What practices can we imagine in this world where progress, novelty, and production of the new has been privileged to the extent that it has had profound impact on not only culture but also nature and how we understand the relationship between the two? Jackson has, for example, suggested practices of maintenance and repair as stories and orders that can handle the decay and breakdown of the 21st Century. In the accompanying text, we imagine a conversation between the ragpicker and the composter that suggest different ways of living with transformation in the aftermath of a plastic era. When plastic materials started to be used they came with the modernist vision that technologies would rid us from restrictions posed by nature. Plastic materials were used as alternatives to, for example, wood, glass and metal, which suggested a world without material scarcity. As a cheaper alternative they have often been used for disposable products meant for one-time-use only. And, at the same time as plastic is hard to mend, maintain and repair, due to the way it wears and tears, it generally doesn’t breakdown and decay as other non-industrial materials. Rather, it accumulates.

The text is a speculative fabulation, but it draws on ethnographic material that has been produced during a series of public engagement events where we invited participants to explore two kinds of emerging hybrid matters that are related to plastics. The first hybrid matter is plastiglomerates, which is a new kind of stone partly consisting of plastic debris coming from such varied sources such as fishing industry, leisure activities and mundane living. The second hybrid matter is common mealworms that can biodegrade Styrofoam. In the first set of public engagement events, we invited people to walk along beaches in Finland and Iceland to look for plastiglomerates. In the second set of public engagement events, we invited people in Denmark and Sweden to use common mealworms to compost plastic waste in their home.

THE RAGPICKER MEETS THE COMPOSTER

C: What did you find, you ragpicker? Can I have a look in your carrier bag?
R: The usual stuff. Plastic containers, fishing nets and wrappings from barbecue sausages. And a new one: a plastic Christmas tree. But, mostly
fishing industry gear and waste from leisure activities.

C: It’s got such a sea smell to it. Let’s go into the kitchen!

Their block of flats was once for the rich families, but when the nearby beaches became flushed with plastics, the rich ones moved on. The ragpicker and the composter felt lucky to find this place to live so close to shores where the waves and currents make some of the marine plastic debris into drift material. Since resources to produce new plastics have become scarce, the plastic drift material has become ambiguous – both pollution and a resource. On a small scale, it’s a welcome addition to the household economy; on another, it’s part of the sustainability discourse. There are heated debates over who has the rights to, what was formerly known as, plastic waste. Is it the ones who were at the point of origin, or the ones who have it in their hands right now? The lack of formalized decisions has led to developments that deeply challenge the right to public access that has been indicative of most Nordic welfare states. For example, remote beaches in northern Iceland and Norway, where huge amounts of plastic debris from afar is washed ashore, have been fenced off, preventing the general public from going there to collect plastic pieces for private use. Instead, big corporations harvest this resource to produce lightweight products where the preferred material is plastic.

R: Look at this beauty! It’s got shimmering stones and a toothbrush almost in disguise. I think I want to keep it as it is.

C: Yet another plastiglomerate. You’re in love with the aesthetics of your rag! I thought you were gonna contribute to our emergency supply and that the rest would be sold off for the common good. Not everyone has a beach like ours nearby. And you know how the plastic dependency and the scarce resources don’t go well together.

R: Have you seen that other ragpickers start bonfires on the beach to make plastiglomerates intentionally? I hear they are making jewellery out of them.

C: I wouldn’t be caught dead wearing one of those. It’s like wearing mink fur.

R: Yes, it’s such a waste! But still so beautiful and mysterious. They make me think of lost visions.
Their windowsill is full of plastiglomerates that the ragpicker has deemed “beauties”. Sometimes discrete objects and products can be deciphered, sometimes how the objects fit into old forms of life can be imagined. What plastiglomerates have in common is that due to wasting, currents, weathering, pressure and fires they’ve become something new; a hybrid matter of stones and plastics and corals and sand and more. Their basement is full of cubes of melted plastics. Like the plastiglomerates, previous objects and practices can only be imagined. Plastic forks, fishing nets, plastic bottles – all kinds of things have merged and become plastic reservoirs. Since newly produced plastic has become scarce, the government has suggested that each household have a 3D printer and at least 1 square metre of plastics at home for emergencies. The recovered plastic is often used to make everyday use objects such as covers for mobile phones and various spare parts to enable repair of domestic technologies.

C: For how long are you going to do this ragpicking?
R: As long as there are plastics washing ashore on the beaches. As long as we need plastics. As long as I have access to the beaches.
C: Can I have this piece of Styrofoam?
R: What for?
C: I want to try something more transformative.
R: What do you mean?
C: I found some common mealworms in our jar of oats the other day. From what I understand they like to eat what we eat - but also what we throw away. And I wanted to truly challenge our dependency on plastics and let them compost some Styrofoam.
R: That’s radical! But ok, you go ahead and take that small piece, but do keep it small please. And, don’t let the worms spread in the apartment!
C: It should be safe. I repurposed this jar that I found them in. I was inspired by the aesthetics of the kitchen practices of keeping things out. Now I use the jar to keep them in. Kind of funny.
A biologist noticed some holes in his plastic trash bag. In the bag he also found common mealworms that seemed to have eaten the plastics. It turned out that common mealworms, that are usually fond of living with humans and feast off the things that are kept in cupboards, can biodegrade Styrofoam. A scientific article showing the use of a species, can thus turn a pest into a labor-force. The scientists have indicated that they want to bioengineer the enzyme of the common mealworms so they can become an even more efficient labor-force. Others have speculated on transferring the enzyme to humans.

C: Look ragpicker, small holes are starting to emerge in the miso soup cup you had a take away in the other week. You can even hear the sound of them chewing.
R: How long will it take until they are done with it. A week? A month? A year? And, it smells!
C: Yes, I think I gave them too much cucumber yesterday. It became such a mess. I’m still trying to figure out how to care for them. It’s too cold and rainy to have them outdoors in the yard. They seem to like it here in our kitchen. They always have.
R: Well, come to think of it, I’m less concerned about the smell. The rag always smells fishy and I’ve gotten used to that. I’d say that the CO2-emissions are more of an issue. Imagine if these grubs were working for us on a large scale.
C: Yeah, and imagine if the superworms escaped. We’ve made ourselves so dependent on plastics that I’m not sure we can cope with that kind of pest. Actually I think the insulation in our house is Styrofoam.
R: I guess, as a ragpicker I’m mainly wondering if composting plastics would mean that we will get rid of plastics all together. Why should we get rid of plastic when it has become such a scarce material? What kinds of lives can we live without plastics? Would we be able to live lives as we know them here if there was no plastic at all?

Recently composting communities have emerged that argue that it should be compulsory to not only do waste sorting, but also for every household to have a compost for domestic plastic waste. One of the arguments was that it was no longer viable for consumers to live with materials only during use-time. Rather, consumers of plastic products that were not mendable or possible to repair – like most of it – had to take care of, and show responsibility.
for, what they had contributed to bringing into the world. Entrepreneurs have liaised themselves with these communities, but instead of the distributed and domestic composting, they have argued for the benefits of more industrial composting, which would relieve the households from burdens of labor and care. Professionals would do that job instead.

C: Speaking of transformation. I think the worms will turn into beetles soon, so I’m thinking of making spring rolls with crunchy mealworms later today. I don’t want them to go to waste.
R: Mm, that is a big step for me. I’m a foodie too, but I prefer clean food.
C: The point is that the worms do biodegrade the plastics. It’s clean. I’ve sprinkled the feces on the herbs out on the balcony.
R: I wish you would have told me. That seems a bit reckless.
C: I’m sorry to break the news, but we’re probably eating plastics already anyway. I’ve recently read that since there’s so much plastic debris in the ocean, there is apparently plastic in sea salt nowadays. Who knows: perhaps we’ll also be able to biodegrade plastics.
R: We? As in humans?
C: Yes, why not? I guess the worms haven’t always been able to do this, but developed this skill as they’ve been living alongside humans and the plastic waste we produce.

The flatmates live in the aftermath of a plastic era, where the lines separating nature and culture no longer seem viable. Instead strange and perhaps unexpected sociomaterial entanglements such as plastic stones and plastic munching worms speak up and question how we can continue to live with or without plastics. The ragpicker and the composter have found different ways of caring for the situation at hand. The ragpicker walks along the beaches, where currents wash plastic debris ashore, to collect and recycle. The composter is looking for something more transformative. But such a transformation requires work, not only from the composter and those who are dependent on plastics, but from a multispecies labor force. These emerging practices of ragpicking and composting offer partial, situated, makeshift responses to the issues that are co-articulated with the changing matters at hand. As the matters at hand continuously shift, so will issues – and practices.

DEDICATION

To the humans and nonhumans who shared the attraction and repulsion of plastiglomerates and plastic composting with common mealworms; who
walked with us along beaches in Iceland, Finland and Norway; who engaged in reproduction and transformation in Denmark and Sweden. Thank you for exploring hybrid matters with us!

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