

Where the Ground Answers the Foot: Kerstin Ekman, Ecology, and the Sense of Place in a Globalized World

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The numerous interrelated and complex narrative strands in Kerstin Ekman's 1993 novel *Händelser vid vatten* [*Blackwater*], span almost twenty years and circle around a tract of forest outside a small village in Northern Sweden. This forested place in the novel was at one point in the story referred to as Stjärnberg [Starhill], but because of the dramatic changes that take place, in the end it is referred to simply as "Ytan" ["the Area"].¹ The change in name suggests how little was left to connect this space to the previous associations it had for a variety of communities, both human and non-human.

While there are certainly organisms still inhabiting Ytan, the cold abstraction of the name suggests its relative barrenness and sterility compared to what it was before it was clear-cut. And even though the forest around Ytan eventually began to recover, "Ytan hade inte blivit skog. Den var mossig, det fanns till och med fläckar av bärris. Bland långvuxet björkkrott hade här och där en tallplanta överlevt, vanställd av snön, av älgarna och stormen" (Ekman, *Händelser* 435) ["the Area had not become forest. It was mossy and even had patches of berry scrub. In among the low birch thicket, here and there a spruce plant had survived, deformed by the snow, elk, and storms" (Ekman, *Blackwater* 403)]. The inability of this place to regenerate suggests the difficulty of re-connecting with the ecological networks from which it was torn. The pillaging of the forest facilitated by both mechanical and rational technologies effectively disrupted both the ecological and anthropological meanings associated with this space—the very meanings that for its human visitors made the space a place.

The descriptions of Ytan in *Händelser vid vatten* are not only focused on the implications of ecologically destructive acts, they also explore how such actions impact human consciousness, identity, and the ways in which individuals interact with, define, and relate to the physical environment. In this novel by one of Sweden's most prominent authors, the representation of ecological interrelatedness serves as a model for understanding both natural ecosystems as well as human dwelling in the world in that it explores how human subjects inhabit space and intertwine it with language and memory to produce meaning. The sense of place that Ekman's characters develop in the novel emerges from a confluence of their own experiences in the space, the facts of their own biological and sociological existence, and the cultural-linguistic baggage they bring with them. Ekman's novel presents this convergence in the subject as essentially ecological in that these factors are interconnected and are constructing and simultaneously being constructed by the physical environment. Of particular interest for

¹ All translations are taken from Joan Tate's published translation of *Händelser vid vatten* entitled *Blackwater*. All other translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

this analysis will be how *Händelser vid vatten* develops the idea of nature and of place in the modern world and even more specifically how a contemporary sense of place depends both on a familiarity with the immediate physical environment as well as on an awareness of geographies that transcend the local and point toward the global.²

Stjärnberg/Ytan is one of the clear examples of how place is constructed in the novel and its descriptions suggest ways in which Ekman's implied ecological models are linked to the understanding of place both as a linguistic construction and as a material reality. For example, the human involvement in this place before the clear-cutting—when it was still known as Stjärnberg—was embodied in a network of paths that traversed the space and inscribed memory and meaning to it.

Det hade gått en stig här. Ja—gått. Stigen började gå då gräs böjde sig. Sommar efter sommar. Med sulorna och klövarna och tyngden upprepades den handling som blåbärsriset till slut lärde sig och vek undan för.

Ett nät av stigar, gångådror, minneskär!—finare och finare ut i granskogsmarkens spetsar mot myrarna och fjällhedarna.

Minnas ända ut i stenskravlet. Inte förlora sig. Minnas med fötterna. Inte med en sjuk svulst som heter längtan och förmerar bilder vilt och grovt och skevt. Nej fotminne, benminne. Tjädertuppens grova skitkorvar—av barr, på barr—under en stortalls krona som han slitit med näbben. (Ekman, *Händelser* 435)

A path had once run there. The path began to run when the grass bent over. Summer after summer. Soles and hooves and the weight they carried repeated the action. The bilberry scrub finally learned and retreated.

A network of paths, walking veins, memory vessels—finer and finer out into the headlands of spruce forests toward the marshes and mountain heaths.

Remembering right out into the stony scree. Not getting lost. Remembering with your feet. Not with a sick tumor called longing that reproduces images wildly and crudely and crookedly. No, foot memories, leg memories. The capercaillie's coarse droppings—of pine needles, on pine needles—below a large pine top he had ripped at with its beak. (Ekman, *Blackwater* 403)

The memory embodied in the paths is not a simple romantic nostalgia or reactionary longing for an essentialized, lost, Edenic nature. Rather, the *fotminne* [foot memory] and *benminne* [leg memory] that interests Ekman is a type of collectively held memory emerging out of direct experience with a dynamic, evolving topography and ecosystem. The sense of a place is not willed unilaterally upon the landscape but emerges out of a relationship where “marken svara[r] foten” (Ekman, *Händelser* 436) [“the ground respond(s) to the foot” (Ekman, *Blackwater* 404)]. Recognition of the temporal dimension of the construction of place negates the need to discover origins and essences and refocuses attention on sensation and the type of embedded interdependence and reciprocity suggested here by the figure of the capercaillie. Place is produced as an interaction of human experience and material environment.

² While this study focuses on Ekman's *Händelser vid vatten*, it should be noted that Ekman returned to the fictionalized town of Blackwater in her later trilogy *Vargskinnet* [The Wolfskin] (1999-2003) to further develop the interconnections between place and history.

This introduction is, of course, only a small snapshot of a long and complex novel, but it does point to some of the central ideas and motifs relating ecology, space, and place. Specifically, *Händelser vid vatten* explores an ecological model of ontology in which elements are intricately interconnected in myriad ways that question, among other things, the construction of place and the role of both materiality and place in an increasingly mobile, technologically mediated, and globalized world. My purpose here is to consider Ekman's model(s) of ecological interdependence in dialogue with the theoretical discussions of space and place that have emerged in recent decades particularly as it pertains to defining place as a complex interplay of the local and the global.

In *Händelser vid vatten*, the decidedly human propensities for naming, narrating, manipulating, and constructing space are counterbalanced by an experience of materiality and the natural environment's ultimate indifference to human activity. While the novel has the ostensibly linear form of a murder mystery, the characters' own encounters with the physical environment, realization of reciprocal relationships, and embodied experience of competing, interlocking narratives thwart progression towards a resolution of the mystery. The novel's network of competing narratives and names are like the network of paths that once crossed Stjärnberg in that they tend to frustrate a stable epistemological project by lacking clear linearity. The effect is to focus readers' attention on how space is produced as a means of understanding the diffuse subject's being in the world; this sense of place forms through the interplay of complex material and discursive networks and it ultimately emerges out of a tension between the constructed and the found, the subjective and the objective, the embodied and the abstract, and the local and the global.

Before proceeding further, it will be useful to provide an overview of some of the theorization of place and how it relates to the ecological discourses at work in Ekman's novel. The definition of place, as many have noted, is notoriously difficult to pin down because it can refer on the one hand to a space as small as a corner or to something as vast as the whole planet. Furthermore, unlike the notion of space, place cannot be measured abstractly or objectively but is grounded in subjective experience of some form or another. It always has "both an objective and subjective face, pointing outward toward the tangible world and inward to the perceptions one brings to it" (Buell, *Endangered World* 59). Place is a space that a subject has delimited in some way and to which the subject has attributed some type of meaning. It exists in contrast to other spaces and, as such, it must be understood contextually and as a part of a network of relations linking both a subject and an object.

Edward Casey's book, *The Fate of Place*, considers the historical variability of the idea of place and how it has related to the "putative absolutes" of space and time. Writes Casey,

[b]eginning with Philoponus in the sixth century A.D. and reaching an apogee in fourteenth-century theology and above all in seventeenth-century physics, place has been assimilated to space.[...] Place came to be considered a mere 'modification' of space (in Locke's revealing term)—a modification that aptly can be called 'site,' that is,

leveled-down, monotonous *space for* building and other human enterprises. To make matters worse, in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries place was also made subject to time, regarded as chronometric and universal, indeed as ‘the formal *a priori* condition of all appearance whatsoever’ in Kant’s commanding phrase.[...] Place, reduced to location between which movements of physical bodies occur, vanished from view almost altogether in the era of temporocentrism (i.e., a belief in the hegemony of time) that has dominated the last two hundred years of philosophy. (x)

The historically recent dominance of the idea of space over place has been fueled by various appeals to universalist discourses of religion, science, ethics, and politics alike. Whereas place is constructed out of specificity and context, space has the appeal of an abstract universality. Casey continues stating that “[i]n our own [twentieth] century, investigations and politics continue to be universality in aspiration—to the detriment of place, considered merely parochial in scope. Treatments of logic and language often are still more place-blind, as if speaking and thinking were wholly unaffected by the locality in which they occur” (xii).

Part of what has propelled the evolution noted by Casey in the philosophical discussion of place has been the remarkable developments in various technologies that have radically altered core conceptions of time and place. These technologies have also facilitated “the cataclysmic events of world wars, which have acted to undermine any secure sense of abiding place [...]; the forced migrations of entire peoples, along with continual drifting on the part of many individuals, suggesting that the world is nothing but a scene of endless displacement; the massive spread of electronic technology which makes irrelevant *where you are* so long as you can link up with other users of the same technology” (Casey xiii, emphasis in the original). Globalization is the general term used to describe this historically unique experience.

Anthony Giddens echoes Casey’s basic argument about the effects of modernization and globalization on traditional configurations of place stating, “[t]he advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between ‘absent’ others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction.” Thus “place becomes increasingly *phantasmagoric*: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them” (Giddens 18-19).

The effects of this devaluation of place are varied and extensive. One particularly important consideration for this study is how a loss of a sense place can lead to the abuse of the natural environment. When a subject lacks an understanding of the impact of decisions and actions, the potential for abuse is heightened as effects can be hidden, true costs are externalized or deferred, and the unique specificity of place is trumped by the interchangeability of location made possible by various technologies. Given this fact, it is by no means surprising that, as Ursula Heise points out, many of the environmentalist discourses emerging from the 1960s and 70s were (and still are) particularly committed to a return to the local and “a celebration of a ‘sense of place’” (8) even if history has shown repeatedly that this idealized sense of place in no way guarantees greater environmental stewardship.

The discussion thus far may seem to have cast modernity's embrace of space in a negative light focusing on globalization's tendency to replace the concrete and the local with the universal and the phantasmagoric leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. But clearly, the separation of space from place and the creation of "non-places" by modernity have also had distinct advantages. As Marc Augé suggests, "Ce qui est significatif dans l'expérience du non-lieu, c'est sa force d'attraction, inversement proportionnelle à l'attraction territoriale, aux pesanteurs du lieu et de la tradition" (*Non-Lieux* 147) ["What is significant in the experience of non-place is its power of attraction, inversely proportional to territorial attraction, to the gravitational pull of place and tradition" (*Non-Places* 118)]. Highways, airports, hospitals, offices, and malls—examples of a few of the non-places considered by Augé—are, after all, designed for efficiency and convenience and focused on facilitating mobility precisely divorced from the entanglements that a traditional sense of place would involve. Indeed, Western society has come to depend upon these non-places to the extent that "l'expérience du non-lieu (indissociable d'une perception plus ou moins claire de l'accélération de l'histoire et du rétrécissement de la planète) est aujourd'hui une composante essentielle de toute existence sociale" (Augé, *Non-Lieux* 148-49) ["some experience of non-place (indissociable from a more or less clear perception of the acceleration of history and the contraction of the planet) is today an essential component of all social existence" (*Non-Places* 119)]. For Augé, non-places have become "[pourtant] la mesure de l'époque" (*Non-Lieux* 101) ["the real measure of our time" (*Non-Places* 79)].

The devaluation of place and the proliferation of non-places can be seen as a liberation of the subject. By focusing on the ways in which identification with place has been co-opted by essentialist discourses such as various forms of nationalism and racism, displacement in modernity is recast in the potentially more positive terms of "transnationalism" and "cosmopolitanism" where rootlessness and independence from a sense of place are empowering. Theorizations about the transnational condition have helped to show that even though the unreflective devotion to place is a source of cultural identity, as Ursula Heise writes, there is nothing natural or given about an identification to place (especially the nation) because such attachments are "on the contrary established, legitimized, and maintained by complex cultural practices and institutions" (6). In fact, delimitating space—necessary for creating a sense of place—can in the very act have negative environmental impacts especially if the provisionality of these delimitations is forgotten and occludes an underlying ecological complexity. In considering the question of geopolitical borders, for example, Lawrence Buell writes, "To think 'environmentally' or 'ecologically' requires thinking 'against' or 'beyond' nationness [...] Seldom do jurisdictional borders correspond to ecological borders.[...] 'the oldest form of globalization' is environmental rather than economic or political. Species have been migrating ever since life on earth began" ("Ecoglobalist Affects" 227).

The advantages of the devaluation of place can be measured in terms of an increase in commerce, convenience, the broader dissemination of information, the potential for a better understanding of large-scale natural systems, and a re-evaluation of the essentialist discourses constructing identity. However, all of these potential benefits are counterbalanced by prospective costs. For instance, individuals and communities without grounding in place must confront the challenges of developing a meaningful identity in some other way that orients them and gives them a sense of sameness through time. Other discourses offer no greater guarantee to be freer from ideological influence than that of the jettisoned place-based discourses. Furthermore, the emptied out non-places of modernity and the loss of familiarity with local ecosystems can lead to feelings of estrangement and a reactionary nostalgia for a sense of belonging and rootedness that might resist modernity's threat to melt everything solid into air. Detachment from one's immediate environment can also lead to a startling lack of sensitivity to natural processes and rhythms and a fundamental misunderstanding of the unique qualities of a specific ecosystem and one's own relationship to it. This alienation can then lead to the subsequent misappropriation and abuse of resources alluded to earlier. Not surprisingly, many environmentalist movements have venerated an idealized view of indigenous cultures' connection to place in calls for the drifting modern subject to "get back" to nature.

An influential example of a nostalgic, place-based discourse in the Swedish cultural context is found in the cultural production of the Scandinavian National Romantics of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. These authors, poets, and artists left an indelible stamp on Swedish culture that has endured to the present day particularly in regards to the representation of the nature and landscape of the North. Verner von Heidenstam, a prominent author in this fin-de-siècle group, famously captures this veneration of place in his poem "Ensamhetens tankar" from the collection *Vallfart och vandringsår* (1888) [Pilgrimage and Wandering Years]. In this poem he proclaims,

Jag längtar hem. Jag längtar var jag går
—men ej till människor! Jag längtar marken,
jag längtar stenarna där barn jag lekt. (Heidenstam 108)

I long for home. I long everywhere I go
—but not for people! I long for the earth,
I long for the stones where I played as a child.

His longing in the poem stems precisely from his mobility as implied by both the poetic voice's distance from "home" as well as the idea of pilgrimage and wandering indicated in the title of the collection. Significantly, the poet's longing, however, is not directed at other humans or to human culture per se but to the perceived stony and static materiality of an environment he experienced as a child. The imagined solidity of the place is contrasted with the ephemerality of human relationships and cosmopolitan culture. Place, in this configuration, is imagined to stand outside of human history and culture and, indeed, Heidenstam seems to overlook entirely how culture contributes at all to the

construction of place. Instead, a heightened and almost intuitive sense of place is suggested as an antidote for what is lost by modernity's mobility and transnationalist aspirations. Heidenstam's landscape is an essentialized view of a unique Nordic nature existing completely independent of human culture and, ironically, only made apparent because of the mobility facilitated by human technology.

But a contemporary audience may have divided feelings for what seems to be at stake in Heidenstam's text. On the one hand, his faith in a definition of place and the ability of the natural landscape to reveal itself in its essence to the human subject seems naïve while, on the other hand, his attempt to recognize the physical environment's influence on the subject and its more-than-human qualities seems nonetheless valuable. In the face of contemporary ecological disasters—many being anthropogenic—the importance of recognizing human embeddedness in natural systems and vulnerability to the physical environment has never been greater. The challenge is to understand how place and nature are culturally constructed while at the same time remaining open to the presence and influence of the more-than-human world. Kerstin Ekman's 1991 novel, *Händelser vid vatten*, is significant in how it juxtaposes these two ideas through its counterbalancing of idealized indigeneity and recognition of the advantages of contemporary culture's dependence on global cosmopolitanism.

The central problem Ekman's novel identifies with the nostalgia articulated by Heidenstam is that although such discourses resist the devaluation of meaning and place they often do so by neglecting to recognize their own participation and dependence upon the very conditions they criticize. Whether it is a belief in the power of indigenous nature to form national character or an environmentalist's desire to return to an original state of nature, Ekman warns that both forms of environmental fundamentalism ignore the entanglement of the subject within natural systems and within human economies and discursive practices.

This problem of longing for rootedness is illustrated in the novel by the experience of Johan Brandberg and his attempts to ground his own personal identity in a fantasy of indigenous Sámi origins.³ Johan was born to a Sámi woman named Gudrun and a Swedish man named Torsten with whom he has always had a strained relationship. Because of the animosity between him and his father, Johan convinces himself that his real father is not Torsten but rather Oula Laras, a Sámi man with tangential connections to Gudrun's family. His belief that he is ethnically full Sámi allows him to distance himself from his own history and from the colonizing culture he holds accountable for destroying Sámi culture and the environment. This fantasy was encouraged by the years he spent living away from home with his aunt, Sakka, who unlike his mother was active in trying to embrace and preserve Sámi culture.

But Johan's mother Gudrun finds Johan and her sister's attempts to resurrect Sámi culture repulsive and disingenuous. "Jag tål inte att dom håller på och samlar ihop

³ The Sámi are an indigenous ethnic group living in the northern provinces of Scandinavia and on the Kola Peninsula in Russia. The Sámi language and culture are distinct from surrounding European traditions and the traditional lifestyle has been geared around the herding of reindeer.

jojkar och allt vad det är. Lulla, lulla, lulla” [“I can’t stand the way people are now collecting the Sami songs and all that. Singing and singing and singing”], she says to Johan. “Vet du vad det är och [sic] vara fattig, Johan? [...] Nejdu Johan. Inga gamla offerplatser. Det var inte vad man gick och tänkte på. *Utan elektriskt!* Och mönsterstickad jumper och rostfri diskbänk. Till och med din moster Sakka drömde svenka drömmar” (Ekman, *Händelser* 458) [“Do you know what it means to be poor, Johan? (...) Oh, no, Johan. No ancient places of sacrifice. That isn’t what we went around thinking about. But electricity! And patterned sweaters and a stainless-steel sink. Even your aunt Sakka dreamed Swedish dreams” (*Blackwater*425)]. Later she continues,

Nostalgi heter det, det har jag lärt mig. Den är bra för kulturmänniskor. Dom som skriver och dansar och står i. Men renägarna driver hjordarna med skotrar nu. Det är faktiskt inte samisk kultur. Det är rätt. Det är svenskt. Dom spanar och driver med helikopter och flyttar djuren till sommarbeteslandet med långtradare. Dom lever ett annat liv nu. *Vi* lever ett annat liv. Men vi lever.[...]

—Dags att sluta med det nu då. Tacka du Torsten och skogsbilvägarna för det liv du har fått. Skolor och universitet och allting. Och att du fick bo hos Sakka och Per. Han har betalt varenda dag för dig. (*Händelser* 461-62)

Nostalgia, it’s called, so I’ve learned. That’s all right for cultured people. Those who write and dance and carry on. But the reindeer owners drive their herds with scooters these days. That’s not actually Sami culture. It’s crude. It’s Swedish. They search and drive with helicopters and move the creatures to summer grazing in long-distance trailers. They’re living another life now. We’re living another life. But we are alive. [...]

The time has come to stop now, then. Thank Torsten and the forest roads for the life you’ve been given. School and university and all. And that you were able to live with Sakka and Per. He has paid every day for you. (*Blackwater* 429-29)

Far from being genuine, Gudrun sees Sakka’s version of Sámi culture as a hybrid that *lacks* authenticity because it does not recognize the myriad ways in which Swedish and Sámi culture are now intertwined. Likewise, Johan learns from his mother just how deeply dependent he is and has always been on his father (and the destructive timber industry) whether he wishes to ignore that support or not.

The position Gudrun’s character articulates here should not be construed as Ekman’s final word about the value of preserving indigenous cultures. Elsewhere she has shown her strong support for it. Rather the position clearly illustrates the danger of thinking in essentialist categories and allowing nostalgia to obscure certain relationships in order to maintain the perceived purity of others. Furthermore, this myth of originality would have one prioritize genetics and literal bloodlines to the almost complete exclusion of the social and economic forces that created the categories of ethnicity and culture to begin with. To apply the same standard to the definition of place would be to claim that certain categories are essential to the definition of place regardless of a culture’s history or locality. While divisions such as urban and rural, nature and culture, and public and private seem fairly straightforward as basic ways to demarcate space in

contemporary western culture, any comparative analysis with other cultures or other moments in history suggest how contingent these categories in fact are and how dependent they are on specific social, economic, geographic, historical, and political contexts.

Johan's willingness to believe in the purity of his ethnically indigenous background and culture likewise runs parallel to Annie Raft's (the main protagonist) willingness to forsake her home and career in Stockholm for the supposed purity of a rural, communal life on Stjärnberget (eighteen years before the area is transformed into Ytan). From the moment Annie Raft and her daughter step off the bus in the small village of Svartvattnet in Northern Sweden they, like Johan, are forced to revise their idealistic conceptions of nature and landscape as a simple antidote for the ills of modern society. Like Johan's sense of Sámi culture, *nature* and *wilderness*, are to a significant degree a social construct that emerges as a response to specific social, economic, aesthetic, historical, and political situations. And despite the fact that they still carry a certain force insofar as people believe in them, actual attempts to isolate them in their pure instantiations are inevitably fraught if not altogether impossible.⁴

But just as one can go too far in a search for essences and origins, the novel likewise resists the notion put forth by some like David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre who have claimed that place is mainly, if not exclusively, a socio-cultural or linguistic construct. Harvey writes for instance, "Place, in whatever guise, is like space and time, a social construct.... The only interesting question that can then be asked is: by what social process(es) is place constructed?" (Harvey 293-94). For Ekman, Harvey's position clearly shoots past the mark. She does not deny the relevance and importance of how place, landscape, and nature are socially constructed, but neither does she want her readers to lose sight of the importance of the materiality of the place as a significant factor in the experience of it. Ekman's position is more closely aligned with Lawrence Buell who characterizes the debate about place as having an "epicenter ... between a still-dominant social constructionist view (the only way to make sense of place is to think of it as socially produced) and increasingly assertive rejoinders that argue for the importance of physiography and/or phenomenological experience of place." Buell continues by suggesting "no future theory of place can have much staying power unless it somehow incorporates all three dimensions [subjective, social, and material], recognizing in the process the malleability and contestedness of the concept" (*Endangered World* 60-61).

Ekman's position is clearly articulated in her 2007 book, *Herrarna i skogen* [The Lords in the Forest] in which she compares the use of the word *landskap/landscape* in the works of Swedish poet, essayist, and botanist Sten Selander with that of contemporary historian Simon Schama (specifically in Schama's book *Landscape and Memory*). Ekman writes,

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the cultural construction of nature and wilderness see William Cronon's essay "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature."

Skillnaden i synsätt mellan Schama och Selander beror på att de definierar begreppet landskap olika. Selander ser det som en naturgiven ursprunglighet, som våldsamt förändrats av människans utnyttjande av det. För Schama är landskapet en kulturell produkt. Inte ens vildmarken bestämmer sig själv; det är människan som lokaliserar och namnger den. När människan har upptäckt och beskrivit landskapet, inte minst i bild, har hon också uppfunnit det enligt Schama. Den viktigaste för hans framställning är hans beslut att inte låta oss sörja förändringarna eller känna skuld för dem.[...] Schama medger visserligen att det mänskliga inflytandet på den naturliga omgivningen inte varit "an unmixed blessing" men han anser inte att det existerar någon naturgiven ursprunglighet.

Selander menar med ordet landskap både det naturgivna och det av människan formade; vi har format det ursprungliga landskapet och gestaltat om det med svedjeland, åker och äng, hagmark, utdikad våtmark, byggen, återplanterad skog och nerbetade marker som blivit ljunghedar. Schamas landskap uppstår först under människans blick och är redan när det beskrivs som vildmark en kulturprodukt. (*Herrarna* 448-49)

The difference in perspective between Schama and Selander comes from different definitions of the idea of landscape. Selander sees it as a naturally given, primordial entity that is violently altered through its exploitation by humans. For Schama, landscape is a cultural product. Not even the wilderness defines itself; humans are the ones who locate and label it. When humans have discovered and described the landscape, even through images, they have invented it according to Schama. Most importantly for his argument is the decision not to allow us to mourn the changes or feel guilt for them. To be sure, Schama concedes, that the human influence on the natural environment has not been "an unmixed blessing" but he does not believe that there is any naturally given, primordial entity.

With the word landscape, Selander refers to both the natural and man-made; we have framed the original landscape and reshaped it with burn-beaten land, fields and meadows, pastures, drained wetlands, developed land, re-planted forests, and overgrazed land that has become heath. Schama's landscape first emerges with the human gaze and is already a product of culture when it is described as wilderness.

Perhaps an additional dimension to the discrepancy in the use of the word *landskap/landscape* stems from the fact that in Swedish it has both natural and cultural resonances, whereas in English it tends to be linked merely to cultural production. Nevertheless, Schama presents the idea of landscape as something always "format av den mänskliga blicken och av våra beskrivningar" (Ekman, *Herrarna* 449) [shaped by the human gaze and by our descriptions] without recognizing the resistance that the materiality of the landscape mounts to cultural colonization. Engagement with natural space, for him, is always a product of culture; the materiality of the place itself seems almost irrelevant.

According to Ekman, Schama not only refuses to acknowledge a materiality outside of cultural construction but he also fails to recognize the extreme separation from the natural world that his position implies. In his lack of remorse about what the natural world has lost because of human intervention, Schama cordons off nature as a separate and distinct realm from culture and refuses to recognize any type of reciprocal relationship or interrelated dependency between the two. Man is always the acting

subject and nature the object to be acted upon. In contrast to this view of nature, Ekman claims that “skiljelinjen mellan människan och det hon vill kalla natur egentligen inte finns” (*Herrarna* 451) [the difference between humans and what she calls nature does not really exist] or as Annie Raft is quoted as saying in the novel, “det finns ingenting som inte är natur. Vi är alla natur. Till och med de stora städerna ska brytas ner till stenbrott där örnar häckar och ödlor solar sig på murarna. Till djungler eller till granskog med hemlighetsfulla formationer” (*Händelser* 334) [“there’s nothing that is not nature. We are all nature. Even the big cities will be broken down into quarries where eagles nest and lizards sun themselves on the walls. Into jungles or secretive formations of spruce forest” (308)].

The point is that landscape and place are always ecological in the sense that place is always formed out of the interlocking relationships between found, material space and the cultural constructs projected onto that space by the subject. The one acts and depends upon the other much as organisms in an ecosystem. In other words, place is created where “marken svara[r] foten” (Ekman, *Händelser* 436) [“the ground repond(s) to the foot” (404)]; it exists both within a natural ecosystem and also within a discursive ecosystem and both systems are fundamentally interrelated.

Given Ekman’s apparent commitment to both these discursive as well as natural ecosystems, it is not surprising that *Händelser vid vatten* is critical of environmentalists and loggers alike and suggests that they have more in common than either would probably care to admit. Annie even says as much after having lived in Svartavatten for eighteen years:

Jag går här som Rousseau gick i S:t Germainskogen. Jag är dimmig av fantasier, dofter och skönhets syner. Poängen är att synerna står i motsats till den civilisation jag lever i. Jag söker ett alternativ. Det gör inte Per-Ola Brandberg när han kör en skogstraktor. Hans syner står inte i motsats till hans samhälle. Inte ens när han skrämmer opp en hare eller konstaterar att myltan börjar mogna.

Jag blir naturligtvis med tiden mer och mer hemma i det främmande precis som Per-Ola är hemma i sin misshandlade resurs. Men det är mina fantasier jag gör mig hemtam i och dom understöds av skogens vildhet och dofter. Per-Ola får understöd av ungefär samma företeelser. Men vilda skulle han inte kalla dom.

Vi är båda barn av vår tid och beroende av varandra, åtminstone jag av honom. Utan avverkning skulle byn vara obodd och jag skulle inte kunna leva ensam här och ha mina syner och fantasier. Det vore att go native vilket är nånting helt annat. Det har Björne Brandberg gjort och han tycks förlorad.[...]

Björne har helt enkelt gjort en helomvändning i tiden och gått bakåt in i gammart som han kallar det. Gammart gjorde ma så. Gammart tänkte ma, såg ma, förstog ma. Men det man förstod var ju att leva i sin tid och det förstår inte enslingen i kojan. (371-2)

I walk here as Rousseau did in the woods of St. Germain, dazed by fantasies, scents, and visions of beauty. The point is, my visions are the opposite of the civilization I live in. I’m seeking an alternative. Per-Ola Brandberg isn’t doing that as he drives his tractor. His visions are not in opposition to the society he lives in. Not even when he disturbs a hare or notices the cloudberries have started to ripen.

Naturally, in time I feel more and more at home in what is alien, just as Per-Ola feels at home in the resources he is abusing. But it is my fantasies that make me feel at

home, and they are reinforced by the wildness and scents of the forest. Per-Ola benefits from roughly the same things. But he wouldn't call them wild.

We are two children of our time and dependent on each other, at least I am on him. Without the felling, the village would be uninhabited and I wouldn't be able to live alone here to have my visions and fantasies. That would be going native and is something quite different. That's what Björne Brandberg has done and he seems to be lost. [...]

Björne has simply done an about-face in time and gone backward into the olden days, as he calls it. In the olden days people did such and such. In the olden days they thought, saw, understood.

But what they understood was how to live in their own time and the loner in the cabin doesn't understand that. (*Blackwater* 343-44)

The novel creates a suspicion of environmentalist positions that would criticize entities like the timber industry without simultaneously recognizing their own dependence on the resources and capital (including hospitals, schools, etc.) that the industry provides. And, of course—and this is crucial—the same criticism can be leveled at those working in the timber industry who fail to recognize how they are dependent upon the health of the ecosystems they exploit.

But by far the most dangerous assumptions, for Annie, are not those held by the clear-cutting loggers, but by those like Björne Brandberg who she sees as an example of someone who has “gone native” and totally withdrawn from society. His return to what he sees as the “olden days” is both naïve, and, as the novel ultimately suggests, even destructive. Annie admires his attempt to embed himself in the landscape, respect it, and learn from it, but his actions lack a crucial social dimension that make his attempts simultaneously highly solipsistic and misanthropic. Annie explains that, “[s]killnaden mellan kojenslingen och mig är att jag alltid går tillbaka till skolan på måndag morgon. Jag vet att mina försök att hitta ett alternativ är bristfälliga och att min uppgift är att lära skolbarn tänka” (*Händelser* 372) [“The difference between the loner in his cabin and me is that I always go back to school on Monday morning. I know my attempts at finding an alternative are imperfect, and that my job is to teach schoolchildren to think” (344)]. Whereas Björn's isolation leads him away from community and responsibility to other humans who are also part of the ecosystem, Annie's willful submersion in place helps her to regain perspective on society enhancing her Monday-morning efforts to teach school children to think and apply a critical eye to the behavior as ecological and discursive beings. She recognizes her continued connections to both place and society and while she is certainly not above questioning those ties she never severs them or lets the one obscure her dependence upon the other. She recognizes simply that “man kan inte leva i världen utan att leva av den” (*Händelser* 193) [“You cannot live in the world without living off it” (177)]. While many of the effects of globalization and the discourse that supports it are not ecologically desirable or sustainable it is nonetheless part of the planet's ecosystem and must be reckoned with.

In the end, however, Ekman's novel is not just ecological in highlighting the subject's interrelatedness with place but also environmental in that it argues for careful

stewardship. Everyone who participates in modern society is implicated in turning the forest into Ytan (*Händelser* 459); and the challenge is to work to mitigate those effects. But the strength of the novel's environmental argument is not a naïve denouncement of the timber industry or a call to return to a state of nature. Rather *Händelser vid vatten* resists facile or simplistic solutions that would lead the reader simply to overvalue materiality or discourse, indigenouness or globalization. It invites us to consider place as something that exists between subject and object, the system and the individual. It attaches meaning to place, but also suggests that we maintain a fundamental openness to the ways in which that definition has formed, changes, and evolves.

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