

# Anthropocene Necropoetics: Empire, Violence, and Ecological Ruin in US Poetry — 3-Day International Conference

co-organized by

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Envisioned in the frame of American Studies but centrally engaging with insights from postcolonial studies and the environmental humanities, the proposed international conference invites scholarship that interrogates historical but also current political and environmental crises in terms of what Ann Laura Stoler identifies in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (2013) as state- and empire-sponsored forms of ruination (the process), ruin (the inter-species state of ruin as well as the material remnants of past lives and livelihoods), and regeneration or restitution (that is, the afterlife of ruination or ruin). Given the organizers' complementary expertise in U.S. poetics of empire (Mayar) and U.S. ecopoetry (Rauscher) and in light of the role that the United States has played and continues to play in the unfolding global polycrisis, this conference proposal calls for a rigorous investigation of what we describe as *Anthropocene Necropoetics* in U.S. American poetry.

For our conference we draw on the established concept of the Anthropocene (cf. Crutzen 2000), which holds that “the Anthropocene marks the moment when human existence became the determinate form of planetary existence—and a malignant form relative to all other forms—rather than merely the fact that humans affect their environment” (Povinelli 55). We also think with American poet and scholar Joelle McSweeney who reminds us in her brilliant reflections on what she terms the “necropastoral” that “the Anthropocene is of course political as well—a single outsize permanent catastrophe made up of component catastrophes: genocides, depredations, the enslavement and debilitation of human populaces alongside the non-human (“What is the Necropastoral?” np). Indeed, in examining works by poets writing in an age of escalating environmental and socio-political crisis, we are interested in the *poetics* of “anthropocene necropolitics” (Lykke 108), including but also going beyond the concerns Nina Lykke raises in her work when she adopts the term to describe “the political neglect of carcinogenic effects of conditions of poverty in postcolonial capitalism and chemical modernity” (Nina Lykke [2019] 108). Similarly conceived at the crossover between postcolonial capitalism and chemical modernity, we conceptualize anthropocene necropoetics in relation to the United States as both a state and an empire that has long pursued imperial policies with enormous human and environmental costs.

In addition to bringing into focus poetries that explore the deadly consequences of political neglect for vulnerable human populations, then, our proposed conference also hopes to engage with a poetry that stands witness to the ruinous effects of more direct and actively violent forms of what scholars variously describe as necropower (cf. Mbembe) or thanatopower (cf. Esposito), that is to say, aggressively negative forms of biopower that target marginalized populations but also explicitly reach beyond the human and into the more-than-human world (see, e.g., Povinelli's "geontological power" 57).

The proposed conference will draw upon Anthropocene necropoetics as

(a) a *poetic praxis* of writing and thinking with poetry that merits nuanced exploration and contextual close reading in US-American poetry of the past and the present, American poetry that employs a variety of poetic forms to address topics such as ecological devastation and mass extinction, war and genocide, detainment and displacement, gendered and racialized violence, poverty and illness

(b) a *critical concept* to unpack and flesh out through cross-disciplinary exchanges between scholars of American Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Black and Indigenous Studies, African American Studies, Asian and Arab American Studies, Feminist and Queer Poetry, Environmental Literary Studies, and Environmental Cultural History.

On the one hand, we contend, the notion of Anthropocene necropoetics holds a critical space for the intersectional study of the poetry of ruin and ruination (cf. Ann Stoler) in the works of American and non-American poets writing about the United States who attend to the ways the United States (as a nation, a state, and an empire with particular cultural-demographic tendencies) enacts anthropocene necropolitics on the local and global scales.

On the other hand, we posit, the concept enables discussions about a multifaceted poetics that probes the crossover between empire- and/or state-sponsored forms of violence and devastation that have resulted in—and at times have responded or claimed to respond to—a host of unfolding and ongoing ecosocial crises. Last but not least, we propose that the poetries of ruin and ruination from the foundation of the United States onward thus placed in conversation with each other will reveal possibilities of resistance, moments of resilience, and sites of regeneration. Taken together, we hope, they may function not just as testaments to humans' destructive capacities but also as hallmarks of a cautiously optimistic draft of the Anthropocene as the geological epoche in which everyone alive today is bound to live and die, but in which the question of how the most vulnerable among us especially live and die still matters.