



## #Nowhereland Placemaking and privilege in an alternative “cocoon community”

By  
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### Abstract

Rural places and small towns are highly valued by lifestyle migrants who wish to live close to nature (Verdich 2010) and have a more environmentally friendly lifestyle. Ängsbacka is a course center and a community for alternative lifestyles, located on the outskirts of a small town in mid-Sweden. The center emphasizes community and belonging, while also being a place characterized by cosmopolitan taste patterns and constant mobility, which can be described as a cocoon community (following Korpela and Dervin 2013).

The members of the cocoon community use social media platforms such as Instagram to make place for themselves, to communicate belonging. Through images, hashtags and captions, they make connections between various places, people, activities and emotions that together contribute to the user's spatial self (Schwartz and Halegoua 2015) and to the placemaking efforts of the community. Those using the hashtag ängsbacka often do so to communicate a deep connection between the place and themselves. At the same time, while the local place and nature is at the center of their activities, it is simultaneously a mere backdrop for their projects of personal development.

Using Ängsbacka as a case, the article adds to research about digital placemaking beyond cities, by examining how the local place is given meaning within a community defined by privileged mobility. With reference to Carfagna et al's (2014) concept of ecological habitus, I argue that discourses on sustainability and harmony with nature can create a connection and sense of belonging that combines the (hyper)local with global alternative lifestyles, even as the cocoon community excludes the local place.

**Keywords:** digital placemaking, social media, privilege, cocoon community, sustainability

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## Introduction

In a photo of a serene forest setting, a woman sits on the ground meditating with her back to the photographer. Light shines in through the trees that surround her, and she seems completely in harmony with her beautiful surroundings. The accompanying hashtags, including #stillness and #meditateinnature, further establishes the associations of a harmonious relation to nature. It is an Instagram post that is typical of the kind of images you encounter under the hashtag ängsbacka. The images often depict people that interact with nature in various ways that makes them immersed in their natural surroundings, while engaging in practices common to so called alternative lifestyles, such as meditation and yoga.

The hashtag is used primarily by the course center with the same name, and by its visitors, and is one way in which they present the place and their attachment to it. Hence, the use of the hashtag is a kind of digital placemaking, a concept defined by Halegoua and Polson (2021:573) as “the use of digital media in cultivating a sense of place for oneself and/or others” to “create emotional attachment”. Most of the literature on digital placemaking have given attention to urban areas, neglecting the rural and small towns. In this article, I analyze the placemaking practices of a community that is located on the outskirts of a small town, and specifically how the community relates to the local place. The posts that use the hashtag ängsbacka make up the main empirical material of the study.

Placemaking is a combination of digital representations and activities based in physical places. This combination of offline and online activities has been explored by, among others, Polson who describes how digital media can create “mobile and flexible places that span online and offline space” (2015: 630). Similarly, Ängsbacka is flexible in the sense that while the community is rooted in the local place, not least through the emphasis on being close to nature, it is characterized by the constant mobility of its members and by tastes and lifestyles that belong to a global New Age culture.

These highly mobile communities can be described as “cocoon communities”, using a concept from Korpela and Dervin’s (2013) research about the contemporary meaning and role of communities. The cocoon is a current form of community that is not permanent yet also not merely temporary. Korpela and Dervin argue that cocoon communities are location-based but places and placemaking are not explicitly explored in the discussion of the concept. The aim of their book is to discuss communities and relationships, and temporality is overall given more consideration than spatial aspects. The main paradox of the cocoon community is that it can be both temporary and permanent. By adding placemaking practices to their theorization of communities I explore how the community constructs a sense of belonging in relation to a local place. By emphasizing the role of placemaking for the cocoon community, the article contributes to the discussion

about contemporary community building and belonging. More specifically, the article adds an understanding of the intermingling of local and global, in the placemaking of a cocoon community.

Ängsbacka was first established in 1997 and is a course center and community for alternative lifestyles that hosts a large variety of spiritual and alternative practices such as yoga, tantra, shamanic rituals and sustainable development. The course center is well-known in the New Age milieu, not least as a place for new spiritual teachers to establish themselves (Frisk 2016). A large and diverse group of people visits the center but New Age communities as well as yoga and tantra events tend to attract predominately middle-class participants (D'Andrea 2006, Islam 2012, Urban 2003).

The course center is located on the outskirts of Molkom, a small mid-Swedish town in the region of Värmland with around two thousand inhabitants. Ängsbacka sits at the edge of the Molkom forest, and the community often incorporates the forest in their activities. Värmland is commonly associated with its vast forests as well as stories and fairytales, being home to many well-known authors (Aronsson et al 2010), but it is also perceived as provincial and remote (Region Värmland 2017).

In the article, I start by explaining how research on digital placemaking can be combined with the concept of cocoon communities, as well as notions of sustainability, closeness to nature and local place. I then present the method, detailing how I have worked with social media posts that use the hashtag ängsbacka, before presenting the analysis.

## **Placemaking, cocooning and sustainability**

Research on placemaking and digital media emphasize questions of identity and community. Haleboua and Polson (2021:573) write that “a drive to create and control a sense of place is understood as primary to how social actors [...] express their identities and how communities organize to build more meaningful and connected spaces”. In a similar vein, Schwartz and Haleboua (2015: 1644) coined the term “spatial self” to describe how individuals “display their experience and/or mobility within space and place in order to represent or perform aspects of their identity to others”. They also write that “the character of a place is a social construct that is continuously created and adjusted by the plethora of visitors to that location and the connotation of that place” (2015: 1649). The visitors of a place “are relating themselves with the values and social groups that are represented by that specific physical place”, hence they are adding to or reproducing the image of that particular place while associating their online identities to the existing image of the place.

Those that use the hashtag *ängsbacka* associate themselves with a place and a community that is characterized by mobility. To theorize the construction of belonging in a highly mobile community a useful concept is Korpela and Dervin's (2013) cocoon community. A cocoon is defined as "a protective enclosure that protects the individual organism from a hostile environment while the organism itself undergoes transformation" (2013: 144). It is inherent in the concept of a cocoon that it is its own world, separate from its surroundings in some way, which allows for a transformation or change. Some of the empirical cases explored in their book are communities of exchange students, expat wives and remote learning groups. Cocoon community is especially useful to understand the relation between the *Ängsbacka* community and the local place, as the activities at *Ängsbacka* all revolve around the notion of personal (and societal) transformation.

The concept is furthermore meant to challenge what Korpela and Dervin see as a conventional understanding of communities as "either permanent and 'strong' or temporary and 'light'". The cocoon in Korpela's study, a group of Westerners in Varanasi, is "an island of safety and cosiness" for people with mobile and fluid lifestyles (2013: 39). Crucially, even if the community is not permanent and constant, participation is not "light" but can be intense. Korpela states that the cocoon is "location-based" (2013: 37), and the concept shows how communities can combine a strong attachment to a local place with constant mobility. The cocoon community is very meaningful to the members. Polson (2014) makes similar arguments in her study of international meetup groups for middle-class professionals who move to global cities for work. The meetups see a constantly changing group of participants, but the members can perceive it as a meaningful community. The shared lifestyles and values of the participants is an important aspect of what keeps the community together.

Just like the expat communities studied by Korpela and Polson, *Ängsbacka* is characterized by a privileged mobility driven by lifestyle choices. More recently, Korpela (2020) has developed the study of lifestyle migrants through her research of what she calls "bohemian lifestyle migrants". Korpela emphasizes the privilege of the bohemians and questions if these groups really are counter-cultural. In a discussion about how to conceptualize these groups, she argues that the "alternative" aspect of alternative lifestyles should be questioned by researchers. She instead emphasizes how the lifestyle of bohemian lifestyle migrants depends on global inequalities that enable their mobility.

Korpela argues that the community members seek continuity and stability in the community, because of the fluidity of their lifestyles. This can be likened to what Morley writes about the privilege of mobility, when he writes that the most privileged are able to move freely between highly connected places, with access to

communication technology, and the safety of the local, traditional and small-scale (2000: 199).

At Ängsbacka, a valuing of the local and small-scale is expressed through a desire to be environmentally conscious. A central part of Ängsbacka's lifestyle revolves around issues of sustainability, defined as living an environmentally conscious life but also more vague notions of being close to nature. What it means to be in connection to nature is never clearly defined by the community, but it seems to mean both living in a natural environment, such as close to the forest, and being in harmony with nature, for example by having a more sustainable lifestyle. Ängsbacka's interest in environmental sustainability has materialized in projects such as building eco-friendly tiny houses and in saving food from a local grocery store. In this article, I discuss sustainability as it is defined by the Ängsbacka community and within the wider New Age community.

To analyze how discourses of sustainability can combine a desire for the locally produced and small-scaled with global lifestyles and taste patterns, a useful concept is Carfagna et al's (2014) concept of an ecological habitus. While notions of sustainable lifestyles are often rooted actions that take place locally, such as buying locally grown food, they are also global and cosmopolitan.

In their article about ethical consumers, Carfagna et al. (2014), argue that ecological habitus describes a new, ecological orientation for groups with high cultural capital, the so-called cultural middle classes. These groups have traditionally had a preference for the "cosmopolitan", which can include traveling often and far, having a curiosity for foreign cultures and wanting to work or study abroad, as well as valuing places and products that they perceive as exotic.

The new orientations of the cultural middle-classes means that they "are oriented toward a material and grounded sense of place" (2014: 160). They prefer the locally based and have a critical stance towards flying. They furthermore value manual labor, such as growing one's own food, or making environmentally friendly cleaning products. Carfagna also writes that the cultural middle classes have a new interest in the material but not in a traditional sense, "the embrace of materiality is not in the traditional form of luxury and excess, but as an earthy, sensual, ecologically infused materialism". They value do it yourself-projects and working with one's hands. This change in orientations of the cultural middle-classes does not mean that they come nearer to groups with low cultural capital. Instead, it is a reevaluation of what gives status. The new preferences can also be used to demarcate distance between one's own group and others, as I will discuss in the analysis.

In the analysis, I make use of the theories of placemaking, a spatial self, cocoon communities and the concept of an ecological habitus to answer the question of how an alternative community defined by privileged mobility relate to and make

use of the local place in a small town. What kind of place is constructed by the online and offline placemaking of the community?

## **Method and material**

There is an abundance of media production about Ängsbacka, both produced by the course center and others. This includes, among other texts, two documentary films (one of which has not been released yet), episodes of public service TV-shows, photos by professional photographers, social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and other platforms, and advertising. Professional photographer Elin Berge includes the Ängsbacka women's festival Sacred Womb, as a part of her 2020 photo book titled *Awakening*, chronicling a current movement for divine femininity or goddess feminism. Ängsbacka has its own media team during the summer festivals. The abundant media production is not strange given that those involved in Ängsbacka are to a large extent middle class with access to tools for media production and creative jobs. Furthermore, it is a photogenic place of natural beauty hosting plenty of colorful and extraordinary events.

The primary material for this article is Instagram posts that use the hashtag *ängsbacka*. I will also refer to interviews that I conducted in 2017, and insights from fieldwork at the largest summer festival at Ängsbacka, the No Mind festival, in 2017 and 2018. When useful for the analysis, I will also refer to other material created at Ängsbacka, such as material from the Ängsbacka website and from one of the documentaries made about Ängsbacka. The documentary, made by filmmaker Renzo Aneröd, has yet to be released but a trailer and shorter clips of the film are made available on Youtube.

The interviewees I talked to argued that society has become more accepting of activities such as tantra, and that could make the visitors more open to showing their interests in alternative lifestyles also on public social media accounts. Some of the visitors that I interviewed mentioned that they had first encountered information about Ängsbacka or a specific festival on social media, which testifies to the importance of digital content to attract visitors.

Instagram is a popular platform for sharing photos and videos, which has grown rapidly in recent years and now reaches a billion users. While Instagram was initially a site for photo sharing, textual expression has grown in importance (Thimm and Nehls 2017). Instagram posts should be analyzed as a whole, including the image, the caption and the hashtags (Barnwell, Neves and Ravn 2021).

Hashtags are a central feature of Instagram that allows users to characterize photos and share them with other users (Sheldon and Bryant 2016). Digital media makes private and personal life open to the public. With the use of hashtags, the

users are not just saving the images for their network but add them to public albums of photos, or “digital mini publics”, defined as “a group of online users referring to a shared topic in a publicly visible and publicly accessible online space over a period of time” (Thimm 2015). Through hashtags, communities are built around themes (Sheldon and Bryant 2016).

Hashtags can be used to create a connection between the place, the author of a post and various phenomena, activities and lifestyles. Users can combine “general reference to the mini-publics with their own, more personal, hashtags” (Thimm and Nels 2017: 332). Sometimes the connection to a place is primarily conveyed through hashtags while the caption is more abstract and generic. In a post from 2019 using the hashtag *ängsbacka*, the poster uses hashtags to connect the place (*#forest*, *#sweden*, *#ängsbacka*), the poster herself (*#wildwoman*) with lifestyle activities (*#yoga*, *#meditation*, *#dance*) and ways of being (*#loveLife*, *#wonder*), that together with the caption form the topic of the post.

*#ängsbacka* is used to associate *Ängsbacka* with many other places that have a similar association to alternative lifestyles and New Age communities. The posts using the hashtag does not have to be about *Ängsbacka*. This use of the hashtag makes visible the “nodes of the global countercultural circuit” as D’Andrea (2006) calls it (see also Korpela 2020). Using hashtags, the connections between these “nodes” are made visible.

The *Ängsbacka* hashtag is used primarily by the course center, people who are affiliated with *Ängsbacka* by teaching or performing there, people who sell products or services and use the connection to *Ängsbacka* to reach an alternative community, and some of the visitors. *Ängsbacka* is a place with many different meanings and teachings, and it hosts a large and diverse group of people. The Instagram posts that include the hashtag is one way in which visitors, residents and the course center itself can define the place. By tagging *Ängsbacka*, they associate their identities to that place, showing their friends and followers that they have been there, as well as associating themselves with the *Ängsbacka* lifestyle and community. For those using the hashtag, *Ängsbacka* becomes a part of what Schwartz and Halegoua (2015) calls their spatial selves. Through images, videos, texts and hashtags *Ängsbacka* is associated with certain activities, emotions and people.

To get an overall view of the placemaking practices of the larger community, I coded the two hundred most recent posts using the hashtag “*ängsbacka*”, removing posts that were irrelevant, for example a few that discussed other places with the same name. The posts included were posted between May and November 2021. Many of the posts are also tagged with “*ängsbacka*”, as well as using the geotag for *Ängsbacka Nyeds-Backa*. From this larger material, I have selected those posts that engage in depth with place, sustainability and nature as the topic of the post. I

only include posts by accounts that are public, meaning that the posts are publicly accessible.

When coding the Instagram posts, I included the images, captions and hashtags. I noted if the posts mentioned or tagged other places, as well as what kinds of emotions, environments, activities and attributes that the users associate with Ängsbacka. The main themes of the Instagram posts are the encounter with nature and becoming part of nature, the intimacy and joy of the community, and advertisement of festivals, activities and workshop leaders.

In addition to the Instagram posts, the analysis is informed by material from interviews and fieldwork. In 2017, I interviewed participants and organizers of the Sexsibility festival and tantra course. Sexsibility started as a tantra coach training that later developed into a festival, first organized in 2009. The festival moved to Ängsbacka in 2014. Some of the interviewees had visited Ängsbacka to take part of other events as well while others had only participated in the Sexsibility events. In 2017 and 2018, I participated at Ängsbacka's largest summer festival, the No Mind festival that attracts close to a thousand participants. The festival offers a smorgardsbord of spiritual practices to try out.

While several of the interviewees had visited Ängsbacka repeatedly, only one of them had stayed at Ängsbacka for a longer time as a volunteer. The Instagram posts give a wider perspective on the community in that sense since it is a heterogeneous group of people that use the hashtag, including the official account of the course center. At the same time, the different kinds of material: the website, the visitors' Instagram posts, the Instagram posts made by the official account of the course center, and the experiences of the interviewees, give a rather homogenous image of Ängsbacka, when it comes to how the place is experienced and what it means for those that visit or live there.

In the following, I will start by describing how the community members use the hashtag ängsbacka to communicate a spatial self and a community. In what sense is Ängsbacka a cocoon community? Second, what is the role of the local place in the community's construction of belonging, and how do the members relate to the local? And lastly, how do they "anchor" themselves to the local place, through notions of sustainability and closeness to nature?

### **At home in a magic cocoon**

Instagram and other sites that are image-driven are considered to be more intimate (Barnwell, Neves and Ravn 2021), often portraying private moments. Intimacy can be expressed through the uploaded images but also through the use of language, such as using nicknames and including intimate knowledge. A common visual theme in the images from Ängsbacka is the community members'

intimacy with each other, with photos of hugs and intimate conversations, and with nature, shown in images where people are hugging trees or rocks, planting seeds in the ground or being surrounded by trees. The photos often invite the viewer to share this intimacy, through close-ups of faces, and angles that put the viewer on the same level as those depicted. The visualization of intimacy of various kinds contributes to the overall emotional intensity that is associated with Ängsbacka, as well as to the sense of a tightknit community, or cocoon, that is close to nature.

Home and homecoming is a recurring theme both in Ängsbacka's presentation of the course center, in the interview material and the Instagram posts. The filmmaker Renzo Aneröd, who is himself a part of the community, has worked on a documentary film about Ängsbacka that has yet to be released. In the trailer for the film *Gränsland/Borderland* (initially titled *We meet at Ängsbacka*), he portrays Ängsbacka as a place that is a refuge and home for people who challenge the societal conventions, who does not have a place in ordinary society that they perceive as shallow, false and too focused on achievements. When arriving at Ängsbacka, a large sign saying *Welcome home* greets the visitor. During one of the *No Mind* festivals that I visited, the welcome ceremony included a song about home and homecoming that repeated the line "we are home in the stars, and our souls will never die", evoking a very abstract sense of home. Many of the festivals and other events are presented as a home coming in the sense that the course participants come home to themselves by finding their authentic selves, and their authentic place in a community, for example in the sisterhood, a man's group, or in the larger Ängsbacka community.

Ängsbacka is at the same time a place in constant movement, where people come and go, especially during the large festivals in the summer that might draw over a thousand visitors for the most popular festival. There is a smaller group of people that have come to live in Molkom, and at Ängsbacka more or less permanently, as well as volunteers and others that stay longer than a festival or two. Two of the interviewees made similar observations about the perpetual inflow of new people and the strong emotions that the festivals and courses evoke. One of them describes it as a "constant constant flow of people that get this revelation and just want to talk and talk".

The course center is also mobile in the sense that it presents many different, and shifting, practices, schools and gurus. The spiritual practices at Ängsbacka combine references to many different places, through the constant mixing of rituals, ceremonies and traditions. These teachings are more or less associated with disparate geographical locations while also being a part of a global culture of alternative lifestyles and consumer culture. There is a general interest in the religious practices of various nature and indigenous religions such as the Peruvian

Q'ero shamans. More or less spiritual practices such as cacao ceremonies, yoga and shamanism are taken out of their cultural and geographical contexts even if they retain their “magic”, through their connotations to non-Western spiritual practices.

Korpela's use of the concept of cocoon communities is useful here, to understand a community that is both temporary and permanent. The bohemian community described by Korpela is temporary since the members come and go as they please and they do so constantly. Community members typically return to their home countries for months each year. But the community itself is rather stable in its practices and rituals. The community is “tight and location-based” (2013: 37).

At Ängsbacka, the place itself is a kind of cocoon, physically by being located on the outskirts of a small town, at a short distance from the rest of the town, but most importantly as a community that claims to make possible inner transformations by sheltering their visitors from the outside world. A common sentiment in the interviews and Instagram posts is that Ängsbacka's primary function is to be a cocoon. They perceive their visits to Ängsbacka as an escape, from the inauthenticity of society or urban life. One interviewee says that people who come to Ängsbacka “search for some alternative to the world that we live in, that is after all very driven by money, by achievements, by shallowness. [...] Searching for something else”. Some of the interviewees used metaphors similar to the cocoon. One of the interviewees says that “if [Ängsbacka] wasn't a separate container it would not have the effect that it has.” Another word used during one of the interviews was “tight container”. One of the interviewees describes Ängsbacka as having its own rules and norms, being as she says “a world inside the world”. Another interviewee says that it is a “vessel for the openness that is needed. In order to generate change or the beginning of change.”

Furthermore, the cocoon community is a place that holds a lot of importance for many of the visitors as a place where they can “be themselves”. Both the interviewees and those using the hashtag often express very strong emotions for Ängsbacka. In one of the interviews, a man describes it in the following way: “Normally, I live in Stockholm and there you are locked-in, like in a little box constantly, and you are like a robot that hardly looks at others. And when you come here, it is like you have an egg shell that is hatching, a bit. And then you can blossom and let down your guard completely.” The nature metaphors strengthen his narrative about the divide between the inauthentic city that transforms humans into robots and the cocoon that allows the participants to hatch and blossom. The cocoon relies on the community sharing a strong sense of the place, and shared associations to attract people interested in the same kind of lifestyle.

Both the interviewees and many of the Instagram posts express strong feelings of belonging to Ängsbacka, as a cocoon in which they can find refuge from mainstream society. The concept of a cocoon community also serves to highlight how Ängsbacka can be a place that is of great importance to the participants even as their stay is temporary. Many of the Instagram posts by those that visit Ängsbacka is about traveling to or from Ängsbacka, or reminiscing about past visits. Using the hashtag makes it possible for them to show their connection to the community even when they are not present.

While a cocoon community, in Korpela's analysis, is location-based, place and space are not at the forefront in Korpela and Dervin's initial definition of the concept. In the following sections, the analysis delves deeper into how the cocoon community relate to the local place, and the intermingling of the local and global. The relation between the community and the local place can be ambivalent. In the community's representations of Ängsbacka, the local place sometimes disappears.

### **A neverland deep in the forests**

Molkom, the small town where Ängsbacka is located, is seldom mentioned in the posts using the hashtag ängsbacka, and this holds true for other forms of communication. The region of Värmland is sometimes mentioned and sometimes Sweden, as in for example Swedish nature. In their Facebook page and on the About page on their website, Ängsbacka describes the course center as being "located in the beautiful deep forests of Värmland, Sweden". The trailer to the film *Borderland* likewise locates Ängsbacka "outside of society, in a secret place, deep in the Swedish forests". This removes Ängsbacka from its particular place and makes the location a bit vague. This vagueness about the location of Ängsbacka is echoed in the continuous confusion over its exact geographical position. A documentary about Ängsbacka, from 2009, is titled *Three miles north of Molkom*, which is incorrect, since Ängsbacka is part of Molkom, which is three miles north of Karlstad, the provincial capital. An Instagram post made by a volunteer worker using the Ängsbacka hashtag erroneously places Ängsbacka in northern Sweden (Ljungberg 2019).

Describing Ängsbacka as being in "the deep forests" gives it an otherworldly feel that removes it from civilization. This is in line with the recurring characterization of Ängsbacka as a fairytale place. The Instagram posts often express a heightened experience in which Ängsbacka is something extraordinary, a festive oasis set apart from mundane everyday life. "Magic" is one of the most used descriptors in the Instagram posts, both from the official Ängsbacka account and in posts made

by their visitors. The interviewees also used the word “magic” in their discussions about Ängsbacka and their experiences there.

In a post from January 2019, the image is a selfie taken by a young woman, with the forest as a background. The hashtags used include “magic” and “neverland”. In another post from January 2021, a video of the snow-covered forest is captioned with a text that likens the forest to Narnia, the magical place in the fantasy novels by C.S Lewis, and the hashtags also includes #fairytale. The notion of Ängsbacka as a magic place removed from its mundane small-town location is established visually by the photos in posts that, in the tradition of tourism photography, center the natural beauty of the garden, the forest and the lake, avoiding the more mundane views of the small town, the big road and the residential area close to the course center.

The forest especially symbolizes a therapeutic calm and solitude, away from human activities and interactions. The photographer Ken Buslay made a commissioned series of photographs from Ängsbacka in 2018, titled *We meet at Ängsbacka*, in which the forest is presented as a place where the festival participants can retreat. The text accompanying the photos from the forest says “When I was overwhelmed, your mystic forests were in reach. Sounds of leaves in the wind, butterflies and the slow moving stripes of sunlight slowed me down to the rhythm that I was designed to swing in”. The forest and the lake are where the participants take photos in which they are naked or semi-nude, which in the context of the photos expresses a desire to be natural more often than eroticism (even if those can be combined), judged by the relaxed poses in the photos together with the accompanying text.

Ängsbacka is sometimes made synonymous with the forest. One interviewee says that she had just left an abusive relationship when she decided to visit Ängsbacka, and felt that it was “rather nice to just drive far away into the forest”. Both Ängsbacka and the forest represents an escape, an opportunity to leave something behind, at least temporarily. Schama (1997: 194) writes that the forest has often been imagined as the antipode of the city or village, but that in fact the forests have always been societies in themselves, with people living and working there. The course center blends into the forest by placing some of their activities there.

In his analysis of travel posts on Instagram, Smith (2018: 173) argues that travel content on the platform reproduces colonial imaginings, and that one common trope is the emptiness of the landscape, which makes it available for tourists to consume. The visitor can define the empty local place according to their desires. The vagueness about Ängsbacka’s location has a similar effect of leaving it open to interpretation.

For some of the visitors, Ängsbacka is not defined by being a part of Molkom, but primarily a non-urban place, defined by being the opposite of Stockholm. This might be more pronounced among my interviewees since many of them only visit Ängsbacka for the Sexsibility events. As mentioned before, one of the interviewees makes this distinction explicit when he compares the robotic life he lives in Stockholm, with the liberation he experiences at Ängsbacka.

For many of the visitors, the local place and its exact location is less important than the lifestyle that they associate with Ängsbacka. Korpela (2020) has explored the practices and experiences of “bohemian lifestyle migrants”, primarily westerners that travel abroad to find a more meaningful life. She argues that while the places visited by these groups are important for their lifestyle, what they are seeking is a community of likeminded individuals with whom they share values. Rather than “being at home anywhere” as nomads are thought to be, they typically do not immerse themselves in the local communities. They are migrating to “a specific alternative social scene that exists in various places” (2020: 3360). The interviewees from the Sexsibility festival argue that the community matters more than the physical place, saying for example that “of course the place matters in a way, but I would say it’s more the people and [how the event is organized]”. Ängsbacka is meaningful to the visitors as a node in a global network of alternative places.

Korpela (2020) writes that the bohemian lifestyle migrants do not find their desired lifestyle in one place but rather in a number of specific destinations such as Goa in India, Mykonos in Greece, Bali in Indonesia and Koh Phangan in Thailand that each has different meanings for the migrants. In a post with a photo from the Molkom Lake in winter, one visitor emphasizes her mobility as well as the “nodes on the counter-cultural circuit”(D’Andrea 2006), by contrasting the frozen lake with a beach in Spain that she visited recently (Ljungberg 2019). A woman who sells feather hair extensions as a part of a social project for women in Bali, tags her posts with both Ängsbacka and Koh Phangan (where she first got involved with the project), Bali and Södermalm, a part of Stockholm where she lives, which highlights the connections between these places that are favored by the “bohemian lifestyle migrants”. Södermalm is not on the “counter-cultural circuit” as described by D’Andrea, but is associated with a bohemian lifestyle (Franzen 2005).

Hence, Ängsbacka is shaped by the privileged mobility of its community for which the local place is meaningful primarily as a fairytale place open to interpretation by the visitors. At the same time, the activities of the community rely on a connection to the local, not least in their interest in sustainability and closeness to nature.

## **An earthy, sensual and cosmopolitan local place**

Notions of sustainability and harmony with nature can strengthen the connection to the local place while also combining the local and global, as I will discuss in the following. As I have mentioned, closeness to nature is a recurring visual theme in the social media posts from Ängsbacka. Many photos show people hugging trees or lying in the grass. The connection to nature is furthermore a feature of spiritual practices that New Age communities have borrowed from nature religions around the world since these are often animistic, meaning that they believe that everything in nature has a spirit and is alive, and that all living creatures are connected (von Stuckrad 2002: 779). About neoshamanism, another popular practice at Ängsbacka, von Stuckrad (2002: 773) writes that it is a reaction to the exclusion of the sacred in modernity. Since the 1960s, when New Age groups popularized modern western shamanism, “the shaman became an indication of a new understanding of humanity’s relation to nature, of man’s ability to access spiritual levels of reality, and of leading a respectful life toward the ‘sacred web of creation’”. Similar ideals are expressed in eco spiritual movements (St John 2001) and in neopagan movements, such as goddess feminism (Raivio 2014), movements that have inspired activities at Ängsbacka.

The connection is made the most explicit in posts about the women’s festival Sacred Womb, posted by the official Ängsbacka account. The text in the posts advertising the Sacred Womb festival says:

when we come to honor our cyclical nature and understand ourselves and each other on a deeper level as nature beings, we can become more relaxed, vibrant, healthy and radiant. We discover how to create our lives without exhausting our resources. In this way, we will be able to support our brothers, lovers, children and families, friends and communities, and become a true contribution. We become a part of the solution in this world

The connections made between the menstrual cycle and nature’s cycles repeat older conceptions of women and femininity as associated with and governed by nature but reinterprets this connection as a strength. The connection to and fusion with nature is emphasized as an essential part of sustainability.

In a post made by the official Ängsbacka Instagram account in 2016, the community’s closeness to nature is discussed as a characteristic that distinguishes it from other groups. In the post, the followers are invited to a sustainability event for what the course center calls “the new farmer”. The photo shows a pair of naked feet resting on a wheel barrel with tools, and in the background a garden with trees and bushes, and the lake. In the comment section, one of the followers

express confusion about the word farmer and asks "does this mean that the festival is aimed at farmers and that only farmers will be there?". The Ängsbacka account replies with an explanation to what they mean with the word farmer, in the following way: "the new smart 'farmer', perma-culturists, transitioners, eco village people, wise and curious people are coming. The new farmer would rather do a forest garden than a monoculture."

The image anchors the user in nature, and the text further establishes the connection to nature that the "new smart 'farmer'" has by centering working with the soil. The connotations of wild, almost unaltered nature that the forest garden evokes are further strengthened by the hashtags that includes #wild. The garden tools visible in the image, together with words like forest garden and wild, strengthen the emphasis on manual labor and closeness to the soil, in opposition to the monoculture associated with conventional farming. Distinction is made through a valuing of the local and small scale, through working with the body and nature, as well as through notions of sustainability and connections to nature that contrasts two groups, farmers and "farmers".

The valuing of manual labor and closeness to the soil is connected to a valuing of the local. In their article about ethical consumption and ecological habitus, Carfagna writes that the consumers they study "express a strong affinity to the local. They prefer local food, local businesses, and local economies", which is in line with the sustainability movement (2014: 164). At the same time, the cultural capital strong consumers seamlessly combine the local and the cosmopolitan, and does not differentiate between them. What they value is a "cosmopolitan local" (165). Their desired local place is partly imaginary and only include some aspects of "the actually existing local". Their taste for the local is "marked by cosmopolitan taste patterns" (175), and "it references a cosmopolitan and often upscale local, selectively rejecting and accepting aspects of the parochial, often-LCC [low cultural capital] local that respondents experience in real life" (164).

At Ängsbacka, the connection to nature is one way in which the local place and global ideals are brought together. The community's relation to nature refers at the same time to what is locally present, such as the lake, the forest or sometimes even a specific part of the forest or a tree, and to an abstract notion of a global Mother Nature or Earth.

One example of this is a post from October 2021 that describes through text and images a "despacho ritual" performed during the summer, in the Molkom forest. The poster is reminiscing about a Solstice ceremony in which rituals borrowed from indigenous Peruvian religion, mixed with Indian Buddhist elements (a mandala), is performed in the local forest. The poster is herself depicted in the first image, sitting in the forest in lotus position with her eyes closed. She does not explain what a "despacho ceremony" is, it is taken for granted

that the audience is familiar with it. Through the ceremony, she experiences a connection to nature and the spirits, and as she says, to “be present”. The ceremony takes place in a particular place, even a specific part of the forest, the “Lions rock”. In the caption that describes the ceremony, nature is at once a specific place, in this case a particular part of the Molkom forest, and global, as in Mother Earth, or as she says “Pacha Mama”.

This post furthermore highlights how the community’s relation to nature is imagined to be reciprocal. Many posts involve nature in the activities in a way that presents nature as caring and therapeutic. In a post made by the course center, the text reads “what is your relationship to nature? We cherish our lush fields, forest and – of course! – the lake. A refreshing dive or a serene walk through the forest can make us feel totally recharged. Knowing she’s always there if we need it, mother nature”. Similarly, in the post about a despacho ceremony the poster describes how the spirits of nature emerge to communicate their care for them. Nature’s care for them validates their presence and is another way to create closeness to the local.

### **Discussion**

The placemaking of the community takes place both on digital platforms such as Instagram and at the physical site, shaping shared values and perceptions of Ängsbacka. The seeming paradoxes of the “cocoon community”, a somewhat permanent and strong community defined by constant mobility can be seen in the use of Instagram posts and hashtags. Ängsbacka functions as a cocoon for people with mobile lifestyles, many of whom do not feel at home in so-called mainstream society. The Instagram posts are used to express a closeness to Ängsbacka and to nature. It is a closeness and sense of belonging that is to some extent location-based but also placeless. Through hashtags, the local place is connected to many other places that are often “nodes on the counter-cultural circuit” (D’Andrea 2006).

The community members often express a belonging that is both located in a local place, on the outskirts of a small town, and part of a global alternative lifestyle. This can be expressed as an emphasis of the hyperlocal but it is an interest in the local that is “cosmopolitan”, shaped by a global New Age culture and “cosmopolitan taste patterns” (Carfagna et al, 2014). The visitors and residents at the course center make place for themselves by giving the local place meaning as a global, cosmopolitan cocoon, which to some extent removes Ängsbacka from its location. When the local, non-urban place disappears in their Instagram posts and is replaced by a magic, fairytale landscape that functions as an ideal backdrop for personal development, it is a reproduction of the urban norm, even if the participants seek to live outside of those same norms.

Sustainability and a closeness to nature can function as ways of anchoring oneself to a place, to strengthen a sense of belonging that is both based in the local and in global, or “cosmopolitan” consumption patterns and lifestyles. The closeness to nature which is an ideal for the community, can combine the local and global since nature is interpreted as being both something very concrete and location-based, for example the Molkom forest or even a specific tree, and an abstract global concept, as in Mother Nature or Earth.

Ängsbacka contains a number of contradictions that the placemaking of the members and the magic of Ängsbacka serves to naturalize. The community emphasize their interest in environmental sustainability while also emphasizing that their visitors come from all over the world. The concerns with environmental sustainability seemingly clash with the mobile lifestyle of many of the community members but sustainability can be interpreted as a feeling and relation to the earth, as a closeness to nature, and does not necessitate sustainable practices and behaviors. Sustainability is furthermore a very wide concept with many possible interpretations.

To study digital placemaking in small towns adds to a research field that has predominately focused on urban areas. The privileged mobility of the community makes it possible to create a cocoon with some distance to the local place. Studying these expressions of placemaking of a relatively privileged and mobile cocoon community furthers the understanding of the cultural meaning of nature and sustainability, constructed by various groups and actors, as well as the connections between discourses of sustainability, placemaking and belonging. Exclusionary practices are to some extent inherent to cocooning. This article also adds to research that highlight how discourses on sustainability or closeness to nature can reproduce privilege and exclusion.

The article combines placemaking with the notion of cocoon communities by analyzing how the community relates to the local. Ängsbacka differs from other counter-cultural nodes like Goa, Varanasi and Ibiza in that it carries so few connotations for the visitors. The cocooning of the community allows for them to separate Ängsbacka from the local context, and to envision a global and flexible place. By emphasizing the community’s relation to the local place, the article adds to the discussion about cocoon communities, and especially by centering on a place that is imagined as an empty utopia. Highlighting the importance of place and placemaking, the analysis answers the questions of how communities, as Korpela (2013: 44) writes, “anchor themselves to certain concrete places”, and how they legitimate their presence, even as the local place disappears.

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