

The Rights of Rivers and the Rites of Trees. MA lecture.
Blokseminar, University of Potsdam

“A tree is a river bound in bark.” Robert McFarlane

We live in a world of relations. In times of complex and radical change, how do we forge life-giving relationships to Nature and to the living world? In this course, we will think through these questions together through the lens of a variety of ancestral traditions and contemporary voices. To focus our inquiry, our investigation will delve into the legal rights and ceremonial rites of rivers and trees and will include an exploration of how to work collectively to defend a river or bless a tree.

As we learn to come back to our senses, sharpening multisensory ways of reflecting and expressing, we will turn to rivers and trees as thought-full companions on this curious journey. Together, we will activate our radical imagination to consider what it could mean to think with a river? What could it mean to think with a tree?

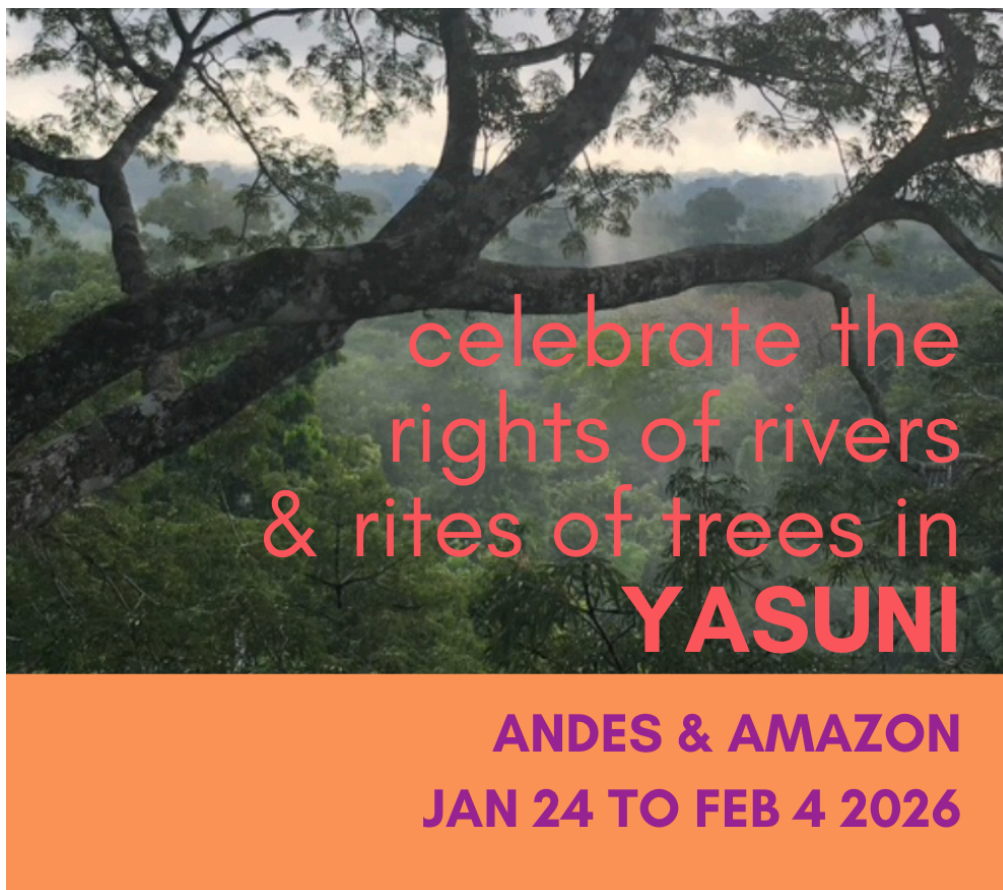
How do we learn to listen to water, to thermal springs, to rain and to rivers? To volcanoes, to trees and to flowers? Throughout this course, we will listen to rivers and to each other, to the voices of ancestral traditions and contemporary environmental activists, to artists, scientists, community leaders and visionaries. Most importantly, we will learn to sharpen our hearing and attune our ears so that we can better learn from plants, birds, frogs, water and places, to our more-than-human kith and kin.

To track our observations, we will keep a Nature journal as well as create a collective knowledge bank where we will gather links to resources that will help us consider these questions through a multidisciplinary and multisensory lens, providing an index we can turn to as we work to better listen to, learn from, and care for the living world.

During the travel segment in Ecuador, we will listen to rivers throughout the country while learning about Ecuador’s historic success in establishing the Rights of Nature and the defense of rivers. We will participate in a *minga* (a communal river clean-up) and a river blessing with the Colectivo Rescate Río San Pedro on the banks of the Río San Pedro, and reflect on what it means to work collectively. We will witness the beauty and empathy of birds, plants, and animals; hear about innovative projects that interweave ancestral knowledge and science on the banks of the Río Napo; and

celebrate Tu B'Shvat, the Jewish holiday of trees, in the Yasuní Nature Reserve where we will climb high up into the canopy of a sacred tree--a massive ceibo--and look out over the most biodiverse corner of the Amazon, newly protected from oil exploration and extraction. In our journey, we will contemplate sultry volcanoes and soak in Tungurahua's turmeric-colored healing waters, as well as visit the once-pristine and now-poisoned Amazonian rivers of Lisa's childhood town, named for Shell Oil. Together, we will listen to Nature and to each other, raise provocative questions, eat great food, and engage in transformative conversations and encounters.

This course will meet for 6 online sessions over the course of the winter semester and will culminate in a group trip to Ecuador (Quito, Tungurahua, Pastaza, Napo, the Yasuni Reserve and Papallacta), 23 January – 4 February, 2026. Costs for travel to and within Ecuador must be paid by each participant.



For the full description of the excursion see [Invitation to a Listening Tour of Ecuador](#)
To register for the excursion: [Registration Form Ecuador](#)

Co-instructors

Prof. Dr. Jonathan Schorsch, Chair, Jewish Religious and Intellectual History, Universität Potsdam; Founding director, The Jewish Activism Summer School (Berlin).

Dr. Lisa María Madera, Ecuadorian-American writer and river keeper whose work explores how narratives shape our relationship to the living Earth. A founding member and co-director of the award-winning Colectivo Rescate Río San Pedro in Quito, Madera weaves community through river restoration and global environmental advocacy. Her work has been featured in a range of spaces, including *Our Kids' Climate*, PBS's *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, and *The Center for Humans and Nature*.

Course Objective: The objective of this course is to take in new perspectives that sharpen our abilities to listen so that we can amplify our questions, while we explore new and old ways to relate to the living world. In this way, we can learn to better protect and nourish Life on our beautiful Earth. Given the background of the instructors, we will bring into dialogue western, indigenous (South American), and Jewish sources and approaches.

Requirements for credit points

A final project that will take the form of a research paper, short film or video, graphic work (comic), PowerPoint presentation, etc. (10.000 characters min.), on a topic chosen by the student in coordination with the instructor. Regardless of format, the presentation must have both a descriptive and analytical component.

Meet 6 Thursdays, 90 min.

12:00 UTC-5 (= 19.00 CET)

- 23.10 Thinking with Rivers. *Quito's River Renaissance: Rescuing our Rivers and Defending their Rights in the Ecuadorian Andes*, Lisa Maria Madera and Maribel Pasquel--rivers, rights/rites and restoration
- 6.11 Thinking with Rivers. *Is a River Alive?* Robert McFarlane, Part 1 "The River of the Cedars" **(to read before class)**
- 20.11 How to bless a river. River blessings and ceremony. *Is a River Alive?* Robert McFarlane, Part 3 "The Living River" **(to read before class)**

4.12 Thinking with Trees. Ancient Israelite Sources

Jonathan Schorsch, "Looking for an Ecological God" **(to read before class)**
[*Grow: Trees and the Rings of Belonging*, Lyanda Lynn Haupt]

18.12 Thinking with Trees. Jewish Sources.

In class:

Rabbinic stories about Honi the Circle Maker.

"The Souls of Trees," Nachman of Bratslav, retold by Howard Schwartz.

Excerpt from *Forward From Exile*, the autobiography of Shmarya Levin (b. 1867), 5.

15.1.26 How to bless a tree. Relationships and rituals.

"Peri Eitz Hadar: A Kabbalist Tu B'Shvat Seder," Miles Krassen **(to read before class)**

In class: "Blessing Trees," Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad, trans. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi.

Texts

These will all be available as PDFs

Quito's River Renaissance: Rescuing our Rivers and Defending their Rights in the Ecuadorian Andes, Lisa Maria Madera and Maribel Pasquel

Is a River Alive?, Robert McFarlane. A joyful, mind-expanding exploration of an ancient, urgent idea: that rivers are living beings who should be recognized as such in imagination and law.

Rooted: Life at the Crossroads of Science, Nature and Spirit, Lyanda Lynn Haupt. This highly personal book is a brilliant invitation to live with the earth in both simple and profound ways.

Song of the Cedars: a song co-created with Los Cedros Forest

<https://open.spotify.com/track/3H182DGezvqGcpcUwIALNW>

“Peri Eitz Hadar: A Kabbalist Tu B’Shvat Seder,” “Blessing Trees,” “The Souls of Trees,” *Trees, Earth, and Torah: A Tu B’Shvat Anthology*, ed. Ari Elon, Naomi Mara Hyman, and Arthur Waskow (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000).

Additional resources that will be useful for our conversation

The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate, Discoveries from a Secret World, Peter Wohlleben. Peter Wohlleben shares his deep love of woods and forests and explains the amazing processes of life, death, and regeneration he has observed in the woodland.

The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling, and the Metamorphosis of Science, Andreas Weber. *The Biology of Wonder* guides us toward discerning that value, meaning, experience, creativity, and freedom exist within and constitute the living world.

La vida de un río, Jorge Anhalzer and Naia Andrade,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2lZk2Ylpsg>

Machángara: entre la cangahua y la arena, Byron Toledo

https://open.spotify.com/episode/5UaAR9MjqsQmhTg3XYuec3?si=44lQH6e8TJm_PH_6w8zL9A

This course is open to the general public with [registration](#) as an auditor or visiting student

Registration must be done by October 30, 2025

For more information: helga.voelkening.1@uni-potsdam.de

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