

Book review of Sverdljuk, Jana, Joranger, Terje Mikael Hasle, Jackson, Erika K. and Kivisto, Peter (eds.) 2021. *Nordic Whiteness and Migration to the USA: A Historical Exploration of Identity*. London: Routledge. 192 pp.



BOOK REVIEW

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The edited volume *Nordic Whiteness and Migration to the USA* gives insights into the experiences and positionality of Nordic migrants in American racist hierarchies in the late 19th and early 20th century. The book is a welcomed addition to a growing body of research taking place during the last two decades, deconstructing the placement of the Nordic countries as “outside” the history of colonialism, as “unallied and neutral” as phrased by Gunlög Fur (2013: 18). This body of research has made visible Nordic actors and states past engagements in various colonial and imperial endeavors and how racist perceptions of the world and coloniality were never absent from Nordic lives. The volume provides nuanced insights into multiple ways people from the Nordic countries were an active part of colonialism and White supremacist ideologies, while also providing a complex picture of internal differentiations and relations of power within the Nordic population.

The book’s editorial team, Jana Sverdljuk, curator of the migration archives at the National Library of Norway, Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, Director of the Norwegian Emigrant Museum, Erika K. Jackson, Associate Professor of History at Colorado Mesa University, and Peter Kivisto, Professor of Social Thought at Augustana College, have in different ways been engaged in migration research, focusing primarily on Nordic migration to the United States. Their short but clear introduction frames the issues at hand, followed by nine chapters organized into six sections. Concluding remarks are written by Peter Kivisto.

As argued in the introduction, the book can be seen as intervening with two theoretical strands. It stresses, in line with postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, race as constitutive of nation-building, an issue that has undergone renewed salience in the current political environment in the United States, with a widespread call for acknowledgment of the country’s racist history. The book makes a critical intervention in this discussion. The second theoretical strand is the growing scholarship on race and the Nordic countries, where the book clearly shows the Nordics were part of settler colonialism. Here, the chapters provide valuable insights into Nordic discussions of integration into American society, their perspectives toward other migrant groups, the

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patterns of settlement in the United States, inter-Nordic relations, and perceptions of Nordic migrants and countries by wider American society.

Betty A. Bergland (Chapter 1) utilizes Charles W. Mills' theoretical concept of racial contract to illuminate how the same racist land policies of the US government expelled indigenous people from the land and provided access to land to Nordic settlers. Bergland's analysis is exemplified with a discussion of Norwegians in the Upper Midwest, and encourages research into the links between "migration/settlement and dislocation/dispossession" (30). Anders Bo Rasmussen (Chapter 3) also addresses land rights but focuses on elite perspectives from the Scandinavian-American community. Using the writing of newspaper editors and Civil War officers, Rasmussen shows that even those who held antislavery views were reluctant to support equal rights to land after the Civil War. Particularly valuable in Rasmussen's analysis is its centering around the idea of transplantation, showing how ideas of race and class from the Old World shaped perceptions in the United States.

Several chapters give insights into the privileges that Nordic migrants enjoyed in the New World and their engagements with racial classifications. These chapters show how acceptable White supremacist ideology was for many migrants from the Nordic countries, how they inserted themselves into it, and how their Whiteness was sometimes questioned. Joranger (Chapter 6) draws attention to the lack of research on Norwegian immigrants' relations with other ethnic groups in the late 19th century, showing that many Norwegians built an ethnic community that was inclusive to others from Norway, but not to other European migrants. Odd Sverre Lovoll (Chapter 7) reflects on how Norwegian immigrants dealt with the multiethnic environment in Chicago, which was a gateway to most emigrants to the northwest (136). While Lovoll stresses the importance of Whiteness for Norwegian migrants, he and Joranger (Chapter 6) draw out the salience of ethnicity and that national ethnic identity must be positioned alongside White racial identity (134). Hans-Petter Grav (Chapter 5) focuses on Pacific Northwest Norwegians and how they constructed their identity through ideas of belonging to both Norway and the United States, enjoying White privilege. At the same time, their understanding of Whiteness was contextual and endowed with notions of cultural rights and civil obligations. Jørn Brøndal's (Chapter 4) comparison of four Danish travel writers writing for a Danish audience reveals how they portrayed Danish migrants in the United States as "stout, honest, hard-working people fitting perfectly into American society" (94). These travel writers positioned Danish migrants high in the US racial hierarchy.

Several of the chapters refer to the idea of Manifest Destiny, showing how this conception constituted a part of the world of these Nordic settlers, giving them a sense of having an exceptionally strong entitlement to land. These were often entangled with ideas of American democracy, where Norwegian immigrants and Norwegian-Americans made claims to have "discovered" and settled America and thus that the idealized American values were, in a sense, Norwegian (Grav, Chapter 5). Although these notions were at times contested by other ethnicities (Lovoll, Chapter 7: 138), they also translated into many Norwegian immigrants seeing themselves as model immigrants (Joranger, Chapter 6). These chapters also deconstruct the assumptions that Nordic migrants settled on empty land in America, giving examples of lived relations between Scandinavian settlers and American Indians. They show how Nordic migrants viewed American Indians as a race that was destined to vanish, often simultaneously exoticizing their culture (e.g., Grav, Chapter 5: 107), while the

chapters also show that there also existed ideas that disrupted this image of the American Indian (e.g., Joranger, Chapter 6: 127).

Most of the chapters link to privileges that Nordic migrants enjoyed, but two focus more explicitly on people who have historically been racialized in the Nordic context. This emphasis is important as research on racism in the Nordic countries often fails to address power dynamics within the Nordic countries themselves, and how different geopolitical and ethnic positionality has affected racism and racialization (see Loftsdóttir 2019). Ellen Marie Jensen (Chapter 2) shows how Sámi experiences and racialization in the United States has to be contextualized within racialization in Scandinavia, where they had been targeted as inferior and forced to culturally assimilate. Even though generally seen as White by the larger US society, Jensen's discussion draws out the complexity of their categorization and how Sámi positionality within the US racial hierarchy depended on the context where they lived and the concentration of other Nordic migrants there. Finnish people also have a history of being seen as an inferior race in the Nordic countries – closer to the east than the west. Aleksí Huhta's (Chapter 8) discussion on Finnish-Americans in the early 20th century draws out their ambiguous positionality within the US context, and how Finnish-Americans tried to position themselves as “not only Americans but as white Americans” (145).

Jackson's Chapter 9 stands apart from others due to both the period analyzed and being less concerned with migration and more with the sexualization of Swedish women in the postwar United States, that is, the depiction of Swedishness as intersecting with gender and sexuality. Through an analysis of films and magazines, the chapter illustrates the creation of the image of Swedish women as “looking for a good time” (162). Showing how, as a sexual plaything, Swedish women were simultaneously exotic and hyper White, the chapter demonstrates the shifting meaning of this image as engaging with broader post-war politics and depictions of sexuality. Peter Kivisto's concluding remarks manage to link the different chapters, tying together the core messages and contextualizing them within theories of US racial hierarchies.

This book is useful, engaging, and constitutes an essential contribution to different fields focusing on migration and racialization. It would have been interesting to include more chapters on non-Norwegian experiences, such as Danish and Swedish immigrations and settler experiences, to better understand the differences and similarities of Scandinavian migration. Also, possibly due to my own focus on Iceland, I miss that there is no chapter on Iceland and few references to Iceland and Greenland. This point links to that it could have been helpful to engage more with research on Whiteness in the Nordic countries themselves. The introduction and closing remarks still pull the volume into such a conversation and position the chapters well within earlier research. In brief, this is an excellent book, and within the field that has been focusing on Nordic colonialism and postcolonialism, it makes a salient contribution.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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