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## "This is home"

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## “This is Home”

### Vaccination Hesitancy and the Meaning of Place

By Mia-Marie Hammarlin

Within the context of a four-year research collaboration, this article takes as its starting point the concept of *place* to delve into vaccination-critical expressions in everyday life in the twenty-first century. The approval of the project was announced in 2019, before vaccine hesitancy was a topic on everyone’s lips.<sup>1</sup> Little did we know then of the globally heated vaccine discussions that were waiting around the corner, or that citizens all over the world would have to learn to understand and use medical abbreviations like COVID-19, mRNA, PCR, ARDS, Delta, Omicron, and Epi Curves to get by in everyday life, where Sweden has stood out as a harshly criticized but also celebrated exception regarding pandemic policy measures by keeping them to a minimum compared to many other European countries. This exceptional situation naturally affects our study in various ways; the research subject has become an emotionally highly charged and fast-moving target, or as a colleague rhetorically asked us during a seminar: “Have you made yourself comfortable in this hornet’s nest?” Fortunately, we have a clear research goal to cling to, and that is to increase the knowledge about everyday reluctance towards different kinds of vaccines in a generally vaccine-positive country like Sweden and how this is communicated, with a special interest in rumour spreading in open digital forums.

It would perhaps be considered preferable in every article that we write to put anti-vaccination thoughts and opinions and how these are communicated at the centre of our studies. It is the opinions that lead to (non-)actions, so to speak. But there are certain risks in doing that, we figure. It is our belief that the people we have met

are not possible to understand if we focus too much on the topic. Naturally, the interviewees – twenty in total so far, seven performed in Hälsingland, the region described here – can speak about whatever they want during the recording, and they do.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the immediate aim of the interviews is to get a deeper understanding of why a minority of Swedish citizens, who have been offered vaccination programmes free of charge since the 1940s, are hesitant or critical towards vaccinations. Therefore, we gently force our interviewees to reflect on these ideas and opinions through our plethora of open-ended questions. In several interview studies with vaccine-critical individuals from different parts of the world this is more or less common scientific procedure; the arguments that hopefully can explain why people refrain from vaccinations are placed in the foreground whilst the *cultural and geographical context* that these people find themselves in is downplayed, if visible at all (see e.g. Lockyer et al. 2021; Mant et al. 2021; Sabahelzain et al. 2019; Peretti-Watel et al. 2019; Landicho-Guevarra et al. 2021). This also counts for thought-provoking and cultural analytically ambitious research that manages to keep the balance between recognizing the problem and refraining from reducing people’s lives to their opinions (Hausman 2019; Koski & Holst 2017; Reich 2018; Kitta 2012). This leaves much unsaid, and calls for locally situated ethnographic fieldwork such as participant observations, particularly as vaccinations are not the main thing that vaccine-hesitant people walk around thinking of, as it were. On the contrary really. Rather, vaccination criticism is entangled in other, more complex visions and experiences in

everyday life, connected to feelings of loyalty, a profound elite critique (Harambam 2020:58–101; Hausman 2019:153–174), and existential ideas about the importance of a certain kind of individual and spiritual freedom, e.g. to be able to breathe clean air, eat biodynamically cultivated food, walk straight into the forest, make your own decisions (Reich 2018:87–96), and control your own body by letting it heal from illness as naturally and holistically as possible (Hausman 2019:194–220).

The purpose of this article is to contextualize vaccine-critical individuals in Sweden, viewed as actors, by highlighting everyday experiences, focusing on the place where these are formed. Arguably, when meeting people with strong opinions that are hard to understand, it might be a preferable method as an ethnographer to *glance* at the subject in question by focusing less on what they say and more on what they do, in the place where they live. As a researcher, it is also a good idea to remind oneself of the importance of solidarity with the people we engage ourselves in when doing fieldwork; an ethically responsive and respectful approach towards a politically loaded question might teach us something about both everyday culture and vaccine hesitancy, and how these are intertwined. A related sub-purpose is to bridge the gap between “my lonely emotion and other people’s [emotions]” (Stewart 2017a, see also Stewart 2017b), and thereby hopefully contribute to a marginalized “group” feeling less alone; a toning down of the inflammatory discourse between pro- and anti-vaccination publicly taking place not only in the United States but also in different parts of Europe (Hausman 2019:54).<sup>3</sup> The following questions will be answered:

How does place matter when it comes to the formation of vaccine-critical opinions? In what way are these opinions embedded in everyday life? What can locally situated studies of vaccine reluctance tell us about dependability and, by extension, solidarity?

### **Vaccine Hesitancy in Sweden**

In 2019, the increase in vaccine hesitancy was singled out by WHO as one of the ten most urgent threats to global health.<sup>4</sup> Infectious diseases like measles are returning in different parts of the world, partly as a result of the activities of the anti-vaccination movements which have become more visible and vocal during the last 5–10 years, not least on the internet (Johnson et al. 2020).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the herd immunity against several dangerous infectious diseases is still high in most Western countries, oscillating between 95 and 100% coverage.<sup>6</sup> But even small decreases in vaccinations would have immediate negative effects for any population. In that sense, the Nordic countries, where citizens’ willingness to get vaccinated is historically strong, offer a perfect point of departure for anti-vaccination studies due to the high vaccination coverage, which makes it easier to follow changes in the population’s vaccination behaviour.<sup>7</sup> Until now, vaccine hesitancy studies in a Swedish context have focused on immigrant groups that refrain from vaccinations (Jama et al. 2018), attitudes towards HPV vaccines for children (see Dahlström et al. 2010), and the swine influenza vaccine Pandemrix in 2009–10, which resulted in a severe but rare side-effect (see Nihlén Fahlquist 2018). Britta Lundgren’s (2015a, 2015b, 2017) ethnographic studies in the aftermath of the mass vaccination during

the swine influenza belong to the scarce body of ethnological studies of modern vaccines in a Swedish context, to which also this article contributes. Additionally, studies of attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccines seem to be on the rise (see Nilsson et al. 2021). Even if the pandemic is not in this article's focus, I still regard it as a contribution to emerging COVID-19-research in a Nordic ethnological context, in line with e.g., Tine Damsholt's studies (2020, 2021).

A plethora of concepts are used to describe criticism against vaccines some of which have already been mentioned, encompassing rather mild to strong objections: vaccine hesitancy, vaccine reluctance, vaccine refusers, anti-vaccinationists, and antivaxxers (see e.g., Lawrence, Hausman & Dannenberg 2014). The individuals presented in this article are neither politically nor in any other way formally organized, in fact, none of the twenty interviewees that we have met so far belong to any particular group of anti-vaccinationists. This points to the inapplicability in this context of the word "antivaxxer", with its (right-wing) political connotations. Instead, they could be sorted underneath the terms hesitant or critical towards all kinds of vaccines, but especially new vaccines. It is also common that they are critical towards traditional medicine in general. They are outspokenly critical of vaccines, at least with people they know, and both nurture and form these opinions in culturally complex settings, drawing on information from the public authorities, pro- and anti-vaccination campaigns, traditional media, social media, open digital forums, discussions at kitchen tables, bodily experiences, conspiracies, rumours, and contemporary legends,

blending rational and emotional reasoning into a personal mixture (Kitta 2015:58–90; Lundgren 2015b:111). However, some of the interlocutors in this article are rather active in spreading their opinions through their social media accounts.

### Theoretical Framework

This study builds upon fieldwork in Hälsingland, a region in the middle of Sweden. While doing things together with vaccine-critical individuals here, such as sauna bathing, horseback riding, picking lingonberries in the forest, a connection between place and the reluctance towards vaccinations emerges. The immune system becomes naturally strong here, people claim, not due to the national vaccination programmes but because of the closeness to nature in this place in everyday life. Nature is repeatedly referred to as something inherently benign, a viable Nordic idea that is the product of the very civilization it seeks to avoid – a national romantic response to urbanization that has been investigated in ethnological classics like *Culture Builders* by Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren (1987). This idea is also well-spread among vaccine-hesitant people, research shows (see e.g., Hausman 2019, Koski & Holst 2017, Kitta 2012), and will be investigated closely in this article.

The concept of place is used to elaborate the complexity of everyday interactions giving rise to health experiences and health disparities (Donovan & de Leeuw 2020:97). It is not seen as something static but "mobile, active, transformative and forceful" (ibid.: 100), and not least sensory (Pink 2015); a multidimensional *locality* where the ordinary takes place. Lawrence, Hausman & Dannenberg write:

Attempts to understand national trends in vaccine refusal will always be of interest to researchers and public health practitioners, but real work to understand individuals and their decisions needs to start where they live (Lawrence, Hausman & Dannenberg, 2014:127).

Playing a bit with words, it is possible to say that I investigate *vaccilocus* instead of *vaccination*, where focus is directed to people's everyday life, in the place where they live. For inspiration in this direction of thinking, I have turned to the French philosopher Simone Weil and her work *L'enracinement* (*The Need for Roots*, 1949). Weil is a refreshingly readable intellectual that is difficult to place in the history of philosophy, but with a documented interest in humanism, mysticism, and political activism.

The concept of place will also be used to capture cultural history aspects of this particular part of Sweden, and the nation as a whole; how a more or less articulated division between the rural and the urban parts of the country has emerged during the last century. Place as a tool helps the researcher to reflect on "broader political ideologies and discourses that interplay with natural and historical factors and ultimately inform the actions and experiences of individuals as well as groups", Donovan and de Leeuw write (2020:100). The quotation suggests a top-down perspective, i.e., that power structures are inscribed into people's lives to the extent that their experiences, actions and bodies are formed by them, which I agree with; power *does* things to people. In my view, however, this perspective pays (too) little attention to the everyday that just *happens*, over and over again, endlessly. Whatever ideologies or structures they might be crouching under, people still *act*

in everyday life, forming the ordinary into a locally situated messy, pleasurable, and sufferable something, "composed out of heterogeneous and noncoherent singularities" (Stewart 2007:4).

In the analysis, I mainly draw upon Kathleen Stewart's ethnographic texts from an "other" America (Stewart 1996a, 1996b, 2007), where she explores people's everyday life and active memory making by using place as a prism, giving space for affect, rhythm, ambiance, bodies, and things, dovetailing them with state-of-the-art vaccine hesitancy research. This theoretical point of departure positions the study within the so-called non-representational turn, that, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, challenges ideas that, for example, atmospheres and affects do not include the representational and the symbolic (Vannini 2015). It also questions and challenges, in line with work by Nigel Thrift (Thrift et al. 2014), studies of globalization and capitalism effects from above. Drawing on a wide range of philosophers<sup>8</sup> from feminist theory, phenomenology, practice theory, and biological philosophy, non-representational theory explores "not the what but the how" of the world (Thrift 2008:113), pointing towards the everyday life that happens – Thrift uses the expression "*the geography of what happens*" (Thrift 2008:2, italics in original) – where bodies act together with things in an "anti-biographical" flow of sensations and affects.

Stewart discovers culture through atmospheres, people's storytelling and immediate surroundings; messy back yards, jokes, clotheslines, unsuccessful dates at fast-food diners, memories of suffering, and vivid dreams that coalesce with the landscape, wherever that might be: steep

hills, seductive rivers, extensive highways, and red houses (ibid., Stewart 2015). Through her rhythmic, poetic, at times sketchy language, she invites the reader: "Imagine," she repeatedly writes, as a call for the reader to partake in the places that unfold through her writing (Stewart 1996b). If Thrift's vocation is to *think* about non-representational theory, Stewart concentrates upon *doing* it, and she did so before anyone had heard of "non-representational theory", as a development of her long anthropological career path.

Vaccine reluctance is a politically delicate and contested matter, and therefore particular cities, towns, and villages will not be mentioned in order to protect the interviewees' anonymity. Other potential distinguishing marks have also been changed. This means that I am hindered from openly referring to certain local cultural history books that have been frequently used during the work process. Instead, ethnographic research from Norrland, to which Hälsingland belongs, more broadly will be listed in the references. In the following, I also strive for a more prose-like language to enable a sense of "being there".

### **The Southern Parts of Rural Norrland**

For elderly and middle-aged people who grew up in Hälsingland, or other parts of rural Norrland for that matter, a common cultural reference point is a sort of golden era – at least it's perceived as such when looking in the rear-view mirror – when the fertile soil and the vibrant sawmill industry nurtured flourishing villages and cities, forming nostalgic stories – a sort of place biography – passed on to children and grandchildren. Back then, it is said that sawmills fought against each other to

find enough workers to be able to keep up the production. Back then, people moved here from the big cities, even from the capital, to settle down and build houses and families. The schools were full of pupils, the story goes. Thriving butcheries, bakeries, and association premises were natural meeting places where people shared everyday gossip. Around here, the Swedish word *storbonde* – which is translated as "big farmer" in different language apps, a word that in my view doesn't conform to the cultural aspects of the word *storbonde* and its historical meaning – encompasses the large-scale, prosperous farms that can still be recognized in the landscape. However, in the twenty-first century many of them are left to their own destiny; impressive wooden two-storey houses and large barns that from a distance appear to be intact but when you come closer the lack of human care is what strikes you the most; flaked paint, worn windows, rampant gardens. Nowadays, the activities in the barns have been replaced by ambitious and well-meaning governmental actions and local initiatives to resurrect "a living countryside" (Nilsson & Lundgren 2018; Nilsson 2018).<sup>9</sup>

Because little by little things changed. My grandmother and her siblings belonged to the adventurous pioneers who left Hälsingland and their shoemaker heritage at a young age in the 1920s to reside in Stockholm and make a living as housemaids and factory workers. None of them returned to Norrland other than to visit. One could say that they embodied "flykten från landsbygden" (the flight from the countryside), which through the years led to sparsely populated villages. Successively, this change from "rural" to "depopulation"

formed itself into a discourse in Swedish culture; a development that is taken for granted and rarely questioned (Hansen 1998:46), and that we share with many other Western countries. Simone Weil wrote poignantly about this process in the 1940s. The depopulation of the countryside leads to the death of society as a whole, and nothing seems to slow down the course of action, Weil argues.<sup>10</sup> Against this background, it's fair to say that Hälsingland today "finds itself caught in a present that began some time ago" (Stewart 2007:1). When living here, the lack of work opportunities and the ongoing depopulation are things you adjust to but never fully accept. The same goes for the high death rates connected to drugs among young adults, as well as the high, by national standards, suicide rates among men. Migrants from different countries hang about in the city centre. Abandoned houses line the roads. The consequences of a century characterized by industrialization, urbanization, and globalization are ubiquitous, easily spotted in the landscape through the contours of disused factories, empty industrial buildings, and closed shops, which I find hard to describe without flirting with the desolation melancholy both captured and constructed by a well-established Nordic art genre (Hansen 1998:184).<sup>11</sup> Typical for this particular genre, besides its positive view of the countryside, is that it frames rural areas as a non-contemporary deviation; an anomaly in time, Kjell Hansen writes (*ibid.*).

After having spent a week together with vaccine-reluctant individuals here, generously invited into people's homes, it all became more intricate, which is one of the many benefits of doing fieldwork – it does complicate things. I write this text "not as a

trusted guide carefully laying out the links between theoretical categories and the real world, but as a point of impact, curiosity and encounter" (Stewart 2007:5). During the fieldwork disparate "scenes of life" (Stewart 2007:77) emerged that pulled the ordinary into an entanglement "of trajectories, connections, and disjunctures" (Stewart 2008), where everyday life was performed among objects (see Frykman & Frykman Povrzanović 2016). The first scene takes place in a steaming hot sauna, where the embedded things of the ordinary come into play: naked bodies, rustic logs, lit candles, outdoor showers, wet towels, and stories of suffering. Through details, atmospheres, feelings, and self-reflexivity, it is my explicit endeavour to refrain from describing the people that I have encountered as romanticized strangers (Hansen 1998:185), or as tinfoil hats for that matter. I had the opportunity to spend some time with a couple of very interesting fellow human beings, my ethnographic task being to "compose a register of the lived *affects* of the things that took place in a social-aesthetic-material-political worlding" (Stewart 2017a:193, italics in original).

### Sauna Stories

It was the interviewees' idea that a sauna would be a good start to the week in Hälsingland for me; they often do this together, so it seemed like a natural thing. After some phone calls and e-mails, I met them for the first time when they picked me up in a car and drove us to a big house located in the countryside. The September evening light as a soft blanket, tucking in the landscape with its overblown fields and meadows, sparsely located houses, and wide-ranging forests.

On arrival, it struck me how much work and time it must take to care for such a well-worn house like this one, placed in a wide garden where the grass was growing high, surrounded by three cottages, one of them from the mid-nineteenth century. Dogs were running about. A mongrel puppy looked more like a wolf than a dog. Later, I could hear someone calling him by his nickname, Wolfy. We were seven women altogether. Around here, people never lock the front door, or any door really, not even at night, or when leaving the house, they said. Locking doors would be some kind of confirmation that there's something to be afraid of out there, a feeling that one wishes to avoid; you're safe here, you can relax. Squeezed in between the main building and one of the smaller houses – painted with "Falun rödfärg" a traditional red distemper paint<sup>12</sup> that distinguishes Swedish peasant cultural history more than any other aesthetic expression – a huge boulder had stranded after the inland ice melted 10,000 years ago. It resembled a yawning hippopotamus weighing hundreds of kilos, and was definitely there before the houses were built, but it seemed to take cover in the garden, hiding in between the houses and birches.

These women were all critical of vaccinations against COVID-19, cervical cancer, and measles, that much I knew. They also knew that I was fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and that I'm positive towards the established vaccine programmes.

Outside the darkness fell. Lit candles decorated the entrance to the sauna. Undressing in front of people I had just met felt a bit awkward, especially as I was there in my professional role, but the scent of resin, the crackling sound, and over-

whelming heat were kind to my nerves. At first, the energy was directed towards me, the stranger coming from the university in the south. Later during the week, they simply referred to me as "Lund University". I didn't know the cultural codes in this particular sauna, but sauna bathing is a well-established ritual in Scandinavia that I have taken part in enough times to know the procedure. When minutes turned into quarter of an hour, the sweat was forming a pool on my stomach, and I had to leave the sauna many times over, together with the others, to drink water and take outdoor showers, stark naked in the darkness of the garden, accompanied by the hippo's massive shadow. The ice-cold water evoked sounds of joy: high-pitched screams and laughter, embedded in the surrounding nature. Half-consciously I studied the others' behaviour so that I would blend in as much as possible. Slowly but steadily, I felt more and more included. It was almost like a physical experience in my overheated skin; I could relax, let my shoulders down.

A conversation took form. Stories were being shared. After having told everyone about my research I now participated mostly by quietly listening to what was being said. For some reason – because who knows how or why topics form themselves when people engage in conversations? – somebody started to talk about pain, loss and sorrow; sudden illness and death that bewilder you in a way that takes years to recover from, if you ever do. Our steaming bodies became still on the shelves,<sup>13</sup> and some of us made low, humming sounds; we were suddenly engaged in "the seemingly simple work of remembering kinship ties and married names – stories of alcoholism, accidents, violence, and cancers"



(Stewart 2007:18). This is how stories of sorrow work; sharing one is the same as giving room for another. I remember how we talked about suicide. It doesn't seem to matter if someone has talked about it as a realistic option for the unbearable agony of life, it still strikes like lightning when it happens; the suicide comes as a shock *because* somebody has been talking about killing him- or herself, as you cannot think that it actually would happen, that someone you love would actually do it. It's numbing how the pleasures of the ordinary suddenly can "morph into a cold, dark edge" (Stewart 2007:4).

### The Forest

The following day, we took some metal berry pickers with us, jumped into the car and drove into the forest to pick lingonberries. Through the windshield we spotted yet another moose hunting team; middle-aged men with naked upper bodies standing beside their vans, putting on camouflage-patterned shirts and jackets. Loaded rifles on their backs. Wolfy accompanied us, unleashed, and made my blood curdle a couple of times when picking berries in full concentration as I thought he was a wild animal – yes, a wolf – coming straight at me. The conversation from the sauna continued, finding its own relaxed ways as often happens when doing things whilst talking. I told the story of my eldest daughter's father, a brilliant public service radio journalist at the time when I met him, who died a couple of years ago, and how lonely he'd been at that point, how ill. My company listened carefully to my story; humming, posing short encouraging questions. Leaning gently against our common experiences of loss and sorrow, we changed the

subject and talked joyfully about our early twenties, laughing at peculiar memories connected to our common lack of cooking skills at that time. And we talked about the fresh bear droppings that you sometimes encounter in the Norrland woods. The steel bucket was full of bright red berries. Wolfy jumped up and down noiselessly in the moss. There was no wind. In silence the forest lay as the light faded.

We also spoke about vaccinations. Why would a child need vaccinations against measles here? This rhetorical question captured some of the thoughts that were being shared. The HPV vaccination to protect girls from cervical cancer seemed "uncertain and unnecessary". In relation to the mass vaccination against the COVID-19 pandemic things were different; all doubts had vanished. The reluctance had grown stronger, for all of them. When I interviewed them individually, each one said that they don't trust either in the authorities' knowledge or honest intentions concerning these "emergency use authorized vaccines". "Over my dead body", somebody declared, not without irony. A recurring idea that was expressed is that the vaccinations might manipulate or destroy the immune system for years to come. "The side-effects might show after five or ten years." There are safer ways to stay healthy around here, they said, such as cultivating your own vegetables, spending plenty of time outdoors, and hanging about with good friends, in the sauna, the forest, and elsewhere. Putting health decisions in someone else's hands was out of the question; "When it comes to health, *I* have the responsibility over my own body. It's a personal matter."

As I always do when meeting vaccine-critical individuals, I asked if, and

how, they try to protect other people from infectious diseases like COVID-19. The answer is generally the same: If they have even the slightest symptom, they stay at home until it's gone. In calm and gentle voices, they also questioned the seriousness of the pandemic (cf. Björkman & Sanner 2013). "Isn't it more like a severe flu, after all?" If the trust in the authorities is low, the belief in the medical industry's health-promoting purpose is even lower; it hits rock bottom in fact. Like many other vaccine-critical individuals around the world, these Hälsingland women were convinced that the pharmaceutical companies are only in it for the money (see Harambam 2020:58–102). These particular arguments as well as the ones concerning a general endeavour for a more natural and sustainable way of living resonate with earlier research results within the field (see Hausman 2019; Koski & Holst 2017; Kitta 2012). The feeling of safety was, among other things, connected to the local surroundings, manifested through unlocked front doors, and outdoor activities. Conceivably, they were involved in collective and active placemaking of which vaccine reluctance had become a part; not a major one, but rather one micro-culture feature among many. I will investigate this in more detail further on.

### **New York Aesthetics Meets Scandinavian Folklore**

There are plenty of opportunities around here to live and work in beautiful old houses without spending one's whole salary on rent. An apartment that I visited was located in a former courthouse built in the late nineteenth century. Most of the flats in this rustic two-story building, with thick stone

walls, were empty. In its prime the house was meant to evoke a feeling of reverence among the local citizens, placed centrally next to the vibrant railway station back then. The railway is still in use but today the trains pass by.

I knew that the interviewee living here was a skilled interior decorator but the apartment still took me by surprise with its exquisite style; industrial cool with a touch of countryside aesthetics embraced by the building's airiness and unique details such as ceiling paintings and extravagant tiled stoves. A writing desk made of steel, a huge bed covered with a French bedspread and linen cushions in white and light grey colours. If you open the windows and play jazz music on a warm summer night, you could pretend to be in Paris or New York. Just like the jazz, social media accounts are used to link oneself to a wider world. They offer the possibility to place one foot in an imaginary, creative, and crowded landscape, scaling up the communication circuits, while the other is firmly placed in this part of Hälsingland, in a particular New York-inspired flat (see Miller, Costa & Haynes 2016). Notably, Sweden's capital Stockholm, a couple of hours' car drive away, is not mentioned as one of those imaginary possibilities. When actually visiting a bigger city, these women prefer to travel north.

Homemade photos covered the walls in the apartment. All of them were taken outside in the nearby surroundings; in the forest, at meadows, or by dark lakes. Most of them sensually picture a woman with little or no clothes on with her thick, curly, hair like a halo around her head; her naked back as she disappears into hundreds of ferns, her body half covered by blue silk stand-

ing in a lake full of water lilies. She rarely shows her face, never looks into the camera, which invites the viewers' fantasies. Imagine her sitting on a powerful white horse with the forest as a backdrop, dressed in a short, old-fashioned nightgown with a longbow on her back, the arrows entangled in her unruly hair, like an elf in *Lord of the Rings*.

An expectation of a resilient Mother Earth that overcomes challenges could be discerned in the pictures, capturing, again, a hope that nature will save us from harm, communicated through aesthetics originating from Nordic folklore. If you involve yourself in nature as a human being, on nature's own terms, you might in the end *become* nature. The Hälsingland woods and lakes in the photos give promises of endless resources; they appear unviolated, peaceful and at the same time intimidating. The limit between civilization and nature becomes blurry, which might be interpreted as either a possibility or a threat depending on who is watching. A nineteenth-century peasant used frightening tales to prevent the children from wandering off in the woods by themselves, where mystic beings waited in the shadows, such as the wood wife, the neck, and the night hag (see, e.g., Stattin 2008 and Egerkrans 2017 for stunning contemporary illustrations of these "Vaesen").

This artwork was not performed to earn money, "it's just a hobby", I was told, where the word "just" seemed unfair, because what makes life meaningful in the end? Playing around certainly does. Instead, a special kind of powerful yoga that had become popular around here provided a somewhat steady income. One evening I attended a workout led by one of the interviewees that took place in an impressive

industrial building in the centre of the main town with ingenious crafted windows, stretching solemnly all the way from the floor to the high ceiling. A dozen women had gathered. The light was dimmed and the music loud; a kind of African-like drum tones created especially for this particular yoga filled every corner of the magnificent hall. We were led through complicated moves reminiscent of martial arts. I did my best to follow the dance-like choreography, the sweat pouring out of my body for the second time during this fieldwork trip. During a sequence with very strong drum music, where we were encouraged to swing an imaginary axe back and forth, I relaxed and sort of became the rhythm, absorbed by my bodily senses "in bending time and space into new kinaesthetic shapes" (Thrift 2008:14).

In relation to the ever-present, amoeba-like, nebulous stress in modern society, this small community of women offered, either consciously or unconsciously, alternative ways of living, or rather, alternative ways of being.<sup>14</sup> In this corner of the earth, time seemed to be an exuberant natural resource, nicely captured by the renowned Swedish author Kerstin Ekman in the Hälsingland-located novel *Löpa varg* (*The Wolf Run*) where the main character, a retired forester, reflects on his wife's cooking habits:

I had brought out the cheese and that extraordinarily tasty marmalade that takes three days to make. First, thin slices of orange are scalded in boiling water. Then they should rest for 24 hours. The next day, you boil them and then leave them in the saucepan overnight once again. The seeds, placed in a small bag of linen, is put into the pan and during the last day the sugar is added, and then you boil it. This becomes a strong marmalade. The

amount of time it takes to make this marmalade only exists here (Ekman 2021:137, my translation).

Besides the strong marmalade, what stayed with me after having read this novel is how socializing with friends, acquaintances, and especially neighbours seems to spontaneously happen in everyday life. Phone calls are superfluous, you just take the car and drop by.<sup>15</sup> At any point of the day there is enough time for brewing coffee and offering a sandwich with a piece of venison on top, enough time to chat about the latest events in the village; a romantic portrait that relies on both lived experience and discourse, where the first has become inseparably entangled with the other (see Hansen 1998).

At this place, there is a possibility to work just enough to support oneself, which means that there is plenty of time to do other things; be with family and friends, arrange photo sessions (playing), go hunting, pick berries and mushrooms in the forest, take long walks and practise yoga and meditation. I was demonstrated an inherited piece of land surrounded by winding roads, gentle hills, and freshwater lakes, not far from the powerful river. A dream to build a house here was taking shape. In contrast to the southern parts of Sweden it is possible to buy land here for bargain prices. Roots, however, the feeling of genuinely belonging to a certain place, are not for sale. "I could never leave Hälsingland," I was told. "This is home." Their past and their present were here, as well as the imagined future. Simone Weil puts words to the fundamental human need of being rooted, a need that is often neglected, maybe because it is hard to pinpoint, to define clearly. Being rooted has to do with a sense of belonging; a natu-

ral, active way of participating in everyday life together with a collective of fellow human beings, to be part of the ordinary that encompasses memories of the past and expectations of what is to come. This sense of belonging is brought about by place, birth, work, and social surroundings that lend themselves to you, Weil writes.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst writing this, I check some of the interlocutors' social media accounts once again, and notice new anti-vaccination statements. Some of them are published together with folklore-artsy pictures.<sup>17</sup> Critical comments about facemasks, hand antiseptics, and social restrictions flourish. There is a firm belief that the body doesn't need vaccines to stay healthy, on the contrary really; vaccines, and not least COVID-19 vaccinations, might be very dangerous to health. There is only one true vaccine winner in the world, and that's the pharmaceutical industry. Because who knows what vaccinations do to the immune system in two, three years' time? I started to recognize the arguments. Without doubt, they claim, there are safer, "more natural" ways to stay healthy around here; working out, spending a lot of time outdoors, eating ecologically cultivated food, being with your loved ones, and enjoying life without fear (Koski & Holst 2017). This is how they protect themselves and others from infectious diseases: by taking responsibility for their own health. Body and soul firmly anchored in this place that is, in between the lines, described as an armour against global threats like a pandemic or climate change. As long as one stays here, close to nature, family, and good friends, everything will be all right, they seem to believe, thus speaking from the vantage point of a personal but also shared *vaccilocus*.

But embedded in the stories is also a worry that "normality isn't normal anymore, that somebody has done something to the way things used to be, that we have lost something, that we have been changed" (Stewart 2007:88).

### **The Friesian Horse**

As the reader will have noted, this group of women were engaged in recurring outdoor activities with the purpose – either implicit or explicit – of living a healthy, natural life. At times, the activities took me by surprise, as when visiting a skilled natural horsemanship practitioner.

The joyful gallop could be heard from a long distance and made me laugh out loud and jump back to take cover. The four-legged gentlemen simultaneously squeezed their brakes at the corner of the stable, equally stunningly beautiful; an older black Andalusian and an equally black Friesian two-year-old. Massive hooves, muscular shoulders, flowing manes, long tails. The Friesian's silklike fur so smooth and shiny that you could use it as a mirror. Soon, we were on our way into the forest, led by the horse owner, the natural horsemanship practitioner.

Suddenly, she let go of the youngster; she just threw the rope over his back, and off he went, all by himself. You rarely meet people in the forest around here, and building trust – by letting the Friesian walk on his own and at the same time training him to come when she calls – has made their relationship strong, she explained. During the long walk the Friesian sometimes stopped to eat, and so we passed him by. A minute later we could hear the hooves as he trotted or galloped towards us, eager to catch up with the herd. Imagine this stun-

ning half-ton animal showing up in speed when called, with attentive ears pointed towards his owner. Every time, he landed softly right beside her sneakers. When we had walked for an hour, the owner and the horse started to play hide and seek among the trees. She first, leading the game, with him following after. I couldn't take my eyes from them. "We do this quite often," I was told. So, this is what it can look like when the extraordinary and the ordinary meet. "The affective subject [...] wants to be somebody. It tries to lighten up, to free itself, to learn to be itself, to lose itself. None of this is easy," Stewart writes (2007:59). Spending time in the forest with a playful horse might help though.

An idea came up some years ago that it could be a lucrative business to combine natural horsemanship training with job coaching to support and heal people who are unemployed or on long-term sick leave – there are plenty of those here. But something came in the way.

I have heard similar stories around here of how visions and dreams end up in passiveness. All of a sudden, illness might stand in the way. Burn-out syndrome in fact. Business plans are put to rest. Applying for jobs that one doesn't get won't help recovery, to say the least. Evidently, stress is not only caused by work overload and lack of time, it can also be nurtured by an uncanny feeling of missed possibilities and opportunities combined with too much time; the same kind of stress that, ironically, can be caused by long-term unemployment in itself. To take responsibility and have the initiative, to be aware that you're useful or even necessary – this belongs to a human being's vital, spiritual needs, Weil writes (1949:19). Even if supported by social in-

surances coverage for food, clothes, and a roof over one's head, the workless are deprived of all that, she argues (ibid.:46). "We're busy if we're lucky," Kathleen Stewart writes (2007:10), and continues:

Stress is a transpersonal bodily state that registers intensities. A thing like stress can linger and do real damage. Or it can also flow out of a household like water down the drain, as when someone who has been unemployed for too long finally gets a job. Any job. (Stewart 2007:43)

It can be difficult to talk about involuntarily unemployment. The body fends off, not by words because they let you down; the voice become tenuous, little by little it turns into a whisper that is replaced by an awkward silence, hesitating at the edge of the unsayable (Anderson 2009:78). You avoid eye contact and close your arms around your chest; the body language as audible as any language. The atmosphere becomes dense in the kind of way that makes you a bit nervous or restless. You need to do something to break free from it; rise from the chair, grab a glass of water, open a window, anything really. But you remain seated, struggling to manage the inner turmoil by fixing your gaze on the table surface.

And again, the conversation was flowing into vaccine reluctance. It could be summarized like this: When the children are small, there might grow a powerful feeling that it would be wrong to inject strange substances into their small, perfect, healthy bodies. It is intuition at its strongest. And in the end, who knows best what a child needs; their mother or the public authorities? The answer is simple, at least for some. This overwhelmingly strong will to protect the children combined with research that you

do by yourself – it's usually hard to remember which sources were being used – leads to a firm belief that vaccinations in general are not only potentially dangerous but also unnecessary. The immune system can certainly be strengthened in other, more natural ways here, and a naturally strong immune system is a much better protection against diseases, for your fellowmen, yourself, and your children. And "*Of course* parents use tools at their disposal to advocate for their own children," even if it ends up in decisions that challenge established societal norms and agreements (Hausman 2019:84, italics in original).

### Conclusion

When summarizing this ethnography-based analysis of vaccine reluctance in everyday life, I would like to claim two major points: First and foremost, *place matters* concerning vaccine hesitancy in terms of cultural history and geography, and as sensory space for the ordinary. Needless to say, vaccine-hesitant or -critical individuals do not form their opinions in a cultural vacuum. At this place, Hälsingland, and for this particular group of people, the negative attitude towards vaccinations seemed to coincide with a certain kind of strong local community, where a collective identity and mutual dependability were formed in relation to a sense of belonging to nature and to a group of like-minded friends. Between the lines, a *lack of* belonging to an imagined political centre also became visible, represented by the capital Stockholm. Kjell Hansen could perhaps have identified this micro culture as an example of the "reluctant margins of welfare", capturing "the relationship on the one hand between people's actions to achieve their own goals, and the

structuring effects of politics on the other" (Hansen 1998:192). In Norrland, Hansen claims, "People do not allow themselves to become totally subordinated to the ideals of policy, but neither do they act in valiant resistance" (ibid.). Instead, at least some people living here perform – explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously – a kind of reluctance against *something*, that represents the imagined (capital) centre and its politics. Reluctance towards nationally established, democratically sanctioned vaccine programmes can be seen as one of many variants on the same theme. In turn, this attitude aligns with a broader criticism of modernity, demonstrating that "techno-scientific modernity and democratic decision-making do not necessarily go together, especially when people feel that technoscience is aligned with big business and profit making and not dedicated to the real well-being of ordinary citizens" (Hausman 2019:218).

Place also matters in terms of the feeling of "local belonging" that is both experienced and performed in everyday life (Hansen 1998:197). The individuals that I met were born here or had moved here from other parts of Norrland, a belonging that was not underscored so much in words as in everyday action; life seemed to revolve around the nearby, and did not stretch geographically or culturally very far. Hälsingland has everything a human soul could ever need, was the unpronounced way of seeing things (except jobs). The women that I met seemed to rely on the local surroundings to protect them from external threats; front doors were left unlocked, friends dropped by, strangers were invited, horses galloped in the forest all by themselves, and the fresh air gave promis-

es of natural good health. It is not a naive attitude towards life, but rather an expression of necessity; of *being both rooted and exposed* in an economically vulnerable and depopulated region. As indicated above, struggling with involuntary unemployment and long-term sick-leave in everyday life, at least some citizens in Hälsingland seem no longer convinced that the welfare state benefits concern them.

Over and above this, intimate places emerged during the fieldwork, namely the female network culture taking place in saunas, during meditation and yoga practice, and at long dinners in each other's houses; a micro culture that was interrelated in subtle ways with a local community economy consisting of long car drives, plenty of spare time, low housing costs, strong marmalades, handpicked mushrooms, and moose meat, served at the table and stored in the freezer. The women that I met took active part in this modern hunting culture, not by shooting wild animals but by picking and gathering food in the forest, and taking care of the meat that men brought to the household (Frykman & Hansen 2009:195–228). They also had a tendency to answer my questions about vaccine reluctance in similar wording. This underscores the importance of *interactive rationality*, meaning that individuals "are prepared to act in accordance with recognised solidarity – if they believe that the majority of people in their community would do the same in a similar situation" (Frykman et al. 2009:25). The *esprit de corps* with a strong local community, such as a village or a landscape, *and* the loyalty to an intimate group of friends – which all together form what I have been calling a *vaccilocus* – in this particular case triumph over

the solidarity with a more anonymous, national, imagined community (see Lundgren 2016).

To engage myself bodily in this place, together with fellow human beings, opened up for new discoveries; this is a place that is *lived*, "the world is a making", writes Thrift, "it is processual, it is in action" (Thrift 2008:113). I cannot but agree. Nevertheless, this lived local community also stands in contact with the surrounding world. When the interviewees spoke about the lack of trust in public authorities and the pharmaceutical industry, claiming that the pandemic threat has been magnified by people who gain money by selling vaccines, they used the same kind of arguments that are spread globally by a multifaceted antivaccination movement, not least on social media and open forums on the internet (see Harambam 2020).

All things considered, my investigation underscores the importance of studying vaccine reluctance as *culturally specific*. To make any sense it needs to be investigated less as de-contextualized opinions and arguments, and more as a socially, culturally, and locally deeply embedded phenomenon, which I have striven to do, with a special focus upon place, nature, and bodily experiences. This in turn points to the evident need to regard established democracies as consisting not only of one singular coherent public sphere but of many differing and conflicting public spheres (Lawrence, Hausman & Dannenberg 2014). This also highlights the risk for Scandinavian researchers of unreflectingly drawing upon results from the United States, where a large body of anti-vaccination studies are produced. There are plenty of cross-national ideas that are being spread among vac-

cine-reluctant people, I have highlighted some of them here, but Scandinavia's high herd immunity, established welfare state model and well-documented high trust in public authorities call for further investigations in this – politically and culturally specific – part of the world.

Secondly, considering the public discourse more broadly, it is my conclusion that there is little substance in the comfortable solidarity claims expressed by representatives of "the public", such as established pundits working on national media platforms, especially when they are flavoured with condescending words directed towards vaccine-critical individuals. To call adults "egoistiska, ouppfostrade värstingstonåringar" (egoistic, ill-bred tearaway teenagers) will most probably not enhance the will in this "group" to take COVID-19 vaccinations.<sup>18</sup> Arguably, it is a false assumption that vaccine-reluctant individuals lack feelings of solidarity; however provocative it might come across, they are loyal to other, more regional, local, and intimate fellowships, as well as to likeminded people across the globe – and there are complex cultural and political reasons for this. Or as Bernice Hausman puts it from an American vantage point: "How, as a society, we deal with these circumstances of fundamental disagreement reflects how well our social contract is working" (Hausman 2019:84).

I have also tried to show that this "group" of people consists of considerate and generous individuals. That I do not share their view of vaccinations does not mean that I cannot reflect myself in them.



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## Notes

- 1 Project title: "Rumour Mining, a mixed methods collaboration", 2020–2023, in cooperation between the language technologists Professor Lars Borin and Associate Professor Dimitrios Kokkinakis at the University of Gothenburg and Associate Professor of Sociology Fredrik Miegel, and Associate Professor of Ethnology Mia-Marie Hammarlin (PI), Lund University.
- 2 However, personal illness narratives or the like are not in the project's focus. If such sensitive data is spontaneously shared, these parts are not transcribed.
- 3 The people we have interviewed so far do not belong to a specific group. i.e., they are not formally organized. They usually meet like-minded people through different sorts of social media groups, especially Facebook, and through social and cultural patterns in everyday life offline.
- 4 <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019>.
- 5 Between 2016 and 2020 worldwide measles deaths climbed by 50%, <https://www.who.int/news/item/12-11-2020-worldwide-measles-deaths-climb-50-from-2016-to-2019-claiming-over-207-500-lives-in-2019>.
- 6 E.g., herd immunity for measles, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.IMM.MEAS>.
- 7 A decline in the number of children vaccinated has previously had immediate negative effects. For example, the incidence rate in Sweden of pertussis rose from 700 to 3,200 cases per 100,000 children in 4 years due to a rather small decrease in vaccinations (Kitta 2012:2).
- 8 As described by Nigel Thrift, non-representational theory draws upon thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel de Certeau, Pierre Bourdieu, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Gregory Bateson, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, among others (Thrift 2008:113).
- 9 Some of the interviewees circulated similar stories when we drove around in the surroundings. I would like to recommend the autobiographical cartoonist Mats Jonsson, and his book *Nya Norrland* (2017), which nicely captures feelings of nostalgia, melancholy, longing, and sorrow in a way that most academic work on the topic does not offer. However, Jonsson also illustrates the deadly Union protests, the threat from World War II, the Swedish hunger protests, and the emigration to the United States as a sort of counterbalance; the everyday was circumscribed by life-changing challenges during this "golden era". Another exception is the ethnological and anthropological literature that paints the receptive portrait of what it means to be a "real" man in Northern rural areas, such as Lissa Nordin's (2007) Bo Nilsson's (1999:130–171), and Ella Johansson's (1994) dissertations.
- 10 "Il est évident que le dépeuplement des campagnes, à la limite, aboutit à la mort sociale. On peut dire qu'il n'ira pas jusque-là. Mais on n'en sait rien. Jusqu'ici, on n'aperçoit rien qui soit susceptible de l'arrêter" (Weil 1949:74f).
- 11 Kjell Hansen (1998:84) gives two apt examples that represent this genre: the novel *Vem älskar Yngve Frej* by the Swedish author Stig Claesson (1968), and photography by the Finnish artist Esko Männikö.
- 12 A colour, like red, can actually become a fruitful analytical point of departure, as Stewart eloquently shows (Stewart 2015:19–33).
- 13 There is an exact word for this kind of sauna shelf in Swedish, namely "lav" or "lave", a special kind of wooden structure.
- 14 In the OECD countries, psychiatric diagnoses are increasing as a cause of long-term sick leave, and stress-related syndromes are among the most common, not least in Sweden (Socialförsäkringsrapport 2020:8; OECD 2012).

- 15 Driving is a necessity around here, even to "nearby" neighbours.
- 16 "L'enracinement est peut-être le besoin le plus important et le plus méconnu de l'âme humaine. C'est un des plus difficiles à définir. Un être humain a une racine par sa participation réelle, active et naturelle à l'existence d'une collectivité qui conserve vivants certains trésors du passé et certains pressentiments d'avenir. Participation naturelle, c'est-à-dire amenée automatiquement par le lieu, la naissance, la profession, l'entourage" (Weil 1949:45).
- 17 One of them has 1K followers in each of two social media accounts.
- 18 Hanne Kjöllér: "Vaccinvägrarna visar att det är jaget – och inte laget – som är svenskarnas ledstjärna." Column in *Dagens Nyheter*, 1 May 2021. *Dagens Nyheter* is one of the most influential and well-respected newspapers in Sweden, and Hanne Kjöllér is an established columnist.

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### Fieldwork

Between March 2020 and September 2021, the project collected twenty recorded interviews in total that have been transcribed in their full-length. With few exceptions, they took place in people's homes. The interviewees participated voluntarily. A consent form, with information about the project and the interviewees' rights regarding e.g., GDPR and possible withdrawal, was signed before the recording began. Seven of the interviews were collected in Hälsingland, 19–24 September 2021, where participant observations also took place, documented through a field diary and recordings.

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