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Meereboer, Arwen

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Arwen Dagmar Meereboer*

Moomins and Complicity with Matter: Tove Jansson's *Moominpappa at Sea* as an Intervention in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* by Jane Bennett

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Abstract: As humans we are constantly engaging not only with other humans but with plants, animals, and matter. This article examines the way we view our engagement with the materiality of the world around us, by looking at the work of philosopher Jane Bennet on vibrant materiality and author Tove Jansson. Bennet presents an argument that matter can be analysed as active and vibrant. While Western philosophers are used to viewing matter as passive and dead, seeing it as active makes space for different engagement with matter. One of the ways we can start engaging with matter, once we stop thinking of it as passive and dead, is through the lens of ethics. Jansson in her children's book *Moominpappa at Sea* shows a possibility for looking at the material world through this ethical lens. This article will put these works in conversation by reading both as philosophical works that have nuanced engagement with the topic of how we can be in community with the things that surround us. Jansson's work provides a helpful addition to *Vibrant Matter* by showing how we are inextricably entangled in harm, and providing a possible way to live with this reality.

Keywords: new materialism, moomins, complicity, ethics, vibrant matter

Within the Western philosophical canon philosophy tends to focus its ethical considerations on humans, or otherwise animals. Things tend to be seen as mere objects, important for the life they may facilitate but unimportant in their own right. Philosophers in new materialism are using both Western and non-Western thinkers to take another look at the life of matter, and to question this strict divide between the animated and the inanimate.

Jane Bennett, in her influential work on new materialist theory *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (2010), argues for a way to reconsider the subject–object

*Corresponding author: Arwen Dagmar Meereboer, Department of Philosophy, Åbo Akademi, Tuomiokirkontori 3, 20520, Turku, Abo, Finland, E-mail: arwenmeereboer@gmail.com

divide Western philosophy often makes. Bennett, using other thinkers within the field of new materialism and post humanism, argues that matter is more than objects, and that this binary divide is limiting the philosophical scope of work on political and phenomenological theory.

Moominpappa at Sea (1984) is part of author Tove Jansson's famous Moomin children's book series.¹ The Moomins are little white trolls who live in Moominvalley with a host of other strange creatures. *Moominpappa at Sea* is one of the later novels and sets a darker tone than the earlier books. In this book the Moomin family, consisting of Moominpappa, Moominmamma, Moomintroll, and adoptive sister little My, move to a small island so Moominpappa can become a lighthouse keeper. The family starts to drift apart on the rocky and hostile island.

There is a rich body of scholarship on Tove Jansson's work, and specifically on the Moomin series. There have been interesting texts written on the ethics of hospitality and Otherness (Happonen 2014; Tesar and Koro-Ljungberg 2015), as well as explorations of gendered relationships (Antikainen 2017; Nilsson Lindberg 2010). Several articles also emphasise the role of nature and spaces in the world of the Moomins; In "Strange vegetation: Emotional undercurrents of Tove Jansson's Moominvalley in November" (2018) Sara Heinämaa describes the autumn forest as one of the main characters of Moominvalley in November, the last Moomin book. In "Parties as Heterotopias in Tove Jansson's Moomin Illustrations and Texts" (2014) Sirke Happonen describes the power that the party as a space has within the world of the Moomins. However, there has not been much scholarship on a new-materialist reading of Tove Jansson's work. In this article I argue that *Moominpappa at Sea* provides a nuanced argument about complicity with matter that provides a valuable addition to *Vibrant Matter*. This essay is based on previous work by the author (Meereboer 2020).

1 Method

Toril Moi in *The Adventure of Reading: Literature and Philosophy, Cavell, and Beauvoir* (2011) argues that literature is often used as an illustration to philosophical theories, but rarely as a work with its own philosophical merit. In this essay I will use Moi's description of reading literature as philosophy. Moi argues that:

¹ Though the later Moomin books strike a darker tone than the earlier ones they tend to be sold as children's books. It has been pointed out that the later books might be considered adult literature, however I think this does children's literature a disservice. A book with depth, dealing in a nuanced way with difficult topics can also be a children's book.

Literature works ‘behind philosophy’s back’. Yet its work is not ‘outside’ philosophy, but ‘essential’ to it, as if philosophy has to turn around, to look behind itself to find fundamental ‘illuminations’ it cannot find in any other way. (Moi 2011, 129)

Literature, according to Moi, can get at some experiences that academic language cannot reach on its own. Due to the immersive nature of literature, it can reach “illuminations” or knowledge, for example about emotions that the academic format struggles with.

Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* also argues that stories, and specifically stories for children, are a useful way to get at new materialist ways of thinking, since they tend to be more comfortable with a slightly animist way of thinking:

It [a story] can direct sensory, linguistic, and imaginative attention towards material vitality. The advantage of such tales, with their ambitious naiveté, is that though they “disavow ... the topological work, the psychological work, and the phenomenological work entailed in the human production of materiality,” they do so “in the name of avowing the questions that have been too readily foreclosed by more familiar fetishizations: the fetishization of the subject, the image, the world. (Bennett 2010, 19)

Bennett argues that what a story can add to academic theories of new materialism is that it “disavows” the way as humans we tend to engage with the world as objects. According to Bennett we produce the world as objectified by seeing things as objects to be used. In a story, we can read the world differently since it gives a freedom to imagine the world differently.

Bennett here is partially quoting Bill Brown from his essay “Thing Theory” (2001). Brown refers to Martin Heidegger’s distinction between objects and things. Objects are tools that go unnoticed; we use a hammer without thinking about the particularities of the hammer, it is like any other hammer. However, when the hammer breaks it becomes an individual thing to us, we see its particularity when we stop being able to use it thoughtlessly. Bennett argues that stories provide this function by ascribing a particular meaning to an object; a literary hammer is easily accessible in its particularity or thingness, because it is described and singular. As readers we are forced to recon with the thingness of literary objects because they are not usable without thought.

2 Ecologies as Alive

Nature, and nature as an uncontrollable force, plays a big role in several Moomin books; in the first book there is a flood, in the second a comet. In “Strange Vegetation: Emotional undercurrents of Tove Jansson’s Moominvalley in November” (2018) Sara Heinämaa analyses Moominvalley in November, the last

Moomin book, and the way the environment can be read as a character in the novel. In *Moominpappa at Sea* the island plays a similar role as a character with which the Moomin family must manoeuvre their relationships.

In *Moominpappa at Sea* the island is overtly hostile to the Moomin family's entry in its ecosystem. Later in the book, different characters 'discover' that the island is afraid rather than angry, but in its fear the island is wild and scary to the Moomin family. The following is the first description given of the island, when the Moomin family arrives:

And then out of the night loomed an enormous shadow: the island itself was towering over them, looking at them carefully. They could feel its hot breath as the boat struck the sandy beach and came to a standstill: they felt they were being watched, and huddled together, not daring to move. (Jansson 1984, 31)

The island is described in animist terms, and the family is overtly fearful of it. The descriptions in *Moominpappa at Sea* are done from two kinds of perspectives: most of the descriptions are from the perspective of individual characters, but the description above is from the perspective of a 'narrator'. The individual characters are clearly biased and often unreliable due to not having all of the information available. This becomes obvious later in the book where characters have different information and come to different conclusions because of it. However, the narration can be assumed to be objective. The aliveness of the island is therefore not an interpretation by the characters but rather a fact about the world. Throughout the novel the island gets more overtly alive and starts to move. The sand, rocks, and trees start crowding the lighthouse trying to get away from something the island fears:

But the island seemed to be getting more and more uneasy [...]. One night Moomintroll saw something that made him feel afraid. It was the sand. It had started to move. He could see it quite clearly, creeping slowly away from the Groke. There it was a sparkling, glittering mass moving away from her great flat feet that were stamping the ground to ice as they danced. (Jansson 1984, 137–138)

Moomintroll sees the Groke, a frightening creature that turns everything she touches to ice, on the island. The Groke has followed the family from Moominvalley to the island because she longs for the light of the storm lantern. Moomintroll starts to come to the beach with the storm lantern to allow the Groke to dance in its light and keep her from coming further onto the island. Moomintroll thinks the island is afraid of the Groke, trying to flee her coldness that is "a danger to everything growing there, everything that was alive" (Jansson 1984, 138). Here we can see that this island is an ecosystem that has a kind of collective aliveness. The sand and the rocks are not growing, but they are still alive enough to fear the Groke and flee from her.

Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* describes the agency of matter as a kind of collective agency. Bennett argues that we cannot say that any singular thing can be the cause of an event; it is rather a swarm of things that participate in an event:

A theory of distributive agency, in contrast [to individual agency], does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect. There are instead always a swarm of vitalities at play. The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits. To figure the generative source of effects as a swarm is to see human intentions as always in competition and confederation. (Bennett 2010, 31–32)

Bennett argues that even when we do hold a single person responsible for an event, this is a simplification of a swarm of vitalities. The way we as humans refer to a single person as a cause neglects the intricacies of the swarm at play. Imagine I try to skip a stone across a lake, and the stone gets blown off course by the wind and hits a duck, I am the only human agent involved, but it is hard to say what the actual cause of the event is. In what Bennett, after Deleuze and Guattari (Bennett 2010), calls an assemblage, in this case stone-I-lake-wind-duck, the duck got harmed, but there are too many swarming agencies to state that I am the singular cause of that harm. According to Bennett we can say that the assemblage was harmful, but the outcome could not have been predicted and the causality is shared (Bennett 2010).

When we look at the island in *Moominpappa at Sea* we see a similar kind of distributive agency. It seems like the island as a whole is alive and made up out of different vibrant components. The beach is made up out of sand and rocks and plants, as well as the proximity to water. When the beach starts to move it moves because so many small components start to move. One grain of sand is not a moving beach, but handfuls of moving sand, rolling rocks, and trees' climbing out of their groves is a moving beach. The island as Tove Jansson describes it is a swarm of vitalities, rather than being alive as individual parts the island is alive as an ecology.

3 Responsibility and Harm

Despite not being the singular cause of the duck being harmed by the assemblage stone-I-lake-wind-duck there is a general sense that *someone* is responsible for the harm. Just because I am not the singular cause of the harm does not mean I should not feel responsible. When we think of agency as distributive, the question of responsibility becomes more complex. It seems like we simultaneously carry a little responsibility in everything, so we are partially responsible for someone else tripping on their shoelace by virtue of breathing the same air, and the

responsibility we have for anything is so small it is negligible. Bennett argues that the kind of responsibility we have changes when we look at responsibility through a new materialist lens. According to Bennett:

Perhaps the ethical responsibility of an individual human now resides in one's response to the assemblage in which one finds oneself participating: Do I attempt to extricate myself from an assemblage whose trajectory is likely to do harm? (Bennett 2010, 37)

According to Bennett the kind of ethical responsibility human agents have, through a new materialist lens, becomes extracting oneself from harmful assemblages. For example, imagine I always vote for and campaign for a political party, but this year in this party's election plan they have an action point about limiting refugee access to Europe, which I predict will cause harm. Bennett would argue that the ethical responsibility I have is to leave this party and look for a different party to vote and campaign for.

I would argue that this image of ethics is severely limited, most of the harmful assemblages we are a part of are impossible to extricate oneself from. When we think of systemic issues like climate change or racial injustice, we cannot remove ourselves from these assemblages, we are always already implicated in them, whether we want to be or not. Here is where *Moominpappa at Sea* can provide us with an intervention to Bennett's arguments in *Vibrant Matter*. I argue that *Moominpappa at Sea* shows us a model of ethics that is based on responsibility and complicity.

When the Moomin family arrives to the lighthouse on the island, they cannot light the stove because there is a bird's nest in the chimney. The family argues for a long time about the ethics of removing the nest, which belongs to a bald coot. They worry that the bird will come back in spring and is confused that the nest is gone. Eventually the family relies on Moominmamma, who is the voice of reason and kindness throughout the Moomin book series, to make the decision. "Take it [the bird's nest in the chimney] down' she [Moominmamma] said. 'We can hang it out of the window. Sometimes trolls are more important than bald coots'" (Jansson 1984, 54). Moominmamma decides the nest should be removed, but as a compromise to the bird it should be hung out of the window. Before Moominmamma decides on this however, she first tries to put off the choice. She says they can leave the nest up for a little while, to which little My responds:

Do you think the Bald Coot will know whether her nest has been moved immediately or only after a little while? You only say that so you can chuck her out with a clear conscience. (Jansson 1984, 54)

Throughout the novel little My is obviously scornful of the other characters when they attempt to make themselves feel less guilty for causing harm. Little My herself is extremely comfortable causing harm to other things in her environment. When Moominmamma says she will remove the nest later little My responds that to the bald coot, the one who will be harmed, it does not matter when the nest is removed, it will still harm her. In the final pages of the novel, the Fisherman enters the lighthouse and spots the birds nest:

The Fisherman caught sight of the bird's nest on the desk. "That should be in the chimney," he said firmly. "It's been there for years." "We had thought we might hang it out of the window," said Moominmamma apologetically. "But we haven't gotten around to doing it ..." (Jansson 1984, 204)

The family, including Moominmamma, had completely forgotten about the nest. Moominmamma may have meant to hang it out of the window, but she did not. Here the family commits double harm to the bald coot. First there is the removal of the nest, which can be argued to be necessary since the nest prevents Moominmamma from cooking. However, the second harm they do to the bald coot is not to hang the nest out of the window, they do not take responsibility for the bald coot after the harm they needed to do to her.

Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1994) argues that ethics begin with recognition of our responsibility to the Other. Levinas states that:

I can recognize the gaze of the stranger, the widow, and the orphan only in giving or in refusing; I am free to go or to refuse, but my recognition passes necessarily through the interposition of things. Things are not, as in Heidegger, the foundation of the site, the quintessence of all the relations that constitute our presence on the earth (and "under the humans, in company with men, and in the expectation of the gods"). The relationship between the same and the other, my welcoming of the other, is the ultimate fact, and in it the things figure not as what one builds but as what one gives. (Levinas 1994, 77)

Levinas argues that when we meet the gaze of the Other we recognise them as other and in that moment their otherness asks something of us. Levinas states that one can refuse this gaze and ignore the Other's need, but one is forced to recognise it. What this view on ethics does is make it clear that ethics is not an addition to a world, something you only have to think about when making a difficult choice, for Levinas ethics are a constant presence in our relationships to Others. Levinas only speaks of relationships to Others that are human, even animals are not an ethical Other, due to their lack of recognisable faces, and he clearly states that things, in

contrast to Heidegger's perception, only figure as ways to interact with a human Other. However, it is easily possible to extend the idea of responsibility to the Other to animals and matter. When engaging with matter we can see that the relationship to matter is always already an ethical relationship. Bennett struggles to introduce ethics to *Vibrant Matter* because she is thinking of a justice based ethics. Justice based ethics are individual and based on principles that can be universally applied. What is just in one case must be just also in a case of the same kind. We tend to think of justice only when we encounter its boundaries, when we see an injustice. In contrast, Levinasian ethics of responsibility permeate all our encounters.

Hanna McGregor in *Complicit Witnessing: Distant Suffering in Contemporary White Canadian Women's Writing* (2013) describes complicity as both the participation in an immoral act as well as the reality of being constantly enwrapped within implication. According to McGregor it is not possible to escape implication in harm like racial injustice or climate injustice. These systems are so large that in some ways we are all complicit in their continued existence (though some are more implicated than others). When we read complicity as the natural companion of Levinasian responsibility we can think of humans as being constantly enmeshed in a network of responsibility and complicity. We are always part of assemblages that will cause harm, and we always have an ethical responsibility to the world around us.

When we now come back to the example of the Moomin family and the bald coot we can see that they are complicit in harm done to the animal not only by causing the initial harm of removing the nest, but then by not taking responsibility for the harm they do. The family is clearly invested in feeling good about themselves, more so than in actually not doing harm. The existence of the Moomin family on the island is permeated by accidental harm. They are encountering nature that is wilful and wild, and does not do what they want. Which is a strong contrast to their life in Moominvalley, where everything is, as the name Moominvalley suggests, for them. Nature on the island is wild and unruly, and if the family wants to survive here they will cause harm. They have to cook, and in order to cook they must remove the birds nest.

Even if the Moomin family would have decided to go back to Moominvalley they would still cause harm to their environment by treading on plants and small animals. Even their arrival to the island causes accidental harm by bringing the Groke to the island, since she follows the storm lantern. The island is scared of the Groke, and she freezes and kills whatever she sits on. The island, due to it being wilder than Moominvalley shows more easily that taking up space always causes harm. The Moomin family is always implicated in certain harms done to the ecosystem they live in.

4 Guilt and Responsibility

The need to care for themselves, their family and nature seems to be in a struggle with the accidental harm the characters in *Moominpappa at Sea* keep being implicated in. They want to care for the assemblages they find themselves in, but keep also doing harm. Ethics of care was first discussed by Carrol Gilligan in her book *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development* (1982). Gilligan argues that ethics is often approached as a mathematical problem, and wants to shift the focus from individual justice to relationships of care. McGregor in her peer reviewed podcast *The Secret Feminist Agenda* (2018) argues that there is an interpretation of ethics of care that imagines being able to only care for your surroundings and never do harm. McGregor argues that the idea that we can eliminate harm and never be complicit in violence is a fantasy. It is, She continues, a harmful fantasy that does not take responsibility for the systems we are always already a part of. She links this fantasy of noncomplicity to an ethics of care, where care is seen as something that can eliminate harm (McGregor and Hoven 2018).

Moominmamma throughout the novel is characterised by her gardening and cooking. She takes care of the family by nourishing them and takes care of plants by doing the same. However, in her gardening on the island something interesting happens. She gardens like she is used to gardening in Moominvalley, but on the island her strategy no longer works. She tries to plant rosebushes and apple trees, which do not want to grow on the island, and her garden keeps being washed away by the sea. In a way she treats the whole island like a garden:

Gradually she had gathered together a large pile of logs and bits of plank. The nice thing about it was that she had tidied up the island at the same time; it made her feel as though the island was like a garden that could be cleaned up and made to look beautiful. (Jansson 1984, 117)

Moominmamma attempts to engage with the island like a garden, planting things she likes, weeding things she does not like, and cleaning it up to fit what she regards as clean and orderly. In this way she exerts her control over the island. In Moominvalley this strategy worked, since it was a more orderly environment where rosebushes and apple trees thrived. On the island however her imposition upon the ecology around her starts to be both futile and a kind of aggression. She herself realises that she is imposing the wrong standard upon the island several times throughout the novel, but is incapable of coming up with an alternative until the end of the novel:

She looked at her withered rose-bushes and thought: 'How silly of me to put them there! But there are plenty, the island is full of them, and anyway, wildflowers are even more beautiful than garden flowers, perhaps.' (Jansson 1984, 193)

At the end of the novel Moominmamma realises that she can garden and also work with the island, she does not have to fight against the wilderness but can work with it. She plans to plant wildflowers, which occur naturally on the island, and encourage those to grow instead of planting rosebushes that will not thrive there.

Little My throughout the novel is pointing out when other characters feel guilt for causing harm, and points out the futility of this. When Moomintroll discovers a glade in the forest where he wants to live, but it turns out to already be full of biting red ants he goes to Moominmamma for advice. Moominmamma tells him that the ants have a right to live there and he cannot make them leave if they do not want to leave. Instead of accepting this he goes to little My. Little My tells him she can do something about it, but he needs to stay away from the glade for a couple of days. When Moomintroll returns to the glade he finds out that little My has poisoned the ants with paraffin from the storm lantern. When Moomintroll confronts little My she says this:

'But ants are like mosquitoes' Said Little My. 'It's a good thing to get rid of them! Anyway, you knew exactly what I was going to do to them! All you hoped was that I shouldn't tell you about it. You're awfully good at deceiving yourself!' (Jansson 1984, 97)

She argues that Moomintroll knew what little My would do, and that instead of not wanting it to happen he just did not want to know about it. He wanted to be able to be ignorant of his complicity in the harm done to the ants. Unlike the nest of the bald coot this seems like a completely avoidable harm. Moomintroll could have done as Bennett advises and remove himself from the assemblage he knew would cause harm by just accepting there were ants in the glade he wanted and then move on. However, him feeling guilty afterwards does not do anyone any good, as little My points out. Moomintroll feels incredibly guilty, but this changes nothing. He even tries to spread sugar around the glade, but red ants do not eat sugar. As human beings we often kill small animals for our own comfort, for example mosquitos, slugs and rats. We prioritise human life over animal life, as Moominmamma does with the nest of the bald coot, and removing the nest seems at least partially justifiable. In another example of harm caused to the island the harm is caused by the lighthouse keeper:

'They must have flown into the light,' Moomintroll said slowly. 'It's what birds do ... And killed themselves. And then the Lighthouse-keeper picked them up every morning. And then one day he got fed up with it, put the light out and went away.' (Jansson 1984, 125–126)

Moomintroll and little My come across a small graveyard of birds underneath the lighthouse. They speculate that the birds must have flown into the lighthouse and died, and that this may be the reason the lighthouse keeper left. The lighthouse keeper, if this story is true, caused harm to birds, but was also fulfilling an important role for the rest of the island. It is never mentioned in the novel, but a lighthouse makes sure boats know there is an island, so they can navigate and not strand on the shore. Additionally within the narrative of *Moominpappa at Sea* the Lighthouse keeper seems to be a figure providing the island with balance. The island only returns to its normal state when the Fisherman remembers he is the Lighthouse keeper and repairs the light.

The harm caused by the lighthouse is unavoidable if the lighthouse is working, and it has to be working in order to provide the care it has to provide for the island. In the same way Moominmamma needs to be able to cook in order to take care of her family. What becomes clear here is that care and harm are interconnected, and taking care of one thing can cause harm to another. This is a clear counterargument to Bennett's idea that the ethics within a theory of New materialism exist out of removing yourself from assemblages you think will cause harm. This statement refuses the idea that some assemblages are assemblages that both do harm and provide care. In the case of the nest of the bald coot, and the lighthouse we see more complex assemblages that the family cannot remove themselves from.

Jansson in *Moominpappa at Sea* present a world of willful matter where her characters have to reckon with the harm they do to an ecology that does not want them there. They are not doing anything significantly different to how they would live in Moominvalley, but Moominvalley behaves differently. In Moominvalley gardens are neat and organised and the environment mostly behaves as they want it to, so they do not notice the harm they might do.

5 Ethical Ecologies

Jansson in *Moominpappa at Sea* clearly creates several examples where the Moomin family is complicit in harm done to the island. However, she also presents a way for them to move forward with the island. At the end of the novel they remain on the island, they are not driven away by nature or their own guilt.

Pietari Kääpä in *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinemas* (2015) describes films that depict what he calls an ecotope as “films with nature as a challenge to human civilization” (Kääpä 2015, 67) He exemplifies this with the film *Thale*:

(...) particularly intriguing is its evocation of the spatial ‘ecotope’ between human and the more than human. In biology and ecology, the ecotope is a space where different organisms

and lifeforms share space. In the case of *Thale* the ecotope is the meeting place where humancentric views are confronted by ecosystemic realities as, literally, the humans come face to face with their others and realize the limitations of their worldviews. (Kääpä 2015, 84)

An ecotope, according to Kääpä, is a meeting place for different organisms. In Kääpä's use of it, when analysing *Thale*, it is a meeting place for the human and the more than human. Within this meeting the human centric worldview is shown to be limited. When the island starts to move the Moomin family exists in what can be called an ecotope. They had previously imagined the island as just an island and that they are good and kind creatures that can own this island as they have owned Moominvalley. The island then proves this assumption wrong by having its own wants and needs.

An ecotope, according to Kääpä, is a kind of ecohorror. Ecohorror is a genre of horror where the meeting between the more than human and the human challenges human notions of control and knowledge. The ecotope is the place of meeting between this uncontrollable more than human and the human failing to control it. The ecotope can be a point of ecosystemic friction between the humans attempting to control their environment and the environment being uncontrollable. Kääpä uses the film *Jurassic Park* as an example; the humans try and fail to control the dinosaurs and end up having to leave them alone or be destroyed (Kääpä 2015). In the case of the island in Moominpappa at Sea the result is less dramatic, but it is clearly a point of ecosystemic friction. The Moomin family attempts to control the island and the island refuses to be controlled.

In *Meeting The Universe Halfway* (2007) Karen Barad introduces her concept of agential realism, going further than a notion of assemblages, Barad claims that agency manifests in intra-action. For Barad there is no significant separation between things, rather there are “phenomena that acquire specific boundaries and properties through the open-ended dynamics of intra-activity.” (Barad 2007, 172) Intra-activity here is a way to express the way that all “interactions” are not really interactions between an individual separate things, but rather intra-actions between phenomena that are inherently part of each other. Phenomena are differentiated only temporarily through what Barad calls a “cut”. Agency for Barad is not something any individual thing possesses or enacts, rather it is relational. This means that for Barad phenomena are constituted through intra-action, and do not precede it. (Barad 2007) We can see for example the way the human body is defined as having a clear outline, an inside and an outside, but when we examine this we see that this defined boundary is based in constant intra-action. There is no clear boundary between me and the food I consume, the air I breathe in and out and the things I touch and exchange bacteria with. The boundary of my body is

constantly shifting and intra-acting. The cuts we enact through matter-discourse² allow us to enter into relationships with the Other, while acknowledging they really are no Other at all because we are already entangled with them. Using Barad's concept of intra-action we can better understand what ecologies are in *Moominpappa at Sea*, we can see that all ecologies have shifting boundaries that are based in where the reader draws the lines, rather than on rigid boundaries between things.

The turning point in *Moominpappa at Sea* occurs when separate from each other Moominpappa and Moomintroll realise the island is alive. Both of them describe hearing the 'heartbeat' of the island. Moominpappa throughout the novel has been trying to understand the island via a scientific method, in order to control it. However, when he realises it is alive, he lets go of this urge to figure out the rules the island adheres to and instead discovers it is afraid. Moominpappa thinks the island is afraid of the Sea and has a strong word with the sea about bullying the island. Moomintroll in the meantime has become friends with the Groke, and she has warmed up, meaning she no longer freezes everything she touches and is no longer dangerous to the island's ecosystem. The island stops moving and stops trying to get into the lighthouse to flee her. The boundaries between the Moomin family and the Others of the island (The Groke, the sea, and the island) that the family has clung to become more fluid through the family's willingness to enter into relationships with the ecology they live in. Through this they are able to acknowledge the shifting topology of intra-action and build a relationship of mutuality to the ecology in which they take part.

When the family arrives, they are all in their own way (with the exception of little My) relating to the island as something Other to be controlled and shaped in an image they like, Moominpappa with his scientific research, Moominmamma with her garden, and Moomintroll with his glade. They imagine themselves caretakers of the island, but none of them are actually caring for the island or willing to form a relationship with it. They are forcing their own image onto the ecology of the island, which is resistant to them. We see that both in the question of harm and the question of care the Moomin family has seen themselves and their family unit as meaningfully distinct from the island and its ecology. However as readers we can see the boundaries of their Moomin bodies shifting. They are not separate from the island; rather they are intra-acting with it, constituting and breaking boundaries between themselves and the island. When they realise the island is alive they are finally able to see it as something that they are already entangled with, and are able to commit to a relationship with its ecology.

² Matter-discourse is a way to express how both matter and discourse constitute these 'cuts' in equal measure. Nothing is ever pure discourse or pure matter; it is always matter-discourse.

Barad states that we cannot meaningfully be separate from the world, and cannot take distance to “not interfere” with nature. We are always already part of nature, and it is part of us (Barad 2007). When thinking of Matter as ethically relevant, and seeing agency as distributive we become both more and less responsible. On the one hand we are never the sole cause of an event, on the other hand we influence much more than we know. We feel in Jansson’s work that we are always part of assemblages that cause harm. However Jansson also presents us with ways to live while taking responsibility for the assemblages we are entangled with. The characters in *Moominpappa at Sea* need to acknowledge the liveliness of the island, and arrive to their own way to relate to the already existing ecology, while acknowledging that there is no way to exist without taking up space and doing harm. Jansson seems to state that care and harm must have a balanced relationship, rather than one completely exterminating the other. Guilt and trying to absolve yourself of guilt does not, according to Jansson, result in less harm being done, it just makes you feel better about the harm you do. In this way Jansson in *Moominpappa at Sea* provides a nuanced argument for the way we can live in relationship with the more than human world and take responsibility for these assemblages while both acknowledging our complicity in harm as well as taking care of the ecology we live in.

6 Conclusion

Jane Bennett in her book *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* argues that philosophy could benefit from eroding the binary opposition between subject and object. Things, Bennett argues, have their own kind of power, and if we look at the way things influence the world we live in as well as ourselves, we can gain a deeper understanding of the world. Bennett argues that, when we look at the world through this new materialist lens, we can see that agency gains a different meaning. A person is no longer the singular cause of an event; rather events are the result of assemblages of things. Bennett describes these assemblages as a swarm of agencies.

Bennett does go into what this lack of individual agency would mean for ethics and responsibility. She argues that, when we acknowledge that human entities can never be the sole cause of an event, the ethical responsibility for humans may change; our responsibility becomes to remove ourselves from assemblages we think will be harmful. Here is where Tove Jansson with *Moominpappa at Sea* provides an important intervention in Bennett’s work.

In *Moominpappa at Sea*, the island that the Moomin family has moved to is different from their previous home in Moominvalley. The island is wild and does

not behave in way the family wants it to behave. There are several encounters with the island where the Moomin family cannot choose not to do harm. Harm and care exist next to each other in these moments. In order to care for the relationships they have they do harm to other relationships. This shows us in a visceral way how we are always already implicated in systems that cause harm, as well as the way harm and care are inextricably linked.

The Moomin family must learn to acknowledge the liveliness of the island and their entanglement with it, as well as to find a balance between care and harm, in order to be able to live with the island. They can only live on the island when they stop trying to control the wilderness and start seeing the island as a living creature which has its own will.

What Jansson presents here is a kind of ethics of complicity where the characters in *Moominpappa at Sea* need to reckon with the responsibility they have towards the assemblages they are a part of. Once they take responsibility in these assemblages, they can build a balanced relationship of harm and care with the ecology they inhabit and are enmeshed with.

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