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## Witnessing Encounters: A Response to Nicole Ineese- Nash's "Ontologies of Welcoming"

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## Witnessing Encounters: A Response to Nicole Ineese-Nash's "Ontologies of Welcoming"

*Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw*

Responding to Nicole Ineese-Nash's beautiful offerings is exhilarating and humbling. "Ontologies of Welcoming" invites us to create openings that those of us who have been educated within a Western tradition are unequipped to do. Before writing, I read Nicole's contribution more than 10 times, unsure how to respond to it as a non-Indigenous scholar in Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, and Lenapewak and Attawandaron territory. Reluctant to appropriate knowledge that isn't mine, I was aware that not responding for fear of implicating myself in ongoing colonization would be yet another way to enact my privilege.

Imperfectly, I offer a story from my own work with young children in early childhood education: witnessing encounters between children and squirrels in an urban park. In early childhood, witnessing means much more than observing from afar. Witnessing requires us to respond and be accountable to the troubling stories of our times. We become attentive witnesses through ongoing encounter, recognition, and curiosity that exceed all rational calculation (Nxumalo, 2019).

The park I visited with the children was built in the 19th century. It is a prototype of colonial intervention in a city designed to resemble the center of the British empire: London, England. It served as both a "cleansing landscape" and "a unique window on Victorian views of nature as well as the politics of class, ethnicity, gender, race, and neighbourhood" (Fisher, 2011, p. 27). Landscaping "functioned as an imperial mode that defined and transformed" the city (Fisher, p. 1). Through landscaping techniques, some human and nonhuman bodies were included. Others were rejected and pushed out. Four pairs of squirrels were introduced to the park in 1914 "to entertain and attract" children and women. In fact, placing squirrels in parks was a common colonial practice across North America.

The original eight squirrels were the ancestors of the melanistic eastern grey squirrels that the children from the early childhood center noticed during our walks. Over the years, as the squirrels reproduced and more were added, they became tame, shifting the orderly rhythms of the park's design. Today, squirrels are so common in the park that they are easy to ignore.

During one of our walks to the park, two children noticed a squirrel approaching us. We decided to stay a little longer in the park that day, watching the squirrels clamber up and down the trees, gracefully jump from branch to branch, cautiously approach passersby for food, and disappear at the sound of a leashed dog's bark in the distance.

Noticing the squirrels anew every time we visited the park slowed us down. Attempting to practice an ethos of becoming-witness, we paid attention. The children noticed that some squirrels had built a nest in a tree. They watched the squirrels drag food up the trees, and they mused about where they might be going. Witnessing the squirrels became a daily practice.

One morning during a clay nest-making inquiry, one of the girls announced she wanted to gift the many clay nests the children had crafted to the squirrels in the park. Together, we planned our next visit with great anticipation: Where exactly in the park would we go? Where would we place each nest? Should we place them up high? Did we need to hide them? And would the squirrels notice the nests? With a dozen clay nests carefully wrapped, we walked to the park. The squirrels joined the children in their proposal.

Each child took the task seriously, carefully deciding where to place a nest. In the midst of this decision-making and dialogue, a squirrel approached the clay nest a child had left at the bottom of a tall tree. Picking up the nest, the squirrel moved it to the other side of the tree. In just a few seconds, at least ten other squirrels tuned in to what the children called “a game of nest”: as the children watched, curious squirrels checked the nests and moved them around with their front paws.

After a few weeks, the children’s attention turned to how the squirrels survived in the park. They had seen squirrels rummaging for food in the park’s garbage cans: eating muffins, Tim Horton Timbits, and the remnants of a sandwich. We had also observed a local squirrel fan tossing peanuts to the squirrels. A child suggested we bring fruit for the squirrels. Reluctantly, we nourished the children’s observations that the squirrels’ chances for survival are enhanced by the food humans bring to the park.

With pieces of fruit in our backpack, we arrived at the park and sat on the grass waiting for the squirrels to approach us. During the wait, one child started to call the squirrels with loud kissing sounds. Everyone followed suit, and in a few seconds, several squirrels approached from all directions. It appeared as if they all arrived at once. The children threw grapes and small pieces of oranges and tomatoes until the squirrels came close.

There was very little talk during the food exchange. Instead, smiles and expressions of astonishment filled the half hour we spent marvelling at the squirrels’ responses to our offers. For many of these children, this was the closest encounter with squirrels they had ever experienced.

Perhaps the children started to see these urban squirrels as having wisdom, rather than as animals that humans come into conflict with. Such a view of squirrels disrupts the colonial narratives of human-animal relations that position animals outside of ethical and political realms. Perhaps through these minor acts of witnessing, children and squirrels are composing a common history that refuses to follow the colonial narrative toward squirrels that drives most citizens in the city. It was the squirrels themselves that created an alternative relational force, signalling for the children a serious commitment that brought them to attend to other relations.

Perhaps this is exactly what Nicole’s offerings in “Ontologies of Welcoming” is asking of us—to attend to relations that might not be highlighted by the colonial imaginaries that have taken hold in childhood studies.

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