Johanna Lindbo, »Sensual Grass Touching Humid Skin: Finding Love in the Relationship between Subject and Landscape«

ABSTRACT

The starting point of this article is the notion of landscapes as intra-active places for dwelling and becoming. Informed by feminist and material ecocritical theory, it aims to make visible a connection between vegetation, water, dirt, affect, and subjects in literary texts. Against a comparative backdrop of the work of the French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir, the article looks at the relationship between humans and nature in contemporary Swedish literature. The analyses explore three fictional young women’s experiences of being-in-nature in three novels: Hanna Nordenhök’s Det vita huset i Simpang (The White House in Simpang) (2013), Sara Stridsberg’s Happy Sally (2004) and Mare Kandre’s Bübin’s unge (Bübin’s kid) (1987). The purpose is to investigate how literary texts can depict and convey experiences of sensuality, embodiment, and belonging within landscapes as something meaningful in terms of the subject’s continuous process of becoming. It is argued that the novels articulate intimate and tactile bonds between the young women and the organic environment that combine creation and destruction, sometimes resembling notions of love.

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Keywords: embodiment, Hanna Nordenhök, landscape, love, Mare Kandre, material ecocriticism, Sara Stridsberg, vegetation

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SENSUAL GRASS TOUCHING HUMID SKIN:

Finding Love in the Relationship between Subject and Landscape

My hair is heavy with twigs and leaves that silently fall to the ground when I turn around, and it is sweet, quiet; branches trail along the ground; the sweet, heavy leaves come loose, gleaming with sap, hitting the grass with a dry, thin sound, like dead flies.¹

This article is about fictional young women in contemporary literature. It is about their bodies and how they respond to the green surroundings in which they are situated. When examining the relationship between women and landscape, however, one must, first of all, recognize the complexity of the topic. In feminist theorizing, for example, the relationship between gender and nature has for long already been a source of tension, with two seemingly contradictory positions juxtaposed with each other. On the one hand, any association between femininity and nature has typically been couched in terms of power relations and patriarchal exploitation of both women and natural resources. On the other hand, however, perspectives have also been put forth that highlight nature as a place for women to become and find momentary relief from the oppressive conventions of society. In the philosophical and aesthetic writings of the feminist icon Simone de Beauvoir, the tension between the two is made particularly manifest.

In her portrayals of young girls’ processes of becoming, de Beauvoir describes a certain bond between the subjects in question and the landscape they inhabit. Sometimes this bond is characterized by abjection, but sometimes it also takes on the characteristic of something dynamic, almost subversive. This is exemplified especially well in de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (Le deuxième sexe, 1949) and in her more autobiographical work Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter (Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée, 1958).

The idea of approaching de Beauvoir’s texts from an ecocritical framework might, however, at first glance seem less than self-evident or even justified. Indeed, de Beauvoir’s existentialist philosophy builds on an anthropocentric view of the world, one in which human intention, will, and perception form the focal points, leading many to overlook the ecocritical potential contained in her output. In The Second Sex, de Beauvoir clearly
states that the benefit a non-urban landscape provides for her young woman characters is in how it makes them human: among flowers, lakes, and birds her adolescent girl can claim her humanity and her body, affirming a setup in which that which is human is defined in contrast to the more-than-human.\(^2\) Also her other writings offer a plethora of intellectual and aesthetic descriptions of nature that address the relationship between that which is human and that which is more-than-human, or, more precisely, between the feminized body and organic landscapes. For de Beauvoir, this relationship is to be understood as something other than an essentialist connection presenting the bond between women and Nature as being primarily about female biology, viewed through a binary system of classifications. This intrigues me, much because such a connection between women and nature can be highly problematic in various ways, but also because I find it beautiful when thinking of it through my own experiences. Reading de Beauvoir awakens memories in me, some of them rather awkward, of my own adolescence. In them, I am in different kinds of landscapes, such as a pine forest or a muddy freshwater lake twenty minutes from my home, leading me to wonder how young women’s connection to nature is portrayed in contemporary Swedish prose.

In this article, I attempt to extend on de Beauvoir’s characterizations of the (at least potential) relationship between humans and the flora and other elements of nature usually referred to as non-subjects, with the ultimate aim of exploring whether such relationships might even be conceived of in terms of what we ordinarily call love. To be able to more concretely analyse how literary texts portray experiences of sensuality, embodiment, and belonging within landscape, I examine novels by three Swedish authors: Hanna Nordenhök (b. 1977), Sara Stridsberg (b. 1972), and Mare Kandre (1962–2005). My examination is guided by the following main questions: Can such experiences be understood as meaningful in terms of the subject’s continuous process of becoming, and if so, in which ways? What can such experiences contribute to our understanding of the relationship between humans and our environment? To what extent, if at all, might it be possible to describe that relationship as also being about ‘love’? To pursue these questions, I draw upon perspectives derived from (somewhat loosely shaped) material ecocriticism, which stress the mutual entwinement of human bodies, nature, materiality, and discourse. Proceeding from them, it becomes possible to address the more-than-human bodies and elements in literary plots as valuable for them both as metaphors and as matter.

In the analysis, the writings of de Beauvoir provide an inspirational backdrop, while the primary sources for this study – three novels by contemporary Swedish authors – all in
their individual ways emphasize the material aspects of being a subject situated in a body of flesh. Such human-flesh-ness is also what previous research has drawn attention to, in discussing abjection and femininity, especially in the case of Stridsberg and Kandre. Adopting a material, ecocritical perspective will help research along these lines to move forward, by throwing light on new ways of understanding embodiment and becoming, understandings in which flesh-ness and agency no longer are restricted to the human body alone.

The delirious narrative in Kandre’s Bübins unge (Būbin’s Kid) (1987) tells the story of the young girl Kindchen who, together with another child, Ungen, is left alone in a house surrounded by an overgrown garden. As their hunger and solitude grows deeper, Kindchen travels further into the garden and the adjoining forest. The garden as a literary motif features also in Nordenhök’s novel Det vita huset i Simpang (The White House in Simpang) (2013), a fragmented story of Zus, a child of a wealthy plantation owner in Indonesia in the late 1930s, who spends her days with her younger brother in her family’s lush garden, keeping a journal of her gardening efforts. In Stridsberg’s Happy Sally (2004), on the other hand, the landscapes consist of lakes and oceans, while the narrative, just as in Nordenhök’s story of Zus, remains fragmented, with letters, memories, and postcards forming the plot in which the main character Ellen is drawn closer and closer to water. What unites these three novels is that they all thematize the feminized body, while at the same time offering three different settings in which the elaboration on the theme takes place – and not only in a geographical sense, but also in terms of the historical period and the protagonists’ social class and biological age.

In what follows, a brief theoretical introduction will first be provided to the eclectic field of feminist material ecocriticism. After that, an analysis of the three novels follows, with a focus on their characters’ sense of belonging, encounter, and embodiment. The article concludes with a brief discussion on how the findings from this analysis might speak for any manifestation of love in these relationships.

BEING CLOSE TO NATURE

In this article, my purpose is to sketch a theoretical framework based on the work of philosophers and theorists who, from different positions, have contributed to notions of human and more-than-human relationships. Some of these authors have focused on love and affect, while others are important because of the ecocritical view they take on landscape and agency. All of them, however, speak in one voice when it comes to understanding love, body, and becoming: emphasizing energy, growth, and decomposition.

In feminist theory, cultural associations between women and
nature has for long already been subjected to interrogation, scrutiny, and criticism. In *The Second Sex*, for instance, de Beauvoir describes how men seek ‘the Other’ and ‘Nature’ in women, but that the form of nature they reach for in women in fact brings them feelings of both discomfort and pleasure: nature, for men, is something to be discovered and conquered, and yet it resists all such attempts, in the end defeating those trying to own it, with its chaotic and mysterious ways. Elsewhere, Merchant has argued that the symbolic connection typically drawn in the West between women and nature underpins the exploitation of both women and the Earth. Closely linked to this image of women as nature is a dualistic understanding of gender and sex, one in which men are associated with culture, intellect, and soul, while women become nature, body, and earthiness. As Mohanty has shown, however, such universal applications of gender dualisms remain deeply problematic, as the constructs behind them are about discourses of representation, not about material realities. The positioning of women as nature and object will, in general, never be stable, since the category dissolves into multiple new groupings shaped by factors such as class, sexuality, nationality, race, age, and functionality. As Dyer, for example, has demonstrated, even if the power of white women remains far from identical to that of white men, they are nevertheless able to both acquire and exercise power vis-à-vis other groups of women, merely by virtue of being white. Indeed, with the help of a combined perspective of critical whiteness studies and feminist ecocriticism, the notion of »women as nature« emerges as a hierarchical construct, one in which animality and earthiness are ascribed differently to different feminized bodies, with the bodies of white, especially Nordic and Anglo-Saxon, women being the ones least associated with Nature, at least in the West. In addition, there is nothing inherent in such nature association to compel us to see it as necessarily carrying a negative or reductive connotation; it may have simply come to be viewed as such as a result of Western capitalist societies’ arrogant attitude towards nature and all other kinds of knowledge different from that of our own. It is precisely for this reason that material ecocriticism, in bringing together narratology, phenomenology, philosophy, ecology, sociology, and biology, can serve as an important tool for understanding the relationships between human and more-than-human as dynamic networks.

As a motif in literary history, the relationship between feminized characters and landscape has featured in the work of feminist writers for some time already. At times, it has remained unthematized in the background, as in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), in which the open landscapes of the English
heaths play a subtle yet important part of the narrative. Other authors have placed the landscape more in the centre of the plot, such as, notably, Jane Lindsay in her Picnic at Hanging Rock (1967), which explores the mysterious vanishing of young white girls in a dry Australian outback portrayed as simultaneously captivating and consuming. The novels of the Brontë sisters have, indeed, become the subject of much attention, not least by scholars such as Gilbert, Gubar, and Spivak, whose analyses have been influential in field of feminist literary studies; especially Spivak’s critical reading of both Jane Eyre and Gilbert and Gubar’s earlier study of the same novel have had a major impact on later post-colonial and critical whiteness studies on literary history in general and the problematic connection drawn between race, subjecthood, and animality in particular. However, the relationship between young women and nature in the writings and lives of the Brontë sisters was also picked up and addressed by de Beauvoir. In The Second Sex, she lingers on the subject, placing it in relation to writings by Colette and Mary Webb to argue that vegetation and animals enable young women to claim their subjecthood.

In examining feminized human subjects’ relationships with landscape in literary texts in this article, the term ‘landscape’ denotes a specific space in nature. As Davies has defined it, landscapes are «natural insofar as everything is natural... [while] at the same time [they are] discursively constituted.» A landscape is a place of dwelling; it can be a city landscape, treeless tundra, or a field of wheat. Here Davies herself goes as far as naming the mother’s body as the first (internal) landscape mammals encounter. In the analysis of the novels by Kandre, Stridsberg, and Nordenhök in this article, however, the term is used primarily to describe the spaces in nature that the characters inhabit and experience. These landscapes are shaped by both material and discursive elements that incorporate history, location, and biological factors. In My Garden (Book) (1999), for instance, the author and gardener Jamaica Kincaid writes about the imperialistic history of plants and garden, using the island of Antigua as an example of how the flora can change dramatically as a result of colonialism and trade. In this regard, her writing often corresponds to that of Vandana Shiva, Terre Ryan, and Veronica Strang, who all make references to concepts such as «botanical piracy» and «gardening the world» to reflect on the various ways in which imperialism has shaped, and continues to shape, our planet’s ecology. While these, to be sure, are all discursive elements in that they are political and historical, they at the same time also have a clear and consequential material dimension: they critically impact flora and fauna. In an ecocritical reading, issues like these are necessary to address, since they affect the interconnectedness between, and experiences of, what we see as human
and what we understand as landscape. Just as with interhuman relationships, moreover, also here questions of power and identity have consequences for the affective relationships between humans and more-than-humans.

Love is often perceived as something specific to the human species, which makes it an interesting subject to approach from an ecocritical perspective. As Ferguson and Jónasdóttir, for instance, have emphasized:

— love is a distinctive, creative/re-creative human capacity and energy that – on its own and/or fused with other essential human capacities, such as the capacity to work – allows humans to act intentionally together to form and change their life and living conditions.14

Here love is linked to intentionality, progress, and capacity characteristic of the life of human subjects, while no thought is given to other species’ ability to experience love. For de Beauvoir, too, while such love presupposes mutual freedom and the ability to be both subject and object, this quintessential mutuality remains the (potential) property of the relationship between two or multiple human subjects only.15 As Lowe has noted in discussing de Beauvoir’s notions of love and freedom, such »authentic love«, however, can, for de Beauvoir, only be achieved when women are socially, economically, and politically independent.16 In Western patriarchy (described by de Beauvoir in The Second Sex), it will thus remain difficult, if not altogether impossible, to achieve, with women relegated to the role of the other allowing men to ignore their equal status as free subjects.

As I will try to show in this article, love can, however, also be understood in a somewhat different way. Assuming that love, as Ferguson and Jónasdóttir have proposed, is energy capable of both creating and re-creating, it can also be taken to manifest itself in the act of experience and embodiment. To enable an examination of how this might apply to relationships between human subjects and landscape, Bennett’s term assemblage is helpful, uniting as it does both human and more-than-human agency.17 In considering the interrelations between human and more-than-human bodies, Bennett has argued that these relationships need to be recognized as characterized by mutuality, in that the parties to them that are more-than-human also bring agency and power into the relationship, even when they are a thing, an object. To help us move beyond the world of subject-centred and often intentionally driven agents, Bennett employs the term actant to describe the source of action, which can be human, more-than-human, or both.18 She then proceeds to discuss the meeting between actants as the very catalyst of what is to come: together the actants form an assemblage of
bodies transforming, acting, and creating. Viewing the fields visible outside the window of my own home, actants such as the farmer, weather, minerals, birds, grains, and machines can be seen forming an assemblage, a body constituted of numerous bodies transforming and pushing the development. In what follows, it is precisely assemblages of this kind, of feminized characters and landscapes, that I will investigate with the aid of a feminist, material, and ecocritical perspective, asking whether it might be possible to understand it as transformative and affective energy, one that we might even be able to describe as involving the dimension of love.

LANDSCAPES OF FREEDOM?

The main characters of the three novels in the focus of this article are all situated very differently in the context of the respective narratives, forcing us to try to understand how and why they connect to the landscapes around them without recourse to generalizations about women and their relationship to nature. Kandre’s Kindchen in Bübins unge, Stridsberg’s Ellen in Happy Sally, and Nordenhök’s Zus in Det vita huset i Simpang exemplify three distinct positions in regard to one’s lived experiences as a young woman. Kindchen is a young girl experiencing her first menstruation in her home marked by poverty and neglect, at a time and place that, according to Witt-Brattström, resemble the Soviet-occupied Estonia. Zus, for her part, is a wealthy girl living in Indonesia in the 1930s surrounded by family and servants. Ellen, again, a mother of two, has already reached middle age and lives the life of the late twentieth century Swedish middle class. Yet, they all are drawn closer and closer to the landscapes they inhabit. In that process, they can also be understood to be searching for a new place, or even creating distance to something, as part of that same movement. All this is in line with what Österholm has noted regarding the portrayal of transitions in novels about girlhood and femininity: the protagonists in them often seek to create dwelling and resting places for themselves, spaces that follow their own rules and language.

In the beginning of Bübins unge, Kindchen is heard describing the garden as her house: »[b]ut this here is my house: putrefaction, and the strong heat, the leafy crowding, and the stones!... I now walk into it and lock Onkel out.« The garden, for her, is a space into which she can retreat and where she can watch the other members of her family being left outside of it; it is a space of decomposition and heat, but also of overflowing shrubbery thick enough to hide her body. The garden transforms into a forest that is both caring and dangerous; it provides shelter and berries for the hungry girl, while at the same time it is also a landscape that triggers emotions in her and impacts her body in violent ways. Since the narrative describes
events and happenings that, apparently, coincide with the arrival of Kindchen’s first period, she can be read as a character on the outer limit of girlhood. As Witt-Brattström stresses, the plot in her story follows the contours of an complete menstrual cycle, with all its elements of overripeness and decomposition.\textsuperscript{23} The girl expresses apprehension towards her own body, asking who this »huge, monstrous girl of flesh, standing in the way of everything« is.\textsuperscript{24} In the garden, close to the outhouse, she digs a hole in the ground in which she buries her bloodied sheets.\textsuperscript{25} The following day is the day of the arrival of Ungen, a famished child brought to the family’s care and subsequently left under Kindchen’s reluctant supervision. Ungen is described as very young and frail, with a shiny blond hair verging on whiteness, all in a slightly problematic contrast to Kindchen’s strong body and dark, almost electric hair.\textsuperscript{26} When first seeing Ungen, Kindchen reflects upon the fact that nothing has yet happened to this child, observing how she bends backwards trying to take in the garden and the forest beyond it with all their vegetation with which Kindchen herself is already so familiar.\textsuperscript{27} In her article on Kandre’s texts, Widegren has questioned normative, naturalizing assumptions about children’s innocence, while Witt-Brattström, Holmqvist, and Berg have suggested that Ungen can be read as the childhood that Kindchen, caught in her transforming, growing body, must leave behind.\textsuperscript{28} From this point on, the narrative increasingly alternates between modes of dreaming and reality, with the world of Kindchen growing more and more fragile and fragmented.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir describes how the adolescent girl, when taking shelter in landscapes, feels that »[f]lesh is no longer filth: it is joy and beauty«; she is now »an individual rooted in the soil and infinite consciousness … both spirit and life; her presence is imperious and triumphant like that of the earth itself«.\textsuperscript{29} Like her, Kindchen, in Kandre’s *Bübins unge*, keeps moving back and forth between the garden, the forest, and the house, searching for places of comfort; yet, whenever she finds one, the comfort quickly fades. Thereby, the fact that she calls the garden her home becomes significant, since doing so implies that even though it was inadequate, even harsh and hostile, to her, it was a landscape for her where she felt embodied and like belonging.

Zus’s garden in Nordenhök’s *Det vita huset i Simpang* is different from the inhospitable, neglected garden inhabited by Kindchen. It is lush, well planned and taken care of, filled with butterflies and dragonflies.\textsuperscript{30} A veranda surrounding the big white house where the family lives becomes a bridge between the inner landscape of the house and the outer landscape of the garden. As a white, wealthy child of two European immigrants benefiting from, and in turn contributing to, the imperialist colonial system in Indonesia, Zus is situated in a specific time
and place loaded with political implications. As Davies has observed about the complexity of belonging in colonized landscapes:

"Belonging in landscape is a deeply emotional experience, but it is also a political experience. From the point of view of some of those with long histories stretching back through time, their claims hold more weight, more emotional and political weight."

Accordingly, we may understand Zus’s tending of the garden as an attempt to shape for herself a landscape in which she can belong. There is, however, nothing unique in her efforts in this regard: gardening has for long been recognized as a Western imperialist way of creating places. Ryan, for example, has described the imperialist garden as colonialism on a micro-level, with the landscape shaped after the new inhabitants’ needs and wishes. In the same way, Zus, even though a child still, writes in her journal about her profound feelings of responsibility towards the garden and her family, believing that the garden needs her, but also that her family depends on it for shelter.

In her novel, Nordenhök portrays the garden and its fauna in a far more detailed and charged manner than Kandre does in Bübins unge, making us aware of the handcrafted and planned nature of a landscape where human hands, in this case Zus’s and her mother’s, impose their control and desire on the vegetation as a way of making the place their own, both politically and emotionally. This control, however, remains far from solid and settled, with Zus beginning to experience how it slips through her fingers like a »slithery and mischievous water creature."

For Ellen in Stridsberg’s Happy Sally, it is, precisely, water that defines the landscape that gives her a sense of belonging. In the novel, she is pictured by her own child as a transparent character always longing for the ocean. Her marriage to Viktor is full of comradeship while, to her, also marked by a struggle between wills and claims to freedom. Together with her family she leaves their home in Sweden for a long voyage over the Atlantic Ocean. Viktor’s dream is to sail from Sweden to the United States, and after a lost bet between the spouses it is indeed decided that the family will undertake the voyage. This is a geographical breakup in the novel that Wahlström has linked to its narrative format, which to a large extent builds on fragmented notes from journals and letters. Once on their way, the narrator, Ellen’s oldest child, recounts how her mother’s longing for the sea draws her further and further away from the family. Her children follow her movements on board of the boat as if they can sense she is drifting away: »[w]hen we have moved between the cabin and deck a few times..."
you start to whisk aside flies and water insects. Then you swim far away from the boat. Here, the watery landscape becomes a space of solitude for Ellen, a professional swimmer; while the boat and the seashores the family stops at are places for her children and husband, the water is her zone.

Even though the three novels portray experiences that in some respects are fundamentally different, what is common to all of them is that the protagonist in each case experiences, and struggles with, a need to establish for herself a different space in nature. Driven by a desire for belonging and attachment, Kindchen, Zus, and Ellen all turn to the landscape around them. Their movement towards the latter, however, also suggests a discomfort associated with the place in which they are situated at first, whether this be a young female body in transformation, a neglectful family, a colonial village and it’s surroundings, or an ordinary nuclear family.

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**ENCOUNTERING NATURE**

How do the three novels illustrate their main characters’ experiences of being in their landscape and how do these relationships between them and the landscape they inhabit affect their bodies and becoming? As Deutscher has argued, the erotic can be found in the ability to experience the world, and de Beauvoir’s writings express precisely this when portraying the world as sensual and open for impressions. In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, the young girl’s experience of landscape through her senses provides one example, with the narrator retelling the young Simone’s understanding of nature as a place that allows her to experience the world with her body, a body that elsewhere finds itself restrained and defined by others.

In *Bübins unge*, Kindchen, too, in a similar fashion experiences the landscape with all her senses. Indeed, the narrative in the book puts a notable emphasis on the role of the senses, including touch, taste, and hearing. Kindchen, for instance, hears stones crack underneath the soil and smells the “burnt and dry fragrance” of the trees, with the trees themselves hissing and roaring. She navigates through the landscape with all her senses aroused and wide open to the world of vegetation, rocks, and sky. There is an element of immediacy in how Kindchen’s narration is constructed: her words are rendered directly as they are spoken, not mediated through a temporal distance, written records, or contemplated memories as in the other two novels. She tells the story as it happens and the reader relies on her immediate perspective only. As Davies has observed, some literature is written in between landscape and body, blurring the space between the two zones and thus creating a sense of embodiment. In *Bübins unge*, this embodiment is effected through the immediate and introvert narration where Kindchen experiences the landscape through her vision,
taste, hearing, touch, and sense of smell. The space between earth and body is often crossed, as in an episode where Kindchen lies on the ground and sticks her tongue into the soil. As Bennett has argued, the activity of eating blurs the boundaries between the inside and the outside, destabilizing the experience of what each of these is in the subject. At one point, Kindchen describes how wind arises from the earth. I disappear in this wild thriving! It forces its way into the centre of my skull, to a spot behind the forehead, more and more quietly, and I know that I am this now: neither. Witt-Brattström reads this passage as speaking of a becoming uterus where the swelling uterus swallows the mind. Instead of resorting to a symbolic reading that confines itself to the girl’s flesh, however, we might understand Kindchen and the wild thriving landscape here as being about just this: a young girl interacting with a landscape. As Kindchen states, she is this neither, which signals her embodiment, an affective and material state of intermeshing with her surroundings whereby both the inside and the outside, the earth and the body, transform.

There is a noteworthy similarity between the portrayal of vegetation pushing itself through Kindchen’s forehead in Kandre’s Būbins unge and the way in which Zus recollects her first encounter with her family’s garden in Nordenhök’s Det vita huset i Simpang. As Zus describes it:

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It all happened so that I, first of all, let the garden come to me. It entered me as a vast space penetrating my chest, forming a place inside my head into which everything would in the end sink or fade; I had to struggle to make room for it inside my body... I received the garden, it became a globe of light right behind my forehead. The task of tending it was bestowed upon me; caring for it was like caring for a small child.

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In writing about the garden in her journal, Zus refers to her first encounter with it as a meeting. In the above quote, she describes how she strategically waits for the garden to take the first step, comparing it to a child that fills up her body before beginning to require care. An embodied experience in the relationship between Zus and the landscape is recounted in the account of how the garden exists inside of the girl, in her chest and behind her forehead; it rushes inside her, and she finds it strenuous to contain it within her. The scene can be read as an illustration of an encounter between actants, one of whom is human and the other one more-than-human: even though Zus states that the garden is given to her, it is all but passive and is described as a vast space and a globe of light, signifying power, tension, and energy. For Zus, the garden, too, is a subject; in the relationship between Zus and the landscape, both
are assigned a subject position in the narrative. In Stridsberg’s *Happy Sally*, on the other hand, Ellen begins to feel less and less comfortable the longer the trans-Atlantic voyage takes; it is as if she has been deprived of her right element when above the waterline. Her closeness to water is indicated throughout the novel by expressions she resorts to, such as »waterface«, »watermothers«, and »waterwrists«. In the eye of the narrator, there is a kinship between Ellen and water; she is strongly drawn to the lake and the sea, she smells of lakes, and she coughs saltwater. Here the embodiment is a feature of the relationship between Ellen and her watery landscape encompassing lakes, canals, and, finally, the ocean. The ocean is also the stage for Ellen’s disappearance: one morning her red bathrobe is found hanging on the boat rail, being all that is left of her corporeal presence. Ellen embodies the notion of a shifting and unrestrained form of water, and her disappearance can be read as an act of dematerialization. Importantly, Ellen’s moment of dissolution takes place on the open sea. In Ellen’s relationship with water, the lakes and the canal can be read as metaphors for normative boundaries preventing her growth and transformation as a subject. Even if her merging with water begins already in these watercourses with their clear-cut demarcations, it is only when she reaches the open sea with no such demarcations visible that she is able to fully shift form and begin to embody the landscape.

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**EMBODIMENT AS LOVE**

Thus far, in examining the three novel characters’ experiences of being a body in relation to a landscape and becoming, the concept of love has remained relegated to the background, becoming only implicitly engaged in observations of emotion, affects, and belonging. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir warns against the kind of love through which women, in their body and soul, lose themselves for the man who becomes the one and only subject. In the three novels in this study, however, one finds approximations of a heteronormative abolishing of romantic relationships, with their portrayals of women and landscapes that appear to run counter to the notion of nature as something passive, bestowing upon it a measure of agency and power instead. At the same time, to be sure, it is also possible to view the relationship between nature and women through a dualistic lens, with the concomitant risk of sexualizing and gendering landscape, protagonists, and the relationships between these two. The organic landscapes in the novels of Kandre, Nordenhök, and Stridsberg are, however, spaces in nature. Turning to the notion of love as an affective energy may then help to avoid imposing an anthropocentric view on the intimate relationships involving them. Kindchen, Zus, and Ellen all experience states of embodiment.
and strong emotional bonds in their relationship to the landscapes they inhabit. These embodiments, however, tend to vacillate between a sensual experience of belonging and closeness within a landscape on the one hand, and a destructive tendency to become completely absorbed into that landscape on the other hand. This is in line with a material ecocritical understanding of matter as something that is simultaneously creative and destructive, as in the case of bacteria that mean growth for one species and fatal disease for another. In the domains of art and aesthetics and in the more theoretical literature in the field, the balancing act between creation and de-creation in love between human subjects has been a recurring topic, with numerous novels, poems, essays, and articles examining the impact and consequences of unrequited love, passion, and power relations and abuse in relationships.

What, then, in the intricate entanglement of these human characters and their surrounding landscapes can be perceived as indicative of elements of love? The relationships between the two are in many respects of a very tactile kind, which already can lead one’s thoughts to love when reading the novels. Kindchen, Zus, and Ellen are all portrayed as sensing physical closeness to the natural elements, which, indeed, is sometimes, as in the case of Ellen, longed for with the intensity of desire. This closeness, moreover, is often associated with at least a degree of boundary crossing, or a sense of being enmeshed with the landscape in ways that create affection and energy, whether positive or destructive. In her Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, de Beauvoir describes the young Simone’s overwhelming experiences of being a body without clearly defined boundaries when moving freely in the landscapes of southern France. She, the young girl, claims she is the scent of wheat, the heat, and that she remains heavy even though she evaporates into the atmosphere. In doing so, the girl’s quality of being flesh in fact becomes the link connecting her to the world, enabling her to experience the latter with all her senses. Here there is a noteworthy contrast between Simone’s experiences and those Kindchen describes herself as having in Bübins unge: both of them can be seen as busy forming an assemblage with their surroundings, in a process that is deeply personal, intimate, and profound for their lives and processes of becoming. Nevertheless, while Simone declares all that she finds herself becoming, Kindchen states herself to become neither. There are transformations happening in both narratives, but in Kindchen’s case embodying the landscape is far more dangerous for the subject, with, as Holmqvist has argued, the elasticity and uncertainty of the protagonist’s I resulting in consequences that are destructive in nature. While Kindchen remains physically intact as a body, the landscape grows further and deeper inside her, producing
chaos. For her, the process of embodying vegetation is a violent one and leaves no room for distance, no room for breathing; as Berg has put it, the vegetation is eating its way into her body, into its origin.52

Zus’s geographical intermeshment with the garden in Det vita huset i Simpang, on the other hand, is only temporary. In her journal, Zus writes of her inability to any longer tell where she herself ends and where the garden begins. She is, however, separated from the lush vegetation just before it absorbs her completely: her mother decides to bring her back to Sweden, and the physical landscape is left behind in Indonesia. What remains of it for Zus are memories and her journal, with her relationship with the landscape becoming merely a memory of an affair experienced as both pleasantly sensual and painful. The same, however, is not true of Ellen in Happy Sally, who, as already indicated, in the end permanently disappears into the vast ocean. The plot emphasizes the necessity of this outcome, preparing the reader for it by constantly bringing up the link between the Ellen and the water as something tending towards dematerialization, ethereality, and mutual belongingness.

Initially, the landscapes in all these cases offer the protagonist a sense of belonging and freedom into which the characters can withdraw and even hide, helping them to transform into a different shape and role. They all experience physical contact and closeness with their landscape and find in themselves an ability to take in their surroundings with all their senses, learning to perceive both their own body and that of the landscape through the materiality of the two. Perhaps it is within this context that I can understand my own experiences described above as a young girl: the landscapes were vast enough to contain my emotions and imagination, but also miniaturistic enough for me to feel connected and safe. The relationships here, to be sure, are not about authentic love, about the kind of granting of mutual freedom and transcendence that de Beauvoir speaks of, but they nevertheless build upon emotional connections whereby both parties contribute to crucial experiences of being embodied for the young women in question. This, however, does not come about owing to some biological connectedness to nature that women by nature would have, but rather because of the landscapes’ ability to offer them alternative kind of intimate bonds and spaces that help them to more freely and genuinely feel, touch, and become. This function of spaces as sheltering hideaways for feminized protagonists was already alluded to above. However, as Österholm has stressed, in narratives of this type it nevertheless almost always occurs a breakup between the girls or women, and the places they inhabit, at the end of the novels.53 Sometimes this separation is brutal, as in the case of Ellen in Happy Sally, who, we may presume, dies, and of Bübins unge in which
we are confronted with escalating violence, while in other cases it is less dramatic, yet equally profound, as for Zus.

In conclusion, one might return to de Beauvoir and her significance for material ecocritical theory. As a philosopher and writer, her enquiries into bodily experience and the nature of femininity should be recommended reading for anyone interested in how that which is corporeal can impact notions of nature and vegetation. As we have seen above, moreover, proceeding from a framework inspired by her analyses also invites critical reflection on power, class, embodiment, and sexuality in relation to the material and more-than-human world, a topic that, importantly, today shows its relevance to extend beyond gender-specific analyses to also embrace a broader set of problems having to do with our anthropocentric relationship to nature and the increasingly fragile ecosystem in which we continue, at least for now, to live.

ENDNOTES

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1 Mare Kandre: Bübins unge (Stockholm, 2010 [1987]), 24; all translations from the original Swedish by the author.
4 Beauvoir: The Second Sex, 163.
5 Beauvoir: The Second Sex, 89, 163.
7 Chandra Talpade Mohanty: »Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses« in boundary 2, 12.3 (1984), 349.
10 Beauvoir: The Second Sex, 374, 376 p.
11 Bronwyn Davies: (In)scribing Body/Landscape Relations (Walnut Creek, 2000), 23.
12 Jamaica Kincaid: *My Garden (Book)* (New York, 2001 [1999]), 137
22 Kandre: *Bübins unge*, 20.
25 Kandre: *Bübins unge*, 38.
26 Kandre: *Bübins unge*, 45, 23, 147.
27 Kandre: *Bübins unge*, 45.
28 Kajsa Widegren: »Flickskildring som får Dantes inferno att verka glättigt. Mottagandet av Mare Kandres *Aliide, Aliide*«, in Eva Söderberg, Mia Österlund and Bodil Formark (eds.): *Flicktion. Perspektiv på flickan i fiktionen* (Malmö, 2013), 137; Jenny Holmqvist: »I dag kan jag inte se mig själv – om Mare Kandre, dubbelgångare och läckande jag« in *Kritiker* 14: 31-32 (2014); Witt-Brattström: »Det ler så mörkt i skogen«, 263; Aase Berg »Efterord«, in Mare Kandre: *Bübins unge* (Stockholm, 2010), 152.
29 Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*, 376.
31 Davies: *(In)scribing body*, 39.
32 Ryan: »The nineteenth-century garden«, 123.
34 Nordenhök: *Det vita huset i Simpang*, 164.
35 Sara Stridsberg: *Happy Sally* (Stockholm, 2004).
37 Stridsberg: *Happy Sally*, 119.
40 Davies: (In)scribing body, 235.
42 Bennett: *Vibrant Matter*, 49.
43 Kandre: *Bübins unge*, 23.
46 Stridsberg: *Happy Sally*, 43.
47 Stridsberg: *Happy Sally*, 41, 70.
49 Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*, 684.
51 Holmqvist: »I dag kan jag inte se mig själv«, 10.
53 Österholm: *Ett flicklaboratorium i valda bitar*, 284.