



OUR PROP MUD

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‘Despised mud, I love you. I love you because people scorn you. / May my writing, literal mud, splash the faces of those who disparage you!’ — Francis Ponge [1]

At the Cardiff Arms Park at 15:57, on Saturday 24th January 1970, the weather was thick and the playing field was muddy. The live televised video feed of the rugby match looks like it was filmed at night [2]. The overhead lamps that appear in shot were not on. The cameras track across and through the heavy atmosphere (fog, smog?) attempting to follow the action, trying to cut through the weather. They can’t defy it, they are seized, wrested by it, as the players are too, and the fans were, and we are, now. Everything is a struggle. The conditions are wrong.

While soil is a material component of playing sport on any grass field, on this day in Cardiff, with the addition of moisture, mud rose, undead. It’s always there, a dormant threat. Pounded from the ground beneath the neat grass, mud distributed itself onto the surface of the match: the players, our screens. Mud’s method of composition — of distribution: smearing.

‘Muddy’ describes the players’ bodies, their clothes, the condition of the pitch and the image that represents these conditions. Muddy describes this environment where everything is drawn together in the soup of the

atmosphere. A glorious indeterminacy that agitates, frustrates. In the video feed, the players are rendered in 2D grey shadows. They are uniform in mud, silhouettes on the screen.

Normally players skid or tumble when they are not vertical and still moving. Now, with the loss of grip, the players slip and slide when attempting to slow down or alter their course. They pile over and on top of each other, sliding past their targets. Their means of contact and interchange is radically altered. Often they become stuck together and at other times they don't quite make the intended contact. One player's left leg slides out in front, too far, leaving no support for the rest of his body. He falls backwards, leaving streaks across the pitch. The difference between skidding and sliding: lubrication. They miss their points, their goals. Is this why there was no winning side? (They drew!) The obfuscation of mud, the meddling of skill into farce made all players equal in their loss.

The referee doesn't figure in the mud. He wears a luminous (angelic) white shirt. He doesn't touch the players, he doesn't have a side. His role is to objectively uphold the rules of the game. His participation premises theirs. His semblance tells us that an attempt at following rules is being made, despite the compromises and opacity brought on by the mud and the atmosphere. He symbolises the interface between us and the players, between us and the mud. Tracking the foul interrelations beneath him, he is in constant danger of getting dirty, of having his symbolic role taken off him.

The boundaries of the teams' sense of self were compromised by the mud: the application of the mud messes up the division between players. Their squad numbers taken away, their teams' fidelity is occluded. Mud messes up the divisions in the audience, who are supporters of either side, because we can't tell who belongs to which team now that the colour of their shirts and identifiable bodily features have been covered. Viewers at home had their teams jumbled. Also messed up are the divisions between insider (specialist) and outsider (non-specialist) audience, who, despite not knowing anything of rugby, are drawn into the spectacle. Attention is divested from the meeting of opposing sides onto the shared condition of play, of mess. With the loss of the target (winning/making the other side lose) comes the sharing of the struggle. Those (me) who have no knowledge of rugby or these teams (Wales and South Africa) are suddenly included, invited by the play of the mud. Something is taken here and something is given. Some try to escape mud (literal and otherwise) and some are drawn to it!

Teams are transformed into orientations. Despite the loss of dexterity, fumbling, falling, slipping, and missing, the players orientate themselves toward one side of the pitch as a way to demonstrate fidelity. Depending on the viewer the mud may enhance heterosexual ideals of masculinity: conquering extreme conditions, sustaining the game despite the added challenge, enjoyment of injuries and benchmarks of strength and endurance. My father played rugby when he was my age; he gleefully recounts mud getting lodged behind his eyes and how he had to have it washed out in hospital.

Another viewer may feel the common frisson of homosexual desire in male sport, they may see the mud as fertile ground for gay readings and imaginaries. It's not new that mud has lent its vocabulary to conflicting homosexual, heterosexual, and homophobic sexual expressions: muddy fuck, mud-packer, mud snake. The threat of acknowledgement of its metaphorical home in anal activity is constant.

Mud is an open word, with many potential uses and destinations. Mud (earth plus water) is also a fairly generic composition. This openness tends to allow it to be easily used by others, for their own purposes. One of the most fertile grounds for mud is in its application as an adjective, synonym, and metaphor [3]. These summon its politics of disintegration, contagion, inaccessible visibility, and its home in mess and filth. When used as a synonym for shit, the word temporarily delays and shields what is meant or referred to. The term 'mud packer', for example, veils its meaning: 'someone who has anal sex'. This seems to perpetuate fear, by using the implicit name. Being named a 'mud packer' is something one should be afraid of, never mind the sex act itself! The transgression signalled by the summoning of anal sex reminds us that it is, still, a transgression. *Anal sex is abject sex* is the logic that is repeated. These meanings are suspended in the course of language, and like silt (one of mud's ways of moving) that bobs along in the river, being distributed freely and aimlessly by the water, mud is indiscriminate and therefore reaches very different destinations (homophobia/homosexuality).

Gareth Thomas's 2014 autobiography *Proud* rewrites the famous rugby player's previous straight 2007 autobiography *Alfie!: The Gareth Thomas Story* [4–5]. The 2007 cover features a toothless Gareth screaming violently at

the viewer. He is fucking wired and his eyes are fixed on us. His bald head flesh looks cooked from exertion, it is shiny, wet, and boiled-red. It sticks out of the book cover, leaning into us viewers, threatening contact with its phallic violence. His mouth is bloody, his few teeth, covered in a gum shield, brashly evidence the types of contact his head has previously had. His lips and cheek have blood smeared on them. It is unclear whose this is, or whether it matters.

The 2014 gay revision features a softly-lit, pastel-toned, stubble-faced, calm Gareth with crystal clear blue eyes on the cover. Soft replaces hard, contemplation replaces knee-jerk violence, serenity replaces turmoil, professionalism instead of impulsiveness, repose instead of penetration.

For Gareth Thomas everything seems certain, intentional, and professional: his straightness revised as gayness is weighed up and quantified through an acknowledgment of guilt. In *Proud* he recounts his friend catching him out in a lie. Gareth says he had been out on the water the previous night, but his friend, who suspected he hadn't, went to Gareth's jet ski and licked the propellers. When they didn't taste salty he had caught Gareth out. Gareth captures this intense act of physical and sexual (licking, tasting his alibi) surveillance in his book, but spins it as a good example of his 'honourable' willingness to own up to how he lied to his friends and family. It demonstrates how he tried to become whole again through reconstituting something previously excluded [6].

After feeling exhausted by the conventionality in Gareth Thomas's biographic works I fled to find archival footage of him, to see whether divergent interpretations might be found in visual material. While working my way through an eBay haul of Welsh rugby DVDs I became stuck on a scene starring Gareth Edwards — another famous Welsh rugby player, from an older generation. The scene that stopped me was the Cardiff Park Arms rugby match from 1970, transformed by the unrelenting appearance of mud. Ironically, mud allowed me to see clearer. The scene clarified and exposed some of what I was interested in in Gareth Thomas. Mud's addition messed up rugby's conventional surface and allowed a view onto the base material composition of the game: people's bodies in relation. These kinds of political derivatives seem far more generative and uncertain than Gareth Thomas's recycled admissions of guilt and fault.

Gareth Thomas scorns himself. He calls himself a liar, a thief, a cheat, a bad character actor, a conniver [7]. This makes getting close to him troublesome — he constantly cleans himself up for us. It's suspicious how easily his cock

pics can be found online. If Gareth Edwards gets muddy in January 1970, Gareth Thomas assumes he *is* mud. Not because he is gay but because he accounts for it in a Christian sense — with repentance.

In 2019 a group of journalists threatened to out Gareth Thomas as being HIV positive. In order to undercut their revelation he trained for the 140-mile Ironman triathlon, and planned a range of publicity about his HIV status to coincide with his completion of the race. His way of proving that someone with HIV can still be one of the strongest people on the planet. One thing balances another — there is never a deficit; he has a wife, then a husband.

My distraction with Gareth Edwards demonstrates the instability in my own methodology: I was looking for gay Gareth but got delayed with straight Gareth. I found something I wasn't looking for. This doesn't just point out that I'm a messy artist but also, I hope, how I have come to value the mess and its intrinsic place in art practice. These two men are inextricably bound together through conventions of masculinity (and Welsh rugby), but I further bind them together because one allows me to undo the other. I could have easily stayed within the confines of my gay rugby star. But Gareth Edwards has allowed me to rub up against the disintegration of the boundaries of sexual desire. Mud has destabilised rugby far more successfully than the cliché of the heterosexual sports player eliciting gay desire.

We all lean on others in order to make work. Even though neither of the Gareths played the official position of prop in their rugby careers, they both propped *me* up. The position of prop is part of the front line of defence in the game and largely based upon the abilities to both physically obstruct the opposing side as well as lift lighter players up to catch the ball. Props make openings for faster and more agile players to exploit. The role of prop is played by those who are physically strongest. These are not the attributes that drew me to my Gareths, nor those that allowed them to prop me up.

Academics often prefer to call their props and those who support their work references or sources. A prop suggests relations based on need, support, and limited capacities. It seems to include intimacy and a social function, even social organisation. References can be allies too, and comrades, they can be friends and lovers, where the division between our self and our reference is more overtly compromised.

The use of references and citational practices in contemporary art practice is often non-existent [8]. The anxiety around betraying influence is perhaps a worry about it being seen as a sign of lack of originality. But this comes at the expense of social relations: if our props are not identified, how can they be included? In much academic work, to have good border integrity from one's sources is proof of not plagiarizing. This kind of inverted demonstration (your work is original because you haven't stolen) is labour undertaken at the expense of inventing new muddy and artistic interfaces between ourselves and others.

1. Francis Ponge, *Unfinished Ode to Mud*, transl. by Beverley Bie Brahic (London: CB editions, 2008). I heard about Ponge from Maria Fusco who brought along one of his poems in a collection of items in a folder, which she wryly opened as she shared quotes and reflections on them during an Art Writing seminar at Whitechapel Gallery in 2012. Her folder action was as potent as its contents for me. How did she decide what to share and when? Why did she leave some items inside, while others were shared? This is someone who has experience in creating desire through withdrawal, of the erotics of pedagogy, I felt.
2. *The Story of Gareth Edwards* (DVD), Go Entertainment Group, 2009, 01:11:37–01:12:56.
3. Although soil scientists may disagree, they have been known to cherish the imaginary and sensorial qualities of their subject. At the 2007 annual German Soil Society conference in Dresden, Alexandra Toland and Gerd Wessolek's survey of the attendees found that more than eighty percent confessed to owning private collections of soil samples for 'aesthetic' reasons. Alexandra Toland and Gerd Wessolek, 'Core Samples of the Sublime — On the Aesthetics of Dirt', in *Soil and Culture*, ed. by Edward R. Landa and Christian Feller (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), pp. 239–57.
4. Gareth Thomas, *Proud* (London: Ebury Press, 2014).
5. Gareth Thomas with Delme Parfitt, *Alfie!: The Gareth Thomas Story* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2007).
6. Gareth Thomas, *Proud*, p. 262.
7. Gareth Thomas, *Proud*, pp. 3; 8; 44; 84; 95; 96; 297; 302.
8. It is customary to have credits in catalogues or at the end of press releases, but these are often restricted to those who physically or organisationally helped, which conveniently leaves artistic authorship singularly intact.