

THE EXCLUSIVE FRONTIER: WHITENESS AND THE SETTLER IMAGINATION

IN *LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS*

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Spurred by Richard Louv's bestseller *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit-Disorder* (2005), a popular movement composed of parents, educators, and researchers has increasingly called for the reconnection of children and the natural environment. This thesis interrogates the cultural assumptions at work in this call to reconnect, specifically how an American frontier imagination structures Louv's ideal form of connection. Drawing on scholarship from the fields of ecocriticism, environmental history, and American studies I assess the implications of Louv's frontier framing for the project of reconnecting children to nature and for the broader field of environmental education. I argue that a frontier vision of connection with nature is at times exclusionary and escapist, and more troubling, has the potential to enforce social hierarchies invested in whiteness and the U.S. settler state.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In his 2005 bestseller *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Richard Louv argues that American children today are more separated from nature than they have ever been and are suffering from it. The symptoms of the child alienated from nature—a condition Louv calls “nature-deficit disorder” (NDD)—include poor health, lack of imagination, and the failure to develop an environmental ethic. Louv’s book has inspired a grassroots movement of parents and educators motivated by the idea that connection with nature represents a salutary, unqualified good for children and encourages the development of an appropriate environmental ethic. This assumption, that connection with nature serves both children’s and environmental health, is taken as a commonsense justification for the work of many environmental education programs. It has motivated “No Child Left Inside” legislation on both the state and federal level, and has inspired a raft of academic research citing Louv’s book.¹ But is it so simple?

Assuming that connection with nature is somehow neutral or an unqualified good, fails to account for the ways in which children are differently positioned in relation to nature and with respect to the dominant stories told about nature in environmental

¹ Louv’s nature-deficit disorder has been cited by researchers in a wide range of fields, including medicine, art education, marital and family therapy, sustainability science, and urban planning (Reddon and Durante, 2018; Inwood and Sharpe, 2018; Laszloffy and Davis, 2018; Ives et al., 2018; Schwartz, 2018). More broadly, as Zylstra et al. (2014) note, a call for humans to “reconnect” with nature has been made in the fields of “ecophilosophy, public health, environmental education, nature-based tourism, outdoor adventure, and multiple psychology disciplines” (p. 120).

education projects such as Louv's. In this thesis, I argue that the frontier imagination structuring Louv's conception of ideal nature, and connection to that nature, promotes a normative form of "environmental correctness" invested in whiteness and the U.S. settler state. I argue that this hegemonic prescription for connection is exclusionary for marginalized individuals and communities that do not easily fit into the frontier narrative. At the same time, this prescription is escapist for the privileged individuals and communities that do fit this ideal. Environmental education programs attempting to reconnect children to nature without interrogating the historically linked exploitation of people and environment run the risk of (re)producing social hierarchies of difference invested in whiteness and a settler subjectivity.

The myth of the American frontier is just one of many, specific, historically and geographically located narratives that continue to function within environmental education, often without the awareness of educators. In outlining the role of the frontier in *Last Child in the Woods*, I provide just one example of these stories in the hope that educators and academics pay closer attention to the historically constructed scripts we ask students to perform in environmental education programs, along with how these scripts interact with broader social scripts concerning race, citizenship, ability, gender, etc.

In this way, my work responds to the call within environmental education research to deconstruct "the texts, myths, and meanings of our culture and our relationships with nature...so we know the stories of which we are a part" (Gough, 2013, p. 380). I am especially interested in how deconstructing these dominant narratives participates in efforts to make environmental education more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Though an increasing amount of environmental education research has focused

on the inclusion of marginalized voices and alternative stories (Gough, 2013; Stapleton, 2018; Aguilar et al., 2017; Nxumalo and Cedillo, 2017), work still needs to be done to comprehensively identify and dismantle the dominant stories that tend to universalize and normalize white, male, elite, colonial perspectives. This paper builds off of important work being done in environmental education research that problematizes the white, male, Euro-settler perspective (Aguilar et al., 2017; McLean, 2013; Miller, 2018) and recognizes the need for an intersectional approach to addressing identity and exclusion within environmental education programs (Maina-Okori et al., 2018). Writing about the influence of Romanticism on outdoor education, Roberts (2018) provides a useful example of how to unsettle this dominant perspective by mapping a field’s intellectual history in order to assess the “thoughtworld of the movement” and its limitations (p. 23). I undertake a similar project, arguing that the U.S. frontier myth is a foundational, structuring story for the thoughtworld of Louv’s project.

Thus far criticism directly addressing *Last Child in the Woods* has focused on how Louv’s vision of connection promotes a problematic nature-culture divide rooted in Euro-Western dualisms and how Louv’s nostalgia for an earlier time evokes a fall-recovery narrative that privileges a Western perspective on nature (Dickinson, 2013; Fletcher, 2017; Taylor, 2013; Nxumalo and Cedillo, 2017). These are important cultural assumptions at work in Louv’s vision of connection to nature, but so far scholars have failed to engage how a frontier narrative—the narrative that Louv himself uses to position his book—structures ideal conceptions of nature and connection to it within *Last Child in the Woods*. Identifying this frontier story is crucial for seeing how connection with nature, as a feature of U.S. environmental discourse, has historically served to normalize

the white, settler subject and naturalize privilege. In order to assess the implications of this frontier framing, I apply critical scholarship from environmental humanities and environmental history to a close textual analysis of *Last Child in the Woods*. Doing so reveals the frontier story's "hidden attachments" (Cosgrove, 1995, p. 36) to U.S. imperialism, xenophobia, and naturalized racial hierarchies.

Beyond developing a better understanding of Louv's project, my aim is to highlight the applicability of extant scholarship in environmental history and humanities to environmental education research more generally. This scholarship does a particularly good job of detailing the historically linked constructions of social identity and nature, how discourses of nature have participated in larger social projects, such as the construction of racial categories and the meaning of American identity. This is evident in the way that nature has historically been used to "naturalize" or normalize social constructions. As ecocritic Paul Outka (2008) explains "Nature-construction is self-construction and vice versa—a tautological factory for turning 'what we want' into 'the way it should be,' and then into 'the way it is'" (p. 29). Nature becomes a way of normalizing and masking ideological projects and subjective bias. This scholarship has also been useful in identifying the ways in which discourses of nature provide a symbolic linkage between individual bodies/identity, environment, and an imagined body politic. This linkage is particularly important to trace in order to see how a prescription of connection with nature through a frontier encounter may be informed by deep anxieties about what it means to be an American, what it means to be a man, and what it means to be white. It allows us to better see how the heterosexual, white, male functions as the most "natural"—both in terms of "normal" and correctly positioned in relation to wild

nature—social identity in the United States (Evans, 2002, p. 183). Reading this scholarship with environmental education in mind suggests that environmental educators and scholars need to pay closer attention to how environmental education in the United States participates in the construction of hegemonic racial categories and exclusionary forms of American identity.

For this paper I look specifically at how the frontier imagination structures three forms of Louv’s prescribed ideal child-nature connection. I begin with a brief review of scholarship on the frontier narrative in U.S. environmental history and how this narrative has been implicated in discourse on race, imperialism, and American identity. I also look at how the frontier narrative provides a broad frame for Louv’s vision of the “de-natured” child(hood). The main sections of my paper describe in detail how the three prescribed forms of frontier connection function in *Last Child in the Woods*, and how these forms of connection are exclusionary, escapist, and reinforce social hierarchies invested in whiteness and the U.S. settler state.

In the first of these sections I look at how connection with nature in *Last Child in the Woods* is conceived as an embodied encounter that develops children’s health and character. I position this prescription for connection within a broader history of U.S. environmental discourse concerned with the purity of individual bodies, childhood, environment, and the nation state. I read Louv’s call for a bodily encounter against ecocritic Sarah Jaquette Ray’s (2013) theory of the “ecological other,” in which she argues that “delineating virtuous ‘environmentalist bodies’ from environmentally impure bodies serves to reinforce other social hierarchies based, for example, on race, gender, sexuality, nationality and ability” (p. 3). In diagnosing children with nature-deficit

disorder, Louv runs the risk of stigmatizing the bodies, homes, and habits of those unable to perform environmentally correct ways of connecting to nature.

In the second section, I look at how a frontier imagination provides the cast of characters children enact when connecting with nature. Specifically, I look at Louv's idealization of Scouting and his depiction of Native Americans as ideal role models for connecting with nature, putting these characters in the context of his call to become "native to place." In making this argument, I draw on critical scholarship by Philip Deloria and Shari Huhndorf detailing the way that the Boy Scouts and other forms of outdoor education have for over a century used the frontier drama to frame students' encounter with nature—an encounter that was meant to shape American character and morality. In casting his characters, Louv is similarly motivated by anxieties around masculinity, authenticity, and the future of U.S. society. His vision for connection with nature thus serves a Euro-settler future and is invested in maintaining traditional forms of social order.

The third and final form of connection with nature I analyze is that of the sublime, transcendent experience nature. I look at how this archetypal form of U.S. environmental connection arose following the passage of the frontier and how the sublime has functioned in the construction of racial hierarchies primarily as reference for an unmarked, white normative subject. In contrast to explicit references to race in earlier frontier narratives, the sublime wilderness becomes a place where the racist violence of slavery and Indigenous genocide could be ignored and white privilege could be naturalized. Environmental education practiced through the lens of a frontier encounter may then serve as a kind of training ground to perform environmentally correct ways of

being that privilege the health, character, and spiritual well being of the American child positioned as white, settler, moneyed, able-bodied, and male.

I conclude the paper with a brief discussion of the implications of this study for environmental education more broadly, as well as alternative approaches to thinking about connection with nature.

CHAPTER II

THE FRONTIER

The myth of the American frontier is fundamentally a story about transformation—about land, progress, and the development of a national identity. This story has been analyzed, criticized, and debated for over century, leaving behind what William Cronon (1987) describes as a “blood-drenched field” of scholarship (p. 157). Stepping on to this field is critical for understanding *Last Child in the Woods* because it is the frontier story that structures the historical template Louv uses to understand contemporary children’s alienation from nature and the transformative power of nature that is at the heart of his call to reconnect. According to Louv, American society’s relationship with nature can be explained with reference to three successive frontiers. These successive stages represent a declension narrative wherein Americans move further and further from the initial frontier encounter that imbued them with a unique identity. The first frontier is the story of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny detailed in historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous frontier thesis. According to Turner, this advancing frontier line served as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization,” and through this primitive encounter “basic American cultural traits” of strength, intelligence, and individualism were developed (qtd. in Louv, 2008, p. 17). Louv’s second frontier was characterized by a romantic vision of nature that followed the closing of the first frontier. It was a period defined by protection of wilderness, the family farm, and what he calls “suburban manifest destiny” where “boys still imagined themselves woodsmen and scouts, and girls still yearned to live in a little house on the prairie...” (p.

18). Just as the first, this frontier would necessarily come to end, in this case, marked by the end of the family farm and an increasingly urban population. Louv's third frontier, representing the current cultural moment, is defined by urbanization and increasing alienation from nature. This literal and imaginative space shaping American perspectives of nature, "is characterized by at least five trends: a severance of the public and private mind from our food's origins; a disappearing line between machines, humans, and other animals; an increasingly intellectual understanding of our relationship with other animals; the invasion of our cities by wild animals... and the rise of a new kind of suburban form" (p. 19). According to Louv, these "trends... form the American context for a de-natured childhood" and are especially noteworthy for the way they "contrast with our frontier self-image" (p. 26, p.19). Collectively they illustrate Louv's concerns over shifting definitions of the natural, of the human, and of the appropriate human-nature relationship. They betray ambivalence about progress, new technologies, and civilization. They suggest faith in the power of nature to transform, and fear over what lack of connection with that nature could do to individual bodies, to a culture, and to a nation.

In this sense Louv's definition of ideal nature mirrors the nature of Turner's frontier thesis and the wilderness it inspired, not so much in what it is—Louv is much more concerned with nature nearby than the big spaces of the American West—but in the transformative power of nature for individuals and society. If Turner's frontier served as a site of transformation—a space where unique American character could be forged, where "primitive racial energies" could be rediscovered, where could one go to become American once that first frontier closed (Cronon, 1987, p. 76)? The answer to turn-of-the-century preservationists such as Theodore Roosevelt was wilderness. Thus the motivation

for establishing National Parks was not an ecologist's concern for biodiversity, rather it was "to protect the nation's most sacred myth of origin" (p. 77). Importantly, wilderness and the frontier that inspired it were figured as "freer, truer, and more natural than other, more modern places," and if one thought this, "then one was also inclined to see the cities and factories of urban-industrial civilization as confining, false, and artificial" (p. 77). And so, as many critics have noted, in wilderness protection we can read anxieties over urbanization, modernization, technological development, and what these meant for American character (especially in men) and American society more generally. (Cosgrove 1995; Cronon, 1996; Comer, 1999; Buell, 2001; Braun, 2003; Kosek 2006). These concerns over vital energies, over authenticity, I will argue, are what structures Richard Louv's concern over the child alienated from nature. They are concerns about what it means to be a man, what it means to be an American, and even what it means to be human. Even more, they are concerns over what it means to be normal, to be natural, and to be white. And though Louv is not so much concerned with the protection of big wilderness, in his vision of backyard nature we can find the same elements of the frontier encounter, the same prescription for warding off the harmful effects of modernity.

The supposed power of the frontier encounter, the wilderness encounter that followed, and Louv's ideal connection with nature comes in large part from the idea that nature functions as a repository of youthful energy. As Denis Cosgrove explains, "wilderness was not merely the theater of American empire, it was the idyll of America's national childhood, wild, innocent, and free" (1995, p. 35). In the frontier imagination, childhood development and the development of the nation are linked projects, both concerned with maintaining purity and discovering primitive energies that "naturally"

inhere in children and wild places. Just as the frontier encounter was essential for developing the strength and character of the nation, an intimate encounter with primitive nature was essential for developing the strength and character of children following the close of the first frontier. This helps explain the narrative power of the frontier for Louv's project, invested as he is in the health of both children and the nation. Thus for Louv, nature is "a place of archetypal power, teaching, and challenge" (p. 8). Nature is primitive, authentic, beyond the human. Louv writes, "America's genius has been nurtured by nature—by space, both physical and mental. What happens to the nation's intrinsic creativity, and therefore the health of our economy, when future generations are so restricted they no longer have the room to stretch?" (p. 97). Even when Louv points to the nature that can be found in and around cities, it is nature that exists in the cracks, or negative space, of an otherwise human-constructed landscape. When one engages that nature in an abandoned lot or a stream behind one's house—it transforms into a kind of micro-wilderness that is part of an "older, larger world" (p. 7). Through that transformation nature becomes a place of healing, a place where "a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy: a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace" (p. 7). Nature is not just an escape or place for moral instruction; it is also a repository of genius, the engine of an economy, the source of U.S. power.

We see then why the stakes are so high for reconnecting the alienated American child to the right kind of nature. In Louv's frontier vision, healthy childhood development and the development of society are deeply intertwined. From the tension between primitivism and progress, health, character, and a unique American identity are forged. At the end of his introduction, Louv calls for the establishment of a "fourth frontier...a

better way to live with nature” (p. 4). This new frontier is one very much modeled on the old, and in this way the “new” relationship to nature comes to serve the preservation of older ways of being—of being healthy, of being human, of being American and the rightful settler of North America. We must trace how this concern over American power is a concern for specific kinds of bodies, and a specific way of life that may be exclusionary and may reinforce hegemonic social hierarchies. “American yearnings for socioenvironmental perfection, isolation, and the need for moral regeneration” (Cosgrove, 1995, p. 38), embodied in frontier, wilderness, and Louv’s ethics, are yearnings that have been shared with social Darwinists, eugenicists, and white nationalists. These shared impulses call for an evaluation of Louv’s ideal form of connection, who it serves, who it excludes, and its unintended consequences for environmental education more broadly. In the next section, I evaluate Louv’s call to connect with nature through embodied, physical encounters, tracing how this call echoes Progressive-era attempts to purify the white body in wilderness.

CHAPTER III

NATURE-DEFICIT DISORDER, DISABILITY, AND THE ECOLOGICAL OTHER

In Louv's frontier imagination, nature as a site of transformation for both children and the nation is particularly important for the role it plays in ensuring bodily health and the health of the body politic. Alienation from nature—Louv's "nature-deficit disorder"—represents a form of physical disability wherein children's bodies become enervated by technology, and they lose their senses. These children can be healed though if given the opportunity to bodily connect with nature. Nature becomes medicine capable of transforming the child able to follow Louv's prescription. Viewing this prescription as part of a longer historical narrative concerning the health and purity of American citizens and nature allows us to see how Louv's call to reconnect with nature participates in the construction of a normative white subject.

Louv is very clear that connecting to nature depends on a specific relationship between bodies and natural space that is physical, strenuous, and intimate. He writes, "If, when we were young, we tramped through forests of Nebraska cottonwoods, or raised pigeons on a rooftop in Queens, or fished for Ozark bluegills, or felt the swell of a wave that traveled a thousand miles before lifting our boat, then we were bound to the natural world and remain so today" (p. 8). In this description nature acts on bodies only when they are positioned in certain ways—out of doors, near easily recognizable, nonhuman animals, on the ocean, in the woods or mountains. Louv's vision calls forth the frontier power of contact with the primitive, the nonhuman, the timeless. Louv also suggests that what bodies do in these places is important for connecting. He praises a book called

Shelters, Shacks and Shanties, written by Boy Scouts co-founder Daniel C. Beard, and books like it, “The genre seemed to suggest that no self-respecting boy could enjoy nature without axing as many trees as possible...what really defines these books, and the age they represented, is the unquestioned belief that being in nature was about *doing* something, about direct experience—and not being a spectator” (p. 15). This relationship to nature defined by “doing” contrasts sharply with the alienated contemporary child, sitting behind computer screens, TVs, and video game consoles, purely a spectator. This child will have leg muscles weakened by too much sitting, eyes nearsighted from watching screens, and brains dulled by “artificial” stimuli. More than that, these children start to lose some essential feature of their humanity. Louv writes, “as the young spend less and less of their lives in natural surroundings, their senses narrow, physiologically and psychologically, and this reduces the richness of the human experience” (p. 3). In this way they become less human, missing something fundamental to Louv’s understanding of what it means to be alive in the world. He calls this “cultural autism,” and along with nature-deficit disorder it represents a form of physical, psychological, and cultural impairment (p. 68).

In Louv’s characterization of the disabled child alienated from nature by modern technology, one hears echoes of Progressive-era reformers concerned with the health of American children and what that health represented for the strength and orderly function of the nation. In 1904, it was “books and reading” that kept children from the “more active, objective life, and...know[ing] nature and man at first hand” (Deloria, 1998, p.107). In 2008, the problem is TV and computer screens. In 1904, psychologist Stanley Hall was concerned about the next generation of “flat chested cigarette smokers, with

shaky nerves and doubtful vitality” (Deloria, 1998, p. 107). In 2008, Louv is concerned about a “generation of physical weaklings” (p. 132). For Louv, as for early 20th century reformers, the cure for the culturally disabled child could be found in nature. Nature serves as a place to work out an authentic identity in opposition to the artificiality of cities and technology. It’s a place to build strength through contact with the wild Other. Thus children should get outside and moving—physically connecting with a nature that has longer views and space to roam.

These anxieties over personal and cultural disablement as the result of urbanization, new technology, and the closing of the frontier, along with the fix of reconnecting to nature, were not limited to reformers concerned with the health and character of turn of the century children. Rather, since the early 20th century U.S. environmental discourse has been shaped by fear and disgust associated with the figure of the disabled body (Ray 2013). According to ecocritic Sarah Jaquette Ray this dominant discourse is invested in “describing which kinds of bodies and bodily relations to the environment are ecologically ‘good,’ as well as which kinds of bodies are ecologically ‘other’” (p. 1). Ray’s “ecological other” is a useful lens for viewing Louv’s conception of the child disabled through alienation from nature. It reveals how the concept of nature-deficit disorder participates in the production of a normative white subjectivity through ideal forms of connection with nature. Ray and other scholars have described how early U.S. environmentalism’s drive to protect wilderness and preserve nature was a response to elite, white fears over genetic and cultural purity, informed by social Darwinism and the eugenics movement. These fears were deeply connected to the passing of the frontier, central as it was to defining an ideal form of white, Anglo-Saxon, American character. In

wilderness, affluent, urban, white men found a new frontier—a new place to try their strength and ensure their manly development. It served as a kind of “purification machine,” working on individual bodies to ensure the wholeness, purity, and strength of the nation more generally (Braun, 2003, p. 181). In this way “‘nature’ gained meaning within the context of social engineering projects to purify the nation,” and the white body, in contrast to stigmatized, racialized immigrants crowding into U.S. cities (Ray, 2013, p. 9).

Reading Louv in the context of this history, we see that his prescription for bodily connection with nature both describes an ideally connected child (representative of ecological, moral, and physical health) and an alienated ecological other (suffering the effect of that alienation i.e. NDD, physical weakness, lack of creativity). It allows us to see the “hidden attachments” (Cosgrove, 1995, p. 36)—to imperialism, genetic purity, and social order—that ride in along with a romantic frontier imagination. Louv’s framing of connection with nature in relation to the frontier reveals his anxiety about the future of the country and about a way of life, more specifically a way of relating to nature, that he understands to be American. And in the frontier one finds a very clearly defined protagonist—the rugged, masculine, white-European, settler. Nature is a place of healing, but is also a place to return to one’s senses—to invigorate the body and to become fully human. For Louv, being “fully human” depends on having the correct relationship with nature, and the ability to perform this relationship. Those without that ability become ecological others, stigmatized bodies living in environmentally “incorrect” places.

Louv’s suggestion that physical connection with a certain kind of nature can be read as means to—and indicator of—physical and mental health is troubling when

considering who ends up in the respective categories of “sick” and “healthy,” and who has access to his prescribed “nature cure.” The trouble with these categories is apparent in Louv’s description of a program designed to bring teenagers from Southern California to Alaska for a two-week visit with Tlingit people in the towns of Ketchikan and Kake. The teenagers are all on probation, ordered to take the trip as an alternative to incarceration. Louv details a meeting he had with the teenagers, “They looked like your usual troubled teenage suspects: a gang member wearing a white net skullcap and black jersey; a girl with orange hair...another boy with a black skullcap with a bandana tied around his head” (p. 111). Louv reads social deviance into skullcaps, bandanas, and orange hair. These are symbols of “urban” youth, alienation from nature, and criminality. These young people have internalized the urban maladies that come with a city life alienated from nature.

The trip has transformed them in important ways though. One boy wears a “sealskin Tlingit medicine pouch around his neck,” a symbol of his contact with traditional people and their connection with nature. Louv says the participants learned about the Tlingit word for “self-respect...by being in nature, and by associating with people who had never been separated from it” (p. 112). He even suggests that the teenagers’ transformed characters could be read physically. He writes, “Anyone who has spent much time around addicts or gang members understands how disarming—and manipulative—they can be. Yet on this afternoon, I saw no evidence of the con artist in their eyes. At least for a while—a day, a week, a year, or perhaps even a lifetime—they were changed” (p. 112). In this passage, Louv wants to show both the ill effects of alienation from nature and the great healing power that even brief contact with nature can

bring to the most alienated. In this case the most alienated are teenagers who rarely make it out of the city, and as a result have become morally deviant—on probation wearing skullcaps. What is remarkable about this encounter for Louv is that these youth have overcome this social deviance—their disability of nature deficit. They are like the “supercrips” described by disability theorists, individuals who overcome bodily impairment to climb mountains and run marathons (Ray, 2013, p. 49). Supercrips are remarkable because their bodies have no place in a wilderness imagination. Similarly, the urban, racialized, nature-alienated gang member is cast as unnatural. They have to be removed from their homes and flown to remote areas of Alaska to find any kind of connection. They are saved only by enacting the white, Euro-American frontier encounter—engaging bodily with big spaces and interacting with Indians. This passage suggests that alienation from nature exists along a continuum. The racialized, urban youth in Louv’s imagination are “naturally” alienated or disconnected from an ideal nature, and their alienation results in moral deviance. The white, suburban child on the other hand is “unnaturally” alienated—they are supposed to be connected to nature, fulfilling their destiny in white wilderness. Their alienation results not in criminality but in obesity and ADHD, the loss of their powers. I argue that Louv’s anxiety represents a fear of white, suburban kids sliding further along the continuum of alienation—becoming “naturally” alienated, blacker, morally deviant. Only through deliberate action now can parents and educators stave off the slide into the unnatural represented by the urban, racialized teens.

Louv’s prescription for an embodied, frontier-like encounter with nature is thus exclusionary depending on children’s access to an idealized form of nature. Louv fail to account for “the uneven racial, gendered, and other power structures that shape the

relations of different groups to the environment,” which assumes “the universal category ‘human’” (Ray, 2013, p. 20). Some children are more likely than others to be able to experience and enjoy connecting to nature in the way that Louv suggests they should—through bodily contact and physical challenge in nature—on foot, without the aid/impairment of technology. As Timothy Morton notes, “One of the defining characteristics of environmental writing is how little attention it pays to the fact that only some bodies have arms and legs; only some bodies are sighted or can hear. There is no such thing as the body, if by that we mean something unmarked by gender, race, or physical ability” (qtd in Ray, 2013, p.29). Louv’s vision of nature and natural connection obscures the understanding that we are always reliant on technology, even in wilderness settings, and that we are always embedded in webs of social, cultural, and economic relations that connect humans to each other and the nonhuman world. Further, some children are directly harmed by their exposure to nature. One might argue that a 10-year-old child who travels the country picking fruits and vegetables in order to support his family is spending too much time outside—their body too much exposed to a sun that can cause heat illness, to water, plants, and soil laden with pesticides. Or consider the case of a child exposed to lead through contaminated drinking water in Flint, Michigan. What Louv fails to recognize is how this child is intimately, bodily connected to nature, and that there are environmental problems more serious than lack of connection to an idealized, romanticized nature.

So who benefits from Louv’s prescription of connecting bodies to nature and whose problems remain unchanged? Nature, when viewed as medicine, as a space of healing, as a space apart from culture, can “disguis[e] its exclusions and legitimiz[e]

social norms” in ways that come to serve individuals already privileged in society (Ray, 2013, p. 38). Louv’s problem, NDD, and its solution, reconnecting children to nature assumes a suburban, able-bodied, white, child who is alienated, in part, because of their affluence and access to the comforts provided by technology. Louv’s suggestion that one of nature’s benefits is that it offers children “controlled risk” signals that his prescribed form of connecting is a luxury that not everyone wants or can afford (p. 178). If Louv’s proposed bodily connection to nature, his “green encounter,” is a site for moral and bodily purification or improvement then it may be that “it substitutes a performance of unity with nature for any actual ecological sensitivity” (Ray, 2013 p. 65). If the driving concern behind environmental education is concern for restoring individual bodily and mental health, of curing nature-deficit disorder, then it may be, that environmental education “comes to serve the fit body more than it serves nature” (Ray, 2013, p. 65). It comes to serve specifically the suburban, white body, revealing anxiety about the loss of power for that body.

The frontier myth fits well into Louv’s project of connecting children to nature because it is a story of progress, the kind of progress that resulted in Louv’s idyllic 1950s childhood. It was the type of progress that made the United States prosperous and free before tipping over into the technological wasteland that Louv imagines today’s children inhabiting. Louv is caught in the bind of wanting advancement, economic growth and American prosperity, along with a environmentally pure, pastoral idyll. But it was frontier virtue that created the context of the “de-natured” contemporary childhood. Ironically, Louv’s crisis of children’s lack of connection to nature is in so many ways the result of these virtues instilled in the U.S. elite. The desire for expansion and space has

led to the suburbs. The desire for growth, the accumulation of wealth and power, and the freedom to choose have been the virtues that justified the unchecked use of resources. The question we have to ask is: how will more frontier virtue fix the problems created by a society inculcated by frontier virtue? Louv's suggestion that we (and by "we" he means white Americans who live comfortably in the middle class or as members of the elite) can return to a golden age when big American spaces were what instilled American genius and the American spirit neglects the interlinked exploitation of both people and the environment that has defined the United States' relationship with nature. If environmental education is to do more than serve the privileged, as space for the maintenance of healthy bodies and ideas about healthy, white bodies connected to nature, then it will have to face that exploitation and the logics that have served it. In next section I look at how the frontier tension between primitivism and progress structures the cast of characters Louv provides for enacting connection with nature.

CHAPTER IV

PLAYING INDIAN

The frontier experience, grounded as it was in an encounter with the primitive, concerned not only contact with nonhuman, untamed, wild nature, it also entailed contact with the primitive human untainted by a debilitating modern society. If the close of the frontier required the protection of wilderness as a space to purify the body and maintain an authentic American culture, it also required preserving some form of contact with the Indian “Other” against which American identity was defined. In both Progressive-era nature education exemplified by the Boy Scouts and Louv’s prescription for connection with nature, Indianness functions as a means to accessing authenticity, the essential, the real in nature. In the frontier myth, children, nature, and Indigenous peoples are imaginatively linked, the first terms in a narrative of progress and civilization. The uncomplicated connection between the three functions in Louv’s imagination as means to ensuring the healthy development of body, land, and nation. Louv’s prescription for connection with nature by “playing Indian” represents in some sense repulsion at what the civilizing process of the frontier has wrought, while at the same time seeking to correct the imbalance by returning to an earlier stage in the process.

This tension between primitivism and progress, real and artificial, was reflected in the Progressive-era nature education exemplified by the early Boy Scouts. As Phillip Deloria explains in his book *Playing Indian*, Boy Scout leadership was split into two camps with regard to which frontier characters should serve as role models for the education of American youth. While Daniel C. Beard used Indianness as the Other

against which his masculine, militaristic, pioneer Scouts were defined, Ernest Thompson Seton turned to Indians as a model for “authenticity and natural purity,” spatially and temporally outside the bounds of modern society (p. 103). Both though “saw themselves grappling with the same basic problem: how to create modern American character in children (especially boys), perceived by many at the turn of the twentieth century to be imperiled by an effeminate, postfrontier urbanism” (p. 96). Both men took for granted an authentic, identity-forming power that could be found in the frontier encounter with nature. Both men worried about what lay on the other side of the frontier’s passing, especially for children. For both men wilderness served as a substitute for frontier. As Deloria notes, “Even if one could no longer pursue a rugged individualist destiny on the frontier, a rustic week of Indian camping in a national park or a scouting expedition in the country might prove reasonable substitute” (p. 101).

The way that Louv writes about Indigenous people mirrors the ambivalence about Indians seen in the positions of Beard and Seton. At times Louv suggests that young boys and girls should be playing pioneer. Describing a bit of his childhood play that took on the perspective of the settler Louv writes, “This tree house became our galleon, our spaceship, our Fort Apache” (p. 81). Thus children might play out U.S. Manifest Destiny, imagining themselves on the advancing line of American empire. Elsewhere Louv quotes E.O. Wilson who suggests that it is best for a child “to be an untutored savage for a while,” not learning the names of flora and fauna, “better to spend long stretches of time just searching and dreaming” (p. 151).

We also see the importance of Indian-nature connection in the encounter between the Tlinglit children of Alaska and the “troubled” teenagers from Southern California. As

we saw earlier, the young people from San Diego learned “‘self-respect,’ by being in nature, and by associating with people who had never been separated from it” (p. 112). Louv views these Tlingit children as never having been separated from nature because as Deloria notes, native cultures are imagined “in a precontact ‘ethnographic present’ always temporally outside of modernity...Indian people necessarily existed in a different stage and thus, in relation to modern white Americans, in a different temporal zone” (p. 106). This temporal othering is key for Louv’s project as it was for Ernest Thompson Seton. If modernity was “cynical and artificial, Indians appeared childlike and natural...whereas moderns lived a high-density, mass-mediated, urban life, Indians were rural and face to face” (Deloria, 1998, p. 106).

And for Seton and Louv, “playing Indian” comes naturally to children. As Deloria notes, “The connections between Indians and children already had a long history, the two being paired rhetorically as natural, simple, naïve, preliterate, and devoid of self-consciousness” (p. 106). This conflation of child, nature, and Indian is essential for understanding the developmental, progressive narrative of the frontier. As psychologist Stanley Hall described in 1904, the development of society from primitive to civilized was continually being enacted in the development of children from “little savage” to well-adjusted adult (Deloria, 1998, p. 106). Essential for Hall’s “recapitulation theory” as it is for Louv’s prescription for healthy development, children are expected “to experience each evolutionary stage before progressing to the next level” (p. 107). Thus “playing Indian” is not just a way to better connect with nature, it is essential for developing into a healthy, well adjusted, modern, and I would argue, white, American.

Connection to nature as a type of frontier encounter, as either pioneer or Indian is troubling given the history of settler colonial violence in the United States and its continued legacy. Louv's nostalgia for the frontier is a problem because it "acts as a form of historical 'mystification'" (Huhndorf, 2001, p. 76). As Shari Huhndorf notes, the frontier stories told by the early Boy Scouts, "by focusing on and locating authentic Native life in the past and by redefining Indianness in terms useful to the dominant culture...both enacted and concealed a contemporary colonial relationship with Native America" (p. 76). This contemporary colonial relationship is completely absent from Louv's work. Instead, he writes, "America's genius has been nurtured by nature—by space, both physical and mental. What happens to the nation's intrinsic creativity, and therefore health of our economy, when future generations are so restricted that they no longer have room to stretch?" (p. 97). Access to all of this space, necessary for the health and well being of American children and the American economy depends on the violent removal of Indigenous peoples. Louv thus justifies U.S. imperialism and settler colonial expansion through his concern for reconnecting children to nature. His work is invested in a settler future without regard for Indigenous claims of sovereignty.

Natural connection to land further strengthens Euro-settler claims to territory through discourse of "rehabitation." Tuck et al. (2014) define "settler emplacement" as "the desire to resolve the experience of dislocation implicit in living on stolen land" which depends on "the discursive and literal replacement of the Native by the settler...." (p. 15). This discursive work of replacing Native with settler may be furthered by settler attempts to identify with Indigenous people and cultural practices as a way of rehabilitating place. This call to rehabit is a feature of many place-based education

programs that suggest students become, as Louv quotes Wes Jackson, “native to their places” (p. 277). In fact, Louv’s “fourth frontier,” his solution to nature-deficit disorder and the current environmental crisis, is “a back-to-the-land movement unlike any in our history” (p. 275). In this movement the Great Plains would be cultivated as a domestic prairie, buffalo and pronghorn would roam free, and human population would be dispersed across the landscape in a collection of “green towns” (p. 283). This call to reclaim and reinhabit a vast swath of North America is just another colonial project in a long history of such projects, a history Louv ignores.

Louv and other environmental educators must thus rethink the way they engage Indigenous culture and practices in the project of environmental education. “Playing Indian” functions as an escape from a history of settler colonial violence. It obscures the way that all land in the United States—urban, rural, wild—is shaped by this history, and that nature, which Louv equates with “space,” was created through the forced removal and genocide of Native Americans. Thus Louv’s project of connecting to nature becomes a way of “covering tracks” (Tuck et. al, 2014, p. 7). Acknowledging this history, centering it in an environmental education program reframes the type of environmental problems that can be addressed by that program. Louv sees the root of environmental problems as a lack of connection between people and nature, especially children. For Louv this attachment is meant to be individual and spiritual. As we saw in the case of the Tlingit children, one way to form this attachment is through engaging with “people who had never been separated” from nature, either directly or through enacting aspects of Indigenous culture (p. 112). The problem with this approach, to quote Sherman Alexie, is that it “blindly pursues Native solutions to European problems but completely neglects to

provide European solutions to Native problems” (qtd. in Hunhdorf, 2001, p. 166).

“Native solutions” are used to fix a largely white, affluent concern about the disconnect between white, affluent, suburban children and nature. Louv’s frontier imagination is constrained within a Euro-settler settler time scale, wherein settler children have lost a connection with land sometime in the last 50 years. Compare this disruption in human-nature relationships to the disruption of Indigenous ways of life continuously enacted as a form of settler violence since European settlement of North America (Powys White, 2016). Framing the problem as Louv does ignores the interlinked exploitation of land and people that defines settler colonialism. It once again obscures difference, normalizing and universalizing the experience of suburban, white Americans. As a goal for environmental education, connecting to nature becomes exclusionary and it limits the ability to address the social, historical, and political roots of climate change and environmental injustice.

Louv’s call for children to regain a lost connection to land and his understanding of indigenous relationships with land is very different from Indigenous scholars working on what they term “land education.” Quite opposite from Louv’s frontier narrative which ignores settler colonial violence and positions Indigenous people as part of the past, “land education engages acute analyses of settler colonialism as a structure, a set of relations and conditions” (Tuck et al., 2014, p.13) By reproducing a frontier narrative of conquest and self-discovery, Louv’s call to reconnect with nature represents a form of “cognitive imperialism” (p. 13). This imperialism comes in the form of positioning the settler as “simultaneously most superior and most normal” (p. 7). Running throughout Louv’s work are assumptions about what constitutes correct ways of engaging with nature and inhabiting land that center Eurocentric ideals as a universally appropriate mode, thereby

denying different ways of engaging with land. Louv's models: U.S settler expansion along the frontier, the family farm, early 20th century Boy Scouts, and post-war rural-suburban prosperity, excludes Indigenous people and erases them from his project. And as Tuck et al. point out, Indigenous knowledge cannot be coopted in a way that is "static or performable" (p. 10). Whereas Louv focuses his attention on what a connection with nature can do for the health of an individual, land education focuses on a relationship of reciprocity where land is a teacher, and a relative. This entails a responsibility to help heal the earth and support the survival of our more-than-human relatives (p. 46). The relationship is less about what nature can do for you, as training ground or medicine, and more about a mutually beneficial relationship borne out of respect and care. Within this worldview, it doesn't make sense to talk about "open space" as the backdrop for American genius and economic growth as Louv does. Rather the focus of land education is remembering and coming to know right relations with land. Thus Megan Bang (2014) writes, "The challenge for place conscious educators is to create learning environments for new generations of young people that do not facilitate and cultivate conceptual developments and experiences of land that are aligned with 'discover(y)/(ing)' frameworks which elevate settlers' rationales for their right to land" (p. 42). Louv's use of a frontier narrative to structure his prescription for connecting to nature is one of these "discovering" frameworks that need to be challenged. If not, connection with nature comes to serve the white, settler subject, and reinforces rather than challenges the logic of a U.S. settler colonial empire. In the next section, I trace how the logic of white supremacy and settler colonization become normalized within a discourse of connection to sublime, transcendent nature.

CHAPTER V

SUBLIME ESCAPES

Thus far I have argued that an essential feature of Louv's prescription for connection with nature, modeled on the frontier, is its transformative, developmental power. The physical connection of bodies and nonhuman nature transforms weak, culturally disabled children into fit, fully formed, healthy children. Playing out frontier pioneers and Indians transforms rootless, uncertain urban children into authentic Americans, in the process, transforming the settler into the rightful, nature-connected occupant of North America. At the same time these transformations are working on individual bodies, they are working on the nation as a whole—one imagined through the lens of the frontier—a collection of democratically minded, yet individualistic, white, Anglo-Saxon pioneers. These forms of connection with nature figured as part of the frontier narrative have historically functioned with reference to aspects of an explicitly white supremacist ideology—eugenics, social Darwinism, the othering primitivism of Indigenous people. How then can Louv imagine a frontier-inflected connection with nature as a morally uncomplicated good? The answer requires seeing another transformative function of the frontier—as a tool of forgetting and purifying the national conscious. Following ecocritic Paul Outka, I argue that the frontier myth, in conjunction with the sublime embrace of unpeopled nature that followed the frontier's passing, has historically functioned to obscure the linked exploitation of land and people that has defined U.S. history. The sublime landscapes of the West, opened by frontier expansion, provided a place for white Americans to reimagine their identity and national story

outside the racial trauma of slavery and the Civil War. This vision of sublime natural connection, wherein the individual merges with the nonhuman, losing oneself to ultimately find their true identity, informs Louv's prescription of connecting with nature. The ability of nature to conjure a feeling of an ahistorical, transcendent self, unbounded by culture and society, is of paramount value to Louv's brand of nature connection. It is this vision that allows nature to serve as an escape—one that naturalizes white privilege and forecloses natural connections that challenge hegemonic power structures invested in whiteness and the U.S. settler state.

According to Louv, nature-deficit disorder is not just an affliction of the body, but also of the mind and spirit. Just as the failure to use all of one's senses is a failure to be fully human, so too is the failure to experience wonder, to experience the world beyond the self. But time spent in nature offers just the opportunity to reengage one's senses, and in so doing reinvigorate the spirit. "Through nature," Louv writes, "the species is introduced to transcendence..." (2008, p. 302). The child alienated from nature risks missing out on this process of discovery, of awakening. They lose the opportunity to develop a poetic sensibility, to be creative, and to dream. In this way they are spiritually incomplete and represent another form of ecological other.

Early in his book Louv describes an experience he has while climbing as a child in Missouri. He writes:

I often climbed alone. Sometimes, lost in wonderment, I'd go deep into the woods, and imagine myself as Rudyard Kipling's Mowgli, the boy raised by wolves, and strip off most of my clothes for the ascent. If I climbed high enough, the branches thinned to the point where, when the wind came, the world would tip

down and up and around and up and to the side and up. It was frightening and wonderful to surrender to the wind's power. My senses were filled with the sensations of falling, rising, swinging; all around me the leaves snapped like fingers and the wind came in sighs and gruff whispers. The wind carried smells, too, and the tree itself surely released its scents faster in the gusts. Finally, there was only the wind that moved through everything.

Now, my tree-climbing days long behind me, I often think about the lasting value of those early, deliciously idle days. I have come to appreciate the long view afforded by those treetops. The woods were my Ritalin. Nature calmed me, focused me, and yet excited my senses. (p. 10)

Here Louv is showing how connection with nature should be done. He strips off his clothes, symbolically stripping away the trappings of civilization. In doing so he becomes wilder, more natural—"the boy raised by wolves." He climbs up, closer to God, which affords him a long view stretching out on all sides. He becomes the all-seeing eye in the center of the landscape. The world extends outward from his perch. His senses become fully engaged and he loses himself in an experience of nature's power. In the end "there was only the wind that moved through everything," including young Richard. Louv's passage mirrors a famous passage from John Muir's *The Mountains of California* wherein Muir describes the hours he spent atop a 100 foot Douglas fir tree in a mountain windstorm. Muir describes the "noble exhilaration of motion," the "bending and swirling backward and forward." He writes that he "feast[ed] quietly on the delicious fragrance streaming past" and that his "eye roved over the piny hills and dales as over fields of waving grain, and felt the light running in ripples and broad swelling undulations across

the valleys from ridge to ridge....” (2008, p. 176). In these passages we see both authors enacting the literary tradition of the natural sublime. In the context of U.S. environmentalism and environmental writing, the emergence of the sublime, though part of an older European cultural tradition, follows the close of the frontier.

In order to understand why the sublime continues to have such resonance today as a preferred mode of natural experience for writers like Louv, one has to look at the origins of the American love for wilderness. According to literary critic Paul Outka, this love stems in part from the way that American landscapes have been racialized since the colonization of the United States. He and other environmental historians have argued that early Christian settlers to North America viewed its vast stretches of unbroken woodland as a barren, condemned, landscape that called to be returned to an Edenic, pastoral ideal. In converting this landscape to farmland, these settlers were not just making a living but imposing a cultural ideal founded on the superiority of “civilized” agricultural societies over “savage” hunter/gatherers. As Outka notes, this puts “native extermination in a larger narrative in which ‘the views of nature’ and not genocidal war is ultimately responsible for ‘confining the Indians within narrower limits’” (p. 30). This larger narrative justified frontier expansion until the point where, as Outka puts it, “the original colonial eco-ideology had been accomplished—the Native Americans killed, large (nonhuman) predation eliminated, agriculture established” (p. 35). Out of this passing stemmed a newfound Romantic sublime embrace of wilderness. And while this new appreciation for wilderness may be explained by a backlash to urban industrialization and anxiety about the feminizing influence of a “tamed nature,” Outka specifically highlights the racial content and motivation for this shift (p. 37). For influential transcendentalist

authors Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, the pastoral landscape left in the wake of the passing frontier became degraded by the horrors of Southern slavery. Their response, an alignment “with a wild nature outside of the racist brutality of their historical moment,” functioned as a kind of escape and a site for identity formation—an attachment to wilderness became “the intensely validated sign of exceptional individuality and absolute freedom” (p. 49, p. 33).

This embrace of the sublime, one in which Emerson and Thoreau sought “disappearance into the normal or natural positioned just outside slavery’s historical and cultural trauma,” helps explain the continued whiteness of the current U.S. environmental movement (p. 43). This disappearance into normal or natural was part of a “historical narrative by which whiteness became an unmarked normative ‘humanity’ and blackness solidified into a clearly marked racial essence” (p. 11). This history must be noted as it traces how a supposed “connection to nature” has been employed not just as a way to personal transcendence, freedom, and finding one’s humanity, but also as a means to justify the very opposite—chattel slavery. Outka argues, “In racially identifying slaves with the agricultural pastoral, especially, with domesticated animals, a terrible sort of transitive algebra allowed whites to conjoin racial and ecological violence. Since whites could do whatever they wanted to nature, and since African Americans were considered part of nature, both land and slave were made utterly instrumental to white desire, objectified as natural resources to be exploited and ‘improved’ in the same gesture” (p. 25).

Following the Civil War and frontier expansion into the American West, the sublime functioned in part to redefine the national story and consciousness, obscuring the

racial trauma of slavery. This escape to nature maintained social hierarchies invested in white supremacy without overt mention of race. Outka explains:

By aligning the subject with a transcendent natural landscape, one (supposedly) outside of history, that landscape and the sublime experience, became in turn, a sign of the subject's transcendent, extrahistorical identity. And by *not* paying attention to what sort of people, historically, were in position to enjoy such experiences—by ignoring the long history of naturalized African-American trauma—sublime natural experience became a way of making whiteness invisible while retaining its social power.” (p. 155)

More than just making whiteness invisible, sublime natural experience became a way of marking difference. As Outka notes, “the inability to engage in that unselfconscious delighted association with nature” becomes an “exception, a mark of damage, of unwelcome particularity...[n]atural appreciation becomes a supposedly neutral test that determines a subject's character—the sort of neutral test that privileged whites just happen to pass in overwhelming numbers” (p. 159). My concern is that this sublime, natural test may be enacted in environmental education—creating another set of ecologically good and ecologically other. If this is the case, then to what extent does environmental education simply become a training ground for passing this test?

We can see the connection between whiteness and the sublime in Louv's vision of pure, natural connection. His nostalgia for the frontier, the early 20th century wilderness movement epitomized by Scouting, and his 1950s suburban childhood centers a white, European, male imagination that obscures complicated histories and politics. This nostalgia neglects how “connecting to nature” has historically been used to construct

racial categories and reinforce privilege. Louv does this, in part, because looking at this history is hard, it's unsettling—it requires difficult action. Louv's nostalgia prioritizes the comfort and supposed innocence of affluent, white children and their parents, who have since the 19th century viewed nature as a place to escape the troubles of society. We can see this in Louv's dismay over the changes he observes in a sixth-grade camp run by his hometown school district. He writes, "this camp's central purpose has shifted from a pure nature experience; it has become, primarily a race-relations retreat with nature used as backdrop" (p. 227). Here we see politics and society polluting a "pure" natural space—one that must remain pure and trouble-free in order for children to have the appropriate experience in nature and to receive its full benefits. Louv writes, "Race-relations and other cultural/political programs at camps across the land are important attempts to imagine a gentler, better world. These are important discussions in a democracy, but childhood is short...The great worth of outdoor education programs is their focus on the elements that have always united humankind: driving rain, hard wind, warm sun, forests deep and dark—and the awe and amazement that our Earth inspires, especially during our formative years" (p. 228). Louv misses the point that people have not experienced nature in uniform ways. And far from uniting humankind, nature has repeatedly been appealed to as justification for racist classifications and the construction of social hierarchies. By universalizing natural experience, Louv neglects the ways that people are differently positioned with regard to nature and how these positionings have been historically constructed, especially with regard to racial categories.

In her essay “Black Women in the Wilderness,” Evelyn White (1996) powerfully demonstrates how historical racial trauma may limit the ability to unselfconsciously enjoy a sublime natural encounter:

I was certain that if I ventured outside to admire a meadow or to feel the cool ripples in a stream, I’d be taunted, attacked, raped, maybe even murdered because of the color of my skin... My genetic memory of ancestors hunted down and preyed upon in rural settings counters my fervent hopes of finding peace in the wilderness. Instead of the solace and comfort I seek, I imagine myself in the country as my forbears were—exposed, vulnerable, and unprotected—a target of cruelty and hate. (p. 284).

Reading this passage alongside Louv’s, we have to ask, who is best served by not talking about race—by not contaminating pure experience? Louv seems to be suggesting that childhood is short and we shouldn’t make children do the work of changing society—or even prepare them for that work. Rather people should find commonality in nature because connecting to nature is a universal experience. It’s a place where we can all be the same—ignoring the way that society treats individuals differently and the way that societies actively promote difference, and how this has historically taken place within the context of connection to nature. This passage raises important questions about what outdoor education should be and what it’s actually doing. For Louv it’s a way for kids to get away for a while—to find or keep their freedom, purity, and innocence—to experience transcendent nature and lose their social identities. It’s an escape, an uncomplicated moral space that reinforces the privilege of not having to deal with one’s privilege. The trouble with this approach is that environmental problems have social,

cultural, and economic roots. We don't see them better by escaping to the woods. How then will Louv's vision of outdoor education prepare children to solve these problems?

Beyond simply functioning as an escape for the privileged, Louv's vision of connection with nature may also be affirming social hierarchies invested in whiteness. As Outka notes, "In making that transcendentalist sublime realm 'pure,' the degraded territory outside it becomes impure, polluted, an Other, a different nature that is available for exploitation. It is not simply the escape promised by the sublime that is problematic, but what drawing that line does to the world outside it and the people who live and work there" (p. 49). What happens when appreciation of sublime natural experience becomes a marker of health in children, a way of "drawing that line"? Louv creates a problem where perhaps there was none, casting certain children as "ecological others," incapable of being normal, natural, whole, healthy, pure, and white. These racialized, ecological others threaten the transcendent escape from history at the center of Louv's vision for connecting children to nature. Connection with nature figured in this way is invested in forgetting, in ignoring the way that nature has historically functioned to define and perpetuate whiteness. Environmental education programs invested in this vision run the risk of naturalizing privilege and failing to prepare young people to face today's most pressing social and environmental problems.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

It may be tempting to view environmental education as a place apart, where children can innocently connect to nonhuman nature. It might seem commonsense to view this connection as natural, timeless, and ungoverned by culture or society. But this vision obscures a more complicated relationship between nature, culture, and society. Perceptions of nature have histories that have changed over time. These perceptions are every bit culturally mediated, projections of fears and desires, reflections of society's organization and impulses. Nature has been relied on to construct the social and cultural—establishing the normal as “natural.” Nature has been used to justify various forms of oppression—patriarchy, racism, and colonialism. As such, nature in its many definitions, its full complexity, must be centered in environmental education programs that hope to prepare students to address our most pressing environmental problems. These problems have their roots in hegemonic logics of domination that find justification in the natural, normalizing hierarchies of social difference invested in whiteness, settler colonialism, masculinity, ability, etc. The myth of the American frontier is one of these structuring logics that must be challenged not reproduced in environmental education.

I am writing not to condemn Louv or the good work being done by environmental educators seeking to reconnect children to nature. Nor am I denying the positive health benefits of spending time outdoors or hiking in parks. And I am not suggesting that Louv has masterminded a white supremacist, nationalist plot deliberately disguised, using nature as camouflage. What I am doing is offering an in-depth analysis of how a specific,

historically dominant U.S. environmental narrative functions within, and quietly structures, the discourse of connection with nature in problematic ways. I'm calling for educators to look beyond the stated benefits of connecting children with nature to see how that discourse has functioned historically in (re)producing racial hierarchies and exclusionary forms of American identity. Ultimately I hope this analysis proves useful to environmental education practitioners concerned with making their practice more equitable, inclusive, and oriented towards justice. They may have been told or have the intuition that environmental education is an overwhelmingly white space, but they don't know why. They may have been told that they need to be careful not to reproduce a dominant discourse, but they aren't exactly clear what that dominant discourse is and how it functions in often unacknowledged ways.

But there are alternatives. Educators and researchers are doing the important work of challenging dominant logics—recognizing difference, calling out the power of “normal” to exclude, acknowledging history and culture. There are various calls to incorporate political ecology into environmental education (Bellino and Adams, 2017; Fletcher, 2017). La Paperson (2014) has offered the concept of a ghetto land pedagogy employing critical cartography. The practice of land education mentioned earlier is challenging ingrained U.S. settler logics (Tuck et al., 2014). There is the work of “re-storying” environmental education and the development of critical pedagogy of place (Nxumalo and Cedillo, 2017; Gruenwald 2008). Together these represent a vision of environmental education that challenges power. They center previously marginalized voices and own the cultural baggage that individuals bring to constructions of the good and normal. They don't use nature as an escape. They don't naturalize privilege. Most

importantly they trust young people enough to share with them the truth. By acknowledging the linked exploitation of nature and people—past and present—educators and students can actually work together to address the shared roots of social and environmental injustice. Failing to do so leads to environmental education that continues to serve the privileged few as an escape to a place of innocence that never existed.

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