

# TEACHING NORTH AMERICAN STUDIES IN FINLAND

## Searching for Crossdisciplinary Perspectives

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**Abstract:** The authors examine the historical roots of Finnish interest in North America, which can be traced back to early Finnish immigration and a broader fascination with Indigenous cultures. Over the past several decades, this interest has grown within academic circles, leading to the creation of several cross-disciplinary North American studies programs in Finland. There is a long tradition of research in fields such as Indigenous studies, immigration history, ethnic minorities, media studies, and environmental issues. While these areas remain central, new scholarship—focused on settler colonialism, decolonizing research, and transnational American studies—has added depth and new perspectives to the field in recent years. This article primarily highlights the North American studies program at the University of Helsinki, but it also touches on research and teaching at the University of Turku.

**Keywords:** North American studies, cross-disciplinarity, settler colonialism, decolonizing research and teaching

### Three Hundred Years of “American Studies” in Finland

The year 2026 will mark the thirtieth anniversary of the North American studies program at the University of Helsinki. Despite this seemingly brief history, the study of North America has deep roots in Finnish academia. Already in 1756, Pehr Kalm, a student of Carl Linnaeus representing the Royal Academy of Turku (now the University of Helsinki), wrote extensively on his 1747–51 travels in North America. His journals were published as *En Resa till Norra America*, which was translated into several languages. Kalm made notes about the nature, plants, animals, and Native Americans he encountered. He may have been the first European scholar to describe Niagara Falls and even wrote about these magnificent waterfalls to Benjamin Franklin. Kalm’s student Anders Chydenius wrote his master’s thesis *Americanska Näfwerbåtar* (1753) on the birch-bark canoes used by the Native peoples of the Great Lakes area. For more than two centuries, Finnish scholars continued to engage with North American topics in fields such as history, politics, and literature. Starting in the early twentieth century, the increasing Finnish migration to North America attracted another new strand of scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

A move toward cross-disciplinary American studies started in the 1980s, spearheaded by Markku Henriksson’s doctoral dissertation “The Indian on Capitol Hill: Indian Legislation and the United States Congress, 1862–1907” (1988). Gaining support and establishing legitimacy for a cross-disciplinary field was difficult. Some more established scholars looked down on North American studies, and students struggled to define their identity as aspiring scholars in the field. “Why do we need North American studies and what are its prospects in Finland?” were repeated questions to the early researchers.

Nevertheless, interest in North American studies courses was great, and thanks largely to Henriksson’s efforts, minor programs were established in the early 1990s at the universities of Tampere, Helsinki, and Turku. From a modest start, these programs have developed into true cross-disciplinary American studies programs. This is especially true at the University of Helsinki, which is the only program to offer bachelor’s degrees (as a part Cultural Studies), master’s degrees (as part of Area and Cultural Studies), and doctoral degrees with specialization in North American studies. At the University of Helsinki, North American studies was first part of the Renvall Institute, and then in 2010 became a subject under the umbrella program of Area and Cultural Studies at the Department of World Cultures, which in 2016 was reinvented as the Department of Cultures.

The interest in and the legitimacy of American studies in Finland has fluctuated over the past few decades depending on world events, and, quite concretely, the personality of the US president. Since the emergence of Donald Trump in the political arena and its global ramifications, the number of students has steadily risen in both Helsinki and Turku. “Understanding the United States” has become a valid field of study. A further boost was seen when Finland joined NATO in 2023. Some of the questions people have today cannot be answered simply through knowing politics or history but require broader and more multifaceted interpretations.<sup>2</sup>

Defining the field of American studies is not only a Finnish struggle. Rather, it has been part of the essence of American studies globally over the past decades. One definition is presented by Philip J. Deloria and Alexander I. Olson in their book *American Studies: A User’s Guide*: it is “an interdisciplinary practice that aims to understand the multiplicity of the social and cultural lives of people in—and in relation to—the United States,

both past and present.” They also discuss the definition or the name that should be used: is it US studies only, American cultural studies, or a more inclusive North American studies that includes the study of Canada and maybe even Mexico?<sup>3</sup>

Echoing this, the University of Helsinki defined North American studies from early on as the “crossdisciplinary and multimethodological study of the culture(s) of United States and Canada.”<sup>4</sup> At the University of Helsinki, the decision was made to incorporate areas south of the United States into Latin American studies, while the University of Turku has traditionally included Mexico, the Caribbean, and even Cuba in its definition of North America. In either case, the approach to the area at hand was to be as broad as possible. The choices truly are unlimited, as is exemplified by the themes of courses offered during the 2023–24 academic year in Helsinki: Indigenous environmentalism, Black athletes, prisons, and North American regionalism, to name a few.

Philip J. Deloria and Alexander I. Olson have also discussed the complexity of method and methodology in the field. They address some criticism toward the lack of clear frameworks, calling the situation “methodological anxiety.”<sup>5</sup> The attempt to find true crossdisciplinarity in research and teaching is challenging and students in Finland struggle with this especially when writing their BA, MA, or PhD theses. There are a plethora of North American studies approaches or traditions to draw from, but for students more familiar with traditional monosciences like history or literature, it is difficult to overcome or find their own voice in this methodological complexity discussed by Deloria and Olson. There is no singular way to do American studies, and at the University of Helsinki, as well as at the University of Turku, we have traditionally been open to all topics and approaches, but crossing disciplinary borders has been at the center of research and

teaching. Despite some challenges in finding their own student/researcher trajectories, and because of this openness, our courses are often considered different from many others offered at the university. As Benita Heiskanen incisively explains:

[t]he most frequent feedback we get from students is that our classes are exciting. Because we use multiple sources, and take both societal and popular discourses seriously, students find it easy to engage in critical thinking and analysis. As far as history classes are concerned, seeing the continuation of contemporary phenomena all the way from the colonial period up to the present . . . is eye opening for students.<sup>6</sup>

What also characterizes Finnish North American studies is the fact that we look at North America from the outside. As outsiders we notice and react to things that might go undetected for an American scholar. We are also less limited by historical constraints when it comes to difficult topics like slavery or Indigenous genocide. As outsiders, however, we need to understand and appreciate the history and the larger frameworks of the field. While we are not bound or limited by the burdens of, let’s say, Turnerian frontier ideology, New Western History, or transnationalism, we need to recognize them and present challenges to current paradigms.

Our geographical distance has also helped us to be open-minded about new methods and technology. Ten years ago, we at the University of Helsinki were among the first in the humanities in Finland to employ digital humanities methods in our research and teaching. Now, offering courses in using quantitative data and network analysis, for example, or the development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other online teaching methods are standard practice for us. While many people may have been suspicious of digital methods and teaching

ten years ago, the Covid-19 pandemic ignited an unprecedented need for these teaching practices that has continued after the return to contact teaching. Thanks to our early adoption of online teaching, we had a comparatively smooth transition to online teaching, and Rani Andersson was selected “Teacher of the Year” thanks to his engaging Zoom lectures. In the fall of 2023, Andersson and Saara Kekki created and successfully ran the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) “Sustainable Stewardship of Nature and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge,” which thus far has been attended by 250 people from across the world. The MOOC included podcasts, music, and video interviews with Indigenous community members. The MOOC also has several interactive elements, including the possibility to use virtual glasses to explore a place in a 360-degree environment. In developing the MOOCs, we engaged in a thorough review of not only new teaching methods, but also those for assessment. Although the purpose of a MOOC generally is to be as self-grading as possible, we have also participated in discussions on the assessment of cultural studies courses more broadly. While exams in some fields serve a purpose, the courses in Helsinki rarely use tests, quizzes, or exams to measure learning. Instead, we typically use essays, oral presentations, and more recently, blogs and podcasts, to more effectively assess deep learning.<sup>7</sup>

### **Institutional Building Blocks of Finnish North American Studies**

We attribute the success of the North American studies programs at the University of Helsinki to three major institutional building blocks: the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair, the Maple Leaf and Eagle Conference, and the McDonnell Douglas Chair in American studies. The establishment of the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair for American studies at the University of Helsinki in 1976 has

proved essential to the vitality of the discipline not only in Helsinki, but in all of Finland. Almost fifty distinguished scholars have held this Bicentennial chair, giving the program depth and scope otherwise impossible to reach. The chairs have represented a variety of fields from Native American studies to environmental history, politics, media, sport, and gender studies.

The second big building block for the American studies program was the organization of the biennial Maple Leaf and Eagle Conference in North American Studies. Initiated by Markku Henriksson in 1986, the conference just saw its twentieth iteration in May 2024. Over the years, the conference has attracted hundreds of scholars and students representing a wide array of topics. This has helped our students to gain more perspectives and broader approaches to the field. The conference is an excellent example of the efforts of the past and current North American studies faculty and researchers and the extensive networks they have created over the years. Both the conference and the Fulbright professorship have helped make the North American studies program in Helsinki strong and distinctive in Finland and in Europe.

Finally, the third success factor in the history of North American studies in Helsinki was the establishment of the McDonnell Douglas Chair in American studies in 1996. Connected to the Finnish purchase of F-18 Hornet fighter jets in 1995, this professorship created a significant degree of stability and continuity for the field. In addition to offering a critically needed permanent professorship—the first in the discipline in Finland—an endowed chair brings along a more solid funding base than a position funded by the university’s basic funding.<sup>8</sup> While the discipline has since become a part of Area and Cultural Studies, the professorship has allowed North American Studies to maintain its distinctive character. Being incorporated into Area and Cultural

Studies has allowed new cooperation, and more students are now engaged in North American studies. Meanwhile, the Area and Cultural Studies program offers a variety of classes in methodologies and theoretical frameworks, which help students in understanding the cross-disciplinary approaches of North American studies as well. This collaboration with scholars working on European Cultural studies brings an additional dimension to North American studies in that while we embrace our American studies heritage from Frederic Jackson Turner to Henry Nash Smith to Harold Innis, our students are also introduced to approaches and methods by cultural studies scholars and political theorists like Stuart Hall and Chantal Mouffe.

The University of Turku has a dual role in Finnish North American studies: it hosts the North American Studies (NAMS) minor program that offers teaching, as well as the more research-focused John Morton Center for North American Studies (JMC). Unlike Helsinki, where North America can be selected as the specialization within a master's degree in area and cultural studies, the minor module in Turku is not part of a degree program. Established in the early 1990s, NAMS has always been inter- and cross-disciplinary, with courses primarily in history, society, and literature (sometimes language and other topics). In the past, there were also courses in geography, but the more scientific branch has disappeared.

After two decades of running a successful teaching program, the University of Turku established the JMC in 2014, another milestone for Finnish American studies. The main focus of NAMS, and subsequently the JMC, is the United States and Canada, but Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean are also included. According to JMC Professor Benita Heiskanen,

[w]hile the United States has always been the focus of the field, the role of other nations within the continent—as well as transnational relations—has become increasingly important over the past few decades. At the John Morton Center for North American Studies, we focus on analyzing historical, societal, and cultural phenomena related to the United States, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean from various transnational perspectives.<sup>9</sup>

At the University of Turku, NAMS is an open minor, and students from all faculties can enroll. Most students come from the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Social Sciences. NAMS is also open to students of the Åbo Akademi University, as well as exchange students from all fields.

The first American Voices seminar, jointly organized with Fulbright Finland, took place in 1993. The seminar series continues to this day, with 2020 being the only gap year due to the pandemic. The thirtieth seminar was held in the fall of 2023.<sup>10</sup> The program has been coordinated by the University of Turku English department since its inception, with Keith Battarbee as the first coordinator until 2012, followed by Janne Korkka. NAMS was part of the Faculty of Humanities until 2019. Since then, it has been officially offered jointly by the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Social Sciences, or the JMC, more specifically. The JMC has been successful in attracting research funding, and its researchers, led by Heiskanen, have contributed to the broadening of NAMS teaching. In addition to the extensive minor program and valuable research done at the University of Turku, the University of Tampere offers a module called North American Studies. Their module, however, only covers economics and policy, and is not American studies in the broader sense.

### **Lines of Research and Teaching for the 2020s**

At the core of teaching North American studies in Helsinki is innovative cross-disciplinary research. Our teaching structure offers a basic survey course that begins with regionalist approaches to North America and is followed by a course on history, cultures, and society. These two comprehensive courses provide the students with the necessary knowledge to explore specialized courses offered each year. One challenge in Helsinki is to make more courses focusing on Canada available for students. While Canada is a vital part of our program and most courses seek to incorporate Canadian viewpoints, it has been difficult to encourage students to write their master's or doctoral theses on Canadian questions. In Turku, on the other hand, the expertise of Senior University Lecturer Janne Korkka makes sure that Canadian topics are covered broadly every year. As we explained above, Finnish North American studies has been famous for its engagement with Indigenous studies, immigration history, ethnic minorities, and environmental issues. In the past decade, these fields have remained central, but new scholarship has brought new dimensions and depth to this expertise.

In immigration studies, in what the Finnish American historian Gary Kaunonen termed "Gen 3.0" of Finnish migrant studies, scholars have not only studied the establishment of Finnish communities and the development of a Finnish American identity, but have moved beyond these questions to tackle intercultural and transnational connections, and even Finnish settler colonialism.<sup>11</sup> Settler colonialism provides a new window in teaching Finnish immigration to North America in larger colonial contexts, suggesting that Finns are not only benevolent migrants, but part of an ideological and practical framework aiming at replacing Native populations while creating their own American dreams.<sup>12</sup>

An integral part of this 3.0 teaching—not only when it comes to the Finnish North American experience but to immigration studies more broadly—is the willingness to use truly cross-disciplinary methods and new tools to discover unforeseen strands of migration to America. In today's world, where immigration and mobilities continue to be a major issue in US and Canadian societies as well as globally, courses that help students understand immigration in depth are crucial. Saara Kekki has specialized in dynamic network modeling and GIS (Geographic Information System, a technology that is used to analyze and visualize geographically referenced information) and has taught several courses on these tools and methods. These courses have enabled students not only to learn about the mobilities of various ethnic groups, but they have opened the eyes of cultural studies students to the possibilities of digital humanities.

Teaching North American history and cultures would not be possible without some attention to the continent's Indigenous people. In fact, this has been and continues to be at the very heart of our program in Helsinki. We approach Indigenous studies as a key element to understanding North American experiences, whether of immigration, settler colonialism, or environmental policies. To some degree, US foreign policy was established on its relations with Indigenous nations, and the league of the Iroquois was instrumental in the framing of the US constitution.<sup>13</sup> Our teaching philosophy here is strongly based on decolonizing methods, community-facing research, and collaborative work with and in Native communities. At its core, decolonizing academic teaching deals with issues such as dispossession, identity, indigeneity, and sovereignty. It also requires non-Indigenous people to respect Indigenous worldviews as equal to other views and recognizing Indigenous traditional knowledges and epistemologies as relevant methodological tools, for example, in using oral histories

to understand social structures or appreciating Indigenous agencies in the past and present. The challenge has been for academia to accept Indigenous ways of knowing and doing as legitimate tools and to merge and apply them with “Western” notions of science. Yet merely “merging and applying” is inadequate, as there is a danger of losing crucial aspects of Indigenous perspectives when Indigenous cultural insights are conceptualized and implemented within the theoretical and methodological paradigms of Anglo-European research, reasoning, and interpretation.<sup>14</sup> This approach allows us to employ best practices of ethical Indigenous studies in our teaching as well. For example, by inviting Indigenous community members to join through zoom or using interviews and research field-notes in our teaching, we can ensure that when we are teaching specific Indigenous topics, we respect Indigenous ways and impart only such knowledge as they deem appropriate. The faculty’s personal networks are of the utmost value in achieving these collaborations.

In addition to our inherent cross-disciplinarity, we work closely with the University of Helsinki Environmental Humanities minor program. The current McDonnell Douglas Professor of American studies, Mikko Saikku, is the head of that program, and is one of the leading environmental historians in Finland. While the University of Helsinki has thus far not collaborated with Turku in terms of teaching, the research done in Turku complements that of Helsinki. Where Helsinki takes pride in its Indigenous, environmental, and ethnic studies research projects and teaching, the JMC in particular has successfully conducted large research projects in media studies, violence, and women’s rights, to name a few. While we have highlighted here a few key elements of North American studies teaching at the University of Helsinki and Turku, the overall topics covered in our teaching curriculum go far beyond those themes, aiming at offering our students a bit of everything that is topical in North America.

## Notes

1. Henriksson, "Afterword," 199–201. For Finnish immigration to North America see, for example, Kero, *Migration from Finland*; Kostiainen, ed., *Finns in the United States*.
2. Fazzi et al., "Teaching American History," 366–75.
3. Deloria and Olson, *American Studies*, 6. For more on this discussion, see Radway, "What's in a Name?" 41–75; Maddox, ed., *Locating American Studies*; Pease and Wiegman, eds., *The Futures*; Radway et al., eds., *American Studies*.
4. "North American Studies," Disciplines, Faculty of Arts, accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/faculty-arts/research/disciplines/cultures/north-american-studies>.
5. Deloria and Olson, *American Studies*, 20, 83.
6. Fazzi et al., "Teaching American History." See also Hill, "What Is This Thing," 361–65.
7. About assessment, see Bastman et al., "Esseiden arviointimatriisi opetuksen ja oppimisen tukena" ("Essay Assessment Rubrik in Support of Teaching and Learning"), 430–72.
8. The University of Tampere also received its first Professor in American studies in 2007, when Dr Katri Sieberg was appointed as the Erkkö Professor of American studies. In 2014, the John Morton Center for North American Studies was established at the University of Turku, Benita Heiskanen being appointed as the first Director of the new center.
9. Fazzi et al., "Teaching American History." The section on the Turku North American studies program is based on the description of its coordinator Senior University Lecturer Janne Korkka.
10. "American Voices Seminar," Fulbright Finland Foundation, <https://www.fulbright.fi/about-us/events/american-voices-seminar>.
11. Kaunonen, Review of *Finnish Settler Colonialism*, edited by Andersson and Lahti.
12. See Andersson and Lahti, eds., *Finnish Settler Colonialism*.
13. See Andersson, "Yhdysvaltain perustuslaki, federalismi ja irokeesiliitto" ("US Constitution, Federalism and the League of the Iroquois").
14. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 215–26; Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*; Helander-Renvall and Markkula, "On Transfer of Sámi," 112–15; Cote-

Meek and Moeke-Pickering, eds., *Decolonizing and Indigenizing Education*.

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