

SIMON C. ESTOK

Introduction: Theorizing Ecophobia, Ten Years In

A decade has passed since the article “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia,” published in the pages of this journal, initiated theorizing about ecophobia. In those ten years, anthropogenic impacts on the planet have gotten much, much worse, and while it is certain that things will continue to get considerably worse for the foreseeable future, it is also abundantly clear that we have taken many steps that could lead us onto paths much different than the one that has gotten us to where we are. A decade ago, I couldn’t have lived the way I do today, driving a fully electric car in British Columbia (where I spend half of my time), a province in which 97% of the electricity comes from renewable, clean¹ sources and where there is an infrastructure to support such cars. A decade ago, it was inconceivable that mainstream media such as CNN or BBC would regularly report on the meat and dairy industry as a major contributor to climate change and that veganism would have widespread acceptance in North America. A decade ago, it was little more than a dream that a “green new deal” (which was two years old at the time)² would get very far as a legislative package—a dream that, as I write in late February 2019, seems much more attainable. And yet a decade ago, no one could have imagined that a person such as Mr. Trump would become the President of the US either, intoxicated as we all were by the hope and promise of having Barack Obama in office. Things change, sometimes for the better, but often for the worse, and the worst is yet to come. Nevertheless, we know the answers, and they are not all that complicated. To be healthy, we need to eat well and cook our own

ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment 26.2 (Spring 2019), pp. 379–387

Advance Access publication June 27, 2019 doi:10.1093/isle/isz034

© The Author(s) 2019. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. All rights reserved.

For permissions, please email: journals.permissions@oup.com

plant-based foods whenever possible. To be sustainable, we need to follow the three principles that sustained us for thousands of years: use renewable energy sources, protect and encourage diversity, and ensure that chemicals and nutrients necessary for life are recycled. And to understand why we do such terrible things to our home, the world that sustains us, we need to understand the ethics behind our behaviors. These behaviors have led to an age that is different from all previous ones in the degree to which humans are disrupting the balances of the earth systems. The current age is characterized by such disruptions and by our paralysis to escape the effects of our own creations. The current age is characterized by our slave relationship to generating ever growing and ever diversifying products (including waste products) and by a perverse faith in the capacity of science to solve the problems. It is characterized by things beyond our control, things we thought had nailed but that have come back to haunt us. It is called the Anthropocene; yet, in its triumphal assertion of human exceptionalism, the term itself both glosses over important facts of biological history and seems to assume that anthropogenic violence against the world is a relatively new thing. It is not, and the origins of our current environmental crises are deeply rooted and darkly ecophobic. Theorizing about ecophobia is necessary to changing it.

Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus noted that "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia" evoked a "blazing response" (758), producing what Greg Garrard dubbed "The Estok-Robisch Controversy" (46).³ But the article produced something else too: Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivills have argued that "efforts to characterize the term 'ecogothic' arguably began with ... 'Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia'" (2). The discussion about ecophobia has far from died down, and for good reason: there really is no way forward until we come to serious understandings of how ecophobia got us to where we are. For boldly encouraging continued theorizing through this Special Cluster, Scott Slovic deserves a lot of credit here.⁴ The continuing debates have produced often brilliant and sometimes provocative analyses, and it is in the spirit of producing more of these that the following eight articles are collected.

Sophie Christman's article "'I have a Dream': Erasing the American Bias of Naturism" begins the collection with the radical claim that "that American ecophobia can only be destabilized and erased by a polity that vests biotic and abiotic resources with the rights of Constitutional personhood." Arguing "that natural environments and non-human species perform life-sustaining services for humans and therefore accomplish civil responsibilities necessary to sustain all life on earth,"

Christman's article raises imperative questions about law. These are important deliberations, and, as I have argued in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, it may be time to recognize "that the selected ideas of liberty that America has enjoyed and promulgated—especially regarding representations in media that are clearly ecophobic—may need to be understood and regulated in the same way that hate speech and hate crimes are" (14). For Christman, the transfiguring of theory into practice has precedence in the legislation that grew out of (and continues to grow out of) the civil rights movement, a model for what Christman sees for environmental legislation. Christman sees ecophobia as a "condition" or a way of thinking but not as a practice and proposes the word "naturism" to describe the practices that she sees resulting from ecophobia,⁵ and she examines how "individual and systemic acts uphold a condition of ecophobia that results in acts of naturism that permeate everyday life in America."

In a challenging and engrossing argument about how examining ecophobia is itself a pedagogical assault on ecophobic ethics, Iris Ralph seeks to explain what exactly "theorizing" about ecophobia can do. Ralph is concerned in "Ecophobia and the Porcelain Porcine Species" with understanding possible reasons for the troubled history of theorizing about ecophobia, a large part of which, she claims, has to do with the way that the very term "ecophobia" calls out, more so than does any other ecocritical term, what society and its most powerful lobbying institutions—the fossil fuel and nuclear power industries, corporate agricultural industries, the meat industry, and the military—largely underestimate, underplay, obfuscate, and conceal. In the second part of "Ecophobia and the Porcelain Porcine Species," Ralph reads a literary text, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, to emphasize that teaching and studying literary texts by examining either their ecophobic content or their rebuke of it is an obvious yet under-utilized strategy for ecocriticism scholars and other professionals to bring more public attention to society's deepest misdirected fears and anxieties. Ralph contends that the term "ecophobia" should be as familiar and contested a term as "racism," "sexism," and "homophobia," and so be daily debated in schools, universities, offices, airports, gas stations, corner stores, food courts, and shopping malls. For Ralph, ecocriticism inches along when it should be making great leaps in the twenty-first century, leaps that she believes ecophobia theory promises to help achieve. In offering fairly close readings of *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph shows compellingly that representations of ecophobia are culturally nuanced and determined.

Indeed, what is ecophobia in New York may not be ecophobia in New Delhi, a point Rayson K. Alex and S. Susan Deborah make in their

"Ecophobia, Reverential Eco-fear and Indigenous Worldview." Alex and Deborah interrogate the element of ecological fear and the reverence attached to ecological entities in an Indian Indigenous context. They call this fear and reverence "Indigenous Reverential Eco-fear" (IRE) and, through analyses of two narratives—a Santhal song and a conversation with a Mudugar leader—explore the sacralization of naturecultures to argue that IRE signals deep ecocultural relationships between the indigenous Mudugar and their environments. The main point of Drs Alex and Deborah is that these fears—even when they are an apparent deep-rooted and (to the industrialized and scientific mind) irrational shrinking and timorousness before nature—are constitutionally and definitively different from ecophobia. In their discussions, Alex and Deborah also argue this reverential eco-fear can easily change into something else, something a lot more like ecophobia. In their examination of an indigenous poem by Robin S. Ngangom, Alex and Deborah clearly reveal the degeneration the indigenous reverential eco-fear ethical paradigm into ecophobia, which they contend is a result of cultural and economic colonization of indigenous communities in India by non-indigenous mainstream Indian society.

Zümre Gizem Yılmaz's "Ecophobia as Entertainment: Fear and Disgust for the Gaze" picks up questions about relationships between profit and ecophobia that Alex and Deborah touch on. Her article examines how a variety of recent art has used ecophobia as entertainment. Yılmaz argues that the material in some of these artworks offers disgusting visceral experiences, hence, she claims, separating the intellect (the creative artist) from foulness (vomit and urine, for example). Other artwork, Yılmaz explains, furthers the representation of ecophobia by exhibiting the violation of nonhuman bodies, actively involving viewers in ecophobic actions, and promoting a continued institutionalizing of ecophobia through art. While her final comments about discouraging art that carries ecophobic messages make sense, censorship smells bad—and where there are bad smells, rotting things in the State can't be far behind.⁶

While for Yılmaz there seems an unproblematic definition of what constitutes ecophobic practices in art, for Guo Wei and Peina Zhuang, things are not always what they seem with ecophobia and biophilia. In their "Ecophobia, 'Hollow Ecology,' and the Chinese Concept of 'Tianren Heyi' (天人合一)," they argue that "天人合一" ("Tianren Heyi," "the integration of humanity and nature") may seem like a biophilic concept, but it has often sustained the ecophobia entrenched since ancient times in Chinese culture. According to Wei and Zhuang, early Chinese mythology, emperor worship, and visual arts express dread of and hostility to nonhuman nature. Wei and Zhuang explain

that early Daoists, particularly Zhuangzi, attempted to demystify ecophobic ideologies and that “Tianren Heyi” played an important role in this process by wisely drawing attention to humanity’s utter dependence on nature. Later thinkers, such as Mencius and Dong Zhongshu, linked “Tianren Heyi” to the moral notion of benevolence. This development, as Wei and Zhuang show, at first glance seems innocuous, but it has had harmful ecological consequences. The Mencian version of “Tianren Heyi,” which has permeated modern Chinese culture and influenced other East Asian countries, encourages ecological complacency, nurturing human indifference to nonhuman suffering. By excavating the past and deconstructing “Tianren Heyi,” the authors explain, we can better understand the ideological preconditions for the massive pollution and growing carnivorousness of contemporary China.

For Brian Deyo (“Ecophobia, the Anthropocene, and the Denial of Death”), too, excavating the past is important for understanding ecophobia, which, for him, is “a primordial, largely precognitive (or unconscious) awareness of our animality: which is to say, our inescapably vulnerable, mortal nature.” Deyo coordinates Anthropocene Theory with the psychological theories of Ernest Becker and Terror Management Theory, recasting ecophobia as a precognitive sense of our animality, finitude, and mortality. Granting the Anthropocene’s capacity to unsettle anthropocentric imaginaries, Deyo argues that it is imperative to speculatively attend to the biological and cultural forces that produce them in the first place. If unconscious fear of the indifference and unpredictability of nature plays a substantial role in the historical development of anthropocentric cultures (the very means by which, according to Becker, humans deny the material, ecological basis of their being), Deyo reasons, then the heightened sense of existential insecurity wrought by the Anthropocene may reinforce their appeal and authority, not to mention the environmentally destructive practices they enshrine.

Steven Hartman and Patrick Degeorges also focus on psychological histories in their “‘DON’T PANIC’: Fear and Acceptance in the Anthropocene,” which offers a psychohistorical reading of civilization-building into the Anthropocene, with a special emphasis on the deeply disruptive present era inaugurated by the Great Acceleration. Their discussion seeks to better comprehend why modern societies find themselves stuck in an increasing ecological panic as a more general awareness seems to grow concerning the Earth’s changing conditions in the Anthropocene. Hartman and Degeorges suggest that ecophobia in the present era is giving way to a *panphobia* that springs from the collapse of the historically constructed, culturally

reinforced, and industrially reproduced separation of Nature and Culture, itself a consequence—ironically—of the success of human colonization of nature and the ever-deepening hybridizations of the social and the natural. For Hartman and Degeorges, panphobia can be understood as an epidemic madness flowing from the unmistakable ecological awareness underlying the Anthropocenic principle of coexistence, and they conclude by questioning whether this very awareness may hold the promise of a way out of this catastrophic paralysis.

Finally, my own contribution to the ongoing discussion about ecophobia focuses on rooted fears about transgressions of bodily boundaries and norms and how these threaten notions about human particularity. “Ecophobia, the Agony of Water, and Misogyny” argues that while microbiophobia and disgust have genetic roots and evolutionary functions that have offered survival advantages, these antipathies also manifest complicated intersections between ecophobia and misogyny. With the *Alien* film franchise as a touchstone, and beginning with Sartre’s theorizing on slime, I show that slime is a shape-shifter that defies categories and poses a threat not simply to human order but specifically to a male order. Slime triggers both ecophobic disgust and various attempts at control—for instance, the picturing of women as sexual objects—that often lead to violence. Within patriarchal narratives, slimic agency intersects with how men imagine the agency of women—sexual, emotional, intellectual, political (and how they fear what they imagine). Patriarchies have no use for women’s agency, any more than ecophobia has use for nature’s agency. I argue that agency, worse than useless here, is a threat that must be rendered safe and palatable when patriarchies imagine women, women’s bodies, and women’s sexuality as sites of pollution articulated through slimic discourses.

Animating each of the articles collected in this Special Cluster is the idea that theorizing ecophobia helps it to become visible, understandable, and subject to action. Ten years ago, my hope was that ecophobia, as a theoretical proposition, would be subjected to scrupulous peer review, questioned, tested, checked, challenged, and tossed if malarkey or developed if viable. And it has been interrogated and tried—from the very start, with the Robisch response,⁷ to the articles in this Special Cluster, and in all of the scholarship in between. Even so, there is much more work yet to be done. One of the surprising blank spots in this collection, as in the larger body of work theorizing ecophobia, for instance, is the relative lack of attention to the biological aspects of ecophobia. Not one of the papers in this Special Cluster, my own included, talk about the almond-sized chunk of the brain that wires us to react in fright to spiders and snakes: the amygdala. What exactly can we say about hard-wiring and genetics without producing fact-free narratives and

nonsense? This is the challenge for theorizing about ecophobia in the age of Trump and “alternative facts,”⁸ and the essays that follow are a good beginning for getting us closer to realizing that challenge.

NOTES

1. Hydroelectric dams are not as clean as they claim to be, since rotting vegetation felled for the dams produces an enormous amount of methane. See Hurtado.

2. David Roberts explains that

The first use of the term “GND” in the US may trace to *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, who called for one in a 2007 column (and in his book *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*) as a kind of green globalism. (Funny thing, politics.) As Kaufman notes in a story on this history, none other than Barack Obama was taken by Friedman’s idea and included a GND in his 2008 platform. (It can also be argued that Obama’s stimulus bill was a proto-GND in itself). (<https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2018/12/21/18144138/green-new-deal-alexandria-ocasio-cortez>)

3. As I explain in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, there is more *debate* than *controversy* between my article and Robisch’s: “Estok/Robisch Debate” would be a more accurate description. Even so, Garrard correctly identified the core of Robisch’s discontent as being a concern over the role of theory in ecocriticism.

4. It needs to be mentioned that the resistance to theorizing about ecophobia spread much further than Robisch. It would be wrong here to neglect mentioning (since so doing is itself a kind of silencing) that the 2010 *ISLE* “Ecocriticism and Theory” Cluster itself seemed to discourage debate on the very matter (theorizing about ecophobia) that motivated it: the call made no mention of the two articles (mine or Robisch’s) that inspired the cluster: the effect was to silence debate about the topic, and, indeed, the eventual collection barely touched the hypothesizing that spurred it.

5. This is not a position with which I entirely agree and am more inclined to describe ecophobic practices that result from ecophobia (as I would describe homophobic practices resulting from homophobia, sexist practices from sexism, and anti-Semitic practices from anti-Semitism).

6. There is definitely something rotten in the state of the Union. When *Time* magazine is forced to run an issue with “Is Truth Dead?” emblazoned on its cover, we know that we have entered a new age, one in which opinions vie for supremacy against verifiable facts in the public understanding of truth. In one of the *Time* articles, Nancy Gibbs explains that “For Donald Trump, shamelessness is not just a strength, it’s a strategy. . . Whether it’s the size of his inaugural crowds or voter fraud or NATO funding or the claim that he was wiretapped, Trump says a great many things that are demonstrably false” (Gibbs), an average of “15 false claims a day in 2018,” according to one

CNN report (see Kessler). At some point, however, as Yilmaz explains, we need to discourage falsehoods. Amazon appears to have gotten this message. The recent and continuing outbreak of measles in the US seems to have prompted some change at Amazon: as I write, there is a headline running “Anti-vaccine movies disappear from Amazon after CNN Business report” on CNN.com (see Sarlin). It would have been better to have not carried the movies in the first place. The work of Dr. Andrew Wakefield connecting vaccinations with autism has long been known to have “been a fraud and a hoax” (McIntyre 83). Eleven people have died of measles in the US since 2000. While I don’t personally like the sound of Yilmaz’s conclusion that ecophobic art “should be discouraged,” educators try to “discourage” (if I am understanding Yilmaz correctly) things that are demonstrably false or are based on demonstrably false notions—things such as homophobic, sexist, and racist material, and so it seems also reasonable to do the same with ecophobic material and, as Yilmaz suggests, to discourage it.

7. This is mentioned in several of the articles collected here—see also my “Introduction,” *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*.

8. What Lee McIntyre calls “the abandonment of evidential standards” (1), of course, does not begin with Kellyanne Conway’s “alternative facts.” Harold Fromm—one of the editors of the field-initiating *Ecocriticism Reader*—offers a particularly shocking example of how, “when we are emotionally invested in a subject . . . our ability to reason well will probably be affected” (McIntyre 55). Fromm argues vigorously against veganism in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, claiming that vegans “are enlisted in an open-ended but futile metaphysic of virtue and self-blamelessness that pretends to escape from the conditions of life itself” (“Vegans”). The 95 blog responses posted online disagreed. Arguing from feeling rather than evidence, Fromm offers untruths that masquerade as facts: “behind their beliefs is the hopeless longing for innocence” (*ibid*). He claims that “Veganism, while perhaps harmless enough, especially if you don’t care about being part of society or alienating potential friends who may find you more trouble than you’re worth, fails on both counts [theory and practice]” (*ibid*). Precisely such “a desire not to offend our friends” (McIntyre 60) that Fromm advocates (here as a guide to ethical living) is what has led us into an age of post-truth. For Fromm, feelings trump facts. I deal with the Fromm rant extensively in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (99–101), from which I have drawn some of this footnote.

WORKS CITED

- Estok, Simon C. “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia.” *ISLE* 16.2 (2009): 203–25.
 ——. *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*. Routledge, 2018.
 Fromm, Harold. “Vegans and the Quest for Purity.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 July 2010. <www.chronicle.com/article/Vegansthe-Quest-for-66090/?sid=cr>.

- Garrard, Greg. "Ecocriticism." *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* 19.1 (2011): 46–82.
- Gibbs, Nancy. "When a President Can't Be Taken at His Word." *Time* 22 Mar. 2017. <<http://time.com/4710615/donald-trump-truth-falsehoods/>>.
- Hurtado, María Elena. "Dams raise global warming gas." *SciDeveNet*, 7 Nov. 2016. <<https://www.scidev.net/global/energy/news/dams-raise-global-warming-gas.html>>.
- Keetley, Dawn and Matthew Wynn Sivils. "Introduction: Approaches to the Ecogothic." *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Ed. Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils. Routledge, 2018. 1–20.
- Kessler, Glenn. "A Year of Unprecedented Deception: Trump Averaged 15 False Claims a Day in 2018." *The Washington Post* 30 Dec. 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/12/30/year-unprecedented-deception-trump-averaged-false-claims-day/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.15c7229c9e68>.
- McIntyre, Lee. *Post-Truth*. The MIT Press, 2018.
- Roberts, David. "The Green New Deal, explained." *Vox Media*, 7 Feb. 2019. <<https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2018/12/21/18144138/green-new-deal-alexandria-ocasio-cortez>>.
- Sarlin, Jon. "Anti-vaccine Movies Disappear from Amazon after CNN Business report." *CNN Business*, 1 Mar. 2019. <<https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/01/tech/amazon-anti-vaccine-movies-schiff/index.html>>.