



# Bank Street Occasional Paper Series

Occasional  
Paper  
Series

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Volume 2021  
Number 45 *Welcoming Narratives in Education:  
A Tribute to the Life Work of Jonathan Silin*

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Article 4

April 2021

## Ontologies of Welcoming: Anishinaabe Narratives of Relationality and Practices for Educators

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### Recommended Citation

Ineese-Nash, N. (2021). Ontologies of Welcoming: Anishinaabe Narratives of Relationality and Practices for Educators. *Occasional Paper Series, 2021* (45). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2021/iss45/4>

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# Ontologies of Welcoming: Anishinaabe Narratives of Relationality and Practices for Educators

*Nicole Ineese-Nash*

Nanaboozhoo, waciye. Minogizheghad. Zoonge Winneshe Wabigonikwe Nindizhinikaaz, Mamawmattawa minwa Tkaronto nindonjiba, mukwa nindodem, Anishinaabekwe nindow.

My name is Nicole Ineese-Nash. I am an Anishinaabe scholar, educator, and writer. I am also a community member, a caregiver, an auntie, a daughter, and an inheritor of knowledge that exists within the rivers of my family's traditional territory. In Anishinaabemowin,<sup>1</sup> my introduction is inherently relational; I tell you who I am through the relationships I hold to land, to spirit, and to my kin. This is a practice in relational accountability that is embedded in my culture and exemplifies the understandings of relational ethics I would like to speak to in this essay.

No matter which culture you belong to, or where on the planet you call home, each of us has an ethical responsibility to our first mother, the Earth. I would like to demonstrate what I have come to understand about relational ethics through Anishinaabe storywork and land-based knowledge systems as they may invite us to think differently about our relations to one another and the non-human world. Indigenous storywork is not merely fictional. Rather these stories exemplify our cultural teachings, understandings, and ways of living so that they may be carried through generations (Archibald, 2008).

## NANABOOZHOO WALKS THE WORLD

Nanaboozhoo (or Nanabush) is a popular protagonist in Anishinaabe stories.<sup>2</sup> Considered by many as the first being sent to Earth from the Sky World, Nanaboozhoo is an exemplification of humanness in its imperfect and awe-inspiring form. Nanaboozhoo is both human and manito (spirit), and oftentimes represents the duality that all beings hold within them. They are both humble and greedy, respectful and mischievous, eager and lazy; perhaps most importantly, Nanaboozhoo demonstrates how we are both learner and educator through the processes of continuous inquiry we engage in throughout our lives.

Many stories describe Nanaboozhoo's initial walk around the Earth. In one story (as written by Edward Benton-Benai, 1988), Nanaboozhoo receives instructions from Gitchi Manito (the great spirit) to descend to Earth and to walk across the entirety of her surface, to learn about everything in Creation, and to bestow each animal, plant, and being with a name. These names come about through ceremonial practices, through relational participation, and through intentional observation. Nanaboozhoo comes to name each aspect of Creation through an in-depth understanding of it in relation to the entirety of the universe. For this reason, most names in Anishinaabemowin speak to the spirit of that being, their purpose, and their abilities. Each name holds its own story, an interwoven part of the narrative of existence.

Nanaboozhoo visited all parts of the Earth, visited with each tree, lived among each species, and touched each body of water. When this great journey was complete, Nanaboozhoo began to realize how everything existed in relation to one another; everything except Nanaboozhoo. Nanaboozhoo began to feel a deep sense of loneliness, as a being not completely of this world and yet, not fully a being of

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1 The language of the Ojibwe people. There are many dialects that may differ from the words used here.

2 Not all Indigenous communities agree on the teachings and content of these stories. This is one version of many.

the Sky World. The Great Spirit noticed this and sent Nanaboozhoo a companion in the form of a wolf, Miangun. Miangun and Nanaboozhoo continued to travel the earth together, visiting, observing, and learning the wisdom that each plant, animal, and landscape had to offer. During this time, Nanaboozhoo and Miangun developed a strong bond to one another and through this relationship, both came to understand their position in the world as kin to all of Creation.

## KINSHIP THROUGH RELATIONAL ETHICS

Nanaboozhoo serves as an example for understanding human relations with respect to the natural world, but also as a mechanism to personify kinship relations between peoples. The Anishinaabe are the sacred beings descended from the sky to a world already harmoniously balanced through cycles of interconnection. Indigenous relational ethics are cultural worldviews premised on understandings of these interconnections and our place among them. I have been taught that each being on Earth has a unique gift to share, and is part of an interconnected network of entities who hold a responsibility to maintain harmony with one another. We have learned this through story, such as the one I have spoken to here, but also through our experiences with the non-human and more-than-human world.

When humans came to Earth, they were welcomed and cared for by the first beings of Creation. We learned about family from the wolf, who Nanaboozhoo came to know as a sibling; we know of the need for seasonal readiness from watching Ajidimoo (squirrel) save food every autumn; we understand reciprocity through plants as they grow in mutually beneficial ways. Our world operates through relational ethics. We are in constant relation to the world around us, to the cosmos, and to the spirit world. Yet through the construction of social hierarchies, humans have largely forgotten or denied their place within the webs of Creation.

Indigenous concepts of kinship allow us to reconsider our place in the world and move away from human-centered configurations of living. Kinship refers to our familial relations, but also to the extended relationships we hold with other humans and the natural world. You may find it silly for me to tell you that a tree is my brother, or that a river is my grandmother, but conceptualizing the world in this way impacts how we carry ourselves and the decisions we make. You may visit that river a little more often or listen to her song a little more attentively if you think of her as a holder of knowledge. You may protect her a little more actively if you think of her as a member of your family. We are all visitors on this planet who have been invited to make this Earth home. We have an obligation to honor that extension of welcome and to remind ourselves of our expansive relations with one another. We are all related.

How might our world change if we were to reinstate biocentric relational ethics into our day-to-day lives? Nanaboozhoo demonstrates the humble principles of visiting that can provide an example of how we can walk as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in colonial contexts. Indigenous stories such as the one told here can help shape our understandings of education by bringing about new ways of thinking of ourselves as educators (as co-learners). These stories are but snapshots of what land and Indigenous perspectives can offer us in caring for one another and our planet. In this way, land itself is pedagogy. It teaches us whether we are there to listen or not. It holds memory of the past and knowledge of the future that enable us to answer questions about how we can live within the changing contexts of our world. We just need to know how to ask.

## LAND-BASED ONTOLOGIES OF RELATION

Ontologies are our diverse manners in understanding the nature of being: what does it mean to be alive and what is our place within the world (Kincheloe, 2011)? For Indigenous peoples, our ontologies are not abstract philosophical ponderings, but are manifested in our daily practice, enacting our beliefs into our actions. Many Indigenous worldviews have been developed by our ontologies of relation; our understanding of our place in the web of Creation, cared for and nurtured by land. Aki (land) invites us to regain our relations to one another and to the non-human and more-than-human world. She does not discriminate based on race, class, ability, or gender. She does not require that we hold prerequisite knowledge. She does not care where on her surface our stories originate. All that she asks is that we honor her by showing her the care that she has shown us since the beginning of Creation.

In Anishinaabe culture, land is our mother: a caregiver who nurtures us, sustains us, and allows us to thrive. All humans exist in reciprocally dependent relationships with land. These relationships are transactional, but also spiritual. We honor our relationships to land when we spend time tending to her and receiving her gifts. This does not only occur when we do what seem to be land-based activities but also in our everyday lives when we acknowledge and invite land into our everyday discourses.

Indigenous theories position land as sentient, as a teacher who communicates in various ways (Styres, 2011). Land continues to have agency even when we are not present, and maintains story and memory of our past. Much of Anishinaabe culture is premised on teachings from the land with an understanding that our physical and spiritual bodies are composed of and dependent on land. Land teachings can extend into future contexts, only insofar as we maintain good relations with land that allow her to prosper. In the context of settler colonialism, land is under constant duress, which strains our ability to tend to our relational responsibilities to land and the non-human world. As a result, our ability to access teachings from the land are hindered by various mechanisms of land proprietorship. Elders are often conceived as the transmitters of cultural knowledge between generations and are our interpreters of land teachings. As a result of colonial violence against Indigenous peoples, many land-based teachings are threatened. The disruption of place-based relations through Indigenous erasure and displacement have hindered the transmission of land-based knowledge to subsequent generations. This results in less access to land both materially and spiritually for all peoples.

## BRINGING LAND ONTOLOGIES AND RELATIONAL ETHICS INTO THE EVERYDAY

Indigenous land-centered understandings of place have applications in care and education sectors, as well as within the interactions we engage in every day. Our world is made up of complex assemblages of human, animal, and other living beings. Decentralizing humans as the primary facilitators of care and education allows us to consider how the non-human and more-than-human presences in our world impact our lives. What may happen when we question our relations to land and enter into relational inquiry with her and the other non-human entities with whom we hold relations? Engaging in these conversations are critical acts of decolonization that may bring us into new relations with Indigenous peoples and lands.

Restorying the environments in which we work allows us to refigure the Indigenous presences that remain held within land, regardless of whether these places are considered to be land-based contexts (Nxumalo, 2016). Land knowledge exists regardless of the presence of our animal kin or plant life. Land knowledge resides within the rocks beneath our cities, in the waters from our taps, and embedded in the stars in our sky. Orienting pedagogy to land-centered, place-specific contexts

can be an intervention upon the colonial structures that reproduce narratives of land proprietorship and Indigenous subjugation. This orientation is an entry point from which all cultures could uncover realities that exist outside of settler-colonial presences, and a means for us to remove the constraints imposed on lands, bodies, and minds. Restorying is a way in which we can decolonize our societies more broadly, informed by but not appropriated from Indigenous knowledges.

The application of Indigenous land ontologies in educational contexts is a challenging yet rewarding endeavor. Restorying place encourages critical thought, hypothesis testing, and scientific inquiry. Further, it encourages cross-cultural constellations of relationality that enable us to live in more sustainable and life-promoting ways. While much of the scholarship in regard to land-based education is focused primarily on forests, or natural environments, we can restory places in urban settings by interrogating the histories of place and the origins of our environmental materials, and by considering what presences are displaced through our occupation of territory. Land-based experiences are not confined to pristine, seemingly uncolonized places, but should be explored in a variety of settings. Engaging in inquiry about land and Indigeneity makes evident the irreparable damage caused by coloniality, invoking us to accept collective responsibility for reconciling, not only with Indigenous peoples, but with the land itself.

## **MAINTAINING GOOD RELATIONS IN THE SPIRIT OF WELCOMING**

What does it mean to be a good relative? As educators, we may not see ourselves as being familial with our students, our institutions, or our environments. Yet these relations exist whether we are conscious of them or not. Indigenous understandings of relationality can serve as a critical intervention in education, inviting us to think in ways that decenter individualism, welcome communal well-being, and encourage inquiry into the more-than-human realm. Ontologies of welcoming are the various understandings we hold as human beings of our place on this Earth and our consequent responsibilities to the places we inhabit. Nanaboozhoo helps us to remember our position as visitors on this Earth. While we have come to call her home, we do not own her; we call her home because of our undeniable relationship to her. But we must always remember that this was the home of the cedars, the wildflowers, and the animals long before we arrived. Just as we have been welcomed by Creation to reside on this Earth, we too must extend that invitation to others, in ethical and respectful ways.

Ethics from an Indigenous perspective are not static practices and procedures; they are ways of being in the world premised on cultural values, beliefs, and relational obligations (Simpson, 2008). Being in good relations with one another begins with relations to land and concerted attempts to decolonize the control of Indigenous territories and Indigenous and Black bodies in the environments in which we live (Smith, 2013). This requires a concerted effort to acknowledge and address white supremacy in our education and social systems. It means actively engaging in difficult discussions and calling out discriminatory and harmful practices. Recognizing the care that land shows us allows us to extend that care to others and to respect those who have an intimate relationship to the places we visit (i.e., Indigenous and Black communities).

Engaging in land-oriented pedagogical practice poses responsibilities for the ways we engage with Indigenous communities as well as with the physical world. It inspires us to think of futurities that challenge the normalized oppressions of particular peoples through systemic mechanisms of control. Considering land as a partner in our work changes the ethics we may employ, and places us all in various positions to remove structures of colonization that hinder our relation to place and place-based

knowledge. However, tensions arise when the ethics of land-based relationality call us to decolonize the systems from which we benefit. We cannot enter into good relations with land when we seek to hold it as property or commodity. To do this work without concerted effort towards positioning land as self-sovereign is to enact further colonial harm that discharges colonial culpability. Land-based understandings cannot be employed without also acknowledging and attempting to restore pre-colonial caretaking relationships to place. This means allowing Indigenous nations to tend to the land employing the ethics of relationality that Creation has taught us for generations.

The places we live, play, and teach are land-specific environments, which hold wisdom we often take for granted. Indigenous nations hold teachings that offer valuable information on how to live in interconnected ways, but it is both an individual and collective responsibility for us all to critically interrogate our relations and honor the responsibilities we carry. All of Creation works so that we may prosper and it is up to us to reciprocate that care to all beings.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Boozhoo. Songe Wabigwanikwe niindizhinikaaz, mukwa nindodem, Mamawmattawa nindonjiba. **Nicole Ineese-Nash** is an Anishinaabe (Oji-Cree) scholar and educator whose work focuses on Indigenous experiences of social systems, understandings of land-knowledge, and community-based research. She completed a Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Studies with a minor in psychology from Ryerson University before continuing graduate studies in early childhood studies. Currently, Nicole is a doctoral student at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in the Social Justice Education program, specializing in Indigenous health.

Nicole works as a research associate and contract lecturer cross-appointed between early childhood studies and child and youth care at Ryerson University. Her work centers on Indigenous youth, families, and communities and seeks to support self-determination and Indigenous resurgence. Nicole is particularly interested in supporting Indigenous youth to connect with their ancestry, land, and cultures. Nicole is also the director and founder of Finding Our Power Together, an Indigenous-led non-profit organization supporting youth in realizing their own goals.