

# Place-Based Knowledges, Water, and the Classics: Teaching the Environmental Humanities in Warsaw, Augsburg, and Ghent

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**Abstract** This contribution stems from a collaboration on a joint MA in the Environmental Humanities for the Erasmus Mundus Program. It first outlines key challenges of teaching the Environmental Humanities in Europe amid the polycrisis. Then it presents three case studies – Warsaw (situated knowledge), Augsburg (interdisciplinary teaching of ‘water’), and Ghent (classics as ‘unplaceable’) – to discuss diverse educational frameworks and practices. These serve as a basis, in a third step, to consider the concrete transdisciplinary interventions that teaching the Environmental Humanities might present in our respective contexts.

**Keywords** Place-specific teaching. Classics. Literature. Water. History. Ethics. Transdisciplinarity.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Warsaw: Situated Knowledge. – 2.1 From Concept to Practice: Teaching Environmental Humanities in and with the City. – 2.2 The Białowieża Forest: Ecologies, Communities, and Borderland Realities. – 3 Augsburg: Teaching (with) ‘Water’. – 3.1 The Environmental Humanities in Augsburg. – 3.2 ‘Blue Literary Studies’. – 4 Ghent: The Problem of the Greco-Roman Classics – A Discipline without a Place. – 5 Where from Here?



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## 1 Introduction

Climate change, land degradation and desertification, species extinction and loss of biodiversity, to name but a few, are central to today's global polycrisis. While much of political debate around these issues in Europe remains dominated by scientific and policy discourses, the awareness of the contribution that the humanities and the arts can bring to the analysis of this crisis has made an inroad with the implementation of the transdisciplinary and methodologically heterogeneous field of the Environmental Humanities (from here on EH) and its unifying "sense of shared and open endeavor addressed toward the remediation of environmental harm, and a powerful conviction that scholarship in the field must revisit its foundational assumptions and engage with a broad constituency" (Foote, Cohen 2021, 2). Developing sophisticated and diverse methodologies to explore the cultural and historical dimensions of environmental change, the EH recognize that dealing with the complexity of the climate and ecological emergency requires crossing disciplinary boundaries. Not only as a field of research, but also of systematic teaching to rethink human and more-than-human relations, the agentic capacities of matter, and fundamental questions of local, regional, and global interdependencies, the EH have thus become even more important in this current moment of polycrisis.

But the EH are not only a methodologically and theoretically diverse field. The various discourses that shape them are themselves implicitly or at times even explicitly responding to the specific contexts of their emergence. This contribution emerges out of a collaboration in drafting a joint MA in the EH for the Erasmus Mundus Program that took seriously the insight that teaching the EH would have to reflect the context-specificity of EH discourses and pay attention to place-based circumstances and constellations – both environmental and discursive – within different European countries and locations. 'Place matters', we believe, in theory and in teaching. Thus, given the emphasis on the place-specificity of teaching the EH at our respective universities, this essay takes as its starting point the divergent foci and practices that we designed into a program – coherent, yet attentive to the particularities of place, discipline, and thematic interest. In bringing together a range of disciplines, theoretical approaches, and methodological frameworks, we sought to design a program that would integrate research-focused, creative, and activist practices in a place-based yet transnationally oriented agenda, a program, that aims at understanding the social and environmental challenges that we face in both their contemporary urgency *and* their historical trajectories.

In the 2-year joint MA, we envisioned a program – with cohorts of 30 international students who would study at least two of the partner

universities – that would draw on and seek to further develop existing practices of place-based teaching at our universities. In the following section, we will thus focus on three concrete examples – Warsaw, Augsburg, and Ghent – to discuss challenges and outline teaching practices with foci on situated knowledges (Warsaw), the interdisciplinary teaching of ‘water’ (Augsburg), and the questions of the Greco-Roman classics (Ghent) as case studies. These will serve as a basis for the final section, in which we will consider the concrete transdisciplinary interventions that teaching the EH presents in and across our respective contexts.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 **Warsaw: Situated Knowledge**

Located at the intersection of historical trauma, ecological challenges, and political transition, Warsaw offers a uniquely resonant context for the practice of the EH. As the capital of a country, the city embodies the intertwined legacies of imperial partitions, twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, and post-socialist neoliberalism. Its environmental specificity is shaped not only by its geographical anchor – the Vistula River (Wisła) – but also by the memoryscapes of destruction and reconstruction, uneven modernization, and contested narratives of nature, nationhood, and progress.

EH as a field have increasingly emphasized the importance of place-based knowledge and the need to embed ecological thinking in specific historical, cultural, and infrastructural contexts. According to Ursula Heise, the environmental imagination is shaped by the tension between global interconnectedness and a renewed longing for locality: “‘sense of place’ has become newly prominent in recent environmentalist discourse because of the increasing globalization of environmental problems” (Heise 2008, 7). In this light, Warsaw offers a particularly nuanced site for reflecting on how local urban ecologies mediate global environmental narratives and their pedagogical implications.

Warsaw’s urban development, unlike that of most Western European capitals, was shaped by rupture, reconstruction, and contested modernities (Czepczyński 2008; Murawski 2019). The near-total destruction of the city during the Second World War, followed by socialist reconstruction under centralized planning, and then the rapid market-driven transformation after 1989, created a stratified urban landscape where environmental and social logics

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**1** This article was jointly conceived by the three authors. Paweł Piszczatowski is the author of section 2; Katja Sarkowsky is the author of section 3, and Marco Formisano is the author of section 4.

often collided. This trajectory has led to a peculiar configuration of public space in Warsaw – one in which the presence of greenery, water access, and social participation is not the result of continuous policy, but rather the outcome of friction between overlapping temporal and ideological regimes.

The Vistula River running through the heart of the city exemplifies these tensions: unlike most urban rivers in Europe, the Wisła remains largely unembanked and retains much of its floodplain, allowing for relatively rich biodiversity and seasonal transformations.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it has become a focus of civic activism, artistic expression, and informal recreation – making it a pedagogically rich site for exploring the intersections of ecology, memory, and urban belonging. As Heise reminds us, place-based environmental imagination is not inherently conservative or exclusionary but may serve as a node of critical reflection and translocal dialogue (Heise 2008, 25-9).

Yet the Vistula's significance in Warsaw extends far beyond its ecological distinctiveness. It is also a river inscribed with the city's political and historical fractures. The site of the 1920 'Miracle on the Vistula', when Polish forces halted the westward advance of the Red Army, the river later became a line of tragic division during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, when Soviet troops halted their offensive on the eastern bank as the insurgent city on the west was destroyed. After the war, the Vistula marked a socio-spatial boundary between the reconstructed, largely depopulated left-bank city and the right bank, where prewar urban fabric and local communities survived. In recent decades, this polarity has again shifted, as gentrification reshapes the right-bank districts, turning the riverfront into a symbolic and material zone where social, ecological, and economic transformations meet.

Teaching the EH in Warsaw thus requires more than the application of universal frameworks; it demands a sensitivity to the city's historical stratification, its post-socialist transformations, and the contested meanings of "nature" within its borders.

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**2** The Vistula (Polish: Wisła) is Poland's longest river (1,047 km) and one of the few major European rivers whose central urban section remains largely unregulated. In Warsaw, its eastern (right) bank preserves wide natural floodplains and riparian forests showing the interplay between natural fluvial processes and urban infrastructure (cf. Wierzbicki et al. 2021).

## 2.1 From Concept to Practice: Teaching Environmental Humanities in and with the City

While theoretical framings are crucial for grounding the EH in conceptual clarity, the specificity of place often reveals itself most fully through practice. At the University of Warsaw, one of the key pedagogical strategies has been to engage students directly with the multispecies fabric of the city. This takes the form of field seminars, urban walks, and sensory explorations facilitated by writers, scientists, and activists. In fact, the Ecopoetological Laboratory (EcoLab) at UW exemplifies this approach: through interdisciplinary encounters, workshops, and collaborative art-science projects, EcoLab fosters non-anthropocentric cultural subjectivity and cultivates student sensibilities attuned to more-than-human urban relations.<sup>3</sup>

A particularly rich example is the work of Michał Książek – a poet, naturalist, and essayist who combines scientific training with a literary sensibility. His recent book *Atlas dziur i szczelin. Rzecz o mieście jako schronieniu dla przyrody* (Atlas of Holes and Cracks: On the City as a Shelter for Nature, 2023) offers a polyphonic cartography of urban life forms that thrive in unexpected crevices, margins, and disturbances of the built environment. In collaboration with the Environmental Humanities Center at the University of Warsaw,<sup>4</sup> Książek regularly conducts field walks that expose students to unnoticed multispecies cohabitations in their immediate surroundings. His interest does not lie in seeking out remote wildernesses or spectacular post-industrial ruins; instead, he reveals how fragments of urban infrastructure – curbs, staircases, gutters, walls – are teeming with complex ecological entanglements.

His writing is attentive to the interstices and insists that nature in the city is not elsewhere, not decorative, not pristine. It is present in moss on tram stops, in the tracks of wild boars, in the silent labor of mycorrhizal fungi beneath parking lots.

Such reflections move beyond traditional categories of urban nature to foreground a poetics of encounter and embodied attention – what Ursula Heise might call a “cosmopolitan sense of place” (Heise 2008,

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, see the Ecopoetological Laboratory website: <https://nonanthro.uw.edu.pl/en/ecopoetological-laboratory/>.

<sup>4</sup> The Environmental Humanities Center (Centrum Humanistyki Środowiskowej) at the University of Warsaw is a dynamic research and teaching unit promoting non-anthropocentric approaches to human-environment relations. It operates at the intersection of posthumanism, new materialism, and decolonial thought, and serves as an interdisciplinary forum for collaboration among scholars and artists. The Center maintains international partnerships with institutions such as the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of Freiburg, and the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

56), here redefined not through abstract universality, but through patient, situated inhabitation.

This pedagogical ethos is further enriched by collaborations with local scientists, activists and artists. For instance, Professor Przemysław Chylarecki, an ornithologist at the Polish Academy of Sciences and expert on avian biodiversity in urban ecosystems, leads dawn bird-watching walks along the Vistula River.

Similarly, Stanisław Łubieński, author of *Dwanaście srok za ogon* (Twelve Jays for a Song, 2016) and co-founder of the NGO Dzika Ochota, offers critical excursions into spontaneous urban greenery, exploring the sociopolitical dynamics of plants in the city.<sup>5</sup> His work, situated between literary essay and grassroots activism, challenges dominant paradigms of urban aesthetics and invites participants to rethink weeds as indicators of resilience and memory. As he writes: “Nature in the city is not something added to architecture – it is an insurgency of life” (Łubieński 2022, 89).

Rather than treating the city as a neutral backdrop for environmental theory, these practices position it as a co-teacher and co-creator of ecological knowledge. They also anticipate the pedagogical ethos envisioned in the joint MA program, which seeks to integrate field-based learning, collaborative workshops, and site-specific seminars into the curriculum. Teaching EH in Warsaw thus means walking with cormorants and poplars, listening to bees on tramlines, tracing the cracks where life insists. It also means confronting infrastructural violence, air pollution, and the ghosted legacies of modernist planning – learning with and from the city itself, in ways that bridge classroom work and lived urban experience.

## 2.2 The Białowieża Forest: Ecologies, Communities, and Borderland Realities

The Białowieża Forest (Puszcza Białowieska), straddling the Polish-Belarusian border, holds a central place in the environmental imagination of Central Europe. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site first in 1979 (Poland) and extended in 1992 to include Belarus, the forest – totaling over 141,885 ha – remains one of the very few extensive European tracts of old-growth, primary forest preserved in its natural state. This vast woodland supports remarkable biodiversity, including at least 59 mammal species,

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**5** Dzika Ochota (Wild Ochota) is a Warsaw-based grassroots environmental NGO active on the city's Ochota district, focusing on urban ecology, habitat protection, and community-led nature initiatives. Its Facebook page documents local actions such as habitat restorations, biodiversity surveys, and educational walks (see [https://www.facebook.com/DzikaOchota/?locale=pl\\_PL](https://www.facebook.com/DzikaOchota/?locale=pl_PL)).

over 250 bird species, and more than 12,000 invertebrate taxa, and shelters viable populations of apex predators such as wolf, lynx, and the iconic European bison.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond ecological value, Białowieża embodies profound cultural and symbolic significance. It is a *biosphere reserve* under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere program since the 1970s and part of the EU's Natura 2000 network, reflecting its dual role as both a natural and cultural patrimony. Scholars note that the forest functions as a "synecdoche" for a broader European and national heritage – its meandering trails, ancient trees, and even modern art interventions evoke collective memory and identity (Klepacka & Kowalski 2024).

The forest has also become a focal point of the recent humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, where environmental and human rights issues intertwine – a situation brought to wider public attention through international media and cultural works such as Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border* (Zielona granica, 2023).

For EH pedagogies, this means Białowieża is more than a living laboratory; it is a thickened site of encounter where biodiversity, legal regimes, history, and local communities intersect. The contrast between its richly layered ecosystems and the adjacent militarized frontier of the EU's eastern border deepens its pedagogical intensity: students must navigate field-based ecological science alongside awareness of injustice, displacement, and geopolitics.

The Environmental Humanities Center at the University of Warsaw has developed an array of place-based learning practices in the region, grounded in long-standing collaborations with two key research institutions: the Mammal Research Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IBS PAN) and the Białowieża Geobotanical Station of the University of Warsaw (BSG UW). These partnerships allow for the organization of interdisciplinary field seminars that bring together ecological monitoring, human geography, literary analysis, and local ecological knowledge. Students are encouraged to understand the forest as a living archive: a layered text – textured with species, stories, policies, and power. During these field seminars, students move beyond passive observation to active, situated learning. Activities typically combine ecological and humanistic inquiry: mornings are spent with biologists from the Mammal Research Institute conducting bird and mammal tracking or studying forest succession, while afternoon sessions involve reflective writing, collective mapping, or discussions with local residents about the socio-political dimensions of conservation.

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**6** See the UNESCO World Heritage List entry for the Białowieża Forest: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/33/>.

### 3 Augsburg: Teaching (with) ‘Water’

#### 3.1 The Environmental Humanities in Augsburg

The University of Augsburg has a long history of teaching the EH in a range of academic disciplines: in ancient, early modern, and contemporary history, literature, philosophy, theology, and geography, scholars have established a strong focus in this interdisciplinary field. In research, this led to three interrelated pillars of cultural ecology, material ecology, and political ecology and to the foundation of the transdisciplinary Environmental Science Center (Schmidt, Soentgen, Zapf 2020, 226). Since 2020, the transdisciplinary PhD program *Um(welt)denken* (Rethinking Environment) is associated with the Center. In the same year and funded by Bavaria’s HighTech agenda, the university established the Centre for Climate Resilience, and even though it is more strongly focused on the sciences, economy, law, and health, it nevertheless retains the link to the EH via its inclusion of scholars from theology, history, the social sciences, and philosophy.<sup>7</sup> And in 2023, Simone Müller’s newly established Heisenberg-professorship for Global Environmental History and Environmental Humanities added a explicitly designated EH position to Augsburg’s EH infrastructure. This productive research environment has grown out of and in turn provides fertile ground for an equally rich and diverse teaching tradition of the EH; probably the most prominent and visible is the interdisciplinary MA program *Umweltethik* (Environmental Ethics) hosted by the Faculty of Catholic Theology, which includes courses from theology, philosophy, geography, history, law, education, literature, and other fields.

The strength of the EH at the University of Augsburg is not accidental but grounded to some extent in the city’s urban design. Augsburg is a city shaped by waterways – particularly the rivers Lech and Wertach, but also by a network of tributaries and creeks as well as canals – and, since 2019, its Water Management System (which dates to the fourteenth century) is a World Cultural Heritage Site. Thus, one strong focus of the EH in Augsburg is ‘water’ and its materiality, with research projects ranging from documenting the fundamental changes of the river Lech over time to the study of wetlands and classes offered in a range of disciplines, particularly in theology, philosophy, literature, history, and geography. ‘Water classes’ – those

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**7** For further information on these centers and their agenda, please see on the Environmental Science Center <https://www.uni-augsburg.de/en/forschung/einrichtungen/institute/wzu/>, on the Center for Climate Resilience <https://www.uni-augsburg.de/en/forschung/einrichtungen/institute/zentrum-fur-klimaresilienz/>, and on the PhD program <https://rethinking-environment-idk.de/>.



taught e.g. by Simone Müller, Kerstin Schlögl-Flierl, Jens Soentgen, or myself – thus tend to focus on place-based teaching, including study trips to local bodies of water and waterways to encourage students to analytically and ethically reflect on human relations to water and to connect those reflections to discipline-specific as well as transdisciplinary analyses.

### 3.2 ‘Blue Literary Studies’

Culture and the arts play a central role in the conception of the EH, in general, and this is evident in how the EH are taught in Augsburg (Schmidt, Soentgen, Zapf 2020, 225). The case study discussed in the following is from my own teaching practice in Anglophone literary studies. In the past three terms, I have consistently focused on water in BA and MA classes as well as in teachers’ education, and in seminar as well as lecture formats. The theoretical backdrop of these classes were the questions asked, and concepts proposed in the ‘Blue Humanities’, an emerging new water discourse in the twenty-first century (De Woff, Faletti 2022, 1) that matured during the 2010s (Mentz 2024, 19) and seeks to counter the tendency towards “terracentrism” (Ryan 2022, 487), including that of the EH. Central for our literary studies classes was the insight that, as Serpil Oppermann puts it, “our perceptions of water bodies are culturally shaped” (2023, 1) and that the analysis of cultural representations of water is thus no luxury but a crucial part of rethinking a purely utilitarian relation to water as resource. The Blue Humanities can be framed as both a subfield of the EH and as a separate set of concerns: while clearly there are crucial overlaps with the questions asked in the EH e.g., about climate change, environmental justice, agentic matter, or human- and more-than-human relations (cf. Schmidt, Soentgen, Zapf 2020) as well as about the possibility of ‘translating’ the materialities into aesthetic forms such as narration (e.g., James, Morel 2020; Caracciolo 2021), there appears to be an even more strongly pronounced interest in materiality and its aesthetic and epistemological components in the Blue Humanities, in “water’s capacity to challenge our ways of knowing” (Chen, MacLeod, Neimanis 2013, 5). A partial explanation might be the form-adaptive and form-giving capacity of water and its range of forms and aggregate conditions, “for water moves from solid to liquid to vapour with acute environmental responsiveness” (5; a concept so beautifully exemplified in Elif Shafak’s 2024 novel *There are Rivers in the Sky*) that lend themselves well to metaphorization of relationalities as well as forms of thinking and knowing.

These ‘affordances’ (to use Caroline Levine’s term, 2015) of fluidity, form-adaptation, and form-giving also seemed to appeal to and resonate with students and their sense of being in the world.

Since literary and cultural studies centrally focus on the cultural representation of water and its materiality, a starting point was provided by two interrelated questions: what do we see in literature (or any other form of cultural representation) when we look through the lens of water that we otherwise wouldn't see? And conversely, how do we look upon water differently when we look through the lens of literature? Thus, while mindful of the process of mediation in and through cultural production, the materiality of water and its material affordances nevertheless played a crucial role, and students were encouraged to think about their own relation to water in its material as well as its culturally mediated forms.

This materiality and the place-specificity of water(s) were important constants in the classes. The various textual examples we worked with – be it David Henry Thoreau's close observation along the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (1849), Amitav Ghosh's detailed description of the Sundarbans and the Venice lagoon in *Gun Island* (2019), or Natalie Diaz's multifaceted engagement with the Colorado River and its cultural significance for the O'odham Akimel people in *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) – tended to stress the specificity of water bodies and their entanglement with societal power structures as well as the necessity to pay attention to said specificity and the challenges it poses for artistic articulation. All class formats thus emphasized interactive student reflection of materiality and the process of artistic and theoretical 'translation'. To link the theoretical, analytical, and interpretative approach to water to its concrete experience and encounter, each of the classes also scheduled study trips to water (a local pond, lake, canal, or river) as part of the syllabus. As indicated, Augsburg is shaped by waterways of various kinds, and we connected the reading of the classes' Anglophone literary corpus to the reflective encounter with a specific local water body. Placed-based environmental imagination and engagement, as Paweł Piszczatowski has put it with Ursula Heise in the Warsaw section of this contribution, can serve "as a node of critical reflection and translocal dialogue", and this embodied encounter was central to the theoretical engagement.

Equally crucial was the connection between the analytic, theoretical, and *creative*. In their engagement with water(s) – some as part of a class trip, some assigned to be done individually – students were encouraged to creatively transform their engagement with water and to reflect on this engagement's relation to class readings, both theoretical and literary. The (non-graded) creative work that emerged out of these encounters ranged from poetry to essays to visual and video art and reflected on the links to theoretical questions we had covered in class. Students explored the possibilities and limits of water's materiality in creative processes, drew analogies between the rhythm of the sea and grieving as well as healing, or reflected on

its potential role in personal memory. Some of them described their literary and creative encounters with water as changing the way they looked at their environment.<sup>8</sup> As one student put it:

Walking along the Lech now, I don't just see a river. I see a force with an agency. A shapeshifter. A record-keeper. Something that flows between times, carrying stories that aren't always ours. There's something humbling in that, even if it's unsettling too. (Isler 2025)<sup>9</sup>

Teaching (with) water – to riff off the title of Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis' important book *Thinking with Water* – allows for teaching the EH as a reflective and theory-based but deeply embodied practice.

#### **4 Ghent: The Problem of the Greco-Roman Classics – A Discipline without a Place**

At Ghent University, there is a group of highly committed environmental humanists from various departments, especially in literature, history, and law, and a number of courses around the EH are regularly offered at different levels. Within this diversified constellation, the teaching of ancient Latin literature has a particular position: its status is perceived as rather marginal to what is considered the core business of ecocriticism, i.e. contemporary literature and thought. It is a fact that within current critical debates around the epistemic value of ecocriticism and its various applications, the field in which I am specialized, the study of ancient Greek and Latin literatures, does not play a significant role.<sup>10</sup> For no mainstream environmental critic is a classicist or shows any particular interest in the cultures and literatures of the ancient Mediterranean. Also, unlike the place-based pedagogy in Warsaw and Augsburg, the teaching of classical literatures, for a number of reasons, cannot be connected with a specific place. And yet classicists have been variously attracted by the hermeneutic possibilities offered by ecocriticism. Even scholars

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<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank the students of the Blue Literary Studies lecture in the summer of 2025 – in particular, Raphaela Deffner, Lea Deubler, Mariella Narvaez Garcia, Isabel-Felicitas Halden, Katharina Heim, Lisa-Sophie Hoch, Bianca Huber, Samuel Isler, Christina Kling, Klara Mößnang, Josephine Ressel, Benjamin Schmid, Simon Stegmann, and David Wings – for their amazing and insightful creative work.

<sup>9</sup> Cited with permission.

<sup>10</sup> I am not arguing though that ecocriticism has not been adopted in Classics. On the contrary, the number of conferences, monographs, articles and co-edited volumes is constantly increasing. See for example Schliephake 2017 and 2020 as well as the series *Ancient Environments* published by Bloomsbury.

belonging to more conservative academic communities (for example, in Italy and France), which traditionally show skepticism – to say the least – towards contemporary theoretical discussions, are now enthusiastically embracing the riches of environmental criticism, which puts at the center of inquiry the environment and other more-than-human actors. And rightly so, since ancient textuality displays an astonishing array of representations of relationships among various environmental and natural elements. This fact invites readings that shed light on their materiality and their presence in the world as such and on their own terms, rather than being read as mere symbols for abstract concerns, as has been too often done in the past due to the humanistic biases that have broadly characterized the interpretation of ancient literary works. Historian of antiquity Christopher Schliephake (esp. 2017 and 2020) has, in an exemplary and clear manner, discussed why environmental criticism is relevant for Classics, but also what ancient cultures can offer to expand and, in a way, complement the goal of environmental history and thought. In what follows, I consider the peculiar status of the Greco-Roman classics within ecocriticism and environmental thought at large and shed some light on the potentialities of this discipline in didactic contexts.

Classics, i.e. the study of the literature, art, history and thought of ancient Greece and Rome, has been massively attacked in the last few years because of its perceived connection with elitism and political conservatism including their extremist tendencies, such as white suprematism and racism. Moreover, the study of Greco-Roman antiquity has historically been used as a tool of conquest and colonization.<sup>11</sup> By alleging their affiliation with idealized Greek and Roman cultural ancestors, European colonizers systematically used the knowledge of classical antiquity as an element in strategies of assault on the cultural traditions of colonized peoples. For this reason, the debate around this fatal intertwining has been called (especially in Europe) “decolonizing Classics”, a label that suggests the need to revisit habituated methodologies that presuppose certain normative epistemic truths to be imposed on others (Umachandran, Ward 2023). From a specifically environmental perspective, the ideals shaped by classical culture correspond to principles of humanism in a broad sense, i.e. the prominent role taken up by humans – more precisely: men – in influencing and forging their environments. Along these lines, it is interesting to notice that the rise of Anthropocene, usually seen as a consequence of disruptive global events such as the “discovery” of America, the industrial revolution or the use

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**11** See (also for further references) Greenwood 2022; Blouin, Akrigg 2024; Padilla Peralta 2025.

of atomic weapons, has been backdated to the introduction of agriculture (Ruddiman 2003). So, if agriculture does count as a or *the* foundational anthropocenic event, then ancient Greco-Roman culture can be included in the scope of ecocriticism since it can be considered co-responsible for the rise of this geologic era. Moreover, as has been pointed out by Schliephake,

Mediterranean antiquity already saw phenomena like catastrophe, collapse, and regeneration – including in environmental terms. One could even say that the popular narrative of the Anthropocene, presented in countless articles and books, makes use of the generic structure of rise-and-fall narratives inspired by ancient models and elaborated in early modern historiography. (Schliephake 2020, 5; see also Graeber, Wengrow 2021)

Along these lines, classical antiquity is seen as a precursor of our current preoccupation and environmental crisis, and as such deserves to be considered within ecocritical debates. But this thought might become problematic if considered from another perspective. Namely, if we see a connection between Greeks and Romans and the early manifestation of the Anthropocene, and if we recognize, as Schliephake seems to suggest, the normative role of ancient concepts of history and temporality in shaping ecocritical discourses, then we might be surreptitiously reinstalling the paradigm of the eternal validity or normativity of ancient Greece and Rome. Paradoxically, perhaps, from this vantage point, Greco-Roman culture can be seen as characterized by the original sin of Western societies as responsible for the Anthropocene, a term in which *anthropos* might be interpreted as blaming the entire human species “for the errors of white male capitalists” (Gary Snyder in Feder 2021, 2). Moreover, on a methodological level the study of classical literatures and texts might seem not only outdated but even useless: philological acumen, reconstructions of specific contexts as well as close reading in general might appear as inadequate or incommensurable with the highly complex problems posed by the Anthropocene: what can they do for the discussion of for instance hyperobjects, differences of scale and global interconnectedness (Morton 2013; Clark 2019)? What did ancient Greeks and Romans know about the environmental issues occurring in their time?

Arguably, a definitive answer to this set of questions is impossible. And that is a good thing, since it is a valuable characteristic of the discourse of EH, and of ecocriticism in particular, to recognize the problematic quality of their subject matter and to embrace critical openness and an unbiased will to taste various possibilities without necessarily finding a solution. It is from this critical perspective that I teach, together with PhD candidate Leila Williamson, an MA

level course in Latin literary studies that is intertwined with the research project *Coming after: Late Ancient Ecopoetics*, funded by FWO, Research Foundation Flanders.<sup>12</sup> The course is entitled “Late antique ecopoetics: journeys, rivers, ecotones”. We consider a number of late antique poems written in Latin between the fourth and the sixth centuries, such as the river-poem *Mosella* by Ausonius, the mythological epic *The Rape of Proserpina* by Claudian, the travel poem *On His Return* by Rutilius Namatianus, and various river and travel poems by Venantius Fortunatus and Ennodius. Our general starting point is the appreciation of literature in general as a fundamental actor in the shaping of environmental consciousness. More specifically, the literature of the late antique period, in the past typically marked as decadent and merely derivative, is presented as a productive paradigm of an untimely aesthetics, bearer of a “strange strangeness” (Morton 2013) that characterizes our own environmental crisis. Considered this way, late antique poetics can shed light on some inherent aspects of ecocriticism itself, which, by definition, *comes after* and is too late. As has been aptly observed by Virginia Burrus, “ecological thought comes belatedly then. It arrives only when it is too late to undo the planetary damage” (Burrus 2019, 1). Belatedness and untimeliness in our course are observed from the double perspective of the contemporary (Agamben 2010, see also Formisano 2020) and the *late* antique period, both indelibly stained by inadequacy in relation to their environment, perceived differently than in the past precisely because of the realization of the profound interconnections and elusiveness of the environment. Again Burrus:

Ecological thought propels us forward toward a future as yet barely imaginable. Paradoxically, it may also draw us back to a past only dimly recalled. What draws us, however, is not the longing for a simpler, purer time and place. Even if such existed, it would be of little help to us now. Rather, the pursuit of a usable past here evokes a context as complex and in its own way as compromised as our own – namely, the late ancient Mediterranean. (Burrus 2019, 1)

The specific contributions of this course in shaping the ecocritical literary consciousness of the students are basically two: on the one hand, they learn to *de-classicize* ancient Latin literature, since, especially from the late antique perspective, it does not serve as a privileged repository of humanistic values and anthropocentric world views. They are introduced to a more-than-human universe that consists of various and infinite entanglements with “riverscapes, deserts, oceans, long journeys, storms, droughts, ruins, churches,

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<sup>12</sup> See <https://comingafter-ugent.be/>.

cities, animals, saints, songs and sounds”.<sup>13</sup> In other words, they learn that ancient texts are not (necessarily) subject to the epistemics shaped by Classics as a discipline in the last two centuries. Moreover, students are invited to use and make sense of the most basic and typical hermeneutic tool of Classics, close reading, in order to recognize “the connections and complexities” between things that appear as opposite, “including those that also apply to scholarship, such as form and content, content and context, coherence and contradiction, etc.”, as observed by Helena Feder in *Close Reading the Anthropocene* (2021, 3). Feder also salutes the “convergence of close reading and scientific ecology”, both marked “by slowing down and looking around to apprehend similarities and differences, to recognize and value interconnections” (4).

To conclude, a de-colonized and de-classicized study of Greco-Roman and, in particular, late antique literature and textuality has the potential of becoming a strong interlocutor within ecocritical debates: not because we recognize in (late) antiquity an anticipation of current anthropogenic crises, but rather because both the difficulty and the strangeness of an ancient language impose a slowdown in reading a text and perceiving environment, as well as an attention to minute details that is functional to the unveiling of material interconnections. This kind of study, which perhaps is not placeable anywhere, promises to be at one and the same time an important voice within environmental criticism, and an instrument to constantly test and push it to its limits.

## 5 Where from Here?

As illustrated and as to be expected, teaching the EH takes very different forms, depending on disciplinary constellations, institutional frameworks and infrastructure, individual interest, and possibilities for collaboration not only in research but also in teaching. We could not pay tribute to the full range of teaching the EH at our universities. Thus, EH in literary or performance studies at Ghent University or the two thematic clusters developed within the Environmental Humanities Center at the University of Warsaw, Art, Literature and Popular Culture in Dialogue with the Natural Sciences and Environmental Discourse and Decolonial Practices, with its special focus on Indigenous cultures of North America and translation as a mode of decolonial engagement, would have deserved more attention. Teachers’ education is another field that warrants detailed discussion. Also, there are overlaps of interest and collaborations between our

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13 See <https://comingafter-ugent.be/>.

universities that predate our work on a joint MA (e.g., in ancient history between Augsburg's Christopher Schliephake and Ghent's Marco Formisano, or the focus on Indigenous cultures that Warsaw and Augsburg have in common). Lastly, other existing collaborations in the preparation of the application and plans for both faculty visits and joint introductory courses to the EH – e.g., with Ca'Foscari University of Venice and its focus on Environmental Anthropology, South Asian Environmental History, and Ecology and Religion – would have complemented the outline of different teaching practices and ideas of teaching cooperation.

But the examples stand for themselves, and they provided a crucial basis for our collaboration. The envisioned MA program – which, unfortunately, did not receive the funding we need and thus will not be put into practice as we had hoped – was designed to allow students from all over the world to explore the EH from both a contemporary and a historical perspective and to understand not only the place-specificity of the subject matter with which they would engage, but also the specificity of EH discourses in and across Europe with its range of languages and academic traditions. Thus, this focus was not meant as yet another reiteration of Eurocentric ideas, but it sought to draw attention to how the productive tension between the local, the regional, and the global as well as the not placeable might play out not only regarding the objects of our analyses, but also how they are framed, discussed, and connected, and how such discourses are put into a self-critical dialogue with the rich discursive traditions of e.g., the Global South – an academic “cosmopolitan sense of place”, maybe, to borrow again from Heise (Heise 2008, 56).

There are other ways to pursue these objectives. As such, we see our collaboration as a transdisciplinary, translocal, and transcultural intervention into our local structures, productive as they may already be, e.g., by long-distance or on-site co-teaching, by joint workshops for MA and early-stage PhD students, by student exchange, or by implementing study-abroad elements in existing or new implementations of EH formats at our universities. Such intervention may start with teaching; but teaching and – maybe just as important – co-learning is a central tool for making the specific contribution of the humanities to the conversation about the global polycrisis, or, better, the ongoing catastrophe, heard not only in schools and universities, but also in politics, civil society, and the business world. As the Canadian poet Rita Wong puts it in her volume *undercurrent*: “let our societies be revived as watersheds” (2015, 14). We need people able to rethink and unlearn. The Environmental Humanities are not a luxury.



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