin story that places humankind back onto a continuous, intended path; on the other, and simultaneously, I find certain continuities in its more recent, modern history which are the aleatory recuperation of what Foucault called “discontinuous systematicities” (1981, 69). Identifying these involves an attentiveness to the commingling of dynamic processes such as industrialization and urbanization, fluid markers of identity such as race, gender and class, substances such as mud and dirt and the material stuff of bodies, and attitudes towards history, society, politics and the nation.

Perhaps it is less fruitful to think in terms of successive historical epochs – premodern, modern, postmodern – and instead to identify the rhymes, ruptures and recuperations (Stoler, 1995) through which physical cultural movements and associated

movements practices such as mud running (re)emerge. And as we will see, if we follow this logic of historical discontinuity and conceive modernity as an attitude, especially an attitude towards (human) nature, then we also raise again for analysis the long-established story of the history of physical culture.

### ***‘Overcivilization’ and the Body Politics of Functional Fitness***

In the Progressive Decades (1890-1920) in the United States, industrialization, urbanization, and associated social and political changes were apace: nation-building and imperialism were matters of great public interest and political import; and Darwinism and Taylorism had become hugely influential among academics, politicians, managers, and reformers. The growth of physical cultural movements and of adventure-based ‘wilderness cults’ (Nash, 2001), each of which share a great deal with the ethos and infrastructure of mud running, are enfolded in this period of substantial political and ecological change.

Heightened concerns about the supposedly emasculating effects of civilization, especially for Anglo-Saxon boys, were rife in the Progressive Era. The growth of industrial capitalism and associated proliferation of middle-management jobs in fledgling corporations came to be seen as a source of physical enervation and, by discursive association, encroaching femininity and weakness. The concern was pronounced among middle- and upper-class parents who wanted to ensure that their sons would be (seen as) strong enough to inherit positions of power and authority at a time when “immigrant politicians, articulate suffragists, and powerful monopolists” were viewed as an imminent threat to the political, economic, and social status quo (Putney, 2001, p. 5). We find this

attitude most overtly politicized in Theodore Roosevelt's 'Strenuous Life' philosophy, a rhetorically deft marriage of athleticism and nationalism insistent that "a healthy state can only exist when the men and women who make it up lead clean, vigorous, healthy lives; when the children are so trained that they shall endeavour, not to shirk difficulties, but overcome them" (1899, cited in Briedlid *et al*, 1996, pp. 377-378; see also Smith Maguire, 2008, p. 30). Roosevelt's own physical transformation "from a sickly house-bound teenager into the rough-riding, safari-going, big-stick wielding Bull Moose of legend," conveyed this aspirational model of masculinity, leadership, and colonial conquest to American youth (Putney, 2001, p. 5). Overcoming adversity through ascetic grit and determination was a potent political and physical cultural trope then as now, though the appeal to cleanliness (as next to godliness), as opposed to the appeal of dirtiness (as found in mud running), is a telling shift.

The proposed antidote to the 'overcivilizing' of Anglo-Saxon Americans was, as Roosevelt embodied and encouraged, a healthy and manly dose of "artificial exercise, outdoor camping, and other methods of strengthening America's elite" (Putney, 2001, p. 4). In other words, an invigorating bout of exposure-to-nature for white male youth, intended to foster strength and survival skills during adolescence and, in the long term, to rescue and secure the future of the boy, American manhood, and the nation. Muscular Christianity was the most influential movement to implement these beliefs, and gained traction in North America after its mid-nineteenth century diffusion from Britain (accompanied by its most renowned and enduring institution, the Young Men's Christian Association). These adventurous exercises in supposedly premodern and preindustrial labor and living were never meant to be necessitated by the boys in later life; they were

rites of passage in pursuit of personal strength, moral hygiene, and national virility *en route* to wielding power in administrative positions. Physical exertion was viewed as a conduit for a kind of managerial excellence, and nature an invigorating resource in its service.

Echoes of this ‘overcivilizing’ thesis are heard in mud running’s opposition to specialized leisure such as (only) running or (only) cycling, and labor, especially the kinds of enervating, office-bound work that so alarmed Progressive Era politicians, pastors, and reformers. Whereas athletic practices and white-collar work are each held to be individualistic and isolating, obstacle courses require and engender collaboration, and are varied in the composition of respective courses and the physical demands of different obstacles. They are thus said to demand and produce a more ‘functional,’ all-round fitness and dexterity, transferable to the ‘real world.’ The Spartan Race, for example, comprises a series (or ‘trifecta’) of standardized, timed obstacle courses set at three distance and difficulty levels: The five kilometer Spartan ‘Sprint,’ the ten kilometer Spartan ‘Super,’ and the twenty one kilometer Spartan ‘Beast.’ The obstacles in each course include climbing ropes, traversing balance beams, throwing spears at targets, navigating cargo nets, and other such assemblies of movement practice, bodies, and fitness technologies. This emphasis on variety and accessibility is a direct response to prevailing trends towards specialization.

In this way, mud running event founders are responding to one of the criticisms also made of nineteenth-century physical culture: That the “dullness of repetitive training” (Markschukat, 2011, 481) as prescribed by doctors, physicians, and reformists, would fail to maintain the enthusiasm of practitioners. The concern, specifically, was that

rational, task-oriented programs of physical culture prescribed by physicians and popular cultural sources would soon lead to boredom, even if the physical benefits were manifest (see Martschukat, 2011, p. 483). When De Sena and Weinberg (2012) declared their “desire to extend the exhaustion and exhilaration of extreme, adventure, and endurance racing to a million people who would never attempt many of the events the Founding Few had conquered” (p. 31), the twinned invocation of exhaustion *and* exhilaration is an attempt to harmonize the imperative of enduring pain and suffering in overcoming obstacles, and the existential, childlike pleasure of playing among dirt and cascading through the course. Together the aim is to incentive exercise that is fun and fearsome, painful and productive. Indeed one of the most prominent tensions in the mud running industry is between asceticism and hedonism, as is broadly evident in the standardized, competitive, and rule-governed Spartan Race, and its more outlandish, playful, and parodic rival Tough Mudder.

### ***Accumulating Primitiveness: Class and Dirt***

Finance people are in a weird juxtaposition ... they make 100 times more than their fathers, but their hands are soft. We designed Tough Mudder to fill that void.

- Will Dean, Tough Mudder founder and CEO, cited in Stein, 2012

Founded in 2010 by former British Special Forces employees, and controversially borne of a Harvard Business School MBA project, Tough Mudder rivals the Spartan Race as the leading mud running event. This makes Will Dean the prime rival to Joe De Sena in the mud running industry. Whereas the ‘Crusaders for Fitness’ (Whorton, 1982) of

nineteenth century physical culture were often at odds about whether science (often pseudo-science) or spirituality were the key ingredients for fit and healthy living, these two are as much entrepreneurs as health and fitness reformers. Indeed their concern lies with securing the business and leisure time of “white-collar urban professionals” (Dean, cited in Stein, 2012) whose jobs in finance or administrative positions mean they wouldn’t otherwise get their hands dirty. Despite their differences, then, I am interested in all that De Sena and Dean hold in common, as both Tough Mudder and the Spartan Race play on the same regressive narrative in rationalizing and marketing their own brands of risky and mud-laden adventure. In particular, I am interested in how their shared *investments in dirt* are intended to appeal to those whose ‘post-industrial’ working lives are deemed to be too clean.

In her account of physical culture in nineteenth century North America, Smith Maguire articulates the ways in which the imperative of rekindling connections with nature was organized along the axes of social class:

[e]xercise and sport promised to return the pastoral values, masculinity, and physical strength of Colonial times to the middle class, while forming the poor, immigrant, and working classes into respectful, moral, healthy, cooperative, American citizens (Smith Maguire, 2008, 27).

Whereas the middle classes were compelled to make forays into the wilderness for individual and national prosperity, the working classes were advised to do so as a response to the ills and illnesses brought about by industrialism. This was in part because of a prevailing symbolic correspondence between physical dirt and spiritual and moral impurity (cf. O’Brien and Szeman, 2014, 37), but the affinity between class and dirt was

rendered more than symbolic by the cramped and unsanitary living and working conditions that arose from the uproar of industrialization.

In North America as in Europe, industrialism revolutionized the organization of trade, labor, and much of everyday life for those living through the transition, while also incubating the outbreak of diseases such as cholera and tuberculosis. Dirt, as Engels (1958) famously detailed in his study of industrializing Manchester in England, came to be seen as part of the physical and symbolic condition of the working class, exacerbated by and unpleasantly palpable to all through the ills of industrialism. In one of several passages that offered thick description of the conditions of life and labor in Manchester, Engels wrote that:

There are whole streets....which are neither flagged, paved, sewerred, nor drained; where garbage and filth of every description are left on the surface to ferment and rot; where pools of stagnant water are almost constant; where the dwellings adjoining are thus necessarily caused to be of an inferior and even filthy description; thus where disease is engendered, and the health of the whole town perilled.” (quoted in Engels, 1958, cited in O’Brien and Szeman, 2014).<sup>16</sup>

Seeing as the poor and working classes bore the brunt of the conditions Engels described, they also became the foremost subjects of health reform movements. Physical culture, often in the form of exercise and nascent sports, was seen as a remedy for the strain of these conditions, along with nutritional and hygienic advocations targeting the public’s heightened “germ consciousness” (Whorton, 1982, 139) during this time. Dirt, reformists

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<sup>16</sup> Though this opens onto somewhat separate discussions about ethnography and epistemology, it’s important to note that Engels described Manchester in such lucid and emotive prose that he might, and has been, accused of fetishizing the conditions of the working class in writing and campaigning towards their emancipation.

held, was to be avoided by the poor, and cleanliness pursued as a moral, spiritual and hygienic virtue. This is not to suggest, as Engels risked in his own descriptions, that the working classes in this period were a stolid bloc ripe for middle-class impositions. Thompson's (1963) renowned account of how the English working classes made themselves as much as they were made guards against "the enormous condescension of posterity" that accounts such as this one might otherwise commit (Thompson, 1963, 12). It is well-established, at least in histories of a Marxist persuasion, that the conditions of early industrialism proved fertile, in England at least, for the fostering of political and social solidarity, and for the growth and development of sport, recreation and leisure practices. Class, for Thompson, is not only or simply a socio-economic referent but a shared experience, consciousness, or cultural condition. Nevertheless dirt and disease were a both a material (bio-physical) and symbolic (middle-class marker of impurity) *problem* for working class people in industrializing societies, as opposed to a *solution*, in the form of nature-retreat exercises to 'wild' hinterlands, for the afore-discussed problems presupposed by much of the middle-classes.

The shift that the mud running industry claims to be responding to in the twenty-first century is from industrial life and labor to less physically strenuous, evermore specialized, 'white collar' forms of post-industrial labor. Will Dean has admitted the "white-collar urban professional" to be a coveted demographic since Tough Mudder's 2010 inception (Stein, 2012). Likewise De Sena, heeding his own background on Wall Street, has remarked that "when I was in finance, everyone smoked cigars and had extravagant dinners ... but now, health and fitness are the new social status symbols" (cited in Stein, 2012). While the entrepreneurial rivalry between these two and their

respective events has become part of mud running folklore (cf. Keneally, 2012), as in any rivalry they are often quicker to stress their differences than all they hold in common. Through De Sena's trading background on Wall Street he has kinship with Dean, who founded Tough Mudder during his MBA at Harvard University. Both of their ventures were partly born of experiences and training in the financial sector, and lead both founders to declare middle- and upper-class professionals as a favorable, profitable demographic to pursue. What's more, and no doubt due to these shared experiences and aspirations, both event founders recourse to the premise of a post-industrial society that inheres "a shift to a service society and the rapid growth of professional and technical employment" (Kumar, 2005, 35). In doing so they reify a distinctly modern notion about the distance of contemporary society from a nature now lost that, despite its dubious purifying claims, carries a great deal of authenticating cultural appeal and capital (Stoddart, 2012). It also evokes origin stories that are so firmly instilled in the modern 'attitude,' and especially the North American attitude, towards nature and labor (Nash, 2001).

This casting of mud's role and capacity in contemporary North American society is contestable on several grounds, not least that the age of a 'post-industrial society' (see Bell, 1973) may not be as starkly different from that brought about at the rise of industrialism as is often held. After all, industrialism itself gave rise to what we might call 'service' oriented or 'middle-management' jobs for those who oversaw manual labor in factories, mills, and so forth. Examples of this are plentiful, and they abound in Putney's account of the growth of muscular Christianity in late nineteenth century North America. For instance, Putney cites the George Fisher of the YMCA's Physical

Education Department as saying that “Industry today is modifying human biology,” causing “the enervation of physical and moral powers,” and that churches, Christian employers, and reformists, need embark on a “new physiological evangelism” (from Putney, 2001, 43). Moreover, and as I will discuss in the chapters to come, mud itself is not some timeless, primordial matter but a vibrant and heterogeneous part of the ecological fabric of all cultures and societies that is made meaningful through material-symbolic entanglements across different histories and geographies.

Mud running’s popularity nonetheless suggests that ‘overcivilization’ remains a concern for those who imply modern life to have become ‘too separate’ from nature, and valorize practices - such as the Spartan Race - deemed to offset the enervating (and so ‘emasculating’) effects of modern conveniences, ‘white collar’ labor, and a life that is somehow ‘too easy.’ Just as managerial excellence was foregrounded by Progressive Era reformers, mud running is popular as a means of building ‘morale’ among office co-workers, as has been the case for some time in adventure racing (Kay & Laberge, 2002). Obstacle courses also have related appeal as a material-metaphor for capitalism’s ostensibly moral reward system, whereby success is directly proportionate to work ethic (Lamb & Hillman, 2014). Class, however, isn’t the only, less still the central mode of distinction enacted in either mud running or the Progressive Era. For one of the most telling recuperations in mud running’s ongoing historicity, we must focus our attention on nineteenth century ideas about the division of labor, and their relation to evolutionism, progress, and human development.

### *'Race,' Adventure, and (Human) Nature*

Mattelart (1997) described the prevailing discourse of late nineteenth century Europe and North America as being based on a “biological paradigm,” one that curiously “borrowed from political economy” (p. 54) in its production of evolutionary understandings of nature and society. In a “circuitous route” (ibid), those theorizing the historical development of societies as one of teleological diffusion from a single origin, or cell, would in turn take from the life sciences. This same period also witnessed a broad, related shift from cultural (and so malleable) to biological (and so inescapable) understandings of ‘race’ and operations of scientific racism (Anderson, 2007). How are these developments related to the physical culture of the time, and in what ways are they implicated in mud running’s genealogy?

Late nineteenth century expeditions into ‘wild’ nature, and their apparent necessity due to ‘overcivilization,’ indicated a significant fissure in the prevailing views on ‘race,’ human nature, and progress. Implicit in the notion of ‘overcivilization’ is that the project of civilization, with its optimistic vision of science and reason as twinned beacons that would lead all of humankind to its destined ends, had been checked by the socio-political upheavals and associated physical ills of the time. It seemed that industrialization and rationality alone might not pave a path towards prosperity.

The corollary that environmental nature might serve as an antidote to the afore-discussed ills of civilization for physical health held consequences for some of the keystone, racialized assumptions of eighteenth century Enlightenment thought (Anderson, 2007; Goldberg, 1993). Specifically, the Enlightenment belief in teleological progress and human unity - that different ‘races’ are simply at different stages of cultural

development on the way to transcending their ‘wild’ roots, but all will breach the immaturity of nature and divinity at some point - was challenged by the depleting effects of industrial capitalism for physical health. Putney (2001) bluntly summarized the dilemma facing Anglo-Saxon American parents concerned by ‘overcivilization’ in the Progressive Era: “On the one hand they want to encourage primitiveness in their sons. On the other hand they want to deplore primitiveness in other cultures” (p. 6). How to advocate for nature-retreat exercises as manly and healthy in order to secure and retain virtue, prestige, and power for the individual and the nation, without conceding the discursively-constituted currency of a racialized taxonomy of difference? To put the dilemma another way, how to publicly recognize an affinity between virility and primitiveness-between strength and nature-while continually asserting the correlation of ‘closeness-to-nature,’ weakness, and inferiority?

The solution was manifest in social Darwinism, enjoying its heyday in the Progressive Era before being largely-or at least scientifically-discredited in the early twentieth-century. Interpretations of Darwin’s insights in *Origin of Species*, most (in)famously popularized as a social doctrine by Herbert Spencer, enabled the assertion that some ‘races’ were in fact mired in their natures while others (namely white males such as those doing the interpretative work) can benefit from wild and rural exposures *en route* to civility (see Anderson, 2007).<sup>17</sup> The irony of Darwinism in this respect is that it dealt a wound to the conceit of human exceptionalism by positing a fundamental kinship between people and other animals (Haraway, 2008), yet inadvertently served to propagate

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<sup>17</sup> This is not to absolve Darwin entirely. He was, as Mattelart (1997) has said, “a man of his time,” a “subject of the Victorian empire” who written during his travels on board the *Beagle* that “it is impossible for an Englishman to behold these distant colonies without a high pride and satisfaction” (p. 77).

a racial ideology by lending credence to the biological destiny of racially-segregated groups. The Enlightenment ideal of linear progress and uneven development among ‘races’ towards a common, humanitarian end was challenged through this confluent emergence of evolutionary theory, and its uptake in accordance with the political, ecological, and nationalistic concerns of the now self-appointed ‘native’ white American populous. Thus an appeal of social Darwinism was that it lent ostensibly scientific credence to nature-retreats as a kind of treatment for ‘overcivilized’ boys, without conceding the futility of civility as a racially-determined marker of natural superiority.

The popularity of adventure-sports in nineteenth century Europe and North America, and the associated rise of ‘wilderness cults’ (Nash, 2001) - also part of mud running’s genealogy - are enfolded in these social, scientific, and political developments. As Ray (2009) documented, nineteenth century wilderness adventure sports such as alpine climbing were “not just about communing with nature and testing the body. Rather, [they were] a direct response to social instability and nation-building during the Progressive Era” whereby, ironically, “American civilization could be advanced by ‘going native’ (Huhndorf, 2001)—practicing wilderness survival exercises, such as hunting, living ‘off the land,’ and eschewing modernity’s conveniences” (Ray, 2009, p. 258). Ray (2009) called this the ‘corporeal unconscious’ of adventure sports, a term denoting that contemporary risk and adventure sports culture “enacts many of these racial, gendered, and classist exclusions of the 19th-century wilderness movement” (p. 259), albeit in ways that enthusiasts might not necessarily recognize, express, or (want to) see themselves in. When the whiteness of adventure sports is recognized, it is often as an acknowledgement that enthusiasts are, predominantly, ‘white.’ What Ray highlighted to

great effect is that adventure sports are themselves invested with an attitude towards nature and the body, a ‘corporeal unconscious,’ that both echoes through De Sena’s biography and the ascetic ethos of ‘overcoming obstacles’ in the Spartan Race, and bears the trace of the historical, social, and political enfoldings in which these activities took shape.

De Sena and Weinberg’s conviction that humans are an innately “competitive species” (2012, p. 18) is striking for its resonance with the social Darwinist doctrine that was so prominent in the Progressive Era. Indeed these two echo the claims of those (often misguided) health reformers of the time, such as Martin Luther Holbrook, who compelled the public to “[t]ake a part in your own evolution” (cited in Whorton, 1982, p. 156) through a will to self-improvement; that is, through physical activity, nutrition, and hygiene. Moreover, De Sena and Weinberg lament the onset of civilization for producing widespread decadence and physical enervation, and proclaim the antidote to be a (re)turn to a ‘premodern’ form of physical activity that has both a moral imperative and evolutionary significance; one in which exertion among dirt in pursuit of excellence is the ‘right’ thing to do with one’s body as individuals and as a species. And dirt, or mud, is discursively recruited here as virile and masculine, and as a challenge to those who quest after a renewed and revived sense of self, rather than for its associations with, for example, fertility and ‘Mother Earth.’ Mud in mud running becomes “‘the mud’ of everyday life, the stuff that drags us down, or at least tries to,” *en route* to recovery, success, and above all, overcoming life’s difficulties (De Sena, 2014, p. 6).

### *The Coloniality of Nature in Physical Culture*

Such remarks indicate that mud running, as a means of regressing to the past *and* inventing one's own future through physical exertion under supposedly 'premodern' conditions, is quintessentially modern, and irrevocably colonial, in its ontological assumptions about the relation of nature to humanity (see Dussel, 1995). The broader point is that while physical cultural movements harboured these attitudes to nature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this does not render them the historically-determining cause of mud running, any more than it makes mud running the inevitable outcome of these developments.

As I have sought to demonstrate, the emphasis on 'overcivilization' that propelled so many bodies into motion in accordance with the 'physical culture imperative' (Segel, 1998) around the turn of the twentieth century, was itself a response to concerns with the project of civilization. It follows that the notion of 'overcivilization' – that civility, rationality and associated technological innovations have distanced certain members of the population from nature – is itself premised on a colonial notion of civilization that set this nature/culture fissure in motion. It seems fruitful, then, to consider what tracing the attitude towards nature in mud running might tell us about the history of physical culture.

As Nash (2001) tells it, the idea of nature as wild and 'other' in North American folklore was a product of the advent of European civilization in the 'New World:' An idea of nature that was unrecognizable to indigenous peoples who made no such dualistic distinction between themselves and their habitats. North American civilization, following the Christian reconquistas of 1492, was built with the materials afforded by nature, and

the idea of nature as wilderness grew out of that same civilizing expanse.<sup>18</sup> That is to say the *idea* of nature as wilderness became ontologically possible only through the onset of settler-civilization and its connotative assumptions of human (read European) ascendancy and superiority. Nash recounts how, through the gradual control of land and space, settler-Europeans in the Americas have come to reenact a centuries-old logic of enclosure, from pastoral fences to gated communities via herding, agriculture, and the dispossession and privatization of land. To them, the earth encountered in those first fateful voyages was as ‘wild’ as that which the first farmers had learned to cultivate centuries before. European pastoral and class prejudices were thus brought to bear on the New World and helped constitute the otherness of nature and, in a pernicious corollary, the indigenous peoples deemed somehow closer to it. These humans, at this point and perhaps “for the first time saw themselves as distinct from and, they reasoned, better than the rest of nature” (Nash, 2001, xi-xii). This sweeping historical sketch lends weight to Enrique Dussel’s (1995) assertion that modernity and colonialism were twinned at birth, and mutually reinforcing thereafter.

It is through this ontological inheritance that De Sena and Weinberg, as modern subjects and adventure sports entrepreneurs, are able to invoke themselves and humankind as being outside of nature; at a critical distance from mud, dirt, and soil. Rather than further the civilizing project of human ascendancy from ‘natural’ ties, De Sena and Weinberg express a selective disdain for modernity – mainly for the perceived debilitating effects of technological and (post-)industrial developments - and declare a

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<sup>18</sup> Absent from my discussion is the extraordinary vibrancy of the ‘Great Wilderness Debate’ (Callicott and Nelson, 2008). Claims about the construction of wilderness are complex and contested, and often polarized along the familiar lines of natural determinism and social constructivism. My persuasions, at least insofar as this history is concerned, are no doubt evident.

subsequent desire to return to a somehow more ‘primitive’ state. They lament the onset of civilization for producing widespread decadence and physical enervation, and proclaim the antidote to be a (re)turn to a ‘premodern’ form of physical activity that has both a moral imperative and evolutionary significance; one in which exertion among dirt in pursuit of excellence is the ‘right’ thing to do with one’s body as an individual and as a species.

That physical culture bears the colonial ‘dark side’ of the modernist movement is well-established (Vertinsky, forthcoming). Yoga, for example, is often recognized as not only emerging in British and other Western cultures during the heightened times of British colonial and imperial rule in the Victorian era, but for merging Hatha Yoga with Western gymnastics (the *Turnverein* or Turner movement). Yet it bears emphasis that the politics and overt modes of exclusion (such as scientific racism) that informed those nineteenth-century adventure-based practices associated with social Darwinism, or the physical cultural philosophies and practices conjectured by hygienists, reformists, and politicians of the Progressive and Jacksonian Eras, are not simply mirrored in mud running. What prevails in events like the Spartan Race and Tough Mudder is a kind of relentless positivity – a ‘will to overcome’ that works to efface any ‘whining,’ pessimism, or contemplation that would impede the vanquishing of obstacles, both literal and those metaphorically transposed onto the course. Mud running is infused with a philosophy through which unfettered will power and strong-mindedness can overcome all circumstances, however historically entrenched, physically inhibiting, psychologically traumatic, or culturally enforced. This philosophy is materialized by and through the infrastructure of the obstacle course itself: predetermined, linear, measurable, and so

constituting - like so many other sports and physical culture practices - a misleadingly simplistic and egalitarian, and yet in a compelling sense individually empowering material metaphor for social life. It taps into a humanistic spirit of inspiration, a naturalistic ethic, and the all-conquering power of the will that is *en vogue* in late twentieth and twenty-first century fitness trends such as CrossFit (Herz, 2014), and foregrounded in the promotional strategies of leading apparel brands such as the Spartan Race's sponsor, Reebok, and Tough Mudder's commercial partner, Under Armour. It yearns for premodernity only in order to get back to a future selectively unencumbered by contouring culture, sedating technology, and specialized physical compartments.

One way to apprehend the discontinuity in this wider historical continuity comes via de-colonial philosopher and activist Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007, 243). Maldonado-Torres draws a distinction between the epochally distinct process of colonialism - "a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation" - and coloniality, defined as those cultural patterns permeating the experience of modernity that survive colonialism, and which as modern subjects we live and breathe "all the time and everyday" (243). Coloniality is akin to whiteness, a saturating history that is invisible; or rather, that is "only invisible for those who inhabit it, or those who get so used to its inhabitance that they learn not to see it, even when they are not it" (Ahmed, 2007, 158). Coloniality, like whiteness, is "a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience" (2007, 150).

The coloniality of 'extreme' and adventure-based sports (Kusz, 2007, Ray, 2009) is manifest in the attitude towards nature found in mud running, but also in the attitude towards the body. For example, sports codified in the nineteenth century, such as the

various codes of football, are structured in the image and spirit of colonialism, based on expansion into and the domination of territory and the prevailing of nation-states. In these ‘invasion’ style sports, time is rationalized and space is colonized, and the body is the vessel through which domination can be secured.

By contrast self-styled ‘extreme’ sports, including many mud running events such as Tough Mudder, “represent a microcosm of the post-imperial politics of Empire” (Stahl, 2010, 55) whereby the body itself is the site of the contest. Tough Mudder’s most outlandish obstacles, such as electrically-charged wires and ‘tear-gas like substances,’ are stressors on the body, intended to test the body’s sensory limits and to shock us into transcendental state. David le Breton (2000), in his writing on ‘extreme’ and endurance sports, calls these moments of symbolic death. “The search,” he writes, “is for personal transfiguration with nature caused by exhaustion or disorientation of the senses, a sudden and incredibly strong feeling of being at one with the world, an ecstasy that then forms such a strong memory that the player does everything possible to relive it” (10).

This symbolic confrontation with death as a (physical) cultural experience is glorified in Tough Mudder, where participants must sign a death waiver that, through its satirical vernacular, ridicules the idea – the preposterous possibility – of actual death. But the same tendency finds its most obvious expression in the Death Race discussed at the outset of this chapter. The coloniality of confronting death in order to ‘feel alive,’ and pursuing suffering for its own sake, are not expressions of a transcendental adventurer-subject for whom the world has come to lose meaning but are manifestations of coloniality that only become visible, if at all, when these (post-)colonial attitudes to nature and the body are historized.

In advocating that we go ‘through the mud instead of around it,’ as in this chapter’s epigraph, De Sena and Weinberg display “the uncritical tendency for ‘civilised man’ to reclaim a ‘lost primordiality,’ an otherness and origin that call up the wounds of ‘alienation from nature’” (Anderson, 2007, 13). They conjure also and at once the image and the spirit of modernity imprinted in the European-American psyche since colonization: Of the white settler, alienated from an idea of nature that has itself been crafted out of the receding surplus of North American civilization. We might suggest also that in these attitudes to nature and the body, the history of physical culture is itself folded into a deeper colonial history than the British expansions of the nineteenth century; one that finds its clearest expression in mud as a murky opponent-object in the pursuit of pleasure, pain and profit.

### ***Mud Running Histories Yet to Come***

Keeping apace with the beginnings of mud running has proved a full-time endeavour. I am writing at a time of especial upheaval, one where the mud running moniker may be giving way to obstacle course racing, or obstacle racing, as part of a familiar design headed towards professionalization and perhaps even Olympic status. But that is the remit of mud running event founders, and not one that is universally shared by other event owners and mud running aficionados. As a case in point, two milestone broadcasts signpost different, though not necessarily antithetical paths that could inform mud running’s future, and (re) define its history. On December 7, 2013, the NBC sports network televised the Spartan Race World Championships, an event that had taken place three months prior among the mountainous terrain of Killington, Vermont.

On December 8 of the same weekend, Tough Mudder was the feature of MTV's True Life television series. The former development is a step towards realizing De Sena's vision for the professionalization and standardization of obstacle racing, and is supported and embodied by elite athletes such as Hobie Call, Amelia Boone, and Hunter McIntyre who vie for prize money and sponsorship in the Spartan Race, and other leading events, across North America. By some contrast, Tough Mudder's business model and promotional culture are built around "camaraderie" and teamwork, parodic, masculinist humor, and satirical suffering, as found in spectacular "obstacles" involving electricity and fire given names like "balls to the wall" and "trench warfare." True to entrepreneurial form, De Sena's (2013) take on Tough Mudder is not subtle:

It's not timed, so it's not a race and not treated like a sport—it's more like a friendly get-together at a bar or a birthday party. . . . We do not define ourselves with mud; we define ourselves with obstacles, and our obstacles are not just going to electrocute people. There's nothing athletic about being electrocuted.

Here De Sena took a strategic stance on the tension between work and play, labor and leisure, and revised his view on mud in order to emphasize a competitive distinction. Nonetheless, as is the case with most such rivalries, event founders and aficionados and are quicker to stress their differences than all they hold in common, and Tough Mudder foregrounds the same "will to overcome" that characterizes the Spartan Race.

An alternative history might have sketched these more recent developments and rivalries endemic to the mud running industry, such as the controversy surrounding Tough Mudder's origins following the accusations, and subsequent court case, brought forward by the UK's 30-year-old Tough Guy event (Keneally, 2012). Or, given the focus

on the Spartan Race here, there was also scope to plot links with CrossFit and other affiliated aspects of contemporary fitness culture in North America. I have instead sought to show that mud running's popularity is not simply an en vogue expression of American fitness culture, as if fitness and culture were themselves social abstracts. Nor is mud running simply an appeal to an authentically competitive and athletic human nature, although this narrative of transcendence and purification is, as De Sena recognized, clearly entwined with its contemporary appeal. Rather, it seems that mud running is premised on an attitude to bodies in and of nature recuperated from the nineteenth century, through which the dynamic of reclaiming and breaking with the past characterizes the spirit of modernity, the renaissance of (interest in) physical culture, and the esprit de corps of the focal practice. Perhaps it is this attitude—of breaking with and reclaiming the past, inventing new senses of self by redeeming ancient notions of what it means to be human, and seeking in nature a revitalizing antidote and an elemental adversary amid the ostensibly degenerative effects of modern life—that gives mud running its remarkable cultural currency in the early twenty-first century.

## 2. Interlude: Beyond Modern Dualisms

Modernity is the conceptual touchstone for understanding sporting and physical cultural practices. Whatever the prefix, be it ‘folk,’ ‘achievement,’ ‘extreme,’ ‘alternative,’ ‘lifestyle,’ ‘post,’ or ‘nature,’ modernity lends these various forms of embodied practice a mutually constitutive anchor of meaning. Take Guttmann’s (1978) historical mapping of modernization *From Ritual to Record*: Beginning with the ancient Games at Olympia, his timeline culminates in the achievement-oriented, capitalist, competitive, rule-governed practices we call modern sports. Contra Guttmann’s contested tale, Rinehart (2000) is among those to have juxtaposed ‘alternative’ sports such as skateboarding and snowboarding to their modern, ‘mainstream’ counterparts. In a subsequent effort to “move beyond simplistic and constraining dichotomies such as traditional versus new, mainstream versus emergent, or other related binaries such as sport versus art,” Wheaton (2004, 3) has since proposed ‘lifestyle’ sports, which are said to develop through and within the putative shift from modern to post-modern times; here the modern again provides a stabilizing referent on the apparent cusp of post-modernity. And, following Pronger (1998), Atkinson (2010, 1250) has recently defined any embodied practice “which intentionally subverts modernist ideologies and practices” as forming part of a ‘post-sport physical culture.’ This heavily abbreviated preamble omits and reduces much to emphasize a point of convergence. In each case, modernity has been crucial to defining and theorizing sport and physical culture.

According to Bruno Latour (1993), the impulse to either embrace *or* reject modernity is itself part of what makes ‘us’ modern. Latour defines modernity as the division (or ‘purification’) of the world into binary categories - nature/culture,

subject/object, mind/body, human/environment, and so forth - between which 'we moderns' must then choose. *Are you modern, or anti-modern, even post-modern?* Refusing to take sides, Latour's renowned retort is that *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993): That the mistake made by those who celebrate *and* those who lament the project of modernity is to assume the efficacy of its claims. 'Being modern' means believing that the modern age actually gave rise to a seismic schism between people and things, subjects and objects, timeless nature and turbulent society. While we have never been modern insofar as 'we moderns' have never - could never - wholly inhabit these as homogenous provinces, the act of purification has performative consequences. Latour's (1993) well-traveled thesis is that the bifurcation of the world along dualistic axes not only aid in interpellating divisive and often ill-fated discursive categories, but also has the paradoxical effect of proliferating material entanglements between the phenomena - be they natural, cultural or technological - that these categories name. His ongoing project, in which he is far from alone, less still an uncontested figure, is to reassemble worlds without inhibitive recourse to the constraints of modern dualistic thought.

Here I consider studies of sport and physical culture to see how recourse to modernity has impressed upon understandings of nature. In doing so I identify a quintessentially modern dualism between the *conquering of*, and a *communion with*, one's 'natural' surroundings. The former stance harbours notorious implications for the environment and its populace, rooted in modernist fictions declaring the autonomy of Man and domination over a distinct natural order (cf. Hansen, 2013). The latter retrospectively opposes and seeks to offset and redress this approach, for "once domination is complete, conservation is urgent" (Haraway, 1989, 34). This has often

meant condemning the disenchanting rationality of modern sports, in which internal (biological) and external (environmental) nature is to be vanquished (cf. Pronger, 2002), and heralding the reconciliatory promise of ‘alternative’ sporting practices which are said to involve “special relationships with the environment” (Thorpe and Rinehart, 2010, 1273) more akin to a communion between body and world.

Conventional logic holds that the sentiment of seeking unity with waves and mountains in surfing or climbing, for instance, is preferable in that it is premised less on the conquering and mastery of the elements structuring so-called modern sports. Nevertheless this latter, ‘anti-modern’ position, as often theorized through those various ‘alternative’ embodied practices that share a common foe in modern sports, risks being complicit in reproducing the dualistic tenets of modernity *through the act of opposing them*. Both stances, modern (conquering) and anti-modern (communion), assume that the claims of modernity have at some point taken hold, such that modern sports *have* served to alienate us from nature through constraining culture and society, and ‘alternative’ sporting practices *are* needed to undo the ills of modernity and return us, albeit temporarily, to a natural state or domain once lost. Subsequent retreats to an ostensibly more authentic, ‘natural’ order as a means of escaping the sterility and disenchantment of modernity and modern sport often rely on and reproduce ideas of nature as sacred, pure, and in need of preservation. Yet if we have never been modern, then this salvation of an imagined primordial nature is neither possible nor desirable. Moreover, such selective and romanticized conceptions of nature serve to obscure and even beset vital political alternatives in our reeling ecological present.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Geologists and other specialists have recently taken to using the term ‘Anthropocene’ to encompass the era since the scientific and industrial revolutions, an era in which humankind has imprinted on and

### *Disenchantment, Authenticity and Nature in Sports and Physical Culture*

Scaling the highest mountains, traversing the most difficult terrain, exploring the depths of the sea and skimming across the oceans, soaring through the skies and descending into deep valley gorges, tunneling far into the interior of the earth and shaping its exterior with both ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ surfaces and structures, sportsmen and sportswomen straddle the globe, and the sportization of the planet seemingly knows no bounds.

(Maguire, 1999, 1)

In opening his influential book *Global Sport*, Joseph Maguire captures the humanistic, triumphalist ethos of athletes scaling, traversing, exploring, shaping, and ‘straddling the globe’. To ascend mountains, to tame elements, to resource one’s biology and overcome one’s ecology; these heroic endeavours are indicative of a distinctively modern approach – what Foucault (1984a) called a modern ‘attitude’ - to commanding, innovating, and perfecting the nature of body and society. ‘The globe,’ meanwhile, is cast in contradistinction to these boundless, mobile athletes as inert matter, tractable at the hands and feet of humankind. Just as Latour argued in his *Politics of Nature* (2004a), in modern dualisms “a pluralistic *multiculturalism* is always opposed to a homogenous *mononaturalism*” (paraphrased in Harman, 2009, 57, original emphasis). The critique of modern sports for conceiving nature as something humankind must depart, sculpt, know and overcome en route to civilization and prosperity rightly links this mentality with environmental degradation, contamination of air and water, loss of species and the deleterious effects of fossil fuel reliance in the late twentieth and twenty first centuries.

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intermingled with all parts of the natural world. In Latour’s (2013) assessment, “[i]f geologists themselves, rather stolid and serious types, see humanity as a force of the same amplitude as volcanoes or even of plate tectonics, one thing is now certain: we have no hope whatsoever - no more hope in the future than we had in the past - of seeing a definitive distinction between Science and Politics” (9). Put another way, this is a crisis state that will not be alleviated by the forlorn pursuit of natural purity.

‘Modern sport’ is said to inhere in its logic a violent propensity towards nature and/of the body (Messner and Sabo, 1994, Pronger, 2002), and to enact invasive, territorial cartographies that bear the imprint of colonial geopolitics.

If the attitude of modernity is twinned with its colonial inheritance – as suggested in chapter one - then it comes as no surprise that sports formed in the image and spirit of modernity reflect and reproduce that same heritage. In these practices, such as codes of football, time is rationalized and space is colonized. The critique of modern sports for conceiving nature as something humankind must depart, sculpt, know, and overcome *en route* to civilization and prosperity links this modern attitude not only to social exclusion and persecution, but also environmental degradation, contamination of air and water, cull of species, and the deleterious effects of fossil fuel reliance in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These sports in many ways reflect and even further the project of modernity by reifying dualisms, not least culture/nature, rationality/emotion, and human/nonhuman (see Hansen, 2013). Yet rather than rehearse this critique anew, I am primarily concerned here with the opposing, nonetheless complicit stance taken in and through many ‘alternative’ or otherwise ‘anti-modern’ sporting practices.

As Belinda Wheaton (2004) has noted, participants in ‘lifestyle’ sports often “express a nostalgia for an imaginary past rural life, and a sense of nature as ‘something mysterious and spiritual’ (Hetherington, 1998, 338) to be revered, protected and nurtured” (12). This seems preferable to the conquering mentality invoked by Maguire. Yet, in light of Latour’s critique, I wonder whether or to what extent the nostalgia attitude invoked by Wheaton remains rooted in and therefore *aids in reproducing* the assumptions of its modern counterpart. In Latour’s words:

Look for the origins of the modern myths, and you will almost always find them among those who claim to be countering modernism with the impenetrable barrier of the spirit, of emotion, the subject, or the margins. In the effort to offer a supplement of soul to the modern world, the one it has is taken away - the one it had, the one it was quite incapable of losing. That subtraction and that addition are the two operations that allow the moderns and the antimoderns to frighten each other by agreeing on the essential point: we are absolutely different from the others, and we have broken radically with our own past.

(1993, 124)

The narration of surfing, snowboarding and kindred 'alternative' or 'anti-modern' sporting practices as exercises in transcending modern culture to fleetingly revel in an intemperate nature once lost, and temporarily regained by select participants, can be seen as just such an effort to offer the modern world a 'supplement of soul.' Paradoxically, this conception of nature wedds these practices to the kinds of modernist thinking which they are at pains to refute. For even in rejecting the deleterious characteristics of modern sport, still discernible in many 'alternative' practices is an anthropocentric belief in human capacities to first extract and later restore nature's vitality through corporeal immersion; or, "the uncritical tendency for 'civilised man' to reclaim a 'lost primordially,' an otherness and origin that call up the wounds of 'alienation from nature'" (Anderson, 2007, 13).

Latour's critique aside, modernity has been variously understood as an epoch, a moment, a mood, a project, an attitude, and a condition. It is said to comprise "a comprehensive designation of all the changes - intellectual, social and political - that

brought into being the modern world” (Kumar, 2005, 67). It is characterized by a perennial drive for renewal, rebirth, and transformation, and a concomitant uprooting from the (often romanticized) stability and coherence of yore. The word modern derives from *modernus* or *modo*, meaning recently, or just now, and was used from at least the fifth century AD to sever ancient Paganism from the newly dawning Christian world (Kumar, 2005). Habermas (1981) has remarked that “the term ‘modern’ appeared and reappeared exactly during those periods in Europe when the consciousness of a new epoch formed itself through renewed relationship to the ancients – whenever, moreover, antiquity was considered a model to be recovered through some kind of imitation” (4). Modernity, then, since the early Christian Middle Ages up until its eighteenth century European iteration, always describes a forceful break with the past.

While the claim is always to a break with antecedent thought and social forms, this is not something that has been or likely could be achieved absolutely. It is better conceived as an aspiration: *we are always on the threshold of modernity* (Hansen, 2013). In this sense the word modern “has always already forfeited, through historical repetition, the very claim it sets out to make” (Jauss, 2005, 329). The novelty and innovation synonymous with being modern is only intelligible in reference to what has gone before.

Nevertheless, what distinguishes the diverse and amorphous intellectual movement gathered under the name Enlightenment from its own ‘modern’ predecessors is its declaration of not just an epochal rupture, but the historicizing of tradition and spirituality, in what was proclaimed to be an age of Reason, ripe for human intervention and marked by incessant renewal (Heyer, 1988). Enlightenment thought posited a universal unity to being human, fixed and unique boundaries and capacities, and “that

human potentiality was [to be] realized in a movement out of nature” (Anderson, 2007, 35). In this denouncing of the Gods, perceived diminishing of the aura of nature, and heralding of a future illuminated by the twinned beacons of science and reason, this modernity promised that “the past was the confusion of things and men; the future is what will no longer confuse them” (Latour, 1993, 71). If the project of modernity is premised on the separation of ‘the ancients and the moderns’ (cf. Habermas, 1981), then Latour’s thesis adds the corollary that this process has been one of ‘purifying’ or separating people and nature, and continually regulating and reproducing those boundaries.

Given the field’s disciplinary heritage, it is not surprising that many sociologists of sport have come to view modern sports as profoundly disenchanting practices.<sup>20</sup> The disenchantment motif most famously threads through Marx’s notion of the self alienated from her labor under capitalism, Weber’s depiction of modern life as consignment to the iron cage of rationality, and also has its echoes in Freud’s repressive hypothesis in *Civilization and its Discontents*. According to Weber, for instance, modern life is disenchanting not because the world’s secrets are already known to all, but due to the pervading impression in our *zeitgeist* that rational understandings of all the world’s sources of wonderment are only ever an equation away. The relationship of classical sociology to Enlightenment thought was, and remains, ambivalent, for these canonical social theorists were at once in awe of and indebted to the logics and rationality of

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<sup>20</sup> This claim is by no means straightforward. While the content of much of classical sociology was critical of the disenchantment, alienation and anomie of modern society, the “social sciences flourished from Europe’s prior self-generated cultural and political resources” (Kemple and Mawani, 2009, 236). Moreover, “their development in the course of trade, exploration, conquest, and domination ‘instantiated Western modernity’ (Prakash, 1999: 13)” (Kemple and Mawani, 2009, 236).

Enlightenment philosophy. Nevertheless, the disenchantment thesis has enduring significance in lamenting the loss of ‘soul’ in modern life, and sport, and in many cases this critique is justified by the detrimental outcomes to which it refers (modern physical education being cast in the image and spirit of industrial production, for instance). However, the notion that nature itself has been disenchanted in some places more than others, such that “a spiritual dimension once found in plants, earth, sky is nowhere to be seen” (Bennett, 2001, 8), is a claim imbued with classic modern dualistic thought and perpetuated in many accounts of modern and ‘alternative’ sporting experience.

Let’s turn to Stephen Lyng for an example of how ‘alternative’ sports serve as an antidote to a modern world devoid of spirituality, meaning and belonging. According to Lyng (2008), and in line with the thesis outlined above, “the attraction to extreme sports can be explained in terms of the compelling experiential contrast they offer to a society increasingly dominated by the forces of alienation, bureaucratization, loss of community, and disenchantment” (89-90). Lyng is captivated by those ‘extreme’ sporting practices that bear many of the hallmarks of ‘lifestyle’ sports but take the threat of physical danger to be the *raison d’être* of the activity. In these sports, participants undertake ‘edgework’ not to rationally circumvent the probability of bodily harm but as a “confrontation with circumstances so chaotic that probabilistic calculation is impossible” (98). Only through this confrontation can the participant disrupt her cultural self and bring about a sense of “pure agency” (98), an implosion of time and space which is “experienced as more ‘authentic’ than everyday reality. The feelings of authenticity are accompanied by a sense that the experience is ineffable - words cannot adequately describe what it is like to negotiate the edge” (86). Edgework describes the means by which participants ‘re-

enchant' their worlds through "the annihilation of the social mind and immediate projection of a contingent body into the flow of action" (100). They experience a "space outside of culture" and concomitantly submit themselves to the "indeterminacy of the natural world" (100). The thesis is seductive, lucid, and long-established: through edgework, 'extreme' sports serve as a way out of the normalcy of culture and into the transcendent sanctity of the natural. The edge is a boundary between life and death, safety and serious injury, consentient culture and transfiguring nature.

My reservations with Lyng's thesis lie not with the heightened existential awareness achieved through 'extreme' sports participation, which without doubt elicits very real and exhilarating experiences. Rather, I suspect that Lyng's sensational account is productive of the very boundaries it then seeks to transcend. The notion that an anesthetizing culture must be transcended to experience a sublime, 'indeterminate' nature rests on the premise that these are autonomous realms, once pried asunder by modernity. The experience of 'extreme' sports is thereby articulated as the performative enactment of modern boundaries in order to remake and destroy those boundaries through masochistic, humanistic fantasies of 'breaking barriers,' reaching the 'outside of culture' and so forth. David Le Breton (2000) runs into similar problems in his stirring anthropology of 'extreme' sports, where he writes of triathletes, climbers and endurance athletes enacting a "hand-to-hand fight with nature" which casts the world as a stage for human self-realization, where "nature" is designated "the site of the event", and the athlete "must see himself [sic] as the master of his activity" in order to have "merited such a moment of bliss" (2000, 2, 6, 7). This mastery of nature is tempered in the same breath when we hear that "An idea of the fusion achieved [with nature, through 'extreme'

sports] is often represented, supporting the personal suffering endured when facing the elements...To be receptive to nature's limits so that the flesh of the world and the body are one, suffering no separation, yet always remaining oneself, this gives a value to the effort, endurance and challenge" (6, 7). Le Breton is grappling with the dualistic tension between mastery over and communion with one's 'natural' surroundings in these activities, oscillating between a Hemingway-esque vanquishing of nature by the virile adventurer and the spiritually-attuned quests of those who seek something other than the rationality, discipline and domination of modern sports. Both Lyng and Le Breton reinforce the idea that these practices are means for getting somehow 'closer to nature', retrieving an imagined primordial self, or achieving a sense of authenticity. Thus they serve to stoke modern dualisms and again contribute to the notion that modernity succeeded in dividing culture from nature, people from their habitats, 'us' from others present and past.

I have chosen these examples to illustrate how modern dualisms produce their own problems, their own boundaries, with inhibitive and often troubling implications, and how accounts of sporting practices can draw on this dualistic logic when theorizing practitioners' experiences of nature. But not all studies of 'alternative' sport and physical culture conform to this logic in the same ways, or to the same extent, and some have experimented in eschewing it altogether. For instance, there has been a resurgence in phenomenological studies of sport and embodiment in recent years (cf. Woodward, 2009). Such accounts look to analyse an athlete's orientation to her surroundings, where the 'objects' at hand become kinds of "bodily auxiliary, an extension of the bodily synthesis" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 176). Among snowboarders, for instance, this can

manifest itself as an affinity between the athlete, the snow, the board and the mountain, brought about through immersion in embodied practice to the point where it is no longer clearly sensed where the body stops and the world begins (Thorpe, 2011). While I have sympathy with the relationality of this approach, the classical phenomenological conception of nature or the environment too often meets its limit in human perception, where nonhuman matter - such as mud, snow or mountains - is only animated through the senses by the perceiving subject. Thus, as with the social constructionist accounts discussed earlier, the residues of humanism endure.<sup>21</sup>

Atkinson's (2011) ethnography of fell running in England's East Midlands is noteworthy for affording earth and mountains their ontological dues. He found in fell running, an ancient Scottish practice where participants traipse up and over mountains, that "part of the exciting significance of this veritably premodern sport stems from the sweaty camaraderie its players enjoy through their collective communion with nature" (2011, 104-105). The existential pleasure experienced through this 'post-sport physical culture' is reported as markedly different from that found in "modernist adventure races," which fell runners insist "do not share the same ethos or play logic" (103) as their anti-modern excursions. Analyses such as this one are important for illustrating alternatives to the predominant narrative of sport, and specifically running, as only a disciplined, rule governed, linear practice on and over dead matter. Yet it becomes problematic when this is achieved by implying and so reifying a sterile reality of nature in those other, modern

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<sup>21</sup> An exception to this, and a key source for eco-phenomenologists (see Toadvine, 2009, for instance), is Merleau-Ponty's (1968) work on the chiasm. Merleau-Ponty's unfinished (1968) monograph *The Visible and the Invisible* lead him away from - without entirely abandoning - the primacy of human perception, towards contemplating the "reversibility of the seeing and the visible, the touching and touched" (147). Reversibility denotes the reciprocal character of intentionality, that is, the notion that human sensations have their echoes in things, including other bodies: to see is to be seen, to feel is to be felt. Merleau-Ponty comes to the more prudent though still assimilative conclusion that "like crystal, like metal and many other substances, I am a sonorous being" (144).

sports, such as adventure racing. Consigning these ‘other’ practices and the nature therein to the disenchanted wastelands of modern life, and turning instead to instances in which different natures are cultivated through embodied practice, is to presume the efficacy of modernity and modern sport to sterilize nature in the first place. The role of nature in modern sport is thus rendered passive, tractable, and irredeemably disenchanted.

The problem is exacerbated by the performative consequences of the anti-modern thesis of nature’s disenchantment in and through modern sports. The storying of mountains - and running therein - as modern, sterile and disenchanted, or anti-modern and so communal and spiritually attuned, “has itself contributed to the condition it describes. Its rhetorical power has real effects” (Bennett, 2001, 4). It follows that “[t]he depiction of nature and culture as orders no longer capable of inspiring deep attachment inflects the self as a creature of loss and thus discourages discernment of the marvelous vitality of bodies human and nonhuman, natural and artifactual” (4). My contention is that although this performativity is significant, the materiality of nature is not wholly subject to semantics. Nature proves disobedient when faced with the analytical lens of the conquering-communion dualism. ‘Natural’ phenomena does not wholly discriminate between conquering and communal approaches to ‘it.’ Put another way, neither side of the conquering-communion dualism is imbued with the efficacy to determine the role of nature therein. Nature itself acts. It produces. It is an agent in all embodied practices irrespective of their modern or anti-modern inflection. To assume otherwise is to risk reproducing the conceit of human exceptionalism, even in efforts towards a communal, more ‘natural’ state of play.

*Beyond Dualisms, Beyond Critique*

“An idea opposed to another idea is always the same idea, albeit affected by the negative sign. The more you oppose one another, the more you remain in the same framework of thought”

- Serres with Latour 1995, 81

Something I have come to find curious about mud running, perhaps more so than any other endurance event, is that it spans two apparently oppositional narratives on modernity, nature, and physical culture. To be sure, it bears many hallmarks of what Atkinson (2011, 103) has described as a “modernist adventure race” in which nature – fetishized in mud - forms the site and object of the event to be vanquished by triumphant runners. But mud running also shares much with ‘alternative’ sporting and physical cultural practices insofar as it claims to offset the disenchanting tenets of modernity by ‘reuniting’ participants with natural surroundings, compartments, and elemental substances (earth, ice, fire), by kindling social ties in otherwise atomistic societies, and by unleashing an ostensibly innate and playful propensity for frolicking in dirt. In both cases something – nature, society, and the ethic of those ‘other’ sports that embody certain traits and attitudes - is being overcome.

The persistence of this dualism begs the question: how to ask of the nature at work mud running without recourse to its modern or anti-modern character, or prefiguring the propensities of the various actors, agencies and affects with which it is continually reconstituted? Val Plumwood’s (1993) ecofeminist critique offers a promising point of departure for eschewing modern dualisms and their hierarchical dispositions. For Plumwood, “[o]vercoming the dualistic dynamic requires recognition of

both continuity and difference; this means acknowledging the other as neither alien to and discontinuous from self nor assimilated to or an extension of self” (1993, 6). Nature, then, should not be viewed as distinct from human (physical) culture and operating in an environmental ether, nor as a product of human (athletic) endeavour, as Le Breton (2000) implies in naming the experience of ‘extreme’ sports a “personally generated spirituality” (2). ‘It’ is always already a part of the cultural and technological phenomena with which it is intra-actively constituent and constitutive (cf. Barad, 2003). To understand the role of nature in embodied practices it might, somewhat paradoxically, be most prudent to avoid purifying nature as a rarefied category from the outset.<sup>22</sup> The next chapter experiments with doing just that.

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<sup>22</sup> The corollary is to stress the importance of documenting “vital connections between the geo (earth) and the bio (life)” (Whatmore, 2006, 601) anew in fieldwork, rather than assuming or proceeding from human sovereignty, centrality or social exclusivity.

### 3. Camaraderie Reincorporated: Tough Mudder and the Extended Distribution of the Social



*Figure 3 - Tough Mudder's 'Everest' at Whistler Olympic Park, British Columbia.*

*Photo by Author.*

That's me, on the left next to my running buddy Ben, near the culmination of Tough Mudder at Whistler in 2012. In the background are the snowcapped peaks of British Columbia's world-renowned skiing resort Whistler Blackcomb; in the foreground, scores of weary runners waiting to take on one of Tough Mudder's signature obstacles, 'Everest.' Everest, of course, is the world's tallest peak, located in the Himalayas and famously scaled by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953. Theirs is the modern conquest *par excellence* and, like other mountaineering escapades before and since, has come to represent a triumph of human ascendancy over nature. In Tough Mudder, Everest is a quarter-pipe smothered with sweat and soil, located precariously at around the eleven-mile mark of this twelve-mile, 'military-style' obstacle course. Ben and I are about to scurry up the greasy exterior and attempt to haul ourselves atop the wooden deck at its apex.

For all the blatant discrepancies between these namesakes, let us push the analogy a little further. The first ascent of Mt. Everest is storied by Hansen (2013) not in the usual triumphalist tone, but as perpetuating the modern myth of human autonomy, from other men, and from nature itself. The figure of the lone, victorious mountaineer would "entangle visions of sovereignty, masculinity and modernity throughout the twentieth century" due to his - and our - emphasis on being first, highest, and unaccompanied (Hansen, 2013, 2). "The will to be first," he continues, "is said to distinguish modern men and women from premodern or nonmodern people who cower in front of mountains" (3). Hansen goes on to not only debunk the modern myth of sovereign ascendancy by detailing the collaborative necessity of mountaineering, but also to show that it was more than a reflection or expression of modernity: Rather, mountaineering "was one of the

practices that constructed and redefined multiple modernities during debates over who was first” (3).

Somewhat surprisingly, given the distinctly modern emphasis on ‘overcoming obstacles’ that Tough Mudder events outwardly espouse, the Everest with which Ben and I are confronted does not entertain the same pretensions to autonomy as its fabled counterpart. Take another look at the picture and you will see the hands of those already atop dangling in anticipation of hauling others upwards. On the far right hand side, one runner is suspended midway through this collaborative manoeuvre. In Tough Mudder’s Everest, and contrary to tales weaved around its eponym, teamwork is encouraged: You, the would-be participant, are invited via the company website to “call upon other Mudders to catch you as you run up the quarter-pipe or work together to form a human chain so that you can scale someone’s shoulders to finally summit Everest.” This encouragement of cooperation in Tough Mudder’s ‘extreme’ endurance events appears as a marked contrast to the fantasy of unaccompanied ascendance synonymous with Mt. Everest, and other quintessentially modern (athletic) practices. In fact Tough Mudder’s entwinement of playful collaboration with grit, pain, and dirt is intended to make it as much about fostering the bonds of friendship anew, creating cultural memories and capital, building office morale, and rebuilding bodies and selves following trauma, as it is about athletic achievement or personal glory. As runners are reminded from initial registration through to post-race beers, Tough Mudder is “not a race but a challenge” in which each and all pledge to “put teamwork and camaraderie before my course time” and to “help fellow Mudders complete the course.” Tough Mudder trades on a spirit of togetherness – an *esprit de corps* or camaraderie - that its obstacles (such as Everest) are

intended to materialize among participants, teammates and strangers alike.

My study was initially prompted by a concern with the overtly masculine and militaristic aspects of what is by some measures just another “modernist adventure race” (Atkinson, 2011, 103) in which one would expect to find – and can find – a commercial ethos and imperative that readily lends itself to corporate team-building exercises and the accrual of physical and cultural capital (Kay and Laberge, 2002); a form of ‘extreme’ adventure racing that bears a history of exclusion along axes of gender, race, class, and dis/ability (Ray, 2009); and domineering approaches to the body and its worldly surroundings. But there is a curious incongruence between these all-too-familiar and apparent themes, and the sociality that I found to characterize not only the prevailing ethos of the event, but the conglomeration of people, technologies, affects, and more besides, that made it possible. Tough Mudder is a shared enterprise in which the ‘obstacles’ are considered to be either ‘external’ to the course, such as traumas or hardships experienced elsewhere, or the course itself, comprising not just the Everest quarter pipe but hanging bars, icy receptacles, muddied tunnels, and much more besides. Both are plausible in the pursuit of ‘overcoming’ obstacles, whereby the course itself becomes a material-metaphor for social life.

Nevertheless, and crucially for this essay, it follows that individual autonomy is displaced in Tough Mudder only to effect the collective *human* overcoming of Everest and the rest of the course, and to elicit the desired sense of ‘camaraderie’ among participants. Rather than undermining the conceit of human exceptionalism synonymous with its eponym that ordains people as the world’s (physically) active subjects that stand above and apart from a world of natural and technological resources, and despite its

collaborative ethic, Tough Mudder therefore appears to retain and reproduce the ontological preeminence of heroic, adventurous (mud) runners overcoming fun and fearsome surroundings.

*What if Tough Mudder's Everest and the course of which it is a part were more than a series of tractable obstacles that are simply clambered and overcome by triumphant runners, individual or collective? What if the material, corporeal, and symbolic 'camaraderie' for which the event is renowned was a more profoundly shared endeavour, one in which a whole host of objects, affects, and competencies, human and otherwise, make dramatic and subtle contributions? And what is at stake in reincorporating these intra- and supra-human materialities as active players in physical cultural practices?* These questions and possibilities emerged over the course of my mud running endeavours during and since Tough Mudder at Whistler in 2012. They are intended to pursue the curious dynamic between Tough Mudder's appeal to the power of individual human will and perseverance, or 'grit,' its collaborative ethos, or camaraderie, and the importance of the infrastructure of the course and the event itself in *materializing*, and making possible, these individual and collective efforts towards 'overcoming' obstacles. They were also, as I will discuss shortly, informed by a host of philosophies and research practices that take seriously the capacities of matter, or 'objects' (such as mud and the various obstacles in Tough Mudder) to partake in and effect social life.

In this essay I revisit my experiences and recollections of Tough Mudder at Whistler through these philosophies and research practices by seeking out, accounting for, and emphasizing the composition and distribution of Tough Mudder's camaraderie: What Bruno Latour (2005) calls 'reassembling the social' as an extended multiplicity of

‘actors.’ Contra the modernist notion of humans simply overcoming natural or technological obstacles, my aim has become to recast the conventional hero figure, the super-human athlete, to afford due attention to the too-often unsung ensemble of intra- and supra-human materialities with which these athletes always share an ecology.

***Object Agency: From Oppression and Subversion to Shared Enactments and Entanglements***

The notion that objects – intra- and supra-human materialities<sup>23</sup> - exercise some kind of agency can be traced through Western philosophy to antiquity, at least, when Epicurus and Democritus clashed over whether atoms were always predictable in their patterns of movement or, as Epicurus posited, matter inheres an immanent proclivity to ‘swerve’ from its ‘natural’ or forecasted path (Barad, 2003; Bennett, 2001). Re-cognition of Epicurus’ claim - implicit to many indigenous worldviews (Blaser, 2014; Sundberg, 2013) yet often marginalized in much of Western thought since Democritus prefigured for Descartes and for Newton the inertia of matter (Barad, 2003; Coole and Frost, 2010) - is currently *en vogue* in the social sciences and (post)humanities in a range of ‘new,’ renewed, and reinvigorated philosophies and research practices concerned with matter, agency, and nature. These include actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), posthumanism (Wolfe, 2010), feminist techno-science studies (Haraway, 1991), vital and ‘new’ materialisms (Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010; Dolphijn and van der tuin, 2012),

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<sup>23</sup> In referencing one side of a troublesome dualism, “object agency” is somewhat problematic language. I nonetheless retain this turn of phrase as a sensitizing concept to the possibility of agency being more than the preserve of the (human) subject. But in doing so, and as noted throughout the essay, I am referring not simply to “nonhumans” but to the intra- and supra-human materialities which make up our biology and with which we share an ecology. Karen Barad’s (2003, 2007) non-essentialist writing on phenomena as always already the performative enactment of “intra-actions” is an ontological premise that refuses dualistic thought, and informs and supports my later claims to the entanglement of mud and runners.

agential realism (Barad, 2003, 2007), assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) political ecology (Robbins, 2004), object-oriented ontology (Harman, 2009) and other less firmly delineated approaches within science studies (Law, 2004), human geography (Whatmore, 2006) and other fields and disciplines. Differences and dovetailings abound, but if there is a shared contention it is that much is at stake in apprehending – and remembering - the various ways in which agency breaches the *anthropos*.

What distinguishes these perspectives is not simply an acknowledgement of the myriad propensities and effects of objects within and for all forms of life, but the ontological character and conditions of their capacity to act. Put another way, the agency of matter has not been entirely absent from modern social and cultural theory, but its recognition has often tended to betray humanistic undertones. Marx and neo-Marxisms, for instance, have contended that the splendor of objects enchants and misleads beholders by concealing the whole story of their inequitable conditions of human production. Objects undergo an alchemic metamorphosis through the process of commodification, a process that harbours deleterious, alienating, and exploitative consequences for those who labor to forge them. Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) furthered this line of argument in their seething critique of the culture industry when lamenting that aesthetic commodities (such as Tough Mudder) undermine the touchstone principle of Enlightenment - critical Reason – by subjecting ‘the masses’ to a stupefying stream of hedonistic pleasure. The shared contention is that an object wields agency insofar as a fetishized commodity has – to some degree - a life of its own. But this capacity is always already scripted in the logics of the (political-economic) structures that subsume it. That is to say, objects are

only agentic in Marx and neo-Marxisms once they have been infused with a capacity to act by capitalist hands and brains, and this process works oppressively, to the detriment of the individual citizen-consumer's critical consciousness and democratic society at large (cf. Bennett, 2001). The irony of these theses is that one demon (capitalism) is struck by the force of critical theory while another (humanism) is strengthened by the blow.

Others have viewed objects as carrying a subversive potential that resists, and yet in some cases hegemonically perpetuates, the social, political, and historical conditions which so concerned Marx and neo-Marxisms. In his cultural studies analysis of British post-war subcultures, Hebdige (1979) contended that "'humble objects' can be magically appropriated; 'stolen' by subordinate groups and made to carry 'secret' meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination" (18). What most distinguishes this perspective on object agency from its Marxian forerunner is that objects are sites of contested rather than foreshadowed significance. Hebdige was interested in how working-class youth - punks, mods, rockers - challenged the conventions they were due to inherit by 'symbolically repossessing' artifacts and commodities such as safety pins, chains, and jewellery (see also De Certeau, 1984). A relevant critique often made of Hebdige's work is that he borrowed and retained Barthes' (1972) (then) structuralist assumption that an 'authentic,' latent meaning underlays these subversive connotations: That arbitrary objects are the harbingers of an essential underlying truth or master code. In this case, and notwithstanding the nuance of his reading of 'homologies' between subcultural groups, that truth remained linked to the class-stratified significance of the stylistic expressions

inferred by the author, and the agency of objects thereby remained limited to being “endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings, by the very [working class] groups who originally produced them” (16).

Aware of these essentializing shortcomings, post-structuralists have since sought to rupture such efficacious claims to human powers of production and meaning-making practices. By eschewing the starting point that authority always has a culpable author, post-structuralism sought to displace human intentionality as the vanguard of agency and to focus instead on how subjects are constituted and regulated by the social (especially lingual) structures to which they are bound. In this formulation, power, and agency, are always already invested in the practices of everyday life, including its myriad objects (institutions, documents, images, technologies, and so forth).<sup>24</sup> However, and despite the insights and gains of post-structuralism, the conundrum remains that even when ‘decentering’ the subject insofar as author-ity over communication is concerned, agency is often deferred into a symbolic domain which remains a human preserve of language, signs, and subjectivity. Perhaps the most influential instance of this is Butler’s (1989) positing of sex as a discursively constituted category, one which highlighted the contingency and complexity of sex and its cultural expressions yet, in doing so, bracketed the materiality of nature, including enfolded bodies (a shortcoming that Butler would spend some years thereafter seeking to address). Consequently, in these important efforts to temper the hubristic status of human sovereignty in making the modern world, a residual humanism endures insofar as agency and meaning are relocated into a ‘symbolic realm.’ In post-structuralism, objects deemed biological and environmental, natural and

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<sup>24</sup> Althusser (1971), in his impassioned defense of Marxism, and Foucault in his subsequent, ironically post-Marxist uptake of Althusser’s ideas, are key figures in this displacement of agency into the “ideological state apparatus” or “disciplinary regimes of truth.”

artifactual, are viewed as active parts of a complex and ambivalent social apparatus, but their significance is nevertheless implied to have origins in discursive practices, and effects in a human social order of things (even if subjects surrender some semantic control through the equation). The authorial sovereignty of the human subject is therefore only deferred, rather than eschewed so as to recognize objects as more than just the site of action.

The point of this selective storying of object agency in modern social and cultural theory is to demonstrate some of the anthropocentric problems to which many of the afore-listed materialist philosophies and research practices are, at least in part, responding.<sup>25</sup> The efficacy and attention granted to human modes of historical, political-economic, and semantic production can obscure and even efface the capacity of objects to share and *make a difference* in enacting agency in socio-natural configurations. And in some cases, the casting of people as the agents of history, or of the symbolic realm of language and subjectivity as the ontological basis for understanding the world, may well have the ironic, performative effect of perpetuating the hubris of human exceptionalism and the various ecological (social-environmental) problems with which it is associated.

By way of response, Bruno Latour is among those to have pursued a radical disavowal of the humanistic tenets of Enlightenment philosophy in order to afford all objects their ontological dues.<sup>26</sup> His claim is that ‘the social’ is not a preordained realm,

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<sup>25</sup> A great deal of theory is necessarily rendered absent from this account, from Spinoza and Deleuze to Zizek on the sublime object of ideology, as well as indigenous knowledges and natural scientific renderings of objects. My choices were partly made to align with some prevailing theoretical trends in the socio-cultural study of sport and physical culture, but also, as mentioned, to highlight particular merits, limits, and lineage of how objects have been theorized.

<sup>26</sup> Latour (1993) recognized that this disavowal in his own philosophy could only be partial and ambivalent: “We want the meticulous sorting of quasi-objects to become possible – no longer unofficially and under the table, but officially and in broad daylight. In this desire to bring to light, to incorporate into language, to make public, we continue to identify with the intuition of the Enlightenment.” But, in carving

system, or structure composed of rational human subjects but the contingent effect of ongoing conglomerations between a hybrid cast of ‘actors’ (or ‘actants’); a fluid ‘network’ that is “*simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society*” (Latour, 1993, 6, original emphasis). Latour’s materialism confronts a world of hybrid phenomena, as opposed to simply active people and passive things, each of which proves disobedient when faced with normative, disciplinary frameworks inherited from the rarefied categories of nature, culture, and technology. The foremost barrier to comprehending this hybridity is what he has called the Great Divide of subjects and objects, culture and nature, humans and nonhumans, bodies and minds, ‘us’ and the Others, present and past: In other words, the distinctly modern premise of human exceptionalism that has for so long been sacrosanct in the canon of Western philosophy (Latour, 1993). It is this divide that Latour’s advocations for doing non-anthropocentric, non-dualistic, and non-reductionist research are intended to eschew. Latour is by no means alone, even less so flawless or complete, in his proposals for a ‘generalized symmetry’ of things and people, but these principles nevertheless offer a compelling point of departure for reconfiguring the social as always already socio-natural.

Human exceptionalism, a broad and diverse school of thought (Foucault, 1984a) that champions the primacy, centrality, and exclusivity of the ‘human being’ from nature, technology, and other animals, is a spatio-temporally particular construct rather than a timeless, universal affliction. It is therefore important to stress again and from the outset that the reconception of agency that Latour and ‘new’ and renewed materialist

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the world up into people and things, “this intuition has never had the anthropology it deserved” (142). This is also the intuition with which Foucault (1984a) sought to reconcile his project in one of his final essays, on Enlightenment, humanism, and modernity.

philosophies put forward is an exercise in *reanamnesis* (Harman, 2009). That is to say, it is as much about remembering the vitality of objects as it is about their reassembly (cf. Robbins, 2004)<sup>27</sup>. The promise of apprehending the collusion of ‘more-than-human’ (Whatmore, 2006) phenomena in enacting agency is, in my reading at least, an invitation to revisit and rework the ontological basis of one’s understanding of and orientation to the world under study, including the *reanamnesis* of things gathered under inhibitive and often troublesome dualistic categories (see Plumwood, 1993). The leap of faith needed, one that confounds modernist and anti-modernist thinking (cf. Latour, 1993) about matter, agency and nature, is to entertain “the capacity of things - edibles, commodities, storms, metals - not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett, 2010, viii). In the context of this essay, the ensuing imperative is to recast – quite literally – the scenes in which Tough Mudder participants are said to ascend and overcome ‘their’ worldly surroundings, and to reincorporate Tough Mudder’s camaraderie as a ‘more-than-human’ phenomena that is shared, contingent, and radically dependent on a world of colluding things.

With the shared enactment of agency as a guiding sensibility, in what follows I revisit my first encounter with Tough Mudder and its Everest obstacle through a ‘reassembly’ (Latour, 2005) of the field notes, photos, conversations, and other artifacts gathered in the lead up to, and during, that event. My tools of analysis to this end have been immersion and description, recursively running, reading, writing, and reconfiguring

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<sup>27</sup> Sundberg (2013) voices a concern with posthumanist theory and research that, in declaring the anthropocentrism of all knowledge hitherto as part of their underlying rationale for rethinking what it means to be human, often efface – and so recolonize – indigenous ontologies that never made such fateful distinctions between nature and humanity.

my recollections in an effort to, in Haraway's words, "redescribe something so that it becomes thicker than it first seems" (with Goodeve, 2000, 108).

### ***Reassembling the Social in Tough Mudder***

Since its founding in 2010, Tough Mudder has become the market leading event in an increasingly saturated mud running industry. In 2013, more than three million people participated in a mud run worldwide and the industry accrued total revenues of just over US\$290m, up from US\$15.9M in 2010 (Rodriguez, 2014). There are differences in the distance, intensity, and ethos of leading events such as Spartan Race, Warrior Dash, and Tough Mudder, accentuated by the movement of the former towards the professionalization, standardization, and telebroadcasting of 'obstacle course racing' as a fully fledged sport (in fact there is a whole professionalizing scene to obstacle course racing that is moving at a great pace, but that I do not focus on in this essay). In any case, each mud running course features a range of 'obstacles' that demand wading, crawling, climbing, paddling and otherwise persevering through mud 'trenches,' ponds, tubes, and various other hindrances made more playful and perilous by the eponymous soil. While obstacle course racing and mud running are often used interchangeably, I have come to favor the mud running moniker for its fusion - in name and form - of runner and mud, culture and nature, human and nonhuman, self and other, body and world.

My participation (or in the company parlance 'enlistment') in Tough Mudder was prompted by an email alert early in 2012 announcing its impending debut in Canada. The event peaked my research interests due to its self-described billing as a 'hardcore 10-12 mile obstacle course designed by British Special Forces to test your all around strength,

stamina, mental grit, and camaraderie,' one exhibiting an overtly masculine, militaristic and collaborative ethos. A first viewing of the company website and its promotional video conveyed that the seemingly parodic, surely pain-inducing challenge of completing the run is best undertaken with friends and family, and Ben was the first to agree to train and run with me as part of my study. Four months later the photograph that opens this essay captured the maturation of a great deal of training, travel, and trepidation.

The Tough Mudder course is mostly more prosaic than is conferred by its more spectacular, promotional renderings. Around 25 'obstacles' are interspersed over 12-miles, meaning that much of the time is spent jogging, taking in the scenery, talking to other participants *en route*, and queuing for obstacles that, due to difficulty, design, or both, produce a 'bottle-neck' of runners watching, waiting, recuperating, and encouraging others. These delays affect the rhythm of the run, and help affirm, in concert with the affective efforts of Tough Mudder to this point, that the course is 'not a race but a challenge.' Nonetheless, some of the obstacles, such as the hanging bars and twelve-foot 'Berlin' walls, did demand particular kinds of training and technologies, and Ben and I adapted our preparation accordingly. We observed and sometimes heeded practically-oriented discussions on Tough Mudder's internal 'Mudder Nation' site, as well as blogs and other forums, ranging from whether gloves with sturdy grip are necessary to avoid splinters and counter greasy surfaces to debates as to the utility of moisture-wicking fabrics to externalize sweat and maintain core body temperature given the need to intermittently submerge in water, leap over fire, crawl across ice, and so forth. Tough Mudder's promotional videos and associated media had promised these sorts of weird and wonderful hindrances, and so, in the weeks and months preceding the run, beach

fronts made boggy by the North-Western rain and high tides worked to simulate the marshy consistency of mud. Park trails punctuated by fitness technologies such as pull-up bars and wooden benches, and long, steep stair cases adjoining the University of British Columbia to the West coast peninsula provided us with the chance to intersperse distance running with intermittent, multi-modal exercises, as demanded by the course.

Occasionally wading into the Georgia Strait, a passage between Vancouver Island and the mainland coast, cooled our body temperatures and cleaned our dirt-laden clothes at the end of training sessions. And we would purchase, mix and consume protein shakes in order to recuperate and do it all again in a day or two, making a small ripple in Vancouver's produce economy and its local and global tentacles as a partial consequence of Tough Mudder coming to town.<sup>28</sup>

The day before the run, Ben drove us North to Whistler with an excited entourage of friends and family, as well as an array of food, apparel, and technology for fueling, undertaking and recording our endeavours. Our journey necessitated journeying along the Sea to Sky Highway, a South-North artery that stems from the U.S. border to British Columbia's southern interior via Vancouver and its international airport. Departing from just south of Vancouver's downtown core, we followed the coastline over, through and alongside a variety of bays, trails, parks, bridges, beach fronts, communities, habitats and heritage sites *en route* to the resort municipality of Whistler. Driving along the Sea to Sky

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<sup>28</sup> Atkinson (2007) found in his study of sport supplements in Canada that consuming these products has become a routine practice among those undertaking regular intensive exercise, especially young, White, middle class males. For Ben and I protein supplements became part of our routine due partly to frequent advocations on the various mud running blogs, forums and websites that I visited as runner-researcher in preparing for Tough Mudder, but also a wider cultural trend that meant creatine supplements were widely available and, in a fitness context, mundane. We certainly gave scant attention to their effects beyond their apparent propensity to make us more confident and competent in advance of what was to come, less still to how they contributed to forming who we are, materially and symbolically. But nonetheless our changed and changing bodies - their entwined biophysical and socio-cultural properties and capacities - were part of the complex ecology that mobilizes around and commingles within events such as Tough Mudder.

Highway means touching these various histories, geographies, communities, and habitats, for the route has roots long preceding the colonization of British Columbia, the highway's construction in 1942, and the subsequent and consequential demand for skiing and sports tourism in the region. For example, we passed through Squamish (Skwxwú7mesh), ancestral home to First Nations peoples who also reside in neighbouring areas in Southern British Columbia, and on whose unceded territory our excursion takes place. The Sea to Sky highway winds through a trade pathway trodden centuries before its construction by First Nations groups, and its upgrading to meet the demands of (sports) tourism has been contested by these groups, alongside environmentalists concerned by its encroachment into wildlife habitats in a region teeming with biodiversity (Stoddart, 2012). The highway is also in part a response to geophysical developments and Arctic weather patterns that make Whistler such an appealing sport for ski, sports, and adventure tourism. The point is that Tough Mudder touches historical, geophysical, and socio-political roots far deeper than its own fledgling past once and even before it reaches a particular place. We played our part in making this journey, of course, and I wouldn't want to understate my gratitude to Ben for driving us all on this 250 kilometer round trip. But it is a narrow lens that misses the bountiful entanglements that these events touch on any given weekend.

The next morning we were transported by buses from our accommodation at Whistler Village to the precise location for the event, Whistler Olympic Park in Callaghan Valley. These were raucous journeys brimming with excitement, bravado, and no shortage of trepidation, exhibiting the full range of colours, costumes and other fanciful attire that people had parodically donned for the self-described 'toughest event

on the planet.’ The scene that greeted us upon disembarking the bus resembled a festival as much as an endurance event. The expected rows of portacabins, bag-drop facilities and looming start line signage were complemented by chin-up and keg-throwing competitions, ‘best costume’ parades, tattooing stands, protein bar and beer stalls run by major sponsors, and blaring rock music, making it easy to forget that a half-marathon obstacle course lies in wait. With hindsight, Ben and I took training rather seriously, in large part to assuage the consternation prompted by Tough Mudder’s promotional materials, and also because of my wanting to immerse in the whole experience for research purposes. We were certainly far less orderly in our preparations for a second Tough Mudder just a few months later in Seattle, and this was no doubt due to finding the Whistler event more eclectic and irreverent than we had been lead to believe hitherto.

The run itself begins in earnest when Tough Mudder participants vault a tall wooden fence to enter the start-line enclosure (colloquially, ‘the bullpen;’ see Figure 5). This has the feel of a rite of passage: The wall demarcates participants from spectators and climbing it seems a kind of ritualistic precursor to the course. In the fifteen minutes before each heat of the run is set on its way from the enclosure, the event emcee (on this occasion mud running’s cult hero Sean Corvelle) riffs a variety of motivational, comic, and galvanizing tropes and techniques for those assembled therein. He insists unambiguously that teamwork is not a choice, but a requisite for completing the run: “...that Mudder to your right, that Mudder to your left, that is your teammate, that is your comrade, that is how you’re gonna make it through this course, trust me that is the only way to do it!” We’re also encouraged at this stage to echo Tough Mudder’s motivational pledge: “I understand that Tough Mudder is not a race but a challenge...I put teamwork

and camaraderie before my course time...I help my fellow mudders complete the course.” For the vast majority who arrive at the event with teammates this moment solicits a material, corporeal widening of their preestablished social enclave; huddles, hugs, and high fives with friends and strangers are encouraged by the emcee and foreshadow the near-necessity of intercorporeal contact and collaboration in what is to come. The scene also witnesses the maturation of a concerted effort on Tough Mudder’s part to effect a sense of camaraderie among participants since their initial registration.



*Figure 4 – The Startline Enclosure. Photo by Author.*

Once the run itself was underway, within the first kilometer of this and any given Tough Mudder event (see Figure 3), everyone is caked in soil. More than simply a

transmissive intermediary of human relations, the mud materializes the expressive gestures of the emcee's start-line ritual, the Pledge, and all the mutual efforts towards sociality that have led to this encounter. Exceeding its conventional status as *only* a material aggregation of earth, water and minerals, this viscous substance aids in producing the desired sense of camaraderie among runners through the shared visual and tactile experience of 'being muddy.' The adhesive quality of the soil homogenizes participants, breeds familiarity, weighs us down, and adds to the irreverence of our shared undertaking. Those who may have approached Tough Mudder with great trepidation, and those who carried with them a competitive, individually-oriented approach over from other endurance events, and indeed those of all prior persuasions, each encounter a substance which makes an impression, leaves its mark, and affects their experience. The neologism 'Mudder' itself implies - inadvertently or not - that participants are no longer only runners, but hybrid mud-runners, bound together in their athletic endeavours by an adhesive that is in equal force social and environmental, to the point where this distinction no longer holds. The material weight of mud, its adhesive capacity to form socio-natural bonds among diverse beings, human and otherwise, establishes it as a constitutive actor in Tough Mudder's characteristic ethos of togetherness.



*Figure 5 – The ‘Kiss of Mud’ Obstacle. Photo by Author.*

This sticky sociality is sustained and oftentimes strengthened through our ensuing encounters with hanging bars, soiled tunnels, icy receptacles, and other obstacles during the course, at the near-culmination of which we arrive, weary and mud-laden, at ‘Everest.’ As described in my epigraph, due to its height, shape, slippery surface, and precarious location near the end of the run, those who have already ascended Everest are often needed to haul others to its summit through any possible means. Because runners

tend to need more than one attempt to reach the top, the lineup swells with every slide back down towards those awaiting their turns. Apprehension and fatigue are palpable, hence my ashen-faced glance towards the camera in Figure 1, but there is also no shortage of encouragement and (sometimes ironic) cheering from the assembled crowd.

Conventionally conceived, participants are the active subjects in this scene, as well as volunteers, effervescent spectators, and course designers and constructors. The obstacle itself is a static object to overcome. Yet, as depicted in Figure 4, humans also act as objects under these circumstances, as ‘levers’ pulling each other up, and ‘ladders’ when participants lie vertically against the surface to form a mountable structure for others to utilize.



*Figure 6 - Tough Mudder's 'Everest' in Action. Photo by Author.*

And this reversal of conventional subject-object relations works both ways. Contributing

to these lively scenes are the materials that compose and cover Everest that each and together display “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett, 2010, 6). Consider the conglomeration of mud, water, and plywood that forms the material surface of the Everest quarter-pipe. The mud alone is an organic substance for giving life, made up of various minerals, gases and water; an abundantly fertile organism in its own right. A similar, perhaps even more self-evident argument can be made for the vitality of water, sweat included, both of which are mixed with lubricants such as soap and vegetable oil by volunteers so as the exterior remains perilous for the event’s duration. And the fiber reinforced plywood is itself a concoction of natural, cultural, and technological heritage, chosen for its capacity to effect a smooth, glossy and hazardous surface. Mud, sodden with liquids, splattered against Everest’s plywood exterior, meets with the velocity and materiality of human participants, resulting in slipping and sliding *en masse* and a host of creative, collaborative efforts to construct more amenable conditions in their pursuit.

These collaborative efforts, moreover, are made possible not simply by the burly bodies assembled at Everest but by the straining muscles, ligaments, tendons, proteins, and more besides, that are put to work by the infrastructure of the obstacle and the course. Proteins, for example, strive within themselves to restore and enhance muscle fibres through their constitutive physico-chemical properties, carrying with them various cultural processes and material capacities. In Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) language, proteins might be thought of as *territorializing* in and through Tough Mudder assemblages, reaching into bodies upon consumption as immanent enfoldings of meaning and materiality - amino acids and health discourses, masculinity and creatine (see

Atkinson, 2007) – and manifesting their effects as a seemingly endless stream of participants leap and lunge, grope and grab, laugh and wince, crash and fall, with all manner of contortions befalling those caught and held mid-manoeuvre at the upper edge of the quarter-pipe.

There are of course no guarantees. Some people display the extent of their training habits by pulling themselves atop the quarter-pipe in spite of the sticky exterior and without the need for the outstretched hands of others; some seem mostly interested in posing for photos and video footage and so play to the nearby cameras in outlandish and now filthy attire; others simply walk around Everest to resume the run, probably exhausted and perhaps distracted by the impending finish line, and beer tent, now visible in the distance.

### ***Exteriorizing Competency ↔ Reincorporating Camaraderie***

The camaraderie on show at Tough Mudder's Everest obstacle is not simply a spontaneous display of togetherness or a benevolent human nature, nor solely a feat of human strength and perseverance. It is, as I have sought to glimpse in this vignette, the commingling and the consequence of material-discursive enactments mobilized towards sociality. Each of those who reach the top of Everest and continue through to the end of the Tough Mudder course incarnate an entanglement of materials, affects, and competencies that fold into this encounter, this moment of triumph. 'We' manifest the strength gained from metabolizing proteins, carbohydrates, and other food stuff as we make our way through an obstacle course; 'we' come to embody the entwined historical, socio-technical, and geophysical developments that make reaching and hosting an event

such as Tough Mudder possible; ‘we’ enfold and emit affects, adorn sports apparel, and are photographed, caked in soil, at the victorious end of a grueling course. But ‘we’ only do this insofar as human subjects are afforded centre stage in the analysis. For the subject is always a spokesperson for an association of actors (cf. Mialet, 2012), and once placed under study, all actors are shown to materialize – to become active – as an entangled enactment of complex collaborations.

This, at least, is the contention borne from the reconfiguring of my mud running experiences and recollections with and through actor-network theory (ANT): A sensibility to research that insists on treating taken-for-granted ontological categories (especially those gathered under the rarefied groupings of nature, society, and technology) as the relational effects of material-discursive processes (Law, 2004). ANT posits that all actors – whatever their designation as human or nonhuman, biological or environmental, subjects or objects, and so forth - are mobilized within and through networks that, in turn, help to constitute and give form to their singularity. And, crucially, this is as true for microbes, iPods, nation-states, and mud, as it is for chief executives, scientists, politicians, and runners. The ANT moniker is a little misleading insofar as a network “does not designate a thing out there that would have roughly the shape of interconnected points, much like a telephone, a freeway, or a sewage ‘network.’ It is nothing more than *an indicator of the quality of a text* about the topics at hand. It qualifies its objectivity, that is, the ability of each actor to *make* other actors *do* unexpected things” (Latour, 2005, 129, original emphasis).<sup>29</sup> A network is a tool and a

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<sup>29</sup> At a 1997 workshop at Keele University entitled ‘ANT and After,’ Latour famously ‘recalled’ actor-network theory, claiming that “[t]here are four things that do not work with actor-network theory; the word actor, the word network, the word theory and the hyphen! Four nails in the coffin.” The awkward, misleading and at times ill-fitting terminology was abandoned by Latour and others for several years

kind of criteria for tracing connections between actors of whatever kind or vintage. The connections they draw are never immutable structures, more like dynamic and fragile webs that give form to everyday life, but some sustain and are sustained in stronger alliances than others. A horizontal or ‘flattened’ ontology, democratic in its scope, precedes and informs the ethnographic labor of tracing who and what is active, and to what consequence. This means insisting on the radical distribution of agency as the effect of collaborations, as opposed to being set forth from human intentions: Every-thing is active in cultural-natural-technological collectives, and any-thing present is therefore potentially agentic.

Tough Mudder, somewhat predictably, puts forward a different view on how camaraderie is mobilized at Everest, throughout the course, and indeed its whole event. An interview with head course designer Eli Hutchinson in *Men’s Fitness* magazine suggests that “obstacles are dreamed up on a white board inside a Brooklyn conference room, where course designer Eli Hutchison leads brainstorm, which he turns into sketches, which turn into full builds, which turn into the selfies and stories spread by more than a million finishers since the race started in 2010” (Fox, 2014). Tough Mudder does indeed invest greatly in course designers and constructors, as well as volunteers to help manage the course infrastructure during an event. And likewise the Tough Mudder brand does the work of reaching into the lives and social relations of participants through the spectacular renderings and photo opportunities that its course and promotional materials elicit (cf. Aronczyk and Powers, 2010).

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thereafter. In his 2005 introduction to ANT, Latour quips that he returned to and retained that same terminology partly on account of the acronym ANT being “perfectly fit for a blind, myopic, workaholic, trail-sniffing, and collective traveler” (9). It nevertheless remains the case that ANT, at least for Latour, is less a theory, or a method, or a designator of networks in common-sense terms, and more a travel guide or sensibility for places unknown.

Nevertheless, this ‘dreaming up’ of obstacles (including quarter pipes) not only belies the genealogy of obstacle courses as technologies that have acted on bodies and minds since long before Tough Mudder’s 2010 founding, but also foregrounds the rational, creative, and efficacious capacities of a designer whose mental aptitude sets all this sociality in motion. This perspective chimes with the modern thesis of human distinctiveness from and sovereignty over a world of tractable ‘nonhuman’ things, through which Tough Mudder becomes the sole consequence of human design in which organizers and participants recruit and manipulate the materials at their disposal towards preferred economic, cultural, physical, or social ends. This conceitful view of agency as a human preserve not only denies the ‘more-than-human’ (Whatmore, 2006) world its vitality but enacts a Cartesian fallacy in suggesting that the act of rational thought is what constitutes meaningful, agentic existence. It thereby underplays or misses entirely the capacities of things, such as the adhesive consistency of mud, to become affective components in the mobilization of the social.

And yet, Tough Mudder obstacles appear to act more or less in accordance with the aims of Tough Mudder and its designers, as hours spent watching the scenes at Everest unfold will attest. What’s more, participants tend to recognize and embrace its ethos of camaraderie. So how to explain its predictability; how it is that the course and the event work? In Latour’s (1988; 2005) terms, the Everest obstacle appears as an *intermediary* of human intentions and relations, doing the will of Tough Mudder and its participants in producing dramas, successes, and tribulations *en route* to the completion of the course. An intermediary is an actor through which action seems to pass consistently, as expected, and without controversy. But once placed under study, intermediaries almost always

show themselves to be made durable by *mediators*: Other actors that exercise their proclivities to create, sustain, or perhaps compromise particular effects. We might expect intermediaries to populate the world in abundance as so much of social life appears predictable and orderly. But Latour (2005) holds instead that there exist endless number of mediators in every social configuration whose outputs are not predicated entirely on their inputs, and who therefore make a difference by *changing or making durable* the behaviors and responses of other actors. And “[w]hen those [mediators] are transformed into faithful intermediaries,” such as bridges, nationalisms, smart phones, discourses on health, or obstacle courses, “it is not the rule, but a rare exception that has to be accounted for by some extra work - usually by the mobilization of even more mediators!” (40).

Everest, then, becomes an intermediary due to an extended distribution of actors exceeding their common-sensical status as ‘mere’ objects and manifesting “traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience” (Bennett, 2010, xvi). And Everest’s efficacy can be extended to include not only runners, volunteers, constructors, and designers, but also outdoor, ad hoc, and portable fitness equipment such as chin up bars, stair cases and cones, fears, motivations, and expectations, proteins, gloves and apparel, blogs, forums, and other forms of media, trails, trees, benches, straits, music, cameras, elements, and countless other actors, each of which play leading and supporting roles in constituting the singularity of individual athletic efforts *and* forming the emergent sociality in which those efforts unfold and are made possible. The role of a designer is of course important, but the outcome, as with the practice of mud running and its attendant camaraderie, is always a shared endeavour.

### ***Mud<>Runner Entanglements***

ANT's 'generalized symmetry' that apprehends objects as active and not passive in socio-natural configurations also means that, even when heavily mediated to produce particular outcomes (such as 'camaraderie'), objects might not behave as expected. Let's take mud as our example, the elemental co-star in Tough Mudder and constant companion in this essay so far. The modern thesis on nature, and mud is no exception here, is one of domination and control. Even if we might contest this in pointing out the ubiquitous modalities of mud in the ecological fabric of different cultures and societies, mud is 'purified' (Latour, 1993) in Tough Mudder as something ruggedly natural, in order to foster not only a shared social experience of which mud becomes a part, but the characteristic 'toughness' and associated virility synonymous with its brand identity. In a sense, then, Tough Mudder seems to engage successfully in the commodification of nature by bringing the mud at Whistler into line with its brand identity, course interface, and consumer experience (there is much evidence that cultural and economic capital can be derived from purifying mud and/as nature, and trading on its sticky capacities and semantic significance; see Stoddart, 2012). But, as described earlier, we might also recognize mud as playing an active part in fostering the company's brand identity through exercising its proclivities, that is, by materializing the desired sense of camaraderie among human participants through its role as an evocative and adhesive substance. In Latour's (1993) well-traveled thesis on modernity, *We Have Never Been Modern*; that is, we have never been separate from nature. But the effort to purify mud as a primordial substance does work to proliferate its socio-natural hybridity in mud running events, as well as playing a part in cultivating a thriving mud running culture and

industry. Mud is not autonomous in mud running, just as Tough Mudder cannot conjure its distinct brand of ‘toughness’ without it; its meaning and materiality are irrevocably entangled and continually co-constituted in and through the practice.

What’s more, if mud is an actor in its own right, then it will not always follow a human script; it can always carry a twist and alter proceedings, for better and worse. In May 2014, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warned that Tough Mudder participants "might be exposed to fecally contaminated water or slurry, [and] that potentially serious diarrheal disease can result if ingested, even inadvertently" (Hamblin, 2014). This followed a Tough Mudder event in Nevada, 2012, after which 22 cases of *Campylobacter coli* infection were confirmed by a Nellis public health investigation. The CDC reported that this “case-control study using data provided by patients and healthy persons who also had participated in the race showed a statistically significant association between inadvertent swallowing of muddy surface water during the race and *Campylobacter* infection” (CDC, 2014). Risk, and the opportunity to exhibit risk, are part of the camaraderie in Tough Mudder, and the satirized yet legally binding signing of ‘death waivers’ before the run is generally treated as a further indicator of the event’s ludic and ludicrous appeal. But on occasion, unexpected and grim incidents serve as a reminder that mud is not ‘just’ a commodity in slick and seamless circulations of capital, or a ‘just’ an intermediary for preordained social relations. Mud is not at the whim of human mastery, and although none of the instances of campylobacter transmission proved fatal, the possibility of dysentery syndrome can’t be good for business. Put another way, and for all its ills, Tough Mudder is not bestowed with the supreme efficacy to convey the desired logic of capital; there is surely “always something

that flows or flees, that escapes ... the overcoding machine” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 216, 226; see also Bennett, 2001).

In addition to inciting media coverage that even Tough Mudder’s risk and pain-oriented brand identity struggled to favorably appropriate, these incidents and reports are fissures in the hubris of human exceptionalism that render conspicuous, and palpable, the agentic capacities of mud. Firstly, they affirm that mud, like all matter, does not need to first be commodified or invested with meanings in order to impress upon social life. It is always already, in Barad’s (2003) Deleuzian terms, an immanent enfolding of meaning and materiality that colludes in its own economy, history, and cultural politics. Secondly, they are a cautionary and darkly comic reminder that mud, earth, and land, are shared with other animals, as well as bearing deep-rooted histories that far breach the modern ‘purified’ storytelling of nature and humanity. Upon arrival at Whistler Olympic Park, we encountered mud in the form of land and earth that has an immanent history, ongoing and complex, that is enacted within it. We found ourselves in the Madely Creek basin in Callaghan Valley (or Whistler Olympic Park since Vancouver’s hosting of the 2010 Winter Games). The valley itself formed through many thousands of years of avalanche formation, seismic activity, and glacial action, all of which was later attested for at the midway point of the Tough Mudder course as we participants slid feet-first into a freezing glacier-fed lake in the lower reaches of the basin. We also found ourselves on the unceded territory of the Squamish and Lil’wat First Nations, on land which has been host to sacred streams, cedar forests, burial sites and hunting grounds for centuries. It is also a region teeming with biodiversity. It does not necessitate critique to recognize this soil as contested or contingent; it bears that historicity, carries and colludes in it, and

forms a sociality in which Tough Mudder participants ephemerally share. And Whistler of course is not unique in this regard: Each mud running event is situated in a particular locale, and therefore made possible and compromised by the commingling of, for instance, civic and environmental policies, land disputes, digital communications and industrial transport systems, political struggles, habitat conservation, untold earth histories, and more besides. The ongoing historicity of mud at Callaghan Valley will bear the imprinted memory of Tough Mudder for years to come, but not simply as the passive victim of athletes and organizers, with conquering or collaborative mentalities.

Thirdly, reports of dysentery also affirm that the human body does not hold strictly demarcated boundaries that raise it above or apart from its natural heritage, or from those premodern Others who are deemed to lack behind. Rather, the composition of the body is itself an entangled ecology of lively substances of the same kind that it encounters constantly (water, fungi, bacteria, and so forth). It is for this reason that, for Haraway (2008), “entities with fully secured boundaries called possessive individuals (imagined as human or animal) are the wrong units for considering what is going on” (70) in socio-natural-technical encounters. The claim is not that human bodies are simply homogenous with nature and other animals, but that it is rarely prudent to strictly demarcate people, animals, elements or objects on the basis of their ostensibly human or nonhuman, natural or artifactual heritage. Mud and runners, as elemental ‘objects’ and embodied ‘subjects,’ exist in a constant recursive loop that is so mundane as to escape attention until, as in this instance, some-thing exercises a proclivity – not necessarily a conscious will but a striving or tendency (cf. Bennett, 2010) - that produces an unpredictable, perhaps unwanted reaction. Through these biophysical and socio-cultural

exchanges, mud – and mud running - can be seen as materially and symbolically contributes to forming who ‘we’ are.

### ***Ontological Politics***

What is at stake in extending the horizons of the social to incorporate a wider cast of actors in studies of sport and physical culture? Or, to paraphrase, what are the politics of an ANT reassembly? There are certainly valid questions and concerns about the politics of Tough Mudder, where the commingling of mud and runner produces, and is produced through, a corporate, masculine event based around a technology most readily associated with military training. As with any physical cultural practice, the cultural and identity politics of these and other mud running events reach across historical and intersectional axes of class, race, and gender, and otherwise act as sites for the contestation and reproduction of particular meanings, ideas, values, identities, and norms. But politics is also a matter of apprehending who and what counts as an active subject in a given social configuration, and I have sought to develop an account that adheres to and advocates for an ontological politics: That is, an account that sets out to apprehend who and what counts, and how their conglomerations constitute, sustain, and compromise mundane and extraordinary (physical cultural) practices.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake – and at odds with the principles of ANT - to invoke the camaraderie in Tough Mudder as a foundational, prediscursive materiality. This would risk echoing the kind of mechanistic materialism so often inferred from *The German Ideology*, in which Marx and Engels (1970) declare that “[i]n direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to

heaven;” that is, from real things ‘on the ground’ and their material social relations towards a transhistorical view from above. In this often exaggerated inversion of idealism, meaning plays second fiddle to the primacy of matter; metaphysics arises from the certainty of substance; and camaraderie might be thought of as deriving from a material base.<sup>30</sup> But this is exactly the kind of dualistic thought, polarizing meaning and materiality, culture and nature, that ANT and ‘new’ materialist philosophies and research practices are intended to eschew. What I have sought to show in discussing Everest as a composition of objects, and in affording mud special attention, is that these materialities are entangled with their symbolic significance. Mud in *Tough Mudder*, as we have seen, is capable of stoking the bonds of friendship and kindling new affinities between people and places, of causing illnesses and injuries, of colluding in brand identities, conjuring primordial imaginaries that exclude and romanticize its own rich and diverse ancestry, of reproducing identity politics, and of carrying histories, geophysical and socio-political, that might otherwise not register in a humanistic order of things. The question should not be which came first, meaning or matter, as this futile inquiry only serves to reproduce the Great Divide (Latour, 1993) of social constructivist versus natural determinist perspectives which continues to beset fields such as kinesiology (Andrews, 2008; Vertinsky, 2009). Instead, following Haraway (2008), it seems more prudent to ask of and pursue entanglements, in and through which “diverse bodies and meanings coshape

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<sup>30</sup> A wealth of theories, including materialist philosophies, have sought to get away from a widely (often crudely) perceived reductionism in Marx and Engels’ materialist conception of history. But Marx’s doctoral dissertation was on Epicurus, with whom he came to *reject* precisely the kind of mechanistic materialism that is often held to inhibit his own method. Something remained of Epicurean metaphysics in Marx’s analysis of commodities, even if he did eventually come to see matter as something from which humans extracted to create artifacts for subsistence, pleasure, and profit. This ‘something’ is pursued in [by] Bennett’s (2001) in what would later become her vitalist materialist philosophy (2001, 2010), and its presence in Marx exemplifies the rhymes and recuperations – rather than teleological progress - in materialist philosophy.

one another” (4).

### ***Reflections on ‘Overcoming-with’ Obstacles***

In the ‘postanthropocentric’ spirit of those materialist philosophies that espouse the premise of object agency, and in response to the resiliency of human exceptionalism and modern dualisms (cf. Plumwood, 1993), the story of mud running told in this essay has sought to recast the conventional hero figures, superhuman athletes, to afford due attention to the too-often unsung ensemble of intra- and supra-human materialities with which these athletes share an ecology. There are no shortage of angles for critiquing Tough Mudder on account of its cultural and identity politics, and the figure of the triumphant mud runner is often marked by many layers of privilege that are, to critically trained social scientists, glaring invitations for deconstruction. But what I have attempted in this essay is a *reconstruction* of the practice as a profoundly shared endeavour, one in which a whole host of actors, human and otherwise, make dramatic and subtle contributions. Perhaps the myth of ascendent and unencumbered singularity and human social exclusivity can be ruptured with an affirmative reassembly at least as well as through a destructive disassembly of its militaristic, masculine, and at once troublesome and collaborative ethos. These are just as much a part of the camaraderie for which Tough Mudder is renowned, but they are recast through recourse to objects with which our (physical cultural) endeavours are profoundly shared, and even shaped by.

Some might feel that ‘reassembling the social’ in this way entails a disenchanting process of making visible things that constitute otherwise wondrous individual feats, such as technological advancements, scientific discoveries, creative design, or athletic

achievements. Such tasks are better left to phenomenologists to theorize ‘from the body’ and its sensory perception of the world, or to the evocative prose of poets, or not subject to analysis at all. But it could equally be seen as profoundly enchanting to, in Latour’s (1988) words, see the world set free and able to act despite – or at the very least alongside - the fanciful conceit of human exceptionalism (see also Bennett, 2001). By the same logic, attempts to radically exteriorize the endeavours of mud runners might be seen as an effort to undermine their achievements or somehow expose their lack of understanding of the ‘bigger picture’ lying ‘behind’ their endeavours. The notion of ‘overcoming’ is, after all, complex and meaningful in endurance sports, ranging from altruistic running to personal recovery from trauma, and in this essay matters of subjectivity have gotten short shrift in order to emphasize the extended distribution of the social. But it is my hope that the opposite is true in the account and reflections given in this essay. Rather, it is through exteriorizing competency – that is, through tracing material-discursive enactments that constitute both sociality and individuality – that the conditions that materialize and fold into athletic triumphs or failures can be made both *visible and accountable*. There is strength in dependency, in fostering alliances, as well as the potentially ethical recognition of precarity. If this remains an ‘overcoming’ of sorts, then it is an ‘overcoming-with’ one’s worldly surroundings, even in practices such as Tough Mudder that appear to harbour a conquering ethos, masculine and militaristic character, and capitalist imperative. As Latour (2005) might put it, striving for social justice through foreclosing critique might not always do justice to ‘the social’ in its fullest sense.

## 4. Interlude: Endurance, Ideology, and (Beyond) the In/authenticity of Suffering

What I have been pursuing is a relational understanding of overcoming removed from its common understanding as an expression of human will-power and singular endeavour; an idea of agency in which subjectivity does not precede action, but is enfolded into it. Agency, when understood as part of a liberal humanist ontology, is something an individual holds and is responsible for wielding. Such understandings of human freedom are often a necessary recourse to uphold liberal ideals of justice and community. Yet, as Judith Butler (2004) notes in her meditations on *Precarious Life*, this notion of agency “does not do justice to passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, irreversibly, if not fatally” (24-25). Whereas my chapters to this point have highlighted how agency – given form in mud running as an heroic mode of overcoming obstacles – is entangled with the contingency of histories and the vitality of substances, I want to turn now to matters of affect: not only to ‘passion and grief and rage,’ but to pain, pleasure, nostalgia, mimesis, inspiration, and optimism. And as we will see, this is not a turn away from matters already considered: affects can attach to all sorts of phenomena, including temporalities, objects, and even other affects (Sedgwick, 2003).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> We can for instance be sad about anger, fearful of hope, and as is most apposite to (studies of) endurance sports, take pleasure in pain.

### *Pain, Authenticity, and the Problem of Boundaries*

The popularity of endurance as sport promises to inform discussions about what it means to *pursue* suffering, just as they garner praise and incredulity for individual feats of perseverance. Endurance, after all, means to struggle resiliently under adverse conditions, and one's relation to those conditions is often a point of contention and controversy. Seeking out pain for sport in a world where hardship is everywhere and ongoing attracts critics, and hedonism is a common accusation made of sporting activities defined variously as 'extreme,' 'alternative' or some related moniker (cf. Wheaton, 2004, 2010). Indeed the notion that sports are trivial, and not serious enough subject matter for consideration in other institutions such as politics and (higher) education, has been the subject of sustained objection over several decades of research in sport studies. As historian Mary-Louise Adams (2012) put it, "[d]oes the valorization of pain/suffering/endurance in sport make it harder to see the injustice in the need to endure in other spheres?" The concern lies with the trivialization of the former potentially brought about by its expression through the latter. It is the decision to endure, to make sport of endurance, on which this vexing debate pivots.

In commentary on mud running, a practice often described as a form of 'extreme'<sup>32</sup> endurance, the in/authenticity of suffering is unsurprisingly a source of contention. Mud running events are held up as cathedrals of solicited pain – “the rise of the sufferfests” as one documentary maker (Scott Keneally) has dubbed their ascendant

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<sup>32</sup> The scare quotes here – as throughout this dissertation - allude to a point made by those who warn against using the 'extreme' moniker, such as Belinda Wheaton (2004). It's a word that mostly performs the work of those who seek to extract cultural and economic capital from the popularity of snowboarding, and other such as activities, perhaps best exemplified by ESPN's X-Games. Conceptually, it is a mostly empty signifier, save for some arguments made by Roger Stahl that I drew on in chapter one, and I prefer the broader designation of physical culture to designate mud running. The events I have focussed on are nonetheless self-styled as 'extreme.'

popularity. And that rise has prompted concerns about the popularity of obstacle courses as sensational sport. Here is Stuart Heritage, for example, writing in the Guardian's

Running Blog about Tough Mudder in an irreverent, contemptuous tone. In his words:

Tough Mudder is Disneyland. It's Tesco. It's a huge, slick, fiercely marketed moneymaking machine; a travelling funfair that sweeps around the country indulging tens of thousands of would-be soldier fantasies for tens of thousands of cushy-jobbed office workers who can't be fuffed with doing an Iron Man. (Guardian, 2013).

Heritage asserts that mud runs are trivial and largely inconsequential events that provide phantom thrills as compensation to those who lack more substantive excitement in their lives. They are at best playful, which in this context is to say that they are not serious.

Thus, the 'inauthenticity' of mud running (and any pain felt in that site) is implied through comparison with Iron Man triathlons, and service in the armed forces: Ostensibly more 'noble' pursuits. Tough Mudder is also assimilated with Disneyland and Tesco in what appears as a further effort to undermine its credibility as a meaningful (physical) cultural practice by underscoring its commercial imperative.

In a similar example drawn from a scholarly source, Lamb and Hillman (2014) have recently explained the appeal of Tough Mudder through its "capacity to serve as a functional site that produces rhetorical proof of one's 'fitness' to survive and succeed within the milieu of corporate capitalism" (3). The authors' conviction is that these events are victories for capitalist orthodoxy because, in experiencing Tough Mudder as a "metaphor for capitalism and organizational culture themselves, participants may mistakenly believe that they are autonomous from social structures that, in fact, hinder

the full exercise of their agency” (16). Thus these events “may perpetuate a kind of false consciousness among those who feel that success in sports translates into professional empowerment in general” (16). Traversing a Tough Mudder course thereby becomes a performative metaphor that confers and naturalizes capitalism’s ostensibly moral reward system; or rather an allegory for how Tough Mudder’s mainly White, middle class demographic would like to believe that system works while the real trick goes on elsewhere.

This is in essence an ideological critique: One that asks whether glorifying the pursuit of pain in Tough Mudder and kindred events distorts and detracts from broader struggles. Indeed, it’s an old take on an *en vogue* practice, as ideological critiques have been made of sport by sociologists and others in the social sciences since (at least) the late 1960s.<sup>33</sup> One problem with them is not so much the diagnosis as its implication. That is to say, in agreeing that the suffering in endurance sports is less noble, less worthy or serious than that undergone by those who struggle with hardships outside of sporting contests, we are building a taxonomy of suffering that makes an object of struggle, and is subject to the views of those who are positioned to adjudicate what constitutes ‘worthy’ pain. Utilitarian arguments about the value of life and the cost of suffering only differ in degree, not in kind. Another problem, to which we will return shortly, is that these interpretations enact boundaries between inauthentic pain ‘in here’ and real, meaningful suffering ‘over there.’

Contrast this ideological perspective with that put forward by Scott Keneally, author of an expose on the controversial founding of Tough Mudder featured in *Outside Magazine* in 2012. While his piece somewhat corroborates the angle outlined above,

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<sup>33</sup> Jean-Marie Brohm’s *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time* (1978), is a classic of this genre.

insofar as Tough Mudder's commercial success is framed as a cut-throat capitalist heist at the expense of the UK's longer standing (and apparently less commercially motivated) Tough Guy mud run, the similarities end there. Keneally is the director of the documentary mentioned earlier (full title: Rise of the Sufferfests: Mud, Masochism, and Mr. Mouse), and on the documentary's Facebook page he offers the following on what motivates people to partake in mud running:

There are many interesting possibilities: narcissism, loneliness, media saturation, outsourcing of manual labor, and so on. To help drill down to the root of it all, I'm assembling a dream team of experts, athletes, insiders and everyday people. And while I certainly don't presume this journey will lead to a single answer, I believe the OCR phenomenon holds a mirror to life in the digital era...and that this discourse is important. (Keneally, 2014).

Keneally is suggesting that while Tough Mudder is a commercially motivated enterprise with a controversial origins story, mud running events more generally might be means for *recovering* authenticity in a (Western) world of self-interest, loneliness, deindustrialization, and so forth.

The distinction is subtle, but important. Heritage invokes Tough Mudder as a circus of commerce and hedonistic fantasies; Lamb and Hillman as a complicit cog in the machinations of capital. Intentionally or not, they each enact an elitist cultural critique synonymous with the famed Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (the 'Frankfurt School'), in which popular (physical) culture, in commodified form, serves as a distraction or diversion from *separate* and more serious matters. In keeping with the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, for instance, cultural forms such as Tough

Mudder equate to a stupefying stream of hedonistic pleasure; and “pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972, 144). The *New York Times* piece cited above chimes in with a similar appraisal when Stein, its author, concludes by recalling the scenes at the start line of a Tough Mudder event in New Jersey: “As the last note of the ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ sounded, a monster truck roared to life and the Tough Mudders chased after it, like a herd of lemmings clad in Under Armour.” Mass society fears of the mindless majority, high on a paradoxical blend of patriotism and hedonism, clad in their sports apparel, and senselessly following that symbol of American capitalist militancy and (auto-)mobility, the monster truck (cf. Newman and Giardina, 2011), are channeled in this somewhat flippant assessment.

Keneally, meanwhile, frames modern life as itself beset by social, psychological and political-economic ills, and wonders if mud running might be the latest in a long list of (physical) cultural practices to help participants stem the tide of alienation. We find this perspective when once again visiting David Le Breton’s anthropology of ‘extreme’ and endurance sports, in which he notes that “many amateur sportsmen [sic] in the West today have started undertaking long and intensive ordeals where their capacity to resist increasing personal suffering is all-important” (1). In endurance sports, he claims, “there is no struggle against a third party, only a commitment to reinforcing personal will-power and overcoming suffering by going right to the limit of a personally imposed demand” (ibid). “The search,” he continues, “is for personal transfiguration with nature caused by exhaustion or disorientation of the senses, a sudden and incredibly strong feeling of being at one with the world, an ecstasy that then forms such a strong memory that the player

does everything possible to relive it” (Le Breton, 2000, 10). But this is not only a ‘personally imposed demand.’ Le Breton suggests that endurance athletes are responding to the uncertainty and ephemerality of modern life, of “a society where reference points are both countless and contradictory and where values are in crisis” (1).

Michael Atkinson (2007) has offered a similar analysis of triathlon as a “pain community,” contending that:

the recent expansion of the triathlon community may be read as a cultural signifier of a commonly experienced physical malaise and social disconnection within factions of the established Canadian middle class. Triathlon is configured by them as a context where meaningful and enduring social connections between people are fostered, and where emotions not typically experienced in everyday may be cathartically released through endurance sport rituals. (2007, 166)

Atkinson’s ethnography presents triathlons as an expression of disenchantment – of malaise and disconnection – with modern life. They enable the pursuit of feeling and meaning in Western societies that are said to have progressively constrained emotional expressions and comportments (Elias, 1978; Elias and Dunning, 1986).<sup>34</sup> Thus triathlons are distinguished from most other kinds of sporting activity, where pain is usually accepted, managed, and inflicted by participants, or celebrated as a signifier of strength

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<sup>34</sup> Taking this perspective to its stark and severe ends, Frederich Nietzsche wrote the following in his posthumously published notes, *The Will to Power*:

To those human beings who are of any concern to me I wish suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities-I wish that they should not remain unfamiliar with profound self-contempt, the torture of self-mistrust, the wretchedness of the vanquished: I have no pity for them, because I wish them the only thing that can prove today whether one is worth anything or not-that one endures. (Nietzsche, 1968, 481).

In a remark that would not read out of place in Joe De Sena’s autobiography discussed in chapter one, Nietzsche insists that he would (benevolently?) deny us not only satisfaction but the basic guarantors of comfort, security and well-being, for without great suffering – without enduring – life is but a void where meaning might have been.

and resolve (see also Young, 2007). Triathletes, on the contrary, “often derive intense social and emotional stimulation through ‘suffering’ athletically” (Atkinson, 2007, 165). They accrue and exhibit social capital on the basis of their shared penchants for pain. The pursuit of suffering in embodied practices such as triathlon is a response to disenchantment with their wider world; not an unwanted outcome of endurance sports, but their *raison d’etre*.

Mud running and other endurance events seem to always emerge as either hedonistic sites of solicited suffering that obscure, underplay and even exacerbate hardships sustained somewhere else, or practices through which pain becomes intensely meaningful *precisely because* the ‘outside world’ has become devoid of meaning.<sup>35</sup> Both are preoccupied with the notion that sport is *a part of a whole*; a kind of ‘subcultural’ activity and community within a wider ‘parent’ culture. Their divergence rests on whether the (subcultural) event, or the world in which it is cultivated, is the true villain of the piece.<sup>36</sup> In other words, is it mud runs themselves that are inauthentic, or do they offer respite from the disenchanting circumstances that form the ‘wider social context?’

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<sup>35</sup> What is interesting and I think important to note is that, as explored in chapter two, these perspectives have their roots in nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe. Weberian tales of disenchantment, Durkheimian conceptions of urban *anomie*, and Marxian logics of exploitation and alienation, continue to inform many understandings of twenty-first century (physical) cultural practices in media and scholarly sources. These perspectives arise from times and places that were undergoing incredible ecological upheaval as many people made the move from farms to factories; the task of the age was to grasp the rhythm and structure of life and labour as they were reorganizing, becoming disorganized and through delocalized systems and structures. The classical theorists of sociology – and relevant also here is Freud – were responding to this transition, its entwined historical uniqueness, psychic strain and political-economic fallout.

<sup>36</sup> This is well established as one of the major questions and conceptual problems in studying any subculture – where it stops and the culture at large begins. See Atkinson and Young, 2007.

### *Affect and (Sub)Culture*

Amid competing accounts of whether suffering in endurance sports is authentic or trivial, subversive or cathartic, in here or over there, we must remember that suffering is *a feeling*, a sensation that acts on and across bodies. Elaine Scarry (1984) described pain as ineffable, as “shattering language” (5). Not only our pain, but that of others escapes our vernacular: “Pains occurring in other people’s bodies flicker before the mind, then disappear” (4). Scarry goes further in stating that while pain is ineffable, and empathy for pain fleeting, it is also inescapable for its subject, and so in a sense pain gives to body and world a semblance of embeddedness and certainty: the grounds for a *shared experience* that exceeds language but not communication. This is not to say that language cannot reveal something about pain. Drawing from Arthur Franks’s *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995), Andrew Sparkes and Brett Smith (2004) have assembled compelling, often distressing narrative accounts of athletes who have suffered spinal cord injuries, each of which serve as powerful examples to the contrary. Pain, nonetheless, cannot be confined to words, anymore than it could be diagnosed as an exclusively bio-medical, physiological phenomena. Pain exceeds, somehow.

For some fifteen or twenty years there has been a sustained (re)engagement with theories of affect to try and apprehend this ‘somehow’ in feelings like pain, as well as pleasure, hope, anger, depression, happiness, optimism and shame. I’ll have more to say about affect and theories of affect in the chapter to follow, but here I want to selectively consider some of the ways that affect theory addresses the limits of the keystone perspectives on suffering in endurance sports discussed above, and of course, in doing so brings horizons and challenges of its own. There are different schools of affect theory,

and at least as many definitions of affect, and so brevity will leave a number of trajectories uncharted for now.

Those who have ‘turned’ to affect do so as part of a broader trend in social theory away from atomistic understandings of space and time. “Space,” according to Nigel Thrift’s (2004) essay on *Intensities of Feeling*, “is no longer seen as a nested hierarchy moving from ‘global’ to ‘local’. This absurd scale-dependent notion is replaced by the notion that what counts is connectivity” (59). Connectivity is perfectly non-descript here as a concept, having nothing to say about the character of space except that it is *not* tiered or unitary. Problems arise when we trace interactions between prefigured ‘realms,’ conceived in advance in atomistic terms. The concept of subculture, as an example that continues to have a significant influence in studies of sport, drew from the prevailing understandings of the atom and its subatomic component to inform an analysis of culture which would “discover and isolate increasingly smaller units of its subject matter” before putting “some of these blocks back together again in an integrated pattern” (Gordon, 1947, 40). However amorphous the identified realms appear to be, and however fluid or blurry the boundaries between them are said to have become in ‘postmodern’ iterations of the concept of subculture, the task remains to probe the interactions between these supposedly ontologically singular units.

Not only in studies of affect, but in an array of theories that are in a sense posthumanist – several of which were mentioned or discussed in the previous chapter – the insights of post-classical physics have nuanced the Newtonian notion of matter as increasingly small, reactive units: that is, the notion on which definitions of subculture are founded (cf. Gordon, 1947). Post-classical theoretical physicists have shown the

subatomic properties of perceptible matter to be “more like vibrating strands of energy, strings that oscillate in eleven dimensions, than like small versions of the sand grains suggested by their name” (Coole and Frost 2010, 12). Drawing from these insights in her posthumanist materialist philosophy (an ‘onto-epistemology’) of how matter comes to matter, Karen Barad proposes intra-activity as an alternative to the task of deciphering interactive relations between the part and the whole. Intra-activity is a concept that counters and complements the more familiar term interaction, which itself presumes the preexisting singularity of an entity, realm, or thing. According to Barad (2003), it is through specific “intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful” (815). In other words, no-thing precedes its relations of becoming. When we trace interactions - an important and necessary exercise - the focal things tend to be conceived in advance in atomistic terms. However amorphous the identified realms appear to be, and however fluid or blurry the boundaries are said to have become, the task remains to probe the interactions between these ontologically singular units. Tracing interactions between the part and the whole is to commit what Barad terms ‘thing-ification:’ that is, the transmogrifying of relations into atomistic ‘relata’, be they entities, units, subcultures, or whatever substrata of a larger structure or culture.<sup>37</sup> “Why,” she asks, “do we think that the existence of relations requires relata? Does the persistent distrust of nature, materiality, and the body that pervades much of contemporary theorizing and a sizable amount of the history of Western thought feed off of this cultural proclivity?” (Barad, 2003, 812). Her weighty contention is that all material-discursive

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<sup>37</sup> In Barad’s (2003) terms, “[t]he primary ontological units are not “things” but phenomena-dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations” (818).

phenomena, including bodies and (physical) cultural practices, are the result of on-going intra-activity.

The fallouts from these insights are likely to be felt for some time, but for our purposes we can stick to saying that affects can be seen to arise *intra-actively* – that is, through encounters or moments of contact between bodies of all kinds, rather than emanating from within singular entities imagined in advance as human, or text, or substance.

Relatedly, affect theorists are reluctant to succumb to the preeminence of coherent and cohering structures such as capitalism, heteronormativity, colonialism or neoliberalism, when trying to give form to the spectacular and humdrum goings on of everyday life. Kathleen Stewart (2007) perhaps describes the terms of this reluctance most lucidly. Writing from and of the United States in “a present that began some time ago,” Stewart intimates that “the terms neoliberalism, advanced capitalism, and globalization that index this emergent present . . . do not in themselves begin to describe the situation we find ourselves in” (1). She continues:

The notion of a totalized system, of which everything is always already a part, is not helpful (to say the least) in a weighted and reeling present. This is not to say that the forces these systems try to name are not real and literally pressing. On the contrary, I am trying to bring them into view as a scene of immanent force rather than leave them looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world.

This weighty task is to enact before consigning; to not short-circuit worlds to reach explanations and conclusions but to try and grasp a present brimming with potential. Pain, then, is not always already anything, nor here *or* there, even if the worlds in which

pain is felt are impressing on us all the time, everyday.

Those who write about affect wish to recover from static and retrospective accounts of life a sense of the present moment, lived, felt, but also imposed and elusive. Affect theorists such as Kathleen Stewart and Lauren Berlant write on the premise that alterity is not a response to a ripple in calm waters – resistance in an otherwise orderly world - but the immanent condition of all life. All of our lives are organized *and disorganized* by an overwhelming array of forces and processes, including the objects, companions and myriad things with which we cohabit. Instead of plotting the logic of that order from on high, seeking glitches in the matrix, or inciting chaos to overthrow it, much of affect theory sets about the challenge of somehow representing the overwhelming immanence of a present in which “revolt, resistance, breakdown, conspiracy, alternative is everywhere” (Latour, 2002, 124).

Part of the radical openness that many who write about affect wish to enact therefore demands not succumbing, in advance, to the affective registers that are known to characterize a given scene. Towards this sensibility the chapter to follow does not foreclose mud running as a scene in which suffering reigns. There are other affects at play in these practices, though they are not more or less distressing, not good or bad at all in fact, but weighted with the force of unfortold becomings.

## 5. Being Overcome:

### Obstacle Courses and the Affective Present

#### *Introduction*

This chapter considers mud running as a sensorium: a viscerally-charged ecology of affective registers and responses. It is an attempt to work through the experience of these events not as a series of personal motivations, structural determinations, or heroic deeds and endeavours, but as immanent forces that arise in encounters between bodies, substances, histories, memories, and biographies. This experience of embodied practice is far from readily identifiable within mud running, where ‘overcoming obstacles’ is the literal and metaphorical *raison d’etre* of the activity. Yet there is an important sense in which overcoming also connotes *being overcome*; being affected by a world into which, in a Heideggerian sense, we are each ‘thrown’ and must seek means of coming to terms with.

Theories of affect, a kind of sensory intelligence (Thrift, 2004) that impresses upon the surface of objects, including human bodies (Ahmed, 2004), are my guide. Affect names the process whereby biology, culture and history fold into one another and become animate as moods, sensations and atmospheres. Affects are generative; they help move worlds along and give them colour and texture. The ‘affective turn’ has been much debated in recent years (cf. Gregg and Seigworth, 2010), and it has become commonplace to note that the emotional immediacy of embodied practices is all too often overlooked in pursuit of explanations and representations that make for judgement, measurement and clean data (Pringle, Rinehart and Caudwell, 2015; Thorpe and

Rinehart, 2010; Woodward, 2009). “The key here,” as Lauren Berlant writes of her own attempts to write about everyday life with and through theories of affect, “is not to see what happens to aesthetically mediated characters as equivalent to what happens to people but to see that in the affective scenarios of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life” (2011, 8). Theories of affect promise a means of apprehending experience that do not always translate well into the language and conceptual apparatus of ideology, discourse or the received psychological and sociological terms of identity and agency (Berlant, 2011). These terms make way for a vocabulary of verbs, of forces, feelings, relations, actions, and orientations, intended to capture life in motion.

***Affect: Forces, Feelings, Relations***

Affects are relational forces, thrown together in moments spectacular and mundane and pregnant with unforetold significance. They are biological and cultural, public and private, felt and feeling sensations. Affects are akin to what Raymond Williams (1977) called ‘structures of feeling’ in evoking “all that is not fully articulated, all that comes through as disruption, tensions, blockage, emotional trouble” (168). As well as exerting limits and pressures, though, affects open up horizons of possibility – lines of flight, Deleuze called them – in the form of hope and desire, though they are not reducible to these terms as expressions of human emotion. With affect we are not dealing with effects as such, but the potentialities invested in spaces where the living of life is felt, including the spectacular and humdrum unfoldings of everyday goings on.

Affects do not originate in the mind or body, nor in some social ether, but are animated in the encounters between things, bodies of all kinds, ‘objects’ and ‘subjects.’ Affects circulate, assemble, flicker, linger, impress and disperse. They register when “something throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation; a something both animated and inhabitable” (Stewart, 2007, 1), and that can be recalled, re-cognized, and later given form in language as an experience, or an atmosphere. Chills felt down your spine, hairs prickling on your neck, blushing cheeks or tingling fingertips: these are moments when affect manifests, though many more such feelings impress upon us without recognition everywhere and all the time. These ‘intensities of feeling’ (Thrift, 2004) - shimmers, bristles, flushes, moods - emerge from contact with the world and often bring us to ourselves, prompting an awareness of the fullness of our being, before or lateral to the comprehension of what is going on.

This ‘before or lateral to’ signals one of the most vexing debates in affect theory, on where affect ends and cognition begins. Affect is not the same as conscious thought. For some, such as Brian Massumi, affect registers in the decimals of a second before cognition. Enacting a dualism between emotion and rationality nevertheless risks aligning oneself with a sordid history.<sup>38</sup> Val Plumwood (1993) has shown us that rationality, as intimated in my discussion of Descartes to follow, has often been used as a touchstone for power and authority: the Master Category to which the speaking, thinking – White, Male, European – subject has long assumed primary recourse. So it is imperative to dispel the notion that thinking and rationality are in opposition to a tempestuous Other, just as we

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<sup>38</sup> I can’t do justice here to the unjust histories of emotion being rendered subordinate in relation to rationality, which does violence not only to those who are discursively marked by gendered and racialized categories (for instance as emotional, or close to nature, and so irrational) but also misses the complexity of affect.

must not conflate the two without considering their fine details and contingencies. As Nigel Thrift (2004) has suggested, affect is “a different kind of intelligence about the world, but it is intelligence none-the-less” (60). Affect, he contends, is neither irrational nor sublime. It is “thought in action” or “corporeal thinking” (60; 65).

Another point of contention for those who seek to apprehend affect is its relation and interchangeability with emotion. Affect is not emotion that is held by or originates from within the subject – what Spelman (1989, cited in Ahmed, 2004) once called the ‘Dumb View’ of emotions. This idea of emotion as belonging to and emanating from the individual is at odds with a relational idea of affect that emerges in encounters. At the same time, affect is clearly separate from biology. A Darwinian translation of affect theory holds emotions as universal, though not unique expressions among human animals. Those drawing from Darwin such as Ekman (1995) have shown that certain emotional expressions – anger, fear, disgust, sadness, enjoyment – manifest in all human cultures, albeit with different cues and consequences. Affects are physiological, but are not simply of the *bios*, just as they are not reducible to structures, texts, determinations, or dialectics that operate on us from without.

Let us not draw firm lines between emotions and affects, partly as attempts to understand the latter often rely on the terms of the former. Emotion, for Massumi, is “qualified intensity” (2002, 28), that is, affect encoded with meaning, and narrativizable. I take affects to be bio-psycho-social phenomena that manifest intra-actively (emerging *through* contact), felt as particular moods, atmospheres, tensions, intensities, that can manifest as churning stomachs, dilating pupils, or as shared sensations that hover through and between encounters. They *feel like* they are ours because they register on and within

our bodies. But it is difficult to conceive of an example whereby emotion precedes contact.

***“Why do they do it”***

Recourse to affect and affect theory in this chapter is in part a response to a recurrent question about mud running that I have been reluctant to oblige: the question of ‘why people do it;’ why they commit themselves to such seemingly painful, exhausting and oftentimes bizarre mornings and afternoons spent toiling through dirt and over obstacles. However interesting the insights gleaned from pursuing such a line of inquiry might be, this question interpellates a subject position that – in concert with others who have this same skeptical sensibility - I have been attempting to rework throughout this study. Teubner (2006) names in broad strokes the intellectual and socio-historical conditions that make this question one of common-sense:

After the scientific revolution, after philosophical enlightenment, after methodological individualism dominating the social sciences, after psychological and sociological analysis of purposive action, the only remaining plausible actor is the human individual. The rest is superstition.

(Teubner 2006, 2, cited in Latimer and Miele, 2013, 6)

Questions of motivation tend to demand recourse to the rational, bounded subject – the human individual - who enacts her motivations, for better or worse. This is the Cartesian subject, the *ego cogito*, for whom thought – or reason - precedes and is the condition for action. Descartes’ skeptical meditations on existence relegated all but the mind to the metaphysical backwaters of superstition and heresy. Descartes held that reason was a

truth in common to human and divine minds, a state of being as opposed to a mode of becoming or capacity to be cultivated. In perhaps philosophy's most cited epigram - 'I think therefore I am' - the capacity to think is accorded centre-stage and the rest of the world, including human flesh, is consigned to sub-ontological status for posterity. In this humanist paradigm thinking precedes, and is a necessary condition for and affirmation of existence.

Descartes's now infamous '*ego cogito*' - the thinking self - has long since been displaced from its centrifugal status, not least by those who initiated and have followed the 'corporeal turn' in the social science and humanities. As Donna Haraway (2008) has outlined, in keeping with Derrida's reading of Freud, the wounds to the Cartesian notion of human exceptionalism are (at least) fourfold. First, heliocentrism and the Copernican revolution removed humankind from its assumed ontological centre-point and cast it instead into "a universe of inhumane, nonteleological times and spaces" (Haraway, 2008, 11).<sup>39</sup> Second, Darwin posited that humans share an evolutionary inheritance with other critters, as opposed to a divine Beginning. The third came from Freud himself when dealing a wound to the primacy of consciousness, and with it the surety and sanctity of Reason as a human preserve, through his writing on the unconscious. And fourth is the enfolding of the organic and the technological in an informatic, technoscientific age that Haraway has herself theorized for several decades.

A fifth wound, entangled with the others, may be posed by the affective turn, which *displaces* emotion from within the thinking, feeling subject. Affect theory shares with poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and other posthumanisms, a sense of agency and

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<sup>39</sup> The Copernican Revolution precedes Descartes' meditations, but the revelation that earth was a single fragment of a benign universe, still dealt a blow to pretensions of human exceptionalism or autonomy.

subject positions “in which individuals are generally understood as effects of the events to which their body parts (broadly understood) respond and in which they participate” (Thrift, 2004, 60). Unlike much of poststructural and postcolonial theorizing, however, affect theories that displace the primacy of the subject do not only relocate meaning and action in the symbolic, less still in language. This, as we will soon see when confronting mud and dirt as redolent matter, would only reproduce the problem of representing feelings as held by or emerging from some-thing that has been endemic to the social sciences and humanities for some time:

Studies almost always end up analysing how people talk about their emotions. If there is anything distinctive about emotions, it is that, even if they commonly occur in the course of speaking, they are not talk, not even just forms of expression, they are ways of expressing something going on that talk cannot grasp. Historical and cultural studies similarly elide the challenge of understanding emotional experience when they analyse texts, symbols, material objects, and ways of life as representations of emotions” (Katz, 1999, 4, cited in Thrift, 2004, 60).

Affects are often read as virtual, which is to say they are real but not material, yet materialize as actual in their effects. Anger, for instance, is not in itself a property or essence but is experienced as ‘something going on’ that may *or may not* channel into violence, with consequences. Other ‘intensities of feeling’ (Thrift, 2004) are not so readily identified through the language of emotions but nevertheless impress and leave traces on the living of everyday life. The immateriality of affects makes their representation a challenge, and definitions of affect are often intentionally diffuse and

elusive. Language can give affective experience a richness and dimension, while always being consigned to never capture its object. Language is not interchangeable with affect. But language can be *about* affect and can itself be affective.

Accepting these terms and their horizons, in what follows I set out to give color and texture to the affective scenes of mud running becomings. This means sometimes departing those scenes in exploring, as I will in the remainder of this chapter, the feelings of childhood abandon and atavistic nostalgia evoked by substances such as mud; military-hero mimesis as an affective state; and inspiration, alongside its cousin, compassion. Mud running, then, emerges not as a bounded scene under study, but also a conduit for exploring affective dimensions of embodied practice.

In this spirit let's begin with a tour through dirt, in its substantial and semantic complexity, before confronting mud as something that is *felt* in mud running, as a yearning sensation that grounds one's self in biographical and historical pasts.

### ***Dirt and Nostalgia***

Mud is an assemblage of earth, water, minerals, bacteria; a viscous blend of lively substances. It is a tangible, visible, material presence in the world. But it is also fluid in a sensory as well as an elemental sense. For many people, mud *evokes* childhood memories of playful abandon, 'natural' beauty, fertility, and rurality, and remains a source of sacred veneration, a lynchpin of evolutionary theory, and much premodern yore. For others it might be associated with the horrors of trench warfare (cf. Das, 2008), agriculture and sustenance, or simply be a mundane backdrop to everyday travails. Despite its ubiquity in the ecological fabric of different cultures and societies, mud still conjures something

imaginary: fantasies of concrete and clay that impress on us, animate imaginings and kindle affinities with places, people and other animals, and much besides.

So how is it that in spite of all this, “Western civilisation has become adept at overlooking the filthy reality of everyday life” (Forde, 2011, 1)? Mary Douglas wrote the manifesto on how dirt becomes intelligible through a system of symbolic classification. In *Purity and Danger* (1966) Douglas cast dirt as “the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter,” one that “takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity” (44). Hence, in Western cultures mud and dirt are for the most part synonymous with premodernity (rurality and simplicity), impurity (as opposed to cleanliness), obscenity (filthy language), unethical behavior (mud slinging; playing dirty), immaturity, and waste. Douglas’ study disrupts these modern, Western conceptions of dirt as something that is ancient, impure, and more pervasive in prior times and foreign places, by demonstrating how dirt reveals its significance through discursive constitution, rather than something antithetical to, or eradicated through, civility and progress. In doing so, she shows how these fetishistic understandings of dirt are overwritten with a colonial and teleological rendering of history, through which progress and purity are held to march forwards and together, hand in spotless hand, out of the murky darkness and into the pristine age of Enlightenment (Kumar, 2005; Elias, 1978). Thus, these prevailing meanings synonymous with dirt tell as much about dirt’s constitutive Other – cleanliness, purity, sterility, and the epochs and occupants who lay claim to these categories – as about any supposedly ancient or essential significations.

Douglas, in sum, deftly outlines the symbolic mechanisms that render dirt *dirty*. This same economy is at work in mud running: a discursive economy that renders mud and dirt evocative of a ‘simpler’ past and people left behind. Yet there are (at least) two sticking points to work through before broaching any such economy, the first being the implications of this privileging of the symbolic, the second a question of how these meanings become intelligible. First, to the problem of social constructivism as the diametrical twin of natural determinism.

In her essay on the place of dirt in social theory, Wolkowitz (2008) wrote of a binary that characterizes and besets understandings of dirt in everyday life. The division she identifies – ‘linguistic-leakiness’ versus ‘really dirty’ – is in essence a longstanding problem bequeathed by the legacies of social constructivist and natural determinist conceptions of matter, meaning, and social life. Bruno Latour (1993) famously called this the Great Divide in modern, Western philosophy of social (symbolic) and natural (substantive) epistemologies, and it applies as much to mud as to the broader classification of dirt. In the most pronounced versions of constructivism, as found in Douglas’ study, the ontological substance of dirt is rendered a category of human meaning-making practices. As we have seen, her intervention helped render dirt as something that reveals its significance through discursive constitution, rather than something antithetical to, or eradicated through, civilizing trends. Yet Douglas’s constructivism also situates dirt in a symbolic realm in spite of its murky materiality, and so leaves us to ponder futile questions about which came first, dirt, or its meanings;

questions that, if left unanswered, reinscribe hierarchical and inhibitive divisions between things and their meanings; words and the world.<sup>40</sup>

By contrast, in naturalist accounts of substance, the attempt to foreground the raw materiality of mud or dirt lends itself to a naively mechanistic materialism, where the cultural and political significance of mud emanates from the foundational assertion of its prediscursive materiality. In this model it's mud first, before meaning and humankind follow. Earthly substances thereby emerge as the preserve of geology and physics, knowable through the twinned beacons of science and reason, and conceived as separate from and superior to the social sciences, humanities, and 'non-modern' ontologies that are deemed to fetishize the certainty of substance. A danger here is that nature appears as static, inert, and at the whim of human mastery; a passive slate on which meanings can be inscribed without affecting or altering its substantive and timeless essence. This apprehension of nature is exemplified in contemporary notions of 'the environment:' for Williams, "a lost word .. a cold word, mechanistic, suited strangely to the coldness generally felt towards nature" (2002, 5, cited in Alaimo, 2010, 2).

These debates and divisions are important because of our object, mud, a substance that precedes humankind by many millions of years, before meanings were sedimented in soil and given form in language. Suffice it to say – and as discussed in earlier chapters - that neither the extremes of social constructivism (mud exists as a product of human

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<sup>40</sup> For example, if we take from Judith Butler (1989) that substance is "nothing other than the coherences contingently created through the regulation of attributes," then the actual stuff of mud is rendered "not only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous" (34). Ian Hacking (1999) is among those to point out the complexity of Judith Butler's rendering of materiality ahead of other social constructivist accounts, and Butler's work for a decade after the publication of *Gender Trouble* would address this complexity (most notably in her *Bodies that Matter* (1993)). Yet when reading *Gender Trouble* I continually struggle with Butler's privileging of the discursive production of our given understandings of sex, physiology, and material substance, rather than elaborating a material-semiotic interweaving of the two that might be given virtual form as affect.

language, craft and inquiry) nor natural determinism (mud is naturally what it 'is' before and even apart from human contact) pave or plant the way for understanding something as fluid, fundamental, and ubiquitous as mud. A substance of fluid consistency and carrier of abundant polysemia, mud is a disobedient subject when faced with analytical prognoses that would otherwise compartmentalize and clean it up along normative and disciplinary axes. Mud is at once subject, object, and representation: A striated trinity that it confounds in its evolutionary origins and multiplicitous becomings. It spills across borders in ways that blur foundational categories for understanding ourselves and the world around us. To try and capture its essence, to argue its existence as either social or natural, or to plot a taxonomy of difference based on its material and symbolic capacities, is limiting at best. At worst this procedure risks complicity with a politics of 'purification' (Latour, 1993) that demarcates in the name of mastery and control, one that (re)produces divisive problems of representation between substance and semantics that then require stitching back together such that knowledge is possible (Barad, 2003). And yet, at the same time these comminglings of things and their categories are imbued with a performative force. That is to say, understandings of mud, matter, and nature, have historically worked in tandem with their referents to materialize particular understandings of who 'we' are. And, of course, understandings of who we are commingle with memories and desires of who we have been, and who we want to be.

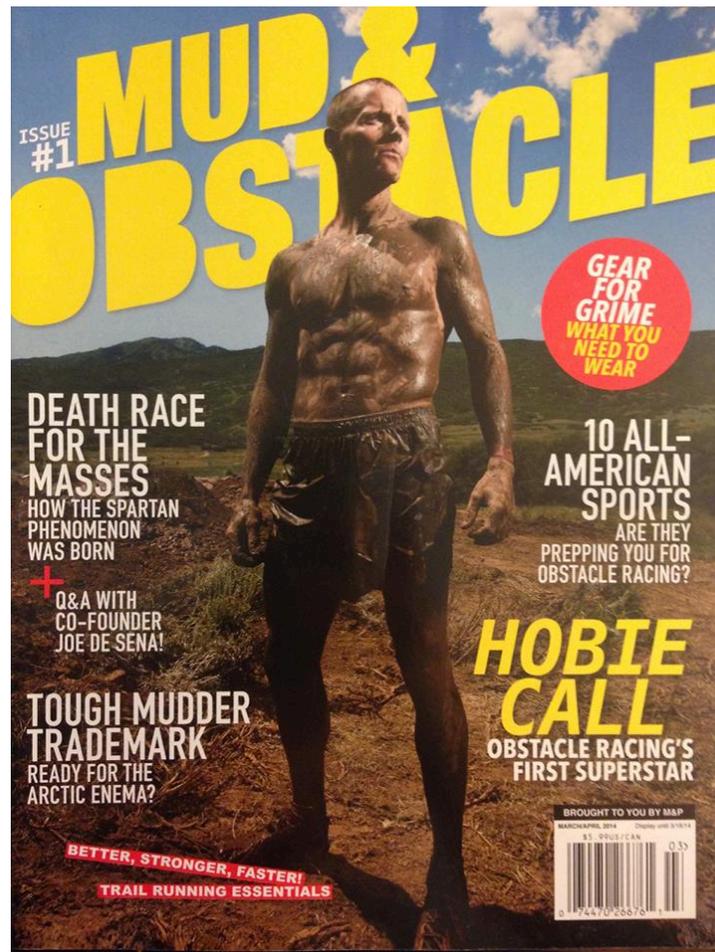
In mud running, mud and dirt play their parts in evoking a nostalgia for childhood and a generalizable youthfulness. Here is Hobie Call, widely recognized as the first professional obstacle racer, recalling a sensation of movement that many others describe and experience in mud running. "It's like a playground for adults ... after I finished the

first one, I felt like a kid again for the first time in years” (cited in *Outside Magazine*, 2012). To ‘feel like a kid again’ is to leap, climb, crawl, and hopskotch through obstacles, laden in mud, alongside friends and family. It is to move through mud in a way that is deemed, through the prism of nostalgia, to precede the weight of thoughts and responsibility, and this lightness manifests as a cascading, care-free movement through space and over objects. Such movements need not necessarily be the stuff of one’s youth to conjure this exhilaration, as nostalgia does not require or instantiate a realist point of reference. It is a projection of the past that is longed for precisely because, like one’s childhood, it is irretrievable.

The idealized longing for childhood expressed by Hobie Call is felt in mud running in relation to the received terms of adult, working life. Mud running events are ensconced in the ethic of fitness as body work and the will to improve one’s embodied self, as well as the infrastructure of the obstacle course, that encourage asceticism and the necessity of enduring in pursuit of one’s desires. But the embodied experience of running in events such as Tough Mudder and Warrior Dash, however grueling it might prove, is often as playful as it is painful. Work and structure, in this conceptual economy, are *not* play and playgrounds, even as the two collapse together in practice. In nostalgic moments distance and proximity are intensified, and differences - such as those between work and play, or childhood and adulthood - pronounced. Nostalgia reassembles memory, biography and history in the affective present. It “orders events temporally and dramatizes them” (Stewart, 1988, 227) in forms that can be romantic or reactionary, skeptical or sentimental. Characterized often as a yearning for something distant and past,

nostalgia is abstract and fleeting, not specific or concrete. It is *affective*, sensed in the immediacy of practice, and so tells us as much about the present as it could the past.

Nostalgia in mud running is not only about childhood, but also premodernity. Biographical and historical pasts felt through these muddy encounters are twinned through a shared emphasis on innocence (of history, of youthfulness and play) and immaturity ('feeling like a kid again'). In Figure 7, Hobie Call is featured on the cover of



**Figure 7 – Hobie Call Featured in the First Issue of Mud and Obstacle Magazine.**

*Mud and Obstacle* magazine, exhibiting the kind of functional, toned musculature that obstacle courses elicit and demand. This youthful, athletic aesthetic is closer to the antiquitous representations of bodies beautiful than, say, the pronounced, hypertrophied

muscles of body builders. And of course he is caked in mud, encoding the scene with the rugged primordiality on which the mud running industry trades. To ‘feel like a kid again’ through frolicking in dirt falls in line with a broader socio-historical regression that is glimpsed in this image: one premised on a romantic rekindling of our paleolithic past, and a teleological storying of Western civilization to offer the course and its traversing a sense of self-contained continuity and achievement.

There is a critique to be made here of how these homologies between premodernity, mud and childhood threaten to render those who are often held to be outside of modernity, or still waiting in a ‘state of nature’ (see Goldberg, 1993) to be modernized, as akin to children. This critique is substantive and important and not to be understated or dismissed. Yet it does not capture the way in which history is intuited - “corporeal thinking,” as Thrift (2004, 65) called it – in the affective present. For what we are presented with in mud running is a case of history intuited in the affective present: Intuition here denoting the process through which history is translated through memory (Bergson, 1991; Berlant, 2011).

Might we alter Douglas’ famous adage that “where there is dirt, there is a system” (1966) to suggest that *where there is dirt there is feeling*? Might identifications with dirt found in mud running be intelligible not as truths essential to substance, nor purely symbolic significations, but as evocative of the innocence and playfulness of childhood *as well as* an atavistic nostalgia for premodernity, the ‘great outdoors,’ and the ostensible simplicity of bygone times and distance lands? This wouldn’t provide a final reconciliation of the age-old problem of matter and meaning. But it promises to glimpse how mud and history commingle as a nostalgic force that operates, first, on the senses.

## ***Becoming-Soldier***

This scene is set at Tough Mudder, Seattle, in 2013, though at the moment captured we could be back at Whistler, or indeed any Tough Mudder event held across and beyond North America during the past five years. We runners (or Mudders) are gathered in the start-line pen, the ‘bullpit,’ having vaulted the wooden wall to breach the enclosure. ‘In here’ the music is loudest, the singing of the national anthem most resonant, and anticipation of the 12-mile ‘military-style’ obstacle course in waiting heightened. ‘Out there’ in the now-constituted hinterlands, friends and family cheer and take photos. National flags are raised to represent Tough Mudder’s – and mud running’s – most popular international locales, and while this varies depending on the location the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia are mainstays. With ten or so minutes to go before the run itself begins in earnest, MC Sean Corvelle begins his oration. Kneeling in formation, we listen.

Ok, on a serious note y’all, as much as we’re all here to do this course, we’re also here to give thanks to our Wounded Warrior Project, let’s hear it for our Wounded Warriors right now [loud cheers]. Tough Mudder’s proud of you man. We’ve raised \$2.5m and we’re here to raise more. This charity works. I’ve spoken with a lot of these veterans, a lot of these wounded warriors, it works for them y’all. We had a couple of guys here from the Wounded Warriors Project, probably still on the course, missing his arms, missing an eye ... I had a guy on our Virginia course, missing both his legs. He sacrificed both his legs for this country, for you and me. Yeah, could you even feel that, you’re all athletes, could you imagine not having your legs? This guy, I saw him coming across the finish line covered with mud on

two prosthetic legs with just as much pride, just as much energy as he had when he left the start line ... all part of our military man, time and time again they prove to us how amazing they are, how amazing you are, 'cos y'all got this, you got this same thing, that's why you're here today, testing that will.

For all those present these affective registers are felt and shared. This is not to say that they are experienced in the same way, as my own reluctance to be recruited into these moments attested every time I settled into Tough Mudder's start-line ritual. But they register, nonetheless, on the senses, manifesting as something like what Walter Benjamin called 'emotional immediacy,' or others have called the 'affective contagion' of crowds. Preexisting knowledges – such as my own learnings of the complicity of valorizing military sacrifice in projects of war, or of the problems arising when military charities take the place of the state in supporting wounded veterans – felt as if they had been cast in to the background, disturbed and dislodged by an overwhelming *some-thing*. Those with whom I have spoken about these moments recalled some-thing similar, many with a greater intensity of feeling than I had experienced. Hairs on your neck prickle, they'd say; heart beats skip and sweat runs cold; and the air is invested with a kind of reverent solemnity before the otherwise playful, parodic, 'military-style' obstacle course gets underway.

For the next few hours this constituted 'we' move through the obstacle course, assembling and dispersing, hauling ourselves and each other over wooden 'Berlin' walls, shuffling through streams, leaping over stacks of burning hay, carrying logs, wading through mud tracks and 'trenches,' stumbling through dangling wires charged with electricity, and hurrying through tents filled with a 'tear gas-like substance.' Everything

is weighted by mud: movement, symbolism, bodies. This ‘we’ re(as)semble what Deleuze (later with Guattari, 1987) cryptically called a Body without Organs; an *esprit de corps*, or spirit of the body, that consolidates not as a coherent whole but as a roving clan, a verb, an immaterial corpus, a morphology of heterogeneous elements that congeal for a duration then scatter.<sup>41</sup> What are we becoming?

Perhaps we mud runners have already become whirring cogs in the machinations of military-industrial might. This is, after all, how the military-industrial complex is often conceived, as an iron triangle of corporate, state and military power. Coined by President Dwight Eisenhower and soon after theorized by Charles Wright Mills (1956) in *The Power Elite*, Nick Turse (2008) has renamed the twenty-first century incarnation of this totality ‘The Complex’: a merciful abbreviation of the “new military-industrial-technological-entertainment-academic-scientific-media-intelligence-homeland security-surveillance-national security-corporate complex” (Turse, 2008, 16). ‘The Complex’ is an awe-inspired denotation of the sheer ubiquity of the U.S. military, of how it invades our everyday lives irrespective of our political, moral or religious affinities. Turse illustrates his point by detailing the lives of a fictitious couple, Rick and Donna: conscientious liberals who protested the Iraq war, harbour great concern over U.S. foreign policy, and take care not only in keeping up to speed with such affairs but also in avoiding the purchase or endorsement of overtly militaristic products and paraphernalia. The twist is that, after we are walked through Donna and Rick’s daily lives, every product, service

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<sup>41</sup> *Esprit de corps* has etymological roots in eighteenth century France, and denotes a *spirit of the body* which recursively gives rise to a strong sense of togetherness, pride and belonging within a social configuration. *Esprit de corps* is at once the individual and collective phenomenological ‘spirit’ of human bodies in motion, and the inextricable, elemental ‘spirit’ of things, such as dirt and sweat, which are held to inhere a vibrant, vital motility of their own (Bennett, 2010).

and organization with which they interact – from Crest toothpaste to their General Motors manufactured car—is revealed as being produced by a United States’ Department of Defense contractor. Resistance, it turns out, is futile. The Complex is more dense and saturating than we could have imagined, reaching into the fabric of our everyday lives and foreclosing our agency in the world as determined by consumption.

On this account, *Tough Mudder* and other mud runs simply plug into ‘The Complex.’ Worse, its parodic rendering of tear gas, trenches, and other material-symbols of warfare threaten to reproduce what George Mosse (1990) has called the “Myth of the War Experience:” an ideological conceit “designed to mask war and to legitimize the war experience ... to displace the reality of war” (7). Through the World Wars, this was achieved through the romanticizing of wartime poetry; the glorification of national sacrifice through memorials, monuments, and cemeteries; the consecration of the war wounded; and the sanctification of those who died in battle apart from ethical and political reflection on warfare itself (Mosse, 1990). In *Tough Mudder*, the sacrifices of the twenty first century war wounded are consecrated at the outset of ludic, ludicrous, ‘extreme’ sports. It is, as Marx had it, history repeating itself “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce” (1852, 15).<sup>42</sup>

In the face of The Complex, a seamless totality of symbiotic alliances, always already ‘invading’<sup>43</sup> everyday life, affect is always already a negative effect. Despair, anger, resentment and resignation are the impulses most likely to be felt. And not only

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<sup>42</sup> The quote in full reads: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce (Karl Marx, 1852/1869, 15).

<sup>43</sup> The subtitle of Turse’s book, *How the Military Invades our Everyday Lives*, is (playfully?) symptomatic of C. Wright Mills’s (1956) diagnosis of a ‘military metaphysics’ - the disposition towards framing social and cultural issues using military language and logics (cf. McKay and Swift, 2012, 233).

among a ‘general public,’ for each of these have also been palpable in cultural studies’ responses to heightened militarization in twenty first century North America. Fear and despair are surely the emotive responses to be anticipated in a world where “violence, it seems, is everywhere. Democracy is under attack. America is engaged in a war without end, a permanent war on the world [and] A politics of fear has off-set a politics of hope” (Denzin and Giardina, 2007, 2). What other politics could possibly emerge, if militarization is best described as “a powerful pedagogical force that shapes our lives, memories, and daily experiences, while erasing everything we thought we knew about history, justice, solidarity, and the meaning of democracy” (Giroux, 2007, 33-34)?

At full risk of, as Lauren Berlant (2011) puts it, making “big claims on the backs of small objects” (11), this isn’t what I felt happening in Tough Mudder, at the start-line or through the course. Rather than fear or social control, Tough Mudder first elicits *compassion* for wounded soldiers, initially in the form of philanthropy. Registration for the events is accompanied by the option to donate money to the Wounded Warrior Project, and the figure of \$2.5m cited above has since grown to in excess of \$8.5m. Such philanthropic partnerships are subject to a variety of critiques, not least when they stand in for sustained and sustainable support from governments and organizations who do not have profit as an imperative, when they come to support causes for reasons that fall in line with that imperative, and when they reduce citizenship to consumption (cf. King, 2006; this reduction is also the ironic effect of Turse’s critique). A further, relevant concern is that philanthropy reifies distance between the sufferer and the benevolent spectator; those wounded soldiers deserving of compassion and support, and those who are willing, able and good enough to give. As Berlant (2004) puts it, “compassion is a

term denoting privilege: the sufferer is over there. You, the compassionate one, have a resource that would alleviate someone else's suffering" (4). So compassion is not simply a 'positive' affect, but in the context of militarization it also marks a different feeling altogether from despair, anger or fear.



***Figure 8 – The Wounded Warrior Project Stall at Tough Mudder, Whistler, 2013.***

***Photo by Author.***

Expressions of compassion, however, are not so simple, not limited to a financial transaction, in mud running. In Tough Mudder, from the moment runners are assembled at the startline, a rhetorical, material and affective process works *to bridge the*

*spectator/sufferer divide*. Recall the language of the oration: ‘This guy [a veteran], I saw him coming across the finish line covered with mud on two prosthetic legs with just as much pride, just as much energy as he had when he left the start line ... all part of our military man, time and time again they prove to us *how amazing they are, how amazing you are, ‘cos y’all got this, you got this same thing*, that’s why you’re here today, testing that will’ (my emphasis). A magical, inspirational transposition, that breaches the binary usually stabilized in relations of compassion, is underway. And as Chapter Three outlined in some detail, this is far from a singularly rhetorical or textual process.

On the one hand, military personnel – the untold numbers absent as well as those present who are invited to stand and receive an ovation – are becoming part of a milieu which is at once familiar, without a formal affiliation or responsibility to the military, and yet displays much of the *esprit de corps* and associated cultural capital of that formative institution. On the other, non-military personnel (‘civilians’) are invited to enact their compassion and support for the war wounded not only as grateful, benevolent fundraisers, but through a ‘military-style’ endeavour. This is the embodied quality of compassion that is seen in so much of endurance sport, from mud runs to marathons – the chance to not only raise money for causes, but to share in the struggle, always tempering that recognition with the liberal sensibility that nothing could be as much of a struggle as that undergone by those for whom you are running. In Tough Mudder, this takes the form of military-hero mimesis, an imitation of soldiery that is cast in the sometimes reverent, sometimes irreverent spirit of respect and goodwill to the military and its members.

Military-hero mimesis is a metamorphosis of civilian to soldier, a strictured labor which calls on and sustains these subject position (there are, after all, no civilians without

soldiers). This has long been a justification for sport and physical activity, from hockey and American football to gymnastics and parkour: to make men of boys for purposes of military preparedness. Participation in one is seen to extol the values of the other: teamwork when faced with an enemy or competition; physical strength and psychic resolve; discipline and an appreciation of rank within a collective; sacrifice for one's country; and (physically and symbolically) violent domination of bodies and territories. And this potential has not been lost on the United States Army, which launched a pilot programme in 2013 designed to take advantage of the synergy between mud running and military training:

Our involvement with the Tough Mudder Organization enables the Army to engage a key audience about army values and services; the ability to serve part time; and to showcase the opportunities that exist in the Army Reserve to help motivated men and women achieve their professional and personal goals (U.S. Army Press Release, September 3, 2013).

Military-hero mimesis, then, illustrates the politics of affect, the sensation of imitation and how its potentialities are recognized by the U.S. Army.

In addition to this political aspect there is also an ethical limitation, a troubling calculability involved in mimesis. The trading of pain necessitates a taxonomic evaluation of which injuries are worth grieving, which diseases need curing: a logic that recruits the rationality of liberal humanist ontologies that lay claim to the value of life and the solemnity of Reason as just cause for giving and ending it. Feeling your pain in my flesh through imitation, even though that mimicry produces actual physical pain and actual feats of endurance, retains the power relations of compassion. And as the quality of

compassion and the sanctimony of giving are part of the fabric of liberalism, questioning the ethics of compassionate deeds and endeavours is a fraught venture. For “in the liberal society that sanctions individuality as sovereign, we like our positive emotions to feel well-intentioned and we like our good intentions to constitute the meaning of our acts” (Berlant, 2004, 5-6). In mud running those imitative expressions of compassion take the form of an “heroic masochistic fantasy” (Haraway, 2008, 82) where pain is met with pain, but on the terms of (national, ethnic, cultural) identification which are doomed to support the causes of war as well as well military causes.

I am suggesting that militarization operates through a more eclectic range of affective registers than the prevailing diagnoses of fear, anger, despair and social control identified in much of cultural studies. Compassion, expressed as mimesis, attaches to pride, love and sharing, not least in the collaborative *esprit de corps* of the a militaristic practice which insists not on winning or vanquishing others, but that “no Mudder be left behind.” These are not the affective registers most would readily associate with war and warfare.

But then we are not visiting a scene of warfare, and here lies the ethical crux of the issue. It is as difficult as it is important to distinguish between war and the cultural production of assent for war. I have wondered if my own discomfort and dissonance when kneeling at the startline to these events stems from a jarring sensation of my understanding of war as incitement to violence and destruction, and the reverence and solemnity of pro-military rituals. Perhaps this is also the case for cultural studies practitioners who have written critically, sometimes in stark, emotive terms, about twenty-first century wars. Yet as Foucault (1978) proposed in his genealogy of the

repressive hypothesis in nineteenth century discourses of sexuality, “pleasure and power do not cancel and work back against one another; they seek out, overlap and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms of enticement and excitement” (45). It would be remiss to assume that even a social process as deleterious as militarization is only productive of and operative through fear, violence and repression; crucially, moreover, it suggests that admission of ‘positive’ affects need not be separated from questions of power.

At the same time, it is important not to fall into the ideological trap of thinking about assent for war and its consequences as a political and economic process that manifests ‘over there,’ and the manufacturing of consent for war as a cultural process that happens where war is never really felt. War is not a ripple of destruction in otherwise tranquil waters. War-induced trauma is everywhere in nations that wage war, it is ordinary, and it would be extraordinary to find a place or (physical cultural) practice that proved an exception to the rule. The point to emphasize about militarization is that the production of violence *and* the production of assent for violence operates, first, on the senses.

### ***Conclusion: Shared Feelings***

That an affect is generative does not mean that it is positive, even if the feeling circulating is one that makes us feel good, or is associated with feeling good. Nor does it mean that the feeling is a falsehood, a sign of deception (‘false consciousness’), or a forbearer of something more certain. Rather than pursue a hermeneutic of fidelity, a question that might be more productively asked about affect is how feelings become shared; how something seemingly personal circulates and accrues all kinds of value.

Sara Ahmed (2004) posits ‘affective economies’ to conceptualize how feelings accrue value in their circulation, such that histories and geographies can be intuited as shared experiences. Departing from an understanding of emotion as something held within us or in the nature of objects (such as mud), Ahmed suggests that “emotions work as a form of capital; affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation” (Ahmed, 2004, 45). To describe how affects circulate and accrue value in exchange, Ahmed engages with a famous economic formula found in Marx’s *Capital*:

I am using the ‘economic’ to suggest that objects of emotions circulate or are distributed across a social as well as psychic field, borrowing from the Marxian logic of capital. In *Capital*, Marx discusses how the movement of commodities and money, in the formula (M-C-M: money to commodity to money), creates surplus value. That is, through circulation and exchange ‘M’ acquires more value (Marx 1977, 248). Or, as he puts it: ‘The value originally advanced, therefore, not only remains intact while in circulation, but increases its magnitude, adds to itself a surplus-value or is valorised. *And this movement converts it into capital*’ (Marx, 1977, 252, emphasis mine) (Ahmed, 2004, 45).

She continues: “I am identifying a similar logic: the movement between signs and objects converts into affect ... Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs” (45). Affects amplify through circulation; they do not just impress on bodies, broadly defined, but swirl and churn in ways that heighten sensations to intensify feelings, public or private. Mud, then, is not only materially sticky; it affixes to meanings in a process of mutually intensifying exchange. In mud running the

circulation is heightened by the array of sensations that arise therein – not only sight of mud, but touch and smell, and other bodies tarred with that same evocative, sticky substance. Moreover, they are animated by the historical sedimentation of particular meanings of dirt, such that these experiences can become shared.

We must not confuse affective economies with economies of affect. The former, as in our example, describes how ‘sticky’ associations between signs, figures and objects lead to the intensification and amplification of feelings. The latter denotes the ways in which people and companies trade on these evocations in monetary terms. Clearly, though, this is not a clean distinction, as the circulation of affect in mud running is an affective resource for those who wish to credentialize, mythologize and commercialize the practice, and those – such as the U.S. Army – who see potential in its mimetic qualities (incorporating, as it does, a particular version of the labor and values of soldiery). Hence nostalgia, compassion and a generalized sense of inspiration are more prominent in mud running marketing materials and its whole promotional culture than anything more concretely related to participation (such as prizes, costs of registration, and the whole gamut of economic categories).

If affective economies operate in swirling cadence with objects and signs, then the question is not so much what makes mud running nostalgic or kindles compassion therein, nor what exactly these affects are, but what they *do*. One possibility is that nostalgia and compassion are stabilizing affects; they each work to organize the past in the affective present. Whereas time in endurance practices is usually considered as a matter of minutes and seconds, in mud running the temporalities that constitute experience are rooted in affect. The obstacle course, and the mud that weighs us down *en*

*route*, are technologies for overcoming obstacles that literally make up the course and that are transposed into it from ‘outside’ in the form of disease, injury, preconceptions about the capacities of the body and so forth. Nostalgia manifests when these exhilarating movements are made through mud and obstacles to animate stable and stabilizing temporalities. It gives history and biography a semblance of continuity in otherwise turbulent worlds. Mud running obstacle courses then become an anchor of meaning; nostalgia “becomes the very lighthouse waving us back to shore - the one point on the landscape that gives hope of direction” (Stewart, 1988, 228); and compassion secures our pain as expressed in relation to something else, or someone else more worthy and therefore more troubled than we find ourselves in the crises of everyday life. This is only one possibility, one becoming in waiting, but it does chime with the structuring principle of ‘overcoming obstacles’ that otherwise unites these physical cultural practices.

## **Conclusion: Conversations and Contributions**

Through these chapters I have sought to study mud running as a popular form of physical culture without acceding to the humanist assumptions upon which it is founded and to which it lays claim. This has meant consulting, without taking as given, the histories of mud running and physical culture (Chapter One), the centrality of the (active) body as theoretical and empirical focus and agentic force (Chapter Three), and the affective registers at work in mud running, such as nostalgia, mimesis, compassion and inspiration, that exceed its promotional focus on pain and risk (Chapter Five). In doing so I have sought to extend my analysis beyond its object: To confront themes and theories and possibilities that at once exceed mud running, and yet are in an important, material sense implicated within it.

In this outgoing chapter I relocate the contributions of this study in relation to conversations and research trajectories that would extend its theoretical, empirical and political horizons. I do this by revisiting key concepts and contentions, highlighting their significance and signposting ways in which they might be developed further.

### ***The Renaissance of Physical Culture***

Chapter One, *Overcivilization and its Discontents*, recasts the histories of mud running and physical culture by tracing their shared attitude towards nature, the body and society through their modernist, colonial roots and routes. The dual claim borne of this genealogical analysis is this: mud running's history is best understood not as a rekindling of 'caveman' comportments and virtues, nor as the remarkable rise of a twenty-first century industry, but as the recuperation of nineteenth century physical culture; and

tracing the “attitude to nature” found in mud running through this heritage articulates physical culture writ large to a deeper colonial history than most established histories admit. I call this historical orientation *the renaissance of physical culture* to denote the recent recuperation of nineteenth century physical cultural movements and movement practices, as well as a broader orientation to history, nature and society in which the past holds the secrets to an heroic present.

I substantiated the first claim by consulting the most comprehensive texts available on mud running and its history, contributing a distinctive genealogical account of an ‘extreme’ endurance sport to the sociology of sport, physical cultural studies, and other fields concerned with the history of somatic practices. Rather than acknowledging that mud running simply has a history, a background against which its contemporary popularity takes shape, I have shown how that history is animated in its modernist ‘attitude’ to nature, the body and society. Settler-colonial ideas about nature are echoed in mud running, not in their original form, but as expressions of disenchantment with modernity that manifest as a concern with ‘overcivilization’. Mud is invoked in these events as both opponent-object and romanticized-subject, as sticky substance that impedes human progress and as evocative of distant times and places when the relationship between people and nature was ostensibly closer, clearer; less murky than modern life has rendered. Something similar can be said about the relationship to human nature invoked in mud running, as *some-thing* that has existed in pure form and can be rekindled through ascetic, athletic practice.

The second claim made in Chapter One regarding the *renaissance of physical culture* is more ambitious, and more speculative. Its analytic promise is not, and cannot

be exhausted in a single essay, or indeed in concluding comments. Suffice it to say that this renaissance orientation to history finds expression in much of Anglo-American popular culture beyond sport, from the white male pioneer (or “heritage hipster”) aesthetic currently *en vogue* in settler-colonial societies across North America, to the narrative arc of movies such as *The Martian*, in which the future of the protagonist, and by implication humankind, rests on the rediscovery of what is human within us through kindling authentic relationships to nature. In the former, we find an historical subversion enacted through style: One that simultaneously enacts a cultural resistance through the adornment of lumberjack attire and other Progressive Era paraphernalia, but also carries with it the ironic, though perhaps rarely realized promise of drawing attention to the ways in which cities like Vancouver are haunted by colonialism. In *The Martian*, a best-selling book before its recent cinematic release, Mark Watney (Matt Damon) sustains himself ‘alone’ on Mars after surviving an aborted space mission by cultivating water and food through agricultural production techniques. His training in botany proves the foundation for (t)his all American hero story of colonization in a brave new world.

The temporalities vary between these popular cultural expressions, and similar retrograde narratives abound in all epochs and cultures. But what I am describing is a provincial recovery of the past, one structured by the enduring nineteenth century concerns about ‘overcivilization’ and enervations of body and mind. It is distinguished by a yearning for a romanticized past, before modern technology and specialized labor and leisure are claimed to have brought about a decadent age of inefficiency and laziness. It glosses over, and even valorizes relationships to nature that are historically and culturally related to colonialism, often identifying universal human experience in their place.

CrossFit represents a kindred site for pursuing this idea further. Like mud running, CrossFit promotes functional fitness and a sense of community that is said to be lacking in other forms of sport – running especially - and society at large. And like mud running, it roots its philosophy for optimal life, labor and leisure in an idea about how human beings used to move, eat and interact with the world and each other. The rise of CrossFit is described by *New York Times* journalist J.C. Herz (2014) as signaling the ‘Primal Future of Fitness’: perhaps a more user-friendly turn of phrase than the one I’ve adopted, but a similar idea in any case. CrossFit exemplifies the renaissance of physical culture through almost identical claims to mud running about the primordially of outright exertion, exhaustion and camaraderie. Whereas the rise of the gymnasium is aligned with that of industrialism – ‘the rise of the machines: Gym circuits and junk fitness,’ according to Herz – CrossFit is suggested to be different in everything from its economic model to its commitment to community. And this affinity between mud running and CrossFit has proved a profitable one. As Herz (2014) acknowledges in a brief commentary on obstacle racing in relation to the CrossFit industry, “Walk through the door of any CrossFit box for an introductory class, and what do you see on the desk? Flyers for an obstacle course” (183).

While Herz waxes lyrical about the virtues of CrossFit and its capacity to awaken our primordial drives, there is a scarcity of scholarly research on this fitness phenomena (but see Dawson, 2015). What I have offered in this dissertation is the beginnings of an analysis that places these principles – community, humanity, and ascetic, exhaustive exercise – under critical scrutiny. Whereas Robert Putnam famously observed that Americans were increasingly bowling alone (2000), no longer in leagues but as a solitary

activity, CrossFit's claim is to a truly collegial fitness experience where members are no longer consigned to training 'together alone' (cf. Dawson, 2015). What kind of community is CrossFit; is it really the 'force of human connection' (Belger, 2012) that unites its millions of members across the globe, or is that itself a collective viewed through a humanistic lens that might benefit from a posthumanist analysis?

### ***Beyond Dualisms, Beyond Critique***

The critique of the modernist attitude to sports and physical culture, expressed through versions of this domineering attitude to nature and/of the body, was the focus of Chapter Two. There I outlined a dualistic tendency in studies of sport and physical culture between embodied practices in which nature is conquered, and those that encourage and are even said to help foster a communion with nature. I suggested that these perspectives are in many ways two sides of the same humanistic coin, insofar as both reify nature as a distinctive (or 'pure') category, and neither afford natures their full ontological dues.

This analysis was motivated by a well-established concern with modernist fantasies that frame nature as a sacred, passive, feminized entity in need of human salvation and preservation. My localized concern was with the complicity of 'alternative' sporting activities and experiences, such as surfing, snowboarding, or mud running, and many scholarly accounts about them, in sustaining myths about some lost primordially that humans must revive, or in reanimating affect through kinship with nature in a disenchanted world.

The discussion staged in this interlude chapter is not so much a critique as an

attempt to move beyond critique (cf. Latour, 2004b), or rather, to move towards generative accounts of socio-natural life worlds. While its primary purpose was therefore to prepare the ground for Chapter Three, it also offers departure points for posthumanist studies of sport and physical culture that engage with environmental studies, and questions of natures conceived non-dualistically and non-reductively.

Such studies are already underway. Stoddart's (2012) work on the political ecology of skiing makes a substantive contribution, in which he plots the skiing industry as a natural-cultural-technological imbroglio: (ideas about) pristine peaks and the mountainous sublime meet with ski chairs, poles and a whole host of technologies that are shown to make mountain resorts pleasurable and profitable. Stoddart demonstrates the complex interplay between tools, substances and ideals that work to purify mountain scenes, as well as the economic, cultural and political implications of adventure tourism. Millington and Wilson (2014) have written widely about golf and the environment, including how animals, plants and chemicals – pests and pesticides – have been ambiguously conceived and treated in the history of North America's golf industry. Elsewhere, writing from outside of the sociology of sport, Anderson's (2012) study of the surfed wave as a convergence of body and world sets out to "theorize from the sea" (571) via Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory, and Bull's (2009) writing on angling conceives streams as "intersections between urban/rural, nature/culture, self/other, internal/external and [as flowing] through the concepts of modernity" (459).

The discussion staged in Chapter Two shares with and is enriched by these analyses of golf, skiing and other sports that conjure images and associations with a sublime naturality: from pristine greens to white mountain tops. I have wondered, though,

if the empirical focus of these analyses on sports in which nature is *normatively conspicuous* might perpetuate the notion that some sports – those where nature is produced as pure and idyllic – are more natural than others. It is important to consider also the ecologies of modern, urban, ostensibly non-natural sports, such as swimming and basketball, if the political concern is broader ecological (socio-environmental) well-being. Indoor sports, so often deemed sites of disenchanting rationality and sterility, also teem with life, and yet studies of these cultural spaces tend to “perpetuate this fallacy of enclosure, the notion that indoor spaces may be physically and socially isolated from the world at large” (Biehler and Simon, 2010, 175). Just as the activists in Wheaton’s (2007) study of Surfers Against Sewage became politically motivated once the purity of the beach was visibly disturbed by the emergence of waste, so it might be for practitioners in ‘modern’ sports who come to see the nature entangled in their cultures. After all, these ‘modern’ sports in urban centres and stadia also form complex ecologies where nature is no less real, present, or consequential, despite its manifestation in less ‘sublime’ form than among mountains, valleys, and oceans. Without the aura of naturality vicariously bestowed upon ‘alternative’ and anti-modern sports through performative tales of disenchantment and authenticity, their naturalcultural entanglements are perhaps especially vital to chart.

Of course the same critique could be leveled at a study of mud running, an embodied practice that explicitly, in name and form, combines nature and culture in spectacularized, ‘sublime’ settings among mountains, valleys, fields and deserts. Wary of this, Chapter Three is in part an attempt to illustrate natures at their most mundane, in spite of the spectacular scenes unfolding in Tough Mudder events. I sought to breach the

conquering-communion dualism identified in Chapter Two by ‘reassembling’ the scenes I encountered at Tough Mudder in concert with Actor-Network Theory and ‘new’ materialist philosophies. The idea here was to confront journeys of overcoming in mud running as radically dependent on and distributed among histories, geographies, substances, forces and processes that rupture the corporeal sovereignty and agency of the adventure hero, as well as notions that the camaraderie on show in mud running events is simply a spontaneous display of togetherness, a benevolent human nature, or feats of human endurance and perseverance.

The broadest aim of this chapter was to develop a conversation between those who study somatic practices and those who theorize how objects – or things conventionally designated as ‘non-human’ - collude in social life. Just as crucial a contribution is the chapter’s reconsideration of what constitutes the ‘physical’ in physical culture. In sports, for example, the moving body has long been recognized as “the most striking symbol, as well as constituting the material core of sporting activity” (Hargreaves, 1987, 141). This approach has great currency and many precedents in studies of sport, on account of the much storied ‘return to the body’ in social theory positioning corporeality as the crucial mediator between self and society (Frank, 1990; Turner, 1984). Likewise in all forms of physical culture, not just sports but exercise, dance, and other movement practices, the received wisdom is that “the physical body - the way it moves, is represented, has meanings assigned to it, and is imbued with power - is central” (Vertinsky, cited in Smishek, 2004, 1). The centrality of the body is also the touchstone for research in the fledgling field of physical cultural studies. Whereas much of the sociology of sport has heeded the significance of corporeality to sporting practices, physical cultural studies

goes further in assuming “the body - and even more specifically the active body - as the central focus of its intellectual labor” (Silk and Andrews, 2011, 7). This somatic turn has no doubt been politically as well as intellectually productive for these scholarly fields, and the academics therein, within the social sciences and humanities. For whereas “[t]here was arguably a time when researchers interested in the history of sport, bodily training or physical culture, found themselves on the periphery of broader issues and debates in contemporary social theory and historiography,” fervor for all things corporeal in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries has moved “the study of sport and physical culture...to the center of the action” (Gruneau, in press).

While this may well be the case, there is an implicit anthropocentrism that comes with quite literally centring the human body as the focus of theoretical and empirical attention. Put another way, I have wondered whether this centripetal pull towards ‘the body’ and embodiment has somewhat deflected attention from the nature too often deemed ‘outside’ of it? This project addresses the vexing question of what to ‘do’ with the moving body in light of posthumanist interventions; of how to apprehend the body without centring ‘it’ unduly in ways that conform to inhibitive dualisms, and forlornly tame its becomings. Actor-network theory, ‘new’ materialist philosophy and their posthumanist cousins aid my attempts to retain a focus on corporeality in all its naturalcultural (Haraway, 2003) complexity, but also, and crucially, to do so without deflecting attention from the biological composition of the body or the natures deemed ‘outside’ of bodily borders.<sup>44</sup> For just as the mind and body are inextricable - so the (active) body and somatic practices are always already ‘becoming-with’ their worldly

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<sup>44</sup> Holly Thorpe (2015) and Pirkko Markula (2014) have also written recently on the materiality of embodied practices in ways that inform and extend the ambitions of this project.

surroundings.<sup>45</sup> This contribution of this chapter is to reconfigure understandings of the moving body as a theoretical and agential force, and mud running is an apposite site for this task precisely because of its emphasis on the power of all-comers to overcome mud-laden obstacle courses.

### ***Obstacle Courses and Affective Experience***

My efforts to this point in the study were towards unpacking fantasies of sovereign life, heroic humanism and corporeal being as they manifest in a practice and industry that trades precisely on these fantasies. I adopted generative methods that privilege creative reassembly rather than destructive disassembly, so as to not deny the possibility of ‘overcoming obstacles’ but to illustrate instead how this process is embedded in historical, technological and socio-natural imbroglios.

In Chapter Four, I momentarily turn to matters of mud running experience, but do so mostly to elaborate the need for another posthumanist manoeuvre in order to understand how these experiences are mediated and shared beyond the *anthropos*. To this end, the Chapter engages with theories of affect and ideology to illustrate the limits of atomistic analyses of cultural practices. I argue that the invocation of a transcendental ‘outside’ – a culture engulfing a subculture, or the penetration of ideology by non-normative practices, for instance – not only reproduces the classic conundrum of where objects of analysis end and begin, but also risks fixing the categories of analysis to what is observed within one or both of these imposed realms.

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<sup>45</sup> Further clarification of the monistic ‘new’ materialist position on mind and body comes from Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012), who note that “[t]he mind is always already material (the mind is an idea of the body), how matter is necessarily something of the mind (the mind has the body as its object), and how nature and culture are always already “naturecultures” (Donna Haraway’s term)” (48).

The promise of affect theory for apprehending experience, signaled in Chapter Four, is then pursued in Chapter Five. In this final Chapter I sought to approach mud running's emotional appeal – its sensational qualities beyond the promotional fanfare of risk and pain – through an engagement with affect theory in keeping with the sensibilities of posthumanism. Thus, instead of mining the significance of individual mud running experiences in pursuit of 'why people do it' – a move that risks reifying what Berlant (2011) calls the "fantasy of sovereign life" (7) – I sought to describe the ways in which encounters with the course generate particular affective registers.

The mythologized primordality of mud once again becomes significant here insofar as it exceeds – without transcending - its material stickiness and symbolic significations in eliciting an atavistic nostalgia for a premodern paradise lost, as well as the innocence and playfulness of childhood. These renditions of the past, premised on a romantic rekindling of our history as hominids and an idealized rendition of youth, harness the story of Western civilization to offer the course and its traversing a sense of self-contained continuity and achievement. This discussion illustrates how muddy obstacle courses give the past palpable form in the affective present, offering semblances of stability and simplicity in otherwise turbulent worlds.

I make a related argument about the relationship between mud running obstacle courses and militarism, which meditates on the capacity of these events to affirm positive associations with and among wounded military personnel, through affective registers such as compassion, mimesis and inspiration. There is a broader argument that needs unpacking here about militarism beyond these events, one for which this analysis of "positive affects" in mud running paves the way. Suffice it to say that obstacle courses

articulate wounded soldiers and their endeavours to pleasurable, progressive emotions – not only fear, anger and social control - that are rarely theorized by cultural and sports studies scholars as part of militarization.

Chapter Five recuperates the analytic theme of the project by exploring the affective capacities of non-human materialities in physical culture. Doing so helped illustrate that pain and suffering are not the exclusive categories of affective experience in mud running events; nostalgia, mimesis, compassion and inspiration are also evoked in these spaces and attach to histories, memories, substances, bodies, and other collaborators near and far. In addition, though, I make a related contention, one not fully elaborated therein but that bears emphasis by way of conclusion. These affective states– nostalgia, mimesis and so forth – are eclectic, yet share in informing a certain *genre* of experience, one that finds expression in my title. The infrastructure of the obstacle course is linear, progressive, predetermined, spatially contained and most importantly surmountable; it materializes an heroic mode of overcoming adversity in which grit and ascetic endeavour are shown, and felt, to be an efficacious approach to life’s myriad problems. This is the fallacy of liberal democratic society, premised on the founding principles of liberal humanist ontology, and it is a blueprint for success that once carried greater currency than in our historical present. These studies are experiments that refuse to take that story at its word, while also refusing to only offer epistemological correctives to a single ontological infrastructure. Faced with sovereign subjects, they seek out their muddy entanglements with mundane objects; confronted with fearsome affects, they invoke pleasure and its politics; ostensibly clean origin stories are recast in their messy becomings.

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