

CHAPTER 7

Indigenous and Settler

The North American Sámi Movement

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The chapter is a study of how the North American Sámi movement expands definitions of what it means to be both settler and Indigenous in the 21st century. It focuses on the specific case of Finnish/Nordic immigrants to North America claiming and promoting Indigenous connections and on how they straddle and blur the boundaries between settler and Native, while negotiating their place in the settler colonial state. Its initial working hypothesis is that the close connections between the North American Sámi community and Native American communities offer a vision of cultural difference at once shaped by global corporate capital and media and yet communicated as local sites of empowerment and protest. Contemporary Indigenous articulations, while informed by state institutions and conditioned by the marketplace, are also contingent and open-ended, complicating familiar narratives of modernization and progress. The term “Indigenous” takes on new meanings as people work both within and against dominant norms of identity formation and economic power, revitalizing local cultural traditions in modern North America, which has never been decolonized but remains settler colonial. Recent ethnic

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renewal movements of European-origin settler groups have included seeking a common symbolic experience from the past in the present, of maintaining diasporic ties and promoting heritage. When taken together with these movements, the North American Sámi case provides an interesting example of what James Clifford refers to as the paradox of articulating “traditional futures,” of articulating histories of survival, struggle, and renewal within the context of colonization, globalization, and “indigenous becoming,” of “adapting and recombining the remnants of an interrupted way of life.”¹ While his discussion need not emphasize routes over roots, the process of selectively reconnecting with the past as a way forward toward a decolonized future is a complex exercise of practice, performance, translation, and community building, of coming to terms not just with what was lost but with what still can be found.

A second hypothesis is that 21st-century Indigeneity is less about strict timelines and more about shared cultural practices and relationships to the land, which allows space for the Sámi and Native Americans to often view the North American Sámi as different settlers who both share transnational migrant identities and have found common ground with other local Indigenous peoples. When confronting the historical process of remaking settler and Indigenous spaces, postcolonial narratives struggle with the unresolved legacies of how people have chosen to reimagine and reorganize societies over time at local and transnational levels. Settler colonialism’s strong emphasis on the dispossession and marginalization of Indigenous peoples has left little room for exploring alternative lived experiences of migration and mobility, for exploring Indigenous kinship connections and connections to nature in transnational contexts. It has neglected an assessment of the everyday encounters between Indigenous peoples and newcomers not overdetermined by the settler colonial project as a geopolitical mode of domination. What this also means is that little space has been devoted to assessing the migration of Sámi people under the guise of national settler projects. While Native American scholars for their part have recently begun turning their attention to how transnational politics and movement have reshaped contemporary Indigenous culture, they have done so from a standpoint that largely ignores overlapping settler–Native perspectives as pedagogies of resistance to hegemonic narratives, as stories that complicate the settler–Native dichotomy.

The chapter explores the makings of the North American Sámi movement and the building of cross-cultural connections and interactions with Indigenous groups. It does not seek to analyze Sámi American identity formation at the individual level. As such, it addresses two crucial questions: How is the North American Sámi movement challenging the divide between settler and Native, and how does it complicate settler colonial narratives in the 21st century? In what ways do descendants of Sámi immigrants to North America find common cause with Native American groups and impact transnational Indigenous movements and political practices? This chapter discusses settler colonialism, the settling of lands taken from Native Americans, and the complex intersections of settler colonialism and Indigeneity. It focuses on how many Sámi Americans acknowledge their complicity in settler colonial practices and yet increasingly search for their Indigenous roots, claiming a special standing as “in-between” in the settler–Native divide. The first section tracks the foundational historical narratives of the migration of Sámi peoples to North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The second section focuses on the role of written texts and heritage display in reclaiming a North American Sámi and transnational Indigenous/settler connections. The third section centers on environmental activism as a space for creating shared Indigenous meanings. Finally, the chapter concludes by offering some thoughts on a world that is becoming more multicultural but not necessarily more homogeneous.

Reclaiming Stories of Migration

The Alaska Sámi migration is one important founding historical narrative in the story of Sámi immigration history in North America. On May 12, 1894, a small group of 16 Sámi from northern Norway arrived in New York City, “all clad in their native costumes . . . of reindeer hide.” They left the same day by train for San Francisco and then by steamship to Alaska. The US government had hired them for three years, at \$27.50 per month plus board, “to instruct Alaskans in the art of driving and herding reindeer,”² believing that reindeer husbandry offered the local Iñupiat and Yupik peoples the best chances for economic survival in changing times. The Sámi taught the local Iñupiat and Yupik not only how to herd and drive reindeer but how to milk the reindeer and make cheese, and how to make various pieces of equipment, such as

sleds, boots, and harnesses. The Iñupiat and Yupik soon became interested in the potential of reindeer herding.

With the discovery of gold in 1897, the US government saw an additional need for the Sámi and their reindeer: transporting goods to mining camps in the remote interior parts of Alaska. It arranged for the transport of roughly 100 more Finnish and Norwegian Sámi herders and their families, 537 reindeer and 4,000 sacks of moss to feed them, and 418 pulkas (Sámi sledges) across the United States. It promoted this with much fanfare as “The Lapland-Yukon Relief Expedition,” or Manitoba Expedition (after the name of their ship). The group arrived in Seattle only to discover that no ship was waiting to take them to Alaska. The Sámi spent several weeks walking the reindeer around Seattle’s Woodland Park, to the amusement of large crowds of people fascinated by their colorful cultural costumes and the associations of reindeer with Santa Claus and elves, before eventually traveling to Alaska.³

Though the US government had bought the reindeer from the Sámi, it continued to need the Sámi herders not just to teach herding skills to Alaska Natives but also to help them provide prospectors with food and other provisions. Still, as short-term laborers, some already chose to return to Sápmi in the early years of the 20th century. But other Sámi families decided to stay and borrowed reindeer from the government herd to establish herds of their own.⁴ However, in 1937, to the detriment of the remaining Sámi, the Bureau of Indian Affairs restricted ownership of reindeer to the Iñupiat and Yupik, thus cutting off access to a reindeer livelihood for many Sámi immigrants. Nonetheless, close and ongoing ties had developed between the Iñupiat, Yupik, and Sámi people in Alaska, including intermarriage (making it possible for Sámi to continue as reindeer herders) and shared cultural practices.⁵ In later interviews, Finnish Sámi who had spent parts of their younger years in Alaska described the time as one of curiosity and adventure, of numerous cross-cultural encounters and economic opportunities.⁶ Overall, approximately one third of the herders remained in Alaska, about one third ultimately returned home to Sápmi, and roughly one third moved south, mainly to the Seattle area, to find work in other industries.

With herding lands becoming ever scarcer in Sápmi due to encroaching pioneer settlers, and with the governments of Norway, Sweden, and Finland/Russia closing the physical borders between the countries, cutting off herding routes, migration offered a new hope

for many. The stories of other Sámi migrants to North America, however, became part of a less well-known “hidden” migration, as Thomas DuBois terms it,⁷ a complex gray area existing in the spaces between homogenizing Nordic national discourses. Many Sámi chose to leave a stigmatized Sámi identity behind, hiding it behind the mask of a national identity. Some had already arrived as part of the Great Laestadian Migration after the death of revivalist leader Lars Levi Laestadius in 1861. Most were south Sámi farmers as well as coastal Sámi and forest Sámi from the Tornio Valley and Kemi area in the Finnish–Swedish borderlands rather than reindeer herders.⁸ European mining companies also recruited workers from the northernmost Finnish regions for the newly established copper mines in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula and in northeastern Minnesota in the later 1800s and early 1900s.

Sámi from Finland often became indistinguishable from other later arriving Finnish immigrants who found little land available save for parcels stripped from Native Americans during the allotment era of the 1880s to 1920s. New identities emerged. Finnish settlers married tribal members, with it being unclear how many such “Finns” may have in fact been Sámi. Given the uncertain racial identity of Finns, sometimes being linked with Mongolians and even American Indians in legal disputes in the very early 1900s,⁹ Sámi from Finland were subjected to general anti-Finnish sentiment in the Upper Midwest, often stigmatized for their darker appearance and confronted with signs that read “No Finns need apply.”¹⁰ Recent scholarly work on the so-called “Finndian” or “Finnishinaabe” persons living on reservations has found that many of them identify as Native American with Finnish roots, very much aware of the fact that their ancestors struggled together with Native Americans to survive in difficult economic circumstances.¹¹ Historians, though, have long contributed to a tradition of suggesting that certain European groups, in this case Finns and other Nordics, enjoyed a more benign and less brutal relationship with Native peoples and the land. Some have noted, for instance, that the Lenape people called Finns and Swedes *akoores* or *nittappi* (meaning “friend” or “those who are like us”) in recognition of a shared familiarity with the forest, a collective name that they did not use for English, German, and Dutch settlers (*senaares*), who the Lenape viewed as rather alien in worldview.¹² Such a perspective undercuts the greater complexity of stories of migration, race, place, memory, and cultural connections at the local level. While the on-the-ground process of settler colonialism, of accommodation

and resistance, cannot be readily outsourced to other groups or wished away as exceptional examples of persons unwittingly taking on the role of settler because of systemic poverty or (racial) oppression,¹³ local designations like “Finndian” highlight the intersecting story of settler colonialism and Indigenous belonging.

Diaspora identity can be complex and messy on the margins, at the borderlands between place-based notions of Indigeneity and the need to migrate. Tim Frandy and Ellen Marie Jensen explore the idea of “diasporic indigeneity” to account for the storytelling and performative expressive culture that serve as mechanisms of cultural revitalization and reclamation efforts. The term addresses a hybrid, more general Nordic heritage claimed by immigrants who do not, for instance, really know “where Finnish ends and Sámi begins” or “where Laestadianism ends and Sámi culture begins.”¹⁴ Diasporic Indigeneity accounts for a growing number of immigrants currently claiming an Indigenous status in their new place of residence in North America based on a status as colonized indigenes in the place where their ancestors formerly lived, such as Maya peoples from Central America. While such claims do not reverse settler colonialism, they represent a popular challenge to the colonialist and nationalist mythology and their underlying morality as well as to various forms of political-economic domination.¹⁵ This reading of Indigenous communities in diaspora has not forestalled critics from charging a lack of continuity and authenticity to such revitalization efforts, though such charges have also been leveled against many Native American and First Nations peoples and various ethnic groups seeking to reconnect with their traditional cultures in the contemporary world.

While the geographically dispersed and fluid transnational identities of Sámi migrants renegotiating social and cultural realities at the local level could never ignore the assimilating tendencies of national politics, they could never entirely be subsumed by them either. Though such a perspective may fit easily within the recent transnational turn in migration studies, it does not account for the tendency of North American Sámi to promote Indigenous connections. What then was the catalyst for a “hidden,” even “shameful,” Sámi identity, an ethnic identity denigrated by mainstream Americans and Nordic immigrants alike, to gradually emerge as a source of strength for later Sámi descendants (with the estimated number ranging between 30,000 and 60,000¹⁶) wanting to seek out, recover, document, and ultimately cel-

celebrate their Indigenous history and heritage through storytelling and performative display?

The North American Sámi Reawakening

Storytelling has a healing effect, teaching people to know and respect their ancestors, teaching the ways of a culture, of one's place in society and the larger world. The international journal *Báiki* (1991) grew out of a search by immigrants in North America for their Sámi roots and for connections, with the name being the nomadic reindeer-herding society's word for cultural survival, meaning "the home that lives in the heart" as one travels from place to place, the invisible bond that transcends time and space.¹⁷ The journal's founding editor, Faith Fjeld (Figure 7.1), had met and received encouragement from Sámi artist and



Figure 7.1: Faith Fjeld with a *Báiki* display in Virginia, Minnesota, c. 2011. Image courtesy of Marlene Wisuri. All rights reserved.

activist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (Áilohaš) at the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. One of her overriding questions was “Are Sámi-Americans Indigenous?” She looked to Valkeapää’s work for inspiration and took heart from his response that in Sápmi “indigenous means harmony with nature”; it is more than just a timeline.¹⁸ Valkeapää’s poem “My Home Is” struck a chord with North American Sámi, especially his words “of course I recognize you even if you are among others ... of course I recognize you even if you are not wearing Sámi dress ... even though we have never met I recognize you.” The poem helped many Sámi immigrants begin to come to terms with decades of struggle over their place in the settler state.

Faith Fjeld also received strong support closer to home from Rudolph Johnson, a librarian at the University of Minnesota-Duluth who had immigrated from Sápmi with his parents as a child, who later spent time in Norway, and who contributed important articles on how best to define Sámi cultural identity in a North American context. Sitting together in his kitchen in Duluth, Minnesota, in March 1991, Rudolph Johnson, his wife, Solveig, and Faith Fjeld brainstormed about telling stories of Sámi history and forced assimilation and comparing Sámi culture with that of Native American peoples. Four months later, the first ever gathering of North American Sámi took place at their house, where proofs of the journal’s first issue were inspected.¹⁹ Published alternately in the San Francisco Bay Area and Minnesota on a shoestring budget, even for several years in Alaska as Faith Fjeld moved from place to place, *Báiki* represented a major milestone in gathering and promoting the collective memories of persons of Sámi descent throughout North America. But it was not the only one.

Artists and writers, too, began to draw attention to North American Sámi experiences, to highlight efforts at group and cultural survival. The work of writer and photographer Marlene Wisuri combines striking images of the interrelationship between reindeer and people in the Arctic with a personal account of the last days of her grandmother, Mary Christine Pekkala, born north of Rovaniemi:

She was thought to be Sámi / Many Sámi “passed” when they came to this country / Native peoples face scorn world wide ... Ninety-two years later as she lay dying / she dreamed and talked of reindeer and lost chil-

dren / her dead mother and betrayal by her father / and the old country
 ... Her granddaughter sat by the bed and listened.²⁰

Her poem is an effort at peeling back the layers of silence, of listening for connections and resonances that have often long since disappeared on both sides of the Atlantic.²¹ Indeed, many North American Sámi do not have such clear connections to their cultural background. Genealogy studies and DNA testing suggest one possible route for establishing genetic roots and family connections. Yet, several of the main Y-DNA and mtDNA haplogroups differ noticeably among various Sámi people and are also found at moderate frequencies in Eastern Europe, so testing often does not provide conclusive results. Likewise, not everyone can readily find family members in the parish church records or census records. Members of the younger generations often encountered silences and a sense of “shame” among first-generation immigrants when raising the question about Sámi ethnic and cultural identity, with many migrants not wanting to discuss past traumatic experiences.²² Writers used the words “decolonization,” “healing,” and “recovery” to characterize the specific trauma faced by North American Sámi as the descendants of immigrants who still bore the stigma of an Indigenous identity deemed racially and culturally inferior.²³ They asked whether Sámi cultural ties had been irretrievably lost. Slowly, though, Sámi heritage discovery and cultural revitalization efforts gained momentum.

Interested persons began to meet, formed Sámi associations, and organized community celebrations and events to claim a particular Indigenous Sámi cultural heritage. The North American Sámi community grew rapidly in the early years of the 1990s, with more and more people of Sámi descent participating in the annual FinnFest and other Nordic festivals. In 1994, the community organized the first Sámi Culture Day and a reindeer festival in Minnesota, where reindeer owners like Tom Scheib provided herding demonstrations (an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 domesticated reindeer, most descendants of the Alaska reindeer, were being herded in the Lower 48 at the time), as well as *Siidastallan* gatherings, a biannual event organized by the Sámi Siida of North America (SSNA). The SSNA was created as a loosely organized group of regional Sámi communities in the United States and Canada. Anja Kitti-Walhelm, Cari Mayo, Marlene Wisuri, John Edward Xavier, and Mervi Salo have each served successively as elected council chairs and been important leaders for the North American Sámi commu-



Figure 7.2: Cari Mayo and Anja Kitti-Walhelm, right, presenting the Sámi flag at the opening ceremony for Finnish Days at Ironworld (now Minnesota Discovery Center) in Chisholm, Minnesota, 1997. Image courtesy of Marlene Wisuri. All rights reserved.

nity (Figure 7.2). Local Sámi Siida communities quickly formed in the Great Lakes region, California, and the Pacific Northwest. The SSNA newsletter *Arran* was founded by Mel Olsen in 1995, who was later joined by Arden Johnson, and published as a quarterly complement to *Báiki*.

The two publications have provided valuable insights into the development of Sámi American communities, helping make the movement truly transnational in scope and with a strong focus on revitalization efforts already taking place in Sápmi. Both journals published numerous articles on Sámi lore, focusing especially on the importance of reclaiming the knowledge of Indigenous elders, both Sámi American community elders and Native American elders. Seeking to fill in the silent spaces demarcating hidden Sámi migrant identities, some people traveled to Sápmi. Among them was Ken Jackson (Grey Eagle), a lecturer in American Indian studies at the University of Washington,

who collected stories being recovered by a younger generation of Sámi activists and drew links between such stories and stories told by Native American groups.²⁴ He presented Sámi stories and legends at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, among other places. They reveal a trickster element, Sámi insiders exposing and outwitting outsiders not through strength or aggression but through superior knowledge of the land and its resources. By emphasizing the continuing North American Sámi story, underscored by the idea of a special relationship to the land as a cornerstone of Indigenous identity, the movement has increasingly established and asserted its narrative position in a globalizing world.

The effort to reclaim a pride in being Sámi and a deeper knowledge of Sámi culture and continuity has gained dramatic expressions through contemporary revitalization efforts. One example is music. Beginning largely in the 1970s, Sámi artists began performing a traditional musical form known as the yoik at festivals, events, and social gatherings. According to Valkeapää, the Sámi yoik, long denigrated and misunderstood by non-Sámi peoples, “is a symbol of Sámi identity, a weapon to strengthen Sámi culture.”²⁵ The yoik is communication between the Sámi and nature, a way of asserting connection to the land. Valkeapää is credited with helping reestablish the yoik as a contemporary art form. After having reportedly “electrified” other Indigenous delegates with his yoiking skills at the first meeting of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples in 1975, he then toured North America in 1982 with Seppo (Paroni) Paakkunainen and his jazz group from Finland, inspiring many later activists in the North American Sámi movement to reinvigorate Sámi cultural practices.²⁶ Promoting the sacredness of nature, with melodies evoking the soundscapes of forest and fells, wind and water, the songs invoke the trance-like rhythm of pounding Sámi drums combined with chanting and throat-singing. The songs connect people to their natural surroundings not as a romantic return to tradition and the past but as a living and evolving cultural present, incorporating influences from spiritual, reggae, country, hard rock, and folk music. Nathan Muus, one of the only North American Sámi who has yoiked publicly at ethnic heritage festivals like FinnFest and enjoyed success as a recording artist, learned from masters like Valkeapää, Mari Boine, and famed Finnish Sámi throat-singer Wimme Saari. But he, like other North American Sámi descendants, have always been acutely aware that they are trying to reclaim family stories and connections, not claiming to be Sámi as such. They do

not want to appear to be impostors or seemingly stray across the line separating cultural revitalization from cultural appropriation. Muus has been intensely gratified that Sámi from Sápmi have heard his yoiks and said, “You’re good. Just keep doing what you are doing.”²⁷ The yoik for him comprises an oral component of storytelling, a creative process of relationship building and of bridging the silences of the past with raised voices of the present.

Storytelling is about naming. In celebrating the survival of Sámi roots and connections, the North American Sámi movement has opened up a space for gatherings that explore what it means to be Indigenous, with no marker of cultural distinctiveness being more central than that of reindeer and reindeer herding. Though the Sámi migrating to North America may already have faced pressure to assimilate in their home countries, including a forced language shift or pressure to discard highly visible forms of cultural dress, and even though they may never have actively practiced reindeer herding (only a minority of Sámi ever herded reindeer), the different groups of Sámi migrants have come to recognize a shared kinship through memories and relationship to the land and experiences as settlers with an Indigenous background.²⁸ Exhibitions have helped keep alive the names and memories of the Sámi who came before. With the assistance of Alaska Reindeer Project family members, Faith Fjeld and Nathan Muus carefully documented the stories of “The Sámi Reindeer People of Alaska,” including names, photographs, and numerous examples of handicrafts, for a traveling exhibition that began in Alaska in 2004 and has since been displayed throughout the continental United States and Sweden. The *lávvu*, a temporary tipi-like dwelling used by herders in Sápmi, became not just a central feature in the material display of culture at “The Sámi Reindeer People of Alaska” exhibition and at numerous other festivals and events, it also helped trigger connections with nature and ancestors and stories of migration in general.

Symbols build on stories and images to connect people to a shared sense of community. Lois Stover especially contributed many photographs and artefacts from her family, helping name those involved in Sámi activities both past and present. Pearl Johnson, from Nome, Alaska, has strong connections to the Alaska Native Iñupiat and Yupik communities as well as to North American Sámi and has been a vital resource in sharing not just North American Sámi memories of the reindeer herding experiment but also Alaska Native perspectives.²⁹

She notes that the Alaska Natives always recognized the Sámi herders as indigenous and not as colonizers.³⁰ Though journalists in Alaska long referred to the remaining Sámi reindeer herders as “The Last of the Lapps,” while in the Nordic countries these Alaskan Sámi herders were “The Ones who Disappeared,”³¹ the stories from Alaska resonate and live on throughout the North American Sámi community. They have given concrete expression to an awakened desire by many Sámi Americans to learn more about and connect with their ethnic roots. (See Figure 7.3.)

The North American Sámi awakening occurred at the confluence of a search by third-generation European Americans for their ethnic roots and the American Indian ethnic revival movement. Nearly all the principal leadership among the North American Sámi have had



Figure 7.3: Lois Stover (left) and Pearl Johnson in traditional dress at the opening of “The Sami Reindeer People of Alaska” exhibit at the Vest-erheim Norwegian American Museum in Deborah, Iowa, December 1, 2012. Image courtesy of Marlene Wisuri. All rights reserved.

close ties with the Native American community dating back many decades. Both Sámi Americans and Native Americans recognize the complexities of Indigenous and settler categories, marking such categories as more descriptive than absolute in the case of Sámi migrants, who do always not feel entirely comfortable calling themselves *either* Indigenous *or* settler.³² Native Americans do currently tend to view Sámi Americans differently from other settlers, especially those who have increasingly reclaimed their Sámi connections in the last 30 years and realized what colonization has meant to the Natives.³³ They share Indigenous values, a closeness to nature, and similar legacies of colonialism and assimilation, albeit filtered through different experiences of racism and access to economic power and privilege. The North American Sámi face a particular challenge of recognizing their European roots without their Indigenous claims seeming like a fad, “Indigenous chic” as one writer termed it,³⁴ akin to “white” Americans claiming distant relations to a Cherokee princess or just wanting to “play Indian.”³⁵

The current popularization of long-disused rituals and efforts to recover sacred objects and sites, a “resanctification of the earth” as Fergus M. Bordewich terms it,³⁶ has become for many Indigenous peoples a way to reconnect with the past and the lives of ancestors by expressing shared environmental and spiritual values. Yet, it raises the question of how the images and alternative environmental perspectives, even if based on both local traditions and shared transnational cultural values, can be taught without flattening them out into stereotypes. After first being too “Mongolian” to be white, now Sámi are often dismissed by others as too “white” to be Indigenous.³⁷ In seeking to reassert a deep connection to the land and nature without it seeming like some mystical variant of New Age pseudo-Indigenous spirituality disconnected from language, culture, and politics,³⁸ North American Sámi just want to have their own say on the matter. They seek to assert a similar structure of relationships to the natural world and history of colonization, to share definitions of Indigeneity that better reflect the global realities of the 21st century.

Environmental Activism

Environmental alliances have provided an opportunity to link the goal of building lasting cross-cultural ties with a common sense of place, defined often in opposition to corporate globalization. As with

other Indigenous movements around the world, grassroots efforts by Sámi writers, artists, and poets inspired others to become community organizers and activists. Just as the North American Sámi are keenly aware that their identities have emerged out of stories of Sámi migration and not out of a profound connection to Sápmi as such, their connections with Indigenous peoples stem from shared histories of colonization and cultural repression; their sense of Indigeneity has helped them reconnect their stories to new sites. At the crossroads of complex, overlapping settler and Indigenous identities, many affiliated with the North American Sámi movement realize that the best way forward is to work for change, to make a commitment to action based on consensus of how best to overcome the legacies of collective trauma and colonialism.

Norwegian Sámi activist Hans Ragnar Mathisen (Elle-Hánsa—Keviselie) wrote a letter from Sápmi, published in *Báiki*. In it he suggested that Sámi immigrants to North America should formulate a declaration of understanding and solidarity as a sign of respect for the original owners of the land, noting that they had been unaware they were moving onto stolen land and that they had not come “as aggressors and destructors of Native American cultures” but rather as persons fleeing the same fate back home. He asks quite pointedly, “have you ever reconciled with the Native Americans?”³⁹ Such a reconciliation would, in his opinion, focus attention on the issue of Indigenous peoples worldwide who have been forcibly alienated from their own lands and heritage. His letter raised important questions about the North American Sámi as colonizers or colonized. It prompted academic Liz Carlson, of Swedish, German, and Sámi descent with connections to Anishinaabe and Cree communities in Canada, to carefully explore how the varieties of ancestries and experiences of North American Sámi relate to questions of “whiteness” and different levels of socialization into the dominant society. Carlson highlights the fact that some may have migrated recently, retaining important aspects of Sámi culture, some have ancestors who emigrated generations ago, and some have mixed ancestry, like herself having “passed for white” and not suffered from race-based oppression. She finds, in response to Mathisen, that many Sámi Americans as a result identify with *both* colonizers and colonized in their efforts to tell stories of travel, place, and cultural renewal.⁴⁰ They wanted to create a shared space to tell those stories.

The Sámi Cultural Center of North America was opened in Duluth, Minnesota, in 2014 in large part to house the expanding collections of Sámi material culture. It stresses a way forward in learning about the links between material culture and traditional ecological knowledge, the importance of family and place to Indigenous ways of knowing. Indeed, one of its central goals is to maintain relationships between Indigenous and environmental communities, thereby facilitating cross-cultural connections both locally and at the transnational level. Activists in Sápmi have generally supported efforts by the center to promote connections between the Sámi and descendants of Sámi immigrants to North America, and, like Mathisen and Valkeapää, they have contributed letters of support and numerous articles to *Báiki* and *Arran* and participated in North American Sámi heritage celebrations and environmental protests. Most people who approach the center with an interest in exploring their perceived Sámi heritage also already have some connection to Native people or culture. They continue to maintain close ties with Indigenous communities, often by blood or marriage, allowing them to construct new frameworks of belonging based on a defense of common cultural lifeways. For instance, Marlene Wisuri, chairperson for the Sámi Cultural Center of North America, has Ojibwe relatives and notes that neighboring Indigenous communities, like the Fond du Lac Reservation in Minnesota, have been incredibly welcoming toward her personally.⁴¹ Prominent Ojibwe elder and writer Thomas D. Peacock has invited Wisuri to collaborate artistically on several award-winning books that tell stories of Native existence, history, trauma, and survival and how to present those stories to schoolchildren in a way that celebrates multiculturalism.

In this context, the ties to place can be both local and transnational. In the documentary *Solveig: The Life and Artwork of Solveig Arneng Johnson* (2012), Solveig, wife of Rudolph Johnson, discusses how her artwork plays with the effects of light and darkness on northern landscapes, how “her passion was to give through her paint.” She was the first North American Sámi artist to become a member of the Sámi Artists’ Union (Sámi Dáiddačehpiid Searvi) in Alta, Norway, in 1991. She only came to terms with her Sámi roots, though, after emigrating to the United States because of the stigma attached to such an ethnic identity back home in the early and mid-1900s, with neighbors only wanting to speak Finnish or Norwegian. Her family had even changed its surname to Arneng, the name of the place where her father had grown up, to

hide any links to a Sámi background. She and her work have helped shape shared stories of nature and emotional attachment to the land and reflect the importance of family and community as “functioning parts of the landscape.”⁴² Even as her art draws on local settings from Sápmi and the Great Lakes region, it is connected to broader environmental concerns and issues of social justice. Increasingly, other North American Sámi activists as well have turned to various forms of art and heritage display to redress past wrongs by focusing on how best to reject aspects of the industrial capitalist mindset that have led to commodification of the environment, systemic forms of environmental racism and injustice directed principally at people of color, Indigenous peoples, and the poor, and the destruction of local community.

Environmental alliances undercut the seeming historical inevitability and legitimacy of settler colonialism and reaffirm the complexity of Indigenous/settler cultural identities and blurred social boundaries at the local level. Sámi descendants have begun telling their life stories and reclaiming memories that reverse the process of assimilation.⁴³ For many, the revitalization of and reconnection with traditional arts and crafts has helped them reassert community-based identities and to reconnect with a forgotten heritage. Laurel Sanders, for instance, blends Anishinaabe and Sámi beading and band weaving to create unique pieces, such as powwow costumes for her children. She has taught classes at the Sámi Cultural Center and been influenced by family connections on the Fond du Lac Reservation and with the Walla Walla Native community in the Pacific Northwest, evidence of a diverse Indigenous heritage.⁴⁴ The Pacific Sámi Searvi in Seattle, for its part, has been a particularly active regional association. Troy Storffjell, Julie Whitehorn, and Lynn Gleason, together with supporters like Renee Joy and Rose Edwards, have all done important activist work in the region. Some former Alaska Sámi reindeer herders moved to the nearby community of Poulsbo, forming strong contacts with the local Suquamish people, connections that trace all the way back to the time of Chief Seattle in the latter half of the 19th century.⁴⁵ In addition to stories and creative artistic expressions that help North American Sámi connect with a deeper sense of place and more socially just, ecologically resilient forms of community and form stronger links with neighboring Native American groups, the rapid expansion of social media in the last few decades has also greatly facilitated such interactions. It has made it much easier for North American Sámi and other

Indigenous peoples to share stories and plan events or even protest movements.

By developing common cultural attachments and relationships to the land, Native and non-Native peoples have joined in decolonization efforts. For instance, in 1998 North American Sámi artist Kurt Seaberg joined the Mendota-Midewakton (Dakota) people in protesting a proposed light rail line and highway plan that would require displacing people and cutting down four sacred oak trees planted in 1862 in memory of the forced removal of Dakota peoples from their lands in Minnesota. Though official histories of the Dakota War of 1862 tell of a bloody event fought between settlers and the Indigenous Dakota, and though many firsthand reports breathlessly recount instances of extreme brutality, German and Nordic settlers had already coexisted with the Dakota peoples for many years. Yet, stories of their attempts to assist one another went largely undocumented. The attempt by Seaberg and the Dakota to find common cause in relating the past to the present did not meet with success, though. On December 20, 1998, in a predawn raid, 600 Minnesota state troopers and Minneapolis police in full riot gear arrested 30 protestors at the memorial site. A year later, at his court trial, Seaberg spoke out against the long history of stripping Indigenous peoples of their rights to the land.⁴⁶ He called attention to memories of the connections between settler and Indigenous communities and the fact that the forced removal of the Dakota from their homes had ruptured those ties, just as the government was again seeking to displace people and nature in the name of progress. His words highlight the sometimes “unlikely alliances” that can form between certain (local) ethnic communities and Indigenous peoples, further transforming seeming “outsiders” into “insiders” by redefining contested local spaces as common ground.⁴⁷

Earlier environmental protests foreshadowed what was to become the largest demonstration to date of Indigenous environmental solidarity: the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at the Standing Rock Lakota reservation in 2016–2017. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous environmental activists joined together to protest the pipeline’s threat to the reservation’s primary water supply and sacred sites. Representatives from hundreds of Indigenous groups from around the world joined the Dakota/Lakota peoples, with temporary communities of thousands created on the reservation borderlands in a show of non-violent resistance. Tribes and non-Native supporters rallied in cities

across the country. Sámi activists in North America connected with activists in Sápmi via Facebook to provide updates and advance shared transnational Indigenous social, cultural, and political agendas.⁴⁸

Numerous photos underscore especially the strong role played by Sámi women in creating social bonds,⁴⁹ participating in gift-giving ceremonies with other Indigenous peoples, wearing *gákti* (traditional clothing), and displaying the Sámi flag as a show of resistance. In one prominent instance, Tim Frandy secured funding and, together with other North American Sámi activists, made arrangements for the twice-Grammy-nominated Swedish Sámi artist and singer Sofia Janok to take part in the protest, with the aim of convincing the Swedish parliament to condemn US actions at Standing Rock, which it did.⁵⁰ In a further visible display of how notions of body, landscape, and the sacred can become integrally connected to new forms of transnational Indigenous collaboration, young Sámi in Norway tattooed themselves with the image of a black snake, derived from Lakota prophecy as a symbol of resistance.⁵¹ Sámi American activist Ellen Marie Jensen, in Norway at the time, organized protests and solidarity events. The show of solidarity, combined with the efforts of North American Sámi protesters and Nordic Sámi at Standing Rock to obtain documentation of human rights abuses, ultimately forced the First Bank of Norway to pull its investments out of the Dakota Access Pipeline.⁵² Such documentation also prompted cities like Seattle and San Francisco to sever ties with Wells Fargo bank for its support of the pipeline. Despite the widespread media attention and international outpouring of sympathy, armored vehicles and police in riot gear cleared the camps using concussion grenades, rubber bullets, attack dogs, and a water cannon in freezing weather. It was part of a larger scale pattern of violence and discrimination against Indigenous peoples, an effort to suppress public protest and criminalize dissent.⁵³

The Standing Rock protest was, however, more a beginning than an end to broader-based solidarity efforts. While alliances to defend land and water at the local level have taken shape for decades, the ongoing fights against further climate damage and injustice are no longer isolated struggles. Lyz Jaakola, an Anishinaabe/Finnish American and member of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa who also has ties to the Sámi Cultural Center of North America, has taken a strong role in protesting the threat posed by large oil companies and mining operations to the Lake Superior ecosystem. Jaakola, an inter-

nationally renowned musician, has joined other Indigenous women staging public protests, often in the form of drumming circles at shopping malls and elsewhere, as part of the grassroots Idle No More movement, which began in Canada in 2012 and quickly spread to the United States, attracting Native and non-Native supporters in both countries. The Pacific Sámi Searvi of Seattle issued a statement in support of Idle No More, acknowledging their role as settlers in displacing and dispossessing the Indigenous peoples of Washington state and vowing to stand in solidarity with them in the pursuit of knowledge about and connections with the land.⁵⁴

In winter of 2021, North American Sámi protestors joined with residents of the Fond du Lac Reservation to protest the construction of Enbridge's Line 3 pipeline across the northern part of Minnesota. The desire to refocus on Indigenous knowledge systems in the wake of climate crisis has accelerated efforts to restore community wellbeing at the local as well as transnational level. Though such efforts have expanded, they are not uncontested. Differing ideas of self-determination have emerged, as some tribal members at Standing Rock and Fond du Lac argue that militant protests are dangerous and hurt the local economy, where jobs are often scarce, and moreover they disrupt daily life in the community. The rapid spread of information has not necessarily led to easy answers about how best to sustain community and relations to the land, even if it has helped develop common cultural perceptions of the value of place and a sense of common understanding. As such, activists have also continued to pursue less confrontational forms of protest.

North American Sámi have turned their attention to how to restore the land and retell different stories of place and Indigenous belonging that challenge prejudice and existing perceptions of difference. Art and humor can convey images of Indigenous survival and cultural resistance in a nonthreatening manner. In 1966, ethnographer Martti Linkola took a picture of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää with his car parked inside a *lávvu* in Enontekiö, Finland, humorously noting a modern use for a traditional reindeer herder's tent. The editorial staff at *Báiki* called attention to Valkeapää's use of humor and art as a way of reclaiming and updating Indigenous stories. It published examples of culture jamming, like a CD cover by Peter Twitchell (a descendant of the Reindeer Project herders) showing a jar of "Eskimo Jam" on the snow-covered Alaska tundra with a spoon shaped like a guitar "stir-

ring things up.”⁵⁵ Such efforts demonstrate the deeper complex history underlying labels, place, and identities. Digital technology has further facilitated the sharing of stories of cultural resistance and the deepening of inter-ethnic relations through various artistic and narrative forms. For instance, a recent digital storytelling exhibition in Toronto, Canada, called “inVISIBILITY: Indigenous in the City,” created a space for urban Indigenous youth to represent themselves and tell their own stories of place and cultural awareness. Educator Mervi Salo’s contribution, “Fragments: A Film about Being Indigenous in the City,”⁵⁶ gave a particular Sámi focus to the power of diverse stories and voices to further transform stereotypes about Indigeneity in the 21st century.

Through art and artwork, through telling stories of belonging that disrupt familiar narratives of migration and settlement, of colonizer and colonized, the North American Sámi are making their voices heard in a rapidly changing world. Though the subscription-based publication of *Báiki* ended with the passing of Faith Fjeld in 2014, and *Arran* stopping publication the following year, *Báiki* continues in the form of occasional special issues, with the Sámi Cultural Center of North America coordinating its activities and carrying on her work at community building and preserving Indigenous values. Art exhibits, educational forums, and multicultural outreach efforts with other local Indigenous communities help celebrate and keep alive her guiding words:

To believe that my indigenous roots died when they were pulled up and transplanted is to ignore the fact that indigenous peoples are always in the process of migration and relocation; mobility and flexibility are integral to the indigenous way of life. To believe that my spiritual connections are limited by time and space is to forget that relationships are circular as the Indigenous have always known, not linear as the assimilated seem to think. To believe that I can cease to be Sámi is to deny the emotion and yearning that stirs in my Sámi-American heart!⁵⁷

Conclusion

Diasporic Indigeneity, or Indigenous immigrant, is an emergent form of awareness that challenges easy understandings of settler colonialism. In responding to the questions of why some immigrants want

to identify as Indigenous and why members of Native nations in the United States and Canada accept their Indigenous claims, this chapter has focused on the importance of storytelling and public celebrations of heritage in fostering an awareness of Sámi culture and facilitating connections among descendants of Sámi immigrants to North America. The Sámi American story is but one story of diasporic Indigeneity that has gained greater voice in the last decades, whether transnationally or in evolving local urban and rural spaces. As with all questions of collective narrative identity and belonging, the personal, cultural, and political are deeply intertwined. This chapter has shared the stories of people with Sámi heritage who have established enduring links with neighboring Native peoples and who have increasingly found links to their own family stories.

Such efforts emerged in the United States and Canada in the wake of the activist movements of the 1970s and as the result of new genealogy tools and new ways of sharing stories and information on social media. Faith Fjeld and others experienced firsthand the ethnic revitalization efforts sweeping the Bay Area and other parts of the United States and Canada in the late 20th century. In the first issue of the journal *Báiki*, published from an apartment on Fillmore Street in San Francisco, she laments:

Not knowing who I am and where I am from, it has been difficult for me to “fit in.” I am drawn to Indian America but I am not American Indian. I am attracted to the black and Latino cultures of America, but I am not from Africa or Latin America. I have heard that our origin is in Asia, but I am far from the keepers of oral tradition who could tell me if it is true.⁵⁸

The apartment served as a gathering place for peoples from many different ethnic backgrounds seeking connection and alternative ways of creating and sustaining community.⁵⁹ *Báiki* at times also shared space at the Native American Intertribal Friendship House in Oakland. The North American Sámi movement first took root in a multicultural context and it has always since been deeply embedded in local concerns and transnational forms of engagement. Reestablishing community is not a one-off process of learning the language, taking a genealogy test, wearing a *gákti*, or claiming a special connection to nature. While it might involve each or all of them, it is first and foremost a lengthy

process of reconnecting with stories and ways of knowing that can take years or decades, but also a process of remaking cultural traditions in the present.

The Sámi Cultural Center of North America and Sámi organizations throughout the United States and Canada continue to share stories of cultural survival and revitalization both locally and internationally. They continue to collaborate with local Native communities on art exhibitions and in pan-Indigenous celebrations. North American Sámi have continued to receive positive feedback from activists in Sápmi, glad that people in North America are telling stories of Sámi migration.⁶⁰ The stories have resonated elsewhere as well, with North American Sámi invited in 2017 to contribute 36 pieces to the ongoing *Imago Mundi* exhibition in Italy as part of the exhibition's larger Sámi collection and works of the world. The North American Sámi artists range in age from ten to 90 and come from different parts of the United States and Canada, with contributions encompassing paintings and drawings to works of fiber, wood, photography, and various types of *duodji* (handicrafts).⁶¹ Their work challenges popular definitions and racist myths about what it means to be “authentically” Indigenous.

Twenty-first-century Indigeneity is in many instances defined less in stark opposition to settler colonialism and more as a mutually shared common cause and cultural identity binding Native North Americans and Indigenous immigrants, a shared relationship to the land that exposes the damaging legacies of settler colonial projects substantiated by racist, patriarchal ideologies of socioeconomic progress and legitimized through overly simplistic national historical narratives. The claims of Indigenous immigrants constitute a form of covert activism, one that can also foster sympathetic alliances and cooperation with other Indigenous groups fighting for environmental and social justice and a redistribution of political and economic benefits.⁶² By challenging dominant definitions of Indigeneity, of the “vanishing Indian” or “vanishing Sámi,” they are challenging the moral superiority of those controlling national narratives and easy definitions of settler versus Indigenous as a way of justifying prior colonial practices.

Notes

- 1 Clifford, *Returns*, 7–8; see also Clifford, *Routes*.
- 2 Fjeld, “The Sami in America,” 3.
- 3 The *Seattle Post Intelligencer* first published stories about the popularity of the reindeer herders, later reprinted in the Sámi-American journal *Arran* under the title “Lapp Visitors Stopover in Woodland Park! Bound for Alaska Hungry Reindeer Occupy Woodland Park.”
- 4 See Vorren, *Saami, Reindeer, and Gold*.
- 5 Fjeld, “The Sami in America,” 4.
- 6 DuBois, “Recalling—Reconstituting—Migration,” 49, citing Pekka Sammaltahti, “Muitalusat sámiin geat vulge veahkkebargui Alaskai”: Clement Sara, “Marry Baer,” <http://arenan.yle.fi/1-3467152> (YLE, 2016) and “Ivar Vest vulgii maid Alaskai veahkkebargui_viejlja Jouni Vest muitala,” <http://arenan.yle.fi/1-3467152> (YLE, 2016).
- 7 DuBois, “Recalling—Reconstituting—Migration,” 56–62.
- 8 Wisuri and Johnson, “Sami Pioneer Communities.”
- 9 Kivisto and Leinonen, “Ambiguous Identity,” 75–76.
- 10 Majava Hensel, “Pilgrims of the Midnight Sun.”
- 11 See, e.g., Kettu, Koutaniemi, and Seppälä, *Fintiaanien mailla*.
- 12 Jordan and Kaups, *American Backwoods Frontier*, 89.
- 13 Tim Frandy, Assistant Professor, Folk Studies, Western Kentucky University, email correspondence, February 9, 2021.
- 14 Frandy and Jensen, “Kulttuurinen pois pyyhkiminen, resilienssi ja jatkuvuus,” 52, 62.
- 15 Fox Tree, “Diasporic Indigeneity,” 1.
- 16 Frandy and Jensen, “Kulttuurinen pois pyyhkiminen, resilienssi ja jatkuvuus,” 51.
- 17 Valkeapää, “My Home Is,” 4; Gaski, “Báiki,” 1–2.
- 18 Fjeld, “Are Sámi-Americans Indigenous,” 7.
- 19 Fjeld, “The Beginnings of *Báiki*,” 10.
- 20 Wisuri, “Shadows from the Past,” 9.
- 21 Marlene Wisuri, Zoom conference call, February 20, 2021.
- 22 Kurtti, “Finnish or Sami?” 2–4.
- 23 See, e.g., Carlson, “Finding the Home,” 7.
- 24 See, e.g., Grey Eagle, “Sámi Storytelling and Identity,” 5.
- 25 Muus, “Nils-Aslak Valkeapää discusses his work,” 7–8.
- 26 Muus, “Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, 1943–2001,” 18.
- 27 Nathan Muus, musician, associate editor of *Báiki*, and Sámi Cultural Center of North America board member, Zoom conference call, February 20, 2021.
- 28 Frandy and Jensen, “Kulttuurinen pois pyyhkiminen, resilienssi ja jatkuvuus,” 58.
- 29 Marlene Wisuri, Zoom conference call, February 20, 2021.
- 30 Marlene Wisuri, email correspondence, November 16, 2021.
- 31 “The Ones Who Disappeared,” 14.
- 32 Tim Frandy, email correspondence, November 8, 2021.
- 33 Marlene Wisuri, email correspondence, November 16, 2021.
- 34 Oberg Hanf, “Indigenous Chic,” 11.

- 35 See Green, “Tribe Called Wannabe”; Deloria, *Playing Indian*.
- 36 Bordewich, *Killing the White Man’s Indian*, 160.
- 37 Frandy and Jensen, “Kulttuurinen pois pyyhkiminen, resilienssi ja jatkuvuus,” 65–66.
- 38 See “Sámi Oainnát,” 11–12.
- 39 Mathisen, “Have You Ever Reconciled with the Native Americans?” 4.
- 40 Carlson, “North American Saami,” 12.
- 41 Marlene Wisuri, email exchange, March 17, 2021.
- 42 Deloria Jr., “Reflection and Revelation,” 29–34.
- 43 Jensen, *We Stopped Forgetting*; see also Jensen, “Sámi Immigration.”
- 44 Steiner, “Growing Art,” 217–19.
- 45 Nathan Muus, Zoom conference call, February 20, 2021.
- 46 Seaberg, “Among Sacred Oaks,” 15, 20.
- 47 See Grossman, *Unlikely Alliances*, especially 10–17.
- 48 On the significance of participatory social media, see Cocq and DuBois, *Sámi Media*.
- 49 See, e.g., Bonogofsky, “Indigenous Activists in Norway.”
- 50 Tim Frandy, email correspondence, July 30, 2021.
- 51 Monet, “What Standing Rock Gave the World.”
- 52 Bonogofsky, “Indigenous Activists in Norway.”
- 53 See, e.g., Estes and Dhillon, *Standing with Standing Rock*; Estes, *Our History is the Future*.
- 54 Pacific Sámi Searvi, “Statement of Privilege and Responsibility,” (2020): <https://www.pacificsami.org/privilege>.
- 55 Fjeld, “Art, Humor, and Images of Survival,” 6. For more on examples of cultural discordance, see, e.g., Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*.
- 56 Salo, “Fragments,” 3–5.
- 57 “Faith’s Words in 1991,” 3–4.
- 58 Fjeld, “Editorial,” 3.
- 59 Nathan Muus, Zoom conference call, February 20, 2021.
- 60 See especially *Báiki*, “30th Anniversary.”
- 61 *Báiki*, Special issue no. 1 (Spring 2017): 2–3.
- 62 Fox Tree, “Diasporic Indigeneity,” 13–14.

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