Stories and Story Work: epistemic practices for attending to difference as happening of the ontological

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How can we know the happening of the ontological in the here and now? How to articulate epistemic practices that are salient to that form of knowing? In particular how to attend to difference and divergence? In this presentation I ask such questions with respect to a research project that seeks to know a postcolonial moment embedded in northern Norwegian landscapes. In the here and now such a postcolonial moment takes the form of Saami Offering Rocks and stories about them. In approaching questions about epistemic practices, I focus on the work of storying. Accordingly, I offer a story as my abstract.

I am looking at a photograph of my friend Britt Kramvig sitting on a tree branch. Her seat emerges from the trunk almost horizontal for about a metre before turning upwards as birch branches do. It is sturdy and quite clear of lateral twigs. She looks so comfortable; the branch at just the right height so her feet touch the ground. In the image, her seat is a swing, hung from the sky, frozen mid arc in its pivot. Just a few metres in front of her a huge rock towers above everything else in the scene—a Saami Offering Rock. Just before I walked back from the scene to capture the image with my iPhone, Britt had told a story of being told a story of a birch-tree branch seat with a form and position that resembled the one on which she was at the time sitting.

She had been told this story when she was attending an old boat builder during her apprenticeship as an ethnographer, making herself useful fetching and carrying. Sitting in just such an arbour seat he had told a story of crafting that seat early on, just after he established his boatyard in that place. A young birch tree grew in a sunny nook. He hung a stone of just the right weight and size to make a low, whippy, flexible branch bend downwards. He set it to protrude horizontally from the slim trunk. Each year for several years he renewed the rope on which this just right stone hung. And he moved the rope loop along the branch’s length. Each year the end of the branch that had headed to the sky in its growth across the preceding months was brought back to the horizontal position. He did this each year until the seat was comfortably wide enough for a human bum. Then finally after years he relieved the branch of its burden; he removed the rope and the stone it held. The branch took off vertically, the horizontal section growing studier and thicker and smoother as buds continually thwarted in their growth, gave up the the struggle. Britt too later took her seat on that boat-maker’s lively birch-tree branch seat. As, many years later she told me the story of being told this story, of course we both wondered. Was this branch upon which she was seated as she told the story of being told the story as she studied the ace of the Offering Rock, the branch on which she still sits in that image, contrived in that way? A seat for contemplation? We became analysts; interpreting. Together we bent down to examine the bark of the branch closely, looking for tell-tale signs of past rope loops constraining growth, speculating as we did so.

We had spent some time searching for this huge rock that, in the image Britt stares at intently. We had used the not very precise directions embedded in a small story printed in a municipal history publication. In a way that had nothing to do with interpretation, but was immediate, and non-inferential, we had recognised the rock as the Sieidi we were looking for when, after tramping around and about, we finally came upon it. The story that had led us to it, was an official story which gave this rock a place in the history of the municipality. The booklet containing it had been ceremoniously presented to us by a kindly, enthusiastic official of the local historical institute. We were attending that rock as workers of and with stories.

Now as I look at the image, I feel our being there in that place alongside that rock and that tree, was premised in myriad re-tellings and re-doings; stories being pulled hither and thither. We were attending that rock as workers of and with stories. Fussing about, we were telling further stories, poking our hands into crevasses, spying old broken glass and speculating on whether it arrived carrying liquor, taking pictures. I suddenly saw us as worker bees attending the queen bee in their hive. This rock generated stories as a queen bee generates eggs. What we were doing there was feeding the rock, and it was generating our future in stories.