

# Coffee-Drinking in Constructing Finnish-Americanness in Three Finnish-American Migrant Short-Story Collections

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*Данная работа рассматривает роль кофе в создании американо-финской идентичности персонажей в трёх сборниках рассказов "Heikki Heikkinen" (1995), "Misery Bay" (2002) и "Back to Misery Bay" (2007) американского писателя финского происхождения Лаури Андерсона. Рассказывая о жизни потомков финских мигрантов в США в конце XX-начале XXI века, автор уделяет большое внимание материальной культуре, в частности традициям питания. Персонажи, живущие на границе между американской и финской культурой, используют элементы обеих в конструировании своей идентичности. Целью данной работы является анализ такого элемента традиций питания, как кофе в этом конструировании. С одной стороны, принесённый из Финляндии их предками обычай пить кофе объединяет персонажей как финнов и отделяет их от других этнических групп. С другой, анализ демонстрирует, что данный обычай претерпел серьёзные изменения в США и приобрёл много новых значений. Таким образом, некогда финский обычай стал для персонажей отличительным знаком их «американской финскости».*

**Keywords:** Coffee, Ethnic Identity Construction, Finnish-Americans, Foodways, Migrant Short Stories

## 1 Introduction

In three collections of migrant short stories, *Heikki Heikkinen* (1995), *Misery Bay* (2002), and *Back to Misery Bay* (2007) by the Finnish-American author Lauri Anderson, foodways hold a prominent position in constructing the identities of the third- and fourth-generation Finnish migrant characters in the USA in the late 20th and early 21st century. Their cooking and eating practices along with food-related rituals function as what Angus Gillespie (1984: 148) defines as “a badge of identity”: they distinguish Finnish-Americans from others and manifest their position in American society. Describing the characters’ culinary habits Anderson pays a great deal of attention to such practice as coffee-drinking. In this article, I will analyze its role in establishing the settlers’ Finnish-Americanness. On the one hand, this “old-country” practice functions as a marker of Finnishness for the characters. On the other, it has undergone many transformations and has obtained many new meanings in the USA. The characters’ coffee-drinking includes both Finnish and American elements, and allows to negotiate the identities with Finland and the USA. I will concentrate on three aspects of coffee and identity construction: the role of coffee as a badge of the characters’ ethnic unity and difference (1); a link between their coffee-drinking and Lutheranism (2); and coffee and their strength as hard workers and rugged outdoorsmen (3).

In these three collections of stories, Lauri Anderson, a second-generation migrant, tells about the second, third, and fourth generation-Finnish-Americans mostly living in Minnesota and Michigan (especially in the Upper Peninsula, also known as the UP or “Yooperland”) in the 1980–2000s. He writes about the comic and tragic aspects of their everyday lives, and revises the stereotypes about Finnish-Americans with the help of satire. Foodways hold a salient position in the texts as it is indicated by the following titles of the stories in *Heikki Heikkinen*: “Fishing”, “Growing Tomatoes”, “Hunting Deer”, “Old Finnish Cooking”, “Taking the Smartass Fishing”, “The New Barbecue Grill” and “The Poaching Hall of Fame”. Coffee is portrayed as a prominent element of the migrants’ food practices as the characters drink coffee in almost every story in Anderson’s three collections. They also participate in coffee-related rituals such as the so-called church coffee on Sundays. As Anderson often exaggerates and uses parody in portraying Finnish-Americans, their coffee-drinking also becomes exaggerated. For instance, in many stories the migrants drink it “by the potful” (Anderson 1995: 27), and it is “strong enough to have a stroke” (Anderson 2002: 20).

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

In my article I will draw on the concepts of the role of food/drink practices in constructing national and ethnic identity. According to Michelle Craig McDonald and Steven Topik (2008: 109), foods have played central roles in constructing national identities, “for though consumption became more diffuse, ingestion remained tempered by local rituals and adaptations”. In Pauliina Raento’s (2005: 50) words, generalized representations of “our national way” of eating unite “us” and simultaneously distinguish “us” from “others” whose food practices may cause suspicion and fear. Such food/drink practice as coffee-drinking is a distinctive niche in our cultural landscape and an important cultural fixture that says as much about us (Dicum & Luttinger 1999: ix). Coffee is a drink that has played a major role in the creation of both American and Finnish national identities. The USA alone daily consume one fifth of the world’s coffee, and it is the largest food import of the United States by value (Dicum & Luttinger 1999: ix–x). Coffee has been historically considered “the national beverage” of the USA (McDonald & Steven Topik 2008: 117), and a “king of the American breakfast table” (Ukers 2012[1922]: 102–103). From the Boston Tea Party, the War of Independence, the frontier and American expansionism to the large coffee corporations and coffeehouse chains such as Starbucks, coffee has played a prominent role in the construction of American national identity. As a result, mainstream Americans consider themselves a coffee-drinking and coffee-loving nation.

At the same time, coffee and its consumption have historically played a special role in the creation of Finnish national identity. Finns are notorious for their passion for coffee, and its level of consumption per capita in Finland is the world highest one (Rojola 2006: 269). Matti Klinge (1999: 97) even considers coffee and Christianity to be two key

elements of Finnishness. Coffee functions as a significant part of Finnish social relations and rituals (Knuutila 2004: 14) such as offering a guest a cup of coffee/inviting somebody to share, serves for communication and is associated with values, norms and beliefs (Rojola 2006: 272). Coffee is also accompanied by the related food items: a variety of Finnish coffee bread such as pulla, kakku, piirakka and pikkuleivät (Saarinen 2004: 167). According to Tuija Saarinen (2011: 232–234; 2004: 163), coffee is both the past and future for Finns and comprises a part of collective memory. Coffee-drinking is a prominent component in both Finnish men's and women's work culture (Saarinen 2004: 164). Saarinen (2004: 163) comes to conclusion that it is difficult to study Finnish culture without paying attention to coffee-drinking.

Eating/drinking habits also hold a vital position in constructing ethnic identities in the context of migration and exile. Migrants in a host country can use the foods and drinks from the old country to construct a “home away from home” (Reichl 2003: 178). The “old food” in a “new world” becomes “soul” food which gives the migrants a taste of home (Reichl 2003: 190). This food “from home” allows the migrants to remember the old country, and evokes their shared identity with fellow people who eat the same (Sutton 2001: 84; 86; 102). There is no surprise that food, and the search for identity expressed by cooking, eating, and food are one of the recurring topics in migrant literature (Vlasta 2006: 51). As Sandra Vlasta (2006: 102) states,

Literary depictions of eating and descriptions of dishes and meals have highly symbolic value, and can reveal a lot about the characters' identity or their search for it. In migration literature, this becomes particularly apparent as the necessity for a re-negotiation of identity is often a main topic that is discussed via food and eating.

On the one hand, food has the potential of uniting the migrant characters and separating them from the dominant group in their host country (Nyman 2009: 282), thus demarcating “us” and “them” (Ashley, Hollows, Jones & Taylor 2004: 83). On the other hand, the migrants' foodways can negotiate with cultures of both the old and new home, blend them and be involved in forming new traditions and identities (Mercer & Strom 2007: 36).

### **3 Coffee as a Badge of the Characters' Ethnic Unity and Difference**

In the stories by Anderson, the migrants' old-country practice of coffee-drinking, and coffee-related aspects (Finnish coffee rituals and coffee bread) unite the characters as Finns, and distance them from others. At the same time, this habit allows them to negotiate their identities with both Finland and the USA by blending coffee-consuming traditions of both countries. The characters' passion is portrayed as a visible marker of their Finnishness. For instance, in the story “The Author” in *Heikki Heikkinen*, a third-generation narrator lives in a little town in Michigan, “full of Finns” (Anderson 1995: 1). He views coffee as one of many food products that manifest his Finnishness: “I also

knew I was a Finn because all fish in our house were pickled, all potatoes were boiled, and the Jell-O had to have plenty of dill. [...] I drank gallons of coffee every day [...]" (ibid. 2). Later the protagonist ironically describes his studies at the Finnish-American university, Suomi College, and tells what he means by "one-hundred percent Finnishness":

I completed my education by taking pre-Finnish studies at Suomi College. Pre-Finnish studies is [sic] for those non-Finns and half-Finns (that's me!) striving diligently to be one-hundred percent Finn but lack necessary qualifications. Maybe they aren't Lutheran or they've never cut down a tree. Or they don't like coffee! (Anderson 1995: 3)

The story "Uncle Leon" in *Heikki Heikkinen* features an eccentric Finnish-American hermit who lacks the values and traits praised by fellow Finnish-Americans. The protagonist's excessive coffee-drinking serves as the only sign of his being "a normal Finn" in his life and even death:

[...] Leon, appeared to be a normal Finn when, at the age of eight, he took to coffee as if it were the staff of life. From then to the end of his life, he drank between twenty and thirty cups a day. Other than that, he was weird. [...] On October 1, 1961 [...] Leon died of a stroke. He had just consumed his two-hundred-thousandth cup of strong, black coffee. In Old Finnish Man terms, he had about as perfect a death as one could have. (Anderson 1995: 104–105)

Coffee also holds a prominent position in the life and death of the second-generation protagonist of many stories, Heikki Heikkinen, a stereotypical old and rugged Yooper Finn. Throughout his life he consumes gallons of coffee and dies not before he drinks several cups of coffee (the story "Heikki's Last Revenge" in *Heikki Heikkinen*):

A week ago last Tuesday, Heikki sat down to a breakfast of pickled pig's feet, King Oscar sardines, limburger cheese, and saltines. Afterwards, he washed the stuff down with a half dozen cups of steaming black coffee. He told his wife he felt tired, lay down on the couch and died. He was just a few days short of his eighty-eight birthday. (Anderson 1995: 74)

Coffee gives the characters, rugged individualists and often hermits, an opportunity to come together on a common ground. According to Dicum and Luttinger (1999: ix), coffee is often associated with relaxation and sociability. In the stories, the shared act of coffee-drinking is a vital part of the characters' social relations as it allows them to socialize with other Finnish-Americans. Over a cup of coffee and traditional Finnish coffee bread such as nisu or pulla, the migrants discuss the news, share their memories and seek solutions to their problems. For instance, in the story "Toivo and Eino" in *Misery Bay*, coffee brings together two old Finnish-American friends, and gives them an opportunity to discuss their problems: "The two went inside to drink coffee and to eat *nisu* and seek a solution" (Anderson 2002: 2, original italics).

Coffee does not only unite the characters' as coffee-loving Finns, and distinguish them from those who do not drink coffee, but also demarcates them from those who drink coffee not in their way. For instance, in the story "Joe Heinonen" in *Heikki Heikkinen*,

the Finnish-American protagonist visits Istanbul and wants to get “proper” coffee: “He tried to find a decent cup of coffee, but everywhere the Turks gave him a tiny cup of something that tasted like mud. Eventually, he gave up in disgust and took a taxi to the airport” (Anderson 1995: 104).

At the same time, although the characters consider their way of coffee-drinking Finnish, their old-country tradition has been also influenced by American environment. In Mary Douglas’ words (2003[1973]: 29–30), ethnic food can recruit new food from to serve to the old traditions. The migrants’ practice of coffee-drinking plays the role described by Douglas, as it absorbs new products to accompany coffee. In addition to traditional Finnish coffee food the characters’ coffee is accompanied with North American products such as bacon and syrup (Anderson 2002: 16). Moreover, the migrants use contemporary and commercialized mass-produced American symbols of ethnic heritage such as coffee cups with inscriptions. In the story “Scanning the News” in *Heikki Heikkinen*, the protagonist Heikki does not only express his Finnishness by drinking coffee, but also buys a coffee cup that says: “I’M FROM FINLAND WHAT’S YOUR EXCUSE?” (Anderson 1995: 39). This demonstrates that the characters negotiate their identities with both Finland of their ancestors, and with the modern United States in which they live. The old-country practice of coffee-drinking is present in their lives, but is also open to changes and transformations in the new country.

In the stories by Anderson, coffee is more than coffee for the Finnish-American characters. They consume it excessively, by “gallons”, and their way of drinking coffee functions as their badge of ethnic distinctiveness as it unites them as Finns and distances from others. It is connected with the memories of the old country, and serves as a common ground for bringing the migrants together. However, by absorbing new products their habit illustrates that their Finnishness is strongly shaped by the USA. As a result, coffee-drinking constructs their identities as Finnish-American.

#### **4 Coffee and the Lutheran Church**

In the stories, coffee is also tightly connected with such cornerstone of the characters’ Finnishness as Lutheranism. The latter is one of the collective symbols of Finnishness both in Finland and in Finnish-American community (Taramaa 2007; 77; 93). At the same time, coffee is related to Lutheranism since Finns have (and still do) historically drunk coffee both at different church events and at home after church service (Saarinen 2011: 177–178). The images of the migrants’ coffee-parties with friends after Lutheran church service, and church coffee and breakfasts on Sundays recur in both *Heikki Heikkinen*, and *Back to Misery Bay*. Charles Camp (1996: 302, original italics) points out that:

The range of associations between food and religion is extensive – from dietary rules that limit what a member of a particular faith may eat, to the symbolic connection between nutritional and spiritual sustenance, to the frequent use of food events such as church suppers and bake sales as fund-raisers and social events benefiting religious groups. Religious communities are seldom formed *because* of their attitudes toward food, but they may come to be known by and differentiated from, other communities as a consequence of food-related beliefs, rituals, or other practices.

Thus, coffee-drinking becomes a visible symbol of the characters' going to a Lutheran church on Sundays, and a badge of their Lutheranism that unites them and differentiates from others. In many stories, shared coffee-drinking and eating Finnish coffee bread on Sunday brings the characters, especially Finnish-American women, together: "Finnish women have a strong sense of privacy which they violate only on Sunday morning after church when they gather to gossip over *nisu* and coffee. Then everything comes out" (Anderson 1995: 77, original italics). Coffee is connected with both the female characters' religion, communication with church friends, and hospitality: "[...] Sunday arrived and her church friends came over for *nisu* and coffee" (Anderson 1995: 63). This is in line with what Tuija Saarinen (2004: 163) says about coffee as a part of Finnish women's own culture where men are not allowed. In the story "Dostoevsky's Three Annas" in *Back to Misery Bay*, the knowledge "how to serve coffee and sweet bakeries to the church ladies" is an important part of raising a daughter of Finnish-American Lutheran minister "to be a lady" (Anderson 2007: 8).

For some male characters, such as the protagonist of many stories, the second-generation Finnish-American migrant Heikki Heikkinen, coffee-drinking and church breakfasts become even more important than actual going to the church. For him they practically replace religion and suffice as a badge of his Finnish Lutheranism: "Heikki hadn't been to church for seventy-two of his eighty-some years, but he retained a child's faith in a Lutheran God. [...] He also attended numerous church breakfasts and suppers" (Anderson 1995: 50). As he puts it himself, "I'll be right back at the Lutheran church next time they have a pancake breakfast" (Anderson 1995: 52). In the story "Heikki's Grandson", Heikki praises one hundred percent Finnishness of his grandson and emphasizes the role that church coffee-drinking and breakfasts play as manifestation of the grandson's Lutheranism: "'He's not an active Lutheran, but he likes their pancake breakfasts and much prefers Lutheran coffee to the Catholic variety', said Heikki" (Anderson 1995: 68). Although there is no such thing as "Lutheran" or "Catholic" coffee, and the expression is facetious, it nevertheless highlights the significance of this food practice for the migrants, and has a point.

Such a mundane practice of the characters' lives as coffee-drinking in the special context of religion becomes a ritual or, as Sutton (2001: 19) defines it, a key site where food and memory come together. He refers to Connerton (1989: 59) who views ritual ceremonies as generating sensory and emotional experiences that sediment memory in the body. Sutton (2001: 29) also adds that religion and ritual are naturalized through the practices of everyday life and vice versa. When the everyday foods and drinks of the

characters are served after Lutheran service at special ritual occasions, they too become special, “Lutheran”, and function as a carrier of ritualized memory that reminds the characters about their Lutheranism and Finnishness through certain sensory and emotional experiences. The second- and third-generation Finnish-American migrants have not had the real memories of the Lutheran church life in Finland. However, they imagine and re-create them on the basis of the old practices they have inherited from their ancestors such as the tradition of drinking coffee after church. This food habit acquires a new meaning in the migrants’ new country as it now stands for Finnish Lutheranism and is sometimes even more important for the characters than going to a church.

At the same time, the characters also blend the old Finnish traditions with the traditions of their new country by accompanying coffee with North American pancake breakfasts. The latter are primarily Canadian and the US tradition associated with cowboys’ history and often used by churches and charities as a means of fundraising. This demonstrates that they recruit new American food practices to the old-country practice, and consider them a marker of “Finnish” coffee-drinking Lutheranism. With the help of coffee they negotiate their identities with both Finnish and American church life traditions as the characters simultaneously belong to both Finland and North America.

### **5 Strong Coffee, Strong Finns**

In the stories by Anderson, the majority of the characters are men. The narrator emphasizes such element of their Finnishness as strength: their strong work ethos and the ability to endure hard work, and their strength as independent and self-sufficient backwoodsmen who are actively engaged with nature. Their coffee-drinking habit emphasizes their Finnish and Yooper masculinity.

Coffee is connected with such feature of the characters’ Finnish-Americanness as their strong work ethic. The latter is considered a significant aspect of Finnishness in both Finland and Finnish-American diaspora (Taramaa 2007: 77; 102–104). Moreover, strength including physical strength has been a prominent distinctive quality of Finnish migrants in America (Taramaa 2007: 118). In the majority of the stories, the male characters are (or used to be) tough and diligent workers in the regional Upper Peninsula industries. Their jobs are hard and masculine: mining, logging and farming. The characters’ strong coffee stands for a strong man as they enjoy a cup of strong coffee before and during their daily back-breaking labor. For instance, the protagonist in the story “Dostoevsky’s Three Annas” describes a typical day of her father in the following terms: “My dad got up before dawn every morning and re-stoked the wood-burning furnace. Then he got a fire started in the wood-burning kitchen stove and made a pot of coffee. He poured himself a cup and was out the door by five-thirty” (Anderson 2007: 18). Saarinen (2011: 232–234) highlights the fact that coffee is an important part of Finnish work culture as Lutheran work ethic as coffee quickly gives energy and rest in

the middle of a workday. At the same time, the “caffeine kick” of strong coffee has historically been important for American work culture as well (Pendergast 1999: 46; 53; 85). Thus, the characters’ coffee-drinking highlights their belonging to both Finnish work and American (and, more specifically, regional Upper Peninsula) work culture.

Coffee is also associated with another badge of the characters’ masculine Finnish-Americanness, the relation with nature in the form of living in the wilderness, gathering, hunting/poaching and fishing. The Finns’ relationship with nature has been a common factor in Finnish life and thus has become a prominent component of Finnishness (Johnson 1996: 243). At the same time, this commitment with nature also signifies a strong regional Yooper identity as in the Finnish-American community in Michigan and Minnesota hunting is a form of an ethnic symbol of Finnish migrants (Frandy 2009: 130). In many stories, coffee along with rifles and fishing gear accompanies tough and rugged Finnish-American backwoodsmen in their exploits in the wilderness. The narrator describes a typical morning of a typical Finnish-American old man in the story “Heikki” in *Misery Bay* in the following terms:

He was ready for the day. [...] On the gun rack in the pickup’s back window, he had his .30-06. A box of shells shared the seat beside him [...] Behind him, in the bed of the pickup, Heikki had his fishing equipment. He also had filled a large thermos with coffee before he left the house, and he enjoyed his first cup cradled between his legs as he drove. In the cool of a cab, the coffee steamed and gave off a rich aroma. (Anderson 2002: 12)

The protagonist further describes the routine of his life: “I drink my coffee and beer, fish, hunt, fart around in the garden, plow snow all winter” (Anderson 2002: 12). In another story “Heikki Rejuvenated” in *Back to Misery Bay*, coffee is also used to emphasize ruggedness, toughness and Yooperness of a Finnish-American backwoodsman protagonist:

His pants were already stained from multiple contacts with rust, mud, old paint, moldy wood, septic dirt, burdock, tree bark, pitch, grass, fish guts, bulls’ blood, beer, whiskey, gun oil, gasoline, motor oil, caulking, Early American wood stain, pork grease, *puurua* [Finnish porridge], coffee, gravy [...]. (Anderson 2007: 88)

As in the case of work, coffee gives energy for further exploits in the wilderness. It is as important for the characters as it was for American frontiersmen (Pendergast 1999: 46).

Coffee also highlights their strength of living in the wilderness in a frugal and self-sufficient way. Some characters who live in the woods use coffee percolators, invented in the USA that can brew coffee without the use of electricity, and thus make the migrants independent from civilization. For instance, in “Arvo Salonen” in *Misery Bay*, a story portrays a hard life of the third-generation Finnish-American lecturer, who deliberately prefers to live in the wilderness the same way as his father and grandfather. He likes to be independent and frugal, and prefers the “good coffee” from “the old-fashioned

percolators” to the coffee from the modern electric coffee maker that tastes “sour and flat” (Anderson 2002: 99–100). When he marries, his young wife “renovates everything in his life” by getting electricity to Arvo’s cabin in the woods, buying modern cooking appliances including a coffee maker, and throwing his old percolator out of the house (Anderson 2002: 92–93; 100). Later when he feels remorse about their unhappy marriage, and nostalgia to his past experience of self-sufficient lone living, he also criticizes coffee makers: “*These things should never have replaced the old-fashioned percolators*, Arvo thought” (Anderson 2002: 99, original italics). Thus, coffee from an old-fashioned percolator emphasizes the ruggedness of the Yooper Finnish backwoodsmen who can successfully live far from civilization. It also illustrates their old Finnish-American values of independent living off the land in contrast to the consumerist lifestyle of the mainstream Americans and Americanized migrants who need modern cooking appliances such as electrical coffee makers. At the same time, this self-sufficiency in terms of coffee-drinking make the characters close with the old-days American pioneers and frontiersmen, also great coffee lovers.

## 6 Conclusions

In Anderson’s stories, the role of coffee and coffee-related practices is significant in constructing the characters’ identities. The shared passion for coffee (often exaggerated by the narrator for comical effect) brings them together and functions as a badge of their ethnic sameness and difference from others. The old-country practice of coffee-drinking is also connected with such markers of Finnishness as Lutheranism, work ethic, hard work, a commitment with nature and self-sufficiency. Their consumption of coffee is to some extent gendered: for the female characters coffee and sweets are connected with meeting friends and gossiping after church, while for the Finnish-American men strong coffee is often a source of energy for bone-breaking labor and/or living off nature. However, as Helena Tuomainen (2009: 528) holds, any migrants’ foodways are bound to transformations in a new country. The characters’ coffee-drinking in Anderson’s stories is not an exception. Their habit has adapted to the new environment. It has acquired new meanings such as “Lutheran” coffee. It has also absorbed new ways and foods (such as percolators and pancake breakfasts) from the American environment. As a result, once Finnish practice now signifies for the characters not only Finnishness, but also Finnish-Americanness, strongly shaped by their regional Upper Peninsula belonging. Coffee gives the migrants a chance to remember both the old country and their ethnic group’s history in the USA:

He felt as one with his grandfather and with a long line of Finnish radicals – Communists, anarchists, founders of co-operatives, temperance members and union advocates. All he needed now was a thick venison steak fried with onions and washed down with several cups of strong percolator-brewed coffee and his day would be complete. (Anderson 2002: 113)

Thus, in their coffee cups both Finland and the USA are blended together.

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