

## Reading Ecophobia: a Manifesto

*Simon C. Estok*

*Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul*

At the November 2009 “The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons” Conference in Antalya, Turkey, Grant Jennings took up the call to ecocritics to explore ecophobia.<sup>1</sup> The results were compelling, excavating depths where we might not expect to find ecophobia. This is what good theory does. Feminism shows up misogyny and sexism—as queer theory shows up heterosexism and homophobia—where other theoretical approaches have ignored them (and thus have participated in the centuries of their critical suppression). Ecocriticism should be performing the same kind of disclosures about how ecophobia is embedded in our cultural artifacts. Jennings’s talk did precisely this: arguing that the zombie movie genre positions our ecophobic responses (to a perceived or imagined unpredictability of nature) onto or into the human frame (the zombie), Jennings maintained that it is, to some degree, ecophobia that generates the sense of horror that this genre characterizes.

Ecocriticism faces a difficult task—as feminism did and does—of convincing often resistant readers (even among the ranks of ecocritics) of their own participation in oppressive discourses. Reading ecophobia is an uphill battle, no less than is exposing sexism. Revelations about sexist language did not and do not exactly receive a warm welcome in patriarchies committed to perpetuating themselves. Few indeed want to hear about how their actions (or lack) personally involve them, make them complicit. Reading ecophobia means making it personal. Reading ecophobia means uncovering and unpacking, means seeing unwelcome and unassumed connections in our thinking, conceptual links we would perhaps rather not see or admit to carrying and circulating. It means recognizing, for example, that ecophobia, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and speciesism are thoroughly interwoven with each other and must eventually be looked at together. Reading ecophobia means looking afresh at things. Reading ecophobia means having the willingness to theorize for ecocriticism rather than backing away from it and seeing all theorizing as a lapse into obscurantism, poststructuralist nihilism, dizzying spinings off, esoteric abstractness, wrangling, or mesmerization, to cite just a few shrill anti-theoretical pronouncements, each from a

---

<sup>1</sup> See my “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia.”

prominent ecocritic.<sup>2</sup> Reading ecophobia means looking at the unacknowledged and often unwitting biases that appear as punctuated outcroppings in literary and other cultural products but that are, in fact, the bedrock on which is based so much of our thinking. Reading ecophobia means identifying the affective ethics a text produces, means having the willingness to listen to, to think about, and to see the values that are written into and that work through the representations of nature we imagine, theorize, and produce.

Fuelled as it is by an apparently sincere desire to compel changes in how we relate with our natural world (notwithstanding Andrew Battista's response to a question about his involvement in the 2009 ASLE conference in Victoria, a reply that seemed to astonish everyone in the room: "I'm *here* 'cause I want a job. I do ecocriticism because there's a *market* for it"); invigorated by the belief that we *can* make a difference (notwithstanding Robert Watson's reservations that ecocriticism may be little more than a "search for a politically safe and aesthetically attractive version of late 1960s radicalism," what we might call a "search" for window-display activism);<sup>3</sup> and prompted both by the urgency of our increasingly dangerous experiences of the world (Katrina springs to mind) and by ever more troubling scientific evaluations of things, ecocriticism is poised to make a difference, and my modest proposal is that this is going to happen by theorizing about ecophobia.

Since Lawrence Buell's claim in 1999 that "ecocriticism still lacks a paradigm-inaugurating statement like Edward Said's *Orientalism* (for colonial discourse studies) or Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (for new historicism)" ("Letter" 1091), many have sought to be that paradigm-inaugurator, including Buell himself, but there can be little doubt of the truth in Timothy Morton's recent assessment that "conventional ecocriticism is heavily thematic" (2). If we are to continue what has truly been remarkable growth and development in this area that has—sometimes with reservations—come to be known as "ecocriticism," then there has to be (it increasingly seems) some sort of binding agreements (definitional, terminological, procedural, methodological) if our work in literary

---

<sup>2</sup> Glen Love warned about "obscurity and inaccessibility" and about "post-structuralist nihilism" (236); John Tallmadge and the late Henry Harrington warned of a "spinning off into obscurantism or idiosyncrasy" (xv); Karl Kroeber sees in environmental writing a chance of "escaping from the esoteric abstractness that afflicts current theorizing" (1); and Lawrence Buell has been worried from the start about a "mesmerization by literary theory" (*Environmental Imagination* 111) and has more recently fretted about "wrangling over what it means" to do ecocriticism (*The Future* 3). It is no exaggeration to claim, as the albeit sometimes abrasive Dana Phillips does, that their resistance to theory "puts ecocritics in the theoretical and philosophical minority among their academic peers" ("Ecocriticism" 38).

<sup>3</sup> This quotation is drawn from page 5 of Watson's erudite and punchy book which opens with the promise that it will bring "ecological advocacy into the realm of Renaissance literature" (3).

and cultural studies is to function as effective responses to the political urgency that motivates our analyses.

Reading ecophobia means moving toward a kind of theory indigenous to ecocriticism, toward a paradigm of and for ecocriticism, a theorizing on ecocriticism's own terms rather than one always piggy-backing on or paying obeisance to or performing a humble cringing before theories developed for different exigencies and urgencies. The exigencies of ecocriticism require the relative peace and cooperation that has characterized the ecocritical community, rather than the unproductive backbiting and turf wars that often exemplify other disciplines; nevertheless, there have been more voices of discontent than one would think, voices often ignored or given less airtime by an increasingly orthodox ecocritical machinery.<sup>4</sup> Rifts have indeed begun to form between the scholars who, on the one hand, wish to "get on with it," who see "making contact"<sup>5</sup> as vital, who see an urgency of the here and now<sup>6</sup> and a "resurgence of the real,"<sup>7</sup> who generally shun "theory," and, on the other hand, the handful of scholars who have disparaged ecocriticism's lack of theorization.

Ecocriticism is at a cross-roads right now. It has achieved a lot in a short time, and while the strategic intangibility it has maintained has opened the doors for any and all who want to join, and has produced tremendous popular support for this important and growing area, at the same time we need to be very clear that times change, and so must ecocriticism. Though there has been a conflict developing among ecocritics, theorizing ecophobia should not deepen that conflict but may very well in fact lead to confluent theorizing and thus toward the kinds of methodological and structural definition some ecocritics seek. Reading ecophobia means challenging the *modus operandi* of a profit-based system that requires the maintenance of ethically inconsiderable objects always available for exploitation. Failing to theorize makes us participate in keeping those objects ethically inconsiderable. Reading ecophobia means having the courage to take up the call to theorize, as the graduate student Grant Jennings has done, in an area aching to be articulated.

---

<sup>4</sup> Certainly, the feeling that ecocriticism has been free of infighting is not one unanimously shared, Jennifer Wallace remarking as early as 1997 in *The Times Higher Education* that ecocriticism "has provoked the inevitable academic squabbles." In this case, it is Alan Liu's comment that "There is no nature; there is only history" to which Wallace refers and which concerns us here, partly because the challenge Liu offers of recognizing and theorizing mediation remains, in many ways, unanswered in ecocritical theory.

<sup>5</sup> Current titles—such as Ingram *et al* (eds), *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice*—reflect this desire for contact.

<sup>6</sup> The Fifth Biennial Conference of ASLE (the 2003 conference entitled "the solid earth! the actual world!") springs to mind.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase "resurgence of the real" comes from the title of Charlene Spretnak's 1999 book.

## Works Cited

- Buell, Lawrence. "Letter." *PMLA* 114.5 (October 1999): 1090-2.
- . *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.
- . *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- Estok, Simon. "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia", *ISLE*, 16. 2 (Spring 2009): 203-25.
- Ingram, Annie Merrill, Ian Marshall, Dan Philippon, and Adam Sweeting (eds). *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice*. Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 2007.
- Jennings, Grant. "A Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Zombie Movie Genre, Ecophobia, and Modern Fears of Environmental Disaster." Paper delivered at "The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons" Conference in Antalya, Turkey. November 4, 2009.
- Kroeber, Karl. *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Liu, Alan. *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*. Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1989.
- Love, Glen A. "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1996. 225-40.
- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. London: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Phillips, Dana. "Ecocriticism, Ecopoetics, and a Creed Outworn." *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics—Special Issue: Earthographies: Ecocriticism and Culture* 64 (Spring 2008): 37-50.
- Spretnak, Charlene. *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature, and Place in a Hypermodern World*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Tallmadge, John and Henry Harrington. "Introduction." *Reading Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*. Eds. John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2000: ix-xv.
- Wallace, Jennifer. "Swampy's Smart Set." *The Times Higher Education* July 4, 1997. 01 March 2008.

Author: Estok, Simon C. Title: Reading Ecophobia: a Manifesto

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=103752&sectioncode=2>

6

Watson, Robert N. *Back to Nature: the Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2006.

The logo for Ecozon, featuring a stylized green leaf or flame-like shape above the word "Ecozon" in a bold, sans-serif font.

Vol. 1 No. 1