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Re-theorising the ‘nature’ of childhood

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Abstract

When Alan Prout wrote *The Future of Childhood* (2005), he claimed that the study of contemporary childhoods requires a broad set of intellectual resources and an interdisciplinary approach. This paper is positioned within the interdisciplinary tradition of the ‘new social studies of childhood’ promoted by Prout and other childhood scholars (Kehily 2004; Cannella and Kincheloe 20002). It draws upon philosophy, social theory, media studies and in particular human geography to bring fresh new perspectives to the crucial relationship between two fundamental concepts that educators often take for granted: ‘childhood’ and ‘nature’. In so doing, it works towards re-theorising the ‘nature’ of childhood.

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Over the last three or four centuries, concepts of childhood and nature have become increasingly co-implicated within the structuring dualisms of western thinking. It is now almost impossible to think about childhood as anything but a natural and universal life stage, distinguished by its radical difference from adulthood. It is also extremely difficult to evoke the notion of childhood without simultaneously evoking the notion of nature, and positioning children and nature in contradistinction to adulthood and culture.

In order to de-naturalise childhood, this paper charts some of the epistemological convergences of childhood and nature within these dualistic framings. It begins with the late eighteenth century philosophies of Jean-Jacque Rousseau, whose romantic conflation of childhood with nature, and the radical separation of both ‘pure nature’ and ‘innocent children’ from the evils of ‘adult society’ has had an enduring influence upon modern western thinking about childhood as well as about nature.

To illustrate Rousseau's legacy, and to demonstrate how the entwined epistemological trajectories of 'pure nature' and 'innocent children' are perpetuated in the popular imaginary, the paper critiques some key representations of natural childhood innocence that are perpetuated through children's popular culture.

While childhood studies scholars have gone a long way towards retheorising childhood by pointing to its historical and cultural construction, not a lot of attention has been paid to its key collateral term, nature. This paper seeks to redress this gap by drawing upon interesting new re-theorisings of nature that have taken place within human geography (Castree 2005). After outlining geography's new critiques of the 'pure nature' assumptions that reside within popular wilderness discourses, the paper draws fruitful comparisons between the 'purist' underpinnings of wilderness and childhood innocence.

Through conducting this cross-disciplinary conversation, the paper offers educators new ways of thinking about the nature of childhood and most importantly, for thinking beyond its purist dichotomous framings.

Introduction

When contemplating the 'true nature' of childhood, many of us might be tempted to rehearse the Peter Pan trick of revoking Neverlands, that idealized and timeless place of perfect harmony (Barry 1911). Even if our own childhoods did not match up to the Neverlands utopia, there is a compelling tendency to couple the notion of childhood as it *should* be with perfect nature. J. M. Barry's Peter Pan fantasy clearly exemplifies this coupling, and also underscores the observation made by many childhood studies scholars. These scholars insist that the concept of childhood is more about *adult imaginaries*, and our own political and moral agendas, than it is about children themselves (see, for instance, Steedman 1990; James, Jenks and Prout 1998; Aitken 2001; Cannella and Kincheloe 2002; James and Prout 2002; Kehily 2004; and Jenks 2005). Speaking about

the role of media representations in this adult-centric process, Buckingham (2000: 9) points out that popular representations of childhood ‘...are often imbued with nostalgia for a past Golden Age of freedom and play’. And certainly if we reflect upon J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan as a template for a plethora of Disney and Dreamworld Studio animations featuring doe-eyed children and animals frolicking in pastoral idyll settings (Aitken 2001:36), we might quite easily come to the conclusion that the Golden Age of childhood is nothing more than a wistful adult fantasy for a time and place that never actually existed.

Unlike J.M. Barry, I am not setting out to locate the ‘true nature’ of childhood within an imaginary of some idealised other time and space. Nor am I seeking to perform the conceit of a certain form of western scholarship that believes it is privy to discovering the scientifically objective ‘true nature’ of childhood because its own knowledge base is somehow historically and culturally transcendent. Rather, I wish to contribute to the growing body of interdisciplinary critical childhood studies which sets out to interrogate and de-naturalise the concept of childhood (Cannella 2002). I stand with Hultqvist and Dahlberg (2001:9) when they assert that: 'There is no natural or evolutionary child, only the historically produced discourses and power relations that constitute the child as an object and subject of knowledge, practice, and political intervention'. My contribution to denaturalizing childhood is to interrogate the often essentialised and valorised ‘special relationship’ between children and nature. This involves not only interrogating the essentialised nature of childhood but also the essentialised nature of nature.

To do this I straddle two disciplinary fields: the new social studies of childhood and human geography. While many childhood studies scholars critique the naturalisation and universalisation of western discourses of childhood (Hultqvist and Dahlberg 2001; Prout 2005; Kehily 2004; Cannella and Kincheloe 2002), the discourse of nature remains relatively under-theorised within this field. Human geography offers additional critical perspectives on the relationship between people and nature, as well as theoretical commentaries on the essentialisation of nature (Soper 1995; Castree and Braun 2001; Castree 2005).

By striking up a cross-disciplinary conversation between the new social studies of childhood and human geography, I hope to elucidate a number of epistemological convergences between the discourses of childhood and nature. Firstly I want to strengthen an understanding of the entangled trajectories of these discourses in modern western societies. Secondly I want to demonstrate that despite the inherently contradictory ways that these terms have been taken up, both singly and as a couple, they have ultimately been mutually constituting and mutually validating. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, in taking up some of the recent geographical critiques of nature, I want to throw more light on the ways in which essentialising discourses of nature authenticate and morally justify essentialising discourses of childhood.

In order to trace these convergences, I revisit the philosophies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau; review the post-enlightenment logic systems that structure a line-up of associated dualisms, including childhood/adulthood and nature/culture; and unpack the notion of 'pure nature' that is embedded within contemporary 'wilderness' discourses, and which articulates with the popular imagery of pure and innocent childhood.

Conflation of childhood and nature

The eighteenth century French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau is an important figure for scholars of childhood as well as scholars of nature. Within both fields, scholars refer to his writings as a pivotal moment in which nature and/or childhood is/are for the first time conflated as the locus of essential goodness. In his book *Emile* (1762), a fictionalised philosophical treatise about the ideal 'natural' education of a young boy in the countryside, Rousseau clearly elided childhood with nature – comparing children to plants, and discussing nature's intentions for children. 'Nature is a *quality* in the child' he said (cited in Rose 1984:44), and he warned that if this essential natural quality was not properly nurtured it would 'decay' (cited in Jenks 2005:3). When he spoke of the corruption of natural childhood, Rousseau was referring to the vulnerability of children to

the vices of European adult society – which he clearly held in contempt, as unnatural and contaminating.

In making this moral distinction, Rousseau himself was drawing upon the logic of dualisms, a way of thinking that took hold during the Enlightenment period in which he lived. The nature/culture dualism that he evoked had been established more than a century earlier, but is often attributed to Descartes' famous separation of mind and body and his privileging of reason. The epistemological separation of both adults and children, and culture and nature that built upon Descartes' original mind and body dualism, were the premises upon which Rousseau built his philosophy of essentially *good* childhood and nature. His contribution was not to invent these dualisms, but to reverse their value hierarchies. Rousseau challenged the conventional wisdom of the day that upheld adult rationality and culture as the highest order and most 'developed' form of human existence and cast childhood instinct and nature as its deficit and inferior polarity.

There were other terms that also fell in line with these dichotomous hierarchies. As the eighteenth century was also the era of European Empire, associated colonialist notions of 'primitivism' and 'savagery' were pitted against the valorised European markers of 'culture', 'domestication' and 'civilization' (Anderson 2001; Gregory 2001). Within the internal logic of dichotomous thinking, Rousseau's promotion of 'natural man' popularized Dryden's (1672) notion of the 'noble savage' (Cranston 1991) as opposed to the prevailing negative connotations of the 'wild savagery' of 'primitive races'. By reversing the value ordering of nature-culture dualisms and their associated 'collateral terms' (Prout 2005), Rousseau produced a romantic conflation of nature/childhood/primitivism that immediately evoked an originary higher order state of purity and innocence.

Rousseau's philosophies have had a powerful formative effect on the western adult 'imaginary' of childhood, which can be traced from the eighteenth century Romantic era to the present. In her study of representations of childhood in European art, Higonnet (1998) argues that popular (Rousseau-inspired) representations of children in natural

settings, such as those by the Romance artists Reynolds and Gainsborough, are typically 'constructed through a semiotic opposition with adulthood. They project a vision of childhood that is defined strongly by what it is not. The childhood represented in such images is innocent because it does not, except by omission, refer to the bodies of adult pleasure' (cited in Prout 2005: 11). Moreover, the children in such paintings are inevitably located within the rural idyll. They are semiotically distanced not only from the absented adults but also from any signs of the impure or unnatural manifestations of adult societies that Rousseau so loudly decried. Within images such as these, children are extracted from social life and positioned in the pre-social context of nature (Prout 2005: 11). They draw heavily upon the nature/culture binary to reaffirm the desirable separation of children's worlds from adults' worlds.

In contemporary western cultural vernacular, representations which remove children from social contexts and conflate them with an idealised form of 'pure nature' still hold popular currency. As earlier mentioned in relation to J.M. Barry's *Peter Pan*, famous utopian nature/child tropes in English literature have been recycled and popularised by the Disney and Dreamworld Studios children's mass media empires. Rudyard Kipling's late nineteenth century classic *Jungle Book*, which was Disneyfied as an animated film in 1967, is another notable example. This ever popular trope of the jungle child, living outside of human/adult society in communion with non-human animals, continues to reincarnate in children's popular media, most recently in the form of *Bindi, the Jungle Girl* (ABC 2007) Australia's twenty-first century, tree-house dwelling, celebrity child 'wildlife warrior'.

One of today's most commercially successful popular culture child/nature enterprises is that of children's photographer, Anne Geddes. Geddes has built a multi-million dollar industry upon reproducing countless images of 'pure nature' babies. A visit to her on-line gallery (Geddes 2009), subtitled 'protect, nurture, love', reveals a selection of her voluminous 25 year old portfolio of photographs of infants, who are predominantly posed amongst flowers, vegetables, leaves and other 'natural' objects and environs. These same images proliferate on a range of commercial products and gifts, including greeting cards,

calendars, coffee table books, toys, children's clothes and maternity wear. Highly sentimentalized and 'cute', they revoke the old romantic formula of pure infancy, located in some idealized and unsullied natural space outside of human society. Not only are adults largely absent from the photographs, but the babies are frequently seen to be nurtured by nature. For instance, they are commonly naked and embedded in fields of flowers, nestled inside orchids and rosebuds, encased by pumpkin shells and cradled by gnarled old tree trunks. In the tradition of Rousseau, Anne Geddes twenty-first century infants are explicitly portrayed as belonging to an un-peopled world of pure nature.

The enormous popularity of Geddes' nature babies images testifies to the enduring legacy of Rousseau's romantic conflation of childhood and nature. The conflation of childhood with nature is so ubiquitous that it seems unremarkable, even when blatantly (and ironically) contrived. Children's geographer Stuart Aitken (2001: 36) notes that: 'Two hundred years after the publication of *Emile*, young people are still thought to be naturally closer to nature with little thought to how childhood is constructed closer to nature'.

Geographies of Nature

To assist in thinking through the ways in which the nature/childhood conflation has been so successfully naturalised - it is fruitful to spend some time reviewing the critiques of nature undertaken within human geography. Positioned between the 'natural' and the 'social' sciences, human geography has a particular interest and investment in elucidating the relationship between nature and society (Castree and MacMillan 2001). It is not surprising therefore, that so many human geographers seek to bridge the nature – social divide by challenging the binaries, or dualisms that support this division.

In reviewing the work of human geographers for their book collection *Social Nature*, Castree and Braun (2001: xi) surmise that in the last decade there has been a 'veritable explosion of geographical research that seeks to denaturalize nature'. Instead of asking questions about what society does to nature, or how nature shapes society, they contend that human geographers are now much more likely to investigate 'who constructs what kinds of nature(s) to what ends and with what social and ecological effects?'. This shift is

indicative of the fact that these days, most human geographers approach nature as a social construct.

Within human geography there are different schools of constructionist thinking. As outlined by Castree and MacMillan (2001:209), these include the cultural geographers, who believe we can only know nature culturally, and never 'in-and-of-itself'. In saying this, cultural geographers are not attempting to deny the reality of nature but to point to the difference between 'real' nature and our representations of it. Moreover, they are also wanting to emphasise that we cannot step outside of the cultural context in which we 'know' it or 'represent' it. The economic geographers comprise another school, which contends that 'nature is increasingly being reconstituted materially as industry-led science and technology exert increasing control over it' (Ibid:209). From both these perspectives, nature, as Neil Smith expressed it over twenty years ago now '.. is nothing if it is not social' (1984:23 cited in Ibid:209).

Not surprisingly, social constructionists often find themselves working at odds with the prevailing commonsense notion that nature is the antithesis of society; and with views that position nature either as an external state (as in 'nature out there'), as an intrinsic quality (as in 'human nature') or as a universal force (as in 'the power of nature'). Against this tide of conventional wisdom, human geographers argue that nature is not just self evidently 'real'; that it cannot be located outside of human experience, that it is not fixed and essential; and that it cannot be ultimately separated off from the social. As Castree (2001:15) points out, it is simply not possible to 'physically disentangle the social and the natural. In reality, all there is, ... is "socionature"'. .

Recently there have been challenges to the limits of constructionist geographies, which do not attempt to address nature beyond a set of human imaginings. For instance, Castree (Ibid:17) again argues that in its refutation of essentialised realist nature, the 'hyper-constructivist' account of nature not only runs the risk of exaggerating the power of humans and societies, but is also unwittingly 'trad[ing] on the society-nature dualism'. He points out that when nature is only ever considered as a concept that is reducible to

culture, this ‘...implies that nature is a *tabula rasa* on which societies can write at will’. Not wishing to re-instate the nature/society dualism, but rather to destabilize it through more complex theorizing, Castree (2005), Whatmore (2002) and Thrift (2007), amongst other geographers, are calling for a reconceptualisation of human/nature relations that move understandings about nature beyond the purely representational. Influenced by Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005) they promote a hybrid geography that messes up the neat dualism of nature and society by recasting socionature as a relational assemblage of all living and inert things, including human and non-human animals, objects and discursive practices.

Wilderness: the ‘pure’ nature discourse

Having broadly outlined the ways in which geographers have been working to de-naturalise nature, I will now look at how these de-naturalising strategies have been applied to a very specific nature discourse - the wilderness discourse. Widely regarded as a sanctified space of pure nature, the concept of wilderness represents the biggest challenge to those geographers who are trying to deconstruct the nature-society dichotomy, because, as Castree notes ‘.. the reason that wilderness is such a beguiling idea is that *it appears not to be an idea at all*’ (Castree 2005:137).

The wilderness discourse offers us a unique opportunity to unpack the notion of pure nature which resonates so strongly within the popular imagery of pure and innocent childhood. Shortly, I will draw out some of the parallels between wilderness and childhood innocence discourses. But first I want to unpack some of the familiar tropes that wilderness narratives contain and look at how geographers have responded to the specific challenges that the concept of wilderness poses.

Although radically separated off from ‘civilized man’ in western thought since the enlightenment, wild nature has not always been held in such high regard. In fact, with the age of science and reason came the proximating of wild nature (and its native inhabitants) with primitivism and savagery. Many links have been made by geographers and cognate disciplines, between the discourses of Empire and of un-European and hence ‘un-natural

nature' (see edited collections by Griffiths and Robin 1997; Adams and Mulligan 2003). Again, it was the Romantic movement, and Rousseau's thinking in particular, that began the philosophical shift to ennoble wild nature and its 'noble savage' inhabitants. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, early American naturalists and writers such as Thoreau (1862) and Muir (1912) began to turn the negative associations of wild nature into positive attributes. Instead of being a threat that needed controlling and dominating, wilderness became the sustaining force of human civilization (Cronon 1998:476-479). The wilderness notion as we now know it, was born.

There are many tropes that flow from the contemporary wilderness narratives, and they build upon the pervasive image of the romantic sublime. As can be seen in the famous wilderness photographs of Ansell Adams in the USA (see Best Studio 2008) and Peter Dombrovski in Australia (see West Wind Press 2007), powerful visual images that foreground the grandeur and the sheer beauty of wilderness reinforce a highly externalised notion of unpeopled nature – which exists in some pure and essential state. This ennobled wilderness draws upon a highly aestheticised notion of nature. Breathtaking images of pristine wild places are familiar to the majority of people in urban western societies. Ironically, we are much more likely to witness the romantic sublime of wilderness on posters on walls, on calendars and in our diaries than we are to actually visit it. This, in turn, contributes to our sense of pure nature being 'out there', separated from human presence and untainted by human activity. Even so, we internalise a sense of the powerful integrity of such places through visual images of wilderness and through wilderness discourses.

So sanctified are these images, that they produce a trope about wilderness as a kind of sacred or divine space. Like Rousseau's image of the natural innocent child, the purity of such images evokes a sense of pre-lapsarian perfection. Wilderness areas become nature's spiritual places – unsullied by 'man'. Environmental geographer William Cronon (1998:483) comments that the "[q]uasi-religious values of contemporary environmentalism rest upon the concept of wilderness'.

Through the reiteration of thinly disguised religious reverences within environmental discourses, wilderness has become 'the ultimate landscape of authenticity' (Ibid: 484). Such authenticity is guaranteed by '[c]ombining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier' ... wilderness comes to be seen as 'the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are or ought to be' (Ibid: 484).

A sense of moral authority builds upon this trope of authenticity. Cronon again, observes that '[m]uch of the moral authority that has made environmentalism so compelling as a popular movement flows from its appeal to nature as a stable external source of nonhuman values against which human actions can be judged without much ambiguity' (Ibid: 26).

So our imaginaries of ennobled wilderness depend upon a notion of pure nature with impeccable integrity – completely separated from the human or social worlds. In fact, wilderness has come to so effectively embody this radical separation of nature from the human/social world, that rather than being perceived as a threat to us, it is now the presence of our bodies that is seen to threaten wilderness. As Cronon (Ibid: 484) puts it: 'If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall'. The persuasive trope of wilderness as endangerment has now come full circle from those early colonial days. These days it is wilderness and its vulnerable species that are in danger of defilement and extinction, and it is 'civilized man's' corrupting influence which is seen to be the problem.

Putting the culture back into wilderness

Just like the recurring debates about childhood innocence, 'The Great Wilderness Debate' also continues to rage. Cronon's controversial assertion, that: 'Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, [wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation - indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history' (Ibid: 471) is still being debated, particularly in environment studies.

While many scholars appreciate the distinction he offers between romanticized discourses about places in the real world, and the real world itself, and also appreciate his location of wilderness discourses within very specific cultural and historical contexts, he has nevertheless been criticized for over-stating the significance of human meaning making about these wilder places on earth (Callicott and Nelson 1998). In other words, in constructing such a forceful argument about the culture of wilderness, Cronin may have over-determined the affect of human representational practices at the expense of acknowledging the actancy and affect of real places themselves.

Others have challenged the pristine wilderness concept from a different perspective. Indigenous and postcolonial scholars have pointed to the erasure of indigenous people from these places (Spence, 1999; Plumwood 2003). Indigenous Australian scholar, Marcia Langton (1996), for example, has argued forcefully that the land has never been un-peopled. This fantasy, she suggests, is nothing more than a neo-colonialist fantasy of terra nullius. The country that white environmentalists refer to as un-peopled pristine wilderness, has an ancient cultural history. The relationship between indigenous people and country are inseparable.

Wilderness and Childhood Innocence

These tropes about the purity and vulnerability of wilderness echo the commonly circulated tropes about the purity and vulnerability of innocent children. Postman's oft cited book about the *Disappearance of Childhood*, written in 1982, exemplifies the belief that childhood, as we once 'knew it', is under threat from adult culture (p.145). The very integrity of childhood, he argues, is at risk. In fact Postman actually proclaims very early in the book, that children have now become an 'endangered species' (Ibid: 4), and by the end, we are told that this is because of the (unnatural) merging of children and adults interests and values (Ibid:131). Childhood, according to Postman, had by the early 1980s been tainted by its over-exposure to the corrupting adult world. It was no longer childhood at all.

Just like endangered wilderness, endangered childhood is a pervasive theme which continues to erupt in the academic and public domains (for discussions of this see Buckingham 1990; Jenks 1996, Stainton-Rogers and Stainton-Rogers 1992, and Valentine 1996). Both are propelled by a similar force of moral authority to preserve and protect. Just as environmental discourses draw their moral authority from the perceived authenticity and autonomy of wild nature, so childhood innocence discourses build their moral authority around a resolutely dichotomous ordering of childhood – which positions children as being everything pure and good that adults are not. Moreover, just as with wilderness, this sense of children’s natural purity and innocence is amplified by sublimely romantic and thereby sanctified ‘other-wordly’ representations, such as those proliferated by Anne Geddes. We do not need to see the child enveloped in flowers to recognise that childhood is synonymous with pure nature.

For childhood innocence, just like wilderness, feeds off what Castree (2005) calls a ‘moral and aesthetic naturalism’. Both are fields in which proponents can claim that their moral and aesthetic values come directly from nature. In both, some things are seen as self-evidently ‘unnatural’ (or bad) and other things are seen as self-evidently ‘natural’ (or good). Moral and aesthetic naturalism ‘denies that values are socially and culturally created’. It rests on the truism that ‘nature knows best’ (Castree 2005: 138).

With the idea of ‘moral and aesthetic naturalism’ in mind, this might be a good time to cast our minds back to Peter Pan in Neverland, and to Rousseau - or rather to a commentary on the Rousseau effect that Jacqueline Rose (1984) identified in her book *The Case of Peter Pan*. In this book, Rose made the observation that in coupling the time of childhood with the space of nature, Rousseau brings ‘... history and geography together in relation to a concept of origin’. She goes on to explain that ‘... at its simplest the idea is one of going somewhere else in order to get back to our past’ (p54).

Of course, this is the exact formula that J.M. Barry perfected, courtesy of Rousseau, when he constructed the narrative of Peter Pan and the return to Neverland, which was always written more for adults than for children. Barry located our lost origins within a utopian other time (our childhoods) which can only be reached through a utopian other

place (pure nature). The possibility of rediscovering our lost childhoods or origins is a very seductive idea. It is manifest in many popular self-discovery narratives, which propose that an interior journey (into our 'true nature') is needed to find the lost 'inner-child' within us. The logic here is that the discovery of this originary self, via reclaiming our 'inner child', will enable us to become more natural and more authentic (Steedman 1990).

In evoking our nostalgia for our own origins, our own lost childhoods, narratives of childhood loss and recovery such as Peter Pan, also endow us, as adults, with a sense of moral duty and obligation to safeguard the authentic nature of real children's lives. They encourage us to maintain the purity of childhood, so that these children too, do not also become contaminated and hence 'lost'. These kinds of moral imperatives that underscore the discourses of childhood innocence, and natural childhoods compel us to undertake what Latour (1993) has referred to as 'the work of purification'. The work of purification, in turn, is bolstered and validated by a well developed sense of moral and aesthetic naturalism.

In this paper, I have unraveled just a few of the connecting threads that stitch together these exemplar discourses of good wilderness nature and good innocent childhood. I have done so to illustrate the extent to which our conceptualization of nature and childhood (thanks to Rousseau) have been so tightly intertwined. Loss, purity, contamination and recovery are all recurring tropes that are reiterated within and across the parallel discourses of wilderness and childhood innocence. Because of their conflation, the concepts of nature and childhood have been very finely interwoven into a dense and complex tapestry of mutually supporting essentialist assumptions.

Hopefully, this unraveling of threads has also foregrounded the ways in which naturalised and purist notions of childhood are inextricably bound up with uncritiqued and dichotomised notions of nature, and how both concepts have been mutually constituting and mutually validating.

Conclusion: Towards a socionature of childhood

In this paper, I have entered into a critical interdisciplinary dialogue in order to provoke some new ways of thinking about the 'nature' of childhood. I have encouraged a reconsideration of 'the work of purification' (Latour 1993) that serves to naturalise highly moralistic, other-worldly constructions of childhood. I have offered a challenge to resist the nostalgic appeal of moral and aesthetic naturalism that is so often a feature of protectionist conceptualisations of childhood.

To offer a way forward in response to these provocations, I pose a final question: If we could resist the struggle to claim childhood as either pure nature or pure culture, how might the hybrid notion of socionature help us to reconfigure childhood? The feminist environmental philosopher Val Plumwood (1998: 683) suggests that instead of thinking about wilderness as a space of human absence, it is much more productive and faithful to think about it as a complex and dynamic presence of culture and nature. Borrowing from such reconceptualisations of nature can help us reconceptualise childhood as well. For if we can resist the nostalgic longing to recapture that Peter Pan in Neverland childhood, if we can refuse its seductive promise to absent all imperfections and impurities, we might be better able to focus upon the rich tapestries of children's real lives as an abundance of heterogeneous presences, with all their impurities. Ironically, it would seem that such a move to re-presence might at the same time re-integrate that 'lost child' back into the imperfect, real and messy world of fascinating naturecultures or socionatures that we all embody and co-inhabit.

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