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Ethnic Identity in Finnish-Australian Literature

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The Finnish emigrant community in Australia is comparatively small but there are a number of emerging Finnish-Australian authors. This article examines the work of Finnish-Australian author Maria Takolander, in particular her acclaimed short story collection The Double.

The article discusses the markers of Finnish ethnicity present in Takolander's work, with reference to how these markers have been impacted by the Australian context in which the stories were written. Ultimately, it can be seen that traditional markers of Finnish ethnicity, such as a love of nature, have been reinterpreted through interaction with Australian culture.

This article forms part of my doctoral dissertation on Finnish emigrant literature and its connection to the Kalevala.

The study of Finnish-Australian communities has been gaining momentum in recent decades, as scholars in Australia and elsewhere recognise the importance of findings made in the Finnish-North American context. Research on Finnish Australians to date has focused on issues such as ethnic identity formation, language retention, the formation of cultural societies and the migrant experience. This largely sociological and historical research has provided insight into what it means to be of Finnish descent in Australia, paving the way for more culturally focused studies.

The study of Finnish Australians, with its early emphasis on sociological and historical aspects, appears to be following the same pat-

tern as early research conducted on Finnish emigrant groups in North America. Of course, there is less material to work with in Australia, purely because the numbers are smaller. In the US, around 635,000 people have Finnish roots, according to 2014 census data, which is about 0.2% of the population ("People Reporting Ancestry"). In Canada, it is around 136,000 people, according to their 2011 census data, which is about 0.3% of the population ("2011 National Household Survey: Data Tables"). Australia recently conducted a census, the results of which are not yet known, but according to 2011 data, there are about 30,000 people who claim Finnish ancestry in Australia, in a country of 22 million at that time ("The Finland-Born Community"). This equates to 0.1%. With such small numbers, it is understandable that the study of this community has been slower to progress than that of the North American Finnish communities. I do believe that Finnish Australians are a group worth studying, however, and that the study of their culture can add to findings already made in other Finnish emigrant communities.

As mentioned, the study of Finnish Australians is following a similar pattern to that of Finnish North Americans, where historical and sociological research led the way, laying a foundation of understanding and interest for more specific, culturally focused research. It is in this more focused area that I hope to contribute, by starting to explore the cultural cre-

ations of Finnish Australians, and drawing out what they can tell us about the ethnic identity created by Finnish emigrant groups. To this end, I am conducting my doctoral research partly on Finnish-Australian literature, within a wider context of investigating Finnish emigrant literature and its connection to the *Kalevala*, as a representation and embodiment of typically Finnish traits and images.

This article will look at the writing of Maria Takolander, a second generation Finnish Australian who has published a number of novels and collections of poetry. It will particularly focus on two stories contained in Takolander's acclaimed short story collection *The Double* (2013). I intend to examine the Finnish trait of affinity with nature in relation to these works, while also exploring the ways its representation has been shaped and remade by an Australian context.

To help in understanding Finnish-Australian culture, however, it is necessary to trace briefly the history of this group. Finnish migration to Australia started much later than that to North America. The first significant wave arrived in the 1920s, after the US began to restrict immigration. In the early 1950s, Australia implemented a formal migration agreement with Finland, offering assisted passage and work to new arrivals. As a result, most Finnish-born people living in Australia today migrated between 1950 and the early 1970s, including my own father and grandparents. Finnish migration to Australia slowed significantly after the 1970s, so that today most of the Finnish-Australian community belong to the second, third or fourth generations.

There have been no large-scale studies on Finnish-Australian culture, defining a set of character traits or images particular to this group. For my doctoral research, I am using North American studies of emigrant Finnishness to provide this set of traits and images, which comprise an affinity with nature, introversion, tenacity, the ritual of the sauna, and the concept of *sisu* (Stoller "Expressions of Ethnic Identity"; Stoller "Sauna, Sisu and Sibelius"; Susag; Taramaa; Walima). I believe these cultural traits and images extend also to Finnish-Australians.

The Australian context necessarily alters the way these typically Finnish traits and images are portrayed by Finnish-Australian authors. Possibly the most noticeable difference occurs in relation to the concept of an affinity with, or connection to, nature. In a traditional understanding of this concept, Finnish emigrant groups are said to feel deep connections with the land, which is both protector and provider. In Finnish-Australian writing, as typified by the work of Maria Takolander, nature is more

menacing. It plays less of a protective role and shifts to an almost predatory one, though an affinity with this menacing nature is still present. The descriptions of the natural environment are harsher and less romantic; there is an ever-present undercurrent of danger and associated caution.

In Maria Takolander's short story 'The Red Wheelbarrow', the unnamed main character was born in Australia to Estonian parents, having been conceived in Estonia. This story has hints of the autobiographical for Takolander, who was born in Australia to Finnish parents but conceived in Finland. The structuring agent of the story is the William Carlos Williams poem of the same name, which Takolander reproduces in prose form as "So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens" (8). By taking the poem out of its original eight-line structure, Takolander puts the focus on the image Williams has created, and not on the way he has done so. The image has a vibrancy, a sense that the world has been washed clean. The rainwater indicates new beginnings, an untapped potential.

Takolander has her main character study this poem at university, where he struggles to find the meaning in it. Later in the story, he recalls the chickens that his father kept in the backyard of their suburban home, confined to their muddy coop. These chickens are dirty and trapped. There is no sense of lightness or new beginnings here. These muddied chickens are closely tied to the main character's father, who was raised in the Estonian countryside and is portrayed as a brutal man.

In the opening scene of the story, he bites his wife and draws blood. At one point, the wife describes his upbringing as 'primitive', telling their son that his father had lived in a house in the woods and slept with animals in the winter for warmth (12). When the father kills his backyard chickens, he rips out fistfuls of bloodied feathers with bared teeth, silently absorbed by the gruesome task (16-17).

During his mid-year university break, the main character travels to Estonia to see his parents' former houses. In Takolander's Estonia, it rains constantly. But again, unlike the Williams poem, this rain is not washing things clean; it is stifling, the sky "a solid slab of grey" (24). The main character finds that his father's house is no longer standing. It is now a "clearing encircled by forest" in which he imagines his father as a young man, "ravenous as a wolf" (24-25). This reference makes explicit the danger of both the forest and the father, through his connection to it. By equating the father with a predatory animal, and noting the forest looks "impenetrably dark", Takolander presents nature as menacing and strongly links the fa-

ther to this sense of menace (25). This is the concept of affinity or connection with nature as it is found in Finnish-Australian writing. The concept is present, but its execution is very different to that of Finnish-North American literature. The connection is more sinister.

Takolander continues this theme in her short story *The Double*. This story is set in both Finland and Australia, and again nature is shown as something menacing, and the concept of affinity with nature has a sinister undercurrent. The central image of nature in this story is *mustajärvi*; Black Lake. As the main character Eeva remembers the word, "fear slows her breath, and she feels the cold of the water and the earth as if it is inside her. She cannot recall what the word means, but she sees a forest lake, cavernous and unmoving, funnelling into its black depths the encircling conifers and a steely sky" (48). This image, of a dark body of water pulling the surrounding earth into its centre, is unsettling for both the reader and Eeva herself.

It is an image that Takolander returns to repeatedly, though. Whether in the way that Eeva's brothers jump from the jetty into the lake, their "pale bodies hovering above the black surface and reflected there for just a moment, [before being] swallowed again", or in Eeva's recollection of walking along the forest path that ended at "the jetty and the lake beyond, like a black hole in the centre of everything, drawing the world in" (55). The story has a sense of foreboding, and the death of Eeva's oldest brother Kalle at the lake is mentioned a number of times before the reader discovers that, having almost drowned there and been pulled ashore by another brother, Kalle had tried to crawl back into the water to drown.

The lake's darkness had finally pulled him into its centre, and was unwilling to release him, physically or otherwise. Takolander makes this explicit by noting, "the black water has turned him into someone they don't know" (75). While her brother struggles to keep Kalle on the shore, Eeva picks up a rock and brings it down on the back of his head, killing him. In this way, the black water turns Eeva into someone she herself doesn't know. This act is also shocking to the reader, who was introduced to Eeva as a middle-aged woman living in Australia, and comes to know *mustajärvi* through her recollections.

In *The Double*, Eeva's connection to nature is forged through a shared moment of horror. The lake claims her oldest brother, and then in essence claims her. Takolander also uses this image of dark water in an Australian setting, with the opening and closing scenes of the story detailing Eeva's interaction with a large puddle, described as "almost a small lake" (48).

This is *mustajärvi* in miniature, in the middle of an area slowly being built out by new houses. In a sign of things to come, this almost-lake pulls Eeva's lower half into it after she faints from a migraine. Unlike the original Black Lake, however, this one is not claustrophobic. It is not surrounded by conifers, and the sky, far from being 'steely', is "crowded with clouds... like a child's drawing" (47).

There is no menace inherent in this picture of nature, but as Eeva recalls the Black Lake of her teenage years while she is lying half in this water, Takolander gives the innocent scene an undercurrent of danger. This is compounded by the effects of Eeva's migraine, with the left side of her body effectively paralysed, trapping her in both her physical self and her natural surroundings.

The Double ends with this almost-lake in Australia, and Eeva looking at her reflection in it. She looks again and sees that "it is a stranger there in the mirrored surface, her pale face muddied, her body bound in white sheeting" (78). This stranger is both Eeva and her brother Kalle, whose face was mud-streaked when they pulled him from the water, with the white sheeting representing a burial shroud. In this final scene, the ducks in the water "flap gently and make way for her", implying a literal and figurative joining of Eeva and Kalle in the depths of the water (78).

The connection that Eeva has with nature in this story is darker than the one Takolander creates in *The Red Wheelbarrow*, but both are based on an image of nature as foreboding and menacing, with a troubling effect on those that enter it. From my early readings of Finnish-North American literature, this is not the case. While the characters in both Finnish-Australian and Finnish-North American writing are connected to their natural environment, in the Finnish-American texts, nature functions more traditionally as a protector and provider, as mentioned earlier.

The reasons for the difference may well have something to do with the differing climates of the two continents, but more work is needed before a cohesive explanation can be put forward. As I continue to explore Finnish-North American literature, I am hopeful that answers can be found in the contrast between the two.

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**Hyvää Joulua ja Onnellista
Uutta Vuotta!**

**God Jul och
Gott Nytt År!**

**Merry Christmas and a
Happy New Year!**



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