

ENGLISH 711

T 12:30-3:00 / New North 311

Approaching the Anthropocene

Nathan K. Hensley

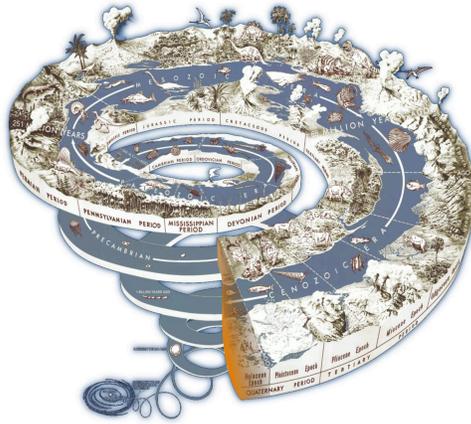
Fall 2017 / Georgetown University

Office Hours: T 3:15-4:15, W 11-12, and by appointment

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The geological timescale (L), Chernobyl amusement park (R)

The entirety of Western thought, and nearly all of literary history, has unfolded under the assumption that a category called “the human” could be opposed to another category called “nature.” This seminar in the environmental humanities tracks the productive breakdown of that distinction. First proposed by earth systems scientists in the year 2000, “The Anthropocene” names a new epoch in planetary history, a chaotic new present at the far end of the Holocene in which human activity – in the form of fossil fuel consumption, industrial farming, urbanization, and nuclear experimentation, among other innovations— has altered forever the course of biotic evolution and left a permanent record of this disturbance in the strata of the earth. In this catastrophic new reality, weather events, sea changes, and even evolutionary processes all derive at least elliptically from human causes, and “nature” can no longer separated comfortably from ourselves. The disastrous costs of these changes for human and nonhuman life mean that the Anthropocene takes the form of a practical challenge, one touching on all branches of culture, politics, ethics, and science. But it is a conceptual problem too, since it generates breakdowns in our most time-honored tools for thought and demands new models by which the present can be apprehended and perhaps even contested. The work of this seminar will be to see how (1) the multiple and interdependent environmental crises characterizing our present moment generate dilemmas for thinking that reverberate across multiple disciplines; and (2) how these conceptual crises crystallize in effects of literary and aesthetic form.

This course will follow the program of the 2016-2018 Mellon-Sawyer Seminar, “Approaching the Anthropocene: Global Culture and Planetary Change,” co-directed by

Nathan Hensley, Dana Luciano, and John McNeill. More on the Seminar is here:
<https://anthropocene.georgetown.edu/>.

Required Texts:

Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (Oxford World's Classics): 978-0199541898

Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (Oxford World's Classics): 978-0199219223

Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, eds., *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (Johns Hopkins UP): 978-1421421896

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* (U Chicago Press): 978-0226526812

Recommended Texts:

These are books from which we'll read significant sections. They'll be available as PDFs but if you're serious about continuing this line of inquiry I recommend you own them. Used is cheapest.

Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (U California Press): 978-0520289970

Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (Duke UP): 978-0822357551

Additional Readings:

A substantial amount of our semester's reading will be posted on our course blog; these readings are marked on the syllabus with an asterisk (*). You should plan to budget at least \$50 for printing these files in the required hard copy format. You are expected **to print the PDFs in hard copy; read everything on printed paper; and (of course) bring all secondary texts to class.** Readings marked "supplementary" are just that: not required (formally or informally) but available to you should you desire further guidance on the primary texts.

Assignments:

Formal Course Work (70% of final grade)

Conference abstract. (500 words) You will use one of the resources posted on our blog to find a conference in your chosen field or the interdisciplinary field of Environmental Humanities, and then write a proposal for that conference. Guidelines forthcoming.

Conference paper. (8-9 pp. maximum; 20 minutes read aloud.) You will write the conference paper you've proposed in your abstract. Guidelines for what this means will be forthcoming, but in general a conference paper is a complete argument condensed, streamlined, and edited for oral delivery at a meeting of scholars.

Seminar paper or final public humanities project. (15-18 pp. or equivalent) This final project will take one of two forms (your choice). One option is a sustained academic argument that follows the format of a published scholarly article, if slightly shorter. For this you are encouraged to expand on your conference paper into a longer, more developed and fully-researched analysis. But you should also feel free to generate an entirely new argument about new text(s). The other option, more amorphous, is a public humanities project. This you will devise in consultation with me, and can take almost any form: a website, an art installation, an exhibit, a happening. The work put into this should be the equivalent of that for a 15-18 pp paper, or more.

Other Work (counted as part of participation grade, which is 30% of final grade)

Weekly posts to our online blog. Each week every seminar participant will make a contribution to the class blog. These posts can take any form: short essays making an argument about the week's reading(s); close readings of single passages with questions appended; or sets of discussion questions in dialogue with other posts. You may also gather and present a piece of writing, art, or mass culture that you see as relating to what we've read. (In this case a word about the relation you see would be appropriate.) I encourage you to vary the form of your entries, moving from criticism to questions to creative posts and remediations of archival objects. *Posts are due the night before class, no later than midnight.* **All class members are required to read all posts.**

Public blog post. Each student will be tasked with making one blog post to the Mellon-Sawyer Seminar blog summarizing a Seminar event. These posts are meant primarily to convey a sense of the event: who was there, what was said, what the throughlines of the discussion were. A secondary task is to include one's own take on those events, but this editorial or dialogic function is secondary to the task of conveying the thrust of the event. Please plan to take photos to post along with your writeup. Remember that these will be pushed out via Seminar social media sites, so you are speaking in the collective voice of the Seminar. You are excused from posting to the course blog for the week in which you generate your Public Post.

Informal research presentation. At the end of the SPRING term we, along with next semester's graduate class also linked the Seminar, will hold a mini-conference that will replicate the format of the Interdisciplinary Nineteenth Century Studies Conference (INCS): you will prepare a short (7 minute) oral presentation of your final project, which you'll present to your peers; discussion will follow. Because this does not fall within the timeframe of our term it is, of course, ungraded – but a good opportunity to practice skills of presentation and real-time response to questions crucial in academia and other fields.

Policy on Late Work:

Reliability is important, and respect for our shared academic endeavor means that lateness is strongly discouraged. Papers and other assignments will be penalized the equivalent of one letter grade for each day beyond their due date, with the first 24 hour period beginning

immediately. Please see me in advance if extraordinary circumstances arise. Incompletes are offered only in genuinely exceptional moments of duress, like the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event, when a meteorite from space ended nearly all life on the planet and replotted the story of evolution.

Course Grading Policy:

Your final grade for this course will reflect the quality of written work you produce (70%); it will also reflect the quality of your participation in the collaborative labor of the course (30%). Thus, your thoughtful responses to the texts, your active participation in class discussions, and your level of commitment to our shared undertaking will all contribute crucially to your final grade. The central component of your grade is your final paper. Responsible collegiality is mandatory.

Absence and Tardy Policy:

The seminar-style nature of this course makes your presence in class imperative. See me in advance if a situation arises that will result in an absence. Please don't come to class late. Excessive absences (more than once) will result in a lowered grade; same with tardies (more than twice). In all cases it is your responsibility to make up missed class time.

Plagiarism:

The absolute prohibition here should be understood. See the Georgetown Honor System website for guidelines: <http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/honor/system/53377.html>. Note that in all matters I expect you to observe the Georgetown honor pledge, which likewise describes what's expected of you as a member of the academic community: *To be honest in every academic endeavor, and to conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community as we live and work together.*

Disabilities, Special Conditions, Etc.:

I'm committed to providing whatever I can to help you be successful in this course. For details about medical and other dispensations, please see: <http://guarc.georgetown.edu/disability/accommodations/>; and visit me early in the term to discuss how I can help.

Guides for Further Study and Research:

Thinking in interdisciplinary ways across boundaries of science and culture is difficult. For reliable scientific information, please see the NOAA website, the International Panel on Climate Change site, and the climate coverage of, especially the *Guardian* (UK) and the *Washington Post*. The GU Library has compiled a hub for accessing interdisciplinary information about climate change: <http://guides.library.georgetown.edu/climate>. For matters of literary and theoretical terminology, your first line of defense is the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*. Second stop is the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available with a Google search. For matters of literary history, consult the *Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature* or the *Columbia Guide to British Literature*. (Links to these are

available the library's [19th century resources site](#).) Only after exhausting these options should you bother with Wikipedia. Please stay away from online summaries not mentioned here. And as always, please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions about this material. We're in this together. I'm here to help.

APPROACHING THE ANTHROPOCENE | SCHEDULE

Please note that this schedule is subject to change. Items marked with an asterisk are available online, via our course blog; items marked (EH) are in the [Energy Humanities Anthology](#).

Tuesday, September 5 | What Is “the Anthropocene” and Why Does it Matter?

King James Bible, Genesis 1-2*
Bill McKibben from *The End of Nature**
Paul Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind”*
Jeremy Davies, from *The Birth of the Anthropocene**
Chris Jordan, *Midway: Messages from the Gyre**

Tuesday, September 12 | A Quake in Method

Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses” (EH)
Ian Baucom and Matthew Omelsky, eds. *Climate Change and the Production of Knowledge**
Imre Szeman, “System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster” (EH)
Roy Scranton, “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene” (EH)
Dana Luciano, “The Inhuman Anthropocene”*
Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Chapters 1 & 2. “A Fable for Tomorrow” and “The Obligation to Endure”*

*Optional: Rob Nixon, “Neoliberalism, Genre, and the ‘Tragedy of the Commons’”**
*Optional: “Approaching the Anthropocene: Global Culture and Planetary Change,” grant proposal.**

Tuesday, September 19 | Writing Climate Now

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*
David Wallace-Wells, “The Uninhabitable Earth”*
Response by Michael Mann*
Timothy Clarke, from *The Cambridge Companion to Ecocriticism**
Greg Gerrard, from *Ecocriticism**
*The Dark Mountain Manifesto**
Mabel Gergan, work tbd*
Dagomar Degroot, work tbd*
Shiloh Krupar, work tbd*

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 21: WRITING CLIMATE NOW

Tuesday, September 26 | In Evolutionary Time

Dana Luciano, guest speaker

Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*
Charles Lyell, from *Principles of Geology**
Two C19 American geology poems*
Elizabeth Grosz, from *Nick of Time**
Rob Nixon, from *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor**
Optional: Patricia Yeager, "Literature in the Ages of Wood..." (EH)*

Tuesday, October 3 | Work in Progress Forum:

Anand Pandian, Johns Hopkins University, Department of Anthropology

Tuesday, October 10 | "As my own being": Nature in / as Us

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*
Nathan Hensley and Philip Steer: "Ecological Formalism; or, Love Among the Ruins"*
Nancy Armstrong, "Emily Brontë In and Out of Her Time."*
John Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," from *Modern Painters**
Selected paintings, J.M.W. Turner*

Tuesday, October 17 | Genres of the Anthropocene

Robert Hass, "Introduction," in *The Eco-poetics Anthology**
Juliana Spahr, selected poems, and from *Well Then There Now**
Mark McMorris, selected poems, and from *The Book of Landings**
Jennifer Chang, selected poems, and from *Some Say the Lark**
Jonathan Culler, "Lyric as Genre," from *Theory of the Lyric**
Margaret Ronda, from *Remainders: American Poetry at Nature's End**

CONFERENCE PAPER DUE

MONDAY, OCTOBER 23: GENRES OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 24: SEMINAR: GENRES OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Tuesday, October 24 | No regular class, attend GENRES OF THE ANTHROPOCENE Seminar, 9:30 am – 12 pm

Tuesday, October 31 | Water, Systems

Nicole Starosielski, from *The Undersea Network**
“Surfacing”: <http://www.surfacing.in/>*
Bruno Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene”*
Jennifer Baichwal, dir. *Watermark*
Amy De’Ath, “Institutional Critique” (EH)
Jeremy Jackson, “Ocean Apocalypse”*

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 3: WATER/LIFE: SYMPOSIUM ON WATER AND WATER SYSTEMS

**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 4: HISTORY GRADUATE CONFERENCE:
“OUR WORLD OF WATER: HISTORIES OF THE HYDROSPHERE”
[OPTIONAL]**

Tuesday, November 7 | Assemblages / Entanglements

John Locke, from *Two Treatises of Government**
C.B. Macpherson, from *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism**
John Stuart Mill, from *On Liberty**
Jane Bennett, from *Vibrant Matter**
Ed Yong, from *I Contain Multitudes**
Peter Godfrey-Smith, from *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness**
Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth, from *Baboon Metaphysics: The Evolution of a Social Mind**
Donna Haraway, from *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene**

Tuesday, November 14 | Work in Progress Forum: Author TBD

Tuesday, November 21 [before Thanksgiving break] | Into Eternity

Film screening: Michael Madsen, dir., *Into Eternity*

Tuesday, November 28 | Action Without Nature

Timothy Mitchell, from *Carbon Democracy* (EH)
Jedediah Purdy, from *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene**
Michael Watts, “Imperial Oil: The Anatomy of a Nigerian Oil Insurgency” (EH)
Jennifer Wenzel, on Fanon
Pope Francis, from *Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality: On Care for our Common Home* (EH)
Avi Lewis, dir., *This Changes Everything* (film)

NYT Review: “This Changes Everything’ Sweetly Confronts Climate Change”

Tuesday, December 5 | Sense of an Ending

Barbara Herrnstein Smith, from *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End**

Frank Kermode, from *The Sense of an Ending**

Elizabeth Kolbert, from *The Sixth Extinction**

Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr, “The #Misanthropocene: 24 Theses”*

Ursula Heise, “Lost Dogs, Last Birds, Listed Species, and the Cultures of
Extinction”*

Claire Colebrook, “We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene: The Anthropocene
Counterfactual”* (EH)

***SEMINAR PAPERS / FINAL PROJECTS DUE BY EMAIL, SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 9TH, 5 PM***