

CHAPTER 8

Life Writing as a Settler Colonial Tool

Finnish Migrant-Settlers Claiming Place and Belonging¹

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By writing their stories of settlement in Canada and the United States over the decades, Finnish migrants and their descendants have claimed their place and belonging in these national histories. Through autobiographical and family history life writing, migrant-settler authors contribute personal narratives of migration, adversity, adventure, and (most often) positive integration that collectively build a rich view of Finnish lives and communities in North America. The most significant boom of published Finnish North American life writing occurred in the 1980s through the 1990s, within the supportive atmosphere of multiculturalism and social history, which sought to populate national historical narratives with a polyphony of voices and experiences. Later life writing works have largely continued in the spirit of marking Finnish migrant-settler contributions to building Canada and the United States into modern nation-states. Through these texts, we are able to see some of the strategies and practices Finns have employed in establishing their North American migrant settlerhood.

How to cite this book chapter:

Saramo, Samira. "Life Writing as a Settler Colonial Tool: Finnish Migrant-Settlers Claiming Place and Belonging." In *Finnish Settler Colonialism in North America: Rethinking Finnish Experiences in Transnational Spaces*, edited by Rani-Henrik Andersson and Janne Lahti, 211–233. AHEAD: Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/AHEAD-2-9>.

This chapter reflects on life writing as a settler colonial tool. I analyze narrative strategies in 12 Finnish migrant-settler works to better understand the subtle, everyday shaping of settler histories and futurities, and how they tie to broader notions of Finnish (settler) colonial complicity. I begin by outlining a needed shift in the terminological framing of Finnish migration settlement that allows us to more effectively confront the implications and impact of generations of presence in North America. I tie this into a brief discussion of assumptions of Finnish (colonial) exceptionalism. I then turn to a close analysis of the Finnish North American autobiographical and family history texts to examine the ways this life writing serves to claim belonging through *sisu*, land, and silences, to create separate settler and Indigenous spaces, and to legitimate settler–Indigenous interactions based on consumption. I conclude by reflecting on how our future can benefit from a conscientious reading of past life writing.

From Immigration and Colonial Histories to Histories of Migrant Settlerhood

With the recognition that settler colonialism is a structure rather than an event,² we can unpack the implications of generations of Finnish presence in North America. Despite the personal motivations and intentions of individual Finnish migrants, the settlement of Finns in Canada and the United States is one piece of the overarching settler colonial project. This project aims to eliminate—or at best disrupt and remove—Indigenous people, lands, governance, knowledges, cultures, and languages, in order to replace them with a settler state in the image of (an imagined) white European colonial metropole.³ In theorizations of settler colonialism, people on the ground rather than distant colonial administrations are typically understood to be the key to implementation.⁴ Settler colonialism, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang emphasize, “is different from other forms of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain.”⁵ Regrettably, the historiography of North American immigration has been slow to do the work of interrogating the entanglements of migration and settler colonialism. Already 20 years ago, historian Adele Perry was calling out the “powerful fiction” of this historiographical divide:

colonization and immigration are presented as wholly separate topics with little in common. Their seemingly discrete character is a fiction of a confident colonizing project where settler dominance is assumed to be normal and inevitable. It is a powerful fiction that masks the fact that dispossession and resettlement were and are deeply and irreparably inter-twined, and indeed they derive their social power from that connection.⁶

Though the current volume marks an important step, scholarship on Finnish settlement in Canada and the United States still has much work to do to overcome such analytical separation.

Thinking through and adapting the terminology we use to frame Finnish communities in North America is part of this work. In my own research, I moved first from the term “immigrant,” in line with the immigration social histories from which my work has drawn direction, to “migrant,” acknowledging the multiple mobilities and networks that shape people’s experiences over the course of their lives. Using the term “settler,” in turn, recognizes what Aileen Moreton-Robinson has identified as the “white possessive logics,” through which people from away have come to claim ownership and dominion of land that is not theirs.⁷ Tuck and Yang have further challenged me to think through the terminological positioning of my work. They argue: “Settlers are not immigrants. Immigrants are beholden to the Indigenous laws and epistemologies of the lands they migrate to. Settlers become the law, supplanting Indigenous laws and epistemologies. Therefore, settler nations are not immigrant nations.”⁸ Tuck and Yang’s differentiation offers a poignant way to reframe our view of “immigrant nations.” Yet, the seeming staticity and homogeneity of “settler” implicit here and in their definition of settler colonialism as “homemaking” (as quoted above) can be further nuanced to capture the multitude of power dynamics and the diversity of settler backgrounds, aspirations, and encounters at play in settler colonialism.

I have come to think of Finns in Canada and the United States as “migrant-settlers,” acknowledging the significance of both of these positionalities. I see the language of “migrant-settler” as offering an opening to talk about the complex ways Finns have experienced and shaped settler colonial North America, while maintaining generations of multifaceted transnational ties. In this way, my thinking is very much in line with Laura Madokoro’s call to work through the lens of

“migrant settlerhood.” As Madokoro frames it, “migrant settlerhood refers to movement and settlement of people that perpetuate, in the past and the present, settler colonial aspirations while recognizing that beyond the physical presence of people, however permanent or fleeting, there exist affinities and loyalties beyond the strictures of the modern nation-state.”⁹

Claiming Finnish (Colonial) Exceptionalism

These “affinities and loyalties” influence the ways Finnish North American communities see their historical position in Canada and the United States, as well as in the world. The national discourse and historiography of Finland has long framed Finns as a historically subjugated people, under the rule of foreign empires until 1917 and long balancing precariously between the geopolitical “East” and “West.” The argument follows that, owing to this positioning, Finns are largely free of the burden of responsibility for European colonialism. When confronted with the legacies and ongoing impacts of occupation of Sápmi lands and Finnish presence globally, however, Finnish state involvement is framed as a “gentle colonialism.” As Veli-Pekka Lehtola explains, Finns have largely subscribed to the broader Scandinavian opinion that their “participation in colonial politics was benign, and their interactions with the encountered peoples in Africa, Asia, and America were gentler and based on collaboration rather than extortion and subjugation.”¹⁰

These ideas of subjugation and collaboration also stand out in the ways Finnish settlement in North America is discussed. One oft-repeated argument states that, as early Finnish migrant-settlers were considered “Mongols” and not “white” in the turn-of-the-century racial hierarchy, Finns faced discrimination and had to struggle to gain social footing without privileges.¹¹ To probe the argument further, however, as Finns fought to become white, particularly through labor politics,¹² they inherently contributed to the entrenchment of the settler colonial order. By Finland’s independence in 1917, Finns had secured their position as “preferred immigrants.”¹³ These counterpoints, however, still often find an uneasy reception in community dialogue. Finnish migrant-settler ways of positioning their history are in line with broader trends of multiculturalizing. As L. K. Bertram identifies in the Canadian context, “Narratives of ethnic arrival often cast immigrants

as co-victims, incapable of participating in the dispossession of others and imagine them as latecomers, who arrived ‘after’ Canadian state campaigns against Indigenous people and claims.”¹⁴

Finnish exceptionalism in North American settler colonialism is further promoted through claims of special affinities between Finns and Indigenous—and particularly First Nations—people.¹⁵ Take for example a 1989 article in a magazine for Finns living abroad, in which the author Paul Sjöblom, a Finn, presented third-hand views of “the Indians’ Finnish friends.” According to Sjöblom, his settler friend was told by “Chief Buffalo” (whose tribe was not named but readers were told “it was his grandfather who signed the treaty creating the Indian reservations in Minnesota”): “Whereas White men of other nationalities tended to regard the Indians as inferior and downright despicable ... the Finns nursed no racist prejudices but treated them considerately as friends and neighbors.”¹⁶ This self-congratulatory writing demonstrates how the widely espoused belief that Finnish migrant-settlers were not/are not racist like other settlers is perpetuated. Purported evidence of this affinity is given through longstanding close cohabitation between Finns and First Nations people, most often with the Anishinaabeg and Cree in the Great Lakes region—but the myth is traced to the New Sweden colony in Delaware in 1638—and further boosted by pointing to intermarriage and the resultant “Finndian” (or “Fintiaani”) descendants.¹⁷ These are the kinds of “moves to innocence” that Tuck and Yang have identified as strategies for securing “settler futurity.”¹⁸ That is, by claiming a righteous past, Finnish migrant-settlers assert a future claim to land and belonging. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth asking when and how claims of connection—and particularly blood connection—may further function as tools to equate Finnishness with Indigeneity (including race-shifting).¹⁹ Such settler moves rarely leave space for a critical examination of competing interests or Finnish participation in processes of Indigenous displacement, such as land use/holding practices. Yet as Gloria Wekker emphasizes, “no one colonizes innocently ... no one colonizes with impunity.”²⁰

In order to further dialogue and understanding, to move to reckoning through returning land back, “colonial complicity” offers a useful lens to situate the (settler) colonial entanglements of the Finnish nation and Finnish people. Simply put, on the level of the nation-state, colonial complicity addresses “countries [that] were neither part of the

colonial center but nor can they claim to have remained outside European colonialism.”²¹ In Suvi Keskinen’s view, complicity with global colonial power structures provided the fledgling Finnish nation-state and its citizens with the opportunity of “being included in hegemonic notions of Eurocentric modernity and the material benefits it promise[d].”²² Ulla Vuorela demonstrated the intimate everyday ways colonial complicity shaped (and continues to shape) Finnish lives and attitudes, particularly through schools and children’s upbringing: “our minds were ‘colonised’ into an acceptance of colonial projects, and we took on board the then ‘universally’ accepted regimes of truth.”²³ These “truths,” in turn, entail/ed equating (Northern) Europeanization with “civilization” and the accompanying internalization of white supremacy inherent in such a belief.

Placing Finnish North Americans through Life Writing

With a fresh framing for viewing Finnish migrant settlerhood, contextualized in Finnish notions of their colonial positioning, we can now turn fruitfully to a close reading of Finnish migrant-settler autobiographies and family histories. These sources lend themselves to engaging, as Laura Madokoro has compellingly urged, in the work of “unpacking the various dreams, motives, and aspirations of people in motion to discern what they can tell us about the making of settler colonial societies and their continued preservation as communities where the nationhood and legal claims of Indigenous peoples are marginalized.”²⁴ Here, I bring together 12 texts written by and about Finnish North Americans, providing a representative sample of autobiographical works available through the Migration Institute of Finland’s comprehensive library of Finnish North American publications.²⁵

Two of the analyzed works are exceptional in that they were directed at popular audiences in Finland and were published much earlier than the others. K. E. Lahtinen’s memoir of fur trapping in 1930s Canada, *Suomalaisia Intiaanien Poluilla – Turkismetsästäjän muistelmia* (Finns on Indians’ Paths: A Fur Trapper’s Memoir), was published in Finland in 1946 by Gummerus. The 1950 Otava-published book *Tau-Wow – Matkani Kanadassa* (Tau-Wow: My Travels in Canada) by Valentin (the pen name of journalist Ensio Rislakki) is a travel memoir, rather than a settler narrative, but provides useful insights on Finnish com-

munities in Canada at the time and about Finnish conceptions of First Nations people.

The other ten texts analyzed texts are, in chronological order of publication: Reino Nikolai Hannula, *Blueberry God: The Education of a Finnish-American* (1979); Maria Lindroos, *Me and My Life* (1980); Olga Fagerlund, *Tarinani lännen ihmemaassa* (*My Story in the Wonderland of the West*) (1980); Ernest T. Koski, "Autobiography" (1981); Sanelma S. Pulkka, *Let Me Be Me* (1988); Mavis Hiltunen Biesanz, *Helmi Mavis: A Finnish American Girlhood* (1989); Gertrude Tiitinen, *A Finnish American Family: How It Was in the Old Days* (1991); Nelma Sillanpää, *Under the Northern Lights: My Memories of Life in the Finnish Community of Northern Ontario* (1994); Veli Ensio Eronen, *Kanadan Kutsu* (2001); and Nancy Jarvis Hager, *Traces of Four Finnish Families* (2015). Out of these, all but the works of Lindroos, Hiltunen Biesanz, Sillanpää, and Eronen were self-published.

I approach these autobiographies and family histories as *life writing* texts, through which the authors seek to share something of their sense of self, and situate themselves in time, place, and belonging.²⁶ In the Introduction to *Helmi Mavis: A Finnish American Girlhood*, Mavis Hiltunen Biesanz explains the impetus for her writing:

Now nearing the end of my seventh decade of life, I am writing this memoir for several reasons. My mother, relatives, and children want me to. My grandchildren say their contemporaries will learn a lot from it, and my own contemporaries will laugh and weep over memories so much like their own. But also, it helps me find out who Helmi Mavis is.²⁷

Like the memoir of Hiltunen Biesanz, the other life writing texts analyzed here (with the exception of the two earliest works) can also be seen as primarily writing/speaking to the author's own family and descendants, in an effort to preserve the family's migrant-settler legacy. They can also be seen as addressing other Finnish migrant-settler descendants, who have a shared frame of reference for the places, pasts, and cultures that are detailed through the text, as well as a wider but arguably also settler North American reader, who can situate the Finnish presence in the broader settler colonial historical narrative of a "nation of immigrants."

Finnish migrant-settler life writing can be characterized as overwhelmingly following the "settler narrative of adaptation, struggle

against a harsh environment, economic development, and integration.”²⁸ A close reading of the life writing texts shows recurring and intersecting narrative strategies in the depiction of Finnish settlement in Canada and the United States. I use the term “strategy” as a nod to both the process of producing life writing narratives and the active work of maintaining settler colonialism. The first is the strategy of claiming belonging through *sisu* and land. Often working in unison with the first, the second strategy is silence, through which colonial histories and practices and Indigenous people and places are rendered absent. The most visible strategy is the delineation of parallel worlds, in which Finnish settlers and Indigenous people coinhabit spaces but without meaningful and/or regular encounters or understandings. The fourth strategy is one of consumption, in which interactions with Indigenous people and places are marked by exoticization and tourism. Many of the texts demonstrate the use of multiple, overlapping strategies, and together tell us much about internalized implicit/complicit settler colonial attitudes and values. As I will demonstrate, the life writing texts also show tensions between the authors’ settler colonial worldviews and their varying levels of recognition of the impacts of dispossession on Indigenous people. An analysis of these life-writing sources provides us with rich and complex new views of Finnish settler colonialism in North America.

Collectively, Finnish migrant-settler life writing serves to situate Finns in North American national histories. They are about belonging. Reino Nikolai Hannula made this objective explicit in his 1979 work *Blueberry God: The Education of a Finnish-American*. Hannula explains that when he realized that Finnish settlers were not part of the leading historical study of his home community of Gardiner, Massachusetts, he was “shocked!”²⁹ He explains: “I tried to shrug it off but I felt as if I were throwing my identity away. ... How could I let those indomitable men and women drop into oblivion without some effort on my part?”³⁰ Hannula, then, set out to write a history of his family and the early Finnish socialists, who he situates as having made significant contributions to society in the United States. These “corrective” North American histories most often follow a struggle to success narrative progression.

Sisu, Land, and Silence

Finnish migrant-settler “pioneer” narratives of settler belonging are told through stories of *sisu*. Hannula’s blue and white book cover, for instance, is emblazoned with this very word (Figure 8.1). *Sisu* is considered to be an essentialist Finnish characteristic without an adequate English language equivalency, but it is often described as a mix of determination, grit, perseverance, and stubbornness. *Sisu* has offered a way to voice Finnish migrant-settler exceptionalism and a tool for interpreting the success of Finnish settlement: Finns thrived in the harsh physical and social environs of Canada and the United States because of their uniquely Finnish *sisu*. Nancy Jarvis Hager concludes her family history by declaring:

This story is about our Finnish forefathers and what they went through. It is also about the Jarvinen (Jarvis) family and what life was like in the early days living on our land. The labor it took to clear the land and to make it livable. The hardships the family went through and the joys of family and friends. It is my desire that you will appreciate whence you came from. You are made of good stock. May you remember you are from Finnish heritage and you have “SISU.”³¹

Sisu has taken on new meanings and significance in the context of migration and forms a key component of Finnish North American identity.³² It has come to define what it means to be Finnish, particularly for the second, third, and fourth (and beyond) generations. The intrinsic connection between settler-migrant *sisu* narratives and settler colonial ethnic chauvinism and attitudes about land ownership are rarely probed.

Land plays a crucial role in the claiming of settler colonial place and history, through the physical and material staking of land for settlement, altering physical landscapes, and renaming, but also through personal and collective level mythologizing of belonging on settler-claimed Indigenous lands. Claiming connection to land(scapes) was a significant project of Finnish nationalism from the late 19th century. Through land, Finnish people solidified and asserted their culture and right to autonomy. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, this practice was continued in North America, with Finns employing their connection to the natural environment as a basis for claiming belonging, identity,

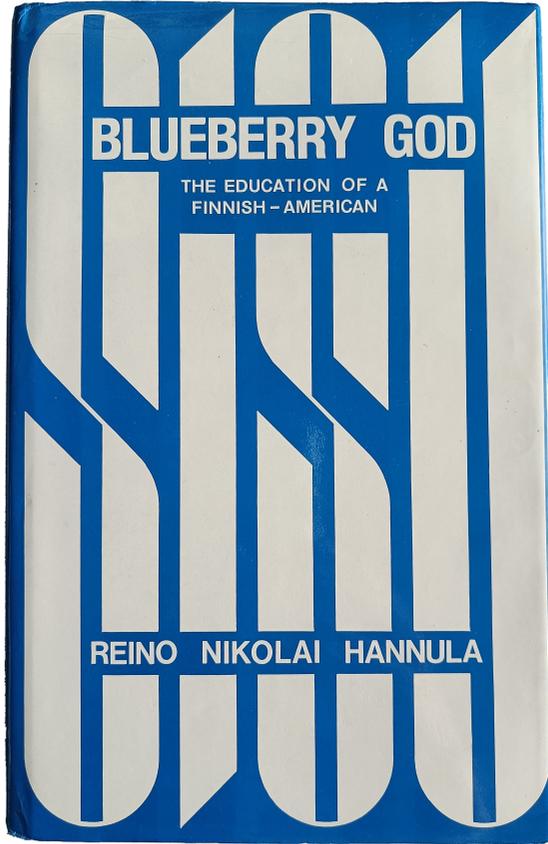


Figure 8.1: Cover of Reino Hannula's *Blueberry God: The Education of a Finnish-American* (San Luis Obispo, CA: Quality Hill Books, 1979).

and history in Canada and the United States.³³ Particularly by drawing on similarities between Finnish nature and the boreal environment of the Great Lakes region, where the most significant number of Finns migrated to, Finnish migrant-settlers were able to assert their “natural” belonging on the lands they settled. The themes of *sisu* and land are closely interwoven and provide an origin story to serve as a foundation for a Finnish North American migrant-settler identity. Through family histories detailing the early days of settlement—felling trees, clearing land, building housing, hunting, and foraging³⁴—Finnish migrant-settlers demonstrate their mastery over the landscape and their entitlement to the places they “developed” through their labor and *sisu*.

Further, by tracing the early North American mobility of Finnish migrant-settlers, the mark they made on many places, and how their descendants ultimately spread out, often settling scattered across the United States or Canada, the life writing serves to map Finnish presence, solidifying their belonging.³⁵ Such mapping entrenches a history and ensures a future.

In telling their families' stories, it is common for the life writers to make no direct reference to North American colonialism, or to Indigenous people or places. It is important to probe such silences, where we identify them, because there is an urgent "need for accountability in the context of generations of presence."³⁶ Perhaps indicative of tendencies more prevalent in urban settlement narratives, Veli Ensio Eronen's life writing about moving to Toronto in the 1950s is without any Indigenous presence.³⁷ Reino Hannula's life writing text melds autobiography with the history of Finns in the United States, covering an impressive array of events and topics, but colonialism is never mentioned and Indigenous people and histories are not featured in any role in the book. Such omissions provide explicit examples of the ways settler colonialism erases and replaces, making invisible local and Indigenous history while writing new settler histories of place and belonging.

While never mentioning Indigenous people or places, throughout her autobiography, Sanelma Pulkka makes several references to "one hundred percent Americans."³⁸ Pulkka does not position herself, her family, or Finnish migrant-settlers in this way, but never explicitly defines what makes a person "100%." It seems, however, that, for Pulkka, ethnic invisibility—bearing no cultural, linguistic, or historical hint of what came before—is the key to this label of Americanness, which is something Indigenous peoples in the United States are never afforded.³⁹ Similarly, in Maria Lindroos's 1980 autobiography, *Me and My Life*, the only mention of First Nations peoples is linked to her thoughts on the "American Melting Pot" and how most people are identified with their ethnicity. Lindroos wrote: "Sometimes I wondered who and where were the real Americans, besides the Indians."⁴⁰ The statement seems to contain a simultaneous acknowledgment and dismissal of Indigenous claims to Americanness and situates Indigenous peoples outside her construction of "America." This type of positioning of North American Indigenous people outside of the Finnish migrant-settler narrative is very common in the studied life writing.

The Narrative Construction of Parallel Worlds and Encounters

The role of other fellow Finns as neighbors and partners in homesteading projects is highlighted in the “pioneer” narratives, at times creating the illusion that they were alone.⁴¹ Nelma Sillanpää’s autobiography provides an example of how space was conceived of as settled when land was cleared and there were other Finns, but everything immediately beyond the Finnish homestead or bush camp was vast wilderness, with connotations of being unclaimed and uncivilized.⁴² The title of Lahtinen’s 1946 memoir depicts ideas of vastness and invisibility (Figure 8.2). Translating into English as *Finns on Indians’ Paths*, the title acknowledges that Finns were indeed on and using Indigenous lands, but leaves open the question of where the Indigenous people were when Finns used their paths. It nods to exoticization and ideas of the “vanishing Indian.”⁴³ Settler colonialism is justified, in part, through the myth of empty lands, belonging to no one (*terra nullius*). This idea of “excess of geography”⁴⁴ is readily evident



Figure 8.2: Cover of K. E. Lahtinen’s *Suomalaisia intiaanien poluilla* (Jyväskylä: Gummerus, 1946).

in Valentin's *Tau-Wow – Matkani Kanadassa*, published in 1950. The book begins: "When Indians and white men meet in the Canadian wilderness, in vast open spaces or unmeasurable forests, they greet each other with the words: 'Tau Wow.' [Translated] in[to] Finnish it means something like 'there's plenty of space.'"⁴⁵ For Finnish audiences, the (supposed) greeting and the presumption of vast spaces positioned settler colonialism as harmless, justified settler land-taking, and assumed the division of spaces for Indigenous communities and settler communities.

When Indigenous people and places do appear in Finnish migrant-settler life writing, they are often framed as separate or parallel to Finnish places and activities. Sillanpää remembered that when she was a child in Algoma District, Ontario, at the beginning of the 1920s, she knew that down the road was an "Indian camping-ground, but didn't dare go that far."⁴⁶ Instead, Indigenous people were primarily watched from a distance. Sillanpää was fascinated to watch First Nations people fishing from canoes on the lake and driving dog sleds on the ice.⁴⁷ K. E. Lahtinen, likewise, described watching passing groups in canoes on the waterways of Northern Ontario with intrigued caution.⁴⁸ The presumed difference between Indigenous people and white people is also readily apparent in the ways they are described. For example, Lahtinen consistently referred to "white skin" but described Indigenous people as having "red leather."⁴⁹ This dehumanizing language situated First Nations people as not just wild animals but harvested animals.

Though much more historical research remains to be done to more fully understand the gendered nature of Finnish and Indigenous encounters and exchanges, existing scholarship based on interviews suggest that, while Finnish men had opportunities to interact with First Nations men at job sites and in the wilderness, Finnish women had fewer occasions for such meetings.⁵⁰ As Anne McClintock has demonstrated, meanings of imperialism and its colonial reach, and how people experience it, is gendered, in addition to racialized.⁵¹ For example, when an Inuit man selling caribou meat came into Sillanpää's home when she was alone, the man's presence and their inability to communicate marked the encounter as frightening.⁵² This experience is reminiscent of encounters narrated by Laura Ingalls Wilder about her family's days of prairie settling during the "Indian Wars."⁵³ In contrast, Sillanpää fondly remembered getting rides on a sled from a First Nations girl who lived nearby.⁵⁴ The life writing examined here

confirms Stanley Hunnisett's conclusion in his 1988 study of historical Finnish and First Nations (specifically Ojibwe and Cree) interactions in Northern Ontario that "relationships between the two groups seem to have been relegated largely to chance encounters."⁵⁵ The Finnish migrant-settler authors do not write about any meaningful personal relationships with Indigenous people.

The life writing often reflects a curiosity about Indigenous people, but a simultaneous unwillingness, disinterest, or fear of learning more. Through fur trapping and fishing in the early 1930s, Lahtinen came into regular contact with First Nations hunters and trappers. Yet, none of the many Indigenous people written about in the book are given a name; they are all referred to as "the Indian." In one case, Lahtinen wrote about a group of First Nations fishermen who asked his trapping group where they were headed, but the text does not narrate the Finnish group asking anything in return. Instead, he explained that after the fishing season "they disappear like ash into the wind, each in their own direction, striving for the hem of the rigid wilderness."⁵⁶ Such descriptions gave the impression that Indigenous people are only concrete beings when the object of the white gaze. The lack of engagement with the work and mobility of Indigenous people also calls to mind Aleksi Huhta's demonstration of how Indigenous people largely fell outside the limits of Finnish North American radicals' expressions and commitments of solidarity, because they "were seen as inhabiting areas – and a time – outside industrial civilization."⁵⁷ Huhta argues that this inability to view Indigenous people as workers "illustrates how evolutionary thinking conditioned the racial thinking of many Finnish-American[s],"⁵⁸ which accords well with the impression I have gained through reading these life writing texts.

The "Autobiography" of Ernest Koski is unusual in that his family spent one year, around 1916, living on Net Lake Reservation in Minnesota. His father was employed as the reservation's blacksmith and Ernest was about eight years old and attending second grade. Koski wrote about how the other white families working on the reservation had private tutors, while he and his siblings attended the local school. In the case of his family, Koski explained, "For our parents and for us children, it was exciting to get to know people of another race, to experience their culture, and especially how to learn to get along with them even while we felt our differences."⁵⁹ He recalled learning some "Chippewa" (Anishinaabemowin) through his interactions with class-

mates, exploring the burial ground, and his family attending the harvest feast.⁶⁰ At home, Koski and his sisters would imitate in play the ceremonial drumming, singing, and dancing. His time living on the reservation is covered in one page of his 24-page autobiography. Written 65 years later, and possibly reflecting hazy childhood memory, his Anishinaabe neighbors and friends are not referred to by name, and only extraordinary events are noted, such as suggesting that the main course of the feast was dog meat.⁶¹ Koski's time living at Net Lake provided his life writing with "exotic" anecdotes that firmly maintained the cultural difference and social positions of his migrant-settler family and the Indigenous people on whose lands they lived.

Consumption and Exoticization

Indigenous people in Canada and the United States are presented as for the benefit of white consumption in other Finnish migrant-settler life writing as well. Not only were Finns curious to watch Indigenous people when they passed by chance, some went on outings to try to catch a glimpse. Olga Fagerlund wrote about her delight to have the opportunity to be taken to look at First Nations people at a reserve near her summer work place in Muskoka, Ontario, in the 1930s, exclaiming "are they real Indians!"⁶² Mavis Hiltunen Biesanz wrote that the Chippewa dances were the "traditional highlight" of the annual Fourth of July celebrations in Tower, Minnesota, in the late 1920s.⁶³ She described her memory of the men's and women's clothing, the music, and the dancing. She remembered, "The music stopped, and the chief held out a basket for donations as the spectators began to disperse. ... [W]e named one of the braves 'Hiawatha' and a girl 'Minnehaha,' and all the way up Main Street we practiced powwowing for our summer games in the woods."⁶⁴ David Hoffman has argued that "non-Native children donned Indian identities in order to take them off," further entrenching their own social position.⁶⁵ For Finnish children like Hiltunen Biesanz and Koski, "playing Indian" served to reinforce settler colonial divides between colonized and colonizer.⁶⁶

When Indigenous people themselves set up ways to gain income from the white gaze directed at them, migrant-settlers often expressed dismay and disparaged the labor. Valentin depicted First Nations tourism in Northern Ontario by, firstly, drawing a contrast between "heavy

labor” and what he saw as First Nations people’s “preference” to make “tourist goods.”⁶⁷ He then described:

One little Indian girl who held her one year old sister on her lap, sold to tourists nothing but her face; the girl stood on the edge of the rapids, where travelers came with their cameras to eternalize the landscape. Almost all the photographers quickly realized of course that the rapids and the Indian girl together are better than the rapids alone, and so Blackhair with her sister ended up on film. For her trouble she always got some coin.

Similarly, Gertrude Tiitinen wrote about her family’s road trip stop at an “Indian Trading Post” in South Dakota:

A Sioux Indian chief, of the Ogallala [Oglala] tribe, dressed in full chief regalia was available for pictures beside his tepee. We took his picture with Barbara. We began to walk away after the picture. He called “Lady, people usually give me a dollar for a picture.” I thought he probably was some poor Indian so I gave him a dollar. He gave Barbara a business card on the back of which he wrote an Indian greeting. In our car we read the other side of the card. It said he was a Sioux chief who owned four other Trading Posts in Arizona and New Mexico! That poor Indian probably had more money than we’ll ever have.⁶⁸

The referenced photograph is included in the book. This rich passage suggests that the Sioux man, as viewed by Tiitinen, was only “deserving” to be paid for his time and presence if he was sufficiently poor. It confirms Reetta Humalajoki’s finding that, while the consumption of Indigenous art and culture was seen as quaint and interesting, it also fueled white anxieties.⁶⁹ These passages about encounters in contexts of tourism and leisure point to the difficulty of many migrant-settlers to reconcile their colonial imaginaries of primitive and vanishing “Indians” with contemporary Indigenous people.

Uneasy Divides

Life writing allows us to examine the writers’ tensions about claiming place and belonging for Finnish people while also recognizing the implications of settler colonialism. Lahtinen’s memoir at times dem-

onstrates a keen understanding of colonial realities for Indigenous people, while still most often presenting them as a matter of fact, without acknowledging any role or responsibility for himself or Finnish migrant-settlers more broadly. For example, Lahtinen wrote about the ways the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly and inflated prices for food and essential goods spawned unjust dependency and indebtedness for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people living in remote areas.⁷⁰ Yet, he explained that "often Indians get to suffer straightforward from lack. . . . But these children of nature accept their part and suffer calmly even hunger."⁷¹ Similarly, Lahtinen acknowledged that white settlers have "shoved" First Nations people from their fishing areas, while also describing the hard work and *sisu* of Finns to settle the very same area.⁷² The memoir narrates Lahtinen and his group getting help from and giving help to First Nations families.⁷³ As a fur trapper and fisherman, working far from settler towns, Lahtinen's life shared similarities with Indigenous people engaged in the same work, yet a consistent division is clear throughout the life writing.

Mavis Hiltunen Biesanz's memoir demonstrates a greater empathy than the other texts. It is worth considering that she grew up to become a world traveler, and wrote several ethnographic and sociological studies of Latin America, which may mark the shaping of her life writing narrative. She recalled, as a girl, being very disturbed by Zane Grey's 1925 novel *The Vanishing American* and being "lost in the story of Indians dispossessed of ancient tribal lands and forests, water sources, buffalo herds, and trapping areas."⁷⁴ In the life writing narrative, Hiltunen Biesanz's socialist big brother made the novel relevant for their area of settlement and class positioning by arguing, "You could say we did that around here too. All of this was Chippewa territory. You can find injustice almost anywhere. The mine owners, the lumber barons . . ."⁷⁵ Thus, while acknowledging dispossession, the emphasis was quickly turned back toward the hardships Finnish migrant-settlers had to endure. *Helmi Mavis* is the only work out of the studied autobiographies and family histories that explicitly presents Indigenous people as modern and similar to the Finns. She remembered the local Anishinaabe "teen-age girls [who] flouted tradition. They wore modern makeup rather than war paint, and a reluctant air of just going along with the tribe. Mischievous but unsmiling, they occasionally did a few steps of the polka or the Charleston."⁷⁶ Again, however, these teenagers were watched from a distance. They were similar to Hiltunen Biesanz

and her Finnish migrant-settler siblings and friends, yet they remained distinctly apart.

Conclusion

The parallels and silences employed by Finnish migrant-settler life writers belie the deep entanglements entailed in the structures of settler colonialism. Finnish migrant-settlers' genealogies and identities have been at the expense of Indigenous people. Finnish *sisu* has been exerted on dispossessed lands. "Finntowns" and Finnish rural enclaves are on taken Indigenous places, remade and renamed into the image of the Finnish settler colonialist. The socioeconomic structures Finnish leftists fought to reform entrenched settler governance and the racialized hierarchy of labor. Such realities can be difficult to accept when confronted so bluntly. Finnish migrant-settler life writing, then, provides an important and accessible way to see the everyday ways Finns have been complicit and participant in the shaping of settler colonialism, creating their own version of migrant settlerhood.

Through life writing, we gain intimate and concrete views of land being cleared, of Finnish-style homes and saunas being built, and of game, fish, and berries being harvested. It outlines the branching of Finnish migrant family trees and the establishment of roots in settled land. It shows the ways cultures are consumed, appropriated, and assimilated. Life writing lets us feel the struggles and successes of Finnish migrant-settler protagonists, and makes it clear that the lines between power and subjugation are never clear-cut.⁷⁷ Through their writing, individual life writers claim little pieces of place and history by writing their family's presence and perseverance on Indigenous lands. Taken together, all of the personal life writings come to amount to a significant assertion of Finnish migrant-settler belonging, stretching across the settler states of Canada and the United States.

Creating a written record of their place and past in North America, life writing can serve as a tool of legitimization for the future of Finnish migrant-settlers. Being aware of the narrative strategies used in this process is important. It allows us to be able to identify and counter the ongoing ways Indigenous peoples' rights and personhood can be depreciated through community discourse and commemoration. By offering us a micro-level view of the ways settler colonialism is built and upheld, life writing may also offer us the tools for its dismantling.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful for funding from Kone Foundation, which has enabled this research. Thank you to my “Place & Colonialism Reading Group” colleagues, Reetta Humalajoki, Johanna Skurnik, and Alekski Huhta, the editors and contributors of this collection, and the Migration Institute of Finland’s Research Seminar for enriching discussions that have allowed me to develop my thinking on settler colonialism. As always, thanks to LAM.
- 2 Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 388.
- 3 In this chapter, I have tried to be as specific as possible when referring to Indigenous peoples. When information is available, I refer to the tribe or territory, or specify, in the case of this chapter, First Nations, Inuit, or Métis. I use “Indigenous” when the sources are not specific or if the point being made is more broadly applicable.
- 4 For example, Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” and Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*.
- 5 Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” 5.
- 6 Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 19. Gunlög Fur has also called out this persistent division in “Indians and Immigrants.”
- 7 Moreton-Robinson, *White Possessive*.
- 8 Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” 6–7.
- 9 Madokoro, “On Future Research Directions,” 2. Madokoro’s “migrant settlerhood” is in dialogue with theorizations of contemporary “immigrant migranthood.” See for example, Chatterjee, “Immigration, Anti-Racism,” 646.
- 10 Lehtola, “Sámi Histories,” 23.
- 11 On the longstanding Finnish racial question, see Kivisto and Leinonen, “Representing Race.”
- 12 Classic analyses of these intersections include Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, and Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*. See also Saramo, “Capitalism as Death,” 672.
- 13 Walker, *History of Immigration*; Lee, *America for Americans*.
- 14 Bertram, “Icelandic and Indigenous Exchange.”
- 15 On the “fictions” of Indigenous-Scandinavian migrant-settler relations, see Fur, “Indians and Immigrants,” 58–61.
- 16 Sjöblom, “Indians’ Finnish Friends,” 37.
- 17 Huhta, *Toward a Red Melting Pot*, 390–91; Kettu, Koutaniemi and Seppälä, *Finntiaanien mailla*.
- 18 Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” 3.
- 19 On the practices and damages of such practices, see Leroux, *Distorted Descent*, and Sturm, *Becoming Indian*.
- 20 Wekker, *White Innocence*, 3.
- 21 Keskinen, “Intra-Nordic Differences,” 164.
- 22 Keskinen, “Intra-Nordic Differences,” 164.
- 23 Vuorela, “Colonial Complicity,” 52.
- 24 Madokoro, “On future research directions,” 3.
- 25 The analyzed texts are, in chronological order of publication: Lahtinen, *Suomalaisia intiaanien poluilla*; Valentin, *Tau-Wow*; Hannula, *Blueberry God*; Lindroos, *Me and My Life*; Fagerlund, *Tarinani lännen ihmemaassa*; Koski, “Autobiography”; Pulkka, *Let Me Be Me*; Hiltunen Biesanz, *Helmi Mavis*; Tiitinen, *Finnish*

- American Family*; Sillanpää, *Under the Northern Lights*; Eronen, *Kanadan kutsu*; and Jarvis Hager, *Traces of Four Finnish Families*. All translations from Finnish to English are by the author.
- 26 My analyses of life writing are particularly influenced by Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, and Douglas and Barnwell, *Research Methodologies for Auto/biography Studies*.
- 27 Hiltunen Biesanz, *Helmi Mavis*, viii.
- 28 Veracini, "Imagined Geographies," 187.
- 29 Hannula, *Blueberry God*, xii.
- 30 Hannula, *Blueberry God*, xii–xiii.
- 31 Jarvis Hager, *Traces of Four Finnish Families*, 211.
- 32 For an analysis of *sisu* in Finnish North American literature, see Taramaa, "Stubborn and Silent Finns."
- 33 Saramo, "Lakes, Rock, Forest."
- 34 For example, Sillanpää, *Under the Northern Lights*, 6–9.
- 35 For example, Tiitinen, *Finnish American Family*; Jarvis Hager, *Traces of Four Finnish Families*; and Pulkka, *Let Me Be Me*.
- 36 Madokoro, "On Future Research Directions," 2.
- 37 Eronen, *Kanadan kutsu*. On urban visibility, narratives, and histories, see Trush, *Native Seattle*.
- 38 For example, Pulkka, *Let Me Be Me*, 25, 33.
- 39 For example, Pulkka, *Let Me Be Me*, 147–49.
- 40 Lindroos, *Me and My Life*, 110.
- 41 For example, Tiitinen, *Finnish American Family*, 46.
- 42 Sillanpää, *Under the Northern Lights*, 9 and 25; Saramo, "Lakes, Rock, Forest," 67–68.
- 43 See for example, Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 64.
- 44 Veracini, "Imagined Geographies," 190.
- 45 Valentin, *Tau-Wow*, 5.
- 46 Sillanpää, *Under the Northern Lights*, 14.
- 47 Sillanpää, *Under the Northern Lights*, 14.
- 48 For example, Lahtinen, *Suomalaisia intiaanien poluilla*, 9.
- 49 For example, Lahtinen, *Suomalaisia intiaanien poluilla*, 55.
- 50 Somero, "Sweat-Bath-Men," 25; Frank Hunnisett, "From Pohjanmaa to the Shores of Gitchee Gumees," 24.
- 51 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 5–6.
- 52 Sillanpää, *Under the Northern Lights*, 78–79.
- 53 Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*.
- 54 Sillanpää, *Under the Northern Lights*, 14.
- 55 Hunnisett, "From Pohjanmaa to the Shores of Gitchee Gumees," 24.
- 56 Lahtinen, *Suomalaisia intiaanien poluilla*, 55.
- 57 Huhta, *Toward a Red Melting Pot*, 391.
- 58 Huhta, *Toward a Red Melting Pot*, 394.
- 59 Koski, "Autobiography," 2.
- 60 Koski, "Autobiography," 2–3.
- 61 Koski, "Autobiography," 3.
- 62 Fagerlund, *Tarinani lännen ihmemaassa*, 14.
- 63 Hiltunen Biesanz, *Helmi Mavis*, 63.

- 64 Hiltunen Biesanz, *Helmi Mavis*, 63.
 65 Hoffman, "Playing Indian at Jewish Summer Camp," 415.
 66 See Deloria's influential *Playing Indian* and Fur, "Indians and Immigrants," 67.
 67 Valentin, *Tau-Wow*, 114.
 68 Tiitinen, *Finnish American Family*, 233.
 69 Humalajoki, "Consumption as Assimilation," 979.
 70 Lahtinen, *Suomalaisia intiaanien poluilla*, 56.
 71 Lahtinen, *Suomalaisia intiaanien poluilla*, 56.
 72 Lahtinen, *Suomalaisia intiaanien poluilla*, 9 and 46.
 73 Lahtinen, *Suomalaisia intiaanien poluilla*, 63–67 and 70–74.
 74 Hiltunen Biesanz, *Helmi Mavis*, 74.
 75 Hiltunen Biesanz, *Helmi Mavis*, 75.
 76 Hiltunen Biesanz, *Helmi Mavis*, 63.
 77 Vuorela, "Colonial Complicity," 49.

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