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## CHAPTER 9

# Finns and the Indigenous People in the Great Lakes Region

## Playing with Settler Myths in Late 20th- and Early 21st-Century Finnish American Fiction

*Roman Kushnir*

### Introduction

The myth of a special relationship between Finnish settlers and the Indigenous peoples in North America has proven persistent.<sup>1</sup> From the Finnish settlers of the New Sweden colony in the Delaware area in the 17th century to the immigrants arriving during the “American fever” in the 19th–20th centuries and their descendants today, traditional mythology of Finnish migration often creates an idealized picture of affinity and similarity between the newcomers and the Indigenous population. Finns are typically presented as peaceful, benevolent colonists who were not complicit in the settler colonial dispossession and elimination of the Natives. They stand in sharp contrast with the majority of other Europeans in North America. Finns build amicable relations with Native Americans and share similar cultural traits

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including a particularly close relationship with nature and land. Finns constitute “whites-who-are-like-us” and “sweat lodge men.”<sup>2</sup> They are also described as fellow victims of racism, prejudices, and discrimination stemming from white America. In the early 20th century, there were even public signs saying “No Indians or Finns allowed.” Various forms of media have been used to perpetuate the myth both in Finland and North America ranging from monuments, post stamps, and celebrations commemorating the first Finnish settlement in Delaware to the recent publications and TV programs of the Yle, Finland’s national broadcasting company.<sup>3</sup> While there is more than a grain of truth in this myth, it often glamorizes, romanticizes, and idealizes the history of Finnish–Indigenous relationship, as well as ignores the participation of Finns in American colonialism.

I will explore the Finnish settler migration mythology through a selection of Finnish-American literature produced in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in order to shed light on the ways in which these texts create, spread, and perpetuate the settler myths. Remarkably, in most such texts the Indigenous peoples and all interactions between them and Finns are absent. Nevertheless, there are few exceptions such as the fiction that I study: the collection of short stories *Down from Basswood: Voices of the Border Country* (2001; the second edition in 2013 has the title *Down from Basswood: Voices of the Boundary Waters*) by Lynn Maria Laitala (Figure 9.1), and the novels *Gift: A Novel of the Upper Peninsula* (1992) by Joseph Damrell and *Welcome to Shadow Lake* (1996) by Martin Koskela. I will focus on how these texts feature the relationship between Finnish Americans and the Indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes region (the historical dimensions of Finnish–Indigenous interactions in this region are addressed in [Chapter 2](#) in this volume). My chapter is divided into two sections. In the section “Sharing the Land,” I will investigate how their Indigenous neighbors are present (or not present) in the lives of the Finnish American characters. At the same time, in the section “Taking the Land” I will also pay attention to how Finnish Americans and the Indigenous population are portrayed in relation with another myth of Finns in America—the myth of taking the land in the new country.

All the texts have a strong regional flavor. They are written by the authors from the Great Lakes region (Michigan in the case of Damrell and Koskela, and Wisconsin in the case of Laitala) and are set there,



**Figure 9.1:** The Ojibwe-themed works by Carl Gawboy, a prominent Ojibwe and Finnish American artist, are used as book covers for *Down from Basswood*. “Morning Chores” (the upper image) is on the cover of the first edition, and “Slipping Away into the West” (the lower image) is on the second. Other illustrations in both editions are also made by Gawboy. The images are used with the permission of the artist. All rights reserved.

mostly in Minnesota and/or Michigan, especially the Upper Peninsula, also known as the UP or Yooperland. This region, originally the home to the Anishinaabeg, also became an adopted home of Finns in America.<sup>4</sup> Attracted by the available jobs in the mining and lumber industries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Finns came there to stay. Together with their descendants they have eventually made the Great Lakes region the “sauna belt,” a hub of Finnishness in North America. Thus, Finnish Americans and the local Indigenous peoples share a long and rich history of living side by side in the area. The Ojibwe (also known as the Chippewa), who belong to the Anishinaabeg, are the most prominent Indigenous people in the Great Lakes region with whom Finnish Americans have had most interactions.<sup>5</sup> The Ojibwe are also the Indigenous people mentioned most frequently in the texts I study.<sup>6</sup> *Gift* tells the story of an old-timer, second-generation Finnish backwoodsman, Gus, and his nephew Harry in the Upper Peninsula in the 1990s, recounting the mysteries, family dramas, and environmental issues that touch their lives. *Welcome to Shadow Lake* portrays the hardships, struggles, and victories of immigrant Finns and their US-born children in a small UP town during the Great Depression. *Down from Basswood* chronicles the lives of several generations of Finnish Americans and the Ojibwe in Minnesota from the early 1900s to the late 1970s. Lynn Laitala, a third-generation Finnish American, is a cultural historian and a prose writer. Joseph Damrell, also a third-generation Finn, is a writer and ethnographer, and a professor of sociology and Native American studies at Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin. The late Captain Martin Koskela, a US Army Second World War veteran and entrepreneur, was a second-generation Finnish American who spent most of his life in the Upper Peninsula. Damrell and Laitala are famous writers in the Finnish American community, while Koskela’s reputation, with only one novel published, is more modest.

### Sharing the Land

Although the Ojibwe are present in all three texts as neighbors of Finns in the Great Lakes region, their roles and position are different in each. In Damrell’s novel, the Ojibwe characters are featured often and play an important role in the plot: meeting with two healers from the Watersmeet reservation is a turning point in the protagonists’ lives, but the

major focus is not on them.<sup>7</sup> Koskela's writing has only some tertiary Chippewa characters who are mentioned rather briefly and who are not involved in the central story. Laitala's collection in turn is one of the most (if not the most) Ojibwe-centered Finnish American texts. In *Down from Basswood*, the interactions between the Ojibwe and Finnish immigrants and their descendants is a key component of the plot. However, despite differences in the roles of the Indigenous people, all three texts convey a positive relationship between Finnish Americans and the Ojibwe. When they describe the lives of the Indigenous population and Finnish settlers and their descendants, they feature friendships, romances, intermarriages, closeness, and shared values and attitudes. At least, there is a picture of both groups peacefully living side by side, having good neighborly relations, and thus sharing the land in the Great Lakes region. There are no tensions or conflicts between Finnish Americans and the Ojibwe in the texts. In all three texts (with some exceptions in Laitala's collection) it is the Finns who are in main focus.

The source writings distance Finnish Americans from other whites in their attitude to the Indigenous peoples. Instead, the good relationship between Finnish Americans and the Ojibwe is contrasted with the racism and the derogatory treatment of the Indigenous population by the white US society. For instance, in *Welcome to Shadow Lake* the predominantly Finnish community, called "little Finland," is presented as accepting, tolerating, and welcoming others regardless of their background.<sup>8</sup> This, the book suggests, makes it stand out in 1930s US society. As one of the non-Finnish characters praises Finnish Americans, "they couldn't care less what nationality you are. You can be black, yellow, red or whatever, and they'll hardly notice. In their country they never learned such biases. Show them respect and you'll get theirs."<sup>9</sup> So, in the book some Chippewa people also live side by side with Finns.<sup>10</sup> Similar notions of the special relationship between the Ojibwe and Finnish settlers are also present in *Down from Basswood*. One of the protagonists is the Finnish newcomer Antti, who has just arrived in the USA in the early 20th century. Indigenous characters do not see him in the same way they perceive the majority of other "whites." Instead, he is unique and different not only in appearance but also in his friendly, respectful, and curious attitude, and his desire to learn their ways of life.<sup>11</sup> This is in sharp contrast with 1910s–1920s US society's racist, highbrow, or at best condescending treatment of the



Indigenous peoples as “simple primitive Natives” and “a dying race.”<sup>12</sup> In *Gift*, one of the central characters, the Finn Gus, and to an extent his nephew Harry, the protagonist of the novel, both spend time and share secrets with several Ojibwe, who otherwise face a negative attitude from local white authorities and police.<sup>13</sup> So, Finns are portrayed as exceptional in their relationships with the Indigenous population.

They are also similar to the Natives. Both Finns and the Ojibwe are portrayed as frugal and self-reliant outdoorspeople knowing “how ... to live from nothing but what creation provided,” which is in line with the myth that nature unites Finnish Americans and the Indigenous people.<sup>14</sup> Both groups live off the land and share a deep connection to the land and nature (this aspect will be addressed in more detail in the section “Taking the Land” below). These related values and attitudes are defined as “the Code of the Woods” in *Gift* or “the rules” in *Down from Basswood*.<sup>15</sup> Both groups are also presented as sharing their know-how of the self-sufficient outdoors life. While the Finnish characters learn a lot from the Ojibwe, they can also teach them skills the immigrants have brought from Finland. For instance, in Koskela’s novel, the Finnish hermit Gust makes traditional Finnish skis for both Finnish Americans and Chippewa.<sup>16</sup> In *Down from Basswood*, Finnish woodworking skills impress the Indigenous people.<sup>17</sup> The abovementioned Antti, who once lived with the Ojibwe, utilizes the knowledge of “living from the woods” to save his and his Finnish friends’ freedom from greedy American companies and to go through the hard years of the 1920s–1940s. He eventually passes the Indigenous ways he has learned to his nephew, thus perpetuating their heritage among Finnish settlers in Minnesota.<sup>18</sup> The special relationship with nature, which unites Finns and the Indigenous population, is also present in *Gift*: “Weren’t Finns coming out of some stone-age Lapland/reindeer herd/frozen tundra/mythic Arctic past that wasn’t altogether different from the Native experience, or at least akin enough to allow them to relate to Native people?”<sup>19</sup> Gus, a decades-long poacher and skillful outdoorsman on his own, is saved from death in the wilderness by two Ojibwe healers, Eddie Small Legs and Dan Foucault. His outdoors lifestyle makes him “primed” to share the Indigenous secrets and wisdom.<sup>20</sup> This experience gives him a new vision of his own place in nature.

The source texts also draw parallels between Finns and the Indigenous people by portraying them as brothers and sisters in troubles, and fellow victims of the white US society and authorities. This is

particularly the case with the episodes of *Down from Basswood* detailing the early days of Finnish America in the first half of the 20th century, when both Finnish immigrants and the Ojibwe are being alienated, stigmatized, and downtrodden by white Americans with their racist, prejudiced, and oppressive attitudes. Both groups are at the bottom of the society. Despite their wisdom, knowledge, and skills, they both are othered, distanced from white America, either as “primitive Natives” destined to die out in reservations or as low-paid manual workers: “Finlanders ... weak minds but strong backs” at best, or ungrateful and undesirable “alien filth – scum” and “violent radicals and revolutionaries” at worst.<sup>21</sup> Oppression and violence are directed at them both. While the Ojibwe are removed from their ancestral lands against their will, sent to the reservations to live under the government’s control and restrictions, and forced to hide or abandon their heritage altogether, Finnish immigrant laborers are simultaneously “treated like beasts” in the mills, lumber camps, and mines.<sup>22</sup> They are “less than a slave,” and are blacklisted and persecuted indiscriminately after labor strikes in which the Finns participated.<sup>23</sup> Any attempts to resist the oppression in the early 20th century are brutally subdued by the US authorities. The Ojibwe’s sacred sites are taken from them by the government, and the immigrants’ prized Finn Hall is also eventually sold out by the Americanized Finn not interested in preserving the old heritage. Thus, both groups practically mirror each other’s experiences. Later in the century, both Finns and the Ojibwe are sent out to fight America’s wars overseas (the Second World War and Vietnam).<sup>24</sup> In *Down from Basswood*, the shared experience of being excluded and marginalized minorities is presented as creating particular understanding between Finnish Americans and the Ojibwe and making them help each other. The similarity of their experiences is neatly summarized by the characters’ words near the end of the book. In the late 1970s the US government’s new forest legislation and restrictions on logging and natural resource use are ruining the Minnesota locals’ (including Finnish Americans) way of life in the same manner Washington once ruined the Indigenous lifeways. So, the characters bitterly conclude: “We are all Indians now ... we are all Indians.”<sup>25</sup> However, it is remarkable that these particular words are uttered decades after the immigration era and only in the moment when the local white dwellers’ rights to use the land, which used to be safe before, are being threatened by the US



authorities that earlier took the land from the Ojibwe and gave it to the immigrant settlers.

The topic of being fellow victims is also present in *Gift*, where the Finnish American central characters and their Ojibwe friends Dan and Eddie are all targets of the negative attitude of the authorities and consequently share a marginalized position as late as in the 1980s–1990s. The Indigenous people are “not treated very well by the cops around here - to say the least” and are “a customary, perpetual focus of official action” in the UP.<sup>26</sup> Their friend Gus, in turn, is “a troublemaker,” “a rebel,” and “something of a certified public enemy” at odds with the police, game wardens, and authorities in general (also with mainstream US society with its commercializing attitude to nature).<sup>27</sup> This fiercely independent second-generation Finnish old-timer along with his kind are presented as suspicious relics from the past, so out of place in the “modern” Michigan of the 1980s–1990s, an “embarrassment” being “in the way of progress.”<sup>28</sup> In such treatment, the parallels between him and the Indigenous people are obvious. After having troubles with the law, Gus finds a place to hide in the reservation, and the police after him are portrayed as being derogatory toward both “dumb Finlanders” and “bow and arrows.”<sup>29</sup> Both *Gift* and *Down from Basswood* present Finns and the Ojibwe as fellow victims. Both texts also tell a similar story about how mainstream US society comes to the Upper Midwest, has little to no concern for the locals and their way of life, and ruins it.<sup>30</sup> This poses a threat to Finnish Americans and the Indigenous people of the Great Lakes region.

The source fiction also portrays how Finns and the Ojibwe participate in each other’s cultures, share practices, rituals, and traditions, and sometimes produce new hybrid forms of culture. Koskela’s novel briefly mentions the Finnish hermit Gust’s having a Chippewa dream catcher in his house given to him by his Indigenous friends.<sup>31</sup> Damrell’s and Laitala’s texts describe the interaction between two cultures in more detail. In *Down from Basswood*, Antti, who lives among the Ojibwe, is depicted as someone able to join (or at least understand) them in their reverent attitude to the woods: “I touched Antti’s wrist, to make him still while I listened to the voices of the manitous, the mysteries in the woods. Did Antti hear them, I wondered?”<sup>32</sup> When the Ojibwe village is hit by the Spanish flu and then forcibly relocated to the reservations, he builds on the grave of his Ojibwe friend Charlie “a strange new spirit house like no one had ever seen. It was built

of squared logs, tightly fitted, with dove-tailed corners. ... The spirit house stood over Charlie's grave for many years. Charlie's spirit had gone from it, but Antti's lingered on."<sup>33</sup> Remarkably, the final story in Laitala's collection is culminated with the episode of the powwow memorial dance, which serves to commemorate one of the elders of the local Ojibwe community. The dance is joined by both the Ojibwe and some Finnish Americans.<sup>34</sup> The shared dance, "the river of life that flowed around the circle," can be understood as a metaphor of the decades-long history of Finnish American and Indigenous people living and dying side by side, peacefully sharing the land of Minnesota, and having a similar worldview, all of which is the central topic of this collection of short stories.<sup>35</sup>

In *Gift*, Finnish and the Indigenous cultures and traditions (especially those connected to nature and mysticism) become intertwined. The Ojibwe healers Dan and Eddie save both the life and soul of Gus, the protagonist Harry's uncle. He is then allowed to participate in a number of their ceremonies. This sets Gus to a new course in life—he quits his career as a poacher and instead becomes a defender of the local wilderness to give something back to the woods.<sup>36</sup> "[T]hey said finding him was a great spiritual sign and that Gus was no longer the old Gus but had been reborn."<sup>37</sup> The novel also puts an emphasis on the sauna and sweat lodge, which is in line with the myth of particular closeness and understanding between Finns and the Indigenous peoples. For Harry and his family, their sauna plays a special role in their lives. Built by their immigrant ancestors and later restored by the US-born descendants, it is "the soul of the ... farm" and "a piece of family history."<sup>38</sup> Yet it also becomes a site of tragedy as Harry's father commits suicide in the sauna. Dan and Eddie declare it "haunted," and the sauna has to be burned down and later rebuilt.<sup>39</sup> When Gus takes part in their ceremonies in the reservation, he fondly remembers the sweat lodge and compares it with the Finnish sauna: "the wigwam lodge, a smallish dome made of saplings, cedar boughs and canvas, was equal of the best sauna in its capacity to produce mind-melting heat."<sup>40</sup> After Gus's death, Harry, Dan, and Eddie take a sauna together to mourn and honor him. As Harry puts it, "Sauna, sweat-lodge, steam bath—all the same. The walls dripping, the steam flowing through one's body, merging memory with present; visions of ancestors and friends, of the wolf, raven, bear, tribe, the living, the dead."<sup>41</sup> Thus, for the characters, Finnish and Indigenous lore comes together there.

On the whole, in portraying the Indigenous people in the lives of Finnish Americans in the Great Lakes region, the source texts curiously play with the myth of a specific Finnish–Indigenous relationship. On the one hand, the novels and short stories present the interactions between Finns and the Ojibwe sharing the land in accordance with this myth. They feature many similarities and shared cultural practices and experiences. What emerges is an image of a positive Finnish–Ojibwe relationship with some stereotyping, idealization, and romanticization. Yet the fiction analyzed can also be understood as dispelling and deconstructing the myth. It is remarkable that in all three texts it is some sort of outcasts and outsiders of Finnish community in North America (be it vagabonds, hermits, loners, rebels, troublemakers, or activists of different sorts) who have the best relationship with the Indigenous people. In the texts, the bulk of Finnish Americans in general do not show any particular interest toward the Ojibwe and simply live their own lives in America with little to no interactions with the Indigenous population. Finns and the Ojibwe *en masse* are portrayed as living nearby for years and even decades, sharing the land but not necessarily sharing any activities together. As the protagonist Harry puts it in *Gift*, “Indians and Finns had only labored together but never had any joint community involvements of which I was aware.”<sup>42</sup> So, in the texts the special relationship between Finnish Americans and the Indigenous people in the Great Lakes region is shown to be primarily on the individual level rather than on the level of their communities. Even among the individual characters not everybody has this closeness and shared understanding with the Indigenous population. In Laitala’s text, some Finnish immigrants, fresh off the boat and at the bottom of the US society in the early 20th century, still see (at least for a time being) the Indigenous people with suspicion, as “wild Indians,” which is the way US white society sees them.<sup>43</sup> In *Gift*, Harry, although friendly with his uncle’s Ojibwe friends, is not as close with them as his relative, and expresses some wariness and suspicion.<sup>44</sup>

As for the myth of being fellow victims, the texts also deconstruct it to an extent. They portray the earlier Finnish American generations’ experiences with the US racism and prejudices questioning the “whiteness” of Finns. For instance, Koskela’s and Laitala’s books mention the attempt to classify Finns as Mongolians and deport them under the Oriental Exclusion Act in the early 20th century.<sup>45</sup> However, the texts also draw attention to Finns quickly becoming “white” enough and thus

accepted.<sup>46</sup> Damrell's novel also tells about the US-born Finns' deliberate efforts to distance themselves from their suspicious immigrant past and roots in favor of "good Lutheran, Republican, north country, white guy values."<sup>47</sup> Thus, distance eventually grows between Finns and the Indigenous people, once fellow victims of US racism. While Finnish Americans, "white-who-are-like-us," are portrayed as becoming more and more "white," and gradually allowed (but not quite as their immigrant past has not been entirely forgotten and can be remembered and reminded of), the Indigenous population stays behind. As one of the Ojibwe bitterly concludes in Laitala's short stories, even in the late 1970s the Indigenous peoples remain the "lowest thing in America."<sup>48</sup> The texts also play with the myth of Finnish Americans being not complicit in American (settler) colonialism and replacement of the Indigenous population, which is the topic of the following section.

### Taking the Land

In the Finnish American migration mythologies there is also another prominent myth—the myth of taking the land and Finnish-specific attitude to nature, living off the land in harmony. Getting their own land formed one of the main motivations of Finns (and other European immigrants in general) coming to North America. The myth emphasizes the settlers putting down roots and acquiring a sense of belonging in the new country by claiming the land as theirs. In this myth, the Finnish Americans created their own "Little Finland" in the USA and Canada, particularly in the Great Lakes region. They did so coming to the "wild, empty, no one's land" and making it their own, as well as bringing culture and civilization. They practically carved this "Little Finland" with farms, schools, Finn Halls, and other Finnish facilities and activities out of the "wilderness" as brave and heroic pioneers (see [Chapter 2](#) in the present volume, which addresses the settlers' cherished self-image as Finns "making gardens out of the wilderness").<sup>49</sup> At the same time, this myth ignores the fact that historically this allegedly "no one's" land was often taken from the Indigenous peoples shortly before or after the arrival of Finns to America, and the area was made ready for Finns to settle. This is hardly congruous with the myth of good relationship with the Indigenous population and Finnish exceptionalism, yet both myths somehow coexist in the mythology of Finnish migration. The topic of acquiring their own land and making

the land theirs remains notable in Finnish American literature, and Anita Aukee Johnson highlights the central role of the land in providing value and identification.<sup>50</sup> However, Finnish American texts rarely reflect on how taking the land is connected with the Indigenous dispossession—the Indigenous people are conspicuously absent when it comes to the topic of land acquisition.

This theme of Finnish Americans' "own land" and closeness with this land also permeates all the source texts of my chapter. The authors portray how Finns get enrooted in the Upper Midwest and attach themselves to the land. This firm and at times practically spiritual connection to the land and nature constitutes one of the main plot lines in all three texts. In *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, the characters seek to protect their farms, co-op sawmill, and local forest from the perils of the Great Depression and a local Finnish American timber baron in particular (and the whole US capitalist system in general). In *Down from Basswood*, the author chronicles the history of Finnish immigrants coming to get "their own land" in Minnesota and developing a fledgling Finnish American settlement into a full-grown community on that land. In *Gift*, the former poacher Gus, after his pivotal meeting with the Indigenous people and shared mystical experience, turns into an environmentalist, an "eco-warrior" protecting local nature.<sup>51</sup> Later he goes to die in the woods to give something back and to become one with the land that has provided for him his whole life. Thus, the motivation of Finns' interactions with the land and nature may be different—some want to start a farm or begin a successful logging business, while others seek to find a place far from civilization to achieve solitude and peace for their souls. Yet the similar motive of the land and nature is present, and throughout all three texts the Finnish Americans are portrayed as living off the land and "living on the land."<sup>52</sup> The land feeds them through farms, tree farms, logging, hunting/poaching, fishing, foraging, etc. It provides Finns with sustenance and material goods, but also with freedom, independence, and the sense of belonging. However, the authors treat the Indigenous peoples, who are the original inhabitants and owners of that land, in different ways. They are practically nonexistent in relation to the land in *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, more notable in *Gift*, and most prominent in *Down from Basswood* (which is also the only text addressing the dispossession of the Indigenous population).

Thus, the myth of taking the land is present in the source fiction: Finnish settlers claim a place in North America via emphasizing their

“natural” connection to the environment. Claims for the Great Lakes area as a Finnish region, “Little Finland,” recur in all three texts. They emphasize that Finns are everywhere throughout the Upper Midwest and even the United States in general. “[L]ots of you Finns in Minnesota” is an observation made by a non-Finn in Koskela’s novel, while in one of Laitala’s short stories a Finnish immigrant in early 20th century proudly says: “anywhere you go, you’ll find Finns.”<sup>53</sup> Damrell’s novel in turn, being set in the 1980s–1990s, portrays the lasting legacy of once-numerous first- and second-generation Finnish settlers in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. In all three texts, Finnish presence in the area is made visible by depicting Finnish farmsteads, saunas, and log cabins in the local landscape. Perhaps most notably, the topic of rootedness of Finns in the region (and in America in general) and the similarity between Finland and the Great Lakes area is addressed in Koskela’s novel. The Finnish American characters trace their community of Shadow Lake back to the original New Sweden colony: a founding father of their settlement is told to be a Finnish pioneer, “probably the first settler” in the area and “a descendant of the Delaware Finn colony of 1638, who wandered westward.”<sup>54</sup> His footsteps were followed by other Finns lured to the area “because it reminded them of the Old Country and offered them something they never had there, a chance to build their own future on their own land.”<sup>55</sup> Using their “natural talent” in woodlands and outnumbering other Europeans, the settlers quickly turned Shadow Lake and the surrounding territories into something “like a colony of their Suomi homeland” and “the ‘little Finland’ of farmers.”<sup>56</sup> There they can live in a safe bubble of Finnishness, “among their own kind, in a sanctuary where they feel secure,” and where it is not even a necessity for the immigrant generation to speak English.<sup>57</sup> As the author puts it, “[t]hey felt at home in Michigan’s upper peninsula [sic] of lakes and forests. The peninsula ... resembled their departed homeland in many respects” and they “turned to the land, to struggle among tree stumps and stones, as their fathers and forefathers had done.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, for the settlers, the decades-long history of the ownership of the land, similarity between Finland and the UP, and “natural” connection to the land legitimize their presence in America and in the Great Lakes region in particular. For them, all of this makes the land theirs and consequently their home.

The Finnish American settlers in the texts are at times celebrated as heroic pioneers and civilizers of the region who clear the land and



triumph over the rugged landscape and other obstacles in the process. They are shown as coming to the allegedly wild unsettled land of the Great Lakes region, often even “discovering” it (as some of them see their immigrant ancestors not only as the first settlers, but also practically as the first people in the area) and “creating farms out of the wilderness” and “establishing a home” there.<sup>59</sup> The texts also emphasize that, besides building farms and homes, and carving livelihoods out of the wilderness lands, the newcomers bring along culture and civilization. Koskela’s and Laitala’s texts describe the settlers establishing Finn Halls with numerous cultural facilities and activities such as libraries and amateur theaters, starting co-ops and other businesses, turning a local crag into a ski hill, etc.<sup>60</sup> Damrell’s novel in turn pays attention to how their Finnish culture eventually got firmly enrooted in the Upper Peninsula and thus became involved in forming the unique regional culture. Overall, the texts mostly portray the Finnish presence in the area as a boon to the Great Lakes region. Finns are depicted as the people transforming the wilderness into cultivated and civilized land. This is in line with how the land-taking myth sees the settlers. It is also remarkable that, despite Finns and the Ojibwe in the texts having a good and even exceptional relationship, the Indigenous people are conveniently absent when it comes to the land, which is seen by the settlers as “no one’s, empty, wild,” and ready for them to take. Although it may be only one part of the story, most of the settler-generation characters really see the land and their role on it in accordance with the land-taking myth. So, this perceived emptiness of the wilderness lands follows the myth and the way the Indigenous people are usually treated in and by that myth.

Yet, on the other hand, the source novels and short stories are not uncritical of this myth. In portraying the Finns’ interactions with the region, they also offer a different approach to the land and land-taking that can be seen as deconstructing the abovementioned myth. This is especially true when considering the alleged noninvolvement of Finnish Americans in American settler colonialism and exploitation of nature. The concentration on the land and its central position in the texts draws attention to the fact that the characters’ interactions with it can be understood as settler colonialism. Land, territory, and access to land lie at the heart of settler colonialism, and territoriality is its specific irreducible element.<sup>61</sup> Settler colonialism destroys to replace; the variety of ways and strategies of liquidation and erasure, such as renaming,

are used to eliminate Indigenous population, the original owners of the land, who stand in the way of precious resources.<sup>62</sup> The colonial acts of discovery are often used as an excuse to claim Native territory.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, colonialism and migration can be connected, specifically in the process of settler colonialism. Early European settlers coming to North America were later followed by migrants moving to the areas where these first settlers had established their presence, and two histories were thus conflated to justify the migrants' presence.<sup>64</sup> Although the source texts rarely depict the Finnish Americans as deliberately destroying and erasing the Indigenous presence in the Great Lakes region as settler colonialism presumes, their interactions with the land still bear many typical features of settler colonialism.

This is noticeable in Koskela's novel. The text casually mentions the Finnish immigrant old timers participating or nearly participating in such projects of American colonialism as Cherokee land rush and building Union Pacific railroad, while the descendants of the Finns from the New Sweden colony are praised by a non-Finn for their being "among the leaders in the push westward from the Atlantic" as a compliment to Finnish Americans.<sup>65</sup> However, more specifically, (settler) colonialism and immigration come together in the novel in the plotline of the Sateenkaari forest, which is one of the central plotlines. The founding father of the Finnish community of Shadow Lake, Martti Mantyla, presumed to be one of the descendants of the Delaware Finns on his way west and the first Finnish settler in the area, stays and acquires the local forest, which eventually receives the Finnish name Sateenkaari (Rainbow).<sup>66</sup> In his last will he asks later settlers, immigrants from Finland, to preserve this forest for the future generations. Eventually, this causes a conflict among Shadow Lake Finns: while the local Finnish timber baron wants to get and cut down Sateenkaari for his profit, the benevolent Finnish farmers seek to protect the forest and leave it to the state to be used as a conservation area.<sup>67</sup> Thus, a reader may note that the fate of the forest is practically a Finnish internal affair: the Finnish settlers have discovered it and named it, and it is Finns who decide its future. While the novel briefly acknowledges the presence of the Chippewa in the area, the Indigenous people have no voice with regard to Sateenkaari, and their perspectives are not considered by the sides involved. This can be approached as an act of settler colonialism as Finns coming to region bring replacement and colonial erasure, albeit not deliberate. They give Finnish names

to the local places (besides Sateenkaari, the novel mentions the name *Itä Perä* (East End), used among Finnish American farmers to refer to their farmland), they use and exploit the local resources as they see fit, and they view the region as “theirs,” while the Indigenous people have no say in the matter. Moreover, the Sateenkaari forest can be seen as a monument to New Sweden, celebrated as a benevolent colony in Finnish American migration mythology. It commemorates the Delaware Finns and their legacy and can be read as symbolically linking the benevolent colony of New Sweden with the benevolent community of Shadow Lake (also called a Finnish “colony” in the text). This accentuates benevolent Finnish colonialism as the majority of the characters want to preserve the forest, not to destroy it, and the forest is ultimately saved at the end of the novel.

The topic of settler colonialism is more directly addressed in Laitala's short stories, which openly tell about the role of Finnish immigrants in the dispossession of the Indigenous people. Early in the text, the local Ojibwe community has been forcibly relocated to the reservation just shortly before or after the arrival of the majority of Finnish American immigrants. These newcomers are by no means responsible for the relocation which has been done by the US authorities. However, the author does not hide the fact that they benefit from that relocation as they get the chance to acquire “their own land” they have dreamed of. Albeit inadvertently and/or unwillingly, Finnish Americans in the area are also shown as being involved in ruining the Indigenous way of life and erasing them. For instance, the immigrants in the 1920s are hired to construct dams, which among other things results in flooding out the wild rice, an important sustenance for the Indigenous people.<sup>68</sup> The short stories highlight how, while not done as a deliberate malicious act on the Finns' behalf, they nevertheless replace the Indigenous presence in the area when former tribal lands with a destroyed Ojibwe village eventually become a place where the Finnish community is built. After the Indigenous people have been sent away to reservations, the newcomers successfully use the skills and know-how earlier learned from them to settle down in the region.<sup>69</sup> At times, it is practically a literal replacement: when a Finnish American boy discovers what he sees as an “Indian grave,” it proves to be a mass grave of immigrant miners.<sup>70</sup> This can be interpreted as a potent symbol of Finns replacing the Indigenous presence both on the land and in the ground of Minnesota. Laitala's short stories constantly juxtapose the Indigenous

and Finnish relationship with the land. The former are removed from their ancestral land and homes, and “scattered throughout Minnesota and Ontario” by the government, and put to prison-like reservations.<sup>71</sup> Even there the Department of Natural Resources and the Bureau of Indian Affairs deprive them of the rights to use the land (via hunting, fishing, logging, rice harvesting, etc.).<sup>72</sup> Finns, however, are generally allowed to settle and live on “their own land” as they see fit. The Ojibwe are portrayed as being forbidden to connect to their tribal lands and thus devoid of stable identity and anchor, while the Finnish settlers are left alone to construct their identities on the said land. While Finns get their new home, the Indigenous people lose their home.

The three source texts (more deliberately in the fiction by Damrell and Laitala) also dispel another element of the land-taking myth—the especially careful attitude of the Finns to the land and nature in contrast to the US exploitation. Despite emphasizing the settlers’ “natural connection” to the region, the books also do not shun that they can (and often do) exploit and ruin the area. The texts address deforestation inflicted on the region by the Finnish workforce in the lumber industry, sometimes not only by hapless poor immigrant lumberjacks but also by wealthy Finnish American timber barons.<sup>73</sup> The “natural connection” and its know-how can be used by Finns just to exploit the local nature more ruthlessly than others. For instance, in the novel by Damrell, the second-generation Finnish American skilled outdoorsman Gus uses his talents for poaching and is notorious for allegedly “killing the last wolf in the U.P.,” and it is only the meeting with the Ojibwe that makes him change his ways after “years of predation and self-destruction.”<sup>74</sup>

Overall, not all the books show land-taking as territorial acquisition from the displaced Indigenous people, whose ownership of the land is erased. Not all of them openly address the underside of the “taking the land” myth. Many elements of this myth are still present in the fiction in question, namely the theme of settling as “improving land,” bringing along culture and civilization, claiming “empty and wild land,” etc. While the Indigenous people may be treated with sympathy by the characters, they are still put aside by the settlers in the same way as US white society does, when it comes to land. However, the texts also draw attention to a clear advantage in terms of the land and its use that the Finnish settlers have over the original owners and inhabitants because of the mainstream US attitude. While, on the one hand, Finns

and the Indigenous people are shown as having much in common, on the other hand the texts illustrate that there is an important difference between them. Finns may face problems in the new country, but nobody prevents them from taking and using the land as much as they want, while the Ojibwe are not allowed to use their own land. However, in general the texts still feature the images of settler–Indigenous amity and reconciliation that, according to Penelope Edmonds, are so common in American history.<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusions

In Finnish American literature there has been (and to some extent still is) mostly silence about Finnish American settlers' interactions with the Indigenous peoples practically in the same way the Finnish migrant life writing stays silent on the matter (see [Chapter 8](#) in this volume).<sup>76</sup> Yet a close reading of literary texts can offer the opportunity to refocus, reframe, and reconceptualize Finnish experiences in North America. Ethnic and immigrant literatures often reinvent the past by creating an image of newcomers' history in their adopted land, at times idealized and whitewashed. Finnish American literature is not an exception. It is highly important to study what kind of image of Finnish Americans and their past (and present) these literary texts project. My analysis demonstrates that, on the one hand, the texts can be approached as reinforcing the Finnish–Indigenous myth. They feature perennial images and themes as well as familiar one-dimensional and/or glamorizing and sugarcoating stereotypes, such as shared lore and mysticism, sauna–sweat lodge similarity, shared special affinity with nature and woods, and, all in all, Finnish uniqueness and exceptionalism in their relationships with the Indigenous peoples. When they portray the interactions between the Finnish American and the Indigenous population, the novels and short stories usually bring to the forefront predominantly amicable relationship. They seemingly shun and hide the less pleasant side of the real history such as Finnish settlers also being complicit in the acts of American colonialism and the Indigenous dispossession. This is epitomized in the presence of two hardly congruous (yet somehow coexisting in Finnish migration mythology) myths in the source texts: the myth of a Finnish–Indigenous special relationship and Finnish exceptionalism, and the myth of taking the land. When it comes to the process of claiming the Great Lakes region as Finnish, the

local Indigenous peoples are portrayed as being conveniently absent, and the land is “empty and wild” for Finns to take.

Yet, on the other hand, the novels and short stories in question, at least to some extent, can be approached as also going deeper and beyond the familiar myths, and giving readers the opportunity to look at them from a different angle. This challenge to the myths is most deliberate in the fiction by Laitala and partly by Damrell, while rather inadvertent in Koskela’s novel. Overall, these three texts both reinforce and deconstruct these myths. For instance, while painting an amicable relationship between Finnish Americans and the Indigenous people, they can draw attention to the fact that only a handful of Finnish Americans have this special relationship, while the majority of Finns are rather indifferent to their Ojibwe neighbors and live their own lives without any significant contacts or interactions. So, this special relationship is depicted as far from universal. While the texts feature the myth of taking the land and Finnish settlers’ “natural” connection with it, the novels and short stories also do not hide that despite their special affinity with nature, Finnish American characters are as involved in exploiting and destroying the local nature and wildlife of the Upper Midwest as anybody else. In the texts, the settlers’ interactions with “their own” land and the process of turning the Great Lakes region into “Little Finland” can be approached as settler colonialism, replacement, and erasure, although the texts themselves may not necessarily present them as such. However, in my selection of fiction only the collection of short stories by Laitala openly and directly addresses the underside of the “taking the land” myth by showing where the settlers’ “own land,” allegedly empty and free to take, has actually come from, and demonstrating the role of Finns in the process of the Indigenous dispossession. On the whole, the multifaceted topic of the complex relationship between Finnish Americans and the Indigenous peoples, and land as represented in Finnish American literature deserves further study. Hopefully, my chapter will draw more attention to it. As it has shown, the Indigenous population, while not in the focus, are not missing entirely from Finnish American literature.



## Notes

- 1 This chapter was made possible by generous support from the University of Jyväskylä.
- 2 Kettu, Seppälä and Koutaniemi, *Fintiaanien mailla*, 8, 40.
- 3 The YLE materials include but are not limited to the documentary *Fintiaanit* (2019) and a number of articles such as “Findians: The Story of Finns’ Distant Cousins” (2016) by Silja Massa and “Suomalaissiirtolaisia ja intiaaneja yhdisti metsä” (Forest United Finnish Immigrants and Indians) (2015) by Heidi Sommar.
- 4 Kettu, Seppälä, and Koutaniemi, *Fintiaanien mailla*, 14.
- 5 Kettu, Seppälä, and Koutaniemi, *Fintiaanien mailla*, 19.
- 6 The words Ojibwe or Chippewa are not used in Damrell’s novel, and the Indigenous characters are referred to as just “Indians” there, but, given it is mentioned that they come from the Watersmeet reservation (Lac Vieux Desert Reservation in Watersmeet Township in the Upper Peninsula inhabited by the Lake Superior Chippewa), it can be presumed from the context that these characters belong to the Ojibwe.
- 7 Damrell, *Gift*, 65.
- 8 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 25, 72.
- 9 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 117.
- 10 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 103, 139.
- 11 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 7–11, 13–14.
- 12 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 82; 89. As Brian W. Dippie demonstrates in his classic study *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (1982), such a perception of the Indigenous peoples as a “dying” or a “vanishing race” doomed to extinction has been persistent and widespread throughout the US culture, literature, and policy for centuries. It was used as a convenient justification for the Indigenous elimination and dispossession.
- 13 Damrell, *Gift*, 5.
- 14 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 9.
- 15 Damrell, *Gift*, 32; Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 92–93.
- 16 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 137.
- 17 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 140.
- 18 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 58–59, 92–93.
- 19 Damrell, *Gift*, 90.
- 20 Damrell, *Gift*, 90–91.
- 21 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 37, 62–63, 82.
- 22 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 54. Although the most significant dispossession of the Anishinaabeg happened throughout the 19th century with the USA and Canada involved, in the 20th century the Ojibwe in the Great Lakes region also experienced loss of the land and the white authorities’ efforts to erase their culture with such assimilation policies as boarding schools, land allotment, laws limiting the use of their land (for instance, prohibiting hunting and fishing, and imposing agriculture instead), etc. Mining and lumber companies hungry for the resources of the region as well as a number of construction projects such as dams also played their part in destroying the Indigenous way of life. For more

- information see Gagnon, *Story of the Chippewa Indians*, Norrgard, *Seasons of Change*, and Bellfy, *Three Fires Unity*.
- 23 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 46–47. In the first half of the 20th century Finns were actively involved in socialist and labor movement in the USA. This was particularly the case in the Upper Midwest where the immigrants from Finland were heavily concentrated in mining and lumber industries. They were active participants in labor strikes such as the 1907 Mesabi Iron Range strike, the 1913 copper-mining strike in the Upper Peninsula, and another strike on the Mesabi in 1916. As a result, the Finnish Americans as a whole ethnic group got a reputation of the “Reds” and dangerous political radicals, and many of them were blacklisted indiscriminately. For more information see, for instance, Kaunonen, *Challenge Accepted*; Kero, “The Social Origin”; Kostianen, “Politics of the Left and the Right.”
- 24 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 120, 174–75, 205.
- 25 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 201–02.
- 26 Damrell, *Gift*, 96, 108.
- 27 Damrell, *Gift*, 4–7, 30–31.
- 28 Damrell, *Gift*, 5, 116.
- 29 Damrell, *Gift*, 61–62, 70–71.
- 30 In Damrell’s novel, this invasion of the US society is in the form of the Department of Natural Resources’ restrictions as well as tourism and general commercialization of the “wilderness”.
- 31 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 139.
- 32 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 11.
- 33 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 17.
- 34 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 205–06.
- 35 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 206.
- 36 Damrell, *Gift*, 66, 89–90.
- 37 Damrell, *Gift*, 65.
- 38 Damrell, *Gift*, 53.
- 39 Damrell, *Gift*, 31.
- 40 Damrell, *Gift*, 90.
- 41 Damrell, *Gift*, 86.
- 42 Damrell, *Gift*, 90.
- 43 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 23.
- 44 Damrell, *Gift*, 31, 88.
- 45 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 120–21; Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 180.
- 46 From an early point in their history in the USA, Finns experienced the ambiguity of their racial identity as the immigrants were not conclusively considered to be white. In the John Svan case in 1908, mentioned in Koskela’s and Laitala’s books, such an uncertain “whiteness” of Finns was used as an excuse to deny citizenship rights to several Finnish activists after the Mesabi Iron Range labor strikes. Thus, like for many immigrant groups, for Finns it took some time and efforts to win their quest for “whiteness”. For more information see Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness*, and Kivisto and Leinonen, “Ambiguous Identity.”
- 47 Damrell, *Gift*, 28.
- 48 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 194.

- 49 All of this has obvious parallels with and ties to the US ideology of manifest destiny, which promoted the mission of remaking the “wild” lands of the west and also celebrated white pioneers’ efforts in bringing culture and civilization.
- 50 Johnson, “Finnish-American Literature,” 244–45.
- 51 Damrell, *Gift*, 66, 89.
- 52 Damrell, *Gift*, 116.
- 53 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 52; Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 43.
- 54 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 10.
- 55 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 45.
- 56 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 25, 67, 72.
- 57 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 72.
- 58 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 177.
- 59 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 178.
- 60 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 56–59; Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 85, 213.
- 61 Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 387–88.
- 62 Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 388.
- 63 Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 390–91.
- 64 Hjorthén, “Transatlantic Monuments,” 116.
- 65 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 219, 19.
- 66 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 10, 19.
- 67 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 100, 174.
- 68 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 37, 47.
- 69 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 58–59.
- 70 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 59.
- 71 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 81, 83–84.
- 72 Laitala, *Down from Basswood*, 83–84, 172–74.
- 73 Koskela, *Welcome to Shadow Lake*, 10, 25, 269; Damrell, *Gift*, 63.
- 74 Damrell, *Gift*, 80, 91.
- 75 Edmonds, *Settler Colonialism and (Re)conciliation*, 19–23.
- 76 By literature in my chapter I mostly mean fiction.

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