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**The Ontopolitics of Mountain Bike Trail Building: Addressing Issues of Access and Conflict in the More-than Human English Countryside.**

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# **The Ontopolitics of Mountain Bike Trail Building: Addressing Issues of Access and Conflict in the More-than Human English Countryside.**

## **Abstract**

In recent years there have been calls for scholars working within sport and physical culture to recognise the (increasing) confluence of nature and culture. Situated within an emerging body of new materialist research, such accounts have shown how various activities are polluted by, fused to, and assembled with nonhuman entities. However, more work is needed on the political possibilities afforded by nonhuman agency, and by extension, the stakes that such flat ontological arrangements might raise for the management and governance of physical culture. Building on research conducted with mountain bike trail builders, this paper seeks to explore what it means to know, to be and to govern a human subject in the Anthropocene. Specifically, I draw on Ash's (2019) post-phenomenological theory of space and Chandler's (2018) notion of onto-political hacking to show how the playful, contingent and transformative practices of the mountain bike assemblage confront the linear and calculated governance of the English countryside. In doing so, mountain bike trails are positioned as objects of hope that allows for a collective re-imagining of political democracy in a more-than-human landscape.

**Key words: Object-Oriented-Ontology; Space; Mountain Biking; Postphenomenology; Ontopolitics**

## **Introduction**

Since its emergence in the late 1970s, mountain biking has been the subject of much conflict and controversy regarding land management, physical and ecological damage, and the antisocial nature of the activity (King and Church 2019). In the UK, these conflicts are set against a complex moral, social, cultural and (geo) political landscape that prescribes and establishes normative assertions regarding rights of way in nature and the outdoors (Brown 2015). Since the eighteenth century, public land has been steadily privatised and put to commercial ends through a neoliberal process of enclosure, and at the time of writing, the UK Conservative government (2019-present) is proposing new trespass laws that would criminalise anyone who enters a land-owner's land without prior permission – constituting one of the most severe restrictions on general freedom in the modern era.

Yet, as a form of sport and physical culture, mountain biking is inherently unsettling for the processes of privatisation and enclosure, and important lessons can be gleaned by following these processes and the trouble they may entail. Specifically, mountain bike trails, and the enjoyment that stems from riding them, highlight the encroachment of urban populations into ‘natural’ environments, and the difficulty of maintaining strictly demarcated boundaries between human and non-human spaces (Cherrington and Black, 2020b). Accordingly, whilst current access laws impose a static understanding of space that rely on apriori interpretations of its use-value, mountain bike trail building, by contrast, requires a particular geographical imagination in which

emergent landscapes are both dependent upon, and, limited by, the peculiarities of the evolving human-technological assemblage (Gibbs & Holloway 2018).

In this article, I argue that the building of mountain bike trails offers a unique ‘response’ to a new climatic regime, and chart what such a response might look like. Drawing on two years of fieldwork with mountain bike trail builders, I proffer that it is the very uncanniness of mountain bike trails that renders an experience that is both constitutive of, and, distanced from, the surfaces, materials, and objects with which they interact. In contradistinction to existing interventions premised on (re)establishing the (human) right to roam in England, I posit that a more viable alternative is one that can foster human participation, whilst also being sensitive to ecology and biodiversity. Specifically, I draw on Ash’s (2019) post-phenomenological theory of space and Chandler’s (2018) notion of onto-political hacking to show how the playful, contingent and transformative practices of the mountain bike assemblage confront the linear and calculated governance of the English countryside through a form of (more-than-human) commoning. In so doing, I illustrate how mountain bikers form important bonds with other objects and life forms, engendering new and emerging kinds of (onto)political subjectivity that allows for a collective re-imagining of political democracy in an emergent and intra-active landscape.

## **Mountain Biking and the Spatial Imagination**

Spaces are not blank, geometric surfaces with pre-given meanings, but rather form part of a shifting landscape of meaning-making that takes place through a range of socio-

cultural, economic, environmental and political networks (Sharpe 2011). Nature sports, such as mountain biking, are said to have a unique spatial and environmental ordering which differentiate them from other, more traditional sporting phenomenon (McCormack 2018). Riders have a close affinity with, and derive pleasure from, the landscapes within which they participate and are humbled by the natural surroundings – to such an extent that they often become advocates of social and environmental change. Ideologically, dominant meanings of ‘natural’ space are also inscribed on particular landscapes to prevent certain individuals, objects and groups from accessing them (Gilchrist & Ravenscroft 2011).

In elaborating on sport and affective geographies, Brown (2012) has shown how the specific capabilities and ideals associated with mountain biking are actualised through a sophisticated human-bike hybrid, requiring the enrolment of technology, movements, sensations, and rhythms. Emphasis is given to ‘the stakes of becoming hybrid in particular ways, the myriad forms of body-to-body attunement demanded ... and how that shapes the kinds of public spaces produced’ (Brown 2012:3). Mountain bikers are shown to value the haptic reverie of rolling, exemplified through the ‘cleaning’ of sections and the contrasting frustration caused by ‘dabbing’ (that is, putting a foot down) or stopping mid-trail. Moreover, both the weight of the bike and the speed of travel prompt a form of aural and physical attunement that seeks to avoid harming or alarming other trail users.

Elsewhere, Brown (2015) conveys the materiality of these human-nonhuman moralities, illustrating the differing ways in which traces in the landscape, including those left by mountain bike tyres, are constituted as unacceptable damage. Such tracks derive negative connotations from other users and are used to ascribe culpability among

different groups, as well as helping to fix ideological notions of ‘Nature’ (that is, tyre marks are ‘matter out of place’). Consequently, mountain bikers are shown to absorb these cultural inscriptions, culminating in a form of self-governance which generates guilt and shame when encountering certain textures and topographies.

However, phenomenologically inspired analyses such as these – organised as they are around the notion of human correlationism – do not go far enough in recognising both the autonomy of objects and the possibility of extending the notion of rights to nonhumans. A key point of contention here is that despite her emphasis on nonhuman encounters, Brown (2015) continually infers a notion of intentionality, that is, the proposition that a self-defining agent is clearly located within a concrete and discernible environment, which is then closely tied to the manifestation of a coherent (embodied) identity (Ash and Simpson 2016). Consequently, though co-present with the human body, the material world is always subservient to its relation to the human.

By contrast, Ash (2019) suggests that our sense of rootedness within a given (social) space should instead be positioned more squarely as an *outcome* of our intimate and fragile relationship with non-humans. Rather than focusing on space as a uniquely human creation or affect, Ash recognises it as something that is comprehended by all objects and entities. In contrast to the work of Brown, object-oriented approaches are therefore staunchly post-phenomenological, in that they are committed to exploring the possibility of a metaphysical existence that sits beyond, and outside of, the subject/object correlate. Thus, Ash renders an approach that sees objects as simultaneously existing both *in* something and *with* something, and positions people, as objects in their own right, as having a dialogic relationship with the spaces that they inhabit (McLeod and Hawzen

2020). Here, it is the relations among the elements, rather than the nature of the elements themselves, that are the most significant aspects of lived space.

In conceptualising this notion of spatial apprehension, Ash positions space as having two modes of relation: a vocabulary of comprehension and the appearance of form. Form refers to how which objects relate to one another; it is not a straightforward relation between two definitive objects, but rather the negative of a thing, 'which is to say, everything that the object is not' (2019:4). For example, McLeod and Hawzen (2020) demonstrate that NFL stadiums are built from various materials - bricks, metal, concrete and plastic - that are differentiated from each other depending on where their qualities (orangeness, hardness, plasticity) begin and end. Concomitantly, these objects cannot exist without the accidents that bring sensual qualities into being, which includes the time of day, the weather, and the seasons. Comprehension, therefore, is the way that various objects such as bricks, the sun and the rain relate to one another, which is reliant on the interobjective differences in form. When considered together, it is the complex interactions between form and comprehension that give rise to emergence of (sporting) space.

## **The Ontopolitics of Sport**

Ash's (2019) theory of space and power is important in the context of this research, as it opens the way for nonhuman agency, whilst helping us to better understand how sporting spaces, and the objects that they comprise, might be incorporated into social and cultural analyses. However, Gibson (2020) has recently attacked the new materialist turn in sport

and physical culture for offering nothing more than a voluntarist conception of political agency, whereby various phenomena are assigned independent agency instead of being critiqued and combatted in political terms. As such initialising an effective posthuman framework requires more than just clever, sophistic and fashionable means of thinking. Instead, it needs to illustrate how this emerging human-nonhuman dynamic demands an 'expanded sense urgently requiring of non-normative ethical and political configuration' (Braidotti and Fuller 2019: 8). So while bearing this in mind, what might a politically oriented and object-centered approach to mountain biking, and mountain bike trail building look like?

In answering this question, I build on a rich vein of works dedicated to destabilising the myth of anthropocentrism and human chauvinism within the context of sport and physical culture (see, for example Thorpe and Clarke 2020; Cherrington and Black 2020b). In particular, I draw inspiration from those accounts that call for an object-oriented politics, which seek to illustrate the influence of objects in the formation of political outcomes. In the context of the current study, Millington et al (2020) argue that such analyses play a pivotal role in destabilising ideological references to 'nature' or 'sustainability', as such terms gloss over the complexities of social, political and ontological arrangements as to position nature as an objective resource. In tracing the influence of objects, object oriented accounts can therefore facilitate more nuanced and dialogic understandings of sport policy by illuminating their controversies, networks, and capacities (Darnell 2020).

In adopting this focus, researchers have convincingly illustrated how water and air serve to sustain, disrupt and potentially reinvigorate the International Olympic

Committee's (IOC) commitment to the environment (McLeod et al 2018; McDonald and Sterling (2020). For example, at the Beijing and Rio Olympics, the Chinese and Brazilian governments were found to be artificially manufacturing the quality of air and water by implementing a series of short-term technological solutions, including: the removal of cement factories, the tightening of vehicle standards and the construction of sewage-treatment facilities. Yet, as the public became increasingly aware of the calculated way in which these methods were being administered, the dense entanglements between air, water, bodies, and the state began to unravel, leading to a series of conflicting articulations. In such circumstances, the authors suggest that that the intra-action of objects contributed to the problematisation of ecological modernisation, whilst prompting the IOC to take make more concerted attempts to grapple with the material complexities of the environment.

When positioned alongside the work of Ash (2016; 2019) such works render a useful lens through which to evaluate the increasing enclosure of the English countryside, as well as the forms of contestation that may lead its future (re)imagining. If relations between objects within a given assemblage are necessarily intra-active, and the power of objects is such that they are subjunctive, then it is possible that these matters of concern can be seized upon to develop new strategies for land reform and public access. Here, we may glean further insights from advocates of a more-than-human commons, who suggest that commoning - a generative practice through which individuals challenge the communication and enclosure of public resources with a view to returning these to the public- should be seen as an emergent process in which human and nonhuman are coextensive. Through this lens, the commons is not just a way of thinking or a geographic

unit of measurement, but a space that fosters an ethic of care and mutual responsibility (Bresnihan 2015).

In adopting this focus, scholars and activists actively contest the capitalist, neoliberal project of enclosure, through which spaces are increasingly detached from the myriad, situated relations and practices of re/production that exist between people, objects and the vital materials. Underscoring this process is the need to shift from away from such rational and technocratic notions of resource management, towards one that emphasises the affective socio-nature relations that can foster subjectivities of 'being in common' with others. Garcia- Lopez (2018) suggests that commoning therefore demands that transformation and production be seen as open (ontologically and epistemologically) to what is foreign, unknown, uncertain, or as yet unborn. In short, both the process and outcomes of public land reform in the context of recreation and leisure require that we recognise how bodies, labour and the affective practices that bring public and private spaces into being, are never uniquely human.

In what is, to date, the most comprehensive overview of the specific how we might come to know, and govern, the subject in the Anthropocene, Chandler (2018), delineates the most compelling strategies for bringing such theories into political praxis. Here, the Anthropocene is seen to present a unique opportunity, in so far as the intrusion of nonhuman lifeforms, and the ontological and epistemological challenges that these intrusions present, allow societies to 'engage more imaginatively with the constantly emerging present, alert to the fact that these relationships need to become a matter of care, attention and opportunity' (2018:11). Indeed, if the number of nonhuman intrusions in social and political life is increasing, then it should be noted that the 'excluded' have

already started to formulate a new world (Latour 2005). Thus, in making us more fragile and challenging our complacent attitude towards the environment, the Anthropocene demands that we rethink what we knew, and work collectively to reimagine where we are going.

To this end, Chandler outlines 3 political strategies for reimagining our collective future, which he terms mapping, sensing, and hacking. Though a fuller exploration of these terms is beyond the scope of this paper, the third term, hacking, shall be utilised for the purposes of this analysis. Hacking is a process in which people work from within an existing system to create new material possibilities. Unlike mapping and sensing, which deal with present dilemmas to offer practical solutions, hacking is a more future-orientated mode of governance that facilitates new ways of connecting with objects that are critical, open-ended and experimental. Rather than focusing on generating new epistemologies, hackers emphasise a growing awareness of empirical and ontological entanglements. As such, they do not sit within the traditional spheres of governance and management, but actively work to form 'new idioms of the political and belonging itself' (ibid: 165).

Via hacking, political change is made manifest in and through the moment of 'co-becoming or of material inter-relation' (Chandler 2018: 165). Underscoring this idea is that objects such as dirt, rocks and trees 'are not seen as already in a relation ... but rather as offering an invitation to creatively join' (ibid:167). In this way, the potential for object arrangements to change is already there in the relation, and is made possible through the actual moment of co-becoming and material intra-action. As a political orientation towards objects, hackers therefore become intimately attuned to the fluidity of relations

and the continual emergence of new possibilities. They undo the artificial separation between subject and object and replace it with a form sympoieses, in which human and nonhuman (political) agency emerges out of a creative and complementary process of world-making, allowing us to see things that are already close to us (that is, nature, ecology or land ownership) in new or imaginative ways. In this vein, the process of hacking is complementary to the aims of more-than-human commoning, in that it is marked by a sense of creativity, re-generation and mutual vulnerability.

In what follows, I show how the form of mountain bike trails is dependant on the (object) relations within which they are comprehended. In so doing, I will capture how a socio-political orientation that is characterised principally by commodification, common sense and personal (human-to-human) responsibility, hides, and to a certain extent deliberately undermines, the subtleties of a sophisticated trail building sensibility. Furthermore, I submit that this emergent trail building sensibility, characterised as it is by nonhuman symbiosis, might trouble and challenge modern forms of spatial governance, whilst providing the basis for new and progressive forms of onto-political management that are made to the measure of the Anthropocene. The paper therefore builds on existing work in physical and cultural studies, which recognises that speculative and object-oriented ontologies can provide a useful lens through which to analyse how things can serve to unsettle various publics, whilst helping to bringing these objects to the forefront of deliberative debate.

## **Assembling a Political Voice via Human-Non Human Entanglements**

The data presented below were collected during interviews with twenty mountain bike trail builders between 2018 and 2020. Participants were selected because they were currently involved, either formally (that is, they were part of a structured attempt to build sanctioned trails on permissive land) or informally (that is, on land that where their building was not lawfully permitted) in trail building within England. England was selected as an important geographic territory for this research as trail building is currently a topical and contentious point of discussion concerning access laws and public rights of way. Interviews sought to uncover how participants positioned themselves in relation to nature, as well as gathering information on how land access was granted, operationalized, interpreted and resisted within English territories. Questions revolved around their level of commitment; their perceived impact on, and, relationship with, the landscapes in which they work; their own trail building preferences; and, their level of adherence to English access laws.

Following transcription, the data were then subject to a thematic analysis, which comprised the three stages of analysis outlined in the work of Sparkes, Perez-Samaniego and Smith (2011). Here, the focus was on what was said as opposed to how something was said, to whom, or for what purposes. Throughout this process, I was cognisant of the tensions and contradictions surrounding the use of (human centered) empirical data in elucidating the vibrancy of objects within sport and physical culture. Specifically, I was wary of attributing agency to only human actors, thus falling into the trap of positioning voice as either pure cause or effect of relations and furthering the myth of human intentionality.

In addressing this friction, inspiration was taken from the work of Mazzei and Jackson (2019), who posit that giving voice to objects means accounting for voice as a material-discursive practice that is inseparable from the object relations within space. In the context of this research, this meant being attentive to the many others – human and nonhuman – with whom we live, whilst simultaneously resisting the 'cutting off of a human subject...as the prime source of experience, knowledge and the real' (Mazzei & Jackson 2019: 1091). Care was taken to ensure that the objects-relations presented were not seen as being enclosed within a hierarchy of relations, but rather as emergent phenomena that were entirely dependent on the composition, and negotiation of, object forces. In what follows, this analytic framework is put to use in exploring the material – discursive order of outdoor space, with specific attention to the two themes that emerged through this dialogue, namely: the tensions between trail building and neoliberal spatial governance, and the subsequent development of an alternative, hacking sensibility.

## **Mountain Bike Trails as Objects of (Co) Production and Disruption**

When asked about the problems currently facing mountain bikers and mountain bike trail builders, all interviewees highlighted the increasing encroachment of culture and people into different outdoor spaces. For example, both Will and Frank articulated the contentious use (and abuse) of space in the 21st-century nature sport-scape:

Times have changed, and current notions of access are ineffectual. We have a whole new user group who are rapidly expanding; it's bringing masses more people into the great outdoors, and many of those people fall in love with those places and desperately want to look after it. (Will)

The general public has more choice than ever and don't know anything other than what they are told. When you're in the Cairngorms, the middle of Scandinavia or deepest Russia that kind of attitude will not work. What we need to do is develop an attitude where people understand and can relate to aspects of the local landscape, as well as being challenged by it in some way (Frank).

The responses here represent two contemporary urges outlined in the work of Bruno Latour (2018). On the one hand, they illustrate the growing diversity of global leisure interests and the increasing number of opportunities for people to be involved in myriad forms of outdoor and adventure tourism. On the other, they demonstrate how this same sense of mobility prompts us to pay greater attention to the materiality of space within a given locality (i.e Frank and Will's comments about 'looking after the landscape'), as we are increasingly deprived of meaningful attachments to land.

In England, this is especially pronounced given the contemporaneous intensification of enclosure, in which public land is sold to private investors, and the political economy of space is reordered to benefit the interests of a small percentage of wealthy landowners. A consequence of this is that mountain bikers are now subject to greater scrutiny, and must increasingly weigh their own self-interests (and object relations) against a range of other user groups. Here, participants remarked how mountain bike trails have become an important object of concern (McLeod et al 2018). For instance, Frank suggested that the administration, governance and management of nonhumans is not only included in the procedures of deliberative democracy, but that the enactment of such procedures is part and parcel of how mountain bikers, and the countryside more generally, were regulated. Other individuals recounted frequent and

intimate encounters with materials, objects and animals, which suggested that trail building necessitates new associations between humans and nonhumans. They also alluded to the numerous conflicts that they had with other members of the public regarding their treatment of these objects, including disputes over soil, trees and gates. Finally, they indicated that these everyday encounters are mediated by scientific and political bodies such as the RSPB, Natural England, as well as cultural groups such as Heritage England, suggesting that an object can become part of the daily routine of administration and management (McLeod and Hawzen, 2020).

In engaging with the vicissitudes of objects within a variety of spaces, the participants recognised that the capacities of objects such as roots, rocks and dirt exceeded the will of these officiating bodies. This was evident when Christine compared her own approach to water management to that of the local council:

The water is going to go where it wants. You can persuade it to go somewhere some of the time but the rest of the time you have to accept that some of the trails do become a river in certain conditions. However, at X they [the council] put the stones down and the channel is back almost exactly where it used to be because they've not really thought about the drainage. I think the council may have approaches that are quite generic and don't necessarily look at the particular situation, they just go 'this is our solution that we use'.

Brown (2015) argues that human inscription is a social and cultural phenomenon, and that traces of movement in talk, action and terrain are key territorialising devices that render certain activities (un)acceptable. In this research, however, participants noted how objects such as water were not simply *incorporated* into the process of political

subjectification, but were rather, thoroughly *constitutive* of it (Millington & Wilson 2017). For instance, Rob revealed how the standardised procedures of water management contradicted the supposed eroding qualities of the mountain bike, while Harry explained how water can be used to build a less manicured trail than those that were constructed at purpose-built trail centres. Accordingly, water is positioned by trail builders as an object that both *produces* and *disrupts* power relations between the individual and the state (Millington and Wilson, 2017) and is seen to act as a key medium in the formulation of a counter-hegemonic identity.

In recognising the shifting way in which water and other objects might intervene in and resist apriori forms of governance, individuals were identified as actively problematising static, and/or commodity-oriented notions property, access, and territory, whilst questioning mountain bikers' exclusion from these spaces. Two neoliberal environments were seen to be especially problematic in this regard. Firstly, individuals such as Tony positioned their own orientation in contradistinction to the Forestry Commission, whose (public) properties currently accommodate many sanctioned and unsanctioned mountain bike trails:

We don't ride in particularly 'pristine' environments. We ride in an environment that is effectively a large, industrial, tree growing factory. And if you have ever been in a plantation after they've felled it ... if you ever want to see decimation and disturbance then go and see that! Building mountain bike trails is very responsible and caring by comparison (Tony)

Tony's experience is indicative of a gradual shift in land management in the UK, whereby critical regulatory functions such as timber production are managed by quasi-state actors

that adopt a market logic towards the value and administration of public space (Bigger & Dempsey 2018). Indeed, although all UK Forestry land is open to the public for the purposes of leisure and recreation, tensions emerge when the public are exposed to the commercial realities of industrial timber production, which may clash with the more intimate ecological assemblages that are formed through the process of trail building. This is evident in the 'decimation' that Tony associates with the harvesting of trees and the level of cynicism that he exhibits towards this practice. Many of the participants positioned this cynicism as a key motive for trail building itself, often describing their intention to actively reclaim these spaces as to - in the words of Scott - 'return the woodland back to nature'.

Secondly, individuals remarked on their suspicions regarding current land access laws within England, which are almost exclusively premised on the relationship between different groups (of humans) and the protection of a reified Nature (McNeish & Olivier 2017). This is summed up by Steve, who laments the government's current focus on the enactment of a 'countryside code':

Rights of way are a bit of a farce. People think they are about preventing groups from accessing land, but actually, they are ensuring codes of conduct when people are there. The emphasis on the environment is relatively small by comparison, and the only time this becomes relevant is when there is damage to an owner's land.

Steve's comments reflect the government attempts to territorialise the English landscape by naming the effects of the activity of objects (Shaw & Meehan 2013). Nonetheless, in imposing a human-centred regulatory framework, which is derived from the rationalised

notions of property ownership and responsible access, mountain bike trails have (unintentionally) become a hybrid fusion of human/nonhuman agents, forced together by the very efforts that attempt to pull them apart. Like the objects and atmospheres enrolled in the governance of environmental issues at the Olympics (McLeod et al 2018; McDonald and Sterling 2020), or opposition to a new golf course (Millington and Watson 2017), we see how objects both participate in, and disrupt the state and the development of political notions of a civil society. Specifically, the material 'damage' (to soil, woodlands and landscapes) is positioned by Steve as inseparable from debates relating to good and bad behaviour. Yet, it is these very same entanglements that allow the participants to advocate for change in the context of mountain biking, by actively reassembling the various associations relating to access and public rights of way.

These findings indicate a dual tendency in the commodification of nature, characterized by a progression towards the governance of nature on one hand, and tensions over the protection of various social and environmental interests on the other (McDonald and Sterling, 2020). Indeed, despite attempts by the Forestry Commission and various administrations to manage and capitalise upon the planting and harvesting of trees, or to grant exclusive access rights to public space, the excerpts explored herein illustrate that objects such as nature and space are always being made and re-made “more thoroughly, though never completely capitalized or commodified” (Prudham 2004: 17). Here, it is *because*, rather than *in spite* of these differences in articulation, that there remains the possibility for these object relations to be re-assembled in a manner that befits the interests of the public. It is to the political possibilities afforded by this view,

and the specific strategies that this might entail, that I will now turn, with reference to the processes of hacking and more-than-human commoning.

## **Mountain Bike Trail Building, Hacking and the More-Than-Human Commons**

In contradistinction to the rational and static apparatus of state-led access rights, the participants advocated a mode of onto-political governance that was akin to Chandler's (2018) notion of hacking. This approach was not drawn from any existing political arrangement but was instead predicated upon an attempt to form a completely new construct of belonging, in which the possibility for political change is experienced in the material emergent inter-relation between human and non-human. As Robert suggests when elaborating upon how to be a responsible trail builder:

Building responsibility is about looking for all sorts of features. It's about watching where the stream beds are and making sure that a trail can naturally drain into it. So it's about making a nice trail that will last, but also recognising the dynamics of the landscape. For example, I now recognise plants that grow in boggy areas, so you know that although your new trail make look fine, it will be grassy and boggy as hell come August' (Robert)

Chandler (2018) contends that hacking necessitates a form of sympoiesis, which undoes the unified subject and replaces it with a process of mutual becoming. This was also evident, for example, in the way that John described trail building as creating a range of new natures and habitats:

The thing about a mountain bike trail is that it's a corridor. So if you are in the middle of the woods and you put a trail corridor through, the 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.

John's interests are not exclusively premised on the development of rideable mountain bike trails, but the process of ecological becoming itself, in ways that produce spatial configurations that do not have clear self-defined boundaries. Indeed, the interviewees' affinity with the land is one that is based on both mutual respect for the vital capacity of objects and the delicate way in which these allegiances have to be upheld and maintained.

Concomitantly, the processes of building a good trail and ensuring it fits with the landscape, require a degree of experimentation, or what was referred to by Christine as 'trial and error'. For instance, Will embarrassingly described taking a leaf blower to his trails, only to have excess water wash off into the surrounding ecosystem whilst Paul told of how he once took a trail into a nesting area for birds and felt haunted by it for years afterward. For Bresnihan (2015), there is something important about these mistakes, as they represent the trail builders' acceptance of not-knowing. This extends beyond mere selfishness or indifference, and promotes more ethical modes of attachments to objects and sentient life (manifest in the embarrassment and shame on behalf of the individuals) whilst providing opportunities to see already existing object arrangements as subject to a period of reorganisation, repurposing and repositioning.

An interesting dynamic, in this respect, are the object relations that emerge within a given spatial location, which is illustrative of the trail builders' appreciation of both comprehension and form (Ash 2019). As John puts it: 'Everywhere you build it's different'. To which Connor adds: 'You'll talk with different people in different locations, and because they've all got different materials and objects to work with, they all have different benefits and problems'. For Paul, this was precisely the allure of trail building as a form of leisure:

I love it the first time you go to a new place. There was this virgin forest in X with great elevation... walking into the woods you were like 'yeah, this is trail building gold'. 'Look at the shape of the land here, look at the rock sticking out there, how can we link this in with it?' We were spoilt for choice about where we could build and how we could do it coming down with some ferns here and a big sweeping bend here. It takes a while to work it out but once you do it is great.

These responses show how the labour involved in building a trail in a given location is only ever an outcome gifted to us through a relationship with non-human objects. Furthermore, it indicates that trail builders are acutely attuned to differences in both the form and comprehension of space (Ash 2019). Note for example, how the materialisation of John, Connor and Paul's trails is directly related to the way in which they are comprehended by other objects (that is, rocks, elevation). Accordingly, the pleasure that they gain from building trails is not in the fixing of objects within time and space, but in what Morton (2018:118) describes as the 'alreadiness' of the trail – a 'tuning to something else ... in which that something else is also, already, tuning to us'.

Accordingly, a successful trail builder must develop a radically different orientation towards nature and space that is sensitive to object relations, and fosters a set of affective practices that are sympathetic to these interdependencies (Cherrington and Black 2020a). Indeed, in tuning to the nonhuman temporalities of the trail through different sensing activities and forms of practice, and in understanding the differences in form and comprehension, the trail building experience indicates an ongoing process of ‘alluring’ (Harman 2005: 143), whereby participants learn simultaneously of both their (fragile) attachments within a given space and how they are distanced from the object that are manifest within it. The skill of bringing a trail to fruition therefore involves both recognition of the symmetry that exists between certain objects, and an understanding of those aspects that are, as it were, *beyond human comprehension* (that is, gravity, gradient of the hillside, local weather patterns).

When combined with the overt challenges noted in the first section of analysis, these responses provide evidence of a more-than-human commoning (Breshihan, 2015), in which human and nonhuman are seen as mutually entangled in the pushback against neoliberal enclosure. Specifically, trail builders recognise that they are as dependent on the landscape (for recreation), as the landscape is dependent on them (not disrupting wildlife and habitats, erosion), leading to an emergent ethic of mutual care and attention (Bresnihan, 2015). Furthermore, there is an acceptance that they will never fully know the (non-human) other, but are nonetheless ethically bound to them and their affects through the material qualities of the trail (that is, the shape of the landscape, the flora and fauna, rocks). In this respect, it could be said that the vulnerability of human and nonhuman within the trail building assemblage makes responsibility possible, because it

already necessitates a principle of equality (Vellicu and Garcia-Lopez 2018). Thus, the drawing together of human and non-human worlds within the trail building assemblage provides glimpses of what life (and leisure spaces) might look like beyond capitalist intervention.

## **Concluding thoughts**

Existing access rights in England are legally and morally unjust. They privilege the interests of a small number of landowners, reinforce neoliberal and hierarchical notions of responsibility, reify ideological and ocular-centric notions of nature, and neglect to account for the significance of objects as they become entangled in human activities (Ravenscroft, Church & Gilchrist 2013). Yet as the population of England continues to grow and the popularity of outdoor sports develops apace, scholars, advocacy groups and myriad political bodies have sought to challenge this political orthodoxy, promoting more open, democratic and egalitarian models such as those currently mandated in Scotland. In the spirit of critical dialogue, this paper has shown that simply extending access to include other (human) user groups is neither wise nor appropriately catered to the nuances of the geopolitical landscape of England. Furthermore, it has shown that advocacy which is premised exclusively on conflicting human constructions severely limits the possibilities for environmental and political change (McNeish & Olivier 2017).

Instead, this paper has explored the relative benefits of an object-oriented approach to access and space, in which the notion of rights is accorded to human and

non-human entities such as rocks, water and trees. Moreover, it highlights how bringing materiality back into the communicative practices of sport and physical culture can help to clarify what is at stake to who in these claims. In this study, mountain bike trail builders drew upon intimate ecological arrangements to both problematise existing forms of governance and explore alternative political sensibilities. This was manifest in the way that they challenged the commodification of forests, water and surfaces, whilst practicing a form of hacking that was premised upon an emergent, co-creative, and future-orientated attitude towards ecological entanglement within different territorial locations. As such, this paper has responded to calls for more empirical work dedicated to the process of commoning (Bresnihan 2015), whilst adding to a burgeoning corpus of work that is dedicated to unpacking the ontopolitics of sport.

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