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Gáttehis gáddi – strandless shores: Translation as witnessing in the Sàmi novel *Far inte till havet*
Gáttehis gáddi – brzegi bez granic: Przekład jako świadectwo w powieści saamskiej *Far inte till havet*

Abstract

Translation is a form of "working through", in which translators negotiate cultural memory rather than merely transferring words. Like Sámi *duodji*, they act as "weavers of words," intertwining linguistic, historical, and emotional threads to preserve and transform the source text. Through this embodied engagement translation appears as a tactile, ethical, and interpretive act. The German translation of Elin Anna Labba's novel *Far inte till havet* (2024) by Hanna Granz, titled *Das Echo der Sommer* (2025), exemplifies how linguistic choices and form mediate the transmission of Sámi cultural memory across languages.

Tłumaczenie jest formą „przepracowywania" przeszłości, w której tłumacze negocjują pamięć kulturową, a nie jedynie przenoszą słowa. Podobnie jak w przypadku saamskiego duodji, działają oni jako „tkacze słów", splatając wątki językowe, historyczne i emocjonalne, aby zachować i przekształcić tekst źródłowy. Dzięki swojej materialności, ucieleśnionemu zaangażowaniu i formie estetycznej tłumaczenie jawi się jako akt dotykowy, etyczny i interpretacyjny. Niemieckie tłumaczenie powieści Elin Anny Labby *Far inte till havet* (2024) autorstwa Hanny Granz jako *Das Echo der Sommer* (2025) stanowi przykład tego, jak wybory językowe i forma pośredniczą w przekazywaniu saamskiej pamięci kulturowej pomiędzy językami.

Key words

Ellin Anna Labba, translation, duodji /Sámi weaving, working through, testimony
Elin Anna Labba, tłumaczenie, duodji / saamskie tkactwo, przepracowywanie, świadectwo

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Gáttehis gáddi – strandless shores: Translation as witnessing in the Sàmi novel *Far inte till havet*

1. Introduction

The Sámi novel *Far inte till havet* (2024; English *The Home of the Drowned*, 2026) begins with a voice that does not follow the conventional first-person perspective. The narrator says, “Jag hade ett namn som jag inte minns” (I had a name that I do not remember), immediately shifting the focus from individual identity to the landscape. This voice belongs to Siivujávri, or Akkajaure on maps, a lake created by the Suorva dam. By giving the lake a voice, Elin Anna Labba animates the environment and situates memory within the land itself, illustrating how identity, history, and memory are intertwined with place. The lake holds memories of past events, such as the environmental and social changes caused by the dam, and reflects the broader relationship between the Sámi people and their land. In this way, the landscape becomes an active participant in the narrative rather than a mere backdrop.

This narrative choice can be understood as an extension of rhetorical witnessing, a concept traditionally applied to human testimonies, here innovatively applied to the lake. Rhetorical witnessing emphasizes how testimonies create space for understanding and ethical reflection, even when they cannot fully resolve past trauma or ongoing injustices (Allen 2021). By assigning the lake a voice, Labba demonstrates that memory is not only held by individuals but is embedded in the environment, linking human and non-human perspectives and expanding the ethical and epistemic scope of witnessing (cf. Kuokkanen 2004).

Although the settlement described in the novel is nameless, Labba weaves together collective and environmental memories rooted in real events. Personal

family stories intersect with larger historical and structural forces that are difficult to reconcile. She highlights threads torn apart by displacement, ecological changes, or political decisions. The novel focuses on Rávdná, her daughter Ingá, and her sister Ánne, who return to their ancestral summer settlement, only to discover that the lake they once identified with is now submerged by a reservoir. Rávdná asserts agency by attempting to defy the authorities, building a conventional house despite Sámi restrictions limiting them to traditional *goahtis* (Sámi tents). This act challenges stereotypical ideas about Indigenous identity and external expectations of authenticity (Dankertsen 2019; Reed 2023).

Labba portrays how different generations navigate and respond to trauma, revealing strategies of endurance, adaptation, and confrontation. Ingá yields to circumstance, while Ánne walks into the water, seeking release. The narrative is interrupted by the voice of the lake, presented in fragmented sections without pagination. Labba herself situates the novel within broader historical processes of border-drawing:

> Borders have always existed, but they used to follow the edges of marshes, valleys, forests, and mountain ranges. The new borders of the Nordic nations cut across all natural systems. They cut through pastureland, kinship, and transhumance routes that have been in use for thousands of years (Nord 2024, n.p.).

Through this fragmented narrative, where landscape and human action intersect, the novel invites readers to witness the real effects of displacement and dispossession.

By intertwining landscape and family action, Labba gives voice to these real stories and shapes how they are conveyed. Language and translation are central to this strategy. Although she is a native Northern Sámi speaker, she primarily writes in Swedish, a choice influenced by past assimilation policies restricting Sámi-language education and publishing. Simultaneously, a Northern Sámi edition was published, translated by Lea Simma, marking the first parallel Sámi--Swedish edition by the author and Norstedts (Labba 2024b). This dual publication underscores the ethical responsibility of transmitting these real stories, linking reading to intergenerational and environmental aspects of Sámi memory. By presenting the story in two languages, Labba affirms Sámi as a living literary language and invites readers to consider translation as both an ethical act and a rhetorical strategy. Translations into English, German, and Polish raise questions about how these memories are conveyed and preserved.

Although Labba has reached an international audience, her work as a Sámi author has received relatively little academic attention. Beatrice Reed emphasizes this in *Territorium, tvangsflytting og tap* (2023), situating Labba's work within the broader context of post-unionist politics, forced relocations, and their dramatic impact on Sámi communities. My study adopts a rhetorical approach, investigating

how her strategies for ethical witnessing are conveyed in the German translation *Das Echo der Sommer* (Fischer Verlag, 2025), where cultural and linguistic mediation present specific challenges. I view translation as a process of active work, rather than merely a bridge between languages or cultures. Translation, in this sense, is a practical and ethical endeavor akin to the Sámi concept of duodji, traditional Sámi craft, understood as *techne*, encompassing both realized skill and potential yet to be enacted (Guttorm and Gaski 2022). Applied to translation, this involves not only how we interpret the text but also how we might have interpreted it (cf. Knobblock 2022; Sterne 2006). Knowledge and practice are inseparable, highlighting the need for attentiveness and care when conveying a culture and its historical context, particularly when the narrative is shaped by specific actions and political circumstances (cf. Ahvenjärvi 2023). Translators must balance fidelity to the Sámi context with the need to communicate effectively with a different audience, sustaining both the ethical and cultural work of the narrative.

2. Elin Anna Labba

Elin Anna Labba's writing blends documentary testimony with poetic reflection, using fragmented prose and polyphonic voices to preserve erased histories. A defining feature of Labba's authorship is the linguistic situation she navigates. Swedish, her mother tongue, functions as the main medium for her writing, while Northern Sámi is integrated strategically, carrying cultural memory and ethical weight. Her early estrangement from Sámi shaped her sense of marginality and informs the rhythm, lexical choices, and syntax of her prose. As Labba reflects: "Att inte ha sitt språk är att alltid stå lite utanför" (Not having one's language is always to stand a little outside) (Nord 2024, n.p.).

Labba draws on Sámi narrative concepts such as *mujttalit*, in which storytelling encompasses both factual recollection and imaginative engagement. In this tradition, the boundary between these modes is fluid (Finbog 2023; Gaski 1999; Hirvonen 2008; Knobblock 2022). The personal experience of losing access to her ancestral language profoundly shapes her act of witnessing. It affects her grammar and gives particular weight to the Sámi words she integrates into her Swedish. Growing up, many around her spoke Sámi, but the language remained largely inaccessible to her as a child. This produced a persistent sense of inadequacy and marginality, illustrating how language loss can estrange individuals from both family and cultural community. Over time, Labba has moderated her anger toward both individuals and the state. Yet the experience of linguistic exclusion continues to inform her writing (Nord 2024). Today, she speaks Sámi fluently and is proficient in written Sámi, though she does not yet consider herself capable of

composing her own books in the language. Her novels have been rendered into Northern Sámi by Lea Simma, although Labba aspires to create her work directly in the language (Nord 2024).

This personal experience is inseparable from the broader historical and political marginalization of Sámi languages (Paradis 2023). Historically, Sámi had few opportunities to write, publish, or receive formal education in their own languages. Although the Swedish Language Act of 2009 (SFS 2009 600) legally recognizes national minority languages, including Sámi, Swedish remains the dominant societal language. This historical context clarifies why Labba's choice of language is necessary. At the same time, it allows her to preserve Sámi narrative structures, rhythms, and forms. By combining factual rigor with a deeply personal and affective style, Labba enacts witnessing that simultaneously conveys historical experience, linguistic marginalization, and cultural memory. In this way, her writing demonstrates how identity, language, and memory are intertwined. It also shows how the act of witnessing can be mediated through linguistic choices.

Labba's works exemplify this approach. *Herrarna satte oss hit* (2020; *The Rocks Will Echo Our Sorrow*, 2024) shows how intimate family histories intersect with systemic historical processes. Drawing on the testimonies of approximately 300 Sámi forcibly relocated in the early twentieth century, the book examines displacement along the Norway-Sweden border. Labba combines oral histories, narrative prose, photographs, colonial records, and Sámi written sources, including a glossary for Sámi terms and translations of historical Swedish documents. Memory resonates through narrative, rhythm, and landscape. Personal stories merge with larger structural histories. Here, witnessing operates on multiple levels: it conveys the lived experiences of individuals while highlighting the historical and political structures that produced these events. Language, memory, and the careful integration of sources function together as tools of ethical witnessing, emphasizing the connection between linguistic practice, cultural identity, and historical accountability.

In *Far inte till havet*, Labba extends this approach to encompass environmental and intergenerational dimensions. The novel addresses the flooding of Sámi lands caused by hydroelectric projects. It employs Northern Sámi rhythms, syntactic patterns, and repetitions reminiscent of yoik to connect people, time, and landscape. Short, fragmentary passages echo oral traditions and ritualized memory, while longer sections narrate broader historical and structural processes. By explicitly drawing on yoik as a method of witnessing, Labba demonstrates how language, sound, and rhythm carry ethical and cultural significance. In this work, witnessing is inseparable from linguistic and embodied practice. Stories are preserved and transmitted not only through content but also through form, style, and rhythm.

This renders the consequences of displacement and environmental transformation tangible.

Labba's prose is distinguished by its polyphony, giving space to multiple voices, which strengthens her act of witnessing. In *Far inte till havet*, the voice of the lake is expressed through the insertion of well-known yoiks in Northern Sámi, which are then translated into Swedish. Some lines are drawn directly from Paulus Utsi's yoik *Gáttehis gáddi* (*Shoreless Shores* 1980). Utsi was a Northern Sámi poet and artisan whose family experienced forced relocation as children and later witnessed multiple displacements caused by hydroelectric projects along the Lule River. The yoik is more than a song; "it is a way of remembering, of linking people, time, and landscapes" (Gaski 1999, 3). As Labba emphasizes in her novel: "yoik was prayer. The land wanted people to yoik, just as it set them to craft and tell stories" (Labba 2024). Historically, yoiking carried a subtle but profound political force. It was not merely a marker of Sámi identity but an expression of a worldview, a stance, and a form of resistance in times when speaking Sámi openly could be dangerous. Even amid dispossession, the Sámi preserved their cultural essence and sense of belonging (Gaski 1993). Utsi's poetry often addresses the struggles and disempowerment of the Sámi people. These subjects resonate directly with the landscapes and historical events described in Labba's novel. By embedding these lines into her narrative, Labba creates a dialogue between past and present, oral and written traditions, and individual and collective memory.

Utsi writes:

Čuoččun lahka gátti
ovtta gáttehis gátti
Gehččot birrasiidda!
Boares gáttit eai šat gávdno
Vierrásat leat gáibidan
Sin dárbbus ii leat geahčige

I stand by a shore
a shoreless shore
Let us have a look around!
Old shores are no longer found
The strangers have claimed them
Their need has no end

Labba closes the novel with: "Jag växer, för att de som vill mig stor kan inte sluta. Aldrig har de kunnat det" (I grow, because those who wish me to be great cannot stop. They never could). These lines serve as a commentary on Utsi's yoik but also as a testament to Sámi resilience and enduring presence. In her work with reference to Utsi, the lake functions as an active participant rather than a mere

backdrop. It bears witness to the stories Labba recounts, affirming the presence of Indigenous people and their profound connection to the land. Through the careful interweaving of intimate narratives, structural histories, and poetic forms, her texts reveal how narrative, rhythm, and landscape intersect to expose historical erasure while simultaneously affirming continuity and persistence. This dynamic interplay underscores the inseparability of identity, history, and ethics within Labba's literary practice.

3. Crossing borders

Research shows that translation is not merely a linguistic exercise, but also an ethical and interpretive practice. This is especially true when languages, cultures, and histories intersect under conditions of historical marginalization (Ahvenjärvi 2023). Sámi literature exemplifies this. It is multilingual, transnational, and deeply rooted in both oral and written traditions. North Sámi is the most widely spoken and literarily active of the Sámi languages (Ahvenjärvi 2023). Despite a relatively limited readership, Sámi literature demonstrates remarkable diversity and vitality. It engages with themes such as hybrid identity, intergenerational memory, ecological interdependence, and questions of land and sovereignty. In this context, translation becomes a negotiation of history, ethical responsibility, and cultural knowledge. Every lexical, syntactic, and stylistic choice contributes to the transmission of voices and memory.

Based on my discussions with Lennart Hellspong and our collaborative work in *Mellan Ord & Bild* (*Between Word and Image*, Hellspong and Källström 2025), translation can be understood as a form of interpretative rhetoric. This framework emphasizes translation as iterative, relational, and ethically mediated. It foregrounds the translator as an agent navigating multiple layers of meaning, social and historical relations, and ethical concerns. Unlike mechanical or "word--for-word" approaches, interpretative rhetoric recognizes that meaning emerges through interaction with the text in its material, historical, and cultural contexts. Translators respond to polyphony, fragmentation, and embedded rhythms in the source text, negotiating tensions between fidelity and adaptation (Källström and Hellspong 2025).

In polyphonic texts such as Labba's, these processes are amplified. Multiple voices, temporal layers, and intergenerational memories converge, demanding heightened sensitivity to rhythm, tone, and cultural embeddedness (Ahvenjärvi 2023). Translation thus becomes a form of ethical engagement with both language and memory. It is a practice that preserves voices while simultaneously respecting cultural context.

The Sámi craft of duodji, or traditional handcraft, provides a useful lens for understanding translation as a relational and iterative practice. The metaphor of weaving carries particular resonance in Indigenous contexts. Histories, identities, and cultures have often been disrupted, fragmented, or suppressed through colonial violence (cf. Labba 2020; Simpson 2017). To interweave, in this sense, is to engage in an act of rejoining. It brings together the scattered pieces of language, culture, and memory that settler colonialism has sought to fracture. Technical skill, cultural knowledge, and ethical awareness emerge simultaneously in duodji, enacted through careful, sustained practice. Britta Marakatt-Labba describes the process vividly: "When we work with traditional clothing, sewing gákti, shoes, or gloves, we first look carefully at the material we will work with, and it shows us how to cut out the pieces. [...] Then I can begin to see small figures dancing on the fabric" (Dahlman 2019).

Translation mirrors this process. Translators must perceive the text's rhythms, gestures, and cultural knowledge. They respond to them iteratively and attentively. Like duodji, translation requires close listening, sensitivity to the texture of language, and ethical awareness of the voices preserved within the text. It is not a one-time act of transfer, but a continuous engagement. Fidelity, intelligibility, and relational responsibility are negotiated throughout. Viewed through duodji, translation is simultaneously technical, ethical, and culturally restorative—a reweaving of voices, memories, and histories into new textual forms (Knobblock 2022).

Jens E. Kjeldsen's concept of Rhetorical Working Through provides a complementary perspective. It situates translation as iterative, relational, and unresolved. Drawing on Kenneth Burke, Kjeldsen frames understanding as a continuous negotiation within pre-existing discourses. New positions, arguments, and perspectives are constantly compared, confronted, and reconciled (Kjeldsen 2022). Applied to translation, working through emphasizes three dimensions: 1) seeking understanding, 2) negotiating social relations, and 3) addressing ethical dilemmas. Translators of polyphonic Sámi texts encounter not only language but also embedded histories, ethical practices, and ecological knowledge. Each interpretive decision becomes a moment of working through. Translators listen to the text's rhythm, respond to silences and absences, and negotiate between source and target epistemologies. Attention must be sustained to multiple voices, historical traces, and ethical implications, balancing fidelity to the source with intelligibility in the target context.

Classical rhetorical perspectives reinforce these ideas. Robert E. Terrill (2019) notes that translation involves ethical judgment, where inherited forms are critically engaged to generate new, responsible discourse. Cicero emphasized that

translation demands judgment to balance fidelity with rhetorical effect, preserving thoughts, mental images, and topic sequences while adapting them to the target language (*De Optimo Genere Oratorum*). Similarly, Quintilian's concept of *imitatio* frames translation as both ethical and creative labor. Imitation serves as a pathway to invention and moral engagement. It should not result in "a mere passive reproduction," but in a new text designed to "rival and vie with the original in expressing the same thoughts" (X.v.4–5). The aim is not simply to accumulate "a crowd of words" but to cultivate the "judgment" to know when and where words are most effective (X.i.5–10). These perspectives underscore that translation is far from mechanical; it is interpretive, relational, and ethically responsible.

Terrill emphasizes the democratic responsibility inherent in rhetoric, a point reinforced by Kjeldsen, who highlights that communicative acts—including translation—carry obligations toward audiences and communities. Translation thus becomes a site where aesthetics, ethics, and civic responsibility intersect. The translator negotiates the preservation and transformation of voices. These performative aspects underscore the necessity of iteration (Grass 2023). Translators must work within the interstices of culture, much as duodji practitioners engage material with care and responsiveness. Postcolonial perspectives reinforce this understanding. Homi Bhabha highlights the ambivalent nature of translation: it is "almost the same, but not quite … almost the same, but not white" (Bhabha 1984, 130), capturing the tension between reproduction and transformation, fidelity and adaptation.

Hanna Granz's translation practice illustrates this approach. In all three stages, her work aligns with Kjeldsen's framework, moving from the personal, through the relational, to the provisional standpoint. Unlike an originally authored text, a translation ages rapidly, requiring ongoing negotiation. In translating *Far inte till havet* into German, Granz outlines a three-phase process: first, receiving—absorbing the text's rhythm and affective resonance; second, interacting and formulating—negotiating meaning within linguistic and cultural contexts; and finally, producing a translation that responds sensitively to both source and target contexts. Throughout, she emphasizes listening to the original voice while considering the target readership, attending to historical traces, affective resonance, and ethical responsibility (Källström 2025a). Translators like Granz act as active agents, shaping how texts carry memory, convey ethical practices, and preserve multiple voices within the broader framework of publishing (Hellspong and Källström 2025).

By situating translation within iterative, attuned practices, this approach highlights the inseparability of language and memory. Ethical, relational, and material dimensions intersect, providing a lens for analyzing both the practical and

theoretical aspects of translation. The question then arises: how can we trace this iterative, relational, and ethically informed process in practice? How can translators navigate the complex web of cultural, linguistic, and material contexts, and how do these engagements shape the translation of Sámi texts, both in preservation and transformation? Applying Kjeldsen's model of Rhetorical Working Through to Granz's translation provides a concrete example of this negotiation in action. I begin with the pursuit of understanding.

4. Seeking understanding

Recurring patterns in Labba's prose invite readers and translators to actively engage, reflecting what Jens E. Kjeldsen describes as seeking understanding in his framework of rhetorical working through: "We deal with issues by seeking understanding, advancing arguments and responding to counter-argumentation" (2022, 242). On a personal level, this involves reasoning while negotiating one's position, emotions, and self-conception—"the internal and external thinking, arguing and emotional positioning" that shapes how individuals relate to the world and themselves (Kjeldsen 2022, 242). For translators like Hanna Granz, this engagement is crucial. She must navigate not only linguistic choices but also the cultural and historical weight of Sámi experience, approaching the task with full commitment (Källström 2025b). Translation, in this framing, is not a technical task but an active, ethically engaged process.

A concrete example can be seen in Granz's translation of Labba's work. A first challenge lies in naming the story's location. In Swedish, it is *Sommarland*; in Germany, however, this could evoke Astrid Lindgren's stories (Källström 2011), potentially overshadowing Labba's intent. Granz must balance fidelity to the text with accessibility, as each lexical choice shapes how German readers perceive Sámi cultural and emotional subtleties. Similarly, the Swedish term *sommarstjärna*, derived from Sámi, refers to a white reindeer born in summer—a nuance rarely captured in Swedish. Such terms carry cultural, ecological, and ethical knowledge, and translating them requires careful negotiation (cf. Østmo and Law 2018). In the passage where the lake "speaks," these fragmentary lines appear on blank, unnumbered pages, interrupting prose and creating rhythm reminiscent of a yoik. Memory and landscape materialize as active agents, requiring both cognitive and affective engagement.

Granz recounts that she initially did not understand the word, and Labba explained it referred to white reindeer. The word was adopted unchanged, preserving its Sámi significance. In the original Swedish, Labba describes the lake receiving heavy waves, forming large herds, becoming rich, having many children, and observing

ptarmigans, white reindeer, summer stars, and hard antlers, concluding with: “Jag är vacker. Jag har blivit vacker” (I am beautiful. I have become beautiful). Granz renders this in German, preserving rhythm, repetition, and cumulative imagery:

> Schweren Wellengang habe ich bekommen und große Herden habe ich gebildet. Ich bin reich geworden und habe viele Kinder. Berghühner und weiße Rentiere, Sommersterne mit harten Geweihen. Jeder sieht, wie groß ich bin, ich habe gehört, wie die Leute darüber reden. Ich habe gelauscht, wenn sie über mich gesprochen haben. Ich bin schön. Ich bin so schön geworden. (I have received heavy waves and formed large herds. I have become rich and have many children. Ptarmigans and white reindeer, summer stars with hard antlers. Everyone sees how big I am; I have heard people talking about me. I have listened when they spoke of me. I am beautiful. I have become so beautiful)

Here, the lake and landscape appear to “speak,” connecting the prose to Sámi narrative traditions where land, story, and identity are inseparable. Metatextually, the passage foregrounds ethical and temporal layering: polyphony, rhythm, and landscape act as ethical agents. Kjeldsen notes that rhetorical working through extends beyond “intentional communication and deliberative argumentation”; it also shapes identification, engenders feelings, guides action, and clarifies personal commitments (2022, 243). Granz’s translation exemplifies this: every choice involves ethical engagement, balancing source and target epistemologies while attending to affective resonance and historical context.

Labba’s writing can also be understood through duodji, the Sámi craft tradition, in which makers engage actively with materials to produce forms that are functional, aesthetic, and culturally meaningful. Just as a duodji practitioner senses material resistance and lets it guide creation (Marakatt-Labba 2019), Labba composes prose through rhythmically structured, materially grounded engagement with language and landscape. Repetition, syntactic patterns, and fragmentary lines act like duodji gestures: each element is attended to, yet meaning emerges relationally within the broader tapestry of text, culture, and land. Isolating these fragments risks flattening their epistemological and aesthetic depth; they carry rhythm, silence, and cultural resonance (Gaski 1999). The fragmentary lake passages, with their layout, line breaks, and white space, mediate meaning and affective response. Rhetorical working through, Kjeldsen argues, is “continuous, open-ended, and active persuasive co-engagement” (2022, 243), a principle that applies equally to Labba’s prose and its translation.

Granz preserves repetition with “Ich habe” (I have), maintaining cumulative momentum: “Jag har stora vågor” → “Ich habe große Wellen” (I have large waves); “Jag har stora hjordar” → “Ich habe große Herden” (I have large herds); “Jag har rikedom” → “Ich habe Reichtum” (I have wealth). Although German syntax favors compact clauses, each image builds upon the last, reflecting her

careful negotiation with the text. The closing lines, “Jag har blivit vacker,” become “Ich bin so schön geworden” (I have become beautiful) capturing tonal and temporal shifts while maintaining the fragmentary, cumulative quality. These formal choices make ethical and historical attentiveness visible: readers perceive layered voices, persistent memory, and the ongoing presence of Sámi cultural and ecological knowledge.

Granz’s engagement extends beyond the page. Museum visits, photographic documentation, and participation in Sámi exhibitions deepen her understanding, providing context that informs both translation choices and ethical awareness. A Sámi exhibition at the Museum of European Cultures in Berlin, featuring yoik performances and discussions on restitution and preservation, highlighted the stakes of cultural preservation and the risk of loss if stories are not carefully conveyed.

Translation, in this framework, becomes ethical and culturally restorative. Viewed through duodji, it is iterative, attentive, and responsive: just as a crafts-person engages with material, adjusting to its affordances and resistances, Granz navigates language, rhythm, and cultural nuances with care. Each lexical, syntactic, and stylistic choice functions as a deliberate gesture, maintaining fidelity to the source while adapting to the German readership.

This iterative engagement exemplifies Kjeldsen’s concept of rhetorical working through. Translation involves both understanding and negotiation. Granz listens to the text’s rhythm, responds to silences and absences, and negotiates between source and target epistemologies. Through this process, the text’s voices remain present and intelligible.

5. Dealing with social relations

Labba foregrounds the relational, ethical, and corporeal dimensions of Sámi experience in her novel, drawing readers into a world shaped by systemic oppression, environmental transformation, and cultural erasure. One of the earliest sites of negotiation in the narrative emerges through the letters Rávdná receives from state authorities regarding the reconstruction of her summer home. These letters are more than administrative documents: they convey the imposition of state power, the exclusion of Sámi voices from modernist development, and the ethical and bodily pressures placed upon the recipient. The Swedish text reads:

> Hon hade fått tillräckligt många brev för att veta, att man måste skydda sig. Orden. Tonen. Det låg mörker i bokstäverna och aktade man sig inte for det under ens skinn (She had received enough letters to know that one must protect oneself. The words. The tone. Darkness lay in the letters, and if one was not careful, it penetrated under the skin).

These letters illustrate a crucial tension: Rávdná must navigate practical constraints, psychological threats, and ethical imperatives simultaneously.

The context of these letters is essential for understanding their weight. In 1942, the Swedish state's hydropower project along the Stora Lule River submerged Sámi villages, erasing traditional summer sites (boplats). Rávdná is prohibited from constructing a modern house with windows, effectively excluding her from the modernist landscape emerging around her. She must negotiate the restrictions imposed by the state while also confronting the erasure of her past and her connection to the land. Complicating this struggle, Rávdná's daughter Ingá demonstrates compliance, accepting a fate that is ethically and emotionally unbearable. In contrast, Rávdná's resistance is largely solitary, highlighting the relational dimension of her ethical labor and the embodied intensity of her struggle.

Hanna Granz's German translation preserves the corporeal immediacy and ethical stakes of these letters while smoothing syntax for readability:

> Inzwischen hatte sie genügend Briefe bekommen, um zu wissen, dass man sich gegen sie schützen müsste. Gegen die Wörter wie auch gegen den Ton. In den Buchstaben lauerte tiefe Dunkelheit, und wenn man nicht achtgab, drang sie einem bis unter die Haut (By now she had received enough letters to know she would have to protect herself, against both the words and the tone. In the letters lurked deep darkness, and if one was not careful, it penetrated under her skin).

The translation emphasizes ethical vigilance and bodily threat while ensuring comprehension for German readers, illustrating how translation itself mediates relational and social dynamics.

In addition, the novel entwines corporeality, landscape, and memory in its depiction of the flood. The family's return to their submerged summer site is rendered in fragmented, paratactic Swedish sentences:

> "Sjön låg i kåtan. Den klarblå dörren stod öppen och ribbornas färg speglade sig i vattnet… Hon försökte säga något, men det gick inte. Kanske hade sjön svalt orden" (The lake was in the hut… She tried to say something, but it did not work. Perhaps the lake had swallowed the words).

This fragmentary style mirrors shock, immobility, and the impossibility of articulating such loss. In German, the prose is more flowing: "Der See stand in ihrem Zuhause… Sie versuchte etwas zu sagen, konnte es aber nicht" (The lake stood in their home… She tried to say something, but she could not). While retaining sensory immediacy, the translation emphasizes Ingá's psychological reception over the landscape's material agency, subtly shifting the relational and affective emphasis.

Rávdná's scream at the flood site further dramatizes the entanglement of emotion, ethics, and bodily presence: "Skriket steg underifrån genom mossan upp i benen" (The scream rose from beneath through the moss into her legs). In Swedish,

syntax conveys fragmentation and corporeal intensity. In German, “Der Schrei begann unter dem Moos, stieg ihr die Beine hinauf” (The scream began under the moss, rose up her legs) introduces a slightly more narrative rhythm, emphasizing Ingá’s observational perspective while preserving the scream’s intensity. Here, translation functions as an ethical and aesthetic mediation, preserving relational and emotional stakes while guiding comprehension.

The act of building a new house exemplifies Rávdná’s situated ethical and cultural agency. Defying state prescriptions for traditional Sámi housing, she combines rational navigation of bureaucracy, emotional expression, and ethical positioning. Lexical choices in translation, including expletives (“jävlar” - “Scheißkerle, wenigstens” [damn it - shit guys, at least]), demonstrate how Granz negotiates intensity, ethical stance, and readability, maintaining the original’s affective and ethical resonance while adapting it for a German audience.

Labba’s fragmented narrative structure complements these thematic concerns, reflecting what Marianne Hirsch (2008) terms postmemory: the intergenerational transmission of trauma. The submerged landscape, fragmented letters, and Rávdná’s scream signal histories that cannot be fully recovered, showing memory, loss, and ethical engagement as intertwined with body, place, and social relation. Translation, as Granz demonstrates, is itself a site of ethical negotiation, mediating syntax, tone, and rhythm to preserve relational and affective complexity. Rávdná’s actions cannot be neatly categorized into reason, emotion, or ethics—they are embodied, context-bound negotiations of power, loss, and identity. The translation also enacts Jens E. Kjeldsen’s concept of Rhetorical Working Through (2022). Granz’s translation mirrors this work, translating not only words but the corporeal dimensions of the narrative. Both author and translator engage in continuous adaptation, revealing how literature can enact memory.

6. Issues

Although this discussion emphasizes Granz’s translation decisions, it is crucial to recognize that these choices are not made in isolation. They arise within a larger apparatus of book production, including editorial decisions, design, typography, imagery, bilingual presentation, and marketing, and are not always deliberate or guided by specific reader expectations. Instead, they can be understood as forms of careful exploration or experimentation. While much research on translation emphasizes language and interpretation, recent studies also highlight the importance of the book as a material object (Källström 2025a; Hellspong and Källström 2025; Mossop 2018). Elements such as format, typography, imagery, and overall design shape how readers engage with and interpret the story. These

features influence not only comprehension but also relational, cultural, and social positioning. From a rhetorical working through perspective, as Kjeldsen (2022) notes, such choices participate in the ongoing formation of collective and individual identities. They guide readers to notice, reflect, and respond to the text, extending memory, relationality, and cultural presence across linguistic and national borders, while leaving space for readers to interpret and explore meaning in their own way. Understanding is thus neither fixed nor guaranteed.

The Swedish edition, *Far inte till havet*, foregrounds political and linguistic specificity more directly. Its title carries a rhythmic, affective warning, though Labba observes that it can also feel flat, like the chopping of a boat engine (Nord 2024). The visual design supports the book's documentary clarity: minimal typography, a sorrowful seascape photograph, and muted blue and green tones both link and distinguish the editions. The photograph depicts a young Sámi girl in traditional *gákti*, sitting in a wooden boat with water almost reaching her eyes. This image conveys both intimacy and distance, suggesting endurance while evoking vulnerability. Because the girl is related to Labba, the photograph connects directly to family memory and blurs the line between personal history and narrative. Compared with the German edition, the Swedish edition actively mediates Sámi presence within a Swedish-dominated literary field, while inviting reflection on tensions between presence and absence, fact and feeling, and recognition and misreading. From a working through perspective, this openness strengthens the text's testimony: readers negotiate between vulnerability and endurance, fact and interpretation, enacting rhetorical identity formation in the very act of reading.

The Northern Sámi edition, *Ale mana Merrii*, asserts narrative and linguistic sovereignty. According to Labba in her interview with Nord (2024), the title's force lies in rhythm, sound, and layered cultural meaning. *Ale* functions as a command yet sounds soft, while *mana* is described as a central Sámi verb expressing the act of traveling—voluntarily or under compulsion—tied to nomadic life. The final word, *merrii*, adds complexity: although it literally means "to the sea," in the narrative context it is uttered in the mountains, not by the Atlantic or the Gulf of Bothnia. Labba explains that the phrase flows up and down like waves, with vowels melting on the tongue, surrounding the speaker with water in ways that are both beautiful and terrifying. This interplay between linguistic rhythm, geography, and memory underscores how the Sámi edition embodies working through: the language itself mediates identity, motion, and vulnerability in ways that cannot be replicated in Swedish or German.

By placing the Swedish and Sámi editions side by side, the publisher signals equality rather than treating Sámi as supplementary. Yet this physical juxtaposition also introduces tension: the Swedish edition retains institutional authority and

broader recognition, which could frame the Sámi edition as secondary for some readers. The bilingual hardcover, combined with simple design and the family photograph, emphasizes continuity, endurance, and cultural agency. From Kjeldsen's perspective, this demonstrates how material and editorial framing is constitutive: design and bilingualism do not simply transmit content but shape how readers engage with cultural presence, memory, and identity.

The German edition, *Echo der Sommer*, differs from both Scandinavian editions by framing the story more poetically and universally, replacing the sharpness of documentary detail with soft, pastel summer landscapes. The Sámi elements in this edition operate as a form of linguistic *imitatio*, capturing aspects of the rhythm and emotional force of oral storytelling in written form. Readers may perceive cultural rhythm and narrative style even before fully engaging with the text. At the same time, the German title *Echo der Sommer* may reference the English title of Labba's first book, *The Rocks Will Echo Our Sorrow*, which carries both biblical resonance and Sámi cultural references. The word "echo" signals poetic reflection and a link to *yoik*, emphasizing the oral and spiritual dimensions of the stories. Yet this poetic framing may also raise questions: does it reduce the perceived urgency of historical and political content? How readers interpret it depends on cultural and institutional context, underscoring once more the constitutive process of working through—an act shaped as much by reception and positionality as by editorial choice.

Readers are encouraged to navigate between languages, images, and text, actively constructing meaning through engagement with the book as a material and social object, including its physical, visual, and linguistic features. This process is inherently non-neutral: readers negotiate overlapping layers of history, culture, and personal narrative, reflecting on their own positionality as interpreters. The Sámi edition functions both as an assertion of agency and as a site of potential misunderstanding or partial reception, showing that translation, design, and publication are never fully transparent and always contingent on readers' cultural and linguistic competence. In this way, *Far inte till havet* exemplifies the complex interplay of linguistic sovereignty, cultural visibility, materiality, and reader interpretation. Its presence challenges assumptions about literary hierarchy, while also demonstrating the limits of control: even carefully designed material and visual strategies cannot guarantee that the intended voice or message will be fully apprehended. The edition's value lies as much in the questions it raises and the negotiations it invites as in the story it tells, making reading a participatory, interpretive process rather than a simple transmission of meaning. Not knowing is thus central to understanding how readers inhabit and respond to these layered texts.

This engagement can be fruitfully understood through the lens of Allen's (2021) concept of rhetorical witnessing. She emphasizes that this involves "the rhetorical conditions under which bearing witness occurs [which] opens up new possibilities of becoming-together-in-loss," as well as "a way of apprehending sites where divided audiences seem to make bearing witness impossible, and yet where possibility remains" (Allen 2021, 61). Reading *Far inte till havet* invites readers to navigate multiple layers of cultural and linguistic specificity, negotiating their own understanding while responding to the experiences of the Sámi community. The book's material and visual elements, including its bilingual presentation, typography, imagery, and design, serve as mediators, shaping how readers encounter and witness these experiences. In this way, the book enacts a form of rhetorical working through. It encourages readers to engage with the ethical, emotional, and epistemic dimensions of Sámi testimony, fostering a relational form of engagement that is neither passive nor entirely predictable.

By situating translation, publication, and design within the joint frameworks of rhetorical working through and rhetorical witnessing, we see how *Far inte till havet* enables readers to participate in a process of ethical and affective recognition. The edition does not simply transmit information about Sámi history or personal experience; it invites readers to reflect on their own positionality, sense the weight of cultural memory, and negotiate meaning in ways that echo Allen's emphasis on witnessing as an active, embodied, and interpretive practice. In this sense, the book exemplifies how literary and material forms can function as sites of ethical engagement, allowing testimony to be both communicated and co-interpreted across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the interplay between Elin Anna Labba's *Far inte till havet* and its German translation, *Das Echo der Sommer*, demonstrates how translation functions as a form of rhetorical working through, as Jens E. Kjeldsen (2022) describes. Translation is not merely a linguistic transfer; it is a dynamic process of negotiation that engages with the cultural, ethical, and emotional dimensions of the text. Kjeldsen emphasizes that understanding is not solely about knowledge, but also about navigating uncertainties, complexities, and ethical responsibilities inherent in both the original and translated works. In this way, translation becomes a site of active ethical engagement, where the boundaries between languages, cultures, and histories are continuously negotiated.

This perspective raises critical questions about the limits of translation. *Far inte till havet* speaks to Sámi identity, intergenerational memory, and the ecological

transformation of the North—elements deeply embedded in language and landscape. The challenge for translation is therefore not only linguistic but also cultural and emotional: how can a translator embody the lived experience of a people whose worldview is inseparable from their environment? Granz's German version, despite its careful attention to rhythm, syntax, and Sámi cultural markers, inevitably faces constraints in conveying the full depth of Labba's writing, highlighting the delicate balance between fidelity and accessibility in cross-cultural communication.

Granz navigates these challenges through strategies that foreground both comprehension and cultural specificity. Retaining selected Sámi terms, often supplemented with brief explanatory notes, allows readers to encounter the original language without losing understanding. Furthermore, the rhythm and cadence of Northern Sámi passages, particularly in the rendering of yoiks, are preserved, conveying musicality and cultural resonance. In these ways, translation becomes a negotiation of ethics and aesthetics: it is an act of both honoring the source culture and adapting it thoughtfully for a new linguistic audience.

The translation process can also be likened to duodji, the Sámi craft tradition, emphasizing attentive, iterative, and material engagement. In this sense, Granz preserves the relational, affective, and testimonial aspects of Labba's narrative, while acknowledging the inherent limitations of translation. Every act of translation transforms the original text: linguistic texture shifts, and certain elements—such as rhythm, visual design, or cultural nuance—cannot be fully replicated. These subtle changes illustrate that translation is not a technical mirroring but a creative transformation, a reimagining of the text in dialogue with a new cultural context.

The materiality of the text further complicates the translation act. *Far inte till havet* employs blank pages, repetition, and visual design as integral storytelling devices, gestures that invite the reader into an active reading experience. Translation thus becomes a conversation between textual materiality and its transference, negotiating what can be preserved and what must be adapted. This adds an ethical layer: preserving the text's material presence is impossible in its entirety, requiring conscious decisions about what carries cultural and emotional weight across languages.

The embodied and performative dimensions of translation underscore this ethical negotiation. As theorists such as Delphine Grass (2023) and Kate Briggs (LaRue 2017) note, translation is an active, bodily engagement: meaning emerges through the translator's interaction with the text, and the translator must "push through their own body" to capture not only words but the lived experience of the narrative. This approach resonates with Kjeldsen's notion of rhetorical working through, emphasizing that understanding and meaning are continuously shaped by attentive, embodied engagement.

Finally, translation can be understood as a form of rhetorical witnessing (Allen, Flynn and Reidner, 2020). The process invites readers to engage with the silences and complexities of cultural memory, challenging us to rethink how we bear witness to the stories of others—stories that may never be fully translatable, yet whose meaning and emotional resonance persist across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In this context, translation may be fruitfully approached as a form of rhetorical witnessing, in which the translator's attentive, ethical, and interpretive engagement mediates the relational, emotional, and cultural dimensions of the source text. Such an approach positions translation not as a mere replication of the original, but as an active, iterative practice that negotiates between fidelity, accessibility, and the partiality inherent in cross-cultural communication. By framing translation in this way, we acknowledge both its limitations and its potential to foster ethical and affective engagement, extending the work of bearing witness beyond the original linguistic and cultural setting.

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