

# Reclaiming a Repressed World: Decolonizing the Human-Animal Relationship in Three Stories by Contemporary Sámi Author Kirsti Paltto

*Ann-Sofie Lönngren*

When the field of literary animal studies started to take shape, one of the first methodological issues addressed regarding literary interpretation was to question the general practice of viewing fictive animals primarily as metaphors for something else, for example, human emotions or desires. Instead, it was argued that literary depictions of animals should be understood according to the logic of metonymy, that is, as ‘real animals,’ leaving traces in the text for the reader to follow and interpret. This redirection of attention ultimately led to the conclusion that literary animals can be agents in the text, thus capable of affecting or even defining the course of events in a fictive story. Theoretically, these discussions were typically grounded in the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as Donna Haraway.<sup>1</sup> But these ideas are also remarkably similar to lines of thought to be found in the field of indigenous studies. Indeed, one of the fundamental pillars of indigenous ontologies is the presumption that the non-human world has agency,<sup>2</sup> an assumption that of course includes non-human animals, meaning that the human exceptionalism of Western colonial know-

<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Ann-Sofie Lönngren, “Metaphor, Metonymy, More-than-anthropocentric. The Animal that therefore I Read (and Follow),” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 23–50. Throughout this article, I mostly employ the terms “human” and “animal” as shorthand for the more accurate but longer phrase “human and non-human animals.” In this praxis I am inspired by Laura Brown’s *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes. Humans and Other Animals in the Modern Literary Imagination* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Lee Rosiek, Jimmy Snyder & Scott L. Pratt, “The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 3–4 (2020), 331–346.

ledge production and philosophy is undermined.<sup>3</sup> From the point of view of human-animal studies, these circumstances call for a mapping of the characteristics of these ontologies and of the role and accounts of animal agency within them. In order to discuss these questions, I turn to literature, which has been described as “storage for knowledge” in indigenous contexts.<sup>4</sup> More precisely, I will analyze three stories written by acknowledged Sámi author Kirsti Paltto (b. 1947).

## Background

Sámi is the name of the indigenous people that traditionally inhabit Sápmi, stretching over approximately 400,000 km<sup>2</sup> of the northern-most parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Depending on how ‘Sáminess’ is defined, one can speak of 70,000–101,000 people belonging to this minority, living in Sápmi and other places.<sup>5</sup> Contacts between people living in this area and the rest of Europe have been continuous since the settlement of Northern Europe at the end of the last Ice Age.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am (Following)*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 1–11; Donna J. Haraway, *Primate Visions. Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York, London: Routledge, 1989); Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 9–15; Elina Helander-Renvall, “Animism, Personhood and the Nature of Reality: Sami Perspectives,” *Polar Record* 46, no. 236 (2010): passim; Barbara Noske, *Humans and Other Animals. Beyond the Boundaries of Anthropology* (Winchester: Pluto Press, 1989), xi.

<sup>4</sup> Rauna Kuokkanen, “Border Crossings, Pathfinders and New Visions: the Role of Sámi Literature in Contemporary Society,” *Nordlit* 15 (2004), 93.

<sup>5</sup> Johanna Domokos, *A Writing Hand Reaches Further—Čállli giehta olla guhkás’. Recommendations for the Improvement of the Sámi Literary Field* (Finland: Nordic Council, 2018), 8. In English, the name of the Sámi people is variously spelled as Sámi, Saami and Sami. I follow Domokos’ praxis and use the ethnonym Sámi, and the term Sápmi for their historical and present primary area (Domokos, *Writing Hand*, 8). The older word ‘Lapp’ is nowadays considered derogatory. See Ildikó Tamás, “The Colors of the Polar Lights (Symbols in the Construction of Sami Identity),” in *The Concept of Freedom in the Literatures of Eastern Europe* (Vöro: Publications of Vöro institute, 2017), 12.

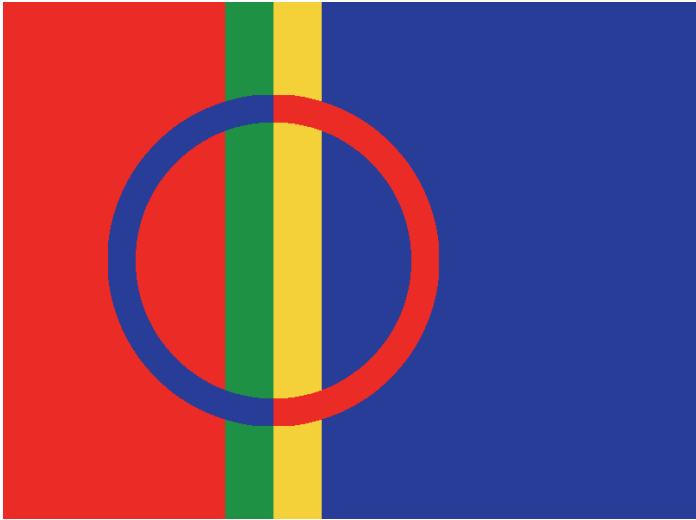
<sup>6</sup> Stéphane Aubinet, *The Craft of Yoiking. Philosophical Variations on Sámi Chants* (University of Oslo: Department of Musicology, 2020), 4.

During the Middle Ages, Sámi and other people co-existed in this area, but as the process of forming nation-states intensified, measures were taken to increase control over Sápmi. Thus, churches were built from around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and from around the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Swedish state started to interfere more regularly with the lives of the Sámi.

The most effective period of missionary work was the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when shamanism and joiking<sup>7</sup> were punished by religious and secular authorities alike. Up until the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these repressive tendencies would increase, particularly in Norway and Sweden, who employed never-before-seen tactics to try to assimilate the Sámi. Apart from having to deal with the loss of societal prestige and discrimination, people struggling to maintain their Sámi identity could no longer use their native language publicly, and everything connected with Sámi culture was stigmatized. In Sweden, the State Institute for Racial Biology (established in 1922 and operative until the 1970s) was used to demonstrate their inferiority. From around the 1960s, however, the claims for Sámi rights and recognition, which had started to form at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, became more insistent and successful. Today, the Sámi people have largely regained their rights to language and culture, and, in some cases, also managed to get legal rights to the land they traditionally inhabit. However, the extent to which their demands are met varies across the four nation-states over which Sápmi stretches. Currently, Norway is the country in which Sámi rights are most extensively acknowledged.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The joik is a singing tradition that touches the whole life of the Sámi. The joiks function as entertainment, as a communication tool, and as an expression of identity. It is also a system for the classification and identification of the Sami's surroundings, and a summary of their experiences and knowledge of the world (Tamás, 11n1).

<sup>8</sup> John Trygve Solbakk, *The Sámi People—A Handbook* (Karasjok: Davvi Girji, 2006), 18–78; Tamás, 17–28.



The Sámi flag.

The reconstruction of a Sámi cultural past that had been shattered by colonial interventions intensified in the 1970s. In this process, fiction came to play an important role. There was now a rise of Sámi authors writing in Sámi about the traditional way of living in this community, but also about conflicts with modern society and between generations, as well as the effects of a history of repression.<sup>9</sup> One of these authors is Kirsti Paltto from Ohcejohka, Utsjoki in Finland, who is sometimes called the first Sámi female writer. The transition from a traditional to a modern society is a recurring theme in Paltto's work, and she is heavily influenced by the indigenous peoples' movement and anti-colonial currents. Since the 1970s, Paltto has published

<sup>9</sup> Domokos, *Writing Hand*, 8–9; Johanna Domokos & Michal Kovář, “Terveisiä Lapista as an Example of Intercultural Dialogism,” *Kirjallisuudentutkimuksen aikakauslehti AVAIN* 3 (2015), 51–67. For a thorough review of the history of Sámi literature, see Rauna Kuokkanen & Kirsti Paltto, “Publishing Sámi Literature—from Christian Translations to Sámi Publishing Houses,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 22, no. 2 (2010), 42–58 and Vuokko Hirvonen, *Voices from Sápmi: Sámi Women's Path to Authorship*, trans. Kaija Anttonen (1988; repr., Kautokeino: DAT, 2008).

texts in a range of different genres, encompassing poetry, short stories, children's books, novels and plays, as well as essays, tracts, and scholarly works. Many of her texts have been translated into other languages such as Swedish, Norwegian, English and Hungarian. Paltto has also received several awards for her authorship.<sup>10</sup>

Paltto is a writer who is often mentioned in overviews of the development of Sámi literature.<sup>11</sup> Scholars have primarily been interested in her significance for reconstructing (in particular women's) Sámi identity and culture, the postcolonial context of her authorship, the ways in which she refers to Sámi folklore and mythology in narratives that are situated in the Sámi community today, and the political significance of the fact that she has written most of her works in the northern Sámi language rather than in Finnish.<sup>12</sup> Although I certainly see the relevance of these perspectives, I claim that there is one aspect of her works with which has not been thoroughly dealt. Many scholars acknowledge the fact that Paltto (and other Sámi and indigenous authors) depict the non-human world as 'animist', a concept that includes the spiritualization of the object world,<sup>13</sup> and a view of nature as alive. Moreover, it includes the existence of a social

<sup>10</sup> Enikő Molnár Bodrogi, "Dissenting Narratives of Identity in Saami, Meänkieli and Kven Literatures," *Revista Română de Studii Baltice și Nordice / The Romanian Journal for Baltic and Nordic Studies* 11, no. 1 (2019), 27; Anne Heith, "Putting an End to the Shame Associated with Minority Culture and its Concomitant Negative Self-Images—On Gender and Ethnicity in Sami and Tornedalians Literature," in *The History of Nordic Women's Literature Online* (Odense: Syddansk Universitet, 2016), 2.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Kaisa Ahvenjärvi, "Reindeer Revisited. Traditional Sámi features in contemporary Sámi poetry," in *Rethinking National Literatures and the Literary Canon in Scandinavia* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 104–129 and Kathleen Osgood Dana, "Sami Literature in the Twentieth Century," *World Literature Today* 71 (Winter 1997), 22–28.

<sup>12</sup> Due to the dispersion of relatively small groups over large areas, there are several different Sámi languages with varying numbers of speakers (Domokos, *Writing Hand*, 8–9; see also Tamás, 13–15).

<sup>13</sup> Harry Garuba, "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society," *Public Culture* 15, no. 2 (2003), 267.

space for humans and non-humans to interrelate to each other.<sup>14</sup> But there is still a lack of studies regarding the details of this ontology in relation to the agency of non-human animals as well as the precise ways in which non-human agency and their narrative effects are accounted for in the works of Paltto.<sup>15</sup>

These questions gain relevance against the background of the traditional Sámi way of living in close kinship with natural elements. This is not unusual in native contexts,<sup>16</sup> and there are rich references to the non-human world in Sámi cultural expressions such as joik.<sup>17</sup> As for non-human animals, the reindeer has always been a cornerstone of Sámi society, even if there are also Sámi villages that have lived off fishing and hunting.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, there are frequent occurrences of bears, cats, dogs and also hybrid creatures in Sámi folklore, joik, literature and mythology.<sup>19</sup> In the following, I will conduct a comparative close reading of the ontology and agency of non-human animals in three short stories from Paltto's collection of stories *Sijålet (Stolen)* from 2003.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Helander-Renvall, 44.

<sup>15</sup> There has, however, been studies conducted regarding the human-animal relationship in other indigenous literature. Within this wider field, my analysis adds a Sámi perspective to previous publications such as *Indigenous Creatures, Native Knowledges, and the Arts: Animal Studies in Modern Worlds* (London: Palgrave MacMillan 2017); Susan McHugh, *Love in a Time of Slaughters. Human-animal Stories against Genocide and Extinction* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2019) and Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), *Why Indigenous Literature Matter* (Waterloo & Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Kathleen Osgood Dana, "Áillohaš and his Image Drum. The Native Poet as Shaman," *Nordlit* 15 (2004), 27.

<sup>17</sup> Stéphane Aubinet, "Chanter les territoires Sámi dans un monde plus-qu'humain," *Information géographique* 81, no. 1 (2017), 20–37.

<sup>18</sup> Tamás, 12–13. Although a large part of the Sámi population lives in cities today, reindeer keeping remains a central element to the internal and external expressions of 'Sámi identity', and Swedish and Norwegian law guarantee the Sámi monopoly in this area. In Finland, however, only 20% of the Sámi population is employed in reindeer keeping, and the percentage is even lower in Russia (Tamás, 15).

<sup>19</sup> Helander-Renvall, *passim*.

<sup>20</sup> This collection was originally published in 2001 in the northern Sámi language, but I have read it in its Norwegian translation. There are altogether 15 separate stories in the book.

### Three stories

In “The bedbug,” we learn about Egá, an older solitary man who, due to his fear of ghosts and other supernatural beings, is the laughing stock of the little Sámi community in which he lives. The course of events begins when Egá sets out for a hike to a headland, where there is an old timber cottage for all to use. Having safely reached the hut, Egá stretches out on the reindeer skin on the floor to sleep. At that point, it strikes him as odd that while there are swarms of mosquitos outdoors, there are none inside the hut. This riddle is solved as Egá becomes aware of what is described as a huge bedbug crawling out of one of the cracks in the wall. Egá hastily collects his few belongings and runs screaming into the night, throws himself in a river and swims across it before he dares to stop. Inside the cabin, the bedbug scuttles across the floor to watch Egá’s escape through the window while sadly contemplating why humans hate bedbugs so much even though they never mean to do anything wrong—just get themselves a meal, and not even by killing, as humans do, but simply by sucking some blood. It then watches Egá sitting on the other side of the river, soaking wet, and shakes its head at the stupidity of man. Next time, the bedbug ponders, it will be smarter not to reveal itself, but climb onto the ceiling and let itself drop down silently onto the nose of the next human who spends the night in the hut. Then the bedbug goes to sleep, and the focalization goes back to Egá, who does not dare to return to the hut. Instead, he walks until he reaches his friend Olle’s house, where he is given warm coffee and new clothes while his own are drying. There, however, he is also laughed at—what ghost is he scared of now? But Egá says nothing, ever, to anyone about the bedbug. The only thing that has changed is that he is no longer afraid of ghosts.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Kirsti Paltto, *Stjålet*, trans. Ellen Anna Gaup, Mikkel A. Gaup and Laila Stein (2001. Repr., Karasjok: Davvi Girji, 2003), 7–13. This is the first story in the collection. It has not been translated into English and the translation of the title is my own. Norwegian original: “Vegglusa.”

“The bear-girl” depicts its main character Rásttôs as an elderly man who is reasonable yet somehow different. At the story’s beginning, we learn that he has a family; however, they live elsewhere than in the small Sámi community in which he himself resides. In his remembrance of his youth, we get to follow how this came about. When Rásttôs was a young man, he was sent into the mountains to collect a few runaway reindeer cows. Exhausted after the non-successful chase, he sits down to smoke, and that is when, to his horror, he discovers a big bear close to him. Rásttôs pulls out his knife to protect himself, but as he watches the bear it becomes transparent and reveals a beautiful naked girl inside. He follows the bear-girl to its lair where they spend the night together. The day after, when Rásttôs goes back to the village, he is surprised to learn that the reindeer herd he thought he had lost is safely back in the enclosure. After that event, Rásttôs will spend the rest of his life visiting his bear-girl. Returning to the present time in the story, Rásttôs is old, but he still looks forward to going into the mountains to spend time with his bear family. The story ends with him imagining that maybe one day, one of his now grown-up bear-daughters will run into a young Sámi man and enchant him like their mother once did to Rásttôs.<sup>22</sup>

“Tracks,” finally, features Sámmol as its main character, an elderly man living with his dog Guksi in a modern Sámi community. Sámmol is known to be hot-tempered, and at the beginning of the story, he is angry at a young Sámi journalist, Ole, who interviewed him for a Sámi newspaper some days previously. That man had got it all wrong! Sámmol had told the journalist about the footprints he has often seen in the mountains, half reindeer, half woman, and now Ole has written that these tracks go down the mountain and disappear into a lake, which is not true. Sámmol is so angry that he calls the journalist

<sup>22</sup> Paltto, 31–41. This is the third story in the collection, but for the sake of clarity in relation to my argument, I have placed it second in my analysis. It has not been translated into English and the translation of the title is my own. Norwegian original: “Bjørnejente.” Editors’ note: Concerning bear-stories see also Claudia Lindén’s chapter in this volume.



and tells him to get in his car and come to see him immediately. When he arrives, Sámmol takes him on a skiing tour into the mountains so that he can see the tracks firsthand. The journalist is amazed and takes photos of them, but then continues to follow them once he has parted ways with Sámmol. Together with Guksi, Ole follows the tracks until all of a sudden the hybrid creature stands before him—half reindeer, half naked woman. While he watches it, the creature splits in two, and then he himself unites with the girl instead of the reindeer. They run in the northern lights together, an event which, for Ole, is characterized by an otherworldly bliss. Then the reindeer comes back and pushes him from the girl's side so that he falls out of the sky and lands on the mountain, just beside his skis. After that, the journalist does not remember anything until he wakes up, together with Guksi, in the basement of his workplace and finds out that 24 hours have passed since he journeyed into the mountains. When Ole's boss calls Sámmol in an attempt to solicit some answers about what happened, the old man simply asks to speak to his dog Guksi, who listens carefully to what Sámmol says before hanging up.<sup>23</sup>

### Discussion: Re-enchanting the world

In order to understand the significance of non-human agency in these stories, we need to start with a conceptualization of their general ontology. This is, however, easier said than done, since they seem to depict at least two different ontologies that are partly at odds with one another. Firstly, there is the modern world we all know where people drive cars, speak over the phone, use cameras for documentation and read newspapers. Secondly, there is a world that contains unrealistic and magical elements that are not possible to account for with modern, scientific concepts. This duality can be understood with help

<sup>23</sup> Paltto, 15–29. This is the second story in the collection, but for the sake of clarity in relation to my argument, I have placed it third in my analysis. It has not been translated into English and the translation of the title is my own. Norwegian original: "Spor."

from some lines of thought advanced by Harry Garuba, who claims that there is a joint “animist unconscious” in all societies that has been subjected to a colonial takeover by monotheistic religions. Thus, this term should not be seen as a doctrine or a specific set of beliefs, but rather as a presupposition for “the re-enchantment of the world,” an umbrella term that Garuba has coined for the recurrence of pre-colonial beliefs and images in the modern world.<sup>24</sup>

While Garuba speaks of the recurrence of such symbols in, for example, commercial contexts of the majority population, I think that his idea can equally be applied to Paltto’s stories as well, since she depicts a modern world that gradually reveals elements from a pre-colonial ontology. Also, on a meta-level, the very medium of ‘literature’ can be seen as colonial, since the Sámi story-telling tradition has always been oral. Thus, the realistic outset of each of the three stories that I study here can be seen as being gradually ‘re-encharnted’ by the oral tradition that is working in them in this specific Sámi context. This discussion is in line with Osgood Dana’s reading of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943–2001), a renowned Sámi poet who was a contemporary of Paltto. Osgood Dana claims that today, the realm of the Sámi shaman (the *noaidi*) in many instances has shifted from the private domain of the family and family group to the public domain of literature and art. She contends that “both poet/artist and shaman are equipped in remarkable ways to negotiate between worlds, and in the hands of shaman-poets, text becomes the tool of prophecy and mediation.”<sup>25</sup> In Paltto’s stories, the occurrence of competing worldviews makes visible the difference between indigenous literature and other kinds, namely the former’s strong reliance on oral story-telling.<sup>26</sup> Since it is the ontology constructed in this tradition that has non-human agency as the norm, then this is the one we need to map.

<sup>24</sup> Garuba, 265.

<sup>25</sup> Osgood Dana, “Áillohaš,” 7.

<sup>26</sup> Kuokkannen, “Border,” 93.

To this end, focusing on the stories' main characters seems like a constructive start. As Garuba notes, the spiritualization of the physical world that characterizes the animist worldview involves literary representational strategies that give "the abstract or metaphorical a material realization" and thus add a "concrete dimension to abstract ideas."<sup>27</sup> In Paltto's stories, the three main characters appear as such literary materializations because of the striking similarities between them. They are all elderly and all are known for being somewhat temperamental, due to some specific character trait: Egá is laughed at for being superstitious, Ráštôt is both respected and questioned for his unusual choice of family, and Sámmol seems to be close to feared due to his hot temper. If these characters are understood according to what Garuba refers as animist literature's habit of "'locking' spirit within matter,"<sup>28</sup> and if we presume that this 'spirit' is the alternative ontology in these stories, then we can conclude that this worldview is old and that it is both ridiculed, respected, questioned and feared.

Further information regarding this issue is gained if we consider the relationship between these characters and the place in which they reside, a small Sámi community. Indeed, these men are all part of the communities in which they live and from which they are marginalized. This marginalization is partly due to their unusual personality traits and partly to the fact that none of them live with a family in a traditional sense. The latter circumstance can be understood with an argument made by Kim Tallbear in a North American and Canadian context, namely, that the ideal of the nuclear family was brought with the colonizers. Before that, the extended family was the norm,<sup>29</sup> something that surely seems to have been the case in Sámi contexts as well.<sup>30</sup> Thus, by living outside of the norm of the

<sup>27</sup> Garuba, 273, 284.

<sup>28</sup> Garuba, 267.

<sup>29</sup> Kim Tallbear, "Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family," in *Making Kin Not Population* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018), 145–164.

<sup>30</sup> Rauni Magga Lukkari, "Where did the Laughter Go?" in *No Beginning, No End: The Sami Speak Up* (Edmonton: Canadian Circumpolar Institute, 1998), 109.

nuclear family, the three main characters in Paltto's stories make visible a long since established part of the Sámi community that has now been pushed aside to its fringes. Indeed, they may have actively taken that place as a point of resistance; we do not learn much about Egá, but both Ráštôt and Sámmol seem to be openly at odds with certain normative expectations of the society in which they live.

The significance of place recurs in the fact that all three of these men, in either the story's past or present time, have gone into their surroundings on a quest for something. These recurring movements from the small village into the mountains can be seen as part of a "social imaginary," which, according to Garuba, is close to the "animist unconscious" in colonized cultures.<sup>31</sup> But even if the images are very similar, there are significant differences regarding what the three men are searching for and find. Egá is aiming for the hut on the headland, and only accidentally stumbles upon a non-human animal so unexpectedly large his fears for ghosts and gnomes—which are part of the colonial folklore—disappear forevermore. Indeed, the fact that he is not looking to find something else but rather is fully oriented in the postcolonial ontology is shown in the fact that he, while he wanders to the headlands, thinks that the mosquitos are "as large as angels"—"angels" of course being part of the Christian mythology of the colonizers.<sup>32</sup>

Ráštôt, on the other hand, is searching for an essential part of Sámi culture and ways of living—i.e. reindeers—when he is surprised to encounter a creature from Sámi mythology. Sámmol, finally, is consciously looking for a supernatural being that he is firmly convinced exists—and he is proven right. If we, again, regard these men as materializations of the worldview in these stories, we can draw the conclusion that the characteristics of this ontology are made clear and visible only in the surroundings, not in the community itself. We can also make the assumption that regardless of what someone is searching for, they may

<sup>31</sup> Garuba, 283.

<sup>32</sup> Paltto, "Vegglusa," 8. Translation by me. Norwegian original: "store som engler."

instead find proofs of this alternative worldview which, once they have seen it, they can always return to if they want. These latter circumstances can be understood by way of Garuba's argument about the forming of a "collective subjectivity that structures being and consciousness in predominantly animist societies and cultures."<sup>33</sup> If one is Sámi, then the animist ontology is always accessible by definition.

For all three men, the encounter in the mountains gives them knowledge of the world that changes their lives forever, but the way in which this occurs depends on their reactions. For Egá, the encounter with the bedbug is terrifying, and so he flees. Also Rástitõs is frightened when he first encounters the bear, reaching for the knife in his pocket. But as he lingers, he learns that the creature before him is not what it appears to be at first sight, but rather something beautiful and desirable which ultimately, as he abandons his fear and follows it, gives him pleasure and a sense of community that will last for life. Regarding Sámmol, we do not learn anything about how he gained the knowledge he has, only that it is now, when he is old, rooted in him to such a degree that he appears to regard it as 'common sense.' In sum, the alternative ontology in these three stories might at first appear scary and overwhelming, but if one dares to linger, they provide a certain dimension of the world that lasts a lifetime.

The images of both the bear-girl and the reindeer-girl hybrid connects this dimension to a pre-Christian worldview which, according to Tamás, plays a determining role in Sámi discourses.<sup>34</sup> In particular, with the case of the bear it is difficult, however, to distinguish between the imaginary reality and the 'real animal' since according to traditional Sámi belief, as Helander-Renvall claims, there are at least three kinds of bears: an ordinary bear, a transformed human in a bear shape, and a bewitched bear. In addition, spirits may take a bear look, and bears may assume the role of helpers to humans.<sup>35</sup> In Paltto's

<sup>33</sup> Garuba, 269.

<sup>34</sup> Tamás, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Helander-Renvall, 51.

story, the bear-girl seems to be a variant of “a transformed human in bear shape,” and this depiction is clearly part of the indigenous ontology made visible in the text.

Together, these three stories reveal in what ways the implications of this alternative ontology are so challenging to modern-day discourse that they cannot be spoken about, only passed on by experience. If and how that knowledge—which indeed forms a lesson to be learned—is passed on differs fundamentally between the three stories, however. In the first, Egá learns something for himself, though he never attempts to share his knowledge with anyone else. However, since the focalization shifts to the bedbug the moment Egá flees from it, the reader is given the chance to follow its inner monologue and learns that it possesses agency, an agenda and a sense of perspective, and also that it means no harm. Indeed, the bedbug’s perspective takes up a good 1½ pages of a story that is only 6 in length. This can be seen as an example of what Garuba defines as a recurring aspect of de- and postcolonial literature, namely “representational strategies and narrative techniques, which are demonstrably superstructural effects of an animist conception of reality and the world,” based in an oral tradition.<sup>36</sup> In the story about Egá, this narrative strategy presents an alternative ontology to the reader, even though the main character has fled the scene.

Contrary to the first, the question of how knowledge about the world should be passed on is openly discussed in the second and third stories. Rásttôs, who was sent into the mountains to look for the reindeer cows by an older Sámi man, imagines that the knowledge he possesses about the world—including the destabilization of the binary categories ‘human’ and ‘animal’—will be passed on by the next generation of bear-girls, his daughters, who will encounter and enchant a young Sámi man in the same way as their mother had. In the third story, the narrative strategy of shifting the focalization to a non-human animal, present in the first story, is partly repeated; we occasionally get the perspective of Sámmol’s dog. This technique relates

<sup>36</sup> Garuba, 270.

to the fact that Sámmol has such confidence in his non-human companion's abilities that he even speaks to him over the phone. Thus, Sámmol clearly shows that he knows that non-human animals have both agency, perspective, and abilities that go unacknowledged. But Sámmol is also knowingly and consciously striving to make visible the alternative ontology in which he lives to a younger Sámi man.

When taken together, the circumstances within which these three stories play themselves out point to the fact that while the ontology they depict can be experienced by any Sámi person, it is transferred to just a few, and can only be gained when human and non-human elements interfere with one another. While those who make visible this alternative ontology are all men, in the stories of Rásttós and Sámmol the non-human element is depicted as an active and desirable female. This is interesting given that historically, there are indications of relatively strong matrilineal and matrilocal traditions and of Sámi women being regarded as equal to man.<sup>37</sup> Also, Sámi women have traditionally been responsible for passing down cultural knowledge to future generations.<sup>38</sup> These circumstances have further connotations for the part of the third story in which the reindeer-girl takes the male journalist on a journey in the northern lights: this natural phenomenon has been identified by Tamás as a universal image for the Sámi people.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, it is apparent that in both the agency of non-human animals and in the stories' depictions of human-animal hybrids, the scientific categories of species are overthrown. Indeed, the very fact that such creatures exist in these stories, as well as the ways in which they engage with humans, point to the fact that the stories' alternative ontology entails a questioning of the modern notion that there is a clear-cut distinction between

<sup>37</sup> Rauna Kuokkanen, "Indigenous Women in Traditional Economies: The Case of Sámi Reindeer Herding," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 3 (2009), 500.

<sup>38</sup> A task that recurs in the 'memory work' carried out by Sámi women writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See Hirvonen, *Voices from Sápmi*, 81–90.

<sup>39</sup> Tamás, 16–17, 29–30.

human and animal. These subversions can be understood with an argument from Garuba, who claims that animist logic “subverts the authority of Western science by reinscribing the authority of magic within the interstices of the rational/secular/modern.” In undermining Western binarism, Garuba claims animist culture “opens up a whole new world of poaching possibilities.” Indeed, this process takes place in Paltto’s stories by destabilizing “the hierarchy of science over magic and the secularist narrative of modernity [and] by reabsorbing historical time into the matrices of myth and magic.”<sup>40</sup>

By extension, the undermining of the Western scientific discourse entails a subversion of normative (human) notions of time and place. In the first story, the reader will notice that when the narrative voice shifts to the bedbug, it appears as if no human time passes, since Egá does not move at all. Again, then, the reader of this story learns more about the animist ontology than about the human protagonist; the presence of a non-human animal has the potential to upset the human timeline. In the other two stories, the rupturing of linear time is connected to a destabilization of the notion of ‘place.’ In the second story, Rásthôs notices the passing of an unexpectedly long duration of time while he has been with the bear-girl in the mountains. He is also surprised to find the lost reindeer cows mysteriously back in their enclosure when he returns to the village. Here, the stories are in line with Garuba’s definition of ‘animism,’ which “opens up a different time outside the usual linear, positivist time encoded with notions of progress and increasing secularization.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the fact that the subversion of time is also connected to the undermining of normative conceptualizations of place has been discussed by Kumkum Sangari, who claims that de- and postcolonial literature conceptualize time as “poised in a liminal space, which, having broken out of the binary opposition between circular and linear, gives a third

<sup>40</sup> Garuba, 270–271.

<sup>41</sup> Garuba, 271.



space and a different time the chance to emerge.”<sup>42</sup> As Osgood Dana notes, this subversion of time and place is a common trait in indigenous ontologies all over the world.<sup>43</sup> In Paltto’s stories, it is a fundamental part of the ontology that human conceptualizations of time and place can, at least temporarily, be overruled by non-human ones.

I would like to end this analysis with a closer look at the subversion of time and space in the third story, paying particular attention to the depiction of the journalist, Ole. When he wakes up in the basement of his workplace, he has no idea of how he got there. He finds that, because he had been away for so long, people have been worried about him. I claim that the fact that he is a journalist gives this story’s disruptions of normative time and space specific connotations. As a journalist, his job is to report and spread knowledge about the ‘truth.’ But since he is originally only capable of thinking and seeing within the modern ontology of the colonizers, he ends up reporting according to their history and timeline. What Sámmol does, however, is to let him experience another history, which was present before the takeover and which has a ‘truth’ that abides.

In line with the thought of Sangari, what is happening here can be understood as the “absence of a single linear time need not be read as the absence of a historical consciousness but rather as the operation of a different kind of historical consciousness.”<sup>44</sup> Although Sangari discusses the works of Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie, the emphasis on alternative histories goes together well with indigenous literature’s reliance on the oral tradition and anti-colonial writings of history. Against this background, it certainly seems relevant that it is in the *basement*, specifically, of Ole’s workplace that he wakes up after his experience in the mountains. This is a place where the marginalized and old are typically stored away, but without disappearing fully. A point that goes together

<sup>42</sup> Kumkum Sangari, “The Politics of the Possible,” *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987), 176.

<sup>43</sup> Osgood Dana, “Áillohaš,” 13–17.

<sup>44</sup> Sangari, 172.

remarkably well with Garuba's concept of the 'animist unconscious'.<sup>45</sup>

### Summary

The alternative ontology presented in these stories consists in the old, which is ridiculed, respected, questioned, feared; the articulation of a specific form of experience universal for all Sámi communities; a defiance against normative colonial discourses, which have become a long-established part of the Sámi community, now marginalized and/or resilient; a mode of being that is visible only outside the village, in its surroundings, that is displayed in an encounter which can be both consciously searched for and randomly found. It opens up for an insight that one does not risk losing once it has been received, an insight that can at first be frightening, yet (erotically) blissful if one lingers there. An alternative ontology that is made visible in both form and content, providing a lifelong community/worldview/knowledge/dimension. It makes itself felt by certain characters, only possible to transfer by experience. Though possible to gain by anyone, it is only acquired by a few. This alternative ontology is a gendered affair, it encompasses the possibility of non-human animals having agency, an agenda and their own perspective. This alternative ontology thus subverts the modern scientific discourse of species. The transmissibility of this ontology relies on an oral tradition, and is grounded on alternative notions of 'history' and 'truth', ones that make possible the overruling of human conceptualizations of time and place by non-human understandings. All of these points take the form of literary human- and non-human materializations of ideas.

In light of the above, I would like to finish this article with a few more general remarks.

Firstly, the modern setting for the stories, the marginalized position of the three characters in the societies in which they live, the all-Sámi world within which they move, and the over-

<sup>45</sup> Considering the Freudian concept of 'the unconscious' as a kind of undercurrent, haunting the stability of the 'normal.'

whelming assurance for which this alternative ontology provides, in terms of experiencing the overall process as a ‘decolonization of the mind.’ This concept has been defined in an indigenous studies context and describes the conscious return to images, beliefs, thoughts, concepts, cultural practices and worldviews that were used before colonization.<sup>46</sup> In Paltto’s stories, this process is partly carried out through non-human agency, but humans who have had their minds decolonized can also pass these insights on to younger generations. This circumstance is made particularly visible in the third story, in which Sámmol goes through much trouble to show Ole what he knows to exist and be true. Sámmol, then, joins sides with the non-human forces in decolonizing the Sámi mind, and in relation to this circumstance, it is interesting to note that he is the character who is depicted as living closest and equally with a non-human animal in his daily life, his dog. Indeed, this aspect points to something that is relevant on a general level for all of these stories, namely that Paltto’s depictions of the relationship between the human and the non-human world relies on the traditional Sámi view of a horizontal continuum, rather than the colonizer’s hierarchical and static Christian view.

Secondly, it is clearly the case that the alternative ontology in Paltto’s stories does not make up a firm system of concepts and beliefs. This is perfectly in line with an argument made by Garuba, who claims that the process of “re-enchanting the world” is not about believing in any specific gods or even about embracing the animist worldview. What it does instead is to provide broad “avenues for knowing our way around our world and society.”<sup>47</sup> Moreover, although the traditional ontology is surely at odds with the stories’ hegemonic one, no attempt is made to replace or overthrow it. This can be understood by way of another argument by Garuba, namely that to “question the

<sup>46</sup> See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Currey, 1986) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999, repr., London: Zed Books, 2012), 24, 111–126.

<sup>47</sup> Garuba, 283.

homogenizing narrative of Western modernity and then replace it with another homogenizing narrative of an animist modernity would be to undermine the various other subaltern modernities struggling for voices.” Indeed, he then makes the politically important claim that in de- and postcolonial contexts, “an animistic understanding of the world applied to the practice of everyday life has often provided avenues of agency for the dispossessed.”<sup>48</sup>

However, in the field of indigenous studies, the ‘avenue of agency’ that is opened up not only concerns the human, but also the non-human world in general, and in particular the non-human animal. Billy-Ray Belcourt has made the case that the colonization of indigenous people and the natural world, including non-human animals, are closely connected processes and that decolonization thus does not happen for only one or the other.<sup>49</sup> It is hoped that my discussion of how humans and non-human animals are related horizontally, making a joint case against the colonization of the mind in Palto’s stories, has made this clearly visible.

Finally, I would like to briefly return to the beginning of this article, which spoke of a development in literary studies about whether fictional animals should be read metonymically or metaphorically. As we have seen, the specificities in de- and postcolonial literature encourage us to choose a third option: to read depictions of humans and non-humans alike as literary materializations of the stories’ abstract ideas. According to Garuba, such narrative techniques should not be understood as extended metaphors, but, rather, as accounts of the significance of the concrete in the text’s worldview.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, these depictions not only float somewhere between metonymy and metaphor but also add their own unique element to an understanding of literary representations. As such, they are certainly

<sup>48</sup> Garuba, 284–285.

<sup>49</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, “Animal Bodies, Colonial Subjects: (Re)Locating Animality in Decolonial Thought.” *Societies* 5, no. 1 (2015): 1–11.

<sup>50</sup> Garuba, 274.

of interest far beyond the scope of the fields of both indigenous studies and literary human-animal studies.

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