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Personal Reflections on Muskogee Men and Matriculture: Transcript

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[*lightly edited; please cite using time signatures*]

Hi, I'm Jeff Gray and I grew up in West Texas in a little town called Lubbock, famous for the musician Buddy Holly. And my lineage is, you know, part Muskogee. My ancestors on the Muskogee side came from Oklahoma. And there's a little longer story about my great-grandmother who was murdered and how my relatives ended up in Texas after that murder. And then on the other side, on the Muskogee side, it goes way back all the way to a guy called Red Eagle or William Weatherford, who was half Scottish and half Muskogee. And his father was from a Scottish clan. And the Scots actually were a lot of Scots in Alabama and the Carolinas that had basically left Scotland after the Cromwell opposition. And they had left because they wanted to set up a clan way of life, and so, when the Scots got into the Carolinas and Alabamas, they mixed quite well with the Native peoples. And because William Weatherford's father was an expert with horses, then he was adopted into this Muskogee tribe and married the chief's daughter. And then his son, Red Eagle, was the result of that. So, it's a mixed, from all the way back, it was a mix. And then on my mother's side, it was primarily Irish and Scottish, and the Irish came over in the famine. So yes, so basically my Muskogee side were in Oklahoma until very recently. And then after

the murder of my great-grandmother, they, some relatives brought them down to Texas and that's how I ended up in West Texas.

[*02:00*]

You know, as I'd said earlier, my very distant ancestor, Red Eagle or William Weatherford, he actually fought in the war against Andrew Jackson. It was the War of 1812, and he was aligned with a gentleman called Tecumseh, which he was Shawnee, and Tecumseh means a panther in the sky or basically a comet. So, after the war, he was pardoned by Andrew Jackson. And then my great-grandmother, the story was, and there's some, you know, speculation was that she was murdered by the lover of her husband. And it was, so it was a dispute there, where apparently this, her husband's lover came in and murdered her. And then once that happened, then the relatives, there were some relatives that were living in Texas and, and they heard about this. So, they went up to Oklahoma and gathered up the youngest children, which was, one of them was my grandmother, Minnie Weatherford, and they brought them down to Texas to take care of them. And I still have some relatives that are part of the Muskogee tribe up there. I think one of her older brothers, who was like seventeen or eighteen at the time of the murder, he stayed there and became integrated into the Muskogee tribe. But my great-grandmother and my grandmother relocated down to Texas. So that's that story.

[*03:41*]

It was my grandfather and grandmother, Minnie Weatherford and William Gray. And they, because I guess... it was interesting about William, his mother, he was Irish, but his mother was part of something called New Fredonia, which was a group in Texas that were into cultural equality. So, they had formed a little community in Texas to promote racial equality, social equality, you know, Native American, Black, Hispanic, whatever was in this tribe. So, that was my grandfather's mother. She was Mary Fredonia, named after the Fredonians. And so, he brought that cultural element when he married Minnie Weatherford, the Muskogee. And he actually was practicing some of their shamanic, I'm assuming he learned it from, from Minnie's relatives. But he was a fiddle player and also sort of, you call it a medicine man or he knew all the herbs and different cures from the Muskogee that he had learned, although he was Irish. But part of that is, you know, when you understand his background coming from Mary Fredonia and these people that were really seeking out an idealistic community. So, that was a big influence on me, was that coupling. And she was also active in a sense, but was more in the background, which I've found is very typical.

[*05:40*]

I've spent a lot of time on reserves out in Manitoba and, and Saskatchewan. And one of the things I noticed was the women tend to be in the background, but not silent. So, their presence is, it's interesting, I mean, they're definitely a force and an energy, but it's not as outspoken as typically the male. And so, that relationship with my grandfather and grandmother was this, he had adopted the information customs of that tribe and they worked in tandem. And so I got exposed to a lot of that just growing up. And you know, it was, I don't know, it would just, also for me, it just seemed very authentic, compared to some of the other sides of the family, which were very racist and, and very overly masculine. I just attached and attracted to that soft-spokenness of that couple.

[*07:04*]

It's a little town in Lubbock. It was West Texas, kind of more of a ranch type of culture versus, you know, Eastern Texas was more your old South, whereas the part I grew up in was more ranch and farm type country. My dad was a plumber. And so he just didn't like to talk about the Native side of things. I got that from my grandfather and grandmother. So, I would say just growing up, I led a very sheltered life. When I was born, I went up, they don't quite know half an hour, maybe an hour without oxygen. My mother had, I guess something had happened, she was bleeding excessively. And my father was actually out of town. He was very psychic. And he just, he was working on an oil rig down in the Permian Basin. And he just on a whim, just got in his truck and drove back to Lubbock and found my mother almost dead on the floor, rushed her to the hospital. And so when I got, when I was born, I hadn't had oxygen for quite a while. And so they were, basically they said I would probably was going to be brain damaged or something. And so, that was for me as a young child, that was kind of like my get-out-of-jail-free card, where I didn't talk till I was seven. And it was like this wonderful little world where I didn't have to interact or talk because, you know, I wasn't expected to. And so, I'd say my first seven years were very much a living dream time.

[*09:05*]

Dreaming was extremely powerful. Out-of-body experiences, all of that stuff was just, um, was what I lived for. And I, there was these dream teachers that would come to me and I would, I spent most of my time in this imaginary world, you know, communicating with dogs and not speaking until finally I had to speak. And, [laughs] but I just didn't really want to!And also I have memory of birth! Before birth, actually, it was with my grandfather. And it was, I want to say it was, I was born in September. So, this was either late July or August when my mother, father, and older sister were visiting my grandfather, and my grandmother had passed away by then. Or no, no, yeah, yeah. My great-grandmother had passed away. So, visiting my grandfather and grandmother, and I actually have a memory

of this event being in the womb. And I later discussed that with my father and, you know, explained to him all of the details of that. And I don't know, I don't think I ever heard that story, right, to that level of detail. But so that was kind of my first seven years was, you know, very little interaction with the culture or Dreamtime, I mean, or anything other than just being in this other world. And then I think it was about that time, about seven or so, that my grandfather and grandmother had moved back to Lubbock. He had retired, and I spent a lot of time with them.

[*11:08*]

They had a little house. He was starting to get arthritis and be crippled. And so I spent, I say from seven to about eighteen, seventeen or eighteen when he passed away, I spent a lot of time taking care of him and then listening to him and getting information from him and just basically being around the two of them and just their influence on me. On both sides of the family, you know, a lot of these psychic abilities; my dad was just amazing. He was a plumbing contractor, but he would basically bid up a job, right. He'd go bid for, to do the high school or whatever, and many times right before he would submit his contract bid, which, you know, the lowest bidder would get the job. He would dream the exact number of the bid and bid at $1 under. And he did this a lot. And it was just like, that was kind of normal for him, this dream time. And with him and my grandfather I spent a lot of interaction in the dream. My father almost never spoke, but we communicated, we talked, we'd meet in the dream. And that's where most of my interaction with him verbally occurred or whatever that state is when you're in dream time.

[*12:49*]

I do believe that these abilities, you know, call them psychic, call them whatever, sixth sense, that we all have it. But you know, certain cultures promote it, and certain cultures, like my grandmother on my mother's side was a strict Southern Baptist, and she was extremely psychic, but she was against it. It was like afraid of it and against, it was like the devil and the devil was hiding behind, you know, when I'd visit her I got baptized seven times. So, when I would be visiting her, I mean, she really believed this. Like she said, you know, the devil, he's right behind that bush over there. And so, a lot of, I think on one side was this culture and these abilities were feared because of this extreme Christianity. And on the other side, it was just accepted and lived.

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When my dad was younger, they would make trips up to Oklahoma, and he was telling the story when he went up to, went up to Oklahoma that his, one of his, I think great-aunts, that they would go up there and they would make tribal drums and she actually helped

them make a canoe, a birch bark canoe. And they would go up there and, and spend time with, I think it was his great-aunt because my great-grandmother had been murdered. So, they would spend time up there, learning this traditional stuff. And then, and I actually, that drum that they made, I was able to keep that. And in terms of the other stories, it was just a lot of stories about going up to that area and learning, you know, how to make, how to make a drum, how to make a canoe. And then, the different herbs and stuff. I guess this aunt was really into a lot of the different herbs and they would learn about that. And yeah, so, basically, my two sisters and they were, we were all interested in the Muskogee, the Native American side of the family because we'd hear the stories. And I would say more what I got from them was just the actions, the behaviors, the stories of visiting the relatives up in Oklahoma. I think that's it, more living the spirituality.

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It was like, don't talk about it, live it. That type of mentality and, and especially from my grandfather was just very much like that. It was like, well, I'm not here to try to convince you of anything, I'm living my spirituality. This is who I am. I know who I am. And I'm going to be who I'm going to be. And I don't need to tell people about it. I don't need to, you know, to try to go convince anybody and just watch my behavior. And if you like what you see, then emulate that. And if you don't, it doesn't matter. So, that was very much the, yeah, the mantra that I experienced.

[*16:46*]

In terms of experiencing some of the racial aspects... I remember, I think it was first or second grade, I had become very good friends with a young, you know, young boy my age in the same grade. And his father was, I think the superintendent of the school system. So pretty upwardly mobile. And I remember one time we were spending a lot of time together and then he came up to me and said, “My dad said, we can't be friends anymore because of this Indigenous side of your family.” And so that hurt, because I mean, we were just, you know, how it is when, when you're like six, seven, eight, it was like, we were just best friends and did everything together. And then, yeah, so, there was that. And then, there in the family get-togethers and stuff, there was one side of the family that basically the, when my grandparents would go visit, they'd have to drive in through the back way, so the neighbors wouldn't see them coming in and stuff like that, where it was, wasn't even subtle. They, we, especially in our teenage years, that all three of us really bonded around this identity.

[*18:25*]

And also, so let's see, this would have been like late sixties, early seventies. And at that time in the United States, there was a cultural renaissance going on with Martin Luther King and, and the civil rights movement and also just culturally a lot of the music. So being of Indigenous background actually became kind of cool at that point. You know, like, I don't know, people probably won't remember, but Kris Kristofferson, who wrote *Me and Bobby McGee*, he was married to Rita Coolidge, who was a member of the Cherokee tribe. And you know, so there was this whole cultural renaissance, not just Indigenous people, but starting to celebrate people of different ethnicities. And I think a lot of it, it was a whole movement, but I attribute a lot of it to Dr. King. I mean, he, that movement was incredible. So by that time, I'd say by the, by our early teens with my sisters, we were all very proud of this heritage and started learning as much as we could about it and participating and learning some ceremonies, sweat lodge ceremonies and different things like that. My younger sister, her, I'm more in touch with her son and, and he's very much, I mean, I, when I find out information about, like, I wasn't even aware of my relationship to Red Eagle or William Weatherford until, I don't know, maybe ten years ago.

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I'd always just heard different stories, but I, an aunt of mine, or I guess our second or third cousin, she's the one that got me the information and showed me the lineage chart of Minnie Weatherford back up a couple, back to Red Eagle. And so I was able to share this with my nephew and he was really excited, so whenever I get information about our heritage, I share that with him and also a lot of my cousins on that side, they're very interested because I've been the one that's really more researching the genealogy and the history, but because as I was saying earlier, they didn't talk much about it because in part trying to hide that link, should just more fit into, you know, into the society at that time.

[*21:28*]

When we met Linnéa [*Rowlatt*, *editor of* Matrix] in Ottawa and then Kristine and I had been adopted into a tribe in Manitoba, Ojibwe tribe, and by an elder named Dorothy Francis. And we got adopted by Hugh and Margaret McKay. And when we got up there, I explained to them, look, I wasn't raised on the reserve, but, I had this incredible influence from my grandparents and just this need to try to want to reclaim, try to re-understand that cultural aspect. And they were going through the same thing. And so I think that was one of the reasons they were welcoming to me. My wife, Kristine, her lineage is Saami or Laplander. And it was interesting because they totally related to her as well. They had mythologies about, that predated European culture about those people, you know, the Reindeer People and somehow they knew about that. And so when we were getting involved with the Waywayseecappo Reserve, they were also trying to reclaim this. So part

of, I think why they accepted myself and Kristine is because this was showing here's some people who had lost a lot of their cultural identity and we were going back to try to understand it more and so bringing us into their community, it sort of showed the people there on the reserve that there was this interest, you know, these like myself, what we call, in Canada you call it Métis, but I'm, in the U.S. we'd be called breeds, like half-breed or breed. And so us going up there and being very much wanting to try to learn as much as we could about that culture because I'd felt like I had been denied that experience, the direct experience of that. And so it was really a good experience up there because I think it was kind of a symbiotic kind of relationship where us exploring and trying to understand more about the culture also helped a lot of the younger people there have more interest in it because why would somebody like this, why would we be interested in their culture? And so I know that Huey, *Mishomis*, he talked to me about that and he was trying to get his tribe, his people, more interested in their cultures. And so, that was sort of this relationship.

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Certainly, you know, I've had mostly experience, here in the U.S. and up in Canada and for sure there's this broader movement, especially within matriarchal societies to try to reclaim that cultural element. And I think either intuitively or maybe objectively, people understand the value of that in our society. And one of the interesting, this is kind of an antidote [*sic*], but Thomas Jefferson was a big fan of, a student of, Indigenous cultures. He actually had this incredible archive of information. And so, when they started to frame the original Constitution of the United States and the separation of powers, that all came from his study of the Iroquoian alliance, who had a similar system set up of executive, legislative, and judicial. And the interesting thing about this Iroquoian alliance is that the judicial system, which would be the equivalent of our Supreme Court here in the United States, was a hundred percent comprised of the matriarchy. And so the executive and the legislative were male. They could create the laws and do the same thing that we do here in the United States with that. But the ultimate authority in that society was, it was a group of grandmothers, a hundred percent female, who could veto or negate any one of these legislative items. And it was an incredible system. I mean, it worked for hundreds of years. They, you know, that it was this peaceful renaissance, I think it was over a hundred years of peace that the Iroquoian alliance had when they had this system of government. So there's some practicality to understanding the matriarchy and in its place. And I personally think if our Supreme Court in the United States was matriarchal, that we would be in a much better state.

[*27:02*]

That's a good question, you know, the influence of, you know, strong matriarchal on a man, on a male. And I would say, for myself, I just resonated to that aspect because it, I guess it allowed me the freedom to understand my feminine more and to see the strength of that femininity, which is, you know, half of my identity. And it's kind of hard to explain, but I felt like there was a balance that I didn't see in a very patriarchal society, which is toxic and also unhealthy, physically unhealthy, mentally unhealthy, um, to when you go an extreme, when you don't have a balance. And so I saw that extreme toxic masculinity all around me. And I feel like having these relationships with my grandmother and that side of the family and with my grandfather and my father, because they were all influenced by that.

[*28:33*]

It was more of an acknowledgment that we could embrace our feminine side and create a balance. And yeah, so, I really, I think that any matriarchal society is going to afford that to its people and that balance and the imbalance is, is that it creates disease and it creates pathologies and I mean, my gosh, you just have to look at the current United States and it's like it creates that, lack of it creates what we're experiencing today in the United States. And so, from more of a extreme on the other side, it's like, why would... without it, you get what we're experiencing today in the U.S., which is, it is just, you know, is seriously problematic. And I don't know, I mean, it's, it's not good for anybody. It's not good for men. It's not good for women.

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It was like, I remember in the seventies, when the women's rights movement was coming along. Of course, my sisters were very much into that, and I was, and my mother. And so, in our little circle, it was my two sisters, my grandmother was still alive, my mother, and then myself and my father. So, it was a four-to-six ratio of women to men. And, I remember thinking, just kind of doing some critical thinking about it, and going, “What’s good for the matriarchy is actually good for me.” Because in my little pod, four-sixths of us were female, and so this is going to benefit my pod for sure, and all other pods. So, yeah, as a young adult, that was kind of my takeaway when the feminist movement started: one hundred percent behind that; still am.

[*30:54*]