

EN9B5 essays: suggested topic areas

Note: *The following topics – not formal titles as such – are intended to offer only initial directions for your thinking and research; you're encouraged to develop and refine your own topic in consultation with me. Essay word-lengths and deadlines are as specified in the MAWL Handbook.*

Examine the rhetoric around uses of 'the Anthropocene' in selected examples of critical, popular and/or literary discourse. What do they tell us about the potential usefulness and limitations of this periodizing designation?

Nomenclature: the Anthropocene vs. the Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Growthocene, Chthulucene, etc. Engage the debates around 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 breakdown?

In what ways does 'race' condition or qualify conceptions of the Anthropocene? How might it speak to questions of agency and/or responsibility regarding the history and development of an epoch so designated?

Consider the frames of 'ecological imperialism' (Alfred Crosby) or 'green colonialism' (Richard Grove) for a reading of tensions or continuities between socio-economic and environmental domination.

What would it mean to decolonise the Anthropocene for literary-critical studies?

Methodology: address the problem of how to read 'energy' in world literature, even (or especially) when it does 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 periods and their representative works.

Engage the theoretical debate between Andreas Malm and Jason Moore concerning the human/nature duality in relation to the culture and politics of the Anthropocene. What implications – political, literary, philosophical – does it have?

Review any aspect of the recent debates over 'world literature' – including how to study, classify, map and theorize it – in light of concurrent developments in the sphere of climate studies or, more broadly, political ecology. How might the latter set of issues condition or qualify the former?

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 species extinctions – e.g. the passenger pigeon, the dodo, the woolly mammoth, etc. – for what it reveals concerning the 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 any 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 politics of economy and ecology in relation.

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 media systems as ‘world-ecological’ phenomena?

Review the intellectual history of the concept of second (or third) nature and its implications for an understanding of Anthropocenic environments.

Write an essay on the production of waste as material index to the culture 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.

Discuss the emerging genre of cli-fi as a response to the problems of representing the processes of climate breakdown in literary form. Or explore climate crisis in genres other than fiction.

Jason 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?

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

Queer Anthropocene: Analyse the role of non-normative sexualities in configurations of the human/extra-human matrix, as these are represented or performed in literary-cultural texts.

Apocalypse then and now: Review the dystopian registers of contemporary or past instances of the literature of climate apocalypse, with a view to delineating and comparing their cultural logics. In what sense do such works cast a different light on the ‘end of nature’ thesis (McKibben) initiating the self-conscious Anthropocene?