During the 35 years I’ve lived in Berkeley, I’ve visited many Finnish & Finnish-American homes in the Bay Area. During these visits, my eyes have inadvertently wandered to scout the Finnish objects and artifacts displayed in Finnish/American homes. Different generations may have different stylistic preferences, but some stable elements, such as wall hangings and design vases can often be found. It has been my longtime dream to look into Finnish immigrant material culture more closely, and I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to do just that with the Berkeley Language Center Fellowship in the fall of 2011.
Goals

My goal in this project has been to explore what Finnishness means, how it might relate to what artifacts people keep in their homes, and how Finnishness is expressed through the narratives shared with me. In addition, I have tied the project to my teaching, as the intermediate and advanced Finnish students in my multilevel class did their own research projects on the Bay Area Finnish American community and on current students in UCB Finnish courses. The project also relates to the MLA (2007) recommended guidelines of translingual/transcultural competence for language instruction.

Finnish Immigration to the United States

Finns most likely joined Viking expeditions as early as 1,000 years ago, but the Finnish emigration to North America was strongest between 1864 and 1914, when Finnish communities were built mostly along the US-Canada border. Today, it is estimated that there are around 700,000 Finnish-Americans in the U.S. Northern California is one of the traditional Finnish areas, and the older Finnish communities can be found in Fort Bragg, San Francisco, and Berkeley. As life in the Finnish-American communities revolved around a variety of ethnic activities and organizations, Finnish-Americans created a new hybrid culture that had ingredients from both the old homeland, Finland, and the new adopted home, America. A hybrid cuisine, and a hybrid language—"fingliska", "fingelska", or "finglish"—also emerged. To date, many Finnish organizations are still alive (Tuomainen, 2008, p. 500-503).

Berkeley as a Finn Town

The already established Berkeley Finnish community grew dramatically after the 1906 earthquake. San Francisco’s sizable Finnish community near the Embarcadero had burned down, and Finns moved to undamaged areas such as West Berkeley where Finnish communities already existed. West Berkeley came to be known as FinnTown. Finns have played a significant role in Berkeley history, especially with the Co-op movement. Even today, two Finnish Halls and a church with services in
Finnish exist in West Berkeley. Partly due to Berkeley’s deep Finnish immigrant roots, UC Berkeley launched the Finnish Studies program in 1995 as the first—and so far only—University of California campus to offer instruction in Finnish language and culture (Watkins, Tuomainen, 2011, p. 89-90).

**Qualitative Research: Ethnographic/Autoethnographic Approach**

While my study can be labeled ethnographic, autoethnography undoubtedly and unavoidably plays a large role in it. Autoethnography as a method combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. When writing an autobiography, an author retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences. When researchers write ethnographies, Geertz and Goodall claim, they produce a "thick description" of a culture (quoted in Ellis, Adams & Bochner, p. 3). The purpose of this thick description is to help facilitate understanding of a culture for insiders and outsiders, and is created by (inductively) discerning patterns of cultural experience—repeated feelings, stories, and happenings—as evidenced by field notes, interviews, and/or artifacts (Jorgenson, quoted in Ellis, Adams & Bochner, p. 3).

What I’ve done is have Finns and Finnish-Americans in the Bay Area discuss the Finnish objects and artifacts in their homes. My goal has been to “tease” the role of Finnishness in their lives out of the interviews. As an ethnographer doing the above, I became *participant observer*—that is, by taking field notes about cultural happenings as well as people’s engagement with these happenings (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, p. 5). As I was also interviewing cultural members I was examining and analyzing their ways of speaking and relating to their Finnish roots, and to the ethnic artifacts in their homes.

The dataset included video recordings, photos, and talk. I analyzed the data reflexively and realized that my presence influenced the narratives, and my autoethnographic comments produced more data and mixed in with the data. I didn’t even try to avoid autoethnicity but did my best to pay attention to the possible influences my pre-established attitudes might have had. The collected data
is a collage of materials, which provided a focus for the themes that emerged. I have analyzed the narratives and the artifacts reflexively in relation to my own interpretative stance.

**The Traditional Idea to Identify Finnishness: the Three S’s: SAUNA, SISU & SIBELIUS**

When I started looking into the literature regarding the concept of Finnishness, the idea of the 3 S’s kept popping up. I assume *sauna* to be a familiar concept to most; also Sibelius’s music is widely appreciated. However, *sisu* is probably a new term, and thus I will share the explanation given in the Urban Dictionary.

![SISU](image)

**SISU**

A uniquely Finnish quality; the word used to typify the Finnish spirit; a concept that is at the heart of how all Finns view themselves; a certain feature or value considered by Finns to be typically Finnish
- endurance, resilience, tenacity, determination, perseverance
- an inner reserve of diligence, capacity, the ability to face head-on and always overcome
- craziness: the recklessness that inspires a person to take on something in the face of incredible odds
- bravery, empowerment, inner strength

(Urban Dictionary)

The 3 S’s, SAUNA, SISU & SIBELIUS, is a popular metaphor, used for images, articles and even books.
However, I find the concept somewhat limited and limiting. While searching for a more appropriate metaphor, I came up with the concept of *aitta*.

**AITTA**
- a granary or other unheated farm storehouse of relatively firm build, used as a storage of various goods that are relatively valuable and too voluminous.
- figuratively used with a modifier, as in *aarreaitta* (a treasure chest).

(Wiktionary)

I will now take you to visit Finns and Finnish-Americans of different generations as I enter their *aarreaittas* with curious eyes, searching for new treasures.

**My Interviewees**

I interviewed 13 Bay Area residents: ten women and three men. Six were Finland-born Finns, four were children of varying ages born to at least one Finnish parent, and three were third generation Finnish-Americans. The ages of my interviewees ranged from 3 to 74.

I used the following categorization of immigrant generations:
- First generation immigrants: Those born in Finland and immigrating to the US at the age of 15 or older.
- Second generation immigrants: Those born in the US or having immigrated under the age of 15.
-The offspring of the second generation is considered the third generation, and their grandchildren are the fourth generation.

(Martin and Jönsson-Korhola, p. 13)

A Highwire Experience

We immigrants have options. We can choose to acculturate as best as possible, or we can live as if we never left our native place (in this case Finland). Most of us end up living in the in-between, a malleable Third Place, balancing our identities every day.

The term Third Space/Third Place has been mostly discussed by post-colonialist thinkers and sociolinguists. Here I’m using Letizia Allais’ working definition presented in her BLC talk. Allais sees the Third Place as the dynamic and hybrid space that serves the navigation across the multiple languages, identities, and cultures an individual may have and experience. She claims further that the Third Place is not static, but malleable. It’s a space of potential as a cultural, personal, and
emotional construct.
I’ve viewed that place as being a highwire artist—I actually prefer the Finnish term: *nuorallatanssija*, literally a ropedancer. I had assumed that many of my second or third generation interviewees would maybe display some symbolic ethnicity. The literature I reviewed had many ideas about the definition of *symbolic ethnicity*. The term was coined by Herbert Gans (p. 167) and refers to ethnicity that is individualistic in nature. These symbolic identifications are essentially holiday traditions, special recipes and rituals, rooted in family traditions—enjoyable aspects of being ethnic. Displaying ethnic and cultural pride through material culture or objects such as flags, bumper stickers, t-shirts, and so on is also included in some definitions of symbolic ethnicity (Virtanen, 2006, p. 2).

But my interviewees surprised me. They seemed to be dwelling much more deeply in the third place than I had expected. The first generation immigrants hardly ever leave the third place, as I so well know, being one myself. This was also the case with the Finns I interviewed. But visual or auditory cues seem to compel also many American born Finns to plunge into the third space occasionally, to varying degrees. Harminder Dhillon expresses this beautifully in the following quote:

Most immigrants are constantly living in the third place, “precariously and perennially held between the sky of aspirations in their adopted land and the gravitational pull of their native one”.  
(Harminder Dhillon, 2007)
Hypothesis

My hypothesis is that Bay Area Finnish-Americans go beyond symbolic ethnicity. They live in frailty and a flimsily outlined third place that is constantly in dynamic motion, expanding or deflecting, depending on the moment. At the same time, the place they reside in is a hybrid personal space of a nostalgic, imaginary ‘homeland’, filled with true and imagined ethnicity. Finnishness is being continually reconstructed according to individual life events, needs, goals, and desires.

Fragilities

I found what is called symbolic ethnicity dynamic and constantly reshaping itself. An example of this is St. Urho’s Day. Midwestern Finnish Americans created this celebration to compete with St. Patrick’s Day, and the celebration has now spread all around the U.S. And there are rumors that even some people in Finland are embracing St. Urho’s Day. Because of the dynamic quality of symbolic ethnicity, I would argue that it is a deeper concept than what the current literature indicates. I found that visual or auditory cues seem to compel many American born Finns (who could be identified as embracing symbolic ethnicity) to plunge into the third space occasionally, to varying degrees. The high-wire balancing act immigrants engage in daily, and the nostalgia moments by the hyphenated Americans, the second or third generation Finnish-Americans, have led me to the concepts of fragility. Fragile objects are often kept carefully wrapped in the aitta. So, I’m peeking into the aitta as a treasure chest of Finnishness.

Becoming a Fragilologist

My findings and fascination with fragilities echo those of a Nigerian visual artist, Otobong N Kanga, whose work I discovered in November 2011 and found intriguing. He has coined the term, fragilologist (i.e., a person who studies things that are fragile) to identify himself. I’d like to join him as a fellow fragilologist to consider the objects, artifacts, and the narrations of those from the following viewpoints:

- Fragility of artifacts
- Fragility of memory
- Fragility of language
- Fragility of ethnic origin of an artifact
- Fragility in awareness of surroundings
- Fragility of traditions
- Internally fragile identity
- Fragility of nostalgia: nostalgia for ethnicity and ethnic purity

So far, I have looked at the following three fragilities in more depth:

- Fragility of the artifacts
- Fragility of the language
- Fragility of the ethnic origin of the artifact

**Fragility of the Artifacts**

The concepts of fragility made me walk around my own home and consider my artifacts with new eyes. I realized that I’ve only used the three green wine glasses inherited from my grandma to toast a new baby, and that the little shot glasses with painted flies get to come out of the china cabinet for only very special occasions.
Also my interviewees pulled out carefully packed fragile items with extreme care while discussing the importance of preserving them and passing them onto next generations. Grandma’s apron is too fragile to be worn at all, the baptismal gown is over 100 years old, the rya rug wall hanging had to be taken off the wall because of the effects of bright California sun, the bird vase inherited from mom is kept on the floor in case of an earthquake, the birch bark slippers are falling apart and displayed on a bookcase, a unique designer vase, received as a 60th birthday gift, is used only for special, expensive bouquets of flowers, the salad utensils carved by grandpa are chipped because a non-Finnish husband uses them for pasta, the rag rug, ordered from Finland and specially color-coded for the bedroom, is now falling apart, and so on. Tuohikontti, a backpack constructed out of birch bark by a skilled grandpa, used for carrying fish, has been chewed up by the interviewee’s dog. The unraveling of the tuohikontti had been quite upsetting. “It felt like a significant part to ancestors unraveling,” my interviewee told me. Similar feelings were shared by many. No one had any plans to discard these fragile items. They have inherent value as nostalgic mementos and connections to important family members. The artifacts are ‘telling a story’—they are ‘evocative objects’ or ‘things we think with’ as Sherry Turkle puts it (Turkle, p. 307).
The meaning of the items shifts with the generations, with time, place, and the narrator and the listener of the story. While the objects become more fragile, the memories associated with them also become more fragile. There’s a narrative of nostalgia and loss associated with many of the artifacts. Some of these objects seem almost idealized. They’re kept because of my interviewees’ needs for belonging and continuity. One of my interviewees, a visual artist, has even based most of her work on nostalgic objects and old photos. The importance of these artifacts could be due to their Finnish origin, but for many the family connection was more important. The artifacts coming from a Finnish relative made them Finnish in the eyes of the owner. This concept brings me to the second fragility.
Fragility of the Ethnic Origin

There’s often no clarity if the object is actually Finnish, but as long as it appears Finnish-like, is acquired in Finland, or inherited from a Finnish relative, it is considered authentically Finnish.

The favorite Finnish object of Maia’s (age 6) is a Walt Disney book, *The Princess and the Frog*. It is a Disney product, and very American as such. It is naturally also originally written in English. But Maia’s book is called *Prinsessa ja sammakko*, and it is a Finnish translation, printed in Finland. Thus, in Maia’s mind, it is a Finnish object. Another interviewee had a reindeer-shaped clock, mounted on a board covered with lichen, on her mantel. She remarked that it certainly looks very Finnish. How is that manifested? Reindeer live in Finland. Lichen is abundantly available and even exported in large quantities. Maybe the lichen for the clock comes from Finland, but the clock itself is manufactured in China. The clock has a multiple ethnic identity, as by now does its Finnish-born owner.
I asked one interviewee, a young California-born Finnish-American, “how would you feel if you broke one of your treasured objects?” She told me that one of her friends had actually dropped a soup plate she loved. She had found a set of the blue-and-white plates, all a little different, at a flea market in Helsinki. She couldn’t explain why the plates made her feel very nostalgic for Finland. I asked to see the remaining plates to take some photos. As she was holding them up, she burst out laughing. On the bottom of two of the plates, you could easily read SVERIGE (Sweden), and another one had DDR printed on it. “But they really look very Finnish to me,” was my interviewee’s embarrassed comment. They were ‘Finnish’ to her.

A third generation Finnish-American showed me a little jewelry box she had inherited from her mom. She told me it was not Finnish, but it made her think of her Finnish mom, so it, in effect, became ‘Finnish’ in her mind. As the artifact is connecting her to her Finnish past, her ethnic identity, it makes it Finnish to her.

In an editorial of the *Journal of Material Culture*, Daniel Miller and Christopher Tilley define the study of material culture to cover a wide area. “The approach can be global or local, it can consider the past or the current period, or the relationship of these two.” (in Esine ja Aika, p. 11). Based on this, the fragility of the ethnic origin could be considered to look at the relationship that connects the current and the past owners of the artifact and their common ethnic heritage. Maybe this could also bring us to the concept of imagined ethnicity, the reconstructed, reimagined Finnishness that is malleable and keeps reforming itself. The urban legend of St. Urho and the celebration attached him can be viewed as an example of imagined ethnicity.

**Fragility of Language**

The third fragility I’ll discuss is the fragility of language. A lot of *Finglish* was used by the third generation Finnish-Americans. The term was created to describe the way
English and Finnish languages were getting mixed in the everyday speech of Finnish immigrants in America. It is typical of Finglish to borrow lexical items from English, to nativize them and to insert them into the framework of Finnish syntax and morphology (Tuomainen, p. 1).

The third-generation Finnish-Americans called certain items with a dialect name the owner of the object had always used. *Esiliina* (an apron; literally a front cloth) became *esliina*, with a dropped ‘i’, or *vyöliina* (literally a belt cloth). Most also displayed many different types of baskets, typically used in household for many functions. However, no one knew the Finnish name, derived from Swedish, *kori*, but called them ‘*baskitti*’, a typical way Finglish words are formed (i.e., by adding a vowel into an English word). *Haarukka*, a fork, became *forkki* or *kahveli* from Swedish, a word borrowed into older Finnish.
They also couldn’t think of a proper term for specially named wall hangings in Finnish. There is täkänä, raanu, poppana, ryijy, etc. based on the style or material used. But even Finland-born Finns mixed these up. Also, for example a wall hanging, called a rya rug in English would be mispronounced as the Finnish term, ryijy became [raia]. Interestingly, though, I found another side . . .

**The Strength of Finnish**

Many of the Finnish-American interviewees told me that they do sprinkle in certain Finnish exclamations into English sentences in their everyday life and that the English-speaking family members have learned to react appropriately. Älä nyt! (C’mon!) Tule tänne! (Come here!). So, there’s certain strength in the Finnish language. Finnish, unlike other Nordic languages, has weathered better and longer in immigrant communities. This is claimed to be due to Finnish being a non-Indo-European language, and thus very different from English. Speakers of other Nordic languages, Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish, all Germanic languages, had a much
easier time in gaining fluency in English than Finns. Most likely, this is partly the reason why Finns have ended up retaining their communal cohesion and ethnic identity longer than other Nordic groups (Susag, p. 42-43).

**THE STRENGTH OF THE FINNISH LANGUAGE**

- tuohivirsut
- salaattiottimet
- kakkulapio
- ryijy
- raanu
- täkänä
- pyykkiesu
- mariskooli

The strength of Finnish was also revealed by the difficulty people had in naming many of the objects in any language other than Finnish. I already knew that that many of the artifacts could only be named in one language, as I had tried to figure out an appropriate name for an item I found at my mom’s attic last summer. It is *Pyykkiesu* (laundry apron), a small apron with a large pocket to hold clothespins when hanging laundry outside. The Finland-born Finns could not often find a word to describe an item in English, mainly because the item does not exist in the U.S. *Tuohivirsut* has to be described as *slippers made out of birch bark*.

A Finland-born interviewee showed me his *kantele*. When asked for an English name, Peitsa, a music lover and a musician, got into a complicated description, “it’s a
cord instrument, and there are different types. For instance, there’s *virsikantele* used to accompany church music such as hymns. Kantele has no threads, just open strings. You could call it a zither—it’s close to the hammered dulcimer and cembalo, used in Hungary. It also exists in Estonia as *kannel* or in Latvia as *kokle*.”

A second-generation Finnish-American told me that her best American friends know what to bring if she asks for *Mariskooli*, one of her favorite design items that she owns in many colors and sizes. When asked to name it in English, she had to pause for a moment before she could come up with “a special kind of Marimekko glass bowl with a stand.”

Code-shifting frequently took place with bilingual or multilingual interviewees. A nine-year-old trilingual interviewee, Mikko insisted on reading (translating) his book, *Tatu ja Patu supersankareina*, his favorite Finnish item in English. But when he came to a list of words, made-up by the author as puns on plays on words, such as *kurjasto* (a place of misery), a pun inspired by *kirjasto* (a place of books, i.e., a library), he quickly reverted to Finnish, without making any effort in trying to translate those into English. Of course, this was most likely an easy choice since Mikko knows me well, and Finnish is the language we have always conversed in.

The strength of the language is also evident in the desire of many of the second and third generation Finnish-Americans to learn or improve their Finnish skills. They told me that knowing the language makes them feel closer to the culture. So there’s a definite longing for Finnishness. To relate that to my topic, the last question I asked was, “If money were no object, what would you bring from Finland to your home here?”

**Objects of Desire – Longing for Finnishness**

Answers to this last question became almost monotonous. Most interviewees would bring a sauna. The ones who wouldn’t were planning to build one here, and one already had a sauna in his house. One who planned to build a sauna would bring a container load of Marimekko fabrics to use for anything and everything, another
who planned building a sauna would bring the grandparents’ wooden furniture, one would bring a Finnish Swan-brand sailboat and name it using an original family name, Kontio that had been changed on Ellis Island. (Kontio is a euphemism for karhu, a bear). One would not want anything concrete but would just want to go to live in Finland to learn the language.

The fact that the sauna was such a popular choice didn’t really surprise me. Many of my interviewees had wall hangings, prints and pictures of saunas on their walls. And the favorite Finnish object of my youngest interviewee, Thea, who was 2 years, 10 months old, was the sauna she pretended to be taking in her playroom. Appropriately, the last person I interviewed treated me to a sauna in his house.
After the various fragilities I’ve been describing, I must admit that I’ve been overwhelmed by the depth of Finnishness even the third generation Finnish-Americans displayed and shared. It is also obvious that there is one stable concept that everyone, whether Finn, Finnish-American, or wannabe Finn, holds close to heart and that proves most essential to his or her Finnishness: the sauna. However, I hope I’ve been able to show you that obviously, the sauna is not the only treasure. And as it so happens, in addition to sauna, aitta also belongs historically and culturally next to a sauna to form a traditional Finnish farmhouse complex.

Obviously, there is a whole aarreaitta or treasure chest to explore. I realize that I’ve been just scratching the surface layer. I hope to keep exploring to get to the bottom of the chest and to all the hidden corners of aitta, where new generations of Finnish-Americans will no doubt add their new and unexpected treasures of Finnishness.
Works Cited


Further Reading


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The Fragility of Memory In A Postmodern Age. 
http://science.jrank.org/pages/10165/Memory-Fragility-Memory-in-Postmodern-


