

# Dirty Theory: Sketches of an Anthropological Account of Mountain Biking

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## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Dr. Bascom Guffin's Sociology-Anthropology 101 course *Introduction to Anthropology*. This paper asked students to "focus an anthropological lens on their lives." It challenged them to use the anthropological knowledge and stance they developed in the class to investigate some aspect of their own lived experience. They had to bring to bear theories and concepts from at least two course readings as well as an outside scholarly source, using them to create a singular, coherent argument. The paper uses Chicago citation style.

## The Approach: Introductions

On a dreary day in March of 2017 I load my bike and dog into the car and drive across town to a place above the local university where the combination of steep forested slopes, well maintained dirt roads, and easy access from town have contributed to an explosion of mountain bike specific trail building. We are a group of four: three humans, and one dog. Of the humans, all three are riders, yet one is also a trail builder and our guide for today – he arranged this ride with the promise of showing us a secret project he's been working on, and we're humming with excitement at the chance to experience this fresh trail. We start our ride like most, with a long climb to the top of the hill – trail building in mountain biking tends to be focussed on the descent, with the climbs often handled by pre-existing dirt roads, and this one is no different.

The conversation on the climb is almost entirely focussed on our immediate surroundings, and our attention rarely strays from the pain in our legs and the climb ahead of us. Mountain biking is often a vigorously de-intellectualised activity, strongly focussed on the embodied experience, and lacking any significant reflection on the ways in which its cultural practices can be better understood through social theory. In this paper I sketch some ways in which this could be remedied, looking at several aspects of the sport and its cultural practices through an anthropological lens. Just as my writing will draw from several bodies of theory, so to the ride I describe contains several rides within itself: it is a portmanteau of real events, which nonetheless describes a series of scenes that should be recognisable to anyone who has spent time amongst mountain bikers.

#### The Trail Head: The Power of Secrecy

After forty minutes or so of steady pedalling we pull up at a seemingly innocuous spot, with thick forest on either side there is no obvious indication of significance to this space. However, our guide for the day has seen markers that are invisible to us, and knows this spot well. This is often the way with secret trails such as the one we've been promised today: hidden away in the woods, their start and finish points are all but invisible to those without the knowledge of their existence and the experience of riding them, and this knowledge and experience is often a carefully guarded secret, to be transmitted in person, and in place, only. In this way, trail knowledge can be seen as intimately experiential – it is only through the embodied experience of riding or building the trail that one gets to know of its location.

We can see in this Mills' discussion of how, for Foucault, the “conventional view of knowledge [...] is that it is created by a series of isolated creative geniuses”<sup>1</sup>; similarly, for our needs, the conventional view of trails is that they are created by a series of isolated creative builders. There are iconic trail builders,<sup>2</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 67.

<sup>2</sup> North Vancouver's Digger (aka Todd Fiander) is perhaps the exemplary example.

there are local heroes known only in their own towns, and often only by name to a select group of riders (in fact, to jump ahead a little, the knowledge of the identity of a trail builder can be a secondary form of power in itself). The trail builder carries an almost mythic weight in mountain biking, but, however famous (or not) the trail builder may be, they still operate within the material conditions of the cultural and physical landscape in which they build: forestry activity builds dirt roads to access terrain; local laws and customs allow access to wild land, and turn a blind eye to trail building; bike technology progresses to make previously untenable terrain accessible to the average rider. This is a history of trails that is “more anonymous, institutionalised and rule governed”<sup>3</sup> than the common perception of ‘great men’<sup>4</sup> advancing the terrain available for riders; it is a history of trails that is far more in-line with the history of knowledge that Foucault was extending throughout his work, and as such, the history – and contemporaneity – of trails is intricately tied to power. Foucault discusses how “knowledge and power are integrated with one another”<sup>5</sup>, in fact “it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power”<sup>6</sup>. In light of this we can see something of the reasoning for the secrecy around many trails: by keeping the trail secret the builder hopes to retain control over the knowledge of the trail, and in doing so there is a coalescing of power around the builder. The knowledge, and by extension the power, centre around the builder for as long as the trail remains secret. In many ways then, the mythology around the trail builder can be read not through their bringing of the trail into existence, but through their monopoly of the knowledge of the trail.

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<sup>3</sup> Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 68.

<sup>4</sup> While many women take part in trail building and maintenance, nearly all well-known trail builders are still men. There are many different ways we can look at this: from the ways in which builders are remembered based on their gender, to the social forces that encourage differing modes of interaction with the community for men and women. Taking a Foucauldian view of the history of trails could be said to remedy this imbalance in some way.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 1st American ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 52.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault and Gordon, 52.

This is not to suggest that trail builders keep knowledge of trails secret explicitly to gain power; there is certainly a more nuanced behaviour going on here, that can be seen in the reasoning given by our builder/guide when introducing us to the trail we're about to ride: as we pick up our bikes (to minimise the evidence of our passing) and walk straight into the undergrowth, he talks about the fragile nature of the trail, its soft topsoil layer – referred to as “loam” – can be destroyed by too many tyres, and so there is a need to restrict access to a small subset of riders who have the skill required to minimise skidding or overly damaging the trail. In this way, the power given by the restriction of knowledge is utilised to protect the trail itself, but in its protection the trail becomes exclusionary, restricting access to only those who have connections to the builder themselves. This Foucauldian notion of the relation between power and knowledge, where it is those with knowledge that have power, and the having of power that constructs knowledge, is interesting to counterpoint with the construction of the power/knowledge relation seen in Graeber's notion of “interpretative labor”<sup>7</sup> – a concept based heavily on Feminist Standpoint Theory<sup>8</sup> - where those without power are forced to generate knowledge about those with power in order to navigate their world. Graeber places this in the context of gender relations, where he describes how “women are always expected to imagine what things look like from a male point of view. Men are almost never expected to reciprocate.”<sup>9</sup> In light of our discussion here, we can see how the non-builder rider

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<sup>7</sup> David Graeber, ‘Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy, and Interpretive Labor. The 2006 Malinowski Memorial Lecture.’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 2 (19 December 2012): 117, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau2.2.007>.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting, in light of the Foucauldian view of knowledge, to notice that Foucault's notion of power/knowledge is attributed to a single “great man”, while Standpoint Theory must be situated within an entire body of Feminist theory that cannot be separated from its material conditions of production. In this light, it is somewhat unfortunate that it is Graeber who has provided the best quotations for my reference here.

<sup>9</sup> Graeber, ‘Dead Zones of the Imagination’, 117.

is required to take on interpretative labour in order to understand the builder, so that they may gain access to this inner circle who are granted knowledge of the trail. The two notions of the knowledge/power relation here, that at first seem quite contradictory, in fact intertwine and work together in this context: it is through our interpretative labour in understanding the builder/guide, and in participating in the work of “imaginative identification”<sup>10</sup> to understand the physical work that has gone into the construction of the trail, as well as the privileged position that we understand the builder to hold because of this, that we are now being led through the deep forest and into the knowledge of the location of the trail. Perhaps we can see this as the interplay of emotional and factual knowledge, due to our lack of power we have felt the need to conduct interpretative labour to construct emotional knowledge that has, in turn, led us to be granted factual knowledge, which, in its turn, has given us access to a modicum of power. Trail building then, in this reading, is as much about the control of knowledge, and therefore power, as it is about the physicality of the building process itself. By culturally focussing on the individual given credit for the build, we naturalise the knowledge/power structure, and do not challenge the exclusionary nature of this process. In particular the “great man” view of trail building tends to focus attention on men, and often excludes women from the cultural capital of secret trails, such as the one we’re about to ride.

#### Dropping In: The Trail and Technology

After a short hike we push through some bushes to emerge onto a clearly defined trail that starts from nothing but undergrowth, and disappears away from us down the hill. We begin the process of checking our bikes, tweaking controls, and selecting gears – it’s a dance that we perform almost mechanically, ensuring our tool is ready for the trail. The other non-builder rider makes a comment about my bike, asking a question about how a new piece of technology I’m trying is working for me. This is a pretty common occurrence: as riders, we spend a lot of time discussing the technology of our bikes, fetishizing the constant new advances that

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<sup>10</sup> Graeber, 117.

appear. However, we could argue that the bike is only one element of technology that is key to our experience today, the trail before us could be considered technology in itself: as a tool built by humans, in order to ease passage through the forest, it can in many ways fit Ingold's depiction of technology as a tool that mediates and distances humans from the environment,<sup>11</sup> as it allows us to pass through the forest without consideration for the undergrowth, without worry about the risk of cliffs or blind gulleys; it allows us to employ the technology of the bike in an environment that would otherwise be hostile to it. More so, as can be seen in the view of trail builders, we fetishize the trail as other from its surroundings, it is not so much a part of the terrain as it is a layer over the terrain, a layer that is built not directly by the hands of the builder, but mediated through trail tools – from the simple shovel to the mechanized digger. We start to see here a trail of technology that constitutes the experience of the rider: the rider's experience of the trail is mediated by the technology of the bike, just as the trail is itself a technology that mediates between bike/rider and landscape; beyond that, the trail tools are a technology that mediates between builder and landscape.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, as we take our first pedal strokes and begin to descend the trail, much of this line of argument seems to slip away. Can we really say that the trail is a technology that is “completely independent both of the subjective identity of its human carriers and of the specific contexts of its application”<sup>13</sup> when riding it feels so completely embedded in our experience? Ingold's argument that technology is a process of “progressive cutting out of technical from social relations”<sup>14</sup> seems completely out of place in the complex social position that the trail holds, as well as the intimate experience of the forest that it creates. Riding this trail at speed gives the feeling of the bike being connected to the self – less a mediating factor between the rider and the trail, and more one that draws us closer to the trail and

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<sup>11</sup>Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling & Skill* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> And, of course, the bike itself has a long complex chain of technologies that go into its existence.

<sup>13</sup> Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 315.

<sup>14</sup> Ingold, 314.

the forest, the bike becomes a tool that “delivers a force that is personal rather than mechanical”<sup>15</sup> as it enables, and constructs, the embodied techniques of the rider. Perhaps a key to this understanding comes from the lack of use value of the mountain bike: this is not a tool designed to do a job that would otherwise be done by a human<sup>16</sup> – rather it is constructing an entirely new technique and experience.

### Gaining Speed: Embodied Practice of Riding

That experience starts to become more intense as we gain speed. We fly down the trail with tyres skipping over roots, working patches of traction to maintain control. Spotting a corner ahead I instinctively start to scrub speed: my fingers reacting on the brake levers, keeping the tyres just at the edge of sliding; my heels dropping to increase traction; my body beginning to ready itself for the turn. All of this happens simultaneously and without conscious thought, my body reacting almost on its own, existing within a technique of movement that has been learned over a long time.<sup>17</sup> I spot the rider in front of me setting up for the corner in much the same way – body low over the bike, back flat, heels down – although neither of us have been directly taught these techniques, we move in a similar way. There is, of course, an efficiency to moving like this, an effectiveness that is hard to avoid if you move the craft of riding along. But there is also an amount of habitus here: were you to watch bikers whose skills were built riding road bikes you would see a different series of techniques, as the skills they developed fit the bikes that they learned on. Much like Mauss’ story of the English troops that could not use the French spades, the techniques of biking are specific to the bike,

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<sup>15</sup> Ingold, 314.

<sup>16</sup> Jim Johnson, ‘Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer’, *Social Problems* 35, no. 3 (1988): 298–310, <https://doi.org/10.2307/800624>.

<sup>17</sup> Marcel Mauss, ‘Techniques of the Body’, *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973): 70–88.

and also to the trails: a rider versed in the trails of British Columbia would not find their techniques apply as well in California.<sup>18</sup>

As we come out of this turn we accelerate faster downhill, the trail turning steeper and rougher, each of us digging into our learned techniques to carry speed through the terrain. Flicking our bikes around a small corner we find ourselves crossing a different trail, where our trail is narrow, rough, and difficult to ride, the trail we cross is wide, smooth, and far less challenging. We can see here some of the evidence of the work that the trail building tools are doing, not just in making the job of the builder easier, but also that of the rider. The narrower trail was built with hand tools – shovels, picks, mattocks – so the work is more strenuous for the builder, but it also puts more work onto the rider. The trail we are crossing was built with a machine that made easy work for the builder, but also for the rider, here the trail can be enjoyed by riders with far less learned technique, with much of the skill of riding delegated to the machine.<sup>19</sup>

#### The Bottom: Conclusion

Soon enough we reach the bottom of the trail. As we talk at the bottom, there is no more discussion of the technical features of our bikes. Discussion now is around the experience of riding the trail, as if the process itself has washed away the technology and instead returned the focus to the techniques and experiences of the ride. In many ways the ride itself seemed to be progressively removing technology from the experience, bathing the riders in the joy of technique, and helping them connect with the landscape – the act of riding makes the subject central, and the machine of the bike becomes an extension of the self.<sup>20</sup> A reversal of the transition from technique to technology that Ingold describes allows us to come closer to the natural world, existing for a time in a pure embodied experience that removes all concern about the technological world.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, 'Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together'.

<sup>20</sup> Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 316–17.

<sup>21</sup> Ingold, 316–17.



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