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Mermaid Becomings: Transition and Self-Care in a Former Religious Woman's Embodied Relation to Nature

Devenir Sirena: Transición y Autocuidado de una Mujer Exreligiosa en su relación corporeizada con la naturaleza

Esdevenir Sirena: Transició i Autocura en la Relació Corporalitzada amb la Natura d'una Dona Exreligiosa

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Abstract

This article considers how transition, in other words, the process of becoming, self-care and an embodied relation to nature interweave in the self-expression of a woman who used to belong to a procreational, conservative religious movement, the Conservative Laestadians. In this article, we focus on her self-portrait and spoken narrative, which were created in an interview organised for women in transition from the religious movement. To study the woman's embodied relation to nature, we turn to the feminist and posthuman philosophies of Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder as well as to the feminist and religious imageries of women. Reading the hand-drawn self-portrait as a mermaid and related spoken narrative with Irigaray's and Marder's 'mattering' – together with the vivid natural elements of water, earth and air – enables us to illustrate the woman's embodied relation to nature as part of her self-care during the transition.

Keywords

Female body imageries; Feminist art; Nature relation; Mermaid; Transition

Resumen

Este artículo considera cómo la transición (es decir, el proceso de devenir), el autocuidado y la relación corporalizada con la naturaleza se entrelazan en la expresión de sí misma de una mujer que antes pertenecía a un movimiento religioso conservador y procreativo, los Laestadianos Conservadores. En este artículo, nos centramos en su autorretrato y en su narrativa oral, generada en una entrevista organizada para mujeres en transición dentro del movimiento religioso. Para estudiar la relación corporalizada de la mujer con la naturaleza, nos basamos en las filosofías feministas y posthumanistas de Luce Irigaray y Michael Marder, así como en los imaginarios feministas y religiosos de las mujeres. Leer la narrativa oral y el autorretrato dibujado a mano como una sirena, junto con el concepto de "mattering" de Irigaray y Marder y con elementos naturales vivos de agua, tierra y aire, nos permite ilustrar la relación corporalizada de la mujer con la naturaleza como parte de su autocuidado durante la transición.

Palabras clave

Imaginarios del Cuerpo Femenino; Arte Feminista; Relación con la naturaleza; Sirena; Transición

Resum

Aquest article considera com la transició (és a dir, el procés d'esdevenir) l'autocura i la relació corporalitzada amb la natura s'entrellacen en l'expressió de si mateixa d'una dona que abans pertanyia a un moviment religiós conservador procreatiu, els Laestadians Conservadors. En aquest article, ens centrem en el seu autoretrat i la seva narrativa oral, generada en una entrevista organitzada per a dones en transició dins del moviment religiós. Per estudiar la relació corporalitzada de la dona amb la natura, ens basem en les filosofies feministes i posthumanistes de Luce Irigaray i Michael Marder, així com en els imaginaris feministes i religiosos de les dones. Llegir la narrativa oral i l'autoretrat dibuixat a mà com una sirena, amb el concepte de "mattering" d'Irigaray i Marder i amb elements naturals vius d'aigua, terra i aire, ens permet il·lustrar la relació corporalitzada de la dona amb la natura com a part de la seva autocura durant la transició.

Paraules clau

Imaginaris del Cos Femení; Art Feminista; Relació amb la natura; Sirena; Transició

Introduction

The relation between nature and the female body is essential to the work of ecofeminists, for whom the link to Mother Earth is both embodied and spiritual (e.g., Griffin, 1978; Rich, 1979). A similar attitude is evident in more recent (post-)poststructuralist theorisations that find the relation between nature and femininity not only mysterious or spiritual but also *matter*ing (Marder, 2021; Irigaray & Marder, 2006; Keller & Rubenstein, 2017; Isherwood & Bellchambers, 2009). Interestingly enough, contemporary feminist analyses of women's nature relations often refer to the acts of bodily self-care, such as tree hugging exercises, that themselves have a long ecofeminist history, and thus a spiritual or religious element in them (e.g., Christ, 2019).

The current new materialist and posthuman feminist discourse on self-care, while stemming from a nonreductive materialist thinking on the human body and its relation to nature, embraces Audre Lorde's idea of self-care as an always political act of self-preservation (Lorde 1996; see e.g., Karkulehto et al., 2022). Following this line of thinking, in this article we focus on self-care as a key to the corporeal, mental and spiritual transition of a woman who used to belong to the procreational religious movement of Conservative Laestadians.¹ With rare data and detailed reading of an ex-Laestadian woman's nature-related, hand-drawn self-portrait as mermaid (Figure 1) and spoken narrative, this article examines her process of transition from a conservative religious community to a freer and more independent secular living through the process of 'becoming mermaid.'

Since the Laestadian ethos finds its fulfilment and realization in Laestadian motherhood and procreation (Rantala, 2019, 2020a), the Laestadian community is not particularly supportive of women's independence and opportunities. Large families and conservative values such as



Figure 1: A former Laestadian woman's hand-drawn self-portrait 2021. Reprinted with permission from the copyright holder

negative attitude towards premarital relationships and the use of birth control mark the lives of Laestadian women. As our informant describes, multiple consecutive pregnancies and relating problematic marital relations make ordinary Laestadian women's lives, including hers, "consuming" and "hard" (Conversational interviews, 2021).

When the woman behind the mermaid portrait resigned from an exclusive and marginal religious group and left her tightly knit community in the aftermath of a divorce, she was a mother of seven children and 48 years of age. Leaving such a powerful and restrictive community requires a lot of courage and determination; especially so since the resigned person is still a target for 'herding,' in which the member is

¹ In this article, we refer to the Conservative Laestadians simply as Laestadians. The Conservative Laestadian movement is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland with approximately 120,000 members. The movement originates with preacher Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861), an indigenous Sámi from his mother's side, in the

19th century Swedish Lapland. Despite its marginality, the Conservative Laestadian movement is prominent especially in northwest of Finland, and it is known for its strong economic bonds and thriving businesses.

pressured to return to the community (Conversational interviews, 2021). It is fair to say, then, that the journey of the ex-Laestadian woman is a heroic one. There are several historical and cultural tales of heroic female protagonists, in which psychological and spiritual transformation specific to female experience becomes visible – and often this happens in relation to nature, as we will discuss below. One of these stories is that of the *Little Mermaid*, the classic literary fairytale by Danish author Hans Christian Andersen, originally published in 1837, but still popular today especially through Walt Disney's animations and the related paraphernalia. In their specific ways, both the well-known fairytale in which the mermaid becomes a (suffering) human and returns to the sea in the form of seafoam (eventually evaporating into air), and the transition of a religious mother can be interpreted as journeys towards self-governed womanhood (cf. Sells, 1995). Intriguingly these processes of transformation and emancipation are inseparable from the intimate embodied relation to nature.

In this article, we have assigned the ex-Laestadian woman a pseudonym Aino. We use the pseudonym and provide only a limited introduction to Aino's background to avoid possible identification within such a small community. We have chosen the pseudonym Aino for the popularity of the name across the generations, but also because Aino is one of the famous female protagonists in Kalevala, in Finnish folklore, who, to escape unwanted marriage with the old man Väinämöinen, walks into a lake (in other words drowns herself), and becomes a fish and then a 'water maid' (in Finnish Wellamo vedenneito). How to interpret Aino's self-determined act, and the transformations that follow it, has been subject to vivid nationalist and feminist debate over the years (Viholainen, 2009).² The same concerns the character of the Little Mermaid (Sells, 1995).

In the following three sections of this article, we first describe the process of data collection and the related art-based method/ology, then unfold the visual analysis of Aino's self-portrait as a mermaid, after which we turn to the spoken narrative with the focus on the elements of nature.

In accordance with new materialist understandings of art (see e.g., Kontturi & Tiainen, 2024), we argue that any form of representation, be it visual or spoken, is always *more-than-representational* (see e.g., Türkmen, 2024; Najdowski, 2020; Kontturi, 2018, pp. 9–10). Accordingly, we suggest that (self-)expression never happens at the representational level only. Rather, it emerges through multiple registers of expression, in an intimate connection to the matters of the porous body (of the one or many) who expresses. Representations – for example, in visual self-portraiture – are never just separate images or symbols inscribed on the body (Kontturi, 2018, pp. 178–186). Instead, as we suggest in the second section of the article, more often than not cultural imageries, such as religious or feminist ones, interweave into a process of becoming with the body and thus participate in the production of actualised embodied expressions.

In the article's third section, we focus on the spoken narrative. With the help of two philosophers, Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, we consider how the three vital elements of nature, namely, earth, air and water, are simultaneously present in the transition of the former Laestadian woman. In their thinking with the natural world(s) Irigaray and Marder (2006) describe the potency of nature regarding the care of oneself – for example, by keeping one's body alive and learning to breathe within. Their philosophical attunement with nature informs the analysis by linking transitions from collective identity and religious community to religious and female body imageries.

² Remarkably, none of the famous (national romantic) Finnish paintings of Aino such as Sigrid Keinänen's [Aino by the sea](#) (in Finnish *Aino meren rannalla*, 1876, in a private collection) or the [Aino Myth \(Triptych\)](#) by Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1891, National Gallery of Finland, Ateneum), present the

'water maid' or mermaid phase of Aino's transformation. Hence, they fall out of the scope of this article (accessed: 12.01.2026).

Notes on the data and method/ology

Studying experience in the margins of society requires the clarification of the inquiry from its methodological underpinnings to data production. The methodological framing of this article derives from Teija Rantala's study with the former Laestadian women (Rantala, 2022, 2025b). Through the posthuman theoretical framework, Rantala focused on the former Laestadian women's views on procreational ethos and reproductive freedom linked to ethics of care and ecological crisis, including concepts such as bodily self-care, nature relation, reproduction (procreation) and ecological sustenance (e.g., Haraway, 1988, 1997; Tronto, 1993).

Rantala's interest in studying the former Conservative Laestadian women's views derives from her previous research on the future aspirations of women and mothers belonging to the Conservative Laestadian movement (see Rantala, 2018, 2019, 2020ab, 2025ab). Noteworthy, Rantala's family background in the Laestadian movement has enabled her to engage with the women and produce data, first through autobiographical writing and memory work, and then, as in the case of the data of this article, via conversational online interviews and creative tasks (interview data, 2021).

The selected data studied in this article is part of a three-year research project, in which Rantala studied the bodily self-determination of former Conservative Laestadian women using feminist open-ended (Rantala, 2018, 2019) and arts-based methods (e.g., Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Knight, 2021). The data set was produced through conversational online interviews with 23 women between 24 and 49 years of age, all of whom identified themselves as women. The anonymized online interview data consists of 38 hours of recordings, comprising approximately 900 pages of transcriptions. The interviews included questions and discussions on the women's disengagement process, their views on reproduction and their relation to their body and nature before and after disengaging from the movement. In the data, the women described their desire to be mothers, but they

were critical of the procreational ethos and women's position in the movement. They also considered consecutive pregnancies and labour ethically problematic (see also Rantala, 2022, 2025b).

Before the actual interviews, a voluntary creative task was introduced to the participants. The creative task included collaborative arts-based techniques, such as visual *mapping* (Knight, 2021), in which the women experimented with drawing, graphics, and art and craft, producing photographs, embroidery, drawings and texts of their embodied relations with their environment. The interviewees were asked questions such as "what is your preferred place in nature?" and "where do you feel most comfortable?" The purpose of these creative practices was to embrace the women's connection to nature as a practice of self-care and self-expression after leaving their religious communities.

The request for women to map their relation to nature was framed within feminist new materialist and posthumanist thought, which grounds it "upon relational ways of understanding the world – that is, entities or humans come into the world through relations rather than pre-existing them" (Bozalek, Zembylas & Tronto, 2021, p. 1). These relations affect the ways people become attuned to the sentient presence of nature (earth, air and water), and the ways they engage in the co-composition with the more-than-human forms of life.

The mermaid transitions within religious and feminist body imagery

In Aino's self-portrait, the mermaid sits naked, legs bent on the rocks by the water, reminiscent of the famous *Little Mermaid* (*Den lille havfrue*, 1913) sculpture by the Danish Edvard Eriksen that was inspired by Anderson's famous fairytale (Figure 2). Whereas the early-20th century mermaid in bronze modestly looks away from the viewer, the mermaid in Aino's self-portrait alluringly looks the viewer in the eye (Figure 1) – referring, perhaps, more to the story of the sirens of the sea, who lure seamen to their demise. In popular imagery, these two traditions,

the kind and modest maiden and the alluring, evil temptress, are often confused. This is how the more-than-representational dimension of the image works: representations, including cultural imageries without a clear reference or single origin, are so intertwined and involved in our thinking-feeling that they become thoroughly embodied as part of us.



Figure 2: *Little Mermaid (Den lille havfrue 1913)*, sculpture by Edvard Eriksen. Photograph by Pasi Säteri. Reprinted with permission from the copyright holder

In this section, we will refer to various religious and feminist imageries involved in Aino's transition from the conservative religious order to a more mundane one. We do not, however, claim that Aino referred to these traditions consciously. Rather, it is likely that, as part of wider cultural knowledge, these imageries accumulated over the years, which means that their exact origin is hard, if not impossible, to trace.³ What we can claim, though – attested by the

visual references of the portrait – is that in one way or another, these various cultural imageries become part of Aino's transition.⁴ What clearly indicates the ongoing process of transition in the mermaid imagery is the absence of human feet. While both mermaids addressed here have (some sort of) legs, neither Eriksen's mermaid nor Aino's self-portrait have clearly identifiable human feet: Eriksen's mermaid seems to have two fins that are becoming feet, while the mermaid's feet in Aino's portrait remain mysteriously hidden.

There is another transition present in the mermaid figure of the former Laestadian woman: her feminine, curvy, and yet firmly shaped body is drawn with secure lines that seem to erase her embodied history of consecutive childbirths. The mermaid's slender youthfulness is conspicuous – the breasts do not appear to have fed multiple babies, and if there ever were stretch-marks due to the multiple births, they cannot be seen in the smoothness of the skin. This raises a question about the purpose of the portrait: Does it rejoice embodied femininity, purity, and eternal youth, or reclaim a new beginning after the hardships of Laestadian motherhood? The conflict between how faith is lived, experienced, and presented is explicit in the former Laestadian woman's embodied mapping. It could be suggested that the figure of the mermaid embodies the Laestadian female ideals, such as beauty, youth, innocence, and purity in the form of virtuousness. However, in practice, Laestadian women experience the requirement to remain fit regardless of the frequent pregnancies and childbirths they go through and the housework that they handle as mothers of large families (Rantala, 2019).

³ While cultural imageries can travel long distance, it is noteworthy that Anderson's, Erikson's and Aino's mermaids all have emerged on the shores of the Baltic Sea. Today, Erikson's sculpture still sits a rock by the Baltic Sea in Copenhagen, close to where its story was originally written. It is also on the shores of the Baltic where the sealife and sailing loving Aino resides, only some thousand kilometres north. There are, of course, local variations, such as Finnish folklore story of Aino, yet Mermaid archetypes and mythological motifs appear in many cultures across the world. For example, in medieval times, it was on the walls of Catholic

churches that Finns (Danes and other Northern European people including Brits and Irishmen), could see and speculate on the alluring mermaid figures (Viholainen, 2009).

⁴ It is worth mentioning that the mermaid has recently become a popular symbol of transgender/genderqueer people (Coward, 2018), who find the little mermaid's journey of painful cultural and embodied transition close to their experience.

Yet, the femininely appealing, even erotic look of the mermaid in Aino's self-portrait is in contrast with the often seemingly puritan, largely non-visual Laestadian religious 'aesthetics' that defines the average style of Laestadian women (see van den Brandt & Wallenius-Korkalo, 2020). The expectation for women, especially mothers, in the Laestadian movement to have 'natural looks' involves a requirement of bodily purity and virtuousness and is particularly linked to their main responsibility as mothers of the new Laestadian generation. The women are expected to dress appropriately and avoid drawing attention to themselves and especially to their bodies. However, in Laestadianism, women should not look 'too' natural either, as that would be considered 'worldly' and therefore sinful not sacred (Rantala, 2019).

In this context, Aino's decision to express herself as a mermaid whose alluring characteristics invite one to study her nude body can be seen as a subversive act. This understanding is further emphasised through the choice to align her body with the natural beauty of a rocky shore on the edge of the water. Indeed, her index finger points towards the tempting, circling movements of the water, *without* hiding her pubic mound, á la *Venus pudica* (modest Venus, as in the original sculpture). In this way, an erotic, pleasurable connection between female sexuality and nature is created. While it is possible to interpret this setting as a structure that subordinates women as an object of male gaze (e.g., Ortner, 1972; Parker & Pollock, 1981), we claim that the analysis should not end there (see also Sells, 1995). Rather, we suggest that the portrait's relation to multiple feminist image-ries enables a more emancipatory interpretation that does not repress or subdue but rather opens new directions for embodied self-expression.

Before diving into the feminist and religious imagery, let us recap the story of the Little Mermaid, and how it has been interpreted as a description of a 'human-becoming,' a transition from a mermaid to a human. In the story the mermaid longs to live in the human world and falls in love with a prince upon saving him from

drowning. The young mermaid seeks help from the sea witch, who provides her with legs in exchange for her voice. However, when the mermaid walks on land, she is wracked with excruciating pain and without a voice she is unable to talk about her love to the prince. To remain in the human world, the mermaid must marry the prince, who, however, marries another, and as a punishment the mermaid turns into sea foam to later become a daughter of the air.

Critical analyses of the Little Mermaid fairytale bring in alternative storylines. In the H.C. Andersen's original story, the mermaid changes from a sea creature to a mermaid in human form and then from the sea foam to a daughter of the air (which entails a religious reference to an angel). In the Disney's animated adaptation of the story (1989; TV series, 1992–1994; video sequels, 2000, 2008), the Little Mermaid is presented as a curious heroine who desires to explore the world (Tatar, 2002; Borges, 2007). Feminist critics, such as Susan White (1993), claim that the threat of losing one's voice signals girls' passage into adulthood within the order of power politics. The Little Mermaid exists in the liminal space between girlhood and womanhood, between woman and siren, and between childhood and adulthood; moreover, she participates in both the aquatic and earthly worlds yet does not belong to either.

In Aino's self-portrait, references to the 'cultural product' of the mermaid are complex: oppression, rebellion, and transformation are all part of her transition from religious motherhood to the life of an independent woman free from the restrictions of conservative doctrine. This transition is difficult. In the children's story, the young mermaid gives up her life in the sea to gain a human form and soul. Similarly, Aino must give up her faith, friends, marriage, and collective existence as a mother to gain a life outside of the secluded community. The process of becoming a mermaid enables Aino to form a connection to a (sensual) cultural imagery that has been previously forbidden of her. It is relevant to acknowledge here that the absence of symbolic figures and objects is a distinctive feature of Laestadianism. Laestadianism is an extreme

iconoclastic type of the Protestant Evangelical Church, which, in contrast to iconic, visually rich religions, such as Catholicism or Eastern Orthodox Christianity, is known for its sparse use of religious symbols (Koerner, 2004). While transitioning, becoming with and through cultural imageries is never a straightforward process – such processes are always complex and contradictory – for Aino, as the former Laestadian woman, this was even more the case.

To engage with the cultural imageries of the mermaid portrait further and to embrace the involved complexities, we now turn to some of the portrait's specific visual details. What the mermaid wears on her head catches attention: a wreath of roses rests on her forehead, drawn with tight and energetic circular movements (Figure 1). Above the roses, a headdress of spiky rays of sun reaches out into the world. Symbolically, these adornments could not be further from the crown of (dead dry) thorns that Lars Levi Laestadius, the founder of the Laestadian movement, placed upon the head of Jesus

Christ in his sermons when addressing the suffering of Christ – and that of humanity – in front of his congregation. The symbolics of the rose wreath and the sunray headdress that the mermaid carries in the portrait, do not refer to the suffering of humanity, or scapegoating of it. Instead, they are positive symbols of power and lust for life that still carry religious bearings. Although in traditional (Catholic) iconography, roses represent the celebrated Virgin Mary, who conceived incorporeally, roses or any flowers with layers of petals embracing 'the sensuous centre core' and 'the orifice' point towards classical feminist imagery, in which flowers are associated with the life-giving vagina and petals with the labia, safeguarding the opening of the membranous place that suggests nothing less than infinity (Rose 1974/2015; Chicago & Schapiro, 2022). Thus, the wreath of roses can be seen as referring to procreation not under the order of religion but as an embodied form of female creativity. Moreover, the sun rays that surround the female figure, seemingly arising from within her, are not unusual in women's religious self-portraiture (Robinson, 2006; Klein, 2009). Sun rays extend into the world, making room for women in the patriarchal religious tradition.

The self-portrait of the former Laestadian woman as mermaid finds a visual companion in a recent art project called *CREATION* (2019–) by Australian feminist artist, Deborah Kelly, who received the Catholic education, but lost her faith at 12 years of age (Kelly in Dane, 2024). *CREATION* promises to establish a new religion for the age of climate urgency, one that is not human-centred and patriarchal, favouring, instead, the practice of more-than-human collectivity and movement. *CREATION* embraces all things and knowledges organic and inorganic; its liturgy boldly honours, for example, "the knowings of stones and water" – the natural substances of the mermaid's immediate surroundings in the self-portrait. The imagery of *CREATION* contains various more-than-human figures, among them a mermaid, whose curvy tail resembles that of a seahorse, while the plump and feminine upper body with bare breasts clearly belongs to the human world



Figure 3: Detail of *CREATION* (visualization for the *Liturgy of the Saprophyte, III*). Original paper collage by Deborah Kelly, 2020. Reprinted with permission from the copyright holder

(Figure 3). With pink makeup covering her eyelids, and wings and a headdress made of spiky poisonous ocean fauna (*glaucus atlantica*) (D. Kelly, personal communication, December 23, 2025), this mysterious hybrid mermaid sits atop the ruined 'rock' of human civilization, atop the capitol of a Greek Ionian column belonging to a bygone world. As in both the original bronze statue and the self-portrait of a mermaid, what the arms and fingers gesture towards holds crucial importance here too: the mermaid's fingers have just released a human skull, which is falling to the ground. In this setting, the mermaid becomes a well-armed siren – or oceanic angel perhaps⁵ – of the transition towards a more sustainable world that is not governed by the tenets of the patriarchal, human-centred stance. The relation in-between the body and environment is likewise explicit in Aino's spoken narrative to which we will turn next.

Thinking through the mermaid relation to nature elements

The human body is radically open to its surroundings (Alaimo, 2010, p. 13). In the visual mappings, which the former Laestadian women sent after the interviews, were photographs of cliffs, forests, and meadows as well as lakes, seas and skies, many presenting the scenery apart from the viewer/maker. Yet, the texts accompanying the photographs contained a layer that contested the hierarchal nature–culture or the subject–object setting. The distance in-between the view/landscape and the viewer/maker could seem to involve a feeling of alienation. This continuous feeling of estrangement, according to Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, is a human condition because “the lack of a human place in the living whole puts us at the greatest remove from the world of plants that are rooted in the earth” (2006, p. 141).

This estrangement concerns not only the former Laestadian women's relations to nature but also their relations to their bodies while belonging to the religious community, as Aino's describes: “My body was the enemy [of my soul], downright evil, since it had needs, inappropriate dreams.” In Laestadianism, nature reflects the earthly realm separated from the sacred community, salvation, heaven, and virtuousness of the soul. For Laestadians, even Lars Levi Laestadius's relation to nature in terms of his substantial scientific achievements and contributions to botany is considered 'worldly' and therefore less sacred and less vital compared to the importance of his religious awakening.⁶ According to Marder, any reference to the human flesh and corporeality denotes earthliness and sinfulness in the Biblical narrative of Eden, in which

After the Fall, Adam and Eve used the leaves of trees, the most exposed parts of plants, to hide their own nakedness and exposure. With that gesture [...] [t]hey lost the paradisiacal ability to attend to oneself and to the others in absolute openness. (2006, p. 156)

This creation narrative of the Fall, which involves blaming Eve, can explain why the former Laestadian women see their relation to nature as interrupted and in need of renewal. Through the mermaid narrative, Aino seems to literally become uprooted and come into her senses, as she starts to feel as if her body and its sensory experiences are separate from the discursiveness of religious doctrine and politics. She is now able to root and recultivate her relation to nature through physical proximity to the elemental and embodied nature communion out on the sea.

⁵ The artist tells that whereas the mermaid wings are made of the venomous spikes of a specific ocean creature, they also refer to the angelic imagery of the specific small, portable late medieval Catholic painting known as [The Wilton Diptych](#) (c. 1395–1399, The National Gallery, London) (accessed: 15.01.2026). One of the two inner panels of the diptych presents several heavenly figures with notoriously

spiky, and according to the artist, “perhaps poisonous” angel wings (D. Kelly, personal communication, December 23, 2025).

⁶ Laestadius's pioneer work in Lappish botany contributes to floristic, taxonomic and ecological information regarding vascular plants (see University of Tromsø, “Laestadius Work”).

Leaving Earth: Uprooting the mermaid body

Aino's narrative describes a time when she was starting her transition away from the movement and struggling with her relation to her body and sexuality. As we have suggested, the mermaid's young and innocent look in the drawing portrays a renewal, or transformation, of the body, a sort of second birth after the transition. Aino has renewed relation to her body, seeing herself as uprooted, with a sunshine halo over her head. Engaging with the drawing using both Aino's own narrative and the literary version of the little mermaid story manages to add another layer to the picture – the mermaid on the rocks has her body trapped on dry land in a world that does not allow her to live out and effectuate her sexuality. To belong and survive in the religious movement, she had to shut down and repress her feelings and needs, along with the secular modes of life that could have led her astray from faith. To fulfil her needs, she had to uproot herself from dry land and enter the sea, a reality in which she could live embodied and with a voice but not eternally.⁷ Uprooting and becoming rooted once again requires an extended sense of a place, which involves not so much a location in which to dwell but thinking through the connections beyond one's own body and the experience embedded in the surrounding nature. However, the transition from dry land to the sea required living in-between the two worlds for some time, as well as a mental and embodied transformation:

Yes, I was free, but I couldn't feel it yet when giving up my faith since [...] in a way, I was still in chains, so to speak, until I was released from these chains [...] from the compliance with the Laestadian doctrine. (Conversational interview, 2021)

The peak point of the transition process starts off the recovery, which requires uprooting and learning to breathe in both contexts: on the

shore and in the sea. Learning to breathe meant not breathing together or being assisted by others in the community (Irigaray & Marder 2006). Just as the mermaid had to breathe differently in water and on land, the woman had to learn to breathe by herself, separated from the community. This transition required moving in-between the love for others and self-love, as well as life in-between the shore, the sea, and the air. Similarly, in self-portrait picturing the naked body halfway kneeling into the water, this hand-drawn mermaid echoes freedom from the norms and religious doctrines while being connected with earth (rock), air and water. Here, these fluid and concrete elements, such as earth, air, and water, interweave, as described in Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*:

The earth itself was the finest sand, but blue as the flame of burning sulphur. Over everything lay a peculiar blue radiance, as if the blue sky were everywhere, above and below, instead of the dark depths of the sea. In calm weather the sun could be seen, looking like a reddish-purple flower, with the light streaming from the calyx. (Andersen, pp. 2–3, 2024)

The drawn mermaid body spreads into her surroundings – into water, air and rock, the elements of nature with which she was in touch. Becoming mermaid through nonhuman earthly existence required the maker/narrator to uproot herself from religious doctrine and its restraints on her life. By becoming attuned to earthly vibrations, she could feel her roots growing again and reforming themselves. Nature, particularly plants and trees – or the “vegetal world,” as Irigaray and Marder (2006, p. 21) call it – is present in the former Laestadian women's depictions of their relation to nature. For many, nature is a ‘mothering place’ that provides the vital element of air required for breathing. Breathing is what enables the passage from vegetative to spiritual life, becoming an inhabitant of the world and joining in the sharing of air (Irigaray

⁷ The Conservative Laestadian doctrine preaches exclusive salvation, whereby the Laestadians form God's chosen community (see Kallunki, 2013).

& Marder 2006). Nature offers the women a place where they could regain faith in life after leaving their community. With the help of the vegetal world, the women can breathe and be independent beyond their former belonging.

Breathing: Daughters of the air

Air is an element that is difficult to engage with and represent visually. In the story of the Little Mermaid, the mermaid transitions from human form to a daughter of the air. The air becomes explicit in the depiction of the liminal space in-between death and heaven:

She saw the bright sun, and hundreds of transparent, beautiful beings floating around her [...]. The little mermaid perceived that she had a body like theirs and that she continued to rise higher and higher out of the foam. "Where am I?" asked she, and her voice sounded ethereal, like the voices of those who were with her. No earthly music could imitate it. "Among the daughters of the air," answered one of them. (Andersen, p. 33, 2024)

Symbolically, this passage could be understood to address the transition of a young girl into adulthood, as well as a change from secular worldly living to the religious realm by adopting the form of an angel, or a daughter of the air. In Aino's hand-drawn self-portrait, the mermaid looks young, has human legs with no tail. She also has a mouth, but still, she is pointing at something with her fingers, like the mute mermaid from Andersen's story, who did not have a tongue and could not speak. This mermaid figure can be seen as entangled with the wish to be eternal and immortal in an earthly form, continuing life while breathing the air and being attached to water and earth with one's entire body. Aino did not illustrate air or wind directly in her self-portrait – only the spirals in the water indicate that there is movement in the air. Due to her love for the sea, she emphasised the vitality of wind in the form of waves, with the sky playing the most important role in her verbal narrative:

Of course, you follow the waves and that, but the new thing is the sky, the limitless dome above that you cannot experience on the shore because the horizon is never so far away when on the shore [...] even though it surrounds you [...] you sense the wind on your body and all. (Conversational interview, 2021)

By situating one's self-recognition in nature, it is possible to become a subject of the world, as well as to acknowledge the aliveness and open-ended continuity of the nonhuman elements of nature that touch us and respond (see Barad, 2012). The sea, the wind and the sky/horizon form the limits of the former Laestadian woman's being – for her, there is nothing else to do than accept them. This reveals the other side of being in the world: the realisation that living is a struggle for survival, accompanied by compassion and gratitude. Compassion reflects the feelings that nature evokes in Aino and the attention that she gives to the outside world based on that feeling. For Marder, "It is through vegetal life, both within and outside us, that we can cultivate a nontraumatic mode of paying attention to the elemental" (2006, p. 157). The vegetal being breathes air, but the mermaid breathes air through water – the vitality of both functions is elemental for mermaids.

As we described before, in Andersen's story, the young mermaid was willing to give up her life in the sea to gain a human body and soul. In contrast, Aino, the former Laestadian woman, after leaving the movement, turns to nature for self-care and finds herself to be one with the forces of the sea, the wind and the sky.

Watering: Mucous female embodiment

According to cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis, "we are literally implicated in other animal, [vegetal], and planetary bodies that materially course through us, replenish us, and draw upon our own bodies as their wells" (2017, p. 3). This connection with other planetary bodies is clearly present in Aino's self-portrait as the mermaid and in her experiences of the sea:

but there at the sea, the boat, the movement, the wind, you sense, and you know the force that makes the boat move forward, but the strongest feeling of what you cannot experience on the shore or in the forest is the enormously open sky because the horizon is so far away. (Conversational interview, 2021)

In her relation to the sea, she sails upon the wind and in-between the sky, the horizon, and the water. The wind induces the movement that the boat follows. This description of Aino's intimate relation to the elemental forces of nature manages to undo our understanding of ourselves as separate beings from nature by positing the human in-between nonhuman animals, earth, air and water. Neimanis reminds us that "watery embodiment thus presents a challenge to three related humanist understandings of corporeality: discrete individualism, anthropocentrism, and phallogocentrism" (2017, p. 3). Equally, elements in nature do not exist independently in a vacuum; rather, they form relational and transitional webs of forces:

so it is the sky and the continuous movement of the clouds and the changes in the weather that you watch all the time in a way [...] the sky to which you don't normally pay attention, and then you have time to watch the clouds, there comes that kind of cloud, and it is actually blowing, and we have to lower down the sails. (Conversational interview, 2021)

Weather changes are the reality of being at sea. A sea is not a sea without wind that makes the waves, without the sky that creates the horizon. The mermaid sitting on the rock, as in Aino's hand-drawn sketch, makes it easy to picture her swimming in the openness and limitlessness of the sea and the sky, floating in an eternal indefiniteness. This freedom felt by Aino depended on the sea and sailing:

It makes me so grateful to have that [sea] in my life [...] especially after letting go of faith, I am able to receive beauty with all my senses as well as the most beautiful things in the world that cannot be seen [...] soft wind on your skin, how lovely it

feels [...] I can feel the fly hover past, and all of this is so lovely, that my body can receive and give pleasure. (Conversational interview, 2021)

The self-care implied by mermaid becoming in the waves of the sea is more-than-representational and it is about emerging within "vital materialities that flow through and around us" that "are crucial to human life per se" (Bennett, 2010, p. x). For the former Laestadian woman, Aino, nature is a concrete resource for recovery, as the space in-between the religious community and the secular world is impossible for her to inhabit: "I cannot live in two worlds at the same time." Similarly, in Andersen's story, the mermaid was forced to choose between two worlds: the natural world and the human world.

However, becoming a mermaid is about inhabiting many worlds simultaneously – due to the suppleness and elasticity of her body, the mermaid can breathe air within and outside of the sea. The mermaid becoming entails a complex and controversial relationship between (gender) fluidity and femininity (Irigaray, 1991). Instead of fluidity, Irigaray (1984) suggested that we employ the concept of mucosity, which reflects consistency and movement as well as expansion and contraction. Mucosity is viscous, and even if it can be seen to belong only to feminine and female-coded bodies (with lips and a uterus), viscosity provides mucosity with the capacity to include and exclude otherness and sameness and embrace the processes of change, becoming and movement that relate to all kinds of gendered formations, including transgender and non-binary bodies and their processes (Hurley, 2014; Salamon, 2010).

From a feminist posthuman perspective, the idea of praising the natural relation between woman and nature could be seen as problematic because it strengthens an ideologically harmful connection – the notion of 'woman' is an essentialist interpretation and a construction that greatly depends on changing cultural and political definitions, meaning that it does not represent 'nature' as such (Alaimo, 2016). In addition, 'nature' can be interpreted as a Cartesian concept emphasising the divide between

the human and the nonhuman; thus, it may be better to replace it with notions such as 'earth' or 'Gaia,' which link the human, particularly the female, more tightly with the earth according to feminist posthuman thinking (Stengers, 2015). Approaching the nature relation through mermaid becoming follows the feminist idea of a female relation to nature that is about transition, healing and recovery, and care for the body and the self. In this context, Marder states the following:

The closest analogy to this experience, perhaps, is the feeling of one's own body – feeling oneself feel. The experiencing and experienced body is not given as an undifferentiated object; it is felt as a whole, in the simplicity of existing, across the diversity of its surfaces and depths, powers and receptivities, foldings and unfoldings. [...] the simple diversity of the body is felt most vividly thanks to the other [...] a rich sense of one's body, is also achieved in contact with the other [...]. (2006, pp. 151–152)

Tailing mermaid becomings in-between worlds

In this article, we engaged with visual and verbal mappings of Aino, a former Laestadian woman's relation to nature that centred around the theme and imagery of mermaid becoming as the becoming of an independent woman. Her visualisations and words illuminate the human tendency to feel an affinity with nature and the desire to interact with other forms of life, which enhance respect for nature and reinforce the sense of obligation to treat other forms of life with loving care. Through relations to various elements in nature, her visual and verbal descriptions of transition *matter* because her empowered self-care achieved through mermaid becoming is more-than-representational – importantly, the mermaid embodies the relation to nature. This nonreductive materialist thinking of embodiment and of the relation to nature is key to understanding how religion is lived corporeally via its imageries and symbolics and

how it affects the body politics of its female followers.

What, then, do the narratives of mermaid becoming suggest? In Laestadianism, the usual transition for young Laestadian women is that towards motherhood to become vital servants of their culture while maintaining the continuation of the doctrine and the movement's future through their self-sacrifice as pregnant-motherbodies. Therefore, the young Laestadian women's interest in forming a close relationship with nature, as well as their general concern for green, sustainable thinking and feminism (i.e., gender equality), can be seen as a threat to the Laestadian way of living; indeed, it questions the sacred order of the female duty to 'cultivate' the future generations of Laestadians. Against this view, the former Laestadian women see the nature endangered by the climate emergency and the damage within themselves as a possibility for healing and survival.

Lastly, we would like to ask, what does it mean to become a daughter of the air, a mermaid of the sea and an earthling of the earth? The Kaleva folklore as well as the fairytale of *The Little Mermaid* both speak of the contradictory relationship between two worlds, those of the land and the sea. Aino's visual and spoken narratives may seem, at first, to establish a simple binary of two contradictory worlds: the open-minded 'earthly' society of cultural validity and the Laestadian mythic, exclusive doctrine depicting a hierarchy of desires, with the mermaid residing in the middle and undergoing transition. However, engaging with the various dimensions of feminist art, religious imageries, and embodied relations with nature in the narrative of the former religious woman, we uncovered a multitude of worlds: an earth world for up/rooting, a vegetal world for air and breathing, a water world for sea-wind-shore entanglements and a world of religious community orders, symbols and faith.

Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder's (2006) thinking on the recovery of relations between humans and the elements of nature, such as earth, air, and water, brought together with the

analysis of feminist and religious body image-ries, helped us understand the significance of the nature relation for the well-being of a woman in transition. The transition between worlds raises many questions for the former religious women, as well as for contemporary mermaids, because their battles for existential validation entail a quest for self-governance and empowered self-care (see Karkulehto et al., 2022; Lorde, 1996). Tailing Aino's mermaid becoming and her reformed relation to nature (earth, air and water) enabled us not only to understand this process as a mode of personal

self-care but also to deepen our understanding of the (more-than-)human self-care, which is deeply rooted in nature's mattering culture and its changing relations.

The mermaid becoming of Aino, the former Laestadian woman, brings forth the female heroine archetypes and mythologies through which we can form connections to women's diverse religious and cultural spheres and their potentials to self-determined self-care and transition within today's societies.

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Data

Rantala, Teija (2021). Conversational interviews with former Conservative Laestadian women [Data set]. [Unpublished raw data].

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