

EN267: Essay questions, 2014-15

Essays of 5,000 words are due on **Tuesday, 20 January 2015** (Week 3 of Term 2). The following topics are intended to offer only suggested directions for your own thinking and research; feel free, indeed encouraged, to develop your own topic in consultation with me beforehand.

1. Contemporary environmentalism faces a contradiction: it seeks to critique the prevalence of rampant consumerism while warning against impending scarcity (of resources, food, energy, etc.) – a warning that depends on appeals to the consumerist status quo. Discuss the implications of this apparent contradiction using any of our texts.
2. “Nature’s independence *is* its meaning—without it there is nothing but us” (Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*). Write an essay about the symbolic crisis signaled by the advent of the ‘Anthropocene,’ exploring critical and alternative perspectives on McKibben’s end-of-nature thesis.
3. Compare the presence of the commons in Clare’s writing to that of wilderness in Thoreau’s. What does a comparative reading suggest concerning the relative constructions of ‘nature’ in the British and North American contexts?
4. Discuss Raymond Williams’s notion of ‘green language’ as a function of the dialectical relations of country and city. How might we read the co-determining presence of urban and rural in works that appear to focus on just one or the other?
5. Develop a reading of the eco-praxis in *A Year in Thoreau’s Journal: 1851* that focuses on any of the following: species observation; meteorology; social metaphors (including those pertaining to gender, race and class); relations of built to natural environments.
6. Eco-critique I: Analyse and evaluate a critic’s eco-reading of any of the works on the syllabus, exploring its implications for larger questions of theory and methodology with respect to the field of ecocriticism.
7. 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 as engaged in any one of our works.
8. “Ecological poetry must [] transcend the elegiac mode” (Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature*). How might poetry (and/or other genres) respond to the challenge of an expanded conception of ecology, beyond the registers of mourning/melancholia?
9. Eco-critique II: Write an essay on the question of eco-mimesis as a privileged mode of environmental writing, with reference to the work of Buell, Phillips and others.
10. Develop an eco-reading of any apparently non-‘ecological’ text (on or off the syllabus).

11. Media ecologies I: Write an essay exploring the function and representation of human mediascapes as a specifically ecological issue.
12. Explore the intersection of scientific and cultural discourses with respect to the production of environmental knowledge in the work of Carson and/or Leopold.
13. Media ecologies II: Analyse the material basis of apparently ‘immaterial’ communication technologies from an environmental standpoint. What are the ecological implications of print, electronic and digital media as a form of ‘second nature’?
14. Write an essay on the production of waste, detritus and/or pollutants as material and symbolic by-products of modernization in any of the works on the syllabus.
15. Write an essay comparing C19 and C20 representations of birdlife as a focal point for registering environmental change.
16. Appropriate and explore any of the following ecological terms for the analysis of environmental writing: ecozone, bioregion, ecoregion, ecosystem, biome, ecotone, climax community, cosmopolitan diversity, endemism.
17. Edgelands: Locate and investigate the interstitial and apparently marginal or overlooked zones between one environment and another, and/or between built and ‘natural’ environments, as a focus for extending ecocritical analysis.
18. Literary topographies: analyse the (formal, historical, political) modalities of writing forests, deserts, plains, mountains, rivers, coasts, wetlands, glaciers or oceans.
19. Discuss ecological writing as a form of what Fredric Jameson calls cognitive mapping: the attempt to locate the subject’s positionality within the field of large-scale, often invisible and impersonal forces characteristic of global (imperial) capitalism.
20. “We seem to be facing two insoluble problems. On the one hand, we have witnessed an endless series of global debt crises, ... to the point where the overall burden of debt – sovereign, municipal, corporate, personal – is obviously unsustainable. On the other, we have an ecological crisis, a galloping process of climate change that is threatening to throw the entire planet into drought, floods, chaos, starvation, and war. The two might seem unrelated. But ultimately they are the same” (David Graeber, “A Practical Utopian’s Guide to the Coming Collapse”). Write an essay mapping the relations between a debt-structured economy and an ecological regime premised on unstoppable growth.