

# Afterword

## Re-Narrating Finnish Histories and Searching for the Politics of Hope

Suvi Keskinen

University of Helsinki

When we published the book *Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region* (Keskinen et al. 2009) over a decade ago, it directly sparked the interest of several Nordic and Central European scholars working with postcolonial and critical race perspectives. The response in Finland was less pronounced, despite the fact that a large part of the contributors came from Finland and the book was reviewed by Finnish scientific journals in gender studies and sociology, among others. In the book, we argued that the Nordic countries are characterized by “colonial complicity”—a concept developed to address the multiple entanglements in the colonial project by countries that had few or no overseas colonies during the heyday of European colonialism. It refers to the ways in which the economic, political, cultural and knowledge-production processes, developed in and through European colonialism, produced a world-system, in which Europe became equalized with civilized, culturally superior and economically developed nations. Even those parts of Europe not considered to constitute its political and cultural core, nor being the prime motors of the cross-Atlantic “triangular trade,” still benefited in many ways from their location in Europe and (what later became named as)

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the “Western world.” Race and racial thinking was an elementary part of this world-system and the power relations it was built on.

The concept “colonial complicity” addressed and sought to articulate the different positions that European countries took in relation to the colonial project. In addition to colonial powers such as Spain, Britain and France, the analytical gaze needed to be directed toward how other parts of Europe participated in and benefited from colonialism and the trade of colonial goods, enslaved people and so forth. We were interested in outlining the differences and the center-marginality relations within Europe, while examining the broad implications of colonialism and racial thinking. Writing from a decolonial perspective, Manuela Boatcă, Sergio Costa and Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2010) point out that a shift in the understanding of the “Occident” took place during the colonial era. The South European countries (Spain, Portugal) that started the over 400-year period of European colonialism gradually lost their leading role to their European rivals. As a result, the North-Western parts of Europe became the center that defined prevailing notions of modernity, European-ness and progress—not only in relation to overseas colonies, but also to other regions within Europe. In this process, Southern and Eastern Europeans came to be perceived as less modern and less white than the new “heart of Europe,” centering countries like England, France and Germany.

The Nordic countries were located in varying positions along this European center-margin division. While not exactly belonging to the “heart of Europe,” Denmark and Sweden were able to lay claims on modernity in economic, political and cultural terms, and participated in the race to establish colonies both overseas and in the Arctic (Höglund and Andersson 2019; Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012; Naum and Nordin 2014). In racial taxonomies, the majority populations in these countries, as in Norway, were categorized to the superior Nordic race (Broberg and Tydén 2003; Hübinette 2017). While parts of the Nordic region and its populations thus could easily lay claims to modernity and white European-ness, others were deemed as peripheral and less white or non-white. The latter group consisted of racialized minorities and Indigenous People within and across the Nordic kingdoms (Keskinen, Skaptadóttir and Toivanen 2019a). Even Finnish history, especially in the pre-independence and interwar periods, witnesses an ambiguous inside/outside position in relation to European-ness and whiteness (Keskinen 2014; 2019). Those questioning the European-ness/whiteness of the Finns were predominantly located in the other European nations and the United States, while the Finnish self-definition, as promoted by politicians and developed in scientific endeavors, largely sought to prove belongingness to white Europe (Isaksson 2001; Kemiläinen 1985).

In today’s Finland, this historical ambiguity in relation to whiteness is not very well known—rather, addressing the thought of the “Mongolian descent” of the Finns is often treated as a humorous anecdote or a relic of the past that is difficult to understand. That whiteness today seems such a self-evident and taken-for-granted characteristic of Finnishness should not make us blind to the

histories that produced Finnish whiteness. The seductiveness of being included in hegemonic notions of Eurocentric modernity (Vuorela 2009) appealed especially to nations at the margins of it and making distinctions toward geographical areas and people perceived to be non-white was a central way of claiming belongingness to Europe (Urponen 2010). Even recent studies of belongingness among youth of migrant background show that the boundaries of Finnishness are rigid and difficult to cross for groups ethnicized and racialized as “others” (Haikkola 2012; Toivanen 2014). Many contributions in this book further elaborate on the relationship between whiteness and Finnishness, as well as their exclusionary effects, showing the relevance of such analytical perspectives to the study of the past and the present.

### Finnish Settler Colonialism and Coloniality

The demand to address questions of colonization and its different layers in the Finnish context has also come from Sámi researchers, activists and artists. Such an analysis does not make use of solely, and sometimes not at all, theories of whiteness; instead, it often draws on Indigenous studies and decolonial perspectives. Many Sámi researchers find inspiration in the concept of “settler colonialism” (Kuokkanen 2020; Veracini 2010; Wolfe 2006), which has been developed to address the logic of elimination and the practices characteristic to the colonization of Indigenous lands. Settler-colonial logic of elimination can take different shapes, ranging from genocide to cultural elimination, linguicide, expulsion of Indigenous populations and replacement of Indigenous institutions with those of the settlers. The settler-colonial logic builds on removal in the effort of gaining access to land; thus, “territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (Wolfe 2006: 388). While operating on a territorial and eliminatory logic, settler colonialism has often been built on racial grammar and racial hierarchies that have legitimized its extractive politics and land appropriation. Settler colonialism also seeks to naturalize its dominance and existence, reducing space for Indigenous cultures and practices, and presenting its power as benevolent, inevitable or belonging to the past (Kuokkanen 2020). In understandings based on the concept of “settler colonialism,” the colonization of Sápmi and the eliminatory logic are ongoing processes and structures. This perspective examines both the historical background and current structures of Nordic societies. Among others, the fishing agreement on the Deatnu River and the plans of building the Arctic Railway from Northern Finland to the coast of Norway are examples of the continued extractive politics of settler states.

The Sámi researcher Veli-Pekka Lehtola (2015) has presented a connected, yet somewhat different, analytical perspective. He uses the concept “persuasive colonialism” to refer to the Finnish colonization of the Sápmi, which has historically taken different forms than the Norwegian or Swedish colonial politics.

The Norwegian assimilation policy (Norwegianization) was coded in legislation and policy measures, whereas the Swedish policy toward the Sámi was based on the essentializing *Lapp skall vara Lapp* (the Sámi should remain Sámi) ideology and a school system that created a separate, less comprehensible educational structure for Sámi children. The Finnish state, on the other hand, did not announce an assimilatory policy or develop parallel structures based on ethnicity, but used its authority and dominance to “dictate in a colonial and fatherly manner what was good for the Sámi” (ibid. 29). The homogenizing ideology of the newly established nation-state was achieved by ignoring and repressing histories, practices and ways of living that did not suit the hegemonic national narrative (Keskinen, Skaptadóttir and Toivanen 2019b). The developing welfare state, with its universalistic discourse, replaced Sámi institutions, culture and language through the installation of its institutions, norms and knowledge production as dominant in the Sámi areas.

In this book, many contributions refer to the concept of “coloniality,” developed in decolonial research in Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa. Coloniality is a useful concept in many ways, since it connects colonial/racial histories to the present operations of power, knowledge and subjectivity. In the theorization of Aníbal Quijano (2000), the emphasis was on coloniality of power or what can also be discussed as the “colonial matrix of power.” Quijano examined the birth of a new global power—colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism—that was built on race as the principle of classifying the peoples of the world, and the control of labor, resources and products. Modernity and rationality were presented as exclusively European characteristics, while the colonized peoples were perceived as inferior and in lack of (relevant) knowledge. Even today, we witness the prevailing global dominance of Eurocentric theoretical models, methodology and academic institutions. Maria Lugones (2010) has argued for the need to understand how the modern, colonial gender system was imposed on the colonized subjects, while masking this in notions of “civilizing missions” and Christianity. She proposes an agenda for decolonizing gender, referring to “a critique of racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social” (ibid. 746). Her approach can be seen as one of the decolonial strands that theorize the intersubjective elements of coloniality.

Coloniality as a concept articulates the connections between past and present colonial/racial relations more firmly than postcolonial perspectives, which tend to address colonial legacies and may end up presenting racial hierarchies as a residue of bygone times. Coloniality also places the Indigenous perspective at the center of the analysis of colonial and racial relations, which highlights its relevance for the analysis of the Nordic countries (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert and Knoblock 2019). Nevertheless, the fact that coloniality is a broad and encompassing term may also provide challenges for empirical and context-specific analysis. It may not be so easy to distinguish the specific forms that race, racism and whiteness take in the Nordic/Finnish context, with such a

broad and temporally far-reaching concept. The research field examining the varying ways in which Indigenous peoples, migrants and racialized minorities are treated by the state, businesses or majoritized white populations may be best equipped when addressing postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, as well as critical race and whiteness studies as a rich set of theoretical traditions from which individual researchers can draw upon depending on their analytical focus.

### “Crisis of White Hegemony” and Politics of Hopeful Solidarity

The editors outline three central themes for this volume—Finnishness, Whiteness and Coloniality. I would like to end with a discussion that, in my view, connects these three themes together, while arguing for the need of social change and the politics of hope. The Finnish society has for some time been in a state that I have called the “crisis of white hegemony” (Keskinen 2018). The connection between whiteness and national identity so carefully built since the independence and especially in the welfare state period after the Second World War, resulting in a firm location within European whiteness, has again been questioned. This time not by race scientists, who would locate Finns among the non-white races as in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but by the presence of new groups racialized as non-white who have found a home in Finland. The perception of Finnishness as whiteness was disturbed even earlier, through the presence of the Roma, Sámi, Jewish and Tatar communities that never did fit into the narrow definitions of Finnish whiteness. But the migration from the 1990s, with increasing (albeit in European comparison low) numbers of migrants from former European colonies, has disturbed the “white hegemony,” building on the consent, common sense and taken-for-granted notions by white Finns, even more severely. This became evident in the aftermath of the 2015 asylum migration, when extreme right groups mobilized in the streets and on social media. The crisis atmosphere was also reflected in the moral panic with which the newly arrived migrants were met by the media and leading politicians of the period. Since the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, white nationalism has mobilized increasingly in politics and the digital space (Keskinen 2011; 2013). The aim of white nationalism is to implement a shift from racial hegemony to racial domination, characterized by coercion, explicit racial hierarchies and expulsion of those perceived as “others.”

The risks connected to white nationalism and racial dominance agendas are serious and threaten both those defined as racial “others” and the political opponents of white nationalism (understood as “traitors” of the nation/race; see Keskinen 2011). However, the “crisis of white hegemony” need not be a state to mourn (cf. Hübinette and Lundström 2014) or have entirely negative consequences. Those who view the connection between Finnishness and whiteness as a violent model, causing pain for those not included in its narrow

definitions of belonging and reproducing colonial/racial structures, can find that the instability of and the disturbance to the taken-for-granted (white) consensus create a moment for social change. When questioning practices that uphold the intertwining of Finnishness and whiteness, state and business actions against Sámi land rights, the conflation of racism and immigration policies, labor market hierarchies and other violent aspects of the current social order, we are opening spaces for a “politics of hopeful solidarity” (see also Keskinen, Skaptadóttir and Toivanen 2019b). This means alliances that work to develop alternatives to both “white hegemony” and “white domination,” recognizing the colonial/racial past and present power relations, but seeking ways to move beyond them. Such actions and alliances are by necessity changing, contradictory and disharmonious, but enable a “politics of hopeful solidarity” that is not only aimed for today, but also for the future.

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