# Introduction: Teaching the Environmental Humanities in Europe

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Paraphrasing Phoebe Waller-Bridge's astute definition of love in *Fleabag* (2016-19), one could argue that teaching "is awful […]; so no wonder it's something we don't want to do on our own".[1] This statement will probably not sit well with the most enthusiastic pedagogues; and yet, perhaps, both the unease around teaching and the need for companionship might sound more universally relatable if one is tasked to convey hope in times of climate despair and escalating polycrises. It makes sense, then, that in their 2017 collection *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities*, Stephen Siperstein, Shane Hall and Stephanie LeMenager stress the importance of gathering the pedagogical experiments undertaken by "a fast-growing community of scholars and educators working to bring the humanities into climate change discourse and vice-a-versa" (2017, 2), producing "an artifact of collective questioning and collaborative work" (2).

This special issue aims to engage in a similar work of gathering, questioning and collaboration. It aims to further trace and expand, with a European focus, the network of university teachers who are tackling the most pressing issues at the heart of the Environmental Humanities (EH), bringing humanities and social science perspectives in conversation with technical and scientific knowledges to articulate culturally embedded and geographically situated responses to the

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[1]  Waller-Bridge, P. (2019). "Episode 6". *Fleabag*. BBC.

causes and effects of climate change, mass extinction and ecological devastation, and to map out pathways toward environmental and multispecies justice.

There cannot be any doubt about the urgency of developing a robust and transformative EH pedagogy, especially in the wake of right-wing resurgence and attacks on the humanities and climate science across Europe and beyond. In recent years, we have witnessed a rise of reactionary formations, which, among other unsavoury positions, variously represent what Cara Daggett calls "fossil fascism", hell-bent on "shor[ing] up fossil fuel systems by denying climate change and dismantling a host of environmental policies" (Daggett 2018, 27). Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective have recently mapped fossil fascism throughout Europe in their poignant investigation into the political ecology of the European far-right (Malm, Zetkin Collective 2021), showing how it combines climate denial and ethnonationalism (40) while serving the interests of fossil capital (37). If fossil fascism employs climate *denial* to "make a statement about immigration" (101), it is worth remembering the related dangers of ecofascism, whose figureheads "proclaim their fidelity to ecological renewal, green world, and agitate ostentatiously against climate change, pollution and despoliation, declaring against those poisons in the service of another, the logic of race" (Miéville 2016, 19).

At the same time, even mainstream environmentalisms are still entrenched in questionable frameworks of development, growth, and empire: a case in point being the European Green Deal, which, as some critics warn, risks acquiescing to neoliberal (Isailovie 2023), colonial and neo-colonial (Vela et al. 2023) imperatives. Such environmentalisms, moreover, are easily paired with the logic of the technological fix, which promises a solution to the climate crisis while disregarding the cultural and political systems that drive it, clinging (in good faith or otherwise) to the idea that the climate crisis does not, indeed, as Naomi Klein (2014) would put it, change everything. All of this results in environmental teachers throughout Europe having to navigate a field of "false environmental knowledges" that risk perpetuating "an ideology in which [acts of ecological violence] are seen as 'necessary evils'" (Misiaszek 2020, 8) and that tend to be "deeply hidden by prevalent noncritical environmental pedagogical models" (9). Teaching environmental knowledges and ethics without connecting them to genuinely transformative and radical shifts in our politics and epistemologies risks wasting crucial opportunities to promote climate justice. In this context, the role of educators working under the umbrella of the Environmental Humanities is, at the very least, to develop a pedagogy that can foster and model inclusive, hopeful, resistant and transformative responses to the climate emergency and ongoing environmental and social injustices. The cultural and political stakes could not be higher.

The specific European focus of this issue emerges as an expansion of a network created in the context of the 2023 EUTOPIA Connected Community on the Environmental Humanities, gathering scholars from Ca' Foscari University of Venice, NOVA University Lisbon, TUD University of Technology Dresden, and the University of Warwick. In its inaugural symposium, in May 2023, the members of the network committed themselves to fostering "a comparative discussion of environmental challenges faced in [their] respective locales, as cities across Europe confront different but related manifestations of the climate crisis".[2] Such place-based approaches have become a staple in EH education – O'Gorman et al. talk, more broadly, of grounded thinking, that is, teaching strategies "that are grounded in specific case studies, sites, or even texts" (447). Reflected in all essays presented in this issue, our contributors develop EH teaching from specific sites – whether these are cities, regions or countries – and situate their pedagogies in dialogue with emplaced communities, activists, researchers, institutions, landscapes, and environmental conditions.

The special issue gathers contributions beyond the original EUTOPIA network, and traces pedagogical experiments in different European contexts. If anything, its variety shows that there has been a considerable expansion of programmes, practices and institutionalisation of the EH in Europe over the last few years, or at the very least of forms of teaching that capture the spirit of the EH even in the absence of their formal recognition. Already in 2019, the global mapping of EH teaching practices carried out by O'Gorman et al. included an encouraging section on Europe. However, they also pointed out that "EH teaching" was "relatively underdeveloped in the UK and Ireland" (O'Gorman et al. 2019, 437) and that "in 'Continental' (Western, Eastern, and Southern) Europe" (439) the entrenchment of national traditions resulted in, at least at the time, no specific programme dedicated to the EH.[3] With contributors from the UK, Ireland, Portugal, Germany, Austria, Italy, Poland, Sweden, and Belgium – only counting their current academic affiliations – this issue demonstrates how EH teaching is increasingly emerging, both as experimental practice and as institutional formation, also in previously underrepresented parts of Europe.

Alongside an emphasis on place – and place-based pedagogy – the collection engages decidedly interdisciplinary approaches, from literary studies (both contemporary and classical), cultural studies, visual and conceptual art, (eco)pedagogy, to ancient, early modern

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**2** https://warwick.ac.uk/global/europe/confluence.

**3** Other recent surveys of EH teaching have offered a global emphasis (e.g. Hubbell, Ryan 2021).

and maritime history, ethnography, and (coastal) archaeology. While simply collecting these disciplines within one publication does not, by itself, produce interdisciplinarity, many of our contributors' approaches transgress traditional disciplinary boundaries and promote conversations beyond customary classroom settings. The experimental teaching methodologies presented in this issue leave the comfort zones of established teaching paths, drawing on arts-based, embodied and narrative methodologies, museum exhibitions, walking exercises, outdoor poetry readings, digital storytelling, role play and citizen science, to mention just a few.

Finally, the essays collected in this special issue, many of which emerge from the collaboration of multiple authors, are testimony to the fact that EH teaching and learning is a collective endeavour. In their explorations of dialogue and resonances across different knowledge and teaching practices, united by a shared commitment to socio-ecological change, they foreground interstitial spaces in which heterogeneous experiences, backgrounds, methodologies, and concerns come together. In resonance with what Anna Tsing, Andrew Matthews, and Nils Bubandt call the "Patchy Anthropocene" (Tsing, Matthews, Bubandt 2019), they remind us of the profoundly patchy nature required of the Environmental Humanities, and of EH teaching in particular, inviting us to embrace turbulent synergies and collective solidarities to face climate chaos and breakdown.

The issue opens with Moritz Ingwersen's and Sophie Lindner's collaboration on the design of an arts-based literary and cultural studies seminar around the concept of 'geostories' that activated student engagement with human-lithic enmeshment around Dresden, Germany. Drawing on the results of a multi-modal assignment that they call "The Carrier Bag of Geostories", they offer examples of how aesthetic practice and embodied experience can mediate difficult theoretical concepts, and how situated encounters with the world through narrative foster self-reflexivity and socio-ecological literacy in relation to more-than-human placemaking with the elements.

Also focused on arts-based methods, Siobhan Leddy's essay is framed as an investigation into posthumanities education, aimed at challenging "common preconceptions about nature, matter, nonhuman agencies, even our own bodies and identities". In particular, drawing from her own teaching, Leddy explores three case studies that mobilize arts-based methodologies: a series of teaching workshops held at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Brno University of Technology (Czech Republic) that focused on exploring non-human agency through playful engagements with sound recording; a seminar at the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany that aimed at challenging received ideas of the weather and understanding the interconnections of weather and bodies through experimental and sensory exercises; and another seminar at the same institution that mobilizes larp methods (live

action role play) to help students imagine themselves as non-human entities with different sensory capabilities. What unites these three experiments is the aim of "challenging the anthropocentrism of our shared sensorium [...] that only permits sensations that reinforce human separation and exceptionalism from environments, climate, (nonhuman) nature, and the world generally".

The essay by Katja Sarkowsky, Marco Formisano, Paweł Piszczatowski outlines efforts of establishing a joint MA in the Environmental Humanities that strings together three institutional, pedagogical and geographical contexts (Warsaw, Augsburg and Ghent). The connecting element between the three interventions is a reflection on history, place, and context, as the three contributors ponder on "the context-specificity" of EH discourses and highlight the importance and possibilities of place-based teaching and corresponding methodologies. The latter include poetic engagements in/with the Warsaw urbanscape, encounters with water bodies in Augsburg, mediated by literature, and the challenges of working on a "discipline without a place" (the Classics, in Ghent).

Similarly highlighting a network of research, teaching and collaboration, the essay by Cristina Brito, Isabel Gomes de Almeida, Isabel Araújo Branco, Ana Catarina Garcia, and Nina Vieira outlines a series of case-studies of teaching-learning practices in Ancient History, Early Modern History & Archaeology, Marine Environmental History and Literary Studies at NOVA University of Lisbon. Their interventions (and teaching practices) emerge from within the sub-field of the Blue Humanities and are united by an engagement with water as both material and symbolical element. Discussing the potentialities of teaching the Blue Humanities in the context of Lisbon, the essay also details the first attempts at introducing EH teaching in Portugal, where the label has not yet been formally institutionalised.

The essay by Eva Bauer, Nicole Haring and Fabiana Fazzi presents the results of an International Teacher Training Program carried out in 2025 with students from the University of Malaga (Spain), Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy), and the University of Graz (Austria) within the framework of the *EcoStories* project. The program combined principles of ecopedagogy – a transformative and critical pedagogical model that engages societal and extractive violence while promoting learners' agency – with the methodology of digital storytelling, understood as a citizen-centered tool for the activation of public engagement through the sharing of stories. Within the context of the teaching training program, *Eco*-storytelling was offered to the participants as an experiment in speculative creation designed to remediate the imaginative and discursive crisis around environmental futures in the Anthropocene.

Pooja Nayak's essay offers a course concept on 'Human and More-than-Human Ecologies' at the Rachel Carson Center of Environment and Society at the University of Munich. Reflecting on the specific experience of teaching students in Germany, while referencing case studies and examples from a variety of global contexts – from India and the Himalaya to Lebanon and Palestine – Nayak explicates her syllabus and teaching practices with an eye for postcolonial interventions in EH education. With an ethnographic sensitivity, she makes a case for attending to "the specifics of Human and more-than-Human ecologies" – the historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which human and more-than-human relations develop and play out – in order to work towards "a cross-cultural education which goes beyond relativism, challenges liberal environmentalism, and counters the dehumanization of people and cultures".

The joint paper by Jonathan Skinner and Graeme Macdonald works under the conceptual umbrella of critical futuring, focused on speculative backcasting and embodied poetics that mediate transformative futures in the present. They offer two different teaching methodologies to achieve that goal. One focuses on Macdonald's involvement in and co-conception of Carbon Ruins, a series of museum exhibits originally developed by the *Climaginaries* research project and featuring artefacts from the fossil era to be discussed from a speculative sustainable future. He explores how "curating, performing and narrating" this museum can be deployed as teaching practice, as well as how the museum can be 'localized' in different contexts (such as Scotland, as done by the author). The other methodology introduces "a range of ecopoetic and participatory reflective practices" developed by Skinner that allow inhabiting "the embodied modalities, alternate rhythms and affects of an environmentally transformed world". These activities, centered on facilitating "an encounter between poetry, body and site", try to attune participants to the uneven reality of the world-ecology while allowing them to grasp relationships to multiple possible futures. Skinner, in particular, describes an ecopoetics workshop performed in the outskirts of the University of Warwick (where both authors teach), in the shadow of ancient woodlands and environmentally devastating infrastructure projects.

The final two papers of the issue are rooted within the context of Ireland. Rory Connolly and Alan Healy present co-creative citizen science as a promising area of EH pedagogy, arguing for the importance of public engagement and the potential of "site-specific and locally grounded perspectives". Focusing on archaeological practice and the possibilities it offers for the encounter with "landscapes, monuments, and heritage sites", they explicate the PRISM project (Preservation by Record of Ireland's Shell Middens),

a citizen science pilot scheme in Ireland that involved volunteer non-specialists to record vulnerable coastal shell middens via a digital reporting platform.

Finally, the essay by Francis Ludlow, Eva Jobbová, David M. Brown and Christopher Morris takes as its starting point the inherently interdisciplinarity of Environmental History and its necessity (and ability) to mobilize both human and natural/physical archives as a research and teaching tool. Arguing that the literacy to read both archives should be fostered already at an undergraduate level, the authors zoom in on Irish dendrochronological records. Through "a reflective 'reading' of one notable oak sample" from the Botanic Gardens Park, Belfast, they illustrate how tree rings provide a source of climate information that can be fruitfully employed in classroom discussion. From this case study, they show how students can be led to discuss conjointly and weave together seemingly distant archives and sources – from the history of botanical gardens, and the reports of newspapers on droughts, to tree-ring chronologies.

Learning from these teaching experiments, each focalising different affordances, site-specific environmental materialities, and interdisciplinary crossings, is both inspiring and daunting. The temporality we work on, in the context of the climate crisis, accelerated by ethnonationalism and unsustainable economic systems, is short, the need for climate (justice) action urgent. What we hope this special issue demonstrates is that withdrawing from the task of learning how to teach (and learn) with, through, and about environmental precarity and embeddedness in the uneven Anthropocene is not an option. Let these pedagogical reflections, best-practice examples, and model exercises be a helping hand in this most mundane, most difficult task.

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