

**‘Nature doesn’t care that we’re there’: Re-Symbolizing  
Nature’s ‘Natural’ Contingency**

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# ‘Nature doesn’t care that we’re there’: Re-Symbolizing Nature’s ‘Natural’ Contingency

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## Abstract

This article draws upon the work of Timothy Morton and Slavoj Žižek in order to critically examine how mountain bike trail builders orientated themselves within nature relations. Beginning with a discussion of the key ontological differences between Morton’s object-oriented ontology and Žižek’s blend of Hegelian-Lacanianism, we explore how Morton’s dark ecology and Žižek’s account of the radical contingency of nature, can offer parallel paths to achieving an ecological awareness that neither idealises nor mythologises nature, but instead, acknowledges its strange (Morton) and contingent (Žižek) form. Empirically, we support this theoretical approach in interviews with twenty mountain bike trail builders. These interviews depicted an approach to trail building that was ambivalently formed in/with the contingency of nature. In doing so, the trail builders acted with a sense of temporal awareness that accepted the radical openness of nature, presenting a ‘symbolic framework’ that was amiable to nature’s ambivalent, strange and contingent form. In conclusion, we argue that we should not lose sight of the ambivalences and strange surprises that emanate from our collective and unpredictable attempts to symbolize nature and that such knowledge can coincide with Morton’s ‘dark ecology’ – an ecological awareness that remains radically open to our ecological existence.

## Keywords

Morton, Žižek, trail building, objet petit a, object-oriented ontology, dark ecology

## Introduction

In recent years there has been a widespread backlash against the ‘anthropocentric’, ‘human exceptionalist’ and ‘arrogant humanist’ bias of much academic scholarship on political ecology (Escobar 1999; Ingold 2000; Krauss 2013; Morton 2007; Sponheim 2007; Swyngedouw 2015). Indeed, a number of thinkers have called for a more ‘ecocentric’ approach, defined by an attempt to place nature, ‘writ large’, at the centre of moral, political and scientific concern (Sutton 2004). A key motivation for scholars is to develop an ecologically informed notion of ‘relatedness’, according to which all organisms, both human and non-human, are *related to* and *constituted by* the environments in which they inhabit (Eckersley 1997; Rickly 2016). This is encapsulated in studies of the Anthropocene and the acknowledgement that current environmental transformations are the result of human habitation on earth (Robbins and Moore 2013; Wark 2015).

With regard to this literature we draw upon the work of Timothy Morton and Slavoj Žižek in order to critically examine two contrasting perspectives on nature, culture and ecology in the context of mountain bike trail building (Morton 2016, 2017, 2018; Žižek 1991, 2016). In fact, while both academics have argued for an ecology without nature (Morton 2016, 2018; Taylor 2009; Žižek 1991, 2016), their approaches remain ontologically divided between Morton’s (2016) object-oriented ontology, reflected in his dark ecology, and Žižek’s (1991) dialectically infused Lacanianism, which is brought to light in his assertions that we should denaturalise nature by accepting nature’s inherent contingency. Notwithstanding the important ontological differences between both Morton and Žižek, this paper will provide the following critique.

First, attention will be given to the object-oriented ontology paradigm and its relation to Morton’s dark ecology and his notion of the symbiotic real. Given that this discussion will seek to highlight how ontological debates can prove effective in (re)interpreting the nature-culture dyad, we will also consider Žižek’s contention that our conceptions of nature require a radical ‘de-naturalizing’. This critique will draw upon Žižek’s understanding of subjectivity and Lacan’s *objet petit a* (*objet a*) in order

to highlight how both approaches can provide a parallax account of nature and culture in the Anthropocene.

Empirically, this approach will be supported by interviews that were conducted with twenty mountain bike trail builders. Specifically, these interviews will be used to highlight how the trail builders' construction of mountain bike trails was ambivalently formed in/with the contingency of nature. As a consequence, it will be argued that such acknowledgement is demonstrative of not only Žižek's assertion that humanity should (re)orientate itself to a symbolization that works in accordance with nature's 'natural' destruction, but that such forms of contingency can prove amiable to Morton's dark ecology, as predicated on an ecological awareness that remains radically open to *our* ecological existence. It is in this vein that we hope to draw upon both authors' work in order to offer an empirically supported account of how the cultural dimensions of nature can be re-symbolized in light of the trail builders' relations in/with nature. It will be argued that this can advance our understanding of ecology and nature, by radically re-appropriating how cultural geographers define and approach these terms.

### **Object-oriented ontology, the symbiotic real and dark ecology**

At its heart, the approach adopted by object-oriented ontology is one that is grounded in the fundamental rejection of Kantian correlationalism, reflected in Kant's anthropocentric privileging of 'the human' in ontological discussions (Harman 2017). Instead:

OOO [object-oriented ontology] holds that there are real things, and that these real things are objects, every single one. We humans are objects. The thing called a 'subject' is an object. Sentient beings are objects. Notice that 'object' here doesn't mean something that is automatically apprehended by a subject. There are all kinds of objects that so-called subjects don't apprehend. Global warming existed long before human instruments started to detect it. For millions of years oil oozed around deep under the ocean. All kinds of objects apprehended it, of course. When we are conscious of something, we are on a continuum with rock strata and plankton that apprehend oil in their own way (Morton 2013: 149).

In his criticisms of correlationism, Morton (2018) proposes his notion of the symbiotic real, which denotes a solidarity between humans and non-humans that works in contrast to subject-object dichotomies. For Morton, 'Human means me plus my nonhuman prostheses and symbionts, such as my bacterial microbiome and my technological gadgets, an entity that cannot be determined in advance within a thin, rigid outline or rigidly demarcated from the symbiotic real' (Morton 2017: 40).

Certainly, the significance of Morton's approach is that while dissolving the privileged position of humans (much like object-oriented ontology and the New Materialist and speculative realist perspectives), he remains 'careful not to attribute actions (and their consequences) to the subjective realization of individual volition and intentionality' (Elsaesser 2018: 3). Rather, such realization is suffused with a sense of ambiguity from which the gap between subject and object, retranslated as object and object, becomes increasingly blurred and undefinable via an explosion of interdependence that neither starts nor finishes. For Morton, it is the withdrawal of objects which underscores the 'strangeness' and sense of anxiety that permeates the Anthropocene, a fact that 'becomes clearer as we enter the ecological crisis – "Has it started yet? How far in are we?"' (Morton 2013: 56). This confusion characterizes Morton's (2016) dark ecology, which describes our sudden awareness that our actions are both knowingly and unknowingly entwined with the environment. Consequently, dark ecology posits 'a mode of existence in which nature is treated as strange rather than familiar, and the individual is encouraged to question reified versions of nature in both their aesthetic and experiential forms' (Cherrington et al. 2018: 14).

Nevertheless, by way of extending this approach, the remainder of this article will undertake an alternative path. Indeed, while open to the ecological awareness that Morton's (2016) dark ecology prescribes, the following discussion will serve to elaborate on the ambivalence and confusion which characterizes our ecological entwinement. Subsequently, whereas the following sections will offer a critique of Morton's object-oriented ontology approach, more importantly, this discussion will be used to extend and elaborate on his dark ecological perspective by supplementing his analysis with an understanding of the Anthropocene that redirects human awareness to the relative contingency of nature. In fact, in interviews with mountain bike trail builders it will be examined how Morton's ecological awareness is reflected

in the various ways in which the trail builders interact in/with nature and its manifold objects. In meeting this aim, we will turn to the work of Slavoj Žižek.

### **A balanced nature?**

Žižek's (1991) account of nature and ecology takes aim at liberal ideologies, which present nature as a harmonious entity (Mother Earth) that has been violated and unbalanced by human action. Here, nature is often predicated on a presupposed notion of a stable equipoise, which is subsequently unbalanced by humanity's hubris, yet, at the same time, redeemable through (unchallenged) attempts to rectify our mistakes and rebalance nature. Indeed, these accounts:

rely on ... a vision of a 'normal' state of things where the cycle is closed and the balance re-established, as if the Anthropocene (where human activity introduced imbalance and opens up the metabolic rift) should be overcome by reinstalling human species into a balanced natural order. ... the fiction of a stable nature disturbed by human interventions is wrong even as an inaccessible ideal which we may approach if we withdraw as much as possible from our activity – nature is already in itself disturbed, out of joint (Žižek 2016: 31 see also Wark 2015).

Key to this interpretation is Žižek's Lacanian influence. Drawing upon Lacan's notion of the Real – that which distorts language and meaning, and which cannot be reduced to experience but nevertheless serves to structure this experience – Žižek contends 'that we must learn to accept the real of the ecological crisis in its senseless actuality, without charging it with some message or meaning' (Žižek 1991: 35). Our attempts to grasp the ecological crisis and halt its progression, present only lukewarm responses which simply 'avoi[d] an encounter with the real' (Žižek 1991: 35). Here, Žižek asks:

Is not the disturbed, derailed course of nature an 'answer of the real' to human praxis, to the human encroachment upon nature, 'mediated' and organized by the symbolic order? The radical character of the ecological crisis is not to be underestimated. The crisis is radical not only because of its effective danger, i.e., it is not just that what is at stake is the very survival of

humankind. What is at stake is our most unquestionable presuppositions, the very horizon of our meaning, our everyday understanding of 'nature' as a regular, rhythmic process. (Žižek 1991: 34)

Rather than ignoring or cynically distancing ourselves from the ecological crisis, the above comments serve to redirect attention to the interpretive horizon which both marks but also limits 'our everyday understanding of "nature"' (Zizek 1991: 34). As a result, it is our interpretation of Nature – as stable, ongoing and always present – which comes undone in the face of ecological catastrophe. Under such circumstances, it is our fictions of nature which act 'as the stand-in for other repressed, disavowed or foreclosed longings and passions – the Lacanian *objet petit a* around which we shape our drives and that disguises the lack of ground on which to base our subjectivity' (Swyngedouw 2015: 134).

Indeed, before returning to Lacan's *objet a*, the following section will serve to take stock of the ontological premises underlying both Morton and Žižek's work. Here, critical attention will be given to examining the ontological differences between Morton's flat ontology, which views *everything* (human and non-human) as an object, and Žižek's consideration of the subject, and how this can be related to nature's 'contingent' symbolization.

### **Ontology and the nature-culture dyad: A flat ontology or subjective excess?**

While object-oriented ontology does not ignore 'the human', it instead argues that humans should not be viewed as the privileged actors in human/non-human relations. As a result, it serves to 'flatten out' our ontological understanding, so that: 'human subjects are just one in the series of disparate objects' (Žižek 2017: 39).

Yet, as Elsaesser notes:

however much object-oriented ontology, post-humanism, the new materialism or speculative realism might wish to cut the Gordian knot and get rid of subjectivity, they still have to manage the unbridgeable gap between self and other, of 'being in the world' and yet excluded from it, of depending on a myriad of relations with others, just to be a separate entity, an individual. (Elsaesser 2018: 16-17)

Accordingly, Žižek's ontology draws attention to the importance of the 'gap' – that which reflects a fundamental void between reality and being. In clarifying the significance of this gap/void, Taylor explains:

Paradoxically, in order to be experienced at all, our sense of both reality and our subjective selves needs to contain an irreducible gap, a lack from which meaningful experience can be generated. In terms of the relationship between subjects and the external physical world that confronts and contains them, this lack/gap can be explained in terms of the symbolic order that we construct so that an otherwise excessively raw reality can be encountered in a meaningful, non-overwhelming fashion (Taylor 2010: 73)

The importance of the 'gap', therefore, is that it helps to maintain the 'meaning that supports our existence' (Vighi 2014: 132). In so doing, Žižek's work presents a dialectical approach to the subject-object distinction, whereby, subject and object are neither separately distinguished nor are they transcended to the extent that the subject simply becomes another object (Žižek 2012). Instead, a dialectic tension between subject and object (objective reality) is reflected by the fact that the subject's relation 'to reality is always mediated by a contingent symbolic process' from which 'a certain excessive fixity intervenes', on behalf of the subject, which consequently allows them to experience reality as a 'subject' (Žižek 2008: 120). Indeed, 'if we abstract this subjective excess from the objective symbolic order, the very objectivity of this order disintegrates' (Žižek 2017: 194-195). As a result, in contradistinction to a flat ontology, for Žižek, 'the way to be a consequent materialist is not to directly include subject into reality, as an object among objects, but to bring out the Real of the subject, the way the emergence of subjectivity functions as a cut in the Real' (Žižek 2016: 70).

Certainly, Žižek's remarks provide a clear point of contrast between his own dialectical ontology and Morton's object-oriented ontology. That is, whereas object-oriented ontology attempts to transcend the 'unbridgeable gap between self and other' (Elsaesser 2018: 16) via the object's withdrawal – a withdrawal that makes it inaccessible and, subsequently, in the case of Morton, presents 'a rift between ... appearance and its essence' (Morton 2013: 168) – Žižek 'transpos[es] epistemological obstacles into the thing [the object] itself' (Žižek 2016: 56). In other



words, 'We do not reach the In-itself by way of tearing away subjective appearances and trying to isolate 'objective reality' as it is "out there," independently of the subject', but rather, 'the In-itself inscribes itself precisely into the subjective excess, gap, inconsistency that opens up a hole in reality. This gap is missed ... by OOO [object-oriented ontology]' (Žižek 2016: 85). Accordingly, while the above discussion has sought to trace the key ontological differences between Morton's 'object' ontology and Žižek's Hegelian-Lacanianism, the following section, and subsequent findings, will aim to bring together these two oppositions. To do so, however, will require a turn to Lacan's *objet a*.

### ***Objet a* and the strange strangeness of nature's contingency: Dark ecology and a denaturalised nature**

Despite his criticisms of object-oriented ontology, Žižek still maintains that the 'subject effectively 'is' an object' (Žižek 2016: 80-81); yet, one that is posited in relation to Lacan's notion of the *objet a*. For Lacan:

there is no subject which is not correlated to an object, *objet a* – but this object is a paradoxical one, an object which fills in the void, a gap in the very texture of reality – it is this object which in effect rips the seamless texture of reality and holds the place of a gap in it. (Žižek 2017: 43)

This 'gap' becomes apparent when we consider how 'the various different Symbolic appropriations of the object are split internally and derive from different attempts to get at the object itself' (i.e. nature) (Flisfeder 2012: 147). Consequently, 'In order to conceive this status of *objet a*, we have to accomplish a move from lacking object to object which stands for the lack, which gives body to it – only this object "is" subject' (Žižek 2016: 43).

Indeed, if we follow the Žižekian contention that the gap between subjective experience and objective reality 'is a crucial, positive and constitutive one that generates meaning and identity' (Carpentier and Trioen 2010: 318), then it is clear that such an approach stands in direct contrast to Morton's (and object-oriented ontology's) anti-correlationism. According to Morton:

the idea that the world isn't real until some correlator (usually tied to a human being in some way) has 'realized' it, can produce the fantasy that reality is a blank slate waiting for (human) projections to fill it in, like a movie screen waiting for a movie to be shown on it. (Morton 2018: 206)

Nonetheless, while acknowledging Morton's (2018) critique, it is apparent that this contention rests primarily on the 'fantasies' that are used, by humans, to fill reality's 'blank slate'. Indeed, nature is often used to explore an individual's 'true', 'authentic', 'inner-being' (Arnauld and Price 1993), providing 'the subjective element constitutive of objective-external reality' (Žižek 2017: 194). Moreover, it is here that we can begin to examine the extent to which nature 'stands for the lack' within subjectivity (Žižek 2016: 43). Consequently, if, as Morton asserts, 'the politics of coexistence are always contingent, brittle and flawed, so that in the thinking of interdependence at least one *being* must be missing' (Morton 2016: 6 [italics added]); then, in the context of ecology, this 'being' is rendered by the fact that nature is effectively 'missing', *until* it is symbolized. It is in this regard that:

the natures we see and work with are necessarily imagined, scripted and symbolically charged as nature. These inscriptions are always inadequate, leaving an excess or remainder, while maintaining a distance from co-produced natures that are complex, chaotic, often unpredictable, radically contingent, historically and geographically variable, risky, patterned in endlessly complex ways and ordered along 'strange' attractors.  
(Swyngedouw 2015: 135)

Furthermore, amidst our current ecological crisis, it is nature which stands as 'an entity that has no substantial consistency, which is in itself "nothing but confusion"' (Žižek 2016: 81); yet, nevertheless, sets in motion a multitude of interpretations and (failed) actions, each attempting to 'fix' the ecological crisis and, in this instance, re-balance nature's disorder. As a result, 'the inherent slipperiness of' any conceptual understanding of nature, requires an appreciation of 'the multiplicities, inconsistencies and incoherencies of its symbolization' (Žižek 2016: 134); and, more importantly, that such symbolization rests upon a level ambivalence that strikes a path between Morton's dark ecology and Žižek's unbalanced nature.

That is, if we consider Žižek's approach to the ecological crisis as grounded in the critique that our (mis)understandings of nature as 'balanced' should be redefined in accordance with nature's instability; then, one of the consequences of *our* ecological crisis is that it requires a radical denaturalization of nature itself. It is this denaturalization which points to a more fundamental acceptance of nature's radical contingency; an assertion that provides a link with Morton's redefining of nature (Morton 2013). For Morton, acknowledging our ecological awareness requires 'letting go of ... nature' (Morton 2018: 27); in other words, we need to let go of our usual ways of 'seeing' nature. Indeed, such 'letting go' is amiable to Žižek's:

radical emancipatory politics [which] should aim neither at complete mastery over nature nor at humanity's humble acceptance of the predominance of Mother Earth. Rather, nature should be exposed in all its catastrophic contingency and indeterminacy, and human agency should assume the whole unpredictability of the consequences of its activity. (Žižek 2017: 237)

This 'contingency', 'indeterminacy' and 'unpredictability' is echoed in Morton's (2016) dark ecology, which is grounded in 'living with the strange' acknowledgment of the symbiotic real. In fact, it is this strange acknowledgement which is reflected in the subject's relation to the *objet a*, referred to as that '*strange object* which is nothing but the inscription of the subject itself into the field of objects' (Žižek 2016: 81 [italics added]).

In summary, rather than viewing nature as idealistically and/or ideologically 'over there', naturally balanced or harmoniously un-besmirched by the hubris of human activity, we can instead follow Lacan's account of '*objet a* – an object whose status is that of an anamorphosis' (Žižek 2016: 81) – in acknowledging the 'anamorphic' effect that nature can have and how it can help re-orientate *us* to the ambiguity and inherent contradictions that underlie nature's symbolization. In doing so, we posit a strange symbiosis with nature, grounded on the premise that the impact of our climate change interventions is largely unknown and that such 'unknowingness' stems from our own 'collective activity' in/with nature (Žižek 2016: 12). In the same way that Morton (2017) promotes a 'tuning' with the non-human, Žižek's attention to the subject can help draw attention to our own practices with/in nature and the effect of these practices as constitutive of our understandings of

nature. In short, such understanding should not lose sight of the contingency, ambivalence and strange surprises that emanate from our collective and unpredictable attempts to symbolize nature.

### **Analysing mountain bike trail builders**

We chose to consider mountain bike trail builders due to their use of organic and/or inorganic materials to construct and maintain a rideable network of trails to suit a range of different interests and abilities. The type of building undertaken by individuals is dependent on a number of aspects, including their level of commitment; their perceived impact on and relationship with the landscapes in which they work; their own riding preferences; and, their adherence to English access laws. For example, some trail builders may work for large contractors who specialize in the development and management of multi-purpose trail centres, creating 'features not found readily on so called 'natural' trails outside the centres and (in theory at least) standardising skill and technical requirements through trail grading' (Gibbs and Holloway 2018: 250). Others may be involved in 'guerilla' activities, creating 'unmapped trails or obstacles ... alongside the formally sanctioned routes' (Gibbs and Holloway 2018: 254). In either case, trails are always part of larger social, cultural and environmental systems that require careful and diligent planning and collaboration on behalf of the builder (Pothecary 2013). Even when trail building activities are less formal in nature they still require consideration of the needs of multiple user groups, whilst taking various environmental and geographical factors into account.

With this in mind, the data in this study was drawn from twenty semi-structured interviews with mountain bike trail builders in England. The interviews formed part of a wider research project examining nature connection(s), the materialisation of dirt and the politics of multi-use trails. Of the twenty participants who agreed to be interviewed, fourteen were involved with a local advocacy group; three worked on behalf of a contractor or large organisation, such as, the Forestry Commission; and, three worked independently to informally develop or maintain an existing trail network. Participants ranged from 18 to 62 years old and all but one was male. As such, this sample mirrors other findings regarding the demographic composition of mountain bike cultures more generally (IMBA 2015).

Over the course of the interviews we were able to acquire rich qualitative data that went beyond other, less personal approaches, such as, surveys or observations (Brighton and Williams 2018). Long (2007) has argued that interviews allow the researcher to clarify questions asked, whilst delving deeper into the participants' motivations and experiences. In this study, this was an important facet of our methodology as it helped us to provide reassurance and clarification of the research aims, especially when individuals expressed anxiety about the representation of certain (often illegal) activities. Accordingly, we were always keen to ensure that interviewees were given ample time to consider their responses, and where possible, encouraged participants to explore experiences that may at first have seemed tangential to the aims of the study. As a result, the inherent flexibility of the semi-structured interview enabled the participants to contribute further layers of meaning to the stories being told (Opdenakker 2006). These stories were then thematically analyzed (Braun and Clarke 2006). This method allowed us to identify, analyse, interpret and report reoccurring experiences, feelings, perceptions and behaviours, whilst locating these within a particular social context (Sparkes and Smith 2014).<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, we present what Knapik labels an 'interactive analysis' (Knapik 2013: 90); that is, an analysis which is jointly created through months of dialogue between researcher and researched to reach a shared understanding of the (emergent) relationship between mountain biking, trail building and nature. The following sections will consider this relationship in further detail.

### **Creating the perfect trail: Construction through destruction**

In accordance with the previous discussion of Lacan's *objet a*, it became noticeably apparent from the responses that there was no 'perfect' trail that could be built. This was reflected in the following comments from Steve, Paul and Conor:

The perfect trail will vary from person to person. (Steve)

... as mountain bikers we all like different things and you also want a variety.  
(Paul)

... everyone's idea of perfect is different. (Conor)

What is significant to Lacan's *objet a*, is that although it plays an important role in constituting the subject, paradoxically, it can never be accessed directly. Certainly, such plurality does not posit a form of social constructionism, whereby the variety of interpretations simply prevent no single definition. Instead, such plurality 'is itself grounded in our real struggles' (Žižek 2013). In fact, discussion of the 'struggles' that trail builders faced, immediately followed the above statements. Here, the various ways in which a 'perfect trail' could be defined was grounded in the struggles that occurred between the various groups who frequented the trail digging sites. This was noted in the following responses:

People are passionate about mountain bikes, but other people are equally passionate about foresting, so you have to try and convince them of the benefits. Most foresters are often of the opinion of: 'why would you want to build mountain bike trails through these woods?', whereas a mountain biker would be like, 'why would you not?' (Scott)

I would say that the perfect trail differs from one rider to another and that can be quite difficult with the trail building. (Christine)

In such instances, discussions on the perfect trail and its impact on the environment would often centre on a 'minimal difference'; indeed, a line of contention that delineated between different perspectives. Here, Andy explained:

So as long as you are not coming through a natural habitat I don't think we are damaging nature, because if you look at the hillside and take two different people – someone who is really into outdoor activities – they might look at the hillside and think 'that is absolutely glorious', 'that's a hillside and that's being used and people are being active and that's great'. So actually that is a beautiful thing. Whereas if you take someone else's perspective who perhaps isn't into activities or has a different viewpoint, they may look at the hillside and say: 'that's destroyed because it wasn't what it naturally was'. I personally don't think that it is damaging to nature, but I do understand the

perspective, and the aesthetics side. There is always a right place and a wrong place.

Notice how Andy's remarks echo Žižek's (2006) reference to the parallax Real. Such a notion refers to 'the minimal difference that cuts across and divides the same object among the various different perspectives' (Flisfeder 2017: 147); perspectives that, for Andy, were minimally aligned in the contention that there was a 'right place' and a 'wrong place' to build trails. Furthermore, this parallax works in conjunction with Lacan's *objet a*, as evident in Andy's shift in perspective ('I do understand the [alternative] perspective') and in the fact that neither perspective ever constituted a perfect trail-nature alignment. In both cases, the construction of a 'perfect trail' was subjectively perceived as a parallax that either 'added to' or 'ruined' the natural environment.

In accordance with Žižek's critique of nature, we can consider how such aesthetics serve to support an understanding of nature as being grounded in a harmonious balance? In various responses, trail builders commented upon the 'maintenance' that was required to sustain the trails. Steve noted that:

A lot of this is more about maintenance than creating new trails. ... Over the years the trail got shittier and shittier so I spent some time working on that – draining the puddles, taking out straight lines and putting features back in. ... On the whole I am not trying to do major engineering. It's minimal intervention.

While this serves to underscore the notion that human intervention can 'restore' balance between the trail and its 'natural' surroundings, we argue that such examples present a more nuanced consideration of the relationship between the trail builders and nature. That is, rather than restoring 'balance' to nature, in Duncan's response, such interaction between trail building and nature could elicit certain 'understandings':

I've met some people, because they've always ridden in the same place, who understand how the local dirt, the local stone, the local – whatever they are

using to build – they learn how it works and how it reacts to water, drainage and use.

Such understanding was grounded in an appreciation of nature's own natural destruction of the trail, reflected in the relation between the 'local dirt/stone' and its reaction to 'water'. It is here that we can begin to identify how, ecologically, the trail builders learnt to associate themselves with the contingency of nature.

Notably, this contingency was reflected in what the trail builders referred to as 'blending in'. Both Paul and Phil stated that:

The best trails definitely just blend in. (Paul)

... the art is getting it to blend back in. Everything I do I try and make it look like it's been there forever. You have to resist the temptation to ride things that you have just built, to test them. So, leave it until Spring. (Phil)

In fact, a neatly organised trail was, paradoxically, an 'eyesore'. Tony explained:

When we do stuff in the woods, I hear stuff like: 'it's got to be sympathetic to the environment and blend in', but my feeling is yes you build it and it is a bit of an eyesore when it's first built, but give it a year or a winter and everything blends in. The edges grow back in, it stops looking so defined, bikes ride over it, everything becomes a uniform shade of brownish colour, which matches the rest of the wood ... when its first built it looks a bit stark, it looks a bit gleaming white and a bit straight edged. But, within 12 months it's all weathered in, the edges have become blurred, and the colours have melded with what's there.

When successfully completed, such 'blending in' would often go unnoticed:

People often don't realise how much work we've done because we've blended it back in. We'll move moss onto the top of the berm so that starts growing again. So, it's keeping a low impact; a low visual impact on the environment. Un-obtrusive. (Conor)



What is apparent in the above examples, is how an 'un-obtrusive' and 'low-impact' 'blending in' was amiable to nature's own 'natural' contingency. That is, rather than centring on a maintenance that kept the track tidy and well-kept, well-constructed trails were maintained through overgrowing and by the trail being 'weathered in'. Indeed, such trails were clearly improved by nature's inherent 'un-balance' and its own natural destruction. Furthermore, in the case of Conor, a trail's construction rested on a strange paradox, whereby a good construction was one that maintained 'a low visual impact'; in other words, a trail that was unnaturally natural. It is in exploring this unnatural nature that the following section will consider.

### **Unnatural nature**

As noted in the previous section, a key characteristic of constructing and maintaining trails rested upon a form of 'blending in' which served to associate the trails with nature's 'natural' contingency. For Steve, such contingency could help add to a trail's 'uniqueness':

That's what's unique about these mountain bike trails, you are inherently unstable, so you can't look up, but want to, and when you get to the bottom you are always yearning for more.

In Steve's example, the desire 'for more' was clearly related to trails that resulted in the rider being 'inherently unstable'. This instability was achieved through certain dips, rocks and foliage. It is in this sense that an ecological awareness was reflected in the relationship between the trail builder, the trail and nature. Take, the following examples:

What suits me is natural, or as natural as trails can be – they have all been built by people or 'things' whether it's a pack horse or whatever. (Steve)

I like stuff to look like a natural path, not man made. (Chris)

In fact, for a 'natural path' to look non-man made, Christine explained that you need to '[be] quite unnatural about putting boundaries around it [the trail]'. This contradiction was acknowledged by Gary:

When I'm riding on trails, I prefer the concept of, in speech marks, 'natural' trails, so I guess I'd certainly steer towards things being natural and fitting with the landscape – not standing out. ... At the same time no tracks are natural, they've all been put there for a purpose. Given time they will all be deemed as fitting in and being natural.

By putting the concept of nature in inverted commas, Gary is alert to the way in which interpretations of nature are both ambivalent and highly contested (Cherrington et al. 2018; Cherrington and Gregory 2017). Additionally, whereas Gary's reference to time highlights how nature provided a constitutive role in the 'naturalising' of a trail, John's remarks were notable to the extent that he believed building trails supported bio-diversity:

To me, the thing about a mountain bike trail is that it's a corridor. So, from a nature point of view, if you were in the middle of a woods [... it's] very homogenous. You put a trail corridor through, you have light changes and you create a very different habitat. So, in a way you are improving the biodiversity by putting a trail in there because it gives an opportunity for the place to be slightly different. So, if you've got a hillside that is all the same it will be all the same all the time. ... from my point of view, it's a beneficial change because there's an opportunity for a slightly different eco-system. ... yes, it's different but it's just a different environment.

What becomes apparent from John's explanation is how his own 'unnatural' actions (constructing a trail corridor in the middle of a forest) served to improve the bio-diversity of the environment. This was achieved by varying its eco-system and by ensuring that nature's natural 'homogeneity' was undermined. This offers a unique perspective on the relation between human praxis and nature. Notable for the fact that it does not deride such action, but instead, offers an alternative perspective on

how nature can be diversified through trail building. In short, nature, for both Gary and John, was achieved through unnatural processes.

Indeed, while both the current and the previous section have sought to comment upon the process of trail building, with particular attention given to nature's 'natural' contingency and to the 'unnatural' ways that 'natural' trails were built, in each case, the relation between the trail builders and nature remained predicated on a managed relationship. Therefore, the following section will afford closer attention to how trail builders related to the contingency of nature. As previously noted, rather than symbolizing nature within a horizon of meaning that seeks to return it to a state of harmony (Žižek 1991), a process that both seeks to mask our own and nature's inherent lack, the following section will highlight how a radical denaturalising of nature can be used to promote a form of ecological awareness that is amiable to the strange strangeness of nature's contingency (Morton 2016, 2018). It is in this sense that we will begin to highlight how Morton's ecological awareness can work in correlation with Žižek's own assertions that we should accept and relate to the inherent destructiveness of nature.

### **A contingent nature**

Nature doesn't care that we're there. (Robert)

While being careful not to assert a reified conception of nature, Robert's comment alludes to an important significance that was evident across many of the interviewee responses. Specifically, that of a nature that was ambivalent ('doesn't care'), but, at the same time, required a degree of ambivalence on behalf of the trail builders themselves. Indeed, such attitudes do not intend to promote a sense of the blasé. Instead, while Žižek asserts that 'we still fight pollution', he likens such action to the notion of 'open warfare' (Taylor 2009: 181). He explains:

It's like in open warfare where you are aware that every firm position you get you have to fight for. You are aware that you do not rely on anything. You are aware that you are in an open process where *the consequences of your acts are ultimately unpredictable*. You know that in the end you will lose. *To accept this radical openness* of the situation means accepting that there is no

final solution, *we are just temporarily buying time*. And I think that in a strange way accepting this open warfare situation is the only true respect of nature. (Taylor 2009: 181 [italics added])

When applied to the present study, such respect of nature was clearly reflected in Robert's remarks, where, rather than idealising nature, a far more ambivalent acceptance of the futility of the trail builders' activity was provided. In particular, the following examples highlight how a sense of unpredictability, openness and temporality underscored the trail builders' responses.

First, notice how, in both John and Duncan's remarks, the idea of building a sustainable trail was impossible.

So, what is a sustainable trail? There's no such thing. If you're really, really lucky a trail will be self-maintaining, which comes down to... if it has just the right amount of traffic, the right amount of rainfall, the right amount of vegetation. If it has just the right amount of everything people will go 'oh there's a sustainable trail!' (John)

I think most people; people who work down their local woods and build jumps know that every month they might have to rebuild everything because it gets trashed. If you can work with what you've got then that works really well, but there are limitations to that, certainly when you're trying to find something that's sustainable. (Duncan)

Again, what we see here is how the notion of 'sustainability' was predicated on nature's instability, as reflected in the 'rainfall' and the growth of 'vegetation' presenting 'limitations' on the ability to achieve sustainability. In both instances, these examples build upon the previous sections, whereby the need to build with nature's 'natural' contingency was emphasised. As a result, the unpredictability of building a trail rested primarily on deciphering which part of the trail could be used. John noted:

So, there is always that thing that you're looking at it and thinking why you are doing it and what you are trying to achieve. I find it fascinating to look at

the trail and understand why it's deteriorating and why it is like it is. What do we need to do? Is it a drainage issue? Is it just the riding line? Is it the volume of traffic? Is it just worn out? What can we do with it and can we make it a bit more interesting to ride? Is it still within the grade? (John)

There was never a certain answer to these questions. Instead, 'imagining' a trail required orientating oneself to the fact that certain aspects could, unpredictably, 'pop out':

There are things that you look at when you're building an enduro trails, like if its uphill or a flat section you look at it and go: 'well that's not going to be good for the enduro', but you might be sat in a forest and the ground is beautiful and dry so you know that it's going to wear well. Then, all of a sudden, you will pop out into a bit and it's all green and moss hanging from the trees and it's all wet and you think: 'argh if we come through here it's going to be a nightmare, so you try and route around. (Paul)

Such 'radical openness' was reflected in the following responses (Taylor 2009: 181), which alluded to the idea of working with whatever was there:

Sometimes when you wonder into the woods and there is a hard frost, a line just jumps out at you – it's just there, because when the frost has laid a path has just developed. Spend enough time in a wood and the line just jumps out at you eventually. You might just see a rocky outcrop or a wall or something like that and just go: 'do you know what, if I can build a line in and a line out, we've got a drop-off'. (Phil)

... sometimes you just go... sod it, let's just start digging and see what happens. (Frank)

I mean sometimes you'll go and they'll be a bit of a rock and you'll go: 'oh yeah let's do that', and you start and it's bigger than we thought. So, you're like: 'aww right, let's leave it'. 'No shall we see how big it is?' Oh, that's big, do you think we could move it? Let's find out!' Then there are six or seven of

you and a lifting strap and sometimes we have a little 2 tonne ratchet and then we see if we can move it. Then we'll go: 'what are we going to do now? Just leave it there because it will go in the trail at some point!' Then there's a huge rock sitting at the side of the trail that will go in the trail at some point because we've moved it about six feet, and it's all to do with the fact that it was raining at the time and we dug around it to get the water away and then were like: 'oh this looks interesting'. (John)

The final example of John is emblematic of the 'radical openness' which was required when building a trail. Yet, appreciating such contingency was also apparent in the inherent temporality of the trail building process. Paradoxically, no trail was ever built to completion, but instead, each trail was a way of using, but also, 'halting', nature's natural contingency. Certainly, this was never achieved and, as a consequence, the act of building was always managed in accordance with nature's inevitable destruction (erosion):

We never build the trail to completion. We would get the line sorted and just ride it in over time. You see how natural lined develop, because when you walk down a hill it's so hard to tell exactly how it's going to be when you get out on a bike. So, we always develop it over time and let it evolve over time, because if you try to develop it from day one it's going to be wrong. You have to leave it over time. (Harry)

In what follows, we will serve to draw upon the above findings in order to provide a final precis on the significance of this contingency for developing an ecological awareness.

### **Summary and conclusion**

With regard to Morton's (2016) dark ecology as well as Žižek's (1991) denaturalising of nature, this article has served to highlight how our approach to nature, culture and ecology can be considered in light of mountain bike trail building. While Morton's object-oriented ontology was critiqued in favour of Žižek's preference for a dialectical approach to subject-object debates, it is argued that such critique can further extend our understandings of ecology and, more importantly, to

acknowledging our relationship in/with the Anthropocene. In part, this requires appreciating the notion of *objet a* and how its relation to the subject can allow us to orientate ourselves to an ecological awareness predicated on the strange (Morton) and contingent (Žižek). To this extent, it is our contention that Morton's dark ecology and Žižek's focus on the radical contingency of nature, offer parallel paths to achieving an ecological awareness that neither idealises nor mythologises nature, but instead, acknowledges its strange unknowingness. This contention is supported by the following findings.

First, it was noted that there was no 'perfect trail' and, by extension, no single definition of what nature meant to trail builders, mountain bikers and the various other individuals/groups who frequented the same sites. In fact, much like Lacan's *objet a*, the idea of 'nature' was predicated on a minimal difference – a parallax gap – from which wider tensions and struggles were enacted around what and who the site should be used for. While these differences were allied with particular appreciations of an 'ideal' landscape, they also highlighted how nature's own erosion and destruction was acknowledged as part of the trail building process. This was elaborated in the second findings section, where it was noted that such acknowledgement rested upon identifying those 'natural' aspects that could be unnaturally used to create a trail. Here, opportunities for erosion could subsequently be used to help construct the trail; a form of construction that ultimately required managing the unmanageable.

Second, it was noted that in each of the examples a clear sense of relating to the contingency of nature was expressed and acknowledged by the trail builders. This required an ambivalent relation to nature and its effects on the trail. Accordingly, while nature's contingent destruction ((un)manageable erosion, inevitable overgrowing of the trail and the effects of water and drainage) formed part of the trail's existence, at the same time, this contingency was managed and organised as part of the trail building process. In other words, in being in/with nature the trail builders acted with a sense of temporal awareness that ambivalently accepted the radical openness of nature (Taylor 2009). Much like the trail builders, this redirects us to the collective activity involved in the symbolizing of nature and, more importantly, its subsequent effects. In particular, we contend that this 'anamorphic effect' is central to achieving a dark ecology and to appreciating an

ecological awareness that is open to the symbiotic real (Morton 2017; Žižek 2016). That is, such openness is:

extremely traumatic, since we ... have to confront a subjectivized Other with whom no subjective identification is possible, it having no common measure with 'being human.' Such an encounter is not an encounter with a deficient mode of an Other Subject, but an encounter with an Other at its purest, with the abyss of Otherness not covered up or facilitated by imaginary identifications which make the Other someone 'like us,' someone we can emphatically 'understand'. (Žižek 2015: 12)

This emphatic understanding was clearly reflected by the trail builders' relation in/with nature.

In conclusion, we believe that the trail builders were able to display an ecological awareness that symbiotically revealed a sense of underlying ambivalence. By determining nature's 'basic epistemological coordinates', a process that required 'embedding [... nature] into an at least minimally familiar symbolic frame-work' (Vighi 2014: 139), the trail builders presented a 'symbolic framework' that was amiable to the ambivalent, strange and contingent form of nature.



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<sup>1</sup> We adopted Sparkes and Smith's six stage process of analysis for thematically interpreting the data.

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