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Personal Reflections on Finnish Matriculture: Transcript

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[*Introduction in Finnish*] Hello, everybody! My name is Kaarina Kailo. I am a Finnish scholar and self-made artist from Oulu, northern Finland, and I am very much interested in my life to promote an eco-socially sustainable future because I am very worried about the direction of the world right now. So, all my life, I have been writing and doing art based on peaceful, egalitarian societies and the past pagan cultures that were much more sustainable than the current patriarchal world.

01:33

I was born in 1951 in Helsinki, in Finland, and I was part of a big family; we were five girls and one boy. I think it was a very, very happy time both in our family and in Finland because we still had the welfare state that allowed people to have perfect long careers and to spend a lot of time with their family – something that is not that way anymore. My best memories are from the extended family island, where we had our summer cottage and where we spent three months every year and, really, the most important value – for my family and for most Finns – was the time spent with family, by a lake, taking saunas. That was the 70s, 60s, 70s kind of a lifestyle in the north.

In fact, in Finland, we have more saunas than cars; we are the country that has the most saunas, and where the core of our identity is the sauna, the bathing culture. In fact, that's where I have departed from, but I came back to this same culture because I started missing it after seventeen years in Canada and eight years in Switzerland. So those are my roots to which I wanted to come back.

03:21

I was very lucky because my father was a pastor and a writer, and he was able to spend three months on the island and work from there. So this allowed us to stay long periods in nature and my grandfather and grandmother were with us there, and my cousins. It was particularly my grandfather who was my role model because he knew a lot about our folk culture and he taught us so much about ecological ways of living and respecting nature.

He told us stories and he dressed up as a forest king trying to pretend that it wasn't him, but we all knew it was him. He had a beard made of moss and a crown, and pine cones, and some sort of a weird dress, so he was a creature from the forest who came to dance on a hill and then he would throw us gifts. We were all so happy as children when he appeared, and there was a little mountain, or I would say a hill, which had something like a door, so we always believed that he lived inside it. So all of this really triggered our imagination and I think that's why I got so interested in oral history and northern stories.

05:00

He was actually Swedish. In Finland, we have Swedish-speaking Finns and Finnish-speaking Finns, so my grandmother was Swedish-speaking, but my father didn't want us to speak Swedish because he was worried that we would not learn Finnish well. So I didn't speak it that much, but, anyway, it was part of my heritage and the stories were a mixture of Swedish and Finnish folklore.

My grandfather, for instance, told us that we should never throw hot water on the ground without first telling the little people that this hot water is coming. We couldn't pick rocks without considering that there might be ants or something living underneath them. So there was a lot of respect for nature and its little people that he taught us. It's quite interesting that he was the technical director of a paper mill, the kind of person that you associate today with these greedy, greedy people who just want money and profit and everything, but he was very different. He really cared about his workers and he had this sense of balance that really inspired me in every way, you know, having a balance in terms of working life and the love for nature and all living beings.

06:35

We always had to return the fish bones to the lake because he said that they would thereby

come back to life. He taught us to find stumps in the forest that had tar in it, and we were given fifty cents if we could bring one of those back. When you put it in the fireplace, it had this blue smoke and blue, no, not smoke, but blue flame. And it was this special kind of *bengali* which lasted for a very long time. So he had all this knowledge of survival in the woods that he taught us.

07:21

I really lament the fact that people don't know any of this information anymore. And, you know, it's all ecological knowledge, but it's not being taught. Because I was lucky enough to be taught all kinds of really wise things about the woods, you know, that's why I became obsessed with writing about them and writing my sauna books and my books on Finnish culture and heritage. Because I think that, you know, if nobody else is doing it, I have to do it because I was lucky enough to learn these things. But one trigger was also that when I spent those seventeen years in Canada, I identified mostly with the First Nations people because they were most like my culture, the northern culture. With them, I was taken to the sweat lodge and I realized how similar the sauna has been. It's no longer that way, but it has been when I started to study it. So we had a very similar gift economy where you give thanks to the elements and you remember the spirits.

08:38

You know, everything is animistic, you know, the fireplace is not just a mechanical thing, but you thank it and you talk to it. So there were a lot of similarities. And then I felt like, oh, I have to write about this, too, because people don't remember anymore. For instance, I give you one example: I was taken to a modern sauna establishment where they had automatic sprinklers in the ceiling. Engineers had calculated, you know, the moisture of the sauna so that you would not have to throw water on the rocks anymore. And they didn't realize, well, that's the whole ritual - you throw water on the rocks to remember the ancestors, you throw water on the rocks to express your hopes, to throw away your illnesses, and to send messages to the other world. So this engineer had no idea that it wasn't, for me at least, progress; it was something very strange because, you know, you lost your whole chance of having a ritual.

So the sauna culture is becoming very much market-oriented with design elements, design stoves, and design architecture, but the spirit is lost in it. What I'm trying to do is bring it back because of, you know, the knowledge that I have from the Native people and from my research.

10:17

My father died quite young; he was only fifty-six. And so my brother, who was only seven years old at the time, he grew up with a matriarchy because we were all girls then at that

point. He has told me that he really missed the masculine element. So I don't know if we did something wrong, but he's become very sweet and very egalitarian and very nice as a person. So maybe we did something right. And, you know, he's very nurturing also. So maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. But in Finland, of course, we were the first European country to give the vote to women and Finland is known for being one of the egalitarian welfare states in the world where there's a lot of equality. But it's kind of interesting equality because when I compare it with Canada and other countries, the women tend to want to be equal to men on the basis of patriarchy. So they want equal chances to make it in the business world and in the stock exchange, and things like that.

11:39

So there's a lot of honorary males among the women. And having been in Canada, where I saw a very different kind of feminism, you know, my job has been to kind of remind them about seeking a different kind of structure for women, which is not patriarchal and where femininity is appreciated rather than just, you know, being treated as equal. And where the feminine way of being, matriculture, all of those things would be shared by men and would make the society overall much more spiritual and equal in terms of relationship with nature and animals. That is happening a little bit, but compared with what I experienced in Canada, the Finnish women, I think, are a bit masculine. And that's maybe the price that we pay for having been equal, I don't know, and having always worked alongside with the men.

12:50

But one problem is that we are one of the most violent countries, which is paradoxical, and I don't know if it's because there is not enough statistics from other countries, because I find it hard to believe that a lot of the Eastern European countries would not also be as violent. But it is true that there's a lot of violence against women, and that's one of the reasons why I left, together with my sisters. Four of us left, and we thought it would be better somewhere else, and we realized it wasn't, but we thought the men would be nicer somewhere else, because we all experienced violence and belittlement. So this is why I think that being equal is not enough, and you have to take the power to change the whole society to make it completely different to patriarchy. And I have, you know, Native peoples in different parts of the world are my role model, because, well, in the case, in the best case, you know, the matricultures in Canada, the Mosuo in China, the Minangkabau, they are my role model, because they have found a way of living in peace and without male dominance.

14:15

So that is also something I write about, and I believe that the sauna has been our most egalitarian, peace-oriented institution, but it has also been colonized by patriarchy and Christianity. But now I'm finding the roots, that it's been the place of our most peaceful philosophy, and we still have a lot of sayings that show, you know, what a wonderful

matriarchal place it has been. But I'm very alone in writing about this, and some people mock me because they have trouble believing it, but I have the proof. I'm very obsessed with proving it, because I have found enough evidence that we have not always been patriarchal. I discovered, for instance, that our relationship with nature was much deeper than I realized. For instance, our language is worth being re-investigated from that point of view, because when we say we go picking berries or we go picking mushrooms, it's a transitional action. It's like we go into the berry and we go into the mushroom in our language, *mennä sieneen*, *mennä marjaan*, so we go inside the spirit of that thing.

15:46

I found out that we always used to thank the plants and the berries and give the first produce of a harvest back to the land. So I discovered that we had a lot of similar rituals and practices that I learned from the Iroquois or other First Nations. So I was really excited about these discoveries, and I was told that I'm just romantic, but I know I'm not romantic. I know that I found the evidence and, you know, language, you can't fool, the language is what it is. And there's a meaning if you, you know, if you have a language that says that you go inside the berry. And then also another similar thing is that we used to think that words are not just metaphors or vehicles for meaning; they have powers. So certain words could not be used because of their strong power charge. And that I found was also similar with native people. So certain words we don't say because we're scared that it will bring the phenomenon, like the bear. If you call the bear by its name, it will show up, and actually, I have been trying to call the bear like that, but it doesn't come. I'm a bit disappointed because I'm in love with the bears.

17:17

I found out that they are the most important spirit animal of women. So maybe it's a spirit animal then, you know, during the shamanistic period, but a lot of women in Finland are crazy about bears. It (*the sauna - ed*) is also a bear's den, you know, the symbolism is very much to do with the rebirth of the bear from the den and the bear seeking honey in the den, in the same way we cover ourselves with honey when we are in the sauna. So there's a lot of unrecognized elements from the bear mythology. The bear is a very important Finnish symbol in our culture. The same with sauna. And there's a word, *sisu*, which means persistence and perseverance. So these were words that were part of the ur-language of what we were conditioned with and to never give up and to persist, and so maybe that's why I've been so stubborn with topics that are not acceptable.

18:24

What I have been drawn to the most are the stories about Bera, Berit. It's a Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish name, which echoes bear, and she's a woman who goes berry picking and meets the bear in the woods and then decides to stay in the den with the bear. And has

children that are half furry and half human; there's a lot of these stories, which are quite humorous also, where sometimes the woman meets the bear and they say, let's wrestle a little bit, and the bear says, but we won't make any wounds. And the woman says, no, we won't make any wounds. We just wrestle. And then the woman falls and the man, the bear sees the vulva, and says, but you are wounded. You have a wound! Then the bear is scared and runs away. There's stories about women lifting their skirts and showing their sex and always the bear runs away and is scared. But there's many stories about telepathy between bears and women and they understand each other's language. But if the woman has a boy, has a son coming in the womb, then the bear will attack the future hunter.

20:19

So these are kind of variants of very many different stories, and I was very struck how similar they are to the stories that I heard in my classes in Simone de Beauvoir Institute when my Native students talked about their bear stories. So it seems to be a northern phenomenon, and, you know, it seems to be, well, with Barbara Mann, we have argued that the bear-woman stories are the oldest stories in the world, because they are so widely spread, because you find them almost everywhere. And, you know, I won't go into the academic stuff, but it's interesting that, you know, it's about the human-animal connection way before patriarchy.

It's patriarchy that enters when the woman is being rescued by the brothers and when they shoot the bear and all kinds of things like that. But there's a lot of depth in these stories, and I'm a bit overwhelmed to just talk about them because it's too much information. But those were the stories that I was very, very intrigued about, because there was definitely a different relationship between women and bears than between the hunters and the bears. The male stories are always about killing, and I couldn't identify with that. Even today, I'm horrified that they shoot the bears.

21:54

To be honest, I'm a bit worried about social media and its impact, because women have been assimilated to a great extent into the market economy and the beauty industry and all of that. But at the same time, I would say there's a growing number of young women and men who realize that we are in the midst of climate change and ecological crisis, and they are yearning for change and they're yearning for something different. So, you know, there's like two strong movements. There is the conservative incel movement of the young men who want women to become tradwives and be dominated. Then there's the red-green boys who want a different society. And, you know, it gives me hope that even though it's not as strongly in your face to see this new movement of ecologically oriented young people, it is there. That's the audience, that's the readership also that I'm interested. So I know my books are not bestseller type, because the publishers want something that is written in an easy style and it has sex and violence and all of that. And, you know, some of them have

complained that it's too esoteric what I'm writing about, but I don't care.

23:34

I've decided that I want to do what I can to bring back the old culture and the ecologically sane wisdom traditions and to talk about what I was taught by my grandfather. And to give hope that way. Also, I live myself here in the north in a house with a well and water; there's a creek next to my sauna. I have only wood-burning saunas. I can grow potatoes and fruit here. I'm totally self-sufficient if there is a crisis. And when I was stupid enough to try to sell my house when my husband died, I wasn't able to sell it because the young people didn't understand the importance of this kind of a place. But now, with all the threats in the world, actually the children of the owner of this house came to see me and said, well, you know, we might be interested in buying this house back when you're gone. I said, great, because this is such a safe place to live in, and you have the woods, the forest next to you, even though I'm only fifteen minutes away from the city.

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So people are waking up; they're realizing that, you know, with the crisis now in Iran and Ukraine and everywhere, being self-sufficient in terms of firewood and water and everything, it's very, very valuable. And well water itself is just, you know, it's a miracle today because, you know, if anything happens, you have the means of survival. So there's hope.

I try to, in my sauna books, I talk in a big way, not only about sauna and what good it does to your soul and your spirit and your body, but about all the wisdom that surrounded it, because it was the place where the working class and the masters and everybody went together. And it was the place where you drop your masks and your ego and it created a community. All our celebrations are centred on the sauna. So we decorate it, we bring the nature inside and the flowers and everything and we haven't lost that. So whether it's midsummer or Christmas or Halloween, we remember the dead or we remember the past in the context of these rituals. So I'm trying to make sure that we don't lose them.

26:34

This is the place where we are the closest to nature and the weather conditions also have an impact. You know, it's dark for a long, long time from November till January, and that's like a hibernation period. I feel very creative during the dark period. I like it. Then in the summer, we have three months of, you know, of light, where the light almost doesn't go down. And that's very joyful also. And then, you know, we have vast masses of land here, so you can be, I can go for a walk with my dog and I don't see anybody. I'm not saying that I'm against people, but it's very sparsely populated. And so when I went to Berlin one day to a conference, I was just shocked because I was pushed around by people all the time and I

didn't like it.

But so, you know, the benefits of being here is it's silent. It's sometimes dark and you can see the stars and you can still see the northern lights. Actually, I have an Airbnb and I had some Japanese people staying here and they said they were scared because it was so quiet. They were not used to that kind of silence. Then they were just standing on the yard and looking at the sky and saying they've never seen the stars. So little things like that matter to me.

28:13

But if I had never left Finland, if I hadn't spent twenty-five years abroad in different countries, maybe I wouldn't have seen all of that because you have to go outside of your culture to be able to appreciate what you have. That's the reason I came back. I missed our culture and I was able to put my finger on what it was that was important, which I don't think would have happened if I had taken for granted everything that we're all about.

And of course, we have animals. We have the reindeer. It takes me two hours to drive to Rovaniemi, to Lapland, and the road is full of reindeer. You feel you're still in a nice world; it's not just skyscrapers and cities. It's a different atmosphere. And in the winter, it's just so beautiful. There's a whole lot of tourists coming now to Lapland because the trees are absolutely covered in snow. It's a very magical landscape here in the north.

29:27