

Opponent's Written Statement on Sanna S. Lehtinen's Doctoral Dissertation "Drowning Lawscapes: State Responsibility for Future Generations' Rights to Coastal Heritage"

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1. Introduction

I have been appointed by the Faculty of Law at the University of Helsinki to act as the Opponent for the public defence of *Sanna S. Lehtinen's* doctoral dissertation entitled "Drowning Lawscapes: State Responsibility for Future Generations' Rights to Coastal Heritage". The public examination took place on August 15, 2025, and I hereby submit my written statement based on the dissertation and Sanna S. Lehtinen's performance during the defence.

The dissertation is a conceptually rich and timely contribution to critical legal and environmental thought. It proposes a reconfiguration of state responsibility and heritage law in the context of climate-induced transformation, particularly sea level rise. It is grounded in theoretical pluralism and interdisciplinary depth, drawing from feminist legal theory, critical environmental law, legal geography, and posthumanist jurisprudence.

The public defence was conducted in a collegial and scholarly manner. Lehtinen responded to questions with clarity, composure, and impressive intellectual reflexivity.

Based on the quality of the dissertation and Lehtinen's performance at the defence, I propose that the dissertation be accepted.

2. Scientific Contribution

The dissertation clearly fulfils the criterion of containing new scientific knowledge. It introduces and develops the concept of "liminal heritage" to describe heritage sites in a precarious state – neither submerged under water nor on land – under threat from rising sea levels. This concept is analytically and legally impressive and productive, offering a new lens through which to reconsider the foundations of heritage law and the limitations of territorial state responsibility in the Anthropocene.

By analysing two richly developed case studies, the Venice Lagoon and the Everglades, the dissertation reveals how law is not only applied to these spaces but is also produced and shaped through them. These case studies are not anecdotal but are theoretically mobilised to demonstrate the shifting spatial, material, and temporal assumptions of legal form.

In doing so, the dissertation intervenes in ongoing debates in critical heritage studies, environmental humanities, and legal theory, offering a genuinely original contribution.

3. Critical Thinking and Theoretical Sophistication

The dissertation demonstrates a high level of critical thinking. It challenges conventional understandings of legal responsibility and proposes a relational, atmospheric, and multi-scalar understanding of legal engagement. Lehtinen applies critical theory not merely as a framework but as a method, allowing concepts like attentiveness, relational subjectivity, and temporal pluralism to guide the analysis.

Particularly praiseworthy is the dissertation's refusal to settle into a single disciplinary comfort zone. Instead, it insists on operating between and across traditions, juridical, ecological, philosophical.

This approach embodies a form of scholarship that is committed, generous, and intellectually bold.

4. Familiarity with the Field

Lehtinen demonstrates profound familiarity with the relevant fields, including international environmental law, heritage law, feminist legal theory, and legal geography. The literature is not only cited but engaged with critically, and the interdisciplinary range is handled with maturity and care.

The dissertation shows clear awareness of both doctrinal standards and theoretical debates, balancing them to construct an argument that is legally grounded while also philosophically expansive.

This balance between theory and doctrine is not easy to achieve in this field, yet Lehtinen does so with scholarly authority.

5. Methodological Mastery

The dissertation applies an innovative methodological approach grounded in attentiveness, situated knowledge, and embodied legal thinking. Of particular note is the use of *walking*, both as an experiential method and as a metaphor, which is applied to navigate and interpret lawscape.

This methodological sensitivity enables the dissertation to attend to atmospheres, environments, and legal affects that often escape conventional legal analysis. The research methods are consistently aligned with the theoretical commitments of the work.

Lehtinen demonstrates confidence in working with complex, non-linear materials and in maintaining coherence across conceptual, spatial, and temporal dimensions.

6. Scientific Convincingness and Conceptual Clarity

The dissertation is scientifically convincing and logically structured. Its core concepts are clearly articulated and consistently developed. The structure is divided into five poetic parts:

1. END/BEGINNING,
2. GRAMMAR,
3. METHODOLOGY,
4. PERSPECTIVE, and
5. BEGINNING/END.

This is unconventional, but it serves the argument well and mirrors the conceptual dissonance the dissertation seeks to explore.

Some sections, particularly those engaging poetic or metaphorical language, might challenge more traditional legal readers. However, this is also a strength rather than a shortcoming.

The thesis reflects a deliberate and well-executed stylistic choice, grounded in the dissertation's theoretical commitments.

7. Justified Results and Ethical Integrity

The dissertation answers the research questions it sets out to explore. The results are presented in the form of five normative principles for rethinking state responsibility in the context of coastal heritage loss. They are justified, clear, and well-supported. These include:

1. Legal recognition of liminality,
2. State responsibility beyond territorialism,
3. Relational legal subjectivity,
4. Temporal pluralism, and
5. Attentiveness as method.

The dissertation also adheres to the ethical norms of research.

Lehtinen demonstrates reflexivity in her research design and methodological orientation, especially in relation to positionality and the treatment of vulnerable environments and communities.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

To conclude, Sanna S. Lehtinen has produced a sophisticated, poetic, and politically significant doctoral dissertation. It contributes new knowledge, demonstrates critical and independent thinking, and reflects deep engagement with both law and its planetary condition.

Lehtinen's performance at the public defence confirmed her command of the material and her ability to engage in serious academic dialogue.

It is therefore my recommendation that the Faculty of Law approve this dissertation and award Sanna S. Lehtinen the degree of Doctor of Laws.