TEEMA-ARTIKKELI

ARTS, LANGUAGE, AND FINNISHNESS

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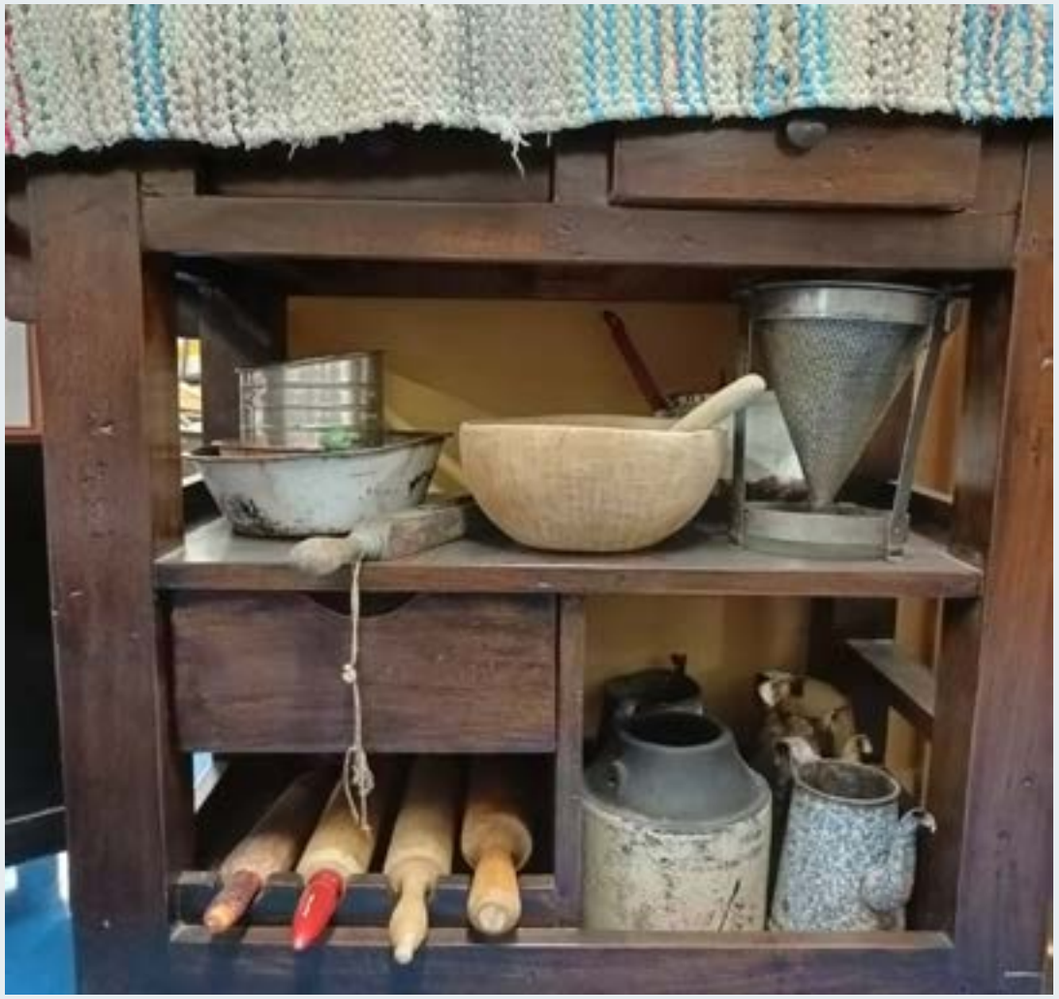
NANCY MATTSON
moved to London from Canada in 1990. Her fourth full poetry collection, *Vision on Platform 2* (Nottingham: Shoestring 2018), reflects on art, faith, history, her Finnish-Canadian prairie roots and her life in England.

CAROLINE KAJORINNE KRIEVIN
is a multidisciplinary artist and facilitative arts administrator who, since 2018, has been developing an arts collective known as "mindful makers." The artist would like to extend thanks to the Ontario Arts Council for funding the creation of Minä puhun suomea | I speak Finnish.



Kuva: Samira Saramo.

Samira Saramo: Introduction

As migrant communities solidify their presence over generations, the language of the early settlers and place of origin often begins to be replaced by the language of the new home place, is no longer passed down from parents to children, and at times is even lost. This shift raises important questions about the role of language in shaping and defining migrant identity.

This section delves into these questions by turning to the practices and perspectives of two artists. Language is central to the works of both poet Nancy Mattson and multidisciplinary artist Caroline Kajorinne Krievin. Both explore their Finnish Canadian heritages and identities through their art and examine the ways the Finnish language has shaped their relationship with and sense of Finnishness.

Mattson is playful with translations of Finnish words and expressions, highlighting fluid meanings and sounds. For readers, Mattson's poetry reflects the mix of feelings and languages that are part of being a migrant descendant. While Finnish language is a steady presence in Mattson's English-language poems, she enjoys the freedom and looseness offered by her self-proclaimed "toddler Finnish" and does not crave full fluency.

In contrast, Kajorinne Krievin longs for Finnish language – for her family, for the Thunder Bay Finnish community, and for herself. Her current project allows her to reflect on the changing presence and sounds of Finnish around her, while learning the language. Through the finished works, Kajorinne Krievin allows audiences to engage and even directly affect the Finnish language soundscape the artwork emits.

While differing in form and approach, both Mattson's and Kajorinne Krievin's works convey a love of their family tongue. Through their artistic practices, they get to the heart of what it means to be a descendent of migrants and to carry the legacies – both gifts and burdens – of language and heritage.

Nancy Mattson: "Using other languages and voices: My Finnish-Canadian roots and other historical and linguistic influences on my poetry"

Being born into an extended Finnish-Canadian family and spending all my childhood summers on my grandparents' farms on the Canadian prairie gave me toddler Finnish and plenty of subject matter for poetry. Editing and contributing articles to a history of New Finland, Saskatchewan, gave me even more to write about. One challenge in my first poetry book, *Maria Breaks Her Silence* (1989) – about a founding mother of *Uusi Suomi* – was to ensure the poems were not swallowed by facts and research. However, very few facts were known about the historical Maria, for she left no letters, diaries, or photographs. So I had the freedom to imagine and invent, creating a possible biography and retaining essential truths about her life as a migrant and pioneer.

I faced similar challenges in moving from history to poetry in my third book, *Finns and Amazons* (2012), set in Paris, Russia, Finland, and Canada. The book is in two parts, dealing first with seven Russian women artists and, secondly, with my Finnish great-aunt Lisi. Caught by Karelian fever, she migrated to Stalinist Russia in the 1930s. Her letters to my grandma, her sister in Saskatchewan, turned up unexpectedly in 2009. In trying to recreate her story through poetry, I had her letters translated from Finnish and then combed them for facts and attitudes. However, I needed history books to help interpret her experiences and place them in wider contexts. But Lisi's actual, physical letters were talismanic. Her uncapitalised, unpunctuated ribbons of prose on folded and refolded and rehandled paper touched me as directly as they had touched my grandma. I wrote many poems from and through them, answering the lost Lisi in poems she and my grandma can never read. My "Belated Answer to a 1933 Letter, Believed Lost" begins:

As a mouse can slip into a space
thinner than an empty envelope

a letter can nudge a myth aside
put words into another story's pocket

You wrote of your life in a Soviet lumber camp
getting better and better all the time, that line
of Stalin's I think you believed. I'm not surprised
you won the women's shooting competition.

In the poem "Stash" I channeled my grandma's voice:

Your letters never become stale
but I handle them so much
my fingers can read them
their words are in my bones

their paper scarified along the folds
air threaded between words
I know so well I recite them
as I scrub sheets on the washboard.

Such poems are a long way from my university studies of English and Canadian poetry. But for me, academic approaches weigh down creativity. I have had warm, helpful, inspiring friends in Finnish studies. I have spoken at Finnish conferences in Finland, the U.S., and Canada, co-organized an international *Kalevala* conference at the University of Alberta, read *Kalevala* in Magoun and then Bosley translations, and attended a three-week Suomi-Seura seminar in Hämeenlinna. In short, I have been steeped in both academia and Finnishness. Leaving historical and biographical details, however, and sidestepping all that could be written about poetic traditions and practices, I shall limit myself to considering how Finnishness comes into a few of my poems.

Basically, I'm fascinated with words, haunted by the histories and world-views hidden in etymology, syntax, and grammar. I'm inspired by metaphors in Finnish words such as *munalukko*, meaning padlock but literally egglock! I love reading dictionaries but need the human voice. I was born into a Finnish sonic world, whose sounds and rhythms inevitably come into some of my poems, as naturally as breathing.

Kauan sitten, long ago, back in the 1980s in Canada, my poem "Third Generation Lost Language Blues" celebrated the swirling possibilities of poetry in English: "*swyrl* from Scottish through Norse, *possibilité* from French through Latin, *poesis* from Latin through Greek". But the poem ended with lament:

I cannot deny the delight
of tongue, ear, mind,
the polyrhythmic shaping
of my Canadian heart
but now I hear the words that English never speaks:
suomea suruksi, language sorrow
laulun kieli, language song.

The translations are not exact, but the poem needed the Finnish and English words to resonate in both sound and sense.

Another early poem, "Old Baby Tales" goes back to infancy and my toddler tongue:

The mouth that sang me lullabies
taught me to touch her face with words:
eye, nose, mouth – *silmä, nenä, suu.*

The soft sounds of Finnish still sing to me. I'm not fluent in my ancestral language but don't wish or need to be. Indeed, staying in that fluid, amorphous place between languages is fruitful for generating poems. I'm reluctant to lose the instinctive but unreliable stab at knowledge, the felt sense of meaning without logical understanding.

When I check my *sanakirja*, childish questions often occur. Why does Finnish have no word for 'fact'? That philosophical puzzle grew into "Tosi is a Word for Truth," a discovery of who I am as a poet and a woman. It begins:

In the Finnish language
a fact is a truth-thing, *tosiasia*
I want to say old words
with my truth-mouth, *tosisuu*
I want to roll wishes
on my truth-tongue, *tosikieli.*

The poem proceeds through several Finnish neologisms, memories of my grandma and wish-and-blessing stanzas, and ends with psychological and spiritual desire:

I want, I want: *haluan, haluan*
Haluan is my name.

The process of defamiliarization is at work here, and it can knock me out of logic into imaginative spaces where poetry bubbles and lurks. One of the most radical examples of this process resulted in a key poem for me. Before I crossed the fraught border from Finland to Russia in 2010 in search of my lost great-aunt Lisi, a London friend taught me the Cyrillic alphabet and Russian survival phrases. While trying to pronounce the letter Щ I imagined some grammar-book tips for the unfamiliar sound *'shch'* in English: "pay attention to the double thistle in the gap/scratched between two words: Welsh sheep" and "listen to the scrape/of the hinge in a folding pushchair." I was surprised when this list morphed into the sorrow of my grandma and all who have lost loved ones through war and oppression.

The Russian word *sdvig* СДВИГ– shift, displacement – turned up in my poem about the woman painter Popova:

When the word *sdvig* snuck in between
brush and board, tongue and teeth,
like a laundress at the tsar's ball,
Popova welcomed the shift:
Hello figure, meet ground,
you have a lot in common.

Words that sneak between languages can generate images, metaphors, and similes in surprising ways.

This sometimes happens within one language, as when a single letter in a word shifts and creates new meanings. In 2019 two nearly identical word-twins landed somewhere between my ears, eyes, and mouth:

The word for practice is *harjaan*
but today its middle letter slips
from the yo-yo sound of J
to the ha-ha letter H
and *harhaan,* the word for astray
falls out of my traitor mouth.

The resulting poem "Seeking my grandmother's tongue" spirals away with references to the Trickster in Indigenous myths, the Unnamed in Manzoni's 1827 Italian novel *The Betrothed [I Promessi Sposi]* and everyone's fear of dementia.

Learning a new language is a struggle for anyone, perhaps especially for immigrants. This is the subject of my early poem "Kanadalainen." Its six stanzas repeat a single grammatical strategy – unfinished sentence fragments in the infinitive – and use the single extended metaphor of pumping water.

To have left behind the language
that flowed like spring water
the easy seepage of fresh words every hour

To have come to a land
of thorough drought
with a dry tongue...
To watch the pumped water
settle and seep
into insatiable
Canadian earth ...

I'll conclude with reflections on a long key poem which set me on a new poetic path, inspired by the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva. "A poet's speech begins a great way off" she wrote in 1923 (tr. Elaine Feinstein, 1999). This got me wondering – where do my speech parts come from? Marina's headlong images and poetic forms, her gapped lines, excited me and gave me a new way of writing about sources, languages and voices.

My poem "Parsing the Ancestors" begins:

Marina's words shoot star-clusters
into me occupy skies without amens
bare emotions that bend horizons

Half-air and half-dark her images: muscles
taut and strong enough to force
buffaloes over cliffs I feel no push

toward intensities but ancestors
chase me from exploded coal mines
call me from black holes of Stalinistikia

My speech parts begin in Finnish forests
where deadwood shifts and crackles
and all echoes ricochet *kaikki kaikut.*

The poem then delves into Finnish, which has no prepositions, articles or genders:

The nouns and pronouns of my ancestors
hook no articles to their necks
hide their genders under hoods

her-less, him-less the-less, an-less
they declare humans half-flesh
half-wonder changeable as stories

told by northern lights
clear as dirt-road parables.

From linguistic basics, the poem travels through memory, history, avant-garde Russian poetry and art – all aboard the Trans-Siberian Express from New York to Vladivostok through Helsinki and Head-Smashed-In-Buffalo-Jump!

That's a long way from my mother's lullabies in Winnipeg, where I was born. Part 1 of this 4-part poem ends:

Marina's a far cry from my mother but I tug
at her comet-skirts latch onto syllables
that squirt from buffalo-tit to snake-throat.

And in retracing some steps of my poetry-writing journey, I have proved to myself again that I never know where a poem will start, or where it will end.

Caroline Kajorinne Krievin: “Minä puhun suomea | I speak Finnish”

Sound sparks deep feelings of relationship to place and memory. Hearing your familial tongue is comforting and nurturing. I am a fifth generation Finnish Canadian living at Pike Lake in Northwest Ontario, near the largest freshwater lake in the world, Gitchigami / Lake Superior. This area, “the land of 1000 lakes,” is surrounded by Finlanders who knew how to log boreal forests and to build roads and settlements along the shores.

I live near a rural community known as “Tarmola,” located just north of Anemki Wekwedong / Thunder Bay, on the traditional Anishnaabe territory of Fort William First Nation. As a multidisciplinary artist, I feel grateful to live here, in the land of Nanaboozhoo / the Sleeping Giant, which in its landscape resembles my ancestors’ land of origin, Suomi / Finland.

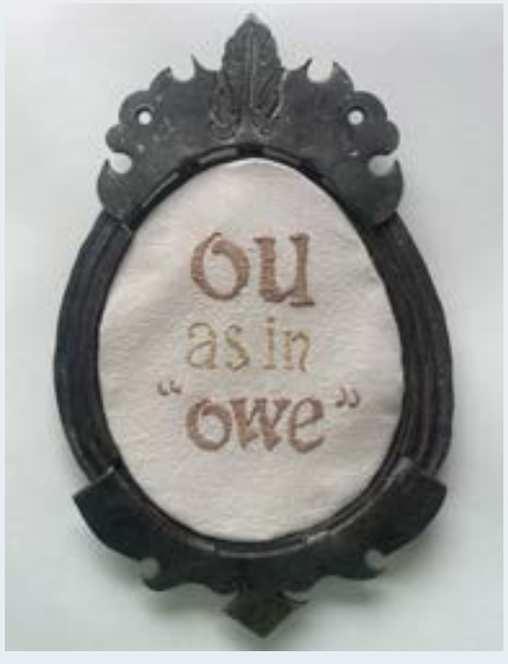
Growing up in the largest Finnish-populated region outside of the Nordics, I understood (some of) the language, but I did not speak it–other than the odd song, basic counting and greetings like, “Kiitos / Thank You.” With the passing of time, my family speaks Finnish less. While living downtown (formerly Port Arthur) in my twenties, I walked a short distance to Bay Street to find–*and feel*–a connection to my cultural heritage, *a privilege that is not lost on me*. Growing up, I heard plenty of Finnish. People spoke Finnish, or Finnglish, at homes, in restaurants, butcher shops, and on penches / benches outside of the Finn Hall. Now, in my mid-thirties, I would be hard-pressed to find a group of elderly folks chatting in Finnish on a community bench.

The final significant migration period of Finnish people to Thunder Bay occurred after WWII, from about 1950-1965. Building on the preexisting Finnish migrant community, there were Finnish doctors, lawyers, real estate agents, clothing stores, jewelry stores, lumberyards, a bookstore, restaurants, etc. Now, migration from Finland to the Thunder Bay area has all but stopped, the next generation speak English, and as Finnish migrant business owners grew old and retired, many stores and restaurants have closed. As of 2023, there are only a few Finnish businesses left.

Tuntea, tutkia, kuunnella / To feel, to investigate, to listen

As an artist, I look to uncover my Finnish roots—the adaptation, expression, symbolic meaning and dis/re/connection of language, customs and Finnish ways of being. Creating using Slow Art forms, for me, act as a way to center and strengthen my relationship with the natural world, with my body, and the themes that guide my work. Using my hands, I aim to preserve and reflect on what I know, and explore and discover what I do not *(and all the complexities in between)*. Intuition and emotion are my guide. Currently I’m combining slow, craft-based practices of *blacksmithing* and *embroidery* with media arts–specifically, *soundscaping,* a practice rooted in *listening*. I must admit, my act of listening seems to be more akin to an act of remembering and searching. As my Granny noted in a letter she offered to me when she heard I was working on this new *“I Speak Finnish”* project,

> ...My grandparents came to Port Arthur in 1910 and 1923, as did many Finnish people. They brought with them, the Finnish of the time, and passed it on to their children and grandchildren. Many of the second and third generation of Finns think they are speaking Finnish, when they are actually speaking “Finliskaa,” half English + half Finnish [also known as Finnglish].



Forged metal frame with embroidered Finnish lesson. Photograph by Caroline Kajorinne Krievin.

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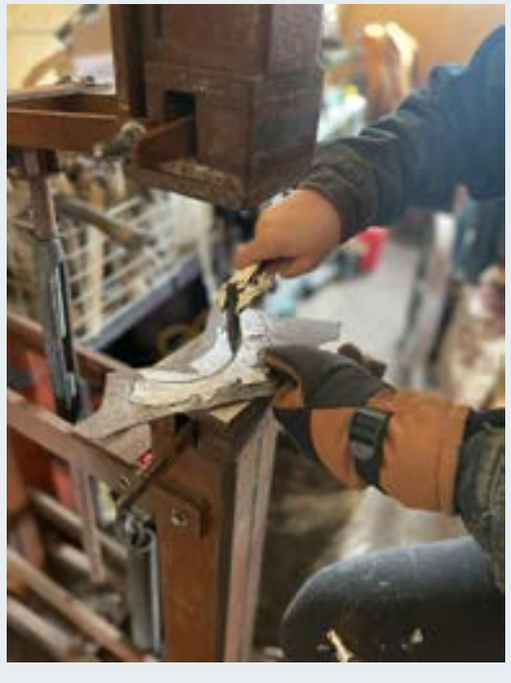
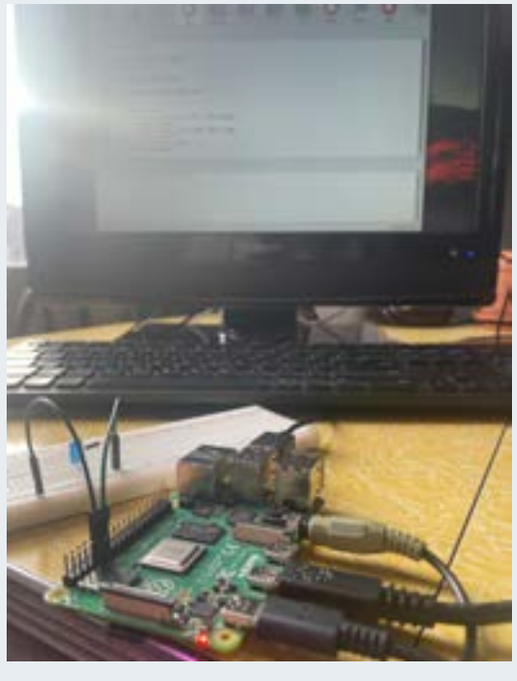
WORD	FINLISKAA	FINNISH
bed	bedi	sänky
truck	trucki	kuorma-auto
car	kaara	auto
lake	leeki	järvi
boat	booti	vene
hospital	hospitaali	sairaala
orange	orensiini	appelsiini
book	buuka	kirja

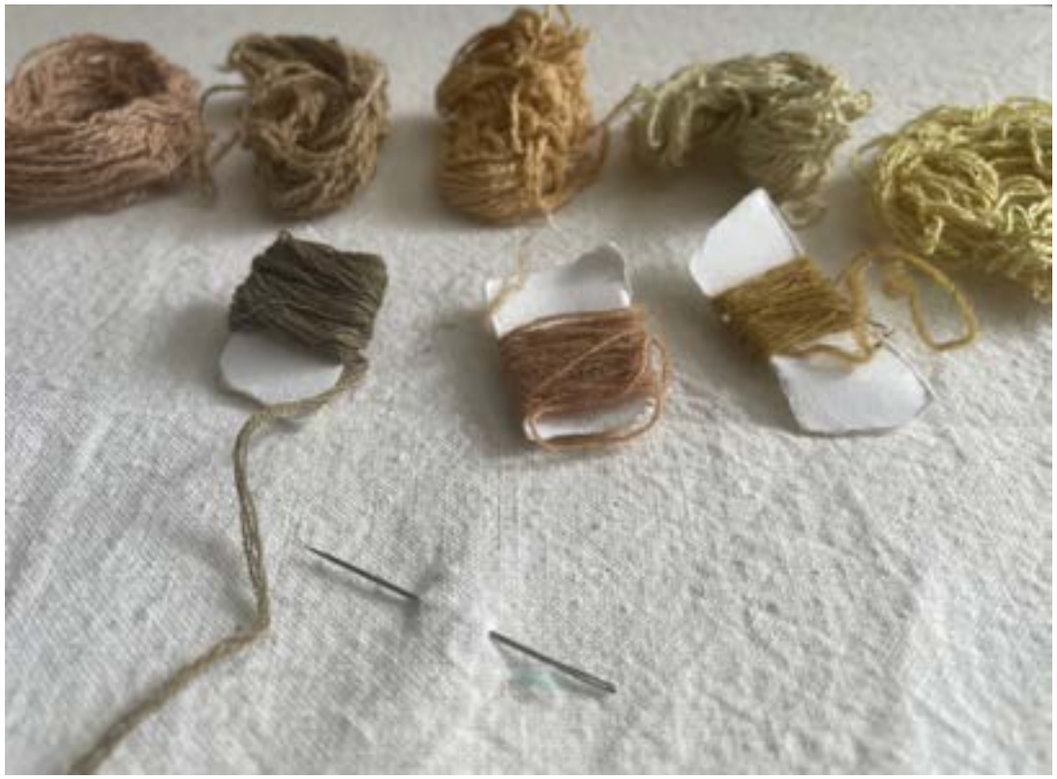
Sound anchors us to a place, and through this new body of work, I aim to reflect on this shifting Finnish migrant soundscape. In researcher and sound artists Taina Saarikivi’s opinion, *“by making place-related sounds audible – and thus visible to people – we can strengthen peoples connection to a place and the identity associated with it.”* Saarikivi further explains how listening doesn’t only involve the ears, but the whole body as vibrations and *“sound is tactile,”* touching things *“even before we reach out to touch them with our hands” (*Kelola 2022). As someone with a musical ear, I am drawn to the art of speaking Finnish and its nuances – how some things simply don’t translate well, or have quite the same rhythm. Hearing the language, and *feeling* a connection to its vibrations is, for me, an integral way to hold deep within my body and spirit, the sounds and memories that root me in place.



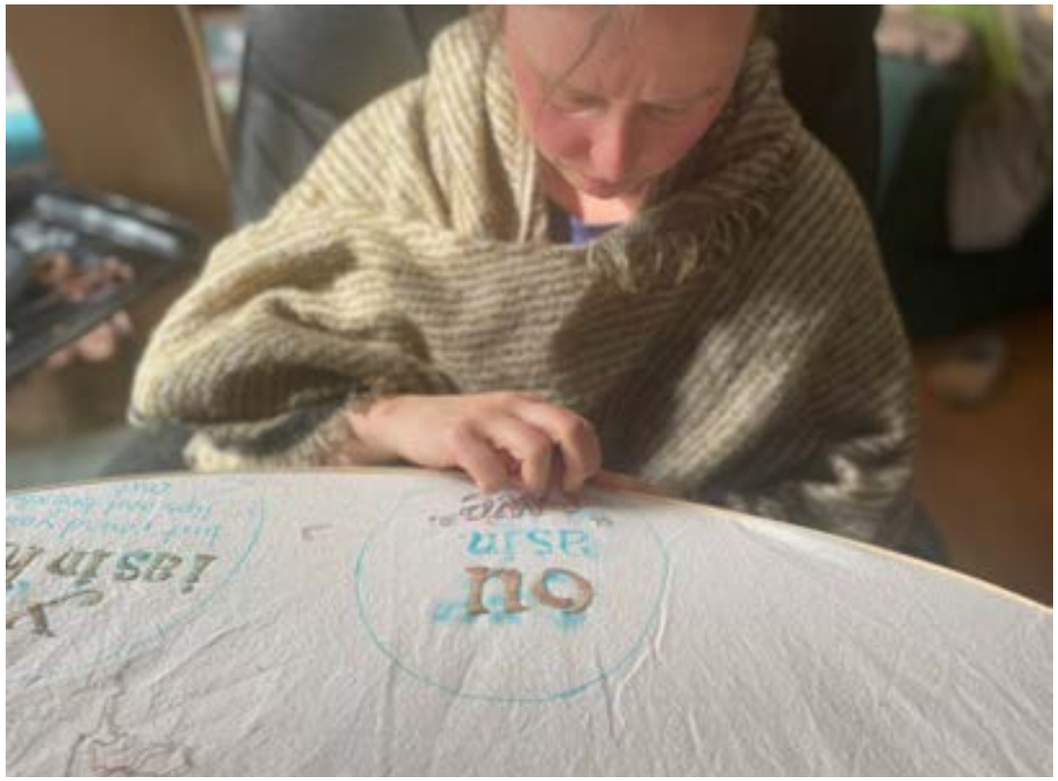
Making frame with Treadle Hammer. Photograph by Christopher Rantala.



Programming exhibit sensors with Raspeberry Pi. Photograph by Caroline Kajorinne Krievin.



Embroidery thread dyed with plants foraged in Finland. Photograph by Caroline Kajorinne Krievin.



Kajorinne Krievin stitching. Photograph by Caroline Kajorinne Krievin.

In the making of *"Minä puhun suomea | I speak Finnish"* I have chosen to pair fine craft with new media. Utilizing 1000-year-old hand tooling alongside modern metalsmithing techniques, I am creating a series of six oval frames–a popular shape from the 1800s to the mid-twentieth century. Inside these frames are Finnish consonants, diphthongs, and vowels, stitched into old sugar sacks using threads that I hand dyed with plants that grow wild in Finland. Paired with the frames are motion sensors, controlled by Raspberry Pi. Many hours have been - and will continue to be - spent, learning this new computer programming skill, which is an integral, yet mostly invisible, portion of the artwork.

Using motion sensors to detect viewers, the sound *only* plays once someone's presence is detected. While the audience has become an active, contributing force within the work, silence has also become integral. As the viewer moves, the soundscape shifts. Walk away, the sounds stop. The voice of my friend, Satu, brings the Finnish language to (audible) life through sharing how to pronounce simple things like, "au as in sAU-na," echoing the embroidered lettering held within the metal frames. Mere fragments of the language and common phrases will reverberate within the gallery walls. *But in that silence, is there an absence of sound? An absence of so-called "Finnishness?"*

Kieli näkyväksi, kuuluvaksi, tuntoiseksi / Making language visible, audible, tactile

Feeling connected to my heritage brings privileges of comfort, guidance, and a sense of identity that is rooted in place. This place I live is steeped in Finnish culture – long home of the famous Hoito restaurant, saunas speckling the shorelines and warming basements. I live in a log home at Pike Lake that my great-great grandparents built nearly one hundred years ago, in the mid-1920s. In the 1940s, they ran the old Järvi Co-op Store here. I've heard stories of picnics, ski races, and games on the lake. For me, these relationships and histories build a sense of belonging, a sense of home, and of hope – something my first generation (Canadian) immigrant friends do not share with me. My Indigenous friends have experienced a legacy of trauma caused by colonialism that too has led to a disconnection of cultural roots. I cannot fathom how the soundscape has changed for Indigenous peoples here and first generation immigrants to Canada, and how the absence of sounds might influence their lives, communities, and futures. I have a strong admiration for their resiliency and work to keep their cultural roots alive. Language, like sound, is ephemeral—it appears and disappears. We are all inevitably connected to and shaped by the living soundscape surrounding us.

I have witnessed the Finnish migrant soundscape change within my thirty-six years. When I was very young, Finnish was spoken often and by many. I remember listening to my father doing business over the phone in Finnish, and Finnish spoken at family and community gatherings. Now, I see families around me who are proud to be "Finnish," but do not know the language. I can think of four Finnish settler friends my age who speak Finnish. I cannot think of anyone younger. Recently I enjoyed hearing my friend's three children (they are from Finland) joke around while speaking the language. *What a joy to my ears (and heart)!* I'm all too aware that if I don't learn the language, there's likely not going to be anyone in my immediate family who will ever learn, or teach Finnish. I fear the languages of Finnish and North American Finliskaa will pass on with older generations who carried and adapted the language to their lives here, on Turtle Island / North America. I'm not so concerned with the correlations between *why* and *how*. I'm more interested in *what's to come,* and *my* role.

For the past decade, my artworks have referenced themes of "home" and "preservation." Creating this new body of work, *"Mina puhun suomea | I Speak Finnish"* is an act of gratitude, and a way of tracing, preserving and carrying some resemblance of so-called "Finnishness" into my future. It is a way of making this changing migrant soundscape visible, audible, and tactile all at once, while expressing both a sense of loss and hope. Lastly, it is also a way of encouraging myself to learn the language. Carving a way forward through a conscious strengthening of my cultural roots, giving way to feeling a broader sense of identity, community belonging, and understanding of myself and of the world.

References

Kelola, Kati (2022). "Different Routes: When the factory whistle fell silent for good, it was as if the whole village had died." Kone Foundation.