

EN267: Essay 1 questions, 2019-20

Essays of either 3,000 (Level 5) or 4,000 (Level 6) words are due at noon on Tuesday, 14 January 2019 (Week 2 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. “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 McKibben identifies, exploring critical and/or alternative perspectives on his end-of-nature thesis.
2. Critically evaluate contemporary debates on the naming and periodisation of ‘the Anthropocene.’ What are the implications of this term, vs. its alternatives, for an understanding of the advent of the geological era in which human action acquires decisive planetary force?
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 between country and city. How might we read the co-determining presence of urban and rural in works that appear to focus on either one or the other?
5. “We don’t yet have an adequate language to talk and act and analyze as if humans and the rest of nature mutually constitute each other” (Jason W. Moore). Write an essay analyzing the discursive inadequacies to which Moore draws attention, and/or explore examples where these limits are creatively overcome.
6. Ecocritique 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 of our works.
8. Write an essay on walking as eco-practice, with attention to the ways geography, race, gender, disability and/or sexuality may inflect a politics of the pedestrian.
9. Ecocritique II: Develop an eco-reading of any apparently non-‘ecological’ text (on or off the syllabus).
10. Explore the intersection of scientific and cultural discourses with regard to the production of environmental knowledge in the work of Carson and/or Leopold.

11. “Perhaps the future of ecological poetry is that it will cease to play with the idea of nature. ... We will lose nature, but gain ecology” (Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature*). Discuss, with examples, Morton’s speculation on a future ecological mode for poetry (or other genres of eco-writing).
12. Write an essay on the production of waste, detritus and/or pollutants as material and symbolic by-products of modernisation, in any of the works on the syllabus.
13. Write an essay comparing C19 and C20 representations of birdlife as a focal point for registering environmental change.
14. Appropriate and explore any of the following ecological terms for the literary analysis of environmental writing: ecozone, bioregion, ecoregion, ecosystem, biome, ecotone, climax community, cosmopolitan diversity, endemism.
15. Edgelands: 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.
16. Literary topographies: analyse the (formal, historical, political) modalities of writing forests, deserts, moorlands, mountains, rivers, coasts, wetlands, glaciers or oceans.
17. Black natures: Analyse the raced dimension of literary representations of the ‘wild’ or wilderness in light of the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade or modern colonialism or their aftermath.
18. Queer environments: Examine the extent to which non-normative sexualities inform the construction, exploration and/or appropriation of extra-human nature.
19. Discuss ecological writing 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.
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.