Dark Ecology is a sprawling, labyrinthine book full of loops and spirals. Such wild disorder makes it hard to write a response paper in any linear fashion, and this is appropriate to the text. One of the central themes in the book is the prominence in dominant human culture of agrilogistics; "a technical, planned, and perfectly logical approach to built space" (42) that arose when our ancestors figured out a way to assure their future food supply- agriculture. Agrilogistics by necessity caused humans to shift their way of looking at the world from one of fear, wonderment and magic to one of rational, linear organization and control. In trying to formulate this paper I am finding my thoughts being channeled in the direction of what Morton calls Easy Think Substance (or hell, maybe what I'm about to say isn't what he means by Easy Think Substance, but I'm gonna use it): a pat, definable, explainable definition of a problem, with a solution, easy to package and hand over in this five page paper.

Let's talk about Morton's "three philosophical axioms [that] provide the logical structure of agrilogistics" (47):

1. The Law of Noncontradiction. The Law of Noncontradiction states that everything has an inherent beingness (assigned by humans) and cannot be anything else. It is the binary that underpins everything in our culture. If something is A, it cannot be B. If something is white, it cannot be black.

2. Existing means being constantly present. If something is A, then it needs to stay A. But The Law of Noncontradiction is constantly challenged by reality, every kind of reality (physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual) and any real challenge is met by the agrilogistic machine with violence. Agrilogistics is inherently unable to adapt. Adaptation means giving into the messy, weird, uncanny, creepy unboundedness of existence.

3. Existing is always better than any quality of existing or more accurate, Human existing is always better than any quality of existing. Agrilogistics was born out of a fear and anxiety our ancestors held about their continued survival, and it therefore privileges the very act of existing over any quality of existing or the existence of anything or anyone not given the upper hand in the binary of 'human' and 'not human.'

I first encountered the concept of agrilogistics (though that term is Morton's) in the works of Daniel Quinn. The idea that the 'problem' with human culture is agriculture. It's not a new idea and there is a whole school of thought and resultant subculture of primitivists who believe we need to get rid of civilization and the problems will go away. That's a generalization of those folks and I haven't put much research into it, but from the exposure I've had that seems to be the case. I would venture to say that Timothy Morton does not agree that we get rid of civilization and the problems go away. If the root of the problem isn't in our actions, but is in the way we see the world and the way our thoughts are organized to process our perception, then it's our thinking that needs to somehow change.

But. But but but. In Morton's book, the answer isn't so simple. The Easy Think answer to the 'problem' of global warming, mass extinctions and general ecological disaster is to change our thinking. Agrilogistic thinking or <something else>. A or B. Not this one, but that one. Sound familiar? He says, "the humanistic analytical tools we currently possess are not capable of functioning at a scale appropriate to agrilogistics because they are themselves compromised products of agrilogistics" (43). Ponder this one: "'Civilization' was a long-term collaboration between humans and wheat, humans and rock, humans and soil, not out of grand visions but out of something like desperation" (45). Our entire history as a species, including agriculture, civilization, and industrialization, has been one of relational interaction with the world around and within us, however unwitting. Agrilogistics needs us to believe that we are in charge, but we aren't, and never have been.

That does not mean we aren't causing great damage to the biosphere and our own ability to live within it, as well as the ability of many other kinds of creatures along with us. And this is sketchy territory. Giving up the idea that we are in control can start to look like giving up our responsibility to the 'problem' altogether. Morton says especially about axiom 3 (the idea that existing is better than any quality of existence ) "so toxic and taboo is the idea of undoing axion 3, one automatically assumes that whoever talks about it must be some kind of Nazi" (52). If we start to imagine that quality of existence could be better than existing, period, we have to start imagining who it is that gets a better quality of existence, and who gets no existence at all- right? Nazi territory there, for sure. But that's Easy Think again. Either for life or against it. If we were able to think in some other way than agrilogistically, what kinds of solutions to this particular binary could we come up with?

Morton refers to a "possibility space that flickers continually within, around, beneath and to the side of" (80) agrilogistics as the arche-lithic. The arche-lithic is the timeless, magical, boundless state of existence that we can imagine other species and non-agrilogistic humans exist(ed) within. It is also the scary, creepy, uncanny, terrifying reality that we are very small creatures on a large planet, and there are things that want to eat us. We aren't in charge. The arche-lithic is hard to write about. Writing seems to be contrary to its very form, which is formless. This isn't about prioritizing one kind of thinking over the other, either. That would put us back in the land of the Law of Noncontradiction. The point Morton makes about the arche-lithic isn't that it is 'better' so much that it exists, and although agrilogistics was developed for the very purpose of trying to obtain some kind of control over it, it sneaks through the cracks into every aspect of our lives. We still die. Our bodies still rot into the ground and become something else. We are made up of numberless creatures that aren’t ‘us’. The interconnection of beings in the world extends INTO our actual physical being. People try frantically to defeat this reality, up to imagining ways to leave the planet that we come from and defeating death.

But ultimately, the arche-lithic does exist, and we are not in charge. The program some humans have been running for 12,000 years-agrilogistics- is catching up with us. We can each assert control on a certain timescale; for instance, when I am so utterly sick of the rain in Olympia I can hop an airplane for Mexico if I so choose, but on an ‘Earth’ timescale, what are my options? The carbon emitted by that airplane will contribute to the biosphere being uninhabitable for future generations. We each can move uneasily within the confines of our coexistence, but we cannot escape it, and on the ‘Earth’ timescale our agrilogistic program is proving a fatal evolutionary adaptation. The question is, can we evolve again?

The third section of Dark Ecology attempts, I think, to address this question. Without giving any pat answers, there are many dark and twisty ideas to chew on. Without ‘calling’ for anything in particular, Morton seems to seductively beckon the reader out of the agrilogistic program and into the uncanny, weird (two words he uses a lot), bottomless pool of the arche-lithic and what he calls ecognosis; “ecognosis is like knowing, but more like letting be known. It is something like coexisting. it is like becoming accustomed to something strange, yet it is also becoming accustomed to strangeness that doesn’t become less strange through acclimation” (5). He chronicles a descent into ecological awareness, or ecognosis, that goes through the following stages; The Guilt, The Shame, The Melancholy, The Horror, The Ridiculous, The Ethereal, The Hollow, The Sadness, The Longing, The Joy.

“It goes like this. We have guilt because we can have shame. We have shame because we can have horror. We have horror because we can have depression. We have depression because we can have sadness. We have sadness because we can have longing. We have longing because we can have joy. Find the joy without pushing away the depression, for the depression is accurate...Let’s make it down into the sadness and proceed further down from there.” (117-119)

Finding a way through the clinging, inescapable sadness of ecological catastrophe and mass extinctions to The Joy is central to what I think Morton is trying to say might be an answer to thinking a future coexistence. We want to avoid pain so we look away, make excuses, deny the truth. But we need to allow ourselves to feel the pain of what is going on in order to tunnel through the seemingly linear, one dimensional structure of agrilogistics in order to feel the Joy that is at the center of everything, because the Joy is in itself the feeling of inextricable connection to everything else in existence, and everything that ever has existed, because it is all still here, just all mixed up in a different form. It’s not something we can decide to do, but something that we can allow to be done to us, to allow the slinky, creepy mesh of coexistence to have its way with us again. To look at the world with timeless eyes again, and allow ourselves to see who is looking back at us, and has been looking towards us the whole time, waiting for us.

“Someone- it seems to us- has just arrived at a party via an elevator. The room goes quiet. Everyone is looking. Imagine everyone to include nonhumans and there you have it: ecognosis, at least in some form.” (135)