Relations and Difference: Teaching the Human and More-than-Human Ecologies in Germany

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Abstract   When the world churns with injustices, what possibilities emerge in thinking across multispecies relations? Grounded in multidisciplinary encounters with ice, octopuses, and farmers who graze goats in lethal landscapes, among others, this article draws on my experiences of teaching the Human and More-than-Human Ecologies course at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich. The article proposes that engaging with irreducible lifeworlds in the thickness of their structural inequalities might 1) help build the interpretive skills to assess dominant environmentalisms, and 2) cultivate an open orientation towards the world in all its horror and wonder.

Keywords   Humans. More-than-human ecologies. Action. Ambivalence. Ethnography. Relations. Difference. Ethics. Wonder. Liberal environmentalisms.

Summary   1 Introduction: Three Moments. – 2 Trajectory. – 3 Contexts and Goals. – 4 Engagement. – 5 Conclusions: Thinking with Relations and Difference.

1 Introduction: Three Moments

August 2023. I decided to begin the new course with one of my favourite essays: the philosopher Amia Srinivasan's book review essay on octopus cognition and embodiment. "Like humans", Srinivasan (2017) writes, "they [octopuses] have a centralised nervous system, but in their case, there is no clear distinction between the brain and body". A few lines in we learn that "an octopus's neurons are dispersed all over its body". Throughout, Srinivasan's essay conveys tantalising, existential asides about octopus preferences, that they "can recognise individual humans", or that an individual octopus disliked being given squid as food. These observations, in the vein of Thomas Nagel's (1974) meditations on bats, push us to imagine "what it's like to be…" a creature whose wilful subjectivity – from pelting enemies with jets of water to escaping tanks and being capable of deception – abounds in its popular encounters with human observers?

September 2023. On my way to Munich for the first time, bioluminescent waves and fantastical anemones swirled on HD screens during a stop-over in Qatar airport. I whipped out my phone to record the slow pulsing of the ocean and sounds of birdsong as jet-lagged travellers stretched out on the fake grass in the airconditioned cool. On descent and take-off, a desiccated landscape was visible in the distance. I made a note to ask my future students: was this setting a more-than-human ecology?

October 2023. A week into the start of the first semester, another phase in Israel's destruction of Gaza began following the attack by Hamas. The period since has been characterized by orchestrated famines, targeted violence, and the widescale displacement of people, and loss of lives. The United States and Germany have been two of the biggest arms exporters to Israel since October 2023 (Blackburn 2025).

As I write in November 2025, I often wonder what it means to teach the environmental humanities and to encourage intellectual enquiry when the world continues to churn with ever-proliferating injustices, and when universities in Europe and elsewhere are sites of struggles for critical thought and human rights. The global power relations embedded in racism and in the logics of capitalism continue to show how environments are not a neutral site nor an accidental casualty (Braverman 2021). They are the very site of violence against humans and more-than-humans, whether in the form of Gaza's war rubble that might take more than fifteen years to clear (Burke 2024), in the militarized attacks on key ecosystems in Ukraine (Richardson 2023) and in Sudan where a civil war, supported by the United Arab Emirates' interest in the country's natural resources, has been raging since April 2023 (Wintour 2025; Conflict and Environment Observatory 2025).

Amid these such difficult global circumstances, might reckoning with (other) humans and more-than-humans offer possibilities for challenging depoliticised and seemingly neutral environmental frameworks and discourses? Reflecting on the epistemological goals of the Human and More-than-Human Ecologies core course, I suggest sustained critical reflections are crucial for recognizing forms of insidious, liberal, and heartening environmentalisms, and to foster spaces committed to informed dialogue and thought experiments. Taught as part of the module on Critical Perspectives in the M.A. in Environment and Society programme at the Rachel Carson Center, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) Munich in Germany, the course draws on ethnography, history, critical theory, fiction, essays, and audiovisual materials to engage with environmental topics as they intersect with varied spaces, senses, relations, ethics, and futures.

2 Trajectory

The origin story of the environmental humanities as a field marked by cross-disciplinary conversations and methods is well-rehearsed. As twenty-one scholars across disciplines co-authored in their piece on teaching the environmental humanities, the impetus was to craft diverse ways of knowing and thinking about environment and society outside the "atomised science-based responses to environmental dilemmas" (O'Gorman et al. 2019, 429). In a broad sense then, scholars working in the environmental humanities have sought to eschew the normative separations between 'nature' and 'culture' by refracting the 'environment' discursively through humanistic, historical, and social science lenses.

In their expansive review on the rise of more-than-human discourses in the past decade, Emily O'Gorman and Andrea Gaynor (2020, 713) argue that such analyses are increasingly concerned with the co-constitution of relations, attending to diverse species/voices, and grappling with situated politics and ethics. If earlier accounts of multispecies encounters focused on troubling Enlightenment-led categorizations of the world (nature/culture, animal/human/plant/ machine), and delineated accounts which challenged human mastery (Haraway 2008; Mitchell 2002), contemporary writings have sought to destabilise the very grounds on which questions of how to live and who can live are asked and answered.

The latter approach has taken the form of, for instance, focus on the "links between species, race, and transnational power structures" via postcolonial studies (Ahuja 2009); shown how humans have been racialised and excluded from Enlightenment's construction of reason in the first place via critical race studies (Jackson 2013); rearticulated

human-animal relationships, despite dehumanising structures, in terms of Black ecologies (Bennett 2020); called for rethinking aspects of subjectivity and agency in relation to plants, animals, and organisms such as microbes and fungi (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010); and foregrounded the disturbing extinctions of biodiverse lifeforms and biocultures (Rose, Van Dooren, Chrulew 2017, 7). Scholars have also observed how animals, such as meerkats, produce their own intra-species differences (Candea 2010); analysed relations, emotions, landscapes, and more-than-human beings in the context of late industrial formations (Tsing 2015; Blanchette 2020; Chao 2022); envisioned an expansive sense of ethics and justice related to water bodies, plants, and animals (Todd 2014; Chao, Bolender, Kirksey 2022); and highlighted the interrelations of alt-right meme cultures and "sex panics" (Boast 2022). More recently, scholars have reflected on anti-colonial research and knowledge practices to reframe accounts of pollution within ecologies (Liboiron 2021) and reckoned with how eco-fascist and settler-colonial discourses (re)produce harms when landscapes and more-than-humans are valorised at the expense of vulnerable humans (Bhan, Govindrajan 2024).

Human and more-than-human discourses also permeate the contemporary geopolitical moment. In a blog post titled "Animals, STS, and the problem of humanity in Gaza", the STS scholar Sophia Stamatoupolous-Robbins (2024) emphasizes that thinking about the non-human or more-than-human agency "is not essentially redemptive". Specifically, she argues, non-human discourse often centres "the environment" to evade politics which ignore the extent of dehumanisation despite the "Israeli state policies that kill and maim Palestinians, that destroy Palestinian infrastructures and that displace and dispossess them".[1]

Against this backdrop, the discourses and concerns which animate the human and more-than-human ecologies become salient for wider conversations on how seemingly neutral concepts and terminology serve to obfuscate violent relations. Attending to the specifics of human and more-than-human ecologies offers opportunities for a cross-cultural education beyond relativism and challenges liberal forms of environmentalisms to counter the dehumanisation of people and cultures.

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[1] Further, specifically in reference to discourses around Palestine in Germany, scholars have also called attention to how the school system, media, and political and administrative class punishes and censors solidarity with Palestine even as these systems promotes liberal ideals of academic freedom (Younes, Al-Taher 2024; Thompson, Tuzcu 2024).

3   Contexts and Goals

The M.A. in Environment and Society programme is listed as an interdisciplinary course in the university's course offerings on sustainability. In their applications to the programme, students often reference Germany as a 'leader' in the field of climate and sustainable policy, and as one of the reasons they are drawn to doing the programme in the country. This reputation is mirrored in writings by political scientists and analysts who attribute Germany's position as a 'trendsetter' in climate governance in the European Union to numerous structural, political, and economic factors since the late 1990s.

Some reasons cited are the presence of a strong Green Party in the country, the consensus across different coalition governments to promote policies of 'ecological modernization' and 'ecological industrial policy', and a shift in the country's energy policy from nuclear energy to renewables which resulted in Germany exceeding its Kyoto target of 21% reduction in Greenhouse gases in 2007 (Jänicke 2011, 129). Others argue that despite the shift in the country's energy policy from nuclear fuels to renewables, and a federal system which has enabled a "coordinated approach to climate policymaking across and between different tiers of governance", a closer look at the subnational picture reveals more complexity across the states in their adaptation approaches (Eckersley et al. 2023, 168). Thus, in a self-selecting way, even as the German and international students in the M.A. come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds,[2] they articulate shared concerns around issues of sustainability and climate-related concerns.

The differences lie in their understandings of environmental histories and cultures, and the expectations they bring to bear on the environmental humanities classroom. For instance, in our conversations in two semesters, some expressed an interest in learning about environmental discourses and preparation for a potential career in an environmental field, others sought to put our discussions in conversation with global events, some articulated a restlessness with reading and writing as a meaningful way to reckon with 'crises', some envisioned the classroom as a space that ought to generate 'solutions'. Variously, they sought examples of "hope", "pragmatism", "realism" and/or expressed feelings of hopelessness in response to having read and analysed how structural relations

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2   Students in the M.A. programme come from a wide range of backgrounds, including literary studies, biochemistry, sociology, history, art, business, gender studies, food and nutrition, psychology, geography, media studies, neuroscience, and computer science, among others.

(such as, political economy; colonialism; corporate profit; resource struggles; militarism; exploitation etc.) exacerbate environmental concerns.

In response to similar student responses in the environmental humanities classroom in the United States, literary scholar Caroline Levine (2023, xi) advocates that the "aesthetic humanities" ought to do more than rehearse their (literary) "moves" by offering a "space of collective action" which operates "between dreams of a total global revolution and the small-scale act or gesture". Addressed perhaps to the American literary studies reader, Levine offers examples of collectives and social movements which have organised to meet (human) survival needs such as food, housing, and shelter. Learning from existing movements which organise for transformation is a valuable exercise, as such pedagogical approaches might go beyond "damage-centered research" to help reimagine ideas of change (Tuck 2009).

Yet, using 'actions' as uncomplicated inspirations to enact even ostensibly progressive environmental goals can be misleading when such actions are delinked from the ideological forces they draw from. For instance, Levine (2023, 77-9) cites the example of Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) and Subhash Palekar's work in India as an example of a "grassroots movement" which offers alternatives to the corporate-dominated agriculture in distressed rural areas. On one hand, the ZBNF practices work towards building systems of food production and cultivation with farmers, by implementing seed saving, soil care and regeneration, and fermentation techniques. On the other, Palekar's advocacy of ZBNF relies on tropes of the Hindu Right, promotes bionativism through the 'native' cow, and considers forests as "model nature" that ought to be mimicked (Münster 2021, 314; Flachs 2021).[3]

Could narratives of desirable environmental action be complicated, and to what ends? As scholars have shown in their ethnographies of activism and movement building (Davé 2023; Graeber 2002), reflections on ambiguities – which inform, accompany, and problematize actions – can be productive sites of inquiry. For instance, to cite an example from my ethnographic research in the post-extraction Kudremukh region in southern India, the celebration of eco-tourism by some residents often disguises that the benefits are mainly accrued by upper-caste landowners who have access to property and the capital to make significant investments in constructing homestays, even as the region's small-scale and

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[3] Anthropologists have analyzed the Zero Budget Natural Farming as an "ambivalent" proposition since "politically reactionary, economically naïve, and ecologically progressive traits cohabit in this movement" (Münster 2018, 760).

marginalized landowners find it challenging to partake in such a model (Nayak 2022). Environmental actions/solutions, as the above examples show, can be utilised tactically to serve dominant interests.

An important goal for the Human and More-than-Human Ecologies course therefore has been to depart from the simple opposition of ideas and actions/practices by examining ambiguities in the specifics of their locations and via empirically informed case studies. Towards this end, I suggest that the classroom space focused on reading, thinking, and practicing expressing one's positions with the goal of learning and dialogue might be one among numerous reflective ways to build tolerance for ambiguities and their implications.

Overall, the course's learning objectives are framed through open-ended questions: how, and when do the human and more-than-human relations emerge as a distinct conceptual field in the environmental humanities? How do contemporary case studies modify existing and popular debates about nature/culture/ecologies, and how have these debates shifted through time? How do we analyse these relations in specifics of place, history, emotion, politics, power, economy and culture? What methods have been developed by humans to study multispecies relations, and what are their limits and affordances? Over a period of fifteen weeks, these questions subtend five overlapping topical themes to focus on conceptual relationships which structure the world.

In *Toolkit*, the first organizing theme (followed by *Spaces*, *Senses*, *Relations*, and *Futures*), we examine the topic's development diachronically. Given the interdisciplinary background of the students, these sessions are concerned with staging a ground for the seminar's future conversations–for instance, how nature/culture debates shifted since the 1980s to the early 2000s, and how historians have reckoned with multispecies relations in the past. The weeks in *Spaces* foreground thinking with landscapes and environments within which multispecies relations play out, such as in the context of war ecologies, and in the ocean and sky; *Senses* focuses on multispecies sounds, such as that of yeast, and on emotions like love and grief; *Relations* grapples with aspects of kinship, gender, economy, race, religion, rural-urban relations; *Futures* lurches between conditions of toxicity, future-making, and the ethics of living amid contemporary crises.

The selection of readings is not exhaustive, and choosing the above five broad topical themes allows for a dynamic syllabus, in that I occasionally change up the readings depending on in-class discussions. The thematic approach also allows for pairing readings situated in different places and worldviews to encourage a comparative and interpretive approach, such as on goats in Uttarakhand (Govindrajan 2015) and fish in the Paulatuuq in Arctic Canada in a week on Kinship (Todd 2014), and on meerkats in the

Kalahari (Candea 2010) and multispecies mourning in West Papua (Chao 2022) in a week on Emotions.

In the week on Multispecies Histories, for example, I paired the historian Tamara Fernando's "Seeing like a Sea" with Etienne Benson's "What was an Environment?" (2021) and Clapperton Mavhunga's "Zvipukanana: Tiny Animals with No Bones" (2024). Fernando's (2022) article opens with a description of a white-tip reef shark in 1801 making its way through the sea grass in the Gulf of Mannar looking for rays and oysters. At the same time, "with no electroreceptors comparable to those of sharks or rays", Fernando writes, a fishing collective was also on search for oysters. In seeing sharks and humans as agents in search of oysters, each using different kinds of tools and expertise, Fernando's article "inverts our perspective to the sea-or ocean-floor" (2022, 128-9) to provide a multispecies history of the Ceylon pearl fishery. The article helped us track how multispecies ecologies are shaped by different scales: of world events, such as globalization, imperialism, colonial violence, slavery; of sea water dynamics, ocean life, and mollusc responses to stimuli and temperature; of the expertise and caste-knowledge of Tamil Parava fishermen, which in turn help us view them as agents in colonial pearl fisheries system.

In the same session, in addition to multispecies histories of place, a text might also work to expose the role of language and the process of reading itself. Mavhunga's (2024) article on the *zvipukanana* (tiny animal with no bones) tracks concepts which have come to reference insects, and which derive from *kurarama* (lived experience), *tsumo* (wisdoms or proverbs), and *zvirahwe* (riddles). Alongside seeing how biological life is embedded in *dvizhimbabwe* "cultures of knowing", the piece interrupted skimming since the author foregrounds the Zimbabwean terminologies throughout, followed by their English translations. Benson's (2021) "What was the Environment?" examines how different variations of the 'environment' as a concept, emerged as a site of knowledge and practice beginning with the late eighteenth century in the Western world. Collectively, the pieces worked to throw critical light on how concepts are materialised in the relations between multispecies life, ecologies, and languages before the contemporary moment, and outside of strictly Anglophone discourses.

4   Engagement

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks contends that excitement about ideas alone are not enough to generate a meaningful learning process in the classroom, which can only take place from collective effort and "in recognizing other's presence" (1994, 8). To create such a space of effort, I prefer to structure classes by 1) drawing on collaborative reading practices,[4] which includes group work and reflective exercises, and 2) using transdisciplinary materials, including multimedia. Utilising a wide range of materials and a mix of genres – from academic writings published in journals, films, digital storytelling, audio, and fiction – encourages accessibility and offers alternative forays into key topics. Furthermore, the multimodal materials encourage students to go beyond representations of fact and evidence towards thinking broadly with experimentations with senses and abstractions (Welcome, Thomas 2021).

Over time, as I came to learn that reducing the number of assigned readings leads to better discussions, I typically included two readings, or paired the reading with multimedia materials each seminar. Students were asked to prepare brief responses of not more than two-three sentences to at least one reading or multimedia material, and post their contributions on the course discussion board. Students therefore were able to view how their peers engaged with the week's topic, often citing these as particularly valuable for their learning during the anonymous course feedback. The responses also helped structure our seminar time as I clustered them by similarity, and offered a short contextualization of the readings in relation to the week's thematic focus.

For instance, in the module on *Senses*, I drew the students' attention to *Singing Ice*, a book of Ladakhi folksongs about the Himalayan mountains, glaciers, rivers, and streams. Prepared by Morup Namgyal, a folksinger and song collector, in collaboration with researchers and translators, the songbook emerges from the "urgency to preserve and share the environmental knowledge embedded in materials".[5] The songs – written in Ladakhi which uses the Tibetan script, and transliterated and translated into English – captures the sounds of ice, water, glaciers in their movements and sensations, with spiritual and place-based references. Namgyal and other community

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4 I thank Kaushik Ramu for this phrase.

5 *Singing Ice: Ladakhi Folk Songs About Mountains, Glaciers, Rivers, and Steams* (2022). Alongside Namgyal, the researchers, translators, and illustrators who worked on the songbook are mentioned on the webpage, which can be accessed at `https://susanschuppli.com/SINGING-ICE-1`. The website also contains snippets of a video interview with Morup Namgyal and of collective singing workshops in 2022 and 2023.

members also organise singing workshops to collectively remember and memorialise this local knowledge.

The book is one fragment of artist-researcher Susan Schuppli's multimedia project *Learning from Ice* (2019-22), which combines scientific and local knowledge from different global contexts to understand the impacts of climate change on glaciers.[6] Each sub-project deals with layered relations around ice: from the decades of scientific knowledge mobilised to interpret its behaviour to how knowledge-making can be the site of geopolitics; the politics of cold and its relation to human rights violations and claims for environmental justice; forced migrations due to glacial recession and water scarcity, and the use of historical and Indigenous knowledges with engineering techniques to create artificial glaciers in the form of 'ice-stupas' in the Ladakh region. The films, archival clips, audio recordings, text, and photographs not only help reimagine the banal ice but also make visible the artistic, scientific, historical, legal and local knowledge practices which intersect with the ice as material in a melting and warming world.

I assign *Learning from Ice* in the weeks on Senses, alongside Sophia Roosth's article on 'Screaming Yeast' (2009) which is a close historical reading of sonocytology, a technique used by scientists to record, amplify, and analyse the intracellular vibrations of yeast cells. In the discussion forum, student responses ranged from reflections on the sounds themselves[7]

> I don't know what kind of sound it (ice) makes when it is not moved/ modified by something else. For example, we see in the videos that the ice is melting so we hear the sound of water, then we see a boat going through sea ice and we hear the ice breaking against it. So the ice actually does many sounds, in correlation with different agents.

to imagining a wider role for sensory knowledge

> [...] the sensory experience of something draws our attention to the vulnerability of organisms or habitats [...] We start to make and feel new connections and can learn to understand our surroundings.

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6 I first came across the *Learning from Ice* project through *Gondwana* (2022), a video installation exhibited at the Kochi Biennale 2022-23, curated by Shubigi Rao. *Learning from Ice* (2019-22) is available at https://susanschuppli.com/LISTENING-TO-ICE.

7 The following responses are cited with student permission and are anonymized to protect privacy. Thank you to the students for letting me include their insights.

and wondering about the role of interdisciplinary methodology for environmental justice goals:

> [...] is it more for the pleasure of the creative process? [...] (I) thought how much yet has to be worked on in terms of environmental justice for the big layer of communities living in glaciers-borderline areas in the next decades.

A student who read both 'Screaming Yeast' and the sub-project 'Listening to Ice' reflected on sound and its relation to empathy via tensions of relation and alterity:

> Is the capacity to produce sound sufficient to provoke an empathic response? I am thinking of Descartes who dissected live animals and called their screams just the workings of the machine. Is empathy evoked if we choose to focus on the ways another entity is similar to us? Does something need to be similar to us to deserve our concern? Is that the opposite of "othering"?

Thinking with materials such as yeast and ice offer compelling entry points into wider discussions of how the study of sounds has a long history in ecological and ethnological studies. The session also offers a chance to dispel ideas that sonic methods are, as one student put it, an "avant-garde method of knowledge production", by showing how the study of sound galvanized different fields and movements in the early 20th century (Sterne 2022, 2) and that the health of habitats and ecosystems have long been measured through mapping their acoustic diversity (Farina, Gage 2017).

5 Conclusions: Thinking with Relations and Difference

I close with three propositions for thinking with and across relations and differences.

One, insisting on specificities allows us to reflect on lived experiences from the mundane to the existential, of life amid war or song amid glacier recessions, of octopus dramas and desires, and the untranslatable and destructive, to name a few. For instance, in one of the weeks on *Spaces*, the seminar engages with Munira Khayyat's (2022) ethnography in South Lebanon's borderlands, subjected to ongoing war, where farmers continue to grow tobacco and graze goats in landscapes that contain unexploded mines. As a hardy dryland crop, tobacco grows in the rocky landscape and is a state commodity which "feeds the poor and serves vested interests". Similarly, goats are inexpensive to raise, and can "usually walk over explosives without triggering them" (Khayyat 2022, 189-90). Khayyat

insists these difficult, yet life-sustaining practices framed by the violence of war are forms of "resistant ecologies". Initially, some expressed being uncomfortable in thinking of war, a destructive force, as creating any form of "resistant ecology". In one class, a student returned to the article to re-read aloud the lines where Khayyat insisted on resistance and the vital dimensions of living and working in war even as she recognised "war as a violent event": one of her interlocutors had characterised it as "fighting for a livable life in an unlivable world is *muqawama* (resistance)" (Khayyat 2022, 183). Attending to how individuals theorise their life from a place of impossibility and in relation to political economy focuses our attention on the material effort of living and subsistence, and how these are tied to a deep knowledge of landscapes even amidst war.

Two, in encountering diverse types of humans, animals, plants, insects, molluscs, fungi, and non-life via the case studies, we necessarily must suspend our certainty about basic categories – life, death, time, ethics, value, play, beauty, future, humour, bodies, emotions, war, love, kin, even ecology – towards wrestling with how such representations are shaped by relations of power and the politics of location (Al-Bulushi, Ghosh, Tahir 2020). For instance, in the current iteration of the course, alongside the visuals of Qatar airport referenced at the start, I showed students images of a post-industrial site overgrown with weeds, an oil rig in the ocean, and a bird in flight between skyscrapers, to ask if they thought of these as 'ecologies'. This elicited the following responses: that since the concept was borrowed from the natural sciences, 'ecology' ought to mean some feedback between organisms and environments; that 'ecologies' necessarily encompassed a variety of environments and relations; that since oil rigs or buildings were "artificial" one couldn't refer to them as 'ecologies', while some also felt that since built infrastructures were often sought by non-humans for shelter or life, these too constituted 'ecologies' in a sense. Parsing shared analytical vocabularies (and their dissonances) across disciplinary boundaries, as ecologists and social scientists suggest, can be crucial in seeing how social and biophysical processes co-constitute one another (Rademacher, Cadenasso, Pickett 2023).[8]

Third, in these efforts of engaging with the material histories, imaginative registers, and cultural practices across places and scales, students learn to bridge the classroom and the world via existential

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[8] The authors write that "plural ecologies and the singularized science of ecology share some essential epistemological aspirations, if not actual methodological ground, in contemporary practice" (Rademacher et al. 2023, 130-1).

and environmental lines of enquiry.[9] In doing so, the point is not so much that we will have infallible answers to our questions or will have achieved justice once we begin the task of inquiry. Perhaps the point is that staging repeated encounters with irreducible lifeworlds in the thickness of their structural differences might help cultivate an open and inclusive orientation towards the world in all its horror and wonder.

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9 While pedagogical efforts are not uniform in their effects, the anonymous course feedback at the end of the semester offered some clues. Students "appreciated the selection of themes and texts" and the "non-European and non-American examples", mentioned the collaborative reading responses and discussions as spaces where they felt "free, welcomed and encouraged", and felt the readings "broadened horizons and perspectives".

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