

Discussion Questions for The Rocks Will Echo Our Sorrow by Elin Anna Labba

The author asks two theoretical questions at the start.

- 1) “We carry our homes in our hearts. Can you do that if you are forced to leave?”
- 2) “Do I have the right to mourn for a place that has never been mine?”

How would you personally answer each of these questions, after reading the story of the displaced Sami families in their own words?

The Swedish authorities use the herds of reindeer as a tool of forced displacement, even going as far as threatening to kill the herds if the people didn’t move. Can you think of other examples in American history where important animal populations were destroyed or manipulated, to displace people and put them at a disadvantage?

Language is used to force Sami families to sign written agreements over land and territory that they didn’t understand, because they were in Swedish and never translated into Sami. There are many similarities between the colonization and forced displacement of the Ojibwe people in Minnesota and the treatment of Sami people in Sweden and Norway. Let’s build a discussion around those similarities, placing each colonial period within the broader context of history.

Do you think the Swedish and Norwegian governments modeled their removal policy after the U.S. Government’s effort to displace Indigenous people?

The treatment of Sami people as specimens for study and classification, which was done at The Racial Biology Institute between 1919 – 1950, is similar to how the U.S. Government determined “Degree of Indian Blood” here in Minnesota. It’s a method used by the Germans during WWII and in the Southern “slave” states. This form of scientific brutality that attempts to classify people by race has had a lingering effect on how we see each other. Let’s talk about scientific colonialism and the construct of race, as it applies to Indigenous people here and abroad.

Reindeer are a critical part of survival for the Sami and at times are used as metaphor for the people. One person interviewed says, “Three years, say the elders. That’s how long it takes for reindeer to get accustomed to new lands.” But the reindeer consistently tried to return north. Do you think people also have this innate sense of our homelands? Why or why not?

At the end, one of the displaced describes how the people were never supposed to learn the names of the mountains and rivers in new lands. This resistance to putting down roots is described as a kind of “trauma response,” experienced by people who have been forced from their homelands. Do you think that this purposeful rootlessness also plays out in American society and culture?

The author notes that the story of the Northern Sami is viewed as a “Sami matter” by the Swedish authorities and a “Swedish matter” by the Norwegian authorities. Let’s discuss accountability and authority as it relates to the forced removal of the Sami.

Then, let’s flip the discussion on accountability and authority as it relates to the problem of institutional racism in the U.S. and elsewhere, and the current trend toward discounting or erasing difficult history.