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# Why Ecocriticism Now?: Pathways to the Eco-Fear Problem and Ecophobia



R. Michael Fisher

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**Technical Paper No. 66**

In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute

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Problem and Ecophobia

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## Why Ecocriticism Now?: Pathways to the Eco-Fear Problem and Ecophobia

R. Michael Fisher  
*Technical Paper No. 66*

**Abstract** – The very recent discovery by the author of the field of post-modern “ecocriticism” within literary criticism, is a welcomed avenue for creative growth. It offers a site of critical reflection upon the authors’ own research and teaching trajectory to define the Fear Problem over the past 28 years. This paper has two main objectives: (1) to outline a series of five technical papers on ecocriticism, of which No. 66 is the first introductory work and, (2) to inquire into the what, who, why of “ecocriticism” as it is portrayed in literary criticism, emphasizing a two-way (or split) in the thinking about its nature and function, especially in regard to the concept of “ecophobia” (i.e., *via* David Sobel *contra* Simon Estok). The author is particularly aligned with Estok’s general direction of thinking to the point of reconceptualizing the Fear Problem within the immanent crises of a tragic global future called the Anthropocene era, as meta-context. With this influence, focus shifts to articulating the *Eco-Fear Problem*. Implications r lead the author to an eventual invoking of a new branch of Subba’s philosophy of fearism field of study to what Fisher is calling *eco-philosophy of fearism*. Overall, throughout this series of technical papers, and beyond, the author desires to add a rich set of layering and lenses to bring into the field of ecocriticism, to enable a mutual cross-fertilization with the richness of ecocriticism and in particular Estok’s “Ecophobia Hypothesis.”

### Introduction to the Ecocriticism Series

Before diving into the heart of this new field of postmodern literary criticism, I’ll describe roughly the series of five technical papers (including No. 66) upcoming in the next few months. Obviously, there is excitement in me but also in academic circles, especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences in regard to theorizing the relatively new ecocriticism genre but also in the ideal that many ecocritics have for bringing real change to the way most of humanity is carrying on as if there was no big ecological crisis facing us not tomorrow, but now, and that in some ways we have as a species pushed the planetary ecosystems beyond the “tipping point” as various scientists and others have said.

**Technical Paper No. 66** as the Abstract already says it, takes readers into an inquiry of the field of ecocriticism and especially brings forth the nature of a two-way split of sorts in the way ecocriticism has been conceived. Within this divergence of views there is the one by Simon Estok that will mostly occupy my attention in the entire series because of his controversial articulation of what he has labeled the “Ecophobia Hypothesis.” My intention is to help myself better understand this movement of thought but also to begin some critiquing it as well, though to do so with all my limitations of been a newbie on the block. Next, **Technical Paper No. 67** will be a more autobiographical and historical reflective piece where I sort through my own ‘natural’ attraction to ecocriticism before I had ever even heard of it (which, I have only heard of in this last week). I’ll explore my roots of thinking and ecocriticism shaped primarily by my long encounter with (critical) integral theory *via* the philosophy Ken Wilber and his very unique evolutionary, developmental and metaphysical systems (post-postmodern) analysis of Eco Camp and Ego Camp thinking and movements. Then I’ll explore the analogous and paralleling critiques of my specialty of analyzing the “culture of fear” dynamic as well as studying the critics of the culture of fear. This overlaps with Estok’s critiques of ecocritics. Then lastly, I’ll explore my development of ‘Fear’ Studies as a means to forefront the nature and role of fear (and ‘fear’) in curriculum theorizing in order to bring educational discourses up to the post-9/11 era complexities and challenges, not unlike ecocriticism to some extent.

**Technical Paper No. 68** will focus on my encounters with the philosopher-poet-novelist Desh Subba and his potent “philosophy of fearism” critique and offering to the world. This will include my joining this philosophy movement in a co-authored book where I bring my own philosophy of fearlessness into mesh with Subba’s work. With the new impetus of several of my ventures of late in the “ecology of fear” literature, including ecocriticism, I will begin to lay down the early stages of a new branch called ecophilosophy of fearism. Parallels of the concept of fearism-t (the toxic form) and ecophobia (Estok) will be central to this paper. **Technical Paper No. 69** will inquire into the intersections of ecocriticism, especially ecophobia and Estok’s analysis of ecomedia (for e.g.) with my own development of fearanalysis and the addition of beginnings of post-Lacanian psychoanalysis as brought forward by the feminist scholar and artist Bracha L. Ettinger in what she calls matrixial theory. **Technical Paper No. 70** will end this series of introductory works with the braiding of Four Arrows’ important Indigenous worldview critique and his CAT-FAW/N theory of fear and fearlessness with strands of the ecophobia critique of Estok and my own thoughts.

A point that I'll go into more detail throughout the series, is that of my own conversion of late from merely talking about the Fear Problem (still important) to talking about the Eco-Fear Problem because I think there is an immanent 'call' to bring this forth as having more 'grab' on larger audiences as the world is really being shaken by the environmental and ecological issues (crises) of the day, the next day, the next...the Anthropocene era is being labeled now as the way to make meaning, and offer a meta-context for philosophy, criticism, and just about everything else we do as thinkers attempting to come up with more effective ways to understand the worst and deepest (if not darkest) problems of the day. Of course, we want to help educate and make people aware, to act positively re: their environment and their well-being; but do so without 'scaring themselves to death' in the process. That story will unfold in Technical Paper No. 66.

### Investigating Ecocriticism as a Genre of Critical Thinking

Wikipedia has a significant entry for this topic. Below is a short excerpt:

“**Ecocriticism** is the study of [literature](#) and the [environment](#) from an [interdisciplinary](#) point of view, where literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of [nature](#). Some ecocritics brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation, though not all ecocritics agree on the purpose, methodology, or scope of ecocriticism. In the United States, ecocriticism is often associated with the [Association for the Study of Literature and Environment](#) (ASLE),<sup>[1]</sup> which hosts biennial meetings for scholars who deal with environmental matters in literature. ASLE publishes a journal—*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (*ISLE*)—in which current international scholarship can be found.

Ecocriticism is an intentionally broad approach that is known by a number of other designations, including "green (cultural) studies", "[ecopoetics](#)", and "environmental literary criticism" and is often informed by other fields such as [ecology](#), [sustainable design](#), [biopolitics](#), [environmental history](#), [environmentalism](#), and [social ecology](#), among others.”<sup>1</sup>

I am very attracted to the ethical, pragmatic and futurist directive of ecocriticism, although I am also a theorist looking to develop better praxis. I'm sure some ecocritics are primarily 'ivory tower' theoretical folks climbing career ladders in the academy, while others are down-on-the-ground activists—a rare few do both kinds of work. I certainly don't place one kind of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecocriticism>

work as against the other, as in ‘good or bad.’ One of the applicable critiques (a question) I have had for many decades is: “Despite the good information and knowledge humanity has accumulated to better manage and protect environments, *why* is it we still are the dominant species (perhaps the only one) that *systematically spoils its own nest*—in a long-term and near unredeemable manner? Since at least the 1960s-70s so much was known of how to turn our economies, politics and life-styles around (e.g., more ‘green’) but we have done very little, and done it far too slowly. I like the ethical component: “Some ecocritics brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation.”

My own claim in this series of Technical Papers 66-70, is that I have nearly been an ecocritic from the age of 16 (now 65), not that I was a very good one nor that I knew what I was doing mostly; but it was there as a critical consciousness—both critical of how people in general (and media) represented “Nature” or “wildlife” and how they related to it and the environment (ecology). I was (and still am) angered a lot by this problematic and have had to do my own correctives and healing around this sense of betrayal, if not despair I often feel—especially in my youth. These latter biological domains, Nature and “wildlife” I deeply loved and made my first careers from. Yet, that is the longer story for Technical Paper No. 67.

First, I need to admit I am no literary criticism scholar and not even a good literary educated person. Intriguingly, Estok is a Shakespearean scholar among other things. I have always preferred non-fiction writing and have no post-graduate study in literature. I never read a novel until I was forced to in grade 12. Though, I have played with writing screenplays, novels and poetry throughout my life but with no “training.” I do love to critically analyze movies like *The Matrix* (1993-2004) trilogy, which made up the guiding meta-narrative (meta-myth) of my arts-based dissertation.<sup>2</sup> Literature is one of my weakest areas actually, besides math, physics, and chemistry. Okay, there is at the same time an attraction to ecocriticism because it is ‘hot’ apparently in academia right now but more importantly because my friend and colleague (and co-author) Desh Subba (Nepalese author-thinker, living in Hong Kong) is first and foremost a celebrated poet and well-known fiction writer in some Eastern circles. Only recently has he started writing explicit philosophy.

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<sup>2</sup> Fisher, R. M. (2003). Fearless leadership in and out of the ‘Fear’ Matrix. Unpublished dissertation. Vancouver, BC: The In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute.

Subba's major work is developing a *philosophy of fearism*,<sup>3</sup> which is decidedly rooted and being applied within literary criticism. Bhutanese and Nepalese writers from around the world (including diasporas) have been inviting Subba to their conferences to speak about his philosophy. I was invited to attend one of these in Texas recently and presented with Subba, of which I find out how well respected he is. Because I met Subba through his philosophy of fearism writing, it is very interesting to watch how literary people in some circles are using "fearism" as he calls it, or a "fearist perspective" (lens) in literature production and critique. I'll take up this topic in Technical Paper No. 68. It seems worth mentioning at the beginning of this series, and tells me of some sensitive antennae and undercurrent of desire that lies within the arts (i.e., literary thought and theory), which is 'leading-edge' in my view when it comes to an engagement with "fear" as subject and object, or perhaps "Fear" as a radicalized *hyperobject*,<sup>4</sup> which artistic-type and literary-type critical thinkers are intrigued about and concerned about. I am too, and yet I'm more a visual and performance artist in my soul. As a side note, Subba has no awareness of ecocriticism or the writing on ecophobia. Later, I'll point to this as an example of independent global streams of critical inquiry on "fear" that go on and then discover each other. Some basic similarities can be found in the theorizing and interests (e.g., Subba, Fisher, Estok). I enjoy trying to enjoin these disparate threads into potentially triangulating, if not unifying and synergizing initiatives, in order to advance the validity and efficacy of the work more powerfully and rapidly. I often label "movements" where most would not perhaps see any connection at all, and I would place the three of us (Subba, Fisher, Estok) as working within the global Fearlessness Movement.<sup>5</sup>

It would be much too long of a paper to attempt to name all the important players and branches of ecocriticism. For one, the scholars and/or activists are many, and at this point I have only scanned a few of their writings. They don't all agree. This makes it complex to try to represent them. I've included some references here<sup>6</sup> to get you started on understanding ecocrit-

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<sup>3</sup> Subba, D. (2014). *Philosophy of fearism: Life is conducted, directed and controlled by the fear*. Australia: Xlibris.

<sup>4</sup> See Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. [a posthumanities work]. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>5</sup> See for e.g., the Fearlessness Movement ning (<http://fearlessnessmovement.ning.com>).

<sup>6</sup> Garrad, G. (2012). *Ecocriticism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York: Routledge; Hiltner, K. (Ed.) (2014). *Ecocriticism: The essential reader*. New York: Routledge; Dreese, D. N. (2002). *Ecocriticism: Creating self and place in environmental and American Indian literatures*. New York:

icism but there's no intention on my part to claim this is a sufficient and/or 'balanced' representation of the field.

The best I can tell at this point, is that ecocritics have emerged because they felt there was 'something wrong' (at least, inadequate) with the dominating narratives in the mainstream media (including literature) when it came to representing the crises that humanity faces, particularly in the realm of eco and/or environmental problems. They didn't (and still don't) like the unquestioning assumptions, discourses regimes and/or motivations behind the way these problems were cast, and especially didn't like the way 'Nature' was cast (as enemy) *contra* human victim/domination narratives. By studying the literature of past and present, as well as mass media (especially), the ecocritics aimed to expose the shortcomings of what could be seen on the surface as a very good thing because such narratives and media were actually 'trying' to 'educate' the populist and create a positive environmental 'wake up' and awareness of the problems going on ecologically. Then, also to offer some ideas and/or motivation of how to change things, including life-styles, etc. Ecocriticism, generally, embraces the good intentions (at some level) of the environmental-type of arts, writing, media—and, yet, sees it is infested with all kinds of problems, from sexism, racism, homophobia, to toxic anthropocentrism and on and on.

Many, like Estok, are very critical of the subtle and gross depictions of 'Mother' (Nature) that end up often coming out of the environmental (and well-marketed) eco-narratives of end times, apocalyptic works, and so on. Many ecocritics have been somewhat optimistic (idealistic?) and believed their movement along with environmental cultural productions to wake-up people would be helpful. There is also now deserved concern that much of this material and eco-critiques have perhaps been self-serving, aggrandizing, naive, and/or out and out only adding to problem(s) they try to resolve (e.g., see Estok, 2016)<sup>7</sup>. This latter critique of some ecocritics is particularly something I am very concerned about and have been for some time in regard to other areas of human crises—e.g., the Fear Problem and how so many have tried to resolve it but generally, too often, have only added to it. That theme appears and is discussed in other Technical Papers in this series (e.g., Technical Paper No. 67).

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Peter Lang; Clark, T. (2015). *Ecocriticism on the edge: The Anthropocene as a threshold concept*. New York: Bloomsbury; Bluell, L. (2005). *The future of environmental criticism: Environmental crisis and literary imagination*. London, UK: Blackwell.

<sup>7</sup> Estok, S. C. (2016). Ecomedia and ecophobia. *Neohelicon*, 43, 127-45.



From what I can tell, ecocriticism (and all its branches, including deep ecology, ecofeminism and dark ecology) is arising to utilize all the powerful tools of postmodern and/or poststructuralist literary critique, cultural critiques in general, and so on. It wants to apply these to something concrete as in the human/planetary problem (crisis) of major proportions in the Anthropocene era—which, addresses the environmental and ecological challenges we face and that will be getting worse in the future by all accounts of experts from many disciplines.

The naming of the Anthropocene<sup>8</sup> as a new geological era of which is named because it is the period (perhaps as far back as the beginning of agriculture, 10-12, 000 years ago) of when human activity has changed geological and climatological features more potently than any other time in recorded history (e.g., Global Warming). The unprecedented high rates of species extinctions during this time go hand-in-hand with this “threshold concept” (Anthropocene) and the reality of series cascading threat that faces Life on this planet—and, the worst is coming nearer and nearer—no longer is this problem off in the distant future. A sense of emergency is being felt deeply by many—and, yes, there are always lots of deniers. Academics with any sensitivity to what is happening in the Anthropocene are reconfiguring their own research and theorizing, and questioning their own actions, in a self-reflexive turn that is highly needed if they are to help contribute to answering the problems rather than increasing them. Time will tell how much the ecocriticism movement will actually help.

### **The Two-Way Split in Ecocriticism: Emergence of Ecophobia**

The Wiktionary generic definition is one place to start our exploration:

*eco-* + *-phobia* from Greek (*oikos*, “house”) and *phóbos*, “fear”).

**“ecophobia** : 1. Fear of one’s home; 2. a feeling of powerlessness to prevent cataclysmic environmental change, apocalypse, etc.”<sup>9</sup>

Etymologically, as simple as this definition is, the broad field of ecocriticism makes this all a way more complicated—a story about to unfold herein. And no one has led this effort of complexification as much as the Shakespearean and Oriental scholar Simon C. Estok at Sungkyunkwan University, College of Liberal Arts, Department of English Language and

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropocene>

<sup>9</sup> See <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/ecophobia>

Literature, South Korea. I'll return to his work throughout this series of Technical Papers as one of *the* most important theorists on “fear” (e.g., “ecophobia”) within the ecocriticism movement today.

Like Estok, I am sniffing out (perhaps) the problem behind the problem—that is, the elusive *why* (explanation) for the root causal formation for humans seemingly to be the only species that systematically pollutes its own nest, even when it knows better—is educated ‘better’—and is supposed to be *the* (or one of the) most intelligence and wise species on the planet: *Homo sapiens*. But let's back-up for a moment and also take pause to not sloppily conflate Indigenous Peoples, who have been (and some still are) living *via* a primal sustainable and sane worldview, with most others (e.g., the latter, following what Four Arrows' called the “Dominant worldview” since 9-10, 000 years ago—that is, after a “departure point” from the original “Indigenous worldview”<sup>10</sup>). Living and theorizing as a North American, I have called this problematic the Indigenous vs. Western (Dominant) Encounter. This latter topic is discussed in Technical Paper No. 70.

Ecocriticism, like any field, especially one that is interdisciplinary, will not be able to settle on *only* one definition or set of principles, meanings or interpretations that all can agree on. Typically, in the postmodern era of which literary criticism blossomed along with ecocriticism, there is a sense that many diverse perspectives, voices and angles on analyzing things are better than one perspective, voice or angle. Of course, with that comes differences that are many and often conflicting in interpretations—and, equally complex are differences in values and in what is attended to as priority and what is left out. This zone of contestation interests me greatly, especially when it comes to how much (or how little) ecocriticism takes into account, and values, the complex nature and role of “fear” in the Anthropocene, and in ecomedia and all the other topic areas that ecocriticism addresses. Indeed, a much larger study ought to be undertaken as a *fearanalysis*<sup>11</sup> of the ecocriticism literature from its beginning. This latter topic will be the emphasis in Technical Paper No. 69.

More or less, I am nearly always practicing some form of fearanalysis on every discourse that I turn my critical attention to, especially in the acade-

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<sup>10</sup> Four Arrows (aka Jacobs, D. T.) (2016). *Point of departure: Returning to a more authentic worldview for education and survival*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

<sup>11</sup> For a general guide to how I have conceived *fearanalysis* (analogous to psychoanalysis but different) see Fisher, R. M. (2012). *Fearanalysis: A first guide book*. Carbondale, IL: In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute.

my but also in the populist sectors. My aim in this is to analyze how different discourses (and authors) define, contextualize, and make meaning of fear (and ‘fear’<sup>12</sup>) as a form of attempting to more or less manage fear (better). That’s the basic premise, ontology and epistemology that underlays my work<sup>13</sup> (and Subba’s; see Technical Paper No. 68).

No doubt a two-way split notion is oversimplified due to my own newness to ecocriticism. Yet, I’ll proceed on that basic assumption. My encounter in reading ecocritical works began with a popular short article in a large distribution Canadian health magazine. It was an article entitled “Ecophobia: Keeping Hope Afloat.” It caught my attention because that is a powerful combination of terms *eco* and *phobia*. I was at first less paying attention to the imagery behind the text—a calm but subtle ominous dark blue waterscape without horizons—signaling ambivalently potential power for land-susceptible destruction *and* potential nurturance (womb-like). The cover text on top of the water photo read:

Although it may be a new word in your vocabulary, ecophobia is a subject of concern for many social science researchers. Reported to be on *the rise* [like the sea levels with global warming?], ecophobia speaks to the challenge of keeping active, healthy, and hopeful in the *wake* [tsunami?] of sorrowful environmental trends.<sup>14</sup> [italics added for emphasis] [note: my critique of the use of these water images/metaphors today in post-hurricane, post-traumatic 2017 fall season of immense tragedies, from an ecocriticism point of view, would be extensive<sup>15</sup> but I’ll subside from such fearanalysis here.]

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<sup>12</sup> Since the early 1990s I have dubbed ‘fear’ (with ‘ marks) as a deconstructed and reconstructed notion of “fear”—and, as a culturally-modified form that is like a ‘different beast’ than fear as we commonly have learned about it, especially learned within the paradigm of the biomedical paradigm, psychiatry and psychology. My approach is transdisciplinary and so ‘fear’ reflects that less comfortable (hegemonic) imaginary of what *fear* is and can become. Any of my publications have this distinction articulated, so I won’t repeat that all here.

<sup>13</sup> For a thorough treatment of my curricular theorizing of “fear management/education” as a global umbrella concept, see, for e.g., Fisher, R. M. (2010). *The world’s fearlessness teachings: A critical integral approach to fear management/education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

<sup>14</sup> Shaffer, D. K. (2017). Ecophobia: Keeping hope afloat. *Alive: Canada’s Natural Health and Wellbeing Magazine*, 421, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> Shaffer’s contradiction in writing an article on “hope” and resilience and “self-care” in these tough times, is brought out in her seeming unconscious use of imagery to invoke fear and terror, if not a sense of passive hopelessness—the very thing she wrote about (as did Sobel) to avoid from their nature-based pedagogy interventions. Yes, that language markets

The article implicitly caters to the Wiktionary definition above for making sense of *ecophobia*. It turns out the author, with a Ph.D. in “nature-based pedagogy” only cited one ecocritic (i.e., Sobel for the authoritative voice of meaning):

Education writer, David Sobel describes the paradox at the heart of ecophobia. As we become more aware, more eco-literate, many of us also become increasingly overwhelmed. [citing Sobel’s 1996 book *Beyond Ecophobia*<sup>16</sup>] ‘[I]nstead of developing a sense of agency...[some feel] a helpless sense of dread about the future.’ [then she adds] So how to prevent paralysis and powerlessness?<sup>17</sup>

After I read this and wrote a plethora of critiques all over this popular article, I still did not know anything about the literature on ecocriticism nor ecophobia. My quick research online introduced me to a broad and deep field of inquiry with some fascinating titles. I read a few recent journal articles by Simon Estok (he has many) and was immediately confronted with the hidden curriculum agenda (*aka* ideology) in this popular article above that was written by a student (in all likelihood) of David Sobel.

Sobel, who is fairly well known as an American nature-based, environmental and place-based educator with a BA in English<sup>18</sup> and M.Ed., has an illustrious career in his specialty areas for over 40 years. As an environmental educator myself way back, I’d never heard of him. I began to doubt the integrity of this popular article because of what it left out—and that is, that Estok is a foremost leader in developing the theory around ecophobia (e.g., his “Ecophobia Hypothesis”<sup>19</sup>)—and, his view of ecophobia is a whole lot more sociopolitical and cultural than

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well in getting attention, and publishers like this kind of fear-based stuff—but it needs to be critiqued thoroughly, as the best of ecocriticism does (e.g., Estok) and fearanalysis would do (e.g., Fisher).

<sup>16</sup> Sobel, D. (1996). *Beyond ecophobia: Reclaiming the heart in nature education*. Great Barrington, MA: Orion.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>18</sup> Taken from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Sobel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Sobel)

<sup>19</sup> Estok’s new book *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (New York: Routledge, 2018) is already up for sale online but still in press. As well as many peer-reviewed articles, Estok has recently put on “The Ecophobia Hypothesis” webinar in Europe sponsored by the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture, and Environment (<http://www.easice.eu/news/other/webinar-spring-2017-dr-simon-c-estok-the-ecophobia-hypothesis/>)

the individual psychological approach of Sobel. This latter typically modern Western discourse of individual psychology analysis (often at the expense of a political one) is very strong in the popular article by the Sobelian author. I say this because of the amount of attention she gave to the psychology of the problem of ecophobia:

Less a true phobia, ecophobia speaks instead to a heightened state of concern over the environment. Antony [a psychology professor] pointed out that if “environment-related anxiety causes significant impairment, then it may be a diagnosable anxiety disorder. People with obsessive compulsive disorder may also have concerns [worries, fears] about contamination from the environment”<sup>20</sup>

Another example of the more W. psychological discourse stood out in an article on teaching college science to undergraduates, where the authors spend most all the attention on the pedagogical dilemma of scientific literacy and environmental awareness. They are concerned about ecophobia in their students when they get ‘too much (real) information’ (TMI) about the world’s ecological crises and become overridden with “feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.” The authors unproblematically (like Wiktionary, like Sobelian approaches) define ecophobia only within the individual psychological (‘clinical’) view: [they define it] “*ecophobia*—a state of mind in which the student is fearful of the looming environmental problems...”<sup>21</sup> This discourse too neatly locates ecophobia within mind, thus, within psychology as a disciplinary (and liberalist biased) form of epistemology: knowledge, knowing and understanding. This hegemonic really needs to be critiqued, from many angles. My critical educator inside is angry at the seemingly do-gooder pedagogue construction here where ultimately the agency of the learner (of supposed TMI) is cast by the Sobelian authors/teachers/helpers (“clinicians”) as: ‘poor students who are so fearful.’ Later, I’ll return to further critique this.

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<sup>20</sup> Shaffer, 111.

<sup>21</sup> Bloom & Holden (2011, p. 46). See Bloom, M. A., & Holden, M. (2011). Battling ecophobia: Instilling activism in nonscience majors when teaching environmental issues. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 40(5), 46-49.

Now, back to my initial reactions. I was snooping out a “split” in the ecocritical discourses,<sup>22</sup> which articulated a tension, if not conflict, between Sobel and Estok—respectively, between a modernist ‘clinical’ discourse frame and a postmodernist ‘political’ discourse frame. Estok (2016), with no detectable animosity toward Sobel’s biased discourse, somewhat confirmed my suspicion. He wrote<sup>23</sup>:

Ecophobia is a subtle thing, involved both in the production and reception of the [eco-]narratives. We may define ecophobia as an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism<sup>24</sup>....I have argued elsewhere... that ecocriticism needs a very broad scope for the term ecophobia. I first proposed the term in the early summer of 1995<sup>25</sup> as a part of the first draft of the final chapter of my dissertation (independent of and in no way derived from the manner in which it [ecophobia] is used in [clinical] psychology and psychiatry) “to denote fear and loathing of the environment in much the same way that the term ‘homophobia’ denotes fear and loathing of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.”<sup>26</sup> At roughly the same time, David Sobel published a long essay entitled “Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education.” As I stated in [my 2011 book] *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare*, “the fact that Sobel and I clearly seemed to coin the same term at roughly the same time indicating a felt need for a viable ecocritical terminolo-

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<sup>22</sup> I am using “discourse” in the Foucauldian and critical sense of the term where power/knowledge is the unit of analysis for competitive pervasiveness patterns of speech, vocabulary, texts, etc.

<sup>23</sup> Estok (2016, p. 132).

<sup>24</sup> Estok is utilizing the ecocriticism of Greta Gaard’s queer ecofeminism work for generic support of his own conceptualization.

<sup>25</sup> It’s intriguing, talking about synchronicity of ideas flowing in the world, that 1995 was my first Technical Paper on defining the distinction of *fear* (psychology’s view) and ‘*fear*’ (a sociopolitical view). Estok was in northern Alberta (Edmonton), and I was in southern Alberta (Calgary) at the time. In later writing (to follow) in this series of Technical Papers 66-70, I’ll work more with the interrelationship I see of ‘fear’ and Estok’s ecophobia conceptualization (i.e., “Ecophobia Hypothesis”).

<sup>26</sup> Estok is citing his own first publication (dissertation) in which he presented this proposition of a very politicized notion of ecophobia (see Estok, 1996, p. 213). Estok, S. C. (1996). Reading the ‘other’ where fancy is bred: Designating strangers in Shakespeare. Unpublished dissertation. Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta.

gy”<sup>27</sup> as early as the mid-1990s for the burgeoning field of ecocriticism.

The split of distinctions re: discourses on ecophobia that Estok makes above are explicit: “I first proposed the term in the early summer of 1995 as a part of the first draft of the final chapter of my dissertation (independent of and in *no way* derived from the manner in which it [ecophobia] is used in [clinical] psychology and psychiatry).” I add italics on “no way” in his description of how he took a whole different path than the psychological more ‘clinical’ discourse. I haven’t read enough of Estok’s work to see how he argues this chosen direction and how he sets up the contrasts with other discourses defining ecophobia.

Again, for my purposes here, I see a two-way split: Sobelian and Estokian versions. And, this is significant to establish from my point of view as a fearologist and critical educator. I want to know the underlying (and contesting) ecocritical discourses that articulate “fear” and its role when we as a species come up to and engage with environmental (i.e., Eco-) issues/problems. Each discourse, Sobelian and Estokian, create a rich tension for sorting through which is the ‘better’ way to go in articulating “fear” and, more pragmatically, which is the ‘better’ way to go in articulating fear management/education(?). I am using “management” in a complex nuance, distinguishing a politicized “managerialism” (*a la* Foucault) and simply “management” as a self/system regulatory *process* in a more ‘natural’ organic systems framing—albeit, for sure these are both interrelated and contextualized as human (culturally, albeit partially) constructed phenomena.

To now focus on Estok’s discourse formation for ecophobia, I return to the point above: “We may define ecophobia as an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism.” I so appreciate Estok’s use of “may” in this definitional direction. He is not absolutistic that this is the only way. I appreciate his additional challenge to ecocriticism overall, in that he calls for an “ecocriticism [that] needs a very broad scope for the term ecophobia”—arguably, I would suggest this is an invitation on his part (in my words) for a critical holistic-integral approach. I have long taken such a (post-)postmodern ap-

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<sup>27</sup> Estok (2016) is citing Estok (2011, pp. 128-29). See Estok, S. C. (2011). *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading ecophobia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

proach to ‘Fear’ Studies<sup>28</sup> overall—which, needs to be broad and deep—which, needs to be a flexible and fluid “*spectrum*” imaginary and approach, one that Estok also claimed is required for ecophobia<sup>29</sup>:

[*contra* a Sobelian reductionistic and non-spectra approach, Estok wrote:] Ecophobia is what allows humanity to do bad things to the natural world....ecophobia is the *cause* of the environmental despoliation that Sobel describes [it is not the psychological (clinical) *result* of such].... Ecophobia is a big thing. Ecophobia is a spectrum condition. No less are sexism, homophobia, racism, classism, and speciesism. We all stand somewhere in these spectra, and it is good if we see where we stand. Then we can act [efficaciously, toward liberation from oppression, not merely battle psychological fear-symptomatics].<sup>30</sup>

My quick take on this very complex quote and set of ideas of “a spectrum” conceptualization for ecophobia (and ecocriticism), is that Estok includes and transcends<sup>31</sup> the Sobelian condition for ecophobia. Estok moves the psychological diagnosis into an expansive cultural-political-philosophical and truly (potential) emancipatory discourse formation. I applaud that because the Eco-Fear Problem is a big thing, is a spectrum

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<sup>28</sup> For e.g., see Fisher, R. M. (2006). Invoking ‘Fear’ Studies. *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 22(4), 39-71.

<sup>29</sup> Estok’s (2016) conceptualization of “spectrum” imaginary to the problem of “ecophobia” is welcomed by myself for several reasons, too complex to enter into here; suffice it to say, I come from a very different trajectory on my notion of a “spectrum of ‘fear’” conceptualization and integral theory (e.g., Fisher, 2010), and yet, I also embrace the spectrum he proposes that we “stand” always more or less embedded in the multiple intersecting oppressions (e.g., classism, racism, sexism, etc.)—and, ultimately, my spectra argument will suggest we have to include a foundational imaginary of placement of fear (and ‘fear’) and ecophobia into fear(ism)—and, complex variants of fearism (and fearism-t)—but that will unfold in later Technical Papers in more detail.

<sup>30</sup> Estok (2016, pp. 133, 137).

<sup>31</sup> This Wilberian phraseology is a basis for a holistic-integral approach to any subject matter. In this case, Estok shows this approach (as I can tell so far) in that he embraces (includes) the basic starting definition of George F. Will, in a 1988 article and first use of ecophobia, outside of a clinical psychological use. Estok (2016) wrote, “... Will defines ecophobia simply as ‘the fear that the planet is increasingly inhospitable.’ Will’s definition is also the position from which I start but from which Sobel departs [unwittingly]” (p. 132). Clearly, to me anyways, Estok includes and transcends Will’s definition and makes it more complex and political and Sobel goes down the road of simplification (i.e., psychologization). I prefer, for a lot of reasons explained in this series of Technical Papers, the Estokian more critical holistic-integral approach (even though, I would take this approach even further than Estok does).



condition. It, like Estok's ecophobia, is a complex phenomena and requires complex interdisciplinarity and/or transdisciplinarity of the imagination and theorizing to grasp, to diagnose well, and thus to offer the 'best' interventions we can come up—all the time realizing we are in a dynamic complex system where there are 'no guarantees' of clean diagnose and clean cures. The Sobelian notion of ecophobia, which seems to have been popularly taken up by many, is troublesome and insufficient—as I (with Estok) have pointed to herein. It would take a much longer and more technical article to do justice to Estok's critique(s)<sup>32</sup> and to add my own critique(s) of Estok's current positioning.

### **Practical Responsibility: Some Ethical Implications**

I don't think it is trivial to note that Estok has generously engaged the work of Sobel in attempting to improve the discourse formation of ecophobia—and, in contrast, Sobel has not returned the engagement. One has to wonder where Sobel is coming from as a public educator, writer and researcher?

In a preliminary search online of several of Sobel's books, he does not mention Estok at all. This silence is potentially innocent on Sobel's part, and/or it is potentially political and ideological. I caution all readers to be critical of everything written about ecophobia by anyone, including yours truly. However, I am not impressed in an ethical and epistemological sense that Sobel writes with authority in the field of environmental, nature-based and place-based education ongoing, is a

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<sup>32</sup> In particular (but not alone), what I have bypassed is the rationale behind Estok's naming of the "Ecophobia Hypothesis" in juxtaposition with, and conflict with, the popular "Biophilia Hypothesis" (e.g., E. O. Wilson's notion) (e.g., see Estok, 2016, pp. 133-34). This is a topic of great interest to me because of my long study of the binary Love (*philia*) vs. Fear (*phobia*) discourse formation complex (spectrum) that exists in world sacred and secular literatures (e.g., theologies and philosophies). I will return to this matter and Estok's somewhat analogous binary critique (see Technical Paper No. 67). The issue underlying all of the contention I'm mentioning here is based on an (implicit) inquiry into the meta-motivational forces (and theories, or myths) that articulate fundamental human behavior (and, for that matter, other species as well). We are now touching on the cosmological (and/or Wilberian kosmological) dimension of ecophobia discourses. Big stuff. Note: I refer often in this series to Ken Wilber, a contemporary American integral philosopher because his work underpins a good deal of my own, albeit, I am also a critic of his work. This will be ferreted out later.

major player in the original formation of “ecophobia”<sup>33</sup> (and going “beyond” it, supposedly), and he ignores(?) informing himself and his readers (followers) of new competing discourses and meanings for this problem of ecophobia—the very problem that he says is so important as a barrier to the empowered learner and new future citizen who ought to care ethically about the planetary ecosystems.

Sobel’s *disregard* (my word) is an indicator of his hidden curriculum (ideology) in his own theory and thinking about ecophobia. It signals to me he is not so interested in understanding (analyzing) ecophobia as he has been to merely come up with a ‘catchy’ marketing phrase to grab attention, write a book on it, and then offer his *cura* of hope to the problem—that is, his taking us (supposedly) “*Beyond Ecophobia*” (the title of his 1996 book). His student of the popular article I mentioned earlier is operating (apparently) on the same ideology of disregard for competing views, ignoring deeper analysis, and pushes for the marketing of ecophobia as a literary ruse for pushing the agenda of “keeping HOPE afloat” (that’s her subtitle of the article). I am never impressed with the too common rhetorical and ideological (classical) FEAR/HOPE dynamic of persuasion and its abuses in history—but that’s another criticism for another time.

I wish to move now to the ethical responsibility in Estok’s alternative positioning of ecophobia within the ecocriticism discourse field—and to do so implicitly in contrast to the “split” that I have articulated so far. I will not be further analyzing the hegemonic Sobelian reductionistic positioning other than to point out the pattern consistent in the discourse. From the three Sobelian-oriented works I’ve cited above re: ecophobia, there is a distinct ‘clinical’ relationship to the concept (and theory). The tendency is to focus on behavior, attitudes and outcomes whereby there is some (apparent) transcending the problem of ecophobia as they define it. For example, Sobel himself called for going “beyond” ecophobia, Bloom & Holden called for “battling ecophobia” and Shaffer asks the “how to” question: “How to prevent paralysis and powerlessness?” in the face of ecophobia. It is not that Estok would treat these expressions as wrong but more so they are predominant in setting the frame for a simplistic version of the ecophobia problem and thus, leave a prescription of more or less getting away

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<sup>33</sup> Unlike Sobel, Estok takes some responsibility to search out the origins of the term “ecophobia” and found its first use “outside of its psychological [clinical] meaning” by George F. Will in a 1988 *Chicago Sun-Times* newspaper article (Estok, 2016, p. 132).

from ecophobia and the sooner the better by some set of means that are equally shallow as the analysis is.

My summary of the ethical responsibility foregrounded by the Estokian positioning on ecophobia is to not assume it is simple. Is to not assume there is some escape. Is to not assume learners are so “hopeless” or “helpless” or “fear-full” that they cannot figure out more complex fear management strategies and analysis—and find agency and empowerment in creative ways. Is not to assume learners have ecophobia (like a disease) that needs immediate treatment from some authority and caregiver/helper (e.g., a psychologist, a teacher). Is not to conflate the symptom with the cause. Is not to focus on the anxiety *per se* (e.g., fears) in confronting environmental catastrophes but to focus on seeing the fear(ism) underneath it, that is, the subtle, that which is systemic pathology (if not insanity) that is not reducible to individual psychology but is more a toxic worldview, a toxic ideology, a toxic politics and ultimately an insidious “culture of fear” itself that is producing individuals who act out the fear(ism)—or, in this case, Estok would say, are acting out ecophobia without really seeing what it is made of and how it is embedded and works in the oppressive systems of ‘normal’ everyday life and history, including all the ‘free’ choices we make as citizens. Estok suggested that overall:

We tend to forget—would like to forget—many inconvenient truths....Our participation in toxic lifestyles [and ideology that reproduces a “groundless hatred of the natural world”]... is something from which we would like to have ethical exception. Toxicity amnesia and eco-exceptionalism are our guides, and we fall into their hands. We have created regimes of displacement [defense mechanisms based on fear] that allow us distance from matter. Perhaps we have become so blinded by the enormity of what we do [and believe]...that we have simply lost perspective....We have become stupid....It seems that ‘the market’ has come to rule everything.<sup>34</sup>

Estok is not completely pessimistic<sup>35</sup> of the potential for humanity to change its ways toward a truly more sane and sustainable life-style and structure, but he is not as optimistic as the Sobelian discourse purveys. Again, this isn’t the place to cover all the subtle distinctions and other

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<sup>34</sup> Estok (2016, p. 137).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 138. He cites the positive turn around re: cigarette smoking in the USA, for example, within a relatively short time frame.

arguments that Estok proposes in his theorizing the “Ecophobia Hypothesis.” I have offered only a taste of the territory and have emphasized the contesting contemporary discourses that predominate in the meaning of and teaching about ecophobia. Everything I prefer in the Estokian approach is due to the resonance I feel and see with my own approach to the Eco-Fear Problem. I think, as Estok (and others) have suggested we are better off to frame ecophobia within an expanded imaginary and theorizing of “tragedy” itself. There is a collapse and derogation of the natural world—and “it is a tragic one.” Literary ecocriticism or any depth analysis will challenge the too-easy, too-quick band-aid solutions that the Sobelian clinical discourse tends to take re: the Eco-Fear Problem.

“What will it take to cause [positive] change? The answer is disturbing,”<sup>36</sup> Estok concluded. I leave it to readers to pursue what he means by that but from this Technical Paper No. 66 you ought to have some good ideas about the disturbance that is required in ecocriticism today, as the Anthropocene context bears down on us with immediacy. Yet, fearing the end of the world and trying to ‘save the world’ is not necessarily going to help much—that is, unless we get to the source of the dynamics of the systemic aspects of ecophobia, beyond mere individual psychology.

My critiques aside, I can certainly agree to a common ground in order to begin thinking and dialoguing together about the crisis of ecophobia (i.e., the Eco-Fear Problem). That common ground is the grave concern that knowledge we are producing (TMI) in media today is going to require very serious analysis—including, how fearmongering and propaganda (ideologies) is spread in the name of “educating” the public about environmental and ecological issues. Knowledge isn’t enough. Ethical analysis is crucial, and like Estok, I believe “fear” has to be put central in any analysis and criticism, including ecocriticism. I leave this now with Estok’s own inspiring words on “consciousness” shifting (i.e., its transformation):

It is essential to focus on the unacknowledged [fear-based] ethics in our everyday consciousness that contribute to environmental problems [where we end up ‘scaring ourselves to death’<sup>37</sup>], ecophobic

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>37</sup> This is not my original term, but several social critics have used this to articulate that a toxic *cycle of fear* is persistent in so many of the ways we perceive, think, and act—then it

ethics<sup>38</sup> in human consciousness of which we are simply unaware and therefore are powerless to control.... [is the crisis of consciousness we have to face] Looking at ecophobia promises an innovative approach to achieving such a necessary [consciousness] shift. The academic and practical value of this research [and theorizing] is vast and offers not simply to expand the range of ecocriticism but to formalize interpretive strategies of reading and viewing that could potentially change the trajectory of ethics through which environmental matters are represented. What this means in terms of the environment has to do with the connections between media representations of the natural environment, on the one hand, and our relationship to that environment on the other. Analyzing ecophobia allows us to develop an entirely new ethical paradigm within which to house our thinking about nature [and fear itself].<sup>39</sup>

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ends up a nightmare of experiences manifest that put us in fear of our lives and future, but we are the one's that created that situation because of fear-based ways of perceiving, thinking, acting. We seem typically unable to see this reifying 'cycle' or 'syndrome' and our role in creating it ongoing. My experience as a therapist for those suffering with long-term addictions, verifies this inability to see the deeper pattern of how the addict (and society) are co-causal re: addiction patterns, and not merely a symptom of it. I am in no way, nor is Estok, attempting to "blame the victim" suffering from ecophobia, for example. Yet, there is a more nuanced ecocriticism required as well—because of the embedded relationship of cause in the consciousness and location of all people (more or less) as ethically responsible for environmental crises—the Anthropocene. Similarly, I could apply this to racism, classism, sexism etc. and all the ways we are differently 'born and raised' into it. We then have to be ethically responsible for it all—the reifying 'cycle' or 'syndrome' or toxic ideology/worldview.

<sup>38</sup> "Ecophobic ethics," as far as I can tell, for Estok, is another way of saying *fear-based* eco-ethics. This is a point I'll return to in later Technical Papers in this series.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.