

EN9B5 suggested essay topics, 2017-18

Note: The following topics are intended to offer only suggested directions for your thinking and research; feel free to develop your own topic in consultation with me beforehand. For word-lengths and deadlines, please see the MAWL Handbook.

Examine the rhetorical framing of ‘the Anthropocene’ in selected examples of critical, popular and/or literary discourse. What do these examples tell us about the potential usefulness and limitations of this periodizing designation?

Nomenclature: the Anthropocene vs. the Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Cthulucene, etc. Engage the debates around one or more of these terms with reference to their implications for world-literary analysis.

When was the Anthropocene? Discuss the relation between the scientific debates around dating the onset of the Anthropocene and the political debates concerning its significance. What is at stake in these debates, and why might they matter for future action against climate change?

Comparative literary methodology: address the problem of how to read ‘energy’ and/or ‘climate change’ in world literature, even (or especially) when they do not figure explicitly as literary subject matter.

The Anthropocene/Capitalocene and literary history: how might these concepts enable us to revise conventional field divisions and categories? Focus your essay on specific examples of periods and their representative works.

Critically assess Elizabeth Kolbert and Ashley Dawson (and/or other writers) on the challenges – epistemological, cultural, political – posed by the advent of the Sixth Extinction.

Examine the literary registration of a case study in the history of modern species extinctions – e.g. the passenger pigeon, the dodo, the woolly mammoth, etc. – for what it reveals concerning the cultural politics of the Anthropocene.

Kate Soper has argued that one legacy of the Cartesian distinction between mind and body is an implicit down-grading or marginalization of the (gendered, raced) body: as a result, “the excluded body returns to subvert the humanity-nature distinction,” acting as a “return of the repressed.” Explore this dynamic in a selected work or works of world literature.

Explore the literary-cultural response to a particular ‘sacrifice zone’ (examples: Chernobyl, the Niger Delta, de-industrialised areas in the north of England or Rust Belt USA, the Three Gorges Dam district in China, etc.) with reference to the interplay between human and other ecologies.

Analyse the material basis of apparently ‘immaterial’ communication technologies from an environmental standpoint. What are the socio-ecological implications of print, electronic and/or digital media as forms of environment-making?

In what sense might we speak of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as ‘world-ecological’ phenomena?

Review the intellectual history of the concept of ‘second nature’ and its implications for an understanding of Anthropocenic culture.

Write an essay on the production of waste, detritus and/or pollutants as material and symbolic byproducts of the Anthropocene.

Discuss writing of (and in) the Anthropocene as a form of what Fredric Jameson calls cognitive mapping: the attempt to locate a subject’s positionality within the field of large-scale, often invisible and impersonal forces characteristic of global (imperial) capitalism.

Future natures: write an essay on dystopian (or utopian) projections of Jason Moore’s *oikeios* after the age of the four ‘cheaps’ – i.e., resources, energy, food and labour.

Moore suggests that “science, power and culture” are crucial to capital’s ability to appropriate unpaid work, thereby creating the conditions for producing Cheap Nature. Explore the role of culture in this regard. How might culture contest, as well as ratify, the means of this appropriation?

Review an issue or debate in current world-literary studies (e.g. distant reading, core-periphery relations, translation and translatability, the transnational circulation of texts, imported form vs. local content) through the lens of questions raised by conceptualizing the Anthropocene (as well as replacement candidates for this term). How might the debate be viewed alternatively from this perspective?

Is Amitav Ghosh right to argue that world literature has failed to meet the challenge of the Anthropocene?

“If we want to learn to live in the Anthropocene, we must first learn how to die” (Roy Scranton). Assess Scranton’s view that the new epoch entails a necessary death of contemporary ‘civilization,’ drawing on works of fiction and social science to examine the implications of this claim.

Finally – feel free to write essays in which you explore a conceptual issue associated with the Anthropocene debates via one or more literary works of your own choosing, either on the syllabus or off.