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# Telling Tales Testing Boundaries

## The Radicalism of Kerstin Ekman's Norrland

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**ABSTRACT** Beginning with analyses of *De tre små mästarna* (1961) [*Under the Snow*] and *Händelser vid vatten* (1993) [*Blackwater*], this investigation into the representation of Norrland in the prose fiction of Kerstin Ekman draws on theoretical material by, among others, Umberto Eco, Mieke Bal, and Rosi Braidotti. The study revolves around the ways in which the texts are told and, especially, who is seeing the events narrated and the implications of this. The juxtaposition of different focalisers in *Blackwater* helps engage the reader in the novel's central questions about memory, identity, environmental destruction, and interpretation. With the central character a troll from the forest, *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* (1988) [*The Forest of Hours*] develops a far-reaching critique of the western categories and boundaries used to determine what is 'human' and what is 'animal'. In the trilogy *The Wolfskin*, consisting of *Guds barmhärtighet* (1999) [*God's Mercy*], *Sista rompan* (2002) ['The Last String'] and *Skraplotter* (2003) ['Scratch Cards'], a plot covering the whole of the twentieth century is focalised by a number of characters and involves the reader in issues to do with postcolonialism, environmentalism and ethics.

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**KEYWORDS** Kerstin Ekman, Norrland, narrative, focalisation, identity, ecocriticism, postcolonialism, ethics

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## Introduction

In 2003, the year in which Kerstin Ekman completed her Norrland trilogy *Vargskinnet* ['The Wolfskin'] with the publication of *Skraplotter* ['Scratch Cards'], the Swedish literary critic Jonas Thente claimed that she, along with a number of other authors of her generation including Sara Lidman, Per Olov Enquist and Torgny Lindgren, represented a specific Norrland tradition. This literary Norrland, according to Thente, was "noga upptrampat, uppmätt, bergfast etablerat med konsensuellt upprättade mytologiska regelverk" ['paced out and measured in meticulous detail, claims staked on bedrock and subject to consensual mythological sets of rules'], with the authors depicting "ett strävsamt folk, nära naturen och Gud och just så charmigt egenartade och autentiska som man vill ha dem, norrlänningarna" ['a hard-working people living close to nature and their God, and as charmingly eccentric yet authentic as you could ever wish; these are the people of Norrland'] (Thente 2003: 171–172). But as Thente read the work of a younger generation as a revolt against this allegedly established version, he failed, as Anders Öhman has pointed out, to dismiss this Norrland mythology seemingly created by the authors themselves and instead provided an unusually clear example of "det kategoritänkande med vars hjälp man betraktat den norrländska litteraturen och som idag fungerar som en närvarande frånvaro" (Öhman 2004: 43) ['the thinking in terms of categories that has provided the lens for viewing Norrland literature and that continues to operate today as an absence, yet still present']<sup>1</sup>. Surveying the well-established tradition of approaching and presenting Norrland writing in terms of specific categories, Öhman in the introduction to his study of the Norrland author Gustav Hedenvind-Eriksson (1880–1967) foregrounded blindness as the corollary of this categorisation and underlined its consequences: "Det är en blindhet som, förutom att den varit förtryckande och hämmande, även har lett till att mycket av den norrländska litteraturen och verkligheten lämnats obeaktad" (Öhman 2004: 44) ['It is a blindness that, in addition to being suppressive and inhibiting, has also had the effect of leaving much of Norrland literature and reality unnoticed'].

Seeing is a central theme in the present study of Kerstin Ekman's major works of prose fiction set wholly or mainly in Norrland. Who is seeing Norrland, what kinds of Norrland are being seen, and with what consequences? The notion of seeing helps foreground not just the concepts of subject and object but also those of order and hierarchisation, power and marginalisation and, of course, nature and culture. The fact that liminal characters and beings are to be found in some of Ekman's novels adds to the urgency of the question about animal and human: where do we draw the line, what are the implications of such a line and, indeed, to what extent do we need one? The

notion of seeing also highlights the role of the reader, and not just the reader who finds herself/himself eagerly turning the pages of an author whose early experience as a thriller writer can still be perceived in some of her later work, but also the reader who, inevitably, finds himself/herself involved in elaborate processes of interpretation. As I shall try to demonstrate, Thente's insistence on placing Ekman's work in a specific category of Norrland writing is particularly unfortunate and, indeed, misleading. In the last instance, as Anders Öhman has pointed out, "handlar det helt enkelt om förmågan till ett rikare seende: kategoriseringar har den egenskapen att inte bara krympa det betraktade utan även den som betraktar" (Öhman 2004: 44) ['it is simply about the ability to see better: categorisations have the effect of reducing not just that which is observed but also the observer'].

Born in 1933, Kerstin Ekman was brought up in Katrineholm, southwest of Stockholm, at the time when the foundations of the Swedish welfare state were being laid. Having completed a degree at the University of Uppsala, she worked with the scripting and production of film, a job that included a spell in the early 1960s in Nikkaluokta, on the hiking route to Kebnekaise in the far north of the country (Boëthius 1993: 112–114), clearly a source of inspiration for the setting of *De tre små mästarna* (1961) [*Under the Snow*, 1997], the fourth of eight thrillers published between 1959 and 1963. While living near Älandsbro in the Norrland province of Ångermanland in the 1970s, she published the first three volumes of the tetralogy that came to mark her breakthrough; however, "Kvinnorna och staden" ['The Women and the City'], as the work is commonly known, is not set in Norrland. But Älandsbro is not far from the Forest of Skule, central to Ekman's 1988 novel *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* [*The Forest of Hours*, 1998]. Around 1980 she moved with her husband to the small village of Valsjöbyn in Jämtland, close to the Norwegian border, where they were to remain for well over 20 years, in other words throughout a period characterised both by the partial dismantling of the Swedish welfare state and the emergence of the environmental movement. The landscape of north-west Jämtland with its forests, lakes and high mountains, increasingly sparsely populated over time, became central to the plots not just of *Händelser vid vatten* (1993) [*Blackwater*, 1995] but also of the *Wolfskin* trilogy consisting of *Guds barmhärtighet* (1999) [*God's Mercy*, 2009], *Sista rompan* (2002) ['The Last String'], and *Skraplotter* (2003) ['Scratch Cards'], and the novella *Hunden* (1986) [*The Dog*, 2009].

Ekman has received numerous awards for her work, including the Nordic Council Literature Prize for *Blackwater* in 1994. She was elected to the Swedish Academy in 1978 but left in 1989, when she and two other members found themselves in disagreement with the Academy's handling of a protest against the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie. The author, Ekman has insisted,

must have the freedom to take risks, to be different, to be a dissident (Ekman 1995; Ekman 1996b).

### *Under the Snow and Blackwater*

*Under the Snow* (1961) was the fourth of Ekman's thrillers to be published as a book. And the success of *Blackwater*, her most widely translated novel and about to be made into a film in Sweden as I write, is no doubt due mainly to its affinities with the genre of the thriller. But as the South African novelist and academic André Brink emphasised when listing, in 1996, *Blackwater* as one of the two novels that had given him the greatest pleasure over the year (the other was Louis de Bernières's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*), Ekman's book, rather than being a thriller, "assumes the guise" of one for other purposes (Brink 1996).

Published 32 years apart, *Under the Snow* and *Blackwater* are set in different parts of Norrland and narrated in very different ways. In fact, the constructions and implications of the Norrland settings in these texts have little in common. But I want to begin this analysis of Norrland in Ekman's prose fiction by comparing and contrasting the two—because of the genre affinity they undoubtedly have, and because of the light the differences between them can shed on the development of Ekman's Norrland. My analyses of Ekman's Norrland texts then move on to *The Dog* and *The Forest of Hours*, before turning, in the final section, to the *Wolf-skin* trilogy.

Although the opening chapter of *Under the Snow* is set in winter, indeed as a sliver of the sun again becomes visible in Rakisjokk following the winter solstice many weeks previously, the remainder of the plot unfolds in high summer. There are Sami characters in this novel, and in Rakisjokk both Finnish and Sami are spoken in addition to Swedish, but the perspective on this area of northern Norrland is that of the outsider. Torsson, the policeman called to Rakisjokk following the death of the art teacher at the village school, has been living in Kiruna, Sweden's northernmost town, for many years but invariably spends his holidays in his home town of Eskilstuna, not far from Stockholm; and David Malm, who is an artist and friend of the dead man and who solves the murder mystery with the police the following summer, comes from the Swedish capital. In part, the narrative is seen through the eyes of Torsson and Malm respectively, and while the penultimate chapter is narrated in the first person by the as yet unidentified murderer who is also the focaliser here, the focalisations of Torsson and Malm are frequently interrupted by the perspective and voice of the omniscient narrator. Umberto Eco has made a useful distinction between "open" fabulas and "closed" ones (with "fabula" denoting "the basic story stuff" as

opposed to the plot, “the story as actually told” [Eco 1984: 27]): in the closed fabula, Eco writes,

the sender offers his addressee continual occasions for forecasting, but at each further step he reasserts, so to speak, the rights of his own text, saying without ambiguity what has to be taken as “true” in his fictional world. (Eco 1984: 34.)

A typical instance of a closed fabula is indeed the detective thriller. *Under the Snow* may be a page-turner, but the text makes only limited demands on the reader’s interpretative skills.

In conjunction with the focalisations of Torsson and Malm, the omniscient narrator of *Under the Snow* reinforces the outsider perspective on a tourists’ Lapland, a Lapland defined by means of maps and often seen from above, as in the following passage:

De hade kommit upp på en vinddriven platå och David tystnade. Daldockor slängde sina stora huvuden i blåsten. Långt nere kunde han se sjöarna glimma som kalla speglar – Rakisjaure, ett isvasst knivsår som mörknade av förbiglidande molnskuggor. [...] Konstapeln plockade fram kartan och började studera den. Han låg på alla fyra och snodde runt i riset. Kikande åt alla håll mumlade han dystra antaganden om fjälltopparnas belägenhet. De kom överens om att de befann sig där den krossade myggan lämnat ett av sina ben på pappret. (Ekman 1964: 143–144.)

[‘They had reached a windswept plateau and David fell silent. The large heads of the globe flowers were swaying in the wind. Far down below he could see the lakes glimmering like cold mirrors, the Rakisjaure an icy sharp slash, darkened by passing shadows of cloud. [...] Torsson took out the map and started studying it. On all fours in the scrub, he peered this way and that, mumbling gloomy guesses at the positions of the mountain peaks. They agreed they were just where the squashed mosquito had left one of its legs on the paper.’ (Ekman 1997: 111.)]

As they reach an ancient site sacred to the Sami, David cannot resist the temptation to lift one of the holy stones, a *seite*. The deluge that follows makes them lose all sense of direction, until eventually they find themselves looking at “ett landskap som *log en fullkomlig främlings stela leende mot dem*” (Ekman 1964: 149; my italics) [‘a landscape that *replied with only the fixed smile of a complete stranger*’ (Ekman 1997: 115; my italics)]. While providing an exotic setting for a thriller plot, the segment of Norrland constructed in *Under the Snow* remains inaccessible and alien.

Having similarities with a thriller *Blackwater*,<sup>2</sup> published more than three decades later, is considerably more many-faceted and more complex—a neat example, as I hope to show, of Eco's "open" fabula. While most of the plot is set in Norrland, the area is located further south, in north-west Jämtland close to the Norwegian border, with part of the plot also set in Norway.

The murders of two young people in a tent some distance from the small village of Blackwater on Midsummer's Eve sometime in the early 1970s are still unsolved 18 years later. The narrative covering this timespan involves considerable shifts in chronology as different parts are seen through the eyes of different characters. These changes also have a crucial impact on the novel's construction of Norrland.

*Blackwater* is divided into two parts. With the exception of the opening pages, Part I is set in the year of the two murders in the early 1970s, from Midsummer's Eve until early winter, while Part II is set 18 years later and covers the violent resolution of the original murder mystery. Part I is focalised by Johan Brandberg, a young man from Blackwater who leaves the village on that fateful Midsummer's Eve; by Birger Torbjörnsson, a GP who lives in the bigger village of Byvången and has practised in this sparsely populated area for many years; and by Annie Raft, a teacher who arrives at Blackwater with her daughter Mia on Midsummer's Eve. Part II, set 18 years later, is focalised mainly by Johan and Birger.

The alternating focalisers in Part I construct differing aspects of this part of Norrland with its small village by a large and deep lake, its murmuring rivulets and rushing streams, its boggy lands with numerous species of sedges, its forests, and the high mountains in the west. Johan initially presents the view from the village with its houses, small farms, grazing goats and scrapped rusting cars, before travelling across the border and encountering, thanks to the female character whose companion he briefly becomes, stories of primeval forests as the spaces of matriarchal myths and erotic encounters. Birger combines his knowledge of the inhabitants of the area with interests in fishing and shooting which bring him to distant lakes, far-away forests and abandoned settlements; at the same time the involvement in environmental causes of his wife, a textile artist, helps sharpen his awareness of environmental change and destruction. Joining with Mia a commune at the abandoned settlement of Stjärnberg, Annie Raft experiences the landscape and demanding living conditions in the vicinity of the high mountains, several hours' walk from Blackwater, before moving down to the bigger village of Byvången and sharing with her students some of her critique of late-capitalist western civilisation.

Reviewing *Blackwater* in the liberal daily *Dagens Nyheter*, Birgit

Munkhammar argued that in light of the three focalisers, the novel might just as well have been three separate ones; indeed, she structured the major part of her review as if this had been the case (Munkhammar 1993). I have disagreed with this claim before, arguing that the *combination* of these separately focalised sequences is crucial (Forsås-Scott 2002: 414–415). But rather than limiting the implications of this combination to what I now think is a somewhat simplistic understanding of relations of gender in my earlier article, I propose to expand them here by shifting the emphasis to narration, the reader, memory, and the postcolonial and ecocritical implications of the construction of Norrland in *Blackwater*.

Eco has written about the role of what he, perhaps illustratively, terms “specific specialization-indices” in establishing the “Model Reader” of a text, for example the use of specialised terminology (Eco 1984: 7). For the reader to be able to familiarise herself/himself with the setting of Ekman’s novel, it is essential that Annie *arrives* on that Midsummer’s Eve, that, as she approaches Blackwater with Mia, she encounters the small village and its surroundings for the first time. To begin with, there are similarities here with the situation of Torsson and Malm in Rakisjokk. Neither Annie nor Mia is able to understand what the people at the bus stops are shouting to the driver or to each other: “De for i ett främmande land” (Ekman 1993: 14) [‘They were travelling in a foreign country’ (Ekman 1996a: 10)]. Annie “visste inte att de for uppåt efter ett sjösystem som sträckte sig ända till högfjället i Norge där det rann upp ur myrar och fjällbäckar” (Ekman 1993: 14–15) [‘didn’t know they were travelling upwards along a system of lakes extending right up to the high mountains in Norway, where it ran out of marshlands and mountain streams’ (Ekman 1996a: 10)].

In its dialectical relationship with the focalisations of Johan and Birger, Annie’s perspective as an outsider helps ease the reader into the closely observed specifics of the Norrland setting of this novel, from the details of the lush flora in the summer light and the way of life in the commune at Stjärnberg, to the isolation in the darkness of winter and the cold that threatens to freeze the fluid in the eyes of the skier. In other words, the combination of different focalisations makes this Norrland accessible to the reader while simultaneously involving her/him in the construction of it. At the same time the different focalisations are fundamental to the sender of this open fabula being able to lead “the addressee step by step to a state of pluriprobability” (Eco 1984: 34).

In Part I of *Blackwater* the sections focalised by Annie predominate, extending to just over 40 per cent of the text, while those focalised by Johan and Birger respectively amount to just under 30 per cent each (Wendelius 1999: 43). But there is more to the sections focalised by Annie than their

role in involving the reader in the construction of this Norrland. With the exception of the opening pages, the sections focalised by Annie in Part I are analepses. While Johan's and Birger's sections are set in the present of the Midsummer's Eve and its aftermath, Annie's sections are looking back from a point 18 years into the future, constructing her *memories* of events. There are references to the notebooks on which she is relying on the very first page of the account of her journey with Mia from Östersund on Midsummer's Eve: "Det stod ingenting om resan i hennes anteckningsböcker för de fanns inte än" (Ekman 1993: 13) ['There was nothing about their journey in her notebooks, because they hadn't existed then' (Ekman 1996a: 9)]. There are a few further references to Annie's notebooks, along with occasional reminders that she is looking back, such as "*Birger som hon då inte visste namnet på*" (Ekman 1993: 82; my italics) ['Birger, whose name she did not know then' (Ekman 1996a: 76; my italics)].

In Mieke Bal's analysis of narrative, memory is a special case of focalisation and often amounts to a narrative act: "loose elements come to cohere into a story, so that they can be remembered and eventually told" (Bal 1999: 147). As constructed in Ekman's novel, Blackwater and the surrounding area are studded with the remains of human habitation and references to characters who once lived there, such as Anton Jonssa who used to herd the horses on their summer grazing and whose name still denotes a path. Annie takes a special interest in some documents that provide fragments of the story about those who lived permanently at Stjärnberg just a few decades previously. In due course she teaches her students, fearful of a nuclear apocalypse, how to remember essential information by storing it, on the classical model, at stops along a specific route; and when Annie, 18 years after that Midsummer's Eve, has gone out into the forest to solve the mystery of the double murders, she must have taken, in the view of her partner Birger, "*Minnets väg*" (Ekman 1993: 434) ('the Path of Memory').<sup>3</sup> And this, he points out, could not possibly have taken her to Stjärnberg, for here the clear-felling has transformed the landscape:

Alla stigar är utplånade. Där finns inga hållpunkter för minnet. Det är en kalyta som blev en tundra. Det växer knappt. Det är för frostlänt, för utsatt. Nej, där är allt minne utplånat. (Ekman 1993: 434.)

['All the paths have been obliterated. There aren't any fixed points for the memory. It's a clear-felled area that became tundra. Hardly anything grows there. It's too exposed to frosts. No, all memory has been wiped out there.' (Ekman 1996a: 412.)]



Bal has made an important distinction between mastering, “looking from above, dividing up and controlling,” and mapping, which amounts to “[g]oing back—in retroversion—to the time in which the place was a different kind of space” and a way of “countering the effects of colonizing acts of focalization” (Bal 1999: 147). In my earlier article I illustrated “mastering” with the attempt by the police to survey and control the area around the site of the double murders (Forsås-Scott 2002: 416–418). But in light of the ecological dimensions of Ekman’s novel, the efforts of the police are just one version of a much bigger process of mastering, which has resulted in the obliteration of memory on the newly-formed tundra commonly referred to as “Ytan,” “the Area,” and which in turn is only one of a growing number of huge clear-fellings.

The “Area,” however, has further implications. When Annie and Mia hear someone running up the forest path that Midsummer’s Eve, Annie catches a glimpse of a dark young man with straight black hair. Associating him with the double murders she discovers soon afterwards, she categorises him as “en utlänning” (Ekman 1993: 83) [‘a foreigner’ (Ekman 1996a: 78)] and—without daring to state her suspicion openly “för det var så infekterat” (Ekman 1993: 83) [‘because that was so poisoned’ (Ekman 1996a: 78)]—a Vietnamese. While well informed of the Vietnam War and its resonances in Sweden, Annie is new to Blackwater and ignorant of the Sami. Johan, the character Anne and Mia have seen running up the path, is half Sami, and on one of the final pages of the novel Gudrun, his mother, underlines to him that her language, Southern Sami, is spoken by only a few hundred people and that she herself was banned from using it at school: “Vi fick prata samiska på dass vi. [...] När jag gick på skolan fick man skämmas för att man var lapp som för ohyra eller tbc” (Ekman 1993: 458) [‘We had to go into the privy to speak our own language. [...] When I went to school, they made you ashamed of being a Lapp, like having vermin or tuberculosis’ (Ekman 1996a: 434–435)].

One form of ecological imperialism, according to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, is “environmental racism” which they define, quoting the American environmental philosopher Deane Curtin, as “the connection, in theory and practice, of race and the environment so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the other” (quoted in Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 4). Environmental racism, say Huggan and Tiffin,

is perhaps best understood as a sociological phenomenon, exemplified in the environmentally discriminatory treatment of socially marginalised or economically disadvantaged peoples, and in the transference

of ecological problems from their “home” source to a “foreign” outlet (whether *discursively*, e.g. through the more or less wholly imagined perception of other people’s “dirty habits”, or *materially*, e.g. through the actual re-routing of First World commercial waste). (Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 4; italics original.)

In Ekman’s novel the colonial policies that have helped marginalise the Southern Sami are effectively applied to all the inhabitants of this peripheral part of Sweden. Significantly it is Gudrun who underlines the parallels between them all, irrespective of ethnicity. When Johan argues that those trying to survive in this part of Norrland are not all involved in the environmental destruction caused by industrialised forestry, she contradicts him:

– Dom försöker väl så gott dom kan, sa han. Hålla sig kvar. Som alla som bor här. Det är väl inget [*sic*] skillnad på samerna och dom andra i det avseendet. [...] Dom försöker leva nån sorts liv som hänger ihop med det som var förr. Och dom flesta vill minnas. Alla kan inte bygga vägar åt bolaget. Alla är inte med och förvandlar det här till Ytan.  
– Jo. (Ekman 1993: 459.)

[‘I suppose they do the best they can,’ he said. ‘Hanging on. Like everyone living here. There’s no difference between the Sami and the others in that respect. [...] They try to live a life that somehow connects to the past. And most of them want to remember. Not everyone can build roads for the company. Not everyone is involved in turning this into the Area.’

‘Yes, they are.’ (Ekman 1996a: 435–436.)]

The narrative of Ekman’s novel involves the reader in a dialogical process of construction, based on differing focalisations and requiring extensive interpretation. The lines quoted above are followed, on the subsequent page, by a short passage about the turning of the forest into “the Area” that is addressed to a “du,” “you”:

Hata dig. Vet vad du gjorde, vad du har varit med om. Det var brådskan, ingenting annat. Den stora brådskan. Alla fick så brått mot döden. Stigar går och försvinner som vägar, som skogar. Men att det gick så fort var fatalt. Nu har du bara närvaro och ett hungerhål. (Ekman 1993: 460.)

[‘Hate yourself.<sup>4</sup> Know what you did, what you took part in. It was the haste, nothing else. The great haste. Everyone was in such a hurry, hurrying towards death.

Paths run and disappear like roads, like forests. But it was fatal that it all went so quickly. Now you have only the presence and a hole of hunger.’ (Ekman 1996a: 437.)]

Whose words are these? Are they spoken aloud? Who is the “you” to whom they are addressed? The second-person address clearly sharpens the environmental critique, but the specific interpretation is left to the reader. The interpreter’s role is demanding and the result can be wholly wrong, as turns out to be the case with Annie’s assumption about the identity of the double murderer. But in *Blackwater* the active role of the reader emerges as a key democratic strategy, a means of beginning to create alternatives to the power structures that have resulted in colonialism and environmental racism, and that are now resulting in the irreparable destruction of the forest.

### *The Dog and The Forest of Hours*

*Rövarna i Skuleskogen* (1988) (*The Forest of Hours*) constructs a Norrland quite unlike that of *Blackwater* and with implications that are also very different, most importantly because the main setting is the Forest of Skule and the central character a troll. *The Forest of Hours* can usefully be approached in light of the notion of “centring on the peripheries” outlined by Cairns Craig, as “the opportunity of the periphery to construct an alternative kind of history, a different kind of map of the ways in which the past has been shaped, and therefore of the ways in which the future might be shaped” (Craig 2007: 32). While the concepts of mastering and mapping are relevant for a reading of this novel too, we encounter them in terms very different from those relevant to *Blackwater*.

Ekman has highlighted the relationship between *The Forest of Hours* and *Hunden* (*The Dog*), the novella published just two years earlier, referring to the latter as “mycket ett språkligt arbete; man kan ju inte skriva inifrån en hund som inte har ord, men jag ville försöka beskriva sinnliga upplevelser utan symboler och liknelser” (Gullberg 1990: 50) [‘very much a language project; of course you cannot write from inside a dog who lacks words, but I wanted to try to describe experiences pertaining to the senses without symbols and similes’]. The story of the puppy who gets lost and survives the winter in the forest (a setting that has nothing in common with the metropolitan environment of Virginia Woolf’s *Flush* [1933] although the *The Dog* clearly has affinities with Woolf’s “biography”), may be told from the dog’s perspective but culminates in his reunion with human beings. As Petra Broomans has put it, “Människorna fanns alltså hela tiden på andra sidan gränsen och de fick bara vänta. Människans språk hade egentligen aldrig slutat” (Broomans 2002: 410) [‘In other words, the human beings were on the other side of the boundary all the time, just waiting. Human language had in fact been there all the time.’] The narrative of *The Forest of Hours* develops a more radical approach, tackling head-on the implications of the fact that the western definition of humanity, as Val Plumwood has empha-

sised, is dependent on the presence of the “not-human”: the uncivilised, the animal and animalistic (quoted in Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 5).

When Skord, the troll, is spotted on the opening page of *The Forest of Hours* by a giant stuck under a fallen tree, he is no more than the glint of an eye among the greenery and the glimpse of a hand with fingers so similar to peeled birch roots that the giant is not sure if he might be seeing a bunch of roots after all. Skord at this point is “mager och jämförelsevis okunnig och utan baktankar, ja, utan tankar alls. Det var inte mycket mer under hårtovan än ett fladdrande som av lavskrikans vingar” (Ekman 1988: 10) [‘a scrawny little troll, unknowing and guileless, and not much given to thinking at all. There was little more than fluttering, like the wings of [Siberian] jays, going on under that tussock of hair’ (Ekman 1998: 4)]. But as he learns to speak and, in due course, learns several languages, Skord becomes more like a human being, his identity morphing throughout his long lifespan from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. Yet he retains his affinity with the forest, not just because he repeatedly returns there but also because he is able to communicate with animals and, as a shapeshifter, able to enter the body of a crow or a stoat. With this liminal character of the forest at the centre, the plot of Ekman’s novel can explore the notions of mapping and mastering in terms that are far more comprehensive and radical than those in *Blackwater*, developing an alternative map of the past—and perhaps also “of the ways in which the future might be shaped” (Craig 2007: 32).

Skord learns about representation and language by observing Bodel, the beggar girl he encounters with her brother Erker on the paths near the Forest of Skule. Using a needle and thread Bodel is able to write, illustrating in the process the distinction between signifier and signified:

Hon skrev blommorna utanför stugan en och en så att de inte framstod bara som en tovig, starkt doftande fäll av koätbara gräs med nickande blomst i topparna. Hon skrev dem med lingarn som hon tvinnade dubbelt sedan hon färgat det med björklöv, renlav eller aspbark. Hon skrev dem inte som de stod där, inte så att de hade kunnat tas från linnelappen och sättas tillbaka i grässvålen, utan hon gjorde tecken för dem. (Ekman 1988: 106.)

[‘She wrote down the flowers outside the house, one by one. This way, flowers became more than just tufts of sweet-smelling stuff, nodding in the wind above a mat of cow grass. She wrote them using linen yarns, spun with double threads which had been dyed with birch leaves, reindeer lichen or the bark of aspens. She did not write them as they were. They could not have been taken from the linen clout and put back into the grass. She turned them into signs.’ (Ekman 1998: 116.)]

However, representation and the telling of stories also amount to the exercise of power. When Bodel uses sticks, stones and spruce cones to make a miniature version of a small village, Skord's threat to drop a handful of stones on the farm where Erker has been maltreated turns not just into the destruction of Bodel's village but into the devastation, by fire, of the village itself. Far bolder and more elaborate as a linguistic experiment than *The Dog*, the narrative of *The Forest of Hours* is a balancing act between the categorisations and ordering necessary for the telling of stories on the one hand and the problematisation and, indeed, critique of categorisations and ordering on the other. Prominently meta-textual and with a central character whose language changes markedly over the centuries—and necessitates a glossary covering words in Ångermanland dialect, Latin, German and French (the English translation has a glossary of Scots words in addition to the Notes)—*The Forest of Hours*, like *Blackwater*, makes extensive demands on its reader. While the novel about Skord has a third-person narrator, the omniscience of this narrator is modest, with the perspectives of the liminal central character foregrounded throughout.

The troll of the forest and the Forest of Skule, then, become central to the plot of Ekman's novel, but what, more precisely, are they associated with? Constructed from the troll's perspective, the forest is a chaos: "i skogen levde man i ett grönt virrvarr, i svarta kärrhål, i rasslande lövkronor, i hål och skrevor, i mossor som gav efter under foten och i gungande risbrötar" (Ekman 1988: 25) ['forest life went on in a green wilderness of rustling leafy canopies, in black bog pools, in holes and clefts, and over mossy surfaces that gave way under foot and crumbling piles of dry branches' (Ekman 1998: 22)]. The forest also has a timescale of its own:

Skogen är genomdragen av tid. Klapperstensfälten har stelnat i stenvågor, i långa bränningar av frusen tid. I myren har den susande skogen sjunkit och varje myrråk brygger jäsande tid. (Ekman 1988: 276.)

['Strands of time run through the forest. The high fields of scree are solidified waves of stone, long swells of unmoving time. Tall trees, once whispering in the wind, have sunk into the peat bogs, where time ferments in the marshy pools.' (Ekman 1998: 310.)]

In due course Skord leaves the forest, but not before he has been part of a band of robbers; subsequently he returns to these characters—or, rather, their successors several generations into the future. The robbers are characterised by a liminality akin to that of Skord, spending the winters "som orrar nergrävda i snö" (Ekman 1988: 97) ['dug [...] into the snow like black grouse' (Ekman 1998: 105)]; and in a sense they, too, reflect the timescale of the for-

est as the names, years and places of burial of their leaders, unlike those of the kings of Sweden, are left unrecorded and quickly forgotten. Only those able to put together a story about themselves and find a listener may have a chance of establishing an identity for themselves—to the extent that a story is a criterion of identity in a context in which the very notion is so radically problematised:

Vem var Baldesjor utan sin berättelse? En räcka rapningar och snarkningar? En loppbiten och svullen kropp under grova fällar? En skrovlig röst, en hand som stack med spjut och stötte med dolk. Ett örsprång, ett evigt pissande, ett slyngknippe av hungrigt mullrande tarmar. Var det något mer? Och vem kunde svara på det? (Ekman 1988: 131.)

[‘Who was Baldesjor without his story? Just a string of belches and grunts? A flea-bitten, bloated body under the coarse covers? A rough voice, a hand that threw spears and stabbed with dirks. A sore ear, someone who pissed regularly, a snake’s nest of hungrily rumbling gut. Was there more to him than that? Who could answer?’ (Ekman 1998: 144.)]

With the Forest of Skule a recurring location in the plot of the novel, the narrative structure helps reinforce that reversal of centre and periphery in which the character of Skord plays the key role.

The Forest of Skule with its very different perspectives on place, time and identity provides not just the starting-point but also the point of reference as the plot traces the development of western civilisation over 500 years. With the emphasis on humankind’s efforts to penetrate, interpret and, indeed, imitate aspects of the natural world, including the universe, the narrative takes the reader from the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, with Skord serving as the famulus of a priest, via an alchemist’s efforts to make gold in sixteenth-century Uppsala with Skord as his assistant, and on to the Thirty Years’ War in which Kristiern Scordius appears as a barber-surgeon on the Catholic side. Having been captured by the Swedes and incarcerated in Finland, he re-emerges as physician to His Lordship in Gustavia in the West Indies, briefly a Swedish colony in the late eighteenth century, and by the nineteenth century Kristiern Schordenius is a mesmerist practising in Stockholm. Ekman’s picaresque novel—whose central character is perhaps a trickster responsible for generating the plot—opens up several opportunities for Skord to get back to the Forest of Skule, but it is thanks to his role as a mesmerist and the commission to treat Xenia, lost in the forest for 12 years, that he returns for good.

What, then, is the effect of the juxtapositions, throughout Ekman’s novel, of central aspects of the development of western civilisation and the forest? When, in the opening section, Bodel tells Skord about the world, she

introduces him to categories, order and hierarchies. At the bottom are the people tilling the earth, above them is the foreman, and above him not the best riding horses, as Skord assumes, but Her Ladyship, the Master, the Bishop, the Pope in Rome and, finally, God in Heaven. Animals, Bodel explains to Skord, do not count because they lack souls; indeed, “[i]ngenting som han sett i skogen räknades som kunskap” (Ekman 1988: 27) [‘[n]othing Skord had seen in the forest counted as knowledge’ (Ekman 1998: 24)]. The categorisations and ordering of this world gradually become more detailed and more rigid, as illustrated by the section on the efforts in the sixteenth century to make gold and the quest for the Philosophers’ Stone, with the separation of the human world and the natural one finalised by Descartes. Invited to Stockholm by Queen Christina, the French philosopher died there in 1650. In Ekman’s novel Skord is introduced to his thinking by the scribe who has been copying Descartes’s notes, and in addition to the division of the human being into body and soul, Moshe Feigenbaum highlights the role of the Cartesian “Method”—“de som förstod att använda sig av den skulle få en sådan makt över tingen att de höjde eller sänkte sig, upplöstes eller blandades på hans befallning” (Ekman 1988: 322) [‘those who understood how to use it would have such power over matter that on command things would rise and fall, dissolve or mix’ (Ekman 1998: 364)]—and of the consequent reductionist perspectives on animals, who

rör sig efter de lagar Den Högste stiftat för dem. De är tappar, kuggar, hjul och leder i hans stora Machine och de går runt i den Carouselle som han för evigt har satt dem i. De äter, de parar sig och de föder avkomma som äter och parar sig. (Ekman 1988: 323–324.)

[‘go about their lives according to the laws the Highest Being has designed for them. They are tappets, cogs, wheels and joints in His great Machine, and they rotate for ever in the Carousels in which he has placed them. They eat, mate and give birth to offspring which eat and mate.’ (Ekman 1998: 366.)]

However, when Skord meets Xenia it is animals and plants that not only provide the metaphors for their relationship but embed their love in a context that explodes any boundaries between nature and culture. Ironically it is Skord, using his old taroc, who has been teaching Xenia about the hierarchies and order she has to learn about in order to function in the world of human beings—“Först föds man, så skriker man. Sen kravlar man, så går man. Ser du, alltid i ordning, ända till slutet.” (Ekman 1988: 383) [‘First you are born, then you cry. Then you crawl, then you walk.’] You see, always the order, all the way to the end.’ (Ekman 1998: 430)]—and it is her reading of novels that has provided her with a model for understanding hu-

man existence: “Det ena kom först, det andra kom sedan – som i en roman’ (Ekman 1988: 376) [‘One thing came first and then came another—as in a novel’ (Ekman 1998: 421)]. But in Ekman’s narrative, inevitably dependent on the demands of story-telling yet consistently pointing up the effects of human systems of order and hierarchisation, the union of Xenia and Skord dissolves all boundaries:

Xenia älskar Skord som tornsvalan älskar luften hon dyker i. Tornsvalan vet att hon inte ska röra vid marken mer, inte så länge hon lever. Skord älskar Xenia som laxen hoppar i forsen. Högre, mycket högre än han behöver hoppar han. Starkare språng tar han än det som skulle räcka till för att föra honom opp på forsacken. Xenia och Skord älskar varandra som rosling och björnmossa flätar sig in i varandra—för intet öga, i ingen avsikt och till intet ändamål flätar sig in i varandra. (Ekman 1988: 392.)

[‘Xenia loves Skord in the same way the swift loves the air she plunges into. The swift knows she will not touch the ground again, not for as long as she lives. Skord loves Xenia the way the salmon leaps in the waterfall. He leaps higher, much higher than he needs to. [He leaps more powerfully than he would need to reach the top of the fall.]<sup>6</sup> Xenia and Skord love each other the way bog rosemary and bear moss intertwine—not for show, not for a purpose nor with intent.’ (Ekman 1998: 441.)]

The representation of the area of Norrland at the centre of Ekman’s novel, the Forest of Skule, helps raise fundamental questions about the prevailing western understanding of the world viewed from an historical perspective, ranging from the definition of time to categorisations such as subject and object, nature and culture. The novel that has a troll from the forest as its central character does not only problematise identity, power and hierarchy but also spells out the effects of these constructs over the centuries. The result is a critique of western civilisation that is as far-reaching as it is imaginative.

### *The Wolfskin*

When *Skraplotter* [‘Scratch Cards’], the final volume in Ekman’s trilogy *Vargskinnet* [‘The Wolfskin’], was awarded the August Prize for fiction in 2003, the Prize Committee pinpointed the lottery scratch card as “sinnebilderna för ett utarmat Sverige av i dag, sett ur marginalens perspektiv med snabbt avfolkade landskap, kyrkor och konsumbutiker” (Anon. 2003) [‘the image of an impoverished Sweden of today, seen from the margin with rapidly depopulated provinces, churches and co-op shops’]. The notion of an “impoverished” Sweden “seen from the margin” is an unmistakable example of a perspective from the centre. However, it is also grounded in aspects of the plot not just of *Scratch Cards* but of the entire trilogy.



Set in a part of Norrland that, geographically, has much in common with that of *Blackwater*, the plot of *The Wolfskin* covers virtually the whole of the twentieth century. The perspective from the centre has been established by ministers of the State Lutheran Church who arrived from the south in the nineteenth century and wrote accounts of their sparsely populated parishes reaching right up to the high mountains on the border with Norway. The perspective from the centre is reinforced by the young mid-wife who is engaged to the incoming minister and who, in the opening pages of the first volume, *Guds barmhärtighet (God's Mercy)*, arrives to take up her post in Röbbäck in March 1916. As the plot expands to include extended parts set in Norway (in addition to Germany, Italy, Scotland and India), the perspective from the centre is most powerfully—and violently—exemplified by the Second World War and the German occupation of Norway with its categorisations of people, its refugees, and also its implications for the Sami who can no longer bring their flocks to the areas high in the mountains where the reindeer give birth to their calves.

However, mastering in the form of the perspective from the centre is also apparent as Ingefrid, on the opening page of *Scratch Cards*, sees Blackwater for the first time on a November afternoon in the 1990s:

Byn vintersov i snön. I orörligheten steg rök ur skorstenen på ett vitt hus. Därinne skymtade ett gammalt par, två skuggor som ljuset snart skulle lysa igenom. Fönstret bakom dem vette ut mot en stor isbelagd sjö.

Nedanför förstubron låg granris att torka fötterna på. I en björk var en fläksvål fastspikad åt talgoxarna. Det satt en virkad gardinkappa i fönstret mot vägen.

Allting var så smått. Kunde det vara hela människoliv? (Ekman 2003: 5.)

[‘The village was asleep for the winter in the snow. Nothing moved but the smoke rising from the chimney on a white house. Inside an old couple could be seen, two shadows that the light would soon penetrate. The window behind them faced a big ice-covered lake.

Below the front steps were branches of spruce for wiping one’s feet. A piece of bacon rind for the great tits had been nailed to a birch. There was a crocheted curtain along the top of the window towards the road.

Everything was so small. Could these be entire human lives?’]

Ingefrid, a minister, has arrived from Stockholm to claim her inheritance including sections of forest defined, through another process of mastering, in terms of place-names and numbers such as Blackwater 1:2, 1:17, 1:24 and 25. More importantly, she wants to trace her biological parents. This process, central to the plot of the last volume of the trilogy, also completes the elaborate mapping that deconstructs the prominent elements of mastering in *The Wolfskin*.

We have traced the changing focalisations and their significance in *Blackwater* and seen how, in *The Forest of Hours*, Skord's liminal characteristics and shifting identities similarly help foreground focalisation. As in *Blackwater*, the reader of *The Wolfskin* is challenged by the narrative's changing focalisations, but in the trilogy there are more of these in a narrative spanning over a considerably longer period of time. With the plot revolving around three generations of women in addition to a male artist, the reader, as in *Blackwater*, is introduced to the location by a female character arriving for the first time. The young midwife, Hillevi Klarin, is a meticulous observer and more diligent than Annie Raft as she begins to document the new setting of her life during the long journey from Östersund to Röbbäck, the third-person narrative detailing her notes on dialect words and terminology, the shooting of a she-wolf, and the recipe for a local treat made of potatoes, barley meal, diced pork and soft whey cheese. With her copious notebooks, initially journals detailing her work as a midwife, Hillevi who gets married to Trond Halvorsen, in due course a shop-keeper and key figure in the community, plays a central role in much of the trilogy.

But the opening pages of the first novel in the series are narrated in the first person by another character, Kristin or Risten, who recalls meeting, at the age of six, her maternal uncle who spoke to her in Sami, the native language that she has forgotten but begins to recall as he sings to her. As Hillevi's and Trond's foster daughter, Risten knows not to tell them about the encounter with Laula Anut; but her first-person narration, told from a chronological point towards the end of the trilogy's timespan and characterised by her part-Sami origin and observations of Sami life gathered during her marriage to a reindeer-herding Sami, is in sharp contrast to the sections focalised by Hillevi. Risten's memories highlight the pressures of a nomadic life initially alien to her, including her worries about giving birth and bringing up two small children, but she also recalls the freedom of moving with the reindeer in the mountains and summer nights with her husband in their hut: "Jag behöver bara tänka på lukten av färskt krossat björklöv och hur Nila kom till mig om natten. Om sådant ska jag inte berätta" (Ekman 2002: 84) ['I only need to think of the scent of fresh crushed birch leaves and of how Nila came to me at night. I won't tell of these things']. Risten's nomadic life is brought to a sudden end by the death of her husband in an accident that takes place shortly after the war yet is directly related to it, but involved as she is with her sons and, in due course, her grandchildren and great-grandchild, this character—who also keeps a few sheep—maintains an affinity with nature not to be found in the character of her foster mother, Hillevi.

The role of the reader and the prominence of meta-textuality in the trilogy are both reinforced by the key part played by the character who is an

artist. At one level the artist who began by drawing and painting animals, especially horses, before switching to working in glass and achieving international fame for solid blocks incorporating the outlines of small babies, can be read as a rebellious migrant along the lines spelled out by Edward Said, who has argued that “liberation as an intellectual mission”

has shifted to the unhoused, decentred, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages. (Said 1994: 403.)

However, the artist in *The Wolfskin* who speaks several languages ranging from his native Jämtland dialect to Norwegian *trøndersk*, *bokmål* and *rikssvenska*, and who sometimes calls himself Elias Elv but uses other names too, is also a liminal character with affinities with Skord in *The Forest of Hours*. Having had to flee from home as a young boy and frequently starving while avoiding people, he sometimes felt that “han inte hade det stort annorlunda än en räv” (Ekman 1999: 124) [‘he was more like a fox’ (Ekman 2009: 118)]; and it is Elias, frequently accompanied by a dog, who stuns Ingefrid with his claim that “[e]tt liv utan djuren är ett gudlöst liv” (Ekman 2003: 251) [‘life without animals is life without God’].

When, after many years and much hesitation, Elias Elv returns to Blackwater, it is “[f]ör att få *se*. Denna nåd som är mig kärare än livet” (Ekman 2002: 101; italics original) [‘to be allowed to *see*. This grace that is dearer to me than life’]. Ingefrid is not just a new arrival whose observations help measure some of the changes that have taken place since Hillevi first travelled to Röbbäck more than 80 years previously: her search for God, for new versions of the pivotal religious experience she had while listening to Bach’s St John Passion in Engelbrektskyrkan in Stockholm in 1967, is also bound up with seeing, with what she refers to as “en ljusvidgning” (Ekman 2003: 131) [‘an expansion of light’].

In *The Wolfskin* animals are important to Risten and Elias, and they become so to Ingefrid too when she is left to look after Risten’s sheep during lambing. Watching the first ewe in labour Ingefrid finds her body moving in unison, “en kroppens inlevelse som hon förut bara hade känt med Anand” (Ekman 2003: 251) [‘a physical involvement of a kind she had previously only experienced with Anand’], and when the lambs have been born and are feeding contentedly, Ingefrid’s sense of happiness is as much about them as about the fact that the son she has adopted from India has settled in his new school.

Children, and especially very young children, are prominent in *The Wolfskin* as the ecocriticism of *Blackwater* and the cultural criticism of *The*

*Forest of Hours* combine with an “ethics of care” akin to that defined—albeit from an explicitly materialist position—by Rosi Braidotti. Having introduced the notion of the “nomadic subject” as a “political fiction, that allows me to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience” (Braidotti 1994: 4),<sup>7</sup> Braidotti, writing about the ethics of care, has argued that the necessary “interconnectedness” is “best served by a nomadic, non-unitary vision of the subject which has dissolved the boundaries of bourgeois individualism and redefined itself as a collective, multi-layered yet singular entity” (Braidotti 2007: 119). The unreported murder of a baby just delivered by Hillevi shortly after her arrival in Röbbäck continues to haunt her and her family. Elias Elv finds a young baby abandoned and, recalling the earlier incident with the baby delivered by the new midwife, struggles to find a woman able to breastfeed it. Risten is taken from her young mother in an attempt to spare her from growing up in poverty on the margins of society. Conceived out of wedlock in the mid-1940s by Hillevi’s daughter Myrten and placed with foster parents when only a few days old, Ingefrid is another abandoned child; and the same is true of her adopted son. It is, Ingefrid tells Birger, the GP who has been brought from *Blackwater* into *The Wolfskin*, “människor som behöver våra gärningar, inte Gud” (Ekman 2003: 313) [‘our fellow human beings who need our deeds, not God’]; and the needs of children epitomise this ethics of care:

Man ska inte tysta barnet med ett slag på munnen när det vill sjunga. Man ska inte straffa det och stänga in det i ett mörkt rum utan öppning, för att det inte förstår vår världsbild. (Ekman 2003: 365.)

[‘No child should be silenced by being hit on the mouth when she or he wants to sing. No child should be punished and shut into a dark room that has no opening because he or she does not understand our concept of the world.’]

Anand is a child in search of means of expressing himself and his interpretation the world, his creative vision inspired by Elias’s collection of many-coloured shards of glass. And when Ingefrid’s faith is shaken by an accident that comes close to claiming Anand’s life, she thinks of the surviving part of her faith as “den barnsliga delen” [‘the childish part’], indeed as “barnet som jag omsluter” [‘the child I’m enveloping’] (Ekman 2003: 364). In this trilogy where boundaries of all kinds are not just called into question but torn down, the forest at night with its wild animals that used to frighten Ingefrid helps change her perspective: “Ögonen är tvättade i det klaraste vatten. Jag är där jag hör hemma” (Ekman 2003: 369) [‘My eyes have been cleansed in the clearest of waters. I am where I belong’]. Emerging as arguably the most

conspicuous example of this narrative's instances of "a nomadic, non-unitary vision of the subject" redefined as "a collective, multi-layered yet singular entity" (Braidotti 2007: 119), Ingefrid decides to remain: appointed to the long vacant post as minister in Röbbäck, she stays with Anand, Birger, Risten and Elias Elv who is her father and whose real name is Elis Eriksson.

## Conclusion

"Vi har möjligheter i oss till en annan sorts samhällen än dem vi skapat" ['We have within us the potential for societies quite different from those we've created'], Kerstin Ekman once pointed out in an interview (Bolinder 1988: 11). She was referring to her tetralogy 'The Women and the City' and the expectations for Katrineholm as it was developing from a railway station into a town. But the notion of the potential for different societies is, if anything, even more relevant to the boldly original exploratory projects launched by the plots of her novels set in Norrland, which constitute the main part of what is arguably the most important *œuvre* in contemporary Swedish literature. The representations of Norrland in these novels, based on close observations and in-depth knowledge, are conveyed with narrative skills recalling Walter Benjamin's words (as he alludes to a quotation from Paul Valéry) about the "old co-ordination of the soul, the eye, and the hand" being "that of the artisan which we encounter wherever the art of storytelling is at home" (Benjamin 1973: 108). Ekman's texts engage us in absorbing stories and challenging processes of interpretation, ensuring that conventional categories are demolished along with traditional boundaries as these Norrland novels insistently raise fundamental issues about our civilisation, its power structures and their consequences for all living beings, and alert us to the potential of radically different perspectives and new approaches.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.
- <sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Norvik Press, London, for permission to re-use some of the material in my article on *Blackwater* published in *On the Threshold* (2002).
- <sup>3</sup> Joan Tate's translation "Memory Lane" trivialises the concept.
- <sup>4</sup> Tate's translation, "Hate you", fails to convey the meaning of the Swedish.
- <sup>5</sup> Sentence missing from the published translation.
- <sup>6</sup> Sentence missing from the published translation.
- <sup>7</sup> In "Narratives from the Margin? Welfare and Well-being in Kerstin Ekman's *Skraplotter*," *Scandinavica* 2011, 50, 1, pp. 84–95, I have drawn on Braidotti's notion of "nomadic becoming" for an analysis of *Scratch Cards*.

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