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Performative Scores for More-Than-Human Swamp Becomings

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where forest ends and pond begins at thresholds, in-between bodies of soil and bodies of water **SUBMERGE** hold your breath, count to eternity, to deep time, and even deeper mud mother of all mosses ABSORB all mess of the world, Falling through, insect webs **PRESERVE** all what is there, yet one cannot see but feel unknowing (from Swamp Diary, 2022)

edges,

These artist pages are a sentient mapping of a place. The score is an open invitation to the reader to move with(in) the landscape of the swamp. The proposed movement unfolds as an embodied act of interconnectedness with, and a responsiveness towards, the endangered Finnish swamp biotopes. How does it feel to move through the depths of the land-and-waterscape, as opposed to tramping its surface? Through emphasizing sensuous and embodied knowledge contained in swamp-related cultural ecologies, I raise the question: What kinds of relationships are activated by thinking *with* a swamp, as different from thinking *about* it?

The Finnish language has an extensive vocabulary for different kinds of wetlands – also known as mires and peatlands. One of the possible interpretations suggests that the country name – 'Suomi' in Finnish – comes from Suo-maa (*suo*=swamp and *maa*=land). Wetlands ecologies are differentiated, among other factors, according to their water economy, nutrition and succession phases.

The Nordic wetlands include aapa mires in the higher and raised bogs in the lower geographical latitudes: with the aapa mires being minerotrophic – they get more water and nutrients from mineralsoil; and the raised bogs being ombrotrophic – getting nutrients mainly from the rainwater.

While this classification into zones offers valuable information for understanding the natural cultural life of the swamp in relation to climatic factors, these artist pages seek to bring forward knowledge that is not strictly tied to anthropocentric knowledge structures. Instead, they aim to activate a myriad of different ways of (un)knowing the world of which the human is only one part. Multi-species ethnography and autoethnography, unfolding in my work through 'sentient encounters', resonate with observations that Thom van Dooren associates with 'a passionate immersion', which 'at its core, involves attentive interaction with diverse lifeways' (van Dooren *et al.* 2016: 6).

Multi-species studies, therefore, reach far beyond mere representation and scientific organization of more-than-human worlds, diving into layered 'thick encounters' and sympoetic relationships.

Moreover,

the effort to navigate one's way through the complexity of worlds in process is fundamentally a question of ethics and politics. It is the question of how do different knowledge practices – different modes of attentive immersion – bring different worlds into being? (van Dooren *et al.* 2016: 12)

On that note, while my artistic and art-informed research acknowledges the limitations of accessing other-than-human epistemological apparatuses, I seek to activate knowledge within affectual, sensorial milieus threaded together from multiple transformative encounters, ways of moving and being moved, and embodying the collective situatedness in multi-species habitats.

Learning about relations between mosses, birds and larger mammals in swamps brings valuable knowledge about the importance of swamps for biodiversity, as well as about different ways of relating to swamps in regional cultural histories. It, nevertheless, grants us with reflection about human ways of being, and our positioning within a nature-culture continuum.

Swamp, as a more-than-human body of soil and water, impersonates a threshold, a margin of human world-building. While only parts of the marshes and wetlands – forested edges, bushy or mossy surfaces – are inscribed on human-made maps, large biotopes remain inaccessible, invisible, impossible or less possible for the (human) body to pass, to visit, to inhabit.

Cultural references to swamps often contain the relationship of remoteness, isolation and qualities of no-land or in-between land, not only suggesting the limitation to human affordance, but also displaying the track record of historical efforts to understand, control and domesticate lush swamp worldings. Nordic-Baltic swamps have been historically mobilized in military conflicts, as borderlands, burial sites for the expelled and constrained from society. The myriad connotations in mythology, pagan and Christian spirituality, and magic, indicate that local communities have been depositing in swamps their more-than-human ancestry, beliefs, fears and hopes. Over the last decades, posthuman swamp aesthetics has extensively spread across sci-fi literature, audiovisual and performing arts, gaming and so forth.

Alongside continuous acquiring of naturalcultural knowledge of Nordic-Baltic swamps through my ongoing research, I have recognized in these landscapes, long-time traces of sensory negotiation with the more-than-human, and the vast space for new imaginations and activations of unhabitual multispecies connection. Wondering how a change of perspective is facilitated through embodied, sentient knowledge, I got interested in swamps as spaces of transformation: from harmful relationships of control, profit, etc., into fertile grounds for responsibility, stewardship and care. Hence, I propose an embodied enquiry: How can separation and void grow into enmeshment, intertwinement and connection with more human-swamp becoming?

In November 2021, I visited Oravasuo swamp in Ähtäri, in central Finland, through the Landscape Rewilding programme set up by a collaboration between Snowchange Cooperative and the Baltic Circle Festival, Finland. 'Wild Trippers' is an ongoing annual event aiming to bring awareness to the endangered swamp ecologies and the urgency to restore Oravasuo and the connected peatland areas of Siikaneva and Rasinneva. With organized rewilding trips, Baltic Circle introduces new forms of environmental thinking and activism in performing arts curation.

With its 18 hectares of swamp, the significance of Oravasuo for biodiversity, and especially the bird community, is enormous. The swamp area belongs to the so-called raised bogs zone, which are relatively forested, rich in nutrients swamps, characteristic of central Finland. Oravasuo is a home for the golden eagle, golden swamp moss and the willow grouse, as well as a passageway for many large mammals. Connected to the nearby wetlands it also serves as a water corridor, maintaining the necessary moisture and biodiversity for the region. In the last fifty years, over 5 million hectares of Finnish swamps have been subject to extensive draining linked to forestation and peat extraction activities. Rewilding is a call for action, and the only solution to reverse the ongoing degradation and loss of the swamp landscape.

Our guides to the Oravasuo swamp were Kaisu Mustonen and Tero Mustonen from Snowchange Cooperative. Tero Mustonen, lecturer at the University of Eastern Finland, keeper of traditional knowledge and a land steward of endangered habitats, introduced Oravasuo as 'the lungs of the planet', referring to the fact that swamps preserve immense carbon in biomass above and under the ground. With muddy swamp water rising up his dark-green rubber boots, Tero Mustonen spoke, among other things, about the importance of bringing the embodied and experiential knowledge into rewilding initiatives.

We moved freely through the swamp, taking time to observe and notice the presence of different species and agencies. Swamp called us to slow down, to tune into its timescale, much larger and slower than the human one. In many ways, this time together with the swamp facilitated ways of knowing and interacting with the landscape beyond mere scientific facts. Developing from what Tim Ingold calls 'relational knowledge', the central point for learning with the swamp has been our own collective situatedness in the landscape: feelings of November's cold and wet in our bodies, the taste of the lingonberries peeking out from under the thin snow cover, sweating together in a sauna or sharing a military tent overnight. Being a part of it all, exposed to all the agency, non-human as well as human, in and around the swamp, in a non-selective and wholesome way, fostered bonds and relationships, and activated responsibility: a long-term commitment to take care of this particular landscape, and to safeguard it.

The second rewilding trip to the same area took place in September 2022. The central activity of this visit was a rewilding field action in the nearby Rasinneva swamp. This collective intervention entailed building dams on ditches that would prevent the swamp from draining. Hours of digging together and engaging through our senses with enmeshed materialities of mud, timber and moss, has gradually built into a powerful sense of more-than-human interconnectedness with the hybrid body of the swamp. Physical intervention-'disturbance' (Tsing 2015) into the landscape, followed by immersion in textures of soil, moss, root systems and watery surfaces, and heightened bodily states of tiredness and pleasure, revealed a potential to reorganize existing assemblages and to 'break down a separation between singular bodies and their environments' (Rotman 2008: 104). The feeling of a shared affection and collective physicality made the entanglements within the group, and the soil, grow stronger.

Research on the affective turn in cultural studies highlights the importance of multi-sensory experiences, feelings and emotions associated with more-than-human landscapes. As previous studies show, moving and

exercising together in the mire strengthens the sense of community between people and their multisensory connections with the mire. Furthermore, these experiences can awaken a sense of the various values of nature' (Laurén *et al.* 2023: 9). Acting from such a place, in my opinion, fosters efforts to decolonize our learned ways of sensuous relating to the environment, making space for listening in multiple directions: listening to our bodies, listening to non-human nature, and listening to each other – sharing and witnessing together within our human communities.

Visits to Ähtäri also included educational sessions, such as lectures on restoration activities by Kaisu Mustonen, the Head of Biodiversity at Snowchange Cooperative, the screening of the movie *On Wings of the Raven* (by Thomas Miller, 2019, exploring the career and worldview of Finnish wilderness photographer Eero Murtomäki) and an open discussion. 'Wild Trippers' was also accompanied by Finnish Skolt Sámi film director and member of Snowchange Cooperative Pauliina Feodoroff. Sharing this experience with a group of art students, curators, researchers and experts in diverse disciplines made it possible to move inbetween embodied sensations, feelings and facts, while building a collective capacity for the intersectional engagement with the swamp.

The hospitable generosity and the warm presence of the local inhabitants at the swamp-neighbouring estate Vanha Väätänen reminded us of the importance of the wetland in relation to a sense of belonging for the local community. The webs of more-than-human interactions transformed the perceived roles we might have arrived with: those of host/guest, visitor, tourist. The growing feeling of becoming able to host new ways of relating – as an expanded intertwined being – while also being hosted by the generosity of the land and the people living on it, stuck with me as a precious way to activate connection with the landscape. I reflect on these experiences as well-curated rehearsals of what performance ecology can be, and as collective practices towards new imaginations sprouting at the meeting grounds of art, activism and environmental learning. 'Wild Trippers' have continued with annual rewilding activities in 2023 and 2024.

Towards the end of our visit to Oravasuo, Tero Mustonen asked us to reflect on our time with the swamp: What moved us? How could we further share our insights and the knowledge obtained in the field? I experienced, together with the small group of mainly urban dwellers, intense feelings of deep presence, grounding and mindful being. An act of returning, spending time with the swamp accommodated the process of multi-species listening and activated a felt sense of more-than-human belonging-together. I recognize over time a gradual change in my own way of approaching swamps, as well in my thinking and writing about them. I can notice this sense of connectedness and attunement informing the way I act in and about swamp environments: before entering the swamp, I announce my presence to its multi-species communities; I learned to recognize the seasonality of swamps and, accordingly, dwelling of non-human animals; I act from the urge of spreading the awareness of the threat they are facing due to unregulated extractive activities; Over time, I developed performative 'responsive movement' techniques, aiming to bring to awareness somatic ties between human and swamp bodyscapes, but also to foster attention and knowledge on multi-species growth and striving in swamps. Nevertheless, I acknowledge my own privilege of having access to such a pristine environment and being able to spend time with it. I hope, and move together with the swamp towards new wisdoms, while unearthing old and long-buried ones.

The undercurrent of these practices is a sentient mapping of the swamp space, activating new modes of relationality that are based in response-ability (the ability to respond) and the feelings of trust within entangled multi-species being. As such, these are distinguishing themselves from profit- and control-based relationships to non-human nature, as embedded in capitalist economies and maintaining in that way nature—culture separation and divide.

In my 'Swamp Diary' (an ongoing collection of notes and reflections on swamp visits), I wrote:

How can one attune itself to the timescales of the swamp, the centuries long perseverance of multispecies compost? How to embrace the moss-ness, its modest living and resilience? Moss: so ordinary, often left unnoticed yet so crucial for life on the Earth. (Swamp Diary, 2020)

Looking closer at the ground, with my bare eyes as magnifying glasses, inspired by how botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer writes about her moss explorations, I dive into wondrous societies of red swamp moss,

its fungal companions and numerous critters that surround them. I get my nostrils close to the ground as I linger in this soft space of somatic attending to these thriving micro-worlds. In this contact zone of a dozen millimetres between my body and the moss, the affect travels and bonds us together: through mixture of scent mingling, topographies of skin and moss surface, and the agency of thin air filling inbetween space, not entirely human, neither one of moss, but both at the same time.

I set my embodied practice into reference ground of 'agential realism' (Barad 2007: 225), inviting the knowledge that is about to become accessible to me, to unfold into an ungraspable, below-the-surface and beyond-the-senses network of information and matter, which remains in its opacity, and reveals itself in curious glimpses.

For their porous qualities, I think of swamps as trans 'bodies of water' (Neimanis 2012). 'Trans' here meaning multiple, ever-changing, shape-shifting, refusing singularity. Swamp is in that sense the hybrid materiality of many, of 'mingled and mixed bodies' (Serres 1995, where symbiotic existence prevails.

The particular felt sense of being with a multiplicity and ambiguity of the swamp evokes what anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt-Tsing (2015) calls 'the indeterminacy of the encounter' – keeping our senses open for what is there to be met, opening itself towards the multi-sensory faculties of orienting, moving and becoming-with the landscape, allowing ourselves to suspend our own rational knowing to welcome soft focus, and embrace the embodied communion, or kinship, with our surroundings:

Where does the swamp begin and end? This body-landscape invites me to move at the edges of knowledge. Swamp allows me not to know, to be present in uncertainty, intuitive trust between my feet and the ground. Swamp stands for in-between, solid and liquid, holding ground and one that is not. (Swamp diary, 2021)

Dialoguing with the swamp, in my attempts to invite answers, has been leading me to experiment with and devise 'scores for the swamp', a collection of propositions that combine sentient mapping, Somatic Movement (Sandra Reeve), Non-stylised Movement (Paula Kramer) and Deep Listening (Pauline Oliveros).

SCORE FOR SWAMP BECOMINGS no1:

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1. go for a walk in the swamp.

2. find a spot that feels comfortable to stop and sit down.

3. spend five minutes observing colours, shapes and textures of the swamp.

4. if possible, lay down and feel the softness of the ground across the whole surface of your back. trust the moss bed holding the full weight of your body.

5. softly submerge your fingers in the body of moss. feel the humidity and smell the scent of moist.
6. continue your walk, responding with every next step to the ground you move upon. listen to the swamp with the soles of your feet.

Thought together with eco-phenomenological (Abrams) and (auto)ethnographic research methodologies, the scores are employed to (re-)activate forgotten imaginations of the environment, to unlearn habitual ways of seeing and to enable shifts of perspective. This allows for alternative ways of relating to and experiencing the environment to emerge. Embracing an 'art of noticing' (Tsing 2015) and a 'learning to see'

(Kimmerer 2003), the scores activate delicate ecologies of being together with a swamp, as multifaceted encounters with 'ways of being one cannot even imagine' (Gustafsson and Haapoja 2020). The act of reading these propositions is stepping into speculative transcorporeal thinking. This requires shaking off the 'natural attitude' (Husserl 1982), a process of becoming mindful not only of *what* is experienced, but also *how*: becoming aware of textures, surfaces, meshes of the swamp and the generous state of being enmeshed. The swamp scores are meant to cultivate a sense of intertwinement and entanglement of 'the sensing body and a sensible landscape' (Merleau-Ponty 1968), where our skin meets the surface of the land, and, together, they connect, rather than separate. The landscape becomes the grown-in continuation of the body, and vice versa.

Rehearsing interconnectedness and responsiveness perhaps teach us 'how to be otherwise' (Gustafsson and Haapoja 2020) to resist inert, often harmful behaviours towards the land; to attend to soils for multispecies justice, solidarity and care. Finding points of connective hope, joy and action, doing and unlearning together, are perhaps a possible way to multiply knowledge, empathy and connection, and make them last.

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