



Radiant Archives: Rebecca Belmore's At Pelican Falls

text by Dr. Jessica Jacobson-Konefall

Rebecca Belmore's *At Pelican Falls* is unsparing, both open-ended and concrete. The installation highlights specific geographies and histories of connection and belonging. Pelican Falls is in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, where Rebecca Belmore, her sister Florene Belmore, and their cousin Scott Benesiinaabandan have generational place-based ties. The space was occupied by a residential school in the mid-20th century, and is now the site of an Anishinaabe-run secondary school, Pelican Falls First Nations High School, at which students from the North today come to study, living in residence on the lake. The archival photographs of residential school students in the installation at PLATFORM, the familial emphasis in Florene Belmore's short story "Little Brother," and the theme of water in video and sculpture—all highlight intimacy and relationship in multifaceted communities, including the loons, including the water.

Indeed, the generation of the show has a uniquely collective aspect, as it incorporates contributions from the mid-century photographer John McAfie, Anishinaabe youth performer Latrell Whiskeyjack, and a group of Anishinaabe children in archival photographs inspiring this work participate centrally in the installation. Métis scholar Sherry Farrell Racette's chapter in the anthology *Photographing Canada's Children* led Belmore to the archival image from Pelican Falls and deserves mention here.

The installation's video, short story and sculptural work respond to three mid-century archival photographs by photographer John McAfie, one from the Ontario Archives and two from the photographer's personal collection. Having struck up a conversation with him by email, Belmore learned that McAfie knew her father personally. McAfie and his friend were out fishing that day with their wives when he took the photographs. The photograph of young Anishinaabe boys in residential school coveralls watching a white fisherman, in fact an employee of the Minister of Lands and Forests, speaks to many facets of historical relationship at Pelican Falls. The aesthetic politics of this photograph took my breath away and, frankly, made me feel pretty judgemental—a quick and easy way to discharge painful emotion. Yet, Belmore explained to me, following a discussion with Collin Zipp, how the mood of the work shifted as a result of Belmore and McAfie's conversation, undertaken within lines etched by shared dignity in contemporary relationship. (1)

The artists explored this place together, in excess of the meanings accruing through the photographic image, during a site visit in summer 2017. Their visit to the site in familial intimacy tends and works the images and histories they convey with a kind of generational care work. Residential school attempted to disarticulate these relationships, its depersonalizing impacts on bold display in the installation's photos. In the provincial archive image the boys appear uniformly, in coveralls with identical haircuts. At the same time, Rebecca Belmore pointed out that, to her, they look like beautiful little otters sitting on the rocks. Sitting in double-layer denim coveralls, it is not safe for the children to swim or even get into a boat, an affront to ongoing Anishinaabe lifeways. Not to mention, that day it must have been so hot outside. One considers the many purposes (carceral sensorial enclosure; sweaty, chafing, exhausting hierarchy) those coveralls were intended to serve.

These young boys look out onto the water, and it highlights what is increasingly missing from the period in which the photograph is taken. There is the absent presence of loss, despite which persist individual and community relationships. The boys' uniforms and haircuts are a visual reproach from history against the residential school period on their land.

(1) Thanks also to Cree curator and scholar Daina Warren, and our students in Indigenous Art 4000 at University of Manitoba School of Art, for meaningful dialogue on this point.

These entangled relationships are surface shimmer channeling through the narrative in Florene Belmore's short story "Little Brother" on sibling love, where the story's depth is grounded in the power of its emotional and historical truth.

Belmore's narrator describes the sunset at the outset in first person narration, an embodied response contrasting the advertising phrase denoting Sioux Lookout with which I am familiar, "Sunset Country." The effect of her voice immediately reframes the land within the embodied experience of an Anishinaabe sister. Someone is there; she of radiant perception. Seeing the nightfall, in repose with little brother, she dreams, commingling past, present, and future, unconscious processes active in her phenomenal awareness of place.

"Little Brother" emphasizes an undisturbed, loving gaze from a big sister towards her younger brother, in the context of lived experience of the land. When the siblings visit a corner store to pick up slurpees, this symbolism is in service to their love, as the narrator recounts the wonder she feels towards little brother while he "painstakingly mixes" the right amount of each flavour into the "swamp water." The two share in camp activities; they maintain the campsite, gathering rocks for fun, swimming, and sitting in the shining sun. The tone of the story at its outset, "mournful" "ache" "questions" "laughter" "haunting," shifts from night time reverie within a shared tent to warm, at-ease belonging, to each other, at the sandy side of a lake. The narrative delineates joy by centering its emphasis on the siblings' everyday moments.

Belmore's video, elegantly shot by Benesiinaabandan, streams a young boy standing in the water on a continuous loop. Facing away from the camera, he splashes water over his head, at times immersing himself and disappearing from view, only to re-emerge. These gestures suggest a ceremonial engagement with the water on the part of the child, perhaps "little brother." In a black T-shirt he immerses himself in purposeful, repetitive, increasingly soaking wet gestures suggesting sacred occasion. Is he there alone?

Florene Belmore writes in "Little Brother,"

We lean against the rail and watch the one boat in its place just above where the water becomes turbulent. We watch a man standing in the bow. He pulls his arm back extending the rod with it and swings it forward releasing the lure sending it in an arc through the air. There is a little splash where it lands. We watch him. He keeps the rod low in front of him, then slightly raises it up while slowly turning the reel winding the line in. We watch him make another cast and reel in.

The togetherness in the story, the camp context of the two watching, highlights the siblings' gaze in alignment. This alignment overwrites the imposed, regulated annulment of subjectivity and relationship that the violence of residential schools attempted. Even in the original archival image, violent as it is, this aim is visibly absurd and it is clear in the image that this goal is in no way achieved here. At the same time, in the video the boy stands alone. While poignant, to my eyes this speaks to his *own* belonging: standing alone he asserts the sacredness of belonging to oneself. In this sense, Rebecca Belmore's comments during her artists' talk at PLATFORM—that this child is Latrell Whiskeyjack at Pelican Falls, and this child is every child, this water is all water—create an additional kind of space; the installation is at once precise and capacious, great and particular.

In the adjacent, smaller exhibition room at PLATFORM is a denim water sculpture. With audio of rapids surrounding, Belmore's 16-meters in diameter, 96-meters of fabric denim circle, sewn from shimmering denim reminiscent of the surface of the lake in the video, is bunched into turbulent, dimensional, contingent, momentary forms. Out of these seamlessly emerges a figure—a coverall denim shirt, the thrust of which seems to defy gravity and the weight of the sculptural waters. At

first, my impulse is to embrace this figure—and my chest hurts; there's no one there to hold. The sculpture of Belmore's raises conceptual questions around archives as denim coverall becomes lake, in conversation with McAfie's photographs. The sculpture orients the shared identity in the photograph; being-together inheres in the water—never the same twice. Powerful emergence exceeds, rushes against, massages, counternarrates, immerses the pain of colonial bureaucracy's attempted non-identity. *At Pelican Falls* offers an interdisciplinary response that troubles colonial archival legitimacy.

For this family within this show, through our conversations as well as the works in *At Pelican Falls*, archives emerge in relational histories and material realities, at times with rearticulated colonial records. *At Pelican Falls* encloses, enframes and interprets state sanctioned archival material. The show's framework emphasizes forms of shared interpretation, emotion as a legitimate lens, and interpersonal closeness. These aesthetic methods approach and produce archival knowledge. Kimberley Lawson (Heiltsuk) contextualizes Indigenous archives within overarching Indigenous experiences, as cultural heritage, memory, spirituality, truthfulness, ownership, survival, and conflict (2004), against the subordinating methods of the state and its liberal forms of archival provenance, materials, access, and interpretation. *At Pelican Falls* as archival manifestation at once names and transforms pain, archive, joy, in luminous waves of aesthetic insight. In the words of Florene Belmore, "I am here." "Where are you?" "I am here." This call and response conveys situated relational autonomy, the personal and archival paradox at the heart of this work.

Rebecca Belmore | A member of Lac Seul First Nation (Anishinaabe), Rebecca Belmore is an internationally recognized multidisciplinary artist. Rooted in the political and social realities of Indigenous communities, Belmore's works make evocative connections among bodies, land and language. Her group exhibitions include: dOCUMENTA 14 (2017), Athens, Greece, Echigo-Tsumari Triennial, Niigata Prefecture, Japan (2015); Global Feminisms, Brooklyn Art Museum, New York (2007); Land, Spirit, Power, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON (1992); and Creation or Death: We will Win, Havana Biennial, Cuba (1991). Belmore was a recipient of the Gershon Iskowitz Prize in 2016 for her outstanding contribution to the visual arts in Canada, Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2013, the Hnatyshyn Foundation Visual Arts Award in 2009, and an Honorary Doctorate from the Ontario College of Art and Design University in 2005.

Jessica Jacobson-Konefall | Dr. Jessica Jacobson-Konefall is a SSHRC postdoctoral research fellow at University of Toronto, in the Department of History of Art (2017-19). She holds a PhD from Queen's University (2011-15) and was a former postdoc at the Centre for Globalization and Cultural Studies, University of Manitoba (2016-17). She teaches at the University of Winnipeg (2010-) and is assistant and archivist to Rebecca Belmore and Osvaldo Yero.

IMAGE | Photograph by John Macfie, 1955. Archives of Ontario, C 330-8-0-0-5

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