

## (Re)considering Squirrel—From Object of Rescue to Multispecies Kin

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*This is a story situated in the Pacific Northwest region of North America, where encounters with a non-native “rescue” squirrel present disequilibrium for an educator and surprises for an early childhood classroom community. Thinking with Haraway, Latour, and common world frameworks challenges the educator’s “back to nature” narrative and generates opportunities to engage with different perspectives about the intersection of nature and culture, human and nonhuman kin, and the limiting quality of anthropocentric, child-centered pedagogies in early childhood education.*

**Key words:** ECE; anthropocentrism; throwntogetherness; contact zone; common worlds

*Once there was an early childhood educator who did her best to offer the young children in her care “wholesome” childhood experiences. She aspired to bring children “back to nature,” where they would be free from the complications of the digital age and the ubiquitous pressures of consumerism. These hopes came from a good place: an instinct that children, as all humans, crave connection, and that this connection could be fed by fostering a relationship with nature.*

*This educator held her idea of the goal of education close to her heart. The aim of education, she believed, is to help children become “more fully human.” She held a concern that the children she encountered rarely took terrible risks or had great adventures. Their lives had been carefully curated by loving, liberal families who wanted everything for them and left them wanting nothing. She felt that the risks provided by “a return to the wild” would offer children a childhood worthy of their abilities and great curiosity. To*

*this end, she planned to open a forest school, a retreat on the outskirts of town where children, families, and educators could engage with beautiful and provocative curriculum. It would be close enough for urban dwellers to commute to, but far enough away that traffic would never have to be dodged on morning walks with the children or airplanes heard overhead during class meetings. Most importantly, the children would have much more to explore than they did in her current school, where they were limited to a fenced yard with a little wooden climbing structure. They would have expansive spaces that they would come to treasure, and be afforded the opportunity to explore places large enough that they could imagine what it might like to be lost.*

I was this teacher, and these were the ideals I cherished. This is the story of how my worldview came to be troubled and eventually transformed.

In this paper, I situate common world multispecies kin—a squirrel—in the complex contact zone that is our school’s North Portland neighbourhood, and show how this creature offered a powerful challenge to the collective imaginings of our classroom community. Second, I show how thinking with Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and common world pedagogies disrupts “back to nature” narratives and generates opportunities to engage with different perspectives about the intersection of nature and culture, and of human and nonhuman kin. Last, I use common world pedagogies to reconsider child-centered pedagogical approaches in early childhood education.

## The “Rescue” Squirrel

The home-based early childhood school I founded in 2006 is at the center of my community of practice and is the setting for the events that inspired this paper.

One winter day, my daughter’s Scouts teacher, Victoria, gave me an injured baby squirrel that she had found in the drainpipe outside her house. Victoria, an elder, was aware that I was an early years educator who had a history of keeping all variety of animals in my basement classroom. “I did my time with baby animal rescues when my own kids were small. That chapter of my life has closed,” Victoria stated simply as she handed me a cat carrier with the squirrel inside. She had done a bit of research and discovered that the squirrel, a non-native eastern gray, would be euthanized if surrendered to the wildlife care centre. We determined that the squirrel was about seven weeks old. I found instructions and fed the squirrel puppy milk, which I had purchased at the local pet shop, with a baby bottle every few hours.

I did not know if the squirrel would live or die—there were two open puncture marks on its head—and I did not have time to think through ethical, or even practical, concerns in regard to caring for a wild animal with young children. Within about 24 hours of bringing the creature home, the children returned to school, and we were all faced with figuring out how to coexist in the basement space that is our classroom.

Although I had concern for the fate of this creature, my focus was on the way in which the children would react to the appearance of a squirrel in their classroom. A tried and true social constructivist with a conventional view of the social realm, I was primarily interested in how the classroom community would make meaning from the experience of caring for a rescue squirrel. It was only later, after encountering Haraway, Latour, and common worlds pedagogies (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2015) that I reflected on the relational aspects of the encounter and considered that there might have been other ways to attend to this experience aside from the anthropocentric sociocultural lens I was accustomed to.

As was my common practice at the time, I was looking for a tidy narrative to move and inspire our larger school community. To this end, I sidelined complicated conversations that I was not prepared for and focused on “safe” grappings, such as the question of how we could give this creature what he needed to survive and thrive. The children had an interest in the squirrel’s “non-native” status. They wondered, as did I, how and why this creature came to be in Portland and what it might mean to leave home and go to a place where you are not welcome. Although I acknowledged the children’s questions, I chose not to dive deeply into these complex conversations because I feared it would take us into messy territories that would complicate the arc of the story that was already forming in my mind. Now I see how *staying with the trouble* (Haraway, 2010, 2016) presented by the messy concepts of borders, migration, and the notions of “native” and “non-native” creatures would have situated our conversations about what a squirrel needs to survive and thrive within the worldly concerns of our time and place (Iorio, Hamm, Parnell, & Quintero, 2017). In that moment, however, I opted to focus on comfortable colonialist-inspired practices of inviting the children to name the squirrel (they chose PT, short for Patter), assign it a gender (male), and regard it as the innocent object of our “rescue.”



Figure 1. PT's hutch.

## Complex Squirrel Identities/Histories

In the *throwntogetherness* (Massey, 2005) of our school's North Portland neighbourhood, where humans and nonhumans exist in complex and complicated relations with one another, encounters with what are commonly regarded as wild creatures are commonplace. Raccoons, opossum, bats, rabbits, and coyotes are all cohabitants of our school neighbourhood. Squirrels are particularly visible and play a significant role in the childhoods of urban-dwelling Portlanders. Though squirrels are often fondly regarded by locals, they hold a complicated place in the common worlds of the Pacific Northwest.

When thinking about these complex histories, the first idea to contend with is the popular

archetype of the *storybook squirrel*. This European-inspired image of the chubby, docile, and beloved emblem of the forest is the prevalent cherished notion of squirrelness that persists in the region. Illustrations representative of the storybook squirrel can be found in local art, t-shirts, coffee mugs, greeting cards, and popular media.

Then there are the complicated realities of real squirrel lives to consider. Western gray squirrels, native to the northwest, were once the most common squirrel in urban Portland. These creatures are now considered endangered due to disease, vehicles, and habitat loss from development, catastrophic wildfires, and overgrazing. Our "rescue" squirrel, an eastern gray, was a non-native "invasive" species from the east coast introduced by humans to the area nearly 100 years ago and the type most commonly encountered today in Portland (Audubon Society of Portland, 2017).

While the nostalgic storybook squirrel is cherished in our collective cultural imaginings, actual squirrels commonly encountered in the region can bite, scratch, and transmit disease to humans. They dig up bulbs, eat produce from urban gardens, and have been known to store their food in exhaust pipes and take up residence in abandoned cars or unsecured attics and garages. Local wildlife experts offer wildly varying recommendations about how to approach squirrels found in city limits depending on the season, the species, and the squirrel's behaviour. Epitomizing the conflicted attitudes toward squirrels, neighbourhood garden stores often sell squirrel repellent, live traps, squirrel-resistant bird food, squirrel food, and squirrel feeders side-by-side.

The complex identities/histories of squirrels in the Pacific Northwest are not unlike the complicated and entangled histories of some humans in this region. Depending on the context, squirrels have been regarded as docile and



Figure 2. Storybook squirrel. Image by Arrowyn Craban Lauer at <http://littlegoldfox.com>

friendly, cherished innocents worthy of rescue and rehabilitation, or reviled as destructive and invasive pests, to be poisoned or, in rural areas, shot on sight.

These dichotomous perspectives about squirrels hold the same underlying premise: that squirrels come from nature and thus are alien to our urban environment. As beacons of the natural world, a pristine place far from the reach of humans, squirrels in urban settings are viewed as “the other”—either dangerous invaders or magical messengers of nature, depending on the context.



Figure 3. Tentative encounters.

In our squirrel encounter, the classroom community, including myself, had to immediately contend with the behaviour of the rescue squirrel that did not fit with the familiar storybook squirrel archetype. Neither docile nor friendly, the squirrel moved about in a frenzy and appeared to regard us with fear and aggression. The squirrel’s panicked manner challenged my rescue narrative. Did the squirrel want to be rescued? Who was this “rescue” really intended for?

### “Back to Nature”: Reconceptualizing Our North Portland Neighbourhood as a Contact Zone

*Once there was a tiny squirrel named PT. His mom went walking in the woods to find meat and she got eaten by a bear. Then the bear spitted her out but she was already died. ~from “The Story of PT”*

“The Story of PT,” a whimsical story my classroom community created about the rescue squirrel, was informed by the pervasive grand narrative of the nature/culture binary, or the Great Divide (Latour, 2005). This narrative dictates that humans exist outside of nature and that nature is an inanimate place somewhere far away (Haraway, 1995). Wild animals live in nature but are not necessarily a part of it. Using this thinking, it follows that squirrels are “from nature” and must undergo a journey from nature (often envisioned as a forest by children in the Pacific Northwest) to make their way to an urban environment such as our school in North Portland. In the collaborative story written by the children, the squirrel came to our school by treetop from the forest to find refuge after his mother was eaten by a bear.

*[PT] climbed over ten trees to the St. John’s bridge. He fell through a hole in the bridge and landed on the ground. He wandered around Portland and he finally found [our school.]. ~ from “The Story of PT”*

The nature/culture divide and human exceptionalism paradigms (Malone, 2016) generate a false construct where agential humans act as stewards upon an objectified nature, to damage, preserve, restore, and rescue (Taylor, 2017). Though our “rescue” of the eastern gray squirrel was well intended, there is a way in which the notion of rescuing both emerges from and reinforces the nature/culture dichotomy and human exceptionalism, disregarding the complex historical, ethical, and environmental factors that contribute to our current environmental predicament.



Once there was a tiny squirrel named PT. His mom went walking in the woods to find meat and she got eaten by a bear. Then the bear spitted her out but she was already died.

Figure 4. The bear.

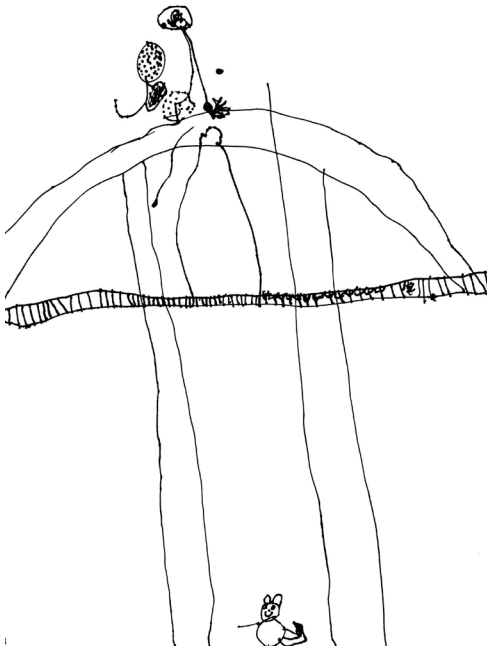


Figure 5. St. John's bridge.

Latour's concept of common worlds (2004, 2009) offers a pedagogical tool to reconceptualize nature, culture, squirrel, child, forest, and city as not separate but rather entangled in mutual *natureculture* (Haraway, 2008) becomings. Common worlds frameworks (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2015) acknowledge that rather than children engaging with a nature that is far away, naturecultures are imminent, and "already constitut(ing) children's worldly lives" (Taylor, 2013, p. 119). Furthermore, common worlds researchers Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Fikile Nxumalo (2015) discuss the opportunities that animals such as "unruly raccoons" present by transgressing false boundaries and troubling the nature/culture binary. Drawing on Haraway's reconceptualization of pedagogical places of encounter as "contact zones of more than human relations" (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Nxumalo, 2015, p. 165) common world researchers propose a turn to a relational and ethical pedagogy that acknowledges nonhuman kin as our common world constituents and asks us to carefully consider "who and what belongs" (Taylor & Giugni, 2012, p.114) in these common worlds we share.

### Challenging Human/Animal Binaries

Through the lens of my conventional social constructivist perspective, I regarded the children as the central protagonists of the squirrel encounter and their (exclusively human) socially constructed meaning-making process as the phenomenon that gave the experience value. However, as Affrica Taylor and Miriam Giugni (2012) remind us, we (humans) are not alone in our common worlds, and these worlds are not only about us. Additionally, Anna Tsing (2012) advances the idea that we ought to reconsider what it means to be human; she contends that "human nature is an interspecies relationship" (Tsing, 2012, p. 141).

These notions offer a powerful challenge to the exclusively human frameworks that are so deeply embedded in early childhood pedagogies. Reconsidering the experience through the lens of common world pedagogies (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2015), I wonder what might have been possible if we had attended to the squirrel as multispecies kin rather than an object of rescue and a subject of inquiry for our classroom community.

As a longtime early childhood educator, anthropocentric child-centered pedagogies are intertwined in my thinking and practice with young children. I believe that in encounters with the rescue squirrel, the children also defaulted to this familiar anthropocentric paradigm. For instance, though the children had a sense of the squirrel's agentic nature, their desire to understand the squirrel's will expressed itself in anthropomorphic terms. Two children who "spoke squirrel" asked PT if he wanted to come out of the hutch, despite the dangers present in the yard. Communicating orally with the squirrel was the children's immediate way of acknowledging the presence of a sentient being.



Figure 6. Child-made nest for PT.

Likewise, the following excerpt from the narrative the children authored gave the squirrel a context they could relate to as humans, as well as a name, a home, a mother, and a best friend.

*He [PT] walked down the sidewalk one way, and a Paragon Falcon was walking down the sidewalk the other way, and they bumped into each other. They started talking. After they talked together for a long time they got friends. They both tried to find their moms together. They lived together in a tiny apartment in Portland.*



Figure 7. Speaking squirrel.

I wonder: Is children’s tendency to anthropomorphize animals instinctive, or is it learned behaviour informed by pervasive anthropocentric worldviews? Though I sit in the tension of not knowing, I hope as an educator to “keep the way open” (Osberg & Biesta, 2008, p. 325) for possibilities aside from the well-rehearsed narrative of the exceptional human and “non-native” animal, the rescuer and the rescued. Rather than limiting each other to these roles or rushing to create a story that makes “the other” feel comfortable and familiar, I would invite the children, as well as myself, to explore differences with a sense of curiosity and to embark on “questioning relationships” (Haraway, 2008) with nonhumans. As Pacini-

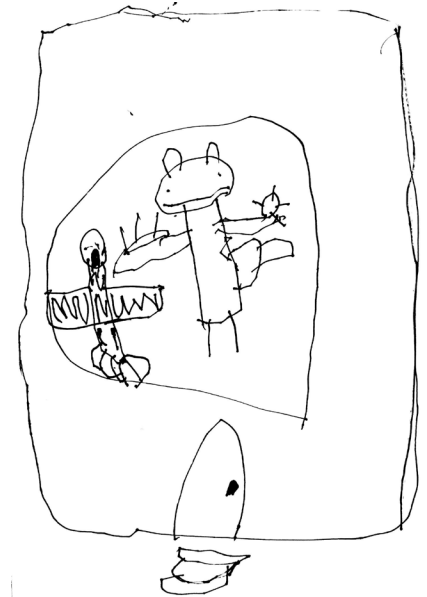


Figure 8. Tiny apartment.

Ketchabaw et al. (2015) note, “the places of discomfort are the places we need to learn from ... they are signals for us to pay attention” (p. 39)! Thus, we might consider attending to the disequilibrium we experience when we set aside our customary roles.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 9. PT, the rescue squirrel.

*I was once an early childhood educator who aspired to bring children “back to nature,” far from the concerns of the city, until I recognized “the immanence of naturecultures already constitut(ing) children’s worldly lives” (Taylor, 2013, p. 119). Now, rather than solely “following the child,” I recognize the complex and complicated multispecies relations (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Taylor, & Blaise, 2016) that characterize children’s daily experiences at school and beyond. I am interested in exploring the relational potential that lies in human/nonhuman encounters and supporting children in learning with, rather than about, the co-inhabitants of their common worlds (Taylor, 2018).*

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**(Endnotes)**

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