

Conversations in the Car, the Bus, the Boardwalk: Reflections on learning
By Clara MacCallum Fraser, with Kelly King & Nicole Latulippe

i. Is it possible to convey the depth of embodied learning through the written word? The participants of the Manitoulin Island Summer Historical Institute (MISHI) were asked to share something of our experience in a blog post, either individually, or as a group. This has been a challenge to get down on paper (first, without the distractions of internet, then on computer) since throughout the trip we sought to engage in a process of listening that didn't totally rely on note-taking. In the past, when I was in a similar learning environment (the Anishinaabe Law Camp at Neyaashiinigmiing First Nation with John Borrows and the Osgoode Law School), I was asked to put away the pen, the paper, the computer, and just *listen*. But really listen – listen actively, with my whole body. It's a scary thing for me – I often feel I have the memory of a goldfish, and worry that I'll forget everything I hear or read if I don't take copious notes. I was told then "you'll remember what you need to for now – the other things will emerge in time, when you need them, or when their time comes." A challenging lesson to learn, but one that I sought to work towards during the MISHI trip. I was reminded, yet again, that every time I step into this sort of immersive learning environment, whether for a moment or for an extended length of time, to learn about Indigenous ways of knowing, some piece of learning or memory from the last time appears and finds solid form – the wisps of learning from the past take shape with, as new wisps of learning appear and wait for a future time when they too will find form. Although quiet reflection and pondering is indeed necessary in order for us to work through our own thoughts and ideas, I'm beginning to learn that it is really with the lived experience after the initial teaching, and in relation with others that the seeds shoot roots and begin to grow, or that light turns from a hard brightness to a glowing warmth. During this week with MISHI, I found I wasn't alone in my worries, nor in my aspirations to listen more wholly.



A piece from Michael Belmore's installation "Smoulder". Carved stone, gilded copper.

ii. Kelly, Nicole, and I have met before. Kelly and I were classmates in a course taught by Dr. Deb McGregor (York University: Osgoode Law School & the Faculty of Environmental Studies), focussed on Indigenous research methodologies. Nicole was a guest speaker at one of those classes. At MISHI, when we arrived, the three of us happened to set up tents next to one another. That first evening, we went for a walk together along the boardwalk overlooking lake Huron, along with another MISHI participant. Some magnetic force pulled us together throughout that week – perhaps familiarity, but maybe

something else – so that we ended up carpooling each day. And thus began a week of listening and learning (with a few scribbled notes here and there), and coming together again and again in – in the car, on the bus, and along the boardwalk – engaged in reflective conversation. We spoke of various conversations and teachings that had taken place throughout the day, sharing our questions and insights, our worries, and our vision for the future. Lines began to appear between one person’s question and another’s insight; we began to tie knots, linking our ideas and marveling at the connections that had been lying in wait, waiting for us to acknowledge them.

In particular, we reflected on reflection – how do we process the things we’ve heard and read and felt? Is it best done alone, in silence, walking in “nature”, or with a journal? Or is it best done in conversation with another, so that the light and energy of the ideas can shine and bounce off the other, enabling us to see the reflection of our own thoughts, our ideas, dreams, and ponderings? We shared a frustration that our ideas and conclusions seemed to blossom and flourish in dialogue with others, but fall flat in the face of a screen or a sheet of paper.

Michael Belmore puts this very question into physical form, with his work *Smoulder*, which he showed us in beautiful serendipity before the farewell feast, at the close of a week of reflection. The installation is made up of sculpted rocks with concave sides bearing the hard brightness of copper sheets rubbed into the ancient surface. The installation takes its form when all the rocks are fitted in amongst one another, not quite close enough to touch, and there they sit, reflecting the light of the copper on each neighbouring rock so that the space between the rocks glows with the warmth of fire. Belmore explained that his frequent use of copper is partly due to its significance in creating space for community. Copper wire is used in lines of communication and energy, creating heat to warm a cold kitchen and light to bring friends together, or enabling one to cross a vast expanse and hear the voice of a loved one from afar. These stones each hold an idea of light, a sheet of copper that on its own reflected light beautifully, but it isn’t until they are put into relation with others that the warmth of that light, of solitary reflection and shared ideas, that the glow of a seemingly primordial fire appears.



iii. On one of our last sessions in the car, Kelly, Nicole, and I talked of the challenge of transitioning from rich learning environments, spaces that generate immense heat of ideas and shared reflection, to the solitary process of writing. We asked one another, how do we maintain this light and warmth beyond this setting, and bring that into our writing and work? We realised that the process of reflection needs both solitary space *and* relational space in order for ideas to blossom and evolve. So, in an effort to

remind ourselves of the importance of embodied learning and experience, even in – especially in – the hustle and bustle of the city, we agreed to meet in Toronto somewhat regularly, to walk along the waterfront and reflect together. We'll walk along the same path throughout the year, watching the world around us change, sharing our ideas, ponderings, and ambitions in an attempt to keep that fire we saw in Michael's *Smoulder* alive and glowing...

