

GOTHIC NATURE



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Theorising the EcoGothic

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ABSTRACT

Theorising about the ecoGothic is undoubtedly one of the most exciting developments in recent ecocritical work because it accepts the challenge to get real about our environmental issues and to look at ‘the fear, anxiety, and dread that often pervade [the relationship of humans to the nonhuman world]: it orients us, in short, to the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of our interactions with nonhuman ecologies’ (Keetley and Sivils, 2017: p. 1). Growing out of discussions about ecophobia, the ecoGothic allows for an enormous range of productive comments. Theorising about menace, the ecoGothic allows for understandings of how we imagine and persecute social and environmental Otherness; about how monstrosity is central to an environmental imagination that locates the human as the center of all things good and safe; about how the control-freak aspects of humanity point toward continued problems; about the entanglement of ontological and existential matters with environmental ethics; and about solutions. One thing is certain: there is no way forward until we come to serious understandings of how ecophobia got us to where we are. EcoGothic theorising helps us toward these understandings.

Theorising the EcoGothic

The appearance of *Gothic Nature* is timely: it is a reflection of the growing understanding that there is a need to look ‘beyond the benign shores of Walden Pond [...] [at] the darker aspects of the human cultural relationship’ (Keetley & Sivils, 2017: p. 16) with the natural world, as Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils have recently explained in their superb introduction to their edited collection *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Ecocriticism did not begin with this vision. When I entered ASLE in 1999, ecocriticism was much different than it is now, much more of an exultant and jolly celebration of nature writing with a more insistent renunciation of theory and ‘obfuscation’. ASLE was disproportionately male, lacking

diversity, very American, and deficient in vegetarian food options at the conferences (except a salad). It probably wasn't a bunch of aging American hippies with guitars singing kumbaya around a campfire, though it seemed to my Canadian eyes to be. Discussions were limited in ways that they aren't now. We've come a long way, but even as recently as 2009, theorising about ecocriticism caused an uproar. This is odd, since theorising, especially about ecophobia, can take us to the roots of the environmental holocausts we have caused. I assume in this article that it is logical to theorise the ecoGothic through ecophobia¹ (indeed, that it is difficult to do otherwise). If we are to better understand why the ecoGothic has been so surprisingly late in developing as a theory, it is reasonable here to try to understand the controversy theorising about ecophobia has generated.

Controversy? What Controversy?²

It has been dubbed 'The Estok-Robisch Controversy',³ and it began with the publication of 'Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia' (hereafter referred to as 'Theorising') in the spring of 2009 in *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, the flagship journal of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). This provocative article changed the direction of ecocriticism in unexpected ways. It evoked a fiery response from former Purdue University professor Kip Robisch, and this response substantially shifted ecocritical groundings. Robisch (2009) held that theory is counter-productive. He indicated that he had no patience for what he called 'Francophilic scholasticism' (p. 703), and he encouraged direct action against scholars he believed are 'nature-fakers' (p. 707).⁴ The article was a disturbing manifestation of a resistance to theory, replete with threats of violence, that had the exact opposite effect of what Robisch seems to have had in mind. A host of well-respected scholars have responded, and I include

¹ As I have explained in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*: The ecophobic condition exists on a spectrum and can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) towards the natural environment. While its genetic origins have functioned, in part, to preserve our species, the ecophobic condition has also greatly serviced growth economies and ideological interests. Often a product of behaviors serviceable in the past but destructive in the present, it is also sometimes a product of the perceived requirements of our seemingly exponential growth. Ecophobia exists globally on both macro and micro levels, and its manifestation is at times directly apparent and obvious but is also often deeply obscured by the clutter of habit and ignorance (Estok, 2018: p.1).

² Most of this section appears in slightly different form in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (pp. 2-5).

³ See Garrard (2011) and Mackenzie and Posthumus (2013).

⁴ This material has been well summarised elsewhere – see, for instance, Mackenzie and Posthumus. Robisch does not specify precisely what *he* means by "nature-fakers".

lengthy quotations from them here to make clear the fact that there really was and is little controversy, if any, at all—except perhaps to Robisch.

In his review of ecocritical theory in *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* for 2009, Greg Garrard identified the core of Robisch's discontent as being a concern over the role of theory in ecocriticism. Though it might more properly be seen as a debate than a controversy, the phrase 'Estok-Robisch Controversy' has certainly gained traction. Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus (2013) summarise the contours of the debate exceptionally well in *ISLE* as follows:

'In the Spring 2009 *ISLE* issue, an article was published by the well-known ecocritic Simon Estok entitled 'Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia' [...] As its title suggests, the article was a position piece on theory itself. Estok argued the potential of the notion of ecophobia to provide a point of coalescence within the currently 'open' and 'ambivalent' space of ecocriticism, and suggested that such confluent theorizations would not only make ecocriticism more rigorous but also make theory itself more engaged with activism. 'Theorizing' was sure to provoke debate, and it is still doing so—but the controversy came from the blazing response, published two issues later, of S. K. Robisch: 'The Woodshed: A Response to "Ecocriticism and Ecophobia"' [...] This article sees Estok as representative of a modern theoretical machine in need of 'monkeywrenching' (700), a 'masturbatory apparatus' (698) that erases nature and has nothing to do with green activism. 'Francophilic scholasticism' (703) comes in for a particular drubbing. Furthermore, the author invites the like-minded to contact him at a published e-mail address in order to show up at conferences with red paint to 'go PETA on these nature-fakers, these seated hikers' (707). 'Feeding theory to the animals' will apparently merit an encounter with the 'wrong end of [his] walking stick' (708), an echo of the title's woodshed.' (p. 758)

Ethan Mannon (2013) has also discussed 'Robisch's near-fanatic desire to defend the purity of an ecocriticism untainted by theory' (p. 3) and characterises the debate as follows:

‘Robisch declares Estok’s piece contemptible from the start because it is hospitable towards theory. Robisch demonstrates a clear distrust of ‘the culture of “theory”’ – which, he argues, ‘seeks rank and power more than it seeks art and insight’, ‘relinquishes thorough analysis in a quest for the limelight’, and ‘is the Monsanto of a native grassland’ (698, 699, 703). Throughout his article, Robisch’s message to sympathetic readers is clear: he suggests it is high time to ‘start monkey-wrenching the theory machine’ and concludes with a rallying cry capable of producing a wide range of emotions, including amusement, passion, and even anxiety (700). After describing his urge to pelt a panel of theorists with karo-syrup-filled water balloons, Robisch outlines his vision of a militant ecocriticism: he writes, ‘Let’s go PETA on these nature fakers, these seated hikers. I want an ELF of ecocritics [...] “Theory” fantasizes itself victimized. I say, dreams can come true’ (707). [...] the Estok-Robisch exchange stands apart in terms of venom.’ (p. 2)

Serpil Oppermann (2011) has described it thus:

‘Estok’s provocative thesis on ecophobia has attracted some serious hostilities against theory in general, as exemplified by S.K. Robisch’s essay in the following Autumn 2009 issue of *ISLE*. This piece, which goes against the very spirit of ecocritical notions of engagement, places praxis in opposition to theory in the name of embracing the active side of life, which ironically leads to the nature/culture dichotomy ecocriticism has persistently sought to avoid. [...] Robisch’s fierceness is a clear sign of an epistemic crisis in the field.’ (p. 161, p. 163)

Richard Pickard (2017), past president of ALECC (the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada) observed in a blog that

‘Simon Estok writes a mostly reasonable [...] piece suggesting that ecocritics need to think and work in a more consistently theoretical way. [...] S.K. Robisch writes—and to his great detriment, Scott Slovic publishes—an angry and unhelpfully ad hominem reply to Estok, representing as well as a broader response to ‘the ecocritical equivalent of cosmetics testers—from Neil

Evernden through Timothy Morton'. (I don't think I'm alone in not understanding the equation in this phrase, or in disliking what I think I understand.) In Robisch's view, 'Poststructuralism, cultural criticism, and their sleazy uncle "theory" have spun out of control to the point at which we should expect more frequent deformities resulting from inbreeding'. Perhaps most startlingly, Robisch suggests asking this question of conference presenters talking about questions of the animal: 'If I got naked right now and came running at you, howling, what would you do?' It's the kind of piece for which the word 'screed' was invented—and I don't think I've ever used the word before.'

And finally, Matthew A. Taylor (2012), in a thoughtful discussion of Poe and posthuman ecology, one that seeks more detailed discussion and nuancing of the theory and definitions ecophobia, found

'Robisch's argument to be problematic, both for its Manichaeian depiction of the evils of theory and for the violence with which its author imagines visiting physical harm upon his theoretical adversaries, as when he fantasizes withholding 'food and water' from a 'poststructuralist' stranded in the forest 'until the survivor acknowledges the representational value of words like "giardia" [...] and "grizzly bear"' (705). Timothy Morton voices a similar concern regarding Robisch's rhetoric in 'Queer Ecology', *PMLA* 125 (March 2010): 273–82.' (p. 370)

Given the storm that was developing, the *ISLE* editor first added to the journal a disclaimer that *ISLE* would not publish articles that 'imply the incitement of violence' and second issued 'a call for submissions to a special forum on the broader topic of "Ecocriticism and Theory"' that would appear in a 2010 *ISLE* issue (Slovic 'Further Reflections'). The call—though it made no mention of the two articles that motivated it (mine or Robisch's), effectively silencing debate about both—appeared in the first issue of 2010 and barely touched the hypothesising that spurred it.

Theorising about ecophobia is now expanding in the rich soils of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities. EcoGothic thinking is part of (and only part of) the larger body of

ecophobia—as an apple is to the tree, a feather to the wing, a second to the hour, and a Nazi to anti-Semitism. With the flourishing of ecophobia, the growing interest in the ecoGothic is understandable: ‘at the broadest level, the ecogothic inevitably intersects with ecophobia, not only because ecophobic representations of nature will be infused, like the gothic, with fear and dread but also because ecophobia is born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and their world. And control, or the lack thereof, is central to the gothic’ (Keetley & Sivils, p. 3). Ecophobia is the unwillingness of humans ‘to come to terms with their nonhuman ancestry and the common, biological origin of all life’ (Del Principe, 2014: p. 2). It is not an intimacy or urge to affiliate with a loving nature (what E. O. Wilson calls ‘biophilia’) that spurs the ecoGothic imagination: the ecoGothic is at core ecophobic. Work theorising ecoGothicism frequently works with or through ecophobia theory, yet, as Derek Gladwin (2014) usefully points out, my own discussions of ecophobia paradoxically do ‘not engage with the EcoGothic *per se*, [...] [but] do [...] foreground fear and phobia as a central concern in ecological readings of literary texts, as well as other cultural productions that have been Gothicised’ (p. 41). Gladwin’s critique is made considerably more poignant by the assertion of Keetley and Sivils that my work is ironically the *source-point* of ecoGothic studies and that ‘efforts to characterize the term “ecoGothic” arguably began with Simon C. Estok’s provocative 2009 essay “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia”’ (p. 2). Certainly there is no question in my mind now that ecoGothic literary representations are exceptional examples of the ecophobic imagination and that ecoGothic Studies and theorising about ecophobia are on the same page, with similar goals and methodologies.

The Rise of the EcoGothic

Arguably, the first volume to explore the ecoGothic was the 2013 edited collection *Ecogothic* by Andrew Smith and William Hughes. This impressive collection does indeed provide ‘a starting point for future discussions’ (p. 13), as the editors hope it will, and it does so as much by what it omits as by what it covers. The most notable and surprising omission is any serious discussion of ecophobia. It is one thing to follow Timothy Clark in ‘tracing different conceptions of nature and their effects throughout the history and cultures of the world’ (as cited by Hillard in ‘From Salem’, p. 105), but it is quite another to misperceive (or, worse yet, ignore) the roots of the ecoGothic. To be perfectly clear: no ecophobia, no ecoGothic. Tom Hillard’s dismissive response to theorising about ecophobia is as clear in his 2013 ‘From Salem witch to *Blair Witch*’ as it was in his 2009 “‘Deep Into That Darkness Peering’: An Essay on

Gothic Nature’, where he suggests that to start analysing ecophobia, ‘we need look no further than the rich and varied vein of critical approaches used to investigate fear in literature’ (p. 688). Respectfully, however, I think that to look ‘no further’ seems—to use Hillard’s own words, originally aimed at my call for critics to address ecophobia—‘overly proscriptive, potentially stifling, and, let’s be honest, unlikely to happen’ (p. 187). Nonetheless, Hillard is perhaps the first scholar to have made the connection between ecophobia and Gothic nature.

The term ‘ecophobia’ has, since Hillard’s 2009 response article, found considerable usage among scholars studying horror and the ecoGothic. For instance, Tara K. Parmiter, in ‘Green is the New Black: Ecophobia and the Gothic Landscape in the *Twilight* Series’, finds use for the term in her discussion of how Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* novels ‘reflect this pervasive fear of nonhuman nature but [...] simultaneously model an increased engagement and appreciation—a more biophilic response—to the natural world’ (p. 222); Bernice M. Murphy discusses ecophobia in *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture: Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness* (2013); the term appears in a couple of essays (one by Tom Hillard, and the other by Sharae Deckard) in the Smith and Hughes collection; it also appears in several of the chapters in Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga’s *Plant Horror* (particularly Elizabeth Parker’s “‘Just a Piece of Wood’”: Jan Švankmajer’s *Otesánek* and the EcoGothic’); Sarah Groeneveld does not directly reference ‘ecophobia’ in ‘Unsettling the Environment’, but she does refer to the seminal ‘Theorising’ essay; Abby Goode identifies ecophobia in Leonora Sansay’s early nineteenth century *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo* (See ‘Gothic Fertility’); Maria Parrino uses the term to describe the ‘sinister place [...] the frightening atmosphere’ (p. 88) of Antonio Fogazzaro’s *Malombra* (see ‘L’orrida magnificenza del luogo’: Gothic Aesthetics in Antonio Fogazzaro’s *Malombra*’); Kaja Franck uses the concept to organise some of her thinking about the Gothic in her PhD dissertation entitled ‘The Development of the Literary Werewolf: Language, Subjectivity and Animal/Human Boundaries’; and in ‘Vegetable Monsters: Man-Eating Trees in *Fin-De-Siècle* Fiction’, Cheryl Blake Price draws on the term to discuss nineteenth century ‘gothic stories and fictionalised travel accounts featuring dangerous exotic plants’ (p. 311).⁵ Elizabeth Parker (2016) explains that ecoGothic is ‘a theoretical lens as opposed to a genre classification’ (p. 217), which, as she notes, is consonant with the definition that Smith and Hughes offer in

⁵ In June 2019, as the articles for this inaugural issue of *Gothic Nature* went to the final proofs stage, *ISLE* published a Special Cluster entitled “Revisiting Ecophobia,” with nine original essays defining and expanding the scope of ecophobia studies.

EcoGothic (p. 1). Parker also claims that ‘the “ecoGothic” has emerged’ (p. 217) in response to my insistence that ecophobia ‘needs theorizing’ (Estok, p. 203). If ecoGothic is an approach, such is not the case with eco-horror, and Parker reiterates the position put forth by Joseph J. Foy (2010) that eco-horror is a genre (p. 217). If we take Parker’s position that ecoGothic is a theoretical lens (which I do), then precisely what does it theorise?

Imagining Menace, Theorising Persecution

Ecophobia needs theorising, and the ecoGothic is a very good lens through which to begin such focusing because it allows us to describe some very specific aspects of the ecophobic imagination. The imagining of nature as a menacing threat is central to ecoGothic texts. The menace can (and often does) involve the idea of nature as an agent bent on vengeance. An agential nature is menacing in itself; a vengeful one is truly horrifying. For Keetley and Sivils, ‘the ecogothic turns to the inevitability of humans intertwined with their natural environment – to humans surrounded, interpenetrated, and sometimes stalked by a nonhuman with an agentic force that challenges humans’ own vaunted ability to shape their world’ (p. 7). For the American ecoGothic, this world ‘was already a haunted land: the ghosts born of colonialism and its attendant environmental perversity grew entrenched in the very soil of North America’s contested ground’ (p. 1). Indeed, ‘American ecogothic [...] grows in soil too often fed by the blood of violent oppression’ (p. 8). One of the things that the ecoGothic lens promises to do for ecophobia theorising, especially with the current ecoGothic focus on the US and the Americas, is to further develop understandings of the intersections between racism and ecophobia, ethnocentrism and ecophobia, and sexism and ecophobia. Keetley and Sivils express this superbly:

‘...the nineteenth century ecogothic imagination [...] taps into the murder and displacement of indigenous peoples, the oppression of women, children, and the lower classes, and, of course, the horrors of slavery. These injustices play out upon a natural world that is likewise victimized. Deforestation, over-hunting, and unsustainable farming, along with countless other forms of shortsighted land management, have forever degraded the continent’s ecological integrity. Combined with their human toll, these practices cast the natural world as a burial ground for victims of social and environmental trauma [...] humanity’s continued abuses against the land and its denizens, human and nonhuman alike,

have spawned a culture obsessed with and fearful of a natural world both monstrous and monstrously wronged.’ (p. 11)

Imagined as menace to the fantasies about normalcy, stability, and control, the natural world in the ecoGothic imagination functions precisely to entrench such fantasies. Just as Americans dug their heels into their xenophobic and racist traditions after 9/11, thus entrenching dualistic (and often stupid) thinking, so too do ecophobic narratives now articulate a stark dualism. Comparable to people’s incomprehension of ethnic foreignness (whether having to do with linguistic issues or vestimentary codes) and their subsequent xenophobic responses, ecophobia is often a response to the perceived inscrutability of the natural world. The inability to understand what is being communicated results in suspicion. From suspicion grows resentment, and from resentment, violence. The roots of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and racism are intertwined with the roots of ecophobia.

Theorising ecophobia through the lens of the ecoGothic helps bring to light social and environmental injustices and perhaps to help curb violence against people and the environment. We need to be very careful in these early days of ecocritical theorising, and our words are very important in how they characterise human/nonhuman relations. It seems reasonable to claim, as Keetley and Sivils do, that ‘nature poses a problem of control, inciting human efforts at dominance’ (p. 3), but I’d suggest that the word ‘inciting’ here is, perhaps, not the best, since it seems to blame the victim. Nature does not incite violence against itself.

Monstrosity and Horror

In ‘Six Theses on Plant Horror; or, Why Are Plants Horrifying?’, an essay destined to become a classic, Keetley (2016) comes at ecohorror through a discussion about the scale and pervasiveness of plants, their 95% share of earth’s biomass dwarfing our own presence and embodying an ‘absolute alterity’ (p. 6). Similarly, David Del Principe’s concise but compelling introduction to a Special Issue of *Gothic Studies* in 2014 recognises the centrality of the monstrous in the ecoGothic imagination: ‘the EcoGothic examines the construction of the Gothic body – unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid – through a more inclusive lens, asking how it can be more meaningfully understood as a site of articulation for environmental and species identity’ (p. 1). Del Principe explains that ‘An EcoGothic approach poses a challenge to a familiar Gothic subject (nature) taking a nonanthropocentric position to

reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear' (p. 1). For Keetley and Sivils, the ecoGothic is important because it 'it not only takes up [...] questions about our very being [...] but also more particular questions of determinism and freedom, especially as these questions play out through a long history and on the limit edges of what we think we know about the human – and what shapes or “possesses” the human' (p. 4). They go on to explain convincingly how 'Ecogothic texts [...] invoke [the] Other as a disturbed and disturbing natural world, one in which traditional boundaries between the human and the nonhuman become blurred in grotesque ways by human atrocities and amoral biological processes' (p. 11). Associations of the disturbed Other and madness with monstrosity and threatening nature is perhaps as old as the ethics and exercise of ecophobia. Certainly, we see associations in the popular imagination between monstrosity and madness in the early modern period, showing how fears about madness represent a larger concern about the intrusion of the undomesticated natural world into the controlled spaces of human civilisation. Keith Thomas argues that 'one of the reasons that monstrous births caused such horror was that they threatened the firm dividing-line between men and animals' (p. 39).

Amidst the sparsity of work that exists within the environmental humanities theorising on psychiatric debility and disability is the startling insight from ethicist Serenella Iovino that imagining madness involves imagining the presence of a kind of nonhuman nature within the human. In 'The Human Alien: Otherness, Humanism, and the Future of Ecocriticism' (2010), Iovino cleverly explains that 'madness and disability create in fact a “wilderness zone” inside the civilised or “tame” area of humanity-as-normality' (p. 55). There are radical implications to this idea. First, the insight challenges, as Iovino notes, the very taxonomy of the human, the 'ontological segregation' (p. 56) of the human. Second, and perhaps more important, is the fact that in imagining madness as the inclusion of the threatening nonhuman within the human, representations of madness imply a distinct disdain toward the more-than-human realm (roughly nature beyond the human). Moreover, unlike many propositions in literary analysis, Iovino's 'wilderness zone' thesis has ample support from literary sources. Even among common contemporary idioms describing madness or insanity, images of animals and nature abound. We cavalierly label madness by talking about going bananas, about bats in the belfry, about harebrained ideas, about going nuts, about rats in the attic, about being as nutty as a fruitcake, about being as crazy as a loon, about being barking mad, about being loony, and so on. But if we regularly imagine nature as an origin of the metaphorical disintegration of the

self, then what about the horrors that attend the actual material disintegration of what we are and the deep imbrication of this process with the materiality of nature?

Slime, the Agony of Water

Decay and rot are important to the ecoGothic because they are agency and excess overgrown and unpredictable. Literary treatments of rot and decay clearly reveal the ecophobic unconscious. As I explain in *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* (2011), for instance:

‘The metaphors Hamlet uses are very telling. Whenever he talks about difference, his thoughts eventually devolve upon some form of rot. For instance, evil resides in excess, and people are bad only ‘By their o’ergrowth of some complexion, / [...] / Or by some habit, that too much o’erleavens/ The form of plausible manners...these men / [...] / Shall in the general censure take corruption/ From that particular fault’ (1.4.27–36). The problem is not ‘one defect’ or ‘particular fault’, since nobody is perfect; the problem is the ‘o’ergrowth’ of such a ‘complexion’. Excess (and eventually rot), then, is the problem, and it is defined with naturalistic imagery.’ (p. 86)

Ecophobia is vestigial genetics gone to seed, things in evolutionary biology that have preserved us but are no longer necessary and yet form the basis of a very destructive set of behaviors. The stamp of one defect, the overgrowth of some complexion, corruption: these are the hallmarks of tragedy and of ecophobia, and as I have argued in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (2018), ‘in narrating a loss of human agency to nature—[ecophobia] is in the very process of writing tragedy (the fall of the human from a place of exceptionalism) while simultaneously announcing the ethical superiority of the human over the nonhuman’ (p. 10).

Rot is slowly receiving more and more ecocritical attention. In a fascinating exploration of ‘the myth of the California dream’ (Weidner, 2017: 237), Ned Weidner reveals convincingly ‘how ecophobic olfactory imaginations separate people across racial lines’ (p. 245). Weidner explains that ‘paradise is generated by an ecophobic desire to safeguard people from the dangers of nature, including its interpenetrating cycle of life and death’ (p. 251). Rot

and slime are unpredictable in their transgressions and blurring of borders and in their imagined alliance with an antagonistic nature. Corruption is the horror of uncontrolled agencies.

There is surprisingly little talk of slime in ecoGothic discussions, surprising because slime is so very central to horror – from the slime inexplicably oozing out of the mouth of the alien in Ridley Scott’s classic *Alien* franchise (1979-) to the slimy eponymous monster in *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954). Jennifer Schell briefly raises the topic of slime in her 2006 article ‘Fiendish Fumaroles and Malevolent Mudpots: the EcoGothic Aspects of Owen Wister’s *Yellowstone Stories*’ but without any theoretical discussion of slime. Anthony Camara makes several points about slime in his ‘Abominable Transformations: Becoming-Fungus in Arthur Machen’s *The Hill of Dreams*’, but the discussion is primarily thematic. Slime is indeed oozing into the discussions, and there are important connections waiting to be made, especially with regard to how are slime, ecohorror, and sexism are interrelated.

Leonard Tennenhouse (1986) once noted that early modern tragedy ‘defines the female body as a source of pollution [...] [and that] any sign of permeability automatically endangers the community’ (pp. 117–18), and we can ask what this means in terms of a feminist ecoGothic. How might a feminist ecoGothic respond to essentialist co-locations of women’s bodies with the natural world and its rhythms? Ben Woodard’s *Slime Dynamics* (2012) gestures toward more of the theoretical routes—ontology and ‘being-toward-extinction’ (p. 13)—that *could* lead to important discussions, but without any mention of gender, sexuality, Gothic, or even Sartre, the book is doomed to be little more than an interesting title. What is particularly glaring is the omission of Sartre.

Jean-Paul Sartre’s theoretical discussions of slime are unique and compelling. ‘Sliminess proper, considered in its isolated state’, Sartre argues, ‘will appear to us harmful in practice (because slimy substances stick to the hands, and clothes, and because they stain)’ (1966: p. 605). Slime is a threat. It threatens boundaries, and ‘the slimy appears as already the outline of a fusion of the world with myself’ (p. 606). It is an utterly ambiguous material: ‘immediately the slimy reveals itself as essentially ambiguous’, and ‘nothing testifies more clearly to its ambiguous character as a “substance between two states” than the slowness with which the slimy melts into itself’ (p. 607). It is beyond our control, is not the water we so

proudly control in our fountains and dams:⁶ indeed, ‘slime is the agony of water. It presents itself as a phenomenon in the process of becoming; it does not have the permanence within change that water has but on the contrary represents an accomplished break in a change of state. This fixed instability in the slimy discourages possession’ (p. 607). It can neither be possessed nor controlled. It is not an object of raw ecophobia: ‘even young children show repulsion in the presence of something slimy’; neither, however, does it take meaning through absolute hardwiring and is, to some degree, an object ‘whose materiality must on principle remain non-meaningful’ (p. 605). Despite their breathtaking originality, Sartre’s comments entirely ignore the gendering of slime (and it is perhaps useful here to remember that the slime-dripping monster in *Alien* was female). Future research within the feminist ecoGothic will no doubt look at slime and at what happens within the Gothic when patriarchies imagine women and women’s sexualities as sites of pollution.

Loss of Control

Unpredictable and uncontrolled nonhuman agency is troubling. The ecophobic loathes the unpredictable. Ecophobia emanates from anxieties about control. The prospect of a loss of control—the perceived threat to human agency by nonhuman nature—is at its core ecophobic. To recognise this is to be able to make changes in our attitude; to fail to recognise it is to be stuck whining about the problems without being able to offer anything but cosmetic solutions. The thought of being taken over by nature is horror, and this imagined threat is potentially ubiquitous. As Lisa Kröger (2013) explains, ‘nature is always reclaiming its space [...] it will always be victorious in the end’ (p. 26). This is what gives a play such as *King Lear* such visceral horror. For *King Lear*, vulnerability to an unpredictable, sometimes capricious, and often hostile nature is terrifying. Images of bareness, exposure, vulnerability, homelessness, and lack of control associated with psychological maladies deftly identify a madness that is enmeshed with a frightening environment in this play, an environment over which control is never a given. It is the changeability of this environment that causes horror, and it is self-

⁶ I have often thought that the reason people are so fascinated by fountains has to do with control. Fountains offer the possibility of chaos, the threat of disorder in the very moment that they carefully choreograph every splash and movement of water. Like our childhood fascination with heavy snow and leaf-strewn autumnal streets that temporarily obscure human order, fountains remind us of natural agency (particularly of water), and it is a powerful and potentially deadly agency. Our control over water, it seems, is rarely complete and is often fraught with ambivalence. On a visit to the Three Gorges Dam in 2008, the ambivalence of the visitors (Chinese and foreign) toward the massive structure hailed as a ‘taming of the Yangtze’ was palpable, a taming that cost 200 lives in onsite casualties and displaced more than 1.2 million people.

abandonment, lack of control, and sheer unpredictability that such an environment threatens to entrench. The result is madness.



Figure 1: Nature taking over buildings in Angkor Wat (Source: Wikipedia).



Figure 2: Nature taking over cars in Macau. (Photo by Simon C. Estok).

But it is not simply a physical encroachment; rather, the fear of reclamation by nature evokes deep anxieties about control. As I have explained in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (p. 18, n. 19), the epic frustrations of not being able to hold and control nature are at their core ecophobic. These frustrations are what is behind the aging sovereign raging at the storm in *King Lear* and the heroic men battling weather in films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *2012* (2009), and *Waterworld* (1995). The epic frustrations of control by nature have been very influential indeed in how both ecohorror and tragedy have developed as genres.

Perhaps one of the reasons that mainstream media representations of climate change looks so much like the news about terrorism is that both climate change and terrorism jerk our nerves about what we can control and what we can't control – and about where our agency stops.

Again, best to be careful with our terms. Ecohorror and the ecoGothic are always ecophobic. Antipathies and ecophobia toward nature, on the other hand, often arise from rationally perceived threats to physical survival, such as tsunamis or earthquakes, and clearly do not always rank as ecohorror or the ecoGothic. It is reasonable then to suggest that, on the one hand, the ecoGothic genre typically expresses or reveals or is dependent on ecophobia and that, on the other, ecophobia does not necessarily imply ecohorror or the ecoGothic imagination. Indeed, representations of dangerous manifestations of nature do not, in themselves, even necessarily constitute ecophobia. Nor, for that matter, is controlling nature *ipso facto* ecophobic.

Ecophobia

For Parker, 'EcoGothic analysis, as well as ecoGothic texts themselves, demands a serious shift in perspective from the pervasive Western anthropocentrism (a view of the world that is human-centric) to "ecocentrism" (where all living things are of equal importance and nature is no longer defined in terms of human value)' (p. 218), and it is certainly true that the analysis and the texts reveal anthropocentrism for what it is. Also true, however, is the fact that it is ultimately the *human* world that matters most to us in the perceived threats of the environments represented in such texts. The threats have no footing within an ecocentric ontology: horror takes meaning in our own sense of what we stand to lose as a species – art, Enlightenment philosophy, knowledge, technology, comfort, continued existence. Part of the horror such texts offer is in precisely the shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism, toward the very possibility of such an ontology 'where all living things are of equal importance and nature is no longer defined in terms of human value'. The problem for ecoGothic analysis is in determining what the threatening agent is and what it is threatening. Fleeing from a plant that is stalking me for food is not displaying ecophobia. There is nothing irrational about self-preservation. Conjuring up images of plants that stalk people for food, on the other hand, is a perfect example of the ecophobic imagination. The ecoGothic imagination itself is under the rubric of ecophobia; it is difficult, though perhaps possible, to imagine otherwise.

Ecophobia is large and complex, neither exclusively fear-based nor entirely a result of an antagonism toward the natural environment. Theorising about the ecoGothic is undoubtedly the most exciting development in recent ecocritical work because it accepts the challenge to look at ‘the fear, anxiety, and dread that often pervade [the relationship of humans to the nonhuman world]: it orients us, in short, to the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of our interactions with nonhuman ecologies’ (Keetley & Sivils, p. 1). There has never been a more timely moment for such work: as Parker explains, ‘In an age of anthropogenic ecological crisis, we know that our own environmental monsters inevitably await us [...] [and] the emergent discourse of the ecoGothic is of increasing relevance in an age of human-caused environmental crisis’ (p. 222). We face a frightening future, but it is at least a little encouraging that we are actually beginning to look at the root issues that have brought us to where we are.

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BIOGRAPHY

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