

Living and Dying as Compost in the Torne Valley Mires

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Abstract

This article takes Donna Haraway's claim that "We are compost" as a literal statement, and considers what might be the consequences of "living and dying well" as compost (97). Combining the work of Haraway with research within Human Plant Studies (HPS) and insights drawn from Indigenous scholars, the article examines a novel for young teens set in the European Arctic as starting point for imagining how to live as compost. In the novel, *Som om jag inte fanns* [As though I wasn't there] by Kerstin Johansson i Backe, a grieving girl, Elina, seeks out her father's spirit in a sphagnum bog. The article draws parallels between Elina's actions and storying activities in the mire and human-moss relationships. These relationships are reflected against Indigenous ways of understanding the meshing of the worlds of the living and dead, as well as the meshing of humans with other living organisms. In doing so, it opens up a richer understand of human-plant relations, but also points out the risks of living as compost.

Keywords: CYA, moss, compost, Sámi children, HPS.

Resumen

Este artículo toma de forma literal la afirmación de Donna Haraway de que "Somos compost", y considera lo que pueden ser las consecuencias de "vivir y morir bien como compost" (97). Combinando el trabajo de Haraway con la investigación de los estudios de los humanos y las plantas (HPS por sus siglas en inglés), y concomimientos tomados de académicos indígenas, el artículo examina una novela para jóvenes adolescentes ambientada en el Ártico europeo como punto de partida para imaginar cómo vivimos como compost. En la novela *Som om jag inte fanns* [Como si no estuviera allí] de Kerstin Johansson i Backe, una chica de luto, Elina, busca el espíritu de su padre en un cenagal musgoso. El trabajo traza paralelismos entre las acciones de Elina y las actividades narradas en el cenagal y las relaciones entre los humanos y el musgo. Estas relaciones se reflejan frente a la manera en que los indígenas entienden las redes tejidas entre los mundos de los vivos y los muertos, así como las redes de los humanos con otros organismos vivos. Al hacerlo, se abre un entendimiento más rico de las relaciones entre humanos y plantas, pero también señalan los riesgos de vivir como compost.

Palabras clave: CYA, musgo, compost, niños samis, HPS.

Introduction

Critters are at stake in each other in every mixing and turning of the terran compost pile. We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Critters—human and not—become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding. (Haraway 97)

In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway posits that “We are compost”, and that each turning of the compost pile causes new entanglements with other forms of life. In doing so, she foregrounds the process of decay in the renewal of life in more-than-human ecologies. Her work is much cited, indicating that she has touched a nerve in our climate crisis dominated world. This nerve network means that we are not alone, even when we feel lonely or alone, and we do not get to act alone either, as all our actions hold implications for the larger *umwelt*, the meshing of living and dead, and of various forms of life.

In this paper, the particular entanglement that interests me is that of humans, mosses and other living and dying beings in the *umwelt* of mires in the European Arctic. ‘*Umwelt*’—the German term for ‘environment’—was developed by Jakob von Uexküll in the 1920s to highlight how each living organism experiences its surroundings (Favareau 83). Here I use it to acknowledge vegetal experiences of humans meshing with human experiences of the vegetal world. My aim is to use a YA novel—*Som om jag inte fanns* [As though I wasn’t there] by Kerstin Johansson i Backe (1978)—as a springboard to think through the implications of living and dying well as compost. The paper begins by combining the work of Haraway, research within Human Plant Studies (HPS) and Indigenous scholars to build a greater sense of the vegetal world of mosses, lichen and mires, and their entangled relationship with humans. I then examine *Som om jag inte fanns* (1978) as a means of tapping into the hive mind of human experience to consider what it might entail to truly live as compost in the context of the mires of the European Arctic.

Envisaging ourselves as compost, demands a recognition that we are all critters heading towards death, and that now is the moment to consider what kind of ancestor we wish to become. At the same time, Haraway suggests, it behoves us to consider our lives in the thick present as meshing with other life forms, including earthworms, microbes, fungi: “the ongoing, snaky, unheroic, tentacular, dreadful ones, the ones which/who craft material-semiotic netbags of little use in trials but of great use in bringing home and sharing the means of living and dying well” (Haraway 43). Living and dying well thus involves engaging with the alien intelligences of plants, fungi and critters other than ourselves. Given the struggles humans face in trying to understand themselves and their fellow humans, this is no small task, and perhaps especially so for adolescents who are beginning to conceptualize the larger world and their place within it for the first time.

Haraway’s methodology is storytelling, an activity she ascribes with the capacity to evoke an ethics of care: “Each time a story helps me remember what I

thought I knew, or introduces me to new knowledge, a muscle critical for caring about flourishing gets some aerobic exercise. Such exercise enhances collective thinking and movement in complexity” (Haraway 29). In this paper, I am interested in how *Som om jag inte fanns* exercises the muscles needed to generate empathetic encounters with alien intelligences and with life as compost. In doing so, I am less concerned with understanding the novel better than I am in using it to imagine the implications of living as compost, and as understanding ourselves as future ancestors.

The novel is set on the Swedish side of the Finnish-Swedish border in the valley of the River Tornio (‘Torne Valley’ in English) in the 1930s. Since 1809, much of the river has formed a border between Finland and Sweden, although the local name—‘väylä’ [route]—recalls that it has always been a route, connecting people, plant nutrients and animals. Before the national border was imposed, the Indigenous people of the Arctic—the Sámi—and the local population—the Tornedalians (literally: ‘inhabitants of the Torne Valley’) moved freely and used their own languages. The imposition of a state border did not result in total restrictions of movement—not least because one can simply walk or ski across the river for half the year—but the imposition of state laws impacted heavily on the local communities especially the Sámi communities and the Tornedalians, who predominantly spoke Meänkieli (a Finnish-Swedish creole with some Sámi influences). The novel is primarily about the imposition of the Swedish-only practices in schools built on the Swedish side of the river: children were punished for using the Sámi languages, Finnish and Meänkieli. *Som om jag inte fanns* depicts this experience.

Although the novel was published in 1978, it remains important due to the National Minority Acts (SFS 2009; 2019) which mandate teaching about Sweden’s five national minorities (Jews, Sámi, Romani, Finno-Swedes and Tornedalians) in schools as part of the work of apology for abuses in the past (Kokkola, Palo & Manderstedt). *Som om jag inte fanns* is one of the few books to depict the language policies that suppressed the use of the national languages available in a format accessible for young readers. It has been made into a film directed by Klas Härö, and is available in English, but the novel has not been translated. The translations here are my own.

In a very different context, Ernestine Schlant has described literature as functioning as a “seismograph of a people’s moral positions” (3). Resonating to her observations of how literature reveals social—and in her case, national—beliefs and attitudes that might otherwise remain hidden, I read Johansson i Backe’s novel in search of such hidden understandings of plant-human relations. That is, while humankind might not consciously be aware of our feelings towards the vegetal world, literature exposes understandings that have not been fully articulated. Literature also allows me to pose questions that Western science, with its focus on controlling variables, cannot ask. If we wish to understand the *umwelt* in which humans and vegetal life are entangled, then we must remain firmly planted in the compost pile. However, the compost pile is always evolving, breaking down, rejuvenating. Literature has a fixity that allows for staying in the moment that real-life obscures.

Children's literature typically expresses adult desires, hopes, and concerns about the future, and so often provides fertile ground for imagining new ways of being in the world. However, in this paper, I am uninterested in whether young readers of *Som om jag inte fanns* would be able to imagine human-plant relations in the ways I describe. I am simply interested in tapping into "collective thinking" about human relations to the vegetal world of the mire (Haraway 97). In doing so, I resist Alison Ravencroft's call for a poetics that produces "its effects most powerfully not through the possible, the familiar—the already known, the already believed—but through the improbable or impossible" (355). Instead, I suggest that the novel can be used to explicate the familiar, and to consider what the implications of the familiar are.

Plants are familiar, but the cognitive bias identified by James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler over twenty years ago—*plant blindness*—describes the tendency to overlook plants, to fail to recognise that they are living beings or simply regarding them as a backdrop for animal life. The intellectual labour of Indigenous scholars provides powerful tools for overcoming plant blindness and articulating relationships between human critters and other living intelligences (e.g. Kuokkanen). In *Gathering Moss*, Potowatomi scholar, Robin Wall Kimmerer, sets out to tell the mosses' story, explaining that "we learn each other's stories by looking, by watching each other's way of living" noting that mosses' "voices are little heard and we have much to learn from them. They have messages of consequence that need to be heard, the perspectives of species other than our own" (x). One of the child characters in *Som om jag inte fanns*—Elina—seems able to hear the voices of the moss and the mire and, in doing so, models ways in which we might live as compost. Both Kimmerer and Elina draw on Indigenous ways of knowing, which entails the conscious awareness of the meshing of living and dead, humans, critters and the vegetal world that Haraway calls for in her explication of the humusities.

Inhabiting the Humusities

Life on earth is dependent on the thin layer of humus feeding and generating the top-layer of soil. It is primarily formed from decaying plant matter, but also animal matter, which is broken down by fungi, microbes, critters and plants to become top-soil. All animal life is dependent on the vegetal matter that inhabits the few centimetres of soil generated by the cycle of producing plant matter (such as leaves) and its decay. This cycle involves multi-species collaboration. Lichen, for instance, produce acids that break down rock to form the first vestiges of soil (Chen, Blume & Beyer). Typically, mosses follow in the lichen's wake, living in the tiny crevices of opportunity created by the lichen (Kimmerer 16-19). These are two of the oldest types of vegetal matter on the planet (La Farge, Williams & England), and they still dominate the landscape of the European Arctic where the land is still rising in recovery from the last ice-age (Veikkolainen). They are broken down by microbes, fungi and earthworms to produce soil in which the higher order plants, such as trees, can survive.

Humans need to develop new relationships with plants if the species is to survive the climate crisis. Plants literally provide the air humans need to breathe. If we continue to perceive plants as servile, as lacking autonomy and desire, as passive in their relations with humans, we will continue our current downward spiral. Changing direction, I suggest, requires more than scientific knowledge of vegetal capacities, it requires imagining ourselves into a new kind of relationship. Ultimately, it involves overcoming plant blindness and recognizing vegetal agency. This is the driving force behind Human-Plant Studies (HPS). HPS is a theoretical disposition which deliberately reverses the assumption of power between humans and plants. It questions what would happen if we “were to consider how plants *act upon* us, contributing to the co-generation of our cultural practices, values, perceptions, relations, artifacts, and all else through their volitions in the *umwelt* of which all living things are part?” (Ryan 104).

One easily observed example of plant volition is the burr. Burrs catch onto a passing creature, and use its movement to disperse seed in a new environment. Other examples include fruits or nuts which encourage an animal to collect and consume it, resulting in the dispersal of seed either by being spat out in new areas (e.g. orange pips) or by passing it through the digestive tract (e.g. tomatoes), allowing the seed to emerge in a nutrient-rich environment. In *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan notes how human cultivation of plants has moved beyond those which provide food (wheat, rice, maize, potato & soya) to those that provide medicine (feverfew, digitalis, & opium poppies), pleasure (marijuana, & tobacco) and beauty (tulips, & *Indigofera tinctoria*). Lichen and moss precede animal life on earth, and so their designs are not as dependent on animal forms as those of more recent arrivals, but this does not mean that they lack purpose, intent or volition.

Sámi scholar, Rauna Kuokkanen explains that “in order to maintain the balance of the socio-cosmic order, gifts of the land must be actively acknowledged through practices, acts, and ceremonies which express gratitude and which recognize that the land is a living being that cannot be endlessly exploited. This relationship is not a mechanistic exchange; rather, it reflects a way of being in the world predicated on active participation in its processes” (145). Drawing on her Potawatomi heritage, Robin Wall Kimmerer seeks out the purpose of mosses, asking what role they have to play in the “web of reciprocity”, the *umwelt* in which plant, mineral and animal matter participate (106-116). Eventually, she recognizes that their gift lies in their great capacity for retaining water. Both living and dead mosses can store water 16-26 times their dry weight within their cells. In the past, Kimmerer posits, wet moss growing in abundance beside water would have been used as a wash-rag to clean babies, and the fluid retaining properties of dried sphagnum moss made it valuable as diapers and menstrual protection. Such actions situate moss in a relationship that results in the plant receiving nutrient rich bodily fluids in exchange. In practice, the kinds of moss (and lichen) that are most easily dried and stored (such as sphagnum and reindeer moss) cannot cope with such rich nutrients, but this means that they

would break down and the result would be a rich compost that can feed the higher order plants such as trees.

Lacking a connection to Indigenous roots, I struggle with Kimmerer's explanation. Given that mosses and lichens can trace their ancestry back to a pre-human world, I would rather see humans as late-comers to the moss party and consider moss in their relation to the *umwelt* in which they first emerged. I find the story of how mosses gave us the gifts of mires that produce oxygen exercises my muscles of caring more effectively than their later gifts. I recognise that we have reason to give thanks to the mosses, but remain unclear as to what humans should offer in reciprocity. Kuokkanen responds to such concerns by noting that "In this system, one does not give primarily in order to receive but rather to ensure that balance of the world on which the well-being of the entire social order is contingent" (33). That is, the gifts humans bring are based on thankfulness not expectations.

Mires are formed when a wet area—such as the shallow lakes formed from melting snow or glaciers—become filled with plants, most commonly sphagnum mosses which, as Kimmerer explains, create their own ecosystem.

There is no ecosystem on earth where mosses achieve greater prominence than in a *Sphagnum* bog. There is more living carbon in *Sphagnum* moss than in any other single genus on the planet. In terrestrial habitats, mosses are overshadowed by the vascular plants and assume relatively minor roles. But in bogs they are supreme. *Sphagnum* or peat mosses not only flourish in bogs, they create them. (Kimmerer 118)

The miraculous water retaining properties of living and dead sphagnum mosses generates a spongy mat over the surface of the lake. The dead cells below wick the nutrient rich waters up to the surface. Mosses need light in order to photosynthesize, so the living cells of the sphagnum grow over the top of the dead cells. The density of plants growing in a mire is such that they form highly effective carbon sinks, and are thus essential for addressing the climate crisis and promoting human chances of survival. The lack of human reciprocity in this relationship is startling.

Kimmerer explains that, in death, mosses decompose to form peat, which provides one of the habitats needed for the vascular plants. Although acidic, peat is slightly less acidic than the mire itself, and can support shrubs and ferns. However, the level of acidity deters many larger plants from making use of the environment. Kimmerer also explains how the great water retaining capacities of sphagnum leave the soil saturated. The roots of large trees require air, and need soil that has space for air between the particles. By filling those spaces with water, the moss prevents large trees from taking root, and so the mire remains open and sunny, allowing the living cells to photosynthesize. The small trees that do grow (some types of birch and pine, occasionally willow) remain stunted in comparison with trees growing in aeriated soil with a neutral pH. Their canopies have little impact on the light available for the moss. As these stunted trees decay, they too are absorbed into the peat. However, leaf-mould from the deciduous trees and the trunks will gradually aeriate the soil making it suitable for forests to emerge (Ediculture). Trees growing in a mire thus contribute to the web of reciprocity by being good ancestors to the larger trees that will follow.

The Indigenous peoples of the European Arctic—the Sámi—understand all lands, including rock formations, as living. It takes an act of wilful ignorance—plant blindness—for anyone not to recognise that the mires are living. Navigating in this landscape requires a person to distinguish where the spongy mat of living mosses is strong enough to bear their weight from weaker areas that will cause the person to sink. The decaying process is such that spongy mosses may extend down for many meters. Since one cannot see where the bedrock lies, stepping off the peat onto the living mosses is like stepping onto a raft supported by water. And just as one cannot push down on water to lift oneself up, one cannot push down on a mire to lift oneself. Kicking one’s legs is likely to cause one to sink. Instead, one must spread one’s weight over the surface, ideally using a rooted plant for support. In short, humans need to understand the vegetation in order to move safely. Understood from a vegetal perspective, plants determine who sinks and who is held up or supported in their attempt to escape.

In real life, the edges between the areas that are strong enough to hold a human weight and the areas where one will sink tend to be gradual so that one gets a warning in the form of a boot-full of water before reaching the dangerous areas. In literature, the edges are more dramatic and there are numerous portrayals of people becoming trapped in the mires. The contrast between the realities of a boot-full of water and the literary life-and death struggle for survival imply that the “collective thinking” about the mires and mosses is that they are threatening (Haraway 97). This fear is storied into portrayals of this environment. However, Elina’s engagements with the mire in *Som om jag inte fanns* depicts reciprocity with the land that is primarily loving.

Educating Elina: When Worlds Collide

Som om jag inte fanns is primarily concerned with the Swedish state’s endeavours to suppress the local languages spoken in the Torne Valley. I am deliberately over-looking this entirely human-centric, logocentric tension to focus attention on human-plant relations. One of the main child characters, Elina, spends time in the mire because she feels a connection to the spirit of her dead father there. When her teacher starts to behave as though she were not there (the title of the novel), Elina runs away to the mire. Normally, Elina is very agile in the mire and can jump from tuft to tuft, finding her way safely. When she runs away from school, however, she is lured into the dangerous parts of the mire and becomes trapped. The climax of novel involves Elina being rescued, and receiving an apology from the teacher.

Although Elina is portrayed as having Meänkieli as her home language, because her mother’s family come from the Finnish side of the border, a careful reading of the text concerning Elina’s father indicates that he was Sámi. More specifically, he appears to have been one of the Sámi who lost their rights in the 1928 Reindeer Herding Act, in which the Swedish state limited Sámi heritage to those who owned reindeer. Those employed in other ways lost their rights to the very minimal

protection offered by the state. Elina is described as having dark hair like her father. More importantly for my discussion, Elina's connection to the mire resonates with Sámi worlding practices, especially her respect for all living organisms' selfhood. She recognizes the plants of the mire as having autonomy and intention.

The novel begins with Elina creeping towards the mire as quietly as she can: "It wasn't as easy today as it had been. The frost had made the grass stiff, and it rustled gently. It was important not to frighten the invisible ones away" (Johansson i Backe 5).¹ The "invisible ones" are part of Sámi conception of the world, which acknowledges the continuing presence of the ancestors, as well as the proximity of Sáiva, the spirit world. They appear in another novel by Johansson i Backe: *De Osynliga* (1979). Thomas DuBois (2023) cites the first account of these spirits written by a Sámi—Johan Turi (1854-1936)—in a Sámi language to show that, although acceptance of the presence of spirits is widespread, only certain people, *noaidi* (shaman), are able to see them regularly. However, there are many stories of one-off encounters between the Sámi and spirits of the dead, commonly ancestors. DuBois also cites Turi as commenting that "innocent animals" can also see spirits (which is why the presence of spirits is often recognised through restlessness among dogs or reindeer) (DuBois 4). Elina is not presented as a *noaidi*, but her 'innocent' games in the mire are closely connected to her ability to sense the spirits of both the dead (her father's spirit) and the living (the plants).

In Sámi worlding, there is a constant meshing of the worlds, but sometimes—for instance, in the northern lights—the boundaries between the worlds are more permeable. This proximity of the spirit worlds is celebrated in two recent picturebooks for Sámi children by Elin Marakatt and Anita Midbjer. In *Lilli, Ájja ja guoksagis* [Lilli, Grandfather and the Northern Lights], Lilli's deceased grandmother appears as a presence within the Northern lights. In the sequel, *Lilli, Lávre ja Sáivoálbmot* [Lilli, Lávre and the Saivo folk], Lilli's little brother, Lávre gets his boot stuck in the mire and is carried to safety by a bird who shows him the Sáivo world. Spirits of close ancestors often take the form of birds (DuBois 10-11). There are many stories of the *uldat* (the invisible ones) entering the human realm, typically a young *ulda* woman who marries a Sámi man (Conrad). In *Som om jag inte fanns*, Elina is depicted as loving magical stories: her sister, Irma, borrows a book of fairy tales for her and Elina learns to read in Swedish by reading these stories. In the mire, however, her storying takes another turn.

Elina comes to the mire to deal with her bereavement; she feels the presence of her father's spirit there. As Kuokkanen explains, for the Sámi, the land is "often addressed directly, as if they were relatives. This close connection to the natural realm is evident also in the permeable and indeterminate boundaries between the human and natural worlds" (33). When Elina visits the mire with her father's spirit in mind, she generates stories about all the living spirits she senses there. In addition to

¹ "Det var inte lika lätt i dag som förut. Frosten hade gjort gräset styvt och det frasade svagt. Det var nödvändigt att inte skrämman bort de osynliga" (All translations from the novel are mine).

her father's spirit, she senses the presence of a cow that wandered into the mire and never returned, moving waters, and also several plants including a birch and fern, all of whom have personal names. She creates stories in which 'Blossoming Birch' and 'Troll Fern' become her companions, and 'Evil Lure' and 'Wicked Snake' form the antagonists. Elina is also renamed as Solveig in the mire. Johansson i Backe makes no attempt to use Finnish or Sámi names. The choice of 'Solveig'—a Norse name—suggests a desire to become part of the Swedish speaking world. One of the meanings of 'Solveig' is 'daughter of the sun', which aligns well with the idea of the idea that the sun is a father figure to the Sámi, as expressed in the award winning poetry, *Beaivi, Áhčážan* [The Sun, My Father] (1991) by Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. Unlike the plant spirits, the father spirit has no bodily form, but Elina's renaming may be part of seeking a connection to him as sunlight.

Of course, Elina knew that life on the mire was a game. But she also knew that it was more real than her life at school and at home. On the mire then she was herself. Although her name was Solveig there, she was herself. That's where she lived. Understood how everything was. Within her game was the truth. If she didn't have the mire, she would be nobody at all. (Johansson i Backe, 42)²

In Elina's imagination, the birch and fern are companions, and she orients herself towards the "Papa-place which was dry and smooth with the softest moss" (Johansson i Backe 7).³ In short, the plants are recognised as having their own spirits, and her friendships with these spirits are "riktigare" [more real] than her relationships with her living family members and human community in the school (Johansson i Backe 42).

The meshing between the worlds of the living and the dead in the Sámi perception—as in the Midber's illustrations of the Lilli books—comes very close to the reality of the Sphagnum mosses' way of being. Kimmerer describes the way living and dead cells intermesh in the plant's cells as follows:

The asymmetric ration of 1:20 between living and dead cells in a single plant in mirror in the structure of the entire bog. Most of the bog is dead, unseen. A *Sphagnum* bog is made of two levels, the deep dead peat and the thin surface of living mosses. ... the dead cells wicking water up from the depths, carrying it to the living layer above. (Kimmerer 120-121)

The 'dead' cells are the source of life for the sphagnum, just as our dead ancestors are the source of our own lives. Kimmerer's description of the healthy working relationship between the living and the dead cells of the Sphagnum bog is analogous to the healthy relationship between the living and dead ancestors in the Sámi world view.

² "Nog visste Elina att livet på myren var en lek. Men hon visste också att det var riktigare än livet där i skolan och hemma. På myren då var hon sig själv. Fast hon hette Solveig där, så var hon sig själv. Det var där hon levde. Förstod hur allting var. Inne i hennes lek fanns det sanna. Om hon inte hade myren skulle hon vara ingen alls."

³ "pappa-platsen som var torr och len med mjukaste mossor."

Ove Kåven (2019) opens up the qualities of relations between the living and the dead in a blog post in which he describes the spirit of a deceased ancestor reaching out to him. The ancestor in question—Johan Kaaven—had considerable power which came to him from the spirit world. Not all his powers were good, and the spirit was troubled. Kåven, who was highly sceptical about the existence of the spirit worlds prior to his encounter with his forefather describes the combination of burden and gift that comes from accepting the legacy: “Whoever receives these powers will also receive an enormous burden; not only must he handle the responsibilities and risks of the powers themselves, but also the weight of the sins of their previous owner” (n.p.). Elina’s father is not portrayed as having powers or sins like Johan Kaaven, but she is taking on more adult responsibilities in his absence. As the eldest child, she is expected to take on many duties in the home—preparing meals, harvesting potatoes, cleaning, and caring for her three younger siblings—tasks that were her mother’s until her father’s death. While Elina’s mother endeavours to earn money to make up for the loss of her husband’s income, Elina takes over from her mother while trying to keep up with her schoolwork in another language. Connecting so closely with the spirit of her father prevents her from living well in the “thick present” (Haraway 1). She cuts herself off from the world of living humans, reorganizing her routines and psychic space to come into closer contact with the vegetal world. In this way, I suggest, she lives her life as compost.

Living as Compost

Elina’s capacity for living-as-compost results in actions that directly nurture the mire, thereby participating in the web of reciprocity, not merely taking but also giving in her relationship to the living, breathing land. On her journey to the mire at the beginning of the story, Elina looks at the autumnal leaves on the ground and spies a particularly beautiful one.

She picked up a large golden leaf and carried it with her. Elina looked at the sensitive nerves. Leaves are more beautiful than people, she thought. It was perfect and well formed. The leaf could have a home in the mire. Perhaps it would yearn for its own tree, but it had already fallen to the ground. It would never return to its own branch. But out on the, no, within the mire it could be. Become one with the mire. Rest under the blanket of snow all winter. Become one with the soil. Merge. She would put it next to the Papa-place. His spirit would rejoice. (Johansson i Backe 5)⁴

Note how the description of the leaf positions it as compost: it has been part of the lived world of its tree, but now its purpose is to become one with the mire and, in doing so, feed the next generation of plants. This understanding connects all living

⁴ “Hon tog upp ett stort guldgult blad och bar det med sig. Elina tittade på de känsliga nerverna. Löv är vackrare än människor, tänkte hon. Så ordentligt och fint tecknad det var. Lövet skulle få bo på myren. Det skulle Kanske längta till sitt eget träd, men det hade ju redan fallit till marken. Upp till sin egen gren kunde det aldrig komma. Men ute, nej inne i myren skulle det få vara. Bli ett med myren. Få vila under snötäcket hela vintern. Få multna. Sammansmältas. Hon skulle lägga det bredvid pappa-platsen. Hans ande skulle glädjas.”

things and acknowledges a sense of purpose. Living and dead are not separate, but rather parts of the assemblage associated with that place. Elina is bringing the gift of food to the mire.

Elina brings the leaf to the “Papa-place” where she feels the strongest connection to her father’s spirit. She then engages in a narrative in which she acknowledges the presence of Onda Loran (Evil Lure): “Evil Lure had his abode in the Dangerous. The Bottomless” (Johansson i Backe 9).⁵ Unlike the plant actors in the mire, Onda Loran lacks a definable body. Like them, he takes a human pronoun—‘he’—not the non-human pronoun, ‘it’. Onda Loran’s formlessness suggests that he is not an individual plant, but rather some kind of spirit, perhaps the collective spirit of the mire. He functions as a force that tempts living creatures—such as a cow belonging to Elina’s neighbour—into the Bottomless. Within the mire, Onda Loran steals milk from the cow (called White Lily in Elina’s world), and gives it to Wicked Snake: a narrative that connects Elina’s world of the mire with the Biblical teachings she receives in school and in her community. At the end of the scene, the leaf shines brightly to show her father’s appreciation, which supports the idea that she senses her father’s spirit in the sunlight.

“I’ll help you out, White Lily”, whispered Elina...

Elina laid the small branch mat over the black ant hole. Wedged it under the soft tufts of grass.

“That’s better”, she said and jumped nimbly backwards. She felt the tufts sway beneath her. Quickly, she fled to the Papa-place which felt safe. The golden yellow leaf shone brightly. Papa’s spirit had liked it. (Johansson i Backe 9)⁶

In Elina’s mire world, the cow feeds the waters with its milk. In reality, the decomposing body of the cow is slowly being released into waters of the mire. The mire is positioned as predatory—it *lures* Elina and the cow. At the same time, Elina and the cow are positioned as becoming the compost that nurtures the mire.

Elina’s actions (as Solveig) in this scene involve providing vegetal matter that feeds the compost in the form of a leaf and by weaving a small mat of twigs which she places over an ant-hole. The twig weaving is intended to help the cow’s spirit escape, while its body feeds the mire. Such a construction would not prevent ants from moving, but it does suggest that she regards the ants as moving between the lands of the dead and the lands of the living, between the spirit world and the world in which she lives as a becoming ancestor. Ants would be unlikely to welcome a structure like a woven mat of twigs, but they might well recycle such matter to produce their own architecture.

⁵ “Onda Loran hade sitt tillhåll vid det farliga. Det Bottenlösa.”

⁶ “- Jag ska nog hjälpa dig ut, Vita Lilja, viskade Elina...

Elina la den lilla grenmattan över det sura svarta myrhålet. Kilade fast den under de mjuka grästuvorna.

- Nu så, sa hon och hoppade kvickt bakåt. Kände hur tuvornas toppar gungade under henne. Flydde raskt till pappa-platsen som kändes trygg. Det guldgula lövet lyste grant. Pappas ande hade gillat det.”

Ants play a vital role in the production of forests, breaking down vegetal and animal matter to produce environments in which fungi, bacteria, mosses and lichen can produce the compost which sustains life on the planet (Cross). Their nests are built by burrowing into the ground, as well as by collecting debris from the forest, much of which they masticate to create their own architecture. They avoid wetlands which would flood the foundations of the anthill. In terms of a realistic portrayal of Arctic mires, the anthill in Elina's mire does not fit. The presence of the plant characters Blommande Björken [Blossoming Birch] and Troll-Feren [Troll-Fern] and—to an even greater extent—an anthill indicate that the Papa-place is a small island where the soil is deep enough to support humans and remain dry.

If we try to make sense of Elina's actions as an expression of human relations with the mire, it indicates that the Papa-place is effectively an island of solid soil matter that can be reached by jumping tuft to tuft across the wetter areas. "You had to know how to jump between the tufts correctly. Light and soft. If you fell between the tufts, you were dead" (Johansson i Backe 9).⁷ Reaching the Papa-place involves risking death. Arrival indicates sanctuary. The boundaries between the two worlds are not absolute.

Readers are told that visitors only come to the mire to pick cloudberry. Cloudberry grows in the loose, damp soil on the edges of mires. The ground around a cloudberry is rarely strong enough to fully support an adult, so one must wear long boots when picking them. Equally, they do not grow in the wettest areas, so the risk of becoming dangerously trapped beside cloudberry is minimal. The visitors do not jump between the tufts, and they do not offer anything to the mire. They regard it as a place to exploit for its riches (cloudberry), and regard the Papa-place simply as a suitable site for a picnic.

The mire was her place. All her own. Except for a week or so when the cloudberry were ripe. A few berry pickers would sometimes come then. But they did not understand the mire. They just picked the berries. ... [They didn't see] the Papa-place which was dry and smooth with the softest moss. They just thought the Papa-place was a good place to eat their packed lunches. When the strangers came, then the invisible ones stayed away. (Johansson i Backe 7)⁸

Cloudberry contains seeds that pass through the digestive tract, so in this way the visitors might be considered as becoming compost. However, unlike other animals who eat the berries, humans are unlikely to leave the seeds in a place that is suitable for the plant to germinate. Cloudberry can also disseminate by growing from the root, but this does not allow them to colonise new areas. The visitors do not live as compost or engage in reciprocal gift-giving: they take resources, but do not feed the mire.

⁷ "Det gällde att hoppa rätt på tuvorna. Lätt och mjukt. Kom man emellan tuvorna var man Dödens."

⁸ "Myren var hennes plats. Alldeles hennes egen. Utom någon vecka då hjortronen var mogna. Då kunde det ibland komma några bärplockare. Men de förstod sig inte på myren. De plockade bara bären ... [De såg inte] pappa-platsen som var torr och len med mjukaste mossor. De trodde bara att pappa-platsen var ett bra ställe att äta matsäcken på. När de främmande kom, då höll sig de osynliga undan."

Meshing the Worlds of the Living and the Dead

The Papa-place is generated from the meshing of living and dead worlds of the mire, but rises above the waters to form a haven for humans, ants and vascular plants. However, living as compost entails certain risks. In the main narrative, Elina is treated as though she doesn't exist by her teacher (hence the title of the novel). Effectively, the teacher treats her as though she were dead. She finds this so distressing, that she leaves school and runs to the mire in search of solace. She briefly encounters her former teacher, Einar and his wife, Yvonne, who are out picking mushrooms. Yvonne is surprised that the locals don't pick mushrooms, which helps her realise that Elina has no logical reason for being out in the mire. (This is botanically nonsensical: edible mushrooms do not grow in mires. But it serves the plot to have a vegetally-aware character notice the threat to Elina's life.) She and Einar discover that Elina has fallen into the mire and is drowning. Einar holds her afloat while Yvonne runs for help. While they are waiting, Elina explains how she came to be trapped in the mire to Einar: "I was tricked by the Troll-Fern. And by the papa spirit. They are out here on the mire. I'm usually here. They were the ones who wanted me to come" (Johansson i Backe 125).⁹

From the sphagnum moss' point a view, a human stepping over their surface assists the breakdown of dead matter, but it also damages the living plant cells. Moss is not generally considered as one of the carnivorous plants, but it feeds on nutrients which can be found in both plant and animal life, albeit very slowly.

A side effect of the slow decomposition is that minerals bound up in living things are not easily recycled in a bog. They persist in peat as complex organic molecules that most plants can't absorb. ... Nitrogen is in especially short supply, but some bog plants have evolved special adaptations to deal with this limitation: eating bugs. Bogs are the exclusive homes for insectivorous plants like sundews, pitcher plants, and Venus flytraps. (Kimmerer 120)

If a nutrient rich human falls into the mire and starts damaging the food supply, is it not reasonable from the plants' perspectives to regard them as an alternative source of food?

Kimmerer notes that most bog plants cannot absorb minerals easily. However, the spirits that lure Elina into becoming compost fodder belong to the fern and to her father: the plants of the island that is emerging from the bog. Many plants—such a grass and evergreens—benefit from fertilizers such as bone-meal and blood. Ferns dislike high levels of nitrogen, but slowly decomposing animal-matter in a bog provides an excellent source of food. The Papa-place is home to Blossoming Birch, a tree that benefits from the phosphorus found in bone meal. However, Elina claims that she was tricked, which suggests that she is not willing to become part of the mire permanently. She resolutely clings to Einar, and to life refusing to become part of the mire.

⁹ "Jag blev lurad av Troll-Feren. Och av papa-anden. De finns här ute på myren. Jag brukar vara här. Det var de som ville att jag skulle komma."

In the assemblage described in *Som om jag inte fanns*, the sphagnum's water retention has generated an ecosystem in which it can thrive by making use of its extraordinary capacity for retaining water, even in death. When it finally decays, it produces peat. Unlike mosses, the higher order plants like the birch and fern use roots to draw moisture from the soil. They cannot take root in the waterlogged areas where the living mosses are abundant, but they can take root when the mosses decay to the point that the soil contains air. The plants growing in these tufts and islands make use of the slow leeching properties of the bog, as they feed on the slowly decaying plant and animal matter. Elina brings plant matter that helps the Papa-place reduce its acidity and fosters the growth of rooted plants. But, by staying so close to her father, Elina is unable to plant roots that connect her to the living world of her mother and siblings. She becomes part of the compost, only held back by a teacher who recognises her value in the human world.

Concluding Remarks: Imagining Life as Compost

Children's literature set in the Arctic has a long tradition of celebrating children's close connection with 'nature', typically expressed as some generalised whole that encompasses landscape, seasonal change, animal and bird life, rarely paying attention to the specificities of such encounters, unless it is to dominate (e.g. lassoing reindeer). Plants have mostly been treated as passive elements of the setting and/or as symbolic reflections on what is happening in the lives of the child characters. Sámi children have largely been exoticized, their ethnic heritage reduced to traditional clothing, reindeer herding, fishing and music (Conrad). *Som om jag inte fanns*, avoids such simplifications.

Elina embraces the individual plants she knows in the mire as autonomous beings who live their own lives. Each time she arrives at the Papa-place, the plants and the spirit of her father tell her what has happened during her absence. She contributes to the formation of soil in which rooted plants can survive by bringing decaying vegetal matter. She knows how to navigate jumping lightly on the tufts of grass growing on mounds of dead plant matter across the waterlogged sphagnum. She recognises the presence of dead matter—her father, the cow, leaves—as parts of world in which she lives.

Elina knows that the stories she tells herself on the mire are unreal on one level, but they fill her needs more readily than her life at school or at home. Her storytelling activities mediate the alterity of the mire, recognises its intelligence. In *Radical Botany. Plants and Speculative Fiction*, Meeker and Szabari propose that plants “compel us to imagine an ingeniously animated and animating matter that we are never able to observe in all its operations” (2). Like Haraway, who suggests storying, Meeker and Szabari present the kinds of storying activities in which Elina engages as a means of mediating a profoundly different form of intelligence.

The fact that our relationship to plants is of necessity highly mediated (even as they remain co-participants with us in the assemblages of life) and that our attempts to

understand them as analogous to us are regularly unsuccessful means that plants inspire speculative activity in our efforts to think with them. (Meeker and Szabari 16)

Living as compost—which Elina models—brings with it the responsibility for nurturing relationships with plant lives, and a recognition that we are future ancestors. However, the novel also warns readers that Elina’s endeavours to think with the plants on the mire leads her to risk her life. Unlike the sphagnum, we cannot directly feed on our ancestors, and such direct, reciprocal relations are dangerous. Understanding the sphagnum’s incorporation of dead matter into living matter as directly analogous to Sámi understandings of the meshing of the worlds of the living and the dead is one way of thinking with the moss. In the story context, acting upon this belief endangers Elina’s life. However, as a speculative activity, it opens up a new way of engaging with vegetal intelligences.

By storying with plants and with her ancestors, Elina addresses her bereavement, and regains her sense of selfhood after it has been questioned by her teacher. Up until the point she offers herself as fodder for the mire to feed upon, the relationship is nurturing and reciprocal. Elina, the individual plants and waters of the mire, and her father’s spirit “become with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff” in an “earthly worlding and unworlding” in which all participants have a purposeful role (Haraway 97). Ultimately, the speculative activity of thinking with plants breaks down, becoming part of the storying compost from which we can build new relations with the vegetal world.

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