



BOOK REVIEW:

Rani-Henrik Andersson and Janne Lahti, editors. *Finnish Settler Colonialism in North America: Rethinking Finnish Experiences in Transnational Spaces*. Helsinki University Press, 2022. 316 pages. ISBN: 978-9523690790. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/AHEAD-2>.

What was the Finnish experience in the context of European powers' global expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? What was Finland's role in the settler colonialism leading to the deracination of North America's Indigenous peoples? Not wielding the might of the British, French, Spanish, or German empires, Nordic countries have long dismissed their participation in displacement activity. *Finnish Settler Colonialism in North America: Rethinking Finnish Experiences in Transnational Spaces* addresses those questions, "challenging traditional histories of Finnish migration" (2). These had previously been viewed "almost in isolation from the broader American context . . . and colonialism" (2). Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, editors Rani-Henrik Andersson and Janne Lahti enlisted twelve scholars whose studies cover race, identity issues, gender, migration, immigration, and history.

"Taking the Land," the first of the book's three parts, situates Finns in the colonial historic land acquisition process that includes knowledge production and community building. Also noted is Finnish participation in systematically repressing and displacing Indigenous peoples. The middle section, "Contested Identities," realigns the discussion toward settler encounters and self-deceptions, thereby exposing shifting, multi-layered identities and racist thinking. In "Settler

Narratives and Legacies," the concluding chapters examine settler narratives and legacies reflected in settler writing, memories, myths, and exploration.

Beginning with Finns immigrating to New Sweden in Delaware in 1638, later waves of immigrants settled all over the North American map with such a dense population in the region around the Great Lakes in Canada and the United States that the region was dubbed the "sauna belt." Finns settled in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and Russian Alaska. Sámis settled in Michigan and Minnesota.

In the first chapter, "Claims for Space," Joanna Spurnik analyzes the writing of Akseli Rauaheimo, whose work establishes the presence of Finns in America, as well as popularizes the continent for a Finnish audience. Additionally, she examines maps from the early 1900s, confirming the presence of Finns in the seventeenth-century colony of New Sweden in Delaware. Based on this dual approach, she questions Finns' constructing geohistorical knowledge of North American space and how using that information validated Finnish presence there. Finns were there in various roles as American society was developing. Their writings revealed the marginalization of Native Americans, whose ontologies of place and space, as well as ideas about their territorial sovereignty, were threatened.

For thousands of years Michigan's Sugar Island had been home to Anishinaabe Ojibwe (Chippewa) people. Their land was usurped by Finnish Americans. Frank Aaltonen, who developed Sugar Island, Michigan, in 1903, maintained that the Anishinaabe hadn't been using the land properly. Justin Gage reasons that by *civilizing* the island's wilderness, Aaltonen drastically perverted the Anishinaabe way of life, impoverishing them.

One settler, Eero Erkko, wondered why Finnish emigrants elected to settle in areas resembling Finland that were cold and arid. Touting a climate suitable for raising fruit trees, his plan prompted a short-lived settlement in Cuba, "Some Kind of Eldorado" (79). Immigrants needed enough capital to bear expenses during the five years required for trees to mature. Author Aleksi Huhta also cites Erkko's colonizing effort as a way of preserving and storing Finnish language and culture.

Recent focus on Finnish migration has overlooked utopian communities. Johanna Leinonen writes that these settlements also contributed to the notion that Finland was blameless in colonizing. Writing about Finnish utopian communities, Leinonen argues that scholars framing utopias as "expressions of humans' desire for improvement," wresting "greater meaning in life," leads to the "establishment of utopian settlements . . . being depoliticized and detached" from settler colonial history (105). Such thinking would exonerate these settlements from the stain of conquest and replacement. These short-lived colonial settlements were established beyond North America, stretching across the globe to South America, Australia, Israel, Russia/the USSR, and Sierra Leone in Africa, revealing the reach of the Finnish diaspora.

In "Contested Identities," the second part of the book, Sirpa Salenius deconstructs James Kirke Spaulding's novel, *Koningsmarke: The Long Finne*,

published in 1823. The novel anchors Finns in early American society. Quintessentially Aryan, *Koningsmarke* embodies white innocence and benevolence. Written at a time when America's nationally sanctioned "exceptionalism" and literary identity were emerging, *Koningsmarke* is "tall, straight, light-complexioned, and blue-eyed" (144). The Indigenous Lenape and enslaved African Americans are stereotypically portrayed as savage and unintelligent, respectively.

In "Socialist Visions of American Dreams," Rani-Henrik Andersson and Rainer Smedman present the parallel experiences of Frank Aaltonen and Oskari Tokoi as examples of "white innocence" and "colonial complicity" in Finnish settler colonial history (174). The two first met in Sault Ste. Marie in 1921 and undertook roles in social activism while maintaining a self-image of benevolence that belied their indifference to the Indigenous plight. In 1891 Tokoi first immigrated to America, arriving in Lead, North Dakota, a year after the US Army killed more than 250 Lakotas at the Battle of Wounded Knee. The Lakotas were routed, and reservation land was available for mining. Tokoi joined the Western Miners' Union. He returned to Finland in 1900 and joined the Social Democratic Party, served in the Finnish parliament, and was elected prime minister in 1917. Sentenced to death by the Communist Party of Finland in exile in Moscow, he escaped to England and re-entered the US through Canada in 1921. Aaltonen joined the Western Federation Miners in Michigan. His attitude toward the Indigenous on Sugar Island exemplified the behavior of European imperial powers. Both Finns had traveled extensively in the US. Both were viewed as anarchists because of their activism. Later in life the two men held romanticized views of Indigenous people and still believed that Finns, among all the other immigrants, were "special."

Erik Hieta explores the North American Sámi movement. Sámis immigrating to America wrestled with double consciousness: they were settler and Indigenous in a new land. He posits that “close connections between North American Sámis and Native American communities offer a vision of cultural differences at once shaped by global corporate capital and media and yet communicated as local sites of empowerment and protest” (181). Acknowledging that selectively reconnecting with the past as a way forward to a decolonized future is complex, Hieta further suggests that the shared cultural practices and relationships to the land of the Indigenous Americans and Sámis weigh more than strict timelines.

Samira Saramo looks at settlers’ written work to understand the “strategies and practices Finns have employed in establishing their North American migrant settlerhood” (211). As a tool enabling migrant settlers to claim place, life writing engendered belonging. She analyzes narrative strategies in twelve Finnish migrant settler works to more fully understand the “subtle, everyday shaping of settler histories and futurities” and how such narratives are tied to “broader notions of Finnish (settler) colonial complicity” (212). These life stories reflect work in the fur trade, travel, memoir, and autobiography. The authors share something of “their sense of self, and situate themselves in time, place, and belonging” (217). She also pays obeisance to *sisu*, that untranslatable Finnish “essentialist characteristic . . . as a way to voice Finnish migrant settler exceptionalism” (219). She concludes by saying that the way “micro-level views of settler colonialism’s culture is built and upheld might also offer tools for its dismantling” (228).

Roman Kushnir explores Finnish migration mythology in twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American literature to “shed light on the ways in which these texts create, spread, and

perpetuate colonial myths” (236). Kushnir suggests that in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, by living in the safe bubble of Suomi homeland colonies, in log cabins on farmlands with saunas, Finns could turn to the land and “struggle among tree stumps and stones as their fathers and forefathers had done” (247). Although the Indigenous population was not the focus of these works, he maintains, the Indigenous population was not “missing entirely from Finnish American literature” (253).

Janne Lahti’s chapter, “Gustaf Nordenskiöld and the Mesa Verde,” provides a stunning example of “Settler Colonial Disconnects and Finnish Colonial Legacies,” the chapter’s subtitle (256). Pursuing a world tour thought to be palliative for tuberculosis, Gustaf Nordenskiöld was enroute to San Francisco and the Far East. Nordenskiöld embarked on a 370-mile detour from Denver to “Cliff Palace” for a “tourist look-see” at Mesa Verde, the ancestral Puebloan cliff dwellings. There Nordenskiöld saw a “void in the scientific and exploratory record and sought to fill it” (261). He studied and excavated the site. Nordenskiöld’s work is white exceptionalism writ large through his pillage of artefacts, disregard for the ancient culture, and disdain for the Indigenous peoples then contemporary. As worldwide issues of repatriation and reconciliation are debated today, former colonized peoples demand the return of their heritage. A portion of Indigenous ancestral remains and artefacts from the Mesa Verde Collection at the National Museum of Finland were returned to the United States in 2019.

In her “Afterword,” Gunlög Fur fulsomely endorses the multi-disciplinary approach in *Finnish Settler Colonialism in North America* that disproves claims that Nordics were not involved in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples that plagued the making of the United States and Canada. Clearly the editors have proved their point. Clearly this work on settler colonialism

could spawn all manner of future research projects and further study, possibly meting out justice on both sides of the Atlantic. Fur believes that scholarship could then “illuminate the entanglement of the histories of progress,” along with those of violence, contributing to “a more honest, just, and factual understanding of our joint and concurrent past” (290).

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